

THE MINUTE REVIEW

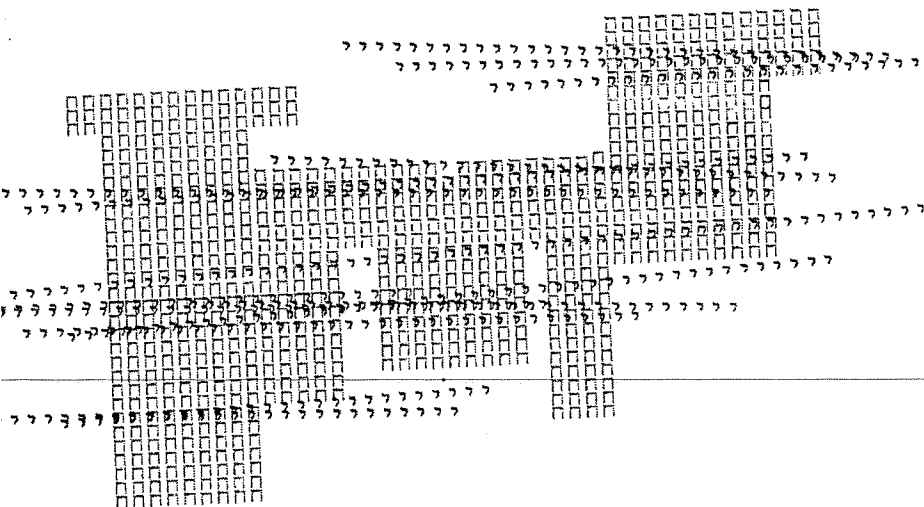
Vol. 2 No. 7 (May 2023)

a little magazine of poetry, prose, and reviews

Derek Beaulieu, editor

Mountain Drive, Box 1020, Banff, Alberta, Canada T1L 1H5

this issue: petra schulze-wollgast | Asmaa Magdy & rob mclennan | Danni
n Stebner | Greg Thomas | Gregory Betts | Joe Devlin | Sal Nunchakov |
ker | Derek Beaulieu |



petra schulze-wollgast

The Writing Craftsman: An Interview with rob mclennan
Asmaa Magdy

Asmaa Magdy: Let us start by introducing you to a traditional reader of poetry. What would a traditional reader of poetry probably find in your kind of writing?

rob mclennan: I hesitate to speculate, as I'm not sure what a "traditional reader of poetry" is. Although I would imagine, as I eschew narrative meaning and the straightforward lyric, that anyone interested in the more "traditional" narrative metaphor-driven lyric mode might be less interested in what it is I am attempting. I am far more interested in how sound and logic shape meaning, and how rhythm shapes itself on the page.

AM: So, it is rhythmical patterns, and audio-visual dualities that matter to you ... would you call this "play" with words? If so, how far do you think this attunes to Eugene Gomringer's view of Concrete poetry as an "invitation" for "play"?

rm: When one works on the page, one has to be attuned to the visual, as that is a part of how the work will be read and experienced. If one were presenting the same work purely in audio format it would be important to attend to different elements of sound, tone, volume, etcetera. I think there's something about understanding, at the very minimum, the chosen form of presentation; mine simply happens to focus on the physical scope of the printed page. But, either way, I am very much attuned to patterns of rhythm, although not interested in furthering any sort of convention. The whole purpose of art is to see what else might be possible and utilizing whatever available tools and years of skill to launch into those explorations. Even while attempting to re-ignite older formal elements, one can't help but make an old form "new" simply due to the difference in perspective, approach, and background anyone contemporary might have over, say, a poet from two centuries back. For me to rework, say, a poem by even a contemporary from another country is to make the poem "Canadian," in that the geography from which I emerge informs much of my perspective(s).

AM: You always introduce your poems as "physical" and "rhythmical". Yet, they remain, one way or another, exemplar of the typographic effect, most relevant to machine-based postmodernist poem, so how would explain this entanglement?

rm: I'm uncertain how explorations of the physical page, rhythm, breath or punctuation fall into a consideration of "machine-based," as I consider those to be quite literally around shape, sound and breath. My sense of the page is very physical, and how and what I present emerges from my physical self. I would say less of the machine than of the body. The modernist ethos kept the human/narrator separate from the world, looking from the outside in; yet the post-modernist understands how much a part of the world we are in, responding to the world from within.

AM: So, how would you prefer to introduce yourself? A poet, an experimenter, a contemplator in language? Or something else?

rm: Honestly, I deliberately steer clear of labeling. I barely call myself a poet, as that is not all I write, having composed fiction, non-fiction, and criticism simultaneously to my poetry for some thirty-odd years. I prefer the term "writer," as it represents a better overview, and offers the designation of function: "writer" = "someone who writes." But I know I emerge very much from a tradition of Canadian postmodernism, heavily following the examples of the Vancouver *TISH* poets of the 1960s and elements of Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser's work within the serial poem, although I somehow took a turn somewhere along the way (American language poets, for example, including Rosmarie Waldrop, Pattie McCarthy, Anna Gurton-Wachter, Lorine Niedecker, Caroline Knox and Sawako Nakayasu, or further poets such as Etel Adnan). If "language poet" and "narrative poet" exist as two imaginary poles in contemporary writing, I exist somewhere between them, perpetually seeking new ways of shaping and thinking. I am a craftsman, I suppose.

