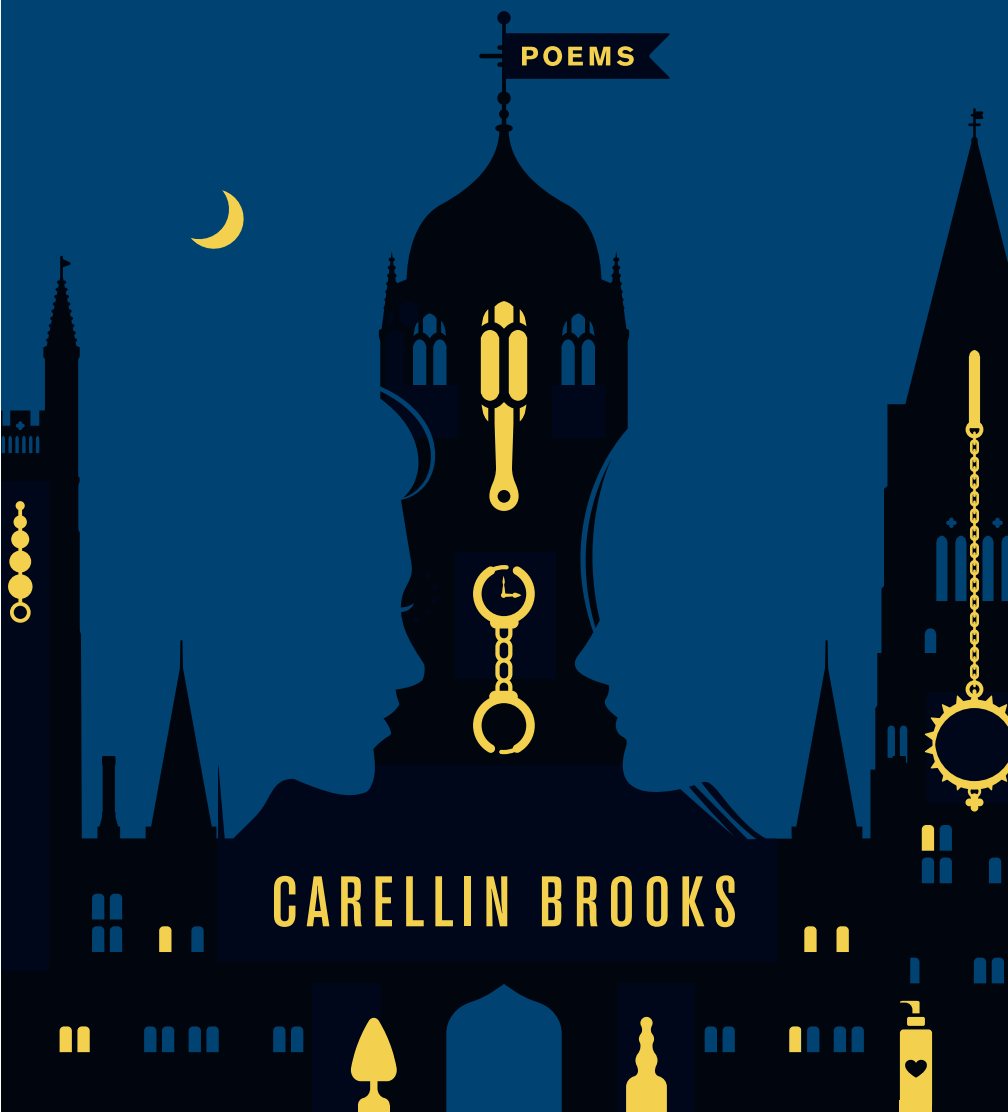



Learned

POEMS

CARELLIN BROOKS



Learned

The image features a dark silhouette of a city skyline against a light gray background. On the right, a tall, slender tower with two spires and a flag on top is prominent. To its left, a large building with a triangular pediment and a chimney is visible. In the foreground on the left, there are arches and decorative finials. The text 'Book*hug Press' and 'Toronto 2022' is centered on the dark silhouette of the building.

