The Six Gifts of Poetry

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Acceptance Speech

MARK TREDINNICK

We live downriver from the past; we fish
Our phrases from the stream. They are not ours;
We finish stanzas long ago begun.
We fly them like a flock of migrant birds
Into the years…

—"Before the Day," *A Beginner's Guide*

Things are as they are. Looking out into the universe at night, we make no comparisons between right and wrong stars, nor between well and badly arranged constellations.

—Alan Watts

The mind is made out of the animals
it has attended.
In all the unspoken languages,
it is their names.
—Robert Bringhurst, "Sunday Morning"

from used furniture, a tree

I WRITE THIS at a desk a friend made for me once from the boards of a demolished timber house. It is late May, and winter seems to want to come. The light foretells winter, and so do the non-Indigenous trees, the maples and elms and oaks, whose leaves coloured up this Fall with a deep intensity I have rarely seen, and which now stand shot of leaves, their inner lives, all our inner lives maybe, outed. The trees that so showily furnish, one day late in May, the threshold of a new season, use an aesthetic the place itself (in its sheoak greys and basalt browns and kangaroo-grass blonds) is only slowly, after millions of years of more restrained articulations, accepting as its own. And the trees, like me, and all of us whose people came late in the day and violently into this

realm, are beginning to apprehend and be shaped by the light and the forms and gestures of living, practised in this landscape by people and their many kind, **since long before the elms or the timber cottage whose timbers became my desk**. And in being here sympathetically, attending to what holds and what is wanted of us, perhaps these transplanted trees and my English and I can discover gestures apt to express our gratitude for all this place on earth knows about being and living, and to ask forgiveness for our presumption in taking any kind of title at all; perhaps through a poetry of deep attention, I might learn, along with these poplars and elms and pinoaks, to honour and join the divinity immanent here in Gundungurra country, along the Wingecarribee River.

Poetry—not just a practice of saying, but of seeing and being and staying—is the way, the one best way, we humans know to put our living back together with our times and our places and the trauma and the bounty and the holiness we inherit. Poetry, as Robert Bringhurst has put it, is the way the world thinks. A place, like my home place here in southeastern Australia, is a mind one might come to share. But being of one mind with the place is going to take a good while and some good poetry and forgiveness.

My desk may be an instance, I think, of a good way to proceed; it is the kind of poem I like to read and write, made as it is, as all our lives are, from lives that came before, and fashioned with love, built to serve a good cause. It repurposes the past and makes of it a present; it carries on almost forgotten traditions; it remembers other ways; it participates in the recreation of the real, which is the art of life. In “The Black Art,” Anne Sexton writes: “from used furniture” the poet fashions “a tree.” From what used to clad a house, a working family’s cottage in Newcastle, my friend has fashioned a desk that is the bedrock of my writing, which may just put a kind of spiritual roof, some thatch, over some who read them, and which, in any event, is humble work, part of whose purpose is to refresh language clapped out from ill-use and to bear a little witness to the days. Each one of which, as Emerson said, is surely a god.

(And what sort of a synchrony is it, a kind of proof that one enters sometimes the mind of the moment, that as I write this paragraph, I hear the ping of an email landing, and when I check, I see it’s from the friend who made me this desk?)

charles wesley & the metrics of the moment

ON MY DESK, as I write, sits a cat, another latecomer to a land that never knew either my kind or hers. She’s Sappho. And if she is not a poet, she is certainly a poem, lying there (her four languid white anapaestic feet drawn under her tortoiseshell torso) beside my tea, which she sips now and then, under the light which would help her read the books strewn here, if she were a reader. She may not know the poet of ancient Greece

she's named for, but in her form and manner my small cat perpetuates the broken-hearted, knowing, sensual and bittersweet intelligence the first Sappho articulated in odes that have lasted twenty-six centuries and still catch the lyrics and tell the truths of lives we lead today: the way our humanity sounds and feels on the inside, as we make our way through trouble and toil, through dream and drought, love and loss, alone and in company.

At my feet, another poet, another lifeform adapting itself to these times and climes, these latitudes and attitudes: Dante, the golden cocker spaniel. Though he may not know it, he reminds me daily, in his elegance and eagerness, in his short attention span, in his persistence, his bad memory and his tenderness, of what I learn from his namesake's terza rima: any given minute of any given midpoint of a life on earth is a scene from the divine comedy of us all, at once a hell and a paradise; like Dante's, one's way through life will not run straight—one's days are for the most part a purgation to which our sins and misfortunes and the weather condemn us and from which our poetic moments, and the grace of what we love and how we are loved and learn to forgive, redeem us. Through poetry—a full moon, for instance, like a lantern dropped in high cloud; nine Argyle Apples, like nine blue days, by the winter creek; or a line that does justice to one of those phenomena—we are interceded for and made good.

Not in the study this afternoon, but plotting delight in the garden is William Carlos Williams—a second spaniel, black and curly-haired, a pirate, a monarch, a clown. On forms like his, lives like his, or like any one of the shapely imperfect moments of the world, everything, as he well knows, depends. *No ideas but in things*, said the first William Carlos Williams; *no ideas but in black dogs,* Carlos the spaniel tells me with his eyes now, arrived at my window and looking in as if he knows I know ...

In one of the short poems ("Carol of the Living") in *House of Thieves*, I write:

> Let's sing out
> Our brief lives in the language of things.
> Let the forms that nature takes—even
> These our organic selves—be our speech
> Again.

This I believe, and from this belief my poems arise. For the poet gives to the otherwise "airy nothing" of the experience of being alive, as Shakespeare puts it, "a local habitation and a name." A good poem is a name and a place, a habitable form, a small world made from a moment or a thought, the fall of light, an encounter, a desire, a grief. A good poem is a small instance of what the world is and of how the world speaks in its language of things.

