

# *The Stag Head Spoke*

*poems*

*Erina Harris*



A Buckrider Book



Erina Harris, 2014

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher or a license from the Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). For an Access Copyright license, visit [www.accesscopyright.ca](http://www.accesscopyright.ca) or call toll free to 1-800-893-5777.

Buckrider Books is an imprint of Wolsak and Wynn Publishers.

Cover image: Wallpaper © time. / photocase.com

Cover and interior design: Natalie Olsen, Kisscut Design

Author photograph: Candace Evans

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro

Printed by Coach House Printing Company Toronto, Canada



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada



Canadian  
Heritage

Patrimoine  
canadien



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

50 YEARS OF ONTARIO GOVERNMENT SUPPORT OF THE ARTS  
50 ANS DE SOUTIEN DU GOUVERNEMENT DE L'ONTARIO AUX ARTS

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Book Fund.

Buckrider Books  
280 James Street North  
Hamilton, ON  
Canada L8R 2L3

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Harris, Erina, author  
The stag head spoke / Erina Harris.

Poems.

ISBN 978-1-894987-82-0 (pbk.)

I. Title.

PS86I5.A74783S73 2014      C8II'.6      C2014-900329-3




*Book One*

*Bestiary: The Enfantesques*

The word *ecology*, fairly young in the English language, was coined by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel as *Ökologie* from the Greek *oikos* meaning a house, a dwelling place, a habitation in 1873.

**CHRISTOPHER ARIGO**, "Notes Toward an Ecopoetics"



The terms Dionysian and Apollonian we borrow from the Greeks... and they continually incite each other to new and more powerful births, which perpetuate an antagonism, only superficially reconciled by the common term 'Art.'...

...Schopenhauer has depicted for us the terrible *awe* which seizes upon man, when he is suddenly unable to account for the cognitive forms of a phenomenon, when the principle of reason, in some one of its manifestations, seems to admit of an exception. If we add to this awe the blissful ecstasy which rises from the innermost depths of man, aye, of nature, at this very collapse of the *principium individuationis*, we shall gain an insight into the nature of the *Dionysian*... [The Dionysian] even seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of Oneness.

...Under the charm of the Dionysian not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but Nature which has become estranged, hostile or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her prodigal son, man.

**FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE**, *The Birth of Tragedy*



It is violence that makes rhyme....

...Rhyme is an ethic.

**HENRI MESCHONNIC**, "Rhyme and Life"



Reim dich oder ich fress dich. / Rhyme yourself or I will gobble you up.

**GOTTFRIED WILHELM SACER**,

*Antipericatametanaparbeugedamphirribificationes Poeticae*

## ***Mimesis: The Dunce and the Shadow –***

### ***DUNCE***

Denim brats tug squirmy bastards tromping  
in foil party hats. Our song a ring  
wrung around the shiny daughter beaming under  
a crown of sugar. We follow her.

Our mistress she insists that his royal fistiness  
must get the strap for fisticuffs.

Then in my clan I am perhaps last,  
cause I would not repeat it back

quite right to my mistress, note by note.  
It is that I could not or I would not:

that I know not. Now I am not  
knowing in the corner that I know

the teacher, tallest in her apron  
which precedes her, of that I am certain  
of her spectacles exceeding her whole face.  
That she clops in foamy voice

walking beside her, like two horses  
walking side by side and one got

wet. Which is taller I know  
which. When her pointy shoe now

clacks and clicks at my blue crayon, which  
may or may not wish

to give its life back to the crack, between  
her, and it, and her heel,

where is born such a lovely shadow:  
that it walks there and it is with the shoes

in her voice and with her. I know shadow  
is dressed best in a dress less fair so

it tugs her. It is longer than her: this makes her  
the angriest. My shadow is in the corner.

My cornered shadow is angry that  
when I wave behind her back

she cannot manage its fantastic wing  
I make her. I made it when my classmates sang.

## ***Mimesis: The Dunce and the Shadow –***

### ***SHADOW***

I love them so much I could eat them.  
They need me. I amuse them when

I make them sing that bloody song  
about my pointy horn, and worn

strapped to my corner I am, am not her  
master, it, for her I cannot repeat, perfect

to her as one, not quite right, gone  
off. A monster's work is never done.

## ***Cryptozoology: Show and Tell Sonnet***

The boy with no voice is trying so hard to speak to name his  
sleeping monster  
Before the class: wriggling bastards and brats steep in stench,  
Held by four-footed wooden desks. No sign of his sister his face  
reddens.

In this classroom guarded by rats, on front line, stranded,  
He exhibits the chipped glass flask in which it steeps sodden,  
Kept in alcohol broth, showing his embryonic slumber to us  
who strain, out  
Past our necks, imagine it awake starts, holds our look for us.

Squirming children wild for the show. But the boy cannot speak,  
turns away, looks  
Out the window where two birds fly over those who are also  
learning:

The town widow walking dusk with the strange girl kept, in red  
dress, to us,  
And the drunkard, flushed, curled in ashen shade by a shrub and  
speaking to it, he

Looks to the window and his voice is carried off by one crow  
And placed elsewhere. As he turns, it tips he sees  
Through the glass that engorged, softening face bows so slowly  
toward his shoulder.



## ***In the Distance***

A grey cat yowls, yanking

caught paw to get it back from the frozen track.

Its spine, a bristling archway its sound slowly crosses  
in low growl, a memory inherited  
is climbing on to the cry of an infant.

He is parted from his sound. It enters sky which carries it  
further and someplace lays it down.

