

Where There Becomes Here

Gerry Stefanson and the Freedom to Reimagine Words

KATRÍN NÍELSDÓTTIR
with GERRY STEFANSON

Gerry Stefanson calls himself “The Word Butcher,” but the name is more affectionate than destructive. He does not take words apart carelessly. He examines them, turns them around, listens to their sounds, and when the word he needs does not exist he creates one.

“I just like playing with words,” he explained during our conversation. For Stefanson, spelling is not simply a set of rules imposed upon language. It is another material available to the poet—something that can carry rhythm, humour, ancestry, and personal experience.

Stefanson describes himself as a “late bloomer” as a poet, although stories, music, and language have surrounded him throughout his life. Born and raised in Selkirk, Manitoba, he comes from Icelandic families on both sides. His father’s family was connected with fishing, while his mother’s Walterson relatives worked in industries that included dredging. He grew up around the docks, fish sheds, and boats of the Red River and Lake Winnipeg. He lived in a community where Icelandic was still spoken by many adults, even as the younger generation was encouraged to become more completely Canadian.

Family stories were among his first literary influences. His grandfather was a fisherman known as “Steve Riley.” He supposedly possessed the luck of the Irish, fished for half the year, and gambled professionally during the other half. His Uncle Johnny was another great storyteller and an important presence during his childhood. His father carried an extensive knowledge of both sides of the family but died when Stefanson was only 23.

Like many people who become interested in family history later in life, Stefanson now finds himself trying to reconstruct stories once held by people everyone assumed would always be there to tell them.

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This uncertainty became the starting point for his recent work on New Iceland: “Things We Know—Things We Don’t Know—Things We Don’t Know We Don’t Know.” Rather than pretending to possess every historical answer, Stefanson makes the limits of memory part of the story. He reaches toward cousins, neighbours, cemeteries, as well as fragments of family knowledge, allowing the gaps to remain visible.

His father also introduced him to the poetry of Robert Service. Stefanson remembers his father’s favourite line: “A promise made is a debt unpaid.” The influence can be felt in Stefanson’s fondness for strong narrative movement, memorable phrases, humour, and people who have lived physically demanding lives. His poetry often sounds as though it is meant to be spoken aloud around a kitchen table, in a fish camp or aboard a boat.

Music provides another foundation. Stefanson played drums in Winnipeg bands, including Orpheum, and music remains part of his life. That experience can be heard in his writing. Repetition operates like a drumbeat, while abrupt line-breaks introduce pauses, shifts, and syncopation. Lists accumulate until they become rhythmic, and repeated words return with slightly altered meanings.

Stefanson is also a constant reader. When he became serious about poetry, he began reading as many as ten or twenty poems a day. “You are what you read,” he said. He studies what works, what does not and how a single changed word can alter the movement of an entire poem. “If there isn’t a good word out there yet,” he explained, “you’re going to have to invent the word.” His invented vocabulary includes “pencilating”—the act of quickly capturing an idea with pencil and sketchpad before it disappears.

His range of influences is broad and sometimes unexpected. He has spoken of Stephen King’s characters moving from east to west and connected that pattern, somewhat mischievously, with the centuries-long westward movement of Icelanders: from Scandinavia across the North Atlantic, then from Iceland to Manitoba and onward across Canada. Stefanson’s own life followed a similar direction, from Manitoba to Alberta and the Rocky Mountains and eventually to the Canadian Gulf Islands. He has also described the work of archaeologist Neil Price as changing his perspective by presenting the Norse world outside the assumptions of later Christian interpretation.

Yet the saga tradition remains especially important. When invited to write about Selkirk, Hecla Island, and fishing on Lake Winnipeg, Stefanson decided that a straightforward historical article would not be enough. “It’s Icelandic,” he reasoned. “It should be poetic. It should be in saga style.”

