

Published in *Prairie Fire*, vol. 33, no. 4, winter 2012–13.

The Anne Szumigalski Memorial Lecture

Coming (back) to Poetry

Robert Currie

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'd like to dedicate this talk to the memory of Andy Suknaski, who died on May 3rd, 2012 in Moose Jaw. Andy was a talented visual artist as well as an exceptional poet, and in his prime he was a kind of wandering one-man publishing house, churning out chapbooks from Wood Mountain or Deer Lodge or wherever else he happened to be. What an inspiration he was for the rest of us.

Now let me begin by sharing my fascination with the way poets see poetry, with the way they define it and describe it, with how poetic their prose on that particular topic is. For example, Patrick Friesen says that poetry is “a way of thinking, a way of being. It's life-blood. Jugular music.”¹ Stephen Dobyns believes that “a poem is a window that hangs between two or more human beings who otherwise live in darkened rooms.”² According to Irving Layton, “A poem when you are done with it, must be able to get off the page, turn the doorhandle, and walk directly into the lives of people.”³ Lorri Neilsen Glenn says that “poetry remains the erotic hearth we are drawn to . . . it is a sacred sort of space, a state of being and of heart, tender, raw, and often exhilarating. . . . And,” she adds, “poetry is the grace we can find in the everyday.”⁴ Molly Peacock takes only a slightly different approach. “Poetry,” she says, “is the art that responds to the anxiety of living.”⁵ Rosemary Griebel notes that “each of us comes to a poem listening / for perceptive words that will crack open / the meaning of this world.”⁶ I think you'll agree that poets often have fascinating ideas about this art that means so much to us. Yes, but it's equally fascinating to learn how they come to poetry, these artists who so often go on to dedicate their lives to their art.

It's no surprise to learn that some young men turn to poetry for the same reason that others begin playing rock and roll. They hope that it will provide them with a way to impress the girls, or, better yet, to win the girls. Let me give you two examples that may surprise you, both examples from poets whose work you probably know. The older of the two had this to say: “I began poetry as a substitute for sex—I was a shy teen-ager with buck teeth and a repressed desire to emulate Jefferey Farnol's heroes in my relations with women . . .”⁷ Now Jefferey Farnol isn't much known today, but a century ago he was one of the best-selling authors in the world, famous for his swashbuckling romances featuring honourable, handsome heroes, innocent heroines and, of course, the most villainous of villains. Who can blame a young poet for wanting to be the kind of hero who might win a beautiful heroine? The second young writer said this about his beginnings: “When I started falling in love with girls, all of whom were older and more mature than I was, I began to imitate various forms of writing, in the hope of bluffing my way into their hearts.”⁸ The first quotation is from Fred Cogswell, who for fifteen years served as an editor for *The Fiddlehead* and later as the sole editor and publisher of Fiddlehead Poetry Books; at one time or another Fred probably published the work of more than a few in this audience. The other quotation comes from Gary Geddes, well-known for his own poetry and for various versions of *Fifteen Canadian Poets*, from which many of us learned our early CanLit lessons. How good it was for all of us that their desire to charm the ladies brought these two men to a lifelong love of poetry.

Others come to poetry in vastly different ways. Some lucky ones have composed poetry as long as they can

remember. I think of one child who had begun to consider poetry her life work even before she was old enough to read and write. She had—as she was quick to emphasize—“the great good luck to be born into a family whose chief amusements were language games.”⁹ One of those games was, in fact, “the poetry game,” which required players to write poems based on folded papers handed them, papers which contained a word they must use and a question they must answer in a poem. It’s no wonder that this child began to glory in her play with the multitude of words floating in her head. She was soon finding ways to make them sing and dance, turning them into poems that never saw the page, keeping them in her memory until she had the chance to recite them to her aunts. Later, when she learned to read and write, she found she could no longer memorize her own poems, and writing new poems was a struggle involving false starts, crumpled pages and many tears. Luckily for her, something which later came to be called “wit-walking” was an art practised in her family for generations. This involved the method of so-called modern freefall workshops, letting ideas run freely and take her where they would, and later looking for the subjects, themes and characters that might inspire a full-fledged work of art. She soon learned that even when no complete poem results, “there is still the exercise itself to rejoice in: words tumbling from the mind and seeding themselves higgledy-piggledy on the paper like plants in a wild-flower garden.”¹⁰ In her case, of course, many wonderful poems did result, and this child grew up to be that remarkable poet who is memorialized in this lecture series.

