

NOTES ON POETRY AND CRAFT from MARILYN ON A ROLL

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

I see what you're saying

I facilitated a writing workshop inspired by visual art recently. I love the electricity when art begets art -- to be inspired by an artist's output in another medium such that you are required to respond in your own -- that communication beyond the cerebral. Correspondence beyond words.

Even working in the medium of pass-the-butter, poetry and story still participate in that realm of that-which-cannot-be-said. I think that's why people get confused about poetry. They expect to encounter the kind of utterance of daily life, or to encounter the basic story structure we've all grown up with, but instead they get this other thing, not entirely visual, not entirely auditory, no butter to pass, nor necessarily a narrative to follow. This attempt to say the unsayable in the medium in which we say the mundane defies logic. Poetry is best accessed when we're alert also to the spaces and silences and read them too.

Look Before You Leap

I was in a conversation recently about "leaping" in poetry, a term generally associated with Robert Bly, who wrote about this idea of how poems can work -- asking the readerly mind to leap between images, to read, as it were, between the gaps. He traced a tradition from ancient Asian poetry to modern Spanish surrealist poets, but argued that Western tradition had abandoned the leap and is lesser for it. He wrote, "A poet who is 'leaping' makes a jump from an object soaked in unconscious substance to an object or idea soaked in conscious psychic substance." Contemporary poetry seems to consider this "leap" as gospel. But ask almost any otherwise intelligent, literate reader what they think of poetry, and they say, "Well, I don't really like poetry. I don't get it." I think we've leaped our way right out of readership.

People don't read mysteries to solve the mystery but rather to enjoy its unfolding secrets. People don't read memoir to figure out what the author should do next in his or her life, but rather to experience what happened when the author made the decision. People who want to puzzle things out do Sudoku. I say stop all this obligatory leaping about. People read poetry to have the world revealed to them in a new way. Poets need to reclaim the power of a good metaphor rather than constantly positioning random things next to each other and considering it craft. I'm not talking about dumbing-down or trotting out singsongy narratives (much as I love a good Robert Service) or greeting card verse. I'm talking about taking some responsibility for the effect of a poem on the reader.

A good metaphor does not ask the mind to fling itself around. Rather, a good metaphor is like the twist of the end of a kaleidoscope -- briefly the world is fragmented and chaotic, then things fall into place in a new and utterly different way. This is what a good poem does. I believe a far wider readership is available to us if we keep that in mind. And if we aren't trying to communicate, then what the hell are we doing?

Charmed Into Unity

Reading poems by Larry Levis and Ocean Vuong these past few weeks. Different backgrounds, different cultures, one young, one dead quite young. But I find their work does similar things for me. They both write in a narrative vein -- that is, they give you a hint of plot, setting, characters, often family members, real or imagined; they put you, the reader, in the room. Then by the end of the poem, you realize they've blown open the fourth wall, and you're standing in the world somehow. The world of time, of the heart, of the human soul, it all comes gusting in that room and you, reader, are changed. Charged. That's what they do for me, anyway. I read, particular poetry, to have my vision of the world shifted. I write for that reason too -- I both want to discover HOW to shift my vision, and want to share what I see.

I went to an event recently in which people were asked what they were passionate about with regard to their creativity. Several people I spoke with were so generous with their intentions -- they wanted their creative work to help people, specific populations, young women, for example, or the mentally ill. My first thought was entirely solipsistic. What I'm passionate about in regard to my creativity is that I'm pushing that creativity, pulling it, prodding it, folding it up and sailing it across the room. Am I writing my best? Am I imagining in the broadest way I can? Talking to these generous others, I was brought up short. What use am I in the world? Well, I have to go back to this purpose of reading and seeing.

Here's a quote from Hermann Hesse that I found on the wonderful gift that is the Brainpickings site. It's from a book of his called *My Belief: Essays on Life and Art*:

The great and mysterious thing about this reading experience is this: the more discriminatingly, the more sensitively, and the more associatively we learn to read, the more clearly we see every thought and every poem in its uniqueness, its individuality, in its precise limitations and see that all beauty, all charm depend on this individuality and uniqueness — at the same time we come to realize ever more clearly how all these hundred thousand voices of nations strive toward the same goals, call upon the same gods by different names, dream the same wishes, suffer the same sorrows. Out of the thousandfold fabric of countless languages and books of several thousand years, in ecstatic instants there stares at the reader a marvelously noble and transcendent chimera: the countenance of humanity, charmed into unity from a thousand contradictory features.

