How far poetry has come in the academy! Here we are exploring what poetry brings to inquiry. When I embarked upon graduate work in the 90’s, we were theorizing narrative interpretive inquiry, and some of us were inserting poetry into those conversations: “narrative (and poetic) interpretive inquiry.” When I wanted to include my reflective piece on poetry and narrative in my dissertation (Norman 1997, 1999, 2001), I experienced resistance from some members of my committee. And thus, in a delayed but oh so postmodern act of defiance in the face of erasure, I am rewriting that earlier piece into this
Paradigms come and go, some more slowly than others. And so it is with a sense of hopefulness and possibility that I engage in the following reflections on poetry, to enter into the discussion.

In an earlier piece of literary non-fiction, I ruminate on a comparison between narrative—which can be filled with poetic language—and poetry—which can be more spare and occupies the blank page differently. Except for the prose poem, of course. There are always exceptions. My rumination began following an invitation to a university Language Arts class to read some poetry and narrative pieces. One of the students asked me: What’s the difference? I struggled to find a coherent response, especially when she commented to me that the narrative writing I shared sounded so poetic. So how is a poem different than a narrative, I asked myself? Does a poem do/say/convey anything a narrative does not? What is not disclosed? What about the spaces a poem leaves? In my work as a poet/writer, an instructor, an academic, I want to stay open to those spaces, not fill them. I want to honour the way those spaces can expand, contract, change, crack, explode, even restrict. No text is innocent. And for me, such potential disruption feels nearer to whatever passes for “truth” or “unity” or “integrity.”

Finally, I replied that poetry and narrative often look different, for one thing, narrative reaching all across a page, while a poem usually occupies only part of the blankness. (Except for those exceptions.) And I talked about the economy of poetry, thinking of all the poetry workshops where I cut out lines and words and what one mentor-poet called “all my busyness.”

Following that class, I thought about that student’s question some more. Narrative may be busier than a poem, and it may impart more. That is, we spell more out in certain narrative writings, leaving less to the imagination, whereas in a poem there are more silences, even more that the reader must bring to the page. I do not mean to imply that narrative writing is static, or that the meaning is fixed, or that there isn’t an absent story there as well, but just that often it’s busier. What we might cut out in a poem, we might amplify in narrative writing. A narrative might contain full sentences, while poems more rarely do, except for the prose poem, as noted above.

Thinking of the silences and spaces in a poem, what the reader brings to the page, the connections between words and between the lines, I am mindful of poet Gary Snyder’s remark: “There are some things that cannot be said except in poetry.”

When we express matters, we use more than words. Meaning also resides in the body, the emotions, in the place that in all of us is neither cognition nor intellect, but a sensory centre we inhabit at birth, a centre where an image or a metaphor or the configuration of words stirs passions that we don’t always acknowledge, let alone honour. I think all writing is more than words, but what is it that can only be said through poetry?

In that earlier reflective piece, I write about writing an autobiographical poem, a pulling together of fragments culled from what I call the Poetry Place in me, a creative state of being that is an unconscious, deep reservoir of often messy feeling and fact, a reservoir that I tap into when I successfully rid myself of the trappings of a busy life that clutter my mind and bury this place. These fragments, like pieces of glass from a broken mirror, can be arranged so many different ways that the mirror becomes endless, reflecting back images I don’t always recognize until someone else visualizes them. In the poem I write, I make selections. Often this selection involves cutting out excess words that do not detract from the overall sense when absent. I am not referring here to what we unconsciously select or
For the poem, I select images and incidents and words which best represent the impression of what I am trying to say; and I often don’t know what I am trying to say until the poem is written, or until I receive responses to it. This is true of all writing. We discover much of what we mean to say as we write. But I am trying to put my finger on the difference when I write poetry. I am more engaged at an unconscious, meditative level (not a literal level) in what may be brewing in a stew of feeling. I try to reach beyond the level of story to the edges of the mirror fragments, to what is behind the mirror. I welcome cutting myself on the jagged and dangerous shards of the mirror, so I will bleed words, words that may make no sense whatsoever as a story. And yet the dried words can be pieced together in the mind like a jigsaw puzzle that ultimately projects a picture sharp with colours and contours.

The connections between words and images seem different to me in a poem. I move them around. I play with them more. I seek what sounds like poetry-music to my inner reading ear. The words in a narrative flow; even if the narrative is disrupted, there is still a sense of waves washing in and out, of interdependent connections that may be separated or broken. In a poem I can jump around more, leave bigger gaps between words or ideas. I can use the non-sense more.

on the edge of a poem

a vision in the breath

“There are some things that cannot be said except in poetry.” The said and the unsaid. All we write in between the words and stanzas, then erase for the sake of effect, musical quality, the mirror. All we say by virtue of how much is not said. The poem, too, bears the traces of erasure.

I am conscious of the fact that in articulating my thoughts about poetry, I have used a whole lot of narrative in my exploration. This seems the ultimate irony. And this, too: are we unwilling to let a poem slip into us and slide around? Must we pin it to a wall of interpretation, like a butterfly caught and captured? No butterfly, no poem, is only the sum total of what is captured for examination. There is always more. Slippage. Ambiguity. Blurred colours. We make sense of our world and our poems through narrative nattering, as I am nattering my way through this writing. But there ought to be a place, too, for reading and hearing poetry where we simply let the sounds and images wash over us like a rainfall. We could listen to a poem as if it were in a different language, a foreign tongue we do not always understand, but respect and honour. Jeanette Winterson writes: “When we let ourselves respond to poetry, to music, to pictures, we are clearing a space where new stories can root, in effect we are clearing a space for new stories about ourselves.”

