

Rediscovering the Poet: Evelyn Lau

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Article abstract

Evelyn Lau discusses the recurring themes of relationships, travel, and place in her poetry. Finding a way to voice the emotional and to critically engage with the confessional mode in poetry is important, and balancing an awareness of form with a concern to avoid rigidity allows the poetry, from one collection to the next, to become increasingly accomplished. For a number of Evelyn Lau's women characters the source of strength comes from seeing, from being observant. Though it is very difficult to lift writing out of two people in a room together, this drama seems one of the most natural vehicles for poetry.

Rediscovering the Poet: Evelyn Lau

SCL/ÉLC BY ISABEL CASTELAO

EVELYN LAU, a native of Vancouver, has published three books of poetry: *You Are Not Who You Claim* (1990), which won the Milton Acorn People's Poetry Award; *Oedipal Dreams* (1992), which was nominated for the Governor General's Award; and *In the House of Slaves* (1994). However, she is more widely known in Canada and internationally as a fiction writer for her diary *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid* (1989), a novel *Other Women* (1996), two short-story collections (*Fresh Girls*, 1993, and *Choose Me*, 1999), and an essay collection, *Inside Out: Reflections on a Life So Far* (2001).

This interview, held in Vancouver in August 2004, is an attempt to focus on Lau's voice as a poet, which has been silent for ten years and hardly studied in the academy. It addresses the craft of poetry and controversial issues in Lau's writing, such as sexuality, love, ethnicity, and gender, all of which contribute to the distinctive quality of her poetic work, making her one of the most original Canadian woman poets in contemporary times.¹

IC All the interviews I have read miss a more integrative approach to your work, including an interest in your poetry. I first knew you as a poet and then as a fiction writer. I guess for most people it is the other way around.

EL I wish I had published poetry before *Runaway* came out, because I think that would have given me more credibility at the time. In fact, I had published a lot of poetry in magazines, although not as a collection. People who follow literary publications would know me more as a poet, and my first love is poetry, and at the moment that's all I'm writing. I'm not working on any prose right now. I wish in general that people were more interested in poetry, but there doesn't seem to be a large audience for it; it's not something people go out and buy and read very often.

IC It has been ten years since you published poetry. Are you working on any projects right now?

EL I have a new book of poetry coming out next year, and this has been taking a long time. I loved writing prose in the past, but I was working on the poetry in between, and this book is one of those books that I rewrote so many times, and every time I thought I almost had a complete manuscript I would throw parts of it out; I just wasn't happy with a lot of it. I'm writing and rewriting many new poems over and over again.

IC Do you have the idea of a poetry collection in your mind when you work?

EL I think that at a certain point I look at it as a poetry collection, but fairly late into the manuscript. Certainly I start out with individual poems, and maybe when I have around thirty poems I think about what direction it's taking, and then I think about how to order the poems and what sort of themes there are, but poetry is something I can't just sit down and tell myself, okay, I need to write ten more poems; this is not going to happen, there has to be a lot of spontaneity to it.

IC Do you spent much time revising your poems?

EL Oh, yes, unbelievably. There's more work in the actual revision than in the writing. Once in a while you get a poem that comes almost whole, which may take only a couple of revisions, but most of the time, it's something that I go back to again and again. I think it's because in poetry the language is so distilled, you're looking at something very confined, maybe only one or two pages long, and so you are always going back and fixing. Every word counts in a poem, unlike a story or a novel where you can delete words sometimes and you won't notice it, but in a poem you notice every flaw. So even when I give a reading of my poetry I may omit a line, add new things; sometimes I am no longer happy with what I have on the page.

IC You once said you were not interested in writing novels. Is this still the case?