And speaking of animals and their names and forms, and since I seem to be telling the life-story of the poetry I write through the animals we keep, let me speak of a horse. He came to me for my birthday this year, a wildly generous gift from the woman who loves me, and he is a far better horse, yet, than I am a rider, but we are finding each other's frequencies lately, and his name is Charles Wesley. And his naming tells you some more of what my poetry believes in. My grandfather's name was Wesley, and he was a Methodist minister. Methodism was (and is in its contemporary manifestations) social justice with hymn-singing; Wesley proselytised on horseback among miners and the gin-soaked urban poor; Charles Wesley is to worship what William Blake was to literature; Wesleyanism is dissent and mysticism and intolerance for pomp; it was and is non-conforming, spiritual activism—with hymn-singing. The intoxication Charles Wesley preached and practised was the kind that prayer and singing and faithfulness and good company yield.

Half the hymns I grew up singing, which my grandmother (my mother's mother) played daily on her piano, were written by Charles Wesley. He wrote nearly nine thousand hymns, and it is said he wrote most of them in the saddle. The Christian Bible contains some of the great literature, but my bible is the book the Earth writes daily, being itself; and Christ doesn't feature much in the hymns which are my stanzas; but if you would understand my poetry and what it believes, remember Wesley. And what my horse, named for him, teaches me, is that the world is right and the line is true and the love is strong when the rhythm is right; and the riding, like the writing, is right, when it listens more than it speaks, when it falls in with the gait of the way things really are, when it is one's body that makes it, not merely one's head.

There's a story of the first Charles Wesley I like, and it says to me what poetry is for in a world that was at least as vulgar then, in its older ways, as it is now, as inclined to sacrilege and rudeness and unkindness, excess and self-concern; it shows us how poetry runs repairs on reality. The Methodists, refusing certain orthodoxies of the official church, were banished from the Anglican churches and forced to meet in halls, sometimes in ale houses. There they had to deal with a lot of competing noise and a fair bit of ridicule. One Thursday night, somewhere in southern England, the local lads, singing on a loop a bawdy local ballad, drowned out the dissenters' prayers. The next week, Wesley turned up at the same ale house with a new hymn—rather more high-minded lyrics set to his transcription of the profane melody the locals had used the week before to drown the Lord. The dissenters sang it back to the rowdy boys, who laughed and were won over.

Good poetry listens to its times, and to all times. Its feet will tap the metrics of the moment; its thinking will run deeper. Like any given life, poetry will be both sacred and profane at once, fleeting and eternal, intoxicated and intoxicating. And this: the music of a

good poem matters as much as its messaging. It works if its tunes catch the worldliness of the world, and hint at the heaven inside things.

without it, something holy in us goes unsaid

THERE IS NOT a culture on the earth, there is no language, that has not evolved poetry. This tells us that poetry matters; if culture is, as Bringhurst says, the human part of how Being articulates itself in particular places on Earth, then poetry is the heart of the speaking part of what human cultures say and mean in any given place and time. Poetry is who we are and it is how we speak that truth of where we find ourselves and how we ask a little more of our human participation in the real. Poetry is the analogue in human speech of love and birdsong and rain. Poetry puts a roof over the head of every heart; it says what it means and how it feels to live, in pain and delight, in grief and desire, and, saying it, makes living holy and more bearable. Something profoundly human is not said, some work that plumbs and conserves and enriches and recreates human life on earth, unless poetry is not made.

It is said we sang before we spoke; music was there in our languaging from the moment we came down from trees on to high plateaus and mountain valleys. Since languaging is an evolutionary act, an adaptation that worked, and since the music of speaking preceded the plainer sense-making work of speech, it seems to me poetry enables human Being; poetry is an aspect of seeing and saying and living in which something essentially human is enacted. We need it like breathing. Without poetry, something holy in us, something miraculous, goes unsaid and unlived; something more than merely functional about our lives stops believing in itself and dies back.

Our deep, authentic intelligences are musical, they are rhythmical, they are seasonal and tidal. Try pirating that, ChatGPT.

The logic of limbs, the reasoning of seasons, the learning of leaves, the wisdom of waters.

POETRY, writes Robert Bringhurst, *is* thinking. “And real thinking is poetry.” Poetry, he explains, “is the thinking of things.” It is the mind of the world. Think of poetry, then, as the world in thought; think of it as consciousness at play through things, the way life thinks. Think of poetry as organic thinking, unintentional and amoral but wise. Think of it as love. The logic of limbs, the reasoning of seasons, the learning of leaves, the wisdom of waters. Poetry is the body’s thought (animal bodies, planetary bodies, grains of sand).

Poetry is a quality or aspect of existence, Bringhurst says: the pattern in the fabric of things.

Poems, Bringhurst goes on, are how we “mime” or “mirror” and “admire” the thinking of things. When once I wrote that “poetry overhears the music of the intelligence of things,” I think I had the same idea in mind, long before my friend Gerhard gave me *The Tree of Meaning*, and I opened it at “Poetry and Thinking,” from which I’ve been quoting here. With poems we catch bits of the world, some of them human, one of them sometimes oneself, humming themselves true, the music of the way they are alive and of where they are alive and with whom. I am struck by the many creation myths of the world that depict the world coming into being in song. Tolkien writes one of them at the start of *The Silmarillion*. Poetry sometimes catches the lyric of how things stand, how they run—how the world articulates what it is somewhere, and what that feels like and how much that matters. “Sun, moon, mountains and rivers are the writing of being, the literature of what-is,” Bringhurst writes. “The outer world—forms, temperatures, the moon—is a language,” Borges wrote, “[that] humans have forgotten or which we can scarcely distinguish.” We inhabit a library. Too often we don’t read the books, we don’t learn from them; too often we burn them. But something tends to go on, notwithstanding the neglect and the human self-concern, and when we find the frequencies, the musical idiom of the intelligence, of the world we inhabit, including its cultures, and when we speak or write what we take part in, the manifestations of being that the world is made of, and when we listen hard beyond the self and beyond the noise of the tropes of the moment, and then when we speak or write what we discern, then poetry “gets written.” The language of what is gets transcribed into a solid form. But the thing is, the poetry, as Bringhurst reminds us, “exists in any case.” Will we, the question is, take part, or not? That is a question for our times and all times, and for each of us.