No. No, you're not a poet but you didn't know it; or, what the hell is poetry anyway

I know they're just trying to connect, to reach out to the strange beast they perceive me as being: poet, or, at least, writer of that strange flora, poetry. But when the next person happens to rhyme as they speak a sentence and then say, gleefully, "oh, I must be a poet!" I'm going to whack them.

No, no. All right. I won't. But what I do need to do is start acknowledging when people make observations in everyday conversation that ARE poetic: when they draw an analogy, use a metaphor or simile, when they make that leaping connection that, I believe, makes poetry its best self.

Did you just say "My neighbor is an old fart"? Poetic! Faintly smelly, not overly offensive, but lingering unpleasantly in your side yard, or even after he departs something remains, something unpleasant just beyond memory or scent or sound? -- yes. A lovely analogy.

To see a faraway star clearly, look just to one side of it. This is how poetry works. Metaphor in poetry is expressing the thing that can't be expressed by likening it to some other thing, and, in so likening, contains something almost perfect in the gap between the thing and the expression, some spirit that you've conjured filling that space and shifting our vision for a moment. If the old fart's name is Art, well, that's just a funny thing.

THE GUTS OF A POEM

Poem as idea

Brenda Hillman states, "It is common to hear students talking about 'the idea behind the poem.' There is no idea 'behind' a poem, I say. The words and their phrases are what we have." This troubles me. If there is no idea behind a poem, then what is the poem? Maybe I'm misunderstanding her use of the word "idea." But idea, after all, is from etymologically from words meaning to see, and form and pattern. I guess I've just made her point.

The poem *is* the idea, the observed/experienced captured in form and pattern.

Maybe I'm misunderstanding the notion of "behind." I guess I'm thinking about the impulse, the deep consideration, and the ambition that I think is required to be "behind" a poem.

One of the things I struggle with in reading poetry is feeling the originating impulse, and following the poet's ambition for the poem. I suspect what disturbs me sometimes is the poem in question actually has insufficient impulse, and foreshortened ambition, and too shallow a consideration. (Of course, this is what torments me in my own writing.)

But how can I tell who is falling short: me, the reader, or the poet and the poem? This is my ongoing challenge, I guess: to accept the poem as idea, and stop trying to peer "behind" it, but rather explore it as I would explore any idea – questioning (argumentative as I am by nature) and rolling with the ride. (But I've never been one for rollercoasters.)

Risky Biz

I was reading a manuscript of someone else's poems recently, and they were really good poems. Very competent, lovely poems of domesticity and parenthood. But, I thought to myself, some element is missing. Is the problem that I'm just not that interested in poems of domesticity and parenthood? I didn't think that was it. I decided finally that what I was missing was a kind of reaching. This very able poet was not reaching beyond her grasp. She knew the world of her poems too well.

If I call what I wanted from this manuscript more risk-taking, what do I mean by that? It's a sense, I think, of a mind in motion rather than a mind at rest; questions asked and pondered rather than answered. What does it mean for any of us to take risks in our work? How do I write a poem that feels risky to me, that feels like I'm peering over the edge of something, and something that makes the reader tremble there too? Is risk about subject area, form, language, meaning?

So little subject matter is risky these days – we've encountered poems by now about just about every potentially taboo subject. So what is risk?

A friend says, "I demand emotional risk. Not necessarily confessional, but someone willing to open a vein, or why are we there anyway? ... I just want to feel inspired by the guts and honesty and curiosity of the speaker, real or implied, to get out there and do the same. It's something I have to say to myself over and over when I'm trying to write a poem, 'Who are you shitting? Get real for a minute here. What's the point? No, seriously, the real point, under all this tapdancing...Be honest!'"

I think I agree about "emotional risk," but I'm just not always sure what that means -- both in what I read and in what I write. And I actually don't always need "emotional" risk, but SOME kind of reaching, whether emotional, craftish, wordish, conceptual. Now, how to translate this for my own self and my own poems is the trick.

