

Clarise Foster

An interview with Richard Osler, winner, second place in “Show Me the Book”

Clarise Foster: In 2009, *CV2* partnered up with The Muses’ Company and “Show Me the Book” was born. The gist of the rules was that contestants submitted an unpublished poetry manuscript for consideration. Your manuscript won second prize, which included a cash prize of \$300 and a feature interview and poetry selection in *CV2*. I know you have privately published one collection of poetry, but what inspired you to send this collection to a contest? Have you submitted directly to publishers? What was that experience like for you?

Richard Osler: I had been working on a manuscript for about a year. I was nervous about sending the manuscript out. Somehow the contest motivated me to get on with it, put it together and submit it. It was great coming second, but now I still face the task of finding a publisher!

CF: I understand that you have work forthcoming in the next issue of *Prairie Fire*—what has been your experience with publication in journals previous to winning second place in *CV2*’s “Show Me the Book”?

RO: It is apt that my first publication in a print literary journal was in *CV2* in 2007! After that milestone, and before placing in “Show Me the Book Contest,” two of my poems were accepted for publication in *Ruminate* magazine in the United States and one in the *Antigonish Review*. And recently I was listed as a finalist for the *Malahat Journal*’s Open Season Awards.

CF: It is interesting to me that you have actually made a career of poetry—from your website I understand that you offer poetry workshops, often with a therapeutic emphasis. What got you started on this path? Why poetry and what do you feel it is about poetry that you have made it a central focus in your Recovering Words workshops?

RO: Synchronicity (meaningful coincidence) played a big part in developing my poetry practice in recovery centres. A friend sent me an invitation to a John Fox retreat and I went. He was instrumental in directly connecting healing and poetry for me. John is a poet and registered poetry therapist in the U.S. who leads many retreats and workshops around the world.

When I met Fox I had already led my first poetry workshop with friends using exercises from Susan Wooldridge’s wonderful romp with words, her book *poemcrazy*. That

experience showed me how most people, even those who have no writing background, with the right prompts, can access words that reveal them to themselves and others in the most surprising way. All this prepared me to say yes to leading recovery workshops starting four years ago. I still

remember a line from a poem written in my first recovery workshop—“An addiction is loving something that will never love you back.”

The best way to explain why poetry works so well in a recovery setting is through a poem I wrote while answering this question.

The Trouble a Poet Is

At a centre for recovering addicts,
a hollowed out place with echoes inside,
I come prepared with some forty-sixers,
empty ones I want them to fill back up
with words; but with this proscription:
no mention of bottle or booze
of any description—Jack Daniels,
Johnny Walker Red, Seagram’s Seventy-Six.
At first, blind stares, the glass-eyed look
the near-drowned wear, or the gaze of creatures
coming up for air from the black lagoon.
Then some words: *my wife; his addiction.*
And this: *A wrecking ball made of glass,*
from the boy/man with his big-sass smile
and his tattooed swagger before he wrote.
I expected trouble but not this trouble:
the trouble a poet is. Their lies, the way
they upset the ordinary, the everyday;
describe a world farther away and nearer
than the one we think we know. Rilke
called poets *Bees of the invisible.* I am
thief and liar too, and call poets, their poems,
wrecking balls made of words. I drink
from these bottles all day, all night, long.

Most people can write something that shocks their sense of who they are when triggered by the words of

great poets who upset the ordinary and smash normal ways of seeing the world. I have watched countless

recovering addicts read their own poems out loud as if the words and stories were someone else's, not their own. Those words can wake them up, begin their healing. It is as if the writer is having a conversation with a stranger *who is yourself*, as Derek Walcott says in his poem *Love After Love*. The American poet Jane Hirshfield says it so well: "Language is sought, and seeks. The poet, pursuing a vessel to hold something known, finds what the poem may know what the poet as yet does not."

CF: According to the activities listed on your website, you also hold poetry retreats. How do these work; who takes them; and how do these activities contribute to your own practice?

RO: My writing retreats go for three and a half days with about twelve hours of facilitated writing time, discussion and reading of poems assigned in previous sessions. The retreatants range from novices to experienced published poets.

My retreats are the way I explore the craft of poetry. And I have been taught by master poets who have helped give me many of the ideas that fashion my so-called "writing adventures" I use in my retreats. Patrick Lane is well known as a master poet but perhaps not so well known as an exceptional teacher and retreat leader. He has influenced my teaching the most. Others include John Fox, B.H.

(Pete) Fairchild, Kim Addonizio, and David Whyte.

CF: It sounds like you spend a good deal of your time working on or with poetry. How do you support it all financially—do you have a separate day job?

RO: I like to think I have two day jobs—one pays me generously in cash; the other pays little or no cash, but its psychic and spiritual income is limitless. Not a hard guess to figure out which job poetry is!

Twenty years ago, after earning an English degree and unexpected careers in business journalism with the *Financial Post* and financial analysis with a stock brokerage firm, I formed a speciality money management business called Aequanimitas Inc. I borrowed the name Aequanimitas, which translates as even-minded, from my ancestor, Sir William Osler, the renowned Canadian doctor.

