

On origins and endings

AMY REISWIG

Arleen Paré explores tiny but sometimes momentous moments of intersection, where we connect unexpectedly.

Questions can be a strange weight. From early insistent childhood, we ask in wonderment: Why? How? As we get older and are initiated into life's more painful realities—like loss, loneliness, injustice—those simple questions become more heavily freighted, as frustration and even anger mix in with our lingering awe at the world. In her new collection *He Leaves His Face in the Funeral Car* (Caitlin Press), Governor General Award winner Arleen Paré shows us how seemingly small packets of poetry, with language that is at once filament flexible and titanium tough, can receive and help carry the weight of those questions.

Now retired and living in Victoria, Paré worked for over two decades in Vancouver social services, particularly mental health housing. It was there, in a world heavy with file folders and the sometimes tragic lives they held, that she began writing. Her first book, *Paper Trail* (2007), was shortlisted for the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize and won the Victoria Butler Book Prize—an award she was nominated for again for last year's *Lake of Two Mountains*, which also earned the Governor General's Award for poetry.

"It was the best gift," Paré says, still almost laughing over the unexpectedness of the GG win. "I don't come out of writing at all. I come out of social work. There you get a job description that's set, and you do the job as best you can; you understand the terms. With writing you don't know. What are the terms?"

That's a question Paré's new work subtly asks about living as well, for it's a job we all have to do, but with no clear terms of reference. Thus she explores a multiplicity of perspectives, from the playful pear which "is not fooled unlike an orange/ a pear knows which end is up" to a hospitalized aunt's strange post-stroke stories that Paré describes as "contingent on sightlines perspectives angles of uncertain faith."

In this, her first unthemed book, Paré delights in those shifting sightlines. Whether it's carefully naming the leaking, seeping, poisonous trials endured by water or the profuse "lush eruptions" of mushrooms that vanish, leaving only a list of fanciful names to fill the mouth, her ranging vision celebrates experience in all its messiness. As she says in a poem about one of her sons: "Not every script reads left to right."



Arleen Paré

While life may not read left to right, Paré shows that there is always meaningful connection—sometimes in time, sometimes defying time and even space. Take, for example, the title poem. She writes about riding in the funeral car after her father's death, reflecting on "My face, which is my father's/... he wills me for as long as I need." Where do things come from? Where do they go? No longer childlike questions when we lose those we love.

"I'm a little bit tethered to the question of provenance for us as human beings," Paré explains. "What is this business about? Philosophers say there's no beginning and no end. And I go: 'Hey, wait a minute. I have a beginning and an end.' It's very odd to have a personal beginning and try to fit that into a context of no beginning. It's not something I'm pleased about." Neither a religious believer nor an atheist, Paré says she's more skeptical, and she is annoyed at the fact that some of our questions seem just...unanswerable. "I love that scientists try to follow this down to little points and then—nothing. But the issue of provenance, why we don't know, makes me a little cross," she laughs. "I think all of us have this funny

little floating question of: Why? How?"

And she applies that questioning yet awestruck eye to everything, right down to the interstellar dust from which we are made. To me, an exemplary poem in the collection is "In Nomine Dust." Looking at dust in all its forms, as our family even, it tries to name "its genus, its everyday and other names too./Cinders and sand, hair, crusts of bread/ all collapse in one direction./ Conjugate dust's provenance,/ particulates, formal and vernacular, everlasting./ *De moleculorum*...Collect its human names, in particular, the dying and the dead,/ its given names:/Adelaide and Celestine, for example...Coming apart under the speckled sky./We are cradles, graves, floating/this froth of stars. Thinking ourselves whole/but knowing/ourselves particulate,/in *pax vobiscum* [peace be with you], essential grit."

Within the questions of origins and endings, Paré explores tiny but sometimes momentous moments of intersection, where we connect unexpectedly—via dust, in a glance, a glancing touch, a touching talk. Of a man she'd see out her windshield weekdays, just after dawn, she

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says simply: “we meet not meeting.” Paré reminds us, importantly, that our lives mysteriously speak to each other constantly—like at her former job with the supposedly defined terms. Even there, Paré still found deeply affecting mysteries. “What are the answers?” she asks me, as we discuss the poem “For the Record,” which presents a gentle catalogue of suicides. “These are real incidents,” Paré notes, somberly. “These were all people who had been referred to me for housing [their names have been changed]. The juxtaposition of our lives—it’s hard to reconcile. But that’s the deal. How do we walk through our lives as we always do and then walk downtown and see people, with all kinds of things going on, sitting on the street asking for our change? I mean, how do we do this?”

For Paré, with an MFA in creative writing from UVic who also sits on the board at Victoria Cool Aid Society, one way is to write. “It’s

very hard for us to manage keeping boundaries and keeping the heart open at the same time,” she admits. “Poetry actually helps to manage it. For me as somebody who writes poetry, it’s useful. I think reading poetry does that too, in a way. All we can do as humans is to try to get a little bead on that really messy, beyond-us experience so we’re not overwhelmed all the time. It’s so overwhelming! Poetry: it’s little, but it holds so much.”

In the case of this new book, Paré’s poetry holds nothing less than the entire state of being, in constant beautiful and frustrating creation and decay—“Dust to dust, endless, even in this, the

poem’s amplifying chamber, endlessness/having entered time and all these words.”



Writer and editor Amy Reisinger finds it indeed a mysteriously intersecting world in learning that she and Paré lived on the same Montreal street, got married at the same age and went to two of the same schools. Amy will also never view dusting the same way again.

Author of *Lake of Two Mountains*,
winner of the 2014 Governor General’s Award

ARLEEN PARÉ

HE LEAVES HIS FACE
IN THE FUNERAL CAR



Allison Gladwell



Muriel Sibley



Priska Stabel



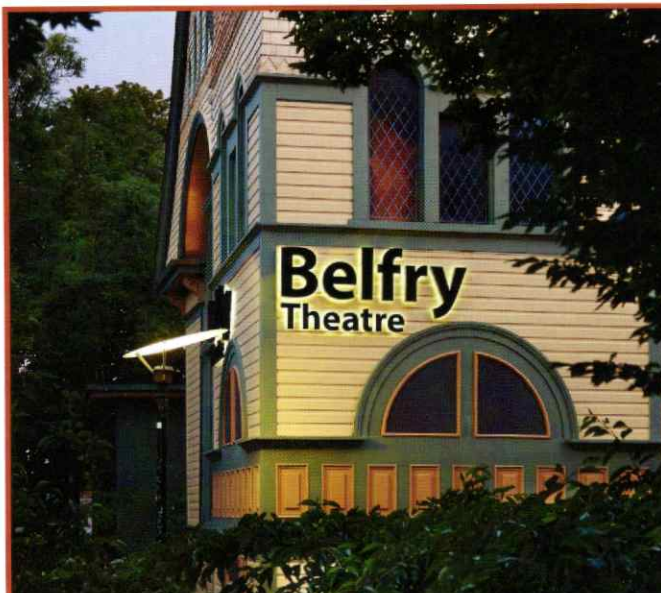
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