

Transformations and Actualization: Poems Written for the 11th Season of New Music at Short North Stage (2023-2024) by Louise Robertson



Poems by Louise Robertson were written for the 11th season of New Music at Short North Stage (2023-2024). All performances at [Short North Stage](#) and funded by the [Johnstone Fund for New Music](#).

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written in conversation with CODE's performance of solo pieces for New Music at Short North Stage, June 4, 2024.

Transubstantiation in the Chauvet Cave, or Ice Age Artists Speak

written in conversation with the Bearthoven performance for the series New Music at Short North Stage, September 12, 2023

In this nave, we sit in a nest hollowed
in the floor, a bed and its nadir made
by the former residents, cave bears.
This is going to be southern France,
is going to be Le Midi, is
always the Tropic of Cancer where they — where
we — will suffer raids, will suffer, like anywhere
but first,
we wash the walls
of these chambers,
bathe them in the same way you bathe a person,
baring smooth surfaces. We char sticks, blend
clay paint, spit, render fat.

Our feet on soft floors, we trace
with blackened pieces of wood,
glob paint then stretch it with thumbs,
or with a broken pinkie finger,
scrape it outward with fur, bark.

Horses ripple on rock walls.
Fire strobes the horns we draw
of the beast (whose body — this is a body: take it and eat it)
beside what will be (but already is) the Ardèche river
(this the blood — take it and drink).
Here the bison maintain shoulder
muscle suggested by rock shapes accented with red ochre,
unslackened by age, unreplaced
by other animals. And here, also
we've printed a mammoth and lions with our hands (so like your hands),
to make our gallery
while we return to earth,
our skin, bone, hair, grit —
all dust, all of us dust.

Ground Bees

*written in conversation with the Ucelli performance of **10 Score** for the series New Music at Short North Stage, October 10, 2023*

The ground bees gentle up each summer,
swiveling and stirring
around tunnel openings made by groundhogs.

I've met their warriors, who pierce denim, advance
in a tangle during mowing.

Many swell from the holes around small bare
feet trampling nearby grass—drunkenly, veering.

Among them surely one is an Andy Dufrain birthed
from her prison sewer.

But most palpate the flower heads in the yard, freeze
under crow and rook shadows.

They retreat to their tunnels when it rains:
their soaked soil chambers; their soft culverts.

Do they feel the vibration of the water, taste it

with their arms? Do they cuddle each other
for the idea of warmth? Are each their mouths

a cathedral — so like ours, so unlike ours — small
enough to hold a prayer, or a piece of one,
little tile in a mosaic. Certainly they can sing.

Their songs are music the way sunlight is fire.
Their songs think night is for sleeping. Sometimes.

The internet says they are peaceful.
The internet says they are kind.

Pity the males dragged out before winter arrives.
Belly ripped open. Endophallus removed.

Unhaunting

*written in conversation with the Unheard-of Ensemble performance of **Unheard-of Multimedia Premieres** for the series New Music at Short North Stage, November 7, 2023*

The rain,
dripping from eave to stone,
erodes the step,
making the bowl of a spoon.

The handle of the awl
used for decades holds
the shape of its person's grip.

The sloped backyard
cuddles run off:
a crevice forms.

A tooth rubs its counterpart
till the second tooth shows
the silhouette of the first

like the squared off under storeys of
trees hanging over the road
yield in the outline of delivery trucks.

One of my friends said
the sky above the hospital matched her
mother's eyes: quartz and rose.

Same for me, except
it was my father and his sky
blazed sapphire and tanzanite.
Finally took his glasses off.

The maple leaf cups
a mouthful of air on its way to the earth —
crisp, curved, and brown — to join
the rest of its brethren and their
memories of wood.

These kinds of shrines
are so much kindling for
the smoky ghosts haunting
and unhaunting our days.

It just now occurs to me,
when I am done being visited
by the shades of everyone I cared about,

that I hope to reappear to others
— children and the like —
who will kind of remember that little smile or who have
a curly toe or who sort of recall
something I said to them
maybe once, something about love
— what was it?
What was it?

Seeds We Might Have Sown

*written in conversation with **Chamber Brews**' "Harmonic Visions" and Carrie Summerford's "Seeds I Might Plant" (ceramic, wood, metal, paint) for the series New Music at Short North Stage, December 5, 2023*

Winter is so often portrayed
as sleep, its solstice gentles by
as fast as the moon passing
across the top of a soda bottle.

