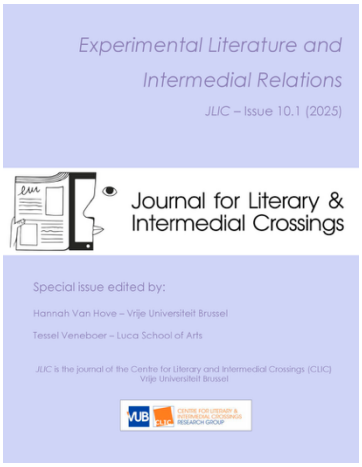


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Hannah Van Hove – Vrije Universiteit Brussel

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# On the Act and Forms of Writing Grief: Paul Stephenson in Conversation about *Hard Drive*

Hannah Van Hove

(transcribed by Xavier Houtave)

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Paul Stephenson is a poet, teacher and researcher whose debut collection *Hard Drive* (2023) was shortlisted for the Polari Book Prize 2024 and the Lambda Literary Award 2024. In this collection, Stephenson considers the impact of his partner's sudden death through affectionate, humorous and formally adventurous poems. In this conversation, Stephenson shares his thoughts on the experimental strategies used in his poetry, reflecting on the act and forms of writing grief. The interview took place on 18 November 2024 during an English Literature class at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Hannah Van Hove introduced the author to the students in the audience and prepared and asked the questions. Students were invited to ask questions at the end of the interview. Xavier Houtave subsequently transcribed the interview, which was later edited by Hannah Van Hove.

Keywords: Paul Stephenson, *Hard Drive*, grief, writing process, experimental writing

## Introduction

Paul Stephenson is a poet, teacher, and researcher who was born in the UK and is based in Brussels. He has written three poetry pamphlets and has published in various esteemed journals, including *Magma*, *Poetry London*, *The Rialto,* and *Poetry Review*. His debut collection *Hard Drive*, the work on which this conversation focuses, was published by Carcanet in 2023 and was shortlisted for the Polari Book Prize 2024 and the Lambda Literary Award 2024. In this collection, Stephenson considers the impact of his partner's sudden death through poems that are affectionate, adventurous, often humorous, and a beautiful testament to an enduring relationship. Poetic form is central throughout as Stephenson experiments with patterns, established forms, and the use of constraints to craft a wonderful reflection on grief in all its guises.

This interview originally took place on 18 November 2024 during a class in the context of the "Literature in English: From the Middle Ages to the Present" Bachelor course taught by Prof. Elisabeth Bekers at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Hannah Van Hove introduced the author to the students in the audience and prepared and asked the questions. Students were invited to ask questions at the end of the interview. Xavier Houtave subsequently transcribed the interview, which was later edited by Hannah Van Hove. After editing the interview, Van Hove posed two final questions to Stephenson,

who reacted to them via an email exchange in November 2025, and these questions and answers close the interview.

## Interview

**Hannah Van Hove:** Welcome, Paul. I was reading *Hard Drive* this weekend and was deeply moved. You manage to catch a very particular sense of grief and loss. It's never simple to discuss or write about these things, but your collection opens up new ways of talking about them. I wanted to start off by asking you about the form of the collection as a whole. How did you conceive of shaping the collection?

**Paul Stephenson:** Thank you. It's wonderful to be here. Yes, the book is a big one—128 pages, whereas most debut collections are closer to 60 pages. When you're shaping a pamphlet of 25 or 30 pages, it's one thing. But shaping a collection of this size is pretty daunting. So what I tried to do was cluster the poems so they were kind of 'movements', like they would be in a piece of music, I suppose. Or chapters in a novel. And to some extent, it reads like a novel because there's a linear narrative. And as I was putting the poems together, it just seemed logical to order them chronologically, almost, so that there were these episodes, these thematic episodes: first, the immediate aftermath with the visiting of a mortuary, second, dealing with the bureaucracy and the ample death administration, the rituals you have to go through, attending a crematorium, collecting ashes, that kind of thing. Then, third, emptying an apartment, putting things in storage, cataloguing, and clearing out. All of these things seemed like little, almost mini pamphlets in themselves. And all of them are full of people, like characters in a soap opera of death. The book was just going to be those first three sections, and I thought maybe a second collection would explore revisiting the relationship. But then my poet friends in my workshop group said, no, we need to know more about the relationship, the back story. So that's what I ended up doing in the second half of the book: we go back in time, we revisit the couple, the tensions of a long-term relationship, cohabitation, travel, etc.

