

**THE BODY  
IS MY  
MYSTER-  
IOUS  
CONCEPT:  
THREE  
QUESTIONS  
WITH LISA  
ROBERTSON  
INTERVIEW  
BY LAURA  
BROADBENT**

When I first started studying creative writing and literature as an undergrad, Lisa Robertson was a name breathily mentioned by professors with such palpable reverence that it became magnetic to me—it had an aura. Young, green, and very new to the craft of poetry, I didn't understand her much at first, yet I sensed in her work a level I didn't know was possible in poetry, a level to aspire to in my own variations of innovation and craft. It does not suffice to label Lisa a poet, since she is also an independent scholar (critic, historian, philosopher, linguist), an essayist,

editor, lecturer, a gardener and a dog-owner. Her subject matter is completely renegade and idiosyncratic, if one gathers her body of work together as a whole. She is a heavy-hitter in erudition, expressed with ninja-like craft and an awe-inducing style. Her sentences literally make people swoon. Considering this rather intimidating combo—which may give one the right to be a total snob—what makes her and her work all the more captivating is her constant humility, openness, curiosity, and elegance. Now Lisa's writing is a fixture in my life, something to which I often return, from which I always derive new pleasure and inspiration; I've revisited all of her books of poetry, her excellent book of essays called *Nilling*, and perhaps my favourite, something I would call my "Bible," the anthology she co-edited with Matthew Stadler called *Revolution: A Reader*. She is also the author of the cult-famous book of essays called *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. In thinking about this issue's theme when approaching Lisa for this interview, I saw the overarching thread of her work as a constant act of poiesis (meaning-making), and I saw eros as inextricable from that act. In chatting before the interview, I told her it would be all about shelter and learning and eros, to which she replied, "shelter and eros and learning are the same thing, right?" I knew then the interview would go well. It was conducted by email correspondence between her home in France, mine in Montreal, and Ontario, interrupted with her trips to the ocean and mine to the lakes, summer guests and getaways, hornet's nests, family outings... over the staccato breaks of summer-time, which is a different sort of time...

Laura Broadbent You suggested in recent correspondence that shelter and learning and eros are the same thing. Besides the rather boring and well-trying representation of eros as romantic love, it is much more than that! I think this is obvious to some and not to most. To me, eros essentially means an animating force, a reach. Elusiveness is definitely key. A reaching in the dark. So one who loves learning and thinking and books and sentences, that animating love

is eros. Could you give a small mental tour of the shelters you have inhabited in this pursuit of learning? I think of any shelter that houses books as a spirit house. More specifically, your shack on Salt Spring, your bookstore, the Warburg library, and your current shelter in France... Take us on a walk.

Lisa Robertson I would have to start with reading hidden in the ruined corn-silo on the farm my parents started renting north of Toronto in '69. The remaining corn had composted to back loam, the silo was roofless, and these lush green things were growing up rampant in the inside micro-climate. So I would climb a ladder, jump down through an opening, and hide for the afternoon, to read in peace. It was humid and cushiony and still bright, but warmly filtered by the foliage. Yet I wouldn't say that I found this place, or others, in a search of learning. It was more like a search for an emotion of freedom. This freedom-sensation has been aligned with certain architectures and economies. Reading and writing have at times become guides to this alignment, and so have friendship, cooking, travel, retreat, conversation, gardening—most of the Epicurean practices.

The Sea-Cabin, at Musgrave Landing on Salt Spring Island, was a place where I lived for a few years starting in 1980, then continued to return to until I left Canada in 2003. It was one of a network of free cabins that used to exist on the West Coast—I had stayed in others in Golden B.C., and elsewhere on Salt Spring. This particular cabin, built in the 1930s by Rosicrucians, and still containing the original library, which had been liberally expanded in the 1960s with City Lights and Grove Press books, and existential and Zen philosophy, was occupied by a hippy architect whom I moved in with when I was nineteen. It was a one-room cedar cabin with various porches, decks, and lean-tos added to it over the decades, so it had a low, rambling aspect under the douglas fir and arbutus, on an oak bluff overlooking Samsun Narrows. There was no rent to pay, and no bills, since there were no utilities of any kind, so that left time to read,