AM: How would you relate the avant-garde poetics in the beginning of the 20th century with their politics of "make it new", and your own? I mean do you consider yourself a form of reincarnation of the historical avant-garde? or a sole performer who creates his own poetic style?

rm: I don't consider myself a reincarnation of anything, but I exist from a time and a place, and my thinking emerges from the context of where and how I was raised, and what experiences I've had, both with reading, listening, and interacting with the world itself over those intervening years. The notion of writing as "experiment" isn't something I've ever considered as past tense, and my formative writing years were spent emerged in various contemporary writers through Coach House Press and Talonbooks and mounds of others engaged in how else one can see or say or think. I think upon George Bowering, Erin Moure and Margaret Christakos; I think upon Barry McKinnon, Derek Beaulieu and Sylvia Legris. There isn't a chasm of silence between "historical avant-garde" and me, somehow emerging out of some

imagined silence. I exist as part of a trajectory and continuation: hardly ever a sole performer, but one that emerged as part of a community. Every writer that has influenced the ways in which I work and think and write help make up the body of my work as a whole. There is no 'sole performer,' but an artist working and living and thinking within the context of a series of overlapping communities and conversations.

AM: Where do you see the future of poetry in this increasingly Artificial Intelligence world? Do you think poetry will cease to use language and depend only on visual representations?

rm: I see no evidence to suggest the ends of written or spoken language, and written language, itself, is an evolved, artificial structure of visual representations. English, for example, owing much to the Greeks, the Phoenicians, etcetera. Language is but a tool, and each tool has its own limitations and biases, to be sure. No matter how language shifts and adapts, there will always still be those who wish to engage with the poetry of it.

AM: What do you think the effect of cross-language globalization will be on the practice and theory of poetics?

rm: Robert Kroetsch referred to literature as a "conversation," an idea I've heartily agreed with for years. The quality of our writing and our thinking can only improve through better dialogue. Often, it is knowing what best to ask, and when best to listen. I was recently part of an online poetry panel launching the Poetry in Canada website (<https://www.poetrycanada.org/>) alongside Erin Moure, Larissa Lai, and Joanne Arnett, and there was discussion on how "Canadian" literature can only be strengthened through funding and opportunities for poets working in First Nations languages. To lift up any of us is to lift up us all. We need to better care for those around us, and larger conversations, one hopes, could only lead to long-term solutions. That might be overly simplistic and optimistic in the short-term, but if reading is something that offers us empathy for those beyond our immediate selves, broadening that scope of awareness should offer us an even broader opportunity for empathy.

AM: In what way do you think poetry at large, and your work, contributes to the public's mentality the way, say, "mass media" does? Many other poets across history have seen their work as somehow participating in society's cultural, and thereby, political, choices. Do you agree?

rm: Gertrude Stein spoke of writing the world in which one lives, and I work to respond to the world I am aware of, including those elements that I think require responding to. I attempt to respond actively, and not simply passively,

but one never knows completely the effects of a life. Am I participating in climate damage by publishing poems on climate crisis via electronic and print means? Is the main accomplishment of any of our work simply capitalism, which itself further drives us deeper into crisis? Possibly, of course. The ways in which to create and respond and listen and self-educate are perpetual. Some days, one can only get it right "in that moment." Sometimes a literature need only speak to, at least in the short term, one person.

AM: The political role; do you think that poetry has a political role?

rm: I think very much so, yes. Writing exists in the world and as a response to the world. I think there are very much ways in which writing can respond to social and political concerns, articulating what otherwise might not have been possible. There are plenty of examples, both contemporary and historical, of writers who have helped articulate thought into potential social and political action. I consider writers and writing to have a responsibility to our environment; to ignore those responsibilities is to live with one's head in the sand. It might be living, but it wouldn't be honest.

AM: Commenting on modern arts, Heigl states that art "has come to its end". He has always viewed modern art as "exhausted" and "has nothing to say". How far do you think this matches postmodernist poetic experimentation and Avant-gardism, including Dadaism, Futurism, surrealism, Concrete Poetry and e-poetics? Did this motivate you to create your own kind of experimentation?

rm: Writing is, first and foremost, constructed through shaping language, sound and meaning. If a particular writer has "something to say," perhaps the form of poetry isn't the best form with which to do such, but possibly an op-ed in the pages of a newspaper. Although any piece of art that can provide an audience with a different way of seeing, and therefore, thinking, is enormously valuable. That possibility might never be exhausted.

AM: In your *The opposite of silence* (2018), you state that your "earliest writing possibilities came from established writers who might not have known exactly what your teenaged or early twenty-something self might have been attempting." Yet, they kept supporting you. Do you feel that you owe these moments of "encouragement" and "acknowledgement" to the universe? Your philosophy of introducing and including other emerging poets and writers into your books and interviews; is it Karma? Commercial requirements? Or something else that pushes you?

rm: Certainly not commercial requirements. If I was worried about commerce, I would be working in a different industry, I would think. As I've writ about

previously, I was raised on a farm, and became quickly aware, through my father's interactions, the structures of community: I saw how he helped other people, and how he was helped by others. Naturally, when I began engaging with writing and publishing, the ways in which I approached assisting others' with readings, publishing and interviews just made sense.

Yeah, right. Can't agree more.

AM: In your *Life is Too Short for A Long Story* (2015), you hint at two "writing lessons": the first, you state, is "patience", and the other is "learning to recognize what works best for what you think you want to do." Writing, for you, is a "battle" but it is not a battle against language, against paper, or even against Capitalism, as we have used to hear from postmodernist poets and writers. It is a "battle" against "laziness and lies." "The best response to a poem is another poem," and "one simply has to make the time to do the things one wishes to do in the ways in which it works best for the individual." For you, writing seems to be a lifestyle; it is something you practice side by side with your chore and domestic activities. Would you tell us more about your view of writing, and your writing rituals?

rm: I wouldn't say language a battle at all, because I'm not really fighting against anything apart from my own biases and blind-spots, as well as my apathy. There are always days it feels difficult to get up and work, after all. Writing is the craft I attend to, daily. My father, the dairy farmer, certainly wasn't daily attending to battle the cows or the hayfields. He got up and he did the work that shaped the way he thought and he lived. I really don't see a difference in approach between what it is that I do and what it is that he did. It wasn't a contradiction for my father to empty the dishwasher.

