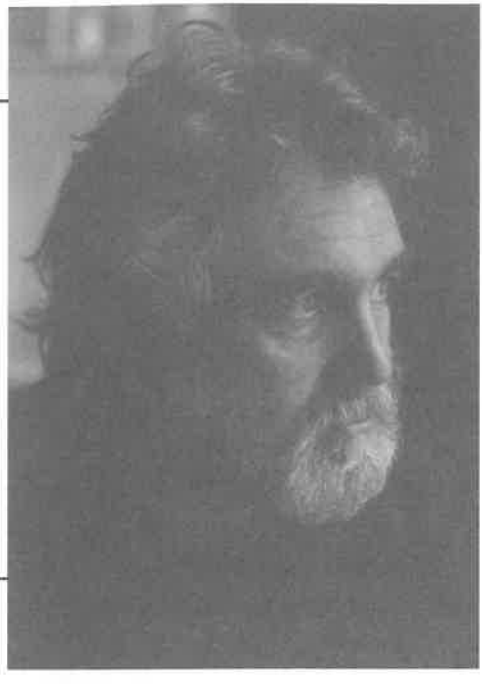
The MCTE Spring 2001 Conference Keynote Address



How I Became a Poet

BY LOUIS JENKINS

Many of my high school teachers would be very surprised, to say the least, if they knew I was actually being paid to speak to English teachers. I think most of them would have happily paid to have me shut up. I was a bad student and a mouthy kid. I suppose that should have been a warning that I would eventually become a writer.

There used to be an advertisement in magazines with the headline, "Are you one of the quiet ones who should be a writer?" With a few exceptions, most of the writers I know are big blabbermouths. Well, I'm here to blabber about writing poetry, which is the only thing I can even pretend to know anything about and, it was suggested to me that it might be helpful if my talk in some way related to the teaching of writing. So I'm going to talk about my own experience, which I should know something about, though I have my doubts.

The idea of becoming a writer first occurred to me when I was in high school. As I said before, I was a bad student. I didn't turn in my assignments and I was for the most part not at all interested

in the stuff we read in English class. I was mesmerized by the words of Blake ("Tyger, Tyger , burning bright . . .") whose poetry, as I recall, we did not discuss. And, as I remember, the textbook was not very helpful either. It said something like, "Blake is a mystical poet." In other words, there is no point in trying to understand this stuff.

Part of the problem, I think, was that most of the teachers I had did not read much poetry. And poetry is an art form that one can only truly understand with the heart, that you must love to understand. Many people, I believe, go about trying to find "the meaning" of a poem, and often "hidden meanings," without connecting emotionally with a poem or ignoring that connection.

A poem means what it says. If one tries to explain a poem using words other than those in the poem, the "meaning" is lost. This is not to say that a poem does not give rise to ideas, or that no brain work is involved, but a poem, a real poem, is not like an essay, an opinion with which one can agree or disagree, but it is a thing unto itself, a fact like a tree or a rock, an experience which one senses the truth of (or not) on a visceral level. There is no arguing this. It is there.

Poetry is about pleasure, the pleasure of experience rendered into words. Because a poem works primarily on levels other than an intellectual level, it is difficult to teach. If one has no intuitive sense, no feeling for poetry, no pleasure in the words, then I think it would be impossible.

On one level I understood Blake's "Tyger" very well. What I did not understand was my own understanding. I am not advocating a completely intuitive approach to a poem. Thinking about and discussing the poem can certainly enhance one's appreciation of the work.

And I don't want to leave the impression that none of my teachers were of any help. Quite the contrary. I had two high school English teachers to whom I will always be grateful. Both possessed great patience and a sense of humor. One of the two was the teacher of the first creative writing class that my high school ever had—highly experimental back in 1961 in Oklahoma—Miss Laverne Kaiser. I signed up and it turned out to be the best class I had in high school. Part of that was because we had nearly complete freedom.

Of course, the class was not nearly as sophisticated as writing classes are now. I'm sure Miss Kaiser had never taught a creative writing class before. As I recall we were given no real assignments but were encouraged to experiment.

