Stop Meaning and Start Singing

Patrick Friesen

I

A writer needs his work to move off the desk and into the world. This means publishing in magazines and in books, but for me it means, just as importantly, to read my poems to audiences. And, over the years, decades, I came to rely on Hildi Froese Tiessen's invitations to read in Kitchener-Waterloo at one venue or another. I am grateful to be here in Waterloo once more. I'm calling this reading/talk "Stop Meaning and Start Singing." This suggests something of what my writing life has been. For me the learning has been gradual, though the transitions have often happened suddenly, in a single poem or a small grouping of poems.

It began with sound and image. My first memory was the crunching sound of my parents' walking in snow behind the covered sled in which I was being pushed. An early visual memory is of an old woman in her coffin, some distant relative. She wore a black dress, and a black kerchief with red roses on it. These things stayed with me, but what really struck me, as I walked by the coffin with my parents, was a blowfly sitting on her forehead. Beauty and mortality. A blowfly is also known as a bluebottle, and that word acquired some importance for me over the years. My second book was called *bluebottle* (1978).[1]

And then singing, the different forms of singing, loving the sounds of words, the rhythms of phrases, as I discovered language. As a child I often repeated a specific word over and over again during a day's play. It was the weight of the word, the sound of it, that I was considering, unselfconsciously, with no purpose. Like it was an object in my mouth, a stone or a seed. This is how one learns language. I remember only a few of the words that preoccupied me long ago: stomach, doldrums, bone, stone.

Aside from hearing my parents sing every day, and they sang very

[1] For a complete listing of Patrick Friesen's publications, go to www.patrickfriesen.com.

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well, I was taught to read early by my mother, and I read constantly. If I was standing still for a moment, I'd pull a paperback out of my pocket. Inevitably a child loses something in becoming literate, even as he gains other things. His apprehension of the world is mediated by others, shaped by whoever his educators are.

Meaning, I learned, was what words were a tool for. And, if you worked at it, you could utilize the sounds, rhythms, the images associated with words to enhance your meaning. Of course, as a young poet I overused the frilly aspects of language, going over the top. But whatever stage I was at as a poet, meaning was at the core of it all. Denotative meaning, certainly, but also connotative meaning. Like all poets I learned how to use figures of speech. Metaphor, after all, was the foundation of human thinking. But I found something missing, something I had known as a child, speaking but not writing. I think the one figure of speech that really got my attention was synesthesia: I loved how it crossed borders, and it reminded me of childish thinking, one sense covering for another. In fact, all children apparently have synesthesia for a time when their brains are still developing. Senses all over the place. And there are adults, probably van Gogh, certainly John Lennon, who experience one sense for another. Sir Isaac Newton apparently saw color when he heard middle-C. For Emily Dickinson the sound of a bugle was red.

Over the years of writing I found myself embracing the song aspect of poetry, often finding meaning to be an unimportant, boring, clichéd byproduct of singing. Imposing meaning on the poetic structure, it seemed to me, brought about a rapid death of any poem. It was like placing a saddle on a sparrow. I had to get rid of the saddle, realize that the sparrow was not for riding but for listening to and singing along with. Singing sometimes, I hoped, like an angel, and other times like a demon. The full range. Singing as sound and picture and motion. I had sung as a child; then I had been educated into meaning. Now I was trying to balance the two, and even unbalance them in favor of singing. Meaning always emerges, of course, just not necessarily the meaning you intended. This is another part of the process of becoming a poet: to trust the language, its sounds and images, and to let it lead you.

I have always been a fan of rock 'n' roll, my era being the late 1950s and the '60s. At first I thought songwriters had to get away from "moon" and

"June" and "love" and to get serious with their lyrics. The best of them did. But I also realized after a while that even serious lyrics hardly mattered when I was in fact listening to, and loving, the singer's voice. The voice itself was the meaning. The texture of it, the range of it, the way a voice could leap into falsetto. The shaping of words in a singer's mouth, the phrasing. That was for me the heart of it. If the lyrics were pretentious, trying to be meaningful but failing, well, that hurt the song. If the lyrics fit the voice, if the voice sounded as if these were the only words it could sing at that time, well, that was a deep pleasure.

