

| FEATURE REVIEW

Carmine Starnino

## Arriving Early

David O'Meara. *Noble Gas, Penny Black*. London: Brick, 2008.

Add up the air travel, and Canadian poetry's carbon footprint is huge. Ralph Gustafson tramped across London and Manhattan. Irving Layton was always packing for Greece (where Cohen waited). Al Purdy got boozy in Mexico and Russia. Earle Birney skin-dived off the coast of Fiji. Gwendolen MacEwen toured Egypt. P.K. Page was a resident of Australia and Brazil. And Don Coles' "wander-years" included Stockholm, Florence, and Munich.

Canadian poets clearly get around, and, fittingly, their ports-of-call are as much stylistic as geographic. Ever since ancient Romans first caught the bug, travel has proven to be a kind of theatre. Whether the backdrop is uncharted rainforest or a cobblestone piazza, being abroad spurs psychological auditions, tryouts of self-invention under exotic test conditions. This premise—that we are freed by not feeling at home—also extends to language: a change of scene can uncork euphoric new noises. Flaubert believed travel helped "enliven one's style"; an idea Layton echoed when he praised a junket overseas for "replenishing my stock of metaphors." Of course, there are pitfalls: overconfident familiarity with customs only glancingly experienced, stolen snatches of a tongue one doesn't speak, cultural namedropping. It was exactly this sort of pretentious cosmopolitanism that pushed Kingsley Amis, in 1951, to issue his famous diktat against poems about foreign cities. But the

xenophilic itch to match untried sounds to unfamiliar surroundings is why the best Canadian poetry on distant settings—such as Daryl Hines’ “Arrondissements,” a dazzling sonnet-sequence on Paris’ 20 districts—ranks among the best Canadian poetry. In each spot on the map we find a poet outside his comfort zone, taking a leap.

The owner of a well-thumbed Baedeker, David O’Meara is constantly drawn to what he called in his first book, *Storm Still* (1999), the “flawlessly foreign.” Wales, Japan, Italy, and Tunisia are some of the far-flung places his poems have described. O’Meara, however, isn’t interested in package excursions. He prizes, and convincingly registers, alien encounters, situations where “our normal props of distraction,” as he explained in an interview with *Ottawater*, “have been disturbed.” Sightseeing, in other words, is about being blown off course: it stirs up (or ought to) soul-searching about how we live, the rules we follow, and our true intentions: everything about us that’s “half-hid // and too uncertain to crack open / easily.” Similar self-interrogations—by turns haunting, lively, and unsentimental—occur when O’Meara dwells on other subjects: small towns in Ontario, hockey photographs, 13th-Century Italian labourers, dilapidated movie houses, stammering, glass, boyhood, and the zeitgeist itself, exuberantly summed up in a long verse-letter to Auden. It also bears mentioning that when he isn’t globe-trotting, he likes to take walks. His second book, *The Vicinity* (2003), was a paean to pedestrianism, filled with sharp-eyed reports on urban odds and ends. (O’Meara’s flaneuring is largely headquartered in Ottawa, where he bartends.) Point being, O’Meara doesn’t need to undertake a transatlantic flight to write a good poem. But sometimes his gifts—energetic verbs, spring-loaded syntax, a love of slang—don’t come fully into action unless faced with the disorientation and toil of travel. Want to arouse O’Meara’s senses and excite his sensitivity to language? Drop him into “the salt-cracked sufferance of the Chott-el-Jerid.”

Take “Arriving Early.” Included in his new collection *Noble Gas, Penny Black*, the poem finds O’Meara standing on a platform at night in the South Korean city of Sunch’on. He’s just missed his bus connection, and, along with it, any chance of rendezvousing with his girlfriend on her birthday. It’s a variation on a favourite theme: people sidelined by setbacks, demoralized by the gulf between dream and reality, or

## FEATURE REVIEW

simply loaded down by the impedimenta of daily life. Things—love, health, especially the weather—rarely go as planned, leaving O’Meara to preserve the disappointments inside formal shapes that become “landmarks / of each near-disaster.” But O’Meara has another favourite theme: despite long odds, we keep making choices that give the competitive edge to hope. This explains why our stressed-out traveller, faced with no real alternative, hands over “just short of three digits Canadian / for a two-hour taxi ride.” What ensues is a high-speed chase in which O’Meara’s cab eventually overtakes the bus (“I raised one mental / finger as we shot across its prow”) and fast-forwards him ahead of the passenger he narrowly avoided becoming (“every inch a gain on where I might have been / if I’d been back there.”) Zipping along in rhyming sestets, the poem calmly captures the anxiety and burning-rubber adrenalin of the episode, but also the bemusement of a man who, his sensible side now eating his dust, has been awarded a fresh start. Arriving early, he is reborn:

