

APRIL GIFTS

2016

Created by: Susan F. Glassmeyer
Cincinnati, Ohio, 2016

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Welcome to 30 days of **April Gifts 2016**, now in its 10th year!

I dedicate the first poem of this series to my dear faraway friend and poet, Odvar Halgunset of Rindal, Norway, who is on the mend from a health challenge. Loyal in friendship, loyal to poetry, Odvar has read these posts for ten years and has been an avid supporter of **Little Pocket Poetry** since its inception in 2007. I'm looking forward to the day when his poetry collection, *Eldfluger Og Sporvar (Fireflies and Sparrows)*, will be translated into English. Warmest wishes for a thorough recovery, Odvar!

*If you can hold the pain of the world in your heart
but never forget the vastness of the great eastern sun
then you can make a proper cup of tea.*

—Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche—

Jakushitsu Genkō (寂室 元光[?] 1290 –1367) was a Japanese Rinzai master, poet, flute player, and first abbot of Eigen-ji (constructed solely for him to teach Zen). His poetry is considered to be among the finest of Zen poetry.



Eigen-ji Temple

650th ANNIVERSARY

The 650th anniversary of the death of poet **Jakushitsu Genkō**, founder of the temple Eigen-ji in Shiga Prefecture, Japan, will be observed in 2016. In commemoration of this event, the Jakushitsu Genkō Study Group is examining Jakushitsu's recorded sayings in order to publish an annotated edition with Japanese readings under the guidance of Sasaki Ryōsai, priest of the Tendai-school temple Chikyō-ji and a scholar well-versed in both Zen and Tendai studies. Japanese readings and detailed notes have been completed and are under revision.

Gathering Tea

*To the branch's edge
and the leaf's under surface
be most attentive*

Its pervasive aroma
envelopes people far away

The realms of form and function
can't contain it

Spring leaks profusely
through the basket

—by *Jakushitsu Genkō*
(trans. Arthur Braverman)



POET NOTES

According to one biography, **Jakushitsu Genkō** was a lively boy who at age 13 entered a monastery in Kyoto, not as a monk but as a student. At the time, male children were guaranteed a good education at a Buddhist monastery. It was reported that Genko was obedient, intelligent, and possessed great sensitivity and warmth of spirit. Wanting to know “the way beyond words”, he left the monastery at the age of 15 years and wandered to China where he studied with masters of the Linji school from 1320-1326 and was ordained as a Buddhist monk. He then returned to Japan and lived for many years as a hermit. It was only toward the end of his life that he decided to teach Zen to others.

SEEKING A THOUGHT-FREE UNDERSTANDING OF ZEN?

You may enjoy *A Quiet Room: Poetry of Zen Master Jakushitsu* by translator Arthur Braverman. Considered to be the most complete selection of Jakushitsu Genko's work, this is more than a book of excellent Zen and Taoist poetry. Braverman puts into context Genko's timeless thinking with thoughtful excerpts from Buddhist scripture and other relevant sources, offering a greater understanding of Zen and Taoist practice and the culture of traditional Japan.

RINZAI VS SOTO ZEN

Jakushitsu Genkō was a Rinzai Zen Master. See the stick in his hand?

Both Rinzai and Soto are forms of Japanese Zen. They differ significantly in style. Soto form is considered “softer” (my word) in the sense that the focus is on zazen, or sitting meditation, a lot of sitting meditation. Rinzai, on the other hand, is more dynamic—a kick-in-the-pants approach that includes the teacher shouting at you and occasionally smacking you with a stick (keisaku) to wake you up if you are falling asleep on the cushion. And it seems there are many ways one can fall asleep aside from on the cushion. I’ve experienced both kinds of Zen teachers and although by nature my ego prefers to fall asleep, I’ve learned a lot from the Rinzai approach. After all, I was educated by Catholic nuns who, in the 1950’s, seem to have had some firsthand knowledge of Rinzai methods.

For a brief comparison of Soto & Rinzai Zen:

<http://cobras.hubpages.com/hub/Soto-and-Rinzai-Japans-Major-Schools-of-Zen-Buddhism>

NOTE ABOUT THE CONTENTS OF APRIL GIFTS

All poetry used for the April Gifts project was available either in the public domain, or permission for use was granted by the poet. Biographical and publishing information was found either online via poetry websites, or at the good old reliable public library. Poet quotes were gleaned from an assortment of online interviews, from books in my personal library, or through correspondence directly with the poet. All other writing, stories, anecdotes, and musings are the happy consequence of my own creation.

—*Susan Frances Veronica Glassmeyer of **Little Pocket Poetry***

If things go as planned, today I'll be away on a three-day silent Zen retreat where, in this moment, I am boldly (and somewhat guiltily) breaking meditation retreat law. I should certainly *not* be talking with you. I should not be distracted by the outer world at all. I should be "watching my mind with my mind" as today's poet, **Susan Browne**, puts it. I should be brushing my teeth while brushing my teeth, eating my breakfast while eating my breakfast. And, it would be wise to refrain from saying "I should". But here I am sneaking off-campus to grab some internet juice down the road at the Bluebird Bakery so I can hit "send" in order for you to enjoy today's entry. Such is my attachment to poetry . . . Or, if I can figure out how to "schedule" my Mailchimp program, I'll let the inner robot of my computer take care of all this for me while I stay seated on my cushion!



Buddha's Dogs

I'm at a day-long meditation retreat, eight hours of watching
my mind with my mind,
and I already fell asleep twice and nearly fell out of my chair,
and it's not even noon yet.

In the morning session, I learned to count my thoughts, ten in
one minute, and the longest
was to leave and go to San Anselmo and shop, then find an
outdoor cafe and order a glass

of Sancerre, smoked trout with roasted potatoes and baby
carrots and a bowl of gazpacho.
But I stayed and learned to name my thoughts, so far they are:
wanting, wanting, wanting,

wanting, wanting, wanting, wanting, wanting, judgment,
sadness. *Don't identify with your
thoughts*, the teacher says, *you are not your personality, not your
ego-identification*,

then he bangs the gong for lunch. Whoever, whatever I am is
given instruction
in the walking meditation and the eating meditation and walks
outside with the other

meditators, and we wobble across the lake like *The Night of the
Living Dead*.

I meditate slowly, falling over a few times because I kept my
foot in the air too long,

towards a bench, sit slowly down, and slowly eat my sandwich,
noticing the bread,
(sourdough), noticing the taste, (tuna, sourdough), noticing

the smell, (sourdough, tuna),

thanking the sourdough, the tuna, the ocean, the boat, the
fisherman, the field, the grain,
the farmer, the Saran Wrap that kept this food fresh for this
body made of food and desire

and the hope of getting through the rest of this day without
dying of boredom.
Sun then cloud then sun. I notice a maple leaf on my sandwich.
It seems awfully large.

Slowly brushing it away, I feel so sad I can hardly stand it, so I
name my thoughts; they are:
sadness about my mother, judgment about my father, wanting
the child I never had.

I notice I've been chasing the same thoughts like dogs around
the same park most of my life,
notice the leaf tumbling gold to the grass. The gong sounds,
and back in the hall.

I decide to try lying down meditation, and let myself sleep. The
Buddha in my dream is me,
surrounded by dogs wagging their tails, licking my hands.
I wake up

for the forgiveness meditation, the teacher saying, *never put
anyone out of your heart*,
and the heart opens and knows it won't last and will have to
open again and again,

chasing those dogs around and around in the sun then cloud
then sun.

—by Susan Browne



POET NOTES

Born in Long Beach, California, **Susan Browne** has lived most of her life in the Bay Area. Her poetry has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Subtropics*, *Mississippi Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Margie*, *The Writer's Almanac*, and *American Life in Poetry*. Her awards include prizes from the Chester H. Jones Foundation, the National Writer's Union, the Los Angeles Poetry Festival, and the *River Styx* International Poetry Contest. Her work was nominated for a Pushcart Award. Selected as the winner of The Four Way Books Prize by Edward Hirsch, her first book, *Buddha's Dogs*, was published in 2004. Her second book, *Zephyr*, published in 2010, won the Editor's Prize at Steel Toe Books. She teaches at Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill, California. For more information about Ms. Browne and workshops she offers: <http://www.susanmariebrowne.com/>

IN HER OWN WORDS—Susan Browne

I walk or run three miles every day. Sometimes six miles. I walk/run outside, at a beautiful reservoir near my home. Water, mountain, sky. My mind opens up, and things come to me. I can see better, the outer and inner and where they meet. I recommend walking in nature every day to get beyond the usual self, the societal self, and meet up with the speaker who is more truly you.

*I usually workshop my poems, so they go through a grueling regime before I even think of sending them out into the world. I know this about myself now: at first, I simply believe my poems are wonderful. Then I slowly wake up from my ego-trance and realize, "Gee, this poem isn't doing a thing." But then I begin tinkering, or I start another poem with some of the better lines. It's a process, one that I love. I love to have a poem in my head. The ride to the grocery store helps. I should write a book called, *The Parking Lot Poems*.*

*Most of the time, I write for myself, a dialogue of self and soul. It's a conversation with the world, though, too. Of course, I want to be read, so I guess I do imagine a good-willed reader out there who enjoys my voice. **My poems are a sort of spiritual autobiography. I think of everyone's poems that way, and I love to hear what the spirit has to say in its incredible variety.***

*The most essential elements of a good poem? Passion; heart; surprise; imagery; cadence; attention to the sounds within words and the silence they come out of; truth. The poem has to have emotional truth, and this can be challenging, because we lie to ourselves, and the world lies. But the most essential element of a good poem is passion. **You can do all kinds of things with language, great pyrotechnics, but if there isn't passion, and swing, you might have a very clever nothing, but that's all you've got.***

Holy Siddhartha! Barbie Doll sales sunk 20% from 2012 to 2014. In an effort to appeal to families complaining about the iconic doll's unrealistic supermodel body, Mattel broke its 57-year-old mold recently by introducing three new Barbie shapes—tall, petite, and curvy. “The new body types are featured in the brand’s 2016 Fashionistas line, which embraces diversity by including seven skin tones, 22 eye colors (!) and 24 hairstyles, including hip blue hair a la Katy Perry,” *Time Magazine* says. Beyond selling new dolls, the company will make even more money because each new model comes with her own clothing line and shoes that can’t be mixed and matched among the other Barbie shapes.

Curvy Barbie boasts some “extra junk in the trunk” and even a little paunch in the front. Her arms and legs are substantially thicker than the skinny buxom blond version I had back in 1959. I guess Santa thought Barbie was good gift material because I wouldn’t have asked for her otherwise. I have little memory of playing with her. What I do remember is making furniture for Barbie out of sawed off bits of wood and metal I scavenged from a new neighborhood near our house where we lived in Michigan. Trouble was, Barbie’s legs, skinny though they were, didn’t bend, so it was impossible for her to sit in the chairs I made for her, let alone meditate in full, or even half, lotus position.



Buddhist Barbie

In the 5th century B.C.
an Indian philosopher
Gautama teaches 'All is emptiness'
and 'There is no self.'
In the 20th century A.D.
Barbie agrees, but wonders how a man
with such a belly could pose,
smiling, and without a shirt.

—by Denise Duhamel



POET NOTES

Denise Duhamel was born in 1961 in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. She received a BFA degree from Emerson College and a MFA degree from Sarah Lawrence College. Duhamel is the author of numerous collections of poetry, including these in the last ten years: *Blowout* (University of Pittsburgh, 2013), *Ka-Ching!* (University of Pittsburgh, 2009), *Two and Two* (2005), and *Mille et un sentiments* (Firewheel Editions, 2005). She has received grants and awards from several organizations, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. Ms. Duhamel was also the guest editor of *The Best American Poetry* 2013. She teaches creative writing and literature at Florida International University and lives in Hollywood, Florida.

Poet Karla Huston says of Duhamel, “Her poems speak with a wild irreverence . . . Duhamel experiments with form and subject, creating poetry that challenges the reader's notion of what poetry should be. She presents what poetry could be as she fully engages pop culture, the joys and horrors of it, while maintaining the ability to poke fun at our foibles—and make us think.”

IN HER OWN WORDS—Denise Duhamel

At some point in my development as a writer, I became interested in putting it all in, trusting my leaps, embracing vulnerability in imagery.

*I don't know if there are topics that I unconsciously avoid, but as soon as they pop up in my writing, I try to take on those topics, whether or not I publish the poems. **I started wanting desperately to say something, to make a point, to be heard—and I still feel that way.** Free verse served me best when I embarked on poetry.*

***What has stayed true in my life as a writer is my dedication to writing—I try to write every day, no matter what—and the joy that writing has given me.** I know writers for whom the act of writing is a necessary chore. They suffer to write great work. I am very lucky that for me writing is a delight.*

As a teenager, I loved acting, painting, photography, and making films with my friend's Super 8 camera. But I always loved writing the best. I chose writing even before I knew poetry was available to me. (Until I was an undergraduate in college, I'd never read a contemporary poet—only poets who had died—and in some mind blip I assumed there just weren't any poets anymore.) I always wanted to be some kind of writer—I wrote plays and songs and “books” before I realized living and breathing people still wrote poems.

*While poetry was less professionalized than it is now, I still had this urge to win prizes and see my work in magazines, to get an “A,” as though poetry could be graded. I wish I had been more patient and less frantic about getting published. **My advice to my younger self would have been, “Chill. Concentrate on the poems. Everything else will work itself out.***

I do believe in inspiration and the muse. But I also believe you have to meet her halfway, show up everyday whether she shows up or not. As a writer, you (I mean, I suppose, I) have to be there to receive her whims. I write a lot of pages that never wind up in poems. When I reread my free writing, often a draft of a poem is there preceeded and followed by gibberish or cliché or nonsense. Then I excavate the draft and begin revising. I don't believe in sweat and tears associated with writing because I love writing so much. I think of it as high-octane play and fun.

The Ghazal is an ancient poetic form originating in Arabic poetry long before the birth of Islam. *Ghazal* is pronounced “ghuzzle”—rhymes with puzzle. The name refers to “the cry of the gazelle when it is cornered in the hunt and knows it will die,” a clue to its classic melancholia. The durable ghazal spread under the influence of Sufi mystics through the Middle East and made its way to Europe during the Middle Ages. The Americas came late to the game but, fortunately, a Kashmiri-born poet, Agha Shahid Ali, shined the spotlight on the English language Persian ghazal. Before his death in 2001, Ali edited the seminal anthology *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*. I acquired this book a couple of years ago and found that both the introduction and the afterward were extremely valuable to my understanding of this poetic form. The anthology offers a variety of beautiful ghazals by 107 poets.

The structural requirements of the ghazal are similar to the stringency of the Petrarchan sonnet. In style and content it is a genre capable of an extraordinary variety of expression around its central themes of love and separation. A traditional or free ghazal has at least 5 end-stopped couplets sometimes described as beads on a necklace: separate elements that combine to create a beautiful whole. The poet often refers to or addresses herself/himself (or an alter ego/pen name) in the last couplet, directly or through word play. The defining characteristics of a traditional ghazal are its rhyme and refrain. The refrain can be a word or phrase. The rhyme appears *directly* before the refrain. Every couplet ends with the rhyme and refrain. In the first couplet only, *both* lines end in the rhyme and refrain. Every line of the poem shares the same meter or syllable count. Finally: *A ghazal doesn't always follow every rule!*

(much of today's info on the ghazal was compiled from Wikipedia)

Today's ghazal by **Patricia Smith** caught my attention because I've never read another ghazal quite like it. I enjoy its voice, its humor, and its musicality. It reminds me in its tone of Lucille Clifton's poem *Homage To My Hips*.

Hip-Hop Ghazal

Gotta love us brown girls, munching on fat, swinging blue hips,
decked out in shells and splashes, Lawdie, bringing them woo hips.

As the jukebox teases, watch my sistas throat the heartbreak,
inhaling bassline, cracking backbone and singing thru hips.

Like something boneless, we glide silent, seeping 'tween floorboards,
wrapping around the hims, and *ooh wee*, clinging like glue hips.

Engines grinding, rotating, smokin', gotta pull back some.
Natural minds are lost at the mere sight of ringing true hips.

Gotta love us girls, just struttin' down Manhattan streets
killing the menfolk with a dose of that stinging view. Hips.

Crying 'bout getting old—Patricia, you need to get up off
what God gave you. Say a prayer and start slinging. Cue hips.

—by Patricia Smith



POET NOTES

Patricia Smith (born 1955 in Chicago, Illinois) is an American poet, spoken-word performer, playwright, author, writing teacher, and former journalist. Her MFA in Creative Writing is from Stonecoast University of Southern Maine. Smith is the author of six acclaimed books of poetry, including *Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah*, and *Blood Dazzler* which chronicles the physical and emotional toll exacted by catastrophic Hurricane Katrina. Her work has been published in *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *TriQuarterly*, and other literary journals and anthologies, including the 2011 editions of *Best American Poetry* and *Best American Essays*. In addition to her poetic works, Smith is also the author of *Africans in America*, a companion volume to the groundbreaking PBS documentary, and the children's book *Janna and the Kings*, which won Lee & Low Books' New Voices Award. Smith is a professor at the City University of New York's College of Staten Island, and on the faculty of Cave Canem and the MFA programs at Stonecoast/University of Southern Maine and Sierra Nevada College.

Recognized as one of the world's most formidable performers, Patricia is a four-time national individual champion of the notorious and wildly popular Poetry Slam, the most successful competitor in slam history. She was featured in the nationally-released film "Slamnation," and appeared on the award-winning HBO series "Def Poetry Jam."

Listen to Ms. Smith perform the persona poem "34" that launched her collection *Blood Dazzler*.
<http://movingpoems.com/2010/09/34-by-patricia-smith/>

GHAZAL NOTE

The ghazal is fun to play with. I've written only a few ghazals, but was lucky enough to get one published on *The Ghazal Page*, Issue 58. Here's a link if you are interested in reading my poem and learning more about the ghazal: <http://ghazalpage.com/>

IN HER OWN WORDS—Patricia Smith

I did a reading in Berlin once, and they had a train that traveled through the German countryside, filled with poets. The train would pull up to a small town where there would be a gazebo with bands playing and people dancing and laughing. The poets would get off the train, read, be fed, and get back on the train and go to the next place. I was in Berlin when the train pulled in for the last time. There were so many people there they had to shut the station down. People had signs, with pictures of the poets. Women were weeping, kids were screaming, and people were like, "The poets are back, the poets are back!" It got me thinking: There are a lot of countries where you read the news and then you find out what the poet says, because they're the truth tellers in society.

Starting in slam, and staying there for quite a while, informs my work in two ways. One, I've learned not to let any topic defeat me—I don't have the patience to be afraid of anything. The slam taught me that I am charged with the telling of my own story—and if I don't tell it, in a way that is unflinching and sometimes terrible, I grant someone else permission to tell it. I learned to be selfish about my own rhythms, and I learned to be a witness. Not a perfect witness, but a curious one. Second, I learned to establish presence. Mic busted? No problem. Drunks in the back roaring and puking? Not an issue. Cappuccino machine blasting away in the corner? Teen babbling on cell phone in the third row? Three people in the audience when you expected 300? All challenges, not concerns. The slam teaches you to own the stage, any stage, and to make it part of the story you've come to tell . . . I can say, without a doubt, and I hardly ever begin with a first line. I was introduced to poetry by getting up on stage and doing it, so the last line is often the first to occur to me. I know how I want the audience, or reader, to feel after the last syllable of the last line in the last stanza. I'm more likely to write the poem backwards.

I don't find myself designating any part of the day as "poetry-writing time." Poetry churns in my head all the time . . . Being a poet means that there's no sacred space. There's no moment I can't bring to a poem. Writing is not a recreational activity, it's the way I process my life, how I move from day to day. It's breath.

From the very first time I started writing, I also made clear to my family and friends why I was writing: not always for fun, not necessarily for audience, not to hear the sound of my own voice. I write to save my own life. I write to move my own life forward, and to make sense of that life. In the process, I have to take unflinching inventory of all the relationships I'm a part of, all the people who've had a say in who I've become. It's all about making yourself a priority, even when the truth may sting someone else. As far as shock: someone else's ability to deal should never lead you to edit yourself.

Fresh out of high school I worked in the secretarial pool for a company (circa *Mad Men* era) in downtown Cincinnati. To save money, I spent most lunch hours at my desk eating something I brought from home while working the newspaper crossword puzzle. Nearby in the accounting department, a quiet man spent his hour reading the dictionary! Each day, 'Ed' began where he left off the day before, reading a page or two, lost in study. Once we became friends, Ed would surreptitiously leave a "word for the day" on a piece of paper on my desk. Did I know what it meant? If not, it became my homework that evening. The game was that I would weave the word into a conversation with my 'teacher' the next day at work. It was important that I understood the word's derivation in order to use it correctly, as though it were part of my regular vocabulary. Mentors* appear like angels though we may not recognize them as such at the time.

