

# A Poet's Voice

**Harold Rhenisch**

Harold Rhenisch's 22nd book is *Return to Open Water: Poems. Selected and New 1978 - 2007*, Novelist, short story writer, essayist, translator, dramatist, poet, and editor. He has won the Malahat Review Long Poem Prize (twice), the CBC Literary Prize, and the George Ryga Prize. He lives in Campbell River on Northern Vancouver Island.

**Author's Statement** Poetry is a dance between body and intellect. It is a form of knowing that does not draw distinctions between human faculties, or between people and their environments, but negotiates their interface through language, and negotiates language through its environment. This is a delightful dance, and it retains the power to rejuvenate the other mythologies that spring from it, including fiction, essays, and science itself: Its touchstone is passion. For me, its music is precise and clean, yet improvised and imperfect. For me, it is what it is to be human.

## ***The Old Poet in Venice***

The water pools at the house's root  
and black ships pass through walls of stone  
mirrored in the tide. In the attic of the house  
a man lies alone, condemned to silence  
by his pride and the words he's made  
to turn all gold to love, a childish trick  
he used to win a war long lost  
before it began, as it should have been:  
war's unjust, and tides rot all wood  
that holds all houses above slick mud.

The sun breaks in as curtains,  
drawn for distant guests, are pulled  
from glass that rings with sounds  
of birds and streets, where bridges cross  
stagnant water and people dress  
as who they're not. For just one day  
the prince is poor, the orphaned girl  
a priest with robes and golden mace,  
a poet a boatman who guides a hull  
from here to there but never back.

There is no going back.  
A man knows that when a man is lost  
within himself and the city's name  
is all he has to answer back  
when he is called to sound himself  
upon the drum and can make no sound  
except the burning pride  
of having loved and fought  
with words, praised tyrants,  
become a fool and accepted pardon  
when he should have screamed  
to the heavens that in this world  
there are only fools; we dress  
in masks and take for lovers  
those who know not and cannot know. There is no  
turning away and no going back.  
No heavens answer words like that.

## ***Pillow Talk***

For thirty years, I was a pear tree above a glacial lake.  
Evening is a flower, folded out of crepe paper and whispers.

In storm, the lake is a black amphora, complete with white horses.  
A bull snake first said the word 'grass.' I whisper it back.

Each leaf is the moment after a match is extinguished, or before it is lit.  
Pears are a memory of snow, yet they both fall.

A woman walks through summer rain, picking roses.  
She is the answer to a question she hasn't posed.

What do you dream of when you are not there  
to dream of flying? Hush, here you are.

## ***Root Cellar Song for Washboard and Cricket***

For weeks the aspens have been torn out of yellow silk.  
I hang a window before a curtain of flowing water.

The process of emptiness leads from conception to trial.  
Sleep needs the mind; it burns it into dust.

I carry away the past in my hands and scatter it to the winds.  
The winds bring it back: a drink of wine before sleeping.

As to why the sparrows have not invented speech, well,  
the grass lives in silence; it amplifies sound and sends it on as footsteps.

I have built a house of field stones that remember the sea.  
Every year the plow turns them over one by one to face the stars.

Plato opened a doorway into the earth.  
The earth walked through it into the light, and was gone.

To escape the binding charms of words, pick up a stone.  
Young men don't know this. Hold it. Be held.



## Stop

I am always stopping. No sooner do I start than I put on the brakes, slam into the dash, hit the wall, when I need a break from trying to begin, come up short, totter on the brink and stare into wrecked cars down by the creek, or sit and leave the shovel in the hole, the hammer, nails, and saw, lying on the wood in the spring sun as the vines reach for the light, and catch my breath, which, I tell you, is hard to catch; no sooner do I take a breath than I must stop that too. My whole life's made of stops like this: the street that ends at another street, the page that turns to stories that start and stop, one page a minute, numbered, chopped, and sewn against a spine.

A book's a lot like a man: no sooner do you know the lovers, who bumped who off to marry whom (in books they talk like that) than the story stops, the ends tied up – roughly, no doubt. You are left lying on the beach, in your own life, stopped in your tracks. You look around: sand, water, bodies, just like yours, oiled, burnt, perhaps bored and looking for a way to stop the thought that this is it. Your heart stops.

You must start at the first page again, stop, the second page, stop, and go on, this time without surprise until you stop, exhausted, and know the second start is no start at all, once you have stopped. The light, the night, the day, the rain, the wind, these all stop, as does the snow, the love, well, maybe that is at last a start, though I have known even love to stop. Still, stopped, it lingers, makes you wish you could say those words again, not the ones that stopped the kiss right on her lips, but the others that stopped the start so love could begin.

Sometimes I stop and look over the cliff at the hayfields and the river and my breath stops, and when it starts it is a different breath. Sometimes I just remember it. It may be so with all that stops, the story I make up in fits and starts, the one you hear as it echoes where I stop and you begin to breathe again, set down the cup, lift the words, your lips, the cloth, as I begin to stop myself.

## The Check Point

### Point Alpha

And there it is. A hedge of hawthorns and wild apples, in full bloom, and rape planted under the tower where the power ran under the road and was switched to the fences that ran along the high ground and divided West from East.

I pick up a chunk of reinforced concrete and pocket it. The wire is gone, except for short twists in the grass. I hadn't expected no man's land to be so quiet – there aren't even any birds, just the sense that my whole life has been lived in this narrow strip. The concrete was poured overnight, and plainly looks like some of the boards warped before it set. No matter. The doors are kicked in and above one someone has spray-painted his political testament:

*1 Euro a Fuck.* Sky blue. There is a parking lot beside the road that Napoleon took, five times, to Leipzig and back, and big trucks heading to Poland, using this old cart track shaded by oaks as a short cut. There was one guard path for the soldiers of the people's republic, and one for the Yanks. I'm in the middle, waiting for a man sitting in his car to leave the gravel lot. The guards are all gone. There's just us. It's a battle of wits. I don't trust him – and though I tell myself not to be suspicious, he's waiting for something, here, in the middle of nowhere and I feel naked. I remember well when the Wall fell. I was jubilant. Who wasn't? A new world had come. Ha. We got an old one. It was a trick. The man in the blue wagon stays an awfully long time, but finally pulls out, heading West.

The trucks are bright green with yellow tarps. They take corners like Michael Schumacher in Mont-Tremblant. Now, in the acrid scent of the rape, it's my turn to inspect this first tower of the East German anti-fascist defense – not to keep the East Germans in but the Wessies out, if you can believe that. At first that day I didn't. There are electrical boxes, stairs (smashed), and a toilet (kicked in) – a National Monument to Freedom, maintained by the Free State of Thuringia, complete with flags and bare pilons marching downhill. Width: 2 metres. Height: eight.

Around the back, more electrical boxes, tossed around as if this were a TV set and the crew had left, a braided aluminum cable in a black sleeve, shiny where it was cut, sticking out of the dirt like the eye of a snake. Don't they realize they could put all this stuff on eBay and sell it in North America for hard cash to erase their budget deficit? Nope.

It's then I step in the shit. The idiot in the blue station wagon was waiting for me to leave so he could make a last deposit. Oh, this is rich. I spend the next half hour scraping his politics off, thinking of myself as I pull a stick from the thorns of the blooming hedge that cuts this nondescript hill in half: *Welcome to East Germany now, you idiot.*