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The Anne Szumigalski Memorial Lecture

The Angel of the Big Muddy

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My subject will be the imagination: its power, its importance, the joy it brings. I want to approach the topic of poetic imagination through one particular writer, the one for whom these lectures are named. A lot of you were acquainted with Anne Szumigalski in her later years, as the author of many collections of poetry and also as a teacher, editor and mentor to dozens of writers on the Prairies and beyond. Every human being is unique—but, I hope you'll agree, few of us are so obviously and so memorably unique as Anne. I want to talk about how she grew into the person you remember: not just a large-scale woman with a girlish voice, a tendency to giggle, and a love of mushrooms, dancing and gardens, but also a large-scale force in Canadian poetry with a passion for language and an uncompromising faith in the value and necessity of this, our chosen art. I also mean to raise the question of whether her belief in the imagination can be sustained in a postmodern age.

When poetry began to play a significant role in the life of Anne Szumigalski—or rather Nancy Davis—she was a girl growing up in rural England in the late 1920s, one of seven children in an unconventional family. “[M]y attitude towards poetry,” she wrote near the end of her life, “has hardly changed at all since I memorized and recited . . . my first childish efforts somewhere between my fourth and fifth birthdays. Later, at about the age of twelve, I decided that if the literary arts can be thought of as a mountain, then poetry is at the very peak. The pointy tops of mountains are no doubt the smallest part. The air is more rarified up here and there is snow under your boots, but then you are as near the heavens as you can get while still having your feet on the ground. Well worth the climb, wouldn't you say?”¹

That was a posture she always maintained: wherever her eyes were peering, her feet were firmly planted on the earth. But Anne says that she arrived at this image or understanding of poetry at the age of twelve, and that she had memorized her first poems before she turned five. Do you think she was exaggerating a bit? Do you suspect she might have been drawing on what we like to call, in a phrase well worth pondering, “poetic licence”?

I believe her. I don't think she was exaggerating at all. And the reason is that a few years ago, when I was rummaging among the Anne Szumigalski papers that are filed away in the University of Regina Library, I came across a copy of an early poem she had written out by hand. The poem is seventy-nine lines long, and it's called "The Angel of the Woods." This is how it begins:

When the first Spring breeze
Blows through the woodland world
And the first new buds upon the trees
Burst and new leaves are unfurled
When the first thrush trills his notes
On the new Spring air
Then comes the Angel of the Woods
Holy, pure and fair . . . ²

Not quite the mature Szumigalski voice, you're probably thinking, even if a few of her best-loved poems do feature the odd angel. Yet the more you look at this poem, the more you notice themes and images that make regular appearances in her later work—angels, of course, but also songs, hair, spring, faith, hunting, love, clothes, and most of all: flowers. The poem evokes an April ecstasy of primroses, bluebells, crocuses, violets, anemones, catkins and daffodils. It ends like this:

She stands her cross in her hand
On her bosom the dove
With spring leaves bound on her brow
For the Angel of the Woods is love
And the flowers bow down their heads
As the bluebells ring
And the little birds sleep in their nests
For the Angel of the Woods is Spring ³

I mentioned this was an early poem, but I didn't say just how early. Anne Szumigalski—I mean, Nancy Davis—wrote that poem when she was nine years old. She was already set on a lifetime's course. Sixty-eight years later, at her funeral in Saskatoon on a damp April day, the brochure that was given out to the congregation in the overflowing chapel included a reproduction of a drawing Anne had done in her last years. The drawing is entitled "Mourning Angels, Morning Doves." As a little girl, she had a pure and ardent faith in the imagination. As an old woman, she had the same faith. The faith was even couched in very similar imagery, although the turtledoves of her childhood had been replaced by North American birds.

In between "The Angel of the Woods" and "Mourning Angels, Morning Doves," many things happened to Anne Szumigalski. Still a teenager when the Second World War broke out, she quickly signed up to be an interpreter, welfare officer and medical assistant for the British Red Cross. At the war's end, travelling with a Red Cross unit across Europe, she faced the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps just after they were liberated. She married a Polish refugee, Jan Szumigalski, and gave birth to several

children. She lived in north Wales and then in the Big Muddy wilderness of southern Saskatchewan, falling in love with the land and sky of the Prairies before moving once and for all to Saskatoon in 1956. And, after a period of silence, of being rebuffed if not humiliated when she sent out her work, she entered the public world of poetry and took enormous delight in helping to create a vibrant literary community in Saskatchewan.

