RLN in Conversation with Joanne Epp

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Joanne Epp is a poet from the Canadian prairies, born and raised in Saskatchewan. Joanne has published poetry in literary journals including The New Quarterly, The Antigonish Review, and CV2. Her chapbook, Crossings, was released in 2012, followed by her first full poetry collection *Eigenheim*. Her second collection of poetry, *Cattail Skyline*, was published in spring 2021. Joanne currently lives with her family in Winnipeg and attends the parish of St. Margaret's Anglican Church. I met up with her in mid-December to chat about her latest book and her life as a poet. Below is a shortened and transcribed version of our conversation.
— SK

Sara Krahn: How did you get started as a poet?

Joanne Epp: We had poetry at home, though not a lot. We had *A Child's Garden of Verses* by Robert Louis Stevenson. And I had an anthology of Canadian Poetry for children that my aunt gave me for my 9th birthday. I also encountered poetry in school. So, it was always sort of there and I guess I found it attractive. I wrote my first poem at the age of 8. It was a shameless knock-off of one of the Stevenson poems in the book. I didn't write a lot as a kid, but there was a definite moment when I was about 20 when, on a day when I had written a poem I thought, yea, I want to do more of this. A bit later in my life, I realized I wanted to do it more seriously and learn how to do it better. But the "doing it better" part took some time.

SK: And what did that "doing it better" part eventually look like? Did it involve school? Mentorships? Workshops? How did that take form?

JE: Both with essays for college and with poetry, I learned writing by reading. At a certain point I started keeping a notebook where I would make notes on things I read and try to figure out what I liked and didn't like. I wanted to take a writing course, but a good friend who I looked up to discouraged it. It was his opinion

that you can't teach creative writing. So, I let that lie for a while. Much later, when I lived in Toronto, I realized I didn't agree with him, and decided to take a writing workshop. There was this thing called The Toronto Writing Workshop that offered courses. I took two of those with the same writer. And it really was a good thing, because she didn't try to mold us, but rather did what a good writing teacher does: she tried to get into the head of each of us and recommend a helpful direction for us as individual writers. I also found it helpful to finally develop a language for what I was trying to do. Because up to that point I was just working on instinct. She encouraged me to be more deliberate. For one thing, to understand the archetypes I was working with. Like instances of drawing on other literature or biblical imagery. As one of my friends said, know your cosmology. Be conscious of the sources you're drawing on.

SK: Right. It's okay to be an informed writer. I think that's great advice especially because writers are readers. We're always taking in the work of others, and it only makes us better when we pay attention to what we're taking in and draw on those voices to tease out our own. It sounds like that workshop was a very formative experience for you as a writer.

JE: Yes, it was. And shortly after we moved to Winnipeg, I joined the Manitoba Writers' Guild and applied for their mentorship program and was accepted. I worked with a mentor for five months and he pushed me in very useful ways too. I tended to be a bit vague in my writing, and he encouraged me to name whatever it is I was talking about. He thought I was too reticent. He'd always say: Just say it! Kick up a fuss! So, I hope I've taken that to heart.

SK: I'm wondering if you can speak to your writing process and how it has evolved?

JE: Hmm, good question. I think I have developed clear ideas of how to revise my own work. That came gradually although I did have a moment of enlightenment about that too. My mentor, Laurie Block helped me with that. One of the writers I like to read, Alice Major—there's something about her work that prompted me to not just read my work for sense and meaning but for sound and rhythm. I would say I've developed more tools to listen to and edit my own work. I used to write my poems on scraps of paper and on backs of envelopes. And only when I thought they were good did I even think to write them in a notebook.

SK: I can certainly relate with that. You get some lightning of inspiration, and you want to write it down, but you don't want to draw too much attention to it just in case it's nothing that anyone should see!

JE: Yes, and maybe I was just afraid of writing bad poetry. But I think you must write bad poetry to get to the good stuff. I was rereading Anne Lamott's book *Bird by Bird*, which is about writing. One of the first things she talks about is the importance of "shitty first drafts." You've got to just spill it out. Work and edit later; just get it all out so you've just got something to shape.

SK: That's great advice. Turning the page, a bit, you would say there's a connection between your writing and your faith. Does one inform the other?

JE: I wouldn't have said so 30 years ago, but now I would say yes. When I first started out there was a period where I was reluctant to write about anything spiritual, because I wasn't sure if it could be done well. Over the last number of years, though, I have allowed the spiritual to get into my writing. It's another example of taking my mentor's advice: If it's important, say it. There have been times, in my 21 years at the parish of St. Margaret's, where I can feel it happening. There's one poem in a chapbook that I wrote around Ash Wednesday that meditates on what liturgy does for us. The Ash Wednesday service and that cross on your forehead make you think about something you'd rather just forget. I was thinking of this while skating on the river, how there's an apparent disjunction between that sunny day skating on the river and then remembering that you are dust.

