



Dan Harasymchuk, Photograph of Steven Heighton at the Eden Mills Writers' Festival in 2017 (CC BY-SA 4.0)

ALYDA FABER

“WHEN I FINALLY LEARN TO LOVE”: AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN HEIGHTON

STEVEN HEIGHTON was born and raised in Toronto as well as Red Lake, Northern Ontario. As a writer and occasional teacher, he lived in Western Canada, Japan, and, for the past thirty years, Kingston, Ontario. He published seven volumes of poetry: *Stalin's Carnival* (1989), *Foreign Ghosts* (1989), *The Ecstasy of Skeptics* (1994), *The Address Book* (2004), *Patient Frame* (2010), *The Waking Comes Late* (2016), and *Selected Poems 1983-2020* (2021). His fiction includes *Flight Paths of the Emperor* (1992), *On earth as it is* (1995), *The Shadow Boxer* (2000), *Afterlands* (2005), *Every Lost Country* (2010), *The Dead Are More Visible* (2012), and *The Nightingale Won't Let You Sleep* (2017). His four non-fiction books are *The Admen Move on Lhasa: Writing and Culture in a Virtual World* (1997), *Workbook: Memos and Dispatches on Writing* (2011), *Reaching Mithymna: Among the Volunteers and Refugees on Lesbos* (2020), and *The Virtues of Disillusionment* (2020). His work has also appeared in *Agni*, *Best American Poetry*, *Best Canadian Poetry*, *Best English Stories*, *Granta*, *London Magazine*, *London Review of Books*, *Poetry*, *Tin House*, *TLR*, *The Walrus*, and *Zoetrope*, and in 2021 he released his first album, *The Devil's Share*.

Heighton was a versatile writer and an exquisite stylist, bringing together the physical and the philosophical while retaining the emotional intensity of the deeply personal and political. George Murray describes him as among the “royalty in the CanLit world,” “a lyrical experimentalist and a metaphysical philosopher with a formalist’s ear,” who, in making a name for himself, also drew international attention to other Canadian writers. In his introduction to Heighton’s first poetry collection, re-issued in 2013, Ken Babstock notes the “vibrancy and veering turns and wind-sprint syntax in the poems” with their enduring themes of “[e]rotic and familial love, the body’s kinetic energies, a mature awareness of time’s designs on that body,

history manifest in the present, violence, death, and our stubborn urge to sing in its shadow.” In response to his first novel, *Publishers Weekly* praises the “texture, grit and pure narrative grace” of his writing with its wide range, from “near Lawrentian lyricism to blunt, gripping simplicity.” Jeet Heer also observes that “[Heighton’s] prose manages to achieve the same miracle of incarnate expressiveness found in Joyce or Nabokov, masters whose words are so intensely textured and specific that we feel them pulsing through our body.” Commenting on his first album, Ron Sexsmith says that Heighton’s songs “truly resonate” with him and that they give him “a sort of ‘where have you been all my life?’ feeling.” Heighton’s work has also been recognized with numerous awards, including the Gerald Lampert Award (for best first book of poetry), four gold National Magazine awards (for fiction and poetry), the 2002 Petra Kenney Prize, and the 2016 Governor General’s Award for Poetry.

The following interview was conducted over email in 2021 and early 2022. Heighton died of pancreatic cancer in April 2022, when this interview was in the final stages of editing.

Alyda Faber: Your *Selected Poems* came out in 2021 along with your first album, *The Devil’s Share*. From the introduction to your *Selected Poems*, I gather that you’ve come full circle—that you began writing songs in your teens and early twenties and then shifted to writing poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. I find that the songs, with their great tonal and formal range and their dramatic variety of voices or personae, cohere with your body of work overall. Why have you returned to songwriting and performance at this juncture of your life?

Steven Heighton: Soon after I started writing poems and stories it was drilled into me: no sentimentality, no clichés. They were the hallmarks of kitsch. Fair enough. But after years of fanatically heeding that good advice, I felt weary of always detouring around certain registers of emotion and around straightforward, demotic expressions of same. Over the years, I’d often glanced longingly in the direction of song and reflected that many of my favourites—great songs, great poetry, like Kris Kristofferson’s “Sunday Morning Coming Down” (1970) and John Prine’s “Hello in There” (1971)—are sentimental by the standards of literary modernism. And how many times have we all happily sung along with an excellent song that revives and

rehabilitates a cliché? Don’t let me down, I’m your man, dancing in the dark, coming in from the cold, etc. Musical accompaniment can do that: elevate the sentimental (if not the maudlin) into authentic, redemptive emotion. Defibrillate the commonplace.

As I sank deeper into my 50s, I felt a longing to transcend Upper Canadian reticence and costive over-control, to quit writing in a kind of stoical code. I wanted to get up on stage, figuratively speaking, and belt out a torch song. Why not? Life is too short not to sing straight from the solar plexus, at least some of the time. True, I’d always been trying to do that in poetry, and maybe the lack of musical accompaniment put a useful pressure on the poems to make their own music, but somehow that was no longer enough. As Prine sang, “your heart gets bored with your mind, and it changes you.”

Faber: Leonard Cohen appears to be a strong influence on your album, as evidenced by your gravelly vocals in some of the songs and your prophetic witness to and protest against events and trends in our current age. Your pre-release single, “2020,” also seems to answer Cohen’s song “The Future” (from his 1992 album of the same name). How would you characterize Cohen’s impact on your work, both musically and otherwise?

