

UNIVERSITY OF SURREY
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

An Interview with American Poet Zachary Carlsen

Dr Caroline Edwards



"Real American poetry will always reflect the movements, patterns, and momentum of "our" English—the U.S. brand. It will always turn the simplest breath into fire."

Zachary Carlsen is the founder and publisher of *Gendun Editions*, a fine art press in the United States. Carlsen's poetic concerns include the velocity of language, gleaming poetic cadence out of the everyday dialects of ordinary Americans (as misheard or misunderstood), strong aesthetic architectural forms and cross-pollinating connections, the literature of ecstasy, apocalyptic and fantasy worlds, mathematical form, and the lyric poem. As well as designing, setting, printing, and binding books for *Gendun*, he has also published poems in a wide range of journals; including *Poesy*, *Camas*, *Dislocate*, *The Cimarron Review* and *Cerise Press*. He recently spent two years living in France during which time he translated the complete works of Blaise Cendrars.

He is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Montana-Missoula, where he teaches Creative Writing and will be holding a workshop at *I'm An American Poet. This is American Poetry*.

What is your understanding of American poetry in its broadest sense? How do you feel your writing takes part in that?

Real American poetry will always reflect the movements, patterns, and momentum of "our" English—the U.S. brand. It will always turn the simplest breath into fire. Our poetry (and/or language) is a dragon that doesn't know it is a dragon—one part fantasy, one part danger, one part romance, one part precision. Even if one doesn't "understand" our dragon, when you are in front of the real thing you have no choice but to take it seriously. THAT is how I know when I am reading real American poetry. My own writing is in many ways made up of what I overhear and mis-hear from my fellow Americans, day to day. In that way, I tame the fire and re-shape it into breath.

Give a general overview of your work. What are your main concerns? What images do you find yourself using over and over?

I always work on big projects. I need an architecture to work within or else the possibilities of the imagination are all too much—for example: 100 poems/each with 10 lines/each line with 10 syllables. Or, a long narrative poem that gives the entire arc of a couple's existence in a fantastical world. My main concerns are investigating a certain element/theme/idea until it is exhausted and inside out, WITHOUT sucking the life from it and beating a dead horse, as they say. The images I keep coming back to these days are: darkness, asters, heroin, and "what does devotion look like" (if that is an image).

What line do you think poetry walks between "truth" and "The Truth"? Do you feel responsible to tell things as they "are" or are you more invested in something else?

The first and only "rule" I ever learned about poetry was that American poetry is not a receptacle for hidden meaning; rather it is the vehicle through which human emotional complexity is constantly revealed. If a poem does that, it does everything—truth, The Truth, everything, Everything. I think poems should avoid didactic impulses and philosophical muscle-flexing.

Where do you think the future of American poetry is?

American poetry will continue to continue continuing to continue. We will know when we get there. But, a trend I see today is excitement about "the serial poem" or the "project poem" or the "book-length poem," which I think is great. The world does not need another "collection of poems" that buzzes from one subject to the next like a pollinator. In the Internet Age I see people wanting cohesion and some sort of trajectory to guide their reading of a manuscript—a building-of or building-on or making-of meaning, NOT a schizo-affected gloss of 45 different experiences linked only by the fact that the same mind recorded them.

What poets writing today do you especially enjoy?

I enjoy almost everything that Ahsahta Press has been putting out lately—Kate Greenstreet and Sandra Dollar mostly. I can't say why, specifically. But generally, these poets are capturing the spark of contemporary American English, as spoken by non-poets. They capture something familiar in our language, something that we, Americans, can identify with, even if we cannot identify WHY that is. Kate Greenstreet, for example, extracts what is interesting and graceful from HOW we communicate, even if WHAT we are saying is not beautiful.

What are you working on at the moment? How does your newer work speak to older work?

I am working on five major projects: 1. *Remembrance Mongrel*, a manuscript of contemporary ecstatic poems centered around my/our habituation to sensory and emotional stimulus. 2. *Ragboy and the Spoonmender*, a book length poem about two characters braving the apocalypse to keep their love in tact. 3. *Any Consolation*, a series of poems arranged in a mathematical pattern, which explores the process of consoling and being consoled. 4. *The Ermine Fire*, a series of abstract lyrical poems. 5. A translation of *The Complete Poems of Blaise Cendrars*. New and old work is always cross-pollinating—one thing feeds the next, leads to the other, doubles back, etc.



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What are you hoping to learn during the four days in the UK?

I am hoping to learn what the universe has put me in touch with. I have long admired the UK's devotion to craft and poetry. Any time I am in Europe my writing changes—I am sensitive to the sounds (but not necessarily the meanings) of language. I will get the rhythm of a sentence in my head, which then becomes a line of music, which then tries to fold itself around everything. I am very much looking forward to bathing in the beautiful and familiar cadences and nuances of the UK's English.

What is your approach to teaching, and what will your workshops be like?

Like my first teacher said: Put real poetry in front of real people and real things occur. It cannot be any other way. My workshops will be high-intensity, for sure. But my style is always flexible; my eye is always on the subtleties of my students' energy. I am always more interested in what they have to say than what I have to tell them. In my workshops we will be reading, writing, and loosening screws as colleagues, poets, and humans together.