

Claudia Lapp Spotlited



Poetry Quebec: Are you a native Quebecer? If not, where are you originally from? Why did you come to Quebec?

Claudia Lapp: I was born in Stuttgart, Germany, soon after WW II, to an American father & German mother. We came to the US when I was two. I grew up in Maryland. After graduating from Bennington with a BA in French and German Literature, minor in Music, I visited Montreal and immediately felt at home. Living in this bilingual multi-cultural city became my goal. Montreal was

beautiful in my eyes, with her mountain park and the Saint Laurent. American draft dodgers abounded. I took a graduate course at McGill and found work at Le Musée des Beaux Arts in the Education Department. At l'École du Musée and local galleries, I met Quebec painters & mixed media artists like Hugh LeRoy, Francois Dery, the late Dave Sorensen, Joyce Jason, Brian Stevens, Michael Snow, Vaillancourt and Molinari. Montreal in 1968 was my charmed zone of right-place/ right-time.

It didn't take long for me to realize how ready I was to leave behind syntactical analyses of old European texts. My life opened up in Montreal and I danced in many worlds. I got to know something of the French Canadian heart and character. For several summers I lived in a tepee made with lodge poles cut and stripped by me and my partner. Our neighbors were Richard & Marthe Seguin. I got to know Serge Fiori and became a HARMONIUM fan. Montreal and Quebec Province have always felt like my "promised land." Doors opened easily for me, professionally and personally.

In 1972, I was hired by John Abbott College to teach English, where my colleagues were Endre Farkas, Peter van Toorn, David Solway and the late Matthew von Baeyer. After obtaining Landed Immigrant status, I swore allegiance to the Queen in 1975, I thought I'd live in Canada forever.

As I wrote back then:

« Vos églises d'argent/ne me font plus tripper, cher Québec/mais vos hivers de givre sont dans ma peau/je reste, je reste icit. »

PQ: When and how did you encounter your first Quebec poem?

CL: I can't honestly remember my first encounter with a Quebec poem. My first months in Montreal were an aural feast and a disorientation of hearing a different form of French than I'd ever studied! Robert Charlebois' hit Québec Air was the rage and I studied his paroles with diligence. I was moved by the songs of Michel Garneau, and tried hard to

understand the context and vocabulary in Réjean Ducharme's *Le Nez Qui Voque*. I read and enjoyed Marie Claire Blais.

PQ: When and how did you first become interested in poetry?

CL: Poetry was spoken aloud in my childhood. My dad loved the English romantics, Shakespeare, Robinson Jeffers and Hart Crane. He knew Latin and was fluent in German. Mom recited German poetry (Rilke, Goethe, Schiller) while vacuuming. I always loved flowery prose and sad poetry and songs (Negro spirituals, English & Scottish ballads, Blues). In Montreal, I joined a small madrigal group.

I was fortunate to have great teachers at Bennington, where I was exposed to Asian traditions (haiku & Zen poems), Donne & Herrick, the surrealists, French & German free verse poets. I got to sing poems set to music by the Impressionists (Poulenc, Ravel, Fauré) for my Senior concert. I wrote tepid poetry at Bennington but studied and sang much that was great.

PQ: What is your working definition of a poem?

CL: These days I really like a phrase used by New York mixed media artist Leslie Dill in her Poetic Visions installations: ENVELOPES OF SYLLABIC AIR, which I translate as vibrating linguistic energy packets. I'm looking for lines that are charged with life. I admit to being under Dill's manic influence, and am in awe of her relentless devotional labors in which POEMS, especially those of Emily Dickinson and Neruda, are the STARS, both in her opera *Divide Light*, and in sculptures.

PQ: Do you have a writing ritual? If so, provide details.

CL: At 66, I continue the work of releasing my unique Voice, rinsed of habit, drawing on a reservoir of voices archaic, forgotten, outrageous, where nothing is predictable. POETRY as words that come through liminal portals just after dream, before daylight persona takes over, or when attention is diffuse and messages & visitations are transmitted, traces of melody. On a black horse, a dream vision in HONEY, is iconic of the way many of my poems begin – while on a massage table, almost napping. The labor of revisiting, clarification, expansion or pruning is left brain work. Poems influenced by external events are often triggered by motion: riding in or driving the car, walking or chance encounters with strangers or animals. My “political” poems (peace, justice, defense of environment) are always responses to real events or people.

