

ALEXANDER MACLEOD

‘Having a conversation with the place you’re in’: Discussing the Past, Present and Future of Atlantic-Canadian Poetry with Brian Bartlett, Ross Leckie, Lindsay Marshall and Anne Simpson

As part of a recent conference devoted to the study of Atlantic Canada, four of the region’s leading writers—Brian Bartlett, Ross Leckie, Lindsay Marshall and Anne Simpson—came together for a special panel discussion and an evening of readings designed to explore the relationship between the past, present and future of Atlantic-Canadian poetry. The event, jointly organized by the Canadian Studies program at Dalhousie and the Atlantic-Canada Studies program at Saint Mary’s University, brought scholars from around the world to Halifax to take part in the International Council for Canadian Studies (ICCS) Summer Seminar Program. Before they presented their work to this global audience, the poets assembled at the Lord Nelson Hotel to discuss their different ways of reading Atlantic-Canadian writing.

Alexander MacLeod: I’d first like to thank all of you for being here. It’s quite something to see all of you gathered around this one table at the same time. Perhaps we should start off with the biggest, most obvious question and then move on. So here it is: Is there really such a thing as Atlantic-Canadian Literature? Or, maybe, in the more Cartesian formulation: Does Atlantic-Canadian Literature exist because we think it does? I’m not going to ask you to define what that literature might look like critically or canonically, but I’d like to hear what each of you think about the category itself. Is it good or helpful to have a classification called Atlantic-Canadian Literature? And do you think you belong in that category?

Anne Simpson: I think that wherever you’re living, you’re having a conversation with the place you’re in. You’re having a conversation with the poets and

other writers who went before you in that place. But you're going to have a conversation in Atlantic Canada that's, say, different than the conversation you're going to have in Toronto or Vancouver. But do we feel that we're in the centre of this conversation? I only know that my writing is different here because I've engaged in a conversation in this part of the world.

MacLeod: There's so much diversity inside of the region. Do we think that a poem by Rita Joe and a poem by George Elliott Clarke and a poem by Brian Bartlett should have some kind of relationship because they are written by people who are living in Nova Scotia at the same time?

Brian Bartlett: I think of the habit children have of putting their name on paper, then their family address, the name of their city, province, and country, and then 'earth,' 'world,' 'solar system,' 'universe.' That can represent the different contexts in which you can think of yourself as human being or poet. The regional I think of as just part of that continuum. We are also Canadian poets, North American poets, poets who exist in a global community reading poems from other countries, translated from other languages. So I don't think of the 'regional' tag as being more or less important than any other tag. You mentioned three poets who have a certain relationship to each other, and I think inevitably they do if they've lived a long time in the same region, and in particular if their ancestral roots are deep there; yet they might have stronger connections to poets from another region of the country or to poets from Ireland, or Poland, or Israel, so it's a very complicated set of relationships. Very often the relationships are there because people co-exist in the same region, but the overlapping and the influences, that sense of kinship, might in fact be stronger between a poet in one region and a poet in another region, or even another continent and language.

Ross Leckie: I think it's a useful category and I think it's a beneficial one. In my view, what regionalism is doing is creating a sense of community. We might call it an imagined community, I suppose, following Benedict Anderson, but it's a community nonetheless. It has its own mythologies, which, in some senses we both create and deconstruct, for lack of a better word. It's got its own politics in the sense that, as Brian was talking about, living in a global economy, in a sense of increasing sameness, and certainly an increasing sense of empires who watch countries being bombed by the United States and Israel and back and forth and all that kind of stuff. Talking about a region, I think, is talking about a place where we can relocate our human self. So, when I look at the poetry I wrote that tried to imagine what it would be like to live in New Brunswick, I wrote a lot to the landscape and

in part to the history of the people and in part to my family's memories but in doing so I was thinking in terms of: how would this speak to other people who live here? How would it speak to other people who don't live here but know about this place? And how would it speak to people who have never heard of this place before, which I imagine most of the world hasn't? So I think that the idea of region even though I think a lot of Atlantic Canadian poetry focuses on landscape and, to some extent, cultural history and may not seem to be speaking outside of its borders, I think it's doing both. I think it's creating a sense of community within a region that is unique and also speaking to other communities that are, in some senses, being spoken in the same way and through their own poetics.

MacLeod: Lindsay, do you think aboriginal writers accept that designation? Do you think they see themselves as Atlantic-Canadian writers?