I want to pause there and talk for a moment about the sources of her work. The literary sources, I mean, apart from her never-ending delight in nature and apart from the personal experiences, whether joyful or deeply sorrowful, that provided the catalyst for individual poems. Anne was immensely well read—although, or perhaps I mean because, she was educated at home and never attended university.

Whenever she was asked to select her favourite writers, she liked to mention one name before all others: William Blake. “[W]e have,” she said, “imagined a God with enough imagination to imagine us”;⁴ and she associated this heretical idea with Blake. The conventional figure of a jealous, white-bearded, patriarchal God, Blake liked to call “Old Nobodaddy.”⁵ She followed him too in his conviction that the body is but an emanation of the spirit. He once defined imagination as “the real and eternal world of which this vegetable universe is but a faint shadow.”⁶ Her Blake was not the laureate of childhood innocence but rather the fiery thinker who imagined the fearful symmetry of tigers. It was energy, not peace, that gave him eternal delight. She loved to quote these lines of his: “Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to human existence.”⁷ Responding to that assertion in her quasi-memoir *The Word, The Voice, The Text*, Anne wrote:

In fact poetry, art, is power, is energy, is eternal. Perhaps it is all that we are. All other things, all other states are pale shadows flitting in the half-light of half-desire, half-energy, half-joy, half-anger, half-contention too. For William Blake was not only a contentious person; he was a contentious poet.⁸

Of course Anne Szumigalski was very fond of this vegetable universe, and Blake was far from the only inspiration she drew upon. She revelled in the language, if not the doctrine, of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, and she once declared that a major influence on her writing was A.C. Budd’s *Flora of the Canadian Prairie Provinces*. I don’t think her tongue was up her cheek, although with Anne it was sometimes hard to tell. But I’d now like to mention two other writers whom she didn’t tend to single out in interviews: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Anne was, I’m convinced, a latter-day Romantic. It was Romanticism, little more than a century before she was born, that had veered away from the authority of classical form, granting power to the unfettered play of an individual’s imagination. A good part of her achievement as a writer was finding ways of translating Romanticism into the landscape of the Canadian west and the history of a Holocaust-ridden age. Where some writers have resorted to cynicism and mockery, Anne refused to give up on the insights and difficult beliefs of writers who meant the world to her. I would argue there’s a direct relationship between the two short passages that follow, the first of them taken from Coleridge, the second from Anne’s poem “A House With a Tower”:

Weave a circle round him thrice,

And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.⁹

the Celt within
who likes to stand up and sing
ecstatic and undulating songs
is the one who opens my mouth
and lets the lies out¹⁰

In “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge promises that “with music loud and long,” the poet will build a sunny pleasure-dome whose shadow will float on the waves. In “A House With a Tower” Anne replaces the dome by a Yeatsian tower, and the ocean by “a muddy puddle-edge / (call it a slough).” She identifies herself as a liar, in opposition to “Angle, that indwelling cousin” who preaches care and who prefers to build rationally, using blocks. Angle is a classicist, if you like; the Celt is a romantic who always renews that poetic licence. What matters for Anne, in this poem and many others, is the passion that allows her to climb up the tower and, as she says, “shape the sky.” But while the two poets imagine a very different landscape, they share a sense of art as something ecstatic and dangerous. They share a vision of imagination as a force to be reckoned with. The savagery of the deep and wooded chasm Coleridge describes in “Kubla Khan” can’t be separated from either its enchantment or its holiness. *Savage, holy, enchanted*: a revealing trio of qualities.

The equivalent in “Kubla Khan” to Anne’s inner Celt is a damsel with a dulcimer—a classic anima figure, in Jungian terms, because the poet says he wants to revive within himself her symphony and song. I’m aware that many women poets have had difficulty with the traditional notion of a female muse whose principal job is to divert, delight and inspire a male author. I never used to think this was much of an issue for Anne, although now I wonder if it begins to explain all those angels who flit through her work. Muses and angels both act as a kind of creative intermediary between humans and the otherwise unreachable divine. In a Hallmark greeting card, angels are soft and feminine; but in Milton and Blake, they are male and often ferocious. In “A House With a Tower,” Anne clearly identifies the indwelling Angle as a male hindrance, whereas she leaves the sex of the Celt within unspecified.