Watch your tone

I've been going over the very useful observations of my poetry made by the leaders and participants of the Colrain manuscript conference I participated in. One group of poems was flagged for having too much the same tone and falling in the same way to the end. I both understand this point but feel a bit helpless as to how to address it. It seems like all my poems fall similarly. Which got me thinking about style. How is it that some writer's styles are so quickly recognizable? And how can some poets create an entire book in their own "style," and that style never seems to get old through the course of the book. And yet, I love, for example, Kay Ryan's work, but can't read an entire book of her work because the style and the tone, for me, DOES get old.

What is style? Tone I have a better handle on. And some of the poems in that flagged group had a kind of hallowed tone I get that I hate. But if it's a problem of falling to the end in the same way, one of my favorite editing tricks is to flip poems upside down, or set them entirely backwards, or start them in the middle, or carve a line of words down the middle or moving diagonally and see what they do without all the other words. This is fun work. But if I end up with something that "falls" differently, will it still be my style? Maybe it's bad to have a style. Too predictable. But I read a judge's comments about a recent manuscript contest winner's collection – the judge said it had "remarkable cohesion." Is that a statement on subject matter? If so, it seems like "remarkable" is a bit of a big word for poems around the same subject. People do that all the time. He must have meant something more holistic. Maybe something about style. Maybe something about tone. If only I could remember what contest it was.

Poetry and sentiment...ality

I have been thinking about sentimentality. A poetry manuscript I was reading seemed to me to veer too frequently toward what I was calling in my own mind "sentimental." What do I mean by that? Am I just a hard-boiled anti-emotion cold fish? Or am I on to something? I think what I mean is poetry that is trying too hard to control me and my emotions, or signaling too clearly what it wants me to feel, rather than allowing the power of the words/images/other fun stuff in poems to bring me to an emotion. Do you know what I mean? I'd rather have emotion suggested, or come at it crabwise through the poem, or have it surprise me, than have it dropped on me. I was reading a poem the other day that had me in tears before I had any idea it was going to do that. Now THAT's what I want. Unfortunately, I can't find the poem again, or I'd show it to you. Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" gets me every time.

Stop While You're a Head: On Emotion in Writing

I keep trying to write ABOUT things -- Man's Inhumanity to Man, the Passing of Time, the Folly of Democracy. All kinds of capital-lettered concepts. And it's all crap. As long as I'm trying to write ABOUT something, it's effortful, awkward, and bad. The only hope is to get out of my head, and to write out of instinct and *felt* things, not *thought* things. The only hope is to try to write moments not of intellectual insight but impossible-to-describe emotions.

The other morning I was washing dishes. The sink window looks out over my hated neighbor's side yard where the hated barking dogs hang out and bark. One of the dogs was out there. One of the hated neighbors was out there too.

I know these beings intimately, in the way neighbors know each other. Reluctantly, inadvertently. So I knew in an instant -- from the unusualness of the moment, the postures, the timing, the shaved patch on the dog's side -- that the dog was dying, and the woman had just realized it in earnest. The dog could not get up. The woman could not get the dog up.

I put down my sponge, went out in my bare feet into the alley that separates us. For a second we looked at each other, this triptych: dog glancing at me, then back to its owner, the woman at me, then back to the dog, me at the dog, then her, then back to the dog. There was nothing we could do for each other.

I asked if I could help. She said she didn't know what to do. I said I didn't either. She said, "I need to get her inside." I wanted to suggest we just make her comfortable where she was, but thought that might too frankly address the reality of the situation, so suggested we call her vet, or that I help carry her in. The woman, Katherine, said, "I have one more idea," and went back up the stairs into her house.

I stayed and talked to the dog, Daisy. She began slowly getting herself up, slowly moving toward the stairs. Katherine came back out. I called, "I'll come around to help you if she needs help getting up the stairs," but as I watched, dog and woman slowly climbed the

stairs, entered the house. At the door, Katherine turned, waved, "Thank you," she said. The vet came later that day to put Daisy down.

The next morning the remaining dog began the usual barking in the quiet morning, and I went back to hating them all. Such is my fickle heart. Write about THAT.

EDITING

Runaway

I was talking with two different people recently about sharing work in progress with others for critique versus developing and relying on one's own instincts. I guess there's a place for both, but I was, knowitallishly, advising them to use their own instincts. But this process of honing your own editorial instincts for your own work. How the heck do you do that?

I know I read and read, both poetry and critique, but how capable am I of really "seeing" my own stuff? I find that the main element required to get some decent perspective is time. I love love love many of my new poems. Then I hate hate hate them. Only with sufficient time can I come to some middle ground of a cooler, less passionate perspective.

