

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

the same way, open the latch with one hand and watch them come back and bumble against the glass, wanting the light

Bather in the night, the soap slides next to me in the tub

Phone dialer when I'm scared, and want to hear Peter's voice, or Valerie's or Barbara's,

Xeroxer, the faint green light pulses over and over, repeating my name as my poems flick by, and the machine spits out copy after copy

Swimmer, slow breast stroke, hand over hand, kick

I stand at the lectern in my jacket, always a jacket to cover up my breasts so I don't feel so naked

I watch as the clouds shred slowly outside and inside, as the hummingbird sits in her deep cup, her bill sticking out, as the phalarope flies around me in circles in the saw-grass and spartina and she wants me to leave her alone so I leave her alone

I squelch through mud in my sneakers and watch Barbara garden and remember to eat her tomatoes:

I bait traps with bird-seed and the door springs shut and I grope for sparrows as they flutter frantically away and I reach into the far corner of the cage and gently clasp them and put them in my bird-bag tied to my belt, so as I walk the bag keeps banging at my hips: and then, at the observatory, I take one out, and blow on her skull, fasten a band around her leg, toss her out the window and let her go:

I listen to myself: this kind of listening is both tedious and courageous

Depression is part of it too: sometimes I bolt awake at night, feeling a man is pressing on top of me, certain it's happening

I see my therapist, my words fill up the room, the past is enormous, I steer towards anger and practice anger as if it were Italian, I throw stones at the canyon and yell and sometimes a clump of shale falls down and a spider races out

I watch tadpoles sink, and water striders: once, six miles in at Mud Lake, some drunken men, a rifle crack, I ran the whole way to the car—

I come back to Soledad: at night plume moths and geometrid moths flatten themselves against the motel windows, looking like chips of bark, and in the

morning a starling teeters across the trash bin—pecking at cellophane, walking over the styrofoam containers from McDonald's. A man who looks scared says, "Good Morning, Ma'am," as he throws away more styrofoam, and I drive under the cool overpass where pigeons nest every year, flapping up into the steel slots, as the trucks go down with their loads—

Needing to pile up silence outside me and within me
the silence underneath the bulbs of Zygodene, Stink-horn and blood-red
saprophytes—

as the minutes open into parachutes that fall and fall again

Akers has beautifully evoked the world of one poet. As the minutes of your own life open and fall, catch them in poems. You've been given one life, one set of unique experiences; out of those particulars, make the poems only you can make.

IDEAS FOR WRITING

1. Make a list of the most memorable events in your life. Some of them will be large—a death, a breakup, some goal you finally accomplished. But list the small things, too, things you've always remembered as particularly special and important in some way. When you're finished, you should have a list of subjects for poems that could take you years to write. For now, start a poem about one of the events you've listed; every so often, you can go back to the list and pick another one.
2. List the objects in your bedroom or living room. Write a poem describing them and telling a little of their—and your—history. A good poem to read first is "Photograph of My Room" by Carolyn Forché, in her book *The Country Between Us*.
3. What do you do every day—or on a regular basis? Write a poem about showering, or jogging, or cooking, and so on. Try, in the poem, to get at the particular way you perform this activity, that might be different from someone else.

4. What are the things you love? The things you hate? List them in two columns. Now, write a poem that combines something you love with something you hate.
5. Begin a poem with the words, "I don't know . . ." You might list several things you don't know, or focus on a particular thing.
6. Begin a poem with a question word: Who, what, where, when, why, how. Ask a big question about life, and then try to answer it from your own experience. (A good poem which asks a lot of questions is "In a U-Haul North of Damascus" in the last section of this book.)
7. Write a poem instructing a reader how to do something you know how to do. First make a list of all the things you can do (hit a tennis ball, change a diaper, identify wildflowers, etc.). Remember that you don't want to sound like an instruction manual, but a poem; make it beautiful, make the lesson one that tells someone about how to live in the world.