We accomplish what we spend our time doing, after all. If one spends the bulk of their time avoiding work, then that is what they will have accomplished.

Before our small children were born, I would wake up and immediately begin, and spend my day immersed in the work of writing, reading, sketching notes, revising, etcetera. Now my mornings begin with preparing coffee for myself and my dear wife, breakfasting the children and making sure they eventually get dressed before I can attend to even the openings of my writing day. Given our current situation of pandemic, I sit with our two young daughters in their morning sessions of e-learning; I sit on the couch with notebook and pen and books and writing drafts. Once I make them their lunch, my wife takes over their afternoon session, and I return to my desk to work throughout the afternoon. Laundry is for evenings; dishes happen as required. On weekends, I attempt to corral the children to assist with larger matters of housecleaning, but only after I've done at least a morning's work at my desk.

Before our two wee monsters were born, my attention span was entirely different, and I could work on two large projects simultaneously, alongside the

plethora of small essays and publications and book reviews. These days, I usually spend a few days on reviews before back to poems, and back and forth like that for weeks, or even months. Prior to that, I was working a stretch of alternating between reviews and short stories; before that, reviews and the novel. This year, I think I've begun and completed a poetry manuscript, so I'm most likely back into prose soon. If I can manage it. Everything takes its own time.

AM: In your *The opposite of silence* (2018), you introduce yourself as "the result of" your "mother's stubbornness" and your father's "farm work-ethic." How do you think your childhood has affected the kind of poetry you introduce?

rm: It's a good question. I spend a great deal of time seeking further ways of thinking and shaping language. I wish not to remain static. I'm not entirely sure where my curiosity emerged, as those examples you cite reference my ability to keep going and keep pushing further. I can only reference the barrage of magazines that came through our mailbox at the end of the laneway, including *Motor Trend* and *National Geographic*, or the documentaries my parents watched. My father lived his nearly eighty years on a small stretch of Eastern Ontario farmland he rarely strayed terribly far from, but he had a vantage of the world well beyond that. I never had the sense he felt limited by his immediate view, and he appeared to have a great amount of curiosity. His footprint was small, but the scope of his landscape was quite large.

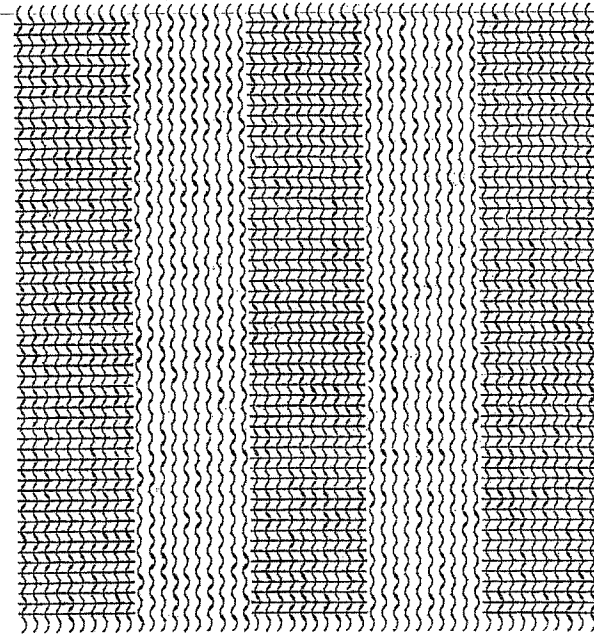
AM: After Auschwitz, and let me say, after the Second World War, in general, many critics and philosophers, of whom Adorno is probably the most prominent, have openly questioned the kind of poetry to come. They, in other words, have viewed any kind of poetry after Auschwitz as "barbarism." The question is: as a poet, how could you personally overcome this dilemma?

