

SHARON THESEN / George Stanley, an appreciation

On the back cover of George Stanley's 1985 book *Opening Day* is a photo taken by Peter Culley at the "Words/Loves" poetry conference at the College of New Caledonia in Prince George in 1980. George is seated at a cafeteria-style table, holding manuscript pages and wearing hiking boots and a scarf. He looks like he's about to give a reading. Which poems were typed on the pages in his hand? "Mountains & Air," "Donatello's David," or one of my favorites, "Vancouver in April" (*It's pretty shitty / living in a Protestant city / and my heart too bleak for self-pity*)?

I wrote a review of *Opening Day*, and what I discerned in it of George's poetics. It didn't even occur to me in 1986 that "opening day" referred to the opening day of a new store or enterprise, and not, at least primarily, the opening of a day, or day-opening. There I was, going on about Maurice Blanchot and "the Orphic"—in which Orpheus' work is not so much to descend to the depths as to bring his desire (the poem?) into daylight, where the phantasms of poetic vision can achieve "form, figure, and reality."

In an early poem, Stanley wonders what keeps him awake at night "at the conscious edge / peering through vacancy." And in subsequent work, official explanations, civic boosterisms, and the cant passing for public discourse are "peered through" in the spirit of a patient and inquiring Marxism or in that of an irritable yet jolly Jesuit. Poetic intelligence searches within the personal discomfort and unease of occlusion ("What am I forgetting? // The fear") until the poem begins to *actually see*.

the system, the tangled boundary
(that has no place in what we learn
as place—we can't see what we name)
deflates, at every encountered point
draws back w/ a gasp of feeling
unappreciated, dangles some plastic
goodies in our faces, some go-cart

A quality of George's work that I admire in other poets as well—Alice Notley and Robert Creeley, for example—is what Ron Silliman described in his back-cover blurb of *A Tall, Serious Girl* as George not letting himself "get away with anything." Not for George the slide into affect, nor the affectless *aperçu*. George's method is most

apparent in the longer poems, which began to appear in *Opening Day* with “Gentle Northern Summer,” and find book-length form in *Vancouver: A Poem* in 2008. The sublime “Veracruz” and some of the later lyrics and elegies seem to have been honed by the strenuous “free writing” (“what’s free about it?” he asks) verse-paragraph style of the long poems. The exposure of a voice (“i don’t know / myself, don’t care”) that argues with poetry and images of “success”; the refusal to be eloquent or elocutionary (“stuck stuck stuck”); the interested surrender to situations, landscapes, and places (note the number of titles beginning with, or implying, the preposition “at” — “At Andy’s,” “At Mr. Mike’s,” etc.) are some of the elements of George’s particular genius — “an acuity of vision,” writes Silliman, “that is so constantly on target as to be eerie.” George’s procedure seems also at times to resemble the Catholic examination of conscience. The purpose is not to “confess” but to uncover occlusions where they have been lurking, probably pretending to be adaptations to the living of life. This following of the route or path of a fleeting thought or notion to the fullness of its possible manifestation, giving it “form, figure, and reality,” creates some of the great pleasure to be derived from George’s work, especially when it is read aloud. George’s readings can be hair-raising, wonderful occasions. We get to feel like the ear of God. “The poem wrestles you / to the ground,” George writes in *Opening Day*.

There’s a particular poem I remember from *Opening Day*: frontier imagism, from when George lived in Terrace and taught English at Northern Lights College. Let’s see if I can write it down correctly.

The green and blue of the land
scape
The black and white of the night
The red and gold of the pub

I’m sure there is a line break between “land” and “scape”.

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Okay, I found it, on page 59. It’s called “B.C. for bill bissett.”

the green & grey of the land
scape

the red & gold of the pub
the black & white of the night

I placed the pub at the end of the poem as a destination after traveling through the land/scape and the night, but the poem has the night at the end, and it's so much better. My remembering "blue" instead of "grey" means I am thinking as a Vancouverite and not as a northerner. I don't remember George as a heavy user of ampersands. But the acoustic aptness of the break between "land" and "scape" is unforgettable.

Back in 1986 I recognized the North Central Interior of George's *Opening Day*: sodium-vapor-lit highways in snowfall, wide swift rivers of summer, downtown streets of beer hotels and apartheid, logging trucks crossing the railway bridge. And I also recognize the college classrooms full of teenage boredom; several of the persons George mentions in his poems; Vancouver streets (Granville, Robson, Commercial Drive, West Broadway); and feelings about things, such as not having been totally overjoyed at the fall of the Berlin Wall, and how thinking about poetry makes you think about death. It occurs to me that George and I have lived a shared land/scape in many ways. We were colleagues in the English Department at Capilano College in the 1990s. He wrote poems about Prince George, my home town, and we read together not too long ago in San Francisco, George's home town. And with Ryan Knighton and Barry McKinnon and a few others we were "Aboutists." (It was a pub idea (Les Aboutistes du Nord), but it caused alarm in some quarters that "a poem can be, or could be, about something.") I could never have predicted such a long friendship when I knew George only as one of the poetry gods from San Francisco, but one who, inexplicably, wound up living in north-central BC. And one whose work I have admired and adored for the past quarter-century. "Love and poetry," was George's inscription on the flyleaf of my copy of *Gentle Northern Summer*.

Love and poetry, George.