



## A Poem Can: Poetic Encounters


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### ABSTRACT

All my adult life I have been a language and literacy educator in school and university classrooms. And for most of my adult life I have also been a poet. I read and write poetry; I teach poetry; I write about teaching poetry and about why poetry is important for living creatively in the world. In my poems I seek to remain open to possibilities for living poetically. I seek to see with the eyes of the heart and to hear with the ears of the heart. In a sequence of poems, citations, and ruminations, I ponder the significance of poetry.

*What I felt when I wrote my first, clumsy poem was that the words were creating a world, not describing a pre-existing one. (Orr, 2002a, pp. 143–144)*

What would happen if  
all the poets in all the world  
suddenly disappeared,  
grew silent, lost their voices?

 live in language, and language lives in me. I am awash in language, espoused and exposed in language. While others are seeking election, or building towers, or seeking cures for diseases, or overseeing fast-food franchises, or inventing apps we cannot live without, I read, write, and teach poetry. I have enjoyed the immense privilege of pursuing an academic career at the University of British Columbia for more than a quarter century. UBC letterhead declares that the university is “a place of mind,” and, without doubt, it is. I am proud to be a professor in this internationally renowned “place of mind,” but I still wonder what might unfold if the university boldly pronounced

itself “a place of mindfulness.” I choose, deliberately and imaginatively, to live mindfully in the “place of mind.” UBC also has a longstanding Latin motto: *Tuum Est*, or “it is up to you.” I like this motto because it reminds me that I am daily making creative decisions about how I choose to live artfully, poetically, spiritually, intellectually, and heartfully.

Heaney (1995) writes:

I had already begun a journey into the wideness of the world. This in turn became a journey into the wideness of language, a journey where each point of arrival—whether in one’s poetry or one’s life—turned out to be a stepping stone rather than a destination... (p. 11)

Like Heaney I know how journeying in the wideness of the world entails “a journey into the wideness of language.” I have been reading and writing poetry for decades. I am never sure that I understand very much or that I have much to say, but I am compelled to promote poetry. Why is a poem significant? Do we really need poems, or is that just a poet’s hope for endorsement and response? What can a poem do? Like Dawn (2013) in her moving memoir, *How Poetry Saved My Life*, I hold fast to the creative energy of poetry for helping us live with hope and wellness in the world. Dawn asks, “What does it mean to be given the rare and privileged opportunity to have a voice? To me, it means possibility and responsibility” (p. 13). As I ruminate on this “possibility and responsibility,” I consider four ways I can complete the sentence stem: A poem can....

## 1. A poem can heal.

under a moon, almost full,  
I am learning to listen  
for cherry blossoms  
like a new alphabet  
for calling out love

I have known much brokenness in my life. I wear the wounds and scars of many decisions, disappointments, desires, debts, and dreams. I turned to poetry as a young man whose life seemed to be swirling out of control. I was tangled in one crisis after another. I wrote in a journal, seeking some explanation or narration for the chaos that simultaneously sapped my energy like a heavy cloud or tossed me about like a scarecrow in a whirlwind. As I wrote in my journal, I slowly learned that writing poetry can be healing. Orr (2002b) promotes the “enormous transformative

power” (p. 6) of poetry and story-making because they help us “to live” (p. 21). In all my writing, I am seeking ways to live with wellness. I heartily agree with Neilsen Glenn (2011) that, “poetry is the grace we can find in the everyday” (p. 117). All my life I have been searching. I am just never sure if I know what I am searching for. Like Gide (1970), “all through my life I have never sought to know myself; that is to say I have never sought myself” (p. 197). I search, but I am not searching “to know myself.” I search in order to live, to become, to explore possibilities in a kind of creative wanderlust. I am engaged in “the perpetual and elusive process of becoming” (p. 197). Poetry is my companion on the journey.

### Thirteen Meditations in the Dentist’s Chair

1

in the liminal space of February  
I take stock like a shopkeeper:  
    go to the dentist  
    buy tires for the CRV  
    remember colleagues  
    who might need prayer

2

beginning the day  
with a root canal  
    reminds me  
    how much  
    I love life

3

there are  
    many kinds of love  
and I have been blessed  
    to know some,  
    likely far more  
        than many  
but long love  
    lasting love  
love shaped on a last  
    is the love  
I thank God for  
    daily

4

we join God  
    in prayer  
not because we need  
to remind God  
or persuade God  
or cajole God  
like an inattentive parent  
checking Facebook  
but because God  
invites us to enter  
the divine energy  
of endless creation

5

sitting in Dr. Carter's chair  
I pray for friends:  
    Harry is dying in Maple Ridge  
    Regina is living with cancer  
    William is dying in North Van  
    Doris is living with cancer

6

Carrie claims nothing means  
    anything anymore  
but doesn't everything mean  
    something, perhaps  
we have forgotten how to be

7

what if my prayers are  
    foolish and futile,  
offered into the stratosphere  
    like an expulsion of air?

what if there is no God?

