

The book cover features a background of four vertical stripes of varying shades of gray. The text is centered and reads:

Poet

*Edited by*  
to JULIE ROORDA  
*and*  
ELANA WOLFF

Poet

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*Edited by*  
to JULIE ROORDA  
*and*  
ELANA WOLFF

Poet

*Poems written to poets  
and the stories that inspired them*



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## Contents



### *A Poet-to-Poet Preface*

by editors JULIE ROORDA and ELANA WOLFF . . . . . 13

### *Rainbow*

to ELIZABETH BISHOP, by STEPHANIE BOLSTER . . . . . 17

### *Kin*

to MARGARET ATWOOD, by YAQOOB GHAZNAVI . . . . . 19

### *This poem is not just about sex*

to ANNE SEXTON, by LENORE ROWNTREE . . . . . 21

### *Proust*

to MARCEL PROUST, by GEORGE WHIPPLE . . . . . 23

### *Runaway*

to MICK BURRS, by BAILA ELLENBOGEN . . . . . 24

### *As Browning to Galuppi, The Poet to His Rob*

to ROBERT BROWNING, by TONY COSIER . . . . . 27

### *My Heart Draws Close to Fear*

to GIACOMO LEOPARDI, by DESI DI NARDO . . . . . 28

### *Star in a Manboat*

to ROBERT FROST, by STEVEN McCABE . . . . . 30

### *Writing the Phoenix*

to ALLAN BRIESMASTER, by PHOEBE TSANG . . . . . 33

### *Ode to Contact Lenses*

to PABLO NERUDA, by CATRIONA WRIGHT . . . . . 34

<i>Canoeing Song</i>	
to PAULINE JOHNSON, by KAREN SHENFELD . . . . .	158
<i>Something Rare</i>	
to RANDALL JARRELL, by GERARD BEIRNE . . . . .	161
<i>Homage to Frank Stanford</i>	
to FRANK STANFORD, by JASON HEROUX . . . . .	163
<i>On the Occasion of Visiting Auden's Grave</i>	
to W.H. AUDEN, by DAVID ZIEROTH . . . . .	164
<i>Inanna on the Subway</i>	
to MALCA LITOVITZ, by ELLEN JAFFE . . . . .	166
<i>Leaping Over Fragments</i>	
to SAPPHO, ANNE CARSON, and H.D., by ELIZABETH GREENE . . . . .	168

## A Poet-to-Poet Preface



ELANA WOLFF

Former American poet laureate Robert Hass has called poetry “a very private kind of art.” I believe this. Poems come from and get to the deepest, most secret, most intimate interstices of the human predicament. That’s why they continue to be written, that’s why they continue to be read. Poems are other people’s pictures in which we see ourselves—image-to-image, private-mind to private-mind.

JULIE ROORDA

It’s a paradox that it is in our particular solitudes we most relate to each other, in our unique privacies that we find the most in common. Robert Hass might very well have said poetry is a very *lonely* art. People continue to write and read poetry because they are lonely. Is it surprising, then, that so much poetry arises from imagined, perhaps longed-for, conversations with other poets?

ELANA: Writing is largely a solitary occupation. So yes, the poet is alone, often lonely, and the poem becomes a piece of crafted language in which he or she seeks to frame a face, a memory, a mood, a truth, a moment in time in which another can recognize himself or herself.

JULIE: As we can see from the variety of forms one poet’s response to another takes, that personal identification is multifaceted. Often the recognition involves a concern with the creative process. A poet addresses another as teacher—sometimes reflecting an actual relationship, sometimes an imagined one. The lines of the perceived mentor’s poem trigger or provide a foundation for the growth of a new poem. Think of the glosa form, for example, or the thousands of poems prefaced by a poetic epigraph.

ELANA: Also the poem written in the manner of the mentor, or the call and response poem.

STEPHANIE BOLSTER

*Rainbow*

A photograph fans out the bright  
contents of the six-month plover's gut:  
the last hundred things it ate, dead  
lighters, crushed glass, cigarettes  
until no room. We do wrong

and yet that reek of alley rot,  
puke, tunnel-pent air, I love  
because New York London Paris.

Five times the fish says yes to the hook,  
no to the tug, five times keeps  
what's given, and so the poet lets it  
go (into wallpaper, similes,  
feathers) into the greasy  
rainbow. Can art  
cancel ruin? Who am I  
to gulp the world and live?