**Vocabulary**

I used to love words,
but not looking them up.

Now I love both,
the knowing,

and the looking up,
the absurdity

of discovering that "boreal"
has been meaning

"northern" all this time
or that "estrus"

is a much better word
for the times when

I would most likely
have said, "in heat."

When I was translating,
the dictionary

was my enemy,
the repository of knowledge

that I seemed incapable
of retaining. The foreign word

for “inflatable” simply
would not stay in my head,

though the English word “deictic,”
after just one encounter,

has stuck with me for a year.
I once lost “desiccated”

for a decade, first encountered
in an unkind portrayal

of Ronald Reagan, and then
finally returned to me

in an article about cheese.
I fell in love with my husband,

not when he told me
what the word “apercus” means,

but when I looked it up,
and he was right.

There’s even a word
for when you use a word

not to mean its meaning,
but as a word itself,

and I’d tell you what it was
if I could remember it.

My friend reads the dictionary
for its perspective on culture,

laughs when I say that
reference books are not really

books, but proleptic databases.
My third grade teacher

used to joke that if we were bored
we could copy pages out of the dictionary,

but when I did, also as a joke,
she was horrified rather than amused.

Discovery is always tinged
with sorrow, the knowledge

that you have been living
without something,

so we try to make learning
the province of the young,

who have less time to regret
having lived in ignorance.

My students are lost
in dictionaries,

unable to figure out why
“categorize” means

“to put into categories”
or why the fifth definition

of “standard” is the one
that will make the sentence

in question make sense.
I wonder how anyone

can live without knowing
the word “wonder.”

A famous author
once said in an interview,

that he ended his novel
with an obscure word

he was sure his reader
would not know

because he liked the idea
of the reader looking it up.

He wanted the reader,
upon closing his book, to open

another, that second book
being a dictionary,

and however much I may have loved
that author, after reading

that story
(and this may surprise you)

I loved him less.

—by Jason Schneiderman



POET NOTES

Jason Schneiderman is the author of the poetry collections *Sublimation Point* (2004) and *Striking Surface* (2010), winner of the 2009 Richard Snyder Publication Prize from Ashland Poetry Press. Structured around an eight-part elegy for his mother, *Striking Surface* references both ancient myths and contemporary culture. Schneiderman's poems have appeared in the anthologies *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet* (2001), *Bend, Don't Shatter: Poets on the Beginning of Desire* (2004), and *Best American Poetry 2005*, and his translations have been published in *An Anthology of Contemporary Russian Women Poets* (2005). His essays have appeared in the *American Poetry Review* and elsewhere.

Schneiderman earned an MFA from New York University and a fellowship from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts. He taught at Hunter College, and Hofstra University, and completed a PhD at City University of New York. Schneiderman is an Assistant Professor at Borough of Manhattan Community College, teaching Gender and Sexuality Studies, Creative Writing, and American Literature. He lives in New York City with his partner, Michael Broder.

ETYMOLOGY NOTE

* **mentor** (noun) "wise advisor," from Greek *Mentor*, friend of Odysseus and adviser of Telemachus in the "Odyssey," perhaps ultimately meaning "adviser," because the name appears to be an agent noun of *mentos* "intent, purpose, spirit, passion". Akin to Sanskrit *man-tar*—"one who thinks," and Latin *mon-i-tor* "one who admonishes".

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Jason Schneiderman

I started writing poetry seriously when I was about sixteen or so. Poetry was the only place where I felt like I made any sense. Prose always made me feel like a liar—I had this hyper awareness of how prose creates all these sins of omission. Poetry let me balance the said with the unsaid . . . My attention is also obsessive rather than exploratory. Once I've found something that moves me, I want to go back to it over and over, rather than go out and finding everything in that genre or by that author. Poetry rewards obsessive attention.

I'm definitely an American poet. The nice thing about the adjective "American" is that it often functions as code for "rule breaking." So if you want to write small poems, but not be bothered with syllable counting, call them "American haiku." I think Gerald Stern went a little far with his book "American Sonnets," but still, the point is that you pretty much slap "American" in front of anything and then do whatever you want.

The truth is that I like to have feelings. If the poem moves me in some way, then I value it. If it doesn't, I don't. Everything else is an effort to figure out how I was moved.

The villanelle is an Italian and French poetic form which has become popular in English due to virtuoso performances like "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas, "One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop and "The Waking" by Theodore Roethke. The villanelle relies on refrains—the repetition of entire lines. The 1993 *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* states that the villanelle "first had as its only distinguishing features a pastoral subject and use of refrain; in other respects it was without rule." The same entry also assigns primary responsibility for the fixed-form villanelle with nineteen lines to the English, not the French. The French word *villanelle* derives from the Italian *villanella* and the Latin *villanus* (meaning "rustic"). The original *villanella* was a ballad-like song with a refrain, which did not adhere to a universal form or have a predetermined length. The "standard" form of the English villanelle was popularized by William Empson in the 1930s; it was adopted by his friends Dylan Thomas and W. H. Auden, and by other notable poets such as Seamus Heaney, Edward Arlington Robinson and Sylvia Plath. James Joyce included a villanelle written by his protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, in his 1914 novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. More recently, villanelles have been penned by Expansive and New Formalist poets who include Jared Carter, Annie Finch, Max Gutmann, R. S. (Sam) Gwynn, Rose Kelleher, Lewis Turco and Richard Wilbur. —These notes are attributed to Michael R. Burch who compiled them.

Out of my own interest in poetic forms, I was studying villanelles online when I came across today's outstanding poem by **Annie Diamond**. Ms. Diamond was awarded first prize in *The Lyric's* College Poetry Contest for this poem. It later won the Lyric Memorial Prize and was named the best poem to appear in *The Lyric* for the year 2013. Annie is likely the youngest poet featured in April Gifts in 10 years. It looks like she has a very bright future ahead of her!

The Difference Between Lack and Absence

Both mean *not having*, but one means *missing* too.
Absence can be welcome, but *lack* implies desire—
 the absence of some noise, a lack of you

might be a good example. And it's true
 that *lack* makes judgment, means that we require
 the thing that's gone (a constant aching, too)

while *absence* just reports; we can make do
 with smaller things; it doesn't sound so dire.
 Who needs the noise? (But I need you.)

Absence lets us start anew,
 while lacking keeps us laced to its dark pyre.
 Both are *not having*, but one is *missing* too,

and wanting nothing more than to undo
 whatever sins caused *lacking* to transpire.
 The noise is done, and so, I guess, are you

with me. In verse I struggle to subdue
my restless heart. (The lacking makes me tired.)
Both mean *not having*; one means *missing* too—
the absence of some noise, a lack of you.

—by Annie Diamond



POET NOTES

Annie Diamond graduated from Barnard College in 2015, a private women's liberal arts college affiliated with Columbia University. She majored in English and Creative Writing. Ms. Diamond has also studied abroad at Mansfield College, one of the constituent colleges of Oxford University in England. Her work has been published in *Apt*, *Avatar Review*, *Clockwise Cat*, *The Columbia Review*, *The Lyric*, and *The Fem*. Ms. Diamond's number one life ambition is to appear on *Jeopardy*.

Ms. Diamond recently won the National Undergraduate Poetry Competition for *Cargoes Journal*, the undergraduate literary journal of Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia. Her winning entry, "American Elegies, 1994-2014," is published in the current (2015) issue of *Cargoes*. You can read her poem at: <https://english.barnard.edu/news/barnard-english-major-annie-diamond-wins-major-poetry-competition>

Ms. Diamond recently received an unexpected call from Robert Pinsky (Poet Laureate 1997-2000) expressing his excitement about her arrival at Boston University this fall where she will be his student in the MFA program.

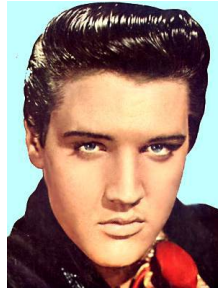
IN HER OWN WORDS—Annie Diamond

Being a young writer, I definitely foresee a writing career for myself, though in conjunction with other things. I would really love to be a professor, both of English and creative writing. I've had a couple of professors and teachers who have meant so much to me, and without whom I would absolutely not be the writer and human being I am today, and if I could be that person for another younger writer sometime in the future, that would feel like success.

*I don't remember where my obsession with the villanelle form came from, but it's my favorite kind of formal poem. This (today's poem) was not the first villanelle I wrote, I had been messing around with it a little bit before I came to this poem. **I was inspired more by the form than by any particular person or emotion. I am always interested in writing about words, and doing so in a villanelle format felt like a fun challenge.***

*I typically begin a poem with a line or a phrase that I've come up with, that normally ends up not being the first line. Or sometimes I will have seen a phrase in a book or another poem, or really anywhere, that I want to use. **I often build poems around their centers, starting with the middle stanzas and working my way to the outside.** I would like to develop a more linear writing style, but I'm not sure how to go about that!*

I am extremely interested and involved in the writing of James Joyce (his novels, not his poetry). His writing has been my main academic focus for the last 2-3 years. I've found that many of the themes he deals with, especially the ideas of legacy and home/homelessness that are so central to Ulysses, are themes that I also address in my own writing.



Nearing Menopause, I Run Into Elvis At Shoprite

near the peanut butter. He calls me ma'am, like the sweet southern mother's boy he was. This is the young Elvis, slim-hipped, dressed in leather, black hair swirled like a duck's backside. I'm in the middle of my life, the start of the body's cruel betrayals, the skin beginning to break in lines and creases, the thickening midline. I feel my temperature rising, as a hot flash washes over, the thermostat broken down. The first time I heard Elvis on the radio, I was poised between girlhood and what comes next. My parents were appalled, in the Eisenhower fifties, by rock and roll and all it stood for, let me only buy one record, "Love Me Tender," and I did.

I have on a tight orlon sweater, circle skirt, eight layers of roll-up net petticoats, all bound together by a woven straw cinch belt. Now I've come full circle, hate the music my daughter loves, Nine Inch Nails, Smashing Pumpkins, Crash Test Dummies. Elvis looks embarrassed for me. His soft full lips are like moon pies, his eyelids half-mast, pulled down bedroom shades. He mumbles, "Treat me nice."

Now, poised between menopause and what comes next, the last dance, I find myself in tears by the toilet paper rolls, hearing "Unchained Melody" on the sound system. "That's all right now, Mama," Elvis says, "Anyway you do is fine." The bass line thumps and grinds, the honky tonk piano moves like an ivory river, full of swampy delta blues. And Elvis's voice wails above it all, the purr and growl, the snarl and twang, above the chains of flesh and time.

—by *Barbara Crooker*



POET NOTES

Barbara Crooker is the author of more than 600 published poems and has received 26 Pushcart Prize nominations. She has received numerous awards, and creative writing fellowships. Her books are *Radiance*, which won the 2005 Word Press First Book competition and was a finalist for the 2006 Paterson Poetry Prize; *Line Dance* (Word Press 2008), which won the 2009 Paterson Award for Literary Excellence; *More* (C&R Press 2010), *Gold* (Cascade Books, 2013); and *Small Rain* (Virtual Artists Collective, 2014). Ms. Crooker has been on NPR's *The Writer's Almanac* 18 times.

Ms. Crooker says: "While I'd primarily describe myself as a writer (poet, essayist, reviewer) I also do editing jobs and private tutorials on poetry, and I am a teacher. I've taught as an adjunct at six colleges, but now only teach at retreats, conferences, festivals and the like. My main job is as caregiver for our (adult) son with autism."

You can learn more about her work at her website: www.barbaracrooker.com.

IN HER OWN WORDS—Barbara Crooker

I write from personal experience. If you look at the facts of my life, you might not think that there would be much reason for rejoicing. My first child was stillborn and my first marriage fell apart partly because of this, my third daughter had a traumatic brain injury when she was 18, my son has autism. So I write in spite of, or in face of, the darkness, the suffering, that is part of the human condition, and if joy is the tone that comes through the most, I'm happy to hear this.

Much of my work begins, as Anne Lamott says, with the "shitty first draft," but then I work as hard as I can to put pressure on the language, to make every word count (metaphor does this, gives you the most bang for your buck), to not be satisfied until I think I've done something different, something original. I'm definitely a fifty draft or more kind of girl, working through layer after layer, like an oyster creating a pearl through excrescence around an irritating piece of grit—the place the poem originated . . . It took me over twenty-five years to get my first book accepted; one of the poems in it is "Twenty-five Years of Rejection Slips."

*I don't have a particular writing strategy. I'm of the Paul Valery school, that a poem is never ended, merely abandoned. I try, though, not to force the endings, but rather, to have them be organic, the natural outcome of what's come before . . . If my writing is not going well, I put it away, as Donald Hall says, in a dark desk drawer. Since I don't have an actual desk (I write at the dining room table), I put it in a file folder, and wait. Often, what needs to happen next is there, on the page, but it's not evident until some time goes by. Then the parts that need to be moved around or excised become oh, so clear. **Magic, happening in the deep underground of the unconscious.***

As my mother used to say, only boring people are bored. If I'm having a dry spell writing, then I read. But I'm never bored.

*A lifetime is like a flash of lightning in the sky,
Rushing by, like a torrent down a steep mountain.*
—words attributed to Gautama Buddha

In my work as a somatic therapist, I'm made aware every day of the transient nature of the bodies I serve, and if I'm not aware of my own body while helping others, how the quality of that work suffers. It may sound morbid to some, but I actually like being aware of the fleeting nature of this mortal existence. I like paying attention to the subtle workings of my body, an ever-changing laboratory, my companion for life.

I take a small exception to the title of today's strong poem by **Katha Pollitt**. I don't perceive the mind-body relationship as a "problem", but rather as a situation, a wondrous reality to live with, challenging though it may be.



Mind-Body Problem

When I think of my youth I feel sorry not for myself
but for my body. It was so direct
and simple, so rational in its desires,
wanting to be touched the way an otter
loves water, the way a giraffe
wants to amble the edge of the forest, nuzzling
the tender leaves at the tops of the trees. It seems
unfair, somehow, that my body had to suffer
because I, by which I mean my mind, was saddled
with certain unfortunate high-minded romantic notions
that made me tyrannize and patronize it
like a cruel medieval baron, or an ambitious
English-professor husband ashamed of his wife—
Her love of sad movies, her budget casseroles
and regional vowels. Perhaps
my body would have liked to make some of our dates,
to come home at four in the morning and answer my scowl
with "None of your business!" Perhaps
it would have liked more presents: silks, mascaras.
If we had had a more democratic arrangement
we might even have come, despite our different backgrounds,
to a grudging respect for each other, like Tony Curtis
and Sidney Poitier fleeing handcuffed together,
instead of the current curious shift of power

in which I find I am being reluctantly
dragged along by my body as though by some
swift and powerful dog. How eagerly
it plunges ahead, not stopping for anything,
as though it knows exactly where we are going.

—by *Katha Pollitt*

from *The Mind-Body Problem*, Random House, 2009.



POET NOTES

Born in New York City in 1949, **Katha Pollitt** is an American poet, essayist and critic. She is the author of four essay collections and two books of poetry. Her writing often focuses on political and social issues, including abortion rights, racism, welfare reform, feminism, and poverty.

Pollitt's father, a lawyer who championed liberal causes, and her mother, a real estate agent, were prolific readers. When their daughter became interested in poetry writing during her middle years, they encouraged her. Pollitt attended Radcliffe College, earning a BA in 1972 before completing an MFA in Creative Writing at Columbia University in 1975. She began publishing her poetry in *The New Yorker* and *Atlantic Monthly* in the mid-1970s and earned critical attention. In 1982, she published a collection of poetry, *Antarctic Traveller*, which solidified her reputation as a noted poet. After working as a copy editor and proofreader at *Esquire* and *The New Yorker* and publishing numerous book reviews, Pollitt began her career with *The Nation* in 1982. She is best known for her bimonthly column "Subject to Debate" which The Washington Post called "the best place to go for original thinking on the left."

IN HER OWN WORDS—Katha Pollitt

You think what people say is what matters, an older friend told me long ago. You think it's all about words. Well, that's natural, isn't it? I'm a writer, I can float for hours on a word like "amethyst" or "broom" or the way so many words sound like what they are: "earth" so firm and basic, "air" so light, like a breath. You can't imagine them the other way around: She plunged her hands into the rich brown air. Sometimes I think I would like to be a word - not a big important word, like "love" or "truth," just a small ordinary word, like "orange" or "inkstain" or "so," a word that people use so often and so unthinkingly that its specialness has all been worn

away like the roughness on a pebble in a creek bed, but that has a solid heft when you pick it up, and if you hold it to the light at just the right angle you can glimpse the spark at its core. But of course what my friend meant was that I ignored inconvenient subtexts, the meaning behind the meaning: that someone might say he loved you, but what really mattered was the way he let your hand go after he said it. It did not occur to me, either, that somebody might just lie, that there are people who lie for pleasure, for the feeling of superiority and power. And yet it should have.

*My favorite living poet (now deceased) has to be Wislawa Szymborska, the Polish Nobel Prize-winner. I love her irony, her wit, the way she brings the grand sweep of history down to the smallest moment. I long to be influenced by her! I should be so lucky. Other living poets I admire --Sharon Olds, Charlie Simic, Robert Pinsky, Marilyn Hacker, who has done so much to revitalize formal poetry and give it some zing. Right now I'm reading Brenda Shaughnessy's *Human Dark with Sugar*, which is wild and funny and extravagant and sexy.*

I try to give both light and dark, the bittersweet. I love to make a kind of shimmering between major and minor keys, sorrow and joy, loss and acceptance. Humor can do that -- if you say a sad thing in a funny or ironic way, you're complicating it, changing the frame.

*I grew up in Brooklyn and, in fact, my mother was born there, which makes me a Brooklynite of considerable ancestry. I've lived in New York City for most of my life. My landscape and people-scape is definitely urban. **I'm not that interested in "nature poetry" or nature writing. I mean I'm all for nature! I just don't want to read about it much.** When I write about the natural world, I'm really using nature as a metaphor, as in 'Lilacs in September': the hurricane-struck lilac producing out of season flowers is a kind of challenge to the reader (and the writer): 'what will unleash/itself in you/when your storm comes?'*

*No living American poet has written more probingly or more beautifully about work than **Philip Levine**. But, by no means is that a profound observation. ... What is less obvious, though, is how important it is to have a poet who is committed to writing about America's working class. Unlike the working-class poetry of Charles Bukowski, Mr. Levine's poetry is less interested in the down-and-out and more interested in how the down get up, how the lower-middle work their way into the middle. His poems forgo wallow for work.* —Dean Rader, poet

As a young man, Mr. Levine worked for Cadillac, in its transmission factory, and had a night shift at a Chevrolet plant. “*You could recite poems aloud in there,*” he told *The Paris Review*. “*The noise was so stupendous. Some people singing, some people talking to themselves, a lot of communication going on with nothing, no one to hear.*”



What Work Is

We stand in the rain in a long line
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
You know what work is--if you're
old enough to read this you know what
work is, although you may not do it.
Forget you. This is about waiting,
shifting from one foot to another.
Feeling the light rain falling like mist
into your hair, blurring your vision
until you think you see your own brother
ahead of you, maybe ten places.
You rub your glasses with your fingers,
and of course it's someone else's brother,
narrower across the shoulders than
yours but with the same sad slouch, the grin
that does not hide the stubbornness,
the sad refusal to give in to
rain, to the hours wasted waiting,
to the knowledge that somewhere ahead
a man is waiting who will say, "No,
we're not hiring today," for any
reason he wants. You love your brother,
now suddenly you can hardly stand

the love flooding you for your brother,
who's not beside you or behind or
ahead because he's home trying to
sleep off a miserable night shift
at Cadillac so he can get up
before noon to study his German.
Works eight hours a night so he can sing
Wagner, the opera you hate most,
the worst music ever invented.
How long has it been since you told him
you loved him, held his wide shoulders,
opened your eyes wide and said those words,
and maybe kissed his cheek? You've never
done something so simple, so obvious,
not because you're too young or too dumb,
not because you're jealous or even mean
or incapable of crying in
the presence of another man, no,
just because you don't know what work is.

—by Philip Levine

ABOUT THIS POEM

And then I just started writing -- and then I got this bitter memory of actually applying for a job at Ford Highland Park once. And they said, you know, "Employment Office opens at 8:00." And I got there, you know, around that time. And that was probably 20th in line or something. Well, they didn't open till 10:00. And it was drizzling. And I like a jerk stayed. All those two hours, I kept thinking, "Well, it opens soon. It'll open--" No. We all stood there. And then I realized they want those of us who are willing to stand two hours in the rain. They want to hire us. They know how docile we are already. We just proved it to them. We'll take any kind of crap they dish out, right?