garden, and walk. We canned blackberries and plums. We ran a cassette deck on a car battery, had a small cedar sauna down by the water, collected rainwater in forty-five-gallon drums, carried spring water from a small pool down a path, and heated and cooked with wood. He went tree-planting for a few months each spring, so I would stay at the cabin on my own, inventing a daily life: typing on an old Remington, sewing peculiar garments on my treadle machine, getting the garden going, walking a great deal all over the mountainside, and reading. It was a nine-mile walk to people and stores. I didn't drive then. I ate a lot of parsnips and winter greens, and nettles, miso, rice, things like that. Gradually I learned to slow down my reading. Most things I read were completely beyond my experience—Genet, for example, then Proust, de Beauvoir, Heidegger, Pound, H.D.—and the only way to stay present in the reading was to take it as slow as possible. At night we had kerosene lamps. It was reading in this cabin that gave me the idea that I should go to Paris, that that was a way to become a writer. I did that in the mid-80s, lived in *chambres de bonne*, worked at Shakespeare and Co. for a while, then had a job as an elderly lady's companion and cook, all the while intensifying the typing of poems, beginning to read in French, discovering, for example, Barthes's *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, and also trying to teach myself ancient Greek from a photocopied textbook. I was reading and re-reading Olson in those rooms, and also Baudelaire and Rilke. I discovered Djuna Barnes, Guy Davenport, read the *TLS* in cafés. I gradually realized that the domestic labour I was doing to make money was really not a good long-term plan, that I needed to focus differently. I decided to return to the West Coast, and go to school at SFU. There I met poets. I was lucky. Robin Blaser, George Bowering, Roy Miki, and Rob Dunham were my teachers. I studied for three years—including summers—then I burned out and took a summer off. I cleaned offices at night and started volunteering at a bookstore run as a sort of intense hobby by one of

my profs, an Olson scholar, Ralph Maud. I ended up using the tail end of my student loan to buy this store from him, or at least make a down-payment on it, and I dropped out of school definitively, then moved the bookstore—called Proprioception by Ralph, after the Olson essay—downtown. At that point I became involved with the Kootenay School of Writing, and Artspeak Gallery, and I published my first chapbook—or rather Lary Bremner did, with Tsunami Editions. I ran the bookstore for six years, first in an upper office in a gorgeous 1907 office building on Hastings Street, then in a storefront on Homer Street. It was heavenly—I felt that bookselling was my calling. I specialized in contemporary poetry, philosophy, theory, and art criticism. It was mostly new books, but I'd stock some rare gems, as I found them—blewointment press, Ian Hamilton Finlay, and David Jones ephemera, that sort of thing. I loved everything about it. The second shop had wide pine plank floorboards and a deep blue ceiling, and it felt to me like a ship. Of course I read a lot, constantly, and when I wasn't reading I was talking books with friends and customers, setting up book-tables at all the academic conferences and readings in town, taking classes at KSW, and then beginning to teach there. When in 1994 I had to close the store because of financial failure, before I liquidated the stock, I carefully chose from it all the books I thought I would need for the decade ahead. I think I chose pretty well—I'm still reading those books. They formed the core of a library that I've been shipping ahead of me at each far-flung move—to Hatzic, B.C. (where I wrote *Debbie*), back to Vancouver, to France, to California, then back to France again.

So for four years now I've been renting a cheap nineteenth-century agricultural labourer's house in a hamlet of four such houses, in the Vienne region, which is in central-western France. Poitiers is the capital of the region. From a North-American perspective, it is extremely picturesque—all beams and stone and so forth. From a French perspective, it is quite banal. It's very isolated,

on the edge of fields, and the night skies are dark and astounding. It is the sort of house that local people prefer not to live in if they can help it—a very permeable house, dusty, damp, and uninsulated. I'm living here because after three years of teaching in California—during which time the crash of 2008 happened, my teaching job ended, I was treated for breast cancer, and my close friend Stacy Doris became seriously sick—I needed to withdraw and regroup, and I needed to live as cheaply as possible. Going freelance again in 2010 in midlife was risky, and my overhead had to be kept very low. I knew this region already because my ex-husband and I had bought a house down here in 2004. I felt ties in a way that is a little hard to understand or describe, given my foreignness. I like the way people live here—modestly, thoughtfully, and with mutual care. People eat what they raise or hunt. They make jam, and share and mend things. It feels like the local economy relates to people's lives. Sometimes when I am up late at night working, the farmers are also working late, seeding or harvesting til midnight. I love the landscape, the rivers, the houses, the little Romanesque village churches, the walnut trees, the medieval frescoes. There are nightingales for the entire month of May. So I bought a 1970s Renault 4L, ordered a new set of Ikea shelves and a couple of carpets, set up my books again, and laid low, writing essays and getting my last couple of books out. The first winter was rough—Stacy died, and the temperatures stayed below -20 for more than a month. My cheap woodstove was inadequate. I moved into one room, beside the stove. But summers are glorious with fruit trees everywhere, doors and windows open, cool floors, many visitors coming from Paris and from Canada and the States. And as the years go by, my ties with other places intensify, and I travel more—Paris, the Netherlands, London. I bought a better woodstove. My new book, *On Physical Real Beginning and What Happens Next*, was mostly written in this house, and at the Warburg Library. And now I live also part of the time in

Paris, with my partner, who is a writer and an artist.