### *Back Story to “Rainbow”*

When discussing Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Fish” with an introductory creative writing class at Concordia University, I was surprised that, rather than praising the poem for its clarity and elegance, several of the students found Bishop’s metaphors (“the coarse white flesh / packed in like feathers”) showy and, more importantly, critiqued the speaker’s sense of having done good in releasing the fish as exaggerated to the point of hypocrisy. What did releasing one fish really mean in the grand scheme of things, especially when it was being released into water rainbowed with oil from the boat from which she fished. More insidious, they felt, was her appropriation of the creature to show off her poetic skill. Having long questioned my own “use” of material (was my having written a book of poems about Charles Dodgson’s transformation of Alice Liddell into Alice in Wonderland any nobler than his own undertaking?), I was shaken by this discussion and, some time later, moved to weave it into a poem about the power and the futility of art, and the problematic role of the artist. A poem like this would have existed without Bishop’s, but her sense of simplicity, frankness, artistry, and play helped it to find its form and focus.



*Kin*

*Swaying up from coiled baskets  
they move as if to music,  
but snakes cannot hear music.  
The time they keep is their own.*

—MARGARET ATWOOD, “*Lies About Snakes*”

*Swaying up from coiled baskets*  
reptile and dragon  
escape from ancient spacecraft  
seduce Adam and Eve

like trees of the ancestral forest  
*they move as if to music*  
an illusion of aged limbs  
remembering the hurricane

sound crescendos  
tempt the meandering lava  
*but snakes cannot hear music*  
slither away from paradise

tigers in the jungle  
waiting for rescue  
not our rhythm, language, or kin  
*The time they keep is their own.*

## *Back Story to “Kin”*

From the time I could recognize alphabets, I became a constant reader. I’m also a believer in immersing oneself in one’s country’s culture. The first book I read when we immigrated to Canada in 1972 was Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*. I’ve reread the book several times since, and I still feel it’s one of her most powerful books; the raw energy gets under your skin.

The first of her books of poetry to fall into my hands was *Power Politics*. Published a year before *Surfacing*, and an inspiration for it, *Power Politics* also hit me like a hammer. A collection of merciless images—like that of the famous “fish hook” in the “open eye”—were difficult to digest. Since then I’ve read her gentler poems. When I experimented with writing glosas, I read *Interlunar*. In “Kin” I’m grateful to pay a small tribute to a great Canadian writer.

LENORE ROWNTREE

*This poem is not just about sex*

I want to drink too much vodka,  
and have unbridled sex  
in Montauk, with a man, not my husband,  
just like Anne Sexton.

I want to be that good girl,  
standing in my black slip, all messy  
and wavery on the bottom stair,  
waiting to go up, and unleash.

I want to find a fresh beating flower  
just above my left wrist, cup  
it with affection, then stop myself,  
again and again, from slashing it.

I want to write lines that tear down the stars,  
that row toward God, turn sun into poison,  
and look gorgeous while reading them,  
just like Anne Sexton.

I want to be a reflection in a window,  
shaped like a book that draws  
parallels between orgasm and writing,  
and everything else.

I want to bed all comers,  
but make every one of them wait,  
while I arrange, and rearrange,  
my white silk, black mink, and blood rubies.

I need to write a poem that attacks  
in the guts, casts a gnawing pestilential  
shadow, yet embraces the rat within,  
just like Anne Sexton.

But I don't prefer suicide, I dress only in denim,  
and I limp into poetry, so too often I find,  
I'm out shopping for tomatoes and melons,  
gone soft and on for half-price.

*Back Story to "This poem is not just about sex"*

I'm in love with Anne Sexton. I didn't know it when I first wrote *This poem is not just about sex*. I thought then I was merely infatuated after reading the biography written by Diane Middlebrook. But I should have known better. I'd renewed the book so many times, the library recalled it. Then weeks later as I tried to re-borrow it, I nearly cried when told it had been *discarded* with no plans for repurchase. Especially since I was the one who had ratted on the book, had shown the librarian how the yellowing, tissue-thin pages were falling out. I was naïve thinking the library would buy a new copy. I'd written down a stack of important quotes from Sexton, and because my life is such a mess of scraps I'd lost them. So I needed that book and thought it was only a consolation prize that I was able to take out her collection of essays *No Evil Star* (rats spelled backwards). I didn't know I was in love with Anne Sexton until I was walking back up the hill away from the library, and the slim pink volume opened to a journal entry titled *Roses* from November 6, 1971. In less than 200 words Sexton had written a love poem, a lament for life, a shield from her abortions, and an anthem for women. It was then I started dying to write a good poem for her.