What was important was the atmosphere.

There were two or three of us in the class who were quite serious about writing, though we pretended not to be, and an unspoken competition developed. For a time we all wrote very short short-stories. In order to break the deadlock, and perhaps get one up on the competition, I decided to write a poem.

I cannot recall very clearly what most of those first few poems were about, but I can still remember how it felt writing those poems, sitting at the kitchen table in my parents house: Exciting. And scary, too.

I didn't have any real idea what I was doing and in some ways I felt like a fraud. As if I were committing an illegal act, perpetrating a hoax, and yet I was doing something entirely my own, creating my own world. It was illegal, abnormal, outrageous and that made it really fun. I did not then know, personally, any other human being who wrote poems. I was on my own, alone with the blank page. I did not know then that would always be so.

I remember one of the things I wrote about was the wind, the ubiquitous Oklahoma wind. I think I called it "Wind Songs." Very original. Here is a prose poem about that wind written much later:

Tumbling Tumbleweeds

Out on the great plains, where I was born, the wind blows constantly. When I was a kid I'd get 35 cents and run as hard as I could to the Lotta-Burger or movie theatre only to find it had blown away. Going home was no better. Sometimes it would take a couple of days to find my house. Under these conditions it was impossible to get acquainted with the neighbors. It was a shock to open the front door and be faced with the county jail, the Pentecostal Church or Aunt Erma carrying two large suitcases. Trash from all over the state caught and piled up at the edge of town and during the windiest times of spring sometimes whole days blew away in a cloud of dust. I feel my natural lifespan may have been shortened by the experience. Still, it was a great place to grow up. As the old boy said, "You can have those big cities, people all jammed together. Give me some wide-open spaces." In the morning out on the plains you have a couple of cups of coffee, get all wound up and go like hell across an open field, try to bounce, clear both ditches and the highway so you don't get caught in the barbed wire, fly from one fenced-in nothing to another, hit the ground and keep on rolling.

As it turned out the poems were a big hit. My fellow writing students liked them and Miss

Kaiser praised them excessively. She showed them to Miss Young (my other favorite teacher) who also gave them much praise. When one of the poems was published in the school newspaper I expected to be teased by my friends. But it didn't happen. I think that the idea of writing a poem, that I would write a poem, was so remote, so weird, that none of them knew how to react. It was as if I had suddenly begun speaking in tongues (actually that would have been less weird). Eventually one of the poems won first prize in a state poetry contest for high school students. By this time I was hooked.

I was ambitious. I wanted to write better and better poems. I asked my teacher. She suggested I read T.S. Eliot on the craft of verse. So I checked out his *Selected Essays* from the library and had a go at it. After a few headlong rushes at the text, after pauses for reflection, I concluded that there was absolutely no way I could ever write poetry.

But I could never really quit. I drifted around for a number of years after high school, dropping in and out of college, always with the idea of writing not very far back in my mind. I attended the College of Santa Fe for one semester and took a writing class from a novelist and poet named Stanley Noyes, the first real writer I ever met. His advice was a help to me and simply the fact he existed, a real writer, was important.

Stanley Noyes helped me to publish my first poems in a literary magazine. Around the same time I discovered books of poetry by Robert Bly and James Wright. The imagery in their poems was astonishing to me. When Robert Bly wrote of snow left in the combine tracks I knew exactly what he was talking about. When James Wright wrote of lying in a hammock on a farm I felt right at home. This was the imagery drawn from the Midwest and transformed into real poetry.

In the late sixties I attended Wichita State University where I met the poet Michael Van Walleghen who was only a few years my senior and was a member of the WSU English department faculty teaching poetry writing. I went on to take all the classes he taught. From Michael I learned the importance of careful reading of a poem and I learned how much commitment and dedication are required to write poetry. In the class I was with others who took the writing of poetry with great seriousness. For the first time I felt part of a community and felt what I did had validity.