The grey cat beside the train track  
writhing. His free paw bloodies a scratched slat.  
Steel track in place beside the cat  
in grit his deepening. He bears down,

under sky tilted jaw at the slit, begins  
with teeth at paw, then a second time cries to it.

## ***March of the Keepers***

### ***PRELUDE***

Ambling, one two we traipsed along went –

metal lunch boxes toted hi ho

by small secret soldiers,

daytime had lent

us its things in snowflake fusillade.

What we were told.

Before the light-trough catches cold.

We set out.

**SEEKER'S MARCH**

I, the first. I, the taller  
could walk the front.  
Could duck for our cover,  
for my brother  
behind me shivering  
for both of us in single mission, set  
one and two, on the trail  
of its trail from each day  
forward march of the sneakers  
in its name  
dip and zag within tracks  
emerge of it and not of it.  
To not look back,  
to swallow sleet  
if air disbanded.  
Handle brother's fragile bones  
that he may glitter  
less so, to  
"Follow it –  
follow it."

## **MARCH**

The others remained unmarked  
by our pledge, could not make out the tracks  
it bled the thing we tracked in leaking snow  
inscribed. One by one they doubled back.

We did not want them in their knowledge  
that could mark us. Lessed, and hushed,  
two soldiers, left, go two by two, our four  
feet in huge footprints of

the path that tracked its cursive: trampled  
pristine snows that gave and held

glinting prints for it.

On bluing knees we clambered through

in sodden, dripping mittens through, to open-air  
tomb of layabout parts where jutted iced scraps

of spent machines spending their bloodying rusts.  
A saucepan wears a single shoe where

light unwraps wrappers all over the images.

Uprooted, a lamppost bent to new shape:

old lady safely practicing her curtsy  
among windows stoned eyeless and balding upholsteries

stripped to springs and bones in muck  
a crooked wire stands up to accuse.

The coat hanger tiara he fashioned for me.

My crown it made me the day's queen: all bowed,

crouched under sky agape over  
the junkyard and shared by us and clawed open

**MARCH II**

When my brother went pale on a blue tin hood  
I slipped and landed at the mouth.

Cut deep the lip splits so brother gave up  
a cloth. Blood everywhere for this

the graveyard of engines surrenders a fender:  
we decide what is and is not a gift:

“To keep it:  
if this fender could be a lance –”

“If the monster is –  
the father, could he allow this?”

Onward,  
passed a procession of crows, a species of unfolding  
fledglings none less ugly than its siblings who  
swoop to receive and trip at rotten entrails of nest  
trashed by predators

“Or the others,”

said my brother  
on our path

“Now follow –”  
“back

on its trail,” we hunker down in northward skulls.  
In tracks we are its keepers, two

to sing our wind-scraped song of kin. Soldiers,  
spittled, weighted, hunch

in secret mission drag wrenched, sparkling, a leg bone homeward

*I*

Trailing, a half-song, a distance  
behind the maker of gaping tracks

we wait.

Keep

out of sight.

We count up paces.

Ahead of us by forty steps  
and out of sight perhaps it waits.

Soon night will rear up from its face.

“Sergeant,” asks one,

“can you name

the thing:” trailing

in half-song of two steps  
behind, a distance in place my brother

trembles as dusk may pounce in pelt of ash  
before we track it in hacked path, in habit path

as our footprints towards cover up the prints  
of it, we traipsing, forsworn to

our yellow boots chew its last gawking trace.

Crossing over we make and unmake it.

“Keep

quiet,” we keep,

unless, once more  
my brother honks, cloaked

in borrowed voice at the shifting order  
of shitting birds

or answers, again  
at the hobbled, froth-lipped dog gone nameless  
at its chain a medal inscribed  
in its master's name  
the hound bows to receive, to undo  
the splayed carcass, some animal pasted to curb  
and opens its bark at the gate:  
and all sounding: bird and boy and dog  
sound back calls making him one of them.  
The animals believe the boy who blames  
the animals for what  
they claim.



Forty paces ahead of us  
and out of sight we hear it make  
its sound in language we cannot  
recognize until it cries  
and then it is  
a man his sound is  
climbing up his  
own hunched back. Soon,  
night will retract  
from his face.

“Keep him  
in sight” –

and wait at the end  
of our block. There, the one we stalk, he pauses  
shifting in his tracks,  
takes stock  
within his shapes and settles  
into the single figure  
mutters at a nude shrub in the remains  
of his language. He fights  
to light a sodden smoke  
then staggers, onwards,  
then we water the ground at the stain  
our waiting borrowed  
at his waiting if it was lent.  
We blame the sky if we are late.



## II

A message from the bent lady, we beg –  
crowning the shaved hill who is leading dusk  
in her grey dress away  
by the hand that shakes two blackening bats  
from her grey smock  
we could pelt bats if we chose –  
clapping them with frozen stones  
to part them slack, and add this to our frozen crimes,  
breaking them into departure:  
flapping lashes of silent film heroines –  
but we do not, instead

we ask –  
will he turn back for us?

“Now,  
can you see the house he will enter?”

Then a wingbeat,

“No, some figure,  
rather, and tall as a father  
on the other side.”  
“Will he be our guide?”

Then, a cloud  
in which the lady is hidden,

“No,”  
the wind

gives my shivering brother a wallop blows out  
from under my coat my grey dress leaks,

flies off.

On a porch across the street

from a flask swigs a figure who laughs  
and whacks canine fleece off of his coat.