There’s also a subtle connection, I think, between Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” and Anne’s poem “Our Sullen Art.” Both are lyrical pieces that involve minute observation of the outer world—lyrics that seek to define ways in which the fruit of such observations can be translated into the human spirit and voice. “Frost at Midnight” is addressed to the poet’s infant son, whom Coleridge imagines in years to come appreciating the sweetness of a variety of natural scenes:

Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall

Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.¹¹

For Coleridge, what will give the boy's imagination space to grow and develop is a life in nature. The poet looks forward to the way his son will interpret the divine through the minuscule splendours of the natural world. Nature fused with the imagination will bring him joy.

In "Our Sullen Art," Anne also imagines the birth of poetry through the eyes and ears of a young boy. But in her poem, the child is a rebel who has climbed onto the roof of a shed and called out "ha ha and who's the dirty rascal now?"—an obscure sort of crime, for which he's despatched to his room as punishment. It's not winter, as in Coleridge's poem, but high summer; and as midnight approaches, the boy

leans from his window listening for animals
far away in the woods strains his ears to catch
even the slightest sound of rage but nothing howls
even the hoot of owls in the dusk is gentle

he hears the tiny snarl of the shrew
the rasp of the snail's foot on the leaf
the too-high squeaking of bats . . .¹²

And so on. Coleridge, in "Frost at Midnight," recalls the wild pleasure he took as a boy in the sound of church bells, "falling on mine ear / Most like articulate sounds of things to come." And then he slept. In "Our Sullen Art" the boy listens to the small, articulate sounds of night before he too falls asleep. At the conclusion of the poem Anne evokes "the day's first traffic," something Coleridge never had to contend with, travelling carefully past the house "so as not to awaken in the child / those savage cries our violent / our pathetic language of poems." But that language will inevitably develop, in just the way that Coleridge says in "Frost at Midnight" his son's spirit will grow, thanks to what the child has seen and heard, the attention he has paid to nature.

So much for Coleridge. As far as I know, Anne never spoke about Emerson, so I'm aware of treading on very thin ice in suggesting there may have been a direct link. But I recently had occasion to read his essay "The Poet," and I was astonished by what I found. The Transcendentalist belief in nature and the imagination, of course, grew straight out of the Romantic movement that had flourished a generation or two earlier. For Emerson, and I hope you'll be willing to forgive the male-centred language that was so widespread in the nineteenth century, "The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre."¹³ Emerson described language as "fossil poetry" and "a tomb of the muses,"¹⁴ because each of its myriad words started life as a stroke of writerly genius. Without poets, we would have no words.

Emerson also insisted, as Anne would a century and a half later, that "it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and

adorns nature with a new thing.”¹⁵ And just as William Blake had described the body as an emanation of the spirit, so did Emerson assert that “The Universe is the externization of the soul.”¹⁶ To quote a particularly remarkable passage from this essay:

The poet alone knows astronomy, chemistry, vegetation and animation, for he does not stop at these facts, but employs them as signs. He knows why the plain or meadow of space was strown with those flowers we call suns and moons and stars; why the great deep is adorned with animals, with men, and with gods; for in every word he speaks he rides on them as the horses of thought.¹⁷

Anne’s third book, *Doctrine of Signatures*, derives both its name and its guiding principle from the herbal doctrine that certain plants function as signs in nature so as to resemble organs of the human body. Plants, not just people, have signatures—“a world in the shape of an egg,” she wrote, “lies in the palm of the hand.”¹⁸ The egg, the world, the hand: all are waiting to be transformed and made sacred by the imagination—because poetry, in another of Emerson’s beautiful definitions, is “God’s wine.”¹⁹ Whether or not Anne was familiar with his great essay (and I suspect she was), I would argue that Transcendentalist beliefs underlie, illuminate and perhaps intoxicate much of what she wrote.

