

## Notes for Broadsheet Poets 5

American writers from Pound, to TS Eliot, Williams, Stephens and Robert Lowell have had a lot to say about the writing of poetry and each sought a form to accommodate their world. As you most likely know, Pound edited Eliot's poems rigorously, even savagely cutting out what he considered to be extraneous chunks of a lesser standard. Because of this unbiased service to his friend, he contributed to Eliot's great name as a poet. It is true that not many poets are the best judges of their own work and it is helpful to have someone whose work you admire and whose mind you trust to comment on what you write, be it a friend or teacher.

The following **Notes** come from poets whose words you most likely will not have heard before, and will not find on any library shelf. They consist of advice, seeds of inspiration and thoughtful analysis.

**Diana Der-Hovanessian**, who lives in Massachusetts, has published twenty books of poetry and translations, was Fulbright Professor of American Poetry at Yerevan State University in Armenia in 1994 and 1999 and is president of the New England Poetry Club, has this to offer, warning against sentimental, cliché-ridden lines (notice the irony: the poem or ditty sounds like what it is not meant to be, quite a dangerous thing to do and only an experienced poet should attempt this):

### Dear Students

*'Painting is not made to decorate apartments.  
It's an offensive and defensive weapon.'* Pablo Picasso

And poetry is not made for greetings cards,  
not made for greeting dawns,  
is not billet-doux, not woe is me, woe is you.  
Poetry is not meant merely to praise.  
it is meant for more than to raise  
the dead or bring grandmother  
to her knees. It should shake, burn and freeze.

It 'should shake, burn and freeze' ...

**Jackson Wheeler**, whose poems are featured in this issue and who edits the valuable poetry magazine, *Solo*, shows in the next paragraph, in which he gives his reasons for writing poetry, how he was shaken, burnt and frozen into writing it:

Because I was sung to as a child. Because my father shot himself when I was ten. Because my mother took in ironing and worked as a janitor so that social services would not take children away. Because, my mother would say, she could turn on the radio and I would lie in the crib and listen, quite as a mouse. Because there was singing on the radio: Kitty Wells, The Louvin Brothers, The Stanley Brothers, The Carter Family, The Stoneman Family, and when I was older, Saturday afternoons with my father's mother, her dark Indian eyes glittering in the twilight of the room – boxing from Chattanooga, Tennessee, announced by Harry Thornton. Because I watched my uncles slaughter hogs, because I watched my mother kill a chicken for dumplings, because I watched the Rescue Squad drag the Nantahala Lake for drowned vacationers, up from Florida. Because Southern Appalachia was imagined by someone else – I just

lived there, in the mountains until I read about it in a book, other than the King James Bible, which is all true my mother said and says, every jot and St. Matthew title of it. Because God is a burning bush, a pillar of fire, a night wrestler, a swathe of blood, a small still voice, a whisper in Mary's ear, conceiving. Because my family is full of alcoholics, wife beaters, spendthrifts, and big-hearted people who give the shirts off their backs. Because their stories lie buried in graveyards, because their stories have been forgotten, because their stories have been misremembered. Because my father's people said they were from Ireland, down Wexford way. Because my father's father baptized people, because my father's mother bore a child out of wedlock and was part Indian. Because my mother's father got his leg crushed at the quarry, because my mother's mother died of brain cancer in her 50s. My friends think I talk too much, don't talk enough; that I'm too queer for company, that I'm not queer enough. My mother's people were Scots and Welsh, three cheers for the beard of Brady Marr, three cheers for the blood on the shields of the Keiths from Wick, three cheers for immigration, the waves of it and the desperation behind it. Let's hear it for King's Mountain and the Scots' revenge for Culloden. Three cheers for extended family, the nameless cousins, all the petty griefs and regrets, the novels never written, the movies never made, the solace of the bottle, the solace of sex, the solace of loneliness of which there is plenty. All hail the poetic arts, and the art of poetry and the knowledge at the heart of it all: *Words bear witness.*

**Linda Gregg**, who features also in this issue, author of many books of poems and has been honoured with many fellowships and awards, is very well worth listening to. This piece appeared in *American Poet*, Spring 2001. Linda understands the heart of poetry, the importance of the driving force inside the poem which is, after all, only clothed in its outer form. She manages to explain very well the actual act of writing poetry: how you need a certain kind of lightness, how you need almost not to think, not to be aware that you are writing and then the poem can take care of itself. If you use your head too much, become too analytical, too abstract, too conscious of what you are trying to accomplish, your lines can fall dead onto the page, heavy as lead. Of course your intelligence has to be there but in abeyance to images and a kind of musing carelessness.

