

The Wing in the Woodbox

For Peter Quartermain



Colin Browne

Sometimes, at night, on the outskirts of a city, with dark fields on either side & a fence line clicking by, an array of lights bursts from the darkness, a blazing inscription on the porous plane of night, a night garden of shimmering lamps, evoking all that is tender and welcoming in a harbour. Soon it will be guiding another three hundred trembling souls to earth. There's surprise, then recognition, then you turn your mind back to the glow on the horizon. The points of illumination burn brightly, piercing the thalamus en route to the cerebral cortex to bind with impulses planted when you were in utero, before you became a magnificent forest.

I'm describing the act of reading Peter Quartermain's new collection of essays, *Stubborn Poetries: Poetic Facticity and the Avant-Garde*, published this year by the University of Alabama Press. It's that good. Quartermain is the companion you long for. An exemplary scholar, he's attentive to every speck of the text. He observes each rest, each collision of breath & the particles that glint like headland mica. He's wise to the fertilities of negative space and negative sound. He's as fond of bad behaviour and anarchic gestures as he is impatient with laziness and complacency. He's probably as suspicious as I am of anything that announces itself as a poem. In

this much-anticipated collection of twenty essays, concluding with the wonderful and appropriate “Paradise of Letters,” you’ll encounter Quartermain the archaeologist, the bibliographer, the collector, the editor, the etymologist, the graphologist, the historian, the listener, the morphologist, the poet, the printer, the suitor, the typographer. His ear is finely tuned, and he can be deliciously prickly. He’d probably agree that Barnett Newman’s forceful reflection on *plastic language* is equally true for poetic language, that both are “directed by a will

towards metaphysical understanding.”¹ And he’d remind you, unequivocally, in case you had any other ideas, that “poetry is sound.” These three little words, which unite the empires of the ear to metaphysics—Bunting, as you might expect, hovers nearby—are taken from an essay in honour of the British poet Richard Caddel entitled “Writing on Air for Dear Life,” a text with such heart-warmth flowing through it that I’d gladly read it every week.²

Quartermain, by the way, is an active supporter of contemporary writing. He helps people out. Years ago, when I took over the editorship of *Writing* magazine, he slipped me a cheque for a hundred bucks to cover the printing costs, a lot of money in 1984. His generosity is legendary. Many of us are honoured to have our walls graced by the cards and broadsides produced on his letterpress that have celebrated a transcendent era of poetry in Vancouver.

I’d like to look briefly at his appreciation of Richard Caddel, a poet, publisher, viola player and, with Quartermain, the editor of *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970*, published in 1998. “Writing on Air for Dear Life” is an homage to and an appreciation of Caddel’s life’s work as a colleague and a dear friend; he died in 2003 at the age of fifty-three. There’s so much to admire in Caddel’s writing; I was particularly moved by an observation in Quartermain’s analysis of the eight-line poem “Larksong Signal,” written in 1993. Caddel, who shares John Clare’s birthday, was an attentive walker and observer of the landscape, not to mention creeping, flying & growing things and the solid objects distributed across the hills and held in place by gravity. It’s clear on a first reading that “Larksong Signal” is not only a transmitter but is, simultaneously, a receiver; that is to say it’s active, a metaphysical two-way valve. It begins with “Arcane,” a word that shares the same root as “ark.”

Larksong Signal

Arcane and isolate breathing
 acts of faith—longstone
 to blind fiddler. High song
 patient in rain. *Sing it—*

no ideas but in tunes—
 “sounds we haven’t heard
 that the birds knew about”—
 writing on air for dear life.³

“Larksong Signal” is also a kind of wind-chime through which blow acts and sites and sights and sounds and snatches of bird song that stick like burrs; it’s also a model of the mind, as any poem is, a medley, a montage, a multi-dimensional signal from the borders of consciousness. In its second stanza the poem receives, juxtaposes and transmits a transformed, italicized corruption of W. C. Williams’ familiar manifesto with two lines from the Ghanaian master drummer Obo Addy: “sounds we haven’t heard / that the birds knew about.” In January 2006, for his 70th birthday, Addy—a long time resident of Portland, Oregon—was interviewed by the *Portland Tribune* and expanded on the lines quoted by Caddel. Referring to his students at Lewis & Clark College, he explained, “I want them to know that there are lots of sounds in the air that we haven’t heard, but the birds hear them and they sing. There are lots of rhythms in the air that we haven’t heard, but the trees hear them and they move to them.”⁴ The air has been filled with these sounds and rhythms since at least the Cretaceous period. I think that Addy’s indirect suggestion is that even though we may be unaware of them, we’re conductors—unconscious conductors. Our music, language and poetry are not our own. Addy’s observations, writes Quartermain, “point to let’s call it the animal world, instinctual and indecipherable but not after all so Other as we might think....”⁵

