

JAMIE REID / Messages to and from

i

for George Stanley

not to be a man

to be a thought

—George Stanley, *Vancouver: A Poem*

George Stanley lives far away from me
in this same city, so that I miss him now,
as often as I think of him and how rarely
I see him in the flesh, he going one way on the bus,
and I another.

He is nevertheless one of the ones
I see most often, because he is always there,
the most loyal and persistent of our own gang of local poets
at our gatherings.

I have seen him often
in my life, more often than many others
of this city who I also miss, missing him
slipping aslant through the city, sitting
with his plants and his paintings alone in his flat
thinking the words of some poem, thinking a thought
to be spoken later when we see him in the flesh,
“feelings
without words,
about places.”

I saw him first in San Francisco
in the bar now grown semi-famous, the site
of what is now called
a literary renaissance,

then barely known
except by poets.

There,
in pique and anger,
I threw a glass of gin and tonic
on George Stanley's lap one night.

In later years, he said he thought it charming.
But I think he truly just forgot.
And I think he doesn't still remember.
How simple these words seem, how difficult
the ideas and feelings that, called to mind,
they call to mind, these many
missing moments, slipped away in time.

ii

George has a kind of taut Jesuit calm
that covers up his in-dwelling human kindness, his desire
to find a place in the place he is in. He speaks
in measured syllables, an air
easily mistaken for self-satisfaction, though he is never
entirely satisfied. There is always
something missing
in the puzzle he is trying to put together with his words, finding
pleasure when the words seem to come together and be fit together.

iii

There are two at least of each of us in each of us. I and another,
he and her, she and him, ego/alter ego, artist/anima, poet/muse,

dancing with each other,
even as we stand still, amidst the thronging of our friends,
their shadows crossing each other on the floor and walls,
the poems emerging from the web of shadows in our minds,
finding their way toward words, with words,
companions of our minds.

iv

Late one night while drinking Irish whiskey,
oddly prideful, George told me his imagination of the game of chess,
a hidden human drama, bishops
sidling diagonally, on the slant, knights
leaping by surprise from square to square.

Within each piece
a human entity compact inside, expressed externally
by its mode of movement, held in place or freed to move
by the configuration of the other actors in their ever on-going game.

The point of chess, to kill the king, no corresponding
king to kill in the give and take of real life and politics,
we citizens, George and the rest of us, moving in small single steps,
slides and leaps, pawns, bishops, knights,
shifting identities, to secure our lives, to be one of us,
to remain on board,
the endless dance in which the moves cannot be known
in advance, the music issuing from a place almost
beyond our hearing, a distant cave in the midst
of the forest of our words.

v

These days, George buttons his jacket and his mouth
and leaves our bar parties early. There may have been a time
when he stayed later than all the others. But now,
The Commissioner
goes home. The dance goes on. This poem
gets out of hand, loses its bearings, finding
another footing, going on, regardless.

vi

When he is not with us, George
sits at home alone, shops for food on Broadway,
travels to Ireland, Mexico, or to his former homes,
San Francisco and New York,
thinking about us, his fellow citizens,
the city, the poem to come
and the poem after that.

The pieces of the game
lie in their box, fingered one by one, brought
to the inner attention, organized, then muddled,
then organized again. A music begins,
a poem emerges,
a figure in the dark, amidst the flow of shadows,
a decipherable figure, a flow, a movement, a moment of sight and hearing,
almost out of sight and hearing, halts into the clearing,
finding its way to words.

vii

He says today we no longer can choose the language that we speak
as if there was a day not long ago when we could.

When we were young?

Before we were born? Who is we? Do today's young
have the luxury of a choice to speak a language different from the one we,
their elders, we so-called seniors, speak,
our words erased, new words and concepts in their place?

When we die and disappear,

does our grammar and syntax disappear along with us?

Who's listening here? Who hears?

viii

The commentators aver that his poems live
outside of time, but when the time comes
for the Commissioner to arrive, he comes on time
to meet with us.

Inside himself, he carries a woman who walks the Malecón
in Veracruz, a girl taller than himself, more serious,
who comes to him in waking as though in a dream,
herself the fully grown child of his own desire,
the imaginary daughter of his own father,
the mother of the boy he loves.

When George speaks, it is the echo of her voice we hear,
coming from the seashore, from the forest,
from the very heart of our City,
transposed from Veracruz and other ports of call.