EL Well, I do have a novel out, though it's more like a novella, it's more about mood than plot, and it started out as a short story, actually, so I didn't sit down to write a novel. Right now I cannot imagine writing a novel. I think it's because I'm so focused on poetry that it's very hard to imagine doing something in the longer form. But I've always loved the

novella, I think it's a very poetic kind of form. I don't tend to write fiction and poetry simultaneously, so now that I'm writing poetry I find it almost inconceivable that I'm going to be writing prose again, though I probably will at some point. I think that poetry has always come more naturally to me because it is what I started writing.

IC Can you advance any thoughts about your new book of poetry?

EL There are certain themes that run through it. Relationships, of course, travel and place are some of the themes. Right now, there is a section about the family and the past, there is a section that focuses on adulterous relationships. I divided it into four or five sections, but I haven't worked with an editor yet; she might have a slightly different idea about how she wants the final version to look.

IC Any change in style?

EL I hope the poems are better. I think they are, because I've worked on them for so long. Getting older, I've read more, and I've thought about things more, and I think I'm more critical of my work. I think there's more discipline in the poems than there was when I was younger; there's much more carefulness in the line.

IC I think *Inside Out* is an excellent work to compare to *Runaway*, your first book (the contrast of the titles already is revealing). The last essay in *Inside Out* talks about the impossibility of running away from your childhood and family memories. Does it mean you have stopped running?

EL Yesterday I was reading some of Sharon Olds's poetry. She is another poet who has written poems about how, even if she has wanted to escape from her family, it is a constant through her life, whether it is in her relationships, in the way she feels about her children — whatever, they are always, always there. I can certainly see that in my writing, in my life. I think that if you haven't really dealt with your childhood in some way, it's always there. Because I don't have a relationship with my parents, in some way, they are more there, because I am still wrestling with it without actually confronting it.

IC The popularity you gained through *Runaway* also added a stigma to the reception and interpretation of your later work. Can you comment on how this has changed after eight books?

EL I think what was really frustrating at first was that *Runaway*

brought a lot of attention. I think most people didn't believe I could follow up with any other work, so even though I found that maddening, at the same time it drove me to prove them wrong. Several books after *Runaway* I was really struggling to distance myself from that first book and establish myself as a writer, and because I was young too, it was very challenging. I think that now that I am older and have a number of other books, the popularity of *Runaway* is not so much of an issue. I think what saddens me a bit is that it's still the book that sells the best of all my work. Probably, I'd say, it sold more than all my other books put together! And of course, writing poetry you don't get the kind of attention that you get when you write prose, which is fine in a way, I like that right now. For poetry there is a smaller audience, but it is a more devoted, a more serious audience.

IC The universe your writing describes so well gravitates around female characters and a female perspective of heterosexual desire. Do you speak from a woman's point of view and to women?

EL I hope not exclusively. I was really pleased when men would come up to me and say how much *Other Women* meant to them, because it was rare. I think there is more of a female audience for books, certainly in Canada, particularly for fiction and poetry; men tend to like more non-fiction, so I'm always pleased when I find male readers who identify with the work. I think, initially, with *Runaway* and the first couple of books, I had a lot of prurient male readers because of the subject matter and I did not like the idea, but over the years with my other work I do appreciate it.

IC Do you have a favourite woman author?

EL Well, lately I've been reading a lot of Sharon Olds. For a long time I stayed away from her work because people always told me I should be reading her, and I didn't want to read work that was similar to mine because I didn't want to be under any influence. I used to read work that was very different from mine, intellectual poets like John Ashbery and other male American poets like Donald Hall. I found them more challenging: they tended to write more from the head than from the heart. Of course when I read someone like Sharon or Anne Sexton, I feel much more identification with the work. Sometimes I find I don't want to read that kind of writing because it comes from a place too similar to where mine comes from.

IC Which of your eight books are you more satisfied with from a literary point of view?

