



PARLIAMENT | PARLEMENT
CANADA

Parliamentary Poet Laureate



POETRY CONNECTION: LINK UP WITH CANADIAN POETRY

Gail Scott lives in Montreal and teaches creative writing at Université de Montréal. *The Obituary* is her fourth novel, all of which exhibit fascinating prose experiments that can easily be read as poetic prose (perhaps “verse novels”). She was instrumental in co-founding the feminist journal *Tessera* and she has published numerous essays, stories, manifestoes, and collaborations. Her essay, “Paragraphs Blowing on a Line,” (in *Spaces Like Stairs*) is a central statement of feminist poetics and primary material for writers considering the “prose poem.”

Poem for discussion:

Dear Grandpa

From: *The Obituary*

Coach House, 2010

Dear Grandpa,

I/ your granddaughter ~~am a liar~~ wanted to be authentic. After, I mean, just before the future. [And the future tale within, which is the realm of the ancestors. Beautifully turned out – a Sunday when one is gathered, photographed to be remembered. Adults smiling too wide]

After wanting to be authentic, I/Rosine the liar relocating in ‘je-me-souviens’ part of continent. Deciding veritable alienation, + not failure to be of undisputed origin, the stuff of any novel. Albeit, pretending to Agathe,

Boubou, Notebook, that, following the encounter with Untel ['little conflagrations...flaring up in the dark like lightning in a film noir'], I could never be the same. Some light, as I spoke, settling over tips of glasses + hairdos in East-end bar, where fitting in pretty well. With French learned in school in Notown [the East]. Jamais in Haeckville [the West]. True, more learned outside from Véro André Thérèse Françoise. Our principal, a lezzie, being chiefly enamoured of Latin. No one teaching anything ~~Algonquian~~.

Grandpa, can you see what a li—???

Still, today, looking out casement. Rain fell on sidewalk. Plink. Plink. Conjuring reading Catullus, for school, at Notown kitchen table. When Veeera extending skinny arm over checkered plastic tablecloth. And wiggling finger under brother Jos.'s nose. For saying you, Grandpa, speaking ~~Indian~~ Cree to Great Grandma Dousse.

Grandpa, at her funeral, you said to Reef:

—I want to thank you for marryin' Veeera, she could be a real bitch,

Then sotto voce to your former little fis':

—You killed her with your wildness.

I/Rosine. In interest of preserving copasetic Dousse family image. Hopping early flight back East. Grey front-button skirt flapping open to knees. Nice pair of boots. Hoping to be ~~happy~~ famous. In so-called French part of continent.

For discussion:

1. Why did Scott draw a line through certain words and phrases and substitute others instead? Why those particular phrases? How does crossing out connect to other forms of suppression she mentions?

2. Near this passage from her novel *Obituary*, Scott quotes from an Alberta Royal Commission Report: "The half breed . . . must either change his (Indian) mode of life to conform with that of the white inhabitants or he must gradually disappear." In what ways does "Dear Grandpa" touch on the effect of this colonization and assimilation policy on First Nations people in Canada?
3. One of the central themes of *Obituary* is the narrator's family history in which Veeera, the narrator's mother, who is part aboriginal, is represented by the family to be white; her aboriginal status is never acknowledged. How does Scott raise this issue in "Dear Grandpa"? What role do you think Grandpa may have had in making her aboriginal status disappear?
4. Earlier in the granddaughter's narrative, she writes of herself, "Sitting there in th' dim light called pénombre in a chambre, I seeing outline of breast just like hers + nearly reaching out + cupping. Which confusion of proprieties I blaming on incidents with ~~Brother Language~~ Untel. Little conflagrations flaring up in dark. Like lightning in a film noir." In what ways does language unsay, untell, or not tell things? How does Scott's naming of language in this way relate to Indian Residential school policies which severely punished First Nations kids who spoke any aboriginal language?
5. The epigraph of Scott's novel is as follows: "What haunts are not the dead but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others. (Abraham + Torok)" In "Dear Grandpa," how does Rosine collaborate in keeping secrets? What's not being said? What sort of gaps are left in this text?

Writing prompts:

1. Notice how Scott renames things: "Notown [the East]" "Haeckville [the West]" (i.e. hickville), the official language as Untel, plus all the substitutions for crossed out words. Jot down experiences you have had where you've been forced to suppress something about yourself, your family, or your cultural heritage. Build a poem out of one or two of these and try renaming things in order to deepen your investigation.
2. Write of experiences you have had where you've been forced to suppress something about yourself, your family, or your cultural heritage. Build a poem out of one or two of these where you include both crossed-out words and substituted words as Scott has done.

3. Rapidly jot down faster than you can think a couple of pages in response to the following sentence: "I am ~~a liar~~ wanted to be authentic." In what ways are you a liar? What does it mean to be authentic? Build a poem out of this research.
4. What are some family or cultural secrets you are aware of? Rapidly jot down a couple of pages of memories, sights, sounds, touches, tastes, and smells you associate with this secret. Who keeps it secret? How? From this research build a poem.
5. Scott uses French, English, slang and dialect in this passage. She also refers to Algonquin, Cree and Latin. Choose a village, town or city you are familiar with and jot down as many words and phrases as you can from at least two different languages you can associate with that place. If you are stuck you can always look at the Latin and Greek roots of common words. From this research, build a poem that uses more than one language.