



Read-Aloud Poems

*for students
from elementary
through
senior high school*

by Susan Ioannou

**Wordwrights Canada
Toronto, 2011**

READ-ALoud POEMS

Revised 2011 Edition

Acknowledgments

Many of the poems in this collection were written with the help of an Ontario Arts Council Writers' Reserve Grant. They have appeared in *Alberta Poetry Yearbook*, *The Antigonish Review*, *B.C. Reading Assessment*, *Bite to Eat Place*, *Canadian Poems for Canadian Kids*, *Canadian Literature*, *Chickadee*, *Clarity Between Clouds*, *Cricket*, *CV2*, *Flip Flops*, *Here Is a Poem*, *On the Line*, *The New Quarterly*, *Pockets*, *Poemata*, *The Poet and the PC*, *Tabula Rasa*, *Toronto Life*, *Treeline*, and *Where the Light Waits*.

Second Digital Edition

ISBN 978-0-920835-37-1

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First Digital Edition

ISBN 978-920835-18-0

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Second, Revised Print Edition

ISBN 0-920835-16-3

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To The Teacher

The selections in this chapbook are meant to be enjoyed, rather than formally “studied”. They are read-aloud poems, appealing to ear as well as eye. Some bounce along on metre and rhyme. One is a full-blown sonnet. Others step more quietly in free verse. The poems also speak in many voices: humorous, descriptive, lyric, narrative, and philosophic.

The poems in Part I are about animals, make-believe, and simple experiences familiar to elementary school children. In contrast, those in Part III express grown-up themes in a more sophisticated style, for reading and discussion with students in senior high school years. Halfway between in subject and form, fall the poems of Part II, aimed at the middle school and junior high years. Of course, each teacher will judge which selections, from one or all three parts, best suit a particular class.

This chapbook also provides an introduction to a contemporary Canadian poet. After all, poetry is not words in a vacuum, but feelings and thoughts born of flesh and blood—to be shared.

Above all, I hope these poems will whet poetic appetites, showing young readers how sound and image not only capture everyday experience, but also give shape and meaning to our fears and dreams.

Susan Ioannou

For Polly

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Part I

Watch Me Climb

I climb my tree
higher and higher
until I look so small
you think I'm a yellow caterpillar
wriggling out to a cloud.

I shinny up bark
to the topmost twig
and there I see the world
from road to pond a thousand miles
and beyond to Antarctica.

What if you hear
branches unruffle
and feel a striped breeze waft by?
It's me, in my T-shirt parachute
floating home butterflies.

Fussy Eater

Mara McCat
likes the personal touch.

She snuggles my leg
and meows till I bring her

mushed-up canned chicken,
but still won't start lunch

until the muck's
stirred with my finger.

It's Spring

Sneaking out behind the dark,
furry shadows soft as sleep
prowl along the moonlit street.

Raccoon robbers!
Clatter! Crash!
Listen to the garbage cans

topple as the gleaming gang
snatch old bones, tea bags, and tins
to munch for midnight snack.

Joe Rides Out To Play

Black, white, sweaty
horses gallop thunder
under Joe's skin.

Rumbling over ribs,
crashing against muscles,
sparking lightning from his eyes,
they stampede into rain.

Someone call the cowboys.
It's puddle round-up time
again!

Snow Boy

Wrestling red leggings,
Stefan snap-snaps.
Wooly blue ears
wiggle in his hat.

Slush-mush boots
knee into snow.
Whizz-balls splat.
Watch it! Oh-oh!

Mittens steam dry.
Pink cheeks warm,
hot-chocolate happy,
snug as popcorn.

Monster

A monster hides
behind my bed.
I have not seen him
but I know
his nose is green,
his ears burn red,
his purple feet
flap big, and glow.

His eyes spin round
like yellow tops.
His teeth snip-snap,
but when I dare
to peek at him
away he hops
and squats behind
my rocking chair.

Am I too scared
to close my eyes
and go to sleep?
No, not at all.
I say my prayers
and jump in bed,
pull up the sheet
and curl down small.

And if the blankets
shiver, he's
the one who fears the dark
—not me.

Tree Trouble

Plop! On my head
drops a little green husk
out of a dizzy-high branch.

A quiver, a rustle,
and down plops another
bouncing along my park bench.

The leaves aren't tumbling,
no raindrops are rumbling.
Still I could use an umbrella

to cover myself from
a furry red fellow
peeling nuts for his lunch.

Upside Down

When dandelions thin to white,
blow, blow, blow.

Up and away they fly
—flakes of summer snow.

