

### Resuscitating the art of Canadian poetry

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## from The Intimate Frailty of Mortals Paul Chamberland translated by Antonio D'Alfonso

Wheat perhaps, roots, reddish outstretch of roots on a twig branching out to the golden corn ear erect under the solar euphoria.

There is fish, water. Water too, yes, when the Earth was alive...

We are fragile if we turn out to be poets: we soon find ourselves standing against our limits not too wisely.

Holding ourselves responsible for this or claiming to be so is laughable, ridiculous too. A poem seems to be random writing.

In ruins yet crystal-clear, such might be the single word of poetry when the Earth faces its end. Will it be so?

Before all vanishes we will need time to put a name on everything, as we did at the beginning, in the Garden of Eden. But naming is possible only if we use silence that drudges at his seclusion. cannot lie. And such might be the Poem. And such might be the Earth.

A face moved by pity glimpsed through the leaves of trees, through the blaze from weapons. The raucous groan of hunger, the breath noxious - for everyone in this world.

A face radiant with tears. Buddha is walking amid the dead, his robe rustles as he announces it is time to wake up.

We are looking for solutions, but we have no idea how to bring this about.

The Earth trembles, bricked in its voicelessness. The Earth? ... What are we thinking of? The pink recess of the mouths of the young, is like the Earth.

This is where the intimacy hides, and melts into the common whisper of the living, this is where hides the Earth. We are unable to sever the Earth from us. We are unable to.

If we do, we will no longer be human beings.

In the end what there is to understand is little, and boundless. Ancient words are heard, those of the apostle: without love, I am no one.

As subdued as a smile under the tears. inheriting an entire landscape, without changing a thing in it, as peaceful as discretion, as joyful as a face rising about the crowd.

The leaves of trees have no idea what they are doing. Wood knows only wood. The human, he, sounds falsely. He imagines he is crafty enough to detune the tuning machine of the universe.

Trees and birds can't do a thing about it. The lack of power is synonymous to sanctioning absence. Tied down to his contortions, the master and creator of nature

But how, accountable for his actions, does he become one with justice?

The hare pricks up its ears hearing footsteps. Gaia's overcoat rises and falls. Venus's liquid glistens with the evening's golden softness.

In Sarajevo, a sniper guns down a child. The blood is cold dew on the cracks of the city, wished-for libation... What does evil taste like?

The moon floats, exuding the rarest of milk.

I worm my way into the fluff of a wing. I throw myself against sapwood, sweetness, corn salad.

- I give into the vortex rising from my guts, I vaginate myself
- outside and offer myself mucous membrane (beauty of starlight).
- In the wing night a thousand suns beat and vest its heat on me.

With all its limbs the framework of animal screams works hand in hand with me.

**Ekstasis** Editions ISBN 978-1-77171-091-6 Poetry 186 pages 5.5 x 8.5 \$23.95



Born in 1939, Paul Chamberland published two *major poetry* collections, Terre Québec (1964) and L'Afficheur hurle (1965) that would forever shift the landscape of



French-language Quebec literature. With colleagues he founded the cultural magazine, Parti pris. He taught at the Université du Québec à Montréal until 2004. In 2007, he received the prestigious Prix Athanase-David. He is a member of the Académie des lettres du Québec.

multiplying my trajectories. Here I am shattered comet, frozen status, rebellion in ruins, rushing into the jaws of space.

Mouths replete with earth, thousands of dead bodies scooped into graves, summer of 1994 in Goma, Africa. Screaming by stratum, generation after generation of the dead piled one on top of the other.

The living get distracted and forget the whys and hows of what others can do to their fellow humans. With Hiroshima and Auschwitz we created, it seems, white legends incomprehensible to our contemporaries for whom the massacres in Bosnia are comparable to the sacrifices of the Aztecs lost in the unreachable recesses of destiny.

The intimate frailty of mortals, savage and stolen warmth, staggering into breath, palms, cheeks, sole of feet: huddling up of guts like a foetus in the organic night - at the tiniest of alerts, the human beast strikes back, must lie low.

