



CHRIST WOULD BREAK YOUR TONGUE

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Sheila Stewart is the author of *The Shape of a Throat* (Signature Editions) and *A Hat to Stop a Train* (Wolsak and Wynn). She co-edited *The Art of Poetic Inquiry* (Backalong Books). Her work has been published in such journals as the *Literary Review of Canada*, *The Malahat Review*, *LEARNing Landscape*, and *Creative Approaches to Research*. Sheila teaches in Women and Gender Studies and at the New College Writing Centre.

Abstract: “Christ Would Break Your Tongue” is part of my on-going exploration of growing up as a United Church minister’s daughter in small-town Ontario. In the title poem, I inquire into the interstices of gender, voice, and authority. In “Dominion” I grapple with how the Christian underpinnings of Western culture place humans above other creatures and lifeforms to the detriment of all living beings. In “Billy Stewart’s Geography” I begin to explore the church’s role in political oppression, colonialism, and residential schools, building on my poetic interests in family dynamics and place (Stewart, 2003; 2012). I use poetic inquiry (Butler-Kisber, Guiney Yallop, Stewart, & Wiebe, 2017; Faulkner, 2009; Galvin & Prendergast, 2016; Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009; Thomas, Cole, & Stewart, 2012) as a research method to reflect *on* and *through* language, letting the poems be the plumb-line of the research process. Poetry’s use of the associative, the particular, and the unconscious allow me to explore terrain which may have been previously un-worded. This is needed to write through shame and grief. I believe with Orr (2002) that “the more of our own stories that we can tell, the richer and more complex our selves become. The richer a use we make of our past experience, the more open we are to present experience” (p. 102). This openness is crucial in the search for word and action. Educator Maxine Greene (1977) calls

us to be open or “awake.” How can poets be awake to this complex social/political moment and use their craft to speak? Poetry works with stories and lyric which are once personal, ideological and often shaped by religion. As a white settler Canadian, I strive to uncover the complicity of my religious and Northern Irish background in hierarchical and oppressive relations. My hope is to provoke.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; authority; gender; colonialism; residential schools; voice; church

The three poems that follow are part of an unpublished larger work, *My Father's Robes: A Poetic Inquiry*, in which I explore growing up as a United Church minister's daughter in small-town Ontario. In the title poem, I inquire into the interstices of gender, voice, and authority. In "Dominion" I grapple with how the Christian underpinnings of Western culture place humans above other creatures and lifeforms to the detriment of all living beings. In "Billy Stewart's Geography" I begin to explore the church's role in political oppression, colonialism, and residential schools, building on my poetic interests in family dynamics and place (Stewart, 2003; 2012).

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Christ Would Break Your Tongue

see it serpent-
wise, a wily woman's. Jesus was another matter,
a story we couldn't let go of

—everyone loves a baby, especially at Christmas and bouncy
with the Easter Bunny. Head bedecked with a thorny crown,

a decal on the pick-up ahead.

Jesus our great
excuse to plaster churchy propaganda at the feet of our
buildings, bomb the bejesus out of each other,

when all we want
to do is kiss Mary's feet. Call Her merciful,
ask for *mercy*.

Dominion

And God said, Let us make man
in our image, after our likeness:
and let them have dominion
over the fish of the sea.

Genesis 1:26

The dog digs a hole in this once Dominion of Canada. CBC
theologian says it means stewardship. Gotta trust our national
radio station: Nada. Host dominioning his interns, eyeing
his interviewees. And God said, Let us make man.

The fowl of the air do not foul the airwaves. Sparrows chirping
in our hedge don't seek dominion over the cars. Why no space
for the flightless dodo? Last seen in 1662. Ivory-billed Woodpecker,
Imperial Woodpecker—gone. In our image, after our likeness.

Syllables raining over all the earth, over every
creeping thing that creepeth. No sermon
from the Silver Maple as old as the house. Roots
seeking water and let them have dominion.

Mary gave birth to Jesus under a tree, not conjuring thrones,
seraphims, dominations. Don't you dare call me Angel.
Your celestial attendants can go to hell. What is our common
wealth, influence, what fish of the sea?

Billy Stewart's Geography

There was a dark tunnel which we all knew about.

See him at a school desk with an ink well, carefully dipping his pen, copying from the board, circa 1930. An index inside the front cover of his hardcover notebook.

*Although Abyssinia is very mountainous
it is making wonderful progress under Italian
control.*

My school-boy father tours me through Ceylon, Rhodesia, Belgian Congo, Italian East Africa rivers and trade.

*Liberia, a very backward state, founded
for liberated American slaves.*

The Sahara
*Wherever water reaches the surface an oasis
is found. These oases differ in size from a few
square yards to areas as big as Ulster.*

Once a year on the Fourteenth of July, my father goes to Warrenpoint on the Irish Sea.

The trio of festival days begins with the Twelfth. The Orangemen come to Tandragee with their brigade. The painted banners display their lodge number and King William on a white horse emerging from the Boyne River. Mothers and children line the streets, cheer on their menfolk as they march and drum. The crowd compare the men on parade from Ballymore, Cordrain, Tullymacann, and beyond. My father's sisters and mother start making ice cream at 5 a.m., sell out mid-afternoon.

The Thirteenth is the Sham Fight in the neighbouring village of Scarva where people enact the battle. "Who won?" ask Roman Catholics, as they are called in Tandragee. "Who won?" an odd Protestant asks.

From Christmas on, the children dream of the Sunday School train excursion. They arrive at the station early clutching their train tickets and food chits.

My father told me, *There was a dark tunnel which we all knew about, and as the slow train went through it, boys kissed girls, and everyone ended up in different seats. Newry station, ten kilometres to Warrenpoint and the great day began.*

On the last page:

100 years ago Canada was roamed by hunters. The Hudson Bay Company was king. Today there are 10 and a half million inhabitants. The natives have dwindled. Today they are given settlements. There are only 100,000 Indians.

Each page of the notebook filled. The school master's text from book to board to notebook.

There was a dark tunnel which we all knew.

What does it mean to have this notebook? In 1955 my parents and older brothers came to Canada, many times bigger than Ulster. By the time I was born, the "wee Canadian," they were longing for elsewhere.

As a United Church minister, did he know about the Mohawk Institute Residential School, Brantford, 1828 to 1970? Closed when I was ten, I visited it later as a museum.

What does it mean to have his memoirs, *A Plain Man's Life Story*, stored in a box in the back of the closet? Typed on his heavy black Remington.

Dad, did you really think the Twelfth was fun for Catholics? *William, of Glorious, of Pious, and Immortal Memory* shouting from the closet.

Did you know about the Gordon Indian Residential School in Punnichy, Saskatchewan, begun in 1889, closed in 1996? I didn't know. I was thirty-five when it closed.

There was a dark tunnel.

Maps and pages failing.

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