With these powerful words as a reminder, and in considering what poetry brings to inquiry, I recall Max van Manen who writes about all “the meaning captured by or embedded in poetic language.” Van Manen comments that in self-examination we discover what it is to be human, what is at the heart of our being, and that “we need other selves, others, the Other, through whom and with whom we seek understanding.” Perhaps a poem is the Other.

So what can poetry, all that poetry is and does, all this meaning captured by or embedded in poetic language, bring to inquiry? to understanding?

It is through the poetry which follows that I hope to begin to address this question, to consider the possibilities.
Poetry can be reconfigured, as I am reconfiguring some of the poems below. We can take poems from one place, a collection for example, and temporarily move them to another, perhaps an essay. Such a rearrangement can complicate and affect the meaning, in one of those turns of writing which makes a place for other versions of response and interpretation.

Poetry records and documents, as surely as ethnographic journaling or taking notes, although perhaps with even more heart and metaphor, even more layers, and therefore, more open spaces between the lines. Such theoropoetics, to borrow Cixous’ term, places poetry in the realm of theory, and beyond, too.

What else does poetry bring to inquiry?

Poetry notices and remembers:

**Sweet New York Bun**

New York steam rises
subway fuelled
metal scraping on bone
we buy Chinatown umbrellas
in the sudden downpour
*umbrellas three dollah!*

an old Asian lady
manoeuvres the curb
with her walker
I rush to assist
my daughters surprised
at this kindness
traffic only stops
when there’s no choice
there never is

I buy a sweet Chinatown bun
Asian ladies with Macy bags
drink hot tea
pull apart their buns
in the wrappers
without touching soft dough

I text message my daughters
*ah, tea*
who are walking with the throng
feet sore eyes full
wet hair curlier
in the humid breath
of late summer cosmos
I sit at long last
drink in tea and New York
remember how in Washington Park
a musician played two trumpets
at once
a mouthful of brass notes
a musical retainer

the sweet bun in my mouth
tastes like those notes
in this city that never sleeps

Poetry loves and celebrates and grieves:

Erasure

my mother asks me for my recipe
"those delicious tarts"
a compliment a daughter should cherish, right?
something inside me shatters
the recipe is hers
this is another bit of erasure
along with the clothesline she used for 50 years

in what winds do these hanging memory lapses blow,
i wonder
as they freefloat
as the frontal lobe breaks apart
like the most delicate of pastries
walnuts and raisins spilling
all over the universe
too scattered to ever
measure whole again

Last Summer of Childhood

we are watching What Not to Wear
in pyjamas and old shorts
this her last summer of childhood
before university begins

soon enough she will be writing papers,
walking on campus in the rain,
wondering where summer went
and holding her damp coat close
to keep warm

this is my last baby
the one I rocked slowly
savouring, savouring
her faded cotton sleepers
smelling of sisters,
old milk
when we shopped at the mall
our own episode of *What Not to Wear*
again and again she emerged:
a white eyelet skirt,
a rust tunic
my eyes on her becoming
the transformation taking place
behind a curtain of clothes

we are watching *What Not to Wear*
this *our* last summer of childhood

Poetry questions,
rages against.
Poetry is political,
risky,
unleashes secrets.

Poetry searches for immortality in ink:

**For Ted Aoki**

always
he will dwell in a place
with roots and rhizomes
I image there
steaming bowls of rice
teriyaki sushi saki
contiguous food metonymy

in the midst of such delicacies
he will embrace his daughter
marvel at her youthful beauty
preserved luminous
whisper how they missed her
how even when he could not see
he held on
to every moment of earthly grace
words forming like flowers
in his ears
in the scent of culture
home
the and/or
and tree roots

Stuck!

I embark upon a career change
after my mother gets stuck
between the wall and a Costco toilet
when my daughters are drinking
lattes on campuses
while others are draining RRSP’s,
mutual funds

I try not to think:
the lost years in pension changes
how travel medical coverage does not extend
beyond 65
or the way my chin now droops
when I check the mirror

I wish:
I could remove the birth date
in the front pages of my books
didn’t have to keep repeating
for my mother
where I work
where I work
where I work
Poetry amuses, embarrasses, plays with ironies, tries to understand:

My Canine Poet

all pumped up
my book launch
the power of words
the poet laureate, a mentor
in attendance

for a few minutes I felt like Atwood
people lined up
the laureate shows me
how you cross out your typed name
write it in
a tradition I am proud to claim
like saying the Scottish play

for a few minutes I felt like
a Capital P Poet
and then—

shit everywhere when I get home
our blind old poodle couldn’t wait
and so he writes me
scatological reminders of humility
on the rug
malodorous tracks in the sand of carpet

I can read what he is messaging me
down the long hall
up the stairs
under the bed

it’s all about the patterns of documentation
recording lives so nothing is lost
not the fleeting fame or attention
but the parts that may smell
are difficult to clean up

it’s about bodily needs
staving off loneliness
what you can’t see there
that requires affirmation
and in the end
a lot of poop artistically dropped
here and there
is after all
a kind of poem too

This is some of what can be said only through poetry.

About the Author

Renee Norman is a professor in the Teacher Education Program at University of the Fraser Valley, where she teaches Language Arts, Literacy, and Fine Arts courses. Her collection of poetry, True Confessions (Inanna) received the Canadian Jewish Book Award in 2006, and a second book of poetry, Backhand Through the Mother (Inanna), was published in 2007.