EL It's funny, because for a long time I wasn't happy with *Other Women*. The novel did not have very good reviews, so I thought it was terrible and I didn't even know it; I started to apologize for that book all the time. But then I read it again and I found it was better than I had thought. I think it is one of those books that you have to be in the right mood for. I was thinking about Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down I Wept*. I remember the first time I read it I hated it, I thought it was really self-pitying, I didn't understand it, and then when I was going through a phase in my early twenties when I was very much in love with a married man, I loved that book because it was like a bible, for me that book said everything that I was feeling. If you don't understand it emotionally, then the book seems to fall apart

IC How would you describe your personal poetics? What should good writing be made of?

EL Good writing should have an element of carefulness to it. I don't have respect for writing that, even if it has a lot of emotion and passion behind it, is just filled out onto the page. I think you have to be particularly careful about this with writing that is confessional because it's easy to do that. What I really respect in other writers is the discipline that makes every line precise, that there's hardly anything you would change. This summer I've been reading a lot of J. M. Coetzee, I've been reading one book after another of his, and I really like him because they are all small books, they are almost like novellas, and there is a lot of intellect behind them and a lot of discipline in the language.

IC What do you think is the role of the writer and the poet in contemporary times?

EL I think for the poet there's not much of a role, unfortunately. You are really on the fringes of society as a poet, and even as a writer. Economically it's really hard: most writers in Canada must find other jobs because they cannot make a living. Also you feel so much outside of society in a way, you have to face a lot of isolation.

IC I was thinking more about what the writer means to the world through her/his work.

EL What I look for in a writer's work is a reflection of the world and

of experience that is mirrored to show it to you in a very different kind of way. I love those moments when I'm reading — when I feel that moment of recognition, when a writer is describing something the way I've always thought about it but I've never been able to put into words, and I say, yes! that's exactly what it's like, and I love that feeling. I think that everything I could learn I learned from books, about the world around us, about how people relate with each other, how they reflect the time in which they live and so on.

IC Do you believe in creative writing courses or more in innate skill and perseverance?

EL Well, I think I believe more in innate skill and perseverance. I did not go to writing class myself, but I guess that there you are able to workshop your writing with other people, and that seems to be useful for a lot of writers. I think it depends on the personality, I think some writers work best in isolation.

IC How would you explain the components of confessionalism and fantasy in your work? Which side of the dualism do you enjoy more?

EL Probably more the confessional aspect. For years I've been trying to get away from that, but I think now I have just accepted that that's the sort of writer I am for the most part. I think there are critics who dislike confessional writing and think it's not as valid. I definitely don't agree with that, except that there has to be discipline. Young writers in particular who pretend to be confessional tend to throw everything onto the page without any kind of rigour or restraint.

IC Part of the challenge of reading your work is being able to enjoy the pure aesthetic pleasure of your craft and your depictions of the dark side of desire beyond moral considerations. The ability to achieve this may be what divides readers into detractors and admirers of your writing.

EL For me, the aesthetic has always been more important than any kind of morality in the writing. The morality is inserted in the style, actually. I almost find a work immoral if it doesn't have that talent in the craft, if it doesn't have that beauty, which I work very hard at achieving and I'm sure I don't always attain. If a work has that, it might excuse almost anything else; obviously not everybody thinks that way. I discovered over the years that you can get people upset if you write about personal

experiences, if you write about people in your life, but the fact is that most writers do. Some disguise it more than others.

IC Tell me a little bit about the change of perspective and subject matter in your evolution as a writer. Your three books of poetry and *Fresh Girls* are focused on subversive accounts of prostitution, sexuality and violence. *Choose Me* and *Other Women* highlight the cliché of romance through marriage, infidelities, unrequited love, etc.

EL I think that in some degree it mirrors my own life. Certainly, during my adolescence and early twenties, prostitution and the things I encountered when I was on the streets obviously influenced me and affected me and, therefore, they were attached to my writing. But into my twenties I became more interested in relationships. John Updike is one my favourite authors; I've always liked particularly American authors that deal with marriages, infidelities, it's something that I've always been drawn to. The more I read of that and the more my own life in some degree reflected that, the more, of course, it showed up in my own writing.

IC Do you think that you have become quieter in style?