Pull On Your Magic Boots

Pull on your magic boots
and clomp around with me.
We'll be giants splashing
mud from sea to sea,
churning hat-high waves
while bugs and elephants flee.

Let's jump over a mountain
quick as a sidewalk crack.
Grab a cloud for a hanky
—to shake at a passing ant.
“Look out below! One hiccup
could startle an avalanche!”

Flopping onto our backs,
close eyes, and kick in the air.
Our boots will fly us behind the moon
to tickle the Great Bear
and pour from the Little Dipper
a fizzing glass of stars.

Pull on your magic boots
whenever you want to be
sliding along an iceberg
or swinging through jungle steam.
Go anywhere in the universe
—just by imagining.

Part II

Candle Flame

When I blow a candle out
does the flame fly to the moon

or spark into a buttercup
to brighten a ladybug's way?

Perhaps dancing in air,
smoke hints where it hides

or like a tiny sun,
night swallows every one.

Tucking In

Pull up the night's blue bedspread.
Smooth the starry sheet.
Fluff the earth's brown pillow.
The garden is going to sleep

Catnip The Mystery Tomcat

Catnip the mystery tomcat
skids like a black motorbike.
Round corners, carpet fringe flying,
he brakes—claws down—at my feet.

What do you want, sir, propped on hind wheels,
motor a-rumble, eyes wide windshields?
Sardines for dinner? Chin tickled?
Ears rubbed?

Why are you twitching your whiskers
(like those eight other times before)?
You've come, I've seen, and we've sat here
tomcat to tomgirl, nose-close on the floor!

Give me a hint: slide round my leg,
or lick my thumb, or meow.
DO SOMETHING to show what you want, please!
Right now!

A spin, a scratch, and hind legs kicking up fringe,
a furry tail flashes from sight,
Catnip the mystery tomcat
off again like a black motorbike.

The Seed

Snoozing under old snow
without an alarm clock
how does a seed know
it's time to grow?

Does Spring trickle down
where cold roots curl
and whisper, "Hey, sleepy head,
throw off earth's covers"?

Or does a wise worm
nudge out a sprout
and say, "Follow me
up this tunnel"?

Perhaps a robin
chirps overhead,
"The soil is softening.
You'd better hustle."

Is that how a seed
blinks for the sun,
yawns, stretches, and buds?
Of course!—Ask a buttercup.

Questions For A Centipede

Around and around
without a sound,
a tiny floor polisher
you scurry.

No back, no front,
you look like a
crowd of cousins
wrapped in a long overcoat.

Tug left? Pull right?
Up walls? Down pipes?
Who chooses
which way to hurry?

And if, to stop you,
I stick out a thumb
will you sting? Or hop on
like a ladybug?

After you flurry
to bed back home,
how will all hundred legs
lie down?

Up North

Up north the midnight sky looks like
a black sieve upside down.

Through a million, million holes
shine stars without a sound

until wind gusts across the moon
and sprinkles thousands down

lighting up the snowdrifts
with sparkles all around.

The Lizard's Cure

Crinkle on crinkle
so many wrinkles
how will I straighten my skin?

Not in the dryer.
Not with an iron.
Not with a rolling pin.

I'll grow another
smoother and softer
under the skin that I'm in.

Wind

Where does the wind go when it blows
grass into wave upon wave?

Up to The Soo, or Timbuktu
on the other side of the globe

or round and around house corners,
chasing its own tail?

Leaping into thunder and lightning
wind howls a hurricane

or sweeps snow off the mountains
like fluff from a dandelion.

Nosing ice floes along the sky
it ruffles a few polar bears

or spirals down to an ocean
sparkling in a puddle.

Almost out of breath, it slows
to the purr of a drowsy kitten

until a passing bumble bee
swallows it for dinner.

If I Were A Pebble

If I were a pebble
all day I'd lie on the shore
and listen to ripples
froth and fall.

I'd close my eyes and wonder
how many like me
the ocean was rubbing together,
smoothing our speckled, hard skins.

But gazing up at the night
I'd laugh how the moon dropped anchor,
splashing stars into millions
and never a one sprinkled down.

"Hello, little pebbles," I'd call.
"How's the water up there?"
and dream the sky was our mirror
we swam in upside down.

At Midnight

Across the dark lake
silver ripples.
The moon
unbinds her braids.

Rachel: A Feline Fable

Rachel always liked to slink
in a not quite empty sink.
Even when we pulled the stopper
still she crouched in hopes of water.

One sad morning we were startled
finding Rachel grown much smaller.
Now, alas, we search in vain
fearing she's slipped down the drain.

Has she flushed into the lake
slowly to evaporate
into growling clouds that rain
cats and dogs on window panes?