When Anne Szumigalski moved from England to the big muddy badlands of southern Saskatchewan, it was not that enormous non-English landscape that disappointed her, but the fact that she had come to a land that didn’t know its own poets. That would begin to change at least in part thanks to Anne—because of her poems, her teaching, her mentorship—in short, her inspiration and example, for she was perhaps the most influential poet in the history of this province. It’s interesting to note that Anne said, “it is the sense of community that I found in Saskatchewan rather than the sense of space and isolation that has most influenced my work.”¹¹

Not every writer takes such a direct route to poetry. I think now of a boy whose beginnings as a writer go back to age ten when he was the proprietor, journalist *and* delivery boy of the *Home Street Clarion*, each issue of which he wrote by hand and personally delivered to his Home Street neighbours. When issue number three caused a neighbourhood scandal by revealing that a couple down the street belonged to a nudist colony, his mother brought his journalism career to an abrupt end.

Shortly after that, luck played a part in turning his attention to poetry. He won a prize from a fish pond at a church bazaar, and that prize was a copy of an old poetry text. If I remember rightly it was the text with that most deadly of ambiguous titles, *Enduring Poetry*. At any rate, it was a faulty copy with many blank pages. One night this young lad started to read a poem in the book, but instead of an ending there was just another blank page. That’s when he began writing his own endings for the poems. Before long, he was filling other blank pages with complete poems of his own, and he was hooked; after all, there were his poems side by side with those of Wordsworth, Browning and Tennyson.

In high school, chance played a further part in his journey to poetry when he noticed that his social studies text picked Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* as one of the best books of all time; he figured with that title it had to be funny; imagine his shock when he saw that what he was borrowing from the library was a monumental epic poem from the fourteenth century. But he liked the “snazzy lingo” and—as he put it—“sailed through that whopper of a book / in I’d say only about two or three months.”¹²

I think perhaps that reading Dante helped make Gary Hyland the remarkable poet he became, the author of eight books, including *Love of Mirrors*, which cleaned up at the 2008 Saskatchewan Books Awards, winning not only the Poetry Award but also the Book of the Year Award. As you may know, Gary was the man who created the Saskatchewan Festival of Words, and was a founder of Coteau Books and the Sage Hill Writing Experience. He was one of the most influential arts activists Saskatchewan has ever known, but despite his endless hours of volunteer work he always found time to write his poems. Even when he was bed-ridden with Lou Gehrig’s disease and could only respond by blinking, he was using an alphabet board and still working with a friend on revising a final suite of poems.

Let me cite another example of the part chance can play in bringing people to poetry. This is the case of a married teenager earning a bare-bones living doing deliveries for a pharmacist. Once, while delivering a

prescription to an elderly man, this young fellow was invited into the house while the old gent went searching for his chequebook. Looking around the living room, the young guy noticed there were books everywhere, not just in a personal library carefully arranged in a wall of shelves, but on the coffee table, the end tables, even on the floor. Checking more closely, he discovered a little magazine called *Poetry* and a book called *The Little Review Anthology*, both of them full of poems. He was astounded by his discovery and immediately began to wish they were both his own. More astounding was the fact that the old gentleman noticed his interest and gave him the magazine and the book, telling him that maybe he'd write something himself some day, and he'd need to know where to send it. Well, Raymond Carver did write some things himself. Eventually, he did send his work to *Poetry*, and the editors agreed to publish six of his poems. Of course, one can argue that Carver would have become a writer even if he'd never met that generous book-lover, but here's what he said about that encounter: "I was just a pup then, but nothing can explain, or explain away, such a moment: the moment when the very thing I needed most in my life—call it a polestar—was casually, generously given to me. Nothing remotely approaching that moment has happened since."¹³

How many children, one wonders, write little poems about their pets or about playing in the snow and then as adults never write again? How many high school cheer-leaders write poems that the cheer-leading squad can chant in support of their school's football or basketball teams, and then give up writing as soon as they graduate? In both cases, a good many, I suspect. Lorna Crozier was a kid who did that kind of writing. Was it chance that made her different—or something else? One can make an argument for chance because, in her first full-time job, teaching in Glaslyn, Saskatchewan, she was lucky enough to have a principal who wrote poems. Lorna valued that relationship, for now at noon hours and recesses she had someone with whom to discuss poetry, each serving as audience, critic and fan of the other's work. Two people keeping poetry alive.

