

Loving Lena: An Interview with Cassie Pruyn on Occupying Space and Writing Autobiographical Poetry

craft talk by Meaghan Quinn



Cassie Pruyn

Meaghan Quinn: First and foremost, congratulations, Cassie, on earning the Walt McDonald First-Book Prize in Poetry! You must be thrilled with this honor and to have this body of work out in the world. *Lena* is now a staple in my library. It deserves to be read, discussed, and recited by readers. Because the poems in this book strike me as deeply autobiographical, based on a forbidden relationship, how does it feel to have it in the hands of readers?

Cassie Pruyn: Thank you so much, Meaghan! It feels wonderful to have the book out in the world, if also terrifying. The fact that it's being read is a huge honor, and conversations with people for whom the poems have resonated—that's been a magical part of this whole process. As you say, the book is deeply autobiographical. It was never my

intention to write such a book. I've never, as an artist, been super interested in my own story. And in fact, I worked hard for a while *not* to write these poems: I felt I didn't have the right, perhaps, to write about this relationship, to write about this woman who is no longer alive. It seemed ... ethically questionable to me, and sometimes still feels that way. But the fact is, as any artist will tell you, you have to create what's inside of you to create. This story was—is—inside of me, and it wanted to reach people. Once I wrote one *Lena* poem, it was over; they just kept coming.

MQ: That is a very relatable struggle for writers. These poems sweep gingerly, at times hauntingly, from narrative to lyric to the imagistic and yet they are tethered by core motifs: *Lena's* lingering, ghost-like presence, *Lena's* intrusive mother, nature, beds, water, and rooms. It seems like place is important to you as a writer. Would you agree?

CP: Absolutely! I get excited when readers pick up on the importance of place in this book. One, because the landscape that served as the backdrop to our real-life relationship—the Hudson Valley, with its lush mountains and glacial river, and New England, where we both are from, with its rocky coastline and ubiquitous sailboats—was crucial to the relationship as it was unfolding. Any place we found ourselves in was important to our relationship because we were hiding. The landscape was our giant closet—full of secret hideaways and twisting backroads. It was the third member of our relationship because of the properties of

our relationship. Also, as a person and as a writer, I have always felt a deep connection to place. The way space and place are active forces in themselves. This is what I wanted to be writing about before the *Lena* poems took over, and where I plan to go next!

MQ: Speaking about the fact that you both hail from New England, it is no surprise that the book begins in a metaphorical ship docked in Massachusetts and ends on the shores of Louisiana. Always water is nearby. Though sex and sexuality between the speaker and *Lena* is at the crux of many of the poems, the sex itself is often shrouded in water metaphors. I could not get enough of the water figuration you include. Writers often have such obsessions. Is it fair to say that water might be one of yours?

CP: Yes! That is definitely a fair statement. Again, I'm fascinated by the energetic properties of both the natural world and of built spaces. Water exemplifies this—what water can do, where it can go, how it keeps us alive and also threatens to destroy our homes and cities. The built capsule of a boat floating on water: the way it encloses the human body while facilitating the liberation of the open sea. This concept is fascinating to me. Those opposing energetic forces. And our relationship, while it was unfolding, kept returning to the water, both literally and psychically. The book's opening poem, "Lena's Summer House in Rockport," was inspired by a dream in which the bed became a boat bobbing among the bone-white masts of sailboats—and we were both in her bedroom and on the open sea; both spaces held us. "Aubade" also originated from a dream in which we became boats ourselves, moored, tipping to and fro all night long, in tandem. *Lena*, in real life, was an avid sailor, and I grew

up sailing. We both had this connection to the New England coast, and now I live in a place that is singularly defined by its relationship to bodies of water—I suppose this is why the book is so watery!

MQ: Ha, watery! I love that. The second poem, "Polaroid," ends with a visual of a matchbox. It unzips the poem, destabilizes it. In this poem and in others, you seem particularly fond of achieving a striking ending. Can you share with us how you arrive at your endings? Or touch on your writing process in general for *Lena*?

