

# Anecdotes About Luciano Iacobelli

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· George Elliott Clarke

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Portrait of Luciano Iacobelli. Oil on panel, 11 x 14 inches, by John Iacobelli (2013).

**Curated by George Elliott Clarke**

*When poet, publisher, artist, and bookseller Luciano Iacobelli passed away in September 2022, deep and grievous was the psychological wound to the Little Italy and wider Toronto collectives of salt-o-the-earth, coffeehouse artistes and hoi polloi, pub-haunting poets. Our lamentations were righteously heaven-shattering and correctly heart-splitting. Compiled here are seven reminiscences about the profound artist and touchy-feely sculptor, adventurous poet and devil-may-care publisher, impassioned pal and judicious critic.*

**Luc: Illuminated**

by GEC

Ignorant that “Luc” signals lucent lucidity, Hollywood and Hoover WANTED-postered “Lucky” Luciano. Naturally!

But because Luc (rhymes with “hooch”) Iacobelli was a teacher alongside my poet-ally, Paul Zemokhol, soon our orbits intersected. Whenever I’d land in The Big Crab Apple in the 1990s, I’d haste to Luc’s bookshop to bag all the Guernica Editions anchoring his shelves.

No miser of light, Luc illuminated letters through lustrous lucubration, even a bookseller’s showoff shoptalk. (His amphitheatre? Gouged outta bookshelves!) A literal “bookie,” the gambling addict (sadly) was also a fabricator of books. Lookit! That technology—that commerce— births a model, enlightened community, eh?

A powerhouse of literary josh and pizzazz, a voice all argot—the tango of slang, his insights were inimitable stilettos thrust home with the brio of a matador. A rambunctious *Gaiety* motivated every flourish of words, his clamorous phrases hammering the thus trammeled air!

Ain’t no orthodox Geometry to near-degrees-of-separation or Venn-diagrams-of-association that a pivotal artist articulates, right? That’s why Luc couldn’t end up a “slippered don” (Walcott) amid a stuffy library, all leather binding and eau-de-vie sniffers.

Each “Luc” product—handmade book, neo-surrealist poem, cast-off-junk-assembled sculpture—be an efficient triumph. Not ever prissy—and never a sedative.

His figures? Rock an unsteady tilt, a groggy undulation—a joggle of decrepit trumpet or fussy jabbering, some rousing patter: The tangible proficiency of the sculptures, the assemblages, all those *Treitschke* (damnably strange) *tchotchkes* (sweet nothings) fashioning an artist-immortal.

Yet, he also be Luciana’s companion and Julian’s sire. Dude: Dazzling, overshadowing....

## **Luciano Iacobelli, Magus**

by Beatriz Hausner

From the outset, Luciano went about brightly. I met him in 1984, inside the neon sign of Dooney’s, which glowed like about-to-expire geraniums. On a fall day. His soul, which likely belonged to an angel, walked ahead of him, and led the way. Luciano was apt to forget a set of wings at the door of the spaces he frequented, in search for answers to the difficult questions our time keeps demanding of us. He held fire in one hand. In his other hand, he clutched a heavy sack, where he carried his gifts to us. There were all the firsts: my first poetry reading, in 1984, organized by him. There were the plus-100 first books he published under his charming imprint LyricalMyrical, objects in themselves that he fashioned through ingenious juxtapositions of materials and means. There were his own extraordinary gifts as a maker and creator of poems, and his more secret paintings and assemblages. He liked to make things happen, germinated collectives. So he brought four of us to form Toronto Word Stage, which engendered Quattro Books. His manner belied the elegance of an Italian aristocrat, and I am certain that the entirety of the world swirled inside those hats he wore with such panache. Luciano Iacobelli, your name invokes the

magic you wore on you, like the garment you've left behind, carelessly thrown on the chair next to where I write. Trembling, I touch this vestige of your person and feel the quivering wings of an angel.

### **Luc Iacobelli: Life Changer!**

by Sasha Manoli

Meeting Luc transformed my life. He challenged me thoroughly and nurtured a core part of who I am. After writing a 50-page manuscript for my first creative writing course with him, he asked me to explain the difference between my writing and that of a monkey plunking a typewriter. I didn't skip a beat; I defended my work: Every word I wrote had meaning! His reaction? A slight, knowing smile. He knew I was serious about my craft, and I could feel respect emanate from him. Luc helped me identify my voice on and off the page. His priceless gift? He helped me see myself for the first time.

Luc taught me his signature, bookmaking technique. When it was time to go to university, I took Creative Writing at Concordia. I asked him if he would allow me to start my own press in Montreal using his style of bookmaking as an attempt to recreate a vibrant and supportive community like the one he'd accustomed me to. He agreed and remained my mentor while I became a resource for other writers.

I shared so many moments with Luc; staying late at SEED chatting about writing and art, making books, going to poetry readings, and to Dooney's: A kaleidoscope of memories from my formative years! Luc was among the most dazzling, intelligent, fun, unique and influential people. I am who I am today because of the time I shared with him, and I know I'm not alone in this sentiment.

### **Dooney's Café and the Strategy of Night**

by Joseph Maviglia

Night... Dooney's Café... Debut site at Bloor and Howland in Toronto's Annex. Smiling fulsomely, Luciano's conversation ran the gamut from a Ray Davies Kinks' punk song to Edgar Allan Poe's "Masque of the Red Death."

