

David Eustace

The question of origins

by Art Joyce

"A friend of mine once said, I'd read more poetry—I just don't know how."

With the precision of language typical of the poet, David Eustace sums up the problem of finding an audience for poetry in the digital age. The irony lies in the fact that more people have more access to education, books and information than at any time in history. Yet poetry is relegated to a cult following—a remote cultural backwater off the superhighway of TV, movies, tabloid journalism, and the internet. Eustace addresses what he calls the "short-sightedness" of this post-modern environment and its distorting effect on history.

"The past is used as something to pick pieces out of to satisfy a craving, rather than trying to integrate it into the present. I'm not looking to the past for a

revival, but post-modernism is too much about the now and instant gratification."

Despite the climate of high-tech media carpet bombing, poetry somehow survives—thrives, even. "There's something otherworldly about it," says Eustace. "I find it harder to lie when I write poetry. The moment has already been created and it's my obligation to be true to it."

For Eustace, the connection to literature is practically genetic. His grandfather, Cecil John Eustace, was a theologian who emigrated to Montreal from England and later worked for the J.M. Dent company in Toronto as an editor and publisher. He was noted for his novels and won an award for best short story of 1929 in the *English Review*. His grandmother, now 92, has kept letters between C.J. Eustace and T.S. Eliot a carefully guarded family secret. The connection with Eliot for David Eustace extends much further—into the esthetic he has developed in his own poetry.

"There's a complexity there that fascinates me. He had a terrific command of past, present and future."

Born July 1, 1970 in Toronto, Eustace studied philosophy and English literature at the University of Toronto for four years. After graduation, he felt the need to "detoxify myself from the university experience" by working on a farm in the village of Hay-on-Wye on the Welsh-English border. It was here he was first published in a regional anthology. After returning to Canada he made his way to Nelson in 1995. Eustace learned the ancient art of book binding and put it to good use in *Bread & Bones*—an anthology of West Kootenay writers compiled and published by himself and Nikki Baerg in September, 1997. He is fascinat-

I
When did the search begin?
When did the search begin
For origins, for the origin
Of a name, a family, our family,
All of us lumped scared in a
Tree
Without branches,
Or Adam beneath,
Accidents of evolution?
Search the trees, the other trees!
They searched the trees.
Search the grounds, the other grounds!
They searched the grounds.
They search the grounds
But who was it that went missing
Who went missing?

*Who went missing, Dear Lyza,
Dear Lyza, who went missing*

Who went missing that we had
To begin
A search
Into the Savanna?

II
The Savanna—
Exotic poetry, this Savanna!
(This is not the savanna of
that other family, each of whom
we hired to guide and help us
shoot elephants, land-whales
of memory; from this savannah of
our wounded origins
we are not

who we thought, you and me)
Tall letters, sharp letters,
Sharp like the grass of that other
Place with its roasted tiger meat
And the smell of burnt tubers,

This is the Savanna of Origins,
Of Grandmother Lucy,
A forgotten riverboat queen,
Her half-skull and broken ribs
Found
Locked
In stone.

III.
The stone,
the grass,
let them count the layers of ash.
*Lucy Locket lost her pocket,
Kitty Fisher found it;
There was not a penny in it,
But a ribbon round it*
let them count the layers of ash,
and let them dig and scratch;
let them sift through our millimeter
of one hundred thousand legalities,
whereinforeinthereinwithin which
they will not find
the name
of the missing.

The stone,
the grass,
let them count the layers of ash,
and let them ask:
when did the search begin?

ed by the relationship between poet and audience and its effect upon both the reading and writing of poetry.

"I try to consider audience—not necessarily a particular audience—it could just be myself.

"There should be a quality to it, an ease of reading. I want people to look at the meaning—the language is almost secondary."

Eustace has been hard at work on a novel. An excerpt from the work-in-progress was featured at a Café Baudelaire reading in June, 1997. In his typical self-effacing manner, he declines to talk about it in any detail, with the wry comment that he is "deeply suspicious" of writers discussing unfinished work. In

the poems featured here—*Origins*—Eustace addresses a universal concern that can include "everything from family to geological history." Family origins are a preoccupation unusual for someone Eustace's age, but cogently expressed in his Williams-like compactness of verse. Eustace sees the role of questioning as vital to both writer and reader.

"As human beings, why do we even care about origins? Why do we start asking ourselves these questions? Is this how we define ourselves as sentient beings? What differentiates us as a species? I like the idea we're a kind of fortunate accident. If so, do we even have any origins?" ♦

