# A Field Guide to Alberta Poets

by Pamela Banting

It is the last night of the Nature Writing and Wilderness Thought Colloquium, a ten-day writers' retreat at a Benedictine monastery near the farming village of Muenster, Saskatchewan, and a group of 14 writers has motored from there in convoy to the lakeside village of Manitou Springs, home of Danceland. The blonde wood of the dance floor is cushioned underneath with coils of horsehair, creating a pleasurable, springy sensation in the knees, and attracts dancers from a nine-hour driving radius. We are greeted at the door by the owners, who give us a brief history of Danceland and take the time to find out who we are. We are somewhat unusual customers—most of us are in our 30s and 40s—while their regular clientele is largely 55 and better, mostly a lot better. With the courage born of 10 straight days of writing, reading and listening to poetry, we tell them with glee that we are poets. Our reason for being in Muenster is to write poetry!

We buy drinks, settle at our tables and wait for the evening to begin. The greeters and ticket takers turn out to be the owners of Danceland, as well as tonight's band (though other old-time and swing bands are booked weekly into the dance hall). After the first tune, the bandleader announces, "We are pleased to have with us tonight a group from Muenster who are in this area of the country to write poetry," and the crowd welcomes us with polite applause. The regulars glide beautifully around the floor for a few numbers, and then we straggle out onto the dance floor only to discover that most of us are nearly hopeless when it comes to the polka, fox trot, two-step or schottische.

ABOVE: The Alberta Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Pincher Creek attracts 6,000 people annually to hear poets recite their odes to the West.

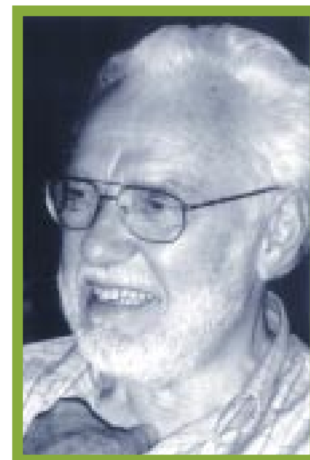
Fortunately, a group of widowed farm ladies from a nearby table comes to our rescue and undertakes to teach us the rudiments of the chicken dance that the band leader has just announced. Chants of "one, two, three, four, five, six, seven" emanate from the dance floor like cartoon captions as the poets struggle to liberate themselves from the rhythms of free verse and master those of the chicken dance. Soon the poets and the ladies are talking avidly with one another. We find out that when they had heard the bandleader introduce our three tables, the women thought he had said we were in *poultry*, not poetry. They must have wondered why we were so inept at the chicken dance.

"Poultry" was the more logical choice. Poetry is probably the most neglected art form in Canada. Because even avid readers are seldom familiar with the poets of their own province and sales are consequently few; bookstores seldom stock a large selection. In turn, because selection is often low and usually biased toward British and American poets who form part of an established literary canon, even the most intrepid reader may have to go to some lengths to find books of poetry by Canadians.

Part of the difficulty Canadians in general can encounter in studying poetry in school or university is that many of the poems in textbooks are from unfamiliar British landscapes with foreign flora, fauna, social customs and history portrayed in an outmoded version of English associated with a much earlier era. For the non-specialist, this can be almost as confusing and off-putting as reading the Income Tax Act or a medical textbook. However, for Alberta readers, contemporary Alberta poets—who share our geography and vernacular and many of our experiences, observations and social concerns—can be much more readable and can also heighten our senses of place and identity. As Donald Snow has written, strong regional literatures may be the only fortresses left standing against the forces of homogenization that accompany globalization and the ever-increasing commodification of our daily lives.

Lucky for us, all four of the western provinces are fairly hopping with poets, so much so that it would be impossible to cover them all here. Poets, like scientists, are continually experimenting to discover new knowledge: they demarcate a field and a problem within it, create hypotheses and test the results empirically. For example, a significant contingent of Alberta poets makes language itself their primary subject matter. Some explore its sound and visual resources (Barbour, Beaulieu, Markotic, Wilcke), while others too numerous to list focus on the codes which shape and determine sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and "race." Some of the most intriguing of these poets write out of what I call a translation poetics, writing between English and another language (Connelly, Gunnars, Pal, Wah) or even between the body and language (Goobie, Hilles, Holbrook). These two groups of language-centered poets tend to be concentrated in the urban milieu of Edmonton and Calgary. However, the poets I have selected here explore in their poetry the landscape and sense of place of their respective regions of the province, both rural and urban.

