

Interview with Méira Cook 2014

Adam Father

by Méira Cook

He wakes up naked and drunk as a bear  
on sun-fermented garbage.  
Hungover and queasy and riled up by bees.  
*Nothing going well today*, he moans,  
life being short and the craft, ah, long.  
Still, might as well take a stab at it,  
lording it over misrule and tending the shame  
that transforms a garden into Genesis.

So there he goes, stalking through the world  
on his back legs, pelting down half-eaten words  
from a great height.  
Whatever he touches shrieks and bellows or writhes  
like the alphabet.  
*A is for Crocodile*, he croaks,  
dashing through the Everglades. See you later!  
And B is for the Wasp that stings him and C —  
C is for the wide blue Ocean  
in which he nearly drowns.

But nothing can drown him, our Adam  
whose resolution is steadfast  
and breezy at last, and buoyant  
as a stone boat.

As is so often the case in Canada, I was at The Banff Centre with Méira. This was in the early 90s. When I was given the opportunity to interview a poet for Brick Books, I knew one of the ones I wanted to talk to was this talented writer.

*A Walker in the City* is Méira Cook's third book of poetry with Brick Books. The opening poem of this collection won first place in the 2006 CBC Literary Awards, and poems in this series were selected as part of the Poetry in Motion initiative. Her earlier books with Brick Books are *Toward a Catalogue of Falling* (1996) and *Slovenly Love* (2003). Méira Cook lives, writes, and walks in Winnipeg.

The "Adam Father" Interview

**1) I asked you if you'd mind choosing the poem you wanted to discuss because I think poets are sometimes asked to answer questions about poems they are finished with or don't maintain interest in or have frequently spoken of. Why did you choose this poem, and what about it interests, or still interests you?**

I wanted to choose a recent poem because the thought of going back to an earlier book chills my blood. Oh Lord, what was I thinking, I say to myself although frequently with more commotion. I chose "Adam Father" from my recent collection, *A Walker in the City* as it's the poem with the least amount of edits in my reading copy.

My continued interest in it takes the form of the usual colossal jealousy we poets harbour towards old Adam. Him being gifted with the power to name things just because he was born at *exactly* the right moment into a blank and nameless universe. I wondered what exactly my Adam-jealousy consisted of. Was it because he's a man or riotous or originary? All of the above or equally well, none.

The solution was not to rename the world — “tiger” for “blue” might muck about with species and the colour wheel but it's no way to escape the cage of language. Instead I thought I would tinker with the heroic stature of the protagonist. I liked the idea of rendering him comic rather than tragic, rowdy rather than serious; a stumbler, a stutterer, a failed artisan.

**2) Do you remember writing this poem (rather than the poem as artifact)? Do you remember what specifically generated it, what your poetic interest was as you approached it?**

“Adam Father” was one in a series of Father Poems collected under the sequence heading “The Book of Imaginary Fathers.” They were written by one of the characters in *A Walker in the City*, a cranky, grumpy old fellow, a curmudgeon (a poet!). Some of the other poems in the sequence include “Vowel Father,” “Electricity Father,” “Our Father,” “Writing Father,” and “Dear Father.” The last is a letter addressed to an absent, peripatetic, lost and wavering father.

The Father Poems in the collection are concerned with issues of authority and authorship, with what is inherited through language, and what is lost — always, forever — in the infinitely fragile yet gallant act of writing.

**3) I wonder what mis-rule he is lording over?**

I like to imagine him lording it over the misrule of the languages and stories and books to come. I've sneaked in an allusion to Chaucer in the first stanza, some alphabetical word play in the second stanza, and an idea of the “stone boat” that is both metaphoric and literal, to end off with.

You see it would be easy enough to represent old Adam as mishandling the language that he is in the process of creating but I perceived him as even more of a fumbler. I saw him flailing and stumbling and trampling amongst the promise of all the world's stories to come: of the Tower of Babel and the Sermon on the Mount, the stories of The Brothers Grimm and the shenanigans of The Marx Brothers, the Library of Alexandria and the drowned books of Prospero, all the stories, the lost fragments, the dead languages, the poetic muse and the demotic impulse, not to mention that crazy, stuttering pig at the end of the cartoon who tells us “That's all folks!”

**4) Adam is languaging the globe into existence, but his alphabet is skewed, his blundering violent. I had a picture, then, of Genesis as overlarge, clumsy, stormy, destructive. Is this accurate?**

Well I certainly like that, Jane. I like your vision of Genesis as unruly, destructive, wayward.

In fact I've loved and cherished almost all the interpretations that readers, over the years, have been gracious enough to offer. I am beguiled by the over-ness of a poem and the way that it then becomes part of a different interpretive discourse.

I'll confide one exception, though. I was invited, one June, to read some of the poems from my new book (*A Walker in the City*) on CBC Radio. I was awfully excited until I arrived and was told that it was a father's day celebration and asked to read some of my decidedly uncelebratory Father Poems and then chat sentimentally about my own father with the host (my father, I'm relieved to say, bears scant relation to *those fathers*). Oh, it was a terrible hour of stuttering self-justification. I felt exactly like a real poet.