



## Parliamentary Poet Laureate



### POETRY CONNECTION: LINK UP WITH CANADIAN POETRY

**George Bowering**, (1935 – ) was Canada's first Parliamentary Poet Laureate (2002-03). He was born in Penticton, B.C. but has spent most of his life in Vancouver. He has been a prolific writer and has published more than 100 books as a novelist, poet, historian, and biographer. He was a primary participant in the "TISH" group at UBC in the early 1960's. He is an inveterate baseball fan and much of his writing plays with the abstract forms that game suggests. He has won the Governor General's Award for both fiction and poetry and is an officer of the Order of Canada and the Order of British Columbia.

#### Poems for discussion:

#### **I Like Summer** and **Parts of Speech**

From: *Teeth: Poems 2006-2011*  
Mansfield Press, 2013.

I like summer so much,  
the way the tiniest rock gets a shadow behind it,  
the kind of shadow that makes Mars photographs so interesting,  
the rocks and shadows you never thought of  
when you were a boy imagining a voyage to Mars  
or other planets you preferred  
because the general run of boys your age were Mars fans  
the way they were Roy Rogers fans so you were a Gene Autry fan,  
and a Red Sox fan because they knew no better than  
to favour the New York Yankees, and that continues  
so that now young women visiting from Japan  
wear pink hats with white New York Yankees insignia

and their boyfriends have their hair dyed blond,  
but that doesn't really work because Japanese hair  
seems to go orange when you dye it, which is fashion,  
isn't it? You have to hand it to someone  
who makes an asset out of what looks like a drawback,  
hence the invention of scrapple, which I tasted for the first time  
at the Florida Avenue Grill in Washington, D.C., having always  
wondered what Charlie Parker and Diz were talking about  
that winter's night in 1947.

### Parts of Speech

He stood on the edge of the mole in Trieste,  
looking down at the water, It was green and  
coming up in bumps, like something alive.  
They called it the Adriatic, which sounds all right,  
like an adjective such as he had learned  
some oceans west of there, not in the first grade  
but eventually, adjectives and other parts of speech,  
as if speech came apart and you could put it together  
again, a boy's amusement in the days after Christmas.  
Though he once did get a dreadful tie for Christmas,  
brown plaid with gold sparkles on its lines, and  
obviously chosen by his aunt Lorna, who was stocky  
and red-headed, with a puggy nose. She was from  
Seattle, where his uncle Red was the underwater  
swimming champion one year. He was the painter  
in the family, a boyhood surviving twin, a man  
who casually employed an ox-horn cigarette holder.  
His dog Beans bit our dog Caesar to the bone and vice  
versa. Caesar recovered on the beach at Dog Lake,  
where he loved to swim, though he in no way resembled  
anything aquatic. In Trieste, though, there was a very  
old man with visible tendons who scrambled across rocks  
and into the sea every day of the year, a man beyond  
description.

**For discussion:**

1. Find a picture of the mole in Trieste. How is this setting echoed in other parts of the poem "Parts of Speech"? How does the ending contrast importantly with the opening?
2. Identify all the references to water in "Parts of Speech." What contrasts and connections to these references make? What ideas emerge?
3. In "Parts of Speech," what other adjectives ending in ic could "Adriatic" be linked to? In what ways is language like water, and in what ways is it not like water? In what ways is it like clothes?
4. Find out what scrapple is and who Charlie Parker and Diz are. Use Google to get hold of the words to the Charlie Parker composition "Scrapple from the Apple." How does this background material connect to other things mentioned in the poem "I Like Summer"?
5. In what ways does "I Like Summer" contrast imagined worlds with an actual physical world?

**Writing prompts:**

1. List some of your favorite verbs; the weirder they are the better. List at least 15 of your favorite nouns. Now use some of the nouns as verbs in sentences. The stranger ones you create can be the most fun. Build a poem around several words from your lists. Or try trading your lists for someone else's lists and build a poem from their words.
2. List as many unfashionable songs, musicians, clothing styles, hair styles, food, sports, etc. as you can. How could you turn these into assets like the scrapple? Build a poem out of your transformations.
3. Without thinking about grammar or sentences, jot down as many memories as you can about somewhere you went to on a trip. When you've got about a page, go back through your list and select two or three powerful images or moments that seem related. Build a poem where you connect each of these to something from some completely different part of your life not to do with your trip.
4. What ideas, images, smells, tastes, sounds come into your mind when you think of Mars? Build a poem out of these.
5. Choose any line or phrase from Bowering's poems. What memories, events, ideas, words, rhymes, or thoughts does the line bring to you? List as many as you can, then write a poem based on your list.

(Notes prepared by Meredeith Quartermain)