We mark its passage
like we're fishing with a crosier,
that ticks back and forth
against a glass neck.

Winter is so often portrayed
as an end, cold grave
to the hot year, with its white extinguishing
blankets, weighing the already heavy arms
of pine trees.

Winter is so often portrayed
as remnants, ashes, dregs—
for good reason, as it ages

our homes and our bodies.
Even the grass in the yard
hunches at the thought of January's
wind chill.

Speaking of which, who doesn't hate the cold itself?
It crimps our feet, refrigerates the floors,
and makes that slippery
transparent ice spread and glisten
across asphalt, prettily
crusting windows.

It would all be too terrible except
for the 12 minutes a day, the sky
blues bright, the earth pulses
and seeds we might have sown
start nosing their
way through soil
up to the light.

Tech Cycles

*written in conversation with **Hypercube**'s performance for the series New Music at Short North Stage, February 6, 2024*

I spent today—the morning, the afternoon—
wired up, connected,
fingertips to keyboard, practically

two tech cycles away
from a chip in my head.
Then late in the day, while explaining

email tracking codes
to a silk-scarf, a stain of sunshine
spilled in through glass block,

kissing my hands, fogging the zoom
with a memory of the white station wagon
we used to take to church and back home,

its red carpet and vinyl interior bleeding on itself
from rainwater and gaps in the frame.
That doesn't happen anymore.

The bench seats, the hard plastic, dad's
nicotine glazing the insides of the windows brown.
But mornings, afternoons,

I am wired up, connected,
practically a chip in my head,
complete with a thousand

polymer threads to link neurons
to keyboard, but late
I explain, there's silk, rain,

a spiderweb loose in the forest, glassy,
collecting what doesn't happen anymore,
shiny, tracking,

it's code, the stain on the windows,
fog, home, vinyl, link,
my parents, the metal

memory and zoom, ruby mornings, red nighttimes,
a leak in the frame,
seat belt shoved between stiff cushions.

I spent today, we, the sun, a kiss
bleeding in my hands,
back home, memory spilled,

I could feel the forest, a web,
its DNA, a glaze, summer in February,
all this dreaming and un-dreaming

practically a chip in my head.

This Is Our Art

written in conversation with Anzû Quartet's performance of new works for New Music at Short North Stage, March 5, 2024. Title crowdsourced with the audience.

The earth
consumes and breeds itself. Flame and ash.

The cities swallow themselves over
and over.

Layers of constructs everywhere.
Grocery, fast food, parking lot.
Grocery, fast food, parking lot.
This is our art. This is our intentional
composition.

Even the smooth gas
station concrete pad — when stripped—
reveals ripe soil but doesn't reveal — yet —
the submerged gasoline tank
held like a mouth
holds a bullet—like we don't know

a mouth can

erupt, flames billowing,
soot spraying, clouds of blue-black-
orange light. Next morning, fog
and grit rise. A cat emerges, too,
leans his hip against the air,
looks over his shoulder
at the shades wandering around
as if they were nothing.

The earth
consumes and breeds itself. Flame and ash.
Growth everywhere, even flower buds
spread on a severed tree limb
in the spring
like they don't know yet, they're
supposed to die.

The cities swallow themselves. This is our art.
We come and go thinking the same thoughts
like we are the only one.
We are the dandelion seeds adrift. We are the ants
scattering. We smell the dirt
sensing past
and future.

I used to think the body a cathedral.

I still do.

Let us sing that psalm. Let us sing that psalm.

I used to think the earth one glorious organism.

I still do. Let us join together.

The earth consumes itself: flame and ash.

The earth breeds itself new life.

Flame and ash. Flowers on a dead limb.

Self-Actualization

written in conversation with Quince Ensemble's performance of their program "Dust to Dust" for New Music at Short North Stage, April 9, 2024.

The earth
invented us

to inhale the water
shuffling along a gutter or

sinking into the grass.
It wanted to absorb its scent

steaming from its loam.
It wanted to sense the squirrel

eyeballing the leaf, the flat flounder
as she flutters into pliant silt

at the bottom of the bay, the leech
inserting a proboscis into

the mouth of her prey, and the prey
received that eucharist.

Even the guinea worm
knows something about our skin

that we do not as she gnaws
her way through our feet

to make more guinea worms
in the drinking water.

The different view
is the point, might

be the argument forwarded
by the cancer

in the eyes of the Tasmanian
Devil as she jumps

from one pup to another.
A pigeon scraping her claw

on a concrete curb experiences
the grain of that texture differently

than scuffed cow
leather would.