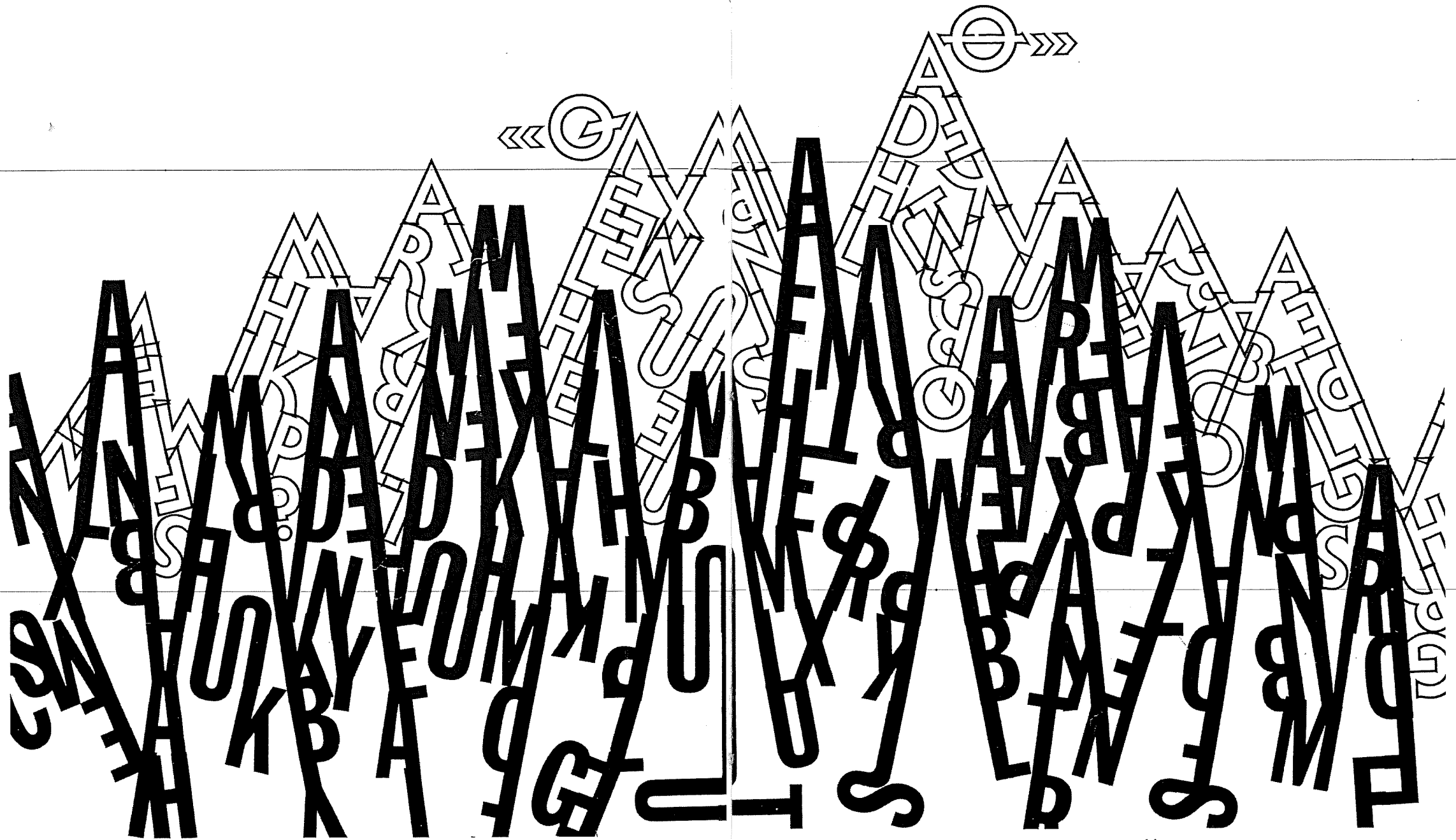
rm: Everything that has influenced the ways in which I write and think and approach writing would fall under the scope of "barbarism," so I'm not sure how to respond to this. After such immense trauma, there have been plenty of writers seeking to articulate and process the events of the Holocaust, and it would be irresponsible, I think, to not utilize writing as a means through which to document, acknowledge and process the scope of such incredible brutality. There are those who write for the dead, but it is for the living, both those who remain and those who have yet to come, that the writing becomes most important. To not write is to begin to forget, and that would be the most irresponsible of all.

AM: One last question: would you please tell audience why are you so keen on writing your name in small form? What is that supposed to imply?

rm: Well, I came up with such in my early twenties, in part as a way to distinguish myself as an individual beyond the boundaries of my immediate family (normal coming-of-age sort of stuff, I suppose). I had also considered that it was less about myself as an individual and more about the writing, so I suppose a part of the decision came from wishing to pull back a bit. Over the years, I've been quite baffled at the level of attention such (in my mind) a minor request it seems, from certain journals refusing to publish work with my name published that way, to others straight-up ignoring it, and posting my name "properly." I still see it on social media all the time, when a publisher might link a review of one of their titles I've written about, posting my name "incorrectly," missing entirely that, perhaps, I might be doing such deliberately. It does seem a silly thing to harp upon, so I rarely correct it, but it is how I wish to appear alongside reviews, interviews or published work. Now, I think it looks sleek. My very name is built for speed.

Weaving
Danni Storm





Outsider of Outsiders: On Lily Greenham's Tune In To Reality!
(Writers Forum, 1974; new rendition by Distance No Object, 2022)
Greg Thomas

Lily Greenham (1924–2001), whose 1974 book *Tune In To Reality!* has been republished by Distance No Object, was a writer, performer, artist, and musician, whose rigorous refusal to adhere to the presentational norms of any one of those media was central to her persona. She explained as such, striking a characteristic note of triumph, in her 1995 statement “Un Arte de Vivir (An Art of Living),” partially reproduced in the sleeve notes for a posthumous double-CD of her performed and recorded poetry, *Lingual Music* (Paradigm Discs, 2007):

I was never exclusively dedicated to any single discipline. Others also seemed to recognise this, because in the field of music I was often described as a painter, in the visual arts I was seen as a poet, in literary circles I was a performer, and so forth. And this was, and still is, the true situation. Some people perceived me as a ‘guest figure’ in their own domain. They were right! Hahaha! Neither nationality, nor religion, nor profession, nor *any sort of classification* covers my own concept of myself. Categories don’t fit my character, nor my soul. (n.p)

The credo of transnationalism seems particularly relevant here, given the playful quality of alienation from language that characterises *Tune In To Reality!*, published by Bob Cobbing’s press Writers Forum. As Michael Parsons notes in a biographical statement included with *Lingual Music*, Greenham was born in Vienna but lived during the course of her life between the Austrian capital, Copenhagen, Paris, and London, where she finally settled; she was also “fluent in at least six different European languages.”

The sense of cleavage between vocal sign and its object in *Tune In To Reality!* is surely rooted in a polyglot’s awareness of the swathe of functional uses to which a particular phoneme, syllable, or even word-length sound might be put, especially when working across a whole family of scripts and tongues (it’s notable that many of the poems appear in two versions, one in English and the second in a different European language.) Greenham’s publisher Bob Cobbing had taught French at a secondary school before committing full-time to sound poetry, and the same sense of running by rote through a foreign lexicon or grammar chart, unearthing strange affinities and connections, that typifies Cobbing’s *ABC in Sound* (1965) can be sensed throughout this book. Take the opening poem “ability.”

adapt adapt adapt adapt adapt
 adapt ability adapt ability adapt ability
 adaptability adaptability adaptability
 adaptable adaptable adaptable adaptable

ableableableableableableableableableable
 aptableptableptableptableptableptable
 adapt apt adapt apt adapt apt
 apt opt apt opt apt opt apt opt
 Aptoptoptoptoptoptoptoptopt
 opt opt opt opt opt opt opt opt
 optout (1)¹

We can sense here the compositional approach that Greenham outlines in “Un Arte de Vivir:” “[a]s a starting point...I used *keywords*, as I like to call them, which I developed through an etymologic associative working process.” The closing gag, meanwhile is presumably a call to ‘opt out,’ in the manner of the era, from “the competitive society” referred to in “the outsider,” (30).