The poet Andrea Brady, who teaches at Queen Mary University in London, encouraged me to apply for a visiting research fellowship in her department, and so I had the opportunity to go to London for a month in Fall 2012 to read at the library of the Warburg Institute. I had spent a few days here and there reading in the library the previous spring, in preparation for a catalogue essay I was writing for the Vancouver artist Lyndl Hall. I needed to find out about the early history of geometry when I first went there, so I was on the history of science floor, which includes magic, philosophy, cooking, medicine, astrology, gemology.... I began to realize the intensity of the place. It's open stacks. Languages are not separated. Extremely ancient books are shelved beside shiny, new university-press editions. The dark carpets are sprinkled with constellation-like scatterings of shreds of paper and leather. Probably we're breathing Renaissance-era pollens. Once I took down a large battered copy of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and it was a first edition, from Frances Yates's library, which she had willed to the Institute. I kept that book on my desk for a month, just to absorb whatever it might be emitting. Also Elizabeth David's library is there. I had been reading and teaching about Aby Warburg in the past, without having visited the Institute. So thanks to Andrea and her colleagues, I found myself with a free apartment in East London, and a month to spend in this most idiosyncratic and profound collection. It was a very emotional experience. Here I was, a life-long library rat, someone who had been reading clandestinely and without method since childhood, being given a key to the secret heart. This library was initially organized by Warburg in four sections corresponding to the four elements and their cosmic interactions. The current organization maintains aspects of this cosmology—the books have no call numbers, so their positions may change, creating energy, and opportunities for Lady Luck. A four-fold system has been retained: Image, Word, Orientation,

Action. When I returned, I mostly stayed on the science floor, an aspect of Orientation, and read the history of astronomy and optics, with occasional forays into historical linguistics. I was tracing Kepler's relationship to German Romanticism, and to Warburg, via Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish Romantic, and learning about the cultural meaning of the astronomical figure of the ellipse. I would say that it is a library of transformation, a scale model of cosmological change. Most of my bibliophilic fantasies were answered there—reading past the two warning bells and almost getting locked in at night, looking through the hand-written index cards of Warburg's own research file catalogue, seeing the stack of glass negatives for his Mnemosyne Atlas, finding a strange typed and mimeographed book from the 1970s, by a classicist from Poitiers, on the etymologies of archaic Greek names for the parts of the human body, finding Benveniste's early work on seventh-century Sogdian proto-Buddhist hymns, and having to cut the pages to be the first reader of that book. The library is absolutely overflowing with unwritten poems, more than any other place I've been.

I suppose the other thing to mention is that since 1995 I've lived with a large mongrel dog—first Angus, now Rosa. That has been essential.

LB Wow—we're kindreds! Though much of what you have done still exist as pipe-dreams of mine, it's good to have goals. And dogs. Yes, it's pretty clear that your movement through all these places is guided by the search for an emotional freedom (one can imagine all the friendships, cooking, travel, books, writing, and retreats therein, as part of the freedom-sensation). Your fascinating trajectory has a distinctly idiosyncratic rhythm and charm to it, a go-by-the-seat-of-your-pants sheer bravery, and a strong organic movement; one thing leads to the next through friendships, connections, leaps, and losses. I'm interested in the times of retreat you mentioned. How they affected your life's rhythm, or whether they had a distinct rhythm and structure of their own. Retreat due to burnout, heartbreak, mourning, sickness? What are those spaces?

How essential are they, or are they more than "essential"? What about extended breaks from writing—have you taken them? Are they included in the retreats?

LR I'm definitely more cowardly than brave.

The things I've done in my life have been steps in a fairly privileged survival, one that has been tempered by many things: being mostly broke, the need to make a living with no particular training or special skills, a psychological need for quiet and privacy, what is now looking like a habitual turning away from institutions, a taste for rural living formed in my childhood, alongside an undeniable romance with two cities: Vancouver and Paris. I've had no goal other than to write, and to have a daily life and economy that felt compatible with my emotional and intellectual life. When I started I didn't know how that was done—I had never met writers, and my family life had no relation to such ambitions, not socially, culturally, or historically. So I figured it out—or rather, made it up—step by step, using a combination of stubbornness, patience, intuition and ignorance. Basically I didn't know then that what I wanted to do ought not to have been possible. But since then I've met other writers whose trajectories have felt familiar—Erin Moure, Gail Scott, Matthew Stadler, Bob Gluck, Eileen Myles, Dodie Bellamy. And I've been helped by those people, and many others.