I write most easily early in the morning before left brain chores make their demands. Rituals vary, but include green tea or grinding and brewing coffee. Meditation, stretching, walking in yard/garden, greeting favorite plants, feeding the crows, hummingbirds, jays. I use drumming and rattles to clear the mind, usually later in the day. My approach changes by day, season, and lunar sign.

PQ: Do you think that being a minority in Quebec (i.e. English-speaking) affects your writing? If so, how?

CL: My education was heavy on European poetry, from Metaphysical English to German romantic and French free verse/surrealist. It did not include French or English Canada. Coming to Montreal was like entering a harbor of Canadian film, art & poetry. I was drawn there by sheer resonance, another American ignorant of life north of the border and eager to immerse myself in la soupe montréalaise, I relished the warmth and physicality of my Québécois friends, their linguistic pride and unfettered creativity and good nature. The tensions between east & west Montreal (French/immigrant and Westmont Anglo) intrigued me and I liked experiencing the diverse worlds.

A seeker, I went to hear spiritual teachers from many traditions: Roshi Philip Kapleau (Zen), Sri Shinmoy (Hindu), Pir Vilayet Khan (Sufi) and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, whose talks on Buddhism drew me like Velcro. His commitment to dharma art and grasp of Western psychology was inspiring and led to a life-long connection with Tibetan Buddhism. In 1974, I spent several weeks in Boulder, at the his Naropa Institute to study with poets influenced by Buddhist teachings, including Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, John Giorno, and Diane Di Prima.

In Montreal I attended readings by Gary Snyder, Margaret Atwood, Roy Kiyooka (friend & mentor), Penny Kemp, Daphne Marlatt, and Leonard Cohen. In jazz bars of Vieux Montreal, I heard Rahsaan Roland Kirk and Thelonius Monk play. My poetics expanded in the hybrid cauldron of Montreal in the late Sixties and Seventies. I was grateful for the cornucopia of influences.

I was the conceptual light weight of the Vèhicule seven, and somewhat intimidated by Artie Gold's intellect and his knowledge of American poets. I was after the experiences.



Clauia Lapp as The Green Ant

PQ: Do you think that writing in English in Quebec is a political act? Why or why not?

CL: As an outsider from the south, I was not focused on being a “minority” in Quebec. The impulse to write & collaborate came from the need to express inner awareness, and in response to issues/dramas in my own life, whether “political” or not. I lacked the context of a native resident, other than an awareness of tensions within the city or province, the way one responds to any environment one comes to know over time. My politics were about relationships and were based on resonance. For me, writing in English while in Quebec was never an intentional political act. I appreciated the richness of living in a bi-lingual city which was replete with linguistic tensions. I was a long-term tourist with deep affection, and frustration at times, with the natives.

PQ: Why do you write?

CL: Verbal and written expression has always been natural and necessary for me. Writing is a primary way I process experiences and come to understand what they mean. When my mother died suddenly, I was 37. Writing poems (*Cloud Gate*) helped me keep my balance and move through my grief.

I write to Praise, to remember, to share with others the transient beauty of the Floating World. I've always been on the Beauty team. It's my Dress of Solace. I absorbed an aesthetic sense of life early on from my family, with strong humanist and ethical values. As elegies begin to pile up in later years, I see this honoring of friends & ancestors as a sacred job. (Beauty as "an explosion of energy perfectly contained", Richard Holmes quoted by John O'Donohue in Beauty: The invisible Embrace)

PQ: Who is your audience?

CL: My audience tends to be a fairly intimate one. Whatever the head count, I like having an audience and the show woman is usually ready to leap out from behind the Introvert's veil. I love reading in our backyard in August to a small crowd, or in a museum gallery surrounded by photographs, outside to seniors for Tea & Poetry, or sharing my work and favorites to Freshmen in their Writing about Art/ Art of Writing class, feeding them Bill Bissett & bp nichol, PK Page & Emily Dickinson. Their enthusiasm flows freely, life is opening for them.

