

three languages represented here. Initially such a publication might be devoted to women writers, past and present. Eventually I hope it would include a sampling of all good writers in our hemisphere. And tomorrow the world! We can insist that we are citizens of the earth first, before other loyalties. And we can believe with Kazantzaklos that the flame of spirit burns in every person and that the purpose of life is to keep that flame alive to illuminate the dark passages of our journey.

Emma, in Carol Bolt's Red Emma, has a fine speech:

Emma: Woman's development, her freedom, her independence must come from and through herself. First by asserting herself as a personality and not a sex commodity. Second by refusing the right to anyone over her body, by refusing to bear children unless she wants them, by refusing to be a servant to God, the state, society, husband, the family. By making her life simpler, but deeper and richer. That is by trying to learn the meaning and substance of life in all its complexities, by freeing herself from the fear of public opinion and public condemnation. Only that will set woman free, will make her a force hitherto unknown in the world, a force of real love, for peace, for harmony--a force of divine

fire, of life-giving, a creator of free men and women.

## POETRY AND AUDIENCE

### Elizabeth Brewster

In some ways I find it easier to answer questions about poetry in poems rather than in prose. A few years ago I wrote a poem which answers some of the questions people most often ask after poetry readings. It's called "Poem for an Audience of One," and it goes like this:

#### POEM FOR AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

Why do you write?  
someone has asked me.  
Is it for fame or fortune?  
Do you wish to communicate  
to a larger audience?  
Have you an important message?

I would like to say,  
though I don't,  
that I write for none of these  
reasons.

I am writing now  
to pass the time  
while I am waiting  
for you to telephone.

Of course, the poem is partly a joke but it's also partly true. "Passing the time" has often been a reason for my writing and many of my poems have been written in part for an audience

of one, or possibly two or three, although I imagine a larger audience over the shoulders of the audience of one.

My attitude to writing poems can be explained by recalling my first attempts to write. I began to write as a child, when I was growing up in rural New Brunswick. We lived on a poverty-stricken, isolated farm during the midst of the Depression. We were some distance from neighbour children and my brothers and sisters were all older than I was. I started to write in summer vacations because I was bored and lonely. Actually, I wrote prose first: little stories and plays, something that I called a novel and a diary. The poems worked themselves into the stories as the words of songs; or I wrote them into the diaries because nothing happened and I wanted to fill the notebook. I would say something like, "This was a rainy day and I wrote a poem about May. Here it is." And then I would copy out the poem.

At first I didn't show what I was writing to anybody and I was very protective of it. One day I came home and found my sister reading one of my little stories aloud to my mother. I was very much upset and went up to my room and hid, I suppose feeling that my privacy had been intruded upon. But my mother and sister both told me how much they liked what I had written and I had my first taste of applause. After that, I suppose writing could never

be completely private. But I still feel that poems are personal and intimate, and the self presented in them is more genuinely my true self, whatever that is, than the self presented in letters or conversation. Poems are essentially true, even though they may be, in some senses, a bunch of lies. In a poem I am in part just talking to myself (maybe finding out about myself), although I am also in part talking to a friend or a group of friends, some person or persons who will understand me and sympathize with me more completely than any friend or lover or sister or brother possibly could.

I haven't imagined my readers as great intellects, just sensitive and intuitive. I've supposed they might be either men or women. In romantic moments, I've thought they might be people living at another time or place who might somehow communicate with my spirit when I'm dead.

Probably because I think of poetry as intimate, I haven't thought of it as having a "message" in a didactic sense, at least not very often. One doesn't too often attempt to teach one's friends; after all one converses with them, one tries to let them see what it feels like to be this person in this place at this time. One shares one's griefs or one's amusement. One tells them stories. Sometimes one carries on an argument with them.

Although I don't tend to think I'm a didactic writer, I do feel that I generally say something and the "something" is important to me. One doesn't just communicate "messages" or "themes." One communicates moods, feelings, observations, experience, attitudes to experience, memories, dreams. And part of what is communicated is the manner of the poem, the kind of language used, the look of the poem on the page, the way it sounds. I would like people who read my poems to hear the voice behind the poems and hear it as the voice of a friend. The voice of a friend echoes in one's ears and communicates more subtly than any "message" the friend may seem to be delivering.

Some poets are, or appear to be objective and impersonal and are not to be found, or at least not very readily, in their poems. But that's not true of me. As a matter of fact, I am probably more readily found in my poems than in this room. I'm more relaxed with the friends I imagine than with the people I have coffee with. That's why I can write--with truth for me--a poem called "Biography and the Poet:"

BIOGRAPHY AND THE POET  
(A Poem for Cathy)

Why, someone asks,  
this intrusion  
of the poet's life?

