



Parliamentary Poet Laureate



POETRY CONNECTION: LINK UP WITH CANADIAN POETRY

Stuart Ross (1959–) is a Canadian fiction writer, poet, editor and creative-writing instructor. He was born in Toronto's north end and grew up in North York. Active in the Toronto literary scene since the mid-1970s, Ross is the co-founder (with Nicholas Power) of the Toronto Small Book Fair, the first of its kind in Canada. A tireless literary press activist, he is also a founding member of the Meet the Presses collective, poetry editor at Mansfield Press, and fiction and poetry editor at *This Magazine*.

Ross has edited several small literary magazines, including *Mondo Hunkamooga: A Journal of Small Press Stuff*, *Dwarf Puppets on Parade*, *Syd & Shirley*, *Who Torched Rancho Diablo?*, *Peter O'Toole: A Magazine of One-Line Poems* and, most recently, *HARDSCRABBLE*.

Ross is the author of two collaborative novels, two collections of stories and seven full-length poetry books. He has also published a collection of essays, *Confessions of a Small Press Racketeer* (Anvil Press, 2005), edited the anthology *Surreal Estate: 13 Canadian Poets Under the Influence* (Mercury Press, 2004) and co-edited *Rogue Stimulus: The Stephen Harper Holiday Anthology for a Prorogued Parliament* (Mansfield Press, 2010).¹

In his introduction to *Surreal Estate*, Ross writes, "Surrealism's precursor, Dada, was an assault on both Western art and on human savagery. More broadly, it was an assault on sense. Surrealism grew out of Dada's rubble, taking on European political and artistic rationalism by endeavouring to excavate truths through rejecting reason and embracing fantasy and dream states."

Ross has held numerous writer-in-residence positions and teaches writing workshops across Canada, frequently one-on-one as a writing coach. He lives in Cobourg, Ontario. In the spring of 2009, Freehand Books released his first short-story collection in more than a decade, *Buying Cigarettes for the Dog*, to almost unanimous critical acclaim. In spring 2011, ECW Press released his first novel, *Snowball, Dragonfly, Jew*.

¹ Wikipedia, "Stuart Ross", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Ross

Poem for discussion:**Itinerary**

From *Dead Cars in Managua*

DC Books, 2008

"Itinerary" is a poetry collection comprised of three sections: "Dead Cars in Managua," "Hospitality Suite" and "You, A Person." The third section gathers poems Ross wrote mostly in his poetry boot camps over the past several years. Many were produced by passing a long text around to participants, who read aloud from it. John Ashbery's "Flow Chart," "Girls on the Run" and "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" were his favourite texts for this strategy. Other poems were written from the bottom up, scrawled between the lines of other poems, mistranslated, and sifted from the texts of mouldy paperbacks.

OCT 26-"Please respect
Mr. Hamburger parking. You
are a guest in the Bavaria
of the Kootenays."

NOV 4-A man stands on a rock,
talking on his cellphone. He falls off.

NOV 11-The kind of hat
with a feather. Five teenage
birds sit along the curb,
sucking cigarettes, windbreakers
flapping.

DEC 22-Father is still in the
ground, surprised, crestfallen.

JAN 3-The rabbi,
the dairy restaurant, the
cripple selling pencils.

JAN 26-An all-girl production
of *Ubu Roi*
performed in a derelict bowling alley
forces the withdrawal
of troops from Iraq.

FEB 13-Mr. Fischbaum
is not in his usual seat.
The Waisbergs whisper.
The ark is pushed open.

MARCH 1-The tarmac
sits on the plane.

MARCH 19-"I bought these blinds
on Venus. I mean,
in Venice."

APRIL 4-A tarantula grips
the ground, about to leap.
Or maybe it's dead.
Or maybe it's not
a tarantula.

APRIL 12-He claimed he was
the first horse
to have a person on him.
But he was just
a tub of margarine
in the fridge.
Isn't that enough?

APRIL 21-And Mother dies.
Just a week earlier
she'd been alive. I walk
from the hospital carrying the quilt
her father had made, which
we'd covered her in. The rain
immediately stopped, so as not
to get it wet.

APRIL 30-They all walk in.
They order egg rolls.
The tallest one pats his jacket
for cigarettes.

MAY 1-An empty bag of Fritos
Corn Chips rocks gently
on the surface
of a pond.

MAY 25-[insert grandmother story
by Joe Brainard here,
in quotes,
with attribution].

JUNE 5-They gather
at the edge of the village
and wait for the circus.
They have never seen
entertainment before.

JUNE 8-Here, a cluster
of glistening bulrushes,
bent by the wind; there,
a crippled Soviet sub.

JUNE 23-Owen.

JULY 11-Someone is left behind,
but someone goes back
to get him or her.

JULY 26-A squirrel leaps into
an electric chair
and straps itself in.
It is taking responsibility.

AUGUST 20-The children
come up for air, water
streams from their hair.
They bob in their seahorses.

For discussion:

1. What is an itinerary? How is an itinerary used when travelling?
2. Ross is considered one of Canada's foremost surreal poets. What does it mean to be a surrealist in today's literary world?

3. Surrealism includes the "avant-garde," the idea of futurism, the untraditional. Poets use dream sequences, strange juxtapositions of images representing a landscape beyond reality. Who is to say this is not possible in the realm of the imagination? What are your thoughts on surrealism?
4. Discuss the work of Salvador Dali.

Writing prompts:

1. Create a daily itinerary, including a timetable and events of the day: favourite places, meals, activities.
2. Create an itinerary for last year. Note specific images that captured your emotions or thoughts during a specific month.
3. The "automatic writing" method, discovered and used by many surrealist poets, allows a writer to compose lines without stopping for unity. Writing takes place within a certain time limit when the pen, pencil or computer does not stop listing images, thoughts, phrases, expressions, colours, emotions—basically whatever flows onto the page. Try your own "automatic writing" for ten minutes. Gather the images into a poem.
4. Create your own surrealist poem. Take two different poems (your own or someone else's). Going line by line, break each line into part one and part two. For example:

part one (I wandered) part two (lonely as a cloud)
 and
 part one (two roads diverged) and part two (in a yellow wood)

Recombine the poems: part one of the second poem with part two of the first poem:

two roads diverged lonely as a cloud.

Use some of these images as the basis for a surrealist poem.

(Notes prepared by Terry Ann Carter)