

Interview:

Hans Jewinski— One of Toronto's Finest

by Viga Boland • Photos by John Boland

"There's no getting away from it" says Ken Waxman (*Quill & Quire*, Jan. 1976) "Hans Jewinski looks like a cop. Even when he's wearing an old pair of corduroy jeans and a sweat shirt."

Maybe.

But this particular Sunday afternoon when Hans stands at my front door, dressed in a T-shirt, shorts, socks, and sneakers, the last thing that comes to mind is a police constable.

Grinning sheepishly, he apologizes for being late (he got lost), eagerly accepts a cold beer, and plops cheerfully into a kitchen chair.

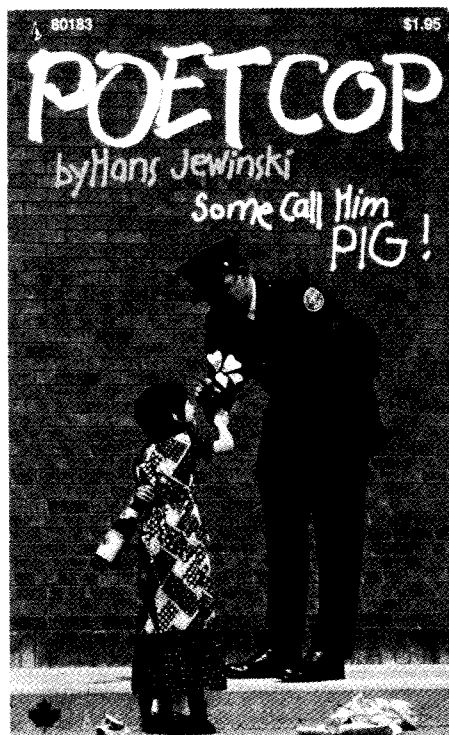
A sort of what-the-hell-is-this-broad-going-to-ask-me look plays about his face until it suddenly dissolves in sincere laughter at my first question:

Why does he write poetry, or rather, what is his aesthetic?

"Be damned if I know!" he exclaims shaking his head and still laughing. "Something that just drives inside. It's not the type of thing that I define or even worry about. Either I'm not old enough or I'm too old. It's just . . . like anything that drives you — like collecting cars or chasing women — you sit down and tinker with your mind."

And when did all this tinkering start?

"In high school. Grade ten or eleven. Both as a result of reading things in



English class which I liked very much and of having to express myself in composition. Most of the fellows were football or basketball heroes and I was never any good at that. But being able to write poems, saying things I wanted to say, always went well, so I (he laughs) wrote love poems . . . but I really got wound up in English class. It was the kind of thing where there were no right answers.

Not your average English student.

But then Hans, flopped back against the wall with his right arm draped over his head, and his feet sprawled out in front of him, a cop who writes poetry, is not your average person.

AND WHEN does he write?

"There's no set time for me.

I work shift work, so I end up writing on the way to court, standing 'round waiting for a bus, waking up in the middle of the night and running for a paper and pencil . . ."

With an erratic schedule like that, how long does it take to write a poem?

"It depends. Some poems write themselves, whether they're long or short. Others might be only three or four lines, but they have to be written, rewritten; made longer, shorter (he gesticulates freely), wider, narrower; throw out that word, bring in this one . . . You know there's some connection that still isn't being made. But it depends on the individual poem. I rewrite all the time. Sometimes I end up going back to what I had in the first place. But I don't mind going over old ground; if it keeps coming back to me, I figure subconsciously there must be a reason. So I go over a thing three, four, five times and do it three, four, five different ways until I finally get it right, until whatever has been bothering me has



finally been exorcised . . . or maybe exercised?"

Smiling, he slumps back in his chair and reaches for his beer.

EARLE Birney, as reported in a past issue of *Quill and Quire*, once stated that "the essentials of poetry are rhythm, dance, and human voice."

How conscious of these things is Hans while he is writing?

"Those are the important things when you begin the poem and the revision is to take the style of the poem or whatever the essence is, and to make sure that it's there from beginning to end. With me, when the poem starts to find itself, to sort itself out, often it's a matter of getting up some parallel lines, parallel stanzas, or trying to juxtapose some thoughts, and in that rhythm is very basic. You get it ascending in one, descending in another. When I'm writing, I do it out loud as well, and then I can tell the way I'm going to be reading this poem, and the way someone's going to be listening to it with their interior voice. And I try to make that voice go up or down, to scream or be quiet or whatever. I think that's very important, the essence of what I'm doing, and (he shrugs) if I can't hear from my own head, I don't see why the reader should hear it!"

