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Poetry to the people

A local man's quest to set writing and writers free

BY CHRIS BENJAMIN
PHOTOS BY LISA ENMAN

In the new add-on at Just Us café on Spring Garden Road, a man takes names, a gentle solicitation: "will you be reading poetry tonight?"

All around him bounces a stocky, athletic-looking dude in a bright, collared shirt, pumping hands and hugging women. He knows almost everyone's name. When those he's met online introduce themselves, he acts like an old friend, his voice edging up an octave. "Oh yeah, Lianne, right on!"

Lianne is Lianne Perry, a writer, artist and comic. "The first time I met Donal Power," she recalls, "at the launch of *Open Heart Forgery*, he had an armload of the first edition and still managed to give me a hug."

Despite his tight connection with these dozens of coffee-shop poets, Power is relatively new to the Halifax scene. He grew up in the North End but spent more than a decade chasing Istanbul. "Each of my stories starts with me trying to journey to Istanbul," he says. "I always end up somewhere else. If I go there I'll actually die—the end of my story."

The chase took him to Hungary during the rocky transition from communism to capitalism, working as a correspondent for *The Economist*, and later to New York City, until the September 11 terrorist attacks. "The spirit of the city changed after that," he recalls. "People were having fear sex and divorced couples were getting remarried."

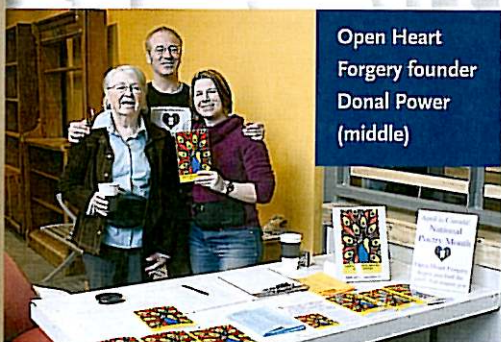
Open Heart Forgery is Power's ongoing ode to his childhood, and now re-adopted, hometown. The self-funded monthly poetry

zine is sparked by a deep-seated belief in community, and that poetry belongs to the people. "I've always been inspired by pamphleteers like Trotsky," Power says. "It's not as beautiful as a book, but what you sacrifice in quality you make up in getting writers in the public view."

By day, Power is an editor with the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council. "The poetry is the labour of love," he says. His own verse has appeared in collections alongside luminaries like Ginsberg, Mark Helprin and Paul Muldoon, but he is cavalier about those achievements. "I don't really know anyone who reads those things," he says. "You never see *Malahat Review* sitting around people's living rooms. I wanted to bust poetry out of that world."

In *OHF*, everything goes, as long as the creations aren't hateful, bigoted or too long (more than 28 lines or 43 characters wide). The poet's name is irrelevant, other than that first-time contributors are prioritized. Every month Power collects 18 poems in a simple single-sheet tabloid, prints 500 to 1,000 copies (folded into threes) and holds a launch. He also circulates a PDF version on the website, encouraging anyone to download and distribute. "It was a subversive way to get it out there," he says.

For the initial launch in February 2009, he piggybacked on David Rimmington's Left Bank Poetry reading series. But the monthly launches have since become their own, avidly attended events. "As more people find out about *OHF* through its print and web distribution, and social media," says Christen Thomas, an *OHF* contributor and managing editor at Formac Publishing,



Open Heart Forgery founder Donal Power (middle)

speaking ART

EXPRESS YOUR VOICE

“as well as through David Rimmington’s radio poetry show, and are drawn in to the readings, it continues to attract new people and keep some original crew.”

Power recently partnered with Halifax Public Libraries to hold launches at various branches, in an effort to take *OHF* beyond the core. “Maybe a little writers’ group will start somewhere,” he says, his hands waving. “I know there are probably people toiling out there who feel alone. Hence the *OHF* traveling road show; I’m going to have to get a bus.”

Attendees of launches leave with hands full of the latest issue, and instructions to leave them around town where people least expect poetry. “When you see people reading the *Coffee News* you know they’re desperate to read,” Power says. “This gives them that, and it’s not a syndicated thing from who knows where.”