Nor was that the end of the role of luck in Lorna Crozier's early poetry career. When she was twenty-three, she met her first live writer, Ken Mitchell, who had come to Swift Current to conduct a creative writing session organized by the high school English department where Lorna now taught. Everyone attending had to submit a piece of creative writing ahead of time, and everyone felt trepidation about doing that. The fear was groundless, for Ken offered gentle criticism to everyone—everyone but Lorna. He said he was sure he'd never seen a poem from her. She was disappointed, of course, but she lied and told him it didn't matter. A month later she was surprised to receive an air-mail letter from Greece. It was from Ken Mitchell with the news that he'd found her poem. "It's good," he wrote, and added, "Have you ever sent any poetry out? Why don't you send this and some of your more polished pieces to *Grain*?"¹⁴ In truth, Lorna had no "more polished pieces," but she sat down and wrote one, and in due time Caroline Heath accepted both poems for *Grain*. All this because Ken Mitchell chanced to find her missing poem under some papers on his desk.

Is it possible that, if he hadn't made that lucky find, Lorna Crozier would never have become the poet she is today? I don't think so. Though Lorna grew up in a working-class family that didn't keep books around the house, she somehow—and very early—developed a love of reading and writing. Years later she would say, "It was just some itch that I was born with, to put words down on paper. I can't think of any other way to describe it."¹⁵ Lorna also recalled an incident from grade one when she wrote a poem about a dying dog and her teacher tacked it up on the bulletin board for everyone to read. After that, it seemed that people expected her to do something with words. Or maybe—and this is what I believe—she expected it of herself.

At this point, perhaps, a few words about my own beginnings with poetry might be appropriate. I was the kind of a kid who'd been writing little stories as long as he could remember, but who'd never even considered trying to write a poem—except once, when forced to for a class assignment in grade eight or nine. However, at university I was lucky enough to take a CanLit class, and that prompted a change. Here's a poem about what happened next:

Contact

In the U. of S. bookstore, pricing texts for intersession,
I'm drawn to a wire rack, a rugged face, slashes of red

and gold across a thoughtful visage. I seize
the book, the price so low I know for sure
there's been a grave mistake, I rush
to the till, fling down my cash before
some harried clerk can raise the price.
On the first bench outside I begin
A Red Carpet for the Sun.

Wandering in the stacks where I once lost
all my powers of concentration, finding
Desmond Pacey's *Creative Writing in Canada*
bookmarked with what seemed to be a snapshot
of the German actress, Maria Schell, her smile
enough to melt ice from January windshields,
today I spot a pamphlet, yellowed pages
bound by staples, *When We Are Young.*

Tonight I jot down an image, play
with words, try to give them shape.
There's been no official diagnosis,
but already I know I'm afflicted
with a fever that I pray will
rage through all my days.¹⁶

Well, I'd have to say that fever is still raging, and I thank Irving Layton and Raymond Souster for their fine examples that set the fever off.

If chance played its part in the way I and these other writers first came to poetry, I have to think that they would have made that trip at other times, in other ways. Each of them had a burning desire to write. More than a desire, perhaps. Isn't a need to write a common factor here? Perhaps the question I should be asking isn't how writers come to poetry, but this: what keeps them coming back again and again?

Certainly, there's the excitement of reading in a little magazine for the first time the poem that you have written. There it is, in print, with your name upon it, ready to be read by people you'll never know, validated somehow by that process. And that is nothing compared to the thrill of holding your first book in your hands, staring at the well-designed cover—there's your title, your name in that space where the author's name belongs, yes, it really is *your* book—then the thrill of riffling through the pages, every one containing a poem of yours, perhaps even your photo looking out at you from the book's final page. It has a heft to it, a certain bookish smell, this book of yours; it is, in fact, quite wonderful.