That kind of concentration puts the poet under pressure, doesn't it?

"Most of the time I can't seem to write or type as quickly

as I think. So most of what I feel while writing is panic trying to get down as much of it as I remember. And then once I get that down, there's a lot of work to be done in trying to toughen up the edges. And there again, I feel everything from frustration to elation."

And when does he feel best?

"When I've had a poem around for weeks and weeks and I've worked and reworked—finally given up on the damn thing—and then have gone back one more time, and suddenly what's supposed to be there is there: then I feel *really* good. The most satisfying poems are those that hang like an albatross around your neck and you know your idea was really good and that this could be a really great poem if you could *only get the goddamned thing finished!* And you work and work and finally it comes. *That's* the best part."

As if to exemplify, Hans takes a satisfied swig from his beer, but concedes that "yeah, sure some poems come out right the first time. And often, they seem to be the best poems in the end. They usually come when I'm writing a lot and when I have enough free time to sit back and think poetry, work poetry for a week or so, and in that time, once things begin to roll, they just keep on rolling."

NOW BEFORE you shout 'Aw c'mon Hans. Don't you ever get dry spells?' listen to what happened to him after the publication of *Poet Cop*:

"I had a horrendous dry spell just after "Poet Cop" was published. I dislike what happened with "Poet Cop". I dislike what happened in the reviews. I took a tremendous dislike to what



I got myself involved in. I don't want to be a popular writer. Simon and Schuster wanted me to write a dirty book with a couple of murders, rapes, the sort of thing to give the little girly-poops (he gives a faggish gesture of the hand) something to read riding the subway to work in the morning. Well I don't want to be that kind of writer! So I guess I just went into a tailspin. Something just snapped. I wasn't very uptight the first couple of months of the dry spell, but then I got very nervous and tried everything from going on two-and-three-week drinking binges to not writing even when I felt like writing, and forcing myself to write when I didn't feel like it. I tried everything: doing readings and not doing them; going to workshops and not going. And in a year, I still hadn't written anything I really liked. I think the worst part for me in a sense is that I don't believe in publishing everything I've ever written. What is bad, I censor myself."

AS IT SHOULD BE if one is going to be any good as a writer

And if you've written a great poem about something, can you write an even better one on the same subject?

Al Purdy, in an interview with *CVII* thinks not.

Hans disagrees:

"I basically think you *can* write better about the

same thing. Once you've had the experience and crystallized it into a poem, you then have the added experience of having written about it. So when you again come upon that particular subject in say a year or so, and it again grabs hold of you, then the second or third poem has that extra dimension. They always get better. Look at Layton; look at Purdy; look at amny of these poets who write a series of poems. The problems set in the first poem have been handled; the stage is set. And suddenly you have command of the situation."



confidentially toward me across the table.

"Look: What it really comes down to is what do you get on the page and does it really work? Can you transmit it to others? *Others* not everyone. What's important is whether the poem is achieving what it's supposed to. *Period.*"

ONE OF THE UNIVERSE

whom, it appears, Hans Jewinski failed to reach with *Poet Cop* was A. Delaney Walker, a reviewer for *Prism International*.

He described *Poet Cop* as "an unbalanced book that wobbles between cruel, cold poems and self-indulgent introspection", a case in which "self-indulgent drivel" is successful mostly because of a terrific "P.R. job".

Not a very kind or accurate assessment, but Hans isn't upset by it:

"I couldn't care less! That's not very important. I don't even think the reader is very important. I couldn't care less if no-one ever came up and said 'I like your poem'. It didn't matter ten years ago when there was no audience and no-one was particularly interested. It hasn't changed. I don't write, in that sense, for an audience, because the poetry audience is so limited. What is important is that *I'm happy* with what I'm doing. Sure, I'd prefer that Walker had read it and liked it instead of calling it 'self-indulgent drivel' but—what - the- heck - I'm a big boy now. I think as long as he's got reason for saying that, that's fine. Anyway, the police poems are only about a third of the poems that I actually have, and they're about my being a policeman on the streets in Cabbagetown, and there's not a lot of room

JUDSON Jerome, the poet who believes most poets are on a losing streak, and who writes a regular poetry column for *Writer's Digest*, thinks that poets are frustrated philosophers.