The resulting work combines personal recollection, family history, humour, settlement history, prose poetry, in addition to haiku. Its five modern “sagas” follow Icelanders westward through migration, settlement, farming, fishing, churches, schools, politics, and community building. Historical figures and events pass quickly through the poems, but they are anchored by intimate images: a father pointing out a name on a

gravestone, children being brought back to the same cemetery, and newcomers learning how to survive beside an unfamiliar lake.

The first saga ends with a compact description of migration becoming belonging:

STOP
when there
becomes here

These words express something central to Stefanson's writing. "There" is Iceland, ancestry, family memory, and the partly recoverable past. "Here" is Selkirk, Hecla, Lake Winnipeg, and the life made by later generations. The transformation from one to the other is never entirely complete.

For me, Stefanson's change of spelling, invented words, and refusal to treat standard orthography as untouchable bring Halldór Laxness to mind. The comparison is not based on identical motives. Stefanson's relationship with spelling developed partly through dyslexia, partly through the pain of being judged by a school system that did not understand how he processed language, and partly through his later discovery that variation could become artistically useful.

Laxness's intervention was more deliberate and cultural. During the 1940s, he published editions of Icelandic sagas using contemporary Icelandic spelling rather than the normalized Old Norse orthography which was at that time commonly imposed upon them. He argued that the sagas were living literature and that their spelling should not create an unnecessary barrier between the stories and modern Icelandic readers. His choices provoked considerable controversy.

Stefanson is not conducting the same linguistic campaign, nor does he identify Laxness as the source of his practice. Nevertheless, both writers remind us that spelling is never entirely neutral. It can determine who feels entitled to enter a story. It can preserve history, but it can also make literature appear distant and inaccessible. Both, for very different reasons, resist the idea that only one written form can carry meaning. This is particularly appropriate in Stefanson's case, because the spelling of his own family name is part of his inherited history. According to family stories, related branches adopted variations including Stefanson, Steffenson, Stephenson and Stefansson as they adjusted patronymic Icelandic names to Canadian legal, financial and social systems. The different spellings became records of Americanization, adaptation, and family identity.

The lake is another language running through his poetry. In *Aegir Claimed*, Stefanson remembers the Suzanne E. A fishing vessel lost during a storm on Lake Winnipeg in September 1965. He had grown up around the fishing industry and knew the world from which the ship and its crew came. The poem transforms the traditional call of "All Hands on Deck" through a series of increasingly empty variations: "No Hands

on Deck,” “All Hands Below Deck” and finally “No Hands Left on Deck.”

The changing refrain gives the poem its emotional structure. The Norse sea figure Ægir enters Lake Winnipeg, connecting an Icelandic mythological inheritance with a distinctly Manitoba tragedy. The final words, “Ægir Wept,” turn the lake from setting into witness. The poem is not only an account of a lost vessel; it is an act of memorialization for people Stefanson believes have been allowed to drift too far toward forgotten history.

Water and ships also provide the central metaphors in *Passages*, Stefanson’s series comparing voyages by sail and steam with the course of a human life. *Bouleversant* turns toward profound family grief, love and the difficult work of continuing after loss. His published writing moves between humour and sorrow without treating them as opposites. Humour is often what permits the sorrow to be spoken.

Stefanson has published widely through *Spillwords Press*, where he was named Author of the Month in May 2022, as well as through *Icelandic Roots* and other literary communities. His path into poetry has been sustained not by formal literary training but by reading, persistence, curiosity, supportive editors and what he calls the advantages of being self-taught.

What once caused him difficulty in school has become part of his distinctive literary voice. Dyslexia does not disappear from his writing process; it is transformed. A spelling variation may create a second meaning. A grammatical turn may produce an unexpected rhythm. A mistake may remain a mistake; or it may open a door that conventional language had kept closed.

Stefanson’s poems do not ask language to stand perfectly still. Words migrate, just as families do. They acquire new spellings, settle into unfamiliar surroundings and become something altered but still connected to where they began.

There becomes here.

And the story continues.