CF: When did you start writing poetry and why? When did you begin to take your writing seriously and submit for professional publication?

RO: I started writing when I was a boy but wrote infrequently after university. When I turned fifty I decided I was now ignoring my writing passion at my peril. I wrote enough poems to privately print *Baboon in the Mirror* in 2002. Some years later

a friend introduced me to Margaret Avison and I gave her a copy. Later in an interview in *Image*, the quarterly arts journal published in the U.S., she quoted a poem from that book as a great example of what poetry should do. That encouraged me to keep writing but I knew I needed help! I started attending writing workshops in the U.S. and Canada and after meeting her at a poetry festival I sent some poems to Heather McHugh for a review. That was a wake up! Her edits and comments told me I was a poet but had lots of catching up to do. In 2006 I privately printed two collections: my African poems *Again, No More* and a chapbook of fifteen poems called *Yet*. I also began to send poems to literary journals.

CF: Your prize-winning manuscript had a very unusual title, *Golgotha and the Dance Floor*. What is the significance of the title and how does it pull the poems in it together?

RO: The title comes from a poem triggered by an orchid. From one angle the orchid's three stems looked like three crosses and I immediately imagined the three crosses from the hill of skulls (Golgotha) where it is said Christ was crucified. From another angle I imagined Sufi dancers, arms held high. I loved this paradox, this strange pairing of death and dancing. The title also captures the sense in many of my poems of the strange yes/no of life. We stand in

death's shadow but we can choose to kick up our heels as long as we can.

CF: The sample of poems that you sent to be featured with this interview have been in some cases been substantially edited since I read them in the manuscript you submitted to the contest. Some writers would feel that poems once submitted in a manuscript are done—and move on. What is your process for editing your work and when do you consider a poem to be complete?

RO: Through my work with master poets I discovered how often what I thought was a finished poem was not! Avison told me she always put her new poems away in a drawer for a month and then re-read them to see if they were complete. This was her way of telling me a poem I had sent her needed more work! I am now much more suspicious of my so-called final drafts.

In the original version of "Playing the Words," I had not mentioned the names of the fishing flies my father used. After making a list I checked it with my brother who reminded me of the most effective fly—the Despair. Adding it to my list showed me how the despair I felt with my Dad was already suggested in the poem.

CF: Your first collection—as well as several of the poems in this most recent issue—focus on your experiences in Africa. I understand you have

been there several times. What about this experience has inspired you poetically? Do you feel that poetry is a particularly effective vehicle in talking about deeply moving experiences? I don't just mean as a way to get people to understand other cultures and difficult societal issues like poverty, but also as a way to create personal understanding, authenticity that allows you to act in some concrete way to change the world around you.

RO: When I visited war-affected areas of Africa (Rwanda, DRC Congo and northern Uganda) in 2006 I was devastated by the stories I heard and what I saw. The only way to deal with the impact was to write. These poems and many others written later saved me, pulled me out of despair and depression after I came home. Lane calls these poems of greater concern.

Yes, if we write with enough distance and get off our high horse, I think a poem can be as powerful as a gun. It can startle us into a new understanding and motivate us to make a difference. If a poem comes across as a position paper, as Stephen Dunn says in his book *Walking Light*, it fails. But if we approach an outrage as Hass does in his poem "Winged and Acid Dark," we can find our own way in. We experience the horror with him. We are not being told how to react.

Hass's poem exemplifies how to write poems about the sensational, materials that he quotes Basho as

saying had to be avoided. I can see him struggle with the obscenity of his subject (rape in Berlin in May 1945). He does describe it but in such a way, in spite of the graphic details, that I can identify with his bewildered confusion at the end: *Something not sayable in the morning silence. / The mind hungering after likenesses. "Tender sky," etc., / curves the swallows trace in air.* This is our job as poets—to hunger after likenesses. If we discover the right likenesses, cultivate apt ambiguity, we can create an authentic and lasting emotional change in a reader.

My African poems changed me. They demanded a response. Late last year a group of us, mainly from the 2006 trip, formed a registered charity called HealCanada to help the women so challenged by the violence, especially rape, in Eastern Congo. We are funding surgical repairs caused by rape and obstetrical traumas and are funding programs to promote safe motherhood.

CF: What has winning second prize in the "Show Me the Book" contest mean to you? Has it changed how you think about your writing at all?

RO: There are many fine poets writing today. It is too easy for me to play the comparison game and wonder why I bother to write at all. To be recognized in this way encouraged me to stop that game, to focus on the craft, the pleasure of being surprised by my

own words and to realize that my words could surprise a reader with their own “ah” of recognition. Placing second was that “ah” of recognition. Thank you.

CF: What are you working on right now?

RO: I am reworking almost every poem in the manuscript and will be adding some new poems that I wrote last year. This is a craft we do. Yes, there is inspiration, but without the perspiration of writing and reading other poets, it is strange how the inspiration fades.