Different voices, doing different things, but always authentic voices. Voices within which you could hear hurt, or joy, or despair. For me, in my era, it was voices like Richard Manuel, John Lennon, Tom Waits, Van Morrison, Sandy Denny, Kiri Te Kanawa, Elly Ameling, Etta James, and others. Voice, of course, extended to instruments. One speaks of a particular pianist's "voicings" on the keyboard. A pianist like Bill Evans, for example, or Marilyn Lerner. They "voice" their music. Jazz played an important part a little later, as I was developing my long line. Particularly, the long line of Bill Evans—and improvisation. I spent a lot of time listening to jazz albums with my son, a drummer. At first, when he was young, I was able to point out things for him to pay attention to. It didn't take long and he was teaching me what to listen for, what to hear.

I realized at one point that I was reading my poems with a "head voice," without fully engaging my body in my voice. At the same time, as I played around with how I might read my poems, I began to write them differently, to fit my physical voice. I began writing in long lines, lines with overlapping phrases, lines that suited my breath.

II

Every writer comes with a suitcase. We are born from the dead, our ancestors, the lands they lived in, the terrain we are born into, language, all aspects of culture, etc. I came out of several hundred years of Mennonite history, culture, and theology (though I didn't learn much of Mennonite theology where I grew up; I caught up with it while I was attending university). I made some choices as I entered my teens that meant I would not follow the

religion I was born into. This isn't a simple matter, because the religion is intertwined with a language, High and Low German, with cultural customs and traits. I began writing poetry at about the same time that I rejected not only the Mennonite approach to religion but Christianity itself. This in turn meant complications. I was born into a Christian society and culture. How would I use language from the place I was leaving? Of course, as I found out, you never completely leave any place. There are trailing threads, and you often return, circling the old place, re-entering for moments and leaving again. Slowly the returns are less frequent, less intense. And some of the threads gain strength.

My subject matter early on was general. It came from observation, from what I was reading, and so on. I had no sense of "Mennonite" writing. I knew Rudy Wiebe had published *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), but I hadn't read it, and I didn't read it for some years. Eventually I became aware that Andreas Schroeder was writing poetry on the west coast. Again, I didn't see any of it till many years later. For me, to write about my Mennonite heritage was a journey I hesitated about at first, and one I had no real precedent for.

Not long before I published my first book, I finally recognized that my closest subject matter was my Mennonite heritage and my relationship to it, and my family within that heritage. Along with this came the prairies. My first few books tended to explore the prairies, or simply held the prairies. I came to visualize, and remember, one piece of land, my grandfather's farm. He represented the prairie farmer for me, and his farm continues to be of great importance for me. My third book, *The Shunning* (1980), is set on this farm with its creek, its bush, fields, and buildings. It was after that book that I began to shift some of my attention to Europe, where my people came from. In fact, when I look back, I can see that though the prairies never left my work, different aspects of European literature and philosophy became more and more important.

About the time I wrote *The Shunning* I wrote a poem that began to break open poetry for me. For the first time I used a prosy, colloquial language that felt looser than what I'd written until then. Most of the lines were still short, but they began to run into each other, creating a problem for me. I observed that when I read the poem aloud I was not hesitating at the end of a line, but running over into the next. I was accommodating my

breath and how I preferred to read poems aloud. I also incorporated a bit of song, and for the first time I threw directly into the poem things I saw or heard outside my window, like my daughter singing in the back yard.

It was while I was making these discoveries in form that I decided I needed to write a book-length exploration of my heritage. What issues were important to me? And how should I deal with them? I wrote the equivalent of a manuscript that I threw away because it didn't know what it was doing. Mixed up between content and form. Then I wrote a piece for voices, voices only loosely identified. I had already begun writing in a looser, prosier style, so incorporating prose in this book was a natural thing to do. The prose bits tended to be related to narrative, the poetry to stiller moments.

I chose as an issue excommunication or "shunning," because it seemed central for a religion that was opposed to physical violence yet condoned spiritual violence. I had in my mind an image of a man lying dead beside a creek with one boot untied, the other tied, and a rifle lying beside him. I also drew on about a dozen pages of dialogue I had written between a man sitting on a gravestone and the man buried beneath him. Then I saw a TV program on shunnings that at that moment (late '70s) were going on in my hometown. I did some research, figured out how I wanted prose and poetry to interact, and came up with *The Shunning*.

I paid close attention to visual images in this book. I used several photographs inside it, and I chose the cover very carefully, including the color. The back cover was an old photo of my father as a boy, standing beside his mother who would die of Spanish flu a few months later. Her death had an impact on all her children, so this seemed a transitional moment, this photo. There was a photo in the interior of my cousin Larry and me at the same age as my father had been on the back cover photo, and another of one of my brothers, again at a young age, pointing a toy rifle. I wanted the book to look and feel like a novel. The setting is my grandfather's farm just outside Steinbach where I was born.