And I like an -- I was so angry that when I get up there and I'm still so mad. And the guy says to me, "What kind of job are you expecting to get here?" Looks up at me. And because I'm a fat mouth, I said, "I want your job. I want to sit behind a desk and treat other men as swine, just the way you're treating me. You know? That's what I want. I'd like the power that you have." You know, I didn't swear at him or anything, but I just told him. And I walked away. And I felt good. I thought, "Good. I'm not that submissive." You can't do that to me without my at least saying something, you know? And I remembered that. —Philip Levine



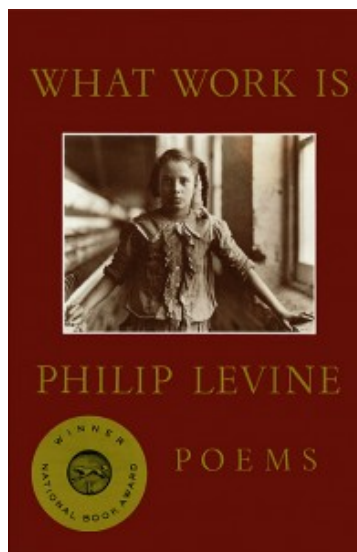
POET NOTES

Philip Levine, the former poet laureate of the United States whose poems dignified working-class life, died of pancreatic cancer on February 14, 2015. He was 87 years old.

Mr. Levine, whose honors included the Pulitzer Prize, was raised in industrial Detroit during the Great Depression. He was the second of three sons and the first of identical twins of Jewish immigrant parents. Mr. Levine began working in factories at age 14. After graduating high school in 1946, he went to college in Detroit. He earned his A.B. in 1950 and went to work for Chevrolet and Cadillac in what he calls "stupid jobs". He wrote poetry in his off hours, determined *"to find a voice for the voiceless,"* he said in an interview with Detroit Magazine. *"I saw that the people that I was working with ... were voiceless in a way. In terms of the literature of the United States, they weren't being heard. Nobody was speaking for them. And as young people will, you know, I took this foolish vow that I would speak for them and that's what my life would be."*

In 1953 he attended the University of Iowa without registering, studying among others with poets Robert Lowell and John Berryman, the latter of whom Levine called his "one great mentor". In 1954 he earned a mail-order masters degree with a thesis on John Keats' "Ode to Indolence".

The poet Yvor Winters helped bring Mr. Levine and his wife and two children to California, putting them up until they found housing, and later selecting him for a Stanford Writing Fellowship. Mr. Levine began teaching in the English department at California State University, Fresno in 1958; he retired from the university in 1992. He also taught at many other universities, including UC Berkeley.



Philip Levine won the National Book Award for "What Work Is" (1991)

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Philip Levine

*You have to follow where the poem leads. And it will surprise you. It will say things you didn't expect to say. And you look at the poem and you realize, 'That is truly what I felt.' That is truly what I saw. My process of revision is fairly simple. **I look at a first draft, and I say, Where's the life here? What's alive here?** Maybe it's the day after I wrote it; maybe it's an hour after I wrote it. I'm much more efficient as a reviser than I was in my forties. Often I have to drop down to line twenty. I'll say, Here's where I really stopped marking time and got alert. Sometimes I'll see that I was alert to start with and then dropped off.*

*Many young poets have come to me and asked, How am I gonna make it? They feel, and often with considerable justice, that they are being overlooked while others with less talent are out there making careers for themselves. I always give the same advice. I say, Do it the hard way, and you'll always feel good about yourself. **You write because you have to, and you get this unbelievable satisfaction from doing it well.** Try to live on that as long as you're able.*

*When you're young, you have almost an agenda. "This is what I'm going to do with my poetry. I'm going to say da, da, da, da, da." Well, all right, you're 15, 16, 18, whatever. By the time you're 22 or 23, you've said all those things. And nobody -- and the poems are mediocre. And nobody gives a damn what you said. So then you-- but meanwhile, this is exactly what happened to me, **meanwhile, you fall absolutely in love with the making of poems. It becomes a source of unbelievable pleasure, the rewards it gives you. You can't describe how marvelous it feels to do it. I'm sure painters feel it, jazz musicians must feel it when they're on and the night, everything's going very well.***

*On a reading tour, you become a performer, and you're really judged as a performer. But then you go back to your workroom, and you can be disappointed in the silence, although it was silence, or seeking work in silence, that helped you create those original poems. These are the two aspects of my being a poet. One is the performer, one is just a writer. When I'm working alone, I do have an inner sense of applause, a sense that I did it, I got what I was after. **As rewarding as it is to give a good reading, it doesn't compare with the feeling of getting a poem right.** Or to feel that I've got it right, because sometimes I can fool myself. But there is a kind of inner applause, and I think that that's what keeps me going.*

NOTE: If you want to hear Philip Levine read "An Abandoned Factory, Detroit" and other fine poems, watch and listen to this wonderful 2013 interview with Bill Moyers:

<http://billmoyers.com/segment/philip-levine-on-americas-workers/>

I have kept a copy of this poem in a file since it first appeared in the August edition of Poetry in 1987, almost 30 years ago. At the time, poet **Debra Allbery** was seeking a publisher for her first collection. That collection, *Walking Distance*, memorialized her hometown, Clyde, Ohio, where she'd lived four streets from where Sherwood Anderson (*Winesburg, Ohio*, based on Clyde) had grown up. *Walking Distance* was chosen from 900 manuscripts by Ed Ochester to win the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize in 1990 and was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 1991. It is one of my favorite re-readable poetry collections. Both the physical landscape and the emotional territory are so vividly and caringly described in Allbery's poems. I feel as though I've walked some distance with this woman, having slipped under the Stop bar many times myself.



Children's Story

What I can't tell them is how normal time
sometimes folds just a little in the wind
the way a flag does, changing its picture.
It's like what's happening bends in and out,
but I just keep walking straight. At school once,
the crossing guard held up a Stop bar,
but I slipped under it and stepped out
into the street. The car that was coming
was a police car, and the policeman
stopped, shook his finger at me and frowned.
And everything around me blurred away to each side,
like a chalk drawing on the sidewalk when it rains.
The next day they sent me upstairs to be scolded
by a teacher who was all voice and no words,
no picture. Sounds scraped themselves
inside her throat, sharpening up as they went.
The next time I did it, I stayed home
for three days. I said I was sick
and my mother believed me. I don't mean
to make all these mistakes, it's just
I have other eyes looking someplace else.

—by Debra Allbery
Poetry, August 1987



POET NOTES

Debra Allbery was born in Lancaster, Ohio, in 1957 and grew up in Clyde, Ohio. She studied at Denison University and the College of Wooster (Ohio), where she earned a B.A. in English. She received her MFA from the University of Iowa and her MA from the University of Virginia. Her first collection of poetry, *Walking Distance*, (chosen from 900 manuscripts by poet Ed Ochester) won the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize in 1990 and was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 1991. Her collection, *Fimbul-Winter*, was published by Four Way Books in October 2010 and won the Grub Street National Book Prize in poetry. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Yale Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Iowa Review*, *New England Review*, *The Nation*, *FIELD*, *TriQuarterly*, and elsewhere. She has twice received fellowships from the NEA as well as other prestigious awards. Ms. Allbery has taught writing and literature at Phillips Exeter Academy, Interlochen Arts Academy, Randolph College, Dickinson College, and the University of Michigan. She first taught in the MFA program in 1995 at Warren Wilson College, and became the director in June 2009.

IN HER OWN WORDS—Debra Allbery

*I think there's a big difference between the first and second book. The first one often had music, and the second one almost never did in composing those poems . . . I was living alone writing that first book (*Walking Distance*), and music kept me company. I'm almost never alone in my life now, and so the silence (in *Fimbul-Winter*) is music. I think that's the difference.*

It can be in a word or, for me, but probably it's more likely that the germ of the poem—the initial seed—is in an image. You see something and you feel it vibrate. You know that the poem is in there. For me, it's often images in the natural world that rise out of the landscape, and then the landscape becomes a fruitful and beneficial—I don't want to say mask because it's not a hiding—but a means of translating yourself. I love that method. That is what Charles Wright does . . . I never studied with him, but I know him and I know his work so well, and I love the way he approaches the poem with transmuting oneself through that exterior so that this is not a poem about first person singular, but a poem that everybody can enter and say, "I'm in this as well, and this is speaking through me." That's the goal.

*No mountains or ocean, but we had orchards
in northwestern Ohio, roadside stands
telling what time of summer: strawberries,
corn, apples---and festivals to parade
the crops, a Cherry Queen, a Sauerkraut Dance.
Somebody would block off a street in town,
put up beer tents and a tilt-a-whirl.*

On December 17, 2015, the Governor of Ohio named **Amit Majmudar** of Dublin, Ohio, as Ohio's first poet laureate. He began his two-year term on January 1 of this year. As a poet, Majmudar has taken a nontraditional path. The Cleveland-area native is a medical doctor and serves as a diagnostic and nuclear radiologist with Radiology Inc. in Columbus. Dr. Majmudar said he intends to bring an interdisciplinary approach to promoting poetry by establishing a link with the existing, thriving Ohio arts community. Another important component of his outreach will be engaging Ohio high school students through a variety of means to encourage the future of poetry in Ohio.

I envision a Laureateship that will reintegrate poetry into the already thriving Ohio performing arts scene by organizing performances that hybridize poetry, music, and dance. Simultaneously, I intend to secure poetry's future in Ohio through the Ohio Future Laureates Program, in which ten established Ohio poets will each mentor standout student poets nominated by Ohio's ten most underprivileged school districts. More projects will develop over the next two years, establishing, I hope, a dynamic precedent for my successors in this post. —Amit Majmudar

The Miscarriage

Some species can crack pavement with their shoots
to get their share of sun some species lay
a purple froth of eggs and leave it there
to sprinkle tidepools with tadpole confetti
some species though you stomp them in the carpet
have already stashed away the families
that will inherit every floor at midnight
But others don't go forth and multiply
as boldly male and female peeling the bamboo
their keepers watching in despair or those
endangered species numbered individually
and mapped from perch to oblivious perch

For weeks the world it seemed was plagued
with babies forests dwindling into cradles
rows of women hissing for an obstetrician
babies no one could feed babies received
by accident like misdirected mail
from God so many babies people hired
women to hold them babies babies everywhere
but not a one to name When we got home
the local news showed us a mother with
quintuplets she was suckling them in shifts
a mountain of sheets universally admired
a goddess of fertility her smile
could persuade the skies to rain Her litter
slept ointment-eyed in pink wool caps while Dad
ran his hand through his hair thinking maybe
of money as he stood surveying his
crowded living room his wealth of heartbeats

Pizza and pop that night and there unasked inside
the bottlecap was *Sorry—Try Again*
you set it down and did not speak of it
the moon flanked by her brood of stars that night
a chaste distracted kiss goodnight that night
your body quiet having spilled its secret
your palms flat on your belly holding holding

Forgive me if I had no words that night
but I was wondering in the silence still
begetting silence whether to console you
if I consoled you it would make the loss
your loss and so we laid beside ourselves
a while because I had no words until
our bodies folded shut our bodies closed
around hope like a book preserving petals
a book we did not open till the morning when
we found hope dry and brittle but intact

—by Amit Majmudar
Poetry (October 2005).



POET NOTES

The son of immigrants, poet and novelist **Amit Majmudar** was born in 1979 and grew up in the Cleveland area. When Majmudar was a boy, the only books of fiction or poetry in his house were the ones he got from the library. His parents were highly educated (both physicians) so there were medical textbooks and journals aplenty. He grew up in a very cultured atmosphere; it just wasn't a *literary* culture. There was plenty of singing and music in the home. Self-restraint is part of Majmudar's Brahmin heritage—drinking and smoking were simply not done—so Majmudar has never tasted alcohol or smoked a cigarette.

Amit Majmudar earned a BS at the University of Akron and an MD at Northeast Ohio Medical University, completing his medical residency at the University Hospitals of Cleveland. He is by ethnicity an Indian, by religion a Hindu. He writes and practices in Dublin, Ohio, where he lives with his wife, twin sons, and baby daughter.

Throughout his medical career, Majmudar has nurtured his writing as a poet, novelist, and essayist. His poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Poetry Magazine*, and *The Antioch Review*. Majmudar is the author of the poetry collections *0°, 0°* (2009), which was a finalist for a Poetry Society of America's Norma Faber First Book Award, and *Heaven and Earth* (2011), which poet A.E. Stallings chose for a Donald Justice prize. His next collection of poems, *Dothead*, will be published in March by Alfred A. Knopf. Majmudar has also published two successful novels, *Partitions* (2009) and *The Abundance* (2011).

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Amit Majmudar

So my profession and personal habits derive from my boyhood household, but my literary and religious obsessions came out of nowhere. Who knows? This may well be momentum from a past life. Essentially I live two lives—you can think of me as two apples on the family tree. One apple didn't fall far from the tree; the other apple detached and floated skyward.

I have not been fortunate enough to study literature formally or be mentored by anyone. That has its upsides and its downsides. My teachers have been dead poets, mostly, and no one dead poet in particular.

*I am currently working on biography of my six-year-old son, if you can believe that. He was born with a congenital heart defect, and he went through an epic medical and surgical odyssey from birth to age five. He is my epic hero, and I am going to sing his heroic exploits . . . The book is also, and perhaps above all, a religious exploration. Because the question of how such a thing could befall him (or any of the thousands of newborns born into instant suffering every year) returns me, alas, to **theodicy** *, and to the most perennially intractable questions of all. If I can explain this one thing to him, I can explain the universe to myself. Wish me luck.*

* **THEODICY**—Theodicy is the study of the problem of evil in the world. The issue is raised in light of the sovereignty of God, and in its most common form, theodicy attempts to answer the question why a good God permits the manifestation of evil.

Both of my parents are dead. There is nothing else like it, no matter how well or how horribly you got along with your folks when they were alive. Sometimes poems arise in me unbidden about my father when I wish they wouldn't. On the other hand, I find it difficult to generate poems born out of grief for my mother who I miss very much.

When I came upon **Kelly Cressio-Moeller's** poem *Threshold II*, I was moved to tears. The artful constraint of her expression is something I aspire to in my own poems.



Today's poem is the second of a pair written by California poet **Kelly Cressio-Moeller**.

When I wrote Threshold I, I didn't know it was going to be the first in a pair and quite honestly didn't know it was about grieving my father until he showed up in the last lines. The serpentine form of each poem reflects how shifting and unsteady mourning can be. When my father died it was the first time I lost a parent. When my mother died it was the last time I would lose a parent. Equally devastating but for different reasons. I felt shell-shocked by the first, unmoored by the second—orphaned. When I was able to write again, everything came up elegies.

—**Kelly Cressio-Moeller**

Threshold II

Two months ago, I scribbled poem notes on hospital paper towels—
my mother dying, snowed on morphine, pneumonic lungs sinking boats
she wanted no one to bail out. Her small hands inflated twice
their size as if to keep afloat. The echocardiogram detailed a

scalloped shell of aortic waves, mitral valve murmurations.

How many secrets did her starlings harbor?

To mark each changing hour, Pegasus, nailed mid-flight
on the beige wall, shook his mane from side to side. I

consulted the meadow priests of purple thistle whose prickly
heads provided no comfort. They said, *Death is a circling*
wolf. There will be no one left to call you by your full name.

Grief falls in rain-whipped sheets; the shadows of the dead

*weigh more than you know. I looked to the night sky for a
comet tail, but only cold stars stared back, unblinking.*

*That month my mother died, I did not bleed and the tips of my hair
wintered. A book finished inside me; my ink tongue froze.*

*What is there to know, if anything?
After my mother's last breath, the color
in her face did not drain down and away, but rose
like a wing catching air or a window opening.*

—by *Kelly Cressio-Moeller*

published in *burntdistrict*, vol. 4, Issue 1, Summer 2015



POET NOTES

Kelly Cressio-Moeller lives in Northern California with her husband, two sons, and their immortal basset hound, Stella. She holds a Bachelor's in Humanities and has done extensive graduate work in Art History at San Jose State University. Her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best New Poets, and Best of the Net. Kelly is looking for a home for her first, full-length poetry manuscript. She is an Associate Editor at Glass Lyre Press.

Ms Cressio-Moeller's poetry has been published by the following: Boxcar Poetry Review, burntdistrict, Crab Orchard Review, Gargoyle, Poet Lore, Rattle, Southern Humanities Review, Spillway, THRUSH Poetry Journal, Tinderbox Poetry Journal, Valparaiso Poetry Review, and ZYZZYVA among others. You can also find her work in *Best of Pirene's Fountain: First Water* (Glass Lyre Press, 2013), *The Crafty Poet: A Portable Workshop* by Diane Lockward (Wind Publications, 2013), and Erica Goss's "Vibrant Words: Ideas and Inspirations for Poets", (PushPen Press, 2014).

Kelly Cressio-Moeller's poem *Threshold I* can be found here: <http://www.spillway.org>

You can read more of Kelly's poems on her website:

<http://www.kellycressiomoller.com/>

IN HER OWN WORDS—Kelly Cressio-Moeller

What writing habits or rituals have you developed, if any?

Each year I attend silent writing retreats in Big Sur—it's a crucial way I fill the well. The silence and solitude are essential for me. I'm a very, very slow writer. Learning to trust the process is something I struggle with daily. A method of note taking is always with me. Pen and paper in coat pockets, purses, the car, voice memos to myself on the iPhone, hospital paper towels...

How do you go about beginning a poem draft? What inspires you to put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard?

Threads, images, snippets emerge, from where I don't know—just grateful they do. I collect scraps of paper, notes I've made by the bedside/shower/car/walk—knots I want to loosen or untie, then sitting down at the desk and beginning, always in longhand. Or sitting down at my desk and seeing what comes up.

Do you find any value in keeping the revision drafts of poems you have written?

Absolutely. Those drafts are the poem's memory, and it may need to retrieve something from it. As time goes on, poems can expand or shrink but they also should be able to look back. I'm a big believer in salvaging what no longer fits in one poem and placing it in my notebook called "Orphan Lines"—nothing is wasted.

Do you have other interests, artistic or otherwise, that inspire your poetry making?

Reading widely, daily—music, painting, nature, films, walking, gardening, photography, the Pacific, the stars, coffee, whiskey, and candlelight. Being open, curious.

Is there any poet, living or dead, you would like to go for a walk with? Have a conversation with? Why?

Four-way tie between Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Joanna Klink, Mark Strand, and Pablo Neruda—to give thanks.

Are you ever afraid of writing a poem? If so, how do you address that?

All the poems I was fearful of writing were the ones I knew I needed to write, and they made the most noise, utterly insistent. "Threshold II" was one of those poems.

Any advice to new writers or writers trying to get their poems published.

Know your work and start reading journals (print and online) where you think there is a good fit and where you would be thrilled to see your work. Check the "Acknowledgements" section in favorite poetry books to see where the poems have been published. Make sure the poems you send are really ready. Follow submission guidelines to the letter. Keep excellent records. There will be long strings of dark days—keep moving forward and learn to write through rejection.

Anything else you would like to share about your writing life?

I protect my writing and well-filling time, fiercely. It's as essential to my self-care as getting enough sleep. I do love how insular writing is, but it's important to have support—either from other poets or from family. I'm incredibly lucky to have very strong, life-saving scaffoldings from both.

When **Sarah Freligh's** mother died in 1999, she began writing poems to address that grief and others in her life. Fifteen years later, her devotion to this work resulted in her latest book, *Sad Math*.

*One of the most important jobs for a poet is to tell the truth as she sees it and have that truth transcend in such a way that the readers recognize this truth in either their life, or the lives of those around them. **Sarah Freligh** has skillfully accomplished this difficult feat in her new book of poems, *Sad Math* (Moon City Press, 2015) . . . a portal through which the reader goes back in time and lives the life of a young woman in the mid-twentieth century . . . Freligh writes about experiences many women are told to forget and not speak of again. It is her honesty that draws the reader in and makes her not want to look away, no matter the subject.*

—Carrie L. Krucinski, *Poets' Quarterly*



Wondrous

I'm driving home from school when the radio talk
turns to E.B. White, his birthday, and I exit
the here and now of the freeway at rush hour,

travel back into the past, where my mother is reading
to my sister and me the part about Charlotte laying her eggs
and dying, and though this is the fifth time Charlotte

has died, my mother is crying again, and we're laughing
at her because we know nothing of loss and its sad math,
how every subtraction is exponential, how each grief

multiplies the one preceding it, how the author tried
seventeen times to record the words *She died alone*
without crying, seventeen takes and a short walk during

which he called himself ridiculous, a grown man crying
for a spider he'd spun out of the silk thread of invention —
wondrous how those words would come back and make

him cry, and, yes, wondrous to hear my mother's voice
ten years after the day she died — the catch, the rasp,
the gathering up before she could say to us, *I'm OK*.

