

Images, Book 1

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Ever since I began writing as a child, my poetry has explored the themes of solitude, love, and death. Lurking under my adolescent scribbles was the question of sexuality, which came to the fore in my fourth book, Bodily Presence. Increasingly, my poetry and my prose is preoccupied by differences – cultural and linguistic – in Canada and between Canadians and people they encounter in other parts of the world. This poem is from my current poetry manuscript The Craving of Knives. (blainemarchand@hotmail.com)

“J’aime presque les images autant que la musique?”

(Claude Debussy to Edgar Varese)

1. Reflets dans l'eau

We are only permitted impressions
as the Docklands Light Rail
pulls out of Tower Hill,
past the sallow tenements
where, through a window, I glimpse
one man, arm raised, clutching
a tea cup while another turns
away. Your fingers staccato on my wrist,
point to the distance,
the autumn darkness clots, ink
stain against hundreds of lights,
festooning the mast of a ship,
the highest building in the British Isles
you say. I am only half listening,
my attention still snagged on that passing scene
in the kitchen. Would he set the cup
down on the table, the other man

*torquere: Journal of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Studies Association /
Revue de la Société canadienne des études lesbiennes et gaies*

Vol. 2 (2000) © CLGSA / SCELG

just come in? Or, is he about to
 chuck it, the other ready to duck?
 The train glides around a curve,
 lights at the water's edge
 stitch the basin's loop. The cars stop
 in the concave of station: Canary Wharf.
 You lean forward, watch office workers,
 collars unbuttoned and ties askew,
 rush off escalators, push through opening doors,
 cram into aisles, onto seats.
 I think of the headlines back home
 – this developmental folly almost sinking
 the family whose fortune
 shores up my country.

You recount how your ship docked here
 that first time you arrived from Durban
 to study, launch your career.
 Even after so many decades away
 your voice betrays the liberty,
 your feet pressing down
 onto the gangway as it bowed
 under passengers' weight,
 the air brisk in your mouth,
 your heart pounding, ignited
 by desire as porters shoved
 your steamertrunks into the boot
 of an uncle's waiting car.

The beat of your fingers against my knuckles
 draws me from my reverie.
 Your voice fills the shape of my ear.
 South Quay. We must disembark
 switch lines, go deep underground.
 I follow you through
 the doors onto the platform, let
 you walk ahead through moorings
 of light into shadow.
 You are still so elegant at eighty-one,
 your height full-drawn.

Your turn toward me, your lips
discreetly curved to a kiss.

2. Hommage à Rameau

The paths are rutted deep in the earth
as they arc, crisscross among unkempt grass
around the oak stands of Hampstead Heath.
I listen to your ragged breath
as you mount a small incline.
It is not so easy as it once was.
You turn to wait as I catch up.
You speak of death,
as you have done several times
in the last few days.
Sometimes seriously,
sometimes joking, ready with a scenario
– a sudden tumble onto Oxford Street
coming out from the Underground,
courteous shoppers pausing,
but not too long, weighted down with shopping bags
they must move on. Never realizing,
I add, you once brought
London to its feet
in Wigmore Hall. So long ago,
you say. So long ago.

But today the music you made is invigorating
as autumn's air. The movements
of branches those notes
in the drawing room before we set out
as we listened to tapes of performances broadcast
across Europe, in Africa. I ask how you drew
these sounds from inside? What deep recess
like tap roots your fingers reached?
You smile at my insistence, my imagery,
quietly say: "practise."
I persist. Before you began,
did you fuse emotion to an image?

Did you follow the sheetmusic note-perfect?
 Was it already arranged inside
 your head the way you have memorized
 every stop on the Piccadilly and Victoria lines?
 You laugh with such ease.
 There's talent, you know.
 Occasionally inspiration." Over your shoulder,
 along the Heath's edge, a white stallion
 vaults over a fallen tree.
 I think of the way my heart leaps
 when I look at you, ask why?
 Is this a search for a father?
 "Sometimes I just let go, follow instinct."

You point the way
 along the path, through a clearing
 to the roadway, the house.
 We walk side by side in silence,
 past couples on benches unwrapping
 sandwiches, thermos of tea. You unlock
 the front door, we pause
 in the vestibule uncertain
 whether to go in or embrace here
 in the enclosed space, unsure
 what holds us together despite living
 in different hemispheres, generations apart.
 A low moan quakes your cousin's house.
 The tube speeds on its way to Golders Green.

3. Mouvement

Belsize Park. Chalk Farm. Camden Town.
 Tottenham Court Road to Leicester Square,
 past Charing Cross and Embankment.
 Our bodies sway with the rhythm of the coach,
 the movement of our thighs this morning.
 We touch and then roll away from each other.
 The powdery scent of your skin on my fingers.
 A tattooed couple in the seat across the aisle

watch us intently. His lips move to her ear.
A gloved hand covers her crimson mouth;
at her wrist, thick loops of chain spill out.
The two stand, leave. I watch your eyes
follow in their wake. We, like them,
believe the truth behind
our relationship remains subterranean.
Each day I have travelled with you beneath this city
past stations with names I know chiefly
from movies and books – Knightsbridge, Earl's Court,
conjured images vague as waking dreams.
For you, they are the fabric of youth.
Depart here and just around the corner,
the church where you staged your first recital;
or here, pass under the subway,
two blocks down, the bedsitter you
and your first lover shared before the Blitz.

Is our love this? A passing in and out
of view, time distilled, remnants trapped inside
the head or heart, a reflection, my face
in the window, thin
membrane that separates us
from dug out earth as we roll
onto Highbury & Islington. This station
we enter and then leave behind,
the route we have chosen
not so straightforward, emotion
close to hand as the folded map
I always carry, refuse to put away.
I trace and retrace our journey
certain only where we've come from,
wanting to anticipate but unable
to follow the announcer's voice
garbled through the speaker.

