Stephen Lawrence: South Australian poet
Personal recollections – In Memoriam, April 2012.
Kate Deller-Evans

Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me,
And turn his merry note
Unto the sweet bird’s throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither:
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather.
As You Like It 2.5.1

‘You know what awaits, don’t you,’ I stated rather than asked Stephen when he submitted his Masters degree in English Literature at Flinders University. It was the early 1990s and we were both students of Shakespeare when the bottom fell out of academic pathways for graduates. Despite our experience tutoring, tenure tracks appeared unattainable. So he took the challenge, enrolling in a teaching qualification at the University of Adelaide. There he signed me up to take elective ‘The Writing Process’ with poet and children’s author, Peter McFarlane. We three ended the year co-editing the resultant anthology, Slice: University Readings (1994), which for many graduating teachers was their first step in publishing creative work. Martha Sumrada (then Veigli) recalls Stephen’s ‘wonderful mix of eloquence and insight’ (pers. comm. 2012). Right from the start, he was an educator and author generous with his time, dedication, and support of fledgling writers. Fellow student in the course, Ivan Rehorek (aka Avalanche) recalls ignoring the rest of the curriculum in favour of the writing group. It was Stephen who organised our visit to Adelaide’s most famous poetry venue. He insisted we each brave it and perform a poem out loud.

It should be no surprise that after only his first few attendances at Friendly Street Poets monthly meetings, in 1995 Stephen was tapped on the shoulder by Penelope Curtin, Literature Officer for Arts SA, and asked to stand for its committee. He served faithfully and continued for the rest of his life as a staunch supporter and contributor to the organisation. Adelaide poet Deb Matthews-Zott remembers:

Stephen and I were co-editors of the Friendly Street anthology Beating Time in a Gothic Space, No. 23, the last Friendly Street anthology of the 20th century. So we spent a lot of time working together during 1999 and I have fond memories of how well we worked together on the collection, meeting in each others’ homes, taking photographs for the back cover in the Botanical Gardens, and surprisingly agreeing on most of the editorial choices. Stephen was also an inaugural member of the poetry group I started in 1995 – A Passion of Poets (a group that still meets today, although the membership has shifted over time). ‘Circuitboard’ is the poem I selected for the 1999
anthology and I think it captures the nature of Stephen’s work very well, and shows something of Stephen himself.¹

**CIRCUITBOARD**

The charge  
Of thought  
And intellect  
Passes through structured ether, receiving  

The glow  
Of instant,  
Experience,  
In return for the intensity of the outlay.  

The ghost  
Of awareness,  
The mind’s electricity,  
Traces varying pathways across the board.  

The mindfield  
Of each reader,  
Each reading,  
Determines the quality of induction.  

The oceans  
Of electrons  
Catch and swirl  
Consciousness in their eddies and flux.  

The current  
Lights up  
What it touches,  
Illuminating one route each time through  

The maze  
Of the grid,  
And passes out,  
Changed from when it entered.

from *Friendly Street Reader No. 23*

Stephen Lawrence’s first collection was published that same year in an anthology borne of the early Passion of Poets group, *Sleeping Under a Grand Piano: Ten South*

¹ Pers. comm. 30 April 2012)

Kate Deller-Evans. ‘Stephen Lawrence: South Australian poet.’  
Australian Poets (Ginninderra Press, 1999). Australian poet Geoff Page says in his Editor’s Note to that book that the poems of Stephen Lawrence display ‘a satirical edge’. Stephen’s next collection was in Friendly Street New Poets 3 along with collections by Louise Nicholas and Richard Hillman (Wakefield Press, 1997). ‘Her Mother’s Arms’ could be described as a verse novelette in the voice of a young female medical student. It was quickly followed the subsequent year with his first solo collection (also with the Friendly Street/Wakefield Press collaboration) Beasts Labial, which as Deb Matthews-Zott notes ‘is also a must read’.

After a number of years teaching, Stephen migrated his career into writing professionally within the South Australian government’s Equal Opportunity Commission. Yet he continued writing and publishing fiction and poetry, winning and being shortlisted for dozens of Australian literary awards. He achieved publication internationally in Romania through fellow Passion of Poets member, University of South Australia academic, Dr Ioana Petrescu, and he was also published across North America and in Denmark.