—by Sarah Freligh



POET NOTES

Sarah Freligh's poetry and fiction have been published in many literary journals, including *The Sun Magazine*, *Barn Owl Review*, *Brevity*, *Rattle*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Third Coast* as well as featured on Garrison Keillor's *Writer's Almanac*. She was the recipient of a Constance Saltonstall Foundation grant for poetry and an Artist Residency Exchange Grant from the New York Foundation for the Arts during which she completed a short story collection entitled *The Absence of Gravity*. A chapbook of her poems, *Bonus Baby* (2002) was later expanded into *Sort of Gone*, which was published in February 2008 by Turning Point Books. Freligh won an NEA fellowship in 2009.

A former sportswriter for the Philadelphia Inquirer, Freligh is currently an adjunct professor of creative writing at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York.

E.B. WHITE NOTE



The Story of Charlotte's Web: E.B. White's Eccentric Life in Nature and the Birth of an American Classic by Michael Sims chronicles E.B. White's animal-rich childhood, his writing about urban nature for the *New Yorker*, his scientific research into how spiders spin webs and lay eggs, his friendship with his legendary editor, and his ongoing quest to recapture an enchanted childhood. Nice review of this book can be found here:

<http://www.npr.org/2011/07/05/137452030/how-e-b-white-spun-charlottes-web>

IN HER OWN WORDS—Sarah Freligh

life is a jigsaw puzzle, divvied up into small pieces. I try to make my writing the key piece and fit the rest of my life around it, but it doesn't always work that way. More often, I find myself fitting the writing into whatever spaces are available between whatever jobs I'm working at the moment. It's certainly not ideal, but not writing at all is worse.

What are your thoughts about writer's block? *Writer's block is similar to the common cold—it's unavoidable and uncomfortable, but it often passes as quickly as it came. Ideas for poems, for stories or essays are everywhere, but sometimes I'm traveling too fast to truly appreciate these small seeds. So I'll try to disconnect myself from all things online and do something slow—knit or take a walk. Read some poetry or great, dense prose. I'll stay away from the computer and scribble some pages in my notebook until I get my energy back for the big stuff.*

What's the best thing about being a writer?

Being part of a community of creative people for whom the word is currency more valuable than money.

What's your advice for aspiring writers? *Just do it. With apologies to Nike for stealing their slogan. But what's true for runners is even more so for writers. Also, enjoy the scenery along the way. Writing is like brushing my teeth. I'm never inspired to brush my teeth, but I do it because I don't like paying the dentist for another root canal or some other awful (and usually costly) procedure. So it is with writing. I do it to avoid plaque buildup.*



*The trademarks of **Edward Hirsch**'s poems are things I strive to bring to my own writing: to be intimate but restrained, to be tender without being sentimental, to witness life without flinching, and above all, to isolate and preserve those details of our existence so often overlooked, so easily forgotten, so essential to our souls. —author Jhumpa Lahiri*

Today's poem was written as an elegy to one of Edward Hirsch's closest friends, Dennis Turner, with whom he enjoyed playing basketball in college. The two also taught together later at Wayne State University. Hirsch took Dennis to see a doctor one day because he had stomach pain. The prognosis was grim. On the drive home, Dennis told Hirsch that if the disease were fatal, then Hirsch owed Dennis a poem. It turned out that Dennis had an aggressive liver cancer and died a short while later. In the video link accompanying this poem, Edward Hirsch explains how he invented a poetic form to mimic the nature of a basketball drive down the court. It's one long sentence! Listen for the turn in the poem that echoes the shift in Dennis Turner's life.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BfgleFAyaY>

Fast Break

In Memory of Dennis Turner, 1946-1984

A hook shot kisses the rim and
hangs there, helplessly, but doesn't drop,

and for once our gangly starting center
boxes out his man and times his jump

perfectly, gathering the orange leather
from the air like a cherished possession

and spinning around to throw a strike
to the outlet who is already shoveling

an underhand pass toward the other guard
scissoring past a flat-footed defender

who looks stunned and nailed to the floor
in the wrong direction, trying to catch sight

of a high, gliding dribble and a man
letting the play develop in front of him

in slow motion, almost exactly
like a coach's drawing on the blackboard,

both forwards racing down the court
the way that forwards should, fanning out

and filling the lanes in tandem, moving
together as brothers passing the ball

between them without a dribble, without
a single bounce hitting the hardwood

until the guard finally lunges out
and commits to the wrong man

while the power-forward explodes past them
in a fury, taking the ball into the air

by himself now and laying it gently
against the glass for a lay-up,

but losing his balance in the process,
inexplicably falling, hitting the floor

with a wild, headlong motion
for the game he loved like a country

and swiveling back to see an orange blur
floating perfectly through the net.

— *by Edward Hirsch*
from *Wild Gratitude*, 1990 Knopf



POET NOTES

Edward Hirsch is a celebrated poet and peerless advocate for poetry. He was born in Chicago in 1950 and educated at Grinnell College and the University of Pennsylvania, where he received a Ph.D. in Folklore. His devotion to poetry is lifelong. Hirsch taught for six years in the English Department at Wayne State University and seventeen years in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston. He is now president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and lives in Brooklyn.

Hirsch has received numerous awards and fellowships. He has written many books of poetry as well as non-fiction. *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (1999) presents close-readings of an eclectic mix of poems and poets, written in an accessible style. His encyclopedic knowledge of poetry, poets, and poetics served him during his tenure at the *Washington Post*, where he penned the weekly “Poet’s Choice” column. Collecting the columns into the book *Poet’s Choice* (2006), Hirsch stated his goals for his work as a critic: *I write for both initiated and uninitiated readers of poetry. I like to spread the word . . . My notion was to make links and connections, to bring forward unknown poets, and to help people to think about poetry in a somewhat deeper way.* Hirsch’s most recent book of poems, *Gabriel* (2014), explores the death of his son and was longlisted for the National Book Award. Eavan Boland described *Gabriel* as “*a masterpiece of sorrow . . . the creation of the loved and lost boy is one of the poem’s most important effects.*”

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Edward Hirsch

Read poems to yourself in the middle of the night. Turn on a single lamp and read them while you're alone in an otherwise dark room or while someone else sleeps next to you. Read them when you're wide awake in the early morning, fully alert. Say them over to yourself in a place where silence reigns and the din of the culture — the constant buzzing noise that surrounds us — has momentarily stopped. These poems have come from a great distance to find you.

If you had told me, though, when I was twenty-four that I would write about Skokie, Illinois, where I grew up, I would have said, ‘You’re out of your mind. Why would I have Skokie in a poem?’ But you become resigned. Your job is to write about the life you actually have.

Robert Frost liked to distinguish between grievances (complaints) and griefs (sorrows). He even suggested that grievances, which are propagandistic, should be restricted to prose, “leaving poetry free to go its way in tears.”

Look closely and you will see / Almost everyone carrying bags / Of cement on their shoulders / That’s why it takes courage / To get out of bed in the morning / And climb into the day
(These lines are from the 78-page elegy for his son that Hirsch has published called, simply, *Gabriel: A Poem*).

After four months, I still was overwhelmed by grief. I felt that a tsunami had hit me and I had to try to stand up. I’m a poet and I spent my life in poetry. And so I began to try and take the stories about Gabriel, some of the anecdotes about Gabriel, and turn them into poems. And when I was doing that, I felt better. I felt as if I were with Gabriel when I was trying to write about him. And also, it was a kind of relief to be thinking about poetry and not just thinking about my own grief.

There is no right way to grieve, and you have to let people grieve in the way that they can. One of the things that happens to everyone who is grief-stricken, who has lost someone, is there comes a time when everyone else just wants you to get over it, but of course you don't get over it. You get stronger; you try and live on; you endure; you change; but you don't get over it. You carry it with you.

I believe, as Ezra Pound once said, that when it comes to poetry, 'only emotion endures'.

I love this line in today's poem:
I will rush to see the evidence no matter how gruesome.

Poet Carrie Fountain is not afraid to admit limitations, frustrations, and failures in her poems. But she doesn't stop there. Despite the vulnerabilities she describes, there is always the expectation of transformation. Her narratives explore the fruitful possibilities of this mortal existence by embracing and living *in* the body, *not* denying it. Even witnessing a death can be an affirmation of life. As a somatic therapist, this subject matter is close to my heart. Without my body, I could not be writing this entry about the poem. Without her body, Carrie Fountain could not have made this poem. Without your body, you could not be reading, or responding to it. It takes presence and courage to live mindfully in one's body.



First

There is a holiness to exhaustion
 is what I keep telling myself,
 filling out the form so my TA gets paid
 then making copies of it on the hot
 and heaving machine, writing
Strong start! on a pretty bad poem.
 And then the children: the baby's
 mouth opening, going for the breast,
 the girl's hair to wash tonight
 and then comb so painstakingly
 in the tub while conditioner drips
 in slick globs onto her shoulders,
 while her discipline chart flaps in the air
 conditioner at school, taped
 to a filing cabinet, longing for stickers.
 My heart is so giant this evening,
 like one of those moons so full
 and beautiful and terrifying
 if you see it when you're getting out
 of the car you have to go inside the house
 and make someone else come out
 and see it for themselves. I want every-
 thing, I admit. I want *yes of course*
 and I want it all the time. I want

a clean heart. I want the children
to sleep and the drought
to end. I want the rain to come
down—*It's supposed to monsoon*
is what Naomi said, driving away
this morning, and she was right,
as usual. It's monsooning. Still,
I want more. Even as the streets
are washed clean and then begin
to flood. Even though the man
came again today to check the rat traps
and said he bet we'd catch the rat
within 24 hours. We still haven't caught
the rat, so I'm working at the table
with my legs folded up beneath me.
I want to know what is holy—
I do. But first I want the rat to die.
I am thirsty for that death
and will drink deeply of that victory,
the thwack of the trap's hard plastic jaw,
I will rush to see the evidence no matter
how gruesome, leaning my body over
the washing machine to see the thing
crushed there, much smaller
than I'd imagined it'd be,
the strawberry large in its mouth.

—by *Carrie Fountain*



POET NOTES

Poet **Carrie Fountain** was born and raised in Mesilla, New Mexico. *Her poems have appeared in The American Poetry Review, Poetry, and Tin House.* Fountain earned her MFA at the James A. Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin where she began work on what would become her debut collection *Burn Lake*. That book received the 2009 National Poetry Series winner and was published in 2010 by Penguin. Fountain's second book, *Instant Winner*, was published by Penguin in 2014. She wrote for the *Texas Observer*, and was poetry columnist for the *Austin American-Statesman*. Fountain *teaches at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas, where she lives with her husband, the playwright, Kirk Lynn, and their children.*

IN HER OWN WORDS—Carrie Fountain

I write and read poems in lieu of a more perfect spiritual practice. In my poems, I wanted to explore the moral and spiritual implications of our everyday actions and desires, which are often complicated and hardly ever perfect.

*For a while, I was writing reviews of poetry collections in order to make a little bit of money and as a way to read books of poetry and to think about poetry. But I struggled to write them—to the point that it would be ridiculous. And we're talking about reviews for the Austin newspaper. So they weren't like 5,000-word, super interesting annotations on some of these works. They were very simple reviews. And finally I realized why I had such trouble with them and why they made me very unhappy: **I don't want to be the arbiter of what is good or what is bad. I just want to read poems and write poems and have conversations with poems and poets.** I think that we're very preoccupied with what is in favor or out of favor and it becomes less and less interesting to me.*

One thing I often do while I'm revising is put everything in tercets or quatrains. I bundle the lines like this. That somehow disappears the breaks for me and helps me focus on the body of the poem, the syntax and the tone. Then I rip it open again and break the lines in different ways, modulating the pace. This is not a technique in traditional sense, I suppose, as much as it is a maneuver: a way of leveraging up the poem to get to its underside.

*There's always a point in my semester when I'm looking at my students thinking, "I've been reading your poems for weeks and weeks and weeks and I haven't written any! What the hell am I doing here? **How can I be surrounded on all sides by poetry and not have enough time to work on my own stuff?**" What matters is that you sit down and you keep writing. That's all that matters.*

I came upon today's poem by what we generally call happenstance, or coincidence. However, I prefer to think of it in Jungian terms—*Synchronicity*. Carl Jung's belief was that, just as events may be connected by causality, they may also be connected by meaning. Events connected by meaning need not have an explanation in terms of causality. Jung used the concept *Synchronicity* to explain his understanding of the paranormal. I had been searching earlier this year for an image to complement a different poem in the April Gift series when I “accidentally” came upon the peculiar photograph below. Curious, I zoomed in to find that on the decomposing body of a dead deer someone placed a flower and taped a copy of today's astonishing poem—*Ode To The Maggot* by **Yosuf Komunyakaa**.



Ode To The Maggot

Brother of the blowfly
And godhead, you work magic
Over battlefields,
In slabs of bad pork

And flophouses. Yes, you
Go to the root of all things.
You are sound & mathematical.
Jesus, Christ, you're merciless

With the truth. Ontological & lustrous,
You cast spells on beggars & kings
Behind the stone door of Caesar's tomb
Or split trench in a field of ragweed.

No decree or creed can outlaw you
As you take every living thing apart. Little
Master of earth, no one gets to heaven
Without going through you first.

—by *Yusef Komunyakaa*

LISTEN TO KOMUNYAKAA READ HIS POEM:

<https://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/komunyakaa.php>



POEM NOTES

Yusef Komunyakaa was born in Bogalusa, Louisiana, on April 29, 1947, where he was raised during the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. He served in the United States Army from 1969 to 1970 as a correspondent, and as managing editor of the *Southern Cross* during the Vietnam war, earning him a Bronze Star. He began writing poetry in 1973. His first book of poems, *Dedications & Other Darkhorses*, was published in 1977, followed by *Lost in the Bonewheel Factory* in 1979. During this time, he earned his MA and MFA in creative writing from Colorado State University and the University of California, Irvine, respectively.

Komunyakaa first received wide recognition following the 1984 publication of *Copacetic*, a collection of poems built from colloquial speech which demonstrated his incorporation of jazz influences. He followed the book with two others: *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* (1986), winner of the San Francisco Poetry Center Award; and *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), which won The Dark Room Poetry Prize and has been cited by poets such as William Matthews and Robert Hass as being among the best writing on the war in Vietnam.

Since then, he has published several other books of poems, including *Neon Vernacular: New & Selected Poems 1977-1989* (1994), for which he received the Pulitzer Prize. His many honors include the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Wallace Stevens Award, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Komunyakaa has taught at University of New Orleans, Indiana University, and Princeton University. He lives in New York City where he is currently Distinguished Senior Poet in New York University's graduate creative writing program.

About his work, the poet Toi Derricotte wrote for the *Kenyon Review*, "***He takes on the most complex moral issues, the most harrowing ugly subjects of our American life. His voice, whether it embodies the specific experiences of a black man, a soldier in Vietnam, or a child in Bogalusa, Louisiana, is universal. It shows us in ever deeper ways what it is to be human.***"

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Yusef Komunyakaa

Students often have such a lofty idea of what a poem is, and I want them to realize that their own lives are where the poetry comes from. The most important things are to respect the language; to know the classical rules, even if only to break them; and to be prepared to edit, to revise, to shape . . . The process reminds him of something he learned from his carpenter father. Before he cut a board he'd measure it seven times, up and down, up and down. And then when he cut, it would slip right into place. Perfect. No light, left or right.

The tongue married to the heart, and emotions defined by flesh . . . It's an emotional logic. The way the body operates makes me think of the blue note. That impossible note the jazz musician attempts to reach for, and it consequently becomes the engine that drives creative improvisation . . . My process is to write everything down and not worry about the shape. Then I impose a structural frame. Since one is working with tools that one loves, he or she knows them well and can trust them. Rhythm extends the possibilities within the shape of language—it's reaching for that surprise, the blue note.

I love the idea of the pencil or pen pressed against the paper. The evolution of the brain has everything to do with the hand. I like the feel, the hand making, creating the letters.

The big break in his career that took him from emerging poet to the poet on his way to winning the Pulitzer Prize: *What happened was that I decided I was going to apprentice myself to a cabinetmaker so I could continue to write. I knew thinking through writing had gripped my psyche. I decided to do work that would relieve me from grading a hundred composition essays each weekend. At that moment I believed, as a poet, my language could become more tangible doing work that anchored me in this world. And that took me back to when I was a teenager cutting pulpwood from daybreak to sunset. In the woods, with birds singing and animal life around me, with sweat dripping in my eyes and the smell of pine in the air, I could travel great distances in my imagination. Though I had drawn blueprints for greenhouses and read some poetry for the first time, in those moments of meditation, I understood the true power of the imagination. That's the moment I realized there was great beauty in the world. When I finally decided to return to that world of physical labor, in this moment of retrospection I realized I had a world that I already knew with my body and soul, and for the first time this deep knowing paralleled my thoughts, my concerns, and who I am.*

Years ago in Toronto, while studying Psychosynthesis (a spiritual psychology developed by psychiatrist Roberto Assagiolo), I met a practitioner who was an avid gardener. He was absolutely passionate about working in his garden as much as he could in all four seasons, even in inclement weather. The garden served as an instructive metaphor for his work with clients in his therapy practice, he told me, and helped developed his own sense of meaning in life. I asked him what was the greatest practical learning he gained from gardening. After a thoughtful moment, he slowly smiled and said—*Patience!*

Today's poem is dedicated to all gardening readers who are impatiently “chomping at the bit” (or if you prefer, “champing the bit”) to go play in the spring mud.



Munstead Wood in Surrey, England created by Gertrude Jekyll

Perennials

This morning I pulled up
the disease ridden carcass
of my best fuchsia phlox.
It's only mid-July,
and already there's a gap
beside the cobalt stalks
of veronica. I'll fill it
with a not-quite-fuchsia dahlia
from a pot.

In the introduction
to his late wife Katherine's book
on gardening, a bemused
E.B. White confessed
“She was quite rough with flowers.”
And Vita Sackville-West,
prescribing a quick cure
for a disappointing border,
wrote briskly, “Hoick it out!”
At noon, coming across

an ox-eye daisy seeded
by wind or birds, I wavered,
then followed precedent
and chopped it at its root.

The day's already hot,
but there's the precarious
delphinium to straighten
and the hopelessly entangled
wisteria to sort.
When I sit down on the porch
to rest, I find myself
deadheading a spent lupine
to urge a second crop.

And now the asters need
a heavy thinning, roses
languish for lack of food.
Last night, lying awake
while slugs attacked the lilies,
I thought of Gertrude Jeckyll
at Munstead Wood, commanding
her staff of gardeners,
then kicking off her mud-
caked army boots to write
gingerly, "The first purpose
of a garden is to bring
happiness and a repose
of mind"

—by *Patricia Hooper*



POET NOTES

Poet **Patricia Hooper** of Gastonia, North Carolina, is a graduate of the University of Michigan, where she earned BA and MA degrees. Her poems illuminate the beauty and mysteries of the natural world, and consequently the seasons of human life. Beneath the calm surfaces of Ms. Hooper's poems, I find a sharp and focused wisdom as well as a sense of humor.

Hooper is the author of three books of poetry: *Other Lives*, *At the Corner of the Eye*, and *Aristotle's Garden*. She is also the author of a chapbook, *The Flowering Trees*, and four children's books. Her poetry has appeared in many magazines including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The American Scholar*, *Poetry*, *The Hudson Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Southern Review*, and *The Kenyon Review*. Hooper has been the recipient of several poetry awards.

2016 PUBLICATION

Patricia Hooper has been selected as winner of the 2015 Anita Claire Scharf Award by the editors of *Tampa Review*. Her new poetry manuscript, *Separate Flights*, will be published in 2016 by the University of Tampa Press. The Scharf Award is given to support publication of a book of poetry that praises and celebrates the beauty and diversity of the natural world; to illuminate the interconnectedness of our global environment; and to affirm the interrelatedness of visual and verbal art. This new manuscript uses metaphors of flight—including birds and planes and art—to explore and express the larger vision.

LITTLE POCKET NOTE

E.B. White, author of *Charlotte's Web*, was key to the poem "Wondrous" by Sarah Freligh posted a few days ago. And today, E.B. White turns up again. I discovered "Wondrous" only recently, with no conscious association to today's poem. "Perennials" was actually slated for last year's April Gifts but got bumped because I couldn't find enough material about Ms. Hooper to suit my needs for the 2015 entry. It's curious every year how 30 poems find each other to form a unified family. It's as if by some mysterious collaboration they create a sense of belonging to one another.