Heighton: Along with other singer-songwriters who’ve had even more of an influence on me, Cohen proved that song was just poetry by other means. And the fact that he was an untrained and unskilled musician (to quote Judy Collins) was encouraging; apparently if you could bring authentic feeling to your performance, and more or less hold a tune, writing good songs was enough.

Faber: Your album concludes with the haunting “New Year Song,” which you once described to me as “an atheist’s song of prayer.” Could you explain what you mean by that?

Heighton: It’s a gospel song in tone and spirit, but the gospel in question isn’t Christian. It’s a religious song that belongs to no particular religious tradition—or maybe to all of them. To me, religion in the pure sense means surrender to something vaster and realer than our conscious self, our ego. That larger thing could be Buddha, Gaia, the Christian Trinity, human creativity from the Lascaux paintings to Wang Wei, the secret life of fungi, an

expanding universe full of dark matter—whatever fills you with awe and wakes you from the grotesque, poisonous illusion of your separateness and importance. Every gospel song celebrates an abrupt realization that your mind/soul is not trapped in a bunker of bone but belongs to something immense and infinite. So: “Repeat the call, I swear that I’ll / Come forward and surrender.”

Faber: In your first book of essays, *The Admen Move on Lhasa*, you describe your ambition to write “visceral, kinetic work,” which is evident in *The Devil’s Share* as in your other writing. How does this ambition relate to your multifaceted explorations of desire?

Heighton: To clarify terms, I should mention that “kinetic”—from the Greek *kino*, to move—is a word I used repeatedly in my 1986 M.A. thesis “Approaching ‘That Perfect Edge’: Kinetic Techniques in the Poetry and Fiction of Michael Ondaatje.” I used it to refer to acoustical, metrical, prosodic, and even orthographic techniques that breathed life, sound, and motion back into words on the page. Since written words are just glyphs, symbols, and abstractions, the hard job of the writer is to create something living out of dead code. That’s where kinetic techniques come in. An obvious one in poetry is rhyme, whether line-end or internal, because of the rhythms and forward movement it generates through the repetition of sound.

But technique is never enough. The material has to have urgency/kinesis too. Enter desire, which always involves or implies forward motion, from a present where you feel dissatisfied, hence desirous of something, to a future point where you’re either pursuing that desire or satisfying/failing to satisfy it. In a way, that reaching-forward-across-time is the whole subject of fiction and much poetry too. It’s also the essence of the Buddhist notion of karma—that we perpetuate suffering through the cause-and-effect cycle of yearning. If we can just hold still, sit, breathe, and want nothing to be other-than-it-is, we briefly pause the world and create no karma; the minute we move forward toward a goal or wish, we produce more karma, for ourselves and the world. Maybe my explorations of desire in fiction/poetry stem from wanting to understand the suffering and tragic beauty we generate through the kinesis of craving, and on some level I dream (yet another desire!) of freedom from it, in the Buddhist sense. So my exploration is partly theological detective work.

Faber: Your most recent novel, *The Nightingale Won't Let You Sleep*, is set in the Greek Cypriot city of Famagusta, derelict and uninhabited since the 1974 Turkish invasion but, in your story, sheltering a group of people escaping past circumstances. This refugee village is discovered at the beginning of the novel by a young Greek-Canadian soldier suffering from trauma related to his participation in the Afghanistan mission. In the novel, songs are invitations to both love and war, and, likewise, your poem “A Psalm, On Second Thought” asks: “who can sing, and not become / the laureate of a state / of legislated greed?” Are you implying that any human art or devotion can be put to good and bad uses?

Heighton: In that poem I was asking whether song (by which I meant lyric poetry, not song per se) is somehow frivolous—an abdication of moral and political responsibility in an unjust and blighted world. The question is dubious, though, in the same way as Theodor Adorno’s famous dictum in “Cultural Criticism and Society” (1951) that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” I mean, don’t human-made horrors render the poetry of celebration (to say nothing of the poetry of protest) even more essential?

But to address your question. I do think any human art or devotion can be put to good and bad uses, and that’s especially true of anything that connects people powerfully and, however briefly, makes a tribe of them. Singing and dancing as congregants at a wedding is clearly a positive act; the excited sing-song chants of schoolboys taunting and finally attacking their victim du jour is a different matter. Or go back, not far in time, to a village stoning. Or consider online shunnings. New and terrifying research reveals that in all these cases, from the wedding to the internet mobbing, the participants are secreting oxytocin—the feel-good chemical often referred to as a “love hormone” because it’s released during sex, for instance, and when a mother is nursing her baby. Turns out the villagers bonding in their role as executioners are, as they pitch their stones and watch their victim die, enjoying a sort of communal climax followed by a sense of catharsis and connection. We’re a scary species.

Faber: Near the end of your memoir *Reaching Mithymna*—in which you weave together reflections on your volunteer work with migrants on Lesbos and stories of your Greek heritage, including early visits to Greece, your parents’ marriage by elopement, and your mother’s death—you suggest that

your mother wanted to “leave her Greek life behind, at least partly” for married life in suburbia, “far from the old world with its tribes and strictures, collective demands, heritable grudges of ancient standing.” Is it fair to say that your poetry, fiction, and non-fiction linger with what your mother attempted to leave behind?