My poetry is how I try to take part in what-is where my body and mind find themselves, where my heart beats; it is my participation in Being, a witness I bear to the inner life of places and experiences and thoughts that come my way. It is a little divination of the thinking of things. Truths I try to catch like fish. And release. The poems I write attempt to do to some moments of the world the kind of justice that light does to time, and love does to what it loves, and birdsong does to dawn and flight to air and shorelines to the tides. I think this is poetry’s work, and we need it to go on.

It seems to me we need to keep reading the books that are the library of the world, or someone is going to shut it, or burn it, down. As I wrote in a poem included in this new translation, “Balmain Nocturne,”

Language only seems to be

For making sense. Words are not for telling

things, but for joining them
In the perpetual recreation of the real.

a poem is a pot for holding grace and bits of eternity a while

Poems are not thoughts; they are things. They are forms of words in which aspects of the intelligence of things in the world are caught, as in a net or in the vibration of the string of an instrument—a lyre, a mouth harp, a cello, a guitar. The thinking of the world takes place in forms; we and the world have bodies; and it is in the bodies of poems that the world is caught and said, that the song is carried on, that being is perpetuated. A good poem is not reducible to its human thoughts, its ideas, its theories or ideologies. A poem is, rather, a sculpture of voice, and architecture of utterance. A poem is perhaps a pot—sometimes a cove or a lap or a cathedral—in which a part of the mystery of being is clarified and momentarily held. Part of what a poem says and means, as with a mountain, is the form it takes in space and time, the shape also of its patterns of sound. Poetry is what happens when we ask more of language. I mean by "what happens," what happens to the poet and to the reader and to the language and to reality so engaged with. And how we ask more of language has a lot to do with prosody: with practices of rhythm and speech music and lineation and the many devices and designs poets always have employed on the page and in speech to shape the sounds of their voices so they are adequate for what they are trying to listen to with truth. When a deeper kind of speaking finds the form that fits it, you have a poem. Like the world, and like our lives, poetry happens in forms: plateau and antelope; these bodies (those soft animals) of ours, torso and limb and toe; sijo and tanka and canto and couplet. Poetry is a kind of lyric listening enacted like a posture in yoga, a stance held, a listening embodied.

running lyric repairs on reality

ELSEWHERE I have said that poetry runs lyric repairs on reality. Poetry has had in all cultures a moral function. Beyond listening, it has sought, often, to ask more of us. To do a bit better at being. And being part. Part of the fellowship of humans and perhaps of all beings, or at least those we share our local lives with. How poetry does this best has much less to do with any virtue it preaches than with how well it is made, and with the lesson of the careful process of its making; how a poem repairs our being has also to do with how deeply and astutely and autonomously it asks readers to listen to (and reuse) language. From used furniture (life lived, language as we hear it), a poem asks a reader to carpenter a tree. *Asking more of language, a poem lets us find more in, and make more of, ourselves*. This is true for the poet and for anyone who accepts the challenge to slow and read the poem. The kind of care a poem takes with language is the kind of care

we'd like to take of our own lives and places and the people and creatures and books and cultures we say we love.

And of course, written as it is in language wider awake than the language that otherwise suffices, poetry seems to wake the world to our perception; it wakes us wider to the world through the shapeliness and integrity, through the "break, blow, burn," the "knock, breathe, shine" (Donne) of its utterance. Poems wake us wider, in particular, to the parts of our lives and other lives and of the world that we disregard or overlook in prevailing discourses—to that "dearest freshness deep down things," as Hopkins says it. In good poems language shines with the newness the forms of the world, including our own, achieve each new moment of their perpetual becoming.

This is the poet's work: "translating the unsayable world." This is my work: to make a decent translation of a line or two of what the world speaks in the poetry of its being, minute after minute. This is the poet's work: to hear and conserve in her saying a little of what she can intuit of the language in which the world keeps on saying itself and all of us true; to conserve what is profoundly real in how the world goes, beyond the grasp of our daily idioms. We need poetry to correct for the silence in which prevailing discourses pass over what living means and what loving costs, and to heal a little of the violence everyday utterance does, in its lifelessness, to life.

tenderness toward the tragedy of all being & the saying of some words of thanks

I WOULD GO this far. Poetry that disregards form on the page and forgets the forms, disdains the things, the songs, the flightpaths, the desire lines, of the earth, the way the real world thinks; poetry that asserts a speaker's self, like a diva in a spotlight, that speaks without regard for the music of speech, that thinks without thought for the feeling thought is bedded in, that mistakes the present moment for all time or even the end of time; poetry that's too busy enjoying the sound of the icons it thinks it smashes to listen for what concerns the earth and the soul; poetry that is too absorbed with its own contemporaneity, to pick the frequencies of eternity inside the minute—such poetry, which is too much poetry of the present moment, reduces us all a little. It falls short of the world and of the work we and the world need poetry to do: The divining of the world and our human being in it. The tenderness toward the tragedy of all being and the saying of some words of thanks.

creation is six parts recreation

IF THIS SOUNDS a little serious, I offer no apology. The world is a serious place in need of serious attention. Life matters. Love counts.

But the ongoing enterprise of creation turns on play and playfulness as well. And so does poetry. Creation is six parts recreation. Just as birds play, so do poets, and their songs in both cases are what love sounds like. Every poem worth singing is a love song; it articulates love for language. It makes love in language, as Paz once put it, and, in a sense, to it. It so loves language it has no place for cliché, for language leached of humanity, for disembodied abstractions. A good poem takes delight in language and where it leads; the poet follows the words more than the thoughts; she follows where the rhythm of the right words leads her.