When I read at Eugene's Tsunami Books with two close women friends for POETS ON FIRE, we drew 150. The energy exchange in a large crowd can be thrilling, an Exhilaration. There's nothing like the nourishing bio-field of shared emotions of trust, truth sharing and empathy. It's a balm for sorrow and a celebration of beauty. And even an audience of one is sweet – to share with a total stranger if the moment's right. People don't like what they don't know...but expose them and see them light up. I've published very little compared to others, but I'm a poet everyday with friends and people I meet. They tell me my vernacular is "poetic."

In North America there's a bias against poetry. The out of bounds, market-driven extroversion of America along with its deeply embedded Puritanism distrusts poetry and art, calls it Elitist. But new generations are replacing these grumpy art-hating habits with warm Hispanic accents and poems Tweeted around the world to honor poets and journalists killed in protest.

PQ: Does your day job impact on your writing? How?

CL: A day job provides resources but consumes personal creative time. When teaching, grading papers was the steadiest detractor from writing. Yet even the "gray shed full of chores" can provide stresses which need catharsis. My most recent job of 8+ years as a volunteer Exhibit Interpreter, was one for which I had great enthusiasm. The learning and knowledge download was incredible. Giving tours to every age from Kindergarten to Elders, and has inspired an ongoing series of poems. Still, interacting intensely with large groups of children early in the morning for tours ranging from Korea, China, Japan and contemporary art from Cuba, Mexico and the Northwest, lead to burn-out and frustration over languishing manuscripts, which is why I am now an Emeritus Exhibit Interpreter.

PQ: How many drafts do you usually go through before you are satisfied/finished with a poem?

CL: How many drafts? Far more than when I was young and had confidence in most of what came out. I've become really particular about what I publish or share because I want to write from the deepest channels and in my genuine voice/s. There's so much out there that's bland and predictable like pop music, lacking mystery or a refreshing slap of awareness.

The issue of time: some poems are received in a caterpillar form. The butterfly won't emerge for a long time. I've worked on some poems for years, thinking, it's almost done, only to begin an unraveling process. Poems which retain their juice can go into hibernation, then reawaken with a new season. A good poem is worth waiting for and devoting attention to. These days I can often finish a poem in 3-8 drafts. Patience is something I've had to learn!

PQ: Do you write with the intention of "growing a manuscript" or do you work on individual poems that are later collected into a book?

CL: I tend to work on individual poems as they come up, then see how they may fit with others in style, voice, theme. As I sort through 30 years of paper files, I keep track of "tracks", making notes on index cards. How quaint, but the less time in front of a computer screen, the better, for my eyes and neurons.

PQ: What is the toughest part of writing for you?

CL: Toughest part of writing practice is RESISTING DISTRACTIONS – email, getting lost in online research on art, music, natural medicine. This is why I'm not on Twitter or Facebook, I wake pretty early, 5-6 a.m., my most productive time, with mind & body fresh.

PQ: What is your idea of a muse?

CL: MUSE - An aspect of the classic Greek goddesses that I like is that they sprang forth from a geyser touched off by the hooves of Pegasus ("geyser"). When the Muse is active, s/he steps out from my naturally cordial Self wearing a mellow or wrathful face. I feel that side often, furious at the way Earth is dishonored and disfigured, her pollinators poisoned, her lions farmed expressly for close range killing by safari hunters. Habitual mind lets go of its grip, Alter Egos assert themselves. S/he is attracted to hoof beats on turf or high desert, alert to a whinny of greeting and the next ride.

PQ: Do you have a favourite time and place to write?

CL: I do love writing on a train as landscape unfolds. The borderline times are most evocative. Daybreak more than nighttime. By moving water, whether the ocean or creeks and falls. Brand new lands – entering a new harbor - Sydney, Istanbul, the island of Santorini -, getting off a plane to step onto a new continent in another hemisphere.

PQ: Do you like to travel? Is travel important to your writing? Explain.

CL: I love the liberating effect of travel, the great routine-buster, and have been blessed to voyage from an early age. At ten, I crossed the Atlantic on the Queen Mary with my parents to visit Europe & relatives. At 16, I travelled with AFS exchange students on a former troop ship to Rotterdam (took 10 days), then flew to Istanbul to meet my Turkish host family. I've visited Greece, Mexico, UK/Ireland, India, Italy, Australia, and most

records were photos and prose – in journals, letters & postcards. If I don't nail the poem on the spot, I lose the impulse. And, memory being unreliable, many a travel poem remains on the psychic sea bottom. Sometimes a dream will nudge flashbacks and link them to Now.