The endeavour has attracted diverse poets with a variety of day jobs: old to young, male to female, Halifamous to closet poets, first-time performers to professional actors and musicians. Cassie MacDonald says she couldn’t resist the chance to put her unconventional songwriting into print. “As a singer/songwriter who often writes words first, in a way that is not initially structured, I was excited to have people read my words without hearing the melody.”

Power’s approach is welcoming for poets who have never felt welcome in the literary scene. “He doesn’t take himself too seriously,” Lianne Perry says. “He makes poetry fun.”

MacDonald had the same reaction. “It was his enthusiasm in our initial emails and meetings that ensured I would continue to be a part of this project,” she says. “This guy does not need emoticons. His smiles jump off the page.”

The pizzazz is genuine and the accessibility is a strategy for rebirthing poetry. “You could go through life and never run into a poem outside of the *Bible*,” Power says. “There’s a really unfortunate negative sentiment by a lot of people who instinctually don’t like poetry. Whatever they’ve read is boring and dry and they have no connection to the poet.”

OHF is an exercise in community development. Each issue is a slice of time and place, the psychological, political and emotional landscape of Halifax. Those who stumble on an issue get a glimpse into the inner workings of barely-known local artists. “Once you

pick up that little sheet at your coffee shop, library or corner store, you are part of the pulse,” Cassie MacDonald explains.

For Perry, *OHF* revealed hidden treasures in her community: artists she thought were all business. “It was great to see people I already knew, or who I’d worked with, have poems printed when I didn’t even know they wrote.”

The monthly launches, too, are community focused. Each is a gathering, not unlike hitting the farmers’ market on Saturday morning, according to Thomas. “They’re celebrations of fresh and local and a chance to meet and chat.”

It is fitting that when Power celebrated a year of *OHF* by anthologizing the first 12 issues, he launched the book at the Seaport Farmers’ Market. The indefatigable Power, helped by poet friends and his partner, Rowena Hopkins, organized a seven-hour marathon poetry reading.





The anthology is another way to spread the word, but Power also hopes to recoup some of the costs of running his grassroots publication with no government support. He has tactically avoided applying for grants, not wishing to surrender the writers’ control or become dependent on unsustainable revenue sources.

Thomas, an experienced publisher, is duly impressed. “Seeing Donal take this kind of project on with no grant funding or government support is awe inspiring,” she says. “It brings publishing back to the writers and away from the businessmen.”

At the market, the anthology flew from the table as a curious crowd of poetry neophytes surrounded once-stage-shy wordsmiths. Power’s low-tech, high-community concept is catching on. Already a South Shore *Open Heart Forgery* is in the works.

“I could have given money to charity but in the end this is a tangible thing,” he says. “With *OHF*, instead of looking at TVs we’re looking around, seeing that this is a really interesting, dynamic place.” |||

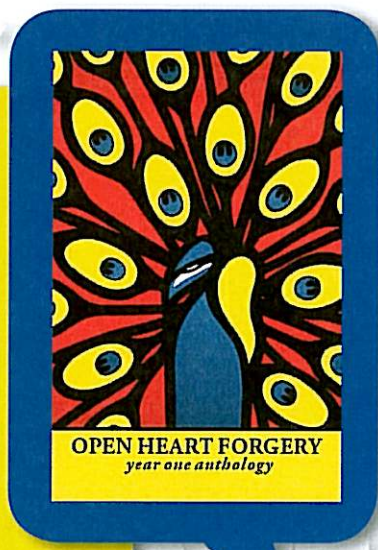
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MARGINS OF SAND

POEM BY EARL BRADFORD, FIRST PUBLISHED IN
OPEN HEART FORGERY

Sediment, kelp... boulders
of tundra & time, along shoreline...
Sand and Surf, sloshy reverb of suds—
applause for beached ramparts of castles—
The fortifications, stockade... moat or causeway;
Driftwood palisades, cartilaginous shells
pillaged of pearls, like bright
Oracles who sizzle over waves
From decadent hull-beam remnants,
Aging timber of rib & mast...
minstrels rage after Muse on Brigantine decks;
the crashing swells of thunder &
lips of rain.



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