Heighton: In a way, yes. I still fantasize about apprenticing myself to an olive farmer in Greece, speaking my mother’s mother tongue properly, working outdoors, and living a life more embodied and less virtual, screen-focused, and chronocentric. I’ve even researched the possibility of growing olive trees in Canada, which is only possible on the Gulf Islands, alas . . . But you’ll notice that in the passage you quote I try to be even-handed and appreciate why she might have wanted to escape “tribes and strictures, collective demands, heritable grudges of ancient standing.” Those are not, to me, appealing phenomena; they’re the shadow-side and reality tax of a rooted village existence in the old world—in this case, the Balkans. Maybe in my books I’m trying to create a sort of ideal realm where it’s possible to be rooted and grow olives (or whatever) but without all those terrifying tram-mels? In my most recent novel, I invented such a place—a refuge where I myself would want to live—but then, true to my instinct to depict whatever truths arise in the organic course of storytelling, I had to tear it all down. Maybe that outcome was an acknowledgement of the fact that for many of us there’s no longer any true home.

Faber: In a *Globe and Mail* column about your volunteer work on Lesbos, you refer to the political necessity of charity “in its root sense of *caritas*, love for all.” Were there lessons you learned about *caritas* in your volunteer work that the writing of *Reaching Mithymna* brought into focus?

Heighton: One thing I learned—as did George Orwell in Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War—is that love is not sufficient. In such situations, organization and infrastructure are hugely important. It was only a matter of luck that we volunteers didn’t lose any refugees that month. We were not medics, and we lacked translators, so chaos often reigned. And yet the applied *caritas* I witnessed among the volunteers was beautiful and inspiring, and it certainly made the refugees feel welcome and safe in a way that the more organized NGO reps failed to do. And though we volunteers were

mostly untrained, our enthusiastic presence did make a difference. So maybe what I’m saying here is that *caritas* is equal in importance to logistical chops, organization, and pots of money. It might not be enough, but it is necessary.

Faber: Your fiction often combines the treatment of large geographies and histories with a feeling of claustrophobia, whether of physically or psychically small spaces. How do you see the intersection of the two?

Heighon: I love when careful readers discern broad, repeated patterns in my writing that I’ve never noticed. But, as always in those cases, I’m not sure what to say about them. The intersection you’ve identified here must be a manifestation of some basic obsession of mine—one of those mysterious tectonic principles of the sort that underlie any writer’s work.

Faber: One of the stories in your collection *Flight Paths of the Emperor*—titled with a Japanese proverb, “A Man Away from Home Has No Neighbours”—comprises numbered sections that explore possible meanings of the proverb. And the epigraph to part one of *The Nightingale Won’t Let You Sleep* is a Greek Cypriot proverb, “When you have a neighbour, you have God,” a theme possibly also implicit in *Reaching Mithymna*. What, for you, is a neighbour?

Heighon: A fraught question. I’ve always been torn between a desire for community—one in which I fully, warmly participate—and a selfish yearning for personal and creative solitude. I’ve tried to find a balance between social pleasures and obligations on the one hand and artistic freedom on the other. I’ve failed. My neighbours here on James Street, in Kingston, would probably say I’m a good neighbour—I greet and talk to them, I shovel their snow, I permit their rogue offspring to ring my deafening doorbell and run off or to shoot me point blank with Nerf bullets. But at certain points in my creative projects I really wish almost everyone would atomize and leave me alone. That wish leaves me with an uncomfortable sense that I’m simply faking sociability. That I fake it fairly well adds to the discomfort. I don’t know which is worse: being recognized for what you really are or not being recognized for what you really are.

For me, a neighbour is someone whose constant presence draws you—

unavoidably, usefully—out of abstract introspection and back into the world of concrete human particularity.

Faber: In an essay written over twenty years ago you contend that “art is an invitation to change what can be changed—one’s self, first and finally—and to cherish what is receding, vanishing, as all things are.” The “vast anthology / of the dead” also haunts your work—whether in what you call your “approximations” (translations) or your own creations. What, for you, is the relation between self-transformation and cherishing “what is receding, vanishing”?

Heighton: In those early essays I indulged in the bad habit of grandly generalizing. I try now to coach and advise myself only—and in concrete, specific terms—while hoping whoever reads me will find the ideas useful. What I can say here is that I’ve had to try to transform myself *in order* to cherish what is receding and vanishing. So that’s the specific connection. See, my problem is that I pay no attention. I’m always eyeing the offing, leaning forward into the next event, setting the next goal, and trying to achieve it. So I live a fundamentally telic, anticipatory life—like a good Protestant but a bad poet. I’m trying to change myself so I can honour, and thus memorialize via attention/attentive writing, the living beauty that’s vanishing as I write these words.

Faber: In the poems “2001, An Elegy,” “Elegy as a Message Left on an Answering Machine,” and “An Elegy, Years After Sarah” and the essays “Jones” and “On Trying to Wear Al’s Shirts,” you reframe and repurpose the elegy form with acute responsiveness to particular deaths and losses. What have you learned about “each death’s . . . fierce urging” in writing these elegies that appear to be so generative for your work as a whole?

Heighton: Exactly what I describe in my last answer. Death’s lesson is to live more in the present instead of hurrying yourself towards your own death (and the planet’s, if your hurry involves manic consumption) by drawing yourself into the future goal by goal.

Faber: The speaker in your poem “On a Change of Address Card Sent a Few Weeks Before You Died” has given up, as illusory, the myth of the self-made

man: "myths of Self- / making is just life without gratitude // or form. In those free seasons I liked to pretend / I'd no address, no author." If not as the product of self-making, what understanding of selfhood *does* serve the writer?

