

## WE'LL JUST EDIT THAT RIGHT OUT OF HERE: A CHAT WITH ROO BORSON

*SCL/ÉLC Interview*  
*by Mike Quinn and Tim Wilson*

Roo Borson was born in Berkeley, California in 1952. She holds a B.A. in English from Goddard College, Vermont and a M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia. She came to Canada in 1977 and now resides in Toronto where she lives with fellow poet Kim Maltman. Her books include *Landfall* (1977), *In The Smoky Light of The Fields* (1980), *Rain* (1980), *A Sad Device* (1982), *The Whole Night Coming Home* (1984), *Transparence of November; Snow [with Kim Maltman]* (1985) and *Intent, or The Weight of The World* (1989). Although mainly known for her contributions to "Boot" poetry, she is also considered to be one of the principal contributors to the development of the prose poem in Canada. Perhaps the aspect of her work which stands out the most in her later poetry, though, is her use of memory. Giftedly, Borson transforms her past experiences into powerfully refreshing word portraits.

The following interview is a result of Tim Wilson and Mike Quinn's involvement in a Canadian poetry graduate seminar at the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton. Therefore, we would like to thank Professor Kathleen Scherf for proposing the idea to us and for helping make it all happen.

In our interview with Roo Borson, she remarked that she felt more at home with Canadians than Americans. It is an understatement to say that we could not have felt more equally at home with her. She was honest, exciting, and most of all patient. We especially thank her.

During the course of our discussion, Borson commented on many topics including memory, national identity, the Canadian Council, prose poetry, her standpoint on the problems associated with the appropriation of voice, her audience, literary theory, and the difficulties of labelling

poets major or minor. The interview took place on November 5, 1991 in the basement of Memorial Hall where Borson had just finished a reading of her poetry.

MQ: Richard Stevenson and Robert Attridge, in reviews of *Intent, or the Weight of The World*, mention the predominance of nostalgia, or *Intent* as a “book of remembrance.” Is it a book of nostalgia? And if so, for what?

RB: It is certainly a book of remembrance. Most of my work is about memory; it uses memory and is about memory in some way. Nostalgia is a more heavily-weighted word. Certainly there is nostalgia because there is grief and loss, and once there is grief and loss, and if you really miss the stuff, then you’re nostalgic for it. In this case, my father, my mother, my childhood, the place I grew up. Actually, not my childhood, but my father and my mother who are dead. And the loss of the physical space where I was a child. So those are in there; there are grief poems directly related to my parents. Also grief for objects—inanimate objects. I’m a little bit obsessed with losing things. I don’t mean like losing a sweater—though it could be a special sweater!—but that you have things and then they’re gone, and you miss them. Not just objects, all kinds of things. I’ve been a bit obsessed with loss—and more so, lately—probably because of the time in my life: lots of people around me have died—friends, parents.

TW: So you are obsessed with change such that losing things is negative. Is that what you are saying there?

RB: Well! On some ultimate scale it’s not negative. It can make you feel bad or make you feel longingful [laughter] and wish that whatever it is wasn’t gone. Otherwise, you could just simply accept the change and roll over into a new phase without concentrating on the memories, I suppose. Elegy is a way of concentrating on the memories. So negative/positive, it’s hard to say. Things in life are too complicated to break down into negative and positive.

TW: I think I was thinking of that because it was Billings, I guess, who read "Rain" as an affirmation of flux and a negation of stasis. Would you agree with that? Or, would you say that for the poem "Rain" only, whereas overall you see it's not really a good or evil thing about change—it's something we have to accept?

RB: Yes! That's true, and also my writing is changing again because I'm no longer in this heavy state of grief I was in for seven years. So I don't think I'll be concentrating on quite the same things, say, in the next book. Well, some of the next book will undoubtedly have some carry-over from this time—it takes me a long time to put a book together—but yes, I'm certainly not obsessed in the way that I was when I was writing those last two books. We'll put it that way. I'm no longer—suddenly, as of last summer—so laden down, and this is a fairly new state.

TW: What happened last summer? Was there some sort of revelation, or . . .

