

FROM SUSAN'S BACK YARD:

Writers on Writing & the Creative Life /4

Lucille Clifton: "Oh, poetry's probably saved my life. It has been the stable thing, something to love. Even in the middle of the most amazing and interesting things, there's a line that I could come to or that would come to me and help me through it. I think poetry has been the one faithful good thing."

Richard Howard: "I do think that many people who say they don't like poetry like the things that poetry can do; they just don't know that it's poetry that's doing them."

Les Murray: "I love poetry for the unemployment it causes, for how it constrains one to work always beyond one's own intelligence, for its not requiring one to rise socially."

Carl Sandburg: "Poetry is the journal of the sea animal living on land, wanting to fly in the air. Poetry is a search for syllables to shoot at the barriers of the unknown and the unknowable. Poetry is a phantom script telling how rainbows are made and why they go away."

Theodore Roethke: "To write poetry: you have to be prepared to die....God robbed poets of their minds that they might be made expressions of his own....The act of poetry remains, for me, more mysterious than sex itself....You must believe: a poem is a holy thing—a good poem, that is."

Robert Pinsky: "The longer I live, the more I see there's something about reciting rhythmical words aloud—it's almost biological—that comforts and enlivens human beings."

Gwendolyn Brooks: "I am not a scholar. I'm just a writer who loves to write and will always write."

Scholars are hard workers. I think I'm rather lazy....If I get excited about something, or if something happens out in the street...I want to report it and record it. I will go inside myself, bring out what I feel, put it on paper, look at it, pull out all of the cliches and nuttiness...I will work on those things. I will work hard in that way. But scholarship—pooh, pooh."

William Carlos Williams in *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*: "I've always thought of a poet as *not* a successful man except in his own mind, which is devoted to something entirely different than what the world thinks of as

success. The poet puts his soul in his work and if he writes a good poem he *is* successful."

Amy Lowell: "It is more difficult to plan a poem than it is to write it when the plan is formed....I do not suppose that anyone not a poet can realize the agony of creating a poem. Every nerve, even every muscle, seems strained to the breaking point. The poem will not be denied, to refuse to write it would be a greater torture. It tears its way out of the brain, splintering and breaking its passage, and leaves that organ in the state of a jellyfish when the task is done. And yet to have no poem to write is the worst state of all. Truly a poet's life is not a happy one. Broken and shattered when creating, miserable and void when not creating, urged always to a strain which cannot heal except through immense pain, peaceful only in the occasional consciousness of a tolerable achievement—certainly the poor creature must be born to his

P O E T R Y

"If you went through my poems, you would see in the beginning of them there are often time-space coordinates in one way or another. We start out with some kind of orientation. One way to make the progress of the poem is that we leave these known coordinates and move off into some terra incognita, a place that is attracting our desire to get disoriented, to get lost."

In the Evening

The heads of roses begin to droop.
The bee who has been hauling his gold
all day finds a hexagon in which to rest.

In the sky, traces of clouds,
the last few darting birds,
watercolors on the horizon.

The white cat sits facing a wall.
The horse in the field is asleep on its feet.

I light a candle on the wood table.
I take another sip of wine.
I pick up an onion and a knife.

And the past and the future?
Nothing but an only child with two different masks.

B Y B I L L Y C O L L I N S



calling, for no man would take on such an existence willingly....Does a man create with his blood and sinews, and suffer in so doing? If he does not, give no heed to his works, they are still-born."

Virginia Woolf in *Orlando*: "Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice? So that all this chatter and praise, and blame and meeting people who did not admire one was as ill-suited as could be to the thing itself—a voice answering a voice."

Robert Pinsky: "[When asked how I first began as a poet,] one answer might be 'Imitating Yeats, Allen Ginsberg, Frost, Eliot.' Another might be 'Reading the dictionary and daydreaming about the sounds of words when I was a kid.'"

Wallace Stevens: "The poet feels *abundantly* the poetry of everything."

Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World*:

- ▶ "What the poet is called on to clarify is not answers but the existence and nature of questions; and his likelihood of so clarifying them for others is made possible only through dialogue with himself."
- ▶ "...the poet does not see and then begin to search for words to say what he sees: he begins to see and at once begins to say or to sing, and only in the action of verbalization does he see further. His language is not more dependent on his vision than his vision is upon his language."
- ▶ "...for the modern poet is not infrequently a syncretist. It is rare for him to subscribe to a single orthodoxy, but his nature as poet is so essentially religious that, exposed as never before to the knowledge of many faiths, many mythologies, he instinctively takes from any or all something of his sustenance."

Robert Bly: "The aim in writing is to evade the superego who will say, 'That image was terrible. Stop right there!'...When writing a poem it's important to be a good host—you allow to come in whatever appears."

Margaret Atwood: "Plato said that poets should be excluded from the ideal republic because they are such liars. I am a poet, and I affirm that this is true. About no subject are poets tempted to lie so much as about their own lives; I know one of them who has floated at least five versions of his autobiography, none of them true."

W. S. Merwin: "We go into a supermarket and we have artificial light, canned music, everything's deodorized...No wonder everybody wanders around like zombies!...Poetry, like all the arts, not only reconnects us with the world, it emanates from the connection with the

world of the senses and the imagination that remains. When that connection is no longer there, there will be no arts, and we won't even know what we missed—we really will be zombies walking around, if we can walk around at all, in a sort of eternal supermarket."

Carolyn Forché: "I think that poetry is the voice of the soul, whispering, celebrating, singing even...poetry is the consciousness which gives rise to the voice. Poetry allows the human soul to speak....You have to keep writing and keep writing until the poem emerges from your soul."

Donald Hall: "I think you can frequently understand a poem on a visceral level, and have the sense of communication with another human being, without being able to write an essay about it. With time enough and skill enough you can write an essay about it, but that's not the primary act of reading a poem....The act of reading a poem is to take it in and to be changed or altered by it."

Elise Paschen: "What intruiges and fascinates me is how complex a creature a poem can be. The content, the emotion, the images will leap up at you, but the subliminal formal elements are at work in the background. The poet has so many techniques at hand...I love taking poems apart in order to see how the poet assembled them. It is almost like mathematical equation. But the real challenge is to combine the formal mastery with the emotional intensity."

William Stafford: "Writing [poetry] is particularly susceptible to this wonderful resource, language. I didn't invent it, I don't control it. It just rolls on. It comes from everybody....It is a great river of possibilities

swirling around us all the time...I guess I do it like a gull—those great swoops of realization and vistas that veer off toward other formulations in language. And even the *syllables* have meaning!"

John Keats:

- ▶ "Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle or amaze with itself, but with its subject."
- ▶ "The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself. That which is creative must create itself."
- ▶ "I am convinced of this...never to write from the sake of writing or making a poem, but from running over with any little knowledge or experience which many years of reflection may perhaps give me; otherwise I will be dumb..."