Paying the fare, it felt a bit Caesarean,  
that surprise advance arrival, stretching my legs, pearled  
out from the warmth of my fiberglass shell, into a world

I didn’t expect to be waiting in. At least, not yet.  
Twenty minutes ahead, I was point man, postulate,  
herald to the very tidings of myself. I leaned  
against your arm, and pictured my double lagging behind  
down off the bus, puzzled, alone, rattling your doorknob,  
pacing the lanes while we’re out on the town. Poor slob.

Two-timed by your evil twin: is there a cheekier metaphor for the way travel eggs us into behaviour so unlikely we no longer recognize ourselves? Even the language picks up new tricks. Check out “Caesarean,” an adjective that not only alludes to the speaker’s premature appearance, but also to how Caesar in 49 B.C. ignored edicts and marched his army across the Rubicon toward Rome, unopposed. And check out the verb “pearled,” with its suggestion of an irritant transformed into an object of beauty. Both words are uncannily right, packed with multiple meanings readers can absorb in a flash. For those familiar with O’Meara’s work, there’s also the sly self-quotation to

keep us busy. "Paying the fare" points backwards to the culture-shock cab ride in *Storm Still's* "Ikime-Jinja" ("we'd paid the fare. I was standing there / somewhere among the months / and nothing recognizable"). And the trope of taxi as time-machine ("into a world / I didn't expect to be waiting in") brings to mind *The Vicinity* and O'Meara's comment about the driver in "From a Dawn Taxi" ("It's a whole / other day there and he's already in it, while / I'm in the back, with the night's final fringes.") It's hard not to see those earlier poems as perspectives O'Meara has revised, improved, outgrown. And given the evidence, it would be hard to disagree: the clean-lined fluency, the invitingly informal tone, the crisp and unforced rhyming, and the speaking voice that, by skillfully modulating short phrases against longer descriptive sentences, rides its own melting. Frankly, I don't think he has written a more perfect poem. Indeed, encoded in its taut and effortlessly colloquial stanzas is the sense that another "poor slob" is "lagging behind"—O'Meara's Prufrockian alter ego: practical, earnest, but without the swing in his step, the swagger.

The person who has "arrived", in other words, is O'Meara himself—or, rather, a style readers can recognize unmistakably as his. "Arriving Early" is a breakthrough poem: coherent, memorable, wholly successful. In this context, "early" becomes an inside joke; there is, after all, no appointed hour for a poet to come of age. The adverb might also be a playful insinuation about being a quick learner. Or maybe O'Meara is teasing us: his ear racing into accents and formal patterns ahead of readers, leaving them unprepared for such effects.

In many ways, the O'Meara who shows up in *Noble Gas*, *Penny Black* is still the same guy. The distinctiveness of his poetry—its unpredictability and variety—comes from what he overhears, not how he sees. It comes from his invention of forms, line-shapes and stanzas that try to preserve the bent ways in which we talk: the cadences of our deadpan, offhand, unembellished conversations. We see Canadian influences—most traceably Don Coles—but, along with many of his peers, O'Meara probably couldn't exist without the examples of contemporary British and Irish poetry. Like Simon Armitage, Glyn Maxwell and Paul Farley, his ambition is to informalize form—free it from fustiness. The result has been a prosody both ardent and anti-ornate: language that looks plain but sounds rich. O'Meara uses "real" names for things—