**Robert Kroetsch**, whose reputation as a poet and novelist spans the globe and whose influence upon most of the poets currently writing across the West has been nothing short of tremendous, was born and raised on a farm near Heisler, Alberta. One of his first poetry books, *Seed Catalogue*, as the title suggests, bears homage to his Western agricultural roots. *Seed Catalogue* is a book-length poem written as a series of numbered sections, several of which begin with a quotation from an actual McKenzie's Seeds catalogue: "There is **no place** in the **world** where **better cauliflowers** can be **grown** than right here in the **West**." Kroetsch says that in the absence of a common spiritual or literary text among the diverse inhabitants of the prairies, our one shared text may be the seed catalogue. He found an old McKenzie's Seeds catalogue in the Glenbow Museum and, as he says, "I wanted to write a poetic equivalent to the 'speech' of a seed catalogue. The way we read the page and hear its implications. Spring. The plowing, the digging, of the garden. The mapping of the blank, cool earth. The exact placing of the explosive seed." Reading a seed catalogue in the dead of winter and having our imaginations aroused by the promises of spring, tender green shoots and tasty vegetables is akin to the evocation of memory, desire and sheer bliss of the mouth which happens when we read a poem.



Rather than provide answers to our questions, a responsibility often seen as the poet's, the various sections of *Seed Catalogue* raise questions about living and loving; the role of poetry in a small rural community; the romantic figure of the cowboy; the place of the poet in a largely ahistorical, materialist culture; the relationship between poetry and prose; between writing poetry and gardening; and between culture and agriculture. In part the poem is also a tribute to the poet's mother, who died when he was just a boy. Kroetsch muses that her garden taught him a sense of place, which in turn gave him a

strong sense of identity. “Your sweet peas,” he writes,

*taught me the smell*
*of morning, the grace*
*of your tired*
*hands, the strength*
*of a noon sun, the*
*color of prairie grass.*

In addition to brief quotations from a 1917 seed catalogue, Kroetsch’s poem includes excerpts from many other kinds of documents—old letters, a will, jokes, anecdotes, bar-room conversations, and family stories—documents which together constitute an individual, family and communal history. The poet assembles snippets from these sources and poses the question “how do you grow a prairie town?” Kroetsch is nothing if not a serious writer, but perhaps he is most serious when he is most playful, as in one of the ways he answers that question:

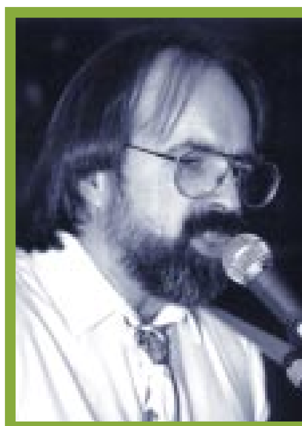
*The gopher was the model.*
*Stand up straight:*
*telephone poles*
*grain elevators*
*church steeples.*
*Vanish, suddenly: the*
*gopher was the model.*

Like Kroetsch, **Monty Reid** too is concerned to place himself and his family precisely in the ancient landscape that we presently call Alberta and to situate his poetic voice deeply in the local. For many years Reid lived in Drumheller and worked at the Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology. Throughout his poetry he explores some of the many different systems for reading and writing the western landscape: topographic maps, field guides, memoirs, scientific nomenclatures, geological deposits, fossils and dinosaur bones. Here is a love poem full of wildflowers indigenous to Alberta, and it works not by metaphor exactly but by a refusal of metaphor:

*you were like none of these:*
*the tongue of hound’s tongue*
*beard of goat’s beard*
*foot of goose foot*

*not the strife in loose strife*
*rue in meadow rue*
*or the wind in wind flower*

*the bed in bedstraw*
*foam in foam flower*
*either term in pussy toes*



*not prickly pear*
*touch me not*
*or skull cap*

*anything in blazing star*
*witch’s butter*
*monkshood*

*unlike even the pale*
*death camas fringing*
*the sloughs*

*especially.*

Reid does not compare his lover to any of the flowers in the list. “You were like none of these,” he says, and goes on to describe her by negation of metaphor, by what she is not (just as Shakespeare in his Sonnet 130 claims “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”). At the same time he refuses the larger metaphor, he unearths others buried in the names of local wildflowers, bringing them to our renewed attention: the names are made strange and freshened in the poetic process. In appearing to empty the metaphors hidden in the names (what Kroetsch might call “unhiding the hidden”), Reid induces the reader to consider the names. Paradoxically, in refusing to metaphorize the beloved, he showers both her and the reader with a multiplicity of possible metaphors. And like all good poems, this one too grants the reader the pleasure of playing language across the tongue: prickly pear, blazing star, monkshood, pussy toes.