Heighton: Gratitude to others, human and otherwise, who have contributed in the construction of your self. True, it might seem you've indirectly created yourself by gravitating toward certain things and people according to affinities both learned and molecular. But where did the learning come from? Where did the molecules come from? All are received or briefly loaned by the universe. You do deserve credit for how hard you work to realize your potential, but beyond that the concept of the self-made person is a silly fiction. Each of us is a collaborative project.

Faber: You also write searing poems that interrogate the conflicted self, "[a]s if something in us does not have our best interests at heart," as you say in a *Globe and Mail* interview. In the poem "The Shadow Boxers," for example, the titular characters are "self-held prisoners / in the mind's shrinking cell," while in "Better the Blues (Unplugged)" and "The Minor Chords" the recurrent refrain "loser" lances the self. Is this conflicted self a help or a hindrance to the writer?

Heighton: I think it's a help to the writer inasmuch as it's generative of passionate, conflict-ridden poetry and fiction. To the person, though, it's certainly a hindrance, at least when it comes to equanimity, stability, and contentment.

Faber: In another early essay, "In the Suburbs of the Heart," you relate personal transformation to writing: "the growth of one's writing—one's voice—is indivisibly bound up with the growth of the soul." Do you still have an (unfashionable) humanistic sense of writing as shaping the writer?

Heighton: Sure, but I wouldn't phrase it so priggishly, and if I used the word "soul" now—and in certain contexts I might—I'd define my terms carefully. (Okay, here goes: "soul" is an emergent property, an epiphenomenon of the sum of brain/body processes as they evolve over time and under pressure. It's not something metaphysical or non-material. The miracle is that

it arises from purely organic processes and yet can transcend and survive them, for example in the form of art.)

Faber: Throughout your work, you often use religious language like “soul,” “blessed,” “revelation,” “Psalm,” “calling,” “reverence,” and “sacramental.” Why is this language important to you?

Heighton: Because I’m essentially a religious writer. Again, by religious I mean concerned with whatever transcends the limited “I” consciousness (to use jazz musician Kenny Werner’s term for the ego). I guess most people would say “spiritual” here, and they’d urge me to do the same instead of committing career suicide by calling my work religious in a secular age. But “secular art,” by my definition, is a contradiction in terms. Okay, some might use that phrase to distinguish the photographs of Diane Arbus or a novel like *Tom Jones* (1749) from devotional Christian poems, paintings of Bible scenes, or Handel’s *Messiah* (1741), but I can’t think of any great work of contemporary art that isn’t religious in the sense that I mean. At the same time, many or most of the artists in question are atheists, like me, or at least agnostic.

Faber: What would you say to your twenty-years younger self who writes, in *The Admen Move on Lhasa*, “art is not only religious, it serves a religious function”?

Heighton: I’d say you were right. And you were wrong to turn on that idea and disown it just because you were derided for it. I’d say you should revise, improve, and republish “Still Possible to be Haunted”—the essay that develops that point most fully—and make no apologies. You’ll be mocked again, though perhaps a bit less this time, not only because this new version will be stronger and define its terms (as I’ve tried to do above with both “soul” and “religion”), but because the world has changed somewhat. These days people—even self-consciously hip humanities profs with their horror of seeming uncool, middle-aged, out of touch with popular culture, insufficiently secular—are more open to the idea that a desire for some kind of spiritual relationship to the world is not only forgivable but a human necessity. To put it another way, Cohen’s invitational songs were getting laughed at or ignored back then—the now-ubiquitous “Hallelujah” was released in 1984

to zero applause—and today the folks I mention above will all sing it with feeling at faculty parties if they get drunk enough. And how (I want to ask) was that ironic/secular/hyperrational approach to life working out for you all anyway? And for the world? It’s worked out fantastically for *capitalism*, of course, but that’s another argument.

Faber: I don’t usually associate poetry with the wide-ranging cast of characters I find in your poems, from anonymous and often unnoticed persons doing small things and thus “*saving the world*” (as you quote Jorge Luis Borges) to brutal abusers and killers. Is this feature an instance of your fiction writing impacting your poetry?

Heighton: I think it must be, yes. Fiction is character in action, in conflict, in argument with the world. To graft such elements onto the sensitive root-stock of lyric poetry would seem, on the face of it, dangerously ambitious, yet there’s a long tradition of it, and poets often do it very economically. Look at W. B. Yeats’ “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” (1919).

Faber: The dramatic action of your novel *Every Lost Country* has its genesis in an incident that sparked an international crisis in 2006 when mountain climbers on the Nepal-Tibet border aided Tibetans escaping Chinese authorities. Your characters, who involve themselves in a fictionalized version of this event, are Canadians: a doctor, his daughter, and a filmmaker. The latter, Amaris, chooses her film subjects by their ability to abrade her, which is consistent with her practice of choosing lovers and friends: “She believes it’s only by chafing up against abrasive characters that you can agitate your fears and assumptions into the light of day, shed them and grow in useful directions . . . [as] harmony is conservative and you can only surprise and change yourself by diving into discord.” How close is your writing practice to Amaris’ lived philosophy?

Heighton: Her personal philosophy/style does amount to a good formula for creative practice: shun the facile and the plausible, don’t repeat yourself, and always move in the direction of your fears and aversions. Or, to paraphrase the character Stein in Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* (1900), immerse yourself in the destructive element.

