Ten Years of Writing about Poetry Has Taught Me This

By
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How to Be a Poet

By Wendell Berry
(to remind myself)

i

Make a place to sit down.
Sit down. Be quiet.
You must depend upon
affection, reading, knowledge,
skill—more of each
than you have—inspiration,
work, growing older, patience,
for patience joins time
to eternity. Any readers
who like your poems,
doubt their judgment.

ii
Breathe with unconditional breath
the unconditioned air.
Shun electric wire.
Communicate slowly. Live
a three-dimensioned life;
stay away from screens.
Stay away from anything
that obscures the place it is in.
There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places
and desecrated places.

iii

Accept what comes from silence.
Make the best you can of it.
Of the little words that come
out of the silence, like prayers
prayed back to the one who prays,
make a poem that does not disturb
the silence from which it came.

Source: *Poetry* (January 2001)
Also found on the Poetry Foundation's website.

Ten Years of Writing about Poetry Has Taught Me This

Poetry is the most textured form of writing. It attracts artists who weave sounds and images with mystery. They may be cranky (T. S. Eliot) or homesick (Seamus Heaney) or humorous (Billy Collins). They may believe that poetry is an instrument of investigation (Jane Hirshfield) or necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry (Mary Oliver) or should light up the sky (Ted Kooser). They may believe that achieving clarity is a quest, not a burden (Carl Sandburg) or that poetry can unite a nation (Amanda Gorman) or should possess an electrifying undercurrent (Louise Glück). Read at your own risk.

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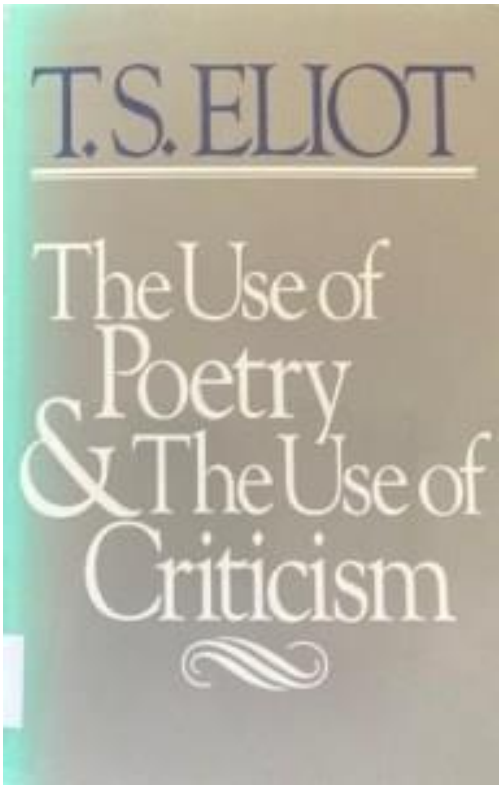
“Any radical change in poetic form is likely to be the symptom of some very much deeper change in society and in the individual.”

Posted on September 20, 2022



What a crank T. S. Eliot must have been! He is the champion of contradiction. Consider this: his difficult and complex poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” revolutionized poetry, and many consider it to be a prime example of social criticism. And yet, he wrote “To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.” However, in the lectures he delivered at Harvard, he argues the opposite: he says that “poetry is not written to provide material for conversation” (8) but to articulate change.

Eliot, T. S. *The Use of Poetry & The Use of Criticism*. Harvard University Press, 1933, pp. 66-67.

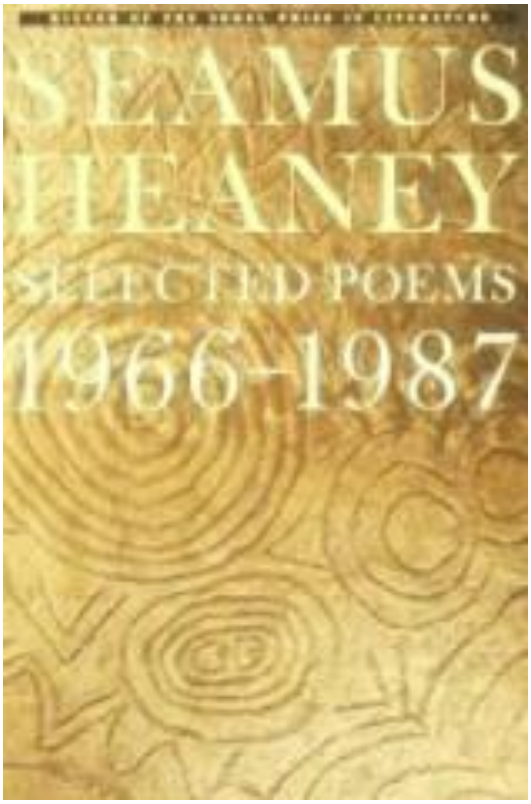
Link to post: https://www.catherinestover.com/any-radical-change-in-poetic-form-is-likely-to-be-the-symptom-of-some-very-much-deeper-change-in-society-and-in-the-individual/

Link to discussion of social criticism: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/t-s-eliot

Link to quote about “a piece of rhythmical grumbling”: https://www.jstor.org/stable/24777099

“There was a sunlit absence.”

Posted on June 5, 2014



This is the first line of my current-favorite poem by the Irish poet who was said to be “permanently homesick.” I wonder if somehow he *enjoyed* being homesick. (Absence isn’t dark, it’s “sunlit” and the title of the section is “Sunlight.”) It describes his aunt baking scones in her kitchen and concludes with a description of love that is unlike any other I’ve ever read: “And here is love like a tinsmith’s scoop sunk past its gleam in the meal-bin.” Past its gleam! A tin scoop in flour! What a strange way to picture love…and yet, it’s haunting and unforgettable.