EL More mainstream, yes, and now that I'm in my thirties even more so. And yet, despite the quiet, what I've always liked about the work of Updike or Cheevers is that on the surface it may be quiet but underneath all the things that are going on can even be more shocking than if they were on the surface, and that's what I'm attempting in my own writing.

IC What was your motivation to write violence through the images of "blood" and the transgression of skin in your early work?

EL I don't think of it so much as violence as of self-destructiveness. For a long time in my youth I struggled with bulimia and violence in prostitution. This kind of behaviour leaks into your writing because it's part of your life. Some people may have found it shocking, but for me it was real life.

IC It is interesting, because some readers may access the violent aspect of your writing from the point of view of fantasy, such as gothic writing, not so much as confessional.

EL Oh, that's interesting. No, for me it was definitely written from the confessional point of view.

IC I find fascinating the contrast between the depiction of sado-masochistic sex and the melancholic female voices that long for love in *In the House of Slaves*, your third book of poetry. What is this book really about?

EL Right now I would say that of my eight books it is the one I'm least happy with. I think the book doesn't succeed because in some of the poems I tried to be very rigid in terms of form and then in other poems I wasn't at all. I'm not happy with the prose form in some of them. I wrote that book in a period of my life when I was feeling both of those sides, the sado-masochistic behaviour and prostitution and the yearning for idealized love. It was not so much a conscious thing as, again, a reflection of my life at that time.

IC Most of your poems have the quality of love poems: the suffering of the lover, the distance and idealization of the beloved, the need to write and confess. Do you perceive them as love poems?

EL I don't know if I would call them that, but I can see what you mean when you say that. Sometimes when you use the term love story or love poem it can sound too sugary and I wouldn't want that. Even if you look at it as a book of love poems there is that edge to them. I don't think it's the right term to use, but I don't know what else to call them.

IC Can you say something about your three books of poetry and what they represent in your evolution as a poet?

EL Well, in my first collection there are some poems that were written when I was extremely young, thirteen or fourteen. I think of the three collections I'm most happy with *Oedipal Dreams*, I think it is the most complete collection, centred around a theme, and it works better as a collection than the other two. I find *In the House of Slaves* too much of a mismatch. I just think that looking back none of these collections have the discipline that I'm striving more for now. In my next collection some of the themes will certainly still be the same, but I think the poems will be more accomplished.

IC Can you comment about the change in style from the more experimental poems in terms of form in *You Are Not Who You Claim* to the prose poems we find in *In the House of Slaves*?

EL I know some of the poems in *In the House* are more rigid in their form, and I'm not sure if that works. I would say that because I was so young when I wrote *You Are Not Who You Claim* there is less convention,

less form, more of an almost naïveté. I think one of the things about writing when you are young, even though you don't have much discipline, is that everything is fresh, and there is a kind of originality to your voice that is unchanged by other voices or by that internal editor. In the next collection that is coming out next year there will be a better medium. The poems will be more conscious in terms of form, but they will not be as rigid.

IC Since *You Are Not Who You Claim*, one of the main themes in your writing is the contrast between appearances and the revelation of the self in intimacy. Do you want to expose the truth behind the mask or to suggest that masks are inevitable?

EL: I think I want to expose the truth behind the mask — I think that's always a challenge for the writer. I've always been most fascinated by this duality.

IC A lot of your work represents an interest in the understanding of masculinity. I find this very original because a lot of women writers in recent decades have preferred to focus their analysis on women-centred relationships, taking men out of the scene. Can you comment on your approach to masculinity in your work?

EL I know some people criticize my work because they think the women are victims, which is interesting because I don't necessarily see that. I am very interested in male characters and I think part of that comes from reading a lot of male writers. I think for a period of time I read male writers almost exclusively because I didn't want a female sense of vision, since I knew it was where I came from. And this is a generalization, but certainly in all the male writers I'm reading there seems to be a real intellectual aspect, even in confessional writing. So I wanted more of that challenge, I wanted more of that other voice. I've tried to write some stories from a male point of view, and I find that so hard to do convincingly. I find this to be a challenge and I definitely want that male perspective in my work.

