

# The Door is Open: For Peter Quartermain



*Aaron Peck*

Every time I enter the Quartermain's home on Keefer Street, as if tuning into a radio frequency, there is in the back of my mind to varying degrees a certain static: Peter Quartermain has such nice *stuff*. I find myself coveting or rather pining for a certain edition of Lydia Davis, tucked away in his basement library, the door to which I often sit across from at the dinner table, aware that down that narrow flight is an enviable collection of books containing a copy of Davis's *The Thirteenth Woman*. Peter, to say nothing of his essays, is not only a collector of *stuff* but also a maker of *things*. With Meredith Quartermain, over the past thirty years, through Slug Press, Keefer Street Press, and Nomados Literary Publishers, Peter has produced broadsheets, chapbooks, and bookmarks, many of which hang on my own walls, mark places in unfinished books, or clutter my bookshelves (Nomados even published a chapbook of mine).

Peter's *things*—not the stuff he or I own but other things he has made—in fact, count for my first acquaintance with him. I often say that I was lucky enough not to have been Peter's student because that way, through our discussions over the past eleven years, I could conceal the stupidity and laziness that would have been obvious to him. My relationship with the Quartermains—the mentorship and support I have received from both—would have never developed, I doubt,

into friendship had it started out as a teacher-student relationship. I got lucky. The Keefer Street and Slug Press broadsheets that hang on my own walls either would have not ended up in my possession or, at least, would not have come to signify, more than their literary beauty, a friendship had I not overcome my initial reaction to Peter Quartermain: intimidation.

I began as a student at the University of British Columbia the year before Peter retired, transferring from a community college in the interior of British Columbia. UBC at that time had a reputation for being a place to study late twentieth-century innovative North American poetry. Although poetry was what I wanted to both practice and study, I neglected to enroll in his class, more out of cluelessness than timidity. No one told me. And then, after they had, he retired (I still feel sorry for Peter's replacement, Adam Frank, who had to take me on as a student and humor my enthusiasm for his predecessor's specialization). Students would gush over Peter's classes. Enthusiasm from his seminars lingered throughout the students in the honors English program. There was a clear division—a caucus-party hierarchy—established by us dodo-students between who had been in Peter's classes and who had not. I was a runt, the then-aspiring poet, a young Alice, who never had the distinction of studying with the critic. His influence resonated in the way each would declare his or her—but usually *his* (it is more often men who engage in such dodo-politics)—*his* credentials of having been in one of Peter's classes. Peter's presence on campus also lingered in the form of a thing he made: a Slug Press broadsheet of one of Meredith's poems hung in the graduate student lounge of Buchanan Tower where a certain precocious undergraduate preferred to study. And this broadsheet was, in many ways, my first material encounter with the Quartermains (I didn't even know what Peter looked like until he was identified by Marjorie Perloff during the question-and-answer period of her lecture at UBC on nominalism in Ezra Pound and Marcel Duchamp). I would look up at that broadsheet in the graduate student lounge while attempting to comprehend whatever literary theory was de rigueur at the time, Eve Sedgwick or Jacques Derrida, distractedly marveling at Meredith's words, as if the broadsheet itself materialized the authority or influence the Quartermains had over us would-be poets.

But the door had closed.

Peter Quartermain had retired. I continued with my studies.

A year later, I had the good fortune of making the acquaintance

of Meredith who, much to my excitement, approached me after a reading, wanting to buy my chapbook.

Meredith Quartermain liked my poems! (Or at least enough to support a young writer and buy a ten dollar chapbook—I've stopped wondering if it's still in their basement, now instead worrying.)

The door had reopened.

First, I was invited out for lunch, then dinner at their home, soon getting to know them both.

A year earlier, while completing my undergraduate degree, reading through criticism and theory—no novels, only poetry—I was a slow reader, sometimes staring in mystification at that broadsheet in the graduate student lounge. My entrance into Peter's thinking, not yet through that Keefer Street door, was through other instructor's seminars in which Peter's essays were assigned, often stymied by the students who would claim more purchase on Peter's criticism for having been in his classes. They *got* it. At first I found the essays difficult, but maybe I was a bad reader, dumb or something, without the necessary background to grasp what was happening. Soon enough, though, I discovered that was the point. I returned to them, reading his essays in anthologies like *Close Listening* and then his own *Disjunctive Poetics*.

Peter and his work are, and always were, nothing but accessible. The demand is simple: he asks you to consider how you read. Getting to know Peter and hearing him ask that question was one of the first in a series of demystifications I have had since (about the workings of authority. By graduate school, after I had become a habitu  of the Keefer Street house, I affixed a printout of his "Research and Writing" lecture notes from a seminar he gave at Naropa in 2002 to the wall above my writing desk.

Peter can be, even if playful, yes, a little pedantic, all too quick to hassle or correct you, or at least *me*, for a typo, grammatical error or misspelling. But that—because that too is endearing, or caring—but that and more, the Peter I admire, and look up to, is open, generous, and perhaps most importantly curious. A product of wartime English boarding schools, Peter learned to be both precise and nimble with his words. He asks questions. He never shuts down a discussion, and if he does all you have to do is fight back a little. If language can be thought of as a river, conversing with Peter is a stream in which you

never step twice, and, at times, it can be a challenge to keep up with the current of puns. But his simple question about *how* motivates his engagement, and it requires that you reply.

For years, each December, I have eagerly awaited a holiday card from the Quartermains, stuffed with bookmarks, sometimes also chapbooks, selections from his autobiography (oh Peter when will you finish, we're waiting!), or Meredith's travel journals. The connection between Peter's engagement with the verbal is matched by the things he has made to transmit those words: the printed matter on which appear phrases, poems, litanies, short stories, complaints, boasts, etc. All the while in his home with Meredith, the *stuff* around him, which he has accumulated over the years, much of which I would not have known about otherwise, such as the *Century* dictionary, the importance of reading Dante in the Temple Classics edition, or other things I already knew about, those damned coveted objects—or rather objects which I covet—like *The Thirteenth Woman* (Peter recently told me that it was Charles Bernstein who urged him to read Davis), reveal a lot about the depth and breadth of Peter's thinking. On his bookshelf or desk, you might notice a collection of poems by Myung-Mi Kim next to a biography of Giordano Bruno.

For the past six years, I also have been reading books with the Quartermains, one of which was Kim's *Commons*. We called ourselves the "Spinoza Club" after the second book we read together, Spinoza's *Ethics*. The other night, over dinner, Meredith brought out a notebook in which she had listed the books we read together, ranging from Hannah Arendt and Norman Cohn to Javier Marias and Thomas Bernhard. I have learned a lot about the process of reading from the keenness, stubbornness and erudition that Peter brings. The other night, as we discussed Lisa Robertson, whose work we all follow with enthusiasm, and who has lately been writing about the experience of reading, Peter replied that he admired the way she "refuses to be bullied by her own ignorance." He could have been talking about himself. Peter's intelligence flourishes in the way it is open to what it does not know. I am reminded of a phrase from one of Peter's deceased friends, Guy Davenport: "We are never so certain of our knowledge as when we're dead wrong."

And if nine years ago in graduate school, I placed Peter's research notes above my writing desk, now I have a broadsheet that he helped me print on his letterpress. It reads: ONE SENTENCE EVERY DAY.