SK: One is such an experience of aliveness,

and the other is a reminder that yes, we also die. Poetry does seem to be a form serving that reminder. I think there's something other-worldly about good poetry, the experience of language in this form; but I think a good poem allows language to spill out of the poem a bit, too.

JE: Maybe there's a parallel here between poetry and liturgical language, in that they can echo beyond themselves.

SK: Can we talk a bit about your latest book of poetry, *Cattail Skyline*? Were you working with a specific theme for the book, or did themes emerge over the course of writing it?

JE: The various sections of the book started as separate sequences of poems. Eventually I realized that the themes of these various sequences did relate to one another. That's when I started thinking about it as more of a collection.

SK: Each sequence does seem very rooted in *place*. And you do cover a variety of places, from familiar scenes on the prairies all the way to Cambodia. There's so much looking and observation in your poetry; you're so attentive to your surroundings, to the places you find yourself whether it's a creek or graveyard or Phnom Penh or Star Lake—you write as an invitation to these places but also as a warning, almost. As if, if we look too hard there's a narrowing of our gaze and in this narrowing our gaze becomes destructive. Your poem called "Minnowing" really captures this. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to read it aloud.

JE: Okay, for sure:

They school in the shadows, their slips
of shadow following beneath,
the lake bottom rippling in sandy waves.
When they idle in the water, I reach
for the long-handled net, let it swish
toward them, then watch them
instantly shift out of reach. A test
of patience: if the net comes too close,
they dart. I keep it almost still, a lazy twitch
now and then. A quick dip and I catch
a single minnow, pull it into the air,
weightless, a flutter in my hand.
I glimpse its silver belly, its round, perfect eye.
In greenish water it was a dart of motion;
now in my cupped palm it seems
made of light, too small to house bones
and heart. I want to look closer, see
beneath its skin, but it loses breath
the longer I hold it. I dip the net
again. The bright thing swims,
regains its element, its grace.

SK: I love that. Because you want to see the fish, be a part of the fish's experience and get close—it's that desire for closeness. But when you get too close and scoop the fish out of the water it can't breathe anymore. You must put it back; you have to let it go.

JE: Yes. I think a sort of recurring theme that comes out in the poems and is often on my mind as I write, is how things are so often out of reach. When you're trying to write about something there's only so much you can express about what you think or see, there's only so much that words can do. You can't possess it. It's there to be seen, treasured, lived in, but not

possessed. I've been writing these "place poems" for quite a while, and it was only recently that David Widdicombe gave me some tools to think about how I could connect it with faith and liturgy. He gave a couple of sermons on creation and talked about how there's plenty of evidence in the Bible that the rest of the world has a relationship with God of its own that is independent of us humans. And I found that idea really opened a window for me. I almost don't even know how to say this, but there's only so much you can see. The world will reveal itself to you if you observe, but there will always be things that remain unseen. There are creatures that will keep to themselves, that you almost see but don't. The world isn't yours. Does that make sense?

SK: It does. I see you trying to capture this sentiment in your poetry through your use of colour, too. There is so much colour in your poetry. You're so much more Emily Carr than Robert Bateman! And your colour descriptions are just magic; your attention to them makes your poetry come alive and it's quite effective. Anyone who's grown up on the prairies would have to just sigh, because so much of living on the prairies is bathing in all the different colours, whether in the skies or the fields.

JE: Yes! I grew up loving the landscape I lived in, but also conscious of the negative things people say about the prairies. About it being boring. But it ain't so! One of my earliest poems that will never see the light of day set the stage for what I would write later. It was called "Colours." I wrote it in little sections, talking about what I thought were the dominant colours of each season, how in the winter it's blue, that icy blue sky and shadows on snow, the blue you only see in those snow shadows…

SK: The way you write with the use of colours is like, a feeling of arrival. You paint the prairies as a place, as a destination—a place to arrive as oppose to just pass through. Many people think of Manitoba as a dead end or just a stop along the way, but you and I both know it's not.

I want to bring up one more slightly serious question. Coming back to what I pointed out in that one poem "Minnowing," where I sense there's a bit of a departure in your voicing of observation as invitation, moving more towards observation as warning. There is responsibility in this kind of observation, because it risks narrowing our gaze and "the fish losing it breath." Was it your intention to be a voice of caution to the observer in the poem, and to the reader?

JE: This is an idea that came to my consciousness as I wrote. Being conscious of how we affect the world is something we can't help but think of these days. There's one way in which it's hard for me to write about, because the subject is just so huge and overwhelming. So, my approach is to go small and close, to see where the beauty is being threatened. And where we hold responsibility. I wonder if we too often think of observation as a passive activity, but we have a responsibility in the way we look at the world. I don't know if we're ever just passive bystanders—we're always stepping on something!