Poetry is both light and grave at once. Gravity and levity make a line memorable. For they are how the earth thinks: how life starts in spaces death opens, how no tide stays low for long, how each season carries notes of all others, how complicit the masculine is with the feminine, the morning with the afternoon, the dawn with the dusk

paying attention in six hundred and sixty-eight languages, at least

MY CONTINENT IS FIVE hundred nations and their many languages, each of which knows a part of the poem of the world that can be known no other way. And many of those languages are now lost, species of wisdom gone back into the earth. When English landed on these shores, this continent was the whole world; now, English, my own tongue, the colonisers' tongue, the language of Shakespeare and the KJV, of Blake and Keats and Austen, joins the many idioms in which those parts of the world-story instantiated on this island are said.

In Western Sydney, which lies between where I live and the city where I was born and where I teach, Sydney, 167 languages, at last count, are spoken. Each of these immigrant tongues, like my own, has its literatures and dialects, and in each some of the genius of the earth and its peoples is uniquely said. And the work of poetry in each of those tongues is the same work, for poetry is the world language, and the larger part of it is the practice of paying attention.

It seems to me right to remember in any place in which one writes the literatures that evolved and held life sacred there before you; it is right always to contemplate the wisdom that played, plays still, in those places because of the antiphonal relationship between local forms and local literatures. *We write downriver of the past; we finish stanzas long ago begun.* We fish our phrases from the stream in which the country where we find ourselves runs, and we release them—flush with country, thick with the silt of many other times and voices and beings—back into the stream, hoping that what we

contribute makes the future, downstream, a little wiser than we were, ourselves in our moment.

This is wisdom—cultural continuity, humility and reciprocity in the relationship between one's art and one's country, between poetry and time—that Indigenous cultures in my land, and every land, have kept teaching, even in the face of annihilation; it speaks to the power of this wisdom and the courage of the defiance of First Nations people in my homeland that this old knowing has defeated all the arguments of the colonisers, made with guns and made with policy and made with literature's connivance—the argument, in particular, that only the present moment counts, and that might is always right. Those are two propositions poetry in its very nature refuses and refutes. What is right and what prevails is the endless revolution land enacts and human cultures participate in minute after minute: life's insistence on itself, beauty's refusal not to be.

perpetual revolution is poetry's traditional work

"REVOLUTION is everywhere," wrote Yevgeny Zamyatin, "in everything." That revolution has always been poetry's work: participation in the work of endless renewal, the enactment and recharging of being that the more-than-merely human world carries on notwithstanding, daily. Poetry is revolution, and it revolts against staleness and the denial of life; against cliché and cant and unkindness, intolerance, tyranny, hypocrisy. Poetry, like life itself in the land, is the endless refusal of ideology and idioms that cheapen life and human understandings of it. Poetry is the conservation of wildness and selfhood; it is the art of "holding of everything dear" (as Berger put it once): everything, such as language and cloud shadow and small moments of inconsequential beauty, hurt, or accomplishment.

This is the revolutionary work of poetry: re-enchantment. "Life," wrote Emily Dickinson, "is a spell so exquisite, everything conspires to break it." Poetry, I think she wanted us to know, recasts the spell; its lines have the power to reenchant one's relationship with all that is, self and world. That takes some doing, and it needs to be done and redone, for the clangour of exploitive idioms is loud. Revolution must be everywhere and all the time, in everything. Poetry enacts revolution lyrically, waking wonder, opening hearts and eyes, saying, spelling, chanting the delight and terror of things as truly as it can sing-and-say; running, in this way, urgent repairs on the broken frequencies of our being in and with the world.

The revolutions poetry starts and restarts are molecular, not social. It invites and allows us to occupy truer conceptions or ourselves, our world and our relations to others.

But without such perpetual renewal of the self of things, no social change worth having is likely to be happen.

the six gifts of poetry

ON THE FIRST night of my second visit to China, a poetry festival in Xichang in November 2018, it dawned on me that the following evening I would be asked to say something worth hearing twice (first in English, then in Chinese) about poetry (in the world and in my life). I was told I'd have six minutes, and I have had a lot to say over the years about this art I love, so I sat in the plenary session and I thought: this has to be tight. What six things do I hold true of poetry? What are its six gifts, I thought to ask myself. And I took back my fountain pen, which Major Jackson had borrowed (probably to sign autographs), and I began, with Major on one side and Jodie Williams on the other to make a list that grew long before it came on home to six. The next morning, I let the other poets tour the old town, and I sat by Qionghai, and refined my list and made dot points I delivered that evening. I've relied on this rubric very often since; I have taught it and spoken it. I run a masterclass online, and I share one of these gifts each week. But I have never written it up, so here it is: *The Six Gifts of Poetry*.

The number is arbitrary, of course. One could name nine or twelve or one hundred-and -eight, six thousand, ways poetry remakes the soul and recasts the spell of being. But six gets us started. As many as one can easily recall in a crisis.

1. Freedom

"POETRY frees language from writing," writes Robert Bringhurst in *The Solid Form of Language*. Writing is talking transcribed, of course, and in most of the idioms in which we write, speech is leached of its colour, its carnality, its life. Speech, the enacted form of language, has qualities about it that the unsaid, unnamed world has: wildness, emotion, selfhood, mystery, liveliness, personality. Life. Much of that is unwanted in the functional and utilitarian kinds of writing we spend too much of our lives in and which threaten in their hegemony to diminish our sense of our lives' meaning: academic, scientific, journalistic, bureaucratic, technical discourses. Poetry, in its aspiration to belong in life, not just to bureaucracy and society, has always served to steal back language from the realms of its use where it is diminished, and so are we—our sense of ourselves and of each other and the world. Freeing language from writing, then—from cliché and banality and cant and hegemonic turns of phrase, from bad plots and metaphors—poetry frees us, too. Giving language back to its other work, its lyric work, poetry gives us back to the fullness of our lives, where we are not defined by prevailing discourses. Restoring language to itself, poetry restores us to our selves, our "wild and precious" lives, as Mary

Oliver turns it. It works this magic on the maker of the poem and on anyone who reads a good poem, no matter the poem's topic or cultural setting.

