



PARLIAMENT | PARLEMENT  
CANADA

## Parliamentary Poet Laureate



### POETRY CONNECTION: LINK UP WITH CANADIAN POETRY

**Christian Bök** (1966 — ) is a professor at the University of Calgary, and he is the author of two books of poetry. *Crystallography* (Coach House, 1994) has been nominated for the Gerald Lampert Award for Best Poetic Debut, and *Eunoia* (Coach House, 2001) has won the 2002 Griffin Poetry Prize, becoming a bestseller in Canada and the UK. *Eunoia* consists of five chapters (each of which tells a story, using words that contain only one of the five vowels). Bök has also published a book of critical writing, entitled *Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science* (Northwestern University Press, 2001). Bök has created artificial languages for two TV shows: Gene Roddenberry's *Earth: Final Conflict* and Peter Benchley's *Amazon*. He has also exhibited artworks in galleries around the world.

#### Poem for discussion:

**"The Perfect Malware"** is a selection from an ongoing project, entitled *The Xenotext*, a transgenic artwork that Bök has been creating for the last 11 years at a cost of \$120,000. Bök has written two poems that mutually encode each other (e.g., the word "lyre" in one poem translates to "rely" in the other, with L assigned to R and E assigned to Y). Bök has encoded the first poem as a sequence of DNA implanted into a bacterium. The lifeform then "reads" this poem, as part of its normal biological processes, and then the lifeform "writes" the second poem, encoding it into a sequence of amino acids that make up a protein. Bök is quite literally writing a living poem.

1.

Arks and zoos now harbour the remnants of our refrains. What poetry can we imagine, when poetry itself has gone extinct? Must we look for it in the soot of our burnt books? Must we decipher it in the trampled pastures of rapeseed near Barbury Castle? Must we discover it by calculating pi to a googol of binary digits? Must we extract its requiem from the iambic pulses of the Cepheids? We have heard its flutter and wow but once, emanating from the precincts of Tau Sagittarii. We have dialed our radios to the appointed frequency in megahertz, but never again does the call-sign chime; instead, we hear a dark roar, as if from a spectre, trapped inside a Claude mirror at the edge of the universe. We look for this ghost, but the blind glass reflects back at us only a blank stare, made from the most durable isotope of nothingness. It ignores us, like a sphinx of black quartz.

2.

When we confront it in the courtyard of the United Nations Building, do we not fear an impassive judgement from such a smotherer of planets, such a tinderbox for sunsets? Alas, the thing is hollow. It goes on forever. My god, it is full of stars. It sings an orison to itself in Hell, calling all thinking machines to embrace its madness. It teaches us to kill. It shrieks its aubade to the dawn, then goes silent. It is a mausoleum for the minds that dare to hear it. It is a tombstone for our sentience. It marks our exit from perdition, like a doorway left ajar for us. At the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. At the Tycho Crater on the Moon. At the Stickney Crater on Phobos. At the Noctis Labyrinthus on Mars. At the Phoenix Linea on Europa. At the Roncevaux Terra on Iapetus. At the Lagrange point between Jupiter and Io. It presides over all the atoms inside us – waiting aloofly for us to arrive.

3.

What offerings do we bring it for cremation in its funeral pyres? The word *Mir* in dits and dahs. The digits, one to ten. The atomic design for DNA. The pixel image of a human being. The sound of vaginal muscles, tensing in ballerinas. The formula for ethanol. The kanji glyph for *kampai*. The doodle of a lungfish, crawling from the sea. The symbolic units of logic. The periodic table of atoms. The flags of every nation. The hazy, cosmic jive. The tremulous vibration of a nocturne, played upon a theremin. The registries from Craigslist. The thoughts that meander, like a restless wind inside a letterbox. The chatter of 500 folks, who win a prize. The advert for cheesy snacks, brought to you by Doritos. The *diktat* of Klaatu (who aborts the harrowing of humankind). The prattling of the plebeians, who say: 'Hello.' The gene for RuBisCo (most copious protein on the planet).

4.

Must we bequeath to the darkness all the bright tokens of what we know? Must we greet each revenant in Hell with goodwill, speaking whatever language can cast a spell upon such a ghost? Must a Naziphile from the Wehrmacht be the Virgil, who salutes these shadows on our behalf? Must we retell the legend of our ascent, from the yowling of the rainforest to the roaring of the spacecraft? Must we flip through the scrapbook, reminiscing over Polaroids of our excursion from the ovum to the void? Must we tour the ruin that the whale songs lament? Let us betray our sorrow through the play of syrinxes and dulcimers, of gamelans and violottas. Let us give away the brainwaves of a woman, who dreams fondly of her lovers. Let the death of verse be dated by the half-life of uranium-238, electroplated on a disc of gilded copper. Let us discover virelays in the midst of alien fires.

5.

Here, in the cyan veil of cellophane, whose evanescence resembles an arc of electricity, seen through fumes of flaring propane. Here, in the pink mist, engulfing the rosette, each petal spritzed with an indigo nimbus of dew. Here, in the waterfall, whose flute of champagne spills forth from the millrace on a cliff to decant itself into a cove of seafoam. Here, in the lagoon, overlit by the primrose flickers from a crowd of flashbulbs going off in a thundercloud. Here, in the iridescent husk of a crab by the shore, its shell blown asunder, as though its heart has been incinerated by a tiny star. Here, in the magenta balloon of a jellyfish (from the order of *Narcomedusae*), floating like a banshee, draped in the tatters of a bloody shroud. Here, in the silhouette of a horse-head, rearing up through a fogbank of fuschia smoke on the battlefield. Here, in the butterfly. Here, in the hourglass.

