

LUNATIC ENGINE: ISOLATION AND POETRY.

By Paul Pearson, May 6, 2020

Like everyone else, I'm thinking a lot about isolation these days. April 30, 2020 was supposed to be a big day for me, the realization of a lifelong goal. When I was nine, all my friends wanted to grow up to be astronauts or truck drivers or dinosaur wranglers. I wanted to be an author. I was a weird kid. Despite being weird, I've almost achieved my goal: I was supposed to be launching my first book of poetry, *Lunatic Engine*, at Audreys Books at 7:00 pm on April 30 during the Edmonton Poetry Festival.



I've spent most of my life working towards the goal of having a book published. It turned out that, though I love reading science and science fiction, my talent was for writing poetry, not prose. Unluckily for me, it is much, much harder to get a book of poetry published than it is to get a novel published. But you've got to play the hand you're dealt, so the old saying goes. You can't hide your lamp under a bushel and so ... poetry.

In the 41 years since I decided I wanted to have a book published, I've done a lot of things to try to achieve that goal: got a degree, read a zillion books of poetry, wrote poems, sold individual poems to magazines, founded a poetry reading series, published other poets' chapbooks, volunteered, worked, worked, worked. There was also a little bit of living happening in amongst all the writing: marriage, career, births of kids, deaths of parents, and all the things we share as humans. And through it all, I kept writing.

One of the things you don't think about when you start off as a poet is "what does a book look like?" A novel, regardless of genre, is pretty straightforward: you tell a story. But what does a book of poetry look like? Does it tell a cohesive story? Is it simply a collection of random poems about random things? Are the poems linked thematically or stylistically? These are seriously tough questions. As it so often happens with these things, the answer, at least for my first book, fell into my lap.

The story of how *Lunatic Engine* came to be is captured in a prose/poem in the introductory section of the book. Rather than try to paraphrase it, I thought it better to just include it below for you. It also really shows how even when I try to write prose, it breaks down into poetry.

The book is about, among many other things, Galileo. I've resisted drawing comparisons here between our time and Galileo's. He, too, had to spend time in isolation, quarantined at one point by the plague and at another by the Inquisition. In most ways, our current situation is nothing like what he had to endure. Compared to living conditions 500 years ago, most of us are living in paradise even if we can't leave our homes. What hasn't changed, though, is our reliance on our families, and on our God. They are the staves of life. Upon these, is everything.

Lunatic Engine is being published by Turnstone Press out of Winnipeg. During this COVID delay, they've asked me to record the poems so that they can release an audiobook version at the same time as the print version. The launch is going to happen this fall during the rescheduled Edmonton Poetry Festival. It will still be at Audreys Books and you can bet that I'll be sharing the details widely when they are finalized. Thanks for reading this and I hope you are staying healthy, safe, and sane :)

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION: DIALOGUE CONCERNING THE TWO CHIEF WORLD SYSTEMS
(from *Lunatic Engine* by Paul Pearson)

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:

—Romans 1:20

In consequence of this that hath been demonstrated, sundry and various Conclusions may be gathered, by which the truth of my principal Proposition comes to be more and more confirmed,

—Galileo

In the winter of 1999, Suzanne gave me a book. We had only been married for a little over a year and were still in the hesitant stage of giving each other spontaneous gifts, still exploring each other's coastlines. But we had a shared sense that there was no horizon to our future and we were both possessed with an insatiable appetite to learn the secrets of the universe. *Galileo's Daughter* was a fitting choice.

It was early December and I was hiding out in the staff residence at Emerald Lake Lodge. Sue had finished her first year of culinary school and was picking up some extra cash and kitchen experience. We were young enough that being apart for two weeks was impossible.

Tucked up at the top of Yoho National Park, the lodge was nearly buried in snow, making it difficult to go outside. Daylight all but disappeared beneath the snow and clouds and while everyone else worked, I was utterly alone for hours on end. As darkness set in, it was just me, a million trees, forty feet of pure white snow, and an infinite night sky lousy with stars. And silence. Yes, don't forget the silence.

