

Vancouver Poet Laureates

Evelyn Lau



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Like much of her poetry, Lau's short fiction, *Fresh Girls and Other Stories* (1993) and *Choose Me* (1999), depicts a dark world of sexual obsession, dominance and dependency. Lau's novel *Other Women* (1995) recounts a young artist's unconsummated love affair with an older married man, and its aftermath. In 1992, Lau became the youngest poet ever to receive a [Governor General's Award](#) nomination, for *Oedipal Dreams*. She has published two subsequent collections of poetry, *In the House of Slaves* (1994) and *Treble* (2005).

Biography

Lau was born in Vancouver, British Columbia to Hong Kong Canadian parents, who intended for her to eventually become a doctor. Her parents' ambitions for her were wholly irreconcilable with her own; consequently, her home and school lives were desperately unhappy. She also attended Templeton Secondary School in Vancouver. In 1986 she ran away from her unbearable existence as a pariah in school and tyrannized daughter at home.^[2]

Evelyn Lau began publishing poetry at the age of 12; her creative efforts helped her escape the pressure of home and school. In 1985, at age 14, Lau left home and spent the next several years living itinerantly in Vancouver as a homeless person, sleeping mainly in shelters, friends' homes and on the street. She also became involved in prostitution and drug abuse.^[2]

Despite the chaos of her first two years' independence she submitted a great deal of poetry to journals and received some recognition. A diary she kept at the time was published in 1989 as *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid*. The book was a critical and commercial success; Lau received praise for frankly chronicling her relationships with manipulative older men, the life and habits

of a group of anarchists with whom she stayed immediately after leaving home, Lau's experiences with a couple from Boston who smuggled her into the United States, her abuse of various drugs, and her relationship with British Columbia's child support services. The film *The Diary of Evelyn Lau* (1993) starred Korean-Canadian actress Sandra Oh.^[2]

Lau had a well-publicized romantic relationship with University of Victoria creative writing professor and author W. P. Kinsella, more than 30 years her senior, which led to the filing of a libel case against her after she wrote a personal essay on the relationship (the essay, "Me and W.P.", won a Western Magazine Award for Human Experience, and was shortlisted for the Gold Award for Best Article).^[3] Her work in magazines won four Western Magazine Awards and a National Magazine Award; she also received the Air Canada Award, the Vantage Women of Originality Award, the ACWW Community Builders Award, and the Mayor's Arts Award for Literary Arts. Her poems were selected for inclusion in Best American Poetry (1992) and Best Canadian Poetry (2009, 2010, 2011). Lau has also worked as writer-in-residence at University of British Columbia, Kwantlen University and Vancouver Community College. She currently lives in Vancouver, where she freelances as a manuscript consultant in Simon Fraser University's Writing and Publishing Program. On Oct. 14, 2011, Lau was named the poet laureate for the city of Vancouver. She is the third poet held this honorary position and her plan is to offer 'poet-in-residence consultations with aspiring poets'.^[4]

GALLBLADDER

Who knew you were even there?
Tucked under the liver, a shrivelled
and sunken pear, small sac, treasure bag
of stones, a stitch in my side—
you are chewing me up from the inside,
your constant gnawing, your spastic contortions
bruising the liver, sending its gamma readings soaring.
When you attack, women say
it's like childbirth, without the happy ending.

You wake me in the night, announce yourself
just under the ribcage, to the right,
you who slept so soundly for decades,
pink and plump, now fiercely awake
and complaining, mottled black
and diseased. I've fed you a rich diet
of sugar and fat, groomed myself into
alliteration, the typical gallbladder patient—
a fat, fertile, forty-year-old female.

The surgeon wants to snatch you,
wiggle you out from the nest of innards
and extract you through a slit in my side,
but I want you to stay a while longer—
your little screeching voice,
your bilious mouth pushing out and pushing out
its stuck stones, wedged in your neck
like olive pits. You keep me in thrall
with your appetite for pain,
your possibility of rupture.

FEET

A doctor once exclaimed, *Those are some ugly feet!*

These days you don't even look human—
nothing like a model's feet in a magazine,
slim and straight as kayaks,
squelching in the sparkly sand.
You resemble the plaster model
in the podiatrist's office, the one he uses
to demonstrate deformities.
Your bunions, knobs of throbbing bone
at the base of the big toe, have given birth
to bunionettes. Your hammer toes
are scrunched into claws, as if forever
trying to grasp at something not there.
Plantar fasciitis renders the morning's first steps
like those of the mermaid's on land,
a dance on knife points.