Lindsay Marshall: I'm not sure whether they do or not. You mentioned this term 'marginal' and I've been thinking about that. It's like sitting over here and watching all of this take place. And I'm not speaking for all aboriginals, but I'm saying the move has got to be made to become engaged in that conversation. I write specifically about culture, my culture, something that I know about, so I started reading about others whose cultures are similar and they have as much passion as I do and I realized that it's about tribalism. There's a tribal element to all of this, to all of us. So it's helpful to be categorized as Atlantic Canadians because it places us where we are. But for myself, ironically, I found kinship in another writer who is Gaelic, who's Scottish. To me, that's breaking it down all the way to the tribal level. And so I found kinship there. So of course, it's very helpful because the region isn't just representative of just the English, the Irish, the French, the Acadian, the Mi'kmaq; it's collective. As time passes, we all develop our own little dialects that are identified by the rest of Canada. "*Ab*, there you are: Atlantic Canada. There it is."

Leckie: It's a good point to note that in other regions of Canada, Atlantic Canada is the place that's seen as most rooted in its past and it's still pastoral. You know: *those Atlantic Poets are going to write about fishing and stuff*. And the interesting thing is that we're still doing a fair bit of that when you look at a lot of poetry that's being written in this region. But in my thinking about that, it has been reconfigured to think about who we will be speaking to in a future notion of what this region will be; and with that in mind, I think a lot of that looking to the past is a way of thinking through what it will mean to live in a Canada dominated by, essentially a single city-state,

or maybe two or three city-states that are expanding at exponential rates compared to, say, New Brunswick, which is actually declining in population, or Saskatchewan, or other similar regions. So we're speaking forward to a place where Canada is not going to have the same sense of relationship. The other cliché that I want to talk about is this notion that we create a sense of Atlantic-Canadian region so that it can yell at Toronto and I don't think that's what it's about. I think what it's about is trying to understand how that changing relationship will affect the region where we live. And to some extent that will mean a greater focus on Toronto and Toronto having a heavier influence on us. And in another sense it will be a lesser one because as the world becomes more global, we look to Gaelic poets or poets around the world—we're reading, translating, thinking about poetries that have nothing to do with Canada. Is nation going to mean the same thing? I don't think so. I think we're writing toward a new sense of nation through our region.

MacLeod: The second issue, which some of you have already brought up is the notion, an important one, that 'Atlantic Canada' exists simultaneously in two different ways. It is a geographic fact drawn on some map, a real physical territory, but it's also a cultural construct, an idea, or an ongoing story we keep telling ourselves about this place. I was wondering if you could talk a bit about that dualism, about nature and culture, and how those two intersect in your work and in the work you appreciate.

Marshall: For me, that relationship between people and nature is part of what I subscribe to as a poet and as someone who understands the learnings of elders and interprets them. As I grow older, I start taking this knowledge and I say, okay let me (as they have done, I'm sure) index this a little better, condense it, make it more succinct, and then that knowledge of the place becomes a little packet that gets passed down to the next generation. The Mi'kmaq territory includes all of Nova Scotia, most of New Brunswick, Quebec, Newfoundland, and the eastern seaboard. And so for me, the geography weaves in and out; there is no border. Borders exist with people—not with lines or buildings or bridges or fences—but with people.

Bartlett: There have been complaints in some circles about the continuing faithfulness of many Canadian poets to so-called 'nature poetry,' a term that's been overused and diffused. Some commentators, primarily urban, have implied or said directly that the age of a poetry directed in part to a rendering of natural landscapes is passé, an exhausted tradition. I've seen pieces that refer to it as Wordsworthian, as if the only possible response to

nature was Wordsworthian, when we have Haida storytelling, we have poets as different as Jane Hirshfield and Tim Lilburn, or Harry Thurston and Jan Zwicky. I think any poet is interested in things that are primal, fundamental. There's nothing more fundamental (I'm beginning to get preachy here) than earth, air, fire, and water. And even a poet like Al Moritz—who has written as well about the city as anyone in Canada—even Moritz is still in contact with earth, air, fire and water. Divisions between nature poetry and urban poetry tend to dissolve in a poet like Moritz. Still, it's inevitable that poets are drawn to what is fundamental, and a lot of that is found both literally and metaphorically in landscapes that are non-urban.