Also I have found that putting together collections is a really useful exercise for feeling out weaker poems. My cilia may vibrate a bit, or a lot, when I'm reading through a collection of my own poems, and I've learned to trust this indication that something's not right. Sometimes the whole poem just has to be removed, sometimes it's a line, and every once in a while, it's not the poem but where it stands in relation to other poems. Sometimes just moving its location can make the cilia calm down. But how do I know I can trust myself?

Northrop Frye wrote, in *The Archetypes of Literature* (Kenyon Review, "The fact that revision is possible, that the poet makes changes not because he likes them better but because they are better, means that poems, like poets, are born and not made. The poet's task is to deliver the poem in as uninjured a state as possible, and if the poem is alive, it is equally anxious to be rid of him, and screams to be cut loose from his private memories and associations, his desire for self-expression, and all the other navel-strings and feeding tubes of his ego."

This readjusts my perspective -- maybe I need to not so much trust myself, but trust the poem. When it's able to walk, it'll walk away. Or run.

Shh

"Because I am not silent the poems are bad," poet George Oppen is quoted as stating, although I can't find the source from which the statement came. But it was exactly the right thing for me to find on the same day that I looked at a relatively new poem for the first time in a few weeks and thought, "What's all this stuff?" Strewn with extraneous stuff that made me think, "Ew," the poem rambled on and on. With that quote I realized that it was silence that was missing. All tell-y, explain-y, prose-y, and drunk on the sound

of my own voice, I had let it all fall onto the page and left it there. It's time to sweep it up, leaving at first just the sound of the broom. Then quiet.

Oui ou non?

Making conversation in French class, a classmate asked me if I write poems for myself or for my readers (or, at least I think that's what he said...). I said that poetry was an inquiry and I wrote them to ask questions of myself (*me demander*) and hoped that the inquiry was of interest to others too. Now I have to go back to my current manuscript-in-progress to find out if that grand statement is in fact true. Nothing worse than catching one's own self in a lie. But it occurs to me that bringing that mindset to an editing process is actually pretty useful. Often a poem isn't working because it already knows too much. The more a poem can wonder, the more open-ended and interesting it can become, both for the writer and for the reader. *Oui ou non?*

More Better Blues

I asked a group what they do to move their poetry to the next level. I got a lot of advice about writing prompts at first. But is the key to writing better poetry writing more? I guess it's a multi-lock door requiring several keys. (More is surely not necessarily better. You could just be generating more of the same.)

Engaging in translation projects has sometimes, I believe, helped me re-engage with my own work with new spirit, which can lead to work that feels more interesting.

"Read widely in other arenas" is another useful piece of advice, I find. Reading in the sciences often jumpstarts me to try interesting things, which can often make for better work.

Other good advice I've received is to examine my poems' ambitions and in what ways the poems may fall short.

Also, are there things I tend to do in my poems that end up being a crutch or a habit rather than a conscious decision that enhances the poem?

Someone suggested reading outside my comfort zone, which seems like an interesting idea. Although given my tendency to be an impatient and crabby reader, that may not be the route for me.

Another key must be to read more and to read with more of a "how'd this poet pull that off?" eye.

I think the old arts tradition of imitation is a good idea too -- painters recreate old master paintings, musicians copy great phrasing, we can write imitations by substituting our own words and leaps and silences into the structure of others' great poems to try to get an intimate sense of how they did what they did.

So anyway, write more, yes, but write more better. Now, if I only I could stop

procrastinating.

Rolling around in the editing process

A friend and I were looking at poem and her rewrite of it. She was trying to decide which, in the end, was the better version. I noticed in the first poem she had a plethora of images, but they did not seem to come out of each other or otherwise necessarily work together. In her rewrite, she, rightly, got rid of some of the images, but then she replaced them with abstract words. And it occurred to me that her rewrite was informed by doubt. She doubted her poem. And so when she reached for ways to revise it, she leaped toward the next version with doubt instead of with trust. And she didn't stick the landing.

So somehow the editing process has to start with trust in the original impulse for the poem, so that the leap for the next version comes not from an unbalanced stance but from a -- oh, I don't know, I can't stretch the gymnast conceit that far, as I never was even able to do a back-bend and my somersaults ended up like Harriet the Spy practicing to be an onion. But you get my meaning -- I need to start the editing process from a belief in the poem.

