

Reflections and Reformations: Poems Written for the 10th Season of New Music at Short North Stage (2022-2023) by Louise Robertson



Poems by Louise Robertson were written for the 10th season of New Music at Short North Stage (2022-2023). All performances at [Short North Stage](#) and funded by the [Johnstone Fund for New Music](#).

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Summer Trees, Winter Trees, written In conversation with Arx Duo's "Percussive Natures"
Performed September 13, 2022

*"Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon,
With the old Moon in her arms"*

- "Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence" via Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Summer trees and their winter selves are an old married couple, who bend around each other — but also like an old divorced couple. Both pairings have seen exactly what the other did that time and would do again — wait and see. They both remember the buzz of sap and the smell of a topped cousin breathing through his open wound. They both remember slowing to match dim afternoons and dark mornings, coldness piled like ocean foam around grazed root knuckles emerging from soil. There is a tenderness to bickering when you don't have to explain yourself. We are all as weird as trees who shed their hurt limbs — or keep them for a while even when it's not going to work out.

Before the snows come, our current trees drop leaves not out of hurt. This shedding is supposed to happen. They don't think it's beautiful that their waving fingers

and palms have turned the color of pumpkins and sunsets.
They don't think it's beautiful when life's thick green
drains away. Pour sour milk out. Spit on the ground. Exhale
exhale exhale. It starts early, when in late summer,
they unsnap their stipules. The moon watches all this
cycling through versions of itself in two quick fortnights.
Moon, you must be sighing and rolling
with the kind of wisdom earned only
by moving faster than everyone else around.

Here is the embrace of wax and wane. The witch is dead;
long live the king. Vice versa. What do we know?
We are so often beasts
who howl at the sky and rub against bark
for a massage. Once, when walking with my young
son who is now taller than me, we saw a nude tree
in June and shook our heads wondering
at how long before it would crack, fall,
and be swallowed — almost
almost
as if none of it ever happened

About the Time Between Seasons written in conversation with Shepherdess with Special Guest

Dara Hankins

Performed October 11, 2022

People don't hate change; they hate your change.
Apples nestle with oranges. Pears with bananas.
A thousand shades of beige can make a sunset
with a thousand shades of rust any day,
looking all the while like cut blood running into
puddles: like a knife pinched by thumb and knuckle
slipped between ribs, skin yielding like the air, water,
and smoke conspires in our atmosphere.
People who tell us we don't like it
think they are the correct
source of change, inventing fears for
us to walk through: a chambered fog,
a threat of skunk, rot, shame, and onion wafting
from the neighbors' yard,
a basket of crumpled paper ideas.
We love change like we love inhalation, the rise,
the pull, the release. We love change: a haircut. We
love change: new shoes. We love change:
old shoes, loosened by our feet,
broken knee splits in jeans wore chasing, cleaning,

for yoga on a hotel room morning on the west coast
when we are still on east coast time.

Even the dog loves change when the autumn slakes
the summer and a fresh layer of scents appears,
or a backhoe exhumes old
information. We are that dog, following
our friends and our loves, tongue out.

In a good way/in a bad way. “New” information.

It’ll make the sun roll around the earth until
it makes the earth waltz around the sun. Galileo

Galilei calculated the size of hell — and we do make hell infinite
sometimes — and then told us about our inertia as well as the phases
of Venus — like we weren’t guessing the truth already.

He could be the patron saint of getting away with it. I tell you
it’s ok to renounce the faith to save your skin.

You have my permission — inhale/exhale —
because I am wrong about everything
including what you love. Come, we can nestle
together, fruit and sunrise both and tell each
other how this one time, when we had to —
or just for fun —
we became something new.

In a Home Where Toddlers Live written in conversation with Kathleen Supové's "Next Door"

Performed November 15, 2022

Every night, you groom the place,
make a new small pile
of laundry in the corner,
line up plastic cups
like soldiers, stack stiff books.
From under
the sofa, comes
a wad of paper chewed
and hardened like a river
stone. The shadows made
from a nightlight crawl up the walls.
In warmer months, you
prep the yard as well —
more stones, more shadows, more plastic
to gather and disappear
before the parade begins.
They always find something that could kill them.
The whole neighborhood
is a hazard: sidewalks
too narrow when pick-up trucks

wash past. The baby
puts a coin in his mouth:
fee for the ferryman and
you fish it out immediately,
a tiger trainer with hand
and fingers still attached, for now.
You walk all the way
to the stop sign with them
just to read it.
Stop. And what a story, that is.
Though to be fair, they
spend most of the walk trying
not to hold your hand. You
loop their wrist in your fingers:
a gentle vise. They twist
and spend the rest of their lives
trying to wriggle free so they can run off,
and look back, and run off and look back.
Good thing we don't often turn to salt. But today,
the raven flies away; dust
frosts their hands,
shoes, and faces. Yours, too.
Yours, too.

Return to Earth written in conversation with Ensemble Terrain
Performed February 14, 2022

Someone in the middle
can make this kind of deathwish:
Lay me down in the backyard
with the honeysuckle arcing:
a roof, a shade, a hold,
seized, clutched, and — with the beetles —
let me be gentled back
into the earth. Folded, enfolded,
re-folded. The beetles and the flies will
negotiate my landscape of eyeballs,
asshole, mouth, and nose,
show themselves to be experts
at intimate discovery.

