**INTERVIEW WITH PAUL SUTHERLAND, ABDUL WADUD  
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MM: Let’s start with a few words about the place where you were born.**

**PS:**I was born in Hamilton, Ontario. It is a steel-making city, very dark and ghostly in the east end and green and bright in the west. An escarpment goes right through the centre of the city – there is a lower and an upper city. This escarpment slope was an endless playground for children. You could turn over rocks and find salamanders, follow streams down from the hilltop, hide underneath waterfalls. This was all within walking distance of my home.

**MM: What school did you attend?**

**PS:** Earl Kitchener School. It was a school with big windows. When I went back years later, they had made them smaller. They blocked out the huge space, perhaps they heard that I used to daydream by looking at those huge windows. I had a good relationship with some of my teachers, who inspired me to work hard, even though I failed three years. They helped me get into the right stream of education, so that I could go to university.

**MM: What happened when you were at university?**

**PS:**I went to the university to study English, but I dropped out after one year. At the same time, I fell in love with my next door neighbour’s wife. In the end, I was in such a difficult situation, that I had to run away. To Vancouver. I boarded a train, with five thousand miles to go and money for about five meals. I used to get into philosophical conversations with rich people so that they might buy me a meal. After a long talk, they would ask: “Have you eaten anything?” “No.” It was an amazing experience to travel across the country at that age.

**MM: How old were you then?**

**PS:**I was twenty. I was writing poetry by then. I remember very vividly playing football on the street at the age of seventeen, when one day I looked up at the attic windows of our house and I said I should be up there writing poetry. And I did. I do not think now the poetry was any good, but it was a start.

**MM: What happened after Vancouver?**

**PS:**I was there for two months, living on bread and cheese. I stayed in a bed sit for a while, a very confined place and later I had to move into a commune, where people were a bit loose. They justified stealing, for example. It was in the late 1960s, the hippie age, a time when people experimented all kinds of ways of living together. I also went to churches and started to explore faiths. I met in Vancouver an important person, a homosexual interested in poetry, who was a devout Catholic who wept when he saw the image of the Virgin Mary. I struggled with this contradiction. At Christmas Eve, I was back in Hamilton. When I went to my next door neighbour’s wife’s house I tried to restart our relationship. After a short while I discovered it was over. It was hard for me to struggle to get free from that chaos. At that time, I had some friends with interesting fathers. One of them was Jim Fish. His father was a doctor at the hospital, a respected surgeon. He and I spent evenings in long philosophical discussions. He said: “You are a thinker and I know the job for you.” And he took me to the hospital and asked me: “Would you like to train to be an orderly?” And I worked there for almost three years and I began to pay attention to the people in intensive care. I had enlightening conversations with them. Some were elderly, some were young, some had tried to commit suicide. I made friends with some of them and visited them at home after they left the hospital. I sometimes went to the psychiatric ward, which I was not allowed to do. I once told a man he was dying and I was not supposed to do that.

**MM: What was the effect?**

**PS:**His wife came to me and asked me: “You did not tell him he is dying, did you?” I looked in her face and said: “No.” You must tell the truth, as much as people can bear it. These were the conflicts I allowed myself to fall into and I had to bear the consequences. During that time, I took long walks and wrote all sorts of things, about nature mostly. One holiday I visited the house of a woman called Edna. One day, just before I left the job at the hospital, she told me: “There is an Indian princess buried somewhere here.” Now, the word Indian is not used. Instead, we say First Nation or Native American. So I set out to find that grave. There were no sign posts to indicate this historic site. All I knew was that it was nearby. I looked for three days. It was autumn, windy, rain was coming on. I was on the southern part of the Bruce Peninsula, an isolated area between George Bay and Lake Huron. On the third day, when I was ready to give up, I saw a butterfly crossing the road and high grass beside the road. I decided to cross the field to follow the butterfly, which eventually took me to the grave. Naheebahweequay and some dates were inscribe on the low slab of stone. And I went back to Mrs Edna and told her: “I found the grave.” She said: “We must plant some flowers.” “Which?” “Hollyhocks,” she said. This is what we did. In that moment – it was 1972 – I knew I could write about this event, in a way I had never written before, which was extremely important to me. That poem led to a collection called Seven Earth Odes, which was finally published in 2004. This is what I call a spiritual experience.