Better still, perhaps, is that feeling of being accepted into the community of poets, for the comradeship of poets is special. Meeting them at readings and workshops, joining them in poetry groups, befriending kindred souls who value just as much as you the magic of language, its music, its rhythms and its subtleties. I personally have been blessed to belong to a poetry group that began in 1975 as the Moose Jaw Movement. That name was partly a joke: we figured if George Bowering and those west coast poets could get their shit together and call it *TISH*, the least we could do was have a Moose Jaw Movement. But the name was also serious: our way of saying you didn't have to live in Vancouver, Toronto or Montreal to be a poet. Over the years the group, which is now called The Poets Combine, has evolved in extraordinary ways, but it's always kept me coming back to poetry. In fact, it's been a touchstone of my life. I suspect that some of you belong to poetry groups that matter just as much to you. Where else can we find conversation so concerned with diction, with imagery and metaphor, that it constantly fires our imaginations?

There's something else that matters to a lot of poets, and that's the hope of writing something that will last.

The best poetry, after all, is timeless. When I began writing poems, I never thought about such lofty ambitions, but then one day I read a story by a writer I'd never heard of before, the Hungarian novelist Lajos Zilahy. He told a powerful tale which I'll attempt to summarize. Its protagonist is John Kovacs, a journeyman carpenter, who falls ill and dies suddenly, in October of 1874. A man who left behind neither wife, nor child, only a distant cousin. Five years after Kovacs's death, the old carpenter for whom he worked died, and nine years later so did the old woman in whose shed he lived. Fourteen years after the death of John Kovacs, his cousin—his only living relative—died too. Then in 1895 a group of drunken men in a pub got to reminiscing about their military service and how they'd once forced a new recruit to stick his head in the oven and while he was down on all fours they'd paddled his behind. After much raucous laughter—and some difficulty—one of them remembered the name of that recruit. John Kovacs. And that was the last time ever his name was spoken aloud. Four years later an old woman lay terrified in a lonely hospital room because she knew she was dying. Looking back upon her life, she remembered briefly a gentle young man who once romanced her on a summer's night, and that was the last time anyone on this earth thought of John Kovacs. The next year a fire destroyed the rectory that held the records of his birth and death. In the hard winter of 1901 a ragged man who feared that he would freeze to death stole two crosses from the village cemetery to build a fire. One of them marked the grave of John Kovacs. Years later, in 1920, a lawyer made an inventory of his father's estate, checking every scrap of paper in every drawer. One paper he threw out was an old receipt of payment for two chairs, signed by John Kovacs. That crumpled receipt ended up on the ground in a pouring rain, the rain gradually washing away the signature—except for the letter V, where John Kovacs had pressed hard with his pen.

Then the rain washed that away too.

And in that instant—forty-nine years after his death—the life of the journeyman carpenter ceased to exist and forever disappeared from this earth . . . But for this . . .¹⁷

Well, I don't know how that story affects you, but it made me think of the possibility of writing something that might just possibly outlast its author. A poem that might endure, one whose music might come ringing down the ages like a bell tolling somewhere far across the snow on a clear winter's night. A romantic idea, no doubt, but one that has a certain appeal for many a poet—though we all recognize how slim our chances are.

Now let's turn to something else that keeps us coming back to poetry: the physical reality of sitting down with a piece of paper or a computer and writing a poem. Struggling with that attempt to create something from nothing, and then settling in for the long run of revision, returning to the poem again and again in the hope that we can make it something that others will want to read, the hope—dare I say it?—that we can create a lasting record of something which would otherwise disappear. Time and again we face the challenge of shaping an experience in such a way that others will not just read about it, but fully share that experience. We try our best to create images they will see, emotions they will feel, ideas they can share, always with the hope our language will take their breath away. No one grows rich by writing poetry, but that wonderful struggle to write the poem does enrich our lives.