Living in rural places has looked more like retreat than it has felt, I suspect. An important part of my rationale has been economic, although I admit that the aesthetics do seduce me—trees and seasons and food and materials. Cities are extremely expensive places, especially with recent years' intensification of neoliberal agendas. I've tended to go to the country to live and write, because time is less of a luxury when you live very cheaply and have fewer outside diversions. Also living alone in the country makes of time an extremely palpable substance, one that exerts special forces on and within poems. I now crave that timesense, though I can't take it for long. I'm not sure what you mean by rhythm... but I lived in the country for most of my childhood

through to the early 1980s, again for just a year in the mid-1990s after I shut my bookstore, in the mid 2000s for a couple of years when I first arrived in France, and for the past four years. The passage of illness, mourning, etc. is normal by middle age—I'm at the point now where it seems that a friend or family member or colleague dies almost monthly. So these spaces are simply part of my life, in a staccato way, not separate or special, and not welcome either. And I haven't really ever stopped writing, maybe because I make a living by writing, maybe because through all the unevenness of the decades, this bookishness has been constant too, a necessary thread. I'm a freelancer, with only two years of full-time teaching work since 1994, and a smattering of one-semester-long residencies and fellowships. Sometimes I work more slowly, and with undesired difficulty, that is certain, and sometimes a much greater proportion of my time is given over to reading, studying, researching—instead of "producing." But basically I've been paid by the word for twenty years, with occasional grace and spaciousness provided by Canada Council grants. So I keep writing. An open book or two alongside a notebook is to me an elemental constellation.

But there's something I want to try to say about the relationship of writing to life. I have been extremely affected by the work of Pierre Hadot, a French historian of philosophy introduced to me by Denise Riley, the poet and philosopher. Essentially, Hadot says that for the Epicureans, the Sceptics, and the Stoics, philosophy was not a professional expertise relating to the mastery of texts and discourses—it was a practice of living, whose end was a good life, a happy life. Ideally, like Hadot's Hellenic schools, I'd like to feel that writing is one part of living, not more or less important than the other parts, which we have mentioned—reading, friendship, cooking, art, travelling, remunerative activities, etc. These activities are strands in a whole, and they actually transform and become one another. In fact, I would rather not even think about parts, but of continuities. My writing on Vancouver as

The Office for Soft Architecture, for example, was an extension of my twice-daily walks with my dog Angus, through East Vancouver alleyways, industrial shorelines, working-class residential neighbourhoods. My first chapbook was composed of sentences that had as their compositional duration my daily bus-ride to work. Most of what I have written has responded to the calls and passions of friendship. A friend will give me a title too good to pass up—*The Weather* started as such a title, from Geoff Gilbert, along with the good advice to listen to BBC radio's shipping reports, at a dinner party in Cambridge. *Debbie* started as actual dinner-speeches and toasts for my friends in Vancouver. Stacy Doris and I loved perfume shopping, and the language and history of perfume, and we turned it into a sound project called *The Perfume Recordist*. Some of our work together on sound and scent is presented in a dossier in the current issue of *C Magazine*. The painters Erin O'Brien and Lucy Hogg were separately making portraits of men, and I wrote *The Men*. Sometimes it takes me a long time to recognize just how some juncture or event in my daily life might inflect composed language—it's not always a clear relationship, yet it is a strong relationship, even if my conscious perceptions of it are often belated.

LB Right. You speak similarly about writing being one equal part of living among many other parts in a recent essay I read of yours, where it was suggested that form is about an assembly of lived relationships (living with senses open and reflecting on what this means) rather than some fixed thing, and that form informs subjects. I see this way of thinking as "soft" form (soft as in living), and I see it too as the ethos behind The Office for Soft Architecture. Am I correct in saying that? In terms of the "writing part" of living, is the idea of form always primary to your thinking? Like what is the relation between form and structure in *Cinema of the Present*? Or in past writings? Or in your most recent book? I know your main medium is the sentence (a fascination with its form, and its historical form), and you write some of the most gorgeous sentences I have ever

read. But how do you conceive of their role in the overall structure of the book, which inevitably produces a fixed form in the end?