RB: Well! It was two years since my mother's death so somehow I just got out of that state I was in, of missing her. My mother was the last to go and now that my house where I grew up in Berkeley is gone—it's kind of like a whole package—I get to start clean. It's just a strange psychological... who knows, who knows.

TW: Time heals all wounds kind of thing?

RB: Well yes! Sure it does.

MQ: This leads into my next question—which is also concerned with memory. Most of *Whole Night Coming Home* (1984) can be seen as an expression of the feelings of adolescence or of coming of age, and this is the aspect of your work which appeals to me the most—it really felt like it was memory and not fiction. You said during your introductory remarks to the launching of *The Whole Night Coming Home* at Harbourfront on November 20, 1984 that "memory turns the past into fiction and that writing about it takes it one step further." So the question is did you find it difficult to cross the time gap between your actual experience of growing up and your writing of these poems? I also would like you to expand a little more on what you mean by "turning the past into fiction."

RB: Well! I didn't find it difficult to cross the time gap because I didn't cross the time gap. I mean the time came to me. I never set out to write something. I never decide "O.K., now I'm going to sit down and write something about adolescence." What happened to me was that the man I live with, Kim Maltman, who is also a poet, was writing some poems about the place he grew up, which is on the prairies in southern Alberta. He was writing about the summer heat, and being really hot, and it started to annoy me. They were really good poems and I thought: "I can write a hot poem too!" So, I wrote a poem in *The Whole Night . . .* The first poem I wrote in here was "The Window." "It's so hot you can hear insects dropping from the trees" etc. So o.k., Kim, you think you can write hot poems, here's a hot poem! Well, my summer heat didn't end up being nearly as hot as his but it catapulted me back into California. I wasn't living there at the time; I was living in Toronto. And back into the state of mind of adolescence. It just started from that one poem. And so all of these memories were coming back to me. I was sort of walking around Toronto in a daze—you know, seeing before my eyes my old boyfriends, and all those feelings, and my high school, my junior high school, and just remembering stuff, and the land especially. So then that generated all these poems.

TW: In that quote Mike cited of yours, about memory being fiction and then writing being a remove from that, as another move—does this mean that your poetry, then, is "doubly fiction"?

RB: Well! That's really a kind of an outside analysis of it. It's not that I'm thinking about that when I'm writing, but I think that's true of writing, and I think that's true of memory—that over time our memories change to some degree. Some of them seem to stay pretty well the same and others evolve so that you can no longer remember one part of it, but maybe you remember another, or maybe you've actually misremembered in some way. So it fictionalizes itself slowly, and then writing it down—well, of course I can't put directly onto the page the visual and other sensory memories which are really what's going on in here as I'm writing the poem, that's really what's going on. The words are just coming, kind of in answer to what I'm seeing or smelling up here, but I can't directly transfer that to the page. So whatever the

words are doing, that's fictionalizing it too, and it's abstracting it in a way, except I'm trying to make it really concrete on the page! So what I'm trying to do is to build those pictures for other people, but of course in someone else's mind it won't be exactly the same picture as it is in mine. So it gets further and further from something that we could call the truth I suppose. But I've been told that fact and fiction have the same root way back—meaning to make. So “fact” and “fict”—well that tells you something about the nature of truth I guess, or what we think of it, or what language thinks of it.

MQ: Well! That clears it up for me because I wasn't really sure what you meant by memory/fiction—and when I had read these poems it really sounded to me like it was memory—the real experience.

RB: Yes! It was. I didn't invent anything. I didn't try to invent very much. Because I can't write fiction. It's very interesting to me that a novelist can just walk down the street and see some stranger and make up a whole life story and take off into a novel. That doesn't happen to me.

TW: So it has to be some sort of concrete experience that has either happened to you or...

RB: Or to somebody close to me, or I've seen it, or I've watched it. And, you know, to some degree we do imagine what other people's lives are like. It's not only my own life in that book. But I don't... I don't know. Everything has to come.... Everything in my writing has a source that I could name, if put to it. And you might not be able to see the connection, from the outside—but for every person in my writing, every leaf, I could say “Oh Yeah! I can tell you where I saw that.”