E.B. White's wife, **Katharine Sergeant Angell White**—also mentioned in today's poem—was a highly regarded writer and editor for *The New Yorker* in the 1920's. In 1958, when her job as editor was coming to a close, White wrote the first of a series of fourteen garden pieces that appeared in *The New Yorker* over the next twelve years. The poet Marianne Moore originally persuaded White that these pieces would make a fine book, but it wasn't until after her death in 1977 that her husband, E. B. White, assembled them into this now classic collection. E.B. White credited Katharine's book *Onward and Upward in the Garden*, with saving his own life, as it gave him her words every day, and something to work on after she had died.

*All my poems are about the same thing, understanding my place in the world. So I think that is the central organizing element; the metaphors, subjects, and form are secondary . . . My breakthrough poem was the first poem in *Delirium*, “The Language of Bees.” When I wrote it, I was stunned. It was so different than anything I had written before. I had been working up to that poem for a long time, but when I wrote it, I thought, “This is what I want to do; this is my real voice.” I also used language in a more complex way than I had ever used it. After that I sat down at my desk with such a different feeling. I still had my ups and downs, but I had a new sense of confidence in my work. —Barbara Hamby*



The Language of Bees

The language of bees contains 76 distinct words for stinging,
distinguishes between a prick, puncture, and mortal wound,
elaborates on cause and effect as in a sting made to retaliate,
irritate, insinuate, infuriate, incite, rebuke, annoy,
nudge, anger, poison, harangue.

The language of bees has 39 words for queen—regina apiana,
empress of the hive, czarina of nectar, maharani of the ovum,
sultana of stupor, principessa of dark desire.

The language of bees contains 22 words for sunshine,
Two for rain—big water and small water, so that a man urinating
on an azalea bush in the full fuchsia of April
has the linguistic effect of a light shower in September.

For man, two words—roughly translated—“hands” and “feet,”
the first with the imperialistic connotation of beekeeper,
the second with the delicious resonance of bareness.

All colors are variations on yellow, from the exquisite
sixteen-syllable word meaning “diaphanous golden fall,”
to the dirty ochre of the bitter pollen
stored in the honeycomb and used by bees for food.

The language of bees is a language of war. For what is peace
without strife but the boredom of enervating day-after-day,
obese with sweetness, truculent with ennui?

Attack is delightful to bees, who have hundreds of verbs
embracing strategy, aim, location, velocity:
swift, downward swoop to stun an antagonist,
brazen, kamikaze strike for no gain but momentum.

Yet stealth is essential to bees, for they live to consternate
their enemies, flying up pant legs, hovering in grass.

No insect is more secretive than the bee, for they have two
thousand words describing the penetralia of the hive:
octagonal golden chamber of unbearable moistness,
opaque tabernacle of nectar,
sugarplum of polygonal waxy walls.

The language of bees is the language of aeronautics,
for they have wings—transparent, insubstantial,
black- veined like the fall of an exotic iris.
For they are tiny dirigibles, aviators of orchard and field.
For they have ambition, cunning, and are able to take direct aim.
For they know how to leave the ground, to drift, hover, swarm,
sail over the tops of trees.

The language of bees is a musical dialect, a full, humming
congregation of hallelujahs and amens,

at night blue and disconsolate,
in the morning bright and bedewed.

The language of bees contains lavish adjectives
praising the lilting fertility of their queen:
fat, red-bottomed progenitor of millions,
luscious organizer of coitus,
gelatinous distributor of love.

The language of bees is in the jumble of leaves before rain,
in the quiet night rustle of small animals,
for it is eloquent and vulgar in the same mouth,
and though its wound is sweet it can be distressing,
as if words could not hurt or be meant to sting.

—by Barbara Hamby



POET NOTES

Born in New Orleans and raised in Hawaii, poet **Barbara Hamby** earned an MA at Florida State University. She is the author of several award-winning poetry collections, including *All-Night Lingo Tango* (2009); *Babel* (2004); *The Alphabet of Desire* (1999) and *Delirium* (1995). With her husband, poet David Kirby, Hamby coedited the anthology *Seriously Funny* (2010). Hamby's poetry has been featured in numerous anthologies, including *The Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry* (2011), three editions of *Best American Poetry* (2010, 2009, and 2000), and *Good Poems for Hard Times* (2006). Hamby has won fellowships from the

Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts as well as several grants from the Florida Arts Council. In 2010, she was named a Distinguished University Scholar at Florida State University. Hamby teaches creative writing at Florida State University in Tallahassee, where she lives with her husband, poet David Kirby.

For more about Barbara Hamby: <http://www.barbarahamby.com/>

IN HER OWN WORDS—Barbara Hamby

I found so much rich commentary by Barbara Hamby, it was difficult to limit myself to the following few paragraphs. All quotes were culled from several online interviews.

I grew up in a big talking family, so words have always been important to me. Both my mother and father were quick with a quip, and my mother, especially, used a lot of Biblical language. . . . When I was in the fourth grade there was a special deal in my school. You could buy a children's dictionary for a couple of dollars—A Dictionary for Boys and Girls: Webster's Elementary Dictionary. When I unwrapped my copy, I felt so rich—all these words and all of them mine. I would read through it randomly, sure I would never know all those words but hoping to one day. And I've never stopped collecting words. I love to find new caches of lingo, such as hardware or jazz or dance or noir films. Other cultures are a fabulous trove of language, especially for an English speaker, because our language can take in anything and make it our own . . . Sometimes I'm just beside myself with the sheer thrill of putting all the thousands of Englishes together. It's like juggling and walking a tightrope at the same time.

*I collect images, notes, ideas in notebooks I carry around with me. Then when a notebook is full I transfer the notes to the computer. Then comes the hard part: I have to wait for the different images to speak to each other. When I begin to see them come together, it's like cosmic dust giving into a gravitational pull that will one day form a planet or at least the minor moon of a minor planet. **To wait until the words are pouring out instead of trying to squeeze them out like a dried out tube of prussian blue.** But at first it's hard to talk yourself into not writing as writing. I like to check my notebooks every day, just to make sure that something hasn't happened in my absence . . . **So I'm not writing all the time, but I'm thinking about poems all the time and gathering images, ideas, lines, words, overheard conversations, magazine articles, newspaper headlines, anything that catches my fancy.** I never understood the Christian dictum "Pray without ceasing" until I became a poet. I think about poetry all the time. I write poetry without ceasing, even though I don't have a pen in my hand all the time.*

Poetry that is made entirely from the conscious mind seems limited, cold and only about half of the human experience. And by the same token, poetry that comes entirely from the unconscious mind is unsuccessful in a different way. Anyone who has done automatic writing or transcribed a dream knows this to be true or anyone older than sixteen. Our entire lives are made up of an interpenetration of the conscious and unconscious minds. If art has anything to tell us, it must take this basic fact into consideration.

*I feel very strongly that we look to art in the same way we look to religion—to discover how to be a human being living within the constraints of time. This was what I think Lorca was getting at with his idea of duende, or the shadow of death. **He said that no great work of art can exist without that acknowledgment of death** . . . Any piece of art must express this basic truth of mortality . . . We go to art for many things—entertainment, escape, stimulation, knowledge—but we also want to experience another human being's take on consciousness. It is how we refine our own consciousness. I'm not religious any more, but I do think about my place in time. For me art is a divine enterprise but without the gods.*

*I have just been realizing that sometimes when I'm reading a poem that isn't moving me, it is often because it has a lot of air and water or mental and emotional energy but no earth and fire or materiality or passion. I think place is an earthy element, and must be given its due for a poem to be successful . . . **Flesh is important. The body and the senses are essential to the human endeavor.** I think young people want to pretend it isn't, or at least that was true for me. I wanted the mind to be everything. Even my most word-drunk ethereal poems have their orientation in the world.*

***Living with another poet is fantastic because the poetry store is always open.** No matter where we are or what we're doing, poetry is in the air. And I never have to make an excuse to work on a poem. He (David Kirby) always understands. And he is a wonderful reader. I show him everything. I may not make every change he suggests, but I make a lot of them, and often his suggestions lead me to something I wouldn't have thought of on my own.*

*There's a concept in Buddhism called beginner's mind, to look at everything as though you are seeing it for the first time. I think travel is a little like that for me. I am seeing something for the first time, which is exhilarating and sometimes scary. **I think it was Flannery O'Connor who said by the time you're 12 years old, you have all the material you will ever need, and I think she's right.** But I like a catalyst to knock that material into shape, and travel is that for me.*

*As far as my own service to poetry, in both my teaching and my writing, I take very seriously what Mallarme said, which is that **it's the poet's job to purify the words of the tribe**. Most of my students are pretty sophisticated, but from time to time I'll get one who thinks that effective usage and high standards apply to prose only and that poetry is where you go if you just want to burp up your inchoate feelings. Uh-uh! No, sir! Poetry's not the stuff that's worse than every other type of writing; it's the stuff that's better. **Your poems should knock the socks off of every other thing that comes down the pike. It's the job of your poem to make people say, "Jesus—how'd that happen? Where'd this come from? This is a damned miracle! Are you telling me a human being wrote this?"** —David Kirby*



More Than This

When you tell me that a woman is visiting the grave
of her college friend and she's trying not to get irritated
at the man in the red truck who keeps walking back and forth
and dropping tools as he listens to a pro football
game on the truck radio, which is much too loud, I start
to feel as though I know where this story is going,
so I say *Stop, you're going to make me cry*.
How sad the world is. When young men died in the mud
of Flanders, the headmaster called their brothers out
of the classroom one by one, but when the older brothers
began to die by the hundreds every day, they simply handed
the child a note as he did his lessons, and of course the boy
wouldn't cry in front of the others, though at night
the halls were filled with the sound of schoolboys sobbing
for the dead, young men only slightly older than themselves.
Yet the world's beauty breaks our hearts as well:
the old cowboy is riding along and looks down
at his dog and realizes she died a long time ago
and that his horse did as well, and this makes him
wonder if he is dead, too, and as he's thinking this,
he comes to a big shiny gate that opens onto a golden
highway, and there's a man in a robe and white wings,
and when the cowboy asks what this place is, the man tells
him it's heaven and invites him in, though he says animals
aren't allowed, so the cowboy keeps going till he comes
to an old rusty gate with a road full of weeds and potholes
on the other side and a guy on a tractor, and the guy

wipes his brow and says you three must be thirsty,
come in and get a drink, and the cowboy says okay,
but what is this place, and the guy says it's heaven,
and the cowboy says then what's that place down
the road with the shiny gate and the golden highway,
and when the guy says oh, that's hell, and the cowboy
says doesn't it make you mad that they're pretending
to be you, and the guy on the tractor says no,
we like it that they screen out the folks who'd desert
their friends. You tell me your friend can't take it
any more, and she turns to confront the man
who's making all the noise, to beg him to leave her alone
with her grief, and that's when she sees that he's been
putting up a Christmas tree on his son's grave
and that he's grieving, too, but in his own way,
one that is not better or worse than the woman's,
just different, the kind of grief that says the world
is so beautiful, that it will give you no peace.

—by *David Kirby*

(this poem was a finalist in the 2015 Rattle Poetry Prize competition)



POET NOTES

Poet, critic, and scholar **David Kirby** was born in 1944 and grew up on a farm in southern Louisiana. He received a BA from Louisiana State University and, at the age of 24, a PhD from Johns Hopkins University in 19th Century American Lit.

Influenced by artists as diverse as John Keats and Little Richard, Kirby writes distinctive long-lined narrative poems that braid together high and popular culture, personal memory, philosophy, and humor. “One thing that I want to do in the poems is to portray the mind as it actually works.”

Kirby is the author of more than thirty volumes of poetry, criticism, essays, and children's literature. His numerous collections of poetry include *The Ha-Ha* (2003), short-listed for the Griffin Poetry Prize, and *The House on Boulevard Street: New and Selected Poems* (2007).

Kirby has also won several prestigious awards for his work. Since 1969 he has taught at Florida State University, where he has received several teaching awards. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida, with his wife, poet Barbara Hamby.

IN HIS OWN WORDS—David Kirby

I said to myself that I'm never going to not talk to a student who walks in my door. I'm never not going to answer an email or chat with some high school kid who calls up just to talk about poetry. There's time for everything. Do it all, and do it with your whole heart and soul. That's what coffee's for. As Warren Zevon says, I'll sleep when I'm dead.

My greatest teachers were my mother and father, she a farm girl who had wonderful stories about voodoo and conjure women and other spooky folk who lived out in the woods and he a philologist who read or spoke a dozen languages. Voodoo and scholarship: you can't beat it! I wouldn't be writing the poems I'm writing today if my parents had been anyone else.

I love to give readings. And to go to good ones—when I can find them, that is. Meow! Did that sound too catty? Most poetry readings are pretty awful, aren't they? How many times have you heard somebody say, "Okay, I'm just going to wing it" or "I think these poems speak for themselves, so I'm not going to say anything about them" or "The next poem is ... the next poem is ... the next poem is"? . . . Look, I have season tickets to the FSU women's basketball games. The Lady 'Noles are currently #16 in the nation. I go to the games with Howard, my barber; he's an ex-cop who knows more about human nature than the entire faculty of the College of Social Science put together, and I love to spend time with him. So if I'm at your poetry reading, that means I'm not going to a game with Howard. Or I'm not going to a movie. Or I'm not having a three-course dinner and a nice bottle of Cotes du Rhone Villages with Barbara. . . .

*So put yourself out a little bit, will you? This is show business! **For the life of me, I'll never understand how people can put hundreds of hours into writing these great poems and then no time at all into reading prep** To me, the best poems work on both the page and the stage. That's not to say your sonnet about your mom should sound like a slam poem. But the poem on the page should have an aural quality; the reader in a library in Kansas should hear you, even though you're a thousand miles away. Reading your poems aloud will help you develop that quality in your written work . . . the simple act of picking poems for an audience will make you think hard about what you do best and how to do it better. **I think a good reading style is indispensable to good writing, which is why I wish more poets would read better** . . . Practical advice? I'll say one thing: slow down. Think Shakespeare: the words are great, the silences even greater. Take your time.*

I know people who are deliriously happy because they've turned their lives over to God, and the same is true for people who love poetry. That doesn't mean that there'll be no quarrels; the great thinkers of the Church like Augustine and Teresa of Avila had highly personal and even contentious relationships with their Maker. And the same for me and poetry. Most of the time, it makes me happier than anything else, but sometimes it just exasperates the hell out of me.

Our son and his dog discovered a dead mama opossum in the woods behind our house. She was not “playing possum”, but her belly was moving. Jake, who was 10 at the time, knew marsupials carried their young in a pouch and, sure enough, there were a dozen babies the size of mice squirming to be fed. Despite our explanation that we didn’t know a thing about taking care of orphaned opossums, Jake was adamant that he wanted to keep and raise them all. We found a naturalist who soon recognized in Jake a sense of compassion and responsibility for these helpless and unpopular critters. Since opossums seldom carry rabies (body temperature is too low), the naturalist allowed Jake to keep two of the babies and taught him how to feed and care for them until they were old enough to be released. The day Jake discovered the opossums was April 20, 1999, the day of the Columbine High School massacre. The contrast was profoundly striking: Two teenagers, just 8 years older than my son, had succumbed to a murderous darkness, while our boy’s kindness flooded that same day with light.

Today’s poet, Gerald Stern, was featured in April Gifts 2012 with his heart wrenching poem “The Dog”, a narrative written in the voice of a dead dog. In today’s poem, “the lover of dead things” shines light on a dead opossum.

Behaving Like a Jew

When I got there the dead opossum looked like
an enormous baby sleeping on the road.
It took me only a few seconds-just
seeing him there-with the hole in his back
and the wind blowing through his hair
to get back again into my animal sorrow.
I am sick of the country, the bloodstained
bumpers, the stiff hairs sticking out of the grilles,
the slimy highways, the heavy birds
refusing to move;
I am sick of the spirit of Lindbergh over everything,
that joy in death, that philosophical
understanding of carnage, that
concentration on the species.
--I am going to be unappeased at the opossum's death.
I am going to behave like a Jew
and touch his face, and stare into his eyes,
and pull him off the road.
I am not going to stand in a wet ditch
with the Toyotas and the Chevies passing over me
at sixty miles an hour
and praise the beauty and the balance
and lose myself in the immortal lifestream
when my hands are still a little shaky
from his stiffness and his bulk
and my eyes are still weak and misty
from his round belly and his curved fingers
and his black whiskers and his little dancing feet.

—by *Gerald Stern*

from *This Time: New and Selected* (W.W. Norton, 1998)

Listen to Gerald Stern read *Behaving Like a Jew*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0XL3KPTD6k>



POSET NOTES

Gerald Stern was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1925 to Jewish immigrants from the Ukraine and Poland. After World War II, he spent time in Western Europe before taking his first teaching job in the mid-1950s. He lives in Lambertville, New Jersey, near the Delaware River, a fairly rural area for which he holds a particular affection. His companion of many years is poet Anne Marie Macari, who was featured in April Gifts in 2012.

Gerald Stern came of age as a poet and activist in the 1950s and 60s. He's probably best known for *Lucky Life* (now part of his *Early Collected*), which established him as a major voice in American poetry in 1977, and *This Time: New and Selected Poems*, for which he won the National Book Award. Stern has published fourteen volumes of poetry and has received many prestigious awards for his writing, including the 1996 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize and a National Book Award for poetry in 1998 for his book, *This Time: New and Selected Poems*. He was Poet Laureate of New Jersey from 2000 to 2002.

Stern earned his B.A. at the University of Pittsburgh in 1947 and an M.A. at Columbia University in 1949. He did post-graduate study at the University of Paris in 1949-50. He has taught at dozens of colleges and universities, and for many years taught poetry writing at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Stern is currently serving as distinguished poet-in-residence at Drew University's low-residency MFA Program in Poetry, along with poet Jean Valentine.

One critic has written that Stern's poems, *"explore past time and heritage, seeking to relocate them in an ecstatic present. In this quest, the poems resemble spiritual acts. They bestow attention upon all living beings and offer consolation for their senseless suffering."*

POEM NOTE

The negative reference to Charles Lindbergh in this poem—***I am sick of the spirit of Lindbergh over everything***—puzzled me at first. After educating myself, I learned that Lindbergh was a Nazi sympathizer and favored "a pure race". In his diaries, he wrote: "We must limit to a reasonable amount the Jewish influence . . . Whenever the Jewish percentage of total population becomes too high, a reaction seems to invariably occur. It is too bad because a few Jews of the right type are, I believe, an asset to any country."

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Gerald Stern

There were no books in my house. I was not discouraged from being a poet. It just never – it was just never brought up. And there was no discussion about literature or writing, or reading. It was just a non-existent subject. I had absolutely no mentors. I came from nowhere.

Buddhism wants to relieve you from suffering; you're supposed to escape from suffering. But the artist's job, as I see it, is to be both attached and detached. How can he not embrace suffering?

I think I have a bone somewhere in my spine, or a wire somewhere in my system, or a feather, that attracts me endlessly to the ruined and fallen.

I feel that my job, as an artist, is to disturb the peace. And to disturb it intellectually, linguistically, politically and literally.

CRITTER FOOTNOTE Just want to mention a scientific fact: The possum and the opossum are two different animals. Both are marsupials, but the possum, the cuter creature with a bushy tail, lives in Australia and surrounding islands, while the opossum with the wicked-looking teeth and naked tail is found only in America and elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere.



possum



opossum

I chose today's poem, not because it represents the larger work of poet **Larry Levis**, but more for its element of surprise. This poem has actually been described as "derivative and stilted" by one critic. I like the poem, if only because it strikes a chord in anyone who has wrestled with a poem that will not "comply". Sometimes in order to write the poem that wants to be written, we have to let it go, free it, surrender as to a lover intent on leaving us.

The Poem You Asked For

My poem would eat nothing.
I tried giving it water
but it said no,

worrying me.
Day after day,
I held it up to the light,

turning it over,
but it only pressed its lips
more tightly together.

It grew sullen, like a toad
through with being teased.
I offered it money,

my clothes, my car with a full tank.
But the poem stared at the floor.
Finally I cupped it in

my hands, and carried it gently
out into the soft air, into the
evening traffic, wondering how

to end things between us.
For now it had begun breathing,
putting on more and

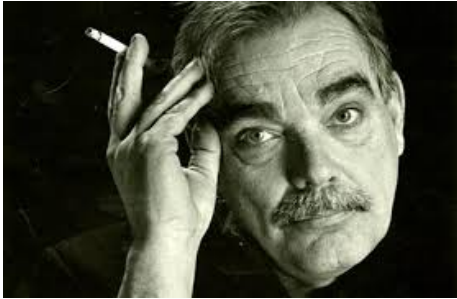
more hard rings of flesh.
And the poem demanded the food,
it drank up all the water,

beat me and took my money,
tore the faded clothes
off my back,

said Shit,
and walked slowly away,
slicking its hair down.