# *from* Merging Dimensions Candice James

### Dreamscape

I entered the dreamscape.

There you were: White shirt, blue striped tie; Rosy cheeks, gray hair speckled with white; Silver glasses glinting, Framing questioning eyes; Surprising the bandit smile Tugging at your eyes... "Where have you been?" you asked.

"I've been writing poems on Earth" I answered.

Then... The dream broke, Swallowed you into the other dimension. Gone in an instant.

I see you everywhere now. Your image is burned into my soul.

I know you, But I can't remember where or when; Can't remember your real name.

Tonight I'll enter the dreamscape again, Searching; Searching for my meaning... Searching for you.

### Harbour of Living Wounds

In a harbor of living wounds, Taking a slice of the past with me, I board the winds of change. With past to the mast And blood on the sail, A hunger moves through me Cutting my thoughts Into chunks of quicksilver stone.

Strong undercurrents Run beneath stars in the mist, Balancing on the lips of the night, Calling in dangerous whispers.

The dogs of my days Nip at my heels. A cat jumps over the moon. I throw off my ghosts To the wolves of darkness.

Walking naked through strangers, I am a ghost resurrected By flames of the night, Burning my scars to the bone In a harbor of living wounds.

### Distances

I'm just another distance Too far away, Out of reach, Across the invisible divide; A wall of tears between us, Solid as Gibraltar, Beyond destruction.

Tired of pulling against each other On the river we travelled, We split the boat in half And moved in opposite directions, Sinking into our own realities, Taking the nearest Sympathetic bystander under with us.

And now, Long since parted, We live an adequate existence Of quiet desperation.

If I look hard, Sometimes I can still see Our water-logged broken boat shells Bobbing haphazardly on the horizon.

Out of reach And too far away, They're just another distance To measure the depth of tears we are Away from each other.

#### **Midnight Burn**

The wolf at the door Is pacing in flames.

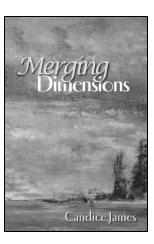
In the dead of a midnight burn, Skulking beneath a frosted moon, He peers, with blazing blue eyes Through the plate glass living room window. The thick glass ripples in surreal shapes. Our images merge in and out, In hazy versions of our other selves.

Stars overhead Play tag with each other, Barging through clusters of windswept trees, Creaking in soft mahogany timbres Singing the body holographic.

In the cramp of a paralyzed second The latch on reality disintegrates. I hear the hard-edged whisper Of a key turning in the lock.

One more shot of single malt scotch And everything is unlocked

Ekstasis Editions ISBN 978-1-77171-071-8 Poetry 116 pages 6 x 9 \$23.95



After serving two 3 year terms as Poet Laureate (2010-2016) **Candice James** has been awarded the title of Poet Laureate Emerita of New Westminster, BC Canada, by order of City Council.



She is also a visual artist, musician, singer/songwriter, book reviewer and workshop facilitator. She is the author of eleven previous books of poetry.

As I come alive and undone In the eyes of the wolf; In the dead of a midnight burn Burning midnight down.

### **Unanswered Prayers**

You prayed for me, Or someone like me.

We met sacrilegiously On the backlit trick of a full moon; And I pretended to love you. Black diamonds splintered Into stilettos of ice, Wounding your tender heart; And I pretended to care.

After a while, I ripped off my mask and disguise. Your naivety broke open, A raw heart filled with lost innocence, Cooked to a crisp Beneath my fiery gaze.

I took you Past the point of pretense Where you learned how to truly pray.

We met again Sacrilegiously On the backlit trick of a new moon.

You walked past me... You had learned the value Of unanswered prayers.