As I was revisiting the manuscript and editing it with the publisher, I thought, actually, there are quite a lot of poems here about the act of writing grief, and the questions of ethics and legitimacy around it. What does it mean to write something so personal and put it out into the world, the book as a product and commodity? It was something I was very aware of as I was writing some poems. So that last section of the collection explores the act of writing around loss and grief. It just seemed natural to tell a story through poems, basically. Rather than have a kind of hotchpotch or random ordering.

**Hannah Van Hove:** Yes, I hadn't read a poetry collection that uses a narrative arc like that in a long time. As a reader, it really does feel like you're taken on a journey by the speaker of the poems... I'd love to dive deeper into your relationship with form. The cover alone hints at formal experimentation—the visible acrostic, for instance—and within the

collection you employ, experiment and play with a wide range of poetic forms: pantoums, haiku, prose poems, blackout poetry, etc. So, to start off with a very general question, how do you find the form of a poem? Do you consciously choose form first when you sit down to write a poem? Does it come later, as you're writing and editing? And going from the level of one particular poem to the plurality of forms within the book, how do you see this collection's relationship towards form as a whole?

**Paul Stephenson:** Thanks, that's a great question. Yeah, I mean, I love form. Some of my first published poems appeared in the experimental anthology entitled *Adventures in Form* back in 2011 from Penned in the Margins. I've always wanted to experiment, being quite influenced by the French experimental Oulipian poets and their use of constraints; I think using limitations, conceits, and rules can force us into places that we wouldn't normally go if we were just writing without any kind of guidance on what we're doing. So, I think form is really interesting, not only to vary the shape, alter the dynamics and the tone, but also to visually mix things up. For example, one of the poems in the collection entitled "The Hymn of Him" was written using only three-letter words ending in "p." That kind of tight constraint shaped the content and tone in ways I couldn't have predicted. I didn't know what the poem was going to be, and I didn't know what the emotional impact of that poem would be. Some bits are funny, some bits are sad. Some words we don't understand, but make meaning from sound.

I think it's interesting to be conscious of forms—sonnets, sestinas, pantoums—but I also like to play with them, break the rules a little bit, not always adhere so strictly, …. I use a lot of repetition. I think the poems are quite musical, some of them. I employ anaphora—having the same word at the end of every line—but you can enjamb the lines sometimes, rather than having it end-stopped. One poem, "Relationship a Covered Reservoir," ends every line with the word "water." That repeated word shaped the writing and created tension, forcing me to write into unknown spaces.

But back to your question, no, I never choose a form when I set out with a poem. Sometimes the line length of the first few lines, or the use of refrain and repetition, might suggest a form, and the poem will start pushing in that direction. I sometimes try out different forms of the same poem. And there are times you write to 14 lines—a kind of natural first destination—and then times you want to move on because there is more to say. Sometimes the poem doesn't want stanzas at all.

**Hannah Van Hove:** To continue thinking about form a little bit more, when I was reading your poem "When we were Jackson Pollock," I was struck by the lines:

> To fill a wall ceiling to floor with the now the instant
> being taken by the automatic the unthinkingness of us
>
> (Stephenson, *Hard Drive* 91)

And I was struck by these particular lines, because I think here—and throughout your collection—there appears to be a paradox, right? A desire to capture a moment in time, the instant, the automatic, the unthinkingness of us, and yet how to do that in an act which is not instant, automatic, unthinking, but requires precisely the opposite? Writing takes time; it's usually not automatic; it requires thought, and you draw awareness to this fact. Earlier, you said you do this explicitly in the last section of your collection, but I think you also do it throughout the book, drawing attention to this tension in the poems, while at the same time, you do succeed, I think, very much in capturing the moment.