Now, following this lengthy digression, let’s return to Anne Szumigalski just after she had immigrated to Saskatchewan in the early 1950s, leaving behind a large family and a promising future as a British poet. For four years she lived with her husband and their young children in the Big Muddy badlands, south of Regina near the US border. Anne remembered it as a land “of salt lakes and desert and rolling boulder-strewn prairie. Only in the green coulees are there songbirds, for that is where the trees grow. . . . Life was hard and isolated. Some of our neighbours still lived in sod huts or even in basements with roofs of turf. Once we tried to race a prairie fire while we were driving into town; it easily beat our sixty miles an hour.”²⁰

It was, she said, “wonderful country.” One day, “when walking under a sky clear and blue as water, I saw a small white cloud floating rapidly across the emptiness. It slowed down. And as I gazed at it a bolt of lightning came out of the cloud and hit the prairie. I could almost see the hand of Old Nobodaddy throwing down his fiery spear.” (You’ll notice the Blakean reference.) “I took this to be a command to go on writing my poetry, something I had neglected for the last few years, for though I heard it resonating in my head all the time I had not written it down. I started with a pencil and notebook. Then I bought a crotchety little typewriter from a neighbour who didn’t know why he had wanted it in the first place. I was on my way, and my poems with me.”²¹

There’s something very special and magical about the landscape of that region, even more than many other parts of western Canada. It can provoke the most amazing responses even from casual visitors. One day, a few summers ago, I drove back to a place I’d written about in prose many years earlier: the fading First Nations petroglyphs outside the dwindling town of St. Victor, not far west of the Big Muddy. It’s a profoundly evocative site, silent except for occasional fragments of birdsong and for the wind slipping across the ancient, art-encrusted rocks. The park doesn’t contain any modern toilets, just a couple of outhouses. And in the men’s outhouse, I found the following piece

of graffiti: “We use the illusion of time to frighten off the illusion of death—Wittgenstein.”

In what I’ve said so far, I’ve probably given the impression that the young Anne Szumigalski was a very English writer. So she was, and would always remain, in the sense of having been steeped in the language and the literature of Britain. But as soon as her plane touched down in Montreal and she boarded the train west, Anne was keen to become something different. Thanks to her reading, her imagination had set to work. Leaving Winnipeg behind, she murmured under her breath two lines from Roy Daniells: “Farewell to Winnipeg, the snow-bright city / Set in the prairie distance without bound.”²² Arriving in Saskatchewan, she already knew her Duncan Campbell Scott: “Gull Lake set in the rolling prairie— / Still there are reeds on the shore, / As of old the poplars shimmer . . .”²³ “I was surprised and disappointed,” Anne later wrote, “to discover that this was a country that did not know its own poets. In vain I might cry out names like Smith, Birney, Hertel, Choquette, Livesay. Canadians seemed to have been brought up in the conviction that there were no Canadian poets; they would counter feebly with Wordsworth, Tennyson, and (sometimes) Dylan Thomas.”²⁴

A country ignorant of its own literature. A spiritual colony. Such was the climate that faced Anne Szumigalski in the 1950s. She was ready for Canada. But was Canada ready for her? She would find the greater challenge to be posed not by her new neighbours on the Prairies but by the gatekeepers of Canadian poetry in distant eastern cities. Once she had settled in Saskatchewan, twenty-three years would elapse before her first book of poems appeared—and even then, that book would be published by Doubleday in New York. Not until Winnipeg’s Turnstone Press issued her collection *A Game of Angels* in 1980 would she see a book of her own published by a Canadian firm. Thereafter Anne was loyal to Prairie publishers. Never did she send out a collection of poems to a company based in Toronto—or Montreal, Vancouver or Ottawa.

Going through Anne’s papers, I began to realize what a bitter struggle she endured as a poet during those first years in Canada. Living in the Big Muddy, her isolation was extreme; even when she moved to Saskatoon she could not hope to join a literary community, for the simple reason that no such thing existed. Most of the infrastructure of the Prairie imagination, so to speak, had yet to be built. I found the same scribbled note at the top of several unpublished poems: “Sent in for lit. competition. No luck.” I also found a few poems that eventually had been published in faraway magazines like *Canadian Forum* and *The Fiddlehead* under the name “A. Szumigalski”—in those days, women stood a better chance of literary success if they didn’t announce their sex to editors. One of A. Szumigalski’s poems appeared in the same issue of *Canadian Forum* as a youthful lyric by somebody who went by the name “M. Atwood.” Most galling, perhaps, were three issues of the magazine *Delta*, edited by Louis Dudek at McGill University in Montreal, where A. Szumigalski published poems in 1961.

