

State of the Art
January 23, 2016

What a great poet does

The style guides of several newspapers have now acknowledged the singular “they”, including the Washington Post. That is a relief because having to rewrite sentences awkwardly to avoid the singular “they” has been a pain. It’s widely used in common speech. The English language can be counted on to evolve in sensible ways. I wonder what other changes will be coming. Will the run-on sentence, also known as the comma splice, ever be accepted? I first noticed that it could be made acceptable when I was receiving letters from a relative. She wrote beautifully, vividly, with a great eye for detail. Her letters were a delight to read. And yet she used the run-on sentence often. All that would have been required, my grammar teaching brain was thinking, was the use of a semi-colon. But that looks so pedantic, stops any flow. A precept when I was young was “ain’t ain’t in the dictionary.” Ain’t never became acceptable even though it is a useful word, working with all the pronouns. Its main use now is in dialogue to indicate that the speaker is elderly or ignorant. “You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog.”

I spent a happy hour skyping with one of my readers/friends, Millie Yeomans, while she showed me her latest paintings. She has three modes of painting: one is of landscapes she imagines, another is of landscapes from photos she has taken, and the third is what she calls her Lawren Harris paintings, influenced by his style, especially his use of light and colour. One of her Harris paintings is titled “The Peak”, of Mt. Bald Peak, with a “light-filled sky.”

It tickled me that she is reading M. Travis Lane’s *Crossover*, that I had introduced Lane to her and that she likes the poetry. She is planning to do a painting inspired by Lane’s “The Beach at La Villette”. “At La Villette the sands were grey/and pale brown like a tawny fur.” She said, “I can just see it.”

From Frog Hollow Press I ordered *The Child Alone*, a limited edition of 150 copies. I’m pleased that mine is number 68 of the 150. This anthology of poems about children—not by them or for them—was edited by Brian Bartlett with a lovely cover and other illustrations by Bartlett’s daughter Laura. It’s an attractive book on Mohawk Vellum paper with a handsome typeface, Warnock Pro, and beautiful end papers. Five of the 24 poets are from New Brunswick: Vanessa Moeller, Sharon McCartney, Alden Nowlan, M. Travis Lane, and Ross Leckie.

In his stimulating introduction Bartlett brings in Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Issa, and Whitman, muses about the poetry of childhood, writes about the differences in the individual poems. “The poems here have been chosen not only for their excellence as poems but also for their unusual perspectives, their capacity to broaden our images of childhood and their value in helping us deepen our appreciation of children aside from their roles as offspring and family members.”

“Running Away” by Don McKay brought back so many memories as well as making sense of them for me. “I was four/and leaving Cornwall,/Ontario, for a life at sea. What//possessed me?” His companion and bad influence is a dog named Sam. “His fate was to be always/on the verge of speech, full of the rich//paradoxes of domestic life and wilderness, just about/to clue us in before he realized afresh/how deaf we were.” When I was typing the poem, I put “edge” for “verge.” But verge is so much better; makes me appreciate what a great poet does.

One of their adventures is to go to the canal “where mechanism met the river, dangerous/and dirty. Perfect.” They had been told that kids were drowned or mashed there. I was six when I went to the canal with its dangerous whirlpool. More adventurous kids would dare to cross on the narrow board that went over it. Later when I was reminiscing about this terror with my father, he was surprised because, he told me, it was only two feet deep.

A wonderful poem by Patrick Warner is written with the cadence of a child’s poem with rhymes—and is about a conception and pregnancy. “Like a tiny toy horse I trolled in the sea,/a black and white horse near the end of my line,/I trolled to see what might be hooked”.

It has only been in the last few years that I’ve used the em dash, usually in place of a comma. I don’t know the rules for its usage. Maybe there aren’t any. I consult the three books here beside me and see that Bartlett in his introduction, M. Travis Lane in her manifesto *Truth or Beauty*, and Peter Thomas in *Lost Land of Moses* use the dash liberally. All three are poets. I will have to notice others’ use of the dash.