In ancient times, when asked where their poems came from, the Greeks and Romans would probably have answered, "Inspiration is a gift from the Muse." In later times, many poets have felt the same, except that their descriptions of the Muse have changed. For example, in the 19th-century, the Romantics found their Muse in the countryside and wrote about the feelings that Nature inspired.

Today, despite a move to the cities, Wordsworth's famous Romantic dictum still echoes: that poetry is essentially "emotion recollected in tranquillity." While the subject may no longer be hosts of golden daffodils in the Lake District, there are urban forms of beauty to discover and celebrate. As an example, I'd like to read a poem which grew out of a marvellous show last spring at Gallery One: Annie's Recipes, sculpture by Anne Lazare-Mirvish. Anne's pieces were arranged serenely about the room, each a shining or fancifully coloured undulant block set on its own wooden pedestal. Only on a
closer look, did the raw materials became apparent. Anne's sculpture were melded from discarded tin cans, wire, and scrap metal. Although fashioned from the detritus of a modern city scape, in her hands these scraps gained a Romantic life of their own that took me back to the realm of Nature. I wrote the poem to express the delight I felt in looking at her sculpture, and to share some of the wonderful pictures Anne's work had set off in my imagination:

**ANNIE'S RECIPES**
*(Sculpture, Gallery One, for Anne Lazare-Mirvish)*

Squares on dark pedestals,  
pushing out of themselves,  
metal frays, or waves, or grows tails.

*Touch us!* strange shapes whisper  
uncoiling round layers and dents.  
*Our edges are beautiful!*  

And knowing how fingers crave secrets,  
heaven you frizzle like angels' hair  
over earth's satiny planes.

Sparkling, a fish becomes its own net.  
Between two yolk-yellow rocks  
a crocodile writhes.

Through chain link and litter  
out whorls a hole  
rigid and ribbed, from where?

From a dark, underground garden,  
worm flesh twining and shining in mould-light,  
phosphorescent?

Or tunnelling blind beneath branches  
deep into witch-black forest  
a harvest moon sets afire?

Bereft, a lamb baas.  
Who will listen?  
-- A headless Nereid who kneels in aluminum folds?

Children tucked side by side,  
row above row, under a cover  
dream with invisible smiles,

for you, like a mother bending to kiss,  
have smoothed the red cockatoo's razor head feathers  
and popped three bellybuttons from one deep mouth.
How mysterious such creation
where wire, drink cans, tubing, mesh
awake as 20th-century icons.

Only you could gather and meld and polish
castoffs and air into hard-glowing cushions
imagination dances upon.

Of course, as we hear about labour unrest, soccer fans trampling
each other to death, political and military scandal, and wars
constantly springing up around the world, it is not so easy to enjoy
recollections in tranquillity. Instead, many poets write from sadness
or anger, perhaps one reason for their lack of popularity in an
entertainment age. However, it is by facing these negative
emotions, and by giving them form on paper, that poets try to
control, understand, and thereby symbolically avert human chaos.
Again, I would like to illustrate with a poem written for a Club
member.

Not long after I joined The Arts and Letters Club, chatting in the bar
one day, Wentworth Walker told me that his house was being
painted by two young students, and how much he delighted in their
easy-going friendliness, and their genuine desire to please and be
helpful. Such innocence and goodness of heart, we concluded, were
expressions of the best in young people and were something to be
grateful for. Yet, it struck us both, how fragile such beautiful
qualities are against the harsh tests of the world. The poignancy of
this realization prompted the poem "In Gratitude", where I chose
the image of gazelles to represent the young, because they are
beautiful and swift, but so terribly vulnerable too:

IN GRATITUDE
(for Wentworth Walker)

The young give fragrance to our days,
not flower frail
but wind gazelles,
smooth bellies outspringing
time's jaws.

They survive on instinct and innocence.
Sniffing, at first, with startled eyes,
they graze on little kindnesses
and trust
the sun will rise,
the moon
never turn tail.

Wiser, we watch them
wend across savannah,
graceful, unwary,
their delicate legs
strong with speed in flight.
We cheer their every escape.
May no hour
bring one down.

Romantics write from personal emotion. In contrast, 18th-century Neoclassicists, like John Dryden and Alexander Pope, were more cerebral in approach, and took their subjects from public events of social, philosophical, or satiric significance. With Neoclassical writing, I would include many of today's poems that originate from research into historic or otherwise significant figures and events. For example, in 1993 appeared the highly regarded book by our own Richard Outram, *Mogul Recollected*. This sequence of poems delved into historical, eye-witness accounts to recreate the life of a circus elephant who drowned in a ship's fire off the coast of New Brunswick in 1836.