PQ: Do you have a favourite Quebec poet? If yes who and why?

CL: I don't have a specific favourite Quebec poet; I simply haven't had time to keep up with another poetry pool at this point in my life.

PQ: Do you write about Quebec? If so, how and why? If not, why not?

CL: I rarely write about Quebec unless memories come up via a dream or when I learn of another friend's passing. I tend to be a poet of the present moment and am very engaged in my Oregon/Northwest life, its diverse landscapes and microclimates, laid-back culture (winemaking, music, art, sustainable agriculture), and environmental activism.

Music also keeps me connected to Quebec. I pull out old LP's by Harmonium, Michel Garneau, Richard Seguin, Gilles Vigneault and voyage... Recently, *Le Vent du Nord* came to a local stage and I savored joul-inflected lyrics of traditional songs, with accordion, hurdy-gurdy, fiddle, piano, mandolin and foot tapping by Olivier, Simon, Réejean, & Nicholas. J'ai ben flyée! I listen to their CD, *Dans les airs*, while driving.

I will always be psychically bound to Montreal and PQ through abiding friendships. Aside from my poetry chums/colleagues, I've reconnected with some former John Abbott students, one of whom lives in Ontario and has introduced me to First Nation writers like Drew Hayden Taylor and poet Gregory Kopocihkan. Another ex-student studies and plays Rumi inspired Dervish music with a group of Sufis led by Turkish master Timucin Cevikoglu.

PQ: You were one of the original organizers of poetry readings at Vehicule Art Gallery. Can you talk about the gallery, your involvement, the why's and the therefore's?

CL: Vehicule Art Gallery Readings: Our motivation for the reading series came out of a desire to provide a venue where emerging young poets and artists could present their work, mingle, and sell books, broadsides and art. Coming from Bennington College, I was used to being around the avant-garde in dance (Martha Graham), music (Henry Brant) and art (Helen Frankenthaler, Jules Olitsky). At the gallery, long before Slams, we were open to experiment and collaborative performance. We encouraged writers who were not established, those on the edge. Several of us made a living as instructors at Champlain and John Abbott Colleges and we encouraged students to attend readings.

Michael Harris and I were the first poets to read at the Sunday afternoon series inaugural on December 10, 1972. There was no heat that day and we never took off our coats. One of Francois Dery's large unstretched canvas paintings was up. The poets who read at Vehicule were mostly local, but I helped to bring in West Coast voices like mentor/friend Roy Kiyooka, whose paintings & photos were shown at Sir George Williams U, Daphne Marlatt, Penny Kemp, and from New York, Anne Waldman. I remember hearing Bill Bissett, but don't know whether it was at Vehicule. Ken Norris & Peter van Toorn's 1982 collection *Cross/Cut*, from Vehicule Press, includes many poets who read at 61,

Ste-Catherine, among them Mohamud Togane, Anne Diamond-McLean, John Asfour, and Tom Ezzy.

As for the publishing aspect, I left it to those who I thought more savvy and better equipped to handle it. My Véhicule friends provided an anchor for me, a structure for the work of editing, producing and presenting. I never got involved with the complexities which evolved later on around publishing rights & territories, much of which unfolded after I left the city in 1979. It was never my realm.

I feel fortunate to be able to see my work in print so early in my writing life, thanks to my karmic links with the Véhicule Gallery poets. The continued support and friendship of Endre, Ken, Stephen and Tom (and Artie from Beyond) I count as one of the bright threads of a privileged life.

After leaving Montreal in 1979 and returning to the US, Claudia Lapp & her husband eventually settled in Eugene, Oregon in 1991. Poetry remains a focal point and she gives frequent readings in Oregon venues. She has written reviews for *Poetry Quebec*, and for Ken Norris's *Floating Up To Zero* (Talon). Other realms of interest include Astrology (professional for over 30 years), Photography and Art (worked briefly at Montreal Museum of Fine Arts). For the past 8 years, she was an Exhibit Interpreter at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (University of Oregon). At 66, these worlds inform her writing more than ever. She is working to "catch up" with her peers with a New & Selected of her own.