



PARLIAMENT | PARLEMENT  
CANADA

## Parliamentary Poet Laureate



### POETRY CONNECTION: LINK UP WITH CANADIAN POETRY

**Meredith Quartermain** (1950– ) has published and read her work in Canada, the U.S. and Britain. Her most recent book is *Recipes from the Red Planet* (BookThug, 2010). *Vancouver Walking* (NeWest, 2005) received the BC Book Awards Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize in 2006. Other recent books and chapbooks include *Matter* (BookThug, 2008), *Nightmarker* (NeWest, 2008), *The Eye-Shift of Surface* (Greenboathouse Books, 2003) and *A Thousand Mornings* (with Robin Blaser, Nomados, 2002).

“Her book of prose poems, *A Thousand Mornings*, is about Vancouver’s oldest neighbourhood, the dockside area of Strathcona. Her work has appeared internationally in *Canadian Literature*, *Literary Review of Canada*, *Matrix*, *The Capilano Review*, *West Coast Line*, *CV2*, *Event Magazine*, *filling Station*, *Prism International*, *Raddle Moon*, *Chain*, *Sulfur*, *Tinfish*, *East Village Poetry Web* and other magazines.”<sup>1</sup>

She has taught English literature and composition at the University of British Columbia and Capilano College, and creative writing at the Naropa University Summer Writing Program. With husband Peter Quartermain, she runs Nomados Literary Publishers, an imprint that has published over 40 poetry chapbooks since 2003.

In the *Globe and Mail*, Margaret Christakos writes, “Quartermain’s poetic tour reads the downtown’s every street sign and historical plaque to invoke not vagaries of weather or a sensitive narrator’s emotional landscape, but the lived epic of how specific native soil became appropriated to a condition of contemporary real estate.” And in *Monday Magazine*, Marc Christensen comments, “Under Quartermain’s gaze, even the most local Vancouver story becomes a link to the greater world, transforming the city into a cosmopolis made of the mad whirls of history, in constant motion with the fates of its living (and long dead) millions.”

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<sup>1</sup> Electronic Poetry Centre (EPC), “Meredith Quartermain”, [www.epc.buffalo.edu/authors/quartermain-m/](http://www.epc.buffalo.edu/authors/quartermain-m/).

**Poem for discussion:****On My Way to the Overpass**

From *Recipes from the Red Planet*

BookThug, 2010

I see her in a sidewalk plaque, one of the Militant Mothers, stretching her arms across the oncoming train. Jean Amos, mother of five, of the Raymur housing projects. No more trains, she says in her warlike, combative way. No more will my children climb through couplings and wheels to get to school. No more kids vs profit - she speaks in her aggressive, overly political style of mothering, reminiscent of Joan of Arc. The railway men, well trained, yell at the mothers who have no right to be standing on their track: You'll go to jail, this is no misdemeanour, you'll be charged with a felony. Treacherous, cruel and fierce, the felonious mothers hold their ground, resolute as tracts of wasteland, firm in their perverse and wicked method of nurturing. The train, on its US Burlington Northern line, snakes passively backwards to the dock. Go to the City if you want an overpass, says the Canadian National Railway. I'll see you get criminal charges, mutters Inspector Beaten of Transport Canada to the biased, hard-line tenders of humanity. The arresting matriarchs are seized by police, who lock them up. Then let them go. The thing blows over with noble companies of railway men promising trains won't run from 8:30 to 9:00, noon to 1:00, 2:00 to 3:20. What distinguished and high-minded companies - they even talk of an overpass. Not long afterwards, the trains snake back, stop beside the school. Children again climb through wonderfully shunting boxcars, hoppers and gondolas, resulting in a quarrelsome tent being pitched on the tracks

by the bellicose, charity-receiving mothers. \$1000 to stop your blockade, says a worthy company with goods for market. Jean Amos says, No. They've broken their promises, she tells the judge from which the venerable companies want an injunction. Let's make these promises part of my order then, says the judge. Thank you Jean, I say, to her bright mosaic chips, and I stroll over the overpass, over the trains snaking beneath my feet.

**For discussion:**

1. "On My Way to the Overpass" is from Quartermain's collection *Recipes from the Red Planet*, which pays homage in its title and inspiration to Jack Spicer's notion of the poet as a conduit of language that seems to come from a source other than a consciously creating self, Martian signals being his memorable metaphor for this otherness of the poetic voice (Camille Martin). How does this view pertain to Quartermain's "voice"?<sup>2</sup>
2. The voices in Quartermain's prose poems take centre stage as they rant, apostrophize, soliloquize, surrealize, tell tall tales. How does the prose poem allow for this kind of writing? Thinking?<sup>3</sup>
3. Irony is used throughout the poem, often through hyperbole: mothers are "warlike," companies as "noble." Discuss the effectiveness.
4. This poem investigates the history embedded in a city structure. It questions the attitude of many who suppose that anything that interferes with profit-making, even the right to child safety, is undesirable. Discuss.

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<sup>2</sup> *Rogue Embryo*, a.k.a. *Camille Martin: a blog about poetry, collage, photography, whatnot*, "Recipes from the Red Planet: Meredith Quartermain's Martian Feast," December 10, 2010, <http://rogueembryo.com/2010/12/10/recipes-from-the-red-planet-meredith-quartermain%E2%80%99s-martian-feast/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

**Writing prompts:**

1. Discuss the history and street names of the place where you live.
2. Try composing a prose poem using images you have collected from the street. Be sure to include images of impoverishment and affluence for contrast, balance, tension and interest.
3. Retrace your steps “on the way to” a certain place (e.g., school, the library or your favourite coffee shop). Write a poem about what you see, hear, touch, smell and feel.
4. Are there any political/ social/ artistic activists that interest you? Write a poem about this person’s life. Include as many details (facts) as you can.
5. Write a poem about bullies/ bullying from both sides of the situation.
6. Experiment with irony in your own poems: words meaning one thing but suggesting something quite different.

(Notes prepared by Terry Ann Carter)