Leckie: In one sense, I think this question of nature in Canada is a vexed one, culturally, and in some senses Canada's moved from (in relationship to ideas of nature) the pre-modern to the postmodern in a real hurry. Only a short time ago people like Margaret Atwood were pointing out this long, rich tradition of Canadian writing about nature, about environment and about its harsh qualities, about being dominated in many respects, about having to find ways of living with it and going through hard times and then we suddenly move from that to this era when we completely dominate nature in many respects. I'm just reading a recent issue of *Scientific American* which is all about the catastrophe of global warming. It has very concrete solutions; there are things we can do to stop it. But all of a sudden we've moved from a very traditional, Canadian kind of pre-modern idea of what nature is to a very postmodern, potentially catastrophic idea of what nature is and for that reason I think nature poetry still has a certain kind of particularity both in this region and in Canada, but in this region in particular. Because in some senses it's a region that people think of as maybe having that kind of heritage (or, at least that kind of heritage industry) that connects us to this pastoral sense of Canada and yet there's no part of Canada that isn't registering what is going on. Global warming is registered at the bottom of lakes and at the top of mountains and in the arctic. I mean, they can find it everywhere. So there's still a growing sense of urgency about it that I think, once again, is going to re-define our communities—both urban and rural. And we're going to have to think about balances between those things. To me, nature poetry and community are very closely interlinked, precisely because we don't have any other choice but to think about it.

Simpson: Somebody mentioned Tim Lilburn. When Tim Lilburn is speaking of nature in his poetry, he's playing with language in a way that's truly remarkable. Are we doing that with nature poetry in Atlantic Canada at this moment? Yes, I think that poets are making interesting innovations and

taking risks. We can see that it's flourishing because we have small presses like Gaspereau, publishing not only poetry, but non-fiction that has a lot to do with poetry and the natural world. They've made a reputation by doing this. So it's really very much alive and kicking.

MacLeod: Time for the history question. All of us live, physically, in this region, but we also occupy this space at a very specific moment in time. As we've already discussed, it's impossible to talk about where you are without also talking about *when* you are. In our preparations for this interview, I've asked each of you to identify (1) a single poem by an Atlantic-Canadian poet that you see (by any definition you choose) as a person who exerted some early influence on your work, a kind of forerunner to the questions you're interested in, and (2) a younger voice, an Atlantic-Canadian poet that you see as a rising figure, someone who will speak to and for this area in the future. Could you tell us about your selections?

Bartlett: The poem I chose is by Robert Gibbs called "All This Night Long." It's a poem I've been carrying in my memory, in my imagination, for twenty or thirty years; a poem that moved me profoundly the first time I read it and that continues to hold me each time I re-read it. When I was in Fredericton as a teenager writing poetry, Alden Nowlan was an overpowering presence in the local literary community and the centre of a great deal of activity and excitement and stimulation. There were other figures there as well, including Robert Gibbs. I think what drew me to his poetry from an early time was that it did offer some differences from and alternatives to the poetry of Alden Nowlan. It offered a kind of play with language, a kind of metaphorical texture and (for lack of a better word) mystery to which I responded very strongly. Nowlan's best work offered emotional power and imagistic clarity, wisdom and compassion. But there was a kind of interest in language for language's sake and verbal play and mischief in Gibbs's work that I found stimulating, and also a sense of the poem often being something that you couldn't quite put your finger on; as soon as you thought you understood it, it was about to jump away and escape your grasp.

MacLeod: We'll go around the table with each person's selection from the past generation of influences and then come back to go to the future.

Marshall: I like Rita Joe. Obviously she had a big influence on me, on all Mi'kmaq writers, just for being who she was. Any poem by Rita Joe would work for me. She's our most important forerunner.

Leckie: The poem I've selected is by Alfred Bailey and it's called "The Isosceles Lighthouse." The poem opens with the line: "The empty lighthouse stood where the man who built it died," and I think that that is, well, a great line by which to open a poem, first of all. But one of the things that I have been thinking about a lot, almost daily in my role as the current editor of the *Fiddlehead*, is that Bailey was the founder of this journal, and that the invention of this magazine was a central event in the history of poetry in this region. I also think that history is as much about forgetting as it is about remembering. Bailey's poem is about an island that has a lighthouse on it and I think what he's doing is talking both about an emptiness of space but also about a fullness of space; about a history that can potentially be lost, that can die, but a history that can be dreamt of, imagined and re-imagined. The poem actually ends with this dream about all these different types of boats that have kind of floated through Canadian history, I suppose. Bailey himself as a poet, I think, has been forgotten in many ways. I think he is one of Canada's most important twentieth-century poets but the Canadian poetry anthologies don't carry his poetry anymore and to me that is a terrible omission. So every time I get a chance to bring Bailey back to the forefront, I take it up.

