

Siré, Cora; Blake, Jason

**"memorize the poems you love, you may need them one day" : an interview with Cora Siré**

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“memorize the poems you love, you may need them one day”

## An interview with Cora Siré

« apprends les poèmes que tu adores par cœur, car tu pourrais en avoir besoin un jour »

## Une entrevue avec Cora Siré

Interviewed by / Interrogé par Jason Blake

**JB** In your novel *Behold Things Beautiful*, you write: “Names were the markers of human existence, transcending all other existential details, such as birth date, eye colour or even the thumbprints on identity cards.” I realize Flaco is talking about people who have disappeared from the imagined South American country of Luscano and its brutal military regime... But still... I couldn't not think of you and your name. When I first came across a poem of yours in the *Literary Revue of Canada*, I thought it was a nom de plume! Can you say a few words about your mishmash name and background?

**CS** My name as a nom de plume? What a great idea! Maybe I'll write a metafictional story about a character who uses my name as a nom de plume with comical consequences...

In truth, my family name carries on its narrow, 4-letter shoulders a centuries-long history of displacement. The early Siré's were kicked out of France because they were Huguenots. After settling in Germany, they were again evicted, and began moving eastwards. My paternal grandparents were born in Baku, then part of Russia. After the revolution, they fled to Estonia. Both my parents were born and raised in Tallinn and later displaced by the war, arriving in Canada in the fifties.

So, I can say that I come from a long line of refugees and embody, as you say, a mishmash of identities: part Estonian, part Russian, part Baltic German and part French. Plus, I was born in Montréal (where I still live), which means I've absorbed a dash of Canadian and a soupçon of Québécoise.

As for Cora, apparently my parents picked the name because it's pronounceable in most languages. Although the sound varies (the rolling r in German for



example, or the accent on the *a* in French), I can confirm that it’s never been mispronounced in my presence! Not so for Siré, given the occasional tendency to disregard the accent.

**JB** A great line in *Behold Things Beautiful* has to do with the title of a sculpture. A sculptor who wants to evoke ashes is told, “You could allude to ashes in the work’s title.” The retort is brilliantly pithy: “That’s the cheap way out.” Especially in your poetry, how integral is the title to the poem? (I’m thinking in particular of “Absolutely No Rubbish,” which is a fun commentary in verse about a sign.)

**CS** You’ve definitely hit on a constant conundrum – the titling of my poems, stories and essays. I wish I could say that I pick a title, get it right the first time, and go with it. “Absolutely No Rubbish” might be an exception. Usually, there’s a long, shape-shifting process to come up with my titles. They’re very important, in that I see them as an entry point or portal beckoning the reader into the poem. I don’t always get it right. “Absolutely No Rubbish” works, I think, because it riffs off the jokey-ironic declarations in the poem and acts as a welcome mat to the sonnet.

Lately I’ve been struggling with the name of my forthcoming poetry collection. I so hoped for a single word title, came up with *Somersault*, but was told by my publisher that the name was taken. We settled on *Not in Vain You’ve Sent Me Light*, a line from a Pushkin poem.

I admire how other authors come up with pitch-perfect titles. I’m thinking of *Reproduction* by Ian Williams or *Son of a Trickster* by Eden Robinson, two phenomenal, recent Canadian novels whose titles are both memorable and authentic to their works.

**JB** *The Other Oscar* is about a Canadian cellist who travels to Chile to be in a film. *Behold Things Beautiful* is also set in South America. Is there anything you might identify as being specifically Canadian about these works? Is there anything like a Canadian sensitivity?

**CS** I believe my novels do reflect a Canadian-ness as a backdrop to their characters’ identity quests. Oscar is Canadian, and his misadventures in Chile are experienced through the lens of someone far away from their home, a state that I’ve lived through myself. The protagonist in *Behold Things Beautiful* returns to her home country in Latin America after twelve years of exile in Canada. Her country has changed and so has she. She’s become an outsider. In both cases, the characters’ reference points to their new settings are grounded by their lives in Montréal.

If there’s a Canadian sensibility, it might have to do with the chafing of the insider/outsider perspective we carry within ourselves. I feel more Canadian when I’m elsewhere, less Canadian when I’m at home. There’s a need, wherever you are, to fit in, to



feel you belong. I don't think that's uniquely Canadian. I do think there's a self-questioning in Canada, as we vacillate between being an outsider looking in and being an insider looking out. Partly, I think, because we're living next door to a cultural behemoth. We absorb American films, TV shows, books, and art as outsiders, no matter how long we've lived on this continent.

Within Canada, we also feel this chafing. It's a tension exacerbated, I think, by the sheer size of our country and the diversity of our landscapes and cultures. It happens when someone from a small town goes to the city, or vice versa, when a city person navigates small town life, or when we travel to other provinces. I once attended a reading by Karen Solie, a very fine poet who grew up in the prairies of Saskatchewan. She said that when she went to Fredericton, New Brunswick, all the trees unsettled her because they prevented her from seeing the horizon.