TW: So it lies somewhere between fact and fiction?

RB: Well! I can always pin it down as far as my own memory goes. A novelist would say “Oh well, you know, I just saw this stranger about whom I know nothing, and this stranger started speaking to me in my mind so I wrote it down.” You know, that's different somehow, from what I do.

MQ: So you could say that these poems are almost like word pictures, or word paintings of memories?

RB: Well yes! I think so. Yes.

TW: Or trying to get as close to that as possible?

RB: Well yes! That seems to be the.... Well, I mean again that's not my *intention*. That's just what happens when I'm writing. When I'm writing I'm always writing to something sensory going on in my mind. It's as though music is playing except the music (the melody) is just visual or sensory, pictures or smells, etc. So I'm writing as kind of *accompaniment*, except that... it's more direct... it's too hard. I don't know what I am doing!

TW: I was wondering, dealing with *Whole Night* still, your poems that deal with growing up, aging, etc. seem also to deal subtly with death—both ends of the circle. Do you feel this experience of coming of age or of change necessarily entails a confrontation with the other side, with death?

RB: Certainly with what we talked about already—I'm certainly very aware of that. I'm kind of hyper-aware before things are lost that they are going to be lost, including life—aging. I think that's all I can say about that.

TW: I don't know if you've noticed, but I've noticed that there seem to be a lot of spiralling or circular movements of things like birds or even in the language, something like "again and again"—that sort of thing in your poetry. So perhaps with this cyclical imagery you are saying—like in your previous answer—that you are aware of what will be lost before the fact.

RB: I actually never thought of that. It makes sense to me.

TW: We'll just edit that right out of there, nobody wants to hear my analysis of your poetry.

RB: They might!

MQ: This question concerns your having lived on both sides of the border. I was wondering if you were conscious of any national identity when you write—either American or Canadian?

RB: Not a national identity, in fact I'm not very conscious of a national identity in general.... I will expand, give me time.

TW: That's a yes or no question, it's okay.

RB: Well, no not really, I have more to say about it—it comes up all the time. In fact I will try to explain it in a way that will not be misunderstood, and first I'll tell you how it has been misunderstood before. Someone at a reading asked me if I feel American or Canadian and I said I feel North American. And they interpreted that as—because this was in Canada—that I was an American imperialist coming up here saying that Canada is North America, i.e. Canada is America, i.e. Canada is the States. That is not what I meant. Because I don't think so much in terms of politics as in terms of the land. And, what I mean when I say I feel North American is that I feel very much as though I came from this continent, with these rivers, these trees, these animals, these mountains, these plains and prairies, these weather patterns, and also something about the culture of growing up here. I meet people from Europe and I know I'm different from them: there's a kind of European sensibility not only with regard to history but with regard to the land and how close everything is, all the cities packed close together. There are not so many wide open spaces. I met somebody from Amsterdam who said that there is nowhere now, there's not one spot in Holland where you can stand and not hear the sound of traffic. So that's the sense in which I feel that I'm from North America, and that I have something in common with other people from North America. Europe or Africa or even South America—they each have something different in terms of the land and climate.

TW: When you said that you had an identity with the land, was that the kind of thing you were thinking about when you said earlier that your remembrance, your nostalgia, was for physical space? Is it a remembrance for inanimate objects, but also for, as you said, land, weather patterns etc.?

RB: Yes, land forms and weather, yes very much. I mean the feel and smell of the air in one place as opposed to another. And I get lonely for certain landscapes. There are many regions that speak to me strongly. And, generally, if I'm in one place, something far away, across the continent, is speaking to me. So that I

carry around a head full of other places no matter where I am. So that if I'm in New Mexico, in my mind I might be in Toronto.

TW: It sounds to me if you wanted to write a poem about Canada you would have to move back to Berkeley.