Simpson: I chose Elizabeth Bishop's "First Death in Nova Scotia" because of the way she accumulates and builds on images to present the power of an event. It is so evocative and so painterly (but it's much more than that). What it does is what a good short story or novel does, and it does it with such brevity: it detonates and yet you don't really realize that until you've finished. For me, that's the sign of a good poem. I've been haunted by that poem in particular, and a few others by Bishop. I'm very interested in her life, too. She's one of those who spent a few years here when she was growing up and then went away. So she has a different journey than those of us who have come here and perhaps resisted it, and who have stayed and grown to love it.

MacLeod: Who are some of the rising, younger poets?

Bartlett: One of the most exciting things about our situation—writing poetry in Atlantic Canada, or Canada in general now—is the freedom of formal aesthetic options that younger poets have. If you think of the history of a poet like Alden Nowlan, he began writing in highly formal, rhyming quatrains and so on, and it was seen as a kind of development in his career when he pulled away from that to write a verse that was looser, more influenced by William Carlos Williams. Al Purdy, by and large, went through

the same sort of pattern, where he began writing verse of a highly formal nature and found his own voice, as they say, and that involved breaking traditional shapings of poems into giving much more of an air of being improvised. But I don't see younger poets having that same kind of staging of their careers—of course, it's dangerous to speak of younger poets having the whole shape of their career yet. But what's interesting is that a lot of them are experimenting with all sorts of things, not feeling the need to be one kind of poet or another. One of the poets I'm thinking of is Geoffrey Cooke, originally from Nova Scotia, with his poem "Chopping Wood." It's a poem with traditional Maritime material; what could be more traditional than chopping wood? But there's a kind of energy in it, and a kind of *cracking* use of language that is very appealing and beautifully mimics the kind of activity going on. Nearly all the stanzas are open stanzas; the poem really moves down the page, and has, for instance, some tremendous rhymes, like "peninsular" with "salt air"; "loosening tool" with "iron rule"; "caesuras in" with "measuring"; and my favourite: "living in" with "shivering." So even though the poem is written in quatrains that have a regular rhyming pattern, Cook has a kind of athletic thrill of inventing rhymes that perhaps the reader has never seen used in poems before.

Marshall: My choice is a writer from Judique, Cape Breton. Her name is Joyce Rankin. One of the interesting things about Joyce is that she's very in tune with her identity, with her history, with her culture. She also has this overwhelming need to share her knowledge. One of her poems I picked that I really like is called "The Berrypickers" because, ironically, I grew up in Maine, or I stayed in Maine every summer and fall. My father would take us to Maine to pick blueberries. I grew up picking blueberries in the summer and then we'd go to school. My experiences were always from one side, the berry picker looking out in one direction, and then all of a sudden I read a poem by Joyce Rankin and she's on the other side looking at us and I thought, wow, that's a nice connection so I really liked her way of seeing it.

Leckie: The poet I've chosen is a very young poet, and, I think, a very interesting and talented poet: Tammy Armstrong. And the poem I've chosen is called "Boat Builder." Again, it covers some very traditional Maritime material. It's written about a grandfather who's building a very Dory-like kind of boat and it ends with him heading off into the waters with it. It's written in a kind of free-verse style, yet there's rootlessness in it, a straining against the edges and a dark sense of that relationship, which I think is already suggesting ways in which the narrator of the poem is looking

towards a number of stark cultural changes that are going to happen within her lifetime. Armstrong's newest poetry—her third book—is a poetry that is doing just that: it's full of disjunctions, it's language that is kind of tumbling over itself, it's a highly different subject matter and tone for this poem. I like the sense in which she picks up on a traditional way of writing about Atlantic Canadian experience in poetry even as her poetry is already starting to transform that way of writing.

Simpson: I picked Tonja Gunvaldsen Klaassen and I picked her because she has not always lived here. She comes from Saskatchewan, originally, and I was just curious about, you know: how did she meet this culture, how did she meet this landscape? I think she's doing very unusual things in terms of images, in terms of sound, in terms of just playing with the poems themselves. She's really somebody to watch as far as I'm concerned.

MacLeod: There has traditionally been this notion that 'the place makes the poet,' or that the landscape has a kind of power to inscribe itself on the poetic imagination. What do you think? Does the poetry make the place? Or, does the place make the poetry? Can you identify important Atlantic Canada poems, or general literary works, that actively change the way we think about this place? How does your work negotiate that terrain?