**MM: What does Canada mean to you? Tell us something about the moment when you left the country.**

**PS:** Canada is very important to me. But only about twenty years ago, did I begin to appreciate how much it meant to me, how much a part of me it was and why people from England would constantly say “you are not from here”, when I came to the UK. Canada was the place where I started to write poetry. It is the place where my family lives. I my youth, I defended something Canadian. For example, at school, I would not stand for God Save the Queen, but stood up for the national anthem of Canada. My friend, Don Black, and I wrote in the school year book that our ambition was to invade the United States and make it a part of Canada. Dream on, but that was what it meant to me: a way of life to be defended. When I started to work in the hospital, meeting these different people, and under the influence of my grandparents, who were first generation immigrants from Britain, I said to myself I want to go to Britain, to see more, to travel further. I travelled by ship. I remember clearly my departure first by train from Hamilton, then by ship from the port of Montreal. The two people who came to that train station with me to see me off were my mother and my grandmother. Not my father, not my grandfather, none of my siblings.

**MM: The feminine side of your family. Would you identify Canada with a feminine figure?**

**PS:**How interesting! I have never thought about it. I think I would have identified it with a masculine figure. This is why I was not expecting my mother and grandmother to send me off, to have that powerful role. I was brought up in a paternal family. But like many families, feminine power is not necessarily conspicuous, but it is there. I wanted to live in a Romantic poetic way, because I knew I was not coming back to live in Canada.

**MM: But did they know that?**

**PS:**I told them I would be back in two years. My friends advised against me telling my parents I was not coming back. A dramatic moment for me was when the ship was leaving the wharf. There were colourful paper streamers between the ship and the land, which snapped at different points.

**MM: What do you feel now about those paper streamers?**

**PS:**They symbolize the break of a bond. In the past age, travelling by sea to another continent was a far more irretrievable action than it is now. I was in a sort of twilight of the era of ocean liners travelling for days across the Atlantic Ocean. That was in April 1973.

**MM:  How was London then?**

**PS:**I arrived in a place called Tilbury, on the River Thames. I did not go to the city proper, until I met my grandmother’s sister, Elsie. I went to her house after walking miles and sleeping in a tent in a little forest, where I am sure I frightened to death a poor man who had come there to walk his dog late at night. Elsie’s daughter and her husband became my first base in the UK. From there I walked into the centre of the city, all the way, fifteen miles, and saw a gradual change from all a shambles, scramble, jumble of small shops and little places to huge buildings and parks. It was very silent. It was a on a Sunday. I knew I did not want to stay there, but wanted to go north. I still had the image of England being a green and pleasant land. I was not interested in the urban scapes, in spite of the remarkable buildings and statues in London.

**MM: How did the idea of home change throughout your life?**

**PS:**I tried to make a home in England, but I failed miserably at that. Failed in relationships, failed in being able to establish a long term employment in a well-paid job. Failed to stay in residential care, looking after disabled children or adults. Thus, gradually, my ideal home became Canada. Somewhere, vague and elusive, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean was my home. It is a bit of a poetic conceit, but neither Canada nor England can be my homes.

**MM: Is this a negative approach to belonging, trying to invent something else?**

**PS:**I have a dual nationality, officially. I do not see either of them as my home, except that Canada is the birthplace. But I was not able to create a home in the UK as my grandparents did in Canada. I had to conceive home as elsewhere, which has become a common expression nowadays. Also I was not willing to make the commitment to belong to Canada.

**MM: Did Canada belong to you?**

**PS:** A friend of mine has written a poem exactly about that: he had left Canada, but Canada did not leave him, meaning me. As far as I am concerned, I am not able to accept that. I am not able to establish profound roots anywhere in a country that I can depend on. I am uprooted.

**MM: But there must be something constant in your life…**

**PS:**The poetry is constant. Time and time again, when I was faced with trauma, I would go back to the poetry. I have realized this is my Ariadne’s thread. I go back to it again and again. In 1972, just before leaving Canada, I had published my first book, Winter Poems. But after my experience at Naheebahweequay's grave, I realized that my style was archaic. Later, I experimented with voices. I was also inspired by Rilke’s poetry, translated into English. Over the next fifteen years or so after arriving in England, I was not at all part of the literary scene. I worked with disabled children and adolescents. I wrote flowery Victorian verse and journals.

**MM: What did the journals help you to do?**

**PS:** The journals helped me to feel alive, though I was not sure I knew how to write anymore. I have recently read some fragments from my journals. My wife loves them. For me, they sound archaic, out of date, clumsy, overwritten. Woody as old turnips. I wrote what I experienced with disabled children and that part I think is fine. Direct observation of what they said and did. I wrote about nature.