LR I'll try to give an example. The Office for Soft Architecture began as a descriptive project. I had been learning about the French documentary photographer Eugene Atget, and his work in early twentieth-century Paris, a city then undergoing large-scale change during the construction of Haussmann's boulevards and the first metros. Neighbourhoods and ways of life were disappearing, and Atget made a record of this disappearance. I was witnessing in Vancouver, since the late 1980s and Expo, what seemed like a related urban transformation. I decided to try to document that, starting in the late 1990s, following Atget's cue. The social and economic changes in the city, essentially caused by real-estate development politics and the political manipulation of urban zoning, had a direct relationship to built and lived form. So I became interested in a politics of form, and its legibility and malleability as surface.

This morphological interest in architectural appearance and surface as an expression of political experience in daily life started to incite in me a critical perspective towards the idea of structure. In architectural aesthetics, especially modernist architecture, it has become dogmatic, at least since Le Corbusier, to suppress the articulation of surface affect, decorative conventions and expressions, in favour of what has seemed like a fetishization of structure. This has been the case in literary aesthetics as well—Pound's rejection of Swinburne and the Victorians as decadent, for example, carried a moral dogmatism. Hal Foster recently discussed this dogmatism, in *Design and Crime*, and this alignment of moral decadence and decorative tropes was the central thesis of Adolf Loos's *Ornament and Crime*, in 1908. The suppression of decorative tropes is gendered too. I've recently been reading Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* (I come very late to most things!) and it was very interesting to me the other day to read his interpretation, from the late 1960s, of

disjunction in poetic syntax. He clearly aligns disjunction with a moral hygiene, claiming that the new staccato, fragmented style worked out by Pound in the late teens was a sign of clear boundaries, vigour, "rectitude and certainty in actions and intentions." Disjunction was in this thinking the antithesis of decadence. Virility and integrity, in their righteous straight masculinity, were aligned with disjunction, and we know that this moral economy was racialized in Pound's later thinking. Since disjunction is still the dominant stylistic trait of avant-garde poetics, it's interesting to look at its historical construction as a purificatory protocol.

All of these things led me to deepen my interest in writing as decorative surface. The sentence is the experimental site where I can test this thinking. The capaciousness and suppleness of sentences, formally, musically, psychically, decoratively, historically, was already my passion. I had focused my practice at that level—it was explicitly the research that became *The Apothecary*, my first book, where I wanted to expand the relationship between the sentence and identificatory subjectivity. Then with *XEclogue*, *Debbie*, and *The Weather*, I was interested in the relationship of this surface effect, and the sentence, to genre, in its gendered and historical dimensions. The Virgilian genres of pastoral, epic, and Georgic loaned me almost ready-made structures—I didn't have to worry about inventing a structure, since by working generically the parameters were already there. So I came to see the composition of a book as an exploration of the historical and subjective tension between form and structure.

*Cinema of the Present* (and before it, on smaller scales, *R's Boat*) clearly maintains a focus at the level of the sentence, then proposes a single structural trope to organize these sentences in a large-scale rhyming relationship. The structural montage of that work was the final compositional gesture—after three or four years of composing an intentional, and for me pleasurable and melodic, sequence of sentences, I effaced

that sequence by doubling, arbitrarily re-sequencing and splicing the new sequence back into the old one. I felt a childlike joy in the creation of a structure through its own destruction. I mean, I want everything—I want the wildness and surprise of Oulipian arbitrariness, and I want melodic development. I want the honey, the hydromel. I want the simultaneous possibility of identification and critique, where critique founds the potential of renewed forms of subjectivity. I want the poem to be a machine for living, as Le Corbu said of architecture, but for me it has to be a soft machine, one that includes and reveals desire as both a destructive and a generative force.

I continue to be extremely implicated in thinking about form. My new book, *On Physical Real Beginning and What Happens Next*, is a series of individual poems and poem sequences that explore form as an originating problematic, taking Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* as a point of departure and return. I can't say with any certainty at all what form *is*. This is exciting. As years pass, I know less, but it *does* get more supple, more capacious. I use these words, structure and form, more and more tentatively. But a clue that I return to is something Trish Salah said to me when we were in conversation as part of Margaret Christakos's *Influency* series at U of T, around 2008 I think. I was setting up an opposition between aesthetics and politics. Trish corrected me, with her characteristic generosity. She said to me, and this is my memory, so I won't use quotation marks, that aesthetics are desire. I suddenly saw that form and aesthetics are the historical traces of the lives of our bodies. Embodiment is ongoing formal experience, and it's always political. I'm for embodiment and its timeliness, and what I want is to enter into a living relationship with form in writing that marries all the peculiar, gritty, hilarious troubles and pleasures of bodies with open linguistic futures, my own, and others' also. Thinking finds its site in the tracings of these relationships. The body is my mysterious concept.