Said it was going
over to your place.

—by Larry Levis



POET NOTES

Larry Levis was born in 1946, the son of a grape grower. He grew up driving a tractor, picking grapes, and pruning vines of Selma, California, a small fruit-growing town in the San Joaquin Valley. He later wrote of the farm, the vineyards, and the Mexican migrant workers that he worked alongside. He also hung out in the local billiards parlor in Selma, across from the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks. *Where I grew up, the specific place meant everything. As a child in California, I still thought of myself, almost, as living in the Bear Flag Republic, not in the United States. When I woke, the Sierras, I knew, were on my right; the Pacific was a two-hour drive to my left, and everything between belonged to me, was me. I was astonishingly sheltered. It was only gradually that I learned the ways in which place meant everything, learned that it meant two hundred acres of aging peach trees which we had to prop up, every summer, with sticks to keep the limbs from cracking under the weight of slowly ripening fruit. It meant a three-room schoolhouse with thirty students, and meant, also, the pig-headed, oppressive Catholic Church which, as far as I could determine, wanted me to feel guilty for having been born at all. And it meant the gradual self-effacement and aging of my parents.*

Levis earned a bachelor's degree from Fresno State College in 1968, a master's degree from Syracuse University in 1970, and a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 1974. Levis has won many awards for his books.

Levis taught English at the University of Missouri from 1974–1980. From 1980 to 1992, he taught at the creative writing program at the University of Utah. He also taught at the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers. From 1992 until his death from a heart attack in 1996 he was a professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University, which annually awards the Levis Reading Prize in his remembrance. An early death at age 49 took Larry Levis at the height of his powers as a poet. He was perceived by many of his peers at the time as one of the leading practitioners of the art.

Larry Levis writes a poetry that is full of surprises. Not the predictable and boring surprises that can be created by formula, but the nourishing shock of fresh ideas that rise from the work of the true poet. —Robert Mezey

Levis is not interested in metaphorical equivalence in comparison as a device whose goal is logical coherence, or persuasion, or concentration; rather, his practice is to use image as a form of inquiry, as a kind of tentative, speculating finger poking into the unknown. —Tony Hoagland

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Larry Lewis

The moment of writing is not an escape . . . it is only an insistence, through the imagination, upon human ecstasy, and a reminder such ecstasy remains as much a birthright in this world as misery remains a condition of it.

*. . . when I was sixteen, I decided one night, to try to write a poem. When I was finished I turned out the light. I told myself that if the poem had one good line in it I would try to be a poet. And then I thought, no, you can't say "try." **You will either be a poet, and become a better and better one, or you will not be a poet.** The next morning I woke and looked at what I'd written. It was awful. I knew it was awful. But it had one good line. One. All the important decisions in my life were made in that moment.*

*I just want to write my own poems. I would like to be one of those people who was, in poetry, a rule breaker; someone who mattered. **Poetry sometimes seems so totally an enclosed or secluded world, a very tiny one . . . so much so that other worlds are closed off to us. I think poetry ought to challenge these other worlds** in the ways that fiction can challenge science or that art can challenge technology.*

Time is a violation. It makes us finite, and therefore the violation is always personal: its final form is both banal and intimate, for it is simply one's death, but finally all of us get the idea, an idea which is actually the absence of any idea and, therefore, unimaginable. As close as one can get to a statement of it is: "The meaning of life is that it stops." And there it is: the empty, white, blank, unblinking center of it all.



Today, April 22, marks the 21st anniversary of **Jane Kenyon**'s death. Born in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1947, Jane was a college student who married her much older professor, poet and author Donald Hall, and retreated from university life with him to Hall's family farmhouse in New Hampshire. She wrote poems with simple words that carry a mystical impact. Plagued by terrible bouts of depression, Jane wrote every day along with her husband, spent time in her beloved farmhouse gardens, was a member of the village church, tended to her cats, and walked the hills with her dog. She thought her husband would be the first to die, aging and living with cancer as he was, but the weight came down first on Jane who died of leukemia in 1995 at the young age of 47.

Years ago, while driving through New Hampshire, my husband and I found the white farmhouse at Eagle Pond Farm in Wilmot, where Donald Hall still lives. We also found the South Danbury Christian Church seven miles up the road where Donald and Jane had been active members. It was a Sunday morning and services were just letting out. In the parking lot I approached a carload of four stalwart women with sturdy names—I recall "Mabel" and "Henrietta" in the front seat—who looked at us suspiciously. I wanted to visit Jane's grave, I explained, hoping to pay my respects. Although they were polite, it was clear the women were not inclined to divulge the information I wanted. Perhaps had we joined them for services, there would have been a different outcome.

This is the third time in ten years I've featured a poem by Jane Kenyon. I could easily fill the entire month with nothing but her poems. They always teach me something I need to learn about life, or poetry, or usually both. Jane had "dry spells" in her writing life—what many writers call writer's block. Some spells were born naturally out of the ebb and flow of life, and some were born out of illness. Surely her terrible bouts of severe depression, and ultimately the leukemia, siphoned her ability to write.

Today's poem is a mere twenty-five words. Why say more about 'not writing'.

I've followed Jane's short poem with a 3,600 word essay, "The Third Thing", by Donald Hall, Jane's husband of twenty-three years. Of special note: When I heard Donald Hall read his poetry at University of Cincinnati several years ago, he opened and closed his reading with a poem by Jane.

Not Writing

A wasp rises to its papery
nest under the eaves
where it daubs

at the gray shape,
but seems unable
to enter its own house.

—by Jane Kenyon



POET NOTES

Jane Kenyon published only four volumes of poetry during her life: *From Room to Room* (1976), *The Boat of Quiet Hours* (1986), *Let Evening Come*, (1991) and *Constance* (1993), and translated a volume of work by the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. I personally recommend: *Otherwise: New & Selected Poems* (1997) and *A Hundred White Daffodils: Essays, Interviews, The Akhmatova Translations, Newspaper Columns, and One Poem* (2000).

IN HER OWN WORDS—Jane Kenyon

Tell the whole truth. Don't be lazy, don't be afraid. Close the critic out when you are drafting something new. Take chances in the interest of clarity of emotion . . . Be a good steward of your gifts. Protect your time. Feed your inner life. Avoid too much noise. Read good books, have good sentences in your ears. Be by yourself as often as you can. Walk. Take the phone off the hook. Work (at writing) regular hours. —from *A Hundred White Daffodils: Essays, Interviews, The Akhmatova Translations, Newspaper Columns, and One Poem*

If it's darkness we're having, let it be extravagant.

IN HIS OWN WORDS:

The Third Thing

—by Donald Hall

Jane Kenyon and I were married for twenty-three years. For two decades we inhabited the double solitude of my family farmhouse in New Hampshire, writing poems, loving the countryside. She was forty-seven when she died. If anyone had asked us, “Which year was the best, of your lives together?” we could have agreed on an answer: “the one we remember least.” There were sorrowful years—the death of her father, my cancers, her depressions—and there were also years of adventure: a trip to China and Japan, two trips to India; years when my children married; years when the grandchildren were born; years of triumph as Jane began her public life in poetry: her first book, her first poem in the *New Yorker*. The best moment of our lives was one quiet repeated day of work in our house. Not everyone understood. Visitors, especially from New York, would spend a weekend with us and say as they left: **“It’s really pretty here” (“in Vermont,” many added) “with your house, the pond, the hills, but . . . but . . . but . . . what do you do?”**

What we did: we got up early in the morning. I brought Jane coffee in bed. She walked the dog as I started writing, then climbed the stairs to work at her own desk on her own poems. We had lunch. We lay down together. We rose and worked at secondary things. I read aloud to Jane; we played scoreless ping-pong; we read the mail; we worked again. We ate supper, talked, read books sitting across from each other in the living room, and went to sleep. If we were lucky the phone didn’t ring all day. In January Jane dreamed of flowers, planning expansion and refinement of the garden. From late March into October she spent hours digging, applying fifty-year-old Holstein manure from under the barn, planting, transplanting, and weeding. Sometimes I went off for two nights to read my poems, essential to the economy, and Jane wrote a poem called “Alone for a Week.” Later Jane flew away for readings and I loathed being the one left behind. (I filled out coupons from magazines and ordered useless objects.) We traveled south sometimes in cold weather: to Key West in December, a February week in Barbados, to Florida during baseball’s spring training, to Bermuda. Rarely we flew to England or Italy for two weeks. Three hundred and thirty days a year we inhabited this old house and the same day’s adventurous routine.

What we did: love. We did not spend our days gazing into each other’s eyes. We did that gazing when we made love or when one of us was in trouble, but most of the time our gazes met and entwined as they looked at a third thing. Third things are essential to marriages, objects or practices or habits or arts or institutions or games or human beings that provide a site of joint rapture or contentment. Each member of a couple is separate; the two come together in double attention. Lovemaking is not a third thing but two-in-one. John Keats can be a third thing, or the Boston Symphony Orchestra, or Dutch interiors, or Monopoly. For many couples, children are a third thing. Jane and I had no children of our own; we had our cats and dog to fuss and exclaim over—and later my five grandchildren from an earlier marriage. We had our summer afternoons at the pond, which for ten years made a third thing. After naps we loaded up books and blankets and walked across Route 4 and the old railroad to the steep slippery bank that led down to our private beach on Eagle Pond. Soft moss underfoot sent little red flowers up. Ghost birches leaned over water with wild strawberry plants growing under them. Over our heads white pines reared high, and oaks that warned us of summer’s end late in August by dropping green metallic acorns. Sometimes a mink scooted among ferns. After we acquired Gus he joined the pond ecstasy, chewing on stones. Jane dozed in the sun as I sat in the shade reading and occasionally taking a note in a blank book. From time to time we swam and dried in the heat. Then, one summer, leakage from the Danbury landfill turned the pond orange. It stank. The

water was not hazardous but it was ruined. A few years later the pond came back but we seldom returned to our afternoons there. Sometimes you lose a third thing.

The South Danbury Christian Church became large in our lives. We were both deacons and Jane was treasurer for a dozen years, utter miscasting and a source of annual anxiety when the treasurer's report was due. I collected the offering; Jane counted and banked it. Once a month she prepared communion and I distributed it. For the Church Fair we both cooked and I helped with the auction. Besides the Church itself, building and community, there was Christianity, the Gospels, and the work of theologians and mystics. Typically we divided our attentions: I read Meister Eckhart while Jane studied Julian of Norwich. I read the Old Testament aloud to her, and the New. If it wasn't the Bible, I was reading aloud late Henry James or Mark Twain or Edith Wharton or Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Reading aloud was a daily connection. When I first pronounced *The Ambassadors*, Jane had never read it, and I peeked at her flabbergasted face as the boat bearing Chad and Mme. de Vionnet rounded the bend toward Lambert Strether. Three years later, when I had acquired a New York Edition of Henry James, she asked me to read her *The Ambassadors* again. Late James is the best prose for reading aloud. Saying one of his interminable sentences, the voice must drop pitch every time he interrupts his syntax with periphrasis, and drop again when periphrasis interrupts periphrasis, and again, and then step the pitch up, like climbing stairs in the dark, until the original tone concludes the sentence. One's larynx could write a doctoral dissertation on James's syntax.

Literature in general was a constant. Often at the end of the day Jane would speak about what she had been reading, her latest intense and obsessive absorption in an author: Keats for two years, Chekhov, Elizabeth Bishop. In reading and in everything else, we made clear boundaries, dividing our literary territories. I did not go back to Keats until she had done with him. By and large Jane read intensively while I read extensively. Like a male, I lusted to acquire all the great books of the world and add them to my life list. One day I would realize: I've never read Darwin! Adam Smith! Gibbon! Gibbon became an obsession with me, then his sources, then all ancient history, then all narrative history. For a few years I concentrated on Henry Adams, even reading six massive volumes of letters.

But there was also ping-pong. When we added a new bedroom, we extended the rootcellar enough to set a ping-pong table into it, and for years we played every afternoon. Jane was assiduous, determined, vicious, and her reach was not so wide as mine. When she couldn't reach a shot I called her "Stubbsy," and her next slam would smash me in the groin, rage combined with harmlessness. We rallied half an hour without keeping score. Another trait we shared was hating to lose. Through bouts of ping-pong and Henry James and the church, we kept to one innovation: with rare exceptions, we remained aware of each other's feelings. It took me half my life, more than half, to discover with Jane's guidance that two people could live together and remain kind. When one of us felt grumpy we both shut up until it went away. We did not give in to sarcasm. Once every three years we had a fight—the way some couples fight three times a day—and because fights were few the aftermath of a fight was a dreadful gloom. "We have done harm," said Jane in a poem after a quarrel. What was *that* fight about? I wonder if she remembered, a month after writing the poem.

Of course: the third thing that brought us together, and shone at the center of our lives and our house, was poetry—both our love for the art and the passion and frustration of trying to write it. When we moved to the farm, away from teaching and Jane's family, we threw ourselves into the life of writing poetry as if we jumped from a bridge and swam to survive. I kept the earliest hours of the day for poetry. Jane worked on poems virtually every day; there were dry spells. In the first years of our marriage, I sometimes feared that she would find the project of poetry intimidating, and withdraw or give up or diminish the intensity of her

commitment. I remember talking with her one morning early in New Hampshire, maybe in 1976, when the burden felt too heavy. She talked of her singing with the Michigan Chorale, as if music were something she might turn to. She spoke of drawing as another art she could perform, and showed me an old pencil rendering she had made, acorns I think, meticulous and well-made and nothing more. She was saying, “I don’t *have* to give myself to poetry”—and I knew enough not to argue.

However, from year to year she gave more of herself to her art. When she studied Keats, she read all his poems, all his letters, the best three or four biographies; then she read and reread the poems and the letters again. No one will find in her poems clear fingerprints of John Keats, but Jane’s ear became more luscious with her love for Keats; her lines became more dense, rifts loaded with ore. Coming from a family for whom ambition was dangerous, in which work was best taken lightly, it was not easy for Jane to wager her life on one number. She lived with someone who had made that choice, but also with someone nineteen years older who wrote all day and published frequently. Her first book of poems came out as I published my fifth. I could have been an inhibitor as easily as I was an encourager—if she had not been brave and stubborn. I watched in gratified pleasure as her poems became better and better. From being promising she became accomplished and professional; then—with the later poems of *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, with “Twilight: After Haying,” with “Briefly It Enters,” with “Things,” she turned into the extraordinary and permanent poet of *Otherwise*.

People asked us—people still ask me—about competition between us. We never spoke of it, but it had to be there—and it remained benign. When Jane wrote a poem that dazzled me, I wanted to write a poem that would dazzle her. Boundaries helped. We belonged to different generations. Through Jane I got to be friends with poets of her generation, as she did with my friends born in the 1920s. We avoided situations which would subject us to comparison. During the first years of our marriage, when Jane was just beginning to publish, we were asked several times to read our poems together. The people who asked us knew and respected Jane’s poems, but the occasions turned ghastly. Once we were introduced by someone we had just met who was happy to welcome Joan Kenyon. Always someone, generally a male English professor, managed to let us know that it was *sweet*, that Jane wrote poems too. One head of a department asked her if she felt *dwarfed*. When Jane was condescended to she was furious, and it was only on these occasions that we felt anything unpleasant between us. Jane decided that we would no longer read together.

When places later asked us both to read, we agreed to come but stipulated that we read separately, maybe a day apart. As she published more widely we were more frequently approached. Late in the 1980s, after reading on different days at one university, we did a joint question-and-answer session with writing students. Three quarters of the questions addressed Jane, not me, and afterwards she said, “Perkins, I think we can read together now.” So, in our last years together, we did many joint readings. When two poets read on the same program, the first reader is the warm-up band, the second the featured act. We read in fifteen-minute segments, ABAB, and switched A and B positions with each reading. In 1993 we read on a Friday in Trivandrum, at the southern tip of India, and three days later in Hanover, New Hampshire. Exhausted as we were, we remembered who had gone first thousands of miles away.

There were days when each of us received word from the same magazine; the same editor had taken a poem by one of us just as he/she rejected the other of us. One of us felt constrained in pleasure. The need for boundaries even extended to style. As Jane’s work got better and better—and readers noticed—my language and structure departed from its old habits and veered away from the kind of lyric that Jane was writing, toward irony and an apothegmatic style. My diction became more Latinate and polysyllabic, as well as syntactically complex. I was reading Gibbon, learning to use a vocabulary and sentence structure as engines of discrimination. Unconsciously,

I was choosing to be as unlike Jane as I could. Still, her poetry influenced and enhanced my own. Her stubborn and unflagging commitment turned its power upon me and exhorted me. My poems got better in this house. When my *Old and New Poems* came out in 1990, the positive reviews included something like this sentence: "Hall began publishing early . . . but it was not until he left his teaching job and returned to the family farm in New Hampshire with his second wife the poet Jane Kenyon that . . ." I published *Kicking the Leaves* in 1978 when Jane published *From Room to Room*. It was eight years before we published our next books: her *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, my *The Happy Man*. (When I told Jane my title her reaction was true Jane: "Sounds too depressed.") I had also been working on drafts of *The One Day*, maybe my best book. Then Jane wrote *Let Evening Come*, *Constance*, and the twenty late poems that begin *Otherwise*. Two years after her death, a review of Jane began with a sentence I had been expecting. It was uttered in respect, without a sneer, and said that for years we had known of Jane Kenyon as Donald Hall's wife but from now on we will know of Donald Hall as Jane Kenyon's husband.

We did not show each other early drafts. (It's a bad habit. The comments of another become attached to the words of a poem, steering it or preventing it from following its own way.) But when we had worked over a poem in solitude for a long time, our first reader was the other. I felt anxious about showing Jane new poems, and often invented reasons for delay. Usually, each of us saved up three or four poems before showing them to the other. One day I would say, "I left some stuff on your footstool," or Jane would tell me, "Perkins, there are some things on your desk." Waiting for a response, each of us already knew some of what the other would say. If ever I repeated a word—a habit acquired from Yeats—I knew that Jane would cross it out. Whenever she used verbal auxiliaries she knew I would simplify, and "it was raining" would become "it rained." By and large we ignored the predicted advice, which we had already heard in our heads and dismissed. Jane kept her work clear of dead metaphor, knowing my crankiness on the subject, and she would exult when she found one in my drafts: "Perkins! Here's a dead metaphor!" These encounters were important but not easy. Sometimes we turned polite with each other: "Oh, really! I thought that was the best part . . ." (False laugh.) Jane told others—people questioned us about how we worked together—that I approached her holding a sheaf of her new poems saying, "These are going to be *good*!" to which she would say, "Going to be, eh?" She told people that she would climb back to her study, carrying the poems covered with my illegible comments, thinking, "Perkins just doesn't get it. And then," she would continue, "I'd do everything he said."

Neither of us did everything the other said. Reading *Otherwise* I find words I wanted her to change, and sometimes I still think I was right. But **we helped each other greatly**. She saved me a thousand gaffes, cut my wordiness and straightened out my syntax. She seldom told me that anything was *good*. "This is almost done," she'd say, "but you've got to do this in two lines not three." Or, "You've brought this a long way, Perkins"—without telling me if I had brought it to a good place. Sometimes her praise expressed its own limits. "You've taken this as far as the intellect can take it." When she said, "It's finished. Don't change a word," I would ask, "But is it any *good*? Do you *like* it?" I pined for her praise, and seldom got it. I remember one evening in 1992 when we sat in the living room and she read through the manuscript of *The Museum of Clear Ideas*. Earlier she had seen only a few poems at a time, and she had not been enthusiastic. I watched her dark face as she turned the pages. Finally she looked over at me and tears started from her eyes. "Perkins, I don't *like* it!" Tears came to my eyes too, and I said, rapidly, "That's okay. That's okay." (That book was anti-Jane in its manner, or most of it was, dependant on syntax and irony, a little like Augustan poetry, more than on images.) When we looked over each other's work, it was essential that we never lie to each other. Even when Jane was depressed, I never praised a poem unless I meant it; I never withheld blame. If either of us had felt that the other was pulling punches, it would have ruined what was so essential to our house.

