

A Glance Back at the Birth of the Stroll

As we prepared for another annual Stroll of Poets, a several years ago, I thought back to the first Stroll, to why and how it began; and wondered whether it was still meeting our needs. My needs as I saw them back then likely were similar to those of all poets.

After several years away from poetry, I had begun composing poems again in the late eighties. I looked, too, for outlets: especially public readings. There were a few readings here and there around town. Mostly they were “juried” by what appeared to be very narrow cliques. Getting a spot on the roster of readers seemed a matter of currying friendship and favour with a host. Many other poets appeared to be in the same position as I was: outsiders.

The format of a short series of readings organized by a group of women was the most promising and fairest I had seen: two invited guest poets, augmented by an open stage to a reasonable maximum number. With a break, the entire program reached to two hours. I was grateful to Ruth Donovan, Alice Major, Rhona McAdam and the others for that very pleasant and well-promoted mini-series; so was disappointed to learn that they were not going to continue it. To keep it alive, I contacted them and found myself reconvening an organizing committee. This time it comprised Alice, myself, Diane Zinyk and Glen Kirkland. We held a season of a half-dozen monthly readings in the above format. In general we felt quite good about the series, but the stagnant attendance figures made us wonder whether there might not be something lacking in our format or approach. In June of 1991, that series also came to a close.

Must poetry accept its status of pauper of the arts? What could be done to give it the weight of public acceptance, and hence an ever-expanding importance? The Fringe brought new audiences to live theatre, and the Gallery Walk drew new patrons into art galleries. But how to do the same for poetry . . . ? I mulled over these questions when chatting with Lori White, proprietor of Afterwords, a second-hand bookshop on Whyte Avenue (long since gone). But of course: there are several venues on Whyte which could lend themselves well to poetry readings: bookshops and bistros. Do it all on the same day: it becomes an ‘event’ then. Lori was intrigued and volunteered her shop. I went around the corner to speak to Margo Cross of Athabasca Books, and she began her long enthusiasm for our event. Down the street to Bjarne’s Books. Bjarne Tokrud liked the idea. At that point I knew it could fly. I called Ivan Sundal, and his enthusiasm told me that poets would go for it. He and I convened a meeting on August 23, 1991.

Glen Kirkland, Alice Major, Bert Almon, Ruth Donovan, Olga Costopoulos, Anna Marie Sewell, Ken Wilson, Ivan and I and met and set a plan for the first Stroll of Poets exactly two months later. We all worked the phones, contacting every poet we knew.

It was all organized on a shoestring. Most publicity was free; though we charged each venue ten dollars, which gave us a promotional budget of \$110.

Twenty-seven days before the event, we held a general meeting of all the poets, the agenda including the question of whether to form a society. Near the end of the meeting someone asked if an anthology could issue from the event. Logic dictated that there was no time to consider it, but we were poets. Again, several people spread the word by phone to ask poets each to submit a poem to the publication. Lori’s bookstore was the “post office” where poems were to be dropped off and picked up. The \$690 printing cost was, I think, fronted



by Tom Trofimuk; and Toni Ford designed the now-familiar page layout of our anthology. With 165 copies printed by Stroll day and another fifty available later, he recouped his money. Most copies were sold to Stroll members themselves, of course. While we have a few copies of subsequent anthologies still available, there are none to be had of this inaugural issue; rare and, within a tiny market, likely quite valuable. Stroll day, October 27, brought a gratifying turnout to hear the sixty or seventy poets despite the early cold snap. The first “No Bards Barred Bar” took place after the event, and all of us felt quite drunk on poetic euphoria even before entering the bar.

In November we applied to register as a society, and spent one Sunday filing slowly through Athabasca Books where a cable TV cameraman recorded dozens of poets, each reciting for the broadcast audiences. Members even reported seeing some clips in subsequent months.

Then came the first “Twelve Days of Poetry,” many of them grouped around themes. Fortunately, our list of poets extended no further than could be accommodated through the twelve days; with the finale just like the other evenings, only bigger. Five or six poets performed; culminating in Mary Howes reciting to the musical background of Guerrilla Welfare. We all got drunk that night too.

Our first Annual General Meeting took place in March, 1992. Ivan Sundal was duly nominated and elected President. Plans were set, structures formed, and we were away.

But growth brings new problems. If we were to fulfill our democratic, inclusive goals, we were going to have to accommodate many more poets than before. Formulas for reading schedules were debated, and the issue resolved. One problem threatened to halt the anthology publication, however; if we were to print an

anthology with each poet again given a full page for poem and bio, a new physical format was required. We couldn't saddle staple the binding by volunteer labour, as we had in the first year. The larger size called for “perfect” binding, which meant a much higher cost of publication. How to raise the funds for it? With a mixture of excitement and dread, Ivan and I and a few others launched ourselves into organizing a small fundraiser. “Poets of the Four Quarters” took place on the summer solstice, during



which four favourite poets recited in the four corners of the 33rd floor observation level of the AGT Tower. The event was catered with wine and a variety of munchies from our gracious restaurateur supporters, and our poets recited their last lines as the sun set at 10:06 p.m. The profit came to about \$350: not huge, but enough to leverage the credit of our printer of several years, Ali of Scholastic Printing. We had also received our first grant from the Alberta Foundation of the Arts, to be used for other expenses of our season.

The expanding roster of poets created challenges in organizing the Twelve Days of Poetry, as well. The 1992 event was created around eleven poets chosen from the anthology by the producers of CBC Radio literary programming in Edmonton. These eleven poets were then each asked to invite three others to recite on the same evening. The CBD producers attended all eleven events, selected their favourites, and recorded these at the 12th Day of Poetry. Controversy erupted amongst the poets who had not been included, for they felt that you had to be someone's friend to be selected. The point was valid, so the executive came up with the plan that we all know by now: blind judging by jurors drawn from the community, and so on. In retrospect we have often marvelled at how the Stroll year had become a cohesive whole. The all-inclusive Stroll fed poems to the Anthology, the Anthology fed the roster into the 12 Days of Poetry, and the first eleven days created, by audience vote, the shortlist for the finale.

The weekly series arose at some point to fill a further need for poets to recite. Again, we struggled with the issue of democratic selection, and filled the first weekly series roster through a kind of hockey draft. Each weekly series is constructed in a different way, however, reflecting the creativity of the year's executive.

And the writers' circles continue as well. I wish more members took advantage of them. My own experience with them was positive, for we all tried to extend the democratic and peer-support ethic into the round-table discussion.

I wish all Stroll members and executive members much fertility in their imaginations as they work on the Stroll. To new members: put your own stamp on it; just be prepared to adapt to the demands of the membership; for events organized with the same individuals at centre-stage and as arbiters tend to frustrate the poetry community. Better to have a rotating roster of hosts and styles running each reading.

- Doug Elves, 2005

