

RYAN G. VAN CLEAVE

*Welcome to the Twenty-First Century: An E-mail Interview with Rachel Loden*

In late 1999, an old friend sent me a copy of *Hotel Imperium*. Imagine my surprise when this book was the only poetry collection of the year that made me laugh out loud. Whether it was a wicked sense of humor in poems about Woody Allen and Little Richard or the insistent and haunting presence of cover boy Richard “Tricky Dick” Nixon himself, I found Loden’s poems illuminating, original, and full of sublime intensity. In short, I was blown away.

After reading Loden’s chapbooks *Affidavit* and *The Last Campaign*, I contacted her via e-mail to learn more about a writer whose work has been justifiably called “both ruthless and luxuriant.” What emerged from her generous correspondence is the following interview.

**RVC:** Your poetry has an edgy irreverence that’s refreshing in today’s world of strait-laced, academic poetry. What is the role of humor in your writing?

**RL:** Maybe I’m just hoping to found the Borscht Belt school of poetry. Laughter, I think, opens up a lot of room in a poem and turns things on their ear. It’s like setting Danny Kaye or Mel Brooks loose in the commissary. Or rather, in the library, someplace where we expect things to be “serious.” It interrupts our expectations of the solemn literary enterprise and that makes a different sort of reading possible—or necessary. “And now for something completely different,” in the words of “Monty Python’s Flying Circus.”

I never actually set out to be funny. But I did want to take on the world in its crude, unrefined state, and you can’t do that without engendering a certain amount of hilarity. To write about history without humor would be to deny its complexity. And anyway, I hail from a long conga line of *tumblers* and comedians as well as white-gloved daughters of the American revolution.

**RVC:** Speaking of something, or someone, completely different—Richard Nixon serves as your inspiration, one might even call him

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your muse, for many of the pieces in *Hotel Imperium*. Is he the mouthpiece for an era we remember with uncomfortable nostalgia or does his presence suggest something more?

**RL:** The first Nixon poem, “Premillennial Tristesse,” was written while he was dying, “slipping / in and out of consciousness.” But he was also slipping in and out of my consciousness. We had lived, as Robert Dole said at his funeral, in “the age of Nixon,” and now where would we be without him, without our old nemesis? Even more disturbing, what would he get up to without us?

**RVC:** That’s exactly right—like all strong political figures, his presence certainly haunts an entire generation. But you were the first to really take him to task, poetically speaking.

**RL:** Oh, I think there have been other visitations, but I feel very lucky that Dick isn’t through with me. I’ve been thinking of him as a muse for some time now, rather than (say) a hotel guest who refuses to check out. He wants to be useful. He always did. It’s hard for him to be the mouthpiece for his “era” because in all the poems, he’s either dying or quite thoroughly dead. But he’s back because he wants something in the present. The times they are a-changin’, you know, and he will not be sidelined or denied.

So now the campaign is against death itself. He’s actually rather sunny about the prospect. He missed the game, missed the enemies. He’s tanned, he’s rested, he’s ready to resist.

**RVC:** What are you going for by juxtaposing poems that deal with social and political issues such as “Blues for the Evil Empire” and “Carnal Acknowledgments” with pop-culture poems like “Lingerie Ads in the Sixties” and “The Gospel According to Clairol”?

**RL:** I guess I don’t think of the poems as necessarily pop-cult vs. political. In an infotainment world, these categories are not fixed. And in any case, an argument could be made that Victoria’s Secret and Clairol and “The Bachelorette” are more political than the former USSR or a dead president. They’re certainly more deeply (and confusingly) implicated in most people’s daily lives.

So there's no firewall between the shadow world of pop and the shadow world of politics. Political figures like Lana Turner and Jayne Mansfield and Madonna and Marilyn Monroe mix it up with entertainers and pop icons like Ronald Reagan, John Kennedy, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton. They're all in showbiz.

But casting calls aside, I never start a poem with the impulse to make a small political point—to say that something or somebody is wicked or virtuous. Agitprop is as boring as art that imagines it is (or can be) “apolitical.” Both are usually humorless, as well, because they're stripped of contradictions.