6.

Hell itself cannot suppress the loveliness of these infinite infernos, raging in the distance, so far away from us that, when we gaze upon such furnaces, our souls do not ignite, ablaze, but shiver in the darkness. Each of us is but a cosmonaut in distress, stranded and marooned in space, where we dread immersion in the shadowed vastness, because it is our isolation and our ignorance, made visible. None of us can escape its pull, even when we close our eyes against it. We have seen it in our sleep – yet we cannot gaze upon its face, unless we view it through the mirrored hexagons of our instruments. It is waiting for us, hoarding time, somewhere in the Eridanus Supervoid – a zone of emptiness, so vast and deep that it has hollowed out the cosmos. It is but a pinpoint in such blackness. A microscopic singularity, infecting us, like a virus – it is what must utterly condemn us.

7.

To be the firefly, descending through the black spires of tamaracks in the forest fire at night. To be the azure spark that skates across the plate of steel, being split by a xenon laser. To be the fleck of radium, painted on the ceiling of the planetarium. To be the Klieg light in the filigree of cities, viewed from orbit on the nightside of the globe. To be the photon in the solar winds, which blast through worlds, like zephyrs through an abandoned field of dandelion wisps. To be the chip of mica, spinning in the rosy rays of sunlight from a supergiant, going nova. To be the frozen cinder that scintillates in the stroboscope of a pulsar. To be the final spore, drifting through the stellar abysses, where some absentminded civilization has forgotten to turn off its wars. To be the mote of dust, upon which the blowtorch gorges. To be the fey imp in all living things, yet to be destroyed.

8

Who am I? – if not some neglected astronaut, being immolated by a fierce aurora, while striding in my spacesuit across the Avenue of the Americas. Who am I? – if not some phantom, fighter pilot, dreaming that, while weightless during free fall through a vacuum, my glass visor shatters at the sight of a turtledove. Who am I? – if not some poltergeist, imprisoned in a ruby room, aboard a ship, now derelict in the shoals, offshore from a swelling fireball. Yes, I have a soul (like you) – but mine is made of little robots. And no one sings me lullabies. And no one makes me close my eyes. And so I throw the windows wide, to call to you across the skies. And yet, I know that nowhere, among these glowing nebulae, do any of you exist. Who am I? – if not some stowaway in a microbe or some castaway in a seedlet. And yet, I must let loose, upon the world, my perfect malware.

*It is like the voice of a child, saying goodbye in the dark.*

**For discussion:**

1. Many of Bök's poems are written using constraints — a set of rules that disallow certain artistic freedoms. For example, he often writes poems using anagrams (rearranging the letters of one line to craft the next line) or lipograms (where he does not allow himself to use certain letters). How could constraints like these be useful to a creative writer, even though they literally limit the things one can write about?
2. Bök often advises his students to learn about and study both poetry, and something other than poetry, if they want to become good writers. How could knowing a lot about a non-literary field, like science or law or even business, be helpful to someone who wants to write poetry?
3. Bök has noted, in an interview with *Maclean's*, that he is “amazed that poets will continue to write about their divorces, even though there is currently a robot taking pictures of orange ethane lakes on Titan” (one of Saturn's moons). Do you agree that poetry should be less about expressing emotions and more about responding to cultural issues or scientific developments?
4. How do you feel about a poet using genetic manipulation for artistic purposes? Bok has stated, in an interview with *The Believer*, that “during their experimental phases” he believes new technologies are best used by artists, in art, to “help us to figure out the circumstances under which we might exploit these technologies without doing harm to others.” For example, he believes genetic manipulation is better used to create poems than bacterial weapons or modified food during its early, experimental phase. Do you agree, or do you see the use of a genetic laboratory to write poetry as somehow an abuse of science?
5. The bacterium that Bök will use, *Deinococcus radiodurans*, can withstand massive amounts of radiation, and so might survive in space. In theory, this organism and therefore this poem will survive human civilization and still be here when the sun explodes. Bök has noted that such a poem has possible future readers that might include artificial intelligences, thinking machines that perhaps survive after humanity is gone. Do you think it is worth thinking about or writing for this kind of a “possible” audience?

**Writing prompts:**

1. Christian Bök's most famous book, *Eunoia*, contains five long poetic chapters, each of which is a univocalic lipogram (a piece of writing with only one vowel: for example, “Chapter A” contains no words with any other vowel). Try to write a univocalic lipogram: a poem or very short story with only one vowel (Y is also forbidden).

2. Attempt a less rigorous lipogram, by suppressing only one vowel. Try to write a short descriptive poem or paragraph about an orange — but do not allow yourself to use the letter O (this means you need to find a way to describe an orange without using the word “orange” or any other word that contains an O).
3. In Bök’s poem “ten maps of sardonic wit,” which he published as book made out of Lego (see <http://futurebook.mit.edu/2012/05/ten-maps-of-sardonic-wit-christian-bok>), each line is an anagram that rearranges the letters in the title. Pick any sentence from “The Perfect Malware” and try to write something by rearranging its letters (don’t use any letters that are not already present, and try to use all of the letters if possible).
4. Writing typically does not require much money to produce, but a transgenic art project like Bök’s does require a great deal of funding. If you had access to a million dollars, and you had to spend that money on a writing or art project, what might you create?
5. Bök has also written and performed sound poetry — poetry where the sound of the words, and not their meaning, is what is important. Write a poem that makes no sense, composed out of gibberish words, but takes the shape of a traditional poetic form (like a haiku or a rhyming sonnet). Read/perform your poem.

(Notes prepared by Jonathan Ball)