A younger person tells
me of their fears. It doesn't matter,
I coo, when you're close to death
you know everything. An older person
tells me about their will and their trusts
and I affirm: brothers and sisters will
take care of each other.

Someone in the middle can
make a kind of fantasy
that means even a cup of coffee is
a benediction. A beetle tasting
grains of soil with its feet
looks delicious. A fly hopping
and looping above the red and
white tendons of a mauled rabbit leg
pops from earth to sky faster than
a zip line.

Someone in the middle makes a lot
of guesses. In fact, just the other day,
two crows met in the yard to confer,
I think, to plan their next soar and dive,
I think, to peck the mud I would step
over, I think, to scream their truth
at me who only hears them caw and rattle —
rattle and caw —
noises I have never understood.
I think.

The Property Owners of Bethany Beach, DE written in conversation with Hub New Music's "to hear the things we cannot see"

Performed March 7, 2023

All of us have taken wounds to the ocean
for its salt: the gashed leg, the slapped face, every
insulted body,
given into the waves. Also: Our missing fathers.
Our drunk mothers. We saw
the wet asphalt of the suicide
by the condominium towers.
We saw the torso shape of the drowned child slide over
a hump of water in the night. All the deaths
are still here
and we still took our wounds to the ocean.
Our preoccupied parents. Our silent
grandparents.

The shoreline collapses and rebuilds itself
with the tides. Healing. Unhealing.
The shoreline collapses and gets rebuilt
every ten years by the owners
to keep our beachfront mutations to a minimum.
And the coast keeps undoing itself.

And the city keeps digging out the bottom of Atlantic
to feed investors. Our golden
inheritance. Our shining houses.

Beach restoration destroys two environments.
Into the belly of the ocean, soft erosion
moves the rust and brown churn away from us.
Beach restoration destroys two environments,
but not property values. Our loan
collateral. Our borrowed legacy.
All of us have fed the ocean with our
our wounds; as if the sea's
constant susurrations is
amnesia; as if the sea's
constant susurrations
is our memory.
Our slippery bodies. The brine.
The salt. The disinfected air.

Reformation written in conversation with Transient Canvas' "Turn Your Hand"
Performed April 4, 2023

The surf of bird calls reached a high
tide during the pandemic; the susurrations
of the cars receded. It turns out
when you take away one layer

of tide during a pandemic, the susurrations.
of something else rises — lark music, stretching grass.
When the cars receded, it turns out
we didn't miss their fumes.

Of the something else that rises — lark music, stretching grass
— you can learn to use a different language.
We don't miss the fumes
of commerce. We make up something else.

You can learn to use a different language
when you take away one layer
of commerce. We make up something else.
like a surf of bird calls reaching a high.

The surf reached high
the susurrations
 receded. It turns out
you take

the tide
 music, grass

we miss their fumes.
 We make up something else,
 a different language,
 layer.
bird calls reaching.

Re-Piercing My Mother's Ears: the Plan, written in conversation with andPlay's "Open Fields"

Performed May 9, 2023

The plan is to lay my mother in her easy chair
and soap her earlobe in warm water
while Frank Sinatra sings
from the iPhone.

First, we will joke around
about the steel pin in my hand
but no jump scares. I will
not get her back for playing
"pinch crab" on beach vacations
with her little daughters.

How could she be so mean! I thought
at the time from my small life where
I had not yet had someone who loved me
hurt me. But the plan for next week,
requires calm. I will recall
those very same beach vacations
to her, with the slippery tides,
the tin foil water, the creak
of metal chairs whose rounded bars
pushed into sand bumps
with our weight. I will have her

imagine bobbing on the waves
on a rubber raft, people distant, cold
shivers below, a few drifting
jellyfish, a boat spreading waves
from two acres away.

Then I will ease the pin
through her half-closed piercing
moving from back to front
and I will recall my own child
who wondered if it really hurt me
when she stepped on
the sidewalk cracks and so she stepped
on the sidewalk cracks just to see
what would happen.

Going to Sleep written in conversation with CODE's (Columbus Ohio Discovery Ensemble) "Breathe"
Performed June 6, 2023

Relax of each body part
in turn, up from the feet: little toe, little toe,
shin, knee, hip. The skirted waist. The warm armpits.
Go all the way to the eyes, eyelid, skin
around your ear. Some people
go to sleep like that. Imagine? Sleeping
with the frisson of
of a wrinkle in the webbed pocket
next to the thumb
or the slick of warm sweat under
your nose, wet philtrum, lip, chin.

When my son became worried about dying,
age five, all I could do was quote
the ancients: "where you are, death is not."
But when my mom called and said two
of her good friends passed in the same week,
I couldn't even do that. I'm somewhere
between the two of them for now. My friends
depart, but rarely. Where death is, I am not.

Relax each body part:
ankle cartilage like cochlea
sensing the buzz in the floors,
stretched muscles running up
the torso wrapping organs.
Some people rest this way,
splayed, curled, or stiff.
I would prefer cremation,
or leave my body in a field
to go back to the earth
so I can feel everything.