**Sid Marty** was raised in the Redcliff/Medicine Hat area and presently lives at the base of the Livingstone Range northwest of Pincher Creek, and the Alberta landscape has been deeply inscribed in his body and soul. Growing up half wild on the prairie, he says, “The river washed me clean and the prairie wind was my towel.” Nowadays Marty is best known for his award-winning nonfiction books such as *Men for the Mountains*, *Leaning on the Wind: Under the Spell of the Great Chinook* and *Switchbacks: True Stories from the Canadian Rockies*, but it was his poetry—*Headwaters*, *Nobody Danced with Miss Rodeo*—which first brought

him to prominence. His poetic influences include Earle Birney, Al Purdy and W.W.E. Ross, and, like the first two, Marty blends in his poetry the vernacular and colloquial with a thorough knowledge of the poetic tradition. This multi-talented writer is also a gifted singer/songwriter, and many of his poems walk the wobbly line between poem and song lyric (and a few have been set to music). The sounds, the rhythms and the images of Marty's poems echo his immediate surroundings, namely, mountains, rocks, the screech of hawks, whinnying horses, sudden thunderstorms—and the chinook winds, of course. Sometimes you can even hear in them the song of barbed wire or the motor when his neighbour starts up his tractor. In "Medicine," Marty writes about never having wanted to grow up on the plains and never having understood why he felt that way

*until I found the mountains*
*where trees grew by themselves,*
*there to greet the first men*
*with thoughts expressed by rock*

*Where flowers burst like songs*
*from tongues of stones.*

Some of his poems are love poems, some social commentary, some sing the praises of manual work and daily life, while others are pure hilarity. One in his latest book, *Sky Humour*, is about the washing machine at the Banff Centre which vibrated and rocked so badly "I mounted up and rode the spin cycle/ all around that log kitchen/ pounding its sides and hollering/ I'M OUTTA THE CHUTE, LET 'ER BUCK!"

I went to my first cowboy poetry gathering in 1994 in Stony Plain, and after the banquet of steak and potato, baked beans, salad and pie had settled and the dance was well under way, a cowboy poet named Frank Gleeson danced me around the floor so fast I thought my cowboy boots were going to fly right off my feet and injure somebody. B.C. poet Gleeson, whose work is a cross between cowboy poetry and rap delivered at the same high velocity as his dance steps, has many Alberta cohorts and counterparts including, to name a few, Terri Mason, Lloyd Dolen, Bryn Thiessen, Doris Daley and Rose Bibby. Cowboy poetry has a loyal following among those who savour its wit, wordplay and narrative. It also has its fair share of detractors, some of whom despair at its incurable fondness for end-rhyme and its tendency toward sentimentalism, while others, raised exclusively on the poetics of modernism, refuse to give it even a polite listen. True, those most comfortable with T.S. Eliot's hollow men, stuffed men, headpieces filled with straw, are not going to like poems about hay bales, tending horses and cattle, making do and lending your neighbour a helping hand. One of the best statements about cowboy poetry is by Agnes Copithorne, who said of her own poetry, "These are not modern poems. They give up their meanings easily." (Doris Daley, on the other hand, defines the difference between the poetry of the literati and the lariati in monetary terms: "People pay to hear cowboy poetry.")