Faber: You say there are “many ways to sing—many keys, many pitches.” Perhaps related to this, your writing takes such diverse forms—satires, lyric love poems, elegies, manifestos, glosa, essays, memos, meditations, dramatic soliloquies, novels, short stories, memoirs, slapstick comedies, and many others. How do you see the relation between voice and form?

Heighton: First, let me mention the one form I’ve never broached: the stage play. That avoidance and indifference likely flags something significant—maybe just that I’m not as drawn to dialogue as to other literary elements. But there’s a sense in which I’m always trying to sing, whatever the actual register or volume of the voice, and at the same time always seeking the right formal container for that particular voice, like a singer taking his guitar from room to room in an apartment, trying even the bathroom and the building’s stairwell, searching for the place where the resonances best suit the song.

Faber: Your free verse poetry is as crafted and concise as your poems following a defined form. Does this relate to what you say in *Workbook* about the “artifice” of writing?

Heighton: Artifice is essential—which is to say, form is essential. Free verse poetry either has form—an internal skeleton as opposed to the exoskeleton that you find in a sonnet, say, or a villanelle—or it’s just chatter, jotting, typing. The appeal of passing off untransformed personal minutiae as art is obvious: it’s easy and, if it gets read and praised, there’s a really direct form of ego validation (they don’t just like my writing, they like ME). Personally, even if producing such work is easier, I don’t want to spend any more time than I already do in the airless little cell of my ego. For me, writing is an *escape* from ego. I understand that when you’re seated in that personal theatre of dreams and grievances, you can almost believe it’s the realest thing in the world and everything beyond it is less real—a figment, a projection—but the opposite is true. The world is real, and the ego is a construction—a little shadow theatre, like Plato’s cave.

Faber: Could you comment on the importance of the lyric mode or impulse, as it seems to be the pulse of your writing regardless of genre or form.

Heighton: It comes back to song and songwriting. Although as a child I liked to draw, I soon realized that my ear was more sensitive and discerning than my eye. So as a writer I’ve always led with my ear. No critic has ever said I have a poor eye for detail or imagery, but if they emphasize a strength they focus on my writing style—the actual music and rhythms of my sentences. I guess what it comes down to is this: sound is how I try to make you see.

Here’s one example. The final section of my short story “Five Paintings of the New Japan,” subtitled “The Starry Night” after Vincent van Gogh’s 1889 painting (which is even more famous in Japan than here), flows toward its ending with an image of the night sky over Osaka—from the point of view of a beer-filled narrator—written in sentences meant to swirl like van Gogh’s brushstrokes: “He and Michiko swayed before me, their features painted a smooth ageless amber by the gentle light of the doorway. Behind them the brooding profiles of bank and office towers and beyond those in long swirling ranks the constellations of early autumn.” The flow of that “long swirling” second sentence, unbroken by any of the four or five commas I could have used; the internal rhyme and alliteration that, I hope, pull you through along a chain of sound, sprocket by sprocket; and the spatial and temporal movement, from youthful faces up to older buildings and on into starry, timeless skies, are all meant to give a sense of soaring, looping motion. I was cheating a bit, I guess, because I knew every reader would have an image of the painting in mind. Still, I think the re-enactive music and rhythms of that prose do conjure it more vividly.

Faber: In your first novel *The Shadow Boxer*—a portrait of an emerging artist (also an amateur boxer) set in Toronto as well as in Cairo and on an island in Lake Superior—your character Sevigne also describes his writing practice as “trying to work the language so it doesn’t just describe action but re-enacts it, in rhythm and sound; to make reading the words a physical experience.” More recently, you’ve been teaching seminars on writing as re-enaction with examples from the work of James Joyce, Robert Fagles’ translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (2006), and others. How has your sense of “writing as re-enaction” developed over the years through your writing practice?

Heighton: I had no idea I gave the game away like that in *The Shadow Boxer*! To judge by those lines, which I’d totally forgotten, my sense of the

importance of re-enactive techniques was fully formed by the time I wrote that book. The techniques themselves are on display in even earlier books—see my reference to the last pages of “Five Paintings of the New Japan” above—but I hadn’t really grasped and formulated them. They were more instinctual then, more unconscious. Thinking and writing about them over the last twenty years have made them more conscious, but still, if I start a first draft today, I won’t be thinking “re-enaction.” It will just happen, like athletes and musicians who can talk in detail about their techniques but, while performing, execute them automatically.

Faber: What is the best kind of relation between what you call the receptive, anonymous “nightmind” and the contrasting ego-driven, secretarial, “daymind”?

Heighton: The nightmind, the deepest stratum of the self, is Promethean and a very poor liar. In fact, lying words—as with someone in the grips of a mescaline or Ayahuasca trip, when the strategizing ape in the brain is silenced—aren’t in its lexicon. As for the daymind, the ego, its assignment is straightforward. It’s meant to act as an interface, to negotiate with the world on behalf of the person and the deeper self, to organize and execute. It’s the editor, not the creator. Or, to return to volunteer creativity and *caritas* on Lesvos, the ideal nexus between the two minds is like a healthy link between a chaotically productive volunteer group and a logistically adept NGO.

Faber: Why do you prefer the word “subconscious” to “unconscious” in your poetry and prose?

Heighton: I think I might simply have wanted to avoid hauling in all the psychoanalytic luggage associated with Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, fascinating and useful though it is, so I made “subconscious” refer to anything beneath consciousness.