RB: Well, in fact I did write about Toronto when I was in Berkeley again for a couple of years. Kim was doing a postdoctoral stint there in physics. So we were living in Berkeley, and I wrote some poems about Toronto. About the summer nights here and the streets and the raccoons. I mean here, meaning Toronto not here New Brunswick—where am I now? In a basement! I often write about things after they've happened. What, is it Wordsworth?—"something recollected in tranquillity..."

TW: Is that in the *Preface*...?

RB: Or maybe he said it somewhere else; I'm just terrible at remembering things.

MQ: This question is sort of part of the question associated with national identity. John Metcalf said there is no Canadian tradition. I was wondering if you agree or disagree.

RB: I disagree. But I'm not a scholar and I'm not a literary critic and I'm not even a studier of literature. I'm a reader of books and I don't sit around and analyze or think about theory at all. It's not that I disrespect it, it's just not something that I do. So I can't instantly make up a countering argument to say, "No, No, there is." But clearly to me there is. I started reading Canadian poetry before I came to Canada in 1974. And then once I got to Canada, I had a job at the public library in Vancouver in the Languages and Literature department, shelving books. And it was a horrible job, it was very demoralizing, because of the way we were treated—the way the lowest-level workers were treated. It was very busy and I had almost no spare time but in the few spare minutes I had I would race over to the poetry section and open up books—by J. Michael Yates, for instance—I was finding Canadian poetry—more Canadian poetry than I had come across growing up in the States. Of course Yates was from the States originally, but he was writing about the land and the mind in a different way: the Great Bear Lake Meditations. I was also reading Susan Musgrave and Margaret Atwood and Robert



Bringhurst. Well, a lot of west coast people plus Atwood, Ondaatje, Avison, Newlove, Purdy... it's hard to remember now, but I was sort of going through the whole poetry shelf. I think Canadian writing is very different from British and very different from American. But so far I haven't explicitly *thought* about the differences; I've only felt them.

TW: What writers and thinkers do you feel have influenced you the most? Would it be the people like Atwood, Ondaatje etc. that you just mentioned?

RB: It's hard to say who has influenced me the most. I really like a lot of different kinds of writing, including writing in translation from other languages. I don't read any other languages fluently or speak them fluently so I'm pretty much confined to English. I can tell you some of the writers I love, and maybe they've influenced me more than others, it's hard to say. Certainly Michael Ondaatje, Mary Di Michele, Tomas Tranströmer from Sweden, Cesare Pavese from Italy. I loved Wordsworth as a kid—my father would quote Wordsworth over the toaster, Wordsworth and Shakespeare. That was my introduction to poetry, I think. My father had a photographic memory, and he would spout these things at breakfast and my ears would perk up. Peter Handke from Austria—he writes in German. Robert Musil, also an Austrian. More Canadians: Bronwen Wallace, Chris Dewdney, Pat Lane, Kim Maltman, George Bowering, Robert Bringhurst. Michael Yates did in fact teach me a lot I think, early on. Well, I think that's enough. The point is I could really go on a long time just sitting here telling you names of... Sharon Thesen.

MQ: Why does some material lend itself better to prose poems than to more traditional poetry?

RB: I'm not sure that the experience from which the material comes lends itself better to prose poetry, but somehow the shape of the material once it's in the form of words... sometimes the words want to go on beyond the line break. For instance, the prose poems in *The Whole Night, Coming Home*: those wanted to be told as though they were stories, although there's no plot and no dialogue. But I didn't want line breaks: line breaks always give a sense of formality and more of a sense of consciously structured rhythm to poems. I just wanted them to go on in a natural voice,

talking. Although I actually want all my poetry to be a kind of natural voice talking—but sometimes you want the backbone the line breaks give you. But then the structure doesn't precede the rest of it. It's not like there's a skeleton hanging in the air and you just hang the lines on it.

MQ: Do you prefer one method over the other? Or is it just...

RB: No, it's based on the material, sort of how the words are coming out and what they want to do.

TW: Their "intent."

RB: Yeah right. Yeah, they have an "intent," I don't.

TW: Richard Stevenson has asserted that it is time for someone to state "the obvious categorically: Roo Borson is not a major poet." He supports this position with reference to, among other things, the lack of closure in your poems.<sup>1</sup> Hasn't he completely missed the point of your poetry?