Might this comment reveal a fertile anxiety? What *do* we think? Quartermain asks us to make a deal with him, perhaps because a discussion of the term “animal world” would be a distraction, but he may feel that his motive might be misunderstood, or that the animal world he’s referring to remains out of reach of the language available to him, or of critical language, or of a common language he might share with others, or that the perhaps the condition he alludes to

is pre-linguistic, or extra-linguistic, or that the imprecise language available is fatally open to misinterpretation, or that soppy, romantic clichés have worn out their welcome, or that the strident propaganda of environmentalism and new-age rapture have poisoned the language with simplistic catch phrases, or, finally, that the signals are inevitably “indecipherable,” even when one is attentive to them. His deal? In order to continue we’re being asked, implicitly, to suspend any debate.

I shouldn’t be surprised by the persistence of this habitual notion of two worlds, especially as it’s difficult to grasp an understanding of each and the relationship between them is traditionally fluid. Let’s take a cue from Quartermain’s division into “animal” and “human” worlds. If the curtain were to drop (I’m thinking of the Kwak’waka’wakw *galsgamlila*, or the “first to appear in the house” ceremony), I think we’d discover that the Other and the Other’s Other (*nous autres*) have been sharing the same room from the beginning. Yet the curtain or veil between the two remains in place. By all accounts, the border can be a dangerous place, perhaps because the categories are fluid and potentially treacherous; one can be “taken.” Persons who travel to the Other world, should they return, are changed forever. And what is meant by instinct? Is a human’s mind not also instinctual? Is the mind of a wolverine instinctual only? Perhaps there’s one mind, and each creature has evolved a way of using it differently.

In Coleridge’s mind, the distinction between human and animal is found in language, or “articulated sound.” Only humans compose poetry, which, he speculates, “. . . is the preparation for art, inasmuch as it avails itself of the forms of nature to recall, to express, and to modify the thoughts and feelings of the mind.”⁶ Poetry’s mimetic suiting up in “the forms of nature”—has Coleridge been listening to Obo Addy?—is critical to the processes of *infusion* and *transference* that act as catalysts for reconciling man and nature—a *moral* concept. Art, writes Coleridge,

. . . is the mediatrix between, and reconciler of, nature and man. It is, therefore, the power of humanizing nature, of infusing the thoughts and passions of man into everything which is the object of his contemplation; colour, form, motion and sound, are the elements which it combines, and it stamps them into unity in the mould of a moral idea.”⁷

Unity, or what Coleridge calls “unity in Multeity,” comes about through transference and reconciliation, each of which are aesthetic processes that bring nature and man into harmony.⁸ These processes would have been “second nature” on Kodiak Island during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when Alutiiq whaling fraternities danced masks carved to represent the elongated heads of birds. The birds were designed as emissaries, travelling on missions between the worlds of human beings, their ancestors, animals, and the domain of supernatural forces.

In his catalogue essay for the *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* exhibition in New York in 1946, Barnett Newman proposed that an Indigenous artwork “was a carrier of the awesome feeling...felt before the terror of the unknowable.”⁹ It reads like a cliché, but I don’t think Newman meant to suggest that only indigenous artists experience terror; I believe he was trying to express a kind of solidarity. It’s the idea of “the unknowable” that’s misleading. For their cosmology was as “knowable” and well known to the Alutiit as Christian or Islamic cosmology is to one steeped in the narratives of the Bible or the Koran. One fears what one *knows*. Perhaps culture is the by-product of attempts to embody and shore up knowing within not-knowing, harmony within disharmony, reconciliation within the irreconcilable. Culture, of course, may be manipulated to serve immoral ends. The artists we associate with Surrealism were particularly vexed by the devastating cultural infections spread by repressive, blood-sucking European institutions and religious orders, and as a result took great interest in the transformative ceremonial arts of the Northwest coast and Alaska. Exiled in New York during WW II, Breton, Matta and others—not always in concert—actively sought what they called a new myth for the post-war world, a catalyst for re-enchantment

In another part of town, W. H. Auden’s divided Joseph in *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* (1944) was also looking for escape. The setting is New York during the winter of 1941-42. (Britten was to have composed the music, but only managed only to set two brief texts.) The Narrator endeavours to impart the spirit of Christmas to Joseph, who’s glued to a barstool. He’s a father in name, but not in fact. Despairing of this world, he longs for another. In the final lines the Narrator proclaims, “There is one World of Nature and one Life,” i.e., there’s nothing more. A few lines later the text concludes with an aphoristic möbius strip: “The Exceptional is always usual

/ And the Usual exceptional.”¹⁰ Auden’s lines can seem smug, or lacking in mystery, but he’s right. Perhaps everyone knows that the Other is only a decoy. Perhaps everyone knows that, like Zero, the Other is a conceptual marker required for the harmonization of the complex equations associated with knowing and not-knowing. One could venture that the concept of the Other is the price one pays for subjectivity. Quartermain knows this, of course.