Let the moral simply be:
kitties, keep your four paws dry
or like Rachel you may shrink
steadily till indistinct

you dissolve in space and time
one more cat-a-logued in rhyme.

Bundle Up

On winter days
houses wear white hats
and bundle up to their porches in banks
so thick, so deep
sidewalks disappear.

Even an apple tree by the road
has pulled its long Johns on.
The street is a white cloak
to cosy the sleeping cars.

On winter days
we bundle up too
and tumble into the snow.
We lie on our backs,
fan angel wings,
and catch white stars on our tongues.

But we're so fat
in red hats and mittens,
black boots, thick ear muffs, wool scarves
nobody trudging along the road
knows any more who we are.

Hopscotch

White as a schoolyard pebble
 skipping across chalk lines
 a galaxy hurtling through space

yet within
 a sandfly's darting eye
 universes of stars

Queen of the Road

Climbing the stable's dark stair
knee deep in hay
pitched from a small wooden door,

sticky with cobwebs
I sucked in my breath
and up to a vast dimness I crept.

Lofts rose into brown light and dust
holding their yellow mountains
high as the pigeon-full beams

where sun leaked between cracks,
and the roof pitched steep, like a giant's tent
-- me the size of a mite beneath.

As I creaked across the wide planks,
up dusted gold from the harvest past,
that day, through the far, double doors,

when sunlight had thundered, and red machines
churned and clanked up the sloping floor
to where I crouched by the bins.

Huge metal elbows had swung over lofts.
Drive wheels whined greased belts around,
coughing hay into rising mounds

while ghosts in red plaid and denim
waved brown hands above rattle and din,
"Get back to the house, girl!" "Go on!"

But now the barn stood quiet,
only high shadows cooing
pigeons from beam to beam.

One rustled into a corner under the eaves,
unruffled, and tucked
small head under wing.

Like feathers down-drifting, soft light
filtered past the emptied hay wagon
and haloed a carriage's cobwebbed black.

To its tall, spindled wheels I darted
and, sneezing dust from my jeans,
climbed to the seat uncoiling in springs.

Eyes closed, sniffing hay's fragrance,
I dreamed of bumping the carriage down planks
through the wide double doors

out into sun, where old King
stamped shaggy hooves in the grass,
coarse tail whipping at flies.

Dodging the horse's great flanks,
I'd stroke the blaze on his nose
and coax him into harness and reins.

"Giddy-up!" I'd holler,
and wheel down the lane,
taller than threshers who'd shooed me away,

freed to rattle beyond the farm,
and rumble dust clouds of my own,
now, no pigeon, head under wing,

no face wet in grandmother's apron,
but queen of the fancy black carriage
running away to town.

Part III

Haiku

Silence. Morning mist.
Along the hedge, a black cat.
Fallen leaf quivers.

Boardwalk, Early Morning

Walking through heavy fog
we see no forward
no back
only now, here
immobilized in a white dream.

Edges melt
regret fades
a lost green bird
singing from an invisible branch.

Within this opaque mirror
we bump into pieces of ourselves:
startled pink
stuffed blue
loom into, out of focus.
Two boards ahead guide our feet.
Fog whites out all cracks beyond.

Blanketed in the unknown
we breathe deep
here, now
freed from shaping a future
and marvel to find our own fingers.

Is this the amazed contentment of ghosts?

Don Valley Day *

I

Helping to heal
the green valley, the greener river,
by harvesting what haste has tossed,

I bend and rise,
hand in a damp cotton glove,
mendicant monk of litter, humble work,

and heal myself,
scooping and rising
in rhythm with ancient planter and gleaner,

in rhythm with a small child
clinging to mother,
stroking her belly's warmth.

II

Apes, cats, many small creatures
pick nits from each other's fur,
a mutual tending and care,

symbiosis: the native respect for nature,
thanking a seal, a deer for giving its life
to be our cover, our food.

Can we mend the rents in the air,
lift stains from the ground,
bring Earth full circle again?

By doing so,
can we begin
to make ourselves whole?

** A spring event where volunteers clean up litter from
the public parklands along Toronto's Don River.*

Cider Making

Apples roll Gran's apron red and green,
sitting in sun before the press,
white hair drawn back in a bun.

Cider strains into jars
straggling from orchard edge across thick lawn.
More apples rot beneath our emptied swing

and far over fields, the long back lane,
where Queen Anne's lace and goldenrod
blur into forest, disappear,

cider freshens Gramps against sun's heat
now climbing midday, brick by brick
yellow over steep eaves

making the roof slates shine,
the tip of the lightning rod
spark against clear sky.

