# I Do Not Have a Particular Home, Place, or People

**A Literary Conversation with Poet Richard Lyons**

July 19, 2013

*Interviewed by James Madison Redd*

*This conversation with Richard Lyons is the twelfth in the Crooked Letter Interview Series hosted by Prairie Schooner's Southern Correspondent, James Madison Redd. The following is a brief excerpt from their recent email conversation.*

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***Richard Lyons** (Ph.D., University of Houston) has published poems in* The Nation, Poetry, New Republic, Paris Review, *and* North American Review*. He is the author of three books of poetry*: These Modern Nights*, a Devins Award winner in the University of Missouri Press Breakthrough Series;* Hours of the Cardinal*, published in the James Dickey Contemporary Poets Series at the University of South Carolina Press; and* Fleur Carnivore*, winner of the Washington Prize. A new project,* Blood Psalms*, is currently in the editing stages. He teaches creative writing at Mississippi State University in Starkville, Mississippi.*

**JMR: You will be sixty-two years old in August, 2013. What do you bring to poetry that younger poets might not?**

**RL**: I bring a body with a lot of mileage. Maybe I bring a "street cred," I think, because there were years in between my degrees in which I worked what some call "regular jobs" or "real jobs." I don't think these kinds of jobs can satisfy a writer in the long run. Because of this, I encourage my students to find jobs they love. I have worked in a variety of profit and non-profit situations.

**JMR: You came from a working-class background, yet your poetry is steeped in high diction and layered in allusion. Why?**

**RL:** I don't enjoy reading poems that keep things simplistic for populist reasons. When writers talk about clarity as "accessibility," I break out in hives. The easier a poem is to paraphrase the more forgettable it is. Reading poetry crazy enough to aspire to endure the ages requires emotional work on the writer's part and the reader's part. Many Americans assume that much poetry and fiction—in my mother's words—is "above them." But I know many smart, working-class readers, and working-class people are not afraid of work. They also give credit where credit is due. I once taught a class at MSU called "The Pleasure of Influence." I want people to have eclectic and voracious appetites for reading and writing. I don't believe in the pop culture notion of originality. I tell young writers that they have to graft themselves into some tradition. If they don't read good poetry, they won't ever write good poetry.

In my poems, I use high diction and low diction. I don't feel that it's a crime to pick up a dictionary or to ask a reader to stretch his or her comfort zone. Our students learn to stretch their expectations every day. Leonardo Sinisgalli writes, "Poets draw milk only from poetry. Flat milk, muddy and lumpy, but better than bright poison, better than warm wine. The poet feeds at the breast of other poets, the great mothers

of poetry." I don't agree with Sinisgalli's use of the word "only" in this quote, though I do agree that reading experiences can and should be a large part of a writer's overall life experience.

**JMR: Your poem "Eyebrows," published in the *Cincinnati Review,* is your "attempt to address tribal angst without much or any immediate personal angst." Why has your more recent work become less personal than your early work, and how has this transition changed your writing?**

**RL:** All writers have to learn to be comfortable alone. Americans especially place a high value on gregariousness. For me, the first lesson of poetry for Americans is to learn to sit still—before a typewriter, back when, before a computer, these days.

In poetry, I think, the ability to mythologize the personal through narrative wanes with age. With my aging, it certainly did.

In my poems, I do not have a particular home, place, or people. Since the Twin Tower attacks, protection and security have resurfaced in America as ultimate values. Maybe because I have moved around a great deal, I've had to embrace change. I don't believe that a home should be a fortress so I do not think about protection and security very much, and thus I find myself at odds with some Americans. Therefore, when I think of a "tribe," I am thinking of a meta-tribe, a global tribe.

When human collectives begin to act like machines, we begin to deal with each other as commodities and we begin to let personal responsibility evaporate. I am aware of the power of our technological advances. I know I am in a minority in America when I say that a healthy fear of machines is a good thing. Recently I've begun to think of my poems as creation myths married to greening songs, but I'm not sure where such thinking and feeling will take me.

**JMR: Your writing is by no means confined to a geographical region. You reference international writing often, usually deriving from languages other than English. Why do you reach outside of your native tongue for inspiration? How does this affect your writing?**

**RL:** I started with translations of Romance Language poets maybe because of an AP French class in high school. To me, these poets seemed less inhibited in practice, tone, and subject matter than a lot of American poets did. These poets had also suffered more direct involvement in war and political oppression. The international poets I've returned to, I've noticed, live or lived in countries around the Mediterranean Sea, or in South America. Their sense of place and home transcends and/or subverts nationalistic boundaries. Writers like Cesare Pavese, Eugenio Montale, Odysseus Elytis, Yehuda Amichai, and Pablo Neruda blend the startling pleasure of Imagistic or Surrealist poetry with a primitivist's obsession with the elements, the topography, and the flora and fauna of a place, I think, to track the growth of the speaker's consciousness. Let's not forget that "Tintern Abbey" has little or nothing to do with the abbey itself. Naming things is fraught with perils.

**JMR: David Wojahn says, "Like the solos of the jazz greats who inhabit [Lyons' book] his poems are exploratory, nervy, emotionally rich..." I know**

**you have a particular affinity for jazz, which is especially featured in *Fleur Carnivore*, and some of your poems are blues poems. What is the value of music in poetry?**

**RL:** I am a jazz addict, I think, because the spirit of improvisation became formalized in a number of quality recordings by Blue Note and other music houses. Artists like Charles Mingus encourage composition toward a capaciousness that threatens to become chaos but doesn't. And jazz, in general, not only braids American, African, and Spanish roots, but it allows political cries for freedom alongside cerebral explorations of the mind and bawdy explorations of the body. Maybe I'm trying to make greed a virtue?

Then again, there is the pleasure of vowels and consonants tied up and untied by syntax.

The sound is what makes the sense worth hearing.

**JMR: The title of your unpublished manuscript, *Blood Psalms*, strikes a chord with me. You live in the Bible Belt, and your mother was devoutly religious as well. I've known you for a long time, and can say you're not traditionally religious. But ritual, scripture, and sacred imagery appear often in your work. Why?**

**RL:** *Blood Psalms* allows me to explore the gestation of poems through incantation. John Donne, long ago, demonstrated the seamlessness between devotional verse and secular love poems. The deity/loved one in my psalms is the earth and the sea, and these forces are both nurturing mother and terrible mother. The human body, to me, ties us to the topography of the globe. It also makes us one of its flora and fauna. I'm sure that my psalms come off as ritualistic poetry. I am certainly trying to appease mysterious forces outside of myself.

After reading James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, I could not ignore that many non-Christian cultures have ceremonies akin to our Easter. Poetry has always tried to induce spring from winter and induce life from death. As I age, I find it more and more urgent to discover why we were created mortal, frail, and hobbled by our beliefs and desires.

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*A winner of the* Mari Sandoz / Prairie Schooner Prize *and finalist for the St. Lawrence Book Award, James Madison Redd's fiction was nominated for* Best New American Voices. *His fiction, poetry, and scholarship have or will appear in* The Oxford American, Fifth Wednesday, Fiction Southeast, Deep South Magazine, *and* Briefly Noted. *He is the editor of the* Prairie Schooner *blog.*

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