Is Hans one of them?

"No. Not at all. I don't think I have boo- all to say about anything in a universal way. I wouldn't want to tell anyone how to live or anything . . ."

In that case then how does he feel about Peggy Fletcher's statement in *Canadian Author and Bookman* (Spring 1977) that "the highest aim in poetry is to speak in a universal language, both in one's own tongue and in translation . . . (that) the poet must touch the soul and heart of all people"?

Hans mops his brow and laughs.

"Oh God . . . these are tough!"

He clears his throat, pauses, and then begins soberly:

"No, I don't agree with that at all. I think that the different types of poetry, from the spoken, memorized poetry to the very artsy-fartsy style - you know, count every word, count every line - well it's all been done. It's all there. There's *nothing* that we can say is

the universal language in all those. And about trying to reach everyone . . . that's bullshit! I don't think that in anything we do can we please all people all the time. Why should it be any different with poetry? You can't reach everyone. I think that poems with an anecdotal style that deal with everyday problems, about everyday people, in everyday language are as important as everything else. I've tried my hand . . . at everything from concrete poetry to very traditional verse. I think the one thing I've learned is to try and let loose, and to be able to try two or three different things with any one thought, idea, or emotion. I don't want to get stuck in a rut on one particular kind of writing - you lose impact, you lose freshness, because you try to channel everything into one certain way of handling things around you. And that doesn't work in *any* medium. But the universal thing . . . Ah!"

He shoves the thought away with a wave of his hand, reaches for another beer, and leans

for super-complicated things. The surface is very simple; there's a veneer of the straightforward, I'm-looking-in-your-eyes kind of style and it works on that level. But there's a lot more happening underneath:

*before I open the room I guard myself
by lighting a cigar*

*no next of kin, only 20's photographs
of family and friends, war buddies
only veteran cards and hospital #'s*

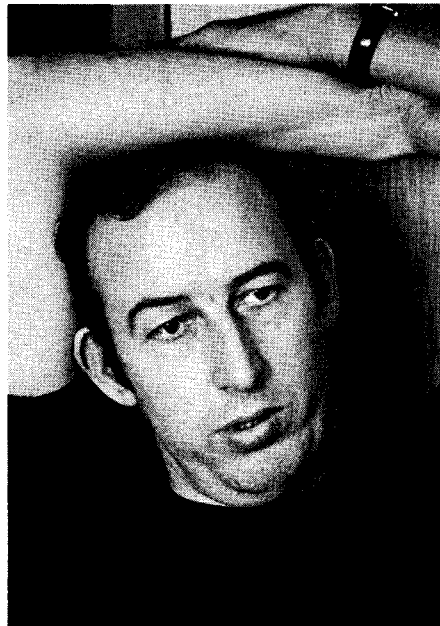
*death as it comes to these men?
alone.
found by stench or unpaid rent
("Smoking on Duty")*

Most people don't read my poems often enough to go beneath the surface. Most of those people don't read Yeats or Elliot either. So why bother with me? Sure the success of "Poet Cop" is all due to Simon and Schuster and has nothing to do with me. I was publishing poems for ten years before that and hardly anyone paid attention. I'm not worried about that part."

IF IT SOUNDS like there's a bitter edge to Hans' words (a bitterness which, by the way, he denies), it isn't a recent development.

It began back in high school and university:

"It (poetry) became such a big part of my life. It was, and is, as important to me as breathing. But at that point, roughly '62 or '63, there were very few little mags, very little going on 'cept among the big name poets, and it was so difficult to get outside that to find any mags that would accept work from a young writer. There were no readings you could go to, and back at high school level it was just *dead*. And as far as the teachers go . . . they can all rot in hell as far as I'm concerned! They didn't



give a damn; no-one did. No-one encouraged kids in any endeavour or asked 'What are you reading?', 'Are you writing anything?'. 'Let's see what you're doing.' I don't think I even had a poem published in those school yearbooks. And the thing that really hurts is that kids in high school are very creative about many of the things they do and it gets choked . . . because there's no encouragement. But then, there have been incredible changes in the past 10 years."

IS HANS a critic of society?

He leans back in the chair, crosses his legs, and this time drapes both his arms over his head:

"I'm not so much a critic of society as a critic of people. I think that as a society we're not all that bad. At one end we're really super. It's incredible how much effort and time people will spend with other people, on other people's problems in one sense . . . and then be so damned irresponsible at the next moment. I don't think we're sensitive enough to

each other most of the time, and my poetry sort of deals with that the most:

*there must be some law
against it*

*: i mean
she only rents the room she
shouldn't be allowed to die in it
("Landlord's Bylaw")*

SENSITIVE? Hans is . . . to people in general, and especially to new poets.