8

prayer is a way of breathing  
oxygen spirit pneuma

prayer is a way of leaning into  
the world, refusing to surrender

9

I don't know what prayer is  
but in the moments of each day  
something won't let me go,  
something tantalizing,  
desire's constant goad

10

perhaps prayer is a message  
tapped in Morse code  
on the stone walls of our cells

11

at a conference in San Francisco  
with thousands of other educators  
one colleague said, I am  
suspicious of anyone  
who talks about hope

12

would I stop praying  
even if somebody  
proved definitively God  
doesn't exist?

13

on this gray wet day in Lent  
while the world rotates  
with slow heavy rhythms,  
I offer a brief prayer  
as I remember you fondly,  
often, a hallowed haunting

## 2. A poem can teach us.

may our teaching  
sing with the vital voices  
of poets in love, longing  
for the possibilities  
of words for translating  
each day's demands

It is a marvellous privilege to be a teacher—to engage daily with others in reading and writing, talking and listening, making and interpreting. I am now a Facebook friend with former students I taught in the 1970s. They were 12 or 13 years old when I first met them in our grade seven classroom. I was 22. From the stories they post on Facebook, I know that their stories have been at least as complicated and tangled as mine. I wonder what we learned together. I remember the copious worksheets and notes on the blackboard and lists of rules, definitions, and facts. I was always seeking to control the curriculum, the classroom, the commotion, the chaos. Gide (1970) reminds me that, “we are deceived by words, for language imposes on us more logic than often exists in life; and that the most precious part of ourselves is that which remains unformulated” (p. 197). I needed more poetry when I began teaching. Poetry is not wedded (or welded) to logic. While poetry can certainly avail of the rhetorical purposes and processes of logical thinking and discourse, poetry thrives on imagery, music, intuition, imagination, indirection, and silence. Poetry works with form in order to challenge formula and formulaic uses of language.

### Heavy Work

*In your poetry language is doing the heavy work.*  
(anonymous reviewer)

a

deciding what to leave  
in heavy work

b

belonging longing to be

c

instead of being in opposition  
I want to be in apposition

**d**

there is no prize in surprize

**e**

what happened happened

**f**

fun fundament fundamentalism

forgets the fundament of fun

**g**

untangling the knot in monotony metonymy

**h**

how are you? well you?

well I think

not sure? not really

not really? a real knot

**i**

my calling is to love words

in their mystery

**j**

a poem is wild with longing

the longing for light

and night

**k**

I want to live

in the world

like a word

that lives love

**l**

angry with acronyms: IT, clRcle, FGPS FSC

acrimonious acronyms arousing arachnophobia

**m**

morning mourning moaning Monday moaning

**n**

aesthetic

writing life into meaning

an/aesthetic

writing meaning into life

**o**

if I write on this page without ink,  
am I writing? can I think without ink?

**p**

I carry my working class baggage  
like a turtle shell  
Sisyphus' rock  
a hoarder's U-Haul

**q**

I have wrapped myself in a quilt of guilt

**r**

consumed, but not defined  
by regrets still  
leaning into each day's hope

**s**

it was a dark and stormy  
morning all the difference

**t**

is life a run-on sentence?

**u**

when I receive a speeding ticket,  
I include it in my CV as a citation



v

my daily planner fills up faster  
than a Newfoundland backyard  
in a November snowstorm

w

delusions of both  
gravity and levity

x

after his wife Ruth died, a neighbour said,  
he is now ruthless

y

yearning for learning  
yearning for you   your yearning  
learning with yearning

z

deciding what to leave  
          out   heavy work

### 3. A poem can show us the way.

poetry is fired  
in the alchemy  
of the alphabet  
where letters know  
our stories steeped  
in autumn's hope

I grew up in Newfoundland where winter is typically long, where the wind can stir up a snowstorm without warning. I have often leaned into winter storms, seeking my way in the wind-whipped snow that renders everything white and formless. I have been lost in snowstorms. I have been lost in many stories, too. On countless occasions, I have not been able to see the beginning of my day's journey, and I have certainly not been able to see any destination I might be hoping for, any destination waiting for me. Poetry is a companion on the way. Poetry accompanies me on the journey of

being and becoming. Parini (2008) notes that, “the truth of poetry is symbolic truth, in that it cannot be verified by conventional means. It differs massively from scientific or philosophical truth, both of which make truth claims that lie outside the boundaries of poetry” (p. 100). To engage with poetry is to live in the heart’s way, to acknowledge the truthfulness of emotion and experience as significant teachers. We read and write poetry because poetry weaves language in texts that speak to us and move us and tantalize us. But, as Parini claims, “the poem is also a labyrinth. One makes a journey through the poem, from beginning to end, moving within the space of the work, its boundaries, tracking its labyrinth or pattern” (pp. 100–101). Like each living day, we seek the way in a labyrinth. Poetry can show us the way.