Still, I feel a motherly affection for you,
the runt of the litter, take you into my hands
on winter nights and rub. Caked with calluses,
studded with seed corns, you are like the old woman
on the bus who wears a purple hat
strung with birds and fruit and jingly bells—
a dropout in the race for beauty,
conformity. The years I stuffed you into stilettos
long gone, now I coddle you
with custom orthotics, sensible shoes
cozy as moccasins. Soon you'll be granted
your lifelong wish and live out the rest
of your days in Birkenstocks—
you'll be walking on air!

LOST AND FOUND

Somehow the custom orthotic, a slip of plastic
worth hundreds of dollars, worked its way out
of my sandal in the rough landscape
of the lunar beach and hid
amidst sandcastles and firepits,
chips of charcoal and tangles of kelp.
We combed and combed the shore,
the waning light against us. Watermelon moon
in the cotton candy sky. It seemed then
that this life was a collection of losses,
a slipping down an ever steeper slope,
shedding possessions and loved ones until,
at the last, we shed our own mottled coat of flesh,
this ragged lumpy lived-in self.
Where had the California beauty gone,
though the sun was setting
behind the lifeguard's blue hut,
the surf drumming? All we found
was what others had lost—

a sneaker, two battered cellphones,
a guitar pick wedged into the sand
like a tiny surfboard. Row of burnt palms
behind the lighthouse, decomposing sea lion
in the rank breeze.

The next morning we returned to the beach,
holding out hope like metal detectors, and there,
in front of me, gleaming like the foot-bone
of an exotic animal, the orthotic!
To find something, after so many losses!
The photograph of that moment shows me
with arms raised in religious ecstasy,
eyes closed and mouth open in a half-mad
silent song of hallelujah. You would have thought
I was calling down the spirits from the next world.
That someone I loved had come back to me
from the place where no one returns. Here in Santa Cruz,
where a man in rags shakes his finger
at the heavenly blue sky, shouting,
Your mother was a hamster,
and your father smelled of elderberry!

George McWhirter



Born in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1939, George McWhirter received a B.A. and his Diploma in Education from Queens' University Belfast, and his M.A. from the University of British Columbia. He has taught in Ireland, Spain and British Columbia. In 1966, he came to Canada, and since 1968 has lived in Vancouver with frequent sojourns in Mexico and Spain. George McWhirter taught at the University of British Columbia from 1970 to 2005 and is now Professor Emeritus. During that time he was associated with PRISM international magazine.

McWhirter was appointed the first Poet Laureate of Vancouver in March 2007. He has over ten books of poetry, and his poems have appeared in anthologies in Canada, the United States, Mexico and Ireland. His poetry has been translated into Spanish.

Currently George McWhirter writes full-time and occasionally gives poetry and literary translation workshops.

Awards

Macmillan Co. of Canada, Prize, poetry, 1969.
Commonwealth Poetry Prize (co-winner), 1972.

Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize, 1988.
F.R. Scott Translation Award, 1988.
League of Canadian Poets Canadian Poetry Chapbook Competition, winner, 1998.
Killam Prize for Teaching, University of British Columbia, 1998.
Killam Award for Mentoring, 2004.
Sam Black Award for Service to Creative & Performing Arts, 2005.

George McWhirter (born [Belfast, Northern Ireland](#), September 26, 1939) is a Northern Irish-Canadian writer, translator, editor, teacher and Vancouver's first Poet Laureate.

The son of a shipyard worker, George McWhirter was raised in a large extended family on the [Shankill Road](#) in [Belfast](#). In 1957 he began a "combined scholarship" studying English and Spanish at [Queen's University, Belfast](#), and education at [Stranmillis College, Belfast](#).^[1] His tutor at Queen's was the poet [Laurence Lerner](#), and he was a classmate with the future literary critic [Robert Dunbar](#) and the poets [Seamus Heaney](#) and [Seamus Deane](#).^[2] After graduating, McWhirter taught in [Kilkeel](#) and [Bangor, County Down, Northern Ireland](#), and in [Barcelona, Spain](#), before moving to [Port Alberni](#), B.C. Canada. After receiving his M.A. from the [University of British Columbia](#) (UBC), where he studied under [Michael Bullock](#) and [J. Michael Yates](#), he stayed on to become a Full Professor in 1982 and Head of the Creative Writing Department from 1983 to 1993. He retired as a Professor Emeritus in 2005. He was associated with PRISM international magazine from 1968 to 2005. McWhirter is the author and editor of numerous books and the recipient of many awards.^[3] His first book of poetry, *Catalan Poems*, was a joint winner of the first Commonwealth Poetry Prize with [Chinua Achebe](#)'s *Beware, Soul Brother*.^[4] He was made a life member of the League of Canadian Poets in 2005 and is also a member of the Writers' Union of Canada and PEN International. In March 2007, he was named Vancouver's inaugural Poet Laureate for a two-year term. He currently writes full-time and lives in Vancouver with his wife. They have two children and three grandchildren.