**MM: Do you think that writing about nature is part of your Canadian heritage?**

**PS:**Absolutely. What Canada means to me is the iconic significance of nature. The Niagara Fall is like a cathedral. This is perhaps true for all frontier countries, Australia, New Zeeland, America. 

**MM: When you went to England, what happened with this heritage?**

**PS:**It seems it is one of the things that became suppressed, because the English do not relate to nature as much as Canadians. Yet, earlier I had been attracted to the English Romantic poets, who expressed the iconic quality of nature: “Mont Blanc” by Shelley, “Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey” by Wordsworth. I could see the nature in their poetry before I could see the mythology and before I could see the human element. But working with suffering people, I was forced to see the human.

**MM: How did you perceive nature after you arrived in England?**

**PS:** It took me sometime until I got to the north of Scotland, where I saw a hint of a natural world similar to what I had seen in Canada. The English gardens and parks are very controlled.

**MM: How did that work for your poetry?**

**PS:**I believe it shut me down for a long time and I wrote those journals to try to find some value in my life. The impact of England, of Europe, was so great that I did not know how to put it into words. It took me about 15 years until I published another book. Well, I published a collection called Town Boy, about love relationships and betrayal. It must have been because I came to England with my Canadian way of being and did not understand how adversarial and antagonistic this way could be. I did not have that certainty to say “that’s me, I’m Canadian”. There is a big crevice between the Europeans and the First Nations in Canada, the former history is truncated, squeezed into two hundred years. After sometime in England, my conception of Canada changed. I was visiting a centenary in the city of Ely and I asked: “Are you one hundred years old?” “No. Eight hundred.” I realized I carried a mindset that was completely wrong. In Canada, time was horizontal. In Europe, I see it as vertical: one civilization builds on another. I could say that in Europe I discovered what History, as opposed to Nature, meant.

**MM: What do you feel about this opposition?**

**PS:**It is highly creative. They are two important elements of our existence, along with the spiritual dimension. Shakespeare inspires me; he manages to constantly portray elements of nature, human nature and the supernatural. I went through a cultural shock that I could not articulate. In 1989, after my first marriage failed, I made an effort to go back to Canada for a month. I have written about this and I started to write differently. I made a special effort to reestablish my connections with my family and homeland. In the 1990s, I went back to Canada often. At that time, I met a UK poet Ian Parks, an established poet who liked my poems including what I said about Canada. I wrote about  these conflicting perspectives in Journeying.

**MM: Many immigrants try to forget where they come from and even hate their native country.**

**PS:**My case is actually a classical immigration example: the first generation is interested in making roots; the second generation consolidates them; and the third generation asks “where do we come from?” The response is often this limbo and people are somewhat shocked that they do not belong to one place or another. In the second generation it is possible for someone to reject their origins, perhaps many do and then learn to value them later.

**MM: What made you become more aware of these changes?**

**PS:**I went back to university in 1984, because people said to me I should. When I was a cleaner in a castle museum, they would often tell me: “You’re not a cleaner. You’re an intellectual. You’ve read all these books. What’re you doing?” At the university, I studied History and English, I read postcolonial literature and theory and this is how I began to understand what was going on. I needed guidance.

**MM: What was difficult?**

**PS:** I was given a map, which I could find my way through, without exactly following the chart. Canada was a colony and England was superimposed on it. One of the reasons I did not feel at peace with modern British poetry is that it was the colonial power’s poetry. Not Canada’s and my poetry. I had to trust my voice. In the 1990s, I completely revamped the Seven Earth Odes. Then, I met Barbara Harrison, who listened to me and helped me over the next six years. We went climbing the mountains in the Lake District and I asked her: “Would you mind me reading from my Odes?” And she gave me feedback: “No. Yes. No. Yes.”

**MM: This open dialogue happened in nature…**

**PS:**Yes, it did. At times I had to give up things I thought were good. It was hard, but I did it. Soon after, a friend who ran a publishing house said she wanted to see some of my poetry. What did I have to say to the world? That is what I asked myself. By publishing Seven Earth Odes, I slowly regained my confidence that I could survive in this transatlantic mentality and create out of it. I did not have to be Canadian or British. I could be something else.