Here is a poem by Michael Van Walleghen, a poem about writing poetry:

Beauty

After I got out of the navy
I loafed at home for awhile then enrolled myself in college

I wanted to make something of myself—
become an accountant like my cousin

or, sweet Jesus, a lawyer. But somehow
(who knows, what happens to our dreams?)
I found myself writing poetry instead.

I was taking a class in poetry writing
and wrote whenever I could—all night

after my job loading trucks sometimes
at a card table down in the basement . . .
But when the sun came up, how odd

how astonishing it was, to realize
that time had simply disappeared!

And there, in front of me, timeless
for all I knew , the night-born poem:
"Seabent," I remember one beginning

"with slowly beating wings
the sunwashed seabirds pass . . ."

Reading it aloud made me dizzy
and I carried it around in my pocket
for days—although, at the same time

what I really felt soared impatiently
beyond words somehow. "Sunwashed

seabirds?" What kind were they exactly?
And where in that truck-loading life
had I stood enthralled to watch them?

Some snot-beaked, garbage-eating gulls
down by the Detroit river maybe . . .

Or in the navy, those creaky albatross
I'd tossed Tobasco-sauced bread to
from the fantail of our ship. Mindless

and cruel, beauty was the last thing
I think I would have ever thought of.

So why was I thinking of it now
and staying up all night to find it?
Whatever it was that made the hair

on the back of my arms stand up
and that darkness in the window

in the merest blinking of an eye
to somehow disappear—leaving me
at a card table in an old coal bin

with one bare bulb hanging down . . .
I can remember thinking, even then

how it could have been a jail cell
a room where prisoners were tortured
the last place on God's grim earth

where poetry might happen. And yet
now and then, rising up from nowhere

on slowly beating wings, something—
I knew there was something, born
perhaps of the hearts pure yearning

that would save my life: Beauty.
The name for those birds was Beauty.

(from *The Last Neanderthal*, U. of Pittsburgh Press, 1999)

As Van Walleghen says, poetry can save your life and that is probably the most important reason for its being.

In 1971 I moved with my wife, Ann Jacobson, to Duluth. One of the first people I met here was Phil Dentinger who was a few years younger than me and an aspiring poet as well. We decided to try to get something started in the then almost non-existent poetry scene, publish a magazine, some small books, maybe hold poetry readings . . . It did not really matter that neither of us had much of an opus.

We were joined by others who had similar aspirations and we held occasional poetry readings. Most often the mood of these gatherings was high hilarity. Lots of jokes and funny poems. I saw it was possible to write a poem that was funny and serious at the same time.

Eventually the poetry reading series we began evolved, through funding from the St. Louis County Heritage and Arts Center and local universities, into the Lake Superior Writers' Series. We were able, over the years, to bring a number of important poets and writers to Duluth for readings and workshops, including Galway Kinnell, Philip Levine, Denise Levertov, Mary Oliver, Sharon Olds, and Louis Simpson.

I was meeting other Minnesota poets as well. I met Bart Sutter, Patricia Hampl, Michael Dennis Browne, among others. And Robert Bly who published the best poetry magazine in the country. In issues of *The Sixties*, Robert published poems by young American poets and translations of poems by European and Latin American poets who for the most part had been unavailable to American readers.

Bly was one of the first translators of Pablo Neruda and the Swedish poet Tomas Transtromer. One of the issues contained a selection of prose poems by various writers, European and American. I was fascinated by the way the prose poem worked, so casual, ignoring the usual mechanics of verse which, to me, often seemed contrived and unnecessary. The prose poem was capable of delivering what seemed to me to be the real essence of the poem, that moment of recognition, of empathy or even epiphany. That moment when as a young reader you feel the absolute rightness of the words. I began writing prose poems along with the others I wrote.

Robert Bly read some of the prose poems I had published in a literary magazine and wrote to me praising the poems and asking if I had enough poems for a small book. In 1973 I published my first chapbook, The Well Digger's Wife, 20 poems, with the Minnesota Writer's Publishing House, a small cooperative publishing venture Bly had initiated. I was 30 years old and had by this time probably half a dozen poems that were good enough to keep.

