

A Brief History of the Short-lived

by Chris Hutchinson

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Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Chris Hutchinson owes a debt of gratitude to former Winnipeg writer Patrick Friesen. It was Friesen who encouraged a young unknown writer to submit his manuscript to The Muses' Company. The result: Hutchinson's first publication – *Unfamiliar Weather*.

But this debt may go even further. During a telephone interview for the radio show *Speaking of Poets*, Hutchinson, who had just taken up residency in Texas, responded to a question regarding the longer lines in his fourth book, *A Brief History of the Short-lived*, and agreed that they could have come about as a result of the influence of Friesen, the master of the long-line poem.

In an interview for Open Book conducted by Alessandro Porco (http://www.openbooktoronto.com/news/shivering_romantic_interview_with_chris_hutchinson), titled "Shivering Romantic," Hutchinson made some interesting statements:

Let's just say that I'm a romantic at heart but I've also been exposed to a dangerously small amount of poststructuralist theory, and that my poetry documents my abject failure (hence the shivering) at reconciling these two worlds.

speaking very generally and just for fun, that the distance between two disparate 'things' is the purview of metaphor. If the metaphor is functioning properly, a reader should be able to fill this gap with some kind of psychic-emotional energy. But it's a nebulous zone, fraught with hazards!

I've become more interested in interruptions, like you say, in fissures, incongruities, disjunctions, fractures, leakages, than in making connections. Because it's not my job to make connections, it's my readers' job to fill the space.

Basically I'm an indolent, west coast slacker kid, and I should have been born rich. As it is, ineluctable financial pressures have made it difficult for me to achieve any lasting state of beatific weightlessness. But occasionally I manage to sneak a few lines onto the page – lines, it's true, that contain recognizable words organized according to the normal rules of syntax and grammar; but lines that are, to some degree I hope, unfettered by the obligations of prosaic cultural utility.

Let us use Hutchinson's own definition of his poetics to evaluate his most recent offering.

We will begin our descent into the poet's mind with the title poem, found on page 10. I do not profess to know what this poem, with its crashing juxtapositions and its timeline that moves from 1864 to 1977 to 1667 and then to "the middle ages" means, although perhaps its last few lines express all that is needed to know:

Before computers

Time was not a river, just the caressing of the impermanence
Of truth; *et in arcadia ego!* His spree is over, his wallet empty
But for modern forgeries of ancient counterfeits. So tired and
Longing to escape the storms and voguish cycles of our lives
He hides amongst the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters
Dozes off between the rats and saints.

Here we have the interruptions, the fissures, the incongruities that give rise to the overarching metaphor bridging their gap, the metaphor of time. We have the loose application of poststructuralist theory with implications of Baudrillard's simulacra and Benjamin's arcadia. And we have the splay of lines upon the page unencumbered by "the obligations of prosaic cultural utility." We are treated to a potpourri of ramblings that resonate in the manner of shafts of sunlight streaming through clouds. We may not know what Chris Hutchinson is about but we appreciate it nonetheless, which is the hallmark of strong poetry that begs for a radical interpretation.

Hutchinson is the bearer of cryptic titles such as "The Historiographer Reads to her Time Travelling Son," where we encounter the short lines reminiscent of his earlier poetic offerings:

On days best for bloodletting
Five sparrows will align
And pass like dark stars
Through Cassiopeia – this
According to the hermetic
Manuscript she is reading
To her son who is feverish and
Oblivious to the hour's irregular
Pulse. (13)

The lengthiness of this quote was necessary to present the full unwinding of the first sentence. I must admit a dislike for Hutchinson's penchant for beginning each line with a capital letter, something I view as a throwback to the Romantics, although he does admit to being a romantic at heart. In this age of omens and hermetic writings such as *The Da Vinci Code*, this poem could be interpreted as a parody. But we can also see a parallel with the title poem discussed above in that Hutchinson seems to have a penchant for manuscripts and other writings which are a frequent reference in his poetry. This penchant can be seen in the third of the poems in his poetic sequence "Serialist":

In the forsaken
illuminated manuscript
the owl's chest is white

as the smoke it thinks
might arise from a particle
physicist's pipe – (33)

The concept of the manuscript bears such an indomitable presence within this collection that it assumes the quality of an overarching self-referential metaphor.

One last comment about the text: it is littered with poems bearing the title “Representational.” Each would appear to be a description of an object, as this example indicates:

Under glass
the cracked porcelain
of a dragonfly’s
wing decorates
the face of each
postage stamp (55)

The shortness of the lines and the division into couplets is strongly reminiscent of William Carlos Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow.” However, Hutchinson reflects Plato’s concept of the ideal whereas Williams creates the iconic.

A Brief History of the Short-lived is a strong poetic work, one worthy of exploration. The development from his first book, *Unfamiliar Weather*, published just seven years before, is phenomenal. The future beckons this talented writer. ♡

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *The Malahat Review*, *Arc*, *The Antigonish Review*, *The Fiddlehead* and *The Danforth Review*, in the US for *Quarterly Conversations*, *Rain Taxi*, *Rattle*, *Big Bridge* and *Galatea Revisits*, and in Australia for *Jacket*.

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