



## Parliamentary Poet Laureate



### POETRY CONNECTION: LINK UP WITH CANADIAN POETRY

**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.”