


THE POET'S COMPANION

*A Guide to the Pleasures of
Writing Poetry*

KIM ADDONIZIO AND
DORIANNE LAUX



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*For our daughters,
Tristem and Aya;
and for our students,
who continue to inspire us.*

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Introduction

This book grew out of our daily concerns as poets, and out of our work as teachers of poetry. For several years we offered one-day intensive workshops in the San Francisco Bay Area, exploring issues and ideas with all kinds of writers. Additionally, we've taught classes in prisons, community colleges, high schools, at writers' conferences, and in university creative writing programs. Our students have been wonderfully varied: carpenters, therapists, waiters, retired persons, housewives and househusbands, photographers, word processors, systems analysts—in short, a cross-section of our community. They've ranged from absolute beginners to publishing poets with graduate degrees. All of them have had one thing in common: the desire to write poetry, and to do it well.

We wanted to create a book that would focus on both craft and process. Craft provides the tools: knowing how to make a successful metaphor, when to break a line, how to revise and rewrite—these are some of the techniques the aspiring poet must master. And the study of craft is lifelong; the exercises offered here should be useful even for experienced poets who want to further hone their skills. Process, the day-to-day struggle to articulate experience, is equally important; so we've devoted a portion of this book to the writing process itself. Within these pages you'll find not only a guide to the nuts and bolts

of how poems are made, but discussions ranging from how to tackle your subject to how to cope with rejection and self-doubt. We've also included practical information like how to submit your work for publication and what the Internet has to offer poets; and there's even a chapter on grammar, a subject too often neglected in creative writing classes.

This book can be used in a number of ways. In a semester-long class or workshop, each chapter in "Subjects for Writing" and "The Poet's Craft" might form the basis for the week's activities. "The Writing Life" can offer the student inspiration and information outside of class; further ideas for creating new poems are taken up in "Twenty-Minute Writing Exercises"—ideal when working with a group. If you're reading this book on your own, let it be your teacher, leading you towards new knowledge and enlivening your imagination. Get together with others, if possible, and assign yourselves weekly exercises from the book, and meet to share the results.

We think you'll find this an accessible guide to the pleasures of reading and writing poetry. The exercises we've developed have proven to be useful catalysts for the creation of new and interesting work, both for ourselves and our students. The poems we've chosen are ones we've loved and found to be important to our growth as poets and human beings. We've avoided including poems that are already widely available in many anthologies and textbooks, and we haven't included any of the fine world poetry available in translation; instead, this book focuses on contemporary poems by American writers, to introduce you to poetry as it is right now, with its concern for both timeless and timely subjects.

Of course, there's a rich and varied poetic tradition that we hope you are already acquainted with, or will be inspired to seek out. Poet Stanley Kunitz called the tradition of poetry "the sacred word"; the poetry being written in present times he characterized as the living word. Both are important to poets. It's crucial to read what's being written now, to see how the language is changing and evolving; new words enter it daily, while others fall into disuse or take on different meanings. It's important to speak, and listen, to a contemporary community of readers and writers. But it's equally crucial to see where the

language came from, how it was fashioned and refashioned by poets of the past. To write without any awareness of a tradition you are trying to become a part of would be self-defeating. Every artist alive responds to the history of his or her art—borrowing, stealing, rebelling against, and building on what other artists have done. This book is only a small part of the whole. Occasionally, our writing exercises suggest that you read a particular poem, but the poem is not included. We urge you to seek out those poems as models, and we encourage browsing through a particular book or anthology. The appendices to this book include further readings that will involve you more deeply with poems and poetic craft.

Most of all, we hope you'll continue to write, to read widely, and to support an art which offers profound rewards, though they're rarely material. Buy collections of poetry, go to readings, and meet others who feel a similar love of the word. In an age of consumerism and declining literacy, this is more than ever a necessity. William Carlos Williams wrote, "It is difficult to get the news from poems, but men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there." And we might add: women, too. We need more poets, not fewer, as some critics of creative writing programs would have it. We invite you to do what Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy asked: to add your light to the sum of light. Do it with patience, and love, and respect for the depth and difficulty of the task. This book is offered in that spirit.



THE POET'S COMPANION



SUBJECTS FOR WRITING

Writing and Knowing

We've been told again and again to write about what we know, but we don't trust that advice. We think our lives are dull, ordinary, boring. Other people have lives worthy of poetry, but not us. And what are the "great" poems about? The big subjects: death, desire, the nature of existence. They ask the big questions: Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going? We find it difficult to believe those subjects, those questions, can be explored and contained in a poem about working at a fast food restaurant, a poem about our best friend, a poem about washing the dishes, tarring the roof, or taking a bus across town. If C. K. Williams had believed this, he might not have written "Tar," which is at one level a poem about fixing the roof, and at another, about the end of the world. Carolyn Forché might not have written "As Children Together," a poem about her best friend which is also about how we choose one life path over another. In the nineteenth century, John Keats wrote to a nightingale, an urn, a season. Simple, everyday things that he knew. Walt Whitman described

the stars, a live oak, a field. Elizabeth Bishop wrote about catching a fish, Wallace Stevens about a Sunday morning, William Carlos Williams about a young housewife and a red wheelbarrow. They began with what they knew, what was at hand, what shimmered around them in the ordinary world. That's what Al Zolynas did in this poem:

THE ZEN OF HOUSEWORK

I look over my own shoulder
down my arms
to where they disappear under water
into hands inside pink rubber gloves
moiling among dinner dishes.