So many mediations
on earth, by earth.

So many ways to sense
a breeze simpering its

way along the surfaces of
a wet or drying

slug. Cannot this whole place be
one act of self-love? Won't it be

a pleasure to announce
every sensation as holy

in the way that love
is always holy?

Some throats know
the shape of a scalpel

when they talk. It's there
anyway, whether or not

we say the words but
we do often feel compelled to say

the words, don't we
as we listen to

each other tell on ourselves, hear
the authority of our lived

knowledge: what quick blades,
what slick wounds.

The earth can
devour us so easily: a tide,

a wind, a plume of poison.
It calls us home

and we go.

Surfacing After a White Cadillac Going 35 Miles Per Hour Hit Me (a Pedestrian)

*written in conversation with Dr. Brianna Matzke's performance of her commissioned program
"TREMOR" for New Music at Short North Stage, May 7, 2024.*

Yellow white tube lights

24 people in the room

They stitched

I knew

What?

I knew who was there

and the screaming,

it was me

as they stitched up—

Who?

It was me

and I knew it was me.

and I passed out and they said "oh good."

About who?

It was me. I heard them. I could see

them all. As from above. But then—

but later and then again time,

it passed and I was in a bed,
floating. I thought I liked time. I thought

I liked people
who bring themselves forward
or stand in the back. Gifts.

There,
 it was a time but then,
it was me. I didn't hear anything
 for a while but the talking.

I was an altar.

 I was the altar for a blond woman
who prayed to me and when—
I left again

 I was there. I came back.
I passed out—ok it was a coma.

Me, you—it doesn't matter
where I was.
I came back. It was me. And then,
I thought it funny:

The first words to float up to me
after the coma were profanity,
to quote my own self: shit fuck damn.

The rest of the language came
back. I can hear fine.
The scars receded.
But the nerve damage remains
and I look at my legs sometimes:
and they

hurt.

I thought it funny. Then again:
time. The words.
They float. Stitches.
Yellow white tube lights and
people in the room.

Firefly Light: For All Brothers

*written in conversation with CODE's performance of solo pieces for New Music at Short North Stage,
June 4, 2024.*

This is for the brother of mine who I now realize
suffered the onset of chronic depression
alone in the crowd of our family,

his face an unwrinkled sea
at the time, but now
age 60, weight 100,
it shows all the marks—
bruised, loose skin—

This is for him,
that one brother of mine
who told me to wear
more clothes to the beach,
more than strings and fringe—

the one who
threw chairs, a kitchen table, the one
whose fights made us hide in the dark closet,
among hanging clothes reeking of our parents,

the one who

Dad yelled at most, the one who drank
beer all summer, every summer—
stank up the Toyota with yeast, brews,
and sweat —the one who,

by contrast, did not hit me,
the one who told me not to be a bitch,
the one who tried to take himself out
three times that I know of,

the one who FaceTimes me
with only a whiskey bottle in view:
all slippery glass and no subtlety,

the one who drove across country for a friend,
the one who painted that Toyota
with Washington colors, the one who
let me race it through Virginia suburbs, lights off,
at night—how did I
inherit speed and freedom
instead of him?

The one who thought

I was cool when I was drunk,
the one who only did cocaine once,
who joined the navy, who said

all he wanted was a turkey sandwich
made with Thanksgiving leftovers,
and I thought: you can have a turkey sandwich,
you should have a turkey sandwich, just have
a damn turkey sandwich,

the one who won't eat,
the one who
wrote a song for me when
I was five and in the hospital,
and sang it to a cassette tape,

the one who I stand with in the kitchen
while he apologizes for
a hug, no hug, his kids, my kids, his room,
my old room closed up and full of mice,
the brother I have no patience for,

the one — I know he's a treasure —
who keeps talking to me while I'm working remote,

the one who drives our mom around,

the one now frail, once strong,
first in all things,
who agrees with me,
who asks me about abortion

like I didn't spend my life avoiding the subject,
who should know these things,
who the rest of us protect,
who the rest of us don't talk to much,
who lives still,
withered as a pile of leaves.

Did you know
fireflies lay their eggs in fallen leaves?
We never rake them up. The bugs blaze and flicker, blinking in
our yard — morse code for summertime nostalgia
and that's you, brother, you're that kind
of light in the world. A flash,
always showing up,
always disappearing,
easy to catch,
easy to lose.