## | FEATURE REVIEW

Corona, Lucky Strike, Docs, and Jolt Cola—and likes the challenge of finding fresh vocabulary for blah subjects (a tossed ball, a root cellar). His images make an open appeal to what we might already notice for ourselves: “hacked-out / silhouettes of spruce,” “a room / of cream walls pouring into baseboards,” “toy-sized election vans / squawking anthems / and slogans from mounted bullhorns.” These descriptions are drawn to actual scale: the telling detail tied to the telling word without inflation or shortfall. A poet who writes lines like “Flags lift and drop—crescent, star, / crescent, star” is a poet who selects his words for their precision rather than their surprise. The surprise, instead, is in the repetition, the gently misdirecting enjambment, the ebb and flow of stresses. The reasons O’Meara once gave for the exquisite tact and naturalness of Coles’ poetry can easily be attributed to his own tone and pacing. The agonized ambivalence of a poem like “After the Funeral” is, after all, carried out by a series of calculated tone-shifts that let O’Meara speed up, slow down, stop short:

Some stay on the hill for hours,  
still as the chiselled stone; others shut the doors  
of cars, and drive back to their hotels, or home,  
visitors

to that hill in years yet to come. And some  
of us gather, as we should, to drink and bequeath  
unto ourselves the memories not eclipsed  
by death.

Through the candid gloom of the bar I watch you  
mourning there among the faces, a hall of mirrors  
lit with stories and clumsy stabs  
at humour

we hope will frame and explain a life. I hold  
myself in cool remove, stubborn over beers.  
Wanting, times like this, to be like you.  
In tears.

I don't think it's a stretch to propose that the speaker's internal tug-of-war—holding his grief in “cool remove,” but wishing it otherwise—mimics the poet's conflicted attitude toward artifice. In his *Ottawater* interview O'Meara claimed that, when revising his new poems, he worked hard to “shuffle the artfulness out of them.” The spirit, if not the evidence, of that thinking can be seen here: quatrains of jagged-nerved line lengths, rhymes that sharpen the irregular textures of the spoken rhythm, syntax that creates a tight seam from simple phrases. O'Meara has always tried to resist any confected, too-sonorous connection between technique and feeling (“you lose something,” he once said, “if it's too polished”) but he also clearly wants his poetry to be carefully crafted, crash-tested, durable. This tension, specifically his need to solve it, has been a boon for him. It's allowed the troubled feelings to which his poems give vent, and given his poetry its range (since no two solutions are the same, every poem is different). Averse to distorting “hall of mirrors” wordplay, his lines lack the verbal éclat of other poets, but are no less kinetic. The running off of form against speech has taught him to evoke a mood using clashing language-levels (“The sandwich was crap, the tea / magnificent”) or astutely reworked colloquialisms (“The further auctioning off / of towns and hills that flashed below—going, gone”). His best poems, in fact, reveal him to be an emerging master of elegantly purred plain-spokenness. Less satisfactory poems show that, while flattened phrase-making can be potent, casualness too aware of itself, and thus making a show of its coolness, leads to overkill: over-advertised ambivalence (“All-Inclusive”), over-dressed offhandedness (“The Day of Invasion”), and over-demonstrative understatedness (“The Game”).

All this, of course, might have been said (even the quibbles) about his earlier books. What sets *Noble Gas*, *Penny Black* apart is the how the grimmer, glamourless aspects of travel have been interiorized—or inscaped—into what one might call a *paysage demoralisé* of private scenes, details and incidents verbally underpinned by the chastened syllables of a man sobering up and coming to grips with what he sees in the bathroom mirror. There are moments of weakness (“Let's ditch this city,” he begs, “these jobs, all the bother / of having things, and keep only each other”) but travel is confronted for what it always was: running away. Escapism ends up exiling O'Meara's speakers, with the poems ruthlessly tracking the distance between

## FEATURE REVIEW

who-one-was-then and who-one-is-now. "After the Funeral," in other words, is also about another kind of death: the traveler who once "felt strange on the Earth, and pictured it as an astronaut" finally lands in adulthood.

