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# Painless lesson on the power of word

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tradition, with an intelligence of insight and jest.

Humour is essential to performance poetry; an excess of sobriety kills attentiveness, drives people away with all their suspicions intact. At this reading, some suspicions were laid to rest by the suspect himself. The subject and text wandered from watches to trains to dancing bears to a chilling paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer. The autobiographical preamble appended to spoken verse were present but with more of an eye to creation word-work rather than the emotions or events contained in them. Two poems concerning trains were read in tandem to compare Canadian and British locomotion. Birney declared they weren't poems so much as "a sort of rhythmic word ramble." They

were never read the same way twice—which is "damn sensible, don't you think?"

With that he tapped his foot and that raspy melodic voice spilled out a sort of rhythmic word association which mystified the audience for two pieces. These were punctuated with an impromptu travelogue and such historical notes as the origin of the Pullman step. A nice, painless lesson on the power of word and the taking of poetic license. A short piece called "there are delicacies" presented a fine metaphoric phrasing between a person and a watch, the implication of time is obvious but nonetheless beautifully wrought and read with understated passion and a hint of melancholy. Poems don't have to be epics and indeed, are better off as graffitti-elegant graffitti. Words, not from on high, but eye level: ascending and descending.

"Bear on the New Delhi Road"

was read with ironical observation. It is a revelatory piece, a lighthearted report about two Hindus inducing a captive bear to dance. Birney's intonation here was dance-like and archly burlesque. Metaphysics from the ridiculous. But it is the last piece for the evening which compelled a profound silence from the numerous listeners. This was a re-working of the Lord's Prayer in less exalted, more humanly directed pleadings. It is uttered with that familiar singsongy reverence but the words are more appropriate-directed to the ears of man rather than the Deity. Birney would have us be saviours, the original being in absentia.

Because, as the last words inform us, "the world goes on, with...or without...us." His use of pause and stress that is so evocative in this. Birney's keying on his own thoughts in contrast to the original text, a subtle exchange; our "daily bread"

becomes our "daily increase". Very powerful indeed.

Earle Birney reads with the ease of a man past caring about public image and histrionics - if indeed he ever cared. Poets are notorious manipulators in a nebulous medium (what the hell is poetry?), all the more suspect because they use word nakedly—without music or prop. In a craft that demands innovation and playful imagination, Birney scribbles with the masters. He brings a wry grace and involvement to the spoken word which enlightens and entertains. If half the poets in Toronto dropped their pants (figuratively, of course) as eloquently as Earle Birney, we could somehow justify the tonnage of versemakers and wordgamers we produce. Pretense is an effective stage-device: good art and creative joy are the genuine article.

# Bley says she sticks with what she knows

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*yourself or Michael Mantler.* I've been lucky. I've worked with the best trombone players in the world. Mike and I are composers, so I don't solo much and he doesn't solo much. We're just not that interested in soloing.

*You've played with a lot of rock musicians.*

I think for a while I was having a reaction against jazz, and I thought: "Oh jazz people are so boring, so self-indulgent, and so reverent of their art." I didn't want to associate with them too much, so I liked the attitude of rock musicians more. I changed about a year ago. I suddenly realized that was so childish, and that jazz was definitely the only music. It's all I listen to now.

*Mantler: I think it was also a reaction*

to the kind of jazz music that was being played at that time. Free jazz got extremely pointless to a lot of people, and it was boring to hear. And it still is.

*Bley: Bebop, that's what I like. Johnny Griffin...I like everybody over fifty. Really, if you make it beyond fifty as a jazz musician, you're great. They're all great, bless their souls.*

*What's the lowdown on the reformed Liberation Music Orchestra?*

Well, I just came back from Germany where I mixed the second album, (on ECM) and the music is quite similar to the first record. I think it's better actually. And we do songs from all those places the Charlie (Haden) likes: Chile, El Salvador, Portugal, Spain.

*Would Haden like it to be an*

*ongoing thing?*

Yeah, he would. Not with me he's not gonna do it! It's over. I've got a band. I don't have that much in me to give to two people—what I give to Charlie I rob from myself. And I'm not crazy. I've devoted myself to Charlie Haden for eight months now. It's c'est fini. Never again.

*Tell me about the days of the Jazz Composer's guild.*

Mantler: Age-old history. It was about 1964. Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Bill Dixon...Bley: And me! I didn't fit in there either. Mantler:...Carla, Paul Bley, Sun Ra, Roswell Rudd, John Tchicai. It as a co-operative of people trying to change the working conditions of free-jazz at that time. We did some concerts, but there were just too many personalities involved. Bley: It was amazing!

*Sun Ra said that the reason the Jazz Composer's Guild broke up was that it's bad luck to take a woman on a voyage.*

I think he's right. Jazz is rough, locker-room music, and women tone it down. I think there's some things only males can do together, like taking showers and stuff.

*Do you think JoAnne Brackeen "tones down" her music?*

No. She's an exception. And she's tall. Short women shouldn't play jazz.

*But don't you think it's a cultural phenomenon if women "tone it down"?*

No., it's if they're short they just don't have it. Tall big women should play jazz. And take showers with the guys. You have to be real strong -- it's a male language at its heaviest. I always feel totally unequipped when I get up there. I'm not one of the guys; I've never been one of the guys. I just write their music for them; I think women should write music for men. There is something very masculine about playing jazz, and it's a beautiful thing to watch -- I've never quite felt part of it. It's not my language. The Jazz Composer's Guild was a very masculine thing too. They used to reach in their pants and say, "Okay, put it on the table, let's see whatcha go." And I'd stand there and go "Oh NO!" I'm serious. There were many times when that's exactly what was being said. People are politer now.

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