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Your David, My Carpenter



by [Leila Marshy](#)

Blood is Blood - video poem collaboration getting a national audience on CBC Radio One September 14 and 16

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“I think Israel is overreacting but it’s a survivalist’s instinct and there is the rub.” So writes Endre Farkas to Carolyn Marie Souaid in July, 2006, a few days after Israel responded to Hezbollah militants with massive air strikes and artillery fire on Lebanese targets. The war lasts over a month, killing 1500 – mostly Lebanese civilians – and devastating the country’s infrastructure. Their correspondence during this period, posted on their [webpage](#), grapples with conflict and their place in and around it. Farkas, Hungarian Jew, asks Carolyn Marie, Lebanese Christian, at one point: “Do we read ourselves into the entrails of this mess? How?” That *how* is answered by their book-length poem and video, *Blood is Blood*.

Blood is Blood by Farkas and Souaid, the power couple of Quebec poetry, is the subject of a CBC radio documentary, airing Friday and Saturday on [Living Out Loud](#). It has also been selected for inclusion in the Zebra Poetry Film Festival in Berlin, Germany, October 18-21. The poets will be heading out there for the screening, as it is also nominated for a prize in the “Tolerance” Competition. An impressive splash for a poem. Rover recently played pitch and catch with a few questions.

ROVER: This poem, and the collaborative project that contextualizes it, was motivated by events half way around the world. Does the world rudely intrude upon poetry – or is it the

poet's responsibility to respond to or interpret the world. Do poems of political engagement differ from poems written from a more personal place?

ENDRE: Many poets feel it's not their responsibility to do anything but write from their "personal space" and let the world, which they arrogantly or timidly think is not part of their domain, go on. I can't. Maybe it's my background — the child of Holocaust survivors, an escapee during the 1956 Hungarian uprising, someone who experienced his coming of age during the 60s. Maybe it's the kind of poetry that I was reading during my formative years and/or the kind of writers I was associating with. Whatever or whichever, most of my writing life has been informed by a feeling that no matter how insignificant a poet's voice may be here in North America, silence is not an option. I have written poems from a "more personal" place but I don't think that it or I should be a foreigner from the more "public place."

CAROLYN MARIE: It's interesting that I was the one who initiated the emails back and forth during the 2006 July war that triggered this poem. I say this because in my early years as a poet, I always felt more at home writing "personal" poems—poems about motherhood, for example, or anything in my immediate range of experience. Even a book like *October*, which examined the 1970 October crisis and the difficult coexistence of Quebec's "two solitudes", was more personally-driven than motivated by the political concern contextualizing it. But having worked with Endre on various Montreal projects like putting poems on 800 city buses and curating the annual *Circus of Words/Cirque des mots cabaret* for several years, I started to get to know his perspective on the poet's responsibility vis-à-vis the world— that poets have an important role to play in the discussion of what unfolds on the international stage.

In 2005, we joined a delegation of Canadian poets invited to Paris to participate in the 4th Symposium against Isolation and Torture. We presented a two-voice text based on the words of prisoners of conscience whose diary entries had been smuggled out of Turkish jails. During this conference, we encountered many Middle Eastern delegates and engaged in some heated discussions about Israel and the Arab world. By the time the shelling started up again in the Middle East, I was ripe. Endre and I had been friends and had collaborated on numerous projects over the years, and if the projects were to continue, we needed to find a way to make sense of what was happening halfway around the world. We were from opposing backgrounds: Endre is a Hungarian Jew with lots of Holocaust-related baggage. I am a Lebanese Christian who has only been to Lebanon once in my life— to adopt a child. In July of 2006, when things were heating up, I was outside Quebec but following the developments closely on TV. One night, I whipped off an email to Endre and basically said: "Your people are at it again"— which triggered a cyberspace dialogue between us. I guess you could say that the world had intruded upon me, a poet with a vested interest in that particular geographical region. I couldn't not react to it, particularly in light of my still having relatives there. And especially in light of the fact that my son, now 20, was born there. The events affected me viscerally.

Blood is Blood is, among other things, a moving love story. A meeting of two people that is both enhanced and compromised by their diametrically opposed differences. Can you talk about this a little bit.

ENDRE: As Carolyn mentioned, the poem began as an exchange of emails between two poets who were friends, and for whom the historical and cultural differences had never before been an issue. However, when the Israel-Lebanon war broke out, what we had previously considered non-issues suddenly moved into the forefront. The emails back and forth were a way of trying to deal with them. As the emails started morphing into poems, and then into an early incarnation of this two-voiced piece, we began to consciously look for a way of dealing with the theme. She came up with the idea of the Romeo and Juliet motif. And I really liked it because it gave the theme a human dimension.

CAROLYN MARIE: It made sense to start with Romeo and Juliet. The literary parallel was obvious and we felt that this motif was a dramatic way to underscore the conflict in our piece. Early drafts focused more on the two characters from the two proud houses: Arab and Jew. Through the writing, and because it was “art”, we were able to reveal our own dark prejudices and deal with them, rather than sweep them under the carpet. In later drafts, we broadened the Romeo and Juliet theme into a more universal one, one whose narrative speaks to tribal wars that have wreaked havoc in other hotspots around the globe. Because we didn’t want to only tackle conflict in the Middle East, but conflict in general. How people meet through crosshairs. The piece is about demonizing the “other” and what happens as a result of it. The real question is: How is it possible to demonize a friend or lover, someone you have an intimate relationship with, how is it possible to want to kill that other person because their version of God is not the one you have?

You’ve made great efforts to bring this poem to various audiences – schools, media, even the Royal Military College. How do you see your roles as public personae? If the poems were purely personal, would you have done the same sort of outreach?