My hands lift a wine glass,
holding it by the stem and under the bowl.
It breaks the surface
like a chalice
rising from a medieval lake.

Full of the grey wine
of domesticity, the glass floats
to the level of my eyes.
Behind it, through the window
above the sink, the sun, among
a ceremony of sparrows and bare branches,
is setting in Western America.

I can see thousands of droplets
of steam—each a tiny spectrum—rising
from my goblet of grey wine.
They sway, changing directions
constantly—like a school of playful fish,
or like the sheer curtain
on the window to another world.

Ah, grey sacrament of the mundane!

This is where we begin, by looking over our own shoulder, down our own arms, into our own hands at what we are holding, what we

know. Few of us begin to write a poem about “death” or “desire.” In fact, most of us begin by either looking outward: that blue bowl, those shoes, these three white clouds. Or inward: I remember, I imagine, I wish, I wonder, I want.

Look at the beginnings of some of Emily Dickinson’s poems: “There’s a certain slant of light . . .” “A clock stopped . . .” “A bird came down the walk . . .” “I heard a fly buzz . . .” and these first words: “The flesh . . .” “The brain . . .” “The heart . . .” “The truth . . .” “A route . . .” “A word . . .” There is a world inside each of us that we know better than anything else, and a world outside of us that calls for our attention—the world of our families, our communities, our history. Our subject matter is always with us, right here, at the tips of our fingers, at the edge of each passing thought.

The trick is to find out what we know, challenge what we know, own what we know, and then give it away in language: I love my brother, I hate winter, I always lose my keys. You have to know and describe your brother so well he becomes everyone’s brother, to evoke the hatred of winter so passionately that we all begin to feel the chill, to lose your keys so memorably we begin to connect that action to all our losses, to our desires, to our fears of death. Good writing works from a simple premise: your experience is not yours alone, but in some sense a metaphor for everyone’s. Poems that fail to understand this are what a writer once parodied in a three-line illustration:

Here I stand
looking out my window
and I am important.

Of course our lives are important, meaningful. But our daily experiences, our dreams and loves and passionate convictions about the world, won’t be important to others—to potential readers of our poems—unless we’re able to transform the raw material of our experiences into language that reaches beyond the self-involvement of that person standing at the window, so that what we know becomes shared knowledge, part of who we are as individuals, a culture, a species.

What do we all know? We know our lives. We all go through child-

hood, adolescence, adulthood and old age. We can write about it. Some of us go through marriage, childbirth, parenthood, divorce. We work, we go to school, we form bonds of friendship and love, we break dishes in anger, we daydream, we follow the news or turn from it in despair, we forget. These are all subjects for our poems, the moments in our own personal lives that need telling, that are worth our attention and preservation.

Poetry is an intimate act. It's about bringing forth something that's inside you—whether it is a memory, a philosophical idea, a deep love for another person or for the world, or an apprehension of the spiritual. It's about making something, in language, which can be transmitted to others—not as information, or polemic, but as irreducible art. Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" begins, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / and what I assume you shall assume, / for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." Whitman died in 1892, but the spirit embodied in his language still speaks to us—passionate, intimate, inclusive.

Here's a poem by former Poet Laureate Rita Dove, about a moment between mother and daughter which comes out of everyday experience and startles us with its frank intimacy:

AFTER READING MICKEY IN THE NIGHT KITCHEN
FOR THE THIRD TIME BEFORE BED

I'm in the milk and the milk's in me! . . . I'm Mickey!

My daughter spreads her legs
to find her vagina:
hairless, this mistaken
bit of nomenclature
is what a stranger cannot touch
without her yelling. She demands
to see mine and momentarily
we're a lopsided star
among the spilled toys,
my prodigious scallops
exposed to her neat cameo.

And yet the same glazed
tunnel, layered sequences.
She is three; that makes this
innocent. *We're pink!*
she shrieks, and bounds off.

Every month she wants
to know where it hurts
and what the wrinkled string means
between my legs. *This is good blood*
I say, but that's wrong, too.
How to tell her that it's what makes us—
black mother, cream child.
That we're in the pink
and the pink's in us.

Dove's poem is about knowledge of the body; the body, after all, is the starting point for what we know. Whitman also wrote, "I sing the body electric," and poets from earliest times have been doing just that, celebrating its sensual pleasures, contemplating its desires and the limits of those desires. In modern and contemporary poetry, a number of writers have taken the body as their subject, with memorable results.

We begin with our selves. We are not only body, but heart and mind and imagination and spirit. We can talk about all those things, about what it is like to be alive at the end of the twentieth century. Wendell Berry has written about marriage, Galway Kinnell about the birth of his children, Sharon Olds about motherhood and pet funerals and her first boyfriend. These and other poets began with the simple idea that what they saw and experienced was important to record, and that the modest facts of their lives, what they knew within the small confines of their limited, personal worlds, could contain the enduring facts and truths of the larger world.