This kind of linguistic play becomes more expansive and adventurous through the gradual accretion of a personified, even strident, narrative voice across the course of the text—it’s hard not to read this as the author’s voice, the ‘impersonal’ aspects of concrete poetics aside. Greenham poses insistent, sing-song questions to the reader, as if pressing us on the absurdity of what all these homonyms, homophones, and threads of association somehow suggest about the world we inhabit. “With the choice of subject matter I wanted to stress the absurdity of daily/weekly/monthly/yearly social ‘trends’ and point out the conformity with which they are met[.]” Greenham notes in “Un Arte de Vivir.” The impulse is clear—because dramatically personified—in the dialogue-style poem “strike:”

(a): what does the word strike suggest to you?
 (b): hit
 (c): you mean to be a hit?
 (b): what a striking remark!
 (a) that was a stroke of luck! (25)

This poem’s closing pun, “why don’t you go on strike too?” evokes a 1970s social malaise that audiences in 2022 Britain might relate to afresh. More significantly, it reflects the ways in which Greenham’s language games tune into the material realities of contemporary politics.

At its best, the combination of rhythmically insistent authorial persona and whip-smart lexical punning is exhilarating, and feeds the political animus. Here’s “capital:”

starting with a c’p’t’l capital letter
 the capital point to make is that
 lack of capital
 in a c’p’t’l’s’t’c in a capitalistic society
 is a capital offence (26)

“the outsider,” planted towards the end of the text, gathers together the accumulated energy of the sequence into something of a poetic manifesto:

i am an outsider of outsiders

because my inside doesn't fit
any concepts
any parties
any professions (30)

At other times, the intrusion of polemic into language game can seem a little glib, as in the well-meaning but misguided punning on "race"—of rats, people— in the above poem: an endearing flaw, perhaps, and certainly one shared with Greenham's publisher Bob Cobbing.

It's worth noting, finally, that these poems, with their linear-narrative flourishes and one-liners, their quick rhythmic energy and jumpy visuals (see note 1), really demand to be *heard*: either in performance or realised alongside electronic soundscapes, like those provided by Paddy Kingsland for versions of several *Tune In To Reality!* pieces on the *Lingual Music* CD. This suggests the significance not only of Greenham's connection to Cobbing's Writer's Forum, the hub of sound poetry activities within Britain during the 1970s, but also, at an earlier stage, to the revered "Vienna Group," consisting of early pioneers in the European neo-Dada revival including Gerhard Rühm, Konrad Bayer, and H.C. Artmann. As Parsons records in his liner notes, Greenham met these poets on her return to Vienna from a painting course in Paris in 1953, and "soon acquired an international reputation as a performer of their work" (n.p.). We might hazard a guess that Artmann's "dialect poems," with their interrogation of the semantic possibilities of particular geographical lexes, were a particular reference point.

Above all else, this collection generates a sense of irrepressible and propulsive energy. It sings out to us hard and sharp across the years, and matches the author's self-projected persona as an inveterate smasher of norms and definitions. Greenham was an outsider of outsiders, "whose outside is/ outsided/ even amongst outsiders" ("the outsider," 30).

Notes

¹ My spacing and lineation here is a sketchy recreation of the visual effects achieved in Distance No Object's rendition of the text, itself an avowedly imperfect facsimile of the original. Like all Writers Forum publications during the early 1970s, *Tune In To Reality!* would have been printed using mimeograph stencils, in this case via a manual typewriter. One aspect of appearance impossible to recreate here is what the new publishers call "Greenham's singular attention to vertical spacing" so that in some poems, 'lines' of text appear staggered between two horizontal planes, creating an energetic, irregular zig-zag

Shelled Remnants

Gregory Betts

I want to get this conversation right and I'm drunk and I'm making it difficult.¹ I begin in the middle—where too I'll end, there being alas to my arrested history as yet no dénouement.² The rain drives through Toronto at night, blurring the lights of Yonge Street through the glass.³ It's cool; that's the principal thing.⁴

Everywhere you heard shrill voices, children crying, cries of misery coming from the depths of this house or that, doors and shutters closed, dead, walled up against the light as if it were a tomb.⁵ I cannot shut out the night—nor its sharp clarity.⁶ A man can't peg himself in so tight that nothing can creep through the cracks.⁷ I, for instance, live in a little peninsula on the fringes of Canada which two generations ago had a rather simple but intelligible agricultural, commercial, and military culture of its own.⁸ I knew the country.⁹

They were branded, however, as theorists, visionary idealists, purists, talkers of academic nonsense, weepers of crocodile tears.¹⁰ There was only one virtue, pugnacity: only one vice, pacifism.¹¹ All that has been found are some pebbles that will be discarded; all that has been discovered is the impossibility of discovering.¹² There is probably an irony involved in this, but I am not drunk enough to figure out what it is.¹³

Bliss be upon you!¹⁴ Woe to the man who is different, who tries to break down all the barriers.¹⁵ Good God!¹⁶ Four o'clock in the morning.¹⁷