RB: Clearly, he hasn't been able to engage with the work he is trying to review. Making a statement like that about closure—he has not understood what I've been doing. Beyond that, the question of minor and major strikes me as silly. Well, we'll all be dead pretty soon and who knows who is going to be thought of as minor or major? And all that is going to change anyway because fads in art change. For instance, I think it was Vivaldi the composer who was more or less forgotten for a time. Then I think it was Pound who found him again and resuscitated his music. What matters is that individual readers come to works of literature, like it, find something meaningful in it, are enriched in some way. Whether readers for my work exist now or later is not predictable by me and I can't control it. On and off over the years people have tried to talk about whether I'm minor or major, and have made various silly comments along those lines. Which I think does a disservice to my work—or to anyone's work. I distrust that impulse some people seem to have, to set the record straight once and for all.

TW: Obviously we need something like the Canada Council or, as David Adams Richards said in an interview with Kathleen Scherf, only Margaret Atwood and Pierre Berton would make

money writing in Canada. Do you see any problems in the way people are selected for funding? For instance, does it support merely a male, white, bourgeois literature?

RB: Certainly not merely male, white, bourgeois because there are lots of women of my generation who have been able to get grants. Race is a different question from the gender question. Certainly there are large groups of people who have been deeply disadvantaged in general, and within those groups not too many people are going to have been encouraged to become writers to begin with. When you take a situation of serious disadvantage in every realm, then yes it probably ends up extending ultimately in one way or another, not necessarily through overt racism, but one way or another.

Certainly there *is* overt racism in Canada. Just the other day two little kids from an elementary school near where I live were yelling "Paki" at some people. So I challenged these two kids; we had a shouting match in the street—"you can't talk to people like that" etc. I wrote a letter to the principal. So now they're going to deal with that issue in the school. You can't get away from overt racism in Canada. But you also can't leap directly from incidents like that to the conclusion that there is implicit racism in the Canada Council. I certainly would not leap to that. So I don't know. Certainly not only white, male, bourgeois people have gotten Canada Council grants, if that's the question.

TW: Could men write a female experience?

RB: Yes, whatever the female experience is. You see, I'm not convinced that I know or could say what's different inherently about male and female experience. There are women I know who say they can. Or that they know that female experience is different from male experience. I don't know that. There's no way that I can know that myself. I'm not in anybody else's body but mine. So I can't know the cat's experience, and I can't know your experience, and I can't know Jan Zwicky's experience even though she's a woman. Certainly there are social experiences in a given culture that women share and that men share and there are big fences, you know, sometimes, running right down the middle of those fields of experience, but those are very socially conditioned. And those can change over time because they are socially

conditioned. If the society changes those things can change. So I can't say that there is anything inherent about female experience. There *may* be, based on the body. But it's hard for me to separate all that stuff out. Certainly women who have had children have a realm of experience in common. I mean there are those things that are based very firmly in our existence as animals.

TW: As a lifeform...

RB: Right, and not only having babies. Other things, too, that you have wider hips so you run differently. I'm just trying to get down to... You know physically, things probably feel different depending on whether you're a man or a woman but they also feel different based on the individual or the species.

TW: So there's a broader realm where we all share the same experience, as a human etc.?

RB: Yeah, there's the experience of being alive! But that may be very different for plants. Mostly, I can say I don't know. But I don't personally identify with an exclusively female experience.

TW: Sarah Harasym<sup>2</sup> says your poetry is very much a "poetry of the body." Would you say that?

RB: Yeah, it's very flesh and blood. Yes, I would agree with that statement.

TW: Do you think your "poetry of the body" shares any similarities with that ("poetry of the body") of Daphne Marlatt or Erin Mouré?

