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"What a poet writes today, he or she won't write tomorrow" : an interview with Carolyn Marie Souaid

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“What a poet writes today, he or she won't write tomorrow.”

An interview with Carolyn Marie Souaid

« Ce qu'un poète écrit aujourd'hui, il ou elle n'écrira pas demain »

Une entrevue avec Carolyn Marie Souaid

Interviewed by / Interrogé par Jim Mele

JM You published your first poetry collection *Swimming Into the Light* in 1995, and *The Eleventh Hour* is your eighth. Do you see it as an evolution of what you began in 1995, or is it a departure or a new direction for you?

CMS In terms of subject matter and the handling of themes, I would say it's a departure. My earlier books were concerned with the idea of human beings on a solo life journey despite being surrounded by family and friends. I tried to address what I perceived to be the impossibility of truly connecting with the “Other.” I wrote about people from opposing realities, struggling to inhabit the same space despite the vast chasm that separates them. The world I kept writing about was really the world of solitude. That seemed to be the running theme.

In the first book, for example, my concern was about whether an adoptive mother would have a true connection with her adopted child. That was the impetus for that book. And then, later, I looked at the French–English conflict. I was married to a staunch Quebec nationalist at the time and I wondered whether there was any way that the French and English could cohabit peacefully here. In a way, it was my love letter to Canada. And then I got a teaching job in Arctic Quebec and became drawn to the cultural gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous people.

What was interesting about those books was that they were like the conceptual record albums of the 1970s, they were a grouping of individual poems serving a larger theme or topic. And even with my most experimental collection, *Satie's Sad Piano*, I had a kind of storyboard, an idea that I was going for. And I would almost sit and brainstorm and think OK, there will be a poem about this, and about this, and about



this, even though I hadn't written them yet. So there was a definite plan, whereas the writing of *The Eleventh Hour* began with an actual incident.

My dad had fallen and broken his hip, and had had surgery. The first poems documented those days. And then I expanded the range of the book to include mortality. I became obsessed with my aging parents and the erosion of life. What Irving Layton called "the inescapable lousiness of growing old." I considered others in my circle who had died, an old boyfriend, relatives, poets I had known. And each of these individual poems began pointing toward a larger existential preoccupation, an overarching theme. I didn't start with a theme, the theme evolved organically – the eleventh hour of life, if you will. The approaching and inevitable endgame.

JM I find that really interesting because your last book – Yasmeen Haddad Loves Joannasi Maqaattik – was a novel. You talk about having a spine when you were writing the earlier collections, that you knew where you wanted to go with it, which is something you have to do with a novel. Did writing that novel free you from having to have that spine or that plan before you started the new collection?

CMS Good question. With the novel, I had carried that story around with me for thirty years. I had written it as a collection of poems, *Snow Formations*. I had written it as a short story. And then I felt like I needed a larger canvas for it, but writing a novel scared me because I always struggled with plot. When I was doing my Master's in creative writing, I remember my fiction professor giving me feedback on my stories. He always said, "There's no plot here. It's all about language, the language gets in the way. We see the scaffolding." And that annoyed me because, as a poet first, I take pleasure in the music of words. I think the language of a novel should be fresh, alive, it should affect you viscerally.

I knew that I was going to write a literary novel, not commercial fiction, but one thing I learned writing it was that I had to get the story on the page. I really focused on that. And afterwards I went back and embellished the language where it made sense to do so.

Writing [*The Eleventh Hour*], I didn't have a plan. It evolved organically. The novel had a plan, even though I didn't stick to it exactly.

When I was awarded a seven-week writer's residency at The Banff Centre [a writers' retreat in the Rocky Mountains] in 2013 to write the first draft of the novel, I was free to daydream, play, imagine my story. I didn't have any other responsibilities, so I was able to focus solely on the act of getting the novel written. And maybe that's the thing that happened in the writing of this collection too, I gave myself the freedom to play. I didn't come prepared with a predetermined or overarching theme.

The other thing is that while I wrote these poems, I was re-reading Billy Collins, all of his collections, and I really hooked onto the ease with which one line moves to the



next, one idea moves to the next. I really took that in. Not that I hadn't before, but I enjoyed reading them a second time, considering his craftsmanship and technique. I'm sure some of that spilled over as I was writing my own poems. I think it helped me become a better seamstress of words, of language.

JM And did you come to appreciate not only the difference between fiction and poetry, but also what's common no matter what you write?

CMS Well what's common, I think, is that there's a puzzle to solve in both. You've got to figure out how to do it right within the genre you're working in. For me, that's the commonality. And you use whatever tools allow you to fit all the pieces together.

JM When you write fiction and you write poetry, especially this last book, do you have a different sense of audience?

CMS I feel like this book is fairly accessible, and I feel like my novel was fairly accessible as well. I feel like no matter what I write, I write in a way that most people can understand it on some level. So my sense of audience is the same for both. In one case, they're getting a story and in the other, they're getting my thought process. Because for me, the single poem is an artifact of how a human brain is thinking at a particular time. What the poet creates for the page or stage reflects the thought process of the moment. Later it becomes a signpost, the marker of a given time. What a poet writes today, he or she won't write tomorrow. I mean, it's very hard to go back to a poem a week later, two weeks later, a month later and revise it, aside from a little tinkering, because your mind is already somewhere else. Whereas you can go back and revise fiction. Even if you have to make major changes, you can somehow sniff around and get back into it.