You will have felt this freedom yourself. Poetry, says Mark Strand in *The Weather of Words*, "allows us to have the life we are denied because we are too busy living." By refusing to bear witness only to prescribed topics and objects and instances, and by refusing to say the world in the inadequacy of the received idioms in which we come to believe we have to conduct our lives, poetry, language at its most layered and accomplished, lets us inhabit the fuller mystery of our lives and days a while; it leads us, the way Virgil leads Dante, disabused, enlarged and spiritually furbished, hurting but healing, back into the fullness of our being. As Jack Gilbert puts it, poetry, language freed from the tuneless idioms of the everyday, "lets us walk in the music of our own the particular heart." As Jidi Majia phrases it in"The Power of a Mouth Harp," the liberated language of poetry lets us feel "our heart beat outside our bodies" again, back in the beat of the land, of reality loosed from the holds of conventional utterance.

2. Forgiveness

WHEN I think of the poetry I love, across the ages and cultures, I find poetry that catches a human being or two, somewhere or other, in the midst of their imperfection: Chaucer, Milton, Donne, Dickinson, Rilke, Tagore, Li Bei, Bukowski, Akhmatova, Levertov, Heaney, (Ellen) Bass, Hirsch, Rumi, Mirabai, Sexton, Sappho, Transtromer, Larkin, (Marie) Howe, Rexroth, Olds, Carlos Williams, Blake, Dante, Hughes (Langston and Ted), Plath, Auden, Shakespeare… Literature's territory is the beautiful trouble we all find ourselves in; its work is spiritual geography. Poetry by the poets whose work both delights and instructs, as Horace says it ought, depicts us in our bewilderment, our confusion, our wonder and our anguish and our doubt, our rage, our fearfulness, our yearning and intoxication. *This is how we are*, it says. *It's okay*, or it's not okay, but it is like this for everyone, so let's get on now. *Let's see if we can do a little better.*

By casting others—the poet herself, others, some Dante, some pilgrim, some mother or father or exile or outcast—in a state of everyday or sometimes more abject humanity, poetry invites us back into our own imperfection, and, withholding conventional judgment, it asks us to find our lives enough. Beautiful even. Tragic and delightful.

Poetry forgives us, thus, for being human. Starting (but not stopping) with ourselves. Only bad poetry is small of mind and mean of spirit; let the writers of tracts be pious, vengeful, baleful, sanctimonious. The lyric bears witness. If it judges, its court

(*coeur*) is in the heart, and its idiom is kindness and sorrow and wit. Poetry is more interested in integrity than rectitude.

Each of us is all of us in a good poem. The particular life examined, caught in its moment, is a metaphor for any one of us at all—the one an instance of all. Other discourse trade in *us and them*, in bully and victim, in stereotype, in category. Lyric poetry does not, and that's why we need it so badly. "Everyone suffers like this," it says; "everyone fails, everyone delights, sometimes, like this." Any moment it captures is offered as all such moments; any life, all such lives; any failure, all such human failures, even one's own; any love, all such loves. Poetry is how our kinship with each other has been spoken of and attended to over time. We are one with all others in the flawed miracle of our being human. The kindness of tone that attends lyric poetry—not forgiving all things or all actions or all of us, and never forgetting injustice, but nonetheless asking us to recognise ourselves in the misadventures, the missteps, the silliness, the violence of others—is its understanding of our kinship with all other such beings and with the earth. Where it finds injustice, where it finds inequity, falseness, pomposity, it hears a music out of key with life, and it throws up its arms and asks us, recognising in this human failure a bad music we participate in, to find the music again.

Mostly, though, poetry instructs by how clearly and humanely it sees and says, by how elegantly it triumphs over its own inevitable shortcomings.

But it's true, in my reading, that poetry has been the idiom in which humanity has been reminded how compassion goes, how hard a good life is to sustain, a faithful heart to keep true. Poetry is the idiom of love, as love is the principle of life and the way of the soul. But sometimes love has hard work to do, hard words to say. As Joseph Campbell, the mythologist, once wrote, compassion is the great virtue, but "if you've got a guillotine, I've got a list." So did Dante, of course, and it's worth checking who figures highest on that list of what is to be contemned. Hypocrites, loan sharks, the intolerant, exploiters of the poor and of the truth and of the earth. Those who are false to god—in other words, who act with lack of integrity, disdain for the mystery and divinity of existence. Others on the list? Bad poets, abusers of language, and evil popes. It's a good list. Some actions and actors there are who fall beyond the remit even of lyric poetry's forgiveness. Amen.

3. Hearthing

A HEARTH is a fire upon the earth; it is a dangerous element brought inside and contained, heat transfigured to warmth, around which kin and kith might sit and find company and peace and safety. But still, if the hearth is to work, there must be a fire; a hearth domesticates the wildness (of the fire, by extension of the wide world, of life)

without putting it out. So it is with a poem, which contains the fire it starts; it makes habitable the wildness of the heart and the world it contemplates.

I am speaking metaphorically here, of course, but in many cultures the ground around the fire has been poetry's place, the threshold around which a people gather for warmth and contemplation and fellowship, and where the storyteller, as Barry Lopez puts it, the seer or the skop or the bard or the Bimo, creates in language the space in which sometimes wisdom arises.

A poem is a place, perhaps a walled garden, perhaps a town square, perhaps a campsite, perhaps a hearth—a space made meaningful in words. An infinity made finite. In a poem, like a hearth at the heart of a place, the outside is brought in; and the inside is invited out, back into the company of the world—the fire, the stone. Interiority is invited to sit with exteriority again, the self with the world. We gather around a fire in the complexity of our differences and are made one a while. Like a hearth, and like all places on earth, lasting poems make complexity cohere; they gather differences and distances and make of them a shared presence.

