

# Poetry and Process: Glad in the Ruthless Furnace

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## I

“Poetry is the magnification and clarification of being,” claims Jane Hirshfield (1997, p. vii). A large claim. Through what alchemy does a whim, an observation, an obsession become the life-force of a poem? And how does the poet go about this magnifying and clarifying? The impetus is often intimate, visceral, and sometimes unsought or even unwelcome. Then, of course, there are poetry classes and workshops, where poems often develop from assignments. Or as Lorna Crozier prefers to say in her poetry retreats, there is a call-and-response.<sup>i</sup> She sends out the call and we respond.

I like this *call* (rather than *assignment* with its etymological roots of legality and restriction). Writing is generally a solitary pursuit, and poets are solitary critters, but I would venture that for most of us, the poem begins in that *call*, that urge clamouring to be addressed.

In my reading of other poets, I hope for three qualities,<sup>ii</sup> which I also strive for in my own finished work. I find these qualities in all types of poems that resonate with me, regardless of style or genre: be they narrative or lyric, free-form or spoken word.

First, is it well crafted? I mean, beyond mechanical correctness, is it Stephen Dobyns’ (2003) *best words, best order*? That is, has it creative, cliché-free diction and vocabulary, aptness of form, structure and metaphor, music of sound-effects, rhythm, cadence, nuance of tone?

Second, does it say something significant? And does it do so without being sentimental, didactic or “explainy?” Does it respect the intelligence of the reader and the power of understatement? Any topic at all is significant if the reader’s understanding is in some way expanded, if she is moved into deepened empathy, curiosity, or insight, a more nuanced sense, with Keats, that *truth is beauty, beauty truth*.

Third, is the poem’s “voice” and tone distinctive? This may seem the hardest to pin down, since it charts the poem’s emotional flavor and intensity, and, by inference, the attitude of the poet. And yet, we respond instinctively to voice and tone; if we were each given a poem by Billy Collins, by Sharon Olds, by Margaret Atwood, and by Patrick Lane, we would be unlikely to confuse one with another, regardless of subject or style. Voice is the tool of the *tone* of the poem; “tone becomes our guide within the labyrinth [of the poem]” (Dobyns, 2003, p. 154). If we misread the tone, we entirely misread the poem. If we misread, for instance, an ironic or satirical tone in Dr. Johnson’s *A Modest Proposal*, we would think he is seriously advocating eating children.

I have teased out these three facets as though they were separate, but they function, are woven into, a singular energy. It is in this empathic, thoughtful and poetic

use of language, says Dwayne Huebner (Donawa, 2009, p. 148), “that truth establishes itself. Truth is the bringing forth of what is into unconcealment.”

And yet, for poets, an abiding mystery and frustration is that language remains always inadequate to the desired depiction. The word is not the thing. So we struggle with ever more focused or specific or startling language; we manufacture metaphors: it’s like *this*, no, it’s like *this*! As Hamlet says, ‘*Tis backed like a weasel*. But we find that many forms of knowledge are themselves non-linguistic: dreams, visions, powerful emotional and sensual experiences, ekphrasis (the poetic experience of another art form). And so, poets who invite the startling, the expressive, the ambiguous, and the lovely into their poems offer readers alternate avenues of perception.

## II

My intention in this essay is to unpack my own poems to illustrate some strategies poets use to transform intimate hunches, intuitions and insights into poems crafted for public understanding. Since I use my own experience, and my own writing, my reflections are not intended as a *how-to*, or, worse, a *how-should* for poets in general, but they may be of use to the poetry reader.

The following two poems are engaged with this journey from the “wordless deep” of hunch and emotion beneath “the senses’ trap doors” to what is “knowable” in language.

### Thin Air of the Knowable

Suddenly the bright smell of apples  
has dredged up a late night, rain,  
and tears for a perfidious lover.  
Why that night, those tears?  
Why not a spangle of apple blossoms?  
Why not polished harvest pyramids  
of Galas, Granny Smiths, Gravensteins?

A whiff of hay bales at the farmers’ market  
returns me to a friend’s barn,  
lanolin thick on my hands,  
hauling pungent fleeces  
and stuffing them in sacks, laughing  
as the naked sheep circle us  
staring in mild consternation.

What gravitation pulls open  
the senses’ trap doors,  
impels perceptions to the wordless deep?

What clutches those reverberations,  
draws them up  
to the thin air of the knowable?

Intention does not have the final say.  
In the capacious heart  
a great silence. The ineffable moves  
and is replenished.