Two of my recent poems have been fashioned from factual material. Both are too long to read here, but the first, "Villa La Pietra: Visiting Sir Harold Acton" opens my latest book *Where the Light Waits*, and is the source of the book's title. This poem describes Sir Harold Acton's estate above Florence, based on firsthand details from a personal visit by my good friend Merla McMurray, and supplemented by my own library research. The second poem, "Bagni di Lucca", grew out of another of Merla's trips to Italy, last spring. Harry Girling had so wonderfully described the famous spa region in Tuscany where the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley once stayed that Merla had to see if for herself. Her account after the trip gave me the contemporary details, but to evoke Bagni di Lucca as it was in the poet's time, I sought out the letters Shelley himself had composed while he summered in this enchanting spot. To my amazement, in many instances I was able to incorporate whole passages from the letters with very little reworking to fit the poetic line -- a tribute to the poetry of Shelley's prose. However, the full story behind these two poems would make a separate Literary Table talk in itself. I mention them now only to suggest the part that research can play in creating a poem.

Leaving the Romantics and Neoclassicists behind, I would now like to quote a few contemporary Canadian poets describing their different creative processes. Each creative process I will illustrate with one of my poems.

For the late Milton Acorn, poetry often began as the voice of someone else. While writing certain sonnets for his collection *Captain Neal MacDougall and the Naked Goddess*, he says he actually heard MacDougall speaking aloud inside his skull:

I'd hear him talking. Sort of in my head.... In some poems, several voices meet until one emerges. Many times I discover a voice in a poem which previously I thought was
my own creation. The most incredible incident was the creation of Martin Dorion.... When I heard the poems it wasn't me at all! You see I'm a second tenor usually, but this was first tenor. And a very tough voice (1)

I know what Acorn is describing. Many years ago, at a wedding, I met two widows, Eileen and her close friend Jean. Although both had long mourned the loss of cherished husbands, that night they decided to snatch life back -- to have fun, to get up and dance. Their feistiness, I knew, would inspire a poem. Later that night I tried to write it. After several false starts, still the words just wouldn't take shape. As a last resort, I tried picturing Eileen at home, turning her radio up loud. It was only then, when my imagination heard Eileen herself speaking, that the poem would let itself be written -- but as her voice, not mine.

EILEEN AND JEAN

"Today we want to dance
six wrinkled years away,
twist the radio
loud with our living,
tangle our tinted hair,
unbutton down to the rug,
kick caution across the picket fence
neighbours sniff over
watering their own weeds.

Cancer ate my Jack.
Alzheimer's wasted Jean's
-- she used to smile from Eatons,
polishing filigreed silver,
ringing up bills like chimes,
wrapping politeness in tissue
softer than Blue Grass.
She misses that thread
into brightness, you know.

Me? Fluorescent lights?
Typewriters out-tapping clocks?
I dreamed my daffodilled lawn,
paper Romances, long walks
down to the beach for tea,
sighed my solitude, slow.

Two girls a-blush at men,
we've kept our hemlines straight,
powdered the shine from our loss;
six years, folded our hands,
nodded, patient and neat,
the Meek....

But today we have to dance!
For Canadian poet C.H. Gervais, also, creativity is like hearing a voice inside his ear. However, the words are not simply dictated by someone else, as was the case for Milton Acorn. Instead, as if rediscovering his own voice long forgotten, Gervais has to coax the words out line by line, almost as if collaborating with himself. Gervais says:

I hear my voice clearly. When I write, I constantly repeat the lines. I have that sense when I've written even two lines, I have to repeat them and I don't know the third one. It's almost as if I've forgotten the third line. Suddenly, reading it, hearing it, the third line comes. And the fourth.(2)

Not long ago, I had a similar experience. An old friend was stricken by the death of his mother, to whom, as an only child, he had been very close. How, I wondered, did it really feel when someone who had loomed so large all his life vanished, and for the first time he found himself so alone? One word kept echoing in my mind: "gone". Like C.H. Gervais, the more I repeated that single word "gone", the more I focused on its vibrating shape in my ear, its lightness across my fingertips -- as though it were an object in itself -- the more one line led to another and another, like a long ribbon unravelling. Here is the poem that resulted:

