

Learning To Make Poems— An Introduction

Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words.

—ROBERT FROST

The poet doesn't invent. He listens.

—JEAN COCTEAU

No one can tell you how best to make the writing happen. For one poet at least, short naps have proved helpful; for him, leaving consciousness for a brief time is invitational to the inner, "poetic" voice. For myself, walking works in a similar way. I walk slowly and not to get anywhere in particular, but because the motion somehow helps the poem to begin. I end up, usually, standing still, writing something down in the small notebook I always have with me.

—MARY OLIVER

Poetry is just the evidence of life. If your life is burning well, poetry is just the ash.

—LEONARD COHEN

What makes a poem a poem, finally, is that it is unparaphrasable. There is no other way to say exactly this; it exists only in its own body of language, only in these words.

—MARK DOTY

*First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.*

—ADRIENNE RICH

WHERE EXACTLY do poems come from? On rare occasions they seem to materialize with an immediacy akin to enchantment. At other times, it's exceedingly clear that they are the product of painstaking and arduous commitment to failure after failure until out of the wreckage some semblance of a poem appears. More often than not, however, they seem simply to be the result of daily activity—reading and thinking, scribbling and revising. The question of how poems come into being has puzzled practitioners and readers of the art since time in memoriam. And while many have cited the nebulous “muse,” such an answer seems inadequate in the face of the radically different paths many poets have taken toward the writing of verse.

Whether teaching in the classroom, giving a reading, or casually conversing with friends and family, the most common question we encounter is: How do you write a poem? Implicit in this question is the puzzlement most of us have when we read a poem that *feels* right, that *sends* us in a direction we hadn't thought possible before entering the front door of the poem. At the back door, as we exit this house made of words, we wonder how it was constructed and whether the builder ever finds herself at a loss, too exhausted to consider taking on another poetry-construction project.

Certainly poetry can be about vision and inspiration, about some emotional or spiritual epiphany that sends us careening toward art as a means of expression. But if it were merely about such ecstatically fleeting moments, about hearing the song the muse sings, then the burgeoning floodwaters of inspiration might have drowned us in poems long ago; or, conversely, perhaps there would have been a dearth of poems, an artistic drought to end all droughts—for how many of us can claim the muse visits us as frequently as we wish?

The poets in this anthology have been asked to explore one of their own poems or the poetic process, to attempt to tell us how poems are born, explaining not only poetry's gestation and birth, but also the parenting that follows, the revisions that help move poetry toward independence and finally into the world of publication.

While some books on the craft of writing poems insinuate that there is a set of basic guidelines that “good” poets follow, the reality is much murkier. In our own exploration of this art form, we have discovered that each writer has his or her own patterns of behavior, his or her own liturgy or training schedule. And like most patterns of behavior, the anomalies—when the individual departs from his or her routine—sometime produce the most interesting results.

Of course, as Dan Gerber contends, poets often don't know how their poems come into being, but they can make valuable and sometimes important discoveries in the stories they make up, after the fact, about how a particular poem might have entered this world. The very act of explaining or re-creating

how a poem is written is itself an act of creation. (Doesn't the writer always start from the beginning, attempting to make over—for what feels like the very first time—the poem, the story, the very means by which word will be placed next to word, image next to image, living tissue serving as mortar?)

As we enter the vision of each poet in this volume, we may be surprised at what we find—enlivened by how certain poems mirror our own existence, instructed in certain methods of revision or drafting, inspired to take a different path that diverges from the worn patterns of our own writing. One thing is certain: we will not be disappointed with the poems that have been made and the stories about their making; we will begin to have a deeper understanding of the complexity of human endeavor, at the way art is made and remade as a means of understanding all the poems that comprise our lives.