I've abandoned more poems than I've revised successfully -- sometimes doubt is well founded. I'm wrestling with several poems right now, torn between trust and doubt. But if I start with a sense of "let's say this poem was born of a strong impulse and I can trust that enough to move forward," I might be able to move toward a revision that affirms that faith in the poem. And thusly girded, I can somersault onward, a pearl onion heading for gravy.

I Gotta Be Me

Poems start with a sound, or a phrase, or a word; visual art with a "gesture," as dance. However we start, we sense a vacuum and fill it through our medium. Making is a process of following the lead of the original impulse. In poetry often in the end we edit it out, the thing that got us going. I imagine it's the same in visual art. What is important is how that following goes, how it allows, what leaps we take -- and the holding off for as long as possible of intention or meaning-making. If we can let the made thing be wholly its inadvertent self, then through the editing process we can refine it so the thing become as clearly itself as possible, given our prowess with the craft. Editing can be thought of as choice-making. Although choices are made along the way as we create, it's in review and consideration that we can linger to make choices informed by intention. But they have to be led by the made thing, not our hopes and dreams for the made thing.

Strike Three: or The Necessity of Vigorous Editing

I was at a reading recently, a mix of fiction, nonfiction, and poets reading from their works, mostly self-published or published by very small local initiatives. Poets have it easy to do a ten-minute reading -- we can fit in a good handful of poems, usually. But longer-format writers have to figure out what ten-minute extract they can feature that doesn't need enormous backstory set-up, but that creates some narrative movement. By and large these readers were not very successful at that, and that set their work at a disadvantage from the get-go.

I wonder if longer-format writers need to actually design a few extracts that meet ten-minute or twenty-minute limits so they're ready for such opportunities. That probably means taking a longer scene and editing it down or moshing together a couple of scenes and deleting out some interstitial matter. This strikes me as a useful editing technique as well.

Which brings me to my next point.

Self-published or sort-of-almost-self-published ("vanity" presses, I hate to call them) authors seem often to have done their work a disservice, as the editing that goes on, if it goes on, is not rigorous enough to create good work. That's just all there is to it. It is hard to edit one's own work.

But it is necessary to grow the tough skin and fierce attention to do so, or to allow someone else to wade in and do it along with you. It is the only way to create good work. In the work of one reader that night, every single noun had an adjective, and not a single verb was done without some -ly defining it. This made for limp nouns, flaccid verbs, and slow, tedious listening. It was all I could do not to leap forward wielding my red pen at the offending volume. (Yes, of course I had a red pen on me. What? You want me to wander naked into the world without my Edit Girl costume hidden under my clothes?) Edit edit edit. Scrutinize everything.

"But do you know how arduous that is?" you cry. Yes. Yes, I do.

Put it away for a while and let time push you back from it.

Do a quick overview, taking notes on flow and movement. Then wade in a bit at a time. Take it scene by scene. Ask of everything: Are you necessary?

Open a new document and throw in there chunks you've taken out, or chunks you're not sure about. That way you can move things back if necessary.

It's rarely necessary.

Do Be Do Be Do; or the Power and Necessity of Active Verbs

I was listening to a friend read a short fiction piece recently and was struck at the leap in power when she came to a character's gesture. For all the loveliness of the prose telling who, why, and where, it was the act of the characters -- he reached toward her throat, she grabbed after the falling ring -- that caught and carried the energy of the piece. Someone else read a poem and again, it was not the abstract nouns, for all their romantic evocations, that contained the poem's gravitas, but the verb that reached out and struck. Good writing demands strong verbs, motion, gestures. Power lurks in the acts of the hands, the body, the feet, trunk or petal, wing or Mack truck. Don't give me love. Give me the actions that love compels.

Beneath the Skin: Levels of Editing Poems

As I brood over my newest batch of poems, and cast a crabby eye on the previous batch, as yet unpublished, it seems to me that editing can be focused on three levels.

There's the level of the text on the page:

- Are the verbs active and surprising enough?
- Are the nouns specific and image-based enough?
- Are there too many articles? Not enough?
- Are the adjectives and adverbs necessary and are they doing enough heavy lifting?
- Are the line breaks serving purposes?
- Do most of the lines have integrity or heft (rather than just being throw-away lines to get to the next meaty bit)?
- Is punctuation serving clarity? If you've eschewed punctuation, is that serving the poem?
- Have you paid attention to sound and silence and rhythm? Are they serving the poem?
- If you're using a form, does the content serve the form or the form serve the content?
- Is the white space serving the poem?