**GONE**

(for Doug Kehoe)

gone the baldness and boldness of it
the round, shiny, metallic
truth of gone
stuns like a gong, struck
with blunted love

the numbness of gone
the forgetting that a familiar
hump in the feel of our world
isn't

the gaping
after a finger snaps
on off
white black
now and for(n)ever

an encyclopaedia
poofed into dust
-- shocking!
in time we forget
a little
(we never recover)
gone heel before toe
teeters, Earth's edge
every year sharper

peering at space
we taste
a black hole
swallow
unending and alone

what comforts
the naked moment?
we all face it
in turn

dying, if we reflect,
makes living kinder

Some Canadian poets begin not so much from a sound in the ear as from a picture the eye beholds. A good example is the late Bronwen Wallace, a writer engaged with social issues, particularly the problems of battered women. She wrote:

For me, poems usually start with a gesture, or a strong visual image of someone saying or doing something, or a particular angle of light. I try very hard to make that the centre of the poem, because I trust that intuition, as one that plugs into collective experience.

Wallace's reference to "collective experience" raises an important point: how relevant is lyric poetry? Why bother to read about one poet's feelings or observations? So what if Jane Doe misses her runaway lover? Who cares if the sun glancing off an office tower makes Joe Blow feel as mighty as Zeus? When does a poem written in the first person transcend a private diary entry and offer something meaningful to others?

All poets who write the word "I" must answer these questions. Here is my attempt. Whenever the first-person "I" is chosen as the poetic vehicle, simply expressing one's private ego isn't good enough; ideally, the poem must work through the autobiographical details for some wider insight to share. One way I attempt to reach out this way in my own poems is by being highly visual, creating a scene that readers can imagine themselves in.

For this reason, both as a Sunday painter and a poet I can understand how Bronwen Wallace draws inspiration from "a particular angle of light". For example, one night in a Queen Street café, I was struck by a petite elderly lady sitting across the room in front of the picture window. She was dressed from head to toe in pink. As the evening sky behind her deepened into indigo, even her skin, illuminated through the glass by a pink neon sign, became deep pink also. The surreal quality of this pink image became a jumping-off point for a long meditation on middle-aged angst. I'll
PINK & INDIGO (Part I)
(For Merla McMurray)

Behind pink neon
glowing against night's indigo,
we sit within the wide café window,
and over chilled lettuce leaves and pâté
watch the world pass.

Watercolours on off-white walls
lie quiet: orderly rows of Italian roofs
tiled in pink, blue pastels.
Their existence is framed, without change
except, imperceptibly at first,
to fade when exposed to light.

We love the darkness for that reason.
Imagination flushes our colours bright
as the curved pink chair, where a wizened lady
puffs defiance under her broad pink brim.
Smoke uncurls between pink nails,
drifts pink rings down jacket and skirt,
dissolves between pink hose and shoes.
She turns, and her crinkled smile puffs us pink too.

Outside, a streetcar climbs the slope,
sliding with purpose, who knows where.
Electric-lit faces, framed like stills,
glide as the movie draws them along.
-- And where are we headed, behind pink neon
gazing into the night?

The poems of feminist Gay Allison also start with visual images, but
Allison proceeds slowly, more intuitively, toward a destination
unknown. She says:
I'm very visual. The image stays in my head for a couple of
weeks, in a mental landscape. Fragments make connections.
It's an ordering of chaos. I don't know what I'm going to
write about until I've started writing. (4)

Like Allison, I have been haunted by an image until it forces out a
poem. In National Geographic appeared a lengthy article and
photographs of Chironex Fleckeri, a huge and nasty jellyfish, living
in the waters off New Zealand, which devours not only fish but even
hapless children swimming. I couldn't get the photographs of this
sinister creature out of my mind. Over a period of weeks, it became
a symbol of consummate and enduring evil:

NORTH OF CAPRICORN
(Chironex Fleckeri)
Drawn through darkness
to lights unknown at the edge of a pier
it hovers in summer-warm waves.
Shimmering filaments
bunch and straighten,
bunch and straighten,
a gelatinous clockwork
that kills
-- but it has no brain.

Ghostly transparence
four-faced (each with an eye)
it turns full cornea and lens
sensing small shadows
to flee, or entwine
shellfish, children,
fragrant flesh
bumbling into its fiery sting
-- instant death --
but it has no brain.