Together with his brother Ed Jewinski, and fellow-poet Greg Gatenby, he edits *Link* and *Missing Link*, little mags designed to give new poets the encouragement Hans never got. At his own expense, Hans also publishes chapbooks from time to time, and has put out an anthology of poetry called *Eight Toronto Poets*.

When I ask Hans what he looks for in poems that are submitted to him, he becomes animated:

"Oh hell . . . all I'm looking for is something fresh. It if strikes my attention and if I'm willing to read it to the end without forcing myself, if it makes me laugh or makes me think, or makes me say 'Damn! That's something I should have thought of myself', then I think it's worthwhile. For "Link" I try to find something from everyone who submits. There are very few people I send everything back to. I will take something if only portions are good, because it's so important to have that feeling that 'I'm a published poet'."

And he's critical of other editors:

"I don't know what's wrong with them! If they'd only remember the first time they got a poem published — it's like the first time you got laid — *everyone* remembers! So what's with these editors, years later, jumping on these



people? I mean, they should know. Part of the job of an editor is to bring them along and to give them some idea. I mean, once you're a published poet, you think 'well I can't write anything that's poor or worse or whatever' and you feel a bit of this burden that you have to live up to being a published poet. *And this is all to the good.* Suddenly this particular poet has to write under a bit of a strain, has to re-evaluate what the heck he's doing, why he's doing it. Is it important to have a book published before you're 45? Is it necessary to end up with a poem in "Poetry Chicago" or "Tamarack"? Why is it important? All these things have to be looked at, like all goals, and they have to be challenged and met, achieved or discarded depending on worth. I personally want to be in there ("Poetry Chicago" or "Tamarack") on my own terms and if they happen to like a poem that's important to me, then *that's* an achievement. But with the new poet it's so important for poetic confidence to have that feeling that 'I'm a part of this poetry group' that, as poets, we're going off in some direction. . . ."

BRIBING HANS with another beer, I greedily seize this moment in which he has discarded his poet's pen for his editor's red

marker to ask him to take a look at several contemporary poems from some little mags.

He studies them carefully for a few moments, comments on a couple, and uses this one to summarize his feelings:

*a photographer was present
at the time my teeth
had been exposed to the light*

*for those who know
the meaning of poetry:
—the torn language
I send my love*

*(a fashionable camera obscura
to capture the lies of reality)*

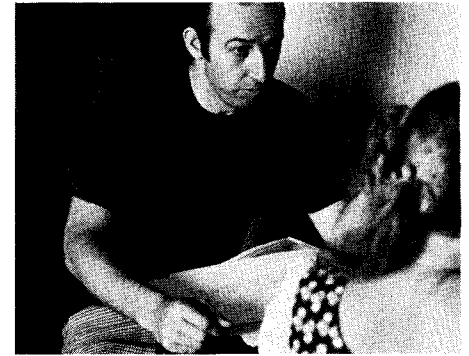
*a dagger-like face
bites the laughter
I unwillingly acquired
oh, pretty one
I envy the diction
with which words drip*

(do you wish to smile)

*who has given you the right
to freeze an incomplete expression
. . . no souvenirs
of such a face, please
—so unlike myself
I am not happy
happiness was not created for me
I am guilty
to feel at all satisfied
I think I know
why we speak in rhyme,
but I won't tell you
(A. D'Alfonso in *The Alchemist*)*

"It's the kind of thing you read in all the little mags. Hundreds and hundreds of poets are writing in this style today — a sort of half-assed understanding of surrealism: 'a photographer was present . . .' etc., etc.

So what? There's no literal meaning there though it does capture the fancy which of course it should. And you sit there and say to yourself: 'Well there's something that unconsciously I'm going to understand from this.' But you read through it and . . . *there's nothing!* 'Cause everything else that's in the poem is just irrelevant really. The problem with poets like this, for the most



part, is that they're not good enough poets to carry the right poem right through and keep up the tension. I can write this stuff — anyone can — by the reams, and that's why you see so much of it and so little of it makes any impression past any kind of point where you say 'this is important'. Instead, your reaction is 'what the hell?'

And take the last three lines.