There's the level of intention:

Is the poem doing what you intended, expressing what you want to express? (Do you know what you are trying to express?) Is it trying too hard? Is it not trying hard enough? Have you brought enough emotional/philosophical depth to the undertaking? Are the images/experiences/ideas sufficiently and deeply, specifically personal such that they become universal?

Then there's the level of what I think of as ambition:

We're all writing in or responding to a literary history and tradition. Where does the poem fit in that tradition, what poems are the greatest expression of that tradition, and does your poem reach for that greatness? In other words, have you figured out the magic of the poems you most admire and have you sought in your own poem to create that magic?

And it's always useful to pause in the entire enterprise now and then to ask "Why am I doing this? Why is my attention on this?" Even if you're unable to answer, the question is worth asking in order to refocus, to re-center.

Mind you, I'm rarely focused and together enough to work at all these levels with any given poem, and am largely lazy anyway. But it occurs to me that this is the bar I'd like to set for myself in the editing process. And by "bar," I mean, let me belly up to it and order a whiskey for the ordeal.

Line Item; or On Poetic Lineation

I see an awful lot of earnest, heartfelt prose that's broken up into poemy-looking lines and stanzas and called a "poem." But I just can't agree. Such work has ignored the most primary and powerful tools of the art and craft of poetry.

Let's just start with the idea of a line. A line should start strong and end strong as much as

possible, and should have some reason for being a made line that ends deliberately and with purpose rather than one that ends because you think a line should be about so long, or one that haphazardly strolls across the page until the automatic right margin shunts it downward.

A line must have some integrity. That integrity should be in the form of:

- idea -- that is, it should do the work of building on, refuting, suggestion something other than, developing or moving along the idea of the poem,
- rhythm -- the line should have some relationship to the lines around it such that it carries along or disrupts established rhythms,
- sound -- the sounds in the line should have some kind of resonance with the idea of the poem or, again, be part of a larger sonic pattern in the poem.

And that's just what I come up with off the top of my head.

The line break itself should have a purpose -- to suggest, to control the reader's pace: hurry the reader along or stop him in his tracks, to hint or wink, to emphasize, argue, and again it also can have sonic responsibilities in the form of, well, silence.

Not every line in every poem necessarily carries weight. Sometimes you just have to get from point A to point B. But the editing process should include serious consideration of each line and its integrity. This is the great fun of writing poetry, for heaven's sake! Otherwise, just write prose. Prose is fine too.

USING THE SENSES

Who Knows

In *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut describes Roland Weary of smelling perpetually of bacon. I can see the greasy skin of him, the bulk of his pork. This brought to mind a girl I knew when I was in third grade. She smelled of mayonnaise. She alarmed me, and she smelled of mayonnaise. Or she smelled of mayonnaise and that alarmed me. I'm not sure which. I have never forgotten her.

I am grateful to my sense of smell, for the most part, although my husband gets tired of me saying uh oh the garbage is starting to smell, or when I sit up in bed in the middle of the night and say do you smell something burning. Not long ago on a bike ride I was suddenly surrounded by the scent of sweet clover. There's a charitable ride I do every spring and I know this one difficult hill will be made easier by the smell of just blooming lilacs from a bush by the road. Whenever I've started a new job, I always pause and smell the whiff of the building I'm in, and think someday I will walk out and never smell this again. I'm weird that way. (And always thinking about the end game.)

The sense of smell is tied tightly to memory, and I like to play a writing game in my workshops of putting the scent of something under the nose of the closed-eyed writers and then say okay, write what it reminds you of. There's a particular kind of fake cherry

scent that brings me back to sitting in the car with my mom, going through the drive-in window at the bank and getting a lollipop from the teller -- the heat of the unair-conditioned car, the fabric upholstery, hot metal and dusty wind through the window.

Here's my challenge to you today. Take a sniff. Spend some time in your nose. Discreetly sniff a stranger. Remember this. You may never smell that guy again.