**RVC:** William Faulkner once said that writers have three things to fuel their work: experience, observation, and imagination. Which of these is most important in your own writing?

**RL:** Well, I think I probably had a bit too much raw experience as a child—enough to think over for a lifetime. The FBI was keeping an eye on my parents, who had been political radicals, and I remember bumping into G-men at my front door after a day in Mrs. Willhite's second grade class. That was interesting. By the time I was ten I had lived in Washington D.C., New York City, Berkeley and Los Angeles. My parents divorced; my mother's terrors developed into full-blown psychosis. She was in and out of hospital and my brother and I were split up between foster families.

That surfeit of experience could only begin to be sorted with careful observation. In a sense, I was in the catbird seat because I was privileged to see so many different worlds—the world of protected, milk-and-cookies children, which I found enviable and fascinating; the chaotic and alarming world at home. The Wonderful World of Walt Disney, with its bright, dancing, child-enticing things, and the wonderful world of socialism, in which all false longings would fall away. The world of my alternately furious and hilarious Jewish father whose acting career was ended by a blacklist. The irreparably broken world of my brilliant, upper middle-class Christian mother, whose electroshock “treatments” wiped her memory-bank clean.

So I became a disciplined observer. I'd been keeping a journal—daily and dutifully, but one night, writing late, something new came out of all the richness and *mishegoss*. At least, it was new to me, and I remember going outside at first light and feeling a surge of fabulous

teenage romanticism. Now the grass and the flowers and the sun were mine in a completely different way. I had claimed them with this act of imagination.

All this by way of saying that experience, observation, and imagination are inseparably braided together, but that with imagination comes the power to “make it new.” And (as corny as it sounds) that’s the ticket to joy.

**RVC:** Many writers admit that writing is a painful act. Is composing poems truly a joy to you?

**RL:** Certainly not always! There are times I hit a wall. And of course it’s pretty risky to mention old-fangled notions like joy while much of the world seems to be hellbent on mass murder or at least massive stupidity. And yet I have to admit that I’d probably rather be writing than doing almost anything else. There’s a lot of sheer physical pleasure in it. What did Blake say in his “Contraries”? “2. Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy. / 3. Energy is Eternal Delight.”

I suppose the pleasure—even relief—comes from using all my faculties, exercising parts of the brain that are dormant while, say, paying medical bills or calling Congressional offices or working in a Ping-Pong ball factory, as my mother once did. There’s a release from anxiety in being engaged at that level, *playing* at that level, making the vast array of tiny aesthetic choices, pushing everything else off the table. You stop time, in a sense. When it’s over it’s like waking up—and often I don’t want to wake up, am dragged unwillingly back to the world of snipers and hospital ships and blow-dried dunces.

So the hard part is not really the writing, but rather finding the wherewithal to turn away from the thousand thousand things-that-must-be-done, that appear more pressing than (what Moore famously called) “all this fiddle.” The tyranny of the everyday! You know the drill.

**RVC:** Your poetry has been called “gloriously musical,” and indeed, your poems read aloud wonderfully. How do you achieve this accomplished sense of rhythm and pace?

**RL:** As a kid, I wanted to be a singer, and did sing very briefly with a band. They wanted me to continue but I was shy. Poetry was a way to make music without making noise, and that had a number of advantages—it didn't bother the grownups and you could do it in your room with nothing but paper and pen. I was reading intensively and listening intensively for many years, and all that I think was part of a poetic apprenticeship.

So in a way I suppose I'm singing on the page. Usually a poem will begin with a musical phrase—a few words, say, in a certain rhythm. And that bit will be the germ of a poem. If I have the sense to sit down and attend to it, or to let it waft around my brain as I walk around, a whole welter of rhythms and images will follow. Often I “have” the whole poem in those first moments—not as a finished thing, but I know how it “sounds,” what sorts of twists and turns it will take, even how particular notes are likely to resolve. I have the music long before I have all the words.