It's the joy of working on the poem that brings us back to poetry. If you don't believe me, listen to what Ted Kooser says about working on a poem: "Revision, and I mean extensive revision, is the key to transforming a mediocre poem into a work that can touch and even alter a reader's heart. It's the biggest part of the poet's job description. . . You can learn to love tinkering with drafts of poems till a warm hand from somewhere above you reaches down, unscrews the top of your head, and drops in a solution that blows your ears off."¹⁸ Yes, poetry offers surprising pleasures, but the greatest thrill comes while we're writing, doing the actual work of wrestling with the poem. Then we're transported beyond ourselves, the boring world burned away as we stoke the fires of creation, straining for that magic flame that might transform our words to art. There's the work that matters—and the joy that returns again and again.

Let me make a statement that is true for most of us: poetry is a spiritual and emotional necessity. I believe that just as we are graced by loving friends, we are graced by poetry. Mary Oliver makes that point with lyrical dexterity. "Poetry," she says, "is a life-cherishing force. . . For poems are not words, after all, but fires for the

cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry.”¹⁹

When I think of the necessity of poetry, I tend to think again of Raymond Carver. Here was a man whose short stories were often compared to those of Chekhov, a major American writer who changed the way the world thought about short fiction, a man who chose to write poetry although his fans argued that his reputation came from fiction and that that was where he should spend his time. Carver, however, wrote what he had to write. As you no doubt know, Raymond Carver was someone who had conquered his alcoholism, only to have his life cut short by cancer. In his last year he received intense treatment first for lung cancer, then for a brain tumour and, after a brief respite, had tumours reappear in his lungs. In the final months before he died on August 2nd, 1988, he found himself giving more and more of his time to poetry. Writing poetry had always been much more than a change of pace from writing fiction. It was essential. Tess Gallagher was Carver’s loving partner during his last ten years, and here’s how she describes the importance of poetry in his life: “. . . as his companion in that life, I’m glad to have helped him keep his poetry alive for the journey, for the comfort and soul-making he drew from it so crucially in his too-early going.”²⁰ Poetry—a necessity indeed.

And now I’d like to return for a few moments to the more mundane idea that it’s contact with other poets that keeps so many of us coming back to poetry, meeting poets we admire, reading their work, learning that they accept us into the valued community of poetry. Let me back up that belief with a story from the summer of 1974. There was a poetry reading at Fort San, the former T.B. sanatorium that was once the home of the Saskatchewan Summer School of the Arts. The site of the reading was to be the little one-room schoolhouse where some of the creative writing classes took place, but it was a muggy evening in July and the heat drove everyone outside onto a patch of grass encircled by trees and caraganas. There were perhaps three dozen people, old and young, staff and students, clustered around the fire that someone started to drive away mosquitoes. There, for an hour, Anne Szumigalski and an emerging writer read their poems. What struck that emerging writer was the fact that, with Anne reading, the heat and bugs were soon forgotten. But not the poems. Here, he thought, was a poet who made all the wild and poetic definitions of poetry ring true. Her poems worked at the gut level—you really did read them with your nerves and you’d be crazy to try to translate them into prose. And what’s more, *he* was reading with her, and she was treating him like an equal. Over the years he would read with her again, introduce her on a number of occasions, even appear with her on a panel. They would become friends, in fact, though not close friends, for he regarded her with too much awe for that to happen. He was a great admirer, not only of her poetry, but also of her leadership, the way she inspired so many other poets, and not just those who met with her in the Saskatoon poetry group or studied in her workshops. Sometimes, when you admire someone’s poetry, there’s one poem that takes on special significance, and Anne’s poem, “Nettles,” did that for him. Anne knew how much he loved the poem, and he thought it must have pleased her, for in his copy of *Instar* she wrote the inscription “love in a field of nettles.” As a matter of fact, Anne used to kid him that he should read the poem at her funeral. He told her he’d be happy to do so if she’d only wait at least twenty years for that event.

Sadly, she couldn’t wait, and in 1999, when she was far too young, she died. The writer of whom I’m speaking drove to Saskatoon for her funeral, wondering all the while, What if she wasn’t kidding? He was too shy to bring it up, of course, but folded inside the pocket of his jacket was a copy of “Nettles,” just in case. The funeral was a fine testament to a wonderful person, and there was no call for him to read her poem.