Simpson: I think that we're all, in a sense, doors. We're all open and things walk through us. I have to go back to the idea of conversation because it *is* a conversation. It's an exchange. It's not necessarily that we're inhabiting the place. It could be just as easily that the place is inhabiting us. It depends on whether the door is open or not and whether we're letting people walk through us, really. I think very often when we're meeting people, that's what is happening. And when we're meeting a place that's what's happening as well.

Leckie: Poets and literary critics have a habit of looking back in the past and seeing how the place determined the poetry and not so much how poetry determined the place. At the same time, in the contemporary moment, we're often thinking about how the poetry makes the place. One of the things that I really want to emphasize is that in those kinds of discussions, there tends to be a lot of focus on the general. And we think, oh well, the general is out there and Atlantic Canada is the specific. But, of course, in the phrase 'Atlantic Canada' is contained a diversity of unimaginable proportions. I mean, it's massive. So when I'm thinking about my own dialogue with place, one of the things I'm thinking of first of all is that I live in

Fredericton. And Fredericton has a climate and landscape that is in many ways similar to Montreal (and if not Montreal then the immediate areas around Montreal), similar to Quebec, or the Quebec that I know. And it's radically different from St. John which is only 60 miles away. When we're in a dialogue with a sense of place—that sense of place can be really immediate. It can be my back yard, or a street in Fredericton, or a particular spot overlooking the river, like Halifax, for example. And I don't think of myself as one person [laughing]. So when I'm talking about a place, I'm talking about it with many voices somehow confusing me. I imagine that sometimes when people read my poetry they might feel a sense that I've been trying to shape it, shape it into some kind of organic whole, but I don't experience it that way. I think it is a far more complicated question both for me personally, but I think also for understanding how poetry is written at a particular historical moment. I think that the poems I write about very specific places that are in some ways very personal to me are also kind of rippling up the scales of magnitude to determine history, and cultural and geographical understandings and I try to bring that sensitivity to poetry of the past. I think it's really important to be asking that question: what place are we really talking about? And I've written about places that have nothing to do with Atlantic Canada. And I also come from Montreal, I didn't grow up here so that conversation, I think, is too easy.

Bartlett: One of the dangers of a discussion like the one we're having is that it can shortchange or temporarily forget about the importance of individuality of voice. When I'm responding to poetry strongly, the primary thing I'm responding to is the individuality of the poet's voice, the individuality of their way of putting language together, their way of looking at the world, recording the world and transforming the world. I think of them as individuals more than as representatives or as members of a certain collective, or a certain region. So I think it's very important for us to recall that the region and landscape can affect different people in such tremendously different ways linguistically. In the last few minutes I've been thinking about poets as different as M. Travis Lane, John Smith and Peter Sanger, taking each one from the different Maritime provinces. And these three poets are poets who have a highly individual style. Their minds are stamped with their character, their personality, their history. They're all, in a healthy sense of the word, quirky poets, and I think their quirkiness is something to celebrate. Their eyes, their ears could not be mistaken for each other's.

MacLeod: What do you think about the relationship between poetry and place in your own work?

Marshall: I think it's an important part of it, because we [laughing], we, the 'royal' we, the aboriginals, the Mi'kmaq community, don't have the critical mass that Leckie, Simpson and Bartlett have. We are so few, so somebody like me can't help but be the representative voice, as awful as it might be. There is a voice now where there was silence before (or, a little voice). You've got to talk it up—that's the whole point. We're trying to implore others to write. At Cape Breton University, I'm in the position to say to young Mi'kmaq poets, "Look, there's a nice literary society you can join that'll help you out. It'll guide you, you have lots of voice and talent and vision and your voice should be heard. Here's how to do it. And by the way, these people don't bite." Because most people still think they bite. Somebody who's not really familiar with how we—*the great literati*—act in certain ways is going to feel uncomfortable. But once you get through to them and say, "Oh, that Ross Leckie is not a bad guy after all, so send him your stuff. Send your Mi'kmaq poetry to *The Fiddlehead*. He'll probably just send it back, but send him stuff anyway. Who knows?" [Laughter] We need to develop that more in our community. For me, my poems are stories that someone else told me. Even though they may not be, physically, 'stories,' they may be old stories that you bring to life. I can't do the same thing in downtown Montreal. I can't do the same thing anywhere else because *it's here*. The land itself is here. The story is here. The sea air and the trees and all that stuff is *right here*. There's no other Mi'kmaq territory. They sent other immigrants back that have homelands all over the world but where are they going to send me? This is it.