GEORGE WHIPPLE

*Proust*

He liked to masturbate  
while watching savage rats  
eviscerate each other.

At the end he lived  
on Peach Melba, apples, beer  
brought in from the Ritz.

He heard no angels singing when  
he died—only gay aristocrats  
discussing funeral wear.

Too weak to hold a pan  
he left his corklined room  
for a marble one

and is remembered for a Madeleine,  
a cup of tea—the memories within.

*Back Story to “Proust”*

This poem is written in the French sonnet style of four tercets with a final couplet. It condenses four pages of a capsule biography into fourteen lines while maintaining the famous facts of Proust’s life, not forgetting his masturbation, which we can all relate to. I’ve always been puzzled as to why Henry James, who knew all the French authors of his day, never mentions Proust—his French counterpart for voluminous, involved, and nectarious prose.

BAILA ELLENBOGEN

*Runaway*

You hold a runaway child  
to your chest for fifty years  
and he melts into your breath,  
becomes your runaway soul.

I imagine a runaway soul  
is hard on the heart;  
slightly furtive, always hungry,  
limitlessly curious —

endlessly alone. The sun  
is glinting off the windows of this room,  
violent sparks envelop cars far below,  
the faint rubber calls of workmen

bound off concrete walls,  
and your pen scratches —  
scratches its beat,  
beats your heart across the page.

And you talk of boxes.  
Never throwing anything out,  
you surround yourself with boxes of paper.  
But I imagine they are boxes of hearts.

Old hearts. A documented  
collection. Because, you ask,  
What can I do when I am alone,  
but pretend I am not alone?

Shadows inch up the brick  
walls and deep below this room  
a subway throbs through  
underground tunnels.

I wonder, do runaway souls need new  
hearts often? Does beauty make you  
gasp, relief cause seizure,  
the sadness of others drown all thought?

In fact, just now, I saw you slip one heart  
in your pocket and wind up a new one.  
When you get home you will gently  
lay the still heart in a box and write

the date and time and weather on the  
cardboard lid: *May 21, 2009: unseasonably hot,  
spring day*. Around the room are stacks of love,  
and memory. Packed in tissue, straw,

foam chips that click with static.  
A legion of hearts to keep you company  
as you continue following your runaway soul,  
writing a revisionary life.

## *Back Story to “Runaway”*

I wrote this poem while the poet Mick Burrs sat before me, writing a poem. For a few years I was conducting research on the cognitive and creative processes that accompany poetry composition. Besides the data I collected, I ended up creating a collection of poetic ramblings about the poets as they rambled. I've always felt that the best way to appreciate a poem is to write one. Once, many years ago, at a poetry reading, I stuffed a wad of poems into Michael Ondaatje's hand and then rushed off. I wasn't trying to push my manuscript on him; I was answering the words. Similarly I was drawn to write poems as my research subjects wrote. How else to honour the process? Anyhow, Mick talked quite a bit about being a conscientious American objector, and his relocation to Canada. He talked about changing his name, and renewing ties with his old name. I was drawn to his warm telling of his life story. And the effect was more than endearing, it raised an authentic question: What can you do when your heart feels tired from all those poems that have lived through you? Maybe the answer is not a choice: Write some more.



TONY COSIER

*As Browning to Galuppi, The Poet to His Rob*

Browning, Rob, toss this one into the hat.  
An editor calls me Victorian — me!  
Quick bash on the old knuckles, *Don't do that.*

Old prestidigitator, fumble me  
A wrinkling out of this one. Bloody soul  
They left out in Galuppi's Venice, see

They want to leave it out again. "*Soul*  
*is Victorian. Blow the candle out*  
*or seek your readers elsewhere.*" Bloody soul,

The best thing that I have, come listen here.  
Come talk with Rob. My handiwork is yours.  
The old great lusty magic is still here.

Four threes build up a sonnet as three fours.  
Pull the couplet out. Shout. Even what they don't want. Open  
the doors, all the doors.

*Back Story to "As Browning to Galuppi, The Poet to His Rob"*

The séance that connected me with the ghost of Robert Browning required no table rapping. The medium was the editor of a magazine, who had stung me with a rejection slip and a curt complaint objecting to the word "soul" in one of my poems. "Soul is Victorian," the editor said, and I thought of Robert Browning's line, "I feel chilly and grown old." In "A Toccata of Galuppi's," Browning's spirit jumped back a century to commune with Venetian composer Baldassare Galuppi's soul, trapped in a soulless era; and so I in this poem ventured back a hundred years to converse with Rob, and we roughed up a poem together, and made it quaintly old-fashioned and boldly brand new.