From the pond's murk  
the carp's slow surge  
to grace and glister  
its sun-spattered fin. (Donawa, 2017, p. 21)

How do we know, and what do we know that comes to us unbidden? The senses have their own wisdom, and the first two stanzas follow my stream-of-consciousness memories, images charged with an emotional impact rather than an intellectual one.

In the first stanza, the seemingly pleasant “bright” smell of apples brings memories of dark, rain, betrayal, instead of a more obvious association with, say, harvests or markets. Smell, perhaps the most primitive of the senses, dominates again in the second stanza. “Whiff” and “pungent” don’t suggest pleasure, but here they combine with visual and tactile images to evoke laughter and friendship, and the absurdly amusing memory of the shorn sheep.

The core of the poem lies in stanza 3, which questions *how* it is that these perceptions come up the back brain (from the “wordless deep”) to waylay us? And anyway, how are we supposed to articulate something that is wordless?

The last two stanzas maintain that the question has no answer, except that intellect (“intention”) is less in charge than we like to think. However, a contemplative openness (“capacious heart”) to both thought and emotion may bring from the “murk” of life, some “sun-spattered” beauty when we least expect it.

My process in this poem? A long and messy one, with many abandoned drafts. The third stanza took shape after a lot of free-writing, more like an essay than a poem. It took me a while to realize that using words to write an essay about why words don’t work wouldn’t end well. The postmodernists have done all that, and much better. So I let those journaled reflections compost for a few months, and then suddenly two memories, of the apples and the sheep, surfaced, and the poem began to take shape. The images seemed to convey the emotional truth of the situation more effectively than a discursive essay.

The final stanza ends with the kind of calm I’ve found most effective-- a response rather than an answer— and evoked some notes I’d taken while observing a Japanese garden, which worked as a kind of coda.

The following poem is a tribute to my wonderful drawing teacher Glenn Howarth (1946-2009), who taught me not to believe the evidence of my eyes. Glenn was intensely interested in the physiology of sight, what we see and what we think we see.

The fovea, a small pit at the back of the eye, is responsible for sharp acuity of vision. Although it covers only the central 2% of our visual field, it takes up over 50% of the visual cortex. So, when we think we see a whole field, at any given minute, all we are actually seeing in sharp detail is that 2%, rather like children looking through a toilet paper roll and pretending it's a telescope. The rest of the visual field is all short-term memory, conjecture, rapid eye-tracking and peripheral vision.

### **In the Galaxy of Our Eyes**

What we think we see  
is the dark noise  
of shadow moving behind the gaze.  
small teeth gnashing  
crunchcrunch  
under the porch

In the galaxy of our eyes  
the fovea anatomizes detail,  
gives us carnivals and colour,  
discerns evening light on water,  
lampgleam on a lover's shoulder,  
the last gold leaves flickering November branches.

To observe a dim star, astronomers avert vision.

Poets approach slantwise  
go by hunch, root for metaphors.  
Like mushroom hunters  
scrabbling pine needles for chanterelles.  
Peripheral tides bring flotsam:  
barnacles and lavender,  
dead bees, persimmons even! How  
to craft them past themselves?

It is snowing again, and dusk dissolving  
silence so deep it beckons.  
Relinquish.

Even the magpie hunched on its perch. (Donawa, 2017, p. 30)

My process here: The first two stanzas cover that physiological aspect of the fovea. What we think we see is often imaginary; what we see and remember in detail is what's important to us: things that go bump in the night, but also emotionally vivid experiences.

I stalled, trying to find a way to use this foveal phenomenon as a metaphor for poetic insight, until I came across an astronomy website that described how even scientists find some things can be found only by happenstance, by averting their eyes. (You can try this with the night sky—your primitive peripheral vision will pick up dim stars more readily than a fixed stare)

“To observe a dim star, astronomers avert vision.”

This core statement, the fulcrum of the poem, became a one-line third stanza.

The “averted” senses offer rich fodder for the poet—we scramble through the “flotsam” the tides of our life bring in, process “slantwise” observations, memories; we follow hunches. We ask the “so what?” question: *How/to craft them past themselves?* Why have I chosen these chanterelles, these barnacles, these dead bees to bring insight into our human dilemmas?

The final stanza both dissolves and beckons toward openness, acceptance, awareness of the human condition, of nature, of the *mysterium tremendum*. Even the magpie.

### III

With the following three poems, I explore connections between the inner psychic world and the material world we must navigate. How can we move beyond solipsism and sentimentality in writing autobiographical poems, love poems, elegies? How to avoid rant and self-righteousness in poems of witness? Common dilemmas, but no easy answers. I strive for what Patrick Lane calls “passionate detachment.” (P. Lane, personal communication, November, 2015) A rigorous navigation of craft can, paradoxically, shape the most turbulent of emotional tides.