We were each other's readers but we could not be each other's only readers. I mostly consulted friends and editors by mail, so many helpers that I will not try to list them, poets from my generation and poets Jane's age and even younger. Jane worked regularly, the last dozen years of her life, with the poet Joyce Peseroff and the novelist Alice Mattison. The three of them worked wonderfully together, each supplying things that the other lacked. They fought, they laughed, they rewrote and cut and rearranged. Jane would return from a workshop exhausted yet unable to keep away from her desk, working with wild excitement to follow suggestions. The three women were not only being literary critics for each other. Each had grown up knowing that it was not permitted for females to be as aggressive as males, and all were ambitious in their art, and encouraged each other in their ambition. I felt close to Alice and Joyce, my friends as well as Jane's, but I did not stick my nose into their deliberations. If I had tried to, I would have lost a nose. Even when they met at our house, I was careful to stay apart. They met often at Joyce's in Massachusetts, because it was half way between Jane and Alice. They met in New Haven at Alice's. When I was recovering from an operation, and Jane and I didn't want to be separated, there were workshops at the Lord Jeffrey Inn in Amherst. We four ate together and made pilgrimages to Emily Dickinson's house and grave, but while they worked together I wrote alone in an adjacent room. This three-part friendship was essential to Jane's poetry.

Meantime we lived in the house of poetry, which was also the house of love and grief; the house of solitude and art; the house of Jane's depression and my cancers and Jane's leukemia. When someone died whom we loved, we went back to the poets of grief and outrage, as far back as *Gilgamesh*; often I read aloud Henry King's "The Exequy," written in the seventeenth century after the death of his young wife. Poetry gives the griever not release from grief but companionship in grief. Poetry embodies the complexities of feeling at their most intense and entangled, and therefore offers (over centuries, or over no time at all) the company of tears. As I sat beside Jane in her pain and weakness I wrote about pain and weakness. Once in a hospital I noticed that the leaves were turning. I realized that I had not noticed that they had come to the trees. It was a year without seasons, a year without punctuation. I began to write "Without" to embody the sensations of lives under dreary, monotonous assault. After I had drafted it many times I read it aloud to Jane. "That's it, Perkins," she said. "You've got it. That's it." Even in this poem written at her mortal bedside there was companionship.

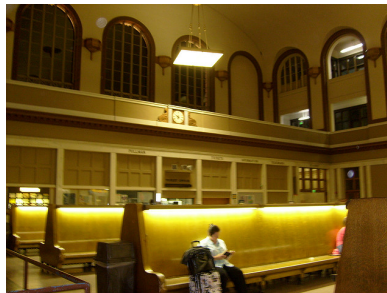
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The English language is like a lover, and the poem is like a body.

—Li-Young Lee

Poet **Li-Young Lee** was born in Djakarta, Indonesia in 1957 to Chinese political exiles. Both of Lee's parents came from powerful Chinese families: Lee's maternal great-grandfather was the first president of the Republic of China, and Lee's father had been the personal physician to Mao Tse-tung. Anti-Chinese sentiment began to foment in Indonesia, however, and Lee's father was arrested and held as a political prisoner for a year. After his release, the Lee family fled through Hong Kong, Macau, and Japan, arriving in the United States in 1964. Lee and his parents moved from Seattle to Pennsylvania, where Dr. Lee attended seminary and eventually became a Presbyterian minister in the small community of Vandergrift. Though his father read to him frequently as a child, Li-Young Lee did not begin to seriously write poems until a student at the University of Pittsburgh. —from The Poetry Foundation

Today's poem of longing echoes Lee's experience of a Chinese diaspora where vast numbers of people have been uprooted from ancestral cultures but are not totally accepted in their adopted lands. Li-Young Lee reads his striking poem, introducing it by describing the comfort he feels in train stations versus airports: <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/station>



Station

Your attention please.

Train number 9, The Northern Zephyr,
destined for River's End, is now boarding.

All ticketed passengers,
please proceed to the gate marked *Evening*.

Your attention please. Train number 7,
Leaves Blown By, bound for The Color of Thinking

and Renovated Time, is now departing.

All ticketed passengers may board
behind my eyes.

Your attention please. Train number 4, The Twentieth Century,
has joined The Wind Undisguised

to become The Written Word.
Those who never heard their names
may inquire at the uneven margin of this story
or else consult the ivy
lying awake under our open window.

Your attention please,
The Music,
arriving out of hidden ground

and endlessly beginning, is now the flower,
now the fruit, now the cup and cheer

under branches more ancient
than our grandmother's hair.

Passengers with memories of the sea
may board leisurely at any unmarked gate.

Fateful members of the foam may proceed to cloud and
Veronica.

Your attention please.
Under falling petals, never think about home.

Seeing begins in the dark.

Listening stills us.

Yesterday has gone ahead
to meet you.

Your attention please. Train number 66,
Unbidden Song, soon to be
the full heart's quiet, takes no passengers.

Please leave your baggage with the attendant
at the window marked: *Your Name Sprung from Hiding*.

An intrepid perfume is waging our rescue.

You may board at either end of Childhood.

—by Li-Young Lee (from *Behind My Eyes*, 2006)



POET NOTES

Li-Young Lee comes from a really old-fashioned Chinese family. If his father was napping, Lee was not allowed to cross the line of his head. Or, if his mother or father were sitting in particular ways, Lee could not walk past them or sit with his shoe facing them. He had to be very conscious of their bodies. Lee's parents were classically educated, which meant that they knew hundreds of Chinese poems, and big passages of the Zhuang-zi (one of the foundational texts of Daoism) and Lao Tze. His father would recite Chinese poems, and sometimes weep after speaking them.

Lee has received numerous awards for his writing. Among them are the 1990 Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poetry for his book of poetry *The City in Which I Love You* and his prose memoir, *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance*, which received the 1995 American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. Other books include *Book of My Nights* (2001) and *Behind My Eyes* (2006) and *Breaking the Alabaster Jar: Conversations with Li-Young Lee* (2006). Lee lives in Chicago with his wife Donna and their two sons.

EDUCATION

*I went to the University of Pittsburgh and I was into biochemistry or organic chemistry, or something like that. I walked into a poetry class and the guy teaching was Ed Ochester. He was a great teacher, and I started reading his poems. I was just knocked out. He introduced me to contemporary American poetry. He showed me Gerald Stern and Phil Levine's work. I think I had a double major in biochemistry and English. But **I left college because I was having a miserable time. I was daydreaming half of the time and I had a lot of personal problems at home. My father was sick a lot, and I was married young. I felt like a stranger. I wasn't a college student.** . . . Later, I spent a year at the University of Arizona because Ed Ochester told me I should go to a writing program. He took me seriously, and if he hadn't I don't know what would have happened to me. I think I would have been in jail or something. But I went there and met some great people. I spent a year there and dropped out. I went to State University of New York at Brockport, and that was one of the most important years of my life. I dropped out and never finished, but they just gave me an honorary doctorate. There were great teachers and great people. They taught me how to read. I don't think I even knew how to read English until I went to Brockport. All of the time I was one of those kids who just kind of got lost in the system. **I never really learned how to read, but I kind of darted around that. I remember being in literature classes as an undergrad at Pitt and not understanding what I was reading. I didn't understand the grammar and the vocabulary; you have to understand that all of our language at home was Chinese. My parents forbade us from speaking English. My mother would not answer me unless I answered her in Chinese.** —Li-Young Lee*

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Li-Young Lee

*To this day, when I am reading prose it's like dishwater, but when I am reading poetry it's like the real liqueur, the real thing. . . . It feels the same way as when you touch the body or face of a lover. It's foreign. So it's the same thing when I am using the language. I feel like I am touching the body of someone I love very much. **The English language is like a lover, and the poem is like a body.***

*What happens is when I am writing a poem—and I am not kidding—when I write a poem, writing from left to right, my elbow will only go so far before it is uncomfortable. That for me is a line break. **The arc of my elbow determines as much as my ear, and as much as my eye or the ache in my foot or the kink in my back. All of that figures into writing. It is a physical thing.** So even the arc of my elbow will decide how far I will go with that line . . . My experience of time is different when I am writing longhand. Somehow the words cost more; it costs you more libido to write the words out along the whole page with your hand . . . **I want the body in there; I want the body laboring. I want the poem to have some of the body's labor in it, some of the fragrance.***

I'm highly aware that I'm a guest in the language. I'm wondering if that's not the truth for all of us, that somehow we're all guests in language, that once we start speaking any language somehow we bow to that language at the same time we bend that language to us.

*We feel very present when we're breathing in. The problem is, that when we're breathing in, we can't speak. So presence and silence have something to do with each other . . . **When I'm reading, I'm reading with my toes, my knees, and the hair on the back of my neck . . . I'm reading with my whole body, my whole person, and my experience is very profound and deep. My sense is that poetry is the deepest and highest form of yoga that we can practice; the highest form of religion. Because when we're working on a poem, we're connecting, or linking or yoking ourselves to our most complete nature, which is God. So my sense is writing poetry or making art is yogic in that it links us to our complete presence.***



Today's poet, **C. Dale Young**, received a message from a seventeen-year-old boy who said that *Torn* was the first book he had ever read that truly spoke to him, a book in which he was able to see himself.

I have, over the years, received a number of letters, emails, etc. about my poems. An email, from a young man who is just coming to terms with the fact he is gay, almost had me in tears. He thanked me profusely and said it was the first time he had read a book in which he saw himself, someone like him. And I remembered how at this young man's age I read E.M. Forster's "Maurice". When I read it, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. In this novel, I found myself. And even though it would be years before I admitted I was gay, here in this novel were the feelings I had known existed in me since childhood. I never knew what it was or what to call it. I assumed something was wrong with me, wrong with my head. I can remember praying to God to make me more like my brother. So, receiving this email from a 17-year-old boy brought me almost to tears. I remember how much I wanted to write to Forster and thank him for Maurice. But Forster was already gone. This email is better than a Nobel Prize. If my tinkering and playing with words finds someone, communicates with someone, then all those hours and hours and moments of neuroses were worth it. In the end, I cannot shake Forster's own words: "Just connect."

—C. Dale Young—

Torn

There was the knife and the broken syringe
then the needle in my hand, the Tru-Cut
followed by the night-blue suture.

The wall behind registration listed a man
with his face open. Through the glass doors,
I saw the sky going blue to black as it had

24 hours earlier when I last stood there gazing off
into space, into the nothingness of that town.
Bat to the head. Knife to the face. They tore

down the boy in an alleyway, the broken syringe
skittering across the sidewalk. No concussion.
But the face torn open, the blood congealed

and crusted along his cheek. *Stitch up the faggot
in bed 6* is all the ER doctor had said.

Queasy from the lack of sleep, I steadied
my hands as best as I could after cleaning up
the dried blood. There was the needle
and the night-blue suture trailing behind it.

There was the flesh torn and the skin open.
I sat there and threw stitch after stitch
trying to put him back together again.

When the tears ran down his face,
I prayed it was a result of my work
and not the work of the men in the alley.

Even though I knew there were others to be seen,
I sat there and slowly threw each stitch.
There were always others to be seen. There was

always the bat and the knife. I said nothing,
and the tears kept welling in his eyes.
And even though I was told to be "quick and dirty,"

told to spend less than 20 minutes, I sat there
for over an hour closing the wound so that each edge
met its opposing match. I wanted him

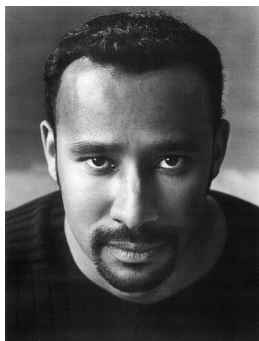
to be beautiful again. *Stitch up the faggot in bed 6.*
Each suture thrown reminded me I would never be safe
in that town. There would always be the bat

and the knife, always a fool willing to tear me open
to see the dirty faggot inside. And when they
came in drunk or high with their own wounds,

when they bragged about their scuffles with the knife
and that other world of men, I sat there and sutured.
I sat there like an old woman and sewed them up.

Stitch after stitch, the slender exactness of my fingers
attempted perfection. I sat there and sewed them up.

—by C. Dale Young



POET NOTES

C. Dale Young is a physician—an oncology radiologist—and has said that because of the demands of his work, he only writes four or five poems a year and works continuously on them until they are complete.

Young practices medicine full-time and teaches in the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers. He is the author of *The Day Underneath the Day* (TriQuarterlyBooks, 2001), *The Second Person* (Four Way Books, 2007), and *Torn* (Four Way Books, 2011). He is the winner of several notable literary prizes. His poems have appeared in many anthologies and magazines, including *The Best American Poetry*, *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation*, *Legitimate Dangers: American Poets of the New Century*, *American Poetry Review*, *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Poetry*. Young lives in San Francisco with his partner the biologist and composer, Jacob Bertrand.

Young's poetry plays with repetition of rhyme, line fragments and the ends of lines and often directly address his work as a physician. The repetition gives the reader a chance to revisit the same territory through the course of a poem and to emphasize the importance of what might seem like small details. "Torn," the title poem for Young's 2011 book of the same name, is a good example of this.

IN HIS OWN WORDS—C. Dale Young

*"Torn" is a poem that for me is filled with contradictions and doubt about humanity. That human beings are capable of tenderness and the ability to heal while at the same time being capable of incomprehensible brutality is something I have always found compelling and powerful. **Many of the poems in my book deal with these dualities and doubts. I also realized that in many ways I am torn in that I work both as a physician and as a poet.** I am also torn as a man who is part Caucasian, part Asian and part Latino. When I first assembled the first draft of the manuscript and read through it, the title Torn seemed inevitable.*

***I love poetry so much that if I help even one of my students to write the next "Ode on a Grecian Urn" then I have done a great service to poetry.** In the end I want great poems to be written and appreciated, and that is what has kept me teaching.*

As a physician, I am keenly aware of the words that come out of my mouth. I never lie to a patient, but always I must be aware that how I phrase something can have a remarkable impact on the person in front of me.** To me, the poet has a responsibility to the poem. I don't believe getting the draft down on paper is writing. To me, that is just getting the raw materials in front of you. **The real work of writing is in what many call revision. I feel my responsibility is to sit with the draft and be open to possibilities.** Many times, I want to just get the poem done. But poems are never really finished. And that desire to get it done quickly often forecloses greater possibilities for the poem. **The only responsibility I feel as a poet is to sitting and being open, to really look and look again, which is exactly what revision means.

For a long time, the narrative poem was for some reason regarded as old hat, as inherently stupid, working against new discoveries of language, et cetera et cetera. It's all nonsense you know. Narrative poetry has been one of the basic elements of any nation's poetry for as long as we know. And in recent years, I've seen among students, among manuscripts that I get, many more narrative poems of all kinds than I did, say, 10 or 15 years ago. Somehow the universe has expanded, and I think that the notion of telling stories or having strong narrative elements in poems seems, as it should, normal once again. —poet Ed Ochester



The Heart of Owl Country

Whatever blossoms is rooted
in the dark as, item

the delicate purple comfrey flower
supported by a brutish taproot

that powers itself into the subsoil
and splits the shale a dozen feet

beneath me, so that the bumblebees
tumble in a drunken frenzy here, and

item, how if I tend my loneliness,
which is no rarer than yours,

friend, I grow stronger,
so that my fists open, and the garden

becomes a natural metaphor for what
we have always known:

that only by going deeply
as possible into our dark

can we discover ourselves
to others, and even though

the stutterer I have always been
would like to say “we will never

die” I know that we will utterly
except for what we yield to friends

or progeny—that’s the garden part—
and I remember now what I’d forgotten

for years, how, once, when we were
driving to my mother’s, in New York State,

at twilight passing through a large marsh
my daughter said *look!* and in every dead

tree there was an owl, hundreds of them,
stupid in the light, like a faculty senate,

staring incomprehendingly at the swamp
and the cars on the interstate, so still

one could have knocked them off their
perches with a stick and my daughter

screamed, delighted, “this must be
the heart of owl country!” and it

was: those soft fists of feathers
waiting for their hour, long

after we’d passed lifting into the spring air
on their solitary flights, each silent

in its large community, alert and perfect.

—by *Ed Ochester*

from *Unreconstructed: Poems Selected and New* (Autumn House Press, 2007)



POET NOTES

Edwin Frank Ochester (born 1939) is an American poet and editor. Born in Brooklyn, New York, he grew up in Queens and was educated at Cornell University, Harvard University, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Currently, Ochester is a core faculty member of the Bennington College MFA Writing Seminars. His books and awards are numerous. For nearly twenty years Ochester served as director of the writing program at the University of Pittsburgh. Since 1972 he and his wife Britt Horner have lived on a small farm in Armstrong County, Pennsylvania. They have two grown children and one grandchild.

Since 1979, Ochester has served as general editor of the renowned Pitt Poetry Series, published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. It is one of the largest and best known lists of contemporary American poetry by any publisher. Poets published by Ochester in the Pitt Series include Sharon Olds, Billy Collins, Ted Kooser, Denise Duhamel, Larry Levis, Kathleen Norris, Alicia Ostriker, Etheridge Knight and Gary Soto. Mr. Ochester says: *Most of these (poets) were not very well known when they started to publish with Pitt, and many of our younger poets who aren't well known yet are terrific and deserve (and will get) wider readership. That's one of the pleasures of the business—to "discover" new poets and watch their reputations grow. Another pleasure, for me, is making eclectic choices.* Under Ochester's leadership, the Pitt Poetry Series has maintained a reputation for feisty independence—so much so that "the pit bull poetry series" is an inevitable pun.

Ochester's father was an insurance man and his mother was a secretary. Ochester says his grandmother who worked boiling diapers, had a sort of natural kindness, a gift for easing pain for people, friends of hers, the kids in the family, her own children. She was a remarkable human being who had a huge influence on him. *She was the one who raised me really because my mother went to work. My grandmother was there every day when I came home from school. For a long time, because I had asthma as a kid—my parents had bought a little place in upstate New York outside of Newburgh—and every summer to improve my health, also to simply improve their lives, my grandmother and I were dropped off in that place, and my parents would come back once a week to bring groceries, but I lived with her for three months at a time, and we had many conversations and we got along amicably. She never disciplined me in any way at all, so I had a great relationship with her.*

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Edwin Frank Ochester

*American poetry is bigger than one or two schools, one or two ways of doing things. I like to think I irritate or, even better, outrage certain academic critics and poetry gangs with the eclecticism of the Pitt list. I do think we've helped increase the readership for poetry: many of our books have sold more than 10,000 copies, and a couple have even reached 100,000. We're also one of the few poetry publishers—maybe the only one?—that doesn't require subsidies. **We need to remember Kenneth Patchen's gentle observation: "People who say they love poetry and never buy any are a bunch of cheap sons-of-bitches".***

There's been a holdover from high modernism, I think—the notion that if poetry is difficult it must be good. And if poetry is easy to read, and I'm not talking about the emotional complexity, but that if it's easy to read, it's not as good. And if you look at most any poetic tradition from around the world, you start to see the nonsense of that.

***Whitman said: "Stand up for the stupid and the crazy".** And I think if there is one moral teaching I can remember, I think it was when I was about 13 or 14, I got on my bike and to the horror of my parents rode out to Whitman's birthplace on Long Island and the nice lady who*

was in charge gave me some pamphlets on Whitman and that was the phrase that stuck with me: “Stand up for the stupid and the crazy” . . . In school, I was the butt of jokes and picked on, but not so much that I wasn’t able to rescue some people who were much lower in the pecking order than I. That’s my idea of religion, I guess. . . . Organized religion has created so much misery for so many people, so many deaths, so many massacres, so many cruelties, but I think that there is, and it’s observable in ordinary people and not just in our own age, but going back as far as written records, a kind of sympathy for human beings, the wish to help other human beings. It’s a kind of natural, inbred Sermon on the Mount, “do unto others.” And that’s what I see, you know, rather than original sin.

I was strongly drawn to today's poet, **Sara Henning**, because of her interest in science, in particular the human body, a subject that permeates the convergence of my personal life and professional work. And, I was drawn to this particular poem because it compares two seemingly dissonant images and braids them together in a compelling way to create a haunting resonance. Her work inspires me to take on such a writing challenge myself.