A poem like a hearth is an accompanied solitude; in it one grief is all grief, one love all love.

I have felt like this often, warmed and made wiser, older, wilder, more urbane; forgiven and made both fiercer and more tender all at once by a poem. For a good poem tells, among many other lives, one's own, all of our lives at once. Poetry catches sometimes the music of all things as they are and puts one back inside it—so that one inhabits again, even if just for the moment the sonnet makes, the much wider, wilder, wiser Self one is.

4. Survival

POETRY, THEN, puts us back in more adequate, wealthier, more diverse and storied ecologies of language, in language replete with world. It wilds us again, while making habitable, even beautiful, the wildness of emotions we share with most of those who've ever live. Poetry puts us back in our lyric selves, inside the lyric frequencies of the world as it is. Where our wholeness dwells, our freedom, our integrity. And so it can save us, as it has saved folks in all times and places, from despair, from loneliness, from dysphoria, from the kind of spiritual catastrophe, an evacuation of meaning, into which loss or pain or violence or the hegemony of exploitive language, or suburbia can plummet us.

We are languaging animals. Since the start we have prospered and we have survived our environments and we have made sense and we have found patterns in chaos and complexity, through language—making words for things, forming metaphors, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, stories, contracts, understandings. In language we are, and the better the language the better we are. Through language we make meaning, and the more adequate the language the fuller and lovelier the meaning, the more coherent the chaos.

So, for thousands of years, poetry has sustained societies and helped individuals in crisis hold on. For a poem is a house made of words. Good words. And yet it is built, often, out of extremities; love and fear and ecstasy and grief and anguish and hope and desire, this is what those words are often about. For it's mostly when love starts or when love stops, when life starts or life ends, when things fall apart and meaning is lost, or when life is almost too much in its wonder to bear, that we turn to poetry? Poetry is good for taking trauma—even the ordinary chaos of lived experience—and making of it a dwelling place: a tent, a house of many rooms (stanzas), a walled garden. Lyric poetry finds forms (rhythmic phrases, images, speech music, lines and stanzas) for inchoate emotions, and so holds them and lets us hold them; it finds patterns in the wilds of life and makes them over into patterned places, spoken worlds.

Sometimes I even think that when trouble is deepest, the old forms work the best: self-evidently these are forms that have proven capable for the longest time of bearing strong emotion and making it beautiful. And to a twenty-first, digital-age reader, they say—the sijo, the tanka, the elegy, the small song, the villanelle: we've seen this kind of thing before; this has been survived; this is one of the shapes in which it has been borne; this is one shape survival takes; you, too, can make your suffering over into a poem.

Cultures everywhere evolved a form, the lyric poem, says Gregory Orr, for the purpose of keeping us sane. The lyric is the best trick humans know for ordering disorder, for making chaos sayable and bearable, for helping each of us and all of us to survive pain, extremity, and chaos. For any, every, human life is, at times, too disassembled, too painful, too unlettered to survive. Consciousness itself, the gift and curse of being human, is now and then unendurable. The world of forms, of energy as it is expressed in light and weather and the rest of it, is almost terrifying in its energy, when we learn to open to it. Poetry helps, Greg Orr says, and it helps best, because of the sheer adequacy of lyric language, to contain the wild without extinguishing or denying it.

Poetry puts us back, line by line, inside our lyric selves and back inside the lyric world. It is a way of staying in the dance between order and disorder. This is why Frost called poetry a momentary stay against confusion. Poetry makes moments mythic, eternal, and so removes their sting. It accompanies all solitude. The hearth again.

5. Re-connection

"The mind making its way through a metaphor," writes Jan Zwicky, "is the mind become *animal* again."

A poem is a leaf that tells a tree. My heart is an exile; my heart, a pilgrim. The years disperse like crabs across the mangrove flats. With used furniture, he makes a tree…

Metaphor, you might almost say, is the native tongue of poetry, and this is vital to the work poetry performs—through language *binding* writer and reader, the possible choir of all the rest of us, back into the music of all things, the ecology of all we are connected to. Metaphor is neatly defined by Edward Hirsch as "a radical likeness between two different things." Metaphoric language asks a reading mind to imagine how two discrete entities—a poem and a leaf, a heart and an exile, for instance; a mind an animal—are each the same as the other. Metaphor in this way practises—and schools minds in—relational thinking—even, in relational being, since one becomes, or one's mind becomes, in a poem, at once the thing meant (the tenor) and the image, the radically different entity, by which it is spoken of (the vehicle). The mind, one's self, moves between two discrete offerings and is asked to discover their kinship. To inhabit their kinship, their symbiosis. So it is that animals, mammals like us, move in the world, finding meaningful patterns of interconnection, finding, stepping out, if you like, networks of connection, in which they/we find belonging, sustenance, whatever is meant by home. In this way, employing metaphor in particular, poetry is the language in which the radical interconnection and similarity of apparently separate thoughts and organisms, times and places, is asserted and instanced, and the reader is asked to move in the world of the text, that forest, and then to move again in the world beyond the text, as if there were an order to which even apparently disconnected things all belonged, and they, the reader, dwelled there too.

Through its metonymic way, its practice of radical kinship, poetry asserts and invites a recollection of the otherness of familiar things and the familiarity of other things; it remembers that *here* inhabits *there*; it says to the reader *see yourself in this life that is not yours* (since it seems to be the poet's); it says to the poet, *imply all such being, in this life you render in verse*. In a lyric poem of any merit the idea is that each "I" is all or any of us at all—each "I" is all such "I"s. And anything a poem evokes is offered as an instance of the wide class of all such things in the world. And so it is, reading a poem, a reader can feel involved again in worlds larger than themselves. And can begin to understand the world as an ecology of selves, the self as a world in which all selves are implied.