DESI DI NARDO

*My Heart Draws Close to Fear*

It took the form of a human  
He came to me in the night  
Leaning in the dimly lit hallway  
Galoshes sprayed with rainwater  
He didn't whisper or tiptoe as I'd imagined  
My name he howled like only a mortal can—  
The cadence just right  
He rapped at my door  
And I naked except for the thick, white smoke  
Enveloping  
Told him to give me a minute  
*Jack*, I said, *When did you start making house calls?*  
From the corner of his cape he revealed his face  
Nostalgia, Baby! His eyes widening, he said,  
Remember how you cried when I gave you breath?  
I pleaded he spare me the truth but he pressed on  
I dove for the pillow  
Everything was stifled by feathers  
The endless hum burying rusted shipwrecks  
Within our hearts

*Back Story to “My Heart Draws Close to Fear”*

An insightful glimpse into the work and life of poet Giacomo Leopardi was offered to me while I was studying English and Italian literature at the University of Toronto. Many years later, I felt privileged to be given the opportunity to translate his epic poem, “The Infinite,” into English — a piece that had moved me significantly during my studies. What I found interesting was that so many literary critics stressed the tenebrific mental and physical state of the poet, which constrains readers to an unduly bleak picture of his masterful oeuvre and also of the poet himself. However, despite Leopardi’s fixation on death, and what many would deem pessimistic and macabre, it is precisely because of his insistent trek to the soul’s dark underside that he ascertains moments of enlightenment. In fact, the last line of “The Infinite” ... *and to shipwreck in this sea is sweet to me* indicates that the certainty of his own imminent end is what grants him heartening spurts of optimism and inspiration. I have always supposed, and still assert, a sense of hopefulness, even buoyancy in his work.

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## Contributors



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GERARD BEIRNE was born in Ireland and was *New Irish Writer of the Year*, 1996. His collection, *Digging My Own Grave* (Dedalus, 1996) was runner-up for the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award. He has published two novels, *The Eskimo in the Net* and *Turtle*, and his most recent collection of poetry is *Games of Chance* (Oberon Press, 2011).

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Among TOM WAYMAN's recent books are a poetry collection, *High Speed Through Shoaling Water* (Harbour, 2007), a critical monograph, *Songs Without Price: The Music of Poetry in a Discordant World* (U of Vancouver Island, 2008) and a novel, *Woodstock Rising* (Dundurn, 2009). He lives in southeast BC's Selkirk Mountains.

MARGO WHEATON's poetry has appeared in various publications including CV2, *The Fiddlehead*, *The Antigoinish Review*, *Prairie Fire*, and in the anthology *Undercurrents: New Voices in Canadian Poetry* (Cormorant). She also received the 2007 Alfred G. Bailey award from the Writers' Federation of New Brunswick for best poetry manuscript.

GEORGE WHIPPLE has published fourteen books of poetry, most recently *Collage with Ekstasis* (2012). He has designed several of his own covers and his sketches appear in various collections, either as supplements to his poems or as stand-alone works. Originally from Saint John, New Brunswick, he now lives in Burnaby, British Columbia.

CHRISTOPHER WILLARD is the author of *Sundre* (Vehicule Press, 2009) and *Garbage Head* (Vehicule Press, 2005). He recently he completed a book length poem titled *round round pOnd*, and currently lives in Calgary, Alberta where his writing is often interrupted by his two cats Twinkle and Squeaky.

ELANA WOLFF's poems have appeared in journals and anthologies in Canada, the US, and the UK. Her suite, "Meridian," garnered First Prize in the 2011 GritLit Literary Competition and her third collection, *You Speak to Me in Trees*, (Guernica, 2006), was awarded the 2008 F.G. Bressani Prize for Poetry. Elana currently divides her working time between writing, editing, and developing and facilitating therapeutic community art.

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DAVID ZIEROTH's latest publications include *The Fly in Autumn* (Harbour, 2009), which won the 2009 Governor General's Award for Poetry, and two chapbooks: *Berlin Album* (Rubicon, 2009) and *Hay Day Canticle* (Leaf Press, 2010). In 2008 he founded The Alfred Gustav Press, a micro press for publishing poetry. He lives in North Vancouver, BC.