



## Flight path: reading Ron Charach

### Dungenessque

Ron Charach

Signature Editions, Winnipeg; 2001

95 pp. \$12.95 (paper) ISBN 0-921833-76-8



Air Canada 125 is a four-hour flight. Is Ron Charach's sixth and latest volume of poetry, *Dungenessque*,\* going to be enough to sustain me? I'm apprehensive. What are my row-mates reading? A Saturday *Globe & Mail* as thick as your wrist. An *In flight* magazine cover piece on golfer Mike Weir. Another magazine open to "Hot sex tips." So much to read, so little time.

As the flight attendant informs us once again about seat belts, floor track lighting and emergency exits, I decide on my route through the book: title piece, finale, opener, epigraph. I presume the poet chooses and positions these bits with care, signposting the collection.

One of the reasons I continue to read Charach's new collections is for his felicitous opening lines. "Dungenessque" does not disappoint: "Crack me open like a crab / amused at the strange soft fur along my shell." Finding it hard to resist such an imperative, I read on:

Tour my body  
find the emotional limits,  
dredge my character  
for small signs of pretense;  
you know they're there.  
Haven't others glimpsed claws  
beneath my hands?  
You listen so closely,  
stretching out my present against my past  
on a long net,  
laying bare ...

Before the reader lies an anatomy of broken relationships, familiar territory for Charach. He is, after all, psychiatrist by day and poet by night. I suspect, though, that he is both simultaneously, distilling narratives of silently exploding marriages, of vulnerability beneath the

carapace, of small perversions and the cannibalism of mutually self-destructive relationships. Both trenchant observer and flotsam on the beach, Charach writes in the first person. I hear a faint echo of Prufrock's "pair of ragged claws scuttling." He understands that we are all damaged goods, some of us less able than others to withstand daily shocks and storms.

"Dungenessque" also works well as a metaphor for the life and work of the poet:

Crack me open like a crab ...  
dredge my character for small signs of  
pretense ...  
all that's left is to analyze  
what can and can't be consumed ...  
There may be a joke or two.

The imperfectly realized creations of personal life are mirrored in the incomplete successes of the poet's craft: "Tomorrow you and your analyst / will pick through the bowl of white flesh / from my brittle compartments." But Charach doesn't let the seriousness of the theme pinion the reader for too long before he relieves the tension. He upends the crab with an ironic and self-deprecating paraphrase of Lady Macbeth: "Who'd have thought the old boy would have so much meat in him?"

In "Thank you," the final poem in the book, Charach offers us an eight-line cameo of an old "gnarly-fingered lady," a patient in his waiting room scanning *Time* and *Life* with a magnifying glass while the poet-psychiatrist looks on covertly and feels "healthier."

Moving from finale to opener, I discover how the first line of "Advice" sets a hook into the reader: "Declining to do her yoga stretches in the

nude ..." In this piece Charach introduces a recurrent challenge that all poets, all writers face: how to enliven the verse, how to give the writing energy, effortlessly. From the woman of the opening line comes the taunting advice: "If you need excitement, / put animals into your poems." At the far end of this elliptical poetic journey are the solicitous words of the emeritus rabbi who recalls his artist-brother's talent for "capturing" birds: "If you too crave excitement, / have you considered placing birds in your *vers libre*?"

Before the "Boeuf bourguignon à trente-cinq mille pieds" lands on my table tray, I arrive at the epigraph, an excerpt from Ken Babstock's poem, "Crab." Here is the source of Charach's title. The eight lines include a finely detailed description of the crab's "knobbed" claws and "wispy ferns at the mouth," the light-distorting quality of "the sea's lens," the taste of the briny water and a hint of lost youth — elements similar to those natural materials Charach uses to construct his poems.

More than food for thought, the poetry of Ron Charach sustains the reader even in the rarefied atmosphere of the Airbus 319. Charach's clever wordplay, the tumbling, inescapable details of life, and his empathic humour keep the reader's feet planted solidly on the ground. For many years poetry has been available on the London Underground. Our national airline should consider distributing free verse along with magazines, so that (as Cathay Pacific used to say) we might all arrive in better shape.

\*Dungeness Crab, *Cancer Magister*, the most important commercial crab of the Pacific northwest coast of the USA. (From Alan Davidson's *The Oxford Companion to Food*.)

**Vincent Hanlon**  
Emergency physician  
Lethbridge, Alta.