Making that happen on the page is a different process. At a certain point I need to take my notebook to the computer and begin to rough out what's there. That's when the formative impulse kicks in, but the sort of music I'm going for determines the form. Will the lines be long and/or short? End-stopped and/or enjambed? What sorts of stanzas or paragraphs?

There are hundreds of decisions to make—some huge and obvious, some as deceptively tiny as the placement of a comma, and for the most part they can't be dictated in advance. They have to be improvised. Each line break is a crucial musical decision. I like what the Irish poet Mairead Byrne recently called a “halt waltz,” so I like to code in little pauses and silences. There's nothing more boring than a poem that's whirring along like a sewing machine, or so I think! I want surprises. I want to interrupt expectations. And then, ultimately, I want the form to satisfy, but in a complex way.

**RVC:** Do you think poetry is in a peak or a valley right now?

**RL:** Well, I can't pretend to have the omniscient view, but what I can say with confidence is that there are poems being written today that shake my world. Or agitate my snow-globe. There are books I covet and cosset. There's writing that gives me fierce joy—oops, that unfashionable word again. Of course, there are also vast oceans of

mediocrity and awfulness. But that's always been true. I don't know what the readers of 2050 will find copacetic, but for someone quietly in the thick of it, the times are bracing.

**RVC:** How do you see poetry changing in response to 9-11?

**RL:** Hmm. I keep hearing that a year after "the events" there were already entire anthologies of 9-11 writing. That seems a bit quick, although I'd be very interested to see them. Maybe they'll be chock-a-block with masterpieces. But I guess I'm a believer in the long historical view. My husband (a logician) was just telling me that astronomers see more when they use their peripheral vision than when they look at the heavens straight on. That makes perfect sense. And of course it inevitably reminds me of Emily's "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant."

I'm a little worried that there will be lots of poems like those really reprehensible editions of "Dateline" or "Primetime Live" that trade in people's fears and offer no context whatsoever. You know, "9-11 widows and their babies" trotted out by some hyena like Diane Sawyer. Which is not meant as a comment on the widows and the babies, whose suffering is and will be unimaginable, but rather on the staggering cynicism of the packagers. And on the opportunities they fumbled.

But what else is new, right? I think there's still a lot of productive bewilderment in the air, and it will out. My own recent work is pregnant with it.

**RVC:** I like what your husband says about astronomers seeing more peripherally than by looking straight on. I think that's an appropriate way to think about how good poetry works.

**RL:** Yes—freezing your attention on something isn't really helpful. The history of mathematics is rife with discoveries that came through a side door. I've seen that in my husband's work, a change of perspective that suddenly solves a problem in a completely unexpected way.

Possibly Richard Nixon serves a similar function in my work, although he seemed to choose me as an experimental subject rather than the other way around. I can see now, though, that he embodies a whole nexus of things that disturb me, foremost among which are time and death.

RVC: Which other writers use humor, as you aptly put it, “to take on the world in its crude, unrefined state”? And who are you reading these days?

RL: Well, the problem with this question is that I like to read everything, preferably at once! But right now I’m completely besotted with D.A. Powell, whose books are *Tea* and *Lunch*. Astonishing stuff—I keep trying to figure out what he’s doing with form, with music, with god and sex and death and laughter.

I’ve been rereading Kafka’s diaries, and they’re both hilarious and heartbreaking. Beckett is really funny, of course. Brecht. Stevens is a comedian. Shakespeare. Julio Cortazar. David Trinidad. Miss Moore. Ashbery makes me laugh out loud on occasion with poems like “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape.” Kenneth Koch’s “Fresh Air” is still one of the funniest poems I’ve ever read. Alice Notley’s “January.” Bob Hicok’s “To the Moon, Alice.” Linh Dinh’s “Academy of Fine Arts.” Harry Mathews’s “Histoire.”

Weldon Kees is comic in his dark way. Whitman of course. Bill Knott. David Bromige is a sort of poetic Houdini who orchestrates escapes that nobody else can manage. Susan Wheeler’s work has a marvelous madcap shape-shifting quality. K. Silem Mohammad is doing astounding, lyrical things with the search engine Google. Gabriel Gudding’s first book will get a lot of people thinking about the possibilities for comic poetry.

