

Rishma Dunlop

For a couple of years as a graduate student, I worked for Rishma Dunlop. Overflowing with projects—this was her natural mode—she needed something like an assistant. Mildly impoverished, I needed the income. Another professor put us in touch.

Our arrangement would have to be unofficial, of course; I already had my teaching assignment. Grad programs tend to discourage their students from taking on extra work. Read, teach, thesis—repeat.

But right here was the sort of policy that Rishma would've rolled her eyes at. (She rolled them often.) Even at our first meeting, I sensed we shared a truth: it's the extracurricular work, the work no one asks a writer to do, that matters most. Her own grad thesis—a creative piece—had been a first for her program. She would continue to probe the edges of what was possible, in any given situation, for the rest of her career as a poet and educator.

I helped Rishma with a couple things during that brief, abbreviated career: editing poems for some journal or project; administrative stuff. I didn't share her taste, exactly; she had patience for poets I couldn't quite admire. But she possessed the right kind of impatience—for bureaucracy, for a certain self-defeating strain of Canadian reticence. Her scrappy energy rubbed off easily. Students adored her.

We tended to meet over a lovely meal at some restaurant I couldn't really afford. Rishma tended to foot the bill. An impresario at heart, she always had several things on the go, which put a conspiratorial edge on our meetings. It's still hard to believe she's no longer around, no longer hatching some beautiful, stylish project.