On the first two occasions, she did not feature in the contributors’ notes at the back. The third time her work appeared in *Delta*, Anne was in the illustrious company of Earle Birney, John Glassco, the late Malcolm Lowry and several other distinguished poets. She would have enjoyed that; but she would not have been happy, I’m sure, to discover that although her poems each had a title, Dudek had added a patronizing overall title: “Two Songs From Saskatchewan.” Earle Birney’s poems did not receive the label “Songs From British Columbia.” In this issue of *Delta*, some information about Anne did

appear on the inside back cover. To quote the note in its entirety: “A. Szumigalski has brought so many enthusiastic comments that more information is in order. She is a woman. Owes her name to a Polish spouse; began life in London, England; has lived the last ten years in Canada’s west. No relation to Sarah Binks.”²⁵

Sarah Binks—the fictional “Sweet Songstress of Saskatchewan,” the supposed perpetrator of lines like “I know not what shall it betoken, / that I so sorrowful seem . . .”²⁶ Was Dudek being intentionally cruel? I assume he was just trying to be witty. But the effect, from what I can tell, was to silence Anne. She was writing poems, not songs, and I don’t expect she liked to see the name of her chosen province used by Dudek as a backhanded insult. She would send no further poems to *Delta*. The ensuing years would bring few if any magazine publications. She was writing, she never stopped writing, yet her first collection still lay more than a decade in the future.

It might come as a surprise, if we pause and look back several decades, to realize just how few outlets then existed for poetry in this country. That first book of Anne’s, *Woman Reading in Bath*, appeared in 1974, in the midst of a terrific burgeoning of literary magazines and book publishers. You could make a good argument that we’re still living off the interest being earned by the poetic capital that was laid down in a brief and glorious period. A year earlier, in Saskatoon and Regina, the magazine *Grain* had sprung to life, with Anne serving as an associate editor from its inception. Right across the country, there were similar birth pangs. A partial list of the English-language literary magazines that arose in Canada between 1969 and 1976 would include *Grain*, *Ellipse*, *Salt*, *Descant*, *Antigonish Review*, *Event*, *Exile*, *Dandelion*, *Matrix*, *Room of One’s Own*, *CV/II* and *NeWest Review*. Where would we be as poets, even today, without these magazines?

They were born in a spirit of great optimism, great faith in the potential of our literary culture. The future seemed wide open. To take but one example, Volume 1, Number 1 of *CV/II* was published in Winnipeg in the spring of 1975. Dorothy Livesay was the editor-in-chief. Here is a little of what she said in a long editorial:

[A]gainst alienation and violence in our society and on the screen . . . one positive force has held firm: the growth into maturity of the arts in Canada. Poetry is being nurtured in the outports as in the cities, and the strong flowering of this delight is what gives impetus to a magazine such as *CV/II*. Old and young alike are tasting its virtue. The response to poetry across Canada today is the response of a people longing for warmth and succour, a sense of community.

So be it. We have our poetry, pushing up from every crack and cranny. What we now lack is sufficient outlets for serious criticism of it.²⁷

Livesay’s editorial took up page two of the infant magazine. Page three was given over to a glowing review of *Woman Reading in Bath*, in the course of which the reviewer praised what he described as “the tour de force involved in turning the Canada Post Office into an erotic symbol.”²⁸

But, of course, it wasn’t only magazines that were pushing up like wildflowers. If we think of the book publishers that arose in English Canada during exactly the same period, 1969 to 1976, we find the following—and again, I fear this is but a partial list: Black Moss Press, Press Porcepic, Breakwater Books, Véhicule Press, Oolichan Books,

Brick Books, The Porcupine's Quill, Coteau Books, Thistledown Press, Red Deer College Press, Turnstone Press and Exile Editions. The work of these publishers has allowed much of the lifeblood to course through Canadian poetry. And, like their magazine counterparts, they emerged at a particular moment in our history. One way of interpreting that moment would be to say the culture had finally caught up with Anne Szumigalski.

I want to go back to something Dorothy Livesay wrote in that first editorial for *CV/II* in 1975. She took delight in “the response to poetry across Canada today,” something she regarded as “the response of a people longing for warmth and succour, a sense of community.”²⁹ That might seem, in retrospect, excessively idealistic. But it strikes me that the institutions I've mentioned—the literary magazines, the book publishers, and also the various writers' guilds and unions and associations that accompanied them into life—were established at a time when poetry enjoyed a significant degree of respect in society at large. There was a confidence behind all these clamorous new journals and publishing firms, a confidence that our poets could speak to and speak for the nation. You might even say that if writers had faith in their dreams of Canada, Canada had faith in the dreams of its writers.