CP: I love the way you characterize the ending of "Polaroid." Arriving at the endings to so many of the poems in *Lena* encapsulates what the process of writing was like: painstaking revision that demanded peeling away the layers of conscious memory to reveal the images beneath that well-worn surface. What I mean by that is, we all have stories we tell ourselves about our relationships. Often, they're fairly linear: we met, and then this happened, then this happened, etc. Almost all of the poems in the book came out of these core memories I had of our short time together: that time we took a trip to Woodstock, that time we almost got caught making out in her dorm room, and so on. But the first drafts of those poems had no discovery to them, no spark or life force. Through the help of my two closest readers, I would rework the poems countless times to find that shimmering image just below the surface—that thing that made the moment memorable to begin with, perhaps, but that my conscious mind had flattened out or erased. This key image—which would often become the ending to the poem—was often just off-screen. The statue at the end of "Closeted in Dutchess County" for example: There were several completely different iterations of that

poem in which there was no statue at all. But, of course, the statue was *critical* to that poem, that memory. Or the matchbox in “Polaroid”—visible in the Polaroid itself, and, according to poem logic, absolutely imperative to that moment, that snapshot, in our relationship. But I have no conscious memory of this matchbox other than it must have been there because eventually, that evening, we had a fire. Through revision I came to regard the memories as three-dimensional, still evolving, still awaiting discovery.

MQ: It is interesting that certain fragments of the conscious memory end up appearing in one’s art. I’d have to say that “Want” is a favorite poem of mine. It drips of want. I noticed the anaphora of “when I” and “when she” and here, Lena as a character and Lena as a dominating force over the speaker come alive. Can you share with us more about the real Lena? Was it painful or cathartic to write about her?

CP: It was both. She was an unforgettable person. We had a very difficult relationship—full of passion and strife and tension. We never achieved anything close to a friendship after our relationship ended because of this, although we were always incredibly important to each other. I don’t feel as if I ever fully understood who she was, and vice versa. Can a person ever really “understand” another person? I don’t know. But we somehow always missed each other, crossed our signals and got the timing wrong, but at the same time our relationship always felt undeniably *fated*. Meeting her for the first time felt like the universe slapping me in the face, and I know she felt the same way. We were born on the same day. Our connection—as imperfect as it was—had a touch of the cosmos to it. Maybe this is always how a first love feels, I don’t know.

But those first few months of anxious courtship (“anxious” isn’t nearly a strong enough word) when we were delaying the inevitable out of fear—her fear of her family, in specific—were both exhilarating and tortuous. The combination of fear and desire led to manipulation, and, sometimes, downright cruelty. I always knew I would remember those days for the rest of my life—they were so singular and surreal. Writing about her—this person with whom I shared something so formative, and who is gone now—was both extremely painful, and also, I think, healing. We were anything but perfect, but we had a momentous adventure together; I will never not feel her absence because of this.

MQ: After rereading this beautiful collection, I keep going back to the stunning line “it’s always been about the distance / with the two of us” as that seems to be the thesis of it all. The separation—and Lena’s eventual permanent separation from the physical world—results in this heat and tension when the women are together. Would you agree?

CP: Absolutely. Our relationship was about distance: our initial, troubled proximity that had to be negotiated because of her being in the closet—how, depending on the ever-shifting variables of time and privacy, we would fly together or fly apart like rotating magnets. After we had been together for a semester, Lena transferred to a new school (not her idea) and our relationship then became closeted *and* long-distance (what a blast!) and then the whole thing fell apart. After it ended, we continued to negotiate what we meant to each other, how close we could and should be. When she got sick, it seemed we were doing this dance of distance and intimacy—all of her friends and loved ones, figuring out what it means to love someone well who’s going through what

she was going through. Even while she was sick we had our difficulties and differences, and I'd go long periods without being able to reach her. And now, of course, she has achieved the ultimate distance, and I'm left hoping she'll visit me in my dreams sometimes.

MQ: And lastly, we know early on Lena is sick, and this is a book length elegy for her. Yet it does not feel entirely mournful but more of a self-discovery of the speaker. Do you feel it is more about the preservation of Lena or the journey the speaker undergoes?

CP: When I first began writing the poems, they were about preservation—preserving Lena, preserving the memories that were unique to the two of us, since we were so often alone together, rarely in the company of mutual friends or family. The most terrifying part of her disappearing, for me, was the fact that I would be left alone with the memories. But I soon realized, through engaging with the poems themselves, that the series has much more to do with the speaker's self-discovery through grief than with preservation. How the speaker grapples with her own guilt, and with fallibility of memory itself. The poems did not want to engage in static preservation, but with dynamic exploration. I had to let go of the idea of loyalty—to Lena or to her memory—although I do feel this book, even in its moments of brutal honesty, is true to what we had, even if it is more about the speaker and her journey at the end of the day.



Cassie Pruyn is the author of Bayou St. John: A Brief History (The History Press, 2017) and the poetry collection Lena (Texas Tech University Press, 2017), winner of the Walt McDonald First-Book Prize in Poetry. Her poems have appeared in The Normal School, The Los Angeles Review, The Common, Salt Hill Journal, Poet Lore, and elsewhere. Born and raised in Portland, Maine, and a graduate of the Bennington Writing Seminars, she teaches at Bard Early College in New Orleans.