Faber: In your writing about writing in *Workbook* you also refer to the “dreamtime of creative work” as “a turnstile into eternity” or what you call the “sacramental realm.” In *Every Lost Country* this “dreamtime” is figured as a prolonged looking at a mountain: “It’s hypnotic, unearthly. The longer you stare, the more it seems a refuge above all human borders and distinc-

tions and this constant dialogue of violence." The thin air on the mountain silences the brain's chatter: "Dulling the mind, it dulls distinctions, slurs the border between abstractions—right and wrong—or apparent opposites—dead and alive, past and present, you and him." How does the blur of "dreamtime" usher in the "sacramental realm" that you seek as a writer?

Heighon: Well, it's a liminal state, close to dream, hence close to a realm that is or seems timeless. In an increasingly urban world as hurried and chronocentric as ours, the places where time seems to pause are more sacred than ever.

Faber: Your poem "Glosa" also ends with powerful and delicate paradoxes in a dream of a tree growing out of the house of the "you" addressed in the poem. Among the leaves, boughs are hung with skeletons of birds as wind chimes: "Their marrow / was music, like yours now—song. Off the cliff of my tongue I made the music fly / *and sent it down the sky.*" Are dreams and music the marrow and bone of poetry?

Heighon: Yes, yes, yes. That's beautifully put. And it's yours, not mine.

Faber: You've taught poetry and fiction workshops across Canada and internationally, in Russia and the Republic of Georgia, among others. Do you think it is possible to teach someone how to write?

Heighon: As you know, many writer-teachers like to claim flatly that "writing can't be taught." I see that dictum as a form of self-promotion that translates to: "Look at me—I turned myself into a writer. No one taught me how." Which of course takes us back to the fiction of the self-made person.

Writing involves both magic and method. The "magic"—the X factor—is the vision and creative dynamism the person brings to the work—the nether-mind elements. "Method" refers to the actual paperwork, paragraph by paragraph—daymind stuff—and it can be taught. Any smart person can learn to write (i.e., revise) clear, economical, reasonably euphonious sentences. As for the magic, and sometimes the madness (think Sylvia Plath's poems), writers have to bring that to the seminar table themselves via sensibility, life experience, receptivity to the nightmind, and hard work. Still, to some degree a teacher can give a keen student tools to help them locate the

material the world is always prolifically offering. So teachers can't endow you with more natural talent than you have, but they can teach you how to write/revise and suggest ways to open yourself to inspiration.

Faber: Your abilities as a teacher are also evident in your work on the craft and labour of writing. Why does this genre matter to you?

Heighton: On one level it's a selfish enterprise. When I write about craft I'm trying to figure out and pin down exactly what I think about writing, so in a way I'm creating a self-portrait in technical/philosophical memos. But the key thing is that I'm trying to coach myself to be better while at the same time hoping some folks will eavesdrop or overhear and find the soliloquy useful.

Faber: For each of your novels (and your memoir), you've drawn maps to orient the reader to the geography of the work. Is there something more than practicality, for you, in these art works?

Heighton: Yes, I've loved maps since childhood. Drawing them then—sometimes maps of our neighbourhood or imaginary neighbourhoods, countries, or, mostly, islands—was a way of translating my own place and life into a more habitable form. I mean, I was not a socially successful kid (and, yes, my cartographic affinities might have been as much a cause as a result).

The map at the beginning of *Flight Paths of the Emperor*, of the Nagai neighbourhood in Osaka where I lived in 1987 and where my *gaijin* characters all reside, is typical of the maps that open most of my books: it's based on reality but partly fictional. I used an official street map as a template and then added features that didn't exist. As for the one in *The Shadow Boxer*, where I superimposed a non-existent island on a map of Lake Superior, my publishers initially insisted I add a note saying, "not for navigational purposes," in case someone with litigious relatives sailed out looking for the island and drowned.

Faber: In *Workbook* and your long essay *The Virtues of Disillusionment*, you critique the virtue of hope as an illusion that takes us out of the present moment, "our one living present." There is also a moving passage in *After-*

lands—your novel based on the abortive 1871 arctic voyage of the *Polaris*, which left a fractious group of survivors drifting on an ice floe for months—that emphasizes our need for this illusion: “People may say they’ve given up hope of something—at times that seems rational enough—but the heart and guts keep their own stubborn vigil. To say I give up hope is really to plead with life and luck to prove you wrong.” Could you comment on these thoughts?

Heighton: Hope is at least partly tragic, as the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn says in *Peace Is Every Step* (1990). And disappointment is always a sign that you’ve weakened and given in to it again, like a disappointing lover you keep taking back. But of all the emotions you transcend on the long spiritual path that leads, they say, to wisdom, hope is surely the last. And there’s a good reason it springs eternal. That reason might be evolutionary, as hope is more motivating and apt to help you survive than despair. Anyway, as I suggest in *Afterlands*, even the most rational among us sometimes go in for a sort of reverse-psychology magical thinking, trying to fool ourselves and at the same time goad the gods into action.

Faber: Your writing often includes implicit or explicit socio-political views—described by you in an interview as “leftist but with attention to forebears”—which you say must be expressed without becoming “propagandist”? How do you avoid this?

Heighton: In fiction, by allowing characters to evolve and surprise me. By not making any one character my mouthpiece. By writing in scenes—dramatizing—and letting the drama complicate matters in just the way life is always complicating our opinions and shattering our categories. So a reactionary character—someone whose views I find repugnant—might develop, over the course of a novel, into someone who on certain levels is sympathetic. Why not? If I believe in talking and listening to people I disagree with, in hopes of getting them to listen reciprocally and reconsider their prejudices, why should I not also “listen” to my characters?