Ms Henning's poem is autobiographical: the memory of being almost torn from the sky by twin tornadoes that devastated Pilger, Nebraska in June 2014, and the intense longing inscribed by the speaker and her absent lover. Ms. Henning's hope was: *that I could write about two different invocations of a trauma in a way that felt both susceptible and revelatory—without the comparative junctions feeling arbitrary, indelicate, or gratuitous. . . . I see the speaker's near-death experience in the plane is punctuated by her desire for the lapsed lover, a character who returns through flashback at the poem's finish. His catalytic relationship with the speaker—invoking a precarious Eros that threatens to shatter her into ecstasy—is left intentionally unresolved. The flashback, predicated on comfort, is sinew between two events that have no closure for the speaker. . . . Perhaps only a turn to language can deflect and resuscitate both speaker and reader out of such a state of terror and longing.*

During the Tornado, I'm Thinking of Stars

June 16, 2014

They're calling them sisters, funnels grafted
to the same spine of rotating air, but I know
they're lovers by how my jet turns wet

and reckless between squalls, by how the squalls
are raptured from the same nexus of desire.
But I'm thinking of your hands on my body,

not the storm. I'm thinking of your back stained
with the sun's reconnaissance after a day
of splitting wood, not unstable air pressed

to the craft's fuselage. On our way to the airport,
cottonwoods throng across asphalt, their catkins
clinging to each tire's underbelly, while broken

power lines stretch, lithe and sinuous, in slicks
of rain. Haven't we all known darkness like this?
The kind that requires a wind-up radio and ends

with the only clear station lilting news of crushed
silos and missing children? The kind the plane
taking me away from you tries to rise through

but, overcome, turns instead to a gale's handfast
ceremony—luggage breaching in the cargo
hold, a woman's head quick and loose against

the plane's thermoplastic wall? As my plane,
not felled but wounded, hunts for any runway
threshold that will have it, I'm thinking of last

summer's solstice, about the man who coaxed us
toward his telescope, the one promising
Saturn's curves swathed in mist, rings enticing

a brusque liaison with Mars. Yet, as he thumbed
the focusing knob and urged my head toward
the eyepiece, Libra's quadrangle hid away

in unconsummated trespass; Saturn, cruel beauty,
gave her body to the dark. As I feared the forces
that begin and end our bond to everything,

you only kissed me like a tempest plunges itself
into the border of a larger vortex before the surge
begins. You wouldn't stop kissing me.

—by *Sara Henning*



POET NOTES

Sara Henning is the author of *A Sweeter Water*, her debut collection of poetry, as well as two chapbooks, *Garden Effigies* and *To Speak of Dahlias*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in such journals as *Quarterly West*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Meridian*,

and *RHINO*. Winner of the 2015 Lynda Hull Memorial Poetry Prize, she is currently a doctoral student in English and Creative Writing at the University of South Dakota, where she serves as co-director of the Tumbleweed Graduate Reading Series, as associate editor of Sundress Publications, and as assistant editor of *Rogue Agent*, a Sundress-affiliated journal for work that inhabits the body.

ABOUT THIS POEM

The following remarks by Sara Henning are from an interview conducted by Rappahannock Review who published Sara's poem in their December 2014 issue.

On June 16, 2014, rare twin tornadoes killed a child and injured nineteen individuals in northeastern Nebraska (the locus of the damage happening in the small town of Pilger). On that day, I was flying from Louisville, Kentucky, where I grade AP Literature exams every summer, back to Sioux Falls, South Dakota (I currently live and study in Vermillion, South Dakota, about an hour south of there). My plane was caught in the storm and severely injured by crosswinds. Luckily, the pilot was able to recover control of our damaged plane and proceeded to land us in a small airport in Lincoln, Nebraska for the night. While we were in the air, the turbulence caused injuries to luggage and minimally to passengers (I escaped physically unscathed, though I had to use the sick bag), but it was the collective fear that permeated the plane that refuses to let go of me: people were praying, holding hands, and fear soon transitioned to desperation. I don't think I would have had the bravado to write this poem if I didn't have direct experience with the event in question. Doing so without context would make me fear that my poem would objectify or reappropriate the experience to self-seeking ends. My hope was to commemorate the devastation happening in northeastern Nebraska through my own brush with death, which in comparison to many who suffered in this incident, is trifling. At the moment, though I have had to travel widely since the event, I have not been able to bring myself to fly.

It was important to me to make sure that I correctly represented a tornado's meteorological and geophysical processes—scientific accuracy in poems is sacred to me. It is my belief that one must understand the intricacies behind the subjects one is attempting to render, and should be able to defend his or her position with research. Effective research often leads to effective writing, and I am not the first to say this. For me, research often provides me the necessary caveats to reach, either directly or tangentially, transcendent moments in my writing. Open-mindedness, research, and innovation are my favorite muses.

IN HER OWN WORDS—Sara Henning

Ms. Henning began college as a Genetics major on a pre-med track.

*My predilection for science led me into poetry, rather than vice versa. **The modes by which I encounter the world and by association, my writing, are deeply influenced by my interest and dedication to science and more importantly, to the human body.***

*I have always considered the act of writing to stem from the body. Writing is an embodied act, fusing the head, the hands, and the heart. When I am writing, I divest myself of borders and just enter the field of language. I feel, and then I think. When I'm thinking, I'm generally on my Smartphone researching (behavior of animals, scientific variables, perjured women, issues of the psyche and its aperture). Then, I internalize my research and feel my way onto paper. The birthing of a poem in this way can vary from a week to several months, and the revision process, when I am honing, sculpting, and providing sinew, can culminate in a day or a year. **I never give my poems time limits, and I never rush their publication.** When the poem is ready, it will let me know.*

Let's be honest: I owe my artistic life to Muriel Rukeyser. Without her poetics of lived social justice, equality, and feminism, many strong female writers could not have followed in her stead. One of her mentees, Anne Sexton, even called her "mother of us all." I admire the feminist social activist poets who followed her, poets who demanded that society be accountable for its behavior.

I am a jumble of inconsistencies and contradictions. Just when you think you know me, I can behave in a way that might leave you scratching your head. I'm obsessed when it comes to folding a fitted sheet "correctly" before it goes in the linen closet, but I don't care much at all whether the bed gets made once it has been slept in. I never kill spiders, flies, or ants—it's all catch and release at our house—except for the mosquito who gets three warnings before I send it on to its next incarnation. I'll let the unmowed grass grow high around the rabbit nest in the lawn, but I feel compelled to edge the flowers beds as soon as the grass encroaches. I love high school musicals but will likely turn down your invitation to go to the opera. I like today's poem for its unapologetic candidness, for its humanness. By questioning what is "the normal range" of happiness, poet **Rebekah Remington** encourages the acceptance of our own differences and deviations from the norm.



Happiness Severity Index

Though in the lower standard deviation, I fall, the statistician says,
within the normal range of happiness. Therefore, no drugs today.

What about tomorrow? What if doodling stars isn't enough?
Will I be asked to color the rainbow one more time?

Name three wishes that might come true?
List everything I've been given within a minute?

Though within the normal range of happiness, I score poor
on bird appreciation, poor on oboe joy. My responses, in fact,

seem to indicate an overall confusion concerning joy itself.
What did I mean that during parties I choose the sofa

like a sick cat? That when tattoos are dispensed I'm first
in line? That books full of other people's misery

make the beach infinitely more pleasant? Stargazing is another weakness.
Too much I examine the patch of dirt where nothing grows

where buried curiosa aren't deep enough, though in Short Answer
I'm all for dancing alone in a silken robe. Friends call.

Mostly the machine answers. Mozart makes me cry.
I kill spiders without guilt. To make up for this

I take the kids to the golden arches play area.
A positive indicator. Also, interest in the existential

is minimal. I approve of make-up and ice cream.
When I wake early, I get out of bed. When I wallow

in planetary counterpoint, it never lasts. And here's what really saves me:
if I were a ghost I'd be Casper. If I were a tradition

I'd be a dreidel. I like the rain. When the boat drifts off
I wave. When the dog runs off I follow.

—by Rebekah Remington



POET NOTES

Rebekah Remington holds a BA from Johns Hopkins University and an MFA from the University of Michigan. Her poetry has appeared in *AGNI* online, *Blackbird*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Smartish Pace*, *Rattle* (where today's poem was first published), and elsewhere. Ms. Remington is the recipient of two Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Awards in poetry. *She lives in Catonsville, Maryland with her husband and two sons, and is an adjunct professor of creative writing at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.* In addition to writing, Ms. Remington has worked as a speech-language pathologist for the Kennedy Krieger Institute and the Baltimore City Public Schools. Remington's chapbook *Asphalt* (CityLit 2013) was selected by Marie Howe for the Clarinda Harriss Poetry Award. Howes says: *I loves how Remington's mind moves from this to that in some utterly lived syllogism ('What looks like failure is something else'). I love how the poet—desperate as the rest of us—loves the world.*

IN HER OWN WORDS—Rebekah Remington

While it's difficult to comment on the exact intentions of each of my poems, I wanted to explore the undercurrent of anxiety that pervades contemporary American life. I grew up in a rural suburb of Baltimore County. My father was an Episcopal priest, and though I usually write outside the confessional mode, my poems have an autobiographical lean. Our house was adjacent to the church cemetery, which served as a wonderful, if somewhat macabre, playground. The boundary between the secular and religious was often blurred, and this haziness has informed much of my work. At the same time, growing up I felt a strange disjunction between the language of the liturgy, as beautiful as it is, and belief, which, in that community at least, tended to be private, mercurial and heterogeneous.

As young as five or six I remember being told *Get over it*. Relatives whispered *She's so sensitive. Why does she care what others think*. Time marched on and nosebleeds came with stress: *Quit over-reacting! Wipe that smile (or frown) off your face. We don't care what you're feeling. It's only a movie; it's only a poem; it's only a song for heaven's sake! Stop crying, or go to your room*. As an adult I spent nine years in two different learning environments—one academic, the other spiritual—directed by teachers who helped tame my habit of taking “the personal” to heart. It was actually a good experience to curb the over-reactions of the insistent ego, but eventually the Buddhist “middle way” proved to make the most sense. Press me, though, and I will side with “the personal” any day, especially when it comes to embodied poetry.

I take **Tony Hoagland**'s poems personally. If you read them with an open mind and a conscious body, they will evoke your humanity and thereby your empathy. You might laugh out loud, or cry quietly. I say trust it. Let it happen. Let the poem inform your life. Hoagland is not afraid to examine uncomfortable material, developing his poems into accessible meditations. Even after twenty plus years of releasing collections, his voice remains current and vibrant.



Personal

Don't take it personal, they said;
but I did, I took it all quite personal—

the breeze and the river and the color of the fields;
the price of grapefruit and stamps,

the wet hair of women in the rain—
And I cursed what hurt me

and I praised what gave me joy,
the most simple-minded of possible responses.

The government reminded me of my father,
with its deafness and its laws,

and the weather reminded me of my mom,
with her tropical squalls.

Enjoy it while you can, they said of Happiness
Think first, they said of Talk

Get over it, they said
at the School of Broken Hearts

but I couldn't and I didn't and I don't
believe in the clean break;

I believe in the compound fracture
served with a sauce of dirty regret,

I believe in saying it all
and taking it all back

and saying it again for good measure
while the air fills up with *I'm-Sorries*

like wheeling birds
and the trees look seasick in the wind.

Oh life! Can you blame me
for making a scene?

You were that yellow caboose, the moon
disappearing over a ridge of cloud.

I was the dog, chained in some fool's backyard;
barking and barking:

trying to convince everything else
to take it personal too.

—by *Tony Hoagland*

Source: *Poetry* (July/August 2009)



POET NOTES

Tony Hoagland was born in 1953 in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He grew up in white middle-class American suburbia with lots of money and monumental emotional upheavals within family. His father (an Army doctor), according to Hoagland, intentionally ruined his own marriage and then died of a heart attack a short time later. At seventeen, the young poet lost his mother to cancer.

Hoagland attended and dropped out of several colleges, picked apples and cherries in the Northwest, lived in communes, and followed The Grateful Dead. He eventually received an MFA from University of Arizona, and currently teaches in the graduate writing program of the University of Houston and in the Warren Wilson MFA program.

In an interview with Miriam Sagan about his poetic influences, Hoagland said, "if I were going to place myself on some aesthetic graph, my dot would be equidistant between Sharon Olds and Frank O'Hara, between the confessional (where I started) and the social (where I have aimed myself). In a 2002 citation regarding Hoagland's Academy Award in Literature, The American Academy of Arts and Letters said that "Hoagland's imagination ranges thrillingly across manners, morals, sexual doings, and kinds of speech lyrical and candid, intimate as well as wild."

Tony Hoagland's publications include: *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty* (Graywolf Press, 2010) *What Narcissism Means To Me* (Graywolf Press, 2003) *Donkey Gospel* (Graywolf Press, 1998) *Sweet Ruin* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992). His newest book, *Application for Release from the Dream: Poems* by Graywolf Press, was released in September 2015.

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Tony Hoagland

I want the creature and the angel to both be in the poem, you know. I don't want to write poetry of angels that doesn't have the beast in it, and I don't want to write a bestial kind of violent, craving, raging poetry that doesn't have some kind of possibility of transcendence in it. ... Another way to say it is I believe that a poem is a body, and should have a body. There are poets who don't have body—I'm using that word sort of metaphorically—don't have body in their poems. I don't know. There's room for everybody, but I like a lot of body in the poem.

The friction of experience should serve as the ground poems arise from—a poem is a reaction to experience. When you're younger you may write terrific sex poems, but then the fires cool and you change a bit. Other kinds of occasions and nuances make themselves available. This gives way to other types of poems, other shapes, other registers and observations. There's always something new to write about, something that has never been described before. Staying alive is about the perpetuation of curiosity, and there's always something new to be curious about.

A poem does have to stay taut in plot and in proportion. However, at the same time, it has to speed up and slow down and change register—all in the name of keeping the reader alert and attentive. In that sense, like a song, or music, it has to have a melody which keeps developing, and a rhythmic regularity underneath, which stabilizes and carries it forward. The reason why a good poem is such a little miracle is that it provides both its own supporting music and its improvisatory verbal surface. I especially like poems that shift their register from mode to mode, from the narrative to the psychological to the metaphysical, or existential—the elevation of a poem's stakes are part of its drama. Ideally, it is not just the speaker's happiness which is on the line, but the speaker's soul.

Nobody knows what a poem is, anyway, and therefore the challenge of writing one is always difficult—impossible—enough to remind you what a hacker you are. It's true, some poets achieve a kind of technical "competence" which allows them to fire off poem after poem, but the best poets are disconsolate, searching, and restless. The human predicament—to be splintered off from creation—is insistently demanding new kinds of effort and inquiry.

The film *Woodstock* (1970) was eventually selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant". **Today's aesthetically significant poem by Mary Oliver conjures a key memory for me from that movie, a scene I've never forgotten. A middle-aged guy, working solo, is cheerfully cleaning out the portable toilets for a sea of music-loving, drug-taking hippies. There's no disdain, no bitterness. Only this: "Glad to be doing it for these kids. My son's here too. And I got one over in Vietnam too. Up in the DMZ now, flying helicopters."**

Here's a 3 minute clip of that segment from *Woodstock*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-V0OqUMoRP4>



Singapore

In Singapore, in the airport,
a darkness was ripped from my eyes.
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.
A woman knelt there, washing something
in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach
and I felt, in my pocket, for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it.
Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.
Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees.
A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain
rising and falling.
A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

When the woman turned I could not answer her face.
Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and

neither could win.
She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this?
Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.
But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor,
which is dull enough.
She is washing the tops of the airport ashtrays, as big as
hubcaps, with a blue rag.
Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing.
She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river.
Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life.
And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop
and fly down to the river.
This probably won't happen.
But maybe it will.
If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?

Of course, it isn't.
Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only
the light that can shine out of a life. I mean
the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth,
the way her smile was only for my sake; I mean
the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds.

—by *Mary Oliver*
Poetry, July 1988



POET NOTES

Mary Oliver was born in 1935 in Maple Heights, Ohio. She attended both Ohio State University and Vassar College, but did not receive a degree from either institution. As a young poet, Oliver was deeply influenced by Edna St. Vincent Millay and briefly lived in Millay's home, helping Norma Millay organize her sister's papers. Oliver is notoriously reticent about her private life, but it was during this period that she met her long-time partner, Molly Malone Cook. The couple moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, and the surrounding Cape Cod landscape has had a marked influence on Oliver's work.

A prolific writer of both poetry and prose, and recipient of many awards, Oliver publishes a new collection every year or two. At last count there were 24 volumes of poetry. Main themes continue to be the intersection between the human and the natural world, as well as the limits of human consciousness and language in articulating such a meeting. I particularly like her scholarly books: *A Poetry Handbook* (1994) and *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse* (1998) about building poems: meter and rhyme, form and diction, sound and sense.

In addition to such major awards as the Pulitzer Prize (*American Primitive*, 1983) and the National Book Award (*New and Selected Poems*, 1992), Oliver has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

LOCAL NOTE

Mary Oliver was the Elliston Visiting Professor at University of Cincinnati, in 1986.

IN HER OWN WORDS—Mary Oliver

The most regretful people on earth are those who felt the call to creative work, who felt their own creative power restive and uprising, and gave to it neither power nor time.

Listen. Are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?

I tell you this to break your heart, by which I mean only that it break open and never close again to the rest of the world.

Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift.

To tell the truth I don't want to let go of the wrists of idleness, I don't want to sell my life for money, I don't even want to come in out of the rain.

Instructions for living a life. Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.

Ten times a day something happens to me like this—some strengthening throb of amazement—some good sweet empathic ping and swell. This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.

**THE END
of April Gifts**



Today marks the completion of ten years of **April Gifts** from **Little Pocket Poetry**. There are now 300 annotated poems in the archives! It's been a long and lovely ride, but my muse tells me it's time to bring this project to its full conclusion, and move on to other adventures. Although there will be no April Gifts in 2017, you will likely hear from me from time to time when a poem just begs to be shared. Mostly, I will be focusing on my own poem making, and developing classes, workshops and writing experiments, some which will incorporate my experience as a somatic therapist and movement educator. I'll keep you posted as things develop.

April Gifts was a humble project born out of my own need to learn more about poetry, how poems are made, and who makes them. I have no degree or formal education related to writing, so I built my own course and along with it a desire to share some of what I learned with others. I've had an opportunity to read thousands of poems, stacks of books, and hundreds of articles and interviews. Researching, writing and organizing hundreds of thousands of words into annual collections for ten consecutive Aprils, was a bountiful labor of love. Learning how to arrange the presentations accurately and aesthetically in Yahoo and MailChimp, was an arduous task; the air made blue many a night.

I feel protective of these 300 poems. In one sense they serve as sacred totems. I told a friend that if someone wanted to get to know me, they could just read these entries across ten years. They are personal to me and no less vulnerable than an open diary.

Folks have asked me how much time I put into this project. Conservatively, I'd say that each April Gift presentation took about 10 hours from start to finish. My husband, David (Fabrey) figured that if I worked a 40-hour week on this project alone—300 entries—it would represent about a year and a half of my life out of the last ten. Of course, this is in addition to my regular full-time job which I also love. Without David's support, this project would have gone in the dumper a few times. His steady presence made it possible for me to stay anchored, focused and encouraged. In addition to moral support, he made domestic life easy on me, especially during crunch time each spring, by doing more of everything—cooking, cleaning, laundry. Plus, he brought me late-night tea and cookies, and made me laugh. I'm truly grateful for his patience, generosity and kindness.

I also want to thank four dear sweet friends who have kept me stable and sane, and frequently amused (there must be laughter!) while I steered this project through the years. Valerie Chronis Bickett, Bucky Ignatius, Annie Stapleton and Anne Steffen. Tears of joy well up in me for what you have given.

April Gifts started out small, so small my hope was that I would connect with only one other person that they might enjoy and benefit from my offerings. Well, that one imagined person grew into hundreds of actual readers who have hung out with **Little Pocket Poetry** for a decade. Many of you have shared these poems with countless others, scattering their beautiful messages far and wide in the U.S. and other countries around the globe. Without your love of poetry, your delightful responses, and our stimulating conversations across the years, I might not have continued with enthusiasm this long. My gratitude is deep and abiding.

I trust our friendship through poetry will continue into a bright future that will enrich our lives.

Kindest regards and affection,

Susan F. Glassmeyer

P.S. The last poem . . .



When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

—by *Walt Whitman*



POET NOTES

Walt Whitman (May 31, 1819 – March 26, 1892) was an American poet, essayist, and humanist. He was part of the transition between Transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his works, and is considered to be the father of free verse. In addition to his work as a poet, Whitman was a journalist, a teacher, a government clerk, and a volunteer nurse during the American Civil War.

You can find volumes written about the man, but this simple note cheered me: Mr. Whitman's major work, *Leaves of Grass*, was first published in 1855 with his own money.

After a stroke towards the end of his life, Whitman moved to Camden, New Jersey where his health further declined. He died at age 72 and his funeral became somewhat of a spectacle. A public viewing of his body was held at his Camden home where over one thousand people visited in three hours. His coffin was barely visible because of all the flowers and wreaths left for him. At the cemetery, friends gave speeches, followed by live music and refreshments!

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Walt Whitman

This is what you shall do; Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.