## *from* Identity Dreams and Memory Sounds J.J. Steinfeld

### **Identity Dreams**

A few anxious days before Yom Kippur during a sweat-drenched dream unsettling as scarred memory or uncertain days the vile and cruel Gestapo asked me what kind of Jew I was, Answer now, Jew, and in the dream I first whispered then shouted so that my dream voice hurt, I am a Kafka Jew, a Kafka Jew, and the Gestapo growing viler and crueller during the sweat-drenched dream yelled, What is a Kafka Jew? and I said a Jew who becomes more Jewish later in life, closer to death. That makes no sense, the Gestapo screams as only the Gestapo in films or dreams can scream and disrupt sense awake or asleep and I say either does having a conversation with the vile and cruel Gestapo during a sweat-drenched dream a few days before Yom Kippur.

Later, after awakening to confront a Gestapo-less day, the morning sun not unkind, I scuffle with the memory of the dream wondering why did I think Kafka Jew why bother questioning what I was or am even while having a dream conversation with the Gestapo vile and cruel. I am a Jew like a tree is a tree or a soaring bird is a soaring bird, I think somewhat poetically, somewhat defensively. The next night, after another questioning day,

with Yom Kippur even nearer, another dream, this one in which a rabbi a little like the rabbi from my bar mitzvah and the long-ago funerals of my parents commiserates with me about my previous dream then tells me I should be more of a Jew a religious Jew, a returned Jew, berating me with, What is this Kafka Jew philosophizing?

and I start to argue with the rabbi, Am I any more distant from God than a religious Jew or a Kafka Jew any more distant from a soaring bird? and the rabbi shakes his head at my past and present worrying for my future with anger or pity or confusion, I am more unsure than ever, and I awake wondering what kind of Jew will I be in my next dream.

### A Displaced Jew Questions Himself on a High Holy Day

Why can't I have a Yiddish accent that calls lovingly to the long ago with unencumbered piety?

Why can't I be old world caught by the nurturing past imagining new worlds?

Why can't I enter undisguised an undiscovered Chagall painting to hover above rooftops?

Why can't I dream of Kafka writing an undarkened story with me a plausible character?

Why can't I have a decent meeting with a clever perhaps erudite dybbuk up to no good, maybe worse?

Why can't I write a prayer a Talmudist would grumble at but by midnight or later offer a somewhat begrudging smile?

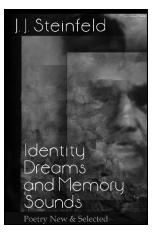
Why can't I speak with God and one of us, at least, have something unambiguous to say?

### I Forget Who Was on Whose Side

a long-ago schoolyard game of war a battlefield or battleground, rebuilt in recollection, words even now carrying and constructing memory I forget who was on whose side what the objectives were we being young and blood-thirsty unaware of formal tactics and strategies or a warlike nature in historical hearts and minds belligerent and combative words unknown to our childish artlessness none of us had yet read Lord of the Flies or Nineteen Eighty-Four or All Quiet on the Western Front looked through the lenses of disquieting authors not a single poem by a forgiving or an unforgiving poet or even dabbled in cynicism or worldly sorrow we were kids playing the primordial, the language rudimentary, too young to kill, too old to forgive

Ekstasis Editions ISBN 978-1-77171-061-9 Poetry 80 pages 6 x 9 \$23.95







has published fifteen books. More than 300 of his short stories and nearly 700 poems have appeared in anthologies and periodicals internationally, and over forty of his one-act plays and a handful of full-length plays have been performed in Canada and the United States.

following the leader, falling into place, I remember that and I remember one boy in particular because someone thought he was effeminate, aloof, and another boy, as fierce as a movie warrior, led a mid-morning raid on the remarkable-bodied noncombatant I yelled for them to stop retreat, surrender, unavailing adult words, and I was relieved that looks were not knives or I would have bled to death that night I heard my father say Europe is far away and Hitler is dead but my father did not sound safe

## ROBIN BLASER REMEMBERED Heidi Greco

nvited out for dinner the other night, I was reminded of just how small a world Vancouver can be. Even though we were gathered on a farm, far from any pretense of city, the surprise of friends in common occurred, amazing all of us: the way Surreyites know folks from Kitsilano and how it takes someone from Langley to make the connection.