Some personal history was integrated into *The Shunning*. I continued with that approach in a series of poems related to my father called "the pa poems." My father, a man of great integrity, had represented a repressive religion to me, so I had a distant relationship with him. In my teen years I had called him "father." Now, years later, in an effort to come to terms with it

all, I called him "pa"—just for these poems. My father was blind in one eye, to me a fact that was always important. The one-eyed man. Just calling him "pa" opened up a lot for me.

pa poem 4: naked and nailed

I remember those carpenter's hands
thick fingers drumming the table
fingers that tightened around my bicep
lifted me right off the kitchen floor
down basement steps
and there we were in front of furnace
me pleading across your knee both of us wishing we were someplace else

but you not spoiling the child
and you swung that leather high
me twisting to look up your arm flung out
seeing you naked and nailed like a child to a tree
how could there be so much love?

I wish I could have seen you sidestep
or shout the words of your hurt
even better I would have loved to see you leaping
on your long narrow feet howling
and sweat flying from that fine muscled chest

what's a father if he doesn't let out
the whirling dervish the gypsy or the juggler?

you one-eyed monster
you saw more than you let on
maybe more than you ever knew
but you couldn't find the words for me

you rowing that boat into mother's dreams
someplace out there maybe still looking for the words
and one night with me sleeping creepy
you'll find them and you'll find me

sitting in bed shivering
maybe before I find you
you'll tap me on the shoulder
I'll turn
I'll recognize you

and see you old dead man
how I start with my grievance
and always end up with this Goddamned love
but I tell you that won't happen everytime
or it'll kill me[2]

By the time I wrote "the pa poems" I was opening up the poem more and more. Still working on line length, I used caesura a lot to indicate breathing spaces. Struggling to loosen things up, to find a rhythm that felt right, I took risks with jumps between poetry and prosy bits within the poem. I felt like I was opening a door to see what would come in. I can see, now, that I was moving my children more and more into poems and leaving the Menno/father issues behind, though they resurface. Because I was bringing more and more into the poems, I began to write poems in sections, like chapters. A real mix of short lines, long lines, and caesura.

In *Flicker and Hawk* (1987) I pretty much found the long line I wanted. I was experimenting with it. Here some long lines run up to 8 or 9 lines in length (indentation showing that all the lines are really part of one long line). Some of these long lines look like paragraphs on the page, and they're a bit of a challenge for public reading, where I have to know how to control my breath.

It was when Kim McCaw, artistic director of the Prairie Theatre Exchange in Winnipeg**,** asked me if I'd be interested in adapting *The Shunning*

[2] Published in *Unearthly Horses* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1984).

for the stage that my involvement in drama began. It took me only a few weeks to write an adaptation, because working with drama felt so natural. I think there is a closer link between poetry and drama than there is between poetry and fiction. Dialogue and motion interest me a great deal. After this foray into drama I frequently wrote for radio, wrote for dance several times, and began to work with musicians. All of this had been inside me but hadn't emerged, except that I'd been looking for the long line because that was where my voice most naturally resided. This play was dusted off 25 years later by the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre and staged again in early 2011. At that point I re-edited it a bit, and Scirocco Press in Winnipeg published it in book form. I did this editing while working on another project in southern Spain. I had brought along the one existing piece of audio tape of my father speaking, in Low German and English, just to remind me of the speech rhythms in *The Shunning*. To hear his voice speaking in a room in Spain was to find myself at the heart of my writing.

For the first time, consistently, I began to use language from my inherited religion, words I had real trouble using at first, but I decided that they were an authentic part of my linguistic inheritance and that maybe I could reshape them. The key word was "lord"; I recall weighing that one for a long time. At the same time, elements of Zen unobtrusively entered my writing. I had done a lot of reading and thinking about Buddhism, and attended a Buddhist church for a while, primarily for the bell meditation. My poem "an audience with the dalai lama" is probably the first example of the presence of Buddhism in my poems. And it holds many of the questions I had, and still have. There is a reference to Richard Manuel in the poem, one of the singers with The Band.

an audience with the dalai lama
or, the old-fashioned pas de deux

on the one hand a leaf in the shrub beside you
on the other family and work
I have never seen God I have been empty and filled and empty
again

what can I say about what I know?
hymns that come easily to my lips while I walk
an ancient anger and the bags I carry filled with hats and shoes