Not long ago I happened to come across an issue of the magazine *Quarry*, published in Kingston in March 1966,³⁰ a few years before the publishing explosion I've just described. *Quarry* had begun life at Queen's University in the 1950s, so it counts as an oldtimer. But what an astonishing array of talent it contained! The twenty-two-year-old Michael Ondaatje guest-edited the issue, which featured a cover by Harold Town, three poems by Margaret Atwood, four by Gwendolyn MacEwen, five by John Newlove, and others by Doug Jones, Raymond Souster and Joe Rosenblatt, as well as a superb and fairly harsh review of Irving Layton written by Al Purdy. But, peering back from a span of over forty years, the parade of talent is not the only notable thing about the magazine. What staggers me is the support the merchants of Kingston showed for the written word.

In a magazine like *Quarry*, you might expect to find ads from the local university, a local bookstore and a few poetry publishers. You might not be surprised to find an ad from the local newspaper—although in 2007, given the miserable quality of most of our newspapers, you'd be in for disappointment. All those institutions did, in fact, advertise in *Quarry* in 1966. But so did the Hudson's Bay Company, whose ad took up a back cover and featured a poem by Gwendolyn MacEwen, “This Northern Mouth.” Can you imagine Wal-Mart paying good money to advertise in a literary magazine today? Can you imagine Sears or Canadian Tire approving marketing copy with a poem at the heart? Even more impressive, to my mind, are the ads from Kingston businesses: Fashion Lane, Kinnear d'Esterre Diamond Merchants, Dover's Clothing Store, the local branch of Victoria and Grey Trust Company, McCormick's Hair Cutting Place, and so on.

In 1966, evidently, there was nothing odd in the idea that local businesses, from barbers to jewellers, had a responsibility to support literary culture, and that it might even prove economically worthwhile for them to do so. Poets and fiction writers who published in *Quarry* back then would not have suffered from the lingering fear that they were sending their work into a vacuum. The idea of imagining Canada—or, in most of the region where I now live, the idea of imagining Quebec—was nothing esoteric, nothing marginal, nothing academic. In a social and an individual sense alike, the imagination mattered.

To reiterate, I'm suggesting that Anne Szumigalski had her first book of poetry accepted and published at a rare moment of grace. When we compare the situation facing poets in the late 1960s and early '70s with the plight of poets who are starting out now, we realize how lucky today's writers are to live and work in a country where an abundance of literary magazines and book publishers can easily be taken for granted. Those journals and publishers exist in every region and every major city. Women poets no longer face the casual patronization, even discrimination that they used to suffer. The spoken word, not just the written text, is alive and well. The Canada Council for the Arts and many provincial counterparts perform superb work, often without thanks. Besides all of which, the Internet has created virtual communities and made possible new forms of poetry distribution that half a century ago were undreamt of. So far, so good.

The downside is that many of us now feel we're writing into a social vacuum. We are comprehensively neglected by the media, except on those rare occasions when prizes and nominations allow literature to be turned into a competitive sport. We are ignored by business, and we are accepted by the academy only insofar as we can be used for its own purposes. We now suffer a federal government that betrays contempt for the arts. Society in general takes so little notice of literature that we are entitled to wonder, at times, why we make the effort to write anything at all. I think it's fair to suggest that the questions "How can I publish?"; "What can I publish?" and "Where can I publish?" that so preoccupied writers emerging in the 1950s and '60s, have diminished over time. What has supplanted them, growing ever louder and more worrying in the inner ear, is the nagging inquiry "Why should I bother to publish?"

I want to dispense with the rose-tinted glasses. Nostalgia for the literary climate of Canada in the late 1960s and early 1970s is no more productive than nostalgia for the acoustic folk-strains of Tom Paxton and Judy Collins. Time has moved on. The arts have fragmented. Above all, we have plunged into cyberspace. Looking to obtain a quick, subjective measure of poetry's place in the multifaceted realm of websites, chatrooms, newsgroups and blogs, I recently googled the name "Anne Szumigalski" and the name "Céline Dion." For the first, there were 848 hits. For the second, there were 3,130,000. That doesn't tell you everything you need to know about society's interest in poetry. But it gives you a pretty good idea. So is there any way to recapture a taste of that shared grace—what Dorothy Livesay called the "warmth and succour" of the wider community; the sense that poetry could matter, not just at gatherings like this one, but also in society at large?