In the small world that is Vancouver, poet Robin Blaser cast a mighty big shadow. Towering down from Burnaby Mountain's Simon Fraser University, the spot where he landed a job in 1966, his influence spread well beyond the walls of the classrooms where he taught.

New Star Books has produced a thin little book that contains a very readable pair of extended essays by two respected writers, Stan Persky and Brian Fawcett. Both men knew Blaser well. Fawcett was one of his students; Persky's relationship ran deeper as, for a while, he lived with

him. But both reveal a deep understanding of Blaser - of the man and of his work.

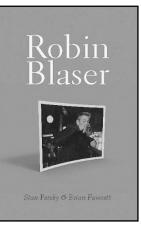
Blaser and his work might find it helpful to read Fawcett's section first. It provides not only a more personable and inclusive-feeling approach, it offers much more context for Blaser and his work. Fawcett recalls being an

impressionable 22 year old and meeting Blaser, one of the professors he met upon first signing on as a student at the then almost-brand-new SFU. As he puts it,

> I thought live writers were going to be like Theseus and Heracles from Greek mythology: half human, half divine, or if not godlike, at least far beyond the human and mortal stuff I was made of.

Blaser didn't disappoint. He was just turned forty, handsome and sophisticated enough to be called, not entirely tonguein-cheek, the Marlon Brando of American Poetry.

Although Fawcett manages to dedeify Blaser over the course of their friendship, he clearly maintains a deep respect for him. But more helpful to the reader than tracking their friendship is Fawcett's exposition of The New American Poetry, the movement based on the 1960's hugely influential anthology, New American Poetry, of which Blaser was a part (along with Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Charles Olson and others). He provides a condensed overview of the principles held by members of that group, and gives a better explanation than I've ever read on Olson's "Projective Verse." Speaking of Olson's early poems, he says, "His utterly declarative mind packs every iota of intelligence he has into each instant,



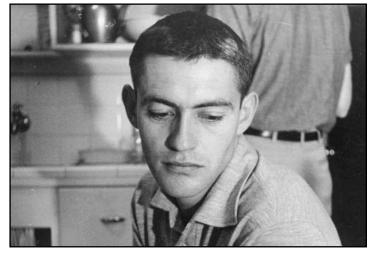
**Robin Blaser** Stan Persky and Brian Fawcett New Star Books, 2010 128 p. \$16.00

Although the book opens with Persky's essay, those not familiar with

Stan Persky



Brian Fawcett



Robin Blaser at Berkeley in California

and lets the narrative and the conventions of the referential universe fend for themselves. Thus the poems move with sometimes disorienting velocity from philosophical deposit to psychological registrations to facts and speculations about local history and geography to what he could see out the kitchen window to cosmological musings, the different modes often lurching over or colliding with one another...". If only Fawcett could have been one of my professors when I was pursuing an English degree!

Persky's essay, called "Reading Robin Blaser" is exactly that. It is an extended analysis of Robin Blaser's poetry. As with Fawcett's contribution to the book, Persky's is readable and insightful. Interwoven into his explications of Blaser's work are his own observations of what poetry is. I particularly like the clarity contained in his remarks about Blaser's Moth Poem, all of which are amplified by a re-telling of the occurrence which set off this particular series of poems - "...an eerie sound emanating from the baby grand piano, as if the instrument itself was playing." It turned out that a moth had got under the lid and every time it rustled against the strings, a thrumming sound resulted.

Persky writes this enlightening passage:

One of the differences between poetry and prose is that the lines of poetry function as "doubles," bearing the meaning contained in the line - the moth in the piano "will play on," that is, will continue to play, whether one reads the moth as simply a literal creature or a representation of the poet – as well as the meanings extended by succeeding lines - the moth in the piano "will play on / frightened wings." And "frightened wings brush / the wired interior / of that machine." This fleeting reminder of why poems have linebreaks is the most fundamental element of the art, yet it's a point seldom made in schools, leaving students puzzled about how the poem tells multiple stories.

Like a poem, this book tells multiple stories, more than the obvious two presented by the two authors. The charm of Persky's essay is his intimacy with the actual work. The balance offered by Fawcett's more explanatory stance makes for a satisfying read. The 16 pages of photos inserted between the two essays further serve to bring the poet to life.

