



## Parliamentary Poet Laureate



### POETRY CONNECTION: LINK UP WITH CANADIAN POETRY

**Fred Wah** (1939 – ) was born in Swift Current, Saskatchewan but he grew up in Nelson, British Columbia. After teaching in the Kootenays and at the University of Calgary, he now lives in Vancouver. He was one of the founding editors of the poetry newsletter *TISH* in the early 1960's. He has published a number of books of poetry, and his biofiction, *Diamond Grill*, has been a popular text in the study of racialized writing. A collection of critical writing, *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity* (2000) was awarded the Gabrielle Roy Prize for Writing on Canadian literature. Recent books of poetry include *Sentenced to Light, is a door*, and a selected edited by Louis Cabri titled *The False Laws of Narrative*. He was Canada's fifth Parliamentary Poet Laureate (2011-13) and in 2013 was made an Officer of the Order of Canada.

Two poems, the first written as requested by the Speakers of the Senate and the House of Commons, the second uncollected from a series titled "Music at the Heart of Thinking."

#### Poems for discussion:

##### The Snowflake Age

Written in Honour of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee - 2012

*"My whole life, whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service...but I shall not have strength to carry out this resolution alone unless you join in it with me as I now invite you to do. God help me to make good my vow."*

Queen Elizabeth II, *Nelson Daily News*, February 7, 1952

*She* said looking through the monarchy of pronouns  
*Her* halftone face profiles the moment

On *our* kitchen table headlines mourn the proper  
Object of *our* common vale of memory and becoming

Dots of quiet morning snow outside the window 724  
Victoria Street then Kootenay Lake the mountain

Mist-hackled town's companion traced as Elephant  
*You* take on the words new news so *we* too

Mark *our* time momentarily collected public  
Memory longs for *its* own kind of peacefulness

All day soft snow hushes the valley but  
For the truck chains clanking up Stanley

The sovereign *We* "... seemed for a moment  
As though the heartbeat of a nation stopped"

That day *your* other *you* as white as the snow  
Fell over the town and drifted into the bank

Of memory just like the city bus *I* always needs  
Another pronoun for the *we* is speaking middle

Voice Dominion over CKLN radio's hourly news  
Sanding in progress up Josephine all clear tonight  
*My* Tenderfoot to King's Scout posing *who*  
Is the *many* might be the mercy of *whose* light

Or how to function as the subject of *what* long  
Moment caught within *each* sentence

Let's not forget – between – the words the traces  
*We'll* line them up for *their* long parade

The street's been plowed for *their* cavalcade  
*I Me You*

*Your They My We*

*this* rime of snowy faces

**Music at the Heart of Thinking 108**

Red Deer College Press, 1987

Now I know I have a heart because it's broken but should I  
fix it now to keep it strokin' or should I stop and listen  
closely to the name I got because it's spoken the one that  
stokes my heart with heat so hot I smell it smokin' or could  
this clock made up of parts be jokin' that missing spark a  
mis-read gap provokin' a little sock of baby breath not  
chokin' the piggy bank of naming's more than tokens not  
just the gossip love is always cloaked in nor all the meaning  
text is usually soaked in but roast potatoes for a tender  
button so much depends upon the things unspoken and if  
the heart is just this clock around which clusters all that's not  
and if the of and to an in that it is I for be was as can set  
these L, M, N, T's far apart so when I sigh my name the  
words won't rust just hasten slowly old tin man I'll stop  
right now and have an egg because I know its yolks inside  
and what I have to do is crack it open.

**For Discussion:**

1. How do both poems focus on elements of speech, grammar and language? List as many examples as you can.
2. In "Music at the Heart of Thinking 108" Wah asks questions at the beginning of the poem. How does he answer these questions later in the poem? How do the last three words of the poem add to his answers?

3. Find on Google an image of Elephant Mountain, Nelson BC, mentioned in "The Snowflake Age." Find out all the dictionary meanings for "trace" and "traces." What do you think Wah means by saying in verse 4 that the mountain is "traced as Elephant"? What does that suggest about the relationship between the name and the mountain? How does his later line "Let's not forget – between – the words the traces" add to this idea?
4. On Google Maps, look up Nelson BC, where Wah was living at the time of Queen Elizabeth's coronation. Find the streets named in "The Snowflake Age." How might some of these names link to his concern that we "not forget – between – the words the traces" that is, not forget something outside the words? Is there a connection between this idea and Wah's concern with names in "Music at the Heart of Thinking 108"?
5. In "The Snowflake Age" Wah writes "That day *your* other *you* as white as the snow / Fell over the town." How does this focus on whiteness raise issues such as the presence of European conquerors on land that belonged to First Nations people? How is the snowfall of pronouns throughout the poem related to this issue? What other things in the poem connect to Canada's history?
6. Does Wah think words convey meaning in the same way an equal sign conveys meaning in math? Point to as many lines as you can to back up your view.

### Writing Prompts:

1. Write down as many phrases as you can that could apply to you (for example: Harry Potter fan, enemy of mosquitoes, etc.), a page or more. From this research build a poem that's a single sentence long like Wah's "Music at the Heart of Thinking 108." Make it last at least 15 lines, written as prose, and build into it a rhyme, the way Wah repeats the okin sound in his.
2. What in your life has fallen on you like snow – something relentlessly changing your life which you couldn't do anything about? Rapidly fill a page or two with memories, sights, sounds, tastes, touches and smells connected with this snowfall. Now build a poem from this research, using two-line verses as Wah has. Experiment with breaking the lines to create surprising shifts such as Wah does when he says the snow "drifted into the bank" which could mean snowbank or even commercial bank, but then shifts at the beginning of the next verse with the words "Of memory."
3. List as many prepositions as you can, at least 20. Or look up a list in a standard guide to writing. Try using them in various phrases. What kind of power do prepositions have over other words? Is it like the power some people have over others? Think of examples. Now build a poem from your research.

4. Study a map of your own town, neighbourhood or region. List as many names of streets, neighbourhoods, highways, and other landmarks as you can, and find out who or what these names refer to. Whose names are not present? Whose names got public recognition this way? Build a poem from your research.
5. Rapidly respond to the following fragment: "the heart is just this clock around which clusters all that's not." Write faster than you can think for 2 pages. Abandon grammar and sentence structure. Whenever you run out of ideas go back to the fragment. Now build a poem out of this research. In your poem try running phrases together and breaking them in odd places to create extra meanings or surprising shifts.