Finding

by [George McWhirter](#)

The pickers out visiting the good
Spots, startled by my dogs, seem clumsy
Or ashamed, as if caught
Relieving themselves,
Bent over, there. They show me buttons,
A whole regalia of mushrooms
Minted by the rain.

Each finding what they need
Cherishes the difficult search. For no reason
Light threads onto a thin, dead branch.

Between dense firs, there's the tallest dogwood
Too. Her long elastic arm
Has grown thin with reaching for that thread.

Questions & Answers

What poetic techniques did you use in "Finding"?

In the early short version I have tried for direct physical effects with devices, made my wife's cheek into what technically be described as a metaphor, but for me her cheek is a real a chapel. How to make them feel made of the same shape and substance. For the two things, a common shape helps and finding the common denominator of their substance in the sound: dome/bone... bone/dome. This is a chapel dome made of bone.

This is my opening and techniques: transformation of two substances/things through sound of into one, chapel cheek/ dome bone, where one thing can take on the function of the other.

Seamus Heaney does this in "St. Francis and the Birds," when St. Francis speaks in the square and around him 'doves throttle up like a flock of words.' "Throttle" is the sound transformer. He's using his through the verb, I'm trying use mine in the nouns and adjectives, adjectives are always made of the same substance as the noun, in the physical world or words: "dome/d"

Nevertheless, I have to keep this under control because I suffer from ELD: elaborate alliteration disease.

I use a traditional lyric line opener that I break into a perpendicular dramatization of its physical parts on each line. I have broken the lines, also, so that the alliteration doesn't literally crush itself with its own too-muchness and momentum, becoming a sonic steamroller while rumbling through the "gooseberry seeds".

There's staggered rhyme/assonance between the lines ("barings" "...berry" "rosary") to help draw attention to something else in sound and hold the ear on the echo of the earlier word a moment to pick it up before the lines move on. I also try to get words to do what they are. "Jam's" does that... it jams the roll-away motion of the previous lines.

(Like football, there are plays and blockers—runs and tackles to first, second and third downs. Then, start all over again. In other words flow, falter and fall in the action of the rhythm.)

I should explain the origin of my ELD and my compound adjectivism. I was smitten by Gerard Manley Hopkins, or let's say, he obviated something in my own Celtic Viking Anglo-Saxon verse genes with his sprung rhythm and compound adjectives. Not till I read in Hopkins poetry and ideas about technique and form did I really recognize where the impulse came from, where it was all the time in the way we talked in Ireland.

Brad Cran



Brad Cran is a writer, accountant and social entrepreneur. Cran served as Poet Laureate for the City of Vancouver from April of 2009 until October of 2011.

He published his first book, *The Good Life*, in 2001 and his most recent book, *Hope in Shadows: Stories and Photographs of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside* (with Gillian Jerome,) won the City of Vancouver Book Award, was shortlisted for the Roderick Haig-Brown Regional Prize, was long-listed for the George Ryga Award for Social Awareness in Literature, and has raised over \$50,000 for marginalized people in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Cran's essay, *Notes on a World Class City*, defended Vancouver's progressive history and went viral in the lead up to the 2010 Winter Olympic games.

His second book of poetry, *Ink on Paper*, is forthcoming in 2013 and he is currently finishing his second book of non-fiction *The Truth About Ronald Reagan: How Movies Changed the World*.

Brad Cran is a poet, essayist and photographer. He has been a longtime contributing editor at *Geist* magazine and has twice curated the widely successful Poetry Bash at the Vancouver International Writers & Readers Festival. Smoking Lung Press, which he founded in 1996, published dozens of emerging poets for the first time. He was the editor of the anthologies *Hammer & Tongs* and (with [Jan Zwicky](#)) *Why I Sing the Blues*. His own collection of poetry, *The Good Life* ([Nightwood Editions](#)), was hailed by the *Vancouver Sun* in 2002 as the one book of poetry people should read that year. In 2004, Cran received the Writing and Publishing commission at the Vancouver Arts Awards, and, in 2009, Cran and his wife [Gillian Jerome](#) were nominated for the Roderick Haig-Brown Regional Prize at the B.C. Book Prizes for their book [Hope in Shadows: Stories and Photographs of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside](#) ([Arsenal Pulp Press](#)), which also [won the 2009 City of Vancouver Book Award](#) and raised over \$30,000 for the people of the Downtown Eastside. He was the second Poet Laureate of Vancouver (2009-2011).