Cider cools our mouths
and dribbles chins
golden as fingers we lick again.

Sweet cider, drawn from sun
and crinkled smiles
—liquid light funnels into jars.

Persimmon

From ebony, persimmon flames.
Lush orange flesh, caped in brown-green leaves,
crosses mountains, sand and ocean
to market, among snow apples, maple syrup,
exotic in the corner grocery.

Halved in a winter-dark kitchen,
it glows from the wooden cutting board
more brilliant than a Chinese poppy
blazing against the stars.
Between lips, cool pulp quivers,
silk, nectar throbbing the tongue
far off to hanging gardens, swollen bees,
frankincense and ancient stones.

Persimmon:
snow melts
from a white winter plate
as east dawns.

New Paperboy

Into this grumpy-grey morning,
whistles a shiny red raincoat
splashing up sidewalk, through puddles,
light as a hop, skip, and jump.

Push, then run, push,
the green paper-bin rolls and bumps.
Pebbles dance up from cold concrete,
crack after square after crack.

Bouncing the curb, the bin slows.
Elbows and knees firm as pistons
rumble the wide metal wheels
up a long driveway, then back.

Damp reddens cheeks. It's enough
pushing on, moment by moment.
Dreams jingle-jangle in pockets
—wealthy with motion, buoyant as breath.

The Third Cup

Coffee-skinned
the young man said
I am black and white

skimmed from European grandmothers,
forefathers deep
as Africa.

Cream and chicory
mingled, cousins
stir fresh love between

to fill no single cup, but brew
old-world amaretto, mint,
almond, and Colombian

with any flavour
spring water will marry
—*generic* Canadian.

Ballerina

(for Polly)

The music muscles feel is like no other,
pulling her to dance from inside out.
A hidden rhythm shivers, till the timbre
whirls her satin pointes away from earth.

Opened to the body's knowing,
she becomes the lyrics motion sings:
pirouettes are verbs, each gesture phrases
what no words alone can fully say.

Freed from metronomes, she leaps dimensions.
Time and space dissolve against wet skin.
Grace firms into strength, and glimpsed perfection
pushes her to spin and spin again.

Fast Exit

Old man Sturdwell
hated Gus like blisters.
Dang cat squatted down,
dropped his dark gift
always on the greenest patch of lawn,
like a mongrel
murdered prize begonias
and ripped the ear near off Sandy,
Sturdwell's darlin' tiger.

Well, the old man stomped and yelled,
pitched a closetful of boots 'n shoes,
strung a dozen cans on Gus' tail,
even fired his shotgun illegal.
Nothing scared that animal.
Gus come back, three times a week at least,
with blacker gifts and crimes.

One night Sturdwell whooped awake, "I got it!"
Eyes agleam, he hacked up a hunka fresh liver
and under full moon, in orange striped pajamas,
he crouched in the dirt, croakin',
"Here, kitty, kitty."
When Gus snuck up,
eager to nip his hand,
he stuffed him in an onion sack.

Grinning like a crazy man, in raincoat and slippers
he hiked them half a mile to the CNR yards
and when no one was lookin'
pitched sack and Gus hard
on a fast freight for Vancouver.

These days,
Sturdwell's got the greenest grass in town.
'Begonias took second in Sunday's garden show.
Sandy sprawls in sunshine,
watching birds, washing her silk ears,
and Sturdwell grins from sleep as
the 2:00 a.m. express whistles.

Nightfall

Pink, blue, gold,
a silk cocoon
wraps the evening garden.

Roses yawn.
Iris curls.

Centered in the lawn, the locust tree
bends around its nests.

Bird feeders close.

A last geranium
nods from its wired bowl.

The dream could float forever . . .

Crouching in a corner
shadowed thick as grass,
the black and white cat
bares his fangs.

At The Ontario Science Centre

1. *Vibrations*

Behind blackened glass,
strung in wire lines, upright and mute,
tight metallic flowerbuds
jiggle when we whistle:
purple,
amber,
luminescent green.

Mimics of our darkest selves'
stubborn urge to pierce
panes invisible as sound,
in skinny unison their quivering lives
roll
toward my lullabies,
jerk
from stamp and clap,
undulate
right back our need
to hear an otherness.

Startled by their silent waves,
we hone three black reflections
to one, long, glittering thread
—awe.

2. *Holograms*

Out of darkness, a lion gilds the air.
 Slowly we reach to stroke its snout.
 Our hands dissolve to gold.

Hovering between dimension and illusion,
 the lion devours us, as our eyes consume him.
 We stare through streaked mane.
 Reality's other side?
 Another frame, another lasered film
 reddened lobster, shimmering conch
 where goldfish fin a glass-thick tank
 —or are their ripples
 photographic traces too?