ENDRE: Probably not and the host venues may not have been as eager or interested to have us. Both the form and content interested these people/organizations. We very consciously created a “show” around this piece. We usually began with individual “personal” poems. However, these individual poems already had the seeds of our social and cultural concerns. I shared poems from *Surviving Words* dealing with my parents’ Holocaust and my own “immigrant” experiences. Carolyn read poems about her experience of going into Lebanon after the 15-year civil war and adopting her son. She also read from a collection called *Snow Formations*, dealing with the intersecting worlds of the native and non-native—based on her experience living among the Inuit of Northern Quebec. From there we went on to present some other two-voiced pieces to introduce the idea of collaboration. And we closed with *Blood is Blood*. Our show was intended to introduce students to poetry, different kinds of poetry and poetry that had a global view.

In a rough draft for the Ten Plagues of Passover – posted on your website – you had “bomb Lebanon” at the end of each activity. It was removed for the final version. Is this simply an example of editing, or were there political reasons for dropping that phrase? How hot does the political poetic potato get?

ENDRE: It was more an aesthetic decision than a political/poetical compromise. The poem had evolved from the Israel-Lebanon war to a larger Middle East focus. After each of the Ten Plagues we could have had a “bomb (a different country each time.)” As it happened, Carolyn

had been reading a Palestinian woman's memoir which listed some of the supplies they used to take into their bomb shelter during an attack. This seemed to be a better counterpoint both thematically and aurally.

CAROLYN MARIE: At times, the potato gets very hot! There is a section called "Your People" which weaves in and out of the piece. In it, each of us engages in some pretty inflammatory name-calling. For me, it was a difficult piece to write because it required that I commit to paper all the derogatory stereotypes of the Jew I had ever heard. I wrote it in one sitting but it took everything out of me. Here is just the tip of the iceberg:

*Your earmarked, persecuted people,
Whose ovens smell and will always smell of revenge,
inferiority, revenge, revenge.
Whose black, barbed-wire past excuses them
for making an industry of Hate,
excuses them for every slaughterhouse
that ever moved lock, stock, and barrel into their hearts...*

Endre wrote a similar piece about the Arab, and then we began weaving them into the dialogue/argument. Working on the various segments, changing them, challenging their "truths" and editing, the process became truly collaborative. What is also interesting about this process is that since we both had a hand in editing and revising each other's writing, neither of us can claim any one part of the text as our own.

Your website provides a fantastic cross-section of the collaborative process, of creative serendipity, and of personal reflection. You've chosen to make yourselves open books, as it were. What is your thinking behind this?

ENDRE: It wasn't so much that we were making ourselves "open books" but making the creative process visible. It is rare that a poet makes his/her creative process part of the finished art. And rarer still is for two poets working on a collaborative project to be so open. We thought that the website would be informative and helpful for teachers and especially for students to see how poems are made. It goes against the "inspiration" "eureka" myths. Making art is (as the word "making" suggests) work.

CAROLYN MARIE: As educators, we felt it was important that the multimedia website (www.bloodisblood.com) not only provide additional background material on the evolution of the project but also free downloadable classroom guides for high school teachers, created with the Quebec Education Program in mind. We spent the better part of a summer building these guides – one for English Language Arts, one for Ethics and Religious Culture and one for a senior history course called Contemporary World. Each uses Blood is Blood as a starting point, and takes students through activities that allow them to explore the themes of tolerance, love and hate articulated by the poem through the specific lens of that course. We felt it was important for these materials to be accessible and free of charge for any school or teacher who had a copy of the book and wanted to engage their students in a meaningful learning experience.

True creative collaborative relationships are rare. Are you better poets for knowing each other? Or is working together mostly a dance of compromise?

ENDRE: Seeing up close how another poet works, going through draft after draft is like being a peeping tom into another writer's process. It is sensual, erotic and arousing. It is also like being in another's workshop. It has made me a better craftsman. Seeing another poet's take and retake on a piece that you started, or vice versa opens up new ways of seeing the world.

CAROLYN MARIE: I would agree with Endre. We are two very different poets in terms of how we create and how we write about the world. We have different aesthetics. But we have also learned a great deal from each other. Writing *Blood is Blood* together was mostly an act of collaboration. One person would suggest something, the other would say yes, or no way. We wove our pieces together through trial and error. We'd read and re-read it for sound and content, for poetics. When it was right, we both just knew it. These days we are focusing on our own work but I like the fact that Endre can read a piece I am working on, and because he has acquired an understanding of how I write and what themes are important to me, he can make useful suggestions. Most of the time, he is right. I have the feeling that the same is true when I am editing him.

Are you happy with the final video? Do you want to make more?

ENDRE: For me a piece is never finished until the poet is dead. Having said that, I am proud of what we did and happy with the result. I would like to do more but something like this is a collaborative effort. It involved not only working with Carolyn but with a videographer and a composer; it required sound studio work, post production, and more. It is very difficult to get the stars and the finances required to align. But I think that we have opened up another avenue for poetry.

CAROLYN MARIE: Do I want to do it again? I would say yes, absolutely, but only when I have more technical knowledge of the camera. I am pleased with what we managed to come up with for a first go, but being a perfectionist, I also see where we might have done some things better. Sometimes while we were filming, I saw things in my mind's eye that I wanted but didn't have enough knowledge of the medium to say to the videographer, shoot that this way. On the other hand, I really enjoyed the process of marrying what we created for the page with visuals. I liked thinking about all the ways we could represent in images what we had said in the poem. Every line, every stanza had such a wealth of possibility. And then having to choose! Some of my favourite memories of the process were the days when we were going through all the footage we had— discovering some happy accident and then working with it. I loved that.

***Blood is Blood* will be airing on Friday, September 14 at 1 PM and Sunday, September 16 at 8 PM on Living Out Loud on CBC Radio One (88.5 in the Montreal area).**