

Inaugural Speech of the Poet Laureate
September 29th, 2004

I would like to thank Mr. Mayor and the city's municipal council. I'd like to express a special note of thanks to Councilor Soknacki, whose vision realized the post of Poet Laureate for the City of Toronto. It is rare and marvelous when municipally conscious talents embrace a fuller vision of what constitutes a true quality of life for a major city. I'd like to thank the committee that appointed me, and the Culture Division, especially Rita Davies and Terry Nicholson for their dedication to the enterprise of furthering the arts.

I am thrilled and honoured to have been chosen as the second Poet Laureate of Toronto. It is no small job to follow in the footsteps of the talented Dennis Lee, a man whose devotion to the moral and aesthetic fabric of this city is without parallel. I have admired Dennis's poetic achievements for 25 years; his mentoring and fostering of a poetic ethos for this city (and in many ways for the country) was realized with true poetic justice by his election as the first poet laureate of Toronto. His tenure has left a lasting impact on the consciousness of Toronto, specifically through the implementation of the "naming" project, an ongoing program that seeks to assert the arts in the public consciousness by the naming of public places in a recognition of artists who have nourished the artistic life of Toronto. The first concrete achievement of this legacy has been the naming of "Oscar Peterson place" at the Toronto Dominion Centre, and we all look forward to the further developments of this ongoing project. Dennis will be working with the Friends of the Poet Laureate on this project, a family of bright minds, assembled to make the job of Poet Laureate more imaginative. I too will count on them during my tenure.

I am a sentimental man, so indulge me with some recollections about Toronto, and then I will give you some thoughts about poetry.

When I was a teenager growing up in the United States, I yearned to be delivered to the "emerald city" of Toronto. Toronto was, in the sixties, with its new city hall and subway system, the envy of all municipal governments, and for me it was a cosmopolitan paradise, with its intellectual émigrés and coffee salons and a work ethic neatly poised beside an openness to culture and ideas. I was delivered to Toronto and sought in my early days as a writer when, as Canadians, we were beginning to put a land claim on the kind of cultural identity we wanted, to promote a spirit of internationalism and to justify it against competing cries of regionalism, nationalism and an assortment of myths that were parochial at best. We worked with the Multiculturalism Directorate, The Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council and with communities to assert a multicultural climate, to honour the diversity of Toronto's inhabitants. Well, Toronto has become a premiere city of diversity with a mandate to preserve that diversity, and it is still a model for other cities when they wonder how to enjoy the economic benefits of globalization, without surrendering their cultural humanity to the "sameness" that globalization brings.

And this is where poetry comes in. Poetry is not something sitting on a page. It is a way of life, a way of being, a way of interacting that sometimes finds its expression on the page; and the pages of poetry may teach people how to live poetically, or more precisely, with passion.

A world class city is not “world class” without passion. If it is without passion, it is merely a big city. Passion is about taking risks in any sector of endeavor, for the good of many and for the elevation of the human spirit. And passion is the way we encourage each other to those ends. Poetry is the record of that passion and the rallying cry for that passion. The arts in general are the measure by which a city understands or doesn't understand that the quality of life is based on much more than economic and fiscal success. And a city that doesn't understand is not a world-class city for very long.

As poet laureate of a world-class city I hope to liaison with the other arts, to create a legacy project that will remind Toronto of its passion for some time to come, and to bring poetry to its citizens in such a way as to help them understand that poetry is what they do with their lives and to urge them to the verbal expression of it.

Pier Giorgio Di Cicco
City of Toronto Poet Laureate