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# rob mclennan's blog

ROB MCLENNAN'S BLOG

[author page](#) : including bibliography, links + extended bio,

Tuesday, July 07, 2020  
12 or 20 (second series)  
questions with Kimberly Alidio

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rob's blog

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*why letter ellipses* (selva oscura, 2020), [: once](#)  
[teeth bones coral](#) : (Belladonna\*, 2020), and  
[After projects the resound](#) (Black Radish,  
2016), and the chapbooks, [a cell of falls](#)  
(Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs, 2019), and  
[solitude being alien](#) (Dancing Girl, 2013).  
She's a tenure-track drop-out, once-and-  
future adjunct, ex-high school history teacher,

upcoming  
events!

[the ottawa small press  
book fair, autumn 2023](#)  
(29th anniversary!)  
[edition, November 18,](#)  
[2023 \(Ottawa ON](#)

and MFA poetry candidate at the University of Arizona. She lives in Tucson with her partner, the poet [Stacy Szymaszek](#).

## 1 – How did your first book or chapbook change your life? How does your most recent work compare to your previous? How does it feel different?

For more than ten years before my first poetry chapbook and first poetry book, there was a shadow book on U.S. Filipinx history that refused to find its way into the world. This book had an advanced contract with the University of Chicago Press that remained on file long after I left academia. The amazingly patient and persistent [Robert Devens](#), when he left his job at the press, handed my chapter drafts over to [Timothy Mennel](#) who emailed me to ask whether I was still working on it, ten years later. He kindly let me out of my contract but technically has first dibs on it should it ever manifest. My relationship with those editors was probably one of the most sustaining relationships I had in academia. Academic book editors were kindred spirits of a sort, but small press poetry publishing was an alternative universe of valuation.

For most of my life, I knew things were going to come out of me and take the shape of books. Whether it was something “I” had to say or something that had to be said through me is hard to say. But I do admit that all along I just wanted one book with my name on the spine. After three books, I’d like to think the “I” has worked its issues out.

## 2 – How did you come to poetry first, as opposed to, say, fiction or non-fiction?

[rob features at the Art Bar Reading Series with Armand Garnet Ruffo and probably someone else, Monday December 11, 2023 \(Toronto ON rob's \(ongoing\) editing service: poetry manuscript evaluation;](#)

## other rob links

[rob's author page on facebook](#)  
[rob's Electronic Poetry Center page: NEWLY UPDATED!](#)  
[Interview Editor at Queen Mob's Teahouse \(2015–2020\)](#)  
[rob's Jacket2 'commentaries' \(January–March 2015\)](#)  
[rob's extensive links page](#)  
[rob's League of Canadian Poets page](#)  
[Sentinal poetry November 2005 feature](#)  
[rob's Ploughshares page 1998 Via Rail Great Canadian Literary Tour](#)

## blog archive

- ▶ 2023 (250)
- ▶ 2022 (365)
- ▶ 2021 (365)
- ▼ 2020 (366)
  - ▶ December (31)
  - ▶ November (30)
  - ▶ October (31)
  - ▶ September (30)
  - ▶ August (31)

I didn't. As an adult, I was fully identified with being a humanities scholar of U.S. empire, critical ethnic studies, and Filipinx Studies, and not with the poetry that I wrote consistently through high school and college.

I had an exit year working as an assistant professor at the University of Texas after being dismissed for not submitting my research manuscript to the promotion-and-tenure committee. During that year, I took my first poetry workshops with [Abe Louise Young](#) and [Hoa Nguyen](#). I subsequently attended whatever I could — VONA/ Voices, Kundiman, all four weeks at [Naropa's Summer Writing Program](#) — while on a postdoctoral fellowship and various adjunct gigs. I wrote my first book while teaching high school, the first supportive workplace I ever clocked into. My second and third books came together the summer after my first year in an MFA program.

To gain writing time and resources, I'm again in an academic institution. Even so, I still come to poetry for the breathing space not afforded by the research university's neoliberal rationalizations, moralistic humanism, and standardized versions of innovative thinking, diversity, and language-use. I have very specific expectations for poetry as a field akin to Duncan's meadow rather than as a discipline.