What we call Evil
is it the same:
more than a criminal
slash to power
but the universe rippling
its infinite net
to destroy to create to destroy
to create
-- but it has no brain.

How much is our will
how much, swept along
on another dark wave
rushing to lights we cannot explain
at the brink of a pier
or regime?
The jellyfish swallows and swallows
for aeons
-- but it has no brain.

As the years go by, I set my writing goals higher. Whether or not I actually succeed, more and more I try to get at artistic truth that is not simply personal feelings or a reflection of events in the outside world, nor a Postmodern game with language either. Ideally I long for my poems to achieve integrity and solidity within and beneath the lines, to become three-dimensional, to breathe, to give off light. But how to write such a poem?

Instead, too often I fidget at my desk, or pace the house, stalking
shadows, what Dennis Lee has referred to as his:

mooching around in an empty space that words may or may not decide to enter, waiting on them tongue-tied (5).

I feel a pressure build in my diaphragm. I know something is there, but I can't get it out. On such days I think of Susan Musgrave's complaint:

Writing can be likened to fishing. Except I hate fishing. Things never surface for me. I've never once caught a fish that came to the top. The rod bends double. Something's down there that never comes up. I think how can people go out there and idly catch fish, as if they're not doing some mystical thing? People always think I'm crazy but that's how I feel. You hook the darkness. (6)

Eventually, my hook jerks, and pulling on the darkness, I start to scribble. Anything. Much of the wordrun sprawls flat and transparent, functional sentences muttering the obvious to myself, what Roo Borson has described in her own creative process as:

a lot of garbage, incredible garbage... reams and reams of junk to get at anything real. (7)

But here and there, words coalesce, a small heap heaving beneath the surface, like a sea monster about to push back up in a mighty wave. I feel life, a promise. For example, a line floats up through my mind, and I type it onto my computer screen: "Are words mere show we crawl under, scratching at matted letters for meaning?"

But what's it about? I'm not sure yet. All I know is: the words are there.

The rest is what I call "de-writing" -- rewriting to determine what I really want to say. Poet and essayist Thomas Joyce explains:

As writers, we discover what metaphors mean after their arrival. First, we contend with the birth, the creature we have before us. Is it a fish or a bird? Does it swim, fly, or both? The unexpected is to be expected. After we understand the metaphor, we seek the pattern that wants to make itself known through the metaphor. (8)

Searching the computer screen, I am patient. I trust. One or two of those words -- but which? -- will bring me face to face with the beast.

I read the line again: "Are words mere show we crawl under, scratching at matted letters for meaning?"

"Scratching" -- something rumbles under that word. It's physical. I actually feel something there. And that other word -- "matted"?

Something is moving under that word too. But what is it below consciousness that makes these two stir and pushes them together? To follow these clues, I doodle free associations across
the screen: "scratching -- animal, frantic, desperate, claws, itch, fingernails, dirty --"

"Dirty?" My mind leaps back to that other word, "matted".

Aha! A link. But exactly what is "matted"? Across the screen I doodle more free associations: "matted -- twigs, brush, hair --"

"Hair?" The word spiders out -- fine, fragile, evanescent, something that doesn't hold, that melts away.

"Melts"? Snow! Of course, that's what we crawl under, to find the matted stuff, the twigs and dirt matted in ice. I've got it!

Feeling giddy, I reread aloud: "Imagine words are snow we crawl under, to scratch at matted ice for meaning."

No, something's wrong. There's a lump in the sound. The phrase, "for meaning" -- it sounds flat, too literal. I've got to keep the metaphor going.

I ask myself, what would I find under matted ice anyway? Spring? Certainly, but "spring" is too general a word. Well, what could show spring, without my having to put a label on the season -- some plant, some flower that blooms early? Crocuses! Happily, I revise the lines:

Imagine words are snow we crawl under and scratch at matted ice for crocuses.

Now, in my imagination, a whole scene bursts open: I am six years old, in my red snowsuit, crawling around a whitened garden, my chapped fingers scratching to find a little gold flower. Good gracious! Already the poem has acquired a setting, a character, and an event. Has a single metaphor, "scratching", yielded so much? Or does the scene spring from something deeper, a forgotten memory perhaps? It doesn't matter. What counts is that the moment feels real when my imagination (re)lives it.

Besides, right now I am a six-year-old in a red snowsuit on my hands and knees. I don't want to deal with adult stuff like poetics. Bored, I flop onto my back in the snow, arms wide. Hey, now I can scoop a snow angel. And so the next lines of the poem take shape:

[or,] flattened on our backs in white, [that] words fan angel wings.

