

INTERVIEW ABOUT MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

How young were you when you first realized you could be a poet?

I started to write at 1967, 52 years ago I'm now 72.5 years old. I went into exile due to the Vietnam War era; then, typewriters, no internet, type poems one by one (no photo copies), international coupons, snail mail only, stamps, 6 month wait and 95 out of 100 never responded, much less made a comment about your poems-just a photocopied rejection letter. So for many years I continued to write but didn't send the poems out. In 2007 with the advent of the internet I revised old poems and created new poems and have now been published in 38 different countries.

Why should anyone read your poetry over the next ten poets?

I don't worry about other poets or competition. I'm too old to give a damn @ 71.5 yrs. I proclaim believing in me. I don't worry if there are too many groceries stores or drug stores on the same corner, bring it on and come visit my small shop I will stamp on you.

Is Dr. Seuss a legitimate poet?

Dr. What? Dr. Who? He is not even in my memory bank. Legacy is not necessarily determined by how many housewives buy Dr. Seuss children's book. Anapestic tetrameter consists of four rhythmic units called anapests, each composed of two weak syllables followed by one strong syllable (the beat); often, the first weak syllable is omitted, or an additional weak syllable is added at the end. Deception, do children give a damn? I'm more impressed with children without thought who write the loveliest poems naturally with images from their heart as children tend to do.

Is poetry better than it was 25 years ago? Explain!

Who really cares, time is justice to itself not us. What is what was then evaluated is in present a waste of poetic time. Oh yes, review and love but never get stuck there less you lived there in time.

What is your single weakness as a writer?

As a child 8-9 yrs. old I had a rare cancer disease bone cancer in my legs. I was carried around on my mother and father backs in pain, I rolled on the floor both legs in casts. I missed most of grades 1-3. So I missed grammar, syntax, and pronunciation. To this day I listen to enunciation of words, look for new words that are primarily action verbs, see how words are put together, pulled apart by syllables to hear how they sound and why I'm mispronouncing them.

If you could write a poem to your President, would he like it?

At my age, 71 plus, I don't much care about what the President thinks much less write a poem to him. Yes policies do affect my living patterns, my financial security to a degree, and I certainly still have strong opinions about public and international affairs, however, as long as he doesn't step on my toes personally, kick me out of the country, or screw too much with my mutual funds who cares? I fought one war with resistance, and acted upon it, one stance leaving this country against an unjust war, Vietnam, is more social action in one act then most people will perform in a lifetime. Now days I'm more concerned about quiet, few phone called, allowing me time to work on my words.

Does poetry really change thought or is that just hype?

This is the best question to ponder of all the other questions above. I guess it depends on your personal definition of purpose on this limited time on earth. We all carry a personal torch that burns, when, how, motive you act upon it is the motivation rightly or wrongly. My cause and disgust ultimately was Vietnam and exile, it took 10 years in exile to resolve the fundamental issue revolving into a lifetime of left over feelings, rejection and acceptance for those actions. Change is in your mind, compulsion of desire for change are the actions and beliefs of others that have influence on your patterns your dreams. Does poetry really change thought or is it your actions resulting in the power of those words that change thought and alter history, legacy?

How long does it take you to write a poem?

How long does it take you to live your life or just one day of it or even one hour? I have some poems on first write that have stood the test of time, I have other poems with editorial suggestions and my changes that have lead up to eight revision on one poem that comes to mind. A poem can be stagnant or ever evolving. I have a few box full of old partial poems always there open for review or die on old yellow paper or napkins from 10-35 years ago. Where do I place time on these things? Life chances, events unfold, social structure evolves so should poems but some things remain where they were born to stay there with a smile of justice done indeed. I have computer files and old boxes full of what I call “starter poems.”

Do you have a single favorite poem written by yourself?

Now this is a bit of a smart-ass question. I have around 500 completed poems, and hundreds of starter poems...and you want me to pick one favorite poem out of all of life and its passages? If I was forced into a corner with my nose in that corner, or someone squeezing my testicles sharp in pain I would have to say a poem back in exile days may be my favorite. “*If I Were Young Again*” is a symbolic poem and real experience of

Michael Lee Johnson while self-exiled in Alberta, Canada for 10 years resulting from the Vietnam War. It can be found on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmnMyE78xCE&t=21s>

If I Were Young Again (V3)

*Piecemeal summer dies:
long winter spreads its blanket again.*

*For ten years I have lived in exile,
locked in this rickety cabin, shoulders
jostled up against open Alberta sky.*

If I were young again, I'd sing of coolness of high
mountain snow flowers, sprinkle of night glow-blue meadows;
I would dream and stretch slim fingers into distant nowhere,
yawn slowly over endless prairie miles.