Newly world-weary, O'Meara still appreciates the curious and bizarre ("Wasn't Japan weird?") but is emotionally closer to the holidaymaker who, jaded, quickly tires of his trip. So often in these tableaux, travel seems a gesture of defeat, where "the reversing surf slaps us flat, our only reward / some crotch sand and a mouthful of salt water." The tone is jet-lagged, slightly depressed, drained. It's a world where everything unknown and undiscovered has been beaten flat by tour groups, where sightseeing consists of "a mental box to add, then / tick off of our itinerary." Life is now a travelling *from*—shock-inducing marvels, as well as treks that promise new kinds of never-seen, recede into the past. Happy memories linger, loom large ("Do you remember the clattering gates / of the bakery where we worked that summer" he asks) but O'Meara can't connect. More often, he sounds like a man running on empty: "I'm prepared / for another entrance into the day, but stall." As with "After the Funeral," we get a sense of two halves at war with each other. The "I" and eye previously used to depict himself in tough-mindedly sympathetic ways ("Lucky / your life, lucky my own") stare out from the no-place, or between-place, of a mind beset by regrets, and haunted by ghosts of less disaffected former selves. O'Meara is bummed out. And like any brooder worth his salt, he lets his thoughts turn to old girlfriends. Lost love has always perfectly embodied the search for lost time, and we can see why in the tender conjurations of "I Used to Live Around Here" ("There's a part of us left in these places: / a held hand, a look, a dumb joke") and especially the five-part "self-unsettling tale" of the book's capstone poem, "The Old Story." It ends:

They sat there, the two of them, flanked  
by the Crystal Palace of whisky bottles, glassware,  
and mirrors, the time-rubbed caramel  
of wood. On bar-

stools, with brass, slouched in repose.  
And talked, the band tuning up, but let

down by the turnout. And shot shit  
on how they met,

what they'd meant when they said,  
how they'd not understood, holding back  
what they had to. Case study  
of a love life. A wreck

is how it looked—theirs and theirs  
but never really theirs. Then nothing to offer,  
just sex, the letting-go factor, the inklings of trust  
and commitment. Dear

Abby, the band's raw twang was  
soundtrack to what's always on their minds.  
Dear Willie Nelson, Dear Will Oldham. They agree  
to be friends.

The first four parts dissect, with forensic doggedness, the days leading to the break-up. The quick-stepping, asymmetrically shaped stanzas enact the process of saying good-bye through a “double exposure” of superbly arranged, miniaturized recollections. It's basically a postmortem: we're given all the early (often ill-boding) impressions, questions, and speculations that add up to a garden-variety 21st-Century courtship shipwrecked by incompatible “plans and pet peeves.” Balanced between blunt and epigrammatic, “The Old Story” is packed with special effects: suggestive semantic turns (“theirs and theirs / but never really theirs”), extended acrobatic riffs (“Smitten, they traded quibs / on old hairdos in photos, Wim Wenders dumb secrets, / all the creeps // and dead ends / they once dated”), and scene-stealing images (“glacial clouds tossing hail / at the window as the late became *very*”). O'Meara binds together everything—the accretion of asides, the unceasing patter, the snappy yet sensual small-talk—on the sharpest, most impulsive bends of syntax, a structure that not only mixes high and low but holds our attention simply by working the switch between the two (this toggling also echoes key contrasts in the book: going/staying, returning/can't return, looking forward/back). Wise, articulate, with a woundedness

## | FEATURE REVIEW

socketed into its wit, the poem comes across not as the result of hard thought and hard choices (which it is), but as an unprompted chemical reaction, a run of lucky breaks out of which a kind of grace emerges.

The real message of “The Old Story,” however, is that O’Meara’s reputation as a seasoned nomad also encompasses the wear and tear of time travel. “We’re tourists / to our past,” he writes at one point, comparing his backward-looking to vacationing that rarely yields deep or lasting effects. But for O’Meara, the autumnal mood is often a hardship to be endured. Far from passive, his nostalgia bottles up an Orphean sense of injustice, an anger over the impossibility of ever retrieving what you’ve lost. This can be easy to miss. “The Old Story” charms us with its disarming combination of insouciance and sadness, but the poem is actually driven by an obsessive, spurned hunt for meaning regarding an event the speaker can eulogize but never explain. With the possible exception of “Arriving Early” (the poem could, in the end, be a wish-fulfillment) the impulse *not* acted on is the main event in these poems. At times O’Meara is frightened that the moment, buzzing with possibilities, will break off and leave behind a sulky bit of uncompleted life. (In one poem, a bungled attempt to break into their locked apartment traps his girlfriend on the roof. He rushes off to get his roommate’s key “scared that in the interlude / you’d vanish, or were never there.”) This puts his poems in an odd predicament: for all my talk about how they vault into a new voice, they are mostly blow-by-blow accounts of nonevents (“You turned forty all afternoon,” is how the book starts). Nothing of much significance happens, and keeps happening: parting glances, sick days, vegging in sleepy Turkish cafés. This nothing-much heightens the poetry’s elegiac properties, the dramatic scarcity standing in for what was already missing. It also reinforces O’Meara’s darker vision of daily life as a cycle of aborted beginnings, and of aging as an experience that replicates the deadening effect of constant travel (stories are “old” because they happen again and again).