**JB** You write in English but include other languages (and you manage this without sounding pompous or silly!). What advantage is there to using, say, Spanish in an English novel?

**CS** It's a good question, one that has to do with the author's sleight of hand in conveying the essence of a setting. The Spanish phrases in my novels remind the reader that the action is taking place in a Spanish-speaking milieu. The smattering of foreign words is never translated, but hopefully used judiciously to situate the reader without confusing her.

When I'm writing, I do have to restrain myself from incorporating too many languages in my texts. This has to do with my thinking and origins. I grew up in a household where Russian, Estonian and German were spoken, along with English and French. Because of my partner (who is half Czech, half Slovenian, was born in Italy and grew up in Argentina), I've spent time in Latin America, and have learned Spanish. All these languages float through my head even though I'm writing in English. Sometimes they want to muscle their way into a story, and I have to be careful. It doesn't make sense for a Canadian character to suddenly speak of *Sehnsucht* or crave some *dulce de leche* ice cream, lovely words that might pop into my imagination.

**JB** *Behold Things Beautiful* includes this lovely line: “memorize the poems you love, you may need them one day and they could save you.” Is this your belief too?

**CS** Absolutely! As a little kid, when I was anxious or stressed, I used to recite, in my head, the verses my parents read to me. The words had a wonderful calming and grounding effect. Of course, there's a massive leap from the stress of being caught committing a childish misdemeanor to the terror of being arrested and imprisoned, the fate of my character in *Behold Things Beautiful*. Poetry is what landed her in prison,



and poetry is what saved her. Nights, in her cell, she'd recite the poems she'd memorized. Not her own works, but those of others as a means to transcend her terror.

As I was writing the novel, I read a lot of books by and about prisoners, including those held by the dictatorships of the seventies in Latin America. In my research, I came across a poetry collection published in the US in 2007. *Poems from Guantánamo: The Detainees Speak* includes twenty-two poems written by prisoners held in the American military detention centre in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, after 9/11. Despite enormous obstacles and horrendous conditions, some of the prisoners were able to write poetry. The power of their words resonates deeply.

The book includes an afterword written by Ariel Dorfman, the Chilean American author and human rights activist. He describes encountering a woman in Paris who'd been arrested and tortured during the Pinochet dictatorship. "It was poetry," she told him, "which had allowed her to survive. In the fierce darkness of her ordeal, she repeated to herself those verses sent from some dead poet ..." The poetry, Dorfman writes, "protected her besieged identity, the one thing those jailers could not touch, could not deny her, could not erase: just some words ... some precarious, almost evanescent, words from the past as a defense against what seemed an eternity of pain and humiliation."

**JB** Your husband has joked that your work is not a reflection of your optimistic personality. Do you consciously adopt a writer's voice or persona? Or does it depend on the work?

**CS** My beloved Otokar thinks I should lighten up! That my writing is too serious, and doesn't hold enough of what he seems to enjoy about me, my sense of humour and appreciation for the absurd. He's partly correct. In my defense, I'll say this: outrage is a potent creative fuel. Many of my stories, essays and poems were born out of an urgent impulse to process and express my outrage at specific forms of injustice, marginalization, or exclusion. But there's nothing more lovely than reading from *The Other Oscar* at a literary event, and hearing people laugh during the passage when Oscar, tipsy on pisco sours, tries to deliver "I Am," an existential sonnet by Borges, to a crowd of strangers.

More humbly, writing funny is really hard! I love the laugh-out-loud absurdity you'll find in passages where the writer uses humour to expose a world's dysfunctions. Maybe I should give it a whirl. In that story you triggered (in your first question) about a character whose nom de plume is Cora Siré ...



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**CORA SIRÉ** / is the author of the poetry collections *Signs of Subversive Innocents* (Signature Editions, 2014) and the forthcoming *Not in Vain You've Sent Me Light* (Guernica Editions), the novella *The Other Oscar* (Quattro Books, 2016), and the novel *Behold Things Beautiful* (Signature Editions, 2016). Her website: <http://quena.ca/>



## Note to a Mapless Self

by Cora Siré

When wiry springs resist  
your bounce and dagger days  
of jealousy, indifference  
weaken and diffuse, reach  
back to good old Wordsworth  
wild, eccentric and bizarre  
who sometimes got it right:  
*Heaven lies about us in our infancy!*

The trick's to be pre-emptive,  
sharp and self-aware.  
Take an axe to angst  
your clingy friend, taste  
magic in the air, read  
your Blake to vault rejection.  
*Whether in Heav'n ye wander fair,*  
laugh lonely at your inside jokes,  
borrow from Japanese poetics,  
get who on earth you are.

Eliot was full of it:  
*I shall not want Honour in Heaven.*  
Of course you will!  
Take flight you trampoliner, dare  
to tumble, somersault,  
vault bluewards and be true  
to Pushkin's promise to the angel:  
*Not in vain you've sent me light.*