. . . Hans thumps the table with his fist in exasperation. . .

I mean good Christ! There's nothing the poet could tell me. Period! You simply have to call this kind of poetry what it is. I'm sure in the end this poet could write good poetry, but all he's doing here is using language for language's sake. And the art of poetry, of developing what you begin with, of coming to some kind of conclusion with it, of somehow communicating with the reader just isn't there. *Jesus Christ!* The most important thing is to match up the beginning and the end through the middle, and so few poets can do that in a satisfying way for the reader."

HANS SLUMPS back in his chair and catches his breath, then goes on to give an example of a popular poem that *is* successful:

"Cohen's 'Suzanne'.
Now there, the beginning lines grab you, the tempo keeps up throughout the

entire poem, and you come out again at the end with lines that leave bells ringing in your head. But you don't go away saying 'so what?' You go back and read it again and say 'Aha! Cohen has done it!' Cohen gives you atmosphere about the lady, puts you into tensions over her, and you realize there's something going on outside your immediate experience."

I QUICKLY give Hans another beer to brace him for the last part of what he terms "these English 301 questions".

Hair dishevelled, sinking lower into the chair, he looks amusedly suspicious when I tell him the "hard" questions are over and he rolls his eyes when I ask him how one gets recognized:

"Damned if I know.

Mine was just total luck. It started with Carroll at Simon and Schuster going through a 'dead file'. He saw an article there that Kildare Dobbs had done on my book collecting and a few of my poems were included in the article. I guess he thought it was an interesting idea — a cop who writes poetry — and so Simon and Schuster called and asked if I had a manuscript.

Hans laughs and hollers:

"Have I got a manuscript??"

But before that, I'd been thrown out by McClelland & Stewart, Anansi, Clarke Irwin, Talon . . . everybody in the world!"

YOU'RE NO help at all, Hans! Most of us will never get that lucky. The best we can hope for is the occasional published poem and three times as many rejection slips . . .

. . . What about them anyway?

"You can't allow others to say that this poem is not good, this style is not good, or even that it's good. When I have a poem that I think



is lousy and someone else tells me it's good, that's his problem, not mine. What I think is lousy, stays lousy, and I don't worry about it too much. We're all fallible, but essentially you have to make your own decisions, and people reject? So what? As long as you're happy, as long as you're willing to do the work and you realize how much effort it is taking, and feel that what you're achieving is worth that effort, that's the essential part."

Hans, who carries a little notebook with him everywhere and can never find it when a poem comes on, and who can't remember what initially triggered the little notations he writes in it, or on envelopes, or brown paper lunch bags, offers only this advice to fledgling poets:

"Keep on writing. *That's it. Write, write, write!*"

His own plans for the future involve a steering away from the kind of thing he did in *Poet Cop*.

"I've suddenly realized I'm a little older. I've been a policeman now for six — seven years and I've rethought all the situations I took for granted, or I didn't think about enough . . . or I've simply got new ideas.

The poems I'm writing now are those that I really like to write. They are more mature in the way I'm looking at things and my role, and the roles of other people in them. I'm also writing more concrete poems, visual poems. And . . . I'm also writing a novel."

As may be guessed, the novel is about a policeman in Cabbagetown, but the slant, not mine to disclose, is neither that which Simon and Schuster asked Hans to take nor that which he used in *Poet Cop*.

MANY YEARS have passed since some of the experiences which first triggered his police poems occurred, such as the overdose death of a close friend Linda, who died with the needle stuck in her arm, and the slaying of fellow-officer, Jimmy Lothian, on Toronto streets.

A deeply sensitive human being, Hans still grieves for them, and writes them into his poems:

*your last bite
deep in the leather
belt the life
squeezed out of
your left arm
: you died holding
the needle of your life
measured out in bags
too pure even for your
habit to support.*

(*"Death in an Echo-Chamber"*)

THE INTERVIEW is over.

I watch Hans squeeze his huge frame into his little red Volkswagen.

He beeps goodbye and my husband John and I find our house suddenly empty.

We're also both thinking the same thing: that it's hard to believe that Hans Jewinski — garrulous, outspoken, a poet who enjoys his beer — will appear on Toronto's streets tomorrow wearing a badge . . .

. . . and that some people will call him "Pig".

*"Poet Cop" can be ordered from
P.O. Box 120, Niagara-on-the-Lake,
Ontario, LOS 1J0. \$2.25 postpaid.*