Espresso kept us talking so deep into the night, Dooney's couldn't sleep. In the mid-1980s, the café dished cake and coffee from 5 p.m. to midnight. But our summer night parleys propped the doors open unto wee hours.

Originally, a quintet—Saro D'Agostino, Giorgio Di Cicco, Antonino Mazza, Luciano, and myself—pontificated easily; we staged rhyming duels or figured out our rank in the Can Lit aristocracy. We five became "Mediterranea"—giving kick-ass readings. Kicking from a different yard line. Yanking up our parents' other-country past, and strutting up new cadences with a cross-breeding of language—multiculti, academese, Beat-splicing Ginsberg with Gramsci. At parties, we cavorted—like dervishes, like well-muscled Catholics, like our Italian fathers...

Luciano's garb? Sports coat haunting lean black suit. Dashing the dance floor after a week of chalkboards. A Clash-like, sartorial nihilism.

When his dad sickened, we pilgrimaged to Western Hospital. I learned of his papa's opera fanaticism, and we'd sit at Scadding Court Parkette and throw bits of wit at each other.

Once I asked, "What's your line?" He chortled: *Last night I slept strong like a parade!* Laughter bust my gut! What feral invention!

I see Luciano now: Sometimes a lookalike...? Ultimately phantom.... In rhyme....

### **Luciano Iacobelli Is!**

by Al Moritz

Luciano Iacobelli was... It's possible to write—but not to think those words. Luciano Iacobelli *is*. I will meet him coming round a corner again soon. Luciano "was" song itself: poetry doesn't exist without him. It continues and remains perpetual as he does. And yet, as Luciano sings,

*...the hour of departure has arrived  
and we go our ways—I to die and you to live  
which is better God only knows*

Luciano is permanently and necessarily infusing the life of Toronto and its poetry.

He was my friend for 25 years. I first met Luciano nigh 1978 amid several Italo-Canadian poets (I'm DiGiuda on the mother's side) grouped about Giorgio DiCicco at the time he was formulating his seminal anthology, *Roman Candles*. Our set? Giorgio, Luciano, Mary di Michele, Antonino Mazza, and Saro D'Agostino plus several young poets of *alter* ethnicities. Len Gasparini (another Autumn 2022 deceased) joined us sometimes, as did Joe Rosenblatt, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Milton Acorn, a few others of the preliminary generations. We met regularly at a Toronto creperie! Passionate arguments? Well, I recall an appalled Luciano adjudicating an ungentlemanly row between me and Saro over a poem of André Breton's!

Luciano gradually became my greatest friend from the group and one of the greatest I've had. More and more the breadth and depth, the peace and the fervency of his own genius emerged for me, along with closer knowledge of his multi-faceted, tirelessly joyful, tirelessly amused, tirelessly outraged and affirmative approach to poetry and art.

### **Alchemy's Alley-cat**

by Giovanna Riccio

As a poet, artist, educator, publisher and philosopher, Luciano Iacobelli shone as infinitely multi-faceted—pure carbon compressed to brilliance. His accomplishments are numerous and wide-ranging, but his tenacious commitment to *Freedom* inspired me most, for in mind, heart and spirit, Luciano dwelled in self-created *Liberty*. Entering the apartment of my first publisher and generous, compassionate friend, everywhere evident was Art's gypsy-alchemist unencumbered by convention, non-conformist, spontaneous—the constant companion of the restless muse. Each visit engendered fascination with the daring mystery of his assemblages and his walls built of books and populated by sculptures and canvasses. He eschewed furniture and material possessions investing instead, in the bounty Art and the life-of-the-mind bestow. An adventurer attuned to the elusive process of creation as a moment-to-moment unfolding, he embodied the vitality of *Chance* and the open road. Rambling through the streets and alleys of Toronto and his beloved Little Italy, he salvaged “garbage” redolent with the buried glow of *Possibility*. Once home, he mined the chemistry of his finds until, alchemically, he transformed everyday junk via a jarring relationship that tendered artworks of provocative humour and ethereal beauty. As a poet, Luciano meandered within and without himself unearthing the images, ideas and emotions that would generate ever-evolving, lyrically gritty poems until visual art and poetry synthesized into what he called, “graphic writing.” His parting opus titled, *Noctograms*—night writing—glyphs and translates the nightlife of the soul into oracular, open-ended illuminations.

### **Teacher, Poet, Amico**

by C. Paul Zemokhol

Early in our friendship, Luciano and I started talking about poetry and teaching, and never stopped. I would often read new poems to him before anyone else had heard them. He could tell what was working in a poem and what wasn't; if it was coming from a genuine place or just overreaching; and he could be direct – he called one of my early lyrics “a Hallmark card.” I could accept such critiques because, from the beginning, he was one of the greatest supporters of my writing.

Luciano loved teaching and inspired his students. He would also nurture my poetical palette by recommending poets and lending me books from his substantial library. I always looked forward to returning the books and discussing the poems with him. His extensive knowledge of literature was allied to an excellent memory and a curious, receptive mind.

When Luciano became my editor and publisher, our editing sessions became enjoyable get-togethers. We mixed discussing the manuscript with discussing our lives and everything else. As an editor, he had a singular ability to evaluate individual poems and to envisage a book's final arrangement.

There are still times when I think of asking Luc a question about a poet or a poem (or about one of his many other fields of expertise). When I realize that he’s gone, I sag a little bit and sigh. To have lived poetry within our friendship was his greatest gift to me.

Click [here](#) to read Luciano Iacobelli's obituary.

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