The book ends on two poems, each dense with fine-tuned emotion. First, a hotel room on a “northern coastline / so far from home.” A backpacker (perhaps another doppelgänger?) lies back, flipping channels, waiting for his beer to chill in the ice-filled sink. The mood is end-of-season, end-of-century, and end of the earth. When he goes into the bathroom to check the progress, we’re given one of the eeriest self-portraits to appear in O’Meara’s poetry:

There's a handprint on the mirror, barely  
 a smudge. Another soul who passed here...  
 the same as you, once so sure of time and space  
 you thought you knew what travel was.

The handprint in the mirror is a nullification: staring back is an identity “finger-printed” by previous consciousnesses. Faced—literally—with evidence that others have stood in that very spot before him, the speaker recognizes himself as a latecomer (the poem is even called “The Late Show”). Here is an image of wanderlust emptied of mojo. In earlier books, O’Meara’s travel poems were jump-started by the unprecedented quality of what he was seeing. Now he makes travel poetry—and makes it his own—from his sense of secondhandness. It’s a picture of a poet in the middle of life’s journey, the dark wood replaced by a Lonely Planet guide. The speaker is thinking of “time and space” because he’s been following a science program on TV about an atom-smasher built to “prove a theory of the universe.” Although “barely / a smudge,” the handprint is proof enough of a universe of diminished premises. Time and space—as it happens, also the two basic principles of travel—are compressed into that tiny room. The world is one-size-fits-all, its distances traversable by the wandering self, and like the stages of life, the journey is one-way. “Ever,” the book’s moving coda, expresses this idea in a lullaby of hypotheticals:

You, me,  
 from the streets of Samarkand to Peggy’s Cove;  
 we’ll see

Delphi,  
 Angkor Wat, the markets of Asia, the Louvre,  
 maybe

shade-trees  
 on the Euphrates if time is kind enough,  
 we’ll see.



## | FEATURE REVIEW

Will we  
ever live in Montreal again. Maybe not, love.  
Maybe.  
We'll see.

O'Meara has a great knack for dropping a hint, and this serves him especially well here. Uncluttered and bone-simple, the poem is a master class in formal and verbal precision. Check out how the refrain (will we / maybe / we'll see) allows pressure to build up inside a minimal structure, and how, with each repetition, the tonal temperature changes. The modesty of the anaphoric form helps O'Meara say no more than he wants to mean. It allows him to wring from his lines a music rich in complicated emotion: regret, resignation, wistfulness, and, very faintly, reprimand. Mortality, the poem implies, drives travel: we hurry to make tracks before our life runs its course. It's no accident the poem's pendent-like stanzaic shapes—tercets split by a long outrider—visually evoke the needle's eye, and the unlikelihood of passing through it. The poem's question-and-answer structure is a Scheherazadean attempt at resisting the great subtractive force shadowing every docked-at destination: constantly amended by evasiveness, life remains pure potential, and the speaker thereby keeps his lover (and death) at bay.

There is something else O'Meara leap-frogs with this book: his predecessors. The voice tugging at a lover's dream in "Ever," trying to pull it down to earth, is also speaking to Canada's distinguished tradition of travelling poets. When Layton et al absconded to Greece, travel was more adventurous, with much of the adventure bound up in the exhilaration of simply being outside the country. O'Meara's era—*my* era—is different. Travel is common, clichéd and too easily fetishizable. Travel poems continue to be written (viz. Stephanie Bolster's explorations of Parisian zoos, for instance) except what they struggle to pin down isn't the strangeness of where they are set, but the belatedness—or elusiveness—of a promised transformation. O'Meara is therefore the first Canadian poet to extend the experience of contemporary travel into the writing itself, where the real adventure now lies—not reportage or reflection, but the trip ongoing. In doing so he has an excellent chance of getting off where every good poet, well-dusted by all the logged miles, hopes to arrive: among the few who, every generation, uphold the distinction between day-tripper and expeditionist, between the Grand Tour of the period manner and the rare, unrepeatable crossing.