**Rose and Garth Bibby** from near Westlock are popular performers on the Alberta cowboy poetry circuit and beyond. Cowboy poetry is essentially work poetry, and Rose's series of "he said/she said" poems about gender roles in farm and ranch work are comical critiques of rigid gender categories and memorable cautions about the penalties for falling into stereotypical thinking. In "Testing, testing" Garth advises young farmers looking for a wife to "check a little farther than the cut of her blue jeans/ Try her out and see how she can handle your machines!" Modern farming requires the operation of a lot of heavy equipment, a factor that enters into several of Rose's poems about farm wifery, including "How to Describe My Wife," also written from Garth's point of view:

*She won't learn to swim and she won't learn to ride*
*Though I've tried my damndest to teach her*
*She wants to argue when I know I'm right*
*She's a charming but obstinate creature.*

*She can't seem to get the hang of machines*
*Especially my pull-type post pounder*
*And when she's out helping to sort out the calves*
*Confusion just reigns all around her*

*But she's pretty good natured, she laughs a lot*
*She likes people, sunrises and roses*
*Still she's hard on the head and hard on the nerves*
*And hell on hydraulics and hoses!*

Cowboy poetry, meant to be recited from memory and listened to in public more than read silently and alone, puts the humour back into verse, and the food, frolic and friendliness at the gatherings are mighty fine too.

When I was entering my teens, the boys liked to quiz the girls as to the difference between a good girl and a nice girl. A good girl, they informed us more than once, went home and went to bed; a nice girl went to bed and then went home. Métis poet **Marilyn Dumont**'s debut poetry book *A Really Good Brown Girl* explores the additional complexities of growing up brown and female in a predominantly white culture. Dumont, who is descended from both the Gabriel Dumont who defended Batoche and his uncle Gabriel who was involved in the establishment of the Métis settlement at Lac Ste. Anne, was raised in lumber camps near Sundre before moving to Edmonton, where she worked in film and video and as an academic advisor for Native Student Services at the University of Alberta, and then to Vancouver. The poems and prose poems in her first collection analyze the social position of the Métis girl whose only choices in the 1950s and 1960s were to become either the Indian princess or the "squaw." As Dumont writes: "I could react naturally, spontaneously to my puberty, my newly discovered sexuality or I could be mindful of the squaw whose presence hounded my every choice." She chose to be "so god-damned respectable that white people would feel slovenly in my presence." "Blue Ribbon Children," her portrait of the roles of wife and mother to which she was expected to accede without question, is a gothic critique of domesticity. "The Devil's Language" interrogates the imposition of standard English and the punishment of Indian and Métis kids for speaking "the Chief's Cree not the King's English":

*My father doesn't read or write*
*the King's English says he's*
*dumb but he speaks Cree*
*how many of you speak Cree?*
*correct Cree not correct English*
*grammatically correct Cree*
*is there one?*

While Kroetsch, Reid, Marty, Bibby and Dumont poetically map the rural territory around the small towns of Heisler, Drumheller, Pincher Creek, Westlock and Sundre respectively, the terrain of Edmonton poet **Mary Howes**—psychiatric/oncology nurse by day, poet and performance artist by night—is that of the human body: the body tempted, tormented and pleasured by desire and the body possessed by illness and rampaging cells.

Howes, whose physical voice bears an uncanny resemblance to the whiskey-smoke drawl of rocker Marianne Faithfull, knows all and discloses much. Tough-minded, tough talking, unflinching, these are not poems for the timid or the sentimental. Or rather they are, since we are all shocked into timidity in the face of the ravages to which the body is susceptible. Like Dumont, Howes also dismantles the proscriptions attached to the good girl, with poems about lust, cigarettes, drunkenness, and picking up men in bars, just as in her poems about the medical profession she deconstructs both the Florence Nightingale and the Nurse Ratched versions of the nurse.

In the following stanza, a man objects to his partner's aggressive sexual ministrations and she counters with medical jargon:

*i'm sick he says*
*it's not only tb*
*i've got congenital heart disease*
*don't we all she says*
*i can't stand any stimulation*
*i could go anytime*
*relax i know cpr*
*or maybe you don't want any heroic measures*
*in that case i'd do a soft code on you*
*know what that means*
*it means you start to croak & i go for coffee.*

An aficionado of music and film, Howes inserts snatches of song lyrics and movie clips here and there into her poems. She performs spoken word poetry with a group of musicians called Guerilla Welfare, sometimes also with contemporary dancers.