MacLeod: This leads into what is going to be our last question, and it has a lot to do with coming full circle. Poetry, like most artistic endeavors, is simultaneously personal and public. The writer essentially does what the writer does in isolation, by themselves in that mythical quiet room, but the significance or the public life of the poem begins only when that poem goes out into whatever kind of community it goes out into. All four of you wear many different professional hats. You sometimes play the role of the poet, but a lot of your time is devoted to your 'other' affiliations with different educational centres or universities, different writers' groups, journals, and community institutions. I'm interested in how you see this relationship between the private production of poetry and the public life of the poet, the role a poet plays in the wider community.

Leckie: I think there's a way in which I can't imagine any poet wanting to be a public figure. Maybe there are some, but I'm not one. And yet, as you point out, you inevitably become so. In my case, I'm particularly aware of

that because I've kind of projected myself, let's say, into a variety of public roles in terms of teaching, in terms of editing and so on. But I hope that it's for the purpose of bringing attention to poetry far better than my own. My own, often, to me, is very private in the way that I experience it. I am aware that hopefully people are reading it whom I don't know, but you do have to ask yourself that age-old question about whom do you write for: for yourself or for the audience? A very strange part of me is that I write for a few friends. And I imagine, when I'm writing, "Oh, so-and-so is really going to like this part!" So I am projecting myself into a public space when I'm writing. But it's a really small one. It's one that I feel I can be comfortable with and not be frightened by. I find the public space a very frightening space.

MacLeod: And yet you've done lots of editorial work and lots of anthologizing and those sorts of activities. The critical effort is there.

Leckie: I suppose part of it is that I'm looking for ways to say: "Hey. I want to be a part your community and I can contribute in certain ways." But to me, personally, there is a strange disjunction between that public persona and this private persona. How they interact is really a great mystery to me. That private persona that's writing the poems is terrified about what's going to happen to those poems and indeed what's going to happen to me once that poem goes out to the world. But that public persona says, "Oh, what the hell."

Bartlett: Even though I agree with Ross to a degree, that most poets are not totally comfortable in a public role, there *are* the Irving Laytons and other people who've appeared to revel in such a role. Few poets would want to exist on their own or to write on a deserted island. The conversation we were talking about earlier—the sense of community, the sense of a readership—is very important for survival for most poets. It's that stimulation from other voices, from other minds, from other sensibilities that becomes valuable. And one of the ways that happens is through the process of editing or being edited, anthologizing, judging literary awards, as controversial as they can be.

MacLeod: But all of that is a community effort. For many, that community begins in some ways locally before it expands outward.

Bartlett: Begins with the workshop among friends and it expands out beyond that.

MacLeod: In what way is that embraced in the local community? How do you see your poetry and its relationship to the community?

Marshall: I write for a very intimate community: thirty-five thousand people in the Mi'kmaq population. That's the audience that I'm imagining. I'm trying to be as honest as possible with them and trying to correctly interpret the teachings, the knowledges, so as to not seem that I'm inventing stuff. I'm not inventing stuff. I'm absorbing the knowledge that's already there. So the audience responds very favorably. For me, it's a process each time. Writing is a very solitary, private act and for that brief second that it's in freefall before it comes out of your mouth and you get whatever your results are—whether it's positive or negative—that to me is what happens when I write. It happens—you're not even aware that it's happening; it's just there.

MacLeod: In your job at CBU, where you're saying, "I'm going to try and encourage other writers, young writers, to send poems to Leckie." How does that role relate to your writing?

Marshall: I put another hat on and I become an advocate for poetry. In order to understand what happens in the writing and publishing process, people have to understand: this is where you are now, this is where you need to get to, and this is how you do it. So, turning the switches on, inside, allows everyone to see how to move forward. So my role would be that switch.

Simpson: I think we have a responsibility as writers to be witnesses so that we are saying what needs to be said. Writing poetry is political. Writing fiction is political. It doesn't matter if you're writing about a very private world, it is nonetheless a political act. I think that there's a responsibility, not only in the act of writing, but in alerting people to events about which they need to be reminded. This act of remembering is not done with 'the world' or even a specific reader in mind; it is done in order to communicate something that should not be forgotten. There's something else, too. The poets or writers in a given community ought to be concerned with mentoring and bringing forward the young so that they can then go on without us—and then to let them go on, and, hopefully, surpass us. I remember being told by my mentor, "Don't go looking for a guru." That was such wise advice, and I never looked again for a guru. I was just very lucky early on. And this is what we need to do for younger writers.

MacLeod: We'll end on that wise note. Thanks very much.