Earlier, I used “binding … back” deliberately. In English, the word “religion” derives from the Latin particle “re” and the “ligio/ ligare” (to bind together), from which English also derives ligature and ligament and, via Italian, the musical term “legato,” in which the tune is played smoothly, all the notes connected. The religious impulse in humankind seems to be a kind of longing for the self to be at one again with a divine ecology, an original order from which all of us feel lost, exiled, excommunicated, perhaps (as Dante did in the dark wood) by the conditions of everyday living. Perhaps Dickinson has this bond in mind, the sense of inhabiting a consciousness beyond time and self, when she speaks of the exquisite spell. And poetry, I want to say, as long as humans have made language and felt exiled, has served the purpose of remaking the conditions of relational being, of recasting coherence with and within the rest of all this otherwise incoherent Babel that is everyday life. And metaphor, chiefly, is how poetry recasts the spell, remakes ecologies of interrelationship, of belonging. The work of poetry is ecological. It is what is meant by spiritual.

A poem begins, says Jane Hirshfield, in language “awake to its connections.”

The poet’s work is to allow language to find her—phrasings in which worlds of connection beyond the thing, or the thought itself she has in mind, are implied; in which the one thing said stands for the ecology of all of its belonging. *Among the metaphoric work the poem does, synecdoche is central*. Each word in a poem is a world; each life alluded to, each piece of weather, each instance of human experience stands in for each such instance and for all the aspects of existence, everywhere, in which the particular is implied. Each poem is a moment of world, in which the whole wide world is said (under the poem’s breath).

Poetry writes the *world in a grain of sand*; it writes in the intimate, the ultimate; in the physical, it writes the metaphysical, all time inside this time. And so it is that on poetry’s hearth, many distances are gathered, and a deep reconnection with the Self of all things is fashioned. Line by line. One can belong, in a poem, to much more than merely one’s life in its circumstances and times. One can be a poem again, a word or two within a book in the library of all being—an incarnation of eternity, part of all else that is.

6. Justice

THE FIRST GIFT of poetry is freedom; the sixth, justice.

We are spiritual organisms living out a tragedy upon an earth that will long outlast us. All we can know, in life, of heaven, is the earth and what we encounter here—and that we are destined to lose it, this heaven. While we’re here, until whatever comes next,

we want to see our lives lived and witnessed in their truth. In their inimitable accomplishment. I think we want it known how our life felt, lived in the certainty that our living will end, and what it signified. We want the truth told about what we lived through and what we overcame and what kind of legacy we leave. And the world knows no better medium than poetry for bearing that kind of witness. Poetry does justice to the inner life of life, the exquisiteness of how it feels to be alive among all the other living forms, in the certain knowledge that this life we know will cease.

Parties and causes, some of them just, some merely powerful or popular, will try to recruit poetry, the way that Augustine Rome tried to recruit Virgil. But what the *Aeneid* writes, like all great poetry, transcending while catching its times and their themes or counter-themes, is what Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet*, or Dante in *La Comedia*, or Sappho in her odes or Akhmatova in her poems, or Austen in *Pride & Prejudice*, or Pasternak in *Doctor Zhivago*, or Jidi Majia in “Promised Land”. Poetry’s topic is the Divine Comedy of all lives as instanced by one life or other.

And while being partisan toward the overlooked and the alienated, the disparaged and the exploited—because poetry is by its nature out of sorts with hegemonies, with monopolies and political or theoretical abstractions, with the discourses of power—poetry ought also to be careful which temporal causes it allows itself to speak for. Poetry’s purpose historically has been to speak for life, for the experience of living, for which no other discourse speaks. It speaks for what is otherwise overlooked or denied or disparaged: for the maddening and sometimes almost unliveable integrity, the innate unconformity, the uniqueness, the shimmer, of each human life lived in all manner of weather, and often under enemy fire. When poetry is seduced by causes, even fine and compelling causes, when it commits to political purposes, inevitably it precludes some lives and privileges others; it participates in classes, categories, hierarchies of merit, stereotypes and abstractions (colonisation, patriarchy, diversity, trauma, privilege, race, gender, disadvantage); and it falls into the same habits of mind and language that poetry by definition resists. In fact, poetry is the antidote to political discourse, to theory, to the abstraction of thought and speech so necessary in courts and government departments and banks, but so inimical to the experience of being alive. The most powerful politics poetry performs is its refusal of politics and political language. *No ideas but in things*, Williams rightly advises. The poet and the human life she instances should best be the “nobody” Emily Dickinson says she is, and all of us are. Or if you like, the anyone at all. The everyperson that Dante is. For, if poetry abandons the cause of speaking for the unspoken earth, the life of any given child or snow leopard or river or human heart, then who will speak of that, which literature will testify for life, for the miracle and misery and mystery one’s one and only life is? And since we are languaging beings, if poetry too abandons us; if poetry mouths mantras and slogans, or speaks slabs of policy and theory, what art will there be left to do justice to what it means for any one of us at all to

live upon the earth, and what will become of our hearts then, unlettered and speechless as they then will be?

The justice poetry does is to life as it goes, and not as we are told it goes, according to some prevailing rubric, and not just our human lives. The justice poetry does is to put us all back for a time inside lives bigger, older, and more actual than any doctrine can begin to help us understand. Its justice is the justice of rivers. Its justice is the justice of flight and geology and love.

There are perhaps a hundred ways of saying why it is that poetry uniquely does justice to the experience of being alive on the earth, but Seamus Heaney said it well enough for me. It satisfies, he said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech "Crediting Poetry", "two contradictory needs of human consciousness in times of crisis. (And for someone, somewhere, for all of us at one time, these are times of crisis.) What are those two needs, each incompatible with the other and which, nonetheless, through its devices and forms, poetry reconciles and consoles?