I believe that poetry at its best is found rather than written. Traditionally, and for many people even today, poems have been admired chiefly for their craftsmanship and musicality, the handsomeness of language and the abundance of similes, along with the patterning and the rhymes. I respect and enjoy all that but I would not have worked so hard and long at my poetry if it were primarily the production of well-made objects, just as I would not have sacrificed so much for love if love were mostly about pleasure. What matters to me even more than the shapeliness and the dance of language is what the poem discovers deeper down than the gracefulness and pleasures in figures of speech. I respond most to what is found out about the heart and spirit, what we can hear through the language. Best of all, of course, is when the language and other means of poetry combine with the meaning to make us experience what we understand. We are most likely to find this union by starting with the insides of a poem rather than with its surface, with its content rather than with its packaging. Too often in workshops and classrooms there is a concentration on the poem's

garments instead of its life blood.

My early life was changed drastically by the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, but not primarily because of the poems' gorgeous words and rhythms. Rather, it was because poems like 'Pied Beauty' and 'The Windhover' gave me a special way of knowing the earth and experiencing God. In the same way, Lorca was important to me when I was very young because of the mystery within the singing. There is a luminosity in those poems of Lorca and Hopkins, and ever since, when I see such luminosity beginning in a poem, it is a sign that something significant has been found.

It may be that the major art in poetry is the art of finding this shining – this luminosity. It is the difference between a publishable poem and one that matters. Certainly one can make good poems without feeling much or discovering anything new. You can produce fine poems without believing anything, but it corrodes the spirit and eventually rots the seed corn of the heart. Writing becomes manufacturing instead of giving birth.

I do not have a road map or a neat system to give you to help you find the luminosity in your poems, but I would like to share how it has been for me. At the start, let us agree that the poet must master the elements of his craft: the rhythm, the strategies, the importance of compression, when to use rhyme and when not to use it – all of that. But at the same time, we have to acknowledge that the craft must not become the content of the poem. It must not become an end in itself. The craft must serve primarily to deliver what the poet is trying to say to the reader and to deliver the feelings or discoveries to her/him with as little loss as possible. Ezra Pound defined craft as the means for delivering the content of the poem and to deliver it alive. However, there is always a danger in making the craft the thing to be delivered. The poet must have craft, but he or she must also locate the substance, the art within remarkable things, just things. This seemingly simple task is usually hard for him/her. At the beginning, the poet typically 'sees' things in one of three ways: artistically, deliberately, or not at all. Those who see artistically instantly decorate their descriptions, turning them into something poetic: the winter trees immediately become 'old men with snow on their shoulders' or the lake looks like 'a giant eye'. The ones who see deliberately go on and on describing a brass lamp by the bed with painful exactness. And then there are the ones who see only what is forced on their attention: the grandmother in a bikini riding on a skateboard or a bloody car wreck. But, with practice, they begin to see carelessly and learn a kind of active passivity until after a month nearly all of them have learned to be available to seeing – and the physical world pours in. Their journals fill up with lovely things like: 'the mirror with nothing reflected in it'. This way of seeing is important, even vital, to the poet, since it is crucial that a poet sees when he/she is not looking – just as he/she must write when he/she is not writing. To write just because the poet wants to write is natural, but to learn to see is a blessing. The art of finding luminosity in poetry is the art of marrying the sacred to the world, the invisible to the human.

**Jack Gilbert**, the revered poet, now about eighty years old, to whom Linda was married for many years, (and whose poems appear in this issue). is equally articulate about the importance, as he sees it, of lack of ornament in poetry. His highly readable piece, **Real Nouns**, consists of a letter to a priest and is as relevant now to anyone writing poetry as it was when it was written about twenty years ago.