Man will not be able to sustain life in its mephitic atmosphere: he will be superseded by machines; a carved idol of an idiot will preside over its clangor; and the final state of the city shall be one in which all is destroyed except the huge, idiotic face.¹⁸ Isn't it funny how nature keeps her ways no matter how mixed-up our feelings?¹⁹

For a short time, life was easier for everyone.²⁰ They focus on civil space, perceiving the social body in terms of its material syntax of streets and roads, buildings and rooms, the tangle of hydro and communication lines.²¹ I felt a bit lost, with the blue and white sky overhead and these monotonous colours all around me — the sticky black tar, the dull black clothes and the shiny black hearse.²² There seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth.²³

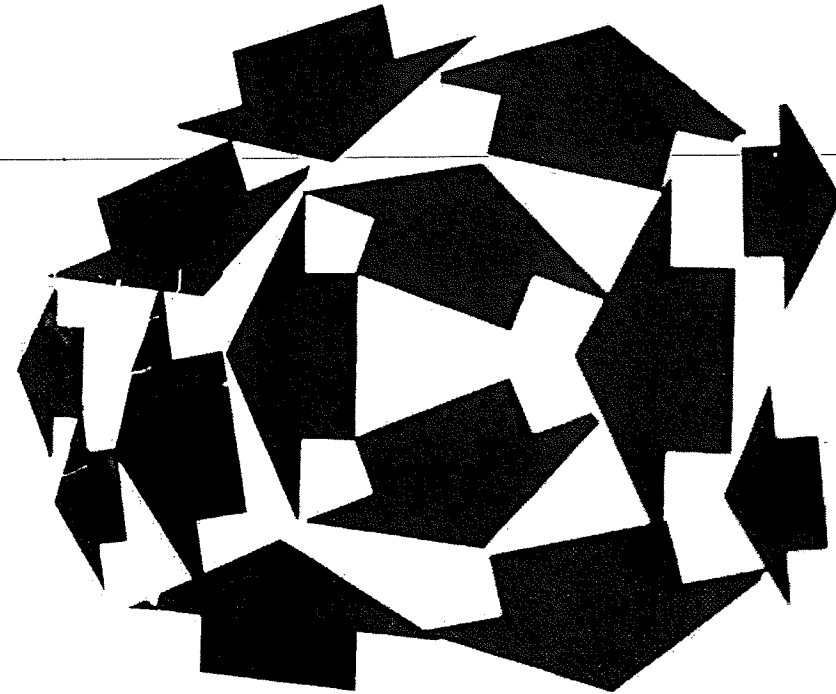
It has been our misfortune to have been overtly neglected by the only national organization in the country that can help support such an effort as ours.²⁴ The

value of the result I still don't know.²⁵ But have you any grave doubts on the subject?²⁶ I can take a hint.²⁷

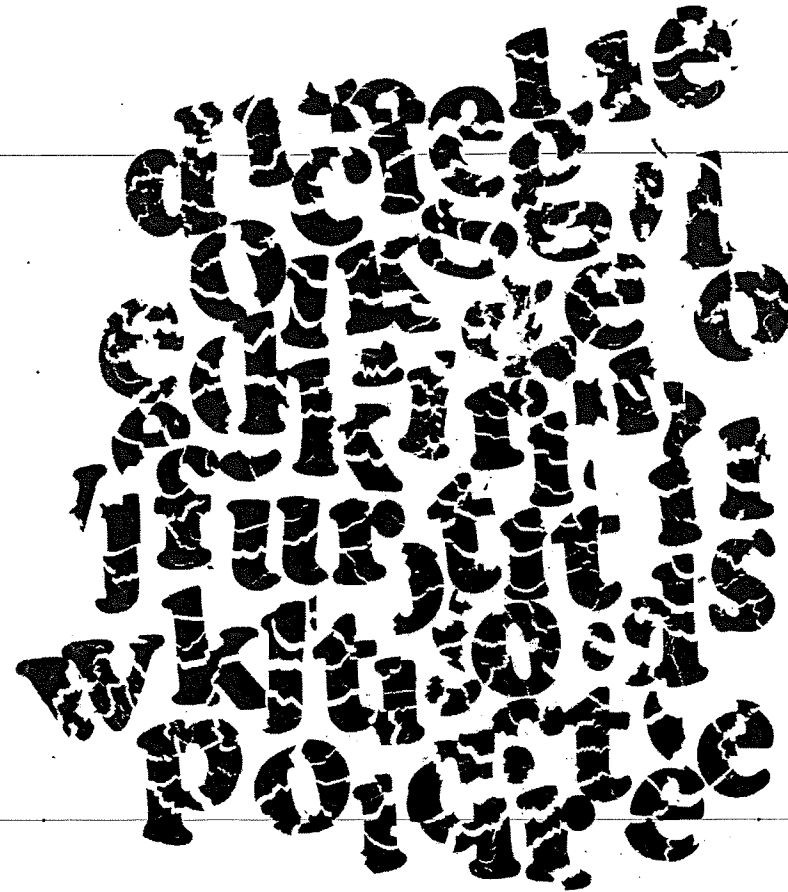
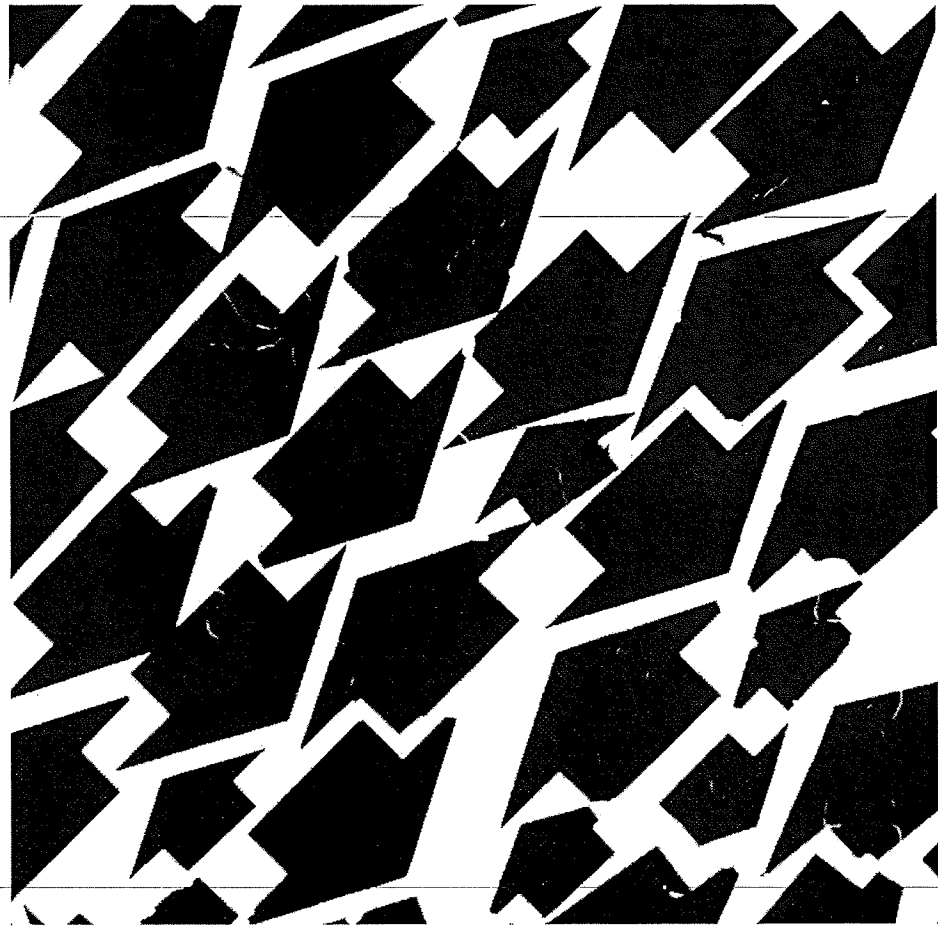
Two Arrow Drawings
Joe Devlin