1. The human need for what he calls "a truth-telling that is hard and retributive."
2. The equal and essential need for a bearing of witness that is *tender*. The need to be understood in one's wholeness and silliness and majesty. The need to be allowed the "holiness of the heart's affections." Kindness, in other words; tolerance; mercy.

Whatever love is for, poetry does that. Only some of what love is for is naming injustice and telling the kind of truth that untells lies, that sets the earth spinning again on its rightful, and life-sustaining, axis. Love is also for seeing. Love is also a radical democracy of acceptance; it is faithful not just to what it wants, but to what is—to the godliness, you might say, of the integrity of people and places and things, being what they are for now. Poetry, as Mary Oliver says it, *lets that soft animal, your body, love what it loves*. And that is a powerful and dangerous politics. That, and its forthright rejection of cliché, is the revolution good poetry, like life itself, enacts.

I read and I write poetry to refuse language and practices that do inadequate justice or deny justice to the sacredness of life—the life of the land, the life of all beings, including especially the human ones. Justice, then—of a kind essential to life itself—is the sixth gift of poetry. Poetry keeps our lives alive in us; it keeps the world alive in us and awake to us; it honours the gift we live out, until we have to give it back; and it shows us in the meantime the kind of truthfulness, integrity and care it would be useful to take with that gift and with other lives we encounter.

the self is a choir; the poem is a catchment

ALTHOUGH to make a poem, or an essay like this, is the most solitary pursuit I know—maddeningly and delightfully—no one writes a poem alone. The self is a choir that sings with and for all selves. Each of us is a catchment fed by an expanse of country: the past, one's culture, one's various inheritances, all one has read, all one has loved and lost, one's friends and teachers, and all the places one has been. So, any prize that comes belongs to all the country upstream of the poetry one has made. Gratitude and humility, two other notes poetry hits, are the only proper responses. The work could not be made without all that has made you and all those who allow you to be who you are and write what you write. *We finish stanzas long ago begun.*

My gratitude for this prize extends in particular to my parents Heather and Bruce Tredinnick, in whose love and care I began, and to my partner, Jodie Williams, who takes pride in my work and lets me get it done by taking care of so much else. To them, my love, always; to live with a poet is no poem. I hope my work does their love justice. But also my poetry would never have been read in China, and it would never have come to the attention of the organisers of this festival and this prize, if it had not been translated. And for the first translation of my work into Chinese, I have to thank Isabelle Li. I know that if she had not found my work in her adopted Australia, I would not be here today to make these remarks or to give thanks for this prize. Many others in China have been kind to me and have appreciated my work: I wish to thank, among them, Jidi Majia, who has often been my host these past ten years, and Huang Shaozheng, my patient translator and friend. Thank you.

And of course, the organising committee of the Qinghai International Poetry Festival, who make this award. The world knows many poets, living and dead, whose work is what I have dwelled upon above; whose work shunts the earth back onto its axis and transfigures the pain of living into a beauty itself. So, it humbles me to think the committee found those qualities in my own. My deep thanks.

the loveliest name in the world

THIS PRIZE may bear, among poetry prizes, the loveliest name in the world. It does not honour a city or a bank or a benefactor, the manufacturer of barbed wire, for instance. It honours an animal and its place. A being endemic to an arid and beautiful high plateau of the world. A small bovid of modest appearance, remarkably well adapted to difficult circumstances, the high plains and mountain valleys of the painterly Qinghai-Tibet

Plateau; an animal poached and plundered nearly to extinction for the wonder of its *shahtoosh*, its underfur, whose wool, “the king of fine wools,” was prized by Indian, Persian and Chinese makers of shawls. It is an awful, if noble, destiny to surrender not just the coat that keeps you alive in cold country, but life itself, so that some humans can knit from your life wedding shawls of exquisite softness. And still—although the Chinese government established a national preserve in Qinghai 1997 to save the golden antelope from extinction—this is a small being with a wealthy name whose hold on the world it has so long graced is tenuous, its future unsure, its status near threatened.

And all of this makes the golden antelope the perfect metaphor for poetry, always endangered, kept alive by the devotion and love of a few, a resilient instance of life’s insistence on itself and of the way beauty sometimes prospers under conditions of radical scarcity. *Trust what is difficult*, wrote Rilke to the young poet, and so the antelope has. And so, like the antelope itself, the people of Qinghai province have trusted, keeping the animal in the world against odds. And so does every poem and every poet, and so do the donors of this prize, believing in poetry and working to promote amity among the poetries of the world, notwithstanding the tensions and political forces that sometimes push nations apart.

It is delightful for me personally, and fitting, that this poetry prize is named for a manifestation of a landscape; for I believe, with Robert Bringhurst and Jidi Majia, that poetry is the speaking, the human articulation, of what the land, in its places, knows. Poetry has been an ecological practice, a way of reminding humans of the natural order they belong to and serve and depend up. Poetry has been a way of allowing humans to deepen into their humanity by becoming, through language organic and mammalian, rivers and seas and plateaux and animals again. And so it is good to receive a prize in whose name poetry and nation and land and animal are named as if they sang in the same choir.

a poem’s work is conservation

CONSERVATION, I believe, is poetry’s work, and what it achieves is what has been won for the golden antelope—by virtue of the devotion of people unwilling to let another miraculous being pass from the earth. Poetry conserves in humanity its wildness and makes that wildness liveable and sustainable. Poetry domesticates the wild (in the world and in each of us who read it) without baffling the weather or shaking the landscape out of it, or out of us; poetry does not extinguish the fire it rekindles in us. In every one of its phrases, and regardless of subject matter, lyric poetry remembers the earth, and all that the earth remembers; it puts us back inside our wiser *Being-with* all things; it fashions of language a hearth where one can sit at ease again in the selfhood one shares with all

things; and it celebrates that which is most alive in all of us, in our pain and our delight, in our coming and in our going, in our speaking and in our staying silent, in our loving and in our living and in our passing away, back into the earth that poetry never forgets.