So at various points throughout your collection, with "Anglepoise," for example, you create a particular atmosphere, a moment in this kind of everyday domestic space. Also in other poems—I'm thinking of "Hand Puppets (You at Your Youest)" where you anchor a memory of your partner—capturing a moment in the day just so, and I find this very moving, because I can see him for a moment, the way you saw him there. So anyway, I was wondering about your thoughts regarding this tension of how to capture the moment whilst simultaneously staging the capturing of the moment?

**Paul Stephenson:** Yes, that tension is definitely there... That poem and others like "Anglepoise" or "Hand Puppets (You at Your Youest)" aim to preserve small, domestic moments and events. But you're right, writing is not immediate. It's meditative, contemplative, thought out on the page, but the first draft might actually splurge out after much subconscious contemplation, an idea fermenting.

Regarding the idea of copying a Jackson Pollock with oil paints: I can't think of anything more automatic and free and unreflective. But there is then indeed a paradox, because a lot of the poems are very, very thought out or restructured and crafted. Poetry is like Pollock in a way, isn't it? Insofar as you want it to look natural and effortless, not let the scaffold show. What I wanted to do with the book was to inventorise, catalogue, preserve; there's reportage, sometimes a travel reportage, anecdotes about the kitchen, the living together.

I wanted the book to preserve us, him, his personality, his characteristics. The "Hand Puppets" poem in particular, captures this sense of mischief and childishness of someone, even within a grown adult, the playfulness and the humour—maybe his own personality has impacted my own humour, my own perspective on the world. So the book is an inventory, a hard drive. It contains all the files, all the images, all the memories, all the short little videos that go through your head. I hoped to make something beautiful from all the pain and make something universal that would speak to others. So that when I got rid of all those objects that were in an apartment one day—and many of the poems explore grief through objects, games, and clothes—you're left with a book, and this is ….

**Hannah Van Hove**: … a distillation of sorts.

**Paul Stephenson**: A distillation, exactly.

**Hannah Van Hove**: Let's return for a moment to Jackson Pollock; in *My Painting* from 1947, he famously stated: "I continue to get further away from the usual painter's tools, such as easels, palettes, brushes, et cetera. I prefer sticks, straws, knives, a broken fluid plate, or a heavy impasto with sand, broken glass, or other foreign mass added" (Pollock 1947–1948, 79). How do you perhaps see your relationship to the usual poet's tools? Would you say, similarly to Pollock, that you're moving away from figurative description, in a sense? And what is so attractive about the abstract expressionism of Pollock? How might it relate to your own poetry?

**Paul Stephenson**: That sense of liberty, of nothing being thought out, nothing being pre-considered, is inspiring in Pollock's work. That immediacy, that freedom that dripping paint gives you. And I mean, can you drip words in the same way? I don't know…

There's a poet, Caroline Bird, who often talks about the process of writing, that you're driving along a road, but you're building the road as you're driving the vehicle, so there is no road ahead. I think that idea of just writing into the void, or into a blank canvas, a blank page, without knowing where you're going, without knowing what the poem is going to be about, without knowing what form it's going to take, and letting something emerge, and then saying: Okay, what do I see? What does this poem want to be? Does it want to be a sonnet? You asked about the form of it. Does it want to be free verse? Does it want to be in stanzas? Does it want to be justified as a box, or is it a prose poem? I love that sense of writing into the void.

**Hannah Van Hove:** Speaking of Caroline Bird, would you consider her an influence? And what other poets have influenced your work?