You know, the problem with many of my allies on the left now is they would rather gratify their virtuous indignation by reviling or cancelling others than try to change those others, and the world, through engagement. The former route is less work, it helps you avoid glimpsing your own sins

and complicities (“We preach on the planet / While we plan out / The beach tours we deserve”), it feels good (see my comments on oxytocin), and it allows you to make more friends and followers, but you alter nothing, including yourself.

Faber: Violence also recurs as a theme in your writing. With its repeated references to eyes and seeing or not seeing, your short story “The Dead Are More Visible” ends with a final interaction between the main character, Ellen, and her would-be attacker, Shane. Ellen has taken out his eye with the steel head of the hose she uses to flood the ice rink during her night shift: “‘You’re going to be all right,’ she told Shane, though really she wanted to take him by the chin and roughly turn his face toward hers and say, ‘Look at me.’” Is the failure to see the other person at the heart of violence? If so, can writing intervene in some way?

Heighton: One of the saddest things in that strange story (it came from a dream) is that Ellen has to injure Shane irreversibly to make him *regard* her—an aging, overweight woman who has grown socially invisible. Your question makes me see the story as an allegory of an issue I touched on in an essay where I described the “ballistic intercourse” between a man and woman who shoot each other simultaneously in Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). Violence is the true sexuality of Puritan America. People are so estranged from each other, in that scene and in my story, that they can only connect intimately through violence.

Faber: Your preoccupation with death is also related to a preoccupation with time. For instance, in your poem “Herself, Revised” the father observes how his ritual reading to his daughter at bedtime gradually fades out: “How does it enter, through what rift / or flaw? Maybe it doesn’t enter at all. / It was there in every sentence: the end.” Your poem “Outram Lake” similarly ends with the speaker noticing a glacial stream “braiding green with sub-conscious silts / from under time’s not quite decisive slide—” What difference does noticing make to “time’s . . . slide”?

Heighton: At times it feels as if it makes little or no difference—life slips past us, and there’s no way to pause it or make it abide. On better days it feels as if staring hard (“if I could start over, I would stare and stare”), pay-

ing attention, and consciously memorializing through spoken, written, or sung words does make a difference and might be all we have.

Faber: Light seems to be immensely generative of metaphors in your writing. For instance, there's the wrenching ambiguity of the image of light entering the eye of a man who has just died in *The Nightingale Won't Let You Sleep* and likewise in your recent poem "Singing in the Grave" with its image of the birth of a stillborn son: "I held him up to the sun crowning / from the lake ten storeys below the ward window / and the molten light made his eyes alive." Can you tell me about the importance of light imagery in your work?

Heighton: Most writers deploy certain kinds of imagery consciously, even self-consciously, and other kinds with no awareness at all. I think light imagery is the latter kind for me, so again you've noticed something I was unaware of. But the obsession you've outed, if that's what it is, doesn't surprise me. I've always been highly heliotropic—someone who craves sun and heat, hates clouds and rain, senses and dreads the daily subtraction of daylight as early as July. I've always simplistically assigned that tropism to my Greek ancestry, but that's just a storyline. It more likely has to do with a fear of time. On the summer solstice, when the light and twilight last over 17 hours hereabouts, the sun really does pause momentarily, and time seems to stall. Then it starts up again, and the light slowly recedes, as if earth is turning its face away from the sun.

Faber: "Appearance / never speaks for marrow" is a phrase in your poem "The Wood of Halfway Through." Is this insight important for your work as a writer?

Heighton: I wonder if it's the simple, central insight of all fiction—that appearance and reality never coincide, and our true lives elapse tectonically below the surface. In a way, my phrase is a translation and elaboration of the Japanese binary terms *tatemai* (surface appearance) and *honne* (true feelings), since *honne* is closely related to the Japanese word for bone.

Faber: You have some exuberant and tender poems about a father's relationship to his daughter and a son's relationship to his mother. The images

in these poems bring together the domestic and the vast—daily intimacies and cosmic space-time. Can you speak to this range of images in connection with these complex relations?

Heighton: One thing, maybe the only thing, I managed to learn from haiku poetry is to find and evoke moments in which the small contains the large—a form of the *coincidentia oppositorum* of Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, and also William Blake (“a World in a Grain of Sand . . . Eternity in an hour”). I recall being struck by a Kobayashi Issa haiku I read when very young: “Reflected / In the eye of the dragonfly / Distant mountains.” That implied comparison doesn’t just involve size—macrocosmic landforms contained in a microcosmic eye—but also duration. The mountains are, by human if not geological standards, eternal, while insects’ lives are proverbially fleeting. There’s great poignancy and beauty in the idea of something so small and ephemeral containing—in this case reflecting—the relatively infinite.

In the poems you mention, I’m partly trying to console my grief at a child’s growing up too fast, as they all do, by bringing in the stars for perspective. In a sense, I’m turning my daughter and myself into the dragonfly.

Faber: In *Workbook*, you refer to yourself as a “*deracinado*” from the nowhere of North American suburbia: “Their life is a postmodern patchwork and they have no native soil. They can write only of their exile, create books that will be their one home.” I wonder if you would comment on the exile from suburbia and the search for home, whatever home might mean. Is this search related to the recurrence of the word “Eden” in your work?