That's far too big a question for me to answer in the few remaining minutes I have. So let me just hint at the response I'd want to develop.

We can't return to a time before the Internet and satellite tv. We can't tell young people to turn off the music on their iPods and listen instead to somebody reciting Coleridge or Emerson or Szumigalski. But we can start, I would suggest, by fostering their own love of words. I'm sure many of you have had the experience of leading a writing workshop in a high school where a well-meaning but burned-out teacher tells you not to expect much—whereupon the students go ahead and produce more work and better work than the teacher had imagined possible. And many of the students take such pleasure in the writing. They respond to a verbal challenge with intensity and shy delight. Yet for the young this can also be a fragile pleasure, and if we greet their work with a

tactless “Why didn’t you do this?” or “You should have done that,” we can cause real harm.

We all know how essential it is to revise our work. But for teenagers, for anyone who is just discovering the joy of writing, revision is a difficult concept to get across. I used to think it was crucial to emphasize the idea that good writing involves hard work. Now I’ve come to believe it’s even more crucial to let students experience the sheer pleasure of allowing language and imagination to roam free, without constraint. You never know how that pleasure will manifest itself and what rewards it might later bring.

When I was a teenager in the early 1970s, I was lucky enough to join the informal poetry workshop that Anne Szumigalski had helped to create in Saskatoon a few years earlier. We were a disparate bunch—a couple of professors, a hematologist, a few students, a few homemakers, a visual artist or two. For a while there was also an old farmer, Alf Bye, who used to drive up with his wife from the Swift Current area, a good three hours southwest of the city, just to attend the workshop meetings. I don’t recall if his wife ever said a word. His poetry was the old-fashioned sort that most of us quietly sneered at—or even, I regret to say, not so quietly sneered at. He wrote about the prairies in sonorous rhyming couplets and florid blank verse that Tennyson would have considered old-fashioned.

At the time, I thought Alf Bye was an embarrassment. Now, decades later, I can begin to appreciate the man. He loved the English language, he needed to express his emotions, and he took genuine pride in the outmoded verse he produced. Why else would he have driven for hours to sit through meetings where he and his speechless wife must have felt terribly out of place? He had no understanding of modern literature—for him, T.S. Eliot was dangerously radical. But he loved poetry. Anne Szumigalski never made fun of the man. The rest of us were happy when he stopped coming to the meetings, but I’m not sure if Anne shared our relief. She understood both his isolation and his passion for language.

I think too of another gentleman in Saskatoon, George Porteous, who was serving as the province’s lieutenant-governor at the time of his death in 1977. One day, having heard that I aspired to be a writer, he asked me how many poems I could recite by heart. Hardly any, I had to admit. I knew that George Porteous had been among the Canadian troops shipped out to Hong Kong in 1941, and I knew that he’d spent the next three and a half years in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. But I didn’t know that he was sustained there by his love of poetry. Every day, amid the squalor and brutality of the camps, he would recite long stretches of Kipling and Wordsworth and Shakespeare to himself. He told me that poetry was what kept him sane.

When I look back on Alf Bye and George Porteous, it occurs to me that somehow, we poets have lost a fair chunk of our essential story. We’ve misplaced the plot, if you like. Over the past thirty or forty years we have focused so hard on the desire to make our work perpetually new; we have become so suspicious of stale rhetoric; and we have wanted so much to disconnect ourselves from the styles and tropes of the past, that we’ve ended up isolating ourselves from the public. True, the public appears more than happy to ignore us; but I think we have colluded in our own abandonment. Now, without for a second retreating into florid blank verse, it’s time that we imagined ways to reconnect.

On those high-school visits I mentioned a few minutes ago, I often ask the students who among them knows a poem by heart. It’s a trick question, really. Almost

never do I find more than one or two embarrassed adolescents lifting a tentative hand, usually thanks to “In Flanders Fields.” But then I ask how many people know the lyrics of a song by heart. And if they’re not feeling too timid, most of the class end up raising their arms. What I then say, of course, is that they do know poems by heart, sometimes several dozen poems—they just don’t think they do. The power of hip-hop derives from in-your-face rhyming. But teenagers seldom think of hip-hop and poetry in the same breath. They associate poetry with textbooks and exams, not with pleasure. I don’t believe Anne Szumigalski would have loved poetry so fervently if she had been forced to study it in school.