**MM: What literature has left a mark on you?**

**PS:**I value postcolonial criticism, psychological theory, feminist criticisms, Marxist theory, I read The Wretched of the Earth, The Making of the English Working Classes, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich etc. I could see there were oppressed people and their oppressors. Although that is a brutal division between peoples, it was the start of recognizing what the problems were, for me as well, and how to deal with them, how to put them into literature and how to show people in these struggles with nature, with each other, with ideas. I could appreciate much more what my family had and have gone through.

**MM: You have experienced spiritual experiences. How did you realize that these experiences can be transformed into poetry?**

**PS:**Most of my spiritual experiences took place in the 1980s, in those years when I was not sure I was a poet and when my first marriage proved highly problematic. I started to write about what happened in a little town called Morley, when a 9-year-old girl had been abducted and her body was discovered three days later in a river. I did research. I read David’s Psalms. At some point I realized the Psalms were reading me. I had never imagined that: the book was a living thing and I was the dead thing. The words were alive and I was not. I puzzled: where does that come from? I reflected on Christ’s wounds and on the presence of the Other. I knew prayers by heart, read the lives of saints from the Roman Catholic calendar every day. And I wrote poetry about Holy Week. People told me “the human wasn’t there” so I put the human in those poems. I slowly accumulated a collection of poems, The Holy Week Sequence.

**MM: How important was it to belong to a community of writers?**

**PS:**Well, I could not stand the isolation anymore. Feedback from other writers was generally good. Although their writing was too British, I listened to what they told me. I realized I could not be as British as them.

**MM: How would you define the way you write?**

**PS:**It is difficult to define how one writes. Rodin once told Rilke, who was brooding for inspiration: “Go to the zoo and write! Don’t come back until you’ve written something!” And Rilke wrote “The Panther”.

**MM: Was England a cage for you?**

**PS:**Perhaps… I understood that one should not look for inspiration, but go out and write. That is part of the process. I see writing as therapeutic. I also trust the act of the intention to write and give attention to something. This tree here can be part of a good poem or not. It is always here to be observed. I am influenced by where I am. I am in Bucharest now. I was in India three months ago. To write about the trees around you is political. When Walcott describes Saint Lucia, he gives significance to something that others might dismiss. I am trying to redress imbalances in my life, political and spiritual, stories not told, suppressed voices.

**MM: How do you balance your ideas of faith, politics and poetry?**

**PS:**Having a faith in England today is self-political. I mean you can be looked at as mad or strange for having faith in a materialistic world, a very secular society. It is very delicate. Here in Romania and also in India, you still seem to have a connection with rituals that go back hundreds and hundreds of years. But this is not so in the British Isles.

**MM: Why?**

**PS:**England went through Reformation and Protestantism cut across those traditions. For a time it was dangerous to follow traditions of the Catholic Church. We also went through the industrial revolution. This combination cut us off from our roots and rituals. To have faith is to engage in rituals. If I walk around with my tasbih, my beads, this is a political statement, because very few are doing it. I could be doing it with my Catholic rosary too. It says I believe in something else, that humanity is not everything, that other goals exist not only material goals. Praying does not mean wasting your time. Illness is not a waste of time. People tend not to believe these are benefits in these actions or conditions. Giving alms or giving money to charities is seen as wasting money.  
People of faith understand the significance of giving, prayer and illness.

**MM: How is that taken over by poetry?**

**PS:** I believe the care of nature is an act of faith. Ecologists do not have to have religious faith, but there is an element of ecology in faith: caring for what you have been given, the Earth. I also try to describe people and the tension between believing and not believing. This is one of the creative flashpoints for me. Like W. B. Yeats said, “out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry”. Why is the world the way it is? How is the world what God wants it to be? This tension can become poetry through observation, taking in what supports and what contradicts an idea.

**MM: This is what you do in the poem The Beloved, when you ask the scarecrow to speak about God. A scarecrow is not a priest and not a shaykh. Why should it be allowed to speak about the Beloved? It is simultaneously humorous and serious, a statement about the Other.**

**PS:**Yes. And about how the other can speak about the infinite Other. Faith is never far away. It is like a thorn in the side, asking me “what about the other way?” That benefits my poetry.

**MM: When did you start to pay attention to Sufism?**

**PS:**My wife claims that I have always been a Sufi. I have been always leaning towards mysticism. As a Christian, I was attached to figures such as Francisco de Assisi, Simone Well and others from different faiths, such as Martin Buber and Kahlil Gibran whose book, The Prophet, was famous during the 1970s, Omar Khayyam’s The Rubaiyat. I have always been in search for the less defined aspects of faith. Formally, I started looking at Sufism when my wife-to-be wrote an email where she said, after listening me read from the Seven Earth Odes, “you are a Sufi”. She sent me a three-pages in which she described Sufi perspectives.