If you have ever watched the CBC television series *North of 60* or *Black Harbour* or seen either of the *North of 60* movies, you are already familiar with some of **Andrew Wreggitt**'s work. He was the head writer for the two series and sole writer for the movies. Wreggitt was raised in northern B.C. and moved to Calgary in 1985. Since then, along with his radio, theatre and television work, he has published five books of poetry, including *Making Movies*, *Southeasterly* and *Zhivago's Fire*. His poems are of a lyric economy and deal with the outdoors, travelling in Europe and Japan, and the complexities of postmodern urban life. Like Reid, whose writing about the natural world involves both the making and the undoing of metaphor, in the following excerpt from his prose poem "Rain," Wreggitt maintains a vigilance against the distortion and sentimentality caused by the attribution of human emotions to natural objects:

*The river is sad today. No, that's not right. The river is full to the teeth with silt and mud and is busy making something new out of itself. Carving new passages, silting up shopping carts, sculpting the clay bank by the cement plant with its flat, insistent forehead. No. It's me who is sad.*

Wreggitt's poems often focus on sorting out emotions (following the death of a father or the end of a relationship) and relocating oneself in the physical world in their aftermath.

Just as you need not be a professional dancer to enjoy an evening at Danceland, neither do you need a degree in English literature in order to enjoy a book of poems by an Alberta author. At Danceland, you simply watch the other dancers for a while and then you get up your courage to step out onto the floor. The more you dance, the smoother you get, until soon you can forget about technique and just let the music and the collective motion of the other dancers take you away. Pick up a book by the Alberta poet of your choice and join the dance.

**Pamela Banting** is the author of *Body Inc.: A Theory of Translation Poetics* (Turnstone, 1995) and the editor of *Fresh Tracks: Writing the Western Landscape* (Polestar, 1998). She lives in Calgary and can do the two-step, polka and schottische.

## A selection of other contemporary Alberta poets and representative works

**Bert Almon**, *Earth Prime* (1994); *Calling Texas* (1989)
**Doug Barbour**, *Fragmenting Body etc.* (2000); *Visible Visions: Selected Poems* (1984)
**Derek Beaulieu**, *Maps and Syntax* (2000), available from http://www.telusplanet.net/public/housepre
**E.D. Blodgett**, *Apostrophes:Woman at the Piano (1995)**; *Apostrophes IV: speaking you is holiness* (2000)
**Tim Bowling**, *The Thin Smoke of the Heart* (2000); *Low Water Slack* (1995)
**Karen Connelly**, *The Border Surrounds Us* (2000); *The Disorder of Love* (1997)
**Olga Costopoulos-Almon**, *Muskox and Goatsongs* (1995)
**Joan Crate**, *Pale as Real Ladies: Poems for Pauline Johnson* (1989)
**Beth Goobie**, *Scars of Light* (1994); *Could I Have My Body Back Now, Please?* (1991)
**Jim Green**, *North Book* (1986); *Beyond Here* (1983)
**Kristjana Gunnars**, *The Axe's Edge* (1983); *Settlement Poems* (1980)
**Claire Harris**, *Drawing Down a Daughter* (1992)
**Robert Hilles**, *Somewhere Between Obstacles and Pleasure* (1999); *Cantos from a Small Room* (1993)*
**Susan Holbrook**, *Misled* (1999)
**Nicole Markotic**, *Minotaurs and Other Alphabets* (1998); *Connect the Dots* (1994)
**George Melnyk**, *Ribstones* (1996)
**Charles Noble**, *Wormwood Vermouth, Warphistory* (1995)
**Rajinderpal S. Pal**, *Pappaji Wrote Poetry in a Language I Cannot Read* (1998)
**Roberta Rees**, *Eyes Like Pigeons* (1992)
**Shane Rhodes**, *The Wireless Room* (2000) *(see the review of this book on page 55.)*
**Shirley Serviss**, *Model Families* (1992)
**Birk Sproxton**, *Headframe* (1985)
**Richard Stevenson**, *A Murder of Crows: New and Selected Poems* (1998)
**Yvonne Trainer**, *Landscape Turned Sideways: Poems 1977-87* (1988)
**Fred Wah**, *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1984)*; *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* (1981)
**Jonathon Wilcke**, *Jackbooty* (2000), available from jcwilcke@ginet.mb.or.jp.
**Sheri-D Wilson**, *Girl's Guide to Giving Head* (1996); *The Sweet Taste of Lightning* (1998)
**Christopher Wiseman**, *Crossing the Salt Flats* (1999)
**Jon Whyte**, *Mind Over Mountains* (2000)
**Jan Zwicky**, *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth* (1998)

** Winner of the Governor General's Award*