And so I found myself alone with Dava Sobel's book, overflowing with every sort of poetic trope a young writer could want. Galileo, the father of the experimental method, the first modern man, and his illegitimate daughter both confined—she to the convent, he under house arrest by the Inquisition—and mortally limited by the Church. Sue and I both have Catholic backgrounds—hers French, mine Italian. But as soon as we were allowed to decide for ourselves, we both chose to have nothing to do with the Catholics, or any Christian church for that matter. At all. Full stop. And yet here I was captured by something so Catholic and yet, somehow not. A story of filial love and devotion, lemon sweets and telescopes, domestic finance, fear and Judgment. The very stuff of both science and poetry lay in my open hands.

Then there were those chapter titles. Who could resist phrases like "She who was so precious to you," "What we require above all else," and "As I struggle to understand"? The poems almost write themselves. Indeed, the two italicized ones did. A couple of the poems also go off in their own surprising

little directions, like “That I Should Be Begged to Publish Such a Work” and “She Who Was So Precious to You,” a poem I wrote for Suzanne early in our relationship after visiting her mother’s gravesite. Some of the poems foreshadowed others.

The book you hold in your hands came together slowly over the course of a much-interrupted decade. I do not need to describe all the delays and peregrinations that came next, the cul-de-sacs, dead ends, pits and valleys. Somewhere in all of this was a transition. Somewhere we stopped being young newlyweds. Somewhere we stopped being angry at our upbringing. Maybe it was Galileo, maybe it was the poetry. Maybe it was the kids, the garden, the funerals, the crushing routine boredom. Or maybe it was trying to figure out how I would answer the questions my children will inevitably ask. I will say that I am happy that this collection does not end where it began.

So back in the snow at Emerald Lake, I was holding what I thought to be a book of answers. It turned out to be as treacherous as all books are and became a book of questions in my hands, asking me: What do you value? What are you striving for? Does the endless, repetitive minutiae of daily life mean anything? What will you stand for? Who will be the witness? How have we as a species survived? Why can’t we see that we have too many different words for the same concepts?—of course the Tower of Babel confused all of our names for God. Did you really think that there was a difference between science and religion? What do you believe?

What am I going to tell my kids? What am I going to tell them about what they hold in their hands? What we’ve left them?

we just figured out evolution a century and a half ago yet some still deny we’re cooking ourselves in our own atmosphere because we’re clever enough to suck combustibles out of the ground but too stupid to stop burning
everything
and the memory of my newborn son
clenched up in the bath like a fist
red and scared
is burned into my being

this is where it either all comes together
or all falls apart specific and the universal
looking through the iced-over part of the window
kept up by the cat howling all night
carrying a stuffed pink bear around
like a kitten
or a dead bird
these poems all trailing
off like a lost thought
a sentence of sorts

Galileo's Dialogues banned for
for two dogmatic centuries
my father was an understanding man

and he barely ever spoke

three years later my daughter
clenched up red and scared
in the same tub as her brother
the same fist

Galileo's daughter read of her father's disgrace
before the Inquisition in the convent
of San Matteo cloistered
and powerless

I'm having a bit of difficulty this morning
I've been trying to write this for hours
but the realization that I'm an orphan
has struck me dumb

what am I going to tell them about the motion
of the earth the stability of the sun the order
of the heavens and the arrangements of the celestial spheres
what am I going to tell them here at the
continually unraveling end?

the simplest act
bathing my children
washing their feet

displacement

Here is the link to the audiobook sampler that includes three poems from *Lunatic Engine* that Turnstone put up on their website on April 27. It's a free download. <https://www.turnstonepress.com/bird-on-a-wire/taking-flight.html>

People looking for more information can also find me online at either www.lunaticengine.com or www.paulpearson.ca