

The Life and Times of Carl Nelson

Oh, where does poetry fit into this world?

by [Carl Nelson](#) (May 2021)



Interior with an Etruscan Vase, Henri Matisse, 1940

I am currently making a mix of my prose and poetry, in an effort to figure out where a poem fits into this world. I've always liked casseroles. And they are the common thing fellow

citizens bring to an injured neighbor. So I've wondered, is there a propitious moment hidden somewhere within a business conversation or party chatter where one might insert a line or two of poetry? Outside of driving behind the wheel, standing in church, or taking a shower, where is it permissible to break into song? Perhaps when the 'hills are alive'? What about just a common tilled field in the hot noon sun which looks heavy with sleep?

It occurred to me that poetry, growing lonely perhaps, will often intrude itself into our thoughts. Or glancing around we might spy their apparel in a lovely flower, a puppy, a grimy factory spewing exhaust even though the words themselves might have gone for a swim while leaving their accoutrements draped like clothes on the nearby bush.

What if we were to allow our thoughts to fully mature within one of those cartoon strip bubbles, and to be seen within all of the other comings and goings? How would this be received?[*]

A Bug Died in My Coffee

*A bug died in my coffee
and tied up my whole morning.*

Well, it's a hard go.
There are a zillion bugs in the world
and they all have to die.
There's a thousand interruptions,
if you have the mind for it.
Every tree has to fall.

There's a thousand deaths from auto accidents yearly.
There's a thousand ways of responding which could be wrong.
And a hundred people more agreeable than me.
My son is growing up and leaving home.
My face is sagging into a frown.
How long before my piece doesn't fit

the jigsaw of others' lives?

Or perhaps picture these poems as paintings on the walls of the situation you are visiting as the writer chatters away, or during a break in the conversation when you casually absorb their ambiance.

An Old Person's Wisdom

*Young people swallow a near-grape concoction,
briary with a fruity bouquet,
for fine wine.*

Older people produce a drier wisdom
of great complexity, hazy but elegant,
smoky, soft, supple, toasty but at times
brawny with a bit of bite,
a nutty flavor with hints of urine and feces,
old yellow nails, rheumy eyes staring out of cold musty
pillows
and memories of war.

We're all salespeople
and wisdom is no different;
it has to get up, shine its shoes, go out and sell
to the younger demographic.
And the older wisdom can be so vast,
like the horizon, it's lost sight of.

My dog does not realize he lives in the United States
on a planet hurtling through infinite space,
where the youth run everything.

And what of an author who does a mite more daydreaming than is
usually survivable? Would your average reader entertain those
individuals if their mental lives were more fleshed out and
put into context somewhat? Maybe even be a little less apt to
trample through a flowering imagination they could smell and
see the carefully acquired humdrum?

Appalachian Life

*West Virginians can be gracious as the day is long,
but at some point people have to realize whose home it
is
and that the way home folk do things is the way it's
done.
But they come at you with Federal Law
sugar-coated with Federal money,
and what're you gonna do about that?
They got money and the law and you don't.
And they'll pursue you right up the cricks and hollers,
intent upon making your life better
and you ain't never seen anything like it.*

My wife, at a young age, was traumatized by the poem, "Jabberwocky". She still feels the flutter of anxiety flap its wings when I mention the poem. It was a poem assigned by her middle school teacher to read and remark upon. I suppose the teacher might have considered it a fun, imaginative reading exercise with lots of unusual words and action, all of which would appeal to a youngster. But for my wife, it was a torment. She was just learning more difficult words for the sense they made and yet the words in this poem made no sense at all. You couldn't even find them in a dictionary! "It made no sense at all. I couldn't tell what it was about." She couldn't even begin to describe what the poem 'meant'. The assignment paralyzed her in abject fear.

So I imagine how much better the experience might have been for her if the poem were preceded by a little explanation from the poet of how it came about or of what he was thinking when he wrote it. Or a bit of foreground fleshed in by the educator might have been of help. Just a few comments of prose orientation, for example, could explain how words and thoughts can be used just for fun, for their interesting suggestions and suggestive sounds. Perhaps compare our beamish boy and the poem's gurgling sounds to drifting down a burbling brook.

Explain how the narrative with its silly named Jabberwock can carry sinister lurking undertones which the "vorpel blade" must "snicker snack". But, of course, this might belie the fact that "Jabberwocky" is not necessarily a poem meant for seventh grade, and that its explication was better demanded of high school level heuristics. As you might imagine, my wife was a very serious little girl with a horrid little curl, who wore a lovely pearl necklace and a buttoned up sweater, and who was accustomed to being at the head of her class. To assign a poem like Jabberwocky for her to decipher was like teaching a youngster to swim with a toss into the roiling ocean. You don't forget experiences like that.

These poems comprise some of the thoughts that were sitting with me on the edge of the bed, when I arose or sprang sideways from my thoughts as I went about my day. Lots of thoughts flutter around in my head like moths, or whenever my mind sits up to consider. It's like shaking a snow globe or pulling out last winter's sweater. Not that poems come upon me full blown. I'll flesh them out later over the day, or week or even the months that follow.

The essays are of a much more intentional nature. They are the record of a memory of a time or an argument which is as much a part of my nature as my fingers or ears. The memories and rhetoric comprise the landscape while the poems are the flying bugs, flowers and such. It could be a criticism of landscape painters that they didn't include the hum of the cicada or the buzz of the cricket, or the sweat around your hatband under a sunny sky. Perhaps think of the poems as these. Swipe or swat at them if you must.

Depot Bay, Oregon

"smallest harbor in the world"

I believe in God. There's no point in believing otherwise.—Fredrick Owen

*Where comfort and humor dress-up as tourists
with a lot of play in their steering...
I believe in a God who employs
the same part of my brain as vacations.*

Lazing away reading women's tops
traces a reverent Sunday in a pagan chapel seaside.
Where the major draws are mermaids,
whales, seashells, shipwrecks—and the major work,
pulling beers and fishing.

The catch is cleaned where the seagulls squawk,
as café patrons, down the walk
—past where the buttery odor of hot caramel wafts—
lift beers and fondle stemware,
as the taffy machines turn slow, like oil boom pump jacks,
and prophesying whales blow seawards.

[*] The downside of this view has been voiced by the comic, Delvin Green: "People who enjoy their own poetry, are the same people who enjoy their own farts."

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Carl Nelson has recently published his newest Self Help Book, *The Poet's (30 Year) Marriage Plan*, which is a useful collection of interlarded poems and prose advice (schemes),

all celebrating the hallowed institution of marriage. To learn more about the author and peruse his work, please visit