I don't think I know much beyond what I know
my left my right hand a leaf wife and children
and sometimes a stony eye

my room you wouldn't believe the books and clothes all over the floor the records and stamps the lamp my smell around the typer
nothing much has happened there if you think of it and I have
on the other hand nothing more has happened outside the room
I grew up with lilacs there are lilacs outside my window there's not much I can make of that
it's like looking at old photographs in a way like catching a second wind or an animal in me sniffing out its old grounds

sometimes I think I have a questions I want to have a question about things that matter
my body used to give me pleasure still does but it's beginning to break down maybe there's a question here
my knees my eyes sometimes there's a ringing in my ears and who knows what's happening just now in my most hidden cell a small detonation
but it seems clear where everything's going
I feel a lot more stupid than I did is this wisdom?

Listen my love is someone other than me this must be what I need
she goes on journeys you should see her walk toward the clearing trees making way you should see her in her wedding dress the hem wet in the grass
you should see her when she drops the armour of her veils

when she's away and it's late when I crawl into bed I find she's dressed the emptiness beside me with her gown

all night I'm restless I wake when my hand finds silk my legs
want to wrap around her
no bed has ever been this empty or so full its feels like god

a man can't say what he is that he needs to rut like a plow knows
earth that he loves it
that he bends his knee to words he loves this too falls insensible
sometimes before the beauty of memory and ruin
sir richard manuel died a lousy death hanging there cold as a fish
I can't explain it just listen to any of his songs just listen to how
pure and sad a man's voice can be when he wants paradise
but his arms aren't long enough
some voices belong to everyone

the boy in me doesn't like conversations he's busy wants to be free
a word for what he remembers he could have said captured
surrounded or surprised
he dreams time before love when he could sing the words didn't
matter only the voice he was
but the man in me accommodates love and loss contemplates
smoke and mirrors from a distance
he moves toward religion like prey to the lion a leaf to earth
or a fish to the hook

does the prey feel ecstasy as it kneels into the lion's need? its
stem hardening does the leaf desire release?
no I don't look for answers the questions are old and will grow
older I want something other than rhetoric or ritual maybe
a gesture
my devotion to the lord is imperfect there's some fight left in
me I may be hooked I am not landed

what's there is my room my hands on the typer my eyes we used
to say what's the diff
my children chewing at my knees my wife smiling through the

window where's she going or is she coming home? she loves me
she loves me not she loves me
what's there is the usual concoction hubble bubble eye of newt
babbling tongue the old-fashioned pas de deux me and you
sometimes mother's on the phone do I love her eyes yes I do and I
still have father's hat
no I haven't seen God I live with angels some fallen
I sing *have thine own way lord* half the time I don't mean it
my wife sloughs her gown my pants at my knees like some clown
my son with his other world eyes you could never know them
or their danger
or my daughter's prayers at night when everyone's asleep this is
a way she speaks
and this is what I know what I need to know I want to redeem
love before it does me in[3]

By 1987 I felt I was in full stride as a poet. I was comfortable with the line, with breath, and with subject matter. I began to work with dance. One of my favorite projects was writing text for a dance work. Through my daughter, who had been taking dance classes at Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers, I met numerous dancers and choreographers, including dancer/choreographer Stephanie Ballard and dancers Margie Gillis and Ruth Cansfield. Ballard and I worked on a piece called "Anna"—Anna for the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, a deep influence on me, and Anna, my great-grandmother, also influential. My work opened up even more. I learned a lot from watching Gillis open up the words with her arms, her facial expression.

The Shunning had been set on one grandfather's farm, and it utilized some of the events that happened there. In 1992 I wrote the *The Raft*, a new play that emerged from some of the history of my other grandfather, my grandfather Sawatzky, and I wrote "A Handful of Rain," a text for dance, with choreographer Ruth Cansfield. I also got involved in translation for the first time, with my friend Per Brask, whom I had met when he became the dramaturg for *The Shunning*. Per convinced me to co-translate with him poetry from Danish. We published several books, including *God's Blue*

[3] Published in *Flicker and Hawk* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1987).

Morris and *We Are Here* by Niels Hav, *The Woods* by Klaus Hoeck, and *A Sudden Sky* by Ulrikka Gernes. This meant trips to Denmark to meet writers. Meeting them and translating had a real impact on my work.