All the Noise Noise Noise

Donald Revell's trippy *The Art of Attention* is making me impatient, but he offers this quote from John Cage: "Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating." I'm curious at his use of the word "noise" (etymologically linked to nausea, interestingly enough, which comes from seasickness) and what he means by "mostly noise." What is the rest of what we hear? This morning the tinkle of what was either water dripping or the far song of red-winged blackbirds was the first sound I was conscious of. A lovely way to start the conscious day. Now the humph, clatter, and mumble of clumps of snow sliding off the new metal roof. Sometimes alarming, startling, confusing, nevertheless, as I know what the noise is, I find it mostly amusing, that the slick roof boots its snow piles so readily and with seeming vigor. My husband and I clash about noise -- he likes to thoughtlessly click on the radio just to have noise. I am forced to listen -- there is no such thing as background noise for me. I always listen. (I don't always find it fascinating.) I have a love/hate relationship with noise -- appreciate some of it, detest others, and that often I'm unable to control noise's access to me makes me anxious. I believe my mother began truly aging when she began losing her hearing but refused to wear a hearing aid. Conversations became difficult, birds turned silent. But the good part is, she is rarely disturbed now by noise. Which is good, as she is living in community and the place is rarely quiet. I can close my eyes, hold my nose, refuse to taste, but I can't not hear. My work is to make the best of the noise, to pay it attention. Revell writes, "A musician is inclined to listen, and when he listens, the sounds are music." He advises, "Incline our senses...toward...the noise becoming music."

NOTES ON POEMS

Those Winter Sundays

The poem drops us right in to its world: "Sundays too" -- no day of rest in this life. Blueblack cold, so bleak and unyielding in its three beats, the color of crows, the color of mourning, of the awful hours predawn.

Those Winter Sundays

by *Robert Hayden*

*Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.*

*I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,*

*Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?*

I am the man, shapeless in his clothes, only his hands in focus, their ache in the cracks, but the burden of the task for family perhaps oddly light or at least unquestioned. And I am also the guilt of the observer's silence each and every one of those mornings.

I feel the consonants of "splinter," of "break," then the ah of warmth, a call. But I know too the chronic – of time, of constancy – nature of some anger. The isolation of "that house." The speaker's fear of it. Oh, and yes, indifference to "him," who has done harm as he has done diligence.

But the polish: also, I imagine, blueblack, smoothed on what I also imagine to be cracked from cold and wear, the oil smell of it, the satisfaction of its coverage, and buffing the shoes to gleam. That subtle gleam, and how it fills the cracks, so temporarily, to make good what must be good, and kept good. For there is so little.

The vie of rhythms, struggle of emphasis: push of rhythm and withholding, anger and regret, the uncompromising cold, that house; even the banked fire's blaze harkens as much of warmth as of rage.

But what gets me in the gut every time is that stutter: what did I know, what did I know. Again and most deeply felt, the regret yawning in the pause and restart. The loneliness of understanding and love felt in absentia and too late. The simple observation of the self's guilt – the indifference, the inability to speak this particular rough and peculiar language of love. The language of love is complicated. The silences of it difficult too. How many times have I failed to understand the languages of love? How many of you whom I have loved have thought me mute?

The father in the end some wayward priest, the worn clothes his vestments, the shoes and polish the body and blood. God as love so far away. Austere from harsh, from sere, or dry, dry as the kiss on a dead man's lips. Are these sacraments the father makes redemptive? Are they enough? Does love require such exercises of expression? And the speaker's ignorance of and then, too late, recognition of those expressions, is that redemptive?

My own father, terrifying in his, to me, inexplicable angers. When I was small he had made me a sandbox, which I loved, and a wooden swing, which he'd hung from the

cherry tree and set with individually carved letters of my name, spelled incorrectly.
How we make of our own chapels lonely places.

Hayden a poor black guy from Detroit who went on to become the first US poet laureate.
Me a working class white girl now a middle class, middle-aged white lady keeping
company in poetry's sacred spaces.

Book One

I've been thinking about change, mostly because I've been stunned recently about how so little that I would like to change or have changed is changing or being changed. So much remains the same. But change slips in sometimes. Change isn't always announced, like God arriving on the scene and booting Adam and Eve from the Garden. Which reminded me of this poem by Anne Marie Macari.