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Whale, after Wallace Stephens and Ending with a Line by Rilke

1

An armoured lung,
a living castle of barnacle
and bone; a peaceful
leviathan moving with
the ease of a dark cloud.

2

The child knows more
about the gray whale
than the adult.
When given crayons
the adult says he does
not know how to draw.
The child is already drawing
the gray whale
with blue and pink.

3

7

In the world of opposites
the gray whale is an ocean cave
populated by sea otters.

4

No I didn't see the whale but
the man behind me at Starbucks did.
Everyone was talking about it
and someone said "did you
see the whale?" his eyes danced
and he shouted across the store
I did, he kept saying. I did.
I saw the whale.

5

And the whale said
Behold the natural world.

6

The woman died and the man
grew frail and ashen.
His life slowed to the pace
of the gray whale.

7

Forget the secrets of elephants.
The gray whale thinks in music.

8

In the Oregon aquarium, the children sit
below the skeleton of the gray whale
drinking cola.

9

The thing is, my dad doesn't like people much.
We saw the whale on the pier outside the
market.
Even after the whale had gone, my dad wanted to
stay
and talk to everyone else who had seen it.

10

Do not live in habit. Do not take the most
basic assumptions for granted. Consider
the city of whales. If you seek it with your eyes
you will never find it. It lives only in the
symphonics
of the ocean. Its music is to the ear
as the pavement is to your foot.

8

11

Can you believe it's August. Can you believe there is a whale in English Bay. How lucky we are to walk through Stanley Park. My heart beats at the speed of birds. I've stopped believing in loneliness. Here we are. It's summer. I want to be in love.

12

Some were trying to decipher what the whale was telling us. Others already knew.

13

And there you were
below the mountains
in the heart of the city
gazing at the gray whale.
You must change your life.

First published online in February 2010 during the Winter Olympics. Brad Cran, poet laureate of Vancouver, refused to participate in the Cultural Olympiad.

2010 Handbook for Entering Canada

Are you bringing any fruits or vegetables into Canada?

Have you visited a farm in the last 30 days?

Are you now or have you ever been a member of a group that disagreed with government?

Do you intend to ride the zip line?

Do you approve of product placement in movies?

Do you like my uniform?

Are you bringing into Canada any currency and/or monetary instruments of a value totalling CAN\$10,000 or more per person?

Have you ever assaulted a police officer with a stapler?

In describing my uniform, would you say that it a) inspires respect or b) breeds contempt?

Have you ever dreamed of shooting a fascist dictator off a Spanish balcony?

Do you approve of John Furlong?

Can you give me an example of the words in your head and how they might be used while in Canada?

Do you vote?

Are you now or have you ever been a person who carries MasterCard?

Were you aware of the Oka uprising, and if so, whose side were you on?

Remind me again about the zip line.

Do you read poetry?

Do you believe in homelessness as a right of the people?

If you were Canadian, and if it were possible to do so, would you vote for John Furlong?

Does the colour of your socks match the colour of your pants?

Do your children own an effigy, stuffed or otherwise, of the Olympic mascot?

Our premier rode the zip line. Did you see that? It looks awesome.

Please arrange the following terms in order of preference, starting with the least important: Health Care, Education, the Environment, Homelessness, Logo Placement at Sporting Events.

Do you now or have you ever owned a copy of Raffi's *Baby Beluga*?

Do you own a cell phone?

Are you carrying any printed matter that illustrates same-sex love?

Are you bringing into Canada any firearms or other weapons?

Did you know that each year, more Canadians trust RBC Royal Bank® for their mortgage solutions than any other provider?

What is the total monetary value of the goods you will be leaving in Canada?

Let's go back to my uniform for a minute, you gotta admit it's pretty fucking awesome.

Do you or have you ever listened to *Democracy Now*?

Can you finish the following sentence? Baby beluga in the deep blue _____.

What colour is your heart?

Do you believe in global warming?

Have you ever purchased No Name brand products? You know, the ugly yellow ones?

If while in Canada you were tasered, would you be upset or go into cardiac arrest?

Do you support an international unelected and roaming fourth tier of government as set out by a non-existent charter of the IOC?

If your government acted against the principles of democracy, would you be compelled to action or would you just tell your friends you are miffed?

Do you ever experience emotions stronger than miffment?

If someone you knew spoke up against your government, would you a) listen or b) think that was a little weird?

Which of the following does not fit? Osama bin Laden, Louis Riel, Chris Shaw, Gordon Campbell.

When asked, will you keep the flow of traffic moving smoothly?

How long will you be staying?