That much said, how about what we *don't* know? That's subject matter for our poems as well. Every good poem asks a question, and every good poet asks every question. No one can call herself a poet unless she questions her ideas, ethics, and beliefs. And no one can

call himself a poet unless he allows the self to enter into the world of discovery and imagination. When we don't have direct experience to guide us, we always have our imagination as a bridge to knowledge. Here's a poem by Susan Mitchell that details what she can't know, but can imagine:

THE DEAD

At night the dead come down to the river to drink.
They unburden themselves of their fears,
their worries for us. They take out the old photographs.
They pat the lines in our hands and tell our futures,
which are cracked and yellow.
Some dead find their way to our houses.
They go up to the attics.
They read the letters they sent us, insatiable
for signs of their love.
They tell each other stories.
They make so much noise
they wake us
as they did when we were children and they stayed up
drinking all night in the kitchen.

The poet has mixed the ordinary with the fantastic to convince us that the dead, indeed, act this way. At the end of the poem, the dead merge with the memory of the living—parents or relatives who “stayed up / drinking all night in the kitchen.” Death is a mystery for all of us, one of the many things we don't understand about the world; poets want and need to explore such mysteries. Poetry would be dull indeed if we limited ourselves only to the things we think we already comprehend; it would be limited, self-satisfied, the poem finished before it was even begun. Robert Frost said, “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.”

But the old advice, “Write about what you know,” is still an excellent place to begin. Start with that, and let yourself move out from what you know into the larger questions. If it worked for Whitman and Dickinson, for Williams and Forché and Dove, it can work for

you. Here's what David Lee has to say about it in this prose poem from his first book:

LOADING A BOAR

We were loading a boar, a goddamn mean big sonofabitch and he jumped out of the pickup four times and tore out my stockracks and rooted me in the stomach and I fell down and he bit John on the knee and he thought it was broken and so did I and the boar stood over in the far corner of the pen and watched us and John and I just sat there tired and Jan laughed and brought us a beer and I said, "John it ain't worth it, nothing's going right and I'm feeling half dead and haven't wrote a poem in ages and I'm ready to quit it all," and John said, "shit young feller, you ain't got started yet and the reason's cause you trying to do it outside yourself and ain't looking in and if you wanna by god write pomes you gotta write pomes about what you know and not about the rest and you can write about pigs and that boar and Jan and you and me and the rest and there ain't no way you're gonna quit," and we drank beer and smoked, all three of us, and finally loaded that mean bastard and drove home and unloaded him and he bit me again and I went in the house and got out my paper and pencils and started writing and found out John he was right.

It certainly worked for Lee, author of *The Porcine Legacy* and *The Porcine Canticles*. He took John's advice to heart and wrote not just one poem, but books of poems about what he knew. And what he knew was pigs. You don't need to travel to exotic places or live through revolutions to write good poems. If you have a life full of drama, then of course that will be your material. But don't wait for something to happen before you begin to write; pay attention to the world around you, right now. That's what poets do. This is how Ellery Akers describes it:

WHAT I DO

I drive on country roads, where kangaroo rats shoot across the blacktop and leap into the bushes, where feral cats streak through fields, and cows lift their

heads at the sound of the car but don't stop chewing, where the horses' manes blow in the wind and the cheat grass blows, and the grapes are strapped to stakes as if they have been crucified

I drive past the Soledad liquor store, where the neon starts, and the argon, past the *Ven-A-Mexico* restaurant, past the fields full of white hair—it's just water spurting across all that lettuce—and a jackrabbit runs and freezes, and the Digger Pines stand on either side of the road and the car plunges over the cattleguards, rattling—

Sometimes I listen to the earth, it has a sound: deep inside, the garnets churning

Sometimes I listen to the birds: the sharp *whir* in the air as the swallow veers over my head, as the wren flies, panting, carrying a twig longer than she is, and by this time I can tell by the sounds of their wings, without looking, whether a titmouse just passed—*flutter*—a raven—*thwack, thwack*—an eagle—*shud, shud, shud*—big wet sheets flapping on a laundry line

I paint: I draw: I swab gesso on canvas, stropping the brushes again and again, rinsing them, as the paler and paler tints go down the drain

I cook, I shell peas, breaking open the pods at the veins with a snap: I take vitamins—all the hard, football-shaped pills—sometimes they get stuck in my gullet and I panic and think what a modern way to die, they'll come and find my dead, perfectly healthy body

I pay attention to the willows: I sniff the river
I collect otoliths, and the small ear bones of seals
I notice the dead mouse on the path, its tail still curled, its snout eaten away by ants

So that although I've forgotten what John and I said to each other outside the airport, I remember the cedar waxwings chattering and lighting on the telephone wires, the clipped stiff grass and how sharp it was against my thighs as the waxwings flashed by

And when I teach, I explain about semicolons, the jab of the period, the curl of the comma: the two freights of verbs and subjects on either side like a train coupling

I pick up spiders in my house, sliding a cup over them and a piece of paper under them, toss them, and watch them sail out the window. I catch moths

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