**3 – How long does it take to start any particular writing project? Does your writing initially come quickly, or is it a slow process? Do first drafts appear looking close to their final shape, or does your work come out of copious notes?**

- ▼ July (31)
- [Jameson Fitzpatrick, Pricks in the Tapestry](#)  
12 or 20 (second series) questions with [Matthew To...](#)
- [12 or 20 \(small press\) questions with Ashley Mille...](#)
- [Chaudiere Books : Six Questions interviews,](#)  
[Margaret Christakos, charger](#)
- [Susan Montez, Teaching Shakespeare](#)  
12 or 20 (second series) questions with [JoAnna Novak](#)
- [new from above/ground press: Maloukis, Burgoyne, T...](#)
- [Noah Falck, EXCLUSIONS](#)  
12 or 20 (second series) questions with [Athena Dixon](#)
- [Ariana Reines, A Sand Book](#)
- [periodicities : a journal of poetry and poetics](#)  
12 or 20 (second series) questions with [Dorsey Craft](#)
- [Stephanie Cawley, My Heart But Not My Heart](#)  
essays in the face of [uncertainties](#)  
12 or 20 (second series) questions with [Sarah Ens](#)
- [12 or 20 \(small press\) questions with Jacquelyn Zo...](#)
- [Christopher Linforth, DIRECTORY](#)
- [Michael Dennis, Low Centre of Gravity](#)
- [Talking Poetics : an occasional series](#)  
12 or 20 (second series) questions with [Max](#)

My inquiries and interests, if there's enough breathing space, are usually all over the place. They become "projects" on their own time. Not too long ago, I was writing a hybrid New-Narrative-ish book that eventually broke apart into two poetry books and a poetry chapbook – no prose anywhere. The whole process was gnarly, probably because I was busy upending my life at the same time. Once I settled into a supportive partnership and living situation, the books and chapbook quickly took shape.

#### **4 – Where does a poem usually begin for you? Are you an author of short pieces that end up combining into a larger project, or are you working on a "book" from the very beginning?**

I'm starting to play around with the idea that a poem begins for me as a humming vibration or frequency. And as a space of communion. Where gestures begin to work with linguistic units. That's about all I can say about words, sounds, utterances, lines, forms, the page, sequences, and books.

#### **5 – Are public readings part of or counter to your creative process? Are you the sort of writer who enjoys doing readings?**

In our self-isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic (it's April 22, 2020 6:34PM Arizona time right now), my partner, Stacy ([who answered these questions seven years ago!](#)), and I made up a game of "Guess Who This Is." The game goes like this: one of us picks a book from her shelf and reads aloud until the other one guesses. Stacy's really good at it. And honest, too. I picked up *Helping the Dreamer* and Stacy yelled, "I can see it's Anne!" Rookie mistake because I really wanted to perform [Anne Waldman](#).

[Brett](#)

[essays in the face of uncertainties](#)

[Lisa Jarnot, A Princess Magic Presto Spell](#)

[Spotlight series #51 : Matthew Gwathmey](#)

[12 or 20 \(second series\) questions with Kimberly A...](#)

[Touch the Donkey supplement: new interviews with k...](#)

[12 or 20 \(second series\) questions with Lia Woodall](#)

[essays in the face of uncertainties](#)

[Bhanu Kapil, How To Wash A Heart](#)

[Anstruther Press: Ellen Chang-Richardson, Síle Eng...](#)

[12 or 20 \(second series\) questions with Paddy Scott](#)

- ▶ June (30)
- ▶ May (31)
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- ▶ 2005 (83)

- ▶ 2004 (46)
- ▶ 2003 (7)

Part of my writing practice is to listen to a lot of recorded poetry readings. And I love and live with a person who programmed poetry readings and oversaw poetry reading curation from 1999 to 2018, at Woodland Pattern in Milwaukee and at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in New York City. I think a lot about what poetry readings have been, what they seem to be now, and what they could be.

At this moment, I wonder what a poetry reading might be for. What ethics and practical concerns inform attending as a reader or as an audience member? To celebrate and gather? To participate in unilateral and/or inauthentic obligation? To make sure people know you're alive and matter? To uphold some idea of the local or the ethnic? To clock into your gig? To sell an image other than a book? Is it deeply felt work?

**6 – Do you have any theoretical concerns behind your writing? What kinds of questions are you trying to answer with your work? What do you even think the current questions are?**

Not surprisingly, I do. Each of my books has an endnote indicating those concerns. None of them tries to answer the questions it raises, though.

There are a lot of questions of this current moment. If we could get into a space of communing together, let's say in a half-hour, we could draw up a mighty list of urgent and beautiful questions. Different ones would arise between us tomorrow. And the next day.

## editor/publisher

[above/ground press](#)  
[Chaudiere Books](#)  
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[ottawa poetry newsletter](#)  
[seventeen seconds: a journal of poetry & poetics](#)  
[ottawater: new Ottawa poetry PDF annual](#)  
[above/ground press ALBERTA SERIES \(2007–8\)](#)  
[Poetics.ca \(2002–7\)](#)  
[Call and Response, School of Photographic Arts: Ottawa \(2011–12\)](#)

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 2023  
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 anniversary )  
 above/ground press  
 subscriptions

Right now, I'm wondering: What is care? How are we living this moment? To borrow from Latour's questionnaire, *Where to land after the pandemic?*: What suspended activities do we want to see cease or change? What do we want to see begin anew? How do we propose that people transition, change, or begin anew?