Just before I moved from Winnipeg to Vancouver, I wrote a book called *A Broken Bowl* (1997). My daughter Marijke had moved to Vancouver, then hitchhiked to Central America, leaving behind anthropology texts in which I became very interested. Ancestry much deeper than my Mennonite history. At the same time, because of my interest in Anna Akhmatova's work, I was mulling the notion of writing something in fragments. She had written a lot of fragments out of necessity during the Stalin regime, fearful of having poems discovered. I liked the connection between Akhmatova's fragments and the fragments of pottery and bone found in archaeological digs. The ongoing history of human violence, on which I did some research, was central to this book—questions of human violence done not only to people but also to the earth. Social injustice, greed, and lies. The arrogance of power, and human ignorance and denial. And what came before history, pre-history?

My first book where every single poem used the long line was *the breath you take from the lord* (2002). This had been a suggestion of poet Dennis Lee. Half the book is a sequence of poems called "clearing poems." Anything could appear in a clearing. Bill Evans, for example, playing piano. A return to the prairie, probably a result of moving to Vancouver. I did a lot of thinking about the prairies while listening to the rain on the coast. Some of the poems are meditative, with old themes returning in new lines.

clearing poem 3

when god tears at your heart or you think that's it you want that to
be it angels perhaps or demons
when you need something to shape suffering something to hold it
with intention

when the night deepens and you stand slow and waiting for your
eyes to take in the trees
when you make your way through deadfall scraping your arms on

the knuckles of a poplar

when the clearing flares with light the moon's brilliance carefully
milking the thistle
when the stone pile glistens and cools sun's heat rising into the
lowering sky

when nothing my god happens nothing in the vastness of your small
rash living
when you have to laugh at the end of yourself at the god you think
you've reached

when you crouch at a cold bethlehem as a constellation wheels
across the clearing
when the offering you brought lies scattered at your feet and the
only gift a broken heart

when you watch as you always have from the edge suddenly aware
something breathes behind you
when you fear the darkness of bush the animal there but no safety
in the clearing

when you find the body of the child struck down in its ecstasy of
light and lamentation
when you step into the barefoot prayer at last when you pass into
the open night[4]

I had met and worked with improv pianist Marilyn Lerner during my last two years in Winnipeg. I'd go over to her house with a handful of poems and read them as she improvised around them. After a while I began improvising within these poems, and sometimes I'd improvise a new poem as she played. We did a project for CBC Radio Winnipeg called "Blue Door," and we appeared together at various writing and jazz festivals. I moved to Vancouver, and she moved to Toronto. Still, we worked together. In 2002

[4] Published in *the breath you take from the lord* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2002)

we recorded on CBC Radio Vancouver. After the program aired we put this project out as a CD called *Small Rooms*. In 2005 we added cellist Peggy Lee and my son, percussionist Niko Friesen, to record *calling the dog home* at the Western Front in Vancouver. I hope to record at least one more CD with Marilyn, this one based on the Spanish poems from my upcoming book.

I learned so very much from working with Marilyn. I learned more about the long line, about how it could interact with music, and how the short line could be used to great effect in the midst of the long lines. Rhythms, phrasing. I learned about improvisation, returning in a way to an early influence on me, Jack Kerouac. And I learned a lot more about voice, my physical voice, how to use it with music, not literally singing but still singing along with the piano. Once, at the Atlantic Jazz Festival, out of necessity we both improvised at the same time—one simple song with piano and words only. I've also co-written songs with Big Dave McLean and Cate Friesen; the latter appeared on her album *Joy's Desire*.

III

The old themes don't disappear. They shift sometimes, and interweave with other themes, but they are there. In my most recent book, *Jumping in the Asylum* (2011), my Mennonite origins return and the theme of music re-enters. Music, rock 'n' roll at first, was crucial in my turning away from something that didn't seem the best fit for me. It saved me. The music itself, but also the release, "jungle music" as my father called it. That uninhibited explosion out of the staid, correct life I was looking to escape. Music was my introduction to the Dionysian approach to life. I finally wrote the poem below about what that was like for me.