RB: I like both Daphne's and Erin's work very much. Each of them writes extremely melodically, and sound is not only some essential "component" but the very ground of the writing. Also the breaking of habits of syntax: when syntax is broken, new forms of verbal music become possible. Daphne and I once had a much too brief conversation about prepositions—just long enough for me to realize and admire the fact that she thinks about these things consciously, which I don't. I just go around mumbling phrases to myself, involved in how they sound. When I think about it, I'm not sure how a "poetry of the body" can be defined—since all poetry involves the body in its composition and its speaking; and certainly we're not talking only about sub-

ject matter—it's an intriguing question. And a question that rears itself up, I imagine, out of the mire of the "mind-body-problem" split—which I think is fallacious to begin with. Nonetheless we have to contend with it in our art and culture. And then there must be many poetics of the body—Robert Creeley's work, for instance, which, if you have to choose an emphasis, is a poetry of the central nervous system rather than of, say, the skin. I suppose, though, that one of the qualities we share—Daphne, Erin and I—is a taken-for-granted sensuousness in the world that is made manifest in the writing. Definitely not a severed head making proclamations—but some continuous awareness of highly physical presence—and also that identity doesn't end bluntly at the boundaries of the skin.

TW: Sarah Harasym also discusses your poetry very much in the light of Derridean theoretical discourse—whether there is a conscious effort on your part to elicit that kind of response or not, she sees it there.

RB: That's fine to find it there—I'm not against it. Well, I just don't think in theory. I'm interested in reading around the edges of theory sometimes, but when I'm writing I'm only being informed unconsciously, I suppose, by the things I have read. I'm just not setting out to "do" anything.

MQ: Do you direct your poetry to any particular audience—for example, academia? Or is it a more personal experience?

RB: I don't ever think about an audience of people; I don't think about any class or group of people. When I'm writing I'm writing down words and saying things out loud to myself and existing in a rhythmic state. I'm writing for an ear that listens but doesn't belong to anyone. I can hear what I'm saying, but it's not my ear that I'm writing to; it's some ear out there and it's made of the world. I don't know how to talk about it.

TW: I can't help but think of Derrida's *The Ear of the Other*. Is this ear, the ear of an "Other"?

RB: I think the ear I'm talking about is a different sort of ear. I'm included in that ear, and so are you, although you don't know it. It's just that my sense is of speaking and that there's an ear listening but the ear's not connected to a head. The ear is not "Other"

because I'm part of that ear also. I guess some people have a muse that gets them to write or... I'm not quite sure what the muse does. But I write for an ear that listens; that's all I can say about it. And it's not Derrida's ear.

MQ: Timothy Findley noted that your work "creates a compelling atmosphere of wonder while maintaining a sense of private distance which you share with the reader."

RB: I think that's a good characterization of my work.

TW: Is there an agenda to the writing of your poetry (of gender or class)—are you setting out to do something?

RB: No, I'm not concerned with the audience while I'm writing. However, after it is written I care very much that individual people hear it. But, while writing I only write for that ear. When I'm doing a reading I guess I'm still reading for that ear but I'm also reading to the exact people in the room and that matters—very much to me—that those people are there.

TW: Do you feel there is more "kinship" between you as an author and the audience as a reader or between you as an author and the audience as a listener—at a reading?

RB: The motive for writing poetry is somehow to sing or to speak. To sing or speak requires a listener and that is why I use this image of the ear. It's not as though I see a ghostly ear, but I am speaking to something. And when I'm writing it's not to a room full of people. My God! I couldn't write with a room full of people listening to my every thought. So both are important. I wouldn't write anything without that ear that's distinct from a given physical audience. But real people are important to me. If I were suddenly the last person alive on earth I wouldn't... Well I might stand up and read from my book of poems if I weren't in total despair. Well, this is getting too hypothetical. Both matter, in other words. It's just that I'm not thinking of a particular audience when I'm writing, I'm writing for that abstract ear.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richard Stevenson, "Roo Borson, *Intent, Or the Weight of the World*," (Review) *ARC* 24 (1990): 53-7. Or see Stephen Morrissey, "Roo Borson, *Intent...*," *Antigonish Review* 79 (1989): 81-4, where the poems are attacked for their poor "sentence structure."

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Harasym, "Ringing Rounds on the proper Name," ed. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli, *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, (Edmonton: Lonspoon/Newest, 1986) 324-34.