Ghosts.
 The 20th century
 burns new light into our brains.

Synaesthesia

If the *squeak* of a polished apple
 hooks the ear,
beef is a head of steam.
Thud hangs heavy, pork stew in a fog,
 and *bump* gobs peanut butter.
Vinegar snarls in the throat like a rope,
 but *rum* runs round as a mixing bowl.

Wood smoke—sigh—
 tastes like lost love.

Subtexts

Imagine words are snow we crawl under
and scratch at matted ice for crocuses.

Or, flattened on our backs in white,
that words fan angel wings.

And how could we forget
that clouds are words too?

Puff and blow
uncertainties into solid shapes,

wait—

How far will they glide?

But after shadows thin, and night
breaks through its first star,

throw off snow and run, wondering
what if white words burn?

Sonnet

When in dismay at how disorganized
my clippings, bills, and letters had become
—they cluttered every room!— I closed my eyes
and grilled my brain: Whatever could be done
for lack of discipline or space? I hoped
some folders, lists, or charts, not cuckoo's nests,
might be the step-by-step technique that coped
effectively for shrinking such a mess.

Instead, my paper chaos kept on rising
until a TV news flash on Bill Gates
flicked on a light bulb—Why keep agonizing?
Go buy a laptop. Digitize. Update!

Thus, phoenix-like, rose order and routine
from Outlook, Word, Excel. My desk is clean!

Porches

Porches (like window sills)
are borders,
but step more gently
to the edge.

Boxed, some blossom
yellow, mauve, and red,
or overwrought with iron,
scroll stiff invitations.

Some uphold uncles in undershirts,
sagging chairs, and bottles of beer.
Others, smoothed grey stone,
tilt guests off into moonlight
after much wine,
or drab as a pre-poured smile,
ease old ladies down.

Porches kiss hello
and cry good-bye,
wave flags,
and take mail in
or put cats out.
The best stay in step with the times,
moving up
and backing down
to keep us on the level.

Fish Magic

(from a painting by Paul Klee)

Nine o'clock. Soundless down deep, nudging, drifting,
ferns and clumped grasses sway green through the dark.

Seaflowers' shocking red, blue, orange bedazzle,
shiny leaves prickle, as night school swims out.

Submarine silence turns shrill with small fish sounds.
Waves shiver, shimmer as students streak by.

Round and resplendent in flame scales, exulting,
one smirks: he passed every final exam.

Blue among shadows, a failure hangs numbly,
tail-fin drooped humbly, his grey gills clamped shut.

Sister slips surely, her silver eyes gleaming
mauve from sea-dreaming of moon, stars, and sun.

Meanwhile three little ones splash neon rainbows,
dart, spin, and bubble with minnows' delight.

Wide-eyed pink merman, translucent with longing,
waves through the watery wilds his good night.

Word Hues

Blue and white
white and blue
ripples, sails, seagulls, clouds . . .
soft wind blows us
down the sound

Green and gold
gold and green
sunlight, shore, rising pine . . .
slide behind us
distant dreams

Pink and mauve
mauve and pink
soften shadows, silence, calm . . .
drift toward
our bed at home.

About Author Susan Ioannou

Since childhood, Susan Ioannou's love of words has found expression in hundreds of poems, stories, and articles appearing in magazines and anthologies from coast to coast.

Her books include *Clarity Between Clouds* (Goose Lane Editions), *Where the Light Waits* (Ekstasis Editions), *Coming Home: An Old Love Story* (Leaf Press), *The Merla Poems* (Wordwrights Canada), and *Looking Through Stone: Poems about the Earth* (Your Scrivener Press). She is also the author of the children's novels *A Real Farm Girl* (Hodgepog Books) and *The Hidden Valley Mystery*, the short fiction collection *Nine to Ninety: Stories across the generations*, and the Canadian literary study *A Magical Clockwork: The Art of Writing the Poem* (Wordwrights Canada).

Before beginning her family (now grown up), Susan taught English at Toronto's Bloor Collegiate Institute, and later became Associate Editor of *Cross-Canada Writers' Magazine*. In the 1980s, she turned to teaching adult students, running The Poetry Tutorial correspondence course (now online as Lessons in Writing the Poem), and leading creative writing workshops for the Toronto Board of Education, University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies, and the Ryerson Literary Society.

Currently, Susan serves as director of Wordwrights Canada and executive editor for ClearTEXT Rewriting and Editing. More about Susan's work as a Canadian writer and editor can be found on her website <http://www3.sympatico.ca/susanio/>