Notes:

- ¹ Ondaatje, Michael. *Coming Through Slaughter*. Toronto: Anansi Press, 1976. 102.
- ² Barth, John. "Anonymiad." *Lost in the Funhouse*. Toronto: Anchor Books, 1988. 169.
- ³ Helwig, Maggie. "Three Lyric Pieces." *Talking Prophet Blues*. Kingston: Quarry, 1989. 53.
- ⁴ James, Henry. "An International Episode." *The Turn of the Screw and Other Short Novels*. Scarborough: Signet, 1962. 26.
- ⁵ Roy, Gabrielle. *The Tin Flute*. Toronto: M&S, 1993. 97.
- ⁶ Livesay, Dorothy. "Fire and Reason."
- ⁷ Watson, Sheila. *The Double Hook*. Toronto: M&S, 1969. 57.
- ⁸ Grant, George. "Philosophy in the Mass Society." *Modern Canadian Essays*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1976. 141.
- ⁹ Lennox, John. *Charles W. Gordon ["Ralph Connor"] and His Works*. Toronto: ECW Press. 17.
- ¹⁰ Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan*. Toronto: Penguin, 1983. 218.
- ¹¹ Shaw, Bernard. *Heartbreak House*. Markham: Penguin, 1988. 18.
- ¹² Atwood, Margaret. *Survival*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972. 117.
- ¹³ Albee, Edward. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* New York: Pocket Cardinal, 1969. 41.
- ¹⁴ Shakespeare, William. "Romeo and Juliet." Act V Scene iii. *The Collected Shakespeare*. 98.
- ¹⁵ Weiss, Peter. *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat As Performed By the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*. London: Dramatic, 1964. Act I. 77.
- ¹⁶ Denison, Merrill. "Brothers in Arms." *Ten Canadian Short Plays*. New York: Dell, 1975. 169.
- ¹⁷ Ryga, George. *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Toronto: New Press, 1971. 74.
- ¹⁸ Brown, E.K. *On Canadian Poetry*. Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1977. 95.
- ¹⁹ Clarke, George Elliott. "To X." *Whylah Falls*. Vancouver: Polestar, 2000. 202.
- ²⁰ Maracle, Lee. "Bertha" *Soujourner's Truth & Other Stories*. Vancouver: Press Gang, 1990. 21.
- ²¹ Jones, D.G. "Preface." *Earthlight*. Toronto: General Publishing, 1982.
- ²² Camus, Albert. *The Outsider*. London: Penguin Books, 1982. 21.
- ²³ Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Toronto: Vintage, 1996. 43.
- ²⁴ Coleman, Victor. "Open Letter to Canada Council." *New Wave Canada*. Ottawa: National Library, 1976. 80.
- ²⁵ Cogswell, Fred. "Two Fables." *Later in Chicago*. Ottawa: Borealis, 2003. 54.
- ²⁶ Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest*. New York: Avon, 1965. Act Two. 66.
- ²⁷ Shaw, Bernard. *Saint Joan*. Markham: Penguin, 1985. Scene II. 74.



Two visual poems
Sal Nunchakov





Language Capture: Mark Addison Smith's *The Streets Are Very Quiet*

Johanna Drucker

Walk down the street and tiny snippets of conversation enter your awareness. We are often incidental witnesses to exchanges that reveal little or nothing—or much too much. I am a speculator in such transactions. I try to gauge the degree of familiarity between people chatting together on a trail, exchanging information that indicates familiarity, or suggests a getting-to-know-each-other first date. Clues are embedded in the language, as well as postures, physical distances and gestures. People are always either moving towards or away from each other at any moment. The linguistic transactions are currency in the push-pull of exchange.