**Paul Stephenson:** Absolutely. Caroline Bird takes a wild idea, like in a poem from her recent collection *Ambush at Still Lake* (Carcanet 2024), about swallowing her child's toys. She lets her imagination go wild and just runs with the ridiculous scenario, and it goes to very dark, comic places. I love the way she takes a seemingly impossible or surreal notion and then takes it seriously and pushes the poem and its possibilities on. Explores it all. Another poet who gave me permission to write was Luke Kennard, who is similarly a kind of surrealist, absurdist poet. I remember reading *The Migraine Hotel* (Salt Publishing, 2009) and going, oh my God, I didn't know you were allowed to do this, you know? It's such a gift when another writer gives you permission to write. Other poets who influenced me are people like e. e. cummings, the modern American poets, Marianne Moore, Frank O'Hara, Tony Hoagland, C. D. Wright, and poets who have an expansive kind of style. Though also writers like the experimental, conceptual French poets and prose writers, Renaud Queneau and Georges Perec.

**Hannah Van Hove:** Do you see yourself writing within a particular lineage?

**Paul Stephenson:** I honestly don't know. There's a poem in the book called "Starchitect" that's slightly Audenesque, I think, echoing "Funeral Blues"... When I launched the book online, Gregory Woods, former Professor of Gay & Lesbian Studies at Nottingham Trent University, asked if it belonged to the gay literary tradition. I wasn't sure what to reply. Many readers have said, "This speaks to everyone. What's specifically gay about it?" It's true that it's not overtly sexual or physical in the way some queer literature is. It's about a relationship—mundane, loving, complicated. But maybe it's gay in the humour, the perspective, the absurdity. Do we need more death poems? There are so many. I think if you're going to write them, it's best to take a risk. Experiment with the form, be funny, play with all the stages of grief. Of course, bereavement is extremely self-indulgent, and what ends up overly sincere doesn't work. But you can find the poetry in what is plain and mundane, the humour hidden within the sorrow.

**Hannah Van Hove:** The body features prominently in your work—in subtle, ambiguous, and explicit ways. From mortuary scenes to moments of intimacy, from ambiguity to grief. And, thinking earlier of Jackson Pollock, I was reminded of how he uses the force of his whole body quite often when he's painting. And I was thinking about the body in relation to the collection and how it features so much, and in such kind of odd ways. You have the weight of the body's brain that you talk about in one of your poems, for example, the body before and after death, but also bodies in relationship. How do you see the role of the body in your work?

**Paul Stephenson:** I hadn't thought of it that way, but yes, the body is there—both living and dead. Sitting on doorsteps, trains, in the forest, in a swimming pool. There's that ambiguity again. But it's not necessarily a conscious choice. Maybe it's more about physical presence, absence, and the spaces we inhabit together. Poets like Andrew McMillan write directly and very convincingly about the body. I suppose mine is more about embodiment in relational and emotional terms.

The poem, "Your Brain," was perhaps my most risk-taking poem in that I didn't put it in the manuscript at the beginning because I thought, is this in bad taste? Should I use this? I used some found material in it, official, formal material, documents, and I did erasure and blackouts. And that was a poem where I just started with the weight of the brain and just kept going, very much inspired by Layli Long Soldier's book *Whereas* (Graywolf Press 2017), where they write a sentence and then qualify it further, expand out, keeping adding details and specificity. Like a slinky, those helical spring toys that "walk" with a mind of their own, cascading down the stairs. So you have a line, and then you go beyond that line, and then you clarify it a bit further, add another position, and very quickly a poem takes shape of its own volition. Suddenly, I was journeying somewhere I didn't know I was going, and the poem kept on for 2–3 pages.

**Hannah Van Hove**: In your poem "Boy at the End of a Long Narrow Garden," the last stanza starts:

> With a feint-ruled notebook and pen to hand, a can of warm cider by his feet,
> at the very far end of a long narrow lawned garden the boy writes, writing
> words that are legible only to him. (Stephenson, *Hard Drive* 85)

I wondered about the position of the speaker here, away from all the people in the house, surrounded by the silent foxgloves in the garden, and about legibility. In particular, I wondered about how you might see your own identity as a writer, formed on the outskirts, away from the busy house full of people. What is perhaps so important about being on the periphery? Does it equal being away from noise, for example? Or how do you see it? And what about legibility? Why are the words only legible to the boy in the garden in this poem? Or, talking more generally, could you speak to the idea of legibility? What does it mean for your work?

