

# see-to-see

## **Requiem: Review of *Sitting Shiva on Minto Ave*, by Toots by Erin Moure (New Star Books, 2017)**

Meredith Quartermain

Paul Émile Savard died alone on December 4, 2015 at St. Paul's hospital. He was the first person Moure loved in the way of wanting to move in and make a life together, she 21, he 33, in mid-'70s Vancouver. They worked for CN and VIA Rail, Erin as a cook and dining-car waitress, and Paul as a "private-car steward, a very prestigious job" where he served as "butler, footman, cook, and housekeeper" for CN executives. When he ran into trouble with alcoholism, he resigned to work as a cook on the passenger cars.

After several years, during which she became known as Mrs. Savard and almost married him, alcohol drove them apart, he almost took her life. Yet for 33 years they stayed friends and occasionally visited. "The little man" always phoned at Christmas. He called her Toots, and was the first person to tell her she was a lesbian. When he died the few possessions he owned included all of Erin's books and every letter and card she'd sent him. Unfortunately, he'd been living in a bedbug-infested Downtown Eastside hotel, and all his possessions had to be destroyed.

Paul was a deeply principled man. He did not swear. He always wore clean, ironed

clothes. He would not kill anything, even bedbugs. He was adept at calming people about to come to blows. He said God was the air we breathed and thought the sky came right down to the ground; you always can touch the sky. He paid his rent and bills, even voluntarily giving a rent raise to his landlord. When alcoholism cost him his VIA job, he kept himself employed in an old folks' home helping them to eat their meals, helping in the kitchen, and staying on 'til retirement, even when privatization slashed his wages.

Moure's text, part memoir, part critical social history, begins with Judith Butler's question: "Whose lives are already considered not lives, or only partially living, or already dead? ... This is someone who understands that she or he will not be grieved if his or her life is lost." Moure will not leave Paul among the ungrievable. Her fiercely loving and extremely moving tribute makes sure of this.

During her seven days of sitting shiva to honour him, Moure shows how Canadian institutions both past and present ruthlessly drive Paul and thousands like him into the realms of the ungrievable. Trying to rid the cities of unemployed, the Catholic Church shoved Paul's family into northern Quebec where they and hundreds like them lost everything in a government and church-run *colonization program* (whereby unemployed were posted to remote, rugged

parts of Quebec to “farm” with completely inadequate resources). This of course has eerie connections to internments of Indigenous, Ukrainian, and Japanese people. Destitute, Paul’s family moved back to Montreal to baby Paul’s first home: Minto Avenue (situated in NDG—No Damn Good, or Notre Dame de Grâce), which was later destroyed in order to create an ugly expressway running like a scar through Montreal. Paul was a literate man, bilingual; he read the paper every day, and believed in education, but the state only provided him public education to grade seven.

As always, Moure’s narrative is inventive, wide-ranging, and densely poetic, weaving together threads from Giorgio Agamben, Rainer Maria Rilke, Madame Benoît’s recipes, the film *Pierrot à Montréal*, Ferdinand Pessoa and dozens of other sources. I learned much about Canadian history. I want her rhythmic powerful thinking to keep running through me forever.

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**Review of *Some End/West Broadway* by George Bowering and George Stanley (New Star Books, 2018)**

Michael Turner

It’s hard to handle this flip-book without thinking of the housing crisis in Vancouver. One need only flip the book over to see that it is shared accommodation, with George Stanley’s *West Broadway* bunking with George Bowering’s *Some End*, and vice versa. Bowering made light of this at

the Vancouver launch this past April when he referred to their book as “West End.” Stanley, as if hearing the conflation for the ninth time, made his Felix Unger face and looked away.

Bowering might blanch at the idea that this shared book is analogous to social conditions in the real estate-flipping City of Vancouver, for he has said many times (doth protest, etc.?) that he loathes sociology and, like a good Modernist, no doubt prefers his art autonomous, unencumbered by what younger social media-tors call context (in this case, a context recently described as one of YT colonial-settler entitlement). In “Social Justice,” he writes: “In school/ socials was just their chicken way of saying history/with something added that was never added” (16). One doesn’t have to read too far into Stanley’s side of the book to see that this “something” could be equal parts Reznikoff, conflict, contradiction, and simile:

Tall yellow poles skim the wires,  
blue trolleybuses sail by  
like Swedish yachts.

99-B’s travel fast, carry  
stolid swaying standing students  
like troop transport. (4)

“All right, it’s true—we oldsters want / what the young have, time and beauty” (8), Bowering confesses at the outset of his title poem. But rather than elaborate on today’s youth, many of whom seem comfortable with their confessions, sharing them glumly, proudly, passive-aggressively, Bowering offers his own: “Knowing something should have/ something to do with writing poems,

at least. I always/denied that, and where did it get me?” (8). Stanley, for his part, has paced himself; he retired his “stick” years ago to better understand the coupling that links desire to beauty’s love train. At the opening of “Desire for the Self,” he writes:

Laugh in surprise of beauty.  
Laugh at your freedom from desire.  
The boy boarding the bus may even  
Flash you a smile: Thanks for not  
wanting me. (32)

At the conclusion of his title poem, Bowering writes: “I always said poems weren’t/supposed to get you anywhere but the end of the poem” (8). Stanley, too, has something to say about this in “Writing Old Age,” a prose piece that opens with a question: “Old Age foresees an end, but need writing have an end in mind?” (25). After some deliberation, he arrives at what “I care about, I wait for, a true line.”

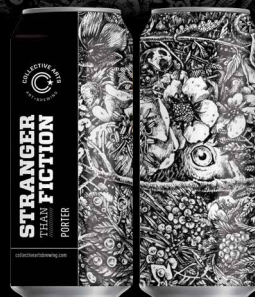
“A true line. To hear it in language,  
bypassing thinking” (26).

And then this admission: “But lately I’m less able to do that” (26). Before concluding: “People are crying for sentences! But not for sentences about thoughts” (27).

Is this a future of Canadian poetry? In Bowering’s “The Future of Canadian Poetry,” he concludes: “You can look forward to poetry in your life, /leave prose behind you, leave social anxiety behind you” (21).



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