### Fragments or Fractals

like a line of poetry  
seeking its apt shape  
on the page, may you  
follow the light  
of poetry calling you

+

does everything have a voice,  
singing a song we need to hear?

+

semantic semiotic symbolic somatic

+

like you can’t put new wine  
in old wine skins, new ways of  
knowing need new kinds of writing

+

what is the *con* in context?

+

is the glamour in grammar  
a magical evocation  
of hopeful possibilities?

+

what is the etymology of nincompoop?

+

beginning a new cliché:  
love makes the world go Mobius

+

found poem  
(did it know it was lost?)

+

a poem is porous  
but not poor

+

what is the *syn* in syntax?

+

he lost his story  
and with it, his way

+

since my life is a collection  
of short stories I will  
begin a new draft

+

the root of truth is play

+

what is the middle of a muddle?

+

fund (past tense of fun)

+

love is indefinable, and hence poets  
are always seeking to define it

+

what do you hear when  
you listen to a flower?

#### 4. A poem can linger.

the early evening light  
in my neighbour's cedar  
invites me to be still

When I moved to the University of British Columbia in 1990, I moved into an office in Ponderosa Annex E, and during 25 years, I gathered many books and memories. Recently, I packed up the remnants of my old UBC office and moved to a new location in a new building where I am beginning new stories. The new building is called Ponderosa Commons. My UBC offices have always been located near a gigantic Ponderosa pine. My Department Head saw me looking out my new office window, attending to the Ponderosa pine that animates my new view, and he wondered if a poem might be coming soon. Of course!

#### Pondering the Ponderosa Pine

*My work is rooted in silence.  
It grows out of deep beds  
of contemplation, where words,  
which are living things,  
can form and re-form  
into new wholes.  
(Jeanette Winterson)*

for more than twenty-five years you have greeted me  
on treks to Scarfe for meetings and more meetings,  
or seeking coffee, the high-octane fuel of scholars,  
or sitting in your shade, sipping coffee, pondering  
if I really need to attend another meeting

I will not render you a metaphor  
in this poem  
I will not anthropomorphize you  
like a Disney cartoon  
I will not sentimentalize your saga of survival  
from weather, pests, and chainsaws  
I will not pretend hermeneutically  
I know your essence

I will not claim I can name  
your existence in

post-structuralist  
post-materialist  
post-human  
post-modern  
post-feminist  
post-colonialist

discourses, enough posts to build a fence around Ben Cartwright's Ponderosa

your wildness cannot be contained in my poem  
any more than I can hold the moon's fullness in a pail

ever green, ever rooted, ever patient,  
ever willing to teach us if we are willing to learn

teach us to remember we are guests  
on an ancient land with countless stories

teach us to walk tenderly with one another,  
filled with memories and hopes for others, too

teach us to know this place of mind  
is also a place of mindfulness

in these last years I have at UBC  
I will loiter often with you, and even if  
I write fewer poems or papers, I might  
yet learn to live like a scholar who knows  
learning always begins with lingering

we no longer dwell in an annex  
like an appendix or supplement

we will not pine for the Ponderosa Annexes  
as we settle into the Ponderosa Commons

let us now dance an Argentinian tango  
with light and shadow, with the rhythms  
of the seasons, with the ebb and flow  
of students and colleagues as we compose  
new stories with the alphabet's possibilities,  
new stories rooted in memory and imagination

## In/conclusion

I heartily agree with Orr (2002b) that, "an awareness of the disorderly and chaotic world we inhabit is a fundamental aspect of being human" (p. 16). Poetry is both a part of that awareness and a significant epistemological and ontological way to engage with inhabiting a "chaotic world" in words so we can be and become human.

In ways I understand only a little,  
poetry fills me with hope for each day's journey.  
May we continue our searching for  
new possibilities for living well together.  
Let our scholarship sing in new voices,  
call out with enthusiasm for the possibilities  
of loving poetry and living poetically.

## References

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