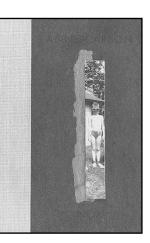
Near the end of the his section, Persky offers this poignant thought, "...we won't be allowed to forget Robin Blaser." This volume further ensures the truth of that.

Heidi Greco lives in South Surrey, where she works as a writer and editor. Her novella, Shrinking Violets, will be published by Quattro Books next spring.

## Anne Carson's Nox, Multa Nox James Edward Reid

"Multa nox: late in the night, perhaps too late.' Nox, Section 1.0

n an earlier work, Economy of the Unlost, Anne Carson examined the nature of the economies in the work of Simonides of Ceos and Paul Celan. Celan was preoccupied by the mass murders he was fortunate to have escaped. They haunted his life and the intense compression of his poetry. Simonides (556-467 BC) was the first Western writer to be paid for his compositions, for writing epitaphs for the shades in Hades. His lines honouring the Spartan dead who were defeated at Thermopylae are better known than his name:



Go tell the Spartans, you who are passing by,

That obedient to their laws, here we lie.

Anne Carson New Directions Books Accordion-folded paper, \$37.50

Nox

He was hired by those who hoped that his epitaphs would somehow preserve something of the history of the unlost from eternal night-if only with a name and a few lines in memoriam. In a 2004 Paris Review (171) interview, Carson spoke of her brother Michael's death, and her "need to gather up the shards of his story and make it into something containable. So this book is a lament in the sense of an attempt to contain a person after he is no longer reachable." In Nox, Carson continues to deal with the death of her estranged brother, and gathers these shards into a box that tries to make sense of his years of absence, her absence from him, and his final absence.

The front cover of this stone gray box that holds many containable things, bears the words, 'Anne Carson' and 'Nox' in gray type. They disappear when the box is tilted or regarded in certain types of light, suggesting the uncertainties and shifting responses inside. The coda on the back of the box indicates, "When my brother died I made an epitaph for him in the form of a book. This is a replica of it, as close as we could get." When Nox is opened or closed, a faint rushing of air is just audible, much like that of the door of a vault. But no vault, grave or stone marks her brother's passing. Nox must.

The left hand pages provide definitions for each Latin word in Catullus' Ode 101, in which he quietly describes his responses and actions



The Nox box open

after the loss of his brother. Catullus' references in Ode 101 and 68 are the only ones we have to his brother. Many of the defined words present usage examples that contain different forms of the word nox. The right hand pages reproduce old family photographs, drawings, postage stamps, and scraps of correspondence from her brother. Reproductions so fine that I initially found myself reaching to smooth a crumpled edge or touch a staple's shadow, each of which was only there as an image. Carson's complete translation of Catullus' poem appears in a yellowed reproduction near the beginning of Section 7.2. The rhythm of some of the lines are chopped and broken by pauses familiar from difficult funeral



Anne Carson

eulogies. Her translation appears again on the last page of Nox, this time obviously crumpled and then flattened. All of its words are smudged by tears, or by their simulacrimae. Her translation carries Catullus into English while retaining as much of the ease and balance with which he presents his sorrow, confusion, loss, and tenderness.. Her take on her own version is different: "No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction . . . I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for a light switch" (7.1).

The right hand pages also carry an occasionally fragmentary, and sometimes continuing narrative of what she recalls of her brother as a child, her mother's recollections, and Carson's own attempts to make sense of his estrangement. None of this is as trompe l'oeil or random as it may appear at first glance. Unless she decides to unravel them, the different threads are woven together. Take the example of the pages that open Section 3.2. The first page describes Carson's visit to Copenhagen to visit Michael's widow who gives her photographs Michael took in different countries "of the girl who died" who was "the love of his life." An empty page follows. The next page prints a thin vertical slice torn from a photo that reveals the corner of a modest house (possibly one of the many childhood homes of Carson and her brother), next to which stands an empty wooden chair. The next page provides definitions and usages of miseras. Part of this entry reads: "miserrima Dido; most sad Dido; (in speical [stet] use) . . . wretched in health, sick, suffering . . . nocte fratris quam ipso fratre miserior: made sadder by the brother's night than the brother himself." The page facing miseras reproduces a small rectangle of paper that appears to have been folded along its four edges before it was torn from a larger piece of paper. It carries only these words, addressed directly to her brother, "Places in the world where you and I saw things" in italics. The change in the fonts and their forms throughout Nox provide a number of associated through-lines.