**7 – What do you see the current role of the writer being in larger culture? Does s/he even have one? What do you think the role of the writer should be?**

Poets can care about and for the language used to pose questions. We can make multi-dimensional macro-micro inquiries into the language used to pose answers. As much as we are typically tasked with imagining, we can attend to what is present and to what is already arriving.

**8 – Do you find the process of working with an outside editor difficult or essential (or both)?**

My poetry editors have included [Marthe Reed](#), [Brenda Iijima](#), [Krystal Languell](#), and [Fred Moten](#). In each case, there's been real trust and joy.

**9 – What is the best piece of advice you've heard (not necessarily given to you directly)?**

Over the past two Januaries, I've worked with the writer [Selah Saterstrom's](#) divinatory readings. From her latest: "Claim the resources you've gained from surviving loss."

**10 – What kind of writing routine do you tend to keep, or do you even have one? How does a typical day (for you) begin?**



## rob essays / reviews / articles

[Joel W. Vaughan reviews Four Stories \(Apostrophe Press, 2016\) at Broken Pencil](#)  
[Pearl Pirie on rob mclennan + mentorship : The League of Canadian Poets \(September 2016\)](#)  
[Pearl Pirie on rob mclennan : Celebration of Canadian Poets, Brick Books \(September 2016\) from the desk of rob mclennan, at Real Pants \(May 2016\)](#)  
["Publishing Tips: On Attention," at The Malahat Review, January 2016](#)  
[a review of my "a \(short\) history of I." by Elizabeth Kate Switaj at Poets' Quarterly](#)

I don't keep a writing routine separate from other routines. But I try not to keep separate routines. I go through my day and reflect on how any labor and any experience relates to a writing and reading life.

I don't associate writing with time but with space. I try to sit at my desk in my studio in a routine, ritualistic way and do whatever I need to do to inhabit that space, to keep it vital and energetic.

### **11 – When your writing gets stalled, where do you turn or return for (for lack of a better word) inspiration?**

I don't know if I've experienced this as a poet in a way that I lived it for many years as an historian. If writing is stalled, other aspects of my life are likely to be "stalled," and I have to go figure that out. I'm happy to no longer follow the academic model of subordinating all aspects of my life to "writing a book."

### **12 – What fragrance reminds you of home?**

Presently, creosote. This question is raising a question about what and where and when "home" is (sigh). I don't know — jasmine rice in my rice cooker. My chicken adobo. Old Bay seasoning? Chlorine.

### **13 – David W. McFadden once said that books come from books, but are there any other forms that influence your work, whether nature, music, science or visual art?**

U.S. modernist poetry cut its teeth on all those things. They're all in the poetry.

[a review of my "wild horses"](#)  
[a short write-up on the reading I did in November 2015 with David O'Meara and Brecken Hancock through the Ottawa Arts Council](#)  
[reviewers on reviewing, for CWILA, November 2015](#)  
[One More Thing, August 2015](#)  
[Profile of Ben Ladouceur, with a few questions, at Open Book: Ontario, June 2015](#)  
[Janet Nicol reviews Notes and Dispatches: Essays, at The Maple Tree Literary Supplement article by Catherine Brunelle on rob's many online schemes, Apartment613](#)  
[review of Why Poetry Sucks: An Anthology of Humorous Experimental Canadian Poetry \(Insomniac Press, 2014\) now up at Arc Poetry Magazine](#)  
[review of Pearl Pirie's the pet radish, shrunken \(BookThug, 2015\) at The Small Press Book Review](#)  
[review of Pattie McCarthy's x y z & \(Ahsahta, 2015\) at The Small Press Book Review, March 2015](#)  
["World's End: Alta Vista," at Atticus Review, February 2015](#)  
[Family Literacy Day, some recommendations, All Lit Up blog, January 2015](#)  
["On Writing" at Catina Noble's blog, January 2015](#)  
["Life Is Too Short For A Long Story," a new essay](#)

I love queer visual art, performance, and dance.

## 14 – What other writers or writings are important for your work, or simply your life outside of your work?

My life and work are gloriously gifted by the experience of writing and reading poetry in relationship with an amazing poet. So, most immediately, [Stacy Szymaszek](#) — her lived experience with poets, her lineages, and her projects — past, present, and future. And her bookshelves.