Let’s return, then, to the joy that lies at the root of our beloved craft and sullen art. Whatever style of writing we prefer, let’s not be afraid to demonstrate the energy of language and the sterling power of imagination. Let’s be willing to share our pleasure, whenever we can, with the young. And let’s not scorn anyone who loves poetry, even if it’s a kind of poetry we ourselves avoid. In brief, I would suggest, language still needs our imagining. It’s a shame if we allow ourselves to get trapped in the vegetable realm. I wonder how many of us have seriously grappled with Blake’s belief that the imagination is the real world, or with Emerson’s faith that the universe is the soul externalized. Post-Einsteinian physics appears far more open to such ideas than conventional Newtonian physics, if only we have sufficient daring.

But even if we can’t share such convictions, let’s not get sidetracked by disputes about poetics, or by disillusionment about what poetry can reasonably be expected to accomplish. I suspect that we—and I include myself in this—have internalized the second part of W.H. Auden’s great elegy in memory of William Butler Yeats, the part where Auden reminds us that “poetry makes nothing happen” and that it merely “survives, / A way of happening, a mouth.” But we’ve neglected the third and final part of the poem, in which he declares that no matter how bleak conditions may be in the outer world, a poet can still persuade his or her listeners to rejoice. As the elegy concludes, Auden speaks directly to his fellow poets—speaks directly to you:

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.³¹

Besides, I don’t think Anne Szumigalski believed that “poetry makes nothing happen.” She knew it had given her the angel of the woods.

Notes

- ¹ "Afterword," *On Glassy Wings: Poems New and Selected* (Regina: Coteau Books, 1997), 209-210.
- ² "The Angel of the Woods," lines 1-8. The handwritten text is preserved in the Anne Szumigalski papers, Archives and Special Collections, University of Regina.
- ³ "The Angel of the Woods," lines 72-79.
- ⁴ John Livingstone Clark, "Conversation With Anne Szumigalski," *Prairie Fire* 18.1 (spring 1997), 28.
- ⁵ For example in "Poems From the Notebook, 1793," *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 185-6.
- ⁶ *Jerusalem*, Plate 77, *Complete Writings*, 717.
- ⁷ *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 3, *Complete Writings*, 149.
- ⁸ "Blake's White," *The Word, the Voice, the Text: The Life of a Writer* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1990), 102.
- ⁹ "Kubla Khan," *Selected Poetry and Prose of Coleridge*, ed. Donald A. Stauffer (New York: The Modern Library, 1953), 45.
- ¹⁰ "A House With a Tower," *A Game of Angels* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1980), 9.
- ¹¹ "Frost at Midnight," *Selected Poetry and Prose of Coleridge*, 64.
- ¹² "Our Sullen Art," *Doctrine of Signatures* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1983), 40.
- ¹³ "The Poet," *Essays: Second Series, in Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 449.
- ¹⁴ "The Poet," 457.
- ¹⁵ "The Poet," 450.
- ¹⁶ "The Poet," 452.
- ¹⁷ "The Poet," 456.
- ¹⁸ "Annwfn," *Doctrine of Signatures*, 72.
- ¹⁹ "The Poet," 460.
- ²⁰ "Beginnings," *Salt* 12 (1974-5), 3.
- ²¹ "Afterword," *On Glassy Wings*, 212.
- ²² "Farewell to Winnipeg," *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English and French*. Chosen and with an introduction by A.J.M. Smith (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1960), 205.
- ²³ "At Gull Lake: August, 1810," *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English and French*, 98.
- ²⁴ "Beginnings," *Salt*, 3.
- ²⁵ The *Delta* issues in question are no. 15 (Aug. 1961), no. 16 (Nov. 1961) and no. 17 (Jan. 1962).
- ²⁶ Paul Hiebert, "The Laurel's Egg" in *Sarah Binks* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1947), 29.
- ²⁷ *CV/II* 1.1 (spring 1975), 2.
- ²⁸ G.V. Downes, review of *Woman Reading in Bath*, *CV/II* (spring 1975), 3.
- ²⁹ Livesay, *CV/II*, 2.
- ³⁰ *Quarry* 15.3.
- ³¹ W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 143.