(Ray – please insert Jack Gilbert’s piece: ‘Real Nouns’ here)

**Elena Karina Byrne**, whose ‘Mask’ poems appear within these pages, is buoyant and magical about her vocation as a poet:

I am a poet because my parents were artists. I am a poet because I was an athlete, a sprinter. The sounds propel the subjects ahead of me: one word dominoes-forward toward every tethering cadence the body can recreate and withstand. There’s a key epistemology of motion here, which pulls the rabbit out of the black hat of the unconscious. Adrenaline and breath, it is an unforgiving passion, always leaving and returning.

Instead of writing an *Ars Poetica* as a prose piece, **Elena Karina** lapses, almost unconsciously, into a poem in her castings about to define poetry. It is as if poetry is her native language. Perhaps it will inspire each one of you to take up a pen or computer and tap into ‘nature’s all-vowel song’ which, Elena says, ‘is only the beginning’.

Pretext is context when you have a nest at the top of your head.  
Syntactical errors, marvellous aural misgivings: what awakens  
our incompleteness, the parts that are part of a whole. Poetry  
is nomadic; it verbs-out the subject.  
It is truth’s lack of permission, sexual tension.  
Here, an underwater photograph held up to a mirror,  
and anxiety’s ghost-portrait as ambush,  
the unfolding umbrellas of jellyfish,  
Plath’s fist which “excludes and stuns”, the pure air  
smell of grass and baby spittle at the end of Lorca’s sentence;  
it is the blueprint for darkness and a red breadbox of light  
we call the heart, the start of it all; it is a flash-flood of understanding  
one drop; it is Paz’s double flame burning between our ribs,  
Hart Crane’s prophecy of forgetfulness and  
the moving narrative of face, twofold voice.  
For all the improbable equations in space, it is idiom’s  
opened doors between thoughts or one beetle buried in a tomb.  
It is Magritte’s still unbitten apple, war’s personal pronoun “I”,  
Shakespeare’s desire with which “can no horse...keep pace”, and  
Valery’s “distracted god in the flesh” when we want to flesh-out.  
Poetry is a letter to a stranger placed on the nape of the neck,  
the unfinished inroad lined with so many trees;  
it is where Roethke exceeds sleep in “the close kiss  
of why not”, where I am animal, ambivalence, ambidextrous;  
Rilke’s “necessary irrepressible” pressing upon me  
and nature’s all-vowel song as companion to longing,  
which is only the beginning...

It seems fitting to end these **Notes** with a poem by **Salita Bryant**, who has a poem in this issue. This remarkable poem, ‘*Ars Poetica*’ is reminiscent of Rilke, yet it is, too, very much Salita’s own sure voice. Salita is a teacher, but the poem itself teaches us, as does all the best poetry, about our own mortality, about life and death, and about

survival. This poem reminds us not only of the wonder and beauty of poetry, but of how vital poetry is to keeping us all alive.

### **Ars Poetica**

All poems are survival.  
It is as simple as that.  
For how do we go into that gently night  
without the light of O,  
without the whistle of S,  
without the inked thumb coursing down  
the nape of our necks and the fingertips  
of Ahh slipping up our thighs,  
taking our hands in the shadows?  
And when the lovely breath comes,  
when the words form, oh,  
we open our mouths in wonderment.  
And only then do we truly know that  
every mortal thing will become undone,  
will become a misplaced star in the pocket  
of the universe. So we must think on a thing's  
gone-ness, its un-ness, and how we must mourn  
that we must become our own mothers  
in order to bear witness to the coming child.  
But so many questions of what to do with so many fallen  
hazel leaves. Yes, how long it takes to learn  
we must never stop counting the starlings  
in every greening field. And can we learn to remember  
even the moon is a lonely child?  
Oh, I tell you, think of a-a, think of o-o.  
Think of tonguing all the sounds of the universe  
into your mouth's hot chamber.  
Breathe in that moon, the orphan of night's love,  
and a poem will seize all the language  
of the heavens unto its becomingness.  
And then you will know how all of the sand  
in the sea dreams of oysters, dreams  
of curling up in those pulpy fists of adoration.

Compiled by Patricia McCarthy