Mark Addison Smith has made an art of capturing these overheard statements. He has, in his own words, “been listening in on other people’s conversations and drawing their words” for about fifteen years. His texts are caught, not composed, preserved like specimens pinned in a collector’s case. His work is filled with hand-drawn renderings of speech that occurs in public but may yet be very private. He gives each bit of language its own graphic treatment, reinforcing a sense of voice and inflection. He accompanies his texts with black-and-white drawings that are stark and vivid, unfussy, but detailed enough to make them images of individuals, not generic figures.

This volume, the second in his series, is titled *The Streets Are Very Quiet*. It contains three-hundred-and-sixty-five drawings from the onset of the pandemic in spring 2020. The title is all too accurate, even if the memory of those empty silent streets is hard to recall now in its full effect. I know I cried many times after lockdown, feeling terror with no other traffic on the major boulevards in Los Angeles. As suggested by his drawing of the word “apocalyptic” in dark storm cyclone lettering, we were all in a state of fear, overwhelmed by the unprecedented dimensions of the quiet brought on by lockdown. Smith, deprived of the source material he used to gather on the street, chose to record invited conversations. Held remotely, they document the radical behavioral changes of isolation, abruptly suspended activity. “I would have been on a plane to Paris yesterday.” The various metrics of that moment appear, “We can also see and feel with two meters distance.” Gender issues, money struggles, the priorities of health and anxieties about work, survival, illness populate these citations. Rituals like the seven p.m. evening clapping and cheering for nurses and front-line workers have their trace here. One discussion contrasts AIDS and the experience of HIV with the current pandemic and bluntly documents the activist concerns and differences. Poignant tales of death and loss, limits on

the size and place of gatherings, the notion of the “pod” and of getting trapped away from familiar circumstances are all present: “I miss Manhattan. I miss my house. I miss my cats. I miss teaching in real time.” These are documents of a particular moment in our shared and recent history. They are resonant because of the way they reference experiences that we have all witnessed and in which we have participated, each of us to varying degrees. The statements are context-dependent, on purpose, deliberately designed by Smith to keep us cognizant of how this period appeared to us, what we lived through. The conversations are date-stamped, the devices on which they occurred are noted, as are the individuals whose words are cited. Individuals are only sketchily depicted in the images. Schematic figures rely on attributes—hands, accessories, devices, postures—to provide some suggestion of identity. What is so compelling about this work—aside from its stark graphic energy—is its attention to language as historical, as social, as connected to the circumstances in which it takes shape as utterance and communication. An urgency and immediacy is palpable in the phrases here. The tone is without any artifice or conceits. And because of that, feels more deadly accurate as a record of this recent past than other carefully composed pandemic works. This is documentary literature whose art is in the craft of editing as well as graphic rendering. The simplest statements are in some ways the most powerful. “I want to pick out my own vegetables.” Or, “I had a bunch of plants in my dressing room that I wanted to rescue.” Tragedy and loss take so many forms—minor, subtle, but also so large in scale they can almost not be registered at the time they occur. Smith’s volume is an eloquent monument to the way language is social before it becomes history. When the contexts fall away, these texts will be their telling remains, language captured at the moment of use.

WE SPEND A LOT OF TIME SAYING CIVILIZATION IS FALLING APART, BUT WHAT ARE WE DOING TO STOP IT? I THINK WE CAN DO THINGS—WHETHER IT'S GETTING OUT TO VOTE IN OUR COMMUNITY OR WRITING LETTERS TO OUR LEADERS...ALTHOUGH, THAT FEELS FUTILE WHEN THE WORLD IS FALLING APART. BUT, WE DON'T HAVE TO STAND IDLY BY IT DOES.



Roxane Gay in conversation with me on May 26, 2020, India ink pen on Bristol board.

3 capsule reviews

Derek Beaulieu

***Boat* by Lisa Robertson (Coach House Books, 2022)**

Boat—Lisa Robertson’s sixth title with Toronto’s Coach House Books—gathers daily thoughts from notebooks, aphorisms about poetics, feminism and thinking across genre. These poetic statements are presented in enjambed poetic lines, prosaic sentences, fragments, and—most startlingly—in the opening sequence “The Hut” which places a caesura in the middle of words, a clean, clear shaft of whitespace runs through the middle of the page, slowing the reading around “I admire the odd transitions” and “the strict geometry of her hair part”. A startling, meditative offering from one of our finest poets.

***The Book of Grief and Hamburgers* by Stuart Ross (ECW, 2022)**

Walking a quiet tread between sorrow and humour, *The Book of Grief and Hamburgers* is emotionally bare, honest, humane. After Covid’s assertion in early 2020, there has been so much loss, so much unresolved grief—and so many ways of avoiding facing that trauma. With this volume Ross sets aside much of his contemporary surrealism and meets our gaze with tears in his eyes. The hamburgers are a self-confessed feint, a greasy-spoon coping mechanism, but like the finest magician who implores you to not take your eyes off the desk of cards while he explains the trick, Ross still astonishes. There’s a space at the counter. Sit. We’ve all bitten off more than we can chew.

***RUHuman: The Typewriter Art of Keith Armstrong*, edited by Barrie Tullett and Tom Gill (The Caserom Press, 2022)**

A fabulous, lush, overview of Keith Armstrong’s work; his typewritten concrete poetry, his small press publishing and his community activism supporting disability rights in the UK, *RUHuman* brings an important voice back into a cultural discourse. Confined to wheelchair from the effects of polio and surgeries and frequently arrested for his activist protests, Armstrong brought a dedication to his small magazine *The Informer* while also producing beautiful skeins of subtly coloured typewritten poems; each demanding more from governments, leadership, and readers.