**Paul Stephenson:** That image comes from observing someone writing—someone who liked to isolate himself while writing. I often write by hand, and frankly, I can't read half of what I write, and I'm not sure he could. So there's the literal illegibility of a frantically written diary of prose.

But also metaphorical: how much of ourselves do we reveal? How much do readers truly understand? Do we want them to be able to read and decipher everything? There's something empowering about being on the periphery—away from the noise—just as there is being on the margins of a page, a place, a group of people.

**Hannah Van Hove**: I was also thinking of what you were talking about earlier in terms of the categorisation of gay literature, which has historically occupied a peripheral position…

**Paul Stephenson**: Yes, there's so much in contemporary publishing, both fiction and poetry, that's very much about identity, be it your own family heritage, migration, illness, experience of social and political life, sexual identity, etc. When I did those first three pamphlets, I never thought to use gay or LGBTQIA+, at all, because it didn't seem relevant to the work.

Since then, things have shifted socially and in publishing. So when it came to the production and the marketing of this book, it probably was useful to label it. Publishers have to sell books and need to find a way to communicate the premise of a book in an easily graspable way. But it's more than a book about a gay relationship, it's about a relationship, about love and loss and friendship. In that sense, I think it merits a broader readership as it speaks to anybody who has lost someone close.

Yes, I think as poets, generally, we are fairly peripheral. We're sitting on the margins and observing, aren't we? We're taking a scalpel to everyday life, and we've got a sort

of hyper-vision. We're trying to condense the bizarreness of the things we see. So, I think we're like this by nature. And of course, as they say half-jokingly, nobody buys poetry. So we're peripheral anyway. Although actually, Caroline Bird came to the Poetry in Aldeburgh festival I was involved with last week and read in a cinema with 243 people. And she got up on stage and said, oh my God, it's like being in a parallel universe where everyone loves poetry! Yeah, so I don't think being peripheral is too bad. It's probably a good place to be.

**Hannah Van Hove:** Absolutely. Could we hear "Nurture" before we open up to questions from the audience?

**Paul Stephenson:** Sure. This is a poem I really had fun with. I didn't know where it would take me.

[*Reads* "Nurture"]

**Audience Question:** Why "tomato"?

**Paul Stephenson:** Get yourself a constraint. Pick a vegetable. Try the same exercise with aubergine or cauliflower. I dare you.

**Audience question:** How do you know when a poem is done?

**Paul Stephenson:** Great question. It's like a Rubik's cube—change one word, the whole thing shifts. Sometimes you put the poem in a drawer for a while. Then revisit with fresh eyes. See what stands out. Try different forms. What does the poem want to be? Play around. As they say, write drunk, edit sober.

**Audience Question:** Could you share something from your last chapter, about turning personal material into a commercial product?

**Paul Stephenson:** Of course. Let me read "Putting It Out There".

[*Reads* "Putting It Out There"]

I was very aware these poems would become a product. They would be marketed and sold. And you can't escape that. But you also have to ask yourself what impact this work will have—on friends, on family, on those left behind. Ultimately, this book is about the living.

**Audience Question:** When you began writing, was publication on your mind?

**Paul Stephenson:** Definitely. Especially during Covid, I was pulling it all together and thinking, "I hope I don't get hit by a bus before this gets published." I wanted it to reach people. It was about preserving the relationship, capturing and celebrating the past, the efforts we made together.

I actually submitted two manuscripts to my publisher. One was a best-of from my previous writing, and one was this. They chose this one. And it felt like a culmination—bringing together all the experiments and ideas from the pamphlets and applying them to something deeply personal.