I have published several books of poems since then and aged considerably. I have been lucky as a poet, partly because of my own naivete. I never realized how difficult it would be to write good poems and publish them. I simply went blindly ahead and was lucky enough to have met people who were sympathetic and helpful: my teachers, my wife, my friends, mentors and publishers. Robert Bly was my first publisher and Jim Perlman of Holy Cow! Press has

published and kept in print my three most recent books.

When I started writing poetry there was less of a "poetry industry" than there is now. Fewer writers' workshops, fewer poetry readings . . . I am pleased that there seems to be more readers of poetry now. I like it when someone reads his favorite poem on the News Hour. But there are problems as well.

The usual pattern nowadays is that the aspiring poet enrolls in a prestigious university writing program, gets an MFA and, if he or she is lucky, a university job teaching the writing of poetry to other hopeful young writers. The poet then has a career but it has little to do with writing poetry. Many of the poets who teach are excellent teachers and write fine poetry but because of this machinery a lot of mediocre work gets published and often good poets outside the academy are overlooked.

I know a number of very good poets who are in their forties and have yet to publish a book. It is especially difficult if you live in the Midwest away from the major publishers and/or did not attend the right university and make the right contacts. I have no answers to this problem. Here is a poem about one of the frustrations of "po biz:"

Where Go the Boats

Green leaves a-floating
Castles of the foam,
Boats of mine a-boatin—
Where will all come home?
—R.L. Stevenson

Legend has it that the great poet Li Po made his newly composed poems into paper boats and let them float away down the Yang Tze. I recommend this practice to poets of today, particularly beginning poets, as an alternative to submitting poems to literary magazines. I do this chiefly because I believe the chances of your poem actually being read are greater using this method.

If you send poems to a literary magazine the unopened envelope goes, along with hundreds of others, into a large cardboard box in one corner of an office or a large closet, or into the trunk of the editor's girlfriend's car along with the empty beer cans and hamburger wrappers. Then once every six months or so, the janitor or someone, a volunteer from a rehab program, comes, opens the envelopes, places the poems in their return envelopes along with a printed rejection slip, seals the envelopes and takes them all to the post office. In the offices of more established literary magazines the entire procedure is done by machine so that your poems return to you, finally, untouched by human hands.

Or suppose, by some mischance, some failure of the system, your poem is published. It won't be read. Just the words "literary magazine" are enough to send a chill to the heart of the most voracious reader. Copies of the magazine will, after having their covers ripped off, be thrown onto a back shelf of a used bookstore which smells of mildew.

How much more noble to think of your poem plying the waters of the Susquehanna or the verdigris or the Mississippi. Think of your poem being pulled ashore by an astonished reader in Davenport or Baton Rouge. Or imagine your little poem boat sailing at last into the open sea, bravely alone.

(originally published in *Willow Springs* #47)

So as a teacher what do you say to a student who wants to write poetry? "Get real?" "Get a job?" In my darker moments I've said "Give it up." I've said that to myself. Writing poetry is a difficult and solitary life at best, but for some it is the only real life. When I decided that poetry was what I would do, there was still the problem of earning a living. There is no way one can make a living simply by writing and publishing poetry and there is often little reward of any kind for one's efforts. I did not want to teach and I never saw myself with a career in insurance like Wallace Stevens or medicine like William Carlos Williams. So for me earning a living has meant a series of short term, often really stupid, jobs and the steady employment of my wife. It has not always been comfortable but it has allowed me to write poems. It is possible to live and make poetry the center of your life. It means making it up as you go, finding your own way. I think a talented student should be encouraged, cautioned to the realities, but encouraged. I believe that the only true poetry gets written by flying in the face of common sense, by persistence through madness, through desperation, and I believe poetry can save your life.

Louis Jenkins lives in Duluth. His poems have been published in many literary magazines and anthologies. Among his books of poetry are *An Almost Human Gesture* (1987), *All Tangled Up With the Living* (1991), *Nice Fish: New and Selected Prose Poems* (1995), *Just Above Water* (1997), and *The Winter Road* (2000). *The Winter Road* (Holy Cow! Press) was nominated for the 2001 Minnesota Book Award for poetry.