The grassland is where in summer silence grows;
in evening eagles spread their wings
dripping feathers like warm honey.

If I were young again, I'd eat pine cones, food of birds,
share meals with wild wolves;
I'd have as much dessert as I wanted,
reach out into blue sky, lick the clouds off my fingertips.

But I'm not young anymore and my thoughts tormented
are raw, overworked, sharpened with misery

from torture of war and childhood.

For ten years now I've lived locked in this unstable cabin,

inside rush of summer winds,

outside air beaten dim with snow.

-1985-

(R 11-12)



In 50 words or less how do you give birth to a poem? How is it conceived and delivered?

A poem is a spirit that comes out of frustration or naturally if drunk or looking at a loved willow tree in the summer wind thunder and rain. How do you deliver a baby poem in clinical conditions like this without the nurses thinking you insane?

Would you work hard if you were published? What motivates you?

I am published internationally in 38 countries and I do work hard at it, so we have covered that part this question. I'm motivated my closings: social injustices gone wrong in turmoil, marriages soured, dreams gone bad, flowers, birds eating seed, praying for what I don't know, having a belief that I will never understand it all or why I'm her or you, when I can't make sense of death of those younger than me or anyone at all. Oh, motivation is when an editor says I need your interview in 48 hours or less.

Would you write a more profound poem on the beach or in the desert and why?

I have written poems about both beaches and desert territory. I seldom have lived near either for any length of time being a Midwest person most of my life. A profound poem is more about who/or what it's about then where accept for the imagery so powerful behind the words.

In your poetry career have you ever written a verse for your mother? Give a line and explain.

I had a father of his generation, welder, boxer, coon fox hunter and it was seldom good. He taught me to love nature though he often killed it, a true oxymoron. My mother was not perfect but she loved life and was a totally giving human being. Often in exile she bailed me out of financially, spoke about Jesus as my Father. My father died at 69, my mother lived in Christ until 98.5 years. She had macular degeneration for 8-10 years before she passed. She rode a stationary bike blind for 45 minutes each day and wondered why? My response was “mom, if not riding that bike you may have been gone years ago.” She also walked blinded 16 times each day from one end of the hallway in her condo to the other and back again, just feeling the walls on each side as she moved down that path. Yes, I wrote on poem about my mother Edith and it's full of grammatical (dangling particles-whatever that is). Thankfully, poetry allows “screw ups” in purpose of meaning. My mother's favorite song was '*I Come To The Garden Alone*'...<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhWOKhGdUZY>.

***Mother, Edith, at 98* (V4)**

By Michael Lee Johnson

Edith, in this nursing home you're
blind with macular degeneration—
I come to you with your blurry

eyes, crystal sharp mind,
your countenance of grace—
as yesterday's winds,
I have chosen to consume you
and take you away.

"Oh, Jesus, where did
you disappear to,"
she murmured over and over again
in a low voice
dripping words
like a leaking faucet:
"Oh, there He is, my
Angel of the coming."

On YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0x5K-qL9do>

If you has \$200,000 to put in the writing community, where would the first thousand dollars go?

This is the most difficult question of all the above since who or whom I love are not organized-and likely I would be dead unable to research unless Jesus has a computer in heaven or hell where ever I end. But in poetry style it would go to my members of my Facebook poetry groups selecting each member privately, to the sites loving lonely pets at nearby shelters (cats and dogs), and to Carol Marcus and my daughter Dawn to keep my legacy alive after I pass.

BIO:

Michael Lee Johnson lived 10 years in Canada during the Vietnam era and is a dual citizen of the United States and Canada. Today he is a poet, freelance writer, amateur photographer, and small business owner in Itasca, Illinois. Mr. Johnson published in more than 1092 new publications, his poems have appeared in 38 countries, he edits, publishes 10 poetry sites. Michael Lee Johnson, has been nominated for 2 Pushcart Prize awards poetry 2015/1 Best of the Net 2016/2 Best of the Net 2017, 2 Best of the Net 2018.194 poetry videos are now on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/user/poetrymanusa/videos>. Editor-in-chief poetry anthology, *Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze*: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/1530456762>; editor-in-chief poetry anthology, *Dandelion in a Vase of Roses* available here <https://www.amazon.com/dp/1545352089>. Editor-in-chief *Warriors with Wings: the Best in Contemporary Poetry*, <http://www.amazon.com/dp/1722130717>.