#### **Late and the Light Already Turning**

Light spills from winter's icy chalice.  
 Scrims of snow gather coasting gulls,  
 shake them out like laundry.  
 It is a white morning, although darkening days  
 slant to the year's midnight.  
 A white morning, it weighs on eyelids,  
 settles on the red winter quilt.

But earth tilts to the solstice fulcrum

for the year's fracking, for renditions,  
for Mandela's death and the world's crocodile tears.

Tears, nothing to dementia patients waiting for the bus.  
To the mad prophet, sleeping bag jumbled in his cart.  
To children trudging rifles through Sahel dust,  
indecipherable as angels in the snow.

In Barbados now, poinsettia hedges glow and  
the cane is inflorescent, each field a white sea  
of plumes stark under the moon.

Did we imagine the brightness of that summer market stall  
where two men sold sunflowers? Each week  
a galaxy of cultivars, we couldn't choose,  
their corkscrew heads weighty in our arms.  
Then one man, alone, an empty chair at his side,  
wrapping our Saturday purchase.  
He said, *The cancer took him.*  
*You only find love like that once.*

It is getting late and the light already turning.  
Still, we attend to white light on a red quilt  
as one might keep a smooth beach pebble which,  
held, harvests the hand's warmth. (Donawa, 2017, p. 47)

I wrote this poem the winter after Nelson Mandela's death. I had begun and crumpled up many attempts to write about his remarkable life and the world-wide impact. I could not get beyond all the well-known facts of his life and the uninteresting fact of my own admiration. I had somehow forgotten the power of understatement.

I lived in Barbados for over three decades, and will never forget the day Mandela was freed from prison. It seemed that everyone in Barbados was glued to a television screen, waiting; it seemed as if the whole world was weeping. No one had seen a photo of him for those 27 years since he disappeared, a sturdy, imposing man in his prime. When he finally emerged, a stately, white-haired elder, it was emotionally overwhelming.

St. 1: So in the end, I felt a brief reference to Mandela would be sufficient for the reader to enlarge from her own general knowledge and experience. And I started where I was, at home, just before solstice, with its icy white light that "weighs on eyelids", "settles on the red winter quilt", wondering what real change had come about.

St. 3 & 4: The earth tilts, not just from the solstice, but from our assault on the environment, from heartless laws, from Mandela's death. The cheap grace of the world's crocodile tears offer no respite to the vulnerable and homeless, to child soldiers.

St.5: My mind flits back to Barbados, and the terrible beauty of the cane fields in the winter months, their white inflorescent plumes. The slave crop, sugar, the engine of colonialism.

St.6: Another brightness brings me back to summer memories, the sunflower stall and the poignancy of personal tragedy.

St. 7: It is late, perhaps too late. The light is not gone, but it is already going. Still, what can we do but attend to beauty and harvest what human warmth we can?

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Another poem that navigates the distance between the intimate inner world and the external world's events was generated by an image. In the summer of 2015, the world was shocked by the photograph of three-year-old Alan Kurdi's body, washed up on the Turkish beach when his family's refugee-crowded boat capsized. The photograph had an extraordinary impact on public opinion, and catalyzed relief efforts around the world, although hundreds, possibly thousands, of refugee children have drowned similarly both before and since this child's death. There was an upswelling of real and concrete efforts to respond with more compassionate action to the desperate refugee families. There was also an upswelling of sentimental and bathetic commentary, many political tears shed trying to outdo other performances of grief.

I could think of no way to write about this, but it haunted me for months. Then one sunny autumn morning as I enjoyed my breakfast of fresh fruit and latte, still pondering the chasm between my pleasant life and the callousness of a world where babies are washed ashore, the shape of the poem just came to me. Very occasionally, there is the gift of a poem that just "hatches" from some back brain fermentation. Then there is just the craft to work on—I say "just the craft", but the simpler it seems to the reader, probably the more work the poet has invested.

### **The Day the Syrian Child Washed Ashore**

the early light flushed  
my lover's face, and we ate late strawberries  
with breakfast. The changeable day

rolled mist along the inlet,  
then channeled sun

stitched by kingfishers.

We breathed so easily,  
prowled a bookstore,  
later worked at heaped desks  
in amiable solitude,

chopped herbs to roast with chicken  
while the sky faded,  
while Palestrina webbed the air,

while the shushing tide brought him in,  
shoes still snug on his small feet. (Donawa, 2016, p. 10)

I kept the language and structure as simple as a nursery rhyme. Simple unrhymed tercets itemize all the blessings of a life privileged with natural beauty, a choice of occupation, cultural richness, and pleasant domestic routines. The body of the poem is bracketed by the startling title and a final couplet that completes the title with blunt force. The last line is slowed down by its single-syllable words, and the four “s” and “sh” sounds echo the tide that has both destroyed the child’s life, and washed him gently ashore.

