Joanne Arnott (1960 – ) was born in Winnipeg and lives in Richmond B.C. Her writing is powerfully informed by her identity as a Metis and her attention to indigeneity. She is a founding member of the Aboriginal Writers Collective West Coast. Since winning the Gerald Lampert Award in 1991 for her collection *Wiles of Girlhood*, she has published half a dozen collections of poetry as well as children’s literature and non-fiction.

Poem for discussion:

she is riding
From: *A Night for the Lady*
Ronsdale, 2013

she is riding

down through the suburban grey
streets dreamed by developers and
implemented for traffic floes

comes riding the turquoise green Grandmother
riding her mighty Sow
onto the battlefield

down along the highway of decay she rides
between the crack houses and on to piggy palace
where the spirits of the women are lifted
out of the horror, out of the muck, like
troubled teeth and bone fragments
their spirits gather and rise, and rise

all of our dead sisters lifted by those winged women
well-versed in the protocols of the battlefields
recognizing the existence of the battlefields, here

as along the highway of tears

shoulders back open arms open chested

the turquoise green grandmother breathes
along with each one of us still travelling
our inner city streets

our turns on the quiet highways
our love affairs gone wrong
our villages overrun

shoulders back
open arms
open chested

letting flow the sounds of the inside
the sounds of our voices calling out songs of sorrow
the sounds of our drums rising through time and through sky
the sounds of our warm bodies travelling swift
through the families
and through the forests

shoulders back
open arms
open chested
we accompany our sisters and brothers to the threshold
we hold them until they are fled, and then
we hold them more

we accompany our mothers and our fathers
we accompany our children, our friends, and o
the many strangers, the star gazers

we hold our dying persons long dwell
inside memory

we lay each one to rest
slowly

shoulders back
open arms
open chested

tears coursing from the inside
across the outside and wetting
our multihued skins

the touch of a warm palm in passing
through hair on a child’s head gently

the touch of lover to beloved
anywhere, at any time

the touch of Grandmother’s warm palm
on the cheek of her adult offspring

or along the stiff hair on the Sow’s back
she is riding
For discussion:

1. Joanne Arnott’s poem “she is riding” begins and ends with an image of “the turquoise green
   Grandmother/riding her mighty Sow.” Thinking only about this single image, try writing down your
   immediate thoughts, impressions and associations without reference to the rest of the poem or any other
   reference.

2. Once you have recorded your first impressions, try to relate them in writing to the rest of the poem and its
   meanings, noting how your thoughts and associations with the image have changed after reading the
   poem through.

3. The poet Emily Dickinson instructed poets to approach their subject matter indirectly for greater effect:
   “Tell all the truth but tell it slant. / Success in circuit lies.” Part of the strength of “she is riding” arises from
   the fact that the subject matter of the poem is not stated immediately and directly, but rather through hints
   and allusions.

   The poem in fact begins with the apparently remote and unrelated image of a grandmother riding a pig.
   With deeper reading, however, the reader is able to infer that the poem is really about deep tragedies that
   have occurred to First Nations women in Canada and about the grief, suffering and sorrow the tragedies
   have caused. Which words and phrases in the poem point specifically to these events, and what is their
   emotional affect?

4. The poem combines sources taken directly from contemporary Canadian news with mythological and
   historical allusions, also combined with personal associations from the mind of the poet herself.
   According to the poet, the image of the grandmother riding her sow is related to the Norse goddess,
   Freya. But Freya is depicted in traditional Norse mythology accompanied by a boar, not a sow. (See:
   http://www.pantheon.org/articles/f/freya.html). In Norse mythology, Freya is also representative of youth
   and freshness, not of grandmotherly age and wisdom, as in the poem. The poet has transformed the
   original image of Freya in order to bring out her own personal meanings related to the events that are the
   subject of her poem.

   Why has she deliberately changed the image of Freya, and how does it suit the purposes of the poem?

5. The poem is about deep grief and sorrow, but it is also about the ways of gaining the strength to
   overcome not only the sorrow itself, but its causes and effect in the society. In that sense “she is riding” is
   much more a social poem than a personal lyric, and it is more about collective feelings than personal
   feelings. In some ways, this poem appears as a set of ceremonial instructions, a prayer, an invocation:
With reference to specific elements within "she is riding," discuss the idea of social poetry as a factor helping to create human community of feeling and thereby to encourage common social action to bring about positive changes in society.

**Writing prompts:**

1. Write a script for a staged or filmed representation of this poem.

2. "she is riding" invokes a generational history from ancestors to the present, speaking of mothers and fathers, grandmothers, and brothers and sisters. Write a poem invoking your own family history as far back in time as you wish.

3. Choose an issue from contemporary news and construct a poem around it.

4. Write a poem that uses a repetitive refrain, much like Arnott’s "shoulders back/ open arms/ open chested."

(Notes prepared by Jamie Reid)