Book*hug Press
Toronto 2022

Learned

POEMS

CARELLIN BROOKS



FIRST EDITION

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Book*hug Press acknowledges that the land on which we operate is the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. We recognize the enduring presence of many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples and are grateful for the opportunity to meet, work, and learn on this territory.

Book*hug Press

To all my teachers
past and present

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Fixed

* * *

(First Media Interview, Montreal, Spring 1993)

Photographer first. Posed in apartment's empty parlour:
daylight-flooded eyes fixed on invisible future.
Embossed wallpaper, jade plant, platinum crop.
Look at me: all picture, all surface, all gloss.

Roommate rattling pots. *When will he be done, eh.*

Black leather biker jacket shrugged over,
thick hide, weight of comfort. *Protect me.*

From what though? I'd won.
The reward for the years bent to the desk.
Handed in on time every assignment.
Start anew, life of the mind, concentrated. Essential.

Reporter on the phone: *But what about you?*
Our readers want to know: How did you learn?
Richest scholarship in the Western world. Anywhere, really.
Funded by diamonds, wasn't it?
Tainted blood, cut facet.
Ruthless exploitation. How can you justify—

Did you really grow up in foster care?
Could you just explain,
abandoned by both parents in turn by the age of—

So young. Surely nobody would ever
accuse you of doing anything wrong,
to provoke such a catastrophe.

Then consigned, I understand,
to a man who took—cleared his throat
How did you, um, recover?

Most with your background don't finish high school, much less
make it to university, much less graduate and then win
such a prestigious worldwide award. Wouldn't you agree?

Can you explain why you turned out
different? Would you say your
orientation, as you people call it,
was caused by your
history of abuse?

*Or perhaps you see yourself as a role model?**

* Picked nose, scratched scabs,
 blackheads *hardly* the thing, academic life.
 Make myself a vessel, empty and bleached.
 Purity. *Higher things.*

*Where do you see yourself in five, ten years?
Political leader? Captain of industry?*

*How do you feel? Have you dreamed of this for years
the way a girl dreams
of her wedding day?*

You must be smart.

Never learned French,
maudite anglais—
shrink from world outside.

Absent for the Grade 5
menstruation talk (got the pamphlet
but never caught up,
apparently still
a mystery this body of mine
powers of attraction despite my will and best efforts,
bit of a disaster so far really)

No contest.

Slip

* * *

*(Montréal, Spring 1993, New York, Summer 1993,
B.C., Summer 1978, Summer 1981)*

A grey man calls, a mathematician.
Head of the scholarship committee.

Handhold sweaty grip plastic telephone receiver.
Sudden bloom of underarm sweat.
Asserted body, troublesome as ever.
Stomach drop, buzz in chest. *Help me.*

Just one vote to seal my fate
(didn't say).

Will he unbend?
Ridiculous. Confess:
I've never known what to do.

Now less than ever
 at this supposed moment of triumph.
You see I'm untethered
Nobody to turn to not even
 the woman who asks me for only one thing—simple
 uncomplicated *Give me* and I sink willingly
 gladly even.

See parents had a habit of slipping
 out of one's grasp—fingers stretch—
 mother lost. Didn't die.
 Left (age eight) father followed (eleven)
 foster family step in take over stay
 foster father had his way well enough
 about that but the body always remembers, doesn't it?
 For good or ill the body keeps its dumb faith.

Hands and pleadings my turn to slip finally but:
 carry with me still the

new knowledge
 inadvertent betrayal
 terrible consequence
 for such unremarkable flesh:
 fat gather small breasts chicken thigh.

Confess: no
 plan no grand ambitions no scheme
 for advancement survive that's all.

But then: books.
 Block out the world
 or at least have all the answers,
 everything solved by the end.
 All clear
 close covers
 shut eyes
 no whispers
 sleep easy
 never have to hear

*Let me
 I know
 you want
 it*

Arrow to teacher's straight lines
 due date exclamation: *Excellent!*
 Always with that mark.
 Here I belong. Right?

Pull up relocate body gone astray
 wandered long ago. Pawned
 shiny coin
 lost value.
 Redeem myself.