The power of understatement can often deliver a greater jolt than outraged frenzy, which draws attention toward the speaker and away from a tragedy. Judging from the shocked silence that always greets this poem at a public reading, it worked here.

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The task of finding joy or beauty amidst life’s grief is hardly an original theme, but the next poem reminds me this is a task we must continually perform. And in the following poem, the world’s “ruthless furnace” that consumes the heart can also open it to “gladness”.

### **Glad in the Ruthless Furnace**

It’s still winter, but a pool of sun simmers  
by the garden shed she’s painted mauve and rust,  
where she brings me coffee, has nailed a cattle skull, horns and all  
under the eaves where a pair of Bewick’s wrens scold and trill,  
clamber through eye sockets, glean the garden’s tangle  
to line the cavity of this cupped haven, their nest.

It’s like Mrs. Foster told us between treatments,



that on her way back from Costco  
she stopped at the funeral home  
and paid for her casket with Visa.  
Well, why not? she said,  
I got enough points for a round trip to Edmonton.

And in the Japanese gardens at Lethbridge  
as summer dark settled on Obon's lanterns  
floating toward the lake,  
we cast our troubles on those spirits flickering  
past the great bronze bell  
the hanging log of its *kanetsuki* vibrated our bone marrow  
and in the background taiko drums  
that beat our hearts for us.

It's like the poet said,  
*We must have  
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless  
furnace of this world.*

Tears are cheap grace.

Feed your archived grief to the shredder.

Sometimes a life opens

to a moment of wind from the sea. (Donawa, 2017, p. 66)

The italicized lines in the final stanza are from the poet Jack Gilbert (2009, p. 3). Initially, I used them as an opening epigraph, but they worked better integrated into the end of the poem.

The reflective first stanza's setting is in winter, the year's low point, the garden a "tangle", the skull and its eye sockets emblems of death. But the gaily painted shed provides a small sunny haven, where friendship and hospitality can thrive, and where the paired wrens prepare for the ongoing flow of life; the eye sockets and dead grass become a "cupped haven".

The mood and tone shift in the small narrative of the second stanza. Wit and irony have their place in poetry, where the serious can all too often become solemn, even ponderous. The elderly woman, clearly a no-nonsense, can-do person, faces the ruthless furnace of her terminal illness with a determination to squeeze in all the pleasure she can, in this case, the round-trip to Edmonton. It was a poignant event, but also very funny. Like life.

An elegaic tonal shift into the third stanza describes Obon, the Japanese Buddhist festival to honour the dead. The setting here evokes the exquisite lakeside Japanese gardens in Lethbridge. At dusk, small floating lanterns are lit, and drift toward the lake

with the spirits they memorialize. As darkness settles, grief and beauty are twined in the flickering lights, the deep vibration of the great bell, the taiko drums.

A shift in tone can prevent tedious repetition. One might claim this poem “says” the same thing three times; however, like musical variations on a theme, the first stanza is domestic and intimate within the garden’s natural rhythm; the second is narrative and ironic; the third pastoral and elegiac.

And the final stanza floats Jack Gilbert’s wonderful (italicized) lines, the poem’s summing-up.

It is difficult to find gladness in life’s ruthless furnace, yet many of the world’s spiritual systems seek strategies to do just that. So do many scholarly discourses of sociology, psychology, and philosophy, as do the aesthetic ones of music, drama, visual arts and literature. It is sad to see that paradigms often fall into warring camps of the quantitative/qualitative binary, rather than a recognition that intellect and heart are required to some degree in all arts-based inquiry. “It is thought” writes poet/philosopher Jan Zwicky, “that pulls the bright gut of the heart/to speech.” (2004, p. 24) She continues:

These are the elements,  
which is to say,  
the difficulty.  
When we lack experience,  
it is the motions of the heart  
that most perplex us.  
But of all these things  
thought is the hardest,  
though its beauty is a distant river  
in its plain of light. (Zwicky, 2004, p. 24)

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<sup>i</sup> Lorna Crozier invites participation through the call-and-response pattern of her poetry retreats.

<sup>ii</sup> The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary publication of *The Best of Canadian Poetry* included insights from the nine previous editors. I was delighted to find, in Stephanie Bolster's "Introduction," a related trio: she looks for "First: good writing. ... Second: depth and challenge. ... Finally, an interesting, even strange sensibility or imagination ...." (Peacock & Lahey, 2017, p. 201.)