Paul Hoover’s got great timing and delicious dry wit. As do Hoa Nguyen and Rae Armantrout. Anselm Hollo is intensely droll and wise, as though he had lived a thousand years. He also did the definitive English translations of the superb Finnish poet Paavo Haavikko, a giant in his country who should be much better known here.

Stephanie Strickland’s new *V* is gorgeous, trailblazing work, an invertible book with two beginnings and a third life in star-clusters of hypertext.

I’ve learned a lot about concision and comedy from George Bowering, the new Canadian poet laureate, who says in his book *Magpie Life* that “If you write about what you know, you will keep on writing the same thing, and you will never know any more than you do now.”

Ted Berrigan’s book *The Sonnets* has been making me laugh (and gasp) since my teens, when I saw him read, and bought a mimeo

copy. Bill Luoma's *Western Love* is a hoot. Susan M. Schultz's *Memory Cards & Adoption Papers* zigzags through history, miscarriage, adoption, and the various mind-forg'd manacles.

I've been dipping into *Excitability* by Diane Williams and *Some of Her Friends That Year* by Maxine Chernoff (both story collections), and they're shriekingly funny at moments and very close to poetry. Paul Muldoon! Catherine Wagner! Russell Edson, how could I forget him?

**RVC:** What a great who's-who of first-rate poets who aren't regularly taught at universities these days. Speaking of which, it's my understanding that you didn't come up through the MFA system. Is that right?

**RL:** Yep. It wasn't the right path for me, although it obviously works well for some others. I learned to write by reading at white heat throughout my teens and twenties. Writing all the while, of course, but the linchpin of the program was reading. Doing that outside an institution, with no teachers other than the ones in books, gave me a certain freedom, in retrospect. I didn't have to sign up for one school of poetry over another. I could read everybody, and I did.

When (very much later) it came time to send work out, I did it cold, without a single workshop, class, or conference. All pobiz was conducted through the mailbox. But I had been subscribing to various literary magazines for decades, so I understood the scene in my own way.

**RVC:** *Hotel Imperium*, which won the University of Georgia Press's Contemporary Poetry Series competition, made the *San Francisco Chronicle's* best-of-the-year list and garnered a lot of good notices. Is there anything that you think the critics have gotten wrong?

**RL:** I've been really happy with the reviews of the book. Many have been downright brilliant and surprising, too, in that they've pointed out things that I hadn't seen on my own. That's been fun and kind of psychedelic. If I have any complaint at all, it might be that sometimes people who loathed Nixon think that the poems "about" him are really (and solely) about him, about that one weird guy. And that I'm standing aloof from him and raining small satiric blows on his



hideous person. That's certainly one way to read them, and people seem to enjoy the chance to vent, to cathex on him a bit. Which is all well and good, but it's not really what I'm after. That's why I call one poem "Bride of Tricky D." Because I think uglifying and demonizing him lets us off the hook. If we marry him instead, something much more interesting happens.

**RVC:** What's the best writing advice you've ever received?

**RL:** I like "received," which puts me in mind of walkie-talkies, Ouija boards and dreams. But the truth is that I've rarely been in a position to receive writing advice. I've pretty much had to follow my own code, keep my own counsel, and have faith in my own perceptions. For the most part, that's stood me in good stead.

So I guess my patented advice would be not to look for advisors, not to read the how-to books and articles, but instead to read passionately and aggressively, develop your ear, and be prepared to spend a long time in the wilderness.

**RVC:** What can we expect next from Rachel Loden? What's the next project you've got in the works?

**RL:** Randolph Healy of Wild Honey Press in Ireland has asked for a chapbook, so that's next. He makes beautiful little books on a shoestring. But I'm not in a hurry. Publishing late was one of the best things I did. I'll always choose a fierce compression over popping out a book every couple of years. The real project is the poems—those stubborn, demanding things, and that's the work I love. I just want to get better at it, and (as they say in Hollywood) leave the rest to heaven.