Heighton: Must be. Damn it, though, can’t I find a trope a little less shopworn? Anyway, over thirty years ago I returned from backpacking in Asia and teaching English in Japan to settle in Kingston. On the whole, it’s been a good place to make a life as a writer. Most of my marriage happened here, I helped raise a child to adulthood here, and I have close friends here, yet I still don’t feel fully at home. I know that a sense of displacement—of being a kind of exile or outsider in your own community or country—is famously generative of certain kinds of art. Naturally that makes me wonder if this sense of homelessness is elective on my part—a romantic affectation and/or a creative strategy—but I doubt it. I think my sense of rootlessness and

disaffection is sincere. Would I lose the urge to write if I ever found a place where I felt fully at home? That's a valid question. I can't answer it. At this point, it seems unlikely I'll ever have to.

Faber: Could you talk about the evolution of a particularly word-drunk poem, "Collision," with its cascade of compound nouns ("eyefar," "heatfeel," "bonewood," "eyebright," "uphoofed," "flankflat," etc.)?

Heighon: "Collision" is a poem rendered from the perspective of a deer being run down by a car on a midnight road. The poem emerges from Les Murray's terrific "The Cows on Killing Day" (1990), which, as you'll have surmised, depicts the point of view of cows about to be slaughtered. As for those compounds, they're impossible to defend or justify on the level of verisimilitude. Deer don't, so far as we know, command English diction and an ability to alliterate and "ken" words in the manner of an Anglo-Saxon bard. But they are alert, sentient mammals, so I trusted my instincts and created a translation of the deer's puzzled, fearful pondering as the lights of a car crest a rise and bear down on it. The compound words are intended to suggest a form of thinking that makes fewer distinctions and sees the world as an interconnected whole.

I recall discussing the poem at a Kingston event with the wonderful South African poet Antje Krog. When she asked what I meant to read that night, I described "Collision," then new and unpublished, and told her I had no idea what people would make of it. She looked aghast and said, "But we *dare* not imagine such things!" And she stormed away, shaking her head. Wow, I thought, that woman is in no way Canadian. But I digress . . . Whatever Krog or other readers think of "Collision," I'd urge anyone to read the Murray poem. It's masterful, and I think he—if not I—prove Krog wrong. (She and I parted friends, by the way, having bonded over hand-rolled cigarettes and a very good post-event Scotch.)

Faber: The unsaid also haunts poems like "Variations on a Cranial Cat Scan Profile After a Laryngeal Fracture," "In Order to Burn," and "Dream Fragment," and the narrator in "Variations" asks about written words, the "thin, cold cuneiform / as on this page, / two or more bone-shores // from life?" To what extent can writing remedy what has been missed or lost in human gesture and conversation?

Heighton: Writing can clarify, and clarification can be a remedy. While I'm always belittling my medium because of its abstraction—lines and shapes called “letters” inscribed in an effort to code for concrete phenomena—and while that's one reason I now want to sing, hence re-embody, words that until now I've set down silently on the page, certainly when it comes to discursive argument there's a lot to be said for clear, concise prose. That's what I'm trying to do here: answer your questions with a logical clarity that I feel I can *only* achieve on the page. But when it comes to conveying emotion, our writing—stripped of intonation and pauses as well as ocular, facial, and manual cues—is really up against it. That's where the re-enactive techniques I've described come in. They're a way of compensating for those catastrophic losses of nuance.

Faber: As urgent as death appears to be in your work, love in its complexity may be an even greater preoccupation for you. This is evident again with your album *The Devil's Share* and perhaps most poignantly with the song “When I Finally Learn to Love (Don't Let It Be Too Late),” which echoes a line in your poem about ecological devastation “¡Evite que sus niños . . . !” (“Prevent Your Children From . . . !”). Is there a call to transformation activated by love?

Heighton: Yes, and it comes back to the religious/spiritual impulse I mentioned before. Just as the contrite speaker in “¡Evite que sus niños . . . !” kneels like a suitor and supplicant at the feet of the planet (“*by the time I fell in love / with the planet / . . . it was dying*”), so the singer of that song acknowledges his own insignificance in the face of something larger: love. Of course, some of what we've called love—mannered and codified “courtly love,” for instance—is a social construct, but even courtly love is based on a real, molecular impulse to connect, embrace, protect, and be protected. To accept that that impulse dwarfs the individual “I” consciousness, in its diseased self-confinement, is a conversion experience pure and simple.

Faber: Does Rembrandt van Rijn, the speaker in “Head of an Old Man with Curly Hair,” speak for the suite of new poems in your *Selected Poems* when he says, “the eleventh hour is every hour, as any old man / can vouch”?

Heighton: Yes, but I wish he spoke more for me. I put the words in his

mouth, yet I still don't live the life I sing about in my songs. My books, like my brain, are full of wise advice I can't seem to follow myself. Maybe I made the great Rembrandt say those words so as to lend them sufficient external authority that I might finally comply. Wake up! Wake up! But I just go on sleeping, like pretty much everyone else.

Faber: Your poem “Some Other Just Ones” begins and ends with translations of lines from Borges’ poem “Los justos” (“The Just,” 1981), and it concludes, “*These people, without knowing it, are saving the world.*” Does your poetry seek to participate in modest acts that save the world?

Heighton: Absolutely. I know, I know, W. H. Auden irritably told us in his poem “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” (1939) that “poetry makes nothing happen,” but he knew he was fibbing. It certainly can and does foment small changes among readers and sometimes beyond them. As for song, we all know it affects countless hearts and minds, whether we’re talking love songs, protest songs, or the chants of freedom marchers. Who can imagine a world without song?