Why isn't the poem  
separate and anonymous  
as the bridge across a river  
which exists only to support  
its burden of cars and people?  
Who cares about the poet  
any more than about the engineer?

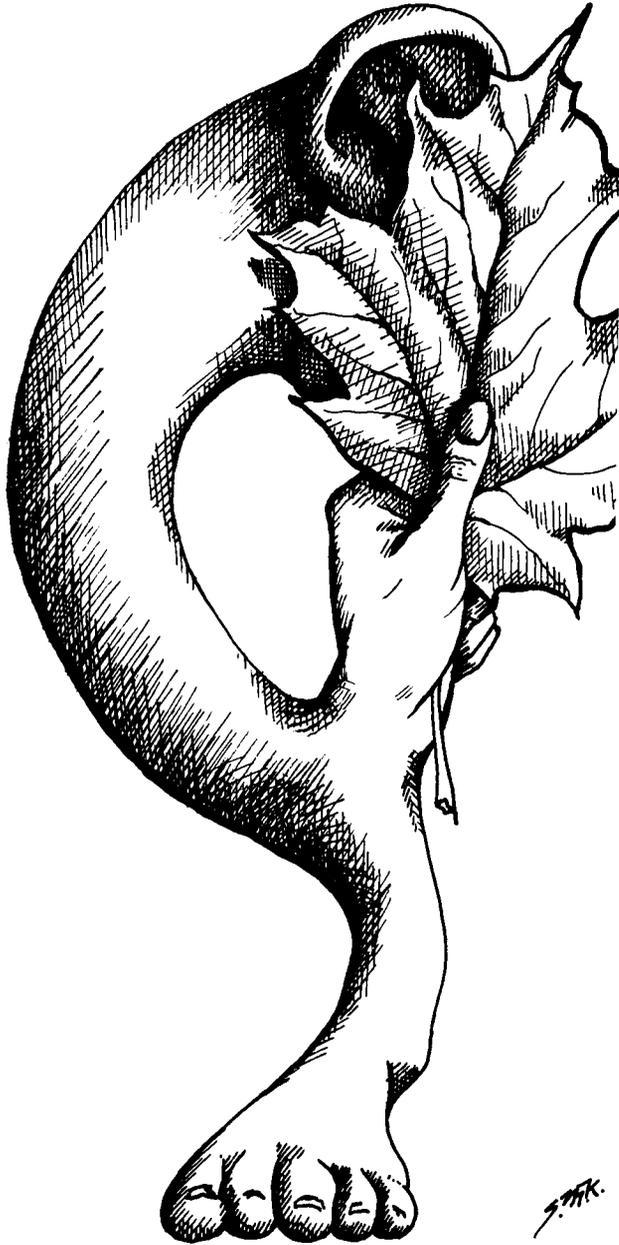
Maybe because  
poems after all  
are not made of steel or concrete,  
are not shaped with the aid of  
blueprints,  
cannot be duplicated  
over another river.

Poems are more organic;  
at worst excremental,  
at best like children,  
separate but wearing  
the parental features;  
sometimes maybe plants,  
green mysteries  
springing unexpected  
from the heart's humus.

It's a more real presence, maybe,  
this red maple,  
than the bones of the dead poet  
feeding its roots;

but be careful how you crush  
under your fingers  
these brittle wafer leaves  
which look dry and powdery.

You might break through to flesh.  
Your whole hand might be  
sopped in blood.



As you can see, that poem starts as another "poem for an audience of one," a poem for a specific girl named Cathy with whom I'd had a discussion about biography and the poet. But the "you" who is addressed at the end of the poem is probably not so much Cathy as another distant anonymous reader who may read the "brittle wafer leaves" of my poetry--or someone else's poetry--some time in the future, and find herself (himself?) encountering the "real presence" of the poet (myself? somebody else?) in a kind of mystic transubstantiation of paper into flesh and blood. It's something I've felt when I've read other poets: I guess I'd like some people to feel the same way about my poems.

## Margaret Atwood

When I first started to write poetry I had no audience, nor could I imagine one. I was sixteen and in fourth year high school. The year was 1956, the accepted stance for girls was collecting china and waiting to get married, and although my immediate friends did not conform to this mould--one wanted to be a doctor, one a psychologist, one an actress--none of them wanted to be poets. The only Canadian poem I had ever heard about was Wilson MacDonald's, "The Scarlet Maple Tree," as Canadian literature was not taught much in the schools. So I had some vague notion that I wanted to write