The poem is a machine for rigorous thinking, and for thinking about thinking during the intersecting collisions of time and space that infiltrate its composition. In poetic thinking, the mind is aware of itself not as jelly in a skull but as a physical body, fallible and proprioceptive, bombarded by floods of sounds and images that penetrate like atomic particles. A poem is the aural trace of this activity, which is always exceptional. Poetic thinking depends on the withdrawal of “the poet” and a surrender to listening, watching, sounding, combining, recombining, shedding, shredding, remembering, forgetting, inventing and notating cellular vibrations. Writing and thinking are acts of pattern recognition that commence with sound. What can this trace offer its listener or reader? Viktor Shklovsky reports that Osip Mandelstam “used to walk along dark stairways. He composed poems orally, searching for the answer in the sound of the spoken word. He used to say that the unwritten strophe is like a blind swallow that flies to ‘the palace of shadows’ and then starts again....”¹¹ Here in Vancouver our barn swallow population has declined by seventy per cent; this simile may one day be incomprehensible.¹² The Japanese artist Susumu Shingu explains that in making his wind-based art he “wants to show the wonder of nature.”¹³ It’s a tall order. What if a poem set out to do the same thing? What would it mean?

Of “Larksong Signal”—we can begin to comprehend the final line now, with its idea of poetry as sound dissolving in the air—Quartermain writes, “The poem’s structure is musical,” and, a little later, “Caddel’s determination is close to Bunting’s, that poetry is sound, and the means and end of his scrutiny are musical.”¹⁴ Quartermain is a terrific guide to the sparks a poem sends off, and still his exegesis reminds me of how difficult it is to articulate what’s meant by musicality in a poetic text. References to music are prominent in Caddel’s poem, and significantly it announces itself as being open to the songs of the Other. It’s a force field. But how does a reader/listener indicate, notate or define musicality? The stave adds

a notational dimension to music. To support chanting from the Torah, cantillation signs, or *te'amim*, are employed, each of which represents a spoken melody in order to indicate how a given sound rises or falls. In free verse, where scansion is not regular, end rhyme is absent and the reader may not be familiar with a poet's speech patterns, accents and common usage, one's grasp of a poem's musical elements remains stubbornly intuitive.

What about Pound's 1923 definitions of *logopoeia*, *phanopoeia* and *melopoeia*? If Coleridge's approach was metaphysical, Pound's interest in "How to Read" was chiefly technical. Like his Formalist counterparts in Russia he sought a practical vocabulary with which to parse works of art.¹⁵ Quartermain draws attention to Caddel's vocabulary, to his Northern dialect and the words of his immediate locality that represent the particularities of specific fields and forests and the creatures therein. The rhythms, the ellipses, the hesitations, the internal rhymes and the play of vowels and consonants are the bounty of an ear and a language tuned to and reflective of "the wonder of nature" within a few acres. Add in Williams, Bunting, Creeley, Obo Addy, a "blind fiddler," rain, breathing, larks' songs, the cries of unheard birds, wind in the branches, memories of tunes and songs once encountered, and you get an idea of the furnace of sensual and intellectual fusion burning in a poem where sense and intellection are one, and indivisible.

"Larksong Signal" is layered then with musical references, but how does this get us closer to a way to talk about musicality? Music precedes and determines semantic and syntactical value. Its elements, including pitch, interval, melody, measure, rhyme, assonance, rhythm, harmony, accent and recurrence, can be quantified, yet remain mysterious. The qualities that move us to ecstasy and to tears remain as elusive as the Higgs boson. One might be capable of scanning Caddel's lines for their rhythmic values and qualities, and this would reveal its subtle aural patterns. To achieve this with some degree of satisfaction, however, would require a shelf-full of comparative scansions, each carefully notated. Notation is, after all, interpretation. The findings would provide a more sophisticated appreciation of the poem and of Caddel's achievement, but would this bring us closer to a definition of musicality? Yes, but only in terms of technique. A poem that summons the voices of the air and the cries of birds, the remembered melodies of a blind fiddler, the patter of rain and the sounds of breathing insists

that readers plunge back into the “instinctual and indecipherable” world of unheard rhythms, enchantment and the repressed.