A few years later, he was going through another book of Anne’s and came across an inscription his memory had somehow managed to repress. There, on August 7th, 1994 Anne had written, “To Bob—who has promised to read a poem at my funeral.” Yes, I was that Bob, and I’ll never know whether she was still kidding me—though I seem to remember an impish grin and think perhaps she was. Still, I felt terrible because I may have let her down. A few weeks after reading that inscription I took a trip up to Saskatoon and drove out to Block 70a of Saskatoon’s Woodlawn Cemetery and found the grave that says, “Poet, Pioneer, Prairie Woman.” The sun was shining brightly that afternoon, a prairie wind blowing from the west, flowing down the slope from the house where Anne once lived, where so many friends and relatives had met to reminisce about her after the funeral. For a long time I stood silently beside her grave, the sunlight stinging my eyes. I read the poem for her then, and I’d like to read it for you now.

Nettles

When I am old
I will totter along broken pavements
the strings of my boots undone
smelling a bit strong like any
fat old woman who has forgotten
which day is Tuesday
(my bath night if you like)

stiff my clothes from old dirt
not sweat at my age mumbling
the cracked enamel mug

eleven cats playing
in my weedy yard drinking
my little ration of milk
with me and withy withy
the cats circle around my house
at night singly filing
in and sleeping on the
saggy stained bed and the chair
and the crumby tabletop

One day they will find me dead
O dead dead
A stinking old bundle of
dead

and in my hand
a peeled wand
and in my ear a cricket sitting
telling me stories and predictions

and the time of night ²¹

Reading that poem by her grave, I wasn't at all sure I'd paid off my debt to Anne, but I did feel very much a part of that community which gives its allegiance to poetry, the one art we come back to again and again because we value it so highly.

May that art long bind us all together.

NOTES

1. Patrick Friesen, "Jugular Music," *Freelance* (November/December 1998): 7.
2. Steven Dobyns, *Best Words, Best Order* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), xii.
3. Irving Layton, Foreword to *The Tightrope Walker* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978), 9.
4. Lorri Neilsen Glenn, *Threading Light: Explorations in Loss and Poetry* (Regina: Hagios Press, 2011), 117.
5. Molly Peacock, Prologue to *The Best Canadian Poetry in English, 2010*, ed. Lorna Crozier (Toronto: Tightrope Books, 2010), vii.
6. Rosemary Griebel, "Silence Broken," *Yes* (Calgary: Frontenac House, 2011), 55.
7. Fred Cogswell, "Happy Poet," *Salt* #10 (Winter 1973-74): 2.

8. Gary Geddes, "Letter from the West Coast," *Salt* #11 (Summer-Fall 1974): 2.
9. Anne Szumigalski, *The Word, The Voice, The Text* (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1990), 33.
10. *Ibid.*, 58.
11. Anne Szumigalski, "Beginnings," *A Woman Clothed in Words*, ed. Mark Abley (Regina: Coteau Books, 2012), 22.
12. Gary Hyland, "Deke and Dante," *Love of Mirrors* (Regina: Coteau Books, 2008), 33.
13. Raymond Carver, "Some Prose on Poetry," *A New Path to the Waterfall* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989), 71.
14. Lorna Uher (Crozier), "Beginnings," *Salt* #15 (Fall 1976): 4.
15. Lorna Crozier, "Against the Grain," *Books in Canada*, date unknown, 14.
16. Robert Currie, "Contact," *Running in Darkness* (Regina: Coteau Books, 2006), 37.
17. Lajos Zilahy, "But For This," *The Writer's Craft*, ed. Frederic A. Birmingham (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1966), 248-251.
18. Ted Kooser, *The Poetry Home Repair Manual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 16-17.
19. Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1994), 122.
20. Tess Gallagher, Introduction to *A New Path to the Waterfall*, Raymond Carver (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988), xxx-xxxi.
21. Anne Szumigalski, "Nettles," *Woman Reading in Bath* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada Ltd., 1974), 82.