Heaney, Seamus. *Selected Poems 1966 – 1987.* Noonday Press, 1991, p. 63.

Link to post:
https://www.catherinestover.com/there-was-a-sunlit-absence/

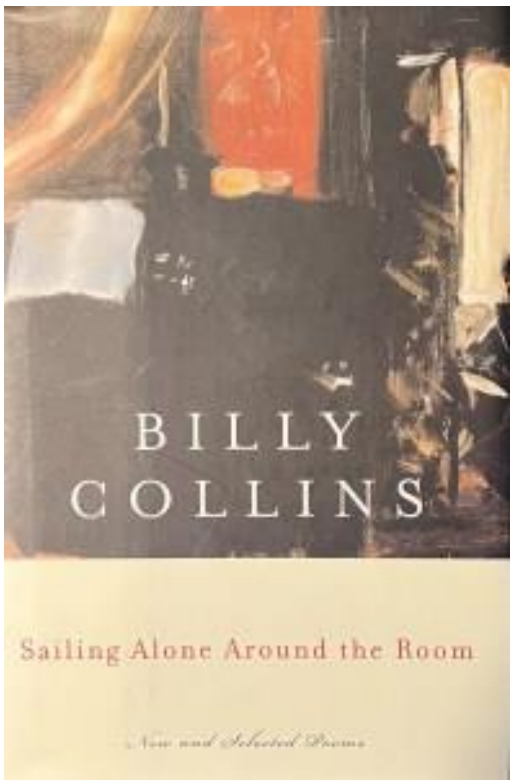
Link to the poem:

https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/8422-poetry/

Link to discussion of homesickness:
https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/aug/30/seamus-heaney

“The name of the author is the first to go, followed obediently by the title, the plot…”

Posted on June 25, 2026



The poem “Forgetfulness” by Billy Collins continues: “the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel which suddenly becomes one you have never read, never even heard of, as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain, to a little fishing village where there are no phones.” I love the way he opens with a wry statement and closes on a different note altogether, as he does here: “No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.”

Collins, Billy. *Sailing Alone Around the Room: New and Selected Poems*. Random House, 2001, p. 29.

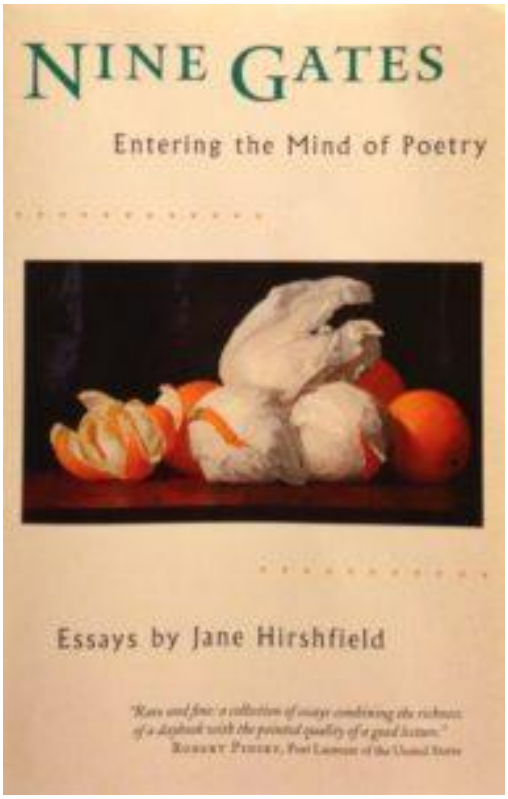
Link to post: https://www.catherinestover.com/the-name-of-the-author-is-the-first-to-go-followed-obediently-by-the-title-the-plot/

Link to video of poet reading the poem: https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=video+of+forgetfullness+by+billy+collins&&mid=36B117988B6DB2C8E29436B117988B6DB2C8E294&churl=https%3a%2f%2fwww.youtube.com%2fchannel%2fUCn3pSkRgfFUdiJTWub_tvFA&FORM=VRDGAR

Link to Poetry Foundation’s biography: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/billy-collins

"To look closely with the attention of questioning changes everything."

Posted on November26, 2016



"It is," Jane Hirshfield writes in this collection of essays about poetry, "if undertaken fully, revolutionary." More stimulating than a triple-shot of espresso, these essays show what can happen when a great poet sets out to describe how poetry is primarily "an instrument of investigation and a mode of perception." When they are at the highest level, perhaps scientists, analysts, and artists share Hirshield's goal of finding "a path toward new understanding and transformation." This is not for the faint at heart. Read this book if you are ready to be challenged to look closely and ask the hardest questions.

Hirshfield, Jane. *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*. HarperPerennial, 1997, p. 52.

Link to post: https://www.catherinestover.com/to-look-closely-with-the-attention-of-questioning-changes-everything/

Link to discussion of "instrument of investigation"
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/jane-hirshfield

Link to interview with the poet:
https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/bookauth/jhirsh.htm

"For poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry."

Posted on January 19, 2019

The poet Mary Oliver died this week, and I'm convinced that if we all would take a break to read her poetry, we would be strengthened by it. The level of anger – about the shut-down, the bickering, the brutal weather – is remarkably high right now. Mary Oliver believed that poetry is one of the things that can save us – that it can "lift the latch" and give a "glimpse into a greater paradise" that is "beyond the margins of the self." Perhaps this is the time to take a deep breath and turn to poetry, such as the ones found here.

Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry*. Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994, p. 122.