[Fred Moten](#) and [Stefano Harney](#) helped me to write *After projects the resound*, and an excerpt from [Lorine Niedecker's Lake Superior Journals](#) guided my second book, *: once teeth bones coral* ∴. My third book, *why letter ellipses*, is sort of crowded with all sorts of people, like [Yayoi Kusama](#), [Amiri Baraka](#), [Andrea Dworkin](#) ...

Lately, I've felt a queer, kindred relation to certain writers associated with U.S.-ian Language Poets: [Tina Darragh](#), [P. Inman](#), [Steve Benson](#), [Ted Greenwald](#), [Stephen Rodefer](#). [Susan Howe](#) continues to be important. I have a tongue-in-cheek aim to reclaim Language Poetry, generally held to be antithetical to the expressive, subjective, and even experimental poetics of BIPOC/ LGBTQIA+ writers, for a poetics of queer-of-color, postcolonial, cross-lingual synesthesia.

## 15 – What would you like to do that you haven't yet done?

Work with others to build alternatives to neoliberal, racial, settler-colonial, carceral capitalism and figure out how to end it.

[up at Numero Cinq, January 2015](#)  
[rob mclennan: recommended reading, at Readerby \(November 2014\)](#)  
[Brian Mihok reviews The Uncertainty Principle: stories, \(Chaudiere Books, 2014\) over at Rain Taxi](#)  
[review of 70 Canadian Poets \(Oxford, 2014\), ed. Gary Geddes, at Cordite Poetry Review](#)  
[review of Redell Olsen's Film Poems \(Les Figues, 2014\) at The Small Press Book Review](#)  
[All Lit Up Fall Preview: rob mclennan anticipates Stan Dragland's The Bricoleur & His Sentences \(Pedlar Press, 2014\)](#)  
[Ryan Pratt reviews "Acceptance Speech" \(phafours, 2014\) over at the ottawa poetry newsletter](#)  
[Profile of The Rotary Dial, with a few questions, at Open Book: Ontario](#)  
[Profile of Stuart Ross' Proper Tales Press, at Open Book: Ontario](#)  
[Author's Note, at matchbook lit, September 2014](#)  
["Ottawa Lit: fall 2014 preview," at Open Book: Ontario](#)  
[review of The Uncertainty Principle: stories, \(2014\) at Necessary Fiction](#)  
[review of The Uncertainty Principle; stories, \(2014\) at Broken Pencil magazine](#)  
["rob mclennan on Elizabeth Smart," re-posted at Literary Mothers](#)



## 16 – If you could pick any other occupation to attempt, what would it be? Or, alternately, what do you think you would have ended up doing had you not been a writer?

Being a poet is not an occupation. But: I would have liked to have learned to be a painter, sculptor, or dancer. (Please don't @ me with [O'Hara](#).)

## 17 – What made you write, as opposed to doing something else?

Language wants me.

## 18 – What was the last great book you read? What was the last great film?

[Duncan's \*The Opening of the Field\*](#). [Akerman's \*No Home Movie\*](#).

## 19 – What are you currently working on?

Care and consciousness amidst the pandemic. Reading poetry in translation. Writing experimental, creative translations of Pangasinan-language poetry — a language of my mother's that I neither speak nor read but a language that helped to raise me.

[12 or 20 \(second series\) questions](#);

Posted by [rob mclennan](#) at [8:31 AM](#)

Labels: [12 or 20 questions](#), [belladonna](#), [Black Radish Books](#), [dancing girls press](#), [Kimberly Alidio](#), [Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs](#), [selva oscura](#)

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[Profile of Jason Christie, at Open Book: Ontario "\(further\) notes on the archive," at Open Book: Ontario](#)  
["On starting a new poetry journal: Touch the Donkey," at Open Book: Ontario](#)  
[review of Lisa Jarnot's a princess magic presto spell \(Solid Objects, 2014\) at The Small Press Book Review](#)  
["John Newlove at 76," at Open Book: Ontario](#)  
[Where Do You Write, My Lovely? \(June 2014\)](#)  
["Literary mothers: rob mclennan on Elizabeth Smart" at Open Book: Ontario \(June 2014\)](#)  
[review of Pearl Pirie's \*Quebec Passages\* \(2014\) at The Small Press Book Review](#)  
[Aaron Daigle discusses How the alphabet was made, \(2014\) over at the Flat Singles Press blog](#)  
[review of Cecily Nicholson's \*From the Poplars\* \(Talonbooks, 2014\) at The Small Press Book Review](#)  
[review of Emily Kendal Frey's \*Sorrow Arrow\* \(Octopus Books, 2014\) at The Small Press Book Review](#)  
["Writing, fatherhood \(fragments\)," at Open Book: Ontario \(May 2014\)](#)  
[At the Desk: rob mclennan at Open Book: Ontario \(April 2014\)](#)  
[review of Angela Carr's \*Here in There\*](#)