I always felt that a poet's body of work represents the stages on the continuum of his or her journey through time and space, which resonates with what Mordecai Richler said about being "a faithful witness to his time and place." That was his job, he said. I feel it's mine, as well. Or at least it's what I have tried to do with my poetry books.

JM To go back to *The Eleventh Hour*, you include five centos or collage poems, work built on lines from poems by other writers that range from Keats to Ron Padgett. What attracted you to that form?

CMS What I like about the cento is that it can allow you to write when, you know, the Muse has left you stranded. Sometimes you just have to roll up your sleeves and get to work. I discovered my fascination with this form a few years ago when I was teaching poetry to young writers at an overnight arts camp, and I had to generate some



engaging writing activities. The room I taught in had a bunch of poetry books lying around, so I decided to attempt a cento, which I had never written before. It seemed it would be a fun writing exercise for my teenagers. I picked a line from one book, then followed up with a line from another, and another, until my poem was complete. I noticed it changed my voice. It allowed me to break out of my usual way of writing. I wrote a bunch and put them aside.

Two or three fit in with the themes of loss and withdrawal that I was writing about [in *The Eleventh Hour*] so I added them to the manuscript. And then I thought, How can I use them? Where can I fit them in? And the only way I saw it would work was by titling them the same thing, which I did. I called them "Augury" and numbered them. Each became a harbinger in some way, a warning that one might associate with the eleventh hour. And I decided, OK, I'm going to write a few more. For sure they shift the voice a bit. And although each is very different, something in their tone is evocative of loss, absence, withdrawal, and longing – they're like little impressionist paintings tucked in among the other poems.

JM You include notes at the end of *The Eleventh Hour* where you give credit to everyone who provided the lines that you used in the centos. But you also include notes on other poems, which is not the most common thing in a collection of poetry.

CMS It's funny you say that because several of the collections I've been reading these days do include notes. In my case, I wanted to provide what I felt was required background for some of the poems. So, for example, there are two poems about Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 that killed my cousin's daughter in March 2019. Her death had a huge impact on me. I wanted to, in a way, honor her by telling that story, giving the background of it in a way that the first of those poems doesn't.

JM I'm glad you brought up the Ethiopian Airline poem. That's really one of my favorite pieces in the book. It addresses your initial impulse to believe and then the eventual disillusionment in the false hope of religious and spiritual things. How did those two elements come together? You mentioned the crash in the title only, and then you have a very personal poem about your travel from belief to disillusionment. How do you see those connecting?

CMS It's a juxtaposition that I chose on purpose. I didn't know how I was going to deal with that subject matter in a way that did it justice. So I decided to revisit an experience I had had when I was in my 20s and went to see a palm reader. At the time I never believed in that esoteric stuff but a friend dragged me there. And I was raised as a Syrian Orthodox woman, I'd had the experience of going to Sunday school, but I never really had the same kind of belief that my parents had. In the poem, I replace



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the traditional church with a different type of church, with the stuff [the palm reader] had told me, which was a story with a happy ending. Most of us want answers. You go to a palm reader, you go to church, you want to know what’s coming. And often they provide you with an answer, but it’s probably not right.

CAROLYN MARIE SOUAID / is a Montreal-based poet and novelist. Her early poetry deals with pivotal moments of Quebec history such as the 1970 October Crisis and the death of Pierre Elliott Trudeau. Other books focus on sociocultural conflicts such as that between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, and Arabs and Jews in the Middle East. Her work has won or been shortlisted for a number of literary awards in North America including the A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry.

JIM MELE / is a journalist and writer living in Connecticut. He was co-editor of *CrossCountry*, a Canadian/US literary magazine. Under the Cross Country imprint it also published a series of books including work by Endre Farkas, Artie Gold, David McFadden, Paul Metcalf, Ken Norris, Larry Zirlin, Michael Andre and Charles Baudelaire.



Ethiopian Airlines: ‘No survivors’ on crashed Boeing 737

by Carolyn Marie Souaid

I once trembled at my mother’s hip
in a ribbed vault of Christian light
while Jesus winked from a jeweled cross,
dispensing hope.

Years later, on the fence, I had my cards read.
It took three buses and a cab ride
to reach her crooked barn
on a patch of earth
where rusty car parts choked among the weeds,
a church, of sorts, in disrepair— all two-by-fours
and scaffolding.
We sat with her tomcats, haloed in dust,
cosmic answers spread across a floorboard.

To quote Yoko, YES.
I returned a believer.
Rapture bubbled in the distance.

Rubbish, all rubbish, it turns out.
Misinformation from the cat lady.

Seems the tentacles of her faith didn’t reach
beyond the tattered outskirts
where power lines sparked and static
hijacked the airwaves.
She spun a yarn and I inferred the happy end.