Angel sculpted, I lie there. I can't get up, or my fists and boots will spoil the two perfect wing sweeps in the snow. I stare at the sky and watch clouds drift, as light as dandelion fluff. More lines take shape:

And how could we forget
that words are clouds too?
Puff and blow 
uncertainties into solid shapes,

wait --
How far will they glide?

So far, I am having a fine time in what appears to be a reasonably happy poem. The sun is warming my six-year-old face. I lie content on my red-snows suited back. Yet that word "scratching" haunts me. Its animal connotations sound a note beyond my childish amusements, a dark note.

"Dark?" Startled, I sit up. What am I going to do when it gets dark?

For a little while, I ponder. It's daylight now. I like making my angel wings in the snow and watching the clouds. I could play all afternoon. But eventually the shadows will lengthen and the orange sun sink down. How will I feel when darkness falls? Everything is so strange, as night comes on. The snow tints blue, and its surface glasses over with ice.

"Ice" -- that word reminds me of my father's warning not to lick icicles, or my tongue will stick, and when I try to pull it away, the skin will tear off and burn. That's what I'm afraid of. What if these weird white words, so playful by day, also hurt? On the computer screen, the next four lines glow:

But after shadows thin, and night
breaks through its first star,

throw off snow and run, wondering
what if white words burn?

It looks as if my original happy snow metaphor contains another, about the cruelty of biting cold. Ah, the treachery of words. How very Postmodern, the adult Susan chuckles. And from this joke, up pops the poem's title, "Subtexts" (9). I stare at my completed handiwork on the screen and for the first time read the whole poem:

SUBTEXTS

Imagine words are snow we crawl under
and scratch at matted ice for crocuses.

Or, flattened on our backs in white,
that words fan angel wings.

And how could we forget
that clouds are words too?

Puff and blow
uncertainties into solid shapes,

wait --
How far will they glide?

But after shadows thin, and night
breaks through its first star,

throw off snow and run, wondering
what if white words burn?

How peculiar the whole process of writing a poem is. Gwendolyn
MacEwen knew the magic so well. She wrote:
For me, language has enormous, almost magical power, and
I tend to regard poetry in much the same way as the
ancients regarded the chants or hymns used in holy festivals
-- as a means of invoking the mysterious forces which move
the world, inform our deepest and most secret thoughts, and
often visit us in sleep. (10)

So to sum up, where do poems come form? Although no doubt
there are many other origins, in this talk I've outlined five. First,
there are Romantic poems that arise from emotional responses to
everyday events, whether as celebrations of the beautiful and good,
or as ways of trying to make sense of darker elements in the
universe. Second, are the Neoclassical poems developed from
research or intellectual reflection. Third are the poems inspired
through the ear, whether poets hear the words of others inside
their heads, or little by little coax out the whispers of their own
deep but forgotten wisdom. Fourth are the poems inspired by the
eye -- by a subtle angle of light, or a powerful image. Lastly are the
poems that emerge from language itself, as if a mythic beast lay
buried within layers and layers of connotation. Of course, of all the
approaches to writing poetry, not one can claim to be the "right" or
"only" path to art. As Thomas Joyce says:
Above all, the poet must write from where he is. If his mind
is leaking away like a faucet at night, he'll have to start
there. If he's bogged down, he'll have to write about being
in the swamp. If his heart is bursting, he'll have to write
about cinnamon hearts because the way to get anywhere is
to start where you are and move forward a step at a time.
Poems have our growth at heart, and that is one reason why
writers ought not to pretend to be wiser than they are. (11)

Thank you.

Endnotes

1. Bruce Meyer and Brian O'Riordan, In Their Words: Interviews
with Fourteen Canadian Writers (Toronto: Anansi, 1984), pp. 126-127.


6. Twigg, p. 44.


Read-Aloud Poems / 34. About Author Susan Ioannou. Since childhood, Susan Ioannou’s love of words has found expression in hundreds of poems, stories, and articles appearing in magazines and anthologies from coast to coast. Her books include Clarity Between Clouds (Goose Lane Editions), Where the Light Waits (Ekstasis Editions), Coming Home: An Old Love Story (Leaf Press), The Merla Poems (Wordwrights Canada), and Looking Through Stone: Poems about the Earth (Your Scrivener Press).