Book One

Light was being, held by her own hands or
touched like water burning bare skin.
In the beginning meant learning to see: a thousand
kinds of green, the vine-crawl along rocks,
the groping mouths of flowers. In the beginning
all they knew was yes, so when the first no
settled quietly around the tree
they thought it birdsong, it took days or weeks
for them to even notice its echo
in the leaves, an absence really, the start of loss.
Later, when the suffering began, who could
she turn to and say: I didn't ask to be born,
squatting, the light separate and cold, distant
as God, and she, already, refusing to kneel.

What revolution is playing out in the tight little container of this poem, the chamber of a reverse sonnet, already a revolution of sorts. The volta's "settled quietly around the tree" is a deceptive environment for what is unfolding; "the first no" setting up the turning point of the first struggle, the break in rhythms emphasizing the disturbance in the universe happening here, and "the start of loss." Internal rhymes keep the poem tight, intact: *light, like, vine, quietly; her, water, learning; kneel, tree, see; thousand, mouths, flowers*. The knell-like *no* and *echo* as anchors. Light burns but touches like water; birdsong is a harsh message. The narrator is disillusioned, confused, defiant. Against the sudden, inexplicable punishment, the suffering, the creation pushes back, angry: "I didn't ask to be born" -- a statement every defiant and angry teen has uttered or thought. But this first creation had no one to say it to. The naysaying God had distanced itself. But there's a sort of you-can't-fire-me-I-quit quality here. She does not bow down. And she does not forget. In remembering what she had ("a thousand kinds of green...the groping mouths of flowers") she prepares herself to claim her right to it again, to find it in her own way. The first line of the final couplet clicks with angry *t's*: *squatting, light, separate, distant*. Here is the repercussion of the creator's refusal. Here is liberty and the

cost of the struggle. In the end: the hope and freedom that can come with defiance and the shedding of a child-like dependence. She refuses to kneel. In the end, the woman squats, in the manner of voiding; in the manner of birthing. Now, everything changes.

Yea, okay, so what I already know but choose constantly to forget is that change comes from within. Gaddammit.

COLLECTIONS

Notes from a First Round Reader

For several years I have served as a first round reader for a national poetry book prize. This means that the publisher has some faith in my astuteness and sensibilities as a reader of poetry such that they will entrust to me the job of nosing through piles of submissions to identify the five or six or so that should go on to the second round readers (who will identify a few to move up to the final committee). I read anywhere from 20-35, depending on the number of entrants and the number of first round readers.

Here are some lessons I've learned along the way:

Faced with up to 30-35 manuscripts, my process was to read a handful of poems at the beginning, two or three in the middle, and two or three at the end. In this way I quickly sorted the mss into three piles: Yes, No, and Maybe. If I was not captured steadily by the poems I read, the ms went to the No pile. If every poem I encountered held something of interest, it got a yes. If there was promise but some unevenness in my response, it went to Maybe. I then reviewed each pile to check my response a second time rereading the first poems I'd read, and reading some more. I almost never moved a No to Maybe or Yes, but occasionally moved a Maybe to Yes. Then all the Yesses got a complete scrutiny to find the handful I thought should go to a second round reader.

Here's what I've found:

- The first poem is very important. And the next few. And the ones in the middle, and the ones at the end...oh, heck, every single poem is important. Not one poem can be a throwaway or a filler.
- There are really competent writers writing boring work, and there not very competent writers with really interesting ideas. The Maybe pile was the most heartbreaking because it contained these two cohorts. I learned that I have to bring together the best of my art and craft with a really good idea.
- Themed collections are no better than unthemed. It has been trendy to create themed collections, and they are often fun to read, but I did not find myself choosing them over a more random-seeming collection. My choices were all about the quality of the poems on the whole. A collection didn't necessarily have to cohere, as long as every poem was fresh and interesting.
- Imaginative + vivid + fully felt = winning combination. By imaginative, I mean evidence of a lively mind at work. By vivid, I mean something special in the language (my preference) or the form or the approach. By fully felt, I mean some emotional gravitas. Any one of these without the others was not enough.
- The sensibility of the press is important, but may be broader than one might think. The contest I read for tends toward lyric poetry, does not tend to produce l.a.n.g.u.a.g.e-y

work, and generally could be considered to be conservative in its tastes. But it also has published some somewhat more experimental work. It has been my own sense, and I have heard this echoed by other readers, that we are each aware of our prejudices about the kind of poetry we like, and we deliberately try to keep an open mind, and to find reasons to say Yes to a collection rather than No.