**Hannah Van Hove:** Thank you, Paul. Let's give you a warm round of applause.

## Postscript

**Hannah Van Hove**: As I was editing this interview, it struck me that I had a similar question to one of the audience members regarding your poem "Nurture", so allow me to pose it here now: What does tomato allow you to do here? And perhaps more generally, what is your relationship towards meaning? I know that's a huge question so let me clarify what I'm getting at: it seems to me there's something about Emily Dickinson's famous line: "tell all the truth but tell it slant" that captures a certain inclination towards meaning in the poems in *Hard Drive*; a sense that you have to approach truth/reality/whatever you want to call it, "slantly", "at an angle"—that, to continue in Dickinson's words, the truth is "Too bright for our infirm Delight" and instead "The Truth must dazzle gradually" (Dickinson)? That perhaps a sideways approach—through repetition, through the use of spacing, through blacking out words, through scoring out words, through elision, or as in "Nurture" and also in the poem "Relationship as Covered Reservoir", through the simultaneous flattening out of a word by using it umpteen times and at the same time, its gathering of a proliferation of meanings, might allow for an approach towards meaning that is indirect, rather than direct.... I wonder whether you could speak a little to this (huge, I know!) idea of meaning and/or truth?

**Paul Stephenson**: Replacing so many words in that poem with "tomato" felt liberating and also rather like a mini-revolt of sorts. I think I was thinking about how we write biographies and about the identity politics that are so ingrained in contemporary poetry. Like in all arts, attention is given to where you are from and how you got there—your trajectory. Everybody is unique, with their own story to tell, so your background is very much your permission to write on certain themes that you have lived and experienced. Authenticity of lived experience is crucial, even if poems may not all be true, but at least speak an emotional truth. But thinking back to myself, I was questioning how much anybody would or should care about the extensive, specific details of my upbringing. Is it that interesting? What if I made up or embellished my biography? Would it matter, and who would know?

Though I've lived abroad for many years, I grew up in what I'd consider quite an ordinary English village, which could be idyllic and pleasant but also stifling and constraining, especially during adolescence when you are going through lots of changes and trying to make sense of the self, perhaps dreaming of escape. Just replacing common, predictable words with "tomato" somehow turned things upside down, made it skewed, topsy-turvy. Some of the things are plausible—watching tomatoes for hours on end, walking around old tomatoes—but others are less so—such as pumping up tomatoes when they go flat. But the conceit enabled me to write on, to find humour and create something visually amusing in the mind's eye.

Importantly, using a random repeat word allowed me to cover stuff up, to write on and around more difficult subject matters by alluding to situations and tensions without tackling them head-on—school, university, early stages of a relationship, etc.

**Hannah Van Hove:** And lastly, what are you currently working on?

**Paul Stephenson**: I recently spent a weekend in Paris in the footsteps of Georges Perec. I had realized that 18–20 October 2024 would be 50 years since he wrote *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* [published as *Tentative d'Épuisement d'Un Lieu Parisien* in 1975] for which he sat for several hours over three days, noting down every detail of the people and place, the traffic, the movement, like a cataloguing of all of human life. It was an incredible experience, and the irony was that I thought I would be the only person with the idea. I ended up bumping into writers, journalists, and authors from all over Europe and even the US who had come on a kind of homage to Perec. Such a surprising and uplifting weekend. I'm hoping to write an essay and publish my own Perecian pages [see Stephenson, "A Re-attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris"].

More generally, I'm working on poems exploring togetherness and the complexities of modern love as you get older in a post-pandemic age of apps and technology, where people have had to renegotiate the self. I think the protagonist of "Hard Drive" goes out into the world, beyond bereavement, and finds that relationships are not as easy as when he was younger. Is he looking for the same thing? Does he really want what he wanted before? People, himself included, have 'baggage' from the past, from living and loving. Do we have less emotional capacity as we age? What are the boundaries of friendship, and when does a relationship grow and move beyond an initial encounter and closeness? Have we moved collectively to new non-traditional ways to be with another person(s)?

**Hannah Van Hove:** Thank you, Paul. It was a real pleasure talking and writing to you about your wonderful debut collection. I wish you all the very best with your new projects!

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