As if trying to reach back to her childhood with Michael, some of the pages resemble a child's scrapbook. While over every page of Nox, the shade of nox, noctis and nocte tolls repeatedly like a distant bell. Yet there is much light in the shadows of this book, and in the smudged perceptions of the twilight that marks Carson's elegy, lament, reflection, and history in Nox. Celan also believed that "He speaks truly who speaks the shade," in an attempt to understand history and keep it from slipping away. Anne Carson states that history "forms a lock against oblivion" (3.3). Some readers may agree. But there is no lock against oblivion. Even in Nox.

(continued on next page)

## STRAW THINGS Ben Pleasants

would like to have spent a day interviewing Robinson Jeffers. He was a poet of hard materials. The people he wrote about along the Pacific Coast can hardly be separated from their rocky landscape.

That is also true of Charles Tidler. He is a poet of hard materials. Unlike Jeffers, who *observed* the landscape, Tidler allowed himself to become a part of it. Exiled from the US at a young age, fleeing war, Tidler's life in British Columbia was one of broken moments. With a wife and two children and goats and chickens, his time was spent extracting life from the cold, hard landscape. There is much of the great Chinese and Japanese poets in his work. *Straw Things*, the title of his book, refers to Taoist teacher Chuang



Straw Things: Selected Poetry and Song 63-07 Charles Tidler Ekstasis Editions, 2009

Tzu who warned us of the little things in life that bring us down.

Charles Tidler reveled in those moments: the expired truck, the badly brewed beer, the busted fences of farming, the empty belly of poetry. Somehow, when you are young, life goes on with broken moments of beauty. That's all you have time for:

### Damn it's cold/ outside sighting stars/ open cabin door/ to fresh bread smell.

That's the style that caught Charles Bukowski's eye when he met Tidler in Vancouver for one of his final poetry readings. Tidler in his homespun clothes, wrestling with a broken transmission, cut hands , a little grease stuck to his eyelashes. Bukowski liked the Tidler lifestyle. "He could work with his hands, Bukowsi told me when he got back to LA. "Most poets have perfect nails. They never worked. They came from Stamford. But Tidler... he's funny when he's drunk and his wife is beautiful."

Bukowski admired in Tidler what he loved in Jeffers: "the clarity and simplicity. There's no dazzling phraseology." At his best as a poet, Tidler is always looking back at Wang Wei, at Basho, at Kito and Buson. Strip it down and then strip it down and strip it down again until the bones glow in the moonlight. I think he said that one night when we were drunk running around in a swamp on Salt Spring Island.

Time and again he brings it of: the broken moment.

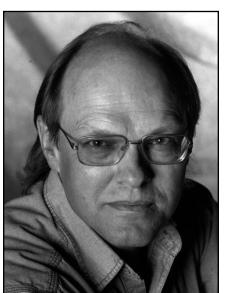
"Tonight I was busy in the garden while next door visitors laughter and music carry -on

My mind became so fuzzy —silly!—. I almost spilled a full bucket of liquid fertilizer (water mixed with chicken shit) on my sandals.

See if that works for you. Read it again. It's clear and simple and yet it brings up so much of what we do in our ordinary, broken moments. There's another element to Tidler too. That his sense of hard survival, Making beauty out of the of toughness life. Bukowski loved that. pretend "Poets so much," he told me. "Tidler has lived it."

"Before dining on this cold winter's evening

let us note the passing of the snowman's nose



Charles Tidler

a frozen carrot sliced into the stew.