**MM: Was this new for you?**

**PS:**New just as the postcolonial theory. I needed a chart to understand what I was feeling and trying to express. She gave me that chart. When you follow a butterfly, you know, this is Sufism. Following a butterfly is like following a spiritual guide. I took this seriously but I did not respond to her email for a month or so. We met and I accepted the principles of Sufism. Islam came along with that. I also think that going to university had shaken my Christianity, my capacity to pray, because I had to work hard to earn a good grade. My inner world was falling down, like a collapsing temple. I was at odds with many at university because I had faith in Christianity. At odds with cultural studies too.

**MM: How did you decide to write A Sufi Novice, your book recently published in Romania?**

**PS:**I began to write it when I visited Cyprus, where I was impressed by Shaykh Nazim and the people who believed in something. My wife-to-be would not marry me, unless the Shaykh gave approval. He lived in North Cyprus and we went to visit him in Lefke. I was very nervous about this. I did not like my love life being decided by someone else, a man, whom I had never met. It was December 2004. I was not a Muslim yet. When I met him, I could see he was a holy man. It is hard to describe the light in his eyes or his gestures. When you meet someone who has trained himself to have perfect manners, you are mystified. You feel he reads your heart. He is ahead of you. He already knew me. The nature of Cyprus also fascinated me. It was the first time I had encountered the Mediterranean Sea.

**MM: Where did he live when you met him?**

**PS:**Right in the middle of Lefke. He gave talks and personal instruction. This encounter inspired me very much. When Daniel Dragomirescu invited me to send a book for his publishing project, I thought it was a good way to honour Shaykh Nazim, who had died one year before, in 2014. Going to Cyprus also showed me that we do not want to know about other people in the world. We want the others to be like us. But this is sad. We need difference and Cyprus showed me again the violence that arises from not accepting difference.

**MM: So publishing this bilingual book in Romania was part of the same idea…**

**PS:**Yes. I was attracted by the Contemporary Literary Horizon right from the start, because I could see the journal was interested in social justice, in otherness, and not in propaganda. Although it is a sensitive subject, I feel respect for the other is healthier here than it is in England.

**MM: I thought the other way round. Maybe it is a matter of perception… I know you organize creative writing workshops. Tell be about them. What would you recommend to someone who is a beginner?**

**PS:** One of the most important acts is looking, observing, close reading your own life, in order to discover what makes it unique to you. Rilke said that by the end of your childhood, you have experienced enough to spend the rest of your life writing about it. Study and feedback, a community of writers you can relate to (who both value and criticize you) are also important. It is good to learn how to stand being rejected, because rejection shuts down or melts down many. Learn how to be at peace with your own transformation. Do not expect things to change by themselves. Be patient. You may need to knock on several doors to find people who value your work and enthusiasm. Of course, the question of quality is important so you have to work on your writing. Now there are many outlets, at least in England. London is a place where much networking takes place but there are many festivals, workshops and readings across the country  
that are equally value which lead to contacts.

**MM: What is your opinion about expressing the authorial “I” or not in a piece of writing?**

**PS:**When writing the Holy Week Sequence, I was influenced by Japanese poetry, haiku, to be precise, as a way of evading the first person’s point of view. The Japanese allows writers to refer to the “I” without mentioning it. I wrote recently “a tree's an umbrella / on the canopy of stars / fill the coal bucket”. The “I” that fills the coal bucket does not need to be there, and yet, in English, it sounds like a command. In Japanese, it is not necessarily a command. The “I” is assumed. In English, we could say “filling the coal bucket” and that does not sound like a command. This makes it elusive and more tentative. But in many poems I use the pronoun 'I'. Usage depends on the subject and context of the writing but experimenting on how to avoid the authorial 'I' can be creative.

**MM: One last question. What are you planning to publish?**

**PS: My** publisher, Valley Press, is interested in a selected collection spanning 300 pages of work. It may come out in the autumn or late in 2015. I hope the book will read like a personal epic, crossing four and a half decades of my writing. I hope it will find a substantial readership.

**MM: Thank you.**

 Books by Paul Sutherland are available on the internet or contact  
him at [paulsuther@hotmail.com](mailto:paulsuther@hotmail.com) . Journeying is available at [www.valleypressuk.com](http://www.valleypressuk.com/) .