

At Home in Poetry

Reading Michelle Erick's
then/again in Abbotsford



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What kind of place is poetry? What place does poetry have in Abbotsford? On April 3, Michelle Elrick returned home to Abbotsford to read from her second collection of poetry, *then/again* (Nightwood Editions, 2017). The book is a spectacular examination of her desire for home which occurs simultaneously with a need to find home elsewhere. Home, notes Elrick, is as much a feeling as it is a location. For a time, during frequent moves, she “began to think of home as ‘what you take with you when you go’” (10). Living and writing now in Halifax, Elrick’s poems seek to locate home in a moment of revisiting and return.

Elrick is back home in Abbotsford to give three readings. The first took place in her family home, in the same space in which some of these poems were written. I attend the two readings the following day, first at the University of the Fraser Valley, and then at a basement informally known as the West Railway Speakeasy. In the readings, she reflects on being home. Home, she notes, is a feeling of place as much as the place in itself. And in the place of the home, hearing Elrick read is familiar and strange.

AT KIND OF HOME CAN OTSFORD BE FOR POETRY?"

Then/again is a beautiful book and quite appropriately published under the blewointment imprint, as the illustrations of Pawet Bignell evoke the image-poetry fusion of bill bissett. Bignell's drawings meditate on space. Scratched and topological, they connect to the geographical exploration of home that Elrick writes.

The epigraph to *then/again* comes from Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*: "Language bears within itself the dialectic of open and closed. Through meaning it encloses, while through poetic expression it opens up." This sets the theme of Elrick's ongoing work. Her first book, *To Speak*, attempted to find a language to recover language. This book continues that mission by looking to the home as a place of language. There is a dialogue between how we create spaces of home and what we experience in those constructed spaces. Home is a sense of place. "At the centre," she writes, "this is a story of encounter" (10). Elrick's book locates this encounter with place through Doreen Massey's *For Space*: "[T]he truth is that you can never simply 'go back,' to home or to anywhere else. When you get 'there' the place will have moved on just as you yourself will have changed" (9).

The poems of *then/again* dwell in the relation of the self to the space of home. As in her poem "crow, (v.)" Elrick verbs the home. She writes a homing poetry, a poetry that is headed home, but is no sooner there than it realizes that home is no longer there: "memory and momentum bent into a geometry of place / where(in) *to be* becomes *to dwell*" (32). Later she notes "I can't stay here forever" (36). The feeling of home is not here permanent. It must be left and then found again and again. In the poem "spilt flour" the poet looks at our ways of saying goodbye and leaving. The speaker finds it difficult, "running out of the room // with only one shoe on, saying 'I will stay in touch'" (51), while "You go not knowing where" (54).

Notes from Abbotsford

Elrick's earlier project "Notes from the Fort," some of which is reprinted here, explored the fragmentary and temporary nature of home. She would set up a temporary dwelling, reminiscent of the blanket forts children build, or the hiding places she was drawn to as a child, and write poetry as a way of encountering the place. Space is transitional and home keeps moving. And in this series of poems, home is the place of safety and hiding, the temporary assertion of belonging or ownership over a space in a living room or secret closet. These places are by necessity transitional. She writes, "something has changed: the fort is just a fort. I am not hid / after all. besides, who is searching? (60)

What kind of home can Abbotsford be for poetry? At the readings, Elrick prefaces the poem with stories of the places. "You may know this place," she says. "I rode my bike on this street." In an Abbotsford basement, she reminds those present of the familiar landmarks, and then breaks the familiarity to reveal an underlying strangeness.

Elrick explores prodigality and return. Reflecting on the idea of Abbotsford, Elrick mentions two stories. The first of these is that of the Prodigal Son. The second is that of Lot's wife (pillar of salt, 77) the Home as a sense of place. But there is also here the danger of looking back. Because "place domesticates" and so home is a place the poet will eventually leave. All of the homes are behind rather than forward.

The poem “Rain Drive: Abbotsford, Reykjavik” explores this confluence of place: “grey needles stitch us together” (61). The place-ness of Abbotsford can be found in the grey rains of Iceland. It gives a momentary sense of home, a feeling of familiarity with strangeness as “one hand waves and the other hand reaches” (61). This gesture of between—the slash of *then / again*—is emblematic of Elrick’s poetics. How do we dwell in momentary place? This is what Jordan Abel notes is a “between-ness that is triangulated by space, by time, by memory.”

Growing up in Abbotsford, in the suburbs, we are very aware that we are outside the centre. Everything seems to be happening elsewhere. As someone who has returned to Abbotsford, I read Michelle Elrick’s poems carefully, searching for recognition, but also listening for dismissal. Can the poet be welcomed home?



Poetry in the Hotel Matsqui

Then/again is composed of alternating sections of prose reflections and poetry. The prose portions of *then/again* are inspired by Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and like his book they form a cartography of the possibilities of the city. By re/making the sense of exploration of the Calvino book, Elrick undoes the cartography of possession and makes strange the cities we find ourselves at home within. The space of the ordinary dwelling is rendered fantastic. Elrick's homes and cities are here shown in the deep sense of becoming.

Nowhere is this more evident than in "Hotel Matsqui." The familiar landmark of Matsqui Village is "escaping the weight of time" (29). It is transformed under Elrick's inhabitation into a fantastic hotel staffed by a young, white ram. The guests of the hotel linger through the poem, but "engaged in the business of dwelling" they are "without histories and without dreams" (29-30).

Place is not place without the poet's pen. It is via poetry that we can see the impact of the place on the self. As one again and again returns through Elrick's poetry to familiar and unfamiliar places, it is the self that is being changed. I see Abbotsford differently now. I remember the Hotel Matsqui as simply a place across the street from my Grandmother's house. I have never been inside. It is solid and square.

Reading Abbotsford: what kind of space is Abbotsford and how do we return to it? Nostalgia is the word we most often think about here, but I want to stress in Elrick's poetry this is without the sentimentality we associate with nostalgia, this goes back to the root of the word, "return home" from the Greek nostos, "A homecoming or homeward journey as a literary subject or topos; spec. the return of Odysseus" (OED Online).

"WHAT KIND OF SPACE IS ABBOTSFORD AND HOW DO WE RETURN TO IT?"

Then/again explores the ideas of home and the ways in which the space between home and return functions. Elrick is constructing this place through poetry. What is the Abbotsford the Elrick returns to? Can we find the poetry here? Traditionally the poet leaves her home town, must go to find her way into a centre, but for one day at least, Michelle Elrick came home, to show us our invisible city.