loose in the house of fundamentalism

You go dancing around your room banging off red walls
  pictures swinging wildly on their hooks
shivers down your backbone tailfeathers ruffling and you
  playing piano with a ball peen hammer

words and doors unhinged as night blooms in the brain's
soil flowering like the watered grave
you're flagrant and lost sniffing for primal heat kicking
your way through the room's furniture

nighthawk or crow this is the word loose in the house of
fundamentalism wings beating against glass
cries of blue fire anger's call for vengeance rocking on
your toes knocking the clock from the wall

a quiver in your bones old as old but who's counting bog
piltdown man and lucy in the sky
bestial and defrocked some god undone with one blue eye
lazy and the other dark and crazy

you skid scuffing linoleum all feathers and mischief
careless damage along the million mile wall
bitching at some yellow-eyed parrot *not enough* nothing
memorized just holy ghost and a slippery foot

wella wella sings the crow *bird is the word* hopping from
leg to leg a cockeyed killer and awry
wella wella next flight out of here heading anywhere and
anything goes and always it does[5]

Reflected in my latest work is my interest in Spain, which goes back a long way. I wrote a poem in my second book that began: "let's go to spain/ live the old ways/before we wear out." When, years ago, I was asked to write an essay for an anthology called *Why I Am a Mennonite*, I wrote "I Could Have Been Born in Spain." My entry to Spain is primarily through Lorca and other poets, and later through Goya. While exploring Lorca's last days in Granada, I discovered the cedar tree beneath which St. John of the Cross was supposed to have written *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Equally important has been my love of *cante jondo*, or deep song, flamenco. I travelled to Granada

[5] Published in *Jumping in the Asylum* (Toronto: Quattro Books Inc., 2011).

because of the great Canadian poet P.K. Page. I was traveling to Lisbon for a month to listen to *fado*. When I told her, she said I must go on to Granada to see the Alhambra, a place she'd always wanted to see but now was too old for. And in 2010 I lived in Spain for six weeks working on a book. My interest in *fado*, a genre of Portuguese folksong, and the fact that my son-in-law is of Portuguese heritage, led me to Portugal as well. In 2005 I stayed in Lisbon for a month, exploring *fado* joints and many other things.

Fundamental to my writing for the last decade and more is something that Robert Bly once called "leaping poetry," a notion deeply rooted in the Spanish poets. It's a kind of poetry that moves beyond metaphor to quick, instantaneous associations. In Lorca's case this leaping was probably somewhat influenced by surrealism. I find it to be a psychologically and spiritually authentic thinking process. It may be best done in Spanish, but I keep trying to make it work for me in English.

Among my recent poems, both "lorca" and "goya," for example, include images related to the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s: such as, for example, the cemeteries where the fascists lined up and shot pretty well anyone who disagreed with them. Lorca, a life-loving, generous, brilliant man, was murdered at the start of the civil war, possibly because he favored the republic, not the fascists, and probably because he was a gay man. He was shot by the forces of a grey, monolithic authoritarian government that also banned a lot of music, literature, and festivals. All authoritarian governments do this, no matter what country.

LORCA

heard water in the aqueduct
before dawn in la colonia

and if there had been light
could have seen childhood

water flowing is the shortest time
eternity is a poor word for this

what can be done about a dream
of black veils and a crucifix

what can be done when you've
forgotten your mother's prayer

only death listens to fear
only his body hangs on to him

smelling the road's dust
hearing the rifle's bolt[6]

GOYA

his hands all over
the black walls of his house
calling the dog crawling
out of the mud

saturn slavering and
bug-eyed devouring
his child in hallucinations
of the darkest god

monstrous night black
and gaping the spittle
of thunderbolt neutrons and
appetite

the town idiot sordid and
sallow hungering for
meat for the son in
his jaw

[6] Published in *A Dark Boat* (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2012)

headless in his grave
goya never rolls over
after the executions and
the cemetery walls

after dark housebound days
there will never again
be anything to roll
him over in his grave[7]

* * * * *

What I've done here today feels a little odd to me, like writing my own obituary, but this occasion has also been an opportunity to clarify for myself what my learning arc as a poet and human has been, and possibly to point out directions still to take. Hildi suggested I read/talk my way through my "career" as a poet, though I don't think of my writing poetry as a career. It's not something I chose like becoming a lawyer, a teacher, or a hockey player. It's just something I've always done; it's my life. Poetry is a way of perceiving. It felt strange to go back through my work, to find poems I had little memory of, for example. Before preparing for this event I had a sense of a certain arc to my writing, but I wouldn't really have been able to explain it. Thinking about my life as a poet was an exercise that made me see the movement of my work, the shifts and transitions. And, so, allowed me to kind of relive my life.

Born in Steinbach, Manitoba, Patrick Friesen now lives on Vancouver Island. He has received the Manitoba Book of the Year Award and the Relit Award for Poetry.

[7] Ibid.