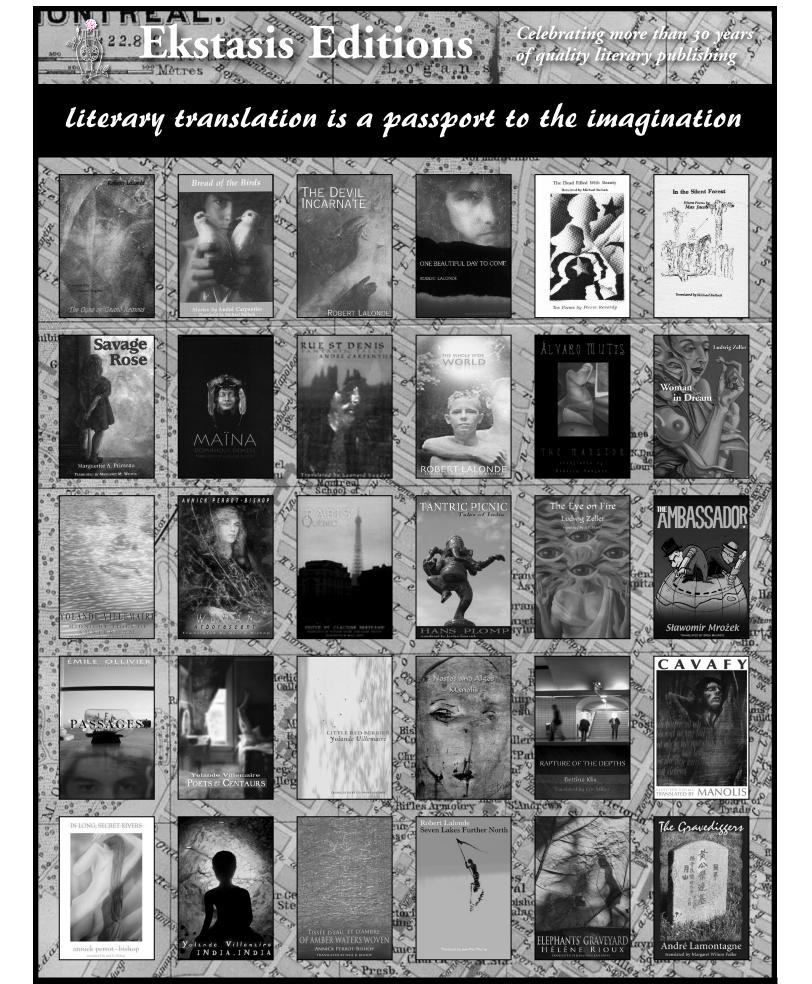
That's what Bukowski loved about Tidler. It explains why Tidler sees real beauty in the painter Bonnard and sees only fraud in Picasso. Tidler could carve a wooden spoon from a broken oak branch and he could do it in words too. Canada is lucky to have won him away from a country that would have sent him off to die for nothing in the jungles of Vietnam.

Ben Pleasants is an anarchist poet, playwrite, essayist and novelist who lives with his wife Paula in California.

#### ANNE CARSON (continued from preceding page)

Looking back is endemic in Carson's work: to Isaiah in *Glass, Irony* and God, Geryon in *Autobiography of Red*, Virginia Woolf and Thucydides in *Men in the Off Hours*, and who creep in *The Beauty of the Husband*, and Sappho in *If Not, Winter*. Throughout this elegiac and hopeful book, the measured description of her responses and actions after her brother's death are as clear and resonant as those of Catullus. With a similar commitment to memory, and a related hope, Joseph Brodsky often said that he didn't write for those who came after him, "but to please the shades of his poetic forbears." *Nox* is one of the books I may turn to, the next time I lose someone, for its commitment to making sense of past and present difficulties, and preserving responses to them.

James Edward Reid is a Canadian writer whose family moved every two or three years. Seven years of Latin study during that time provided a kind of continuity. His work has appeared recently in Vallum: Contemporary Poetry, The Sarmatian Review and Off The Shelf.



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