Some might say that poetry has been failed by the hurricanes of historical, literary and linguistic interpretation, by the tyranny of the eye, by the promise of celebrity and by its sorry capitulation to being strung up like a piñata and whacked by pedants and nitpickers. But the ear can return a poem to life again, no matter what indignities it may have suffered. The ear is the primary organ. Sound cannot be exhausted. “*Sing it— / no ideas but in tunes—*”, writes Caddel, no doubt smiling; sound is mother to the idea.

Quartermain has asked us to consider that the Other is not so Other after all. What would reconciliation look or sound like? Perhaps the musical concept of “contrary motion” is helpful. In a musical composition, contrary motion occurs when two parts move in opposite directions. This occurs, for example, when one part is ascending while the other part is descending. We’ve already recognized that “Larksong Signal” is a two-way valve, a transmitter and a receiver simultaneously. It draws in the familiar, the unfamiliar, “the forms of nature,” the “instinctual and indecipherable”—and who can say what else—and then, through intellection, imagination, mimesis, pattern recognition, memory and other means it transmits out into the universe a new medley of sounds driven forcefully by what Barnett Newman called the “will towards metaphysical understanding.” This is a fierce process, and the creation of a perfect object is the last thing on its mind. The poem, like a dancing mask, is a two-way valve in a world that is restless, changeable, mutable. To see reconciliation as a function of simultaneous reception and transmission is to understand that “the Other” can only stand apart in a motionless state of existence, which will never exist. Conceptually, it seems to have a role to play in speculative equations, but in the flow of life it’s a semantic trick in a forest of semantic tricks. The poem listens to the wind blowing through the beautiful leaves and branches on the trees in that forest.

Mask maker Perry Eaton grew up in the village of Ouzinkie on Kodiak Island. All the houses had woodstoves for heating and cooking, and it was usually the kids’ responsibility to keep the wood box full. After bringing in an armload and dumping it into the box there’d be sawdust and splinters and chips of bark to sweep up. According to Perry, there was an eagle’s wingtip in every wood box. It was used as a whisk to sweep the wooden planks on the floor: the wild in the

heart/hearth of the domestic. Is this not a living symbol of the poem, of a world that is "...not after all so Other as we might think...?" And is this not the world at the heart of our cycles of singing and flowering? And are these not wonders of nature? I think of Ssu-Ma Kuang in Guy Davenport's "Veranda Hung with Wisteria," whose poems are the trace of his contemplations in the garden. The flowers whose names he spoke while reading the poems to his companions were also flowers.¹⁶

In the distance, just above the horizon in a darkening peach coloured sky, an airliner has been cleared for landing.

¹ John Coplans, "Primitivism and American Art" in *Provocations*, intro. Stuart Morgan (London: London Projects, 1996), 140-141.

² Peter Quartermain, "Writing on Air for Dear Life" in Peter Quartermain, *Stubborn Poetries: Poetic Facticity and the Avant-Garde* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2013), 128.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See Eric Bartels, "Drummer treasures tradition while cultivating creativity." *The Portland Tribune*, January 19, 2006. Bartels writes: "A master drummer by the age of 6, Addy has been honing his skills as a performer for over six decades. / 'I was born into traditional music and dance,' he says. 'My father and grandmother were what the British called fetish people. They performed in spiritual ceremonies. The spiritual people, they put kings on the throne. My father was a very important person.' / He was one of 55 siblings; his father had 10 wives, Addy says. 'You know women like important people,' he jokes. All the men were drummers, and all the women were dancers and singers." Obo Addy died in 2012.

⁵ Quartermain, 128-129.

⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "A Course of Lectures: XIII. On Poesy or Art," in *The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 1, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (London: William Pickering, 1836), 218.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, vol. 2, ed. J. Shawcross (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), 262.

⁹ "Northwest Coast Indian Painting" was the inaugural exhibition at the new Betty Parsons Gallery at 15 East 57th Street, New York City, in September 1946. Coplans, 140.

¹⁰ W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio" in *Collected Poems*, 2nd ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 399.

¹¹ Viktor Shklovsky, *Energy of Delusion* (Champaign, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011), 90.

¹² Larry Pynn, "Swallow Populations in free fall in Metro Vancouver, with no end in sight," *Vancouver Sun*, 5 August, 2013.

¹³ See Thomas Riedelsheimer's documentary portrait, *Breathing Earth: Susumu Shingu Working with the Wind*. Filmpunkt/Skyline Productions/WDR, 2012, 93 mins.

¹⁴ Quartermain, 129 and 131.

¹⁵ See Ezra Pound, "How to Read" in Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. and intro. T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1981), 25.

¹⁶ Guy Davenport, "Veranda Hung with Wisteria" in *The Death of Picasso: New and Selected Writing* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, Publishers, 2003), 221.