IC Is this because you want to restrain your voice from the heart?

EL I think I want more of a balance. I know for me the voice from the heart comes much more easily and more instinctively. I'm fascinated by male characters and by my relationships with men, and I become curious about how men view certain situations. I think behind all that is the

relationship with my father, which has always informed my life so much, and my other relationships with men.

IC Your work focuses on heterosexual desire, the troubles of marriage, infidelities and triangles. These are subject matters that seemed to be more central to some women writers in the 60s and 70s.

EL I think I really don't care about being fashionable. That's the ground, that's the topic that really excites me; maybe it seems a bit retrograde right now, yes. I remember reading a couple of reviews of *Choose Me* saying that it was kind of pre-feminist. I'm not thinking about politics or being politically correct when I write, I'm just really fascinated about the making of relationships and the way that something like marriage and fidelity can bring up all these issues of trust and betrayal and how people are behind the masks.

IC Do you identify with authors like Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath or Margaret Atwood, who also treat these themes in their poetry?

EL Well, I'm thinking more about Alice Munro, actually, it took me a long time to admire her work. She is a difficult reading for young writers, but I think she is one of the best writers in Canada. A lot of her stories still cover that territory, and she does brilliant work.

IC Women critics have criticized your depiction of women as victims and the lack of a feminist stance in your work. But I think that what you are representing is more the ambiguity of power in relation to gender. How do you describe the source of strength for women in your literary world?

EL I think for a number of my women characters the source of strength comes from seeing, from being observant. Sometimes, even though because of their inner situation or their own making they are in a relationship where they are sufferers, they can see through it. I don't think you are a victim if you can see through your own situation. Should you stay there for whatever psychological reason, if you are stuck in that phase, your awareness lifts you up from being a victim.

IC Do you think this is related somehow to the weight of the visual in your poetry, in particular in *In the House*?

EL Well, I was thinking more of *Choose Me* when I talked about seeing and awareness. I think for poetry it is description and metaphor, and I think sometimes in moments of pain, emotional or physical pain,

things can become very clear, as in alcohol and drug-induced states. There are moments of almost perceptual clarity where you can see everything, I think in my poetry I try to capture that.

IC You have stated on several occasions that you don't want to be labelled a woman-of-colour writer; however, critics have struggled to find the ethnic component in your writing because you are a Chinese-Canadian author.

EL I think we are going to see that changed in coming generations. Certainly, in North America, Asian writers have written almost exclusively about ethnicity, because it was such a major part of their experience of immigration, their dislocation of culture and so on. For me, being born in Canada and leaving home very early, that was less of an influence than other things. My adolescence was influenced by prostitution, drugs and the street, not by where my ethnicity was placed in relation to the world. I think I'm starting to see this in some writers like Madeleine Thien: you don't see her ethnicity in her stories. I think in coming generations there will be people writing, no matter what their colour is, about their relationships with their family and people without that influence. I guess I was one of the first. I never thought about ethnicity very much, it was never a conscious thing and I didn't see why I should be writing about it. Unfortunately, some people think that if you don't write about it then it's because you're ashamed of it or because you're denying it. For me it was not something that informed me, there are so many other things that concern me more.

IC In one article you wrote that your sense of otherness comes mainly from your sensitivity as a writer. I cannot help thinking that the experience of being in-between cultures may contribute to the condition of being an outsider in society.

EL I honestly don't think so. Definitely, when I was growing up, Vancouver was not the cultural mix that it is now, but my sense of otherness came partly because of dress (I've written about this before), since my parents did not have a lot of money; that brought the sense of not fitting in. But also from knowing at a young age I was going to be a writer and being quite detached. Watching all the time you feel you are an observer. And then, of course, the experience of being on the street and being on the fringes of society.

IC So what do you think of critics who find traces of ethnicity in your work?