Poet and Flinders University academic Steve Evans worked at various times with Stephen on the Arts SA Judging Panel for the John Bray Poetry Award. He recognised Stephen’s skills ‘in identifying foibles in human behaviour nevertheless through the warmth of observation’. Steve sought out his poems for inclusion in the journal for which he is Literary Editor, the London-based AAAJ (Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal) for the ‘Literature and Insights’ section.

As he could do in his collection How Not to Kill Government Leaders (Wakefield Press, 2002), Stephen Lawrence was speaking to an audience that recognised not just the jargon but the unwritten rules and protocols of professional behaviour, especially in communication, which was his forte, that could so easily be sent-up. He was able to foreground the silliness but also to appreciate the fundamental compassion, especially given some people’s seriousness about its use. His work found ready readers in the journal where with bureaucratic monologue he could lampoon business speak.

That ability can be found in his takes on government process, too, such as in Friendly Street’s 2006 November Poem of the Month, ‘The Legislative Assembly’:

Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker
I am aware of Standing Order 67.
I am aware that Standing Order 67
warns against members repeating
repeating sentiments already expressed
at the risk that they may be ordered
to resume their seats on the ground
on the ground of repetition.

However, the Acting Speaker will be aware

\[2\] pers. comm. April 2012.

that at the time he took the point of order
I was responding to an interjection – ….

Despite protestations in Stephen’s early poem ‘This is the only poem that I shall write about a train’ his fourth poetry collection was with Picaro Press in September 2008 (#80) and was entitled The Culture of Trains. In 2009, with Gillian Britton, Stephen co-edited the quirky anthology Small City Tales of Strangeness and Beauty (Wakefield Press) (reviewed by Deb Matthews-Zott in Transnational Literature May 2009). Stephen was productive and his poems won all sorts of competitions, such as the inaugural RiAus Monthly Science Poetry prize for ‘Every Feeling’ in 2011. In addition to writing, he voraciously read and reviewed and judged. One of his more recent judging duties was to choose Robyn Cadwallader’s 2010 Single Poet manuscript i painted unafraid and subsequently launch the collection. While taking up a scholarship to study a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide he became poetry editor of Wet Ink magazine there. In the writers’ memorial to Stephen on 29 April, fellow doctoral graduate and reviewing colleague, Heather Taylor Johnson paid tribute to his prowess and insightful fearlessness when reviewing even the greats of the Australian literary scene, including his idolised Les Murray, the poet he was thrilled to have met the month before at Adelaide Writers’ Week 2012.

Stephen’s true vocation as a poet was evident to his teacher at Flinders University all those years ago. Joost Daalder recalls supervising Stephen’s MA on Shakespeare:

He’d hand up drafts for me to look at and scribble comments on. Obviously this involved also my turning over each sheet. Every sheet had a poem, or snatches of poems, on the back. They struck me as remarkably good and professional. Each poem of course had a slash through it, as I was meant to read the thesis, not the poems. Competent though Stephen’s thesis work was, the poems were more exciting to me, even though I did not realise they were his. Eventually I asked him whose they were, and he told me the truth … I was very pleased and impressed, and greatly encouraged him to go on writing poems!3

Stephen Lawrence’s final collection of poems is the creative work ‘A Spiritual Problem is a Chemical Problem’ within his dissertation ‘A Poetic of Disunity: Selves and Silence’, which is available online.4 ‘My lasting impression of Stephen was that of a dry, acerbic wit, coupled with a charming smile. This would light up the room.’ Stephen’s creative and professional writing had attracted admiration across the country. Australia has lost a distinct and fine voice in the passing of Stephen Lawrence, aged only 54. He is survived by the loves of his life, his wife Celine and children, Georgia and Joseph.


This poem, from his thesis manuscript was also Friendly Street Poem of the Month August 2010. I read it at his writers’ memorial gathering.

WHAT QUANTUM GRAVITY LOOKS LIKE

Time keeps everything from happening at once. Countless dimensions will be needed to survive the four we’re lost in.

The universe duplicates every time we look.

Time does not exist; there is only more likely and less likely.

There is not single now, now. And there never was.

We feel a river. In reality there is only the ocean.

With thanks to all those who supplied comments for this piece - KDE