EL Well, you can read almost anything in a work of literature, but I would say they are misguided in terms of my own intention, I don't think they could get very far.

IC Talking about traces of ethnicity in your work, I always find descriptions of male characters (such as blue eyes) that make me assume they are Caucasian; however, you seem to leave to the reader's imagination the physical traits of your female characters.

EL I never thought about that. Maybe I see the men more vividly while I write in terms of the way they look. I think I see the women more from the inside, because I'm writing more from the female point of view; I'm looking out from their eyes. Now that I think about it I think of the women as being mixed, part Caucasian, part something else.

IC I find the concept of the transgression of boundaries almost constant in your work, as in the breaking of skin, the inside and outside of rooms, the intimate and the public, etc. Can you comment on this aspect of your writing?

EL Boundary breaking is something I've always been fascinated about. There are so many ways that topic can come up. When I was younger it was prostitution and drugs, the crossing over of boundaries into behaviour socially unacceptable. As I'm getting older, relationships, infidelities, marriages, and so forth, that's another breaking of boundaries. Yes, probably that is in all of my work, the flirting with boundaries, the discovering of where the boundaries are.

IC How about the boundaries between men and women. Does gender difference mark the way men and women perceive the world and love in your writing?

EL Yes. Not exclusively, but for the most part. I think this is what makes it so fascinating for literature.

IC Is this what creates the impossibility of communication between them?

EL Probably. Also it's part of a passive aggressiveness on both sides: there is so much unspoken that ends up being built up. And there's so much that is going on under the surface, so much that is not being said.

IC Can you talk about the importance of place in your work? The

obsession with houses, rooms, the city, and the actual lack of spatial coordinates in your stories and poems.

EL I like the sensation of a floating kind of world. As soon as you name a city, readers will have their own vision. By not naming the city, by relying on some description, it becomes more dreamlike; it could be almost anywhere. I like not anchoring things down in terms of place, even though I think Vancouver has had a lot of influence in my life and writing, in the sense of mood and weather and so on.

IC How about the obsession with the image of rooms and houses?

EL (Laughs) It is because of my terror of being homeless. Also, my obsession with hotel rooms is related to the fact that I find it very hard to actually lift my writing out of two people in a room together. I think this seems to be natural to me, the drama between two people in a room. I'm quite uncomfortable in groups, I don't know how the dynamics work, but I know very well how the dynamics work between two people.

IC How is being Canadian important to you and your work?

EL I don't think it is important for my work, again, because I don't ground my stories in place. And I think in terms of my reading I tended to be more drawn to American and British writers. The Canadian literary scene now is very mixed; I don't think it's defined by any particular voice. I don't think I represent Canadian writing, and I don't think it's easy to find a fiction writer that represents the country today.

IC Can you talk about the importance of the border with the United States in your work (I'm thinking about some of the poems in *In the House* and *Other Women*)?

EL Because we live so close to the border here, the United States in many ways seems similar but also very different. That comes very much from my location, from living in Vancouver — you can cross the border for lunch and you are in another country.

IC I remember reading in an interview a long time ago about your infatuation with the United States.

EL My dream is to drive all across America, going to all small towns and every city; I love the desert. I think it's the country I'm most fascinated by, above all the landscape. I think for me, actually, the border goes vertically more than horizontally. Going down the Oregon coast or going to California I feel more at home than going to Toronto or New

York. The East Coast is just like another land. I think I'm very much a West Coast writer.

IC What are your plans for the future?

EL Because I'm writing poetry it's really hard to make ends meet. I sit on an arts jury sometimes for prizes and grants, so I do a lot of reading. Occasionally I do manuscript consultation and editing, a little bit of freelance writing. I find I'm in a phase of my life when I want a lot of time alone, to read and to think. But it is hard, I'm getting older, I'm thirty-three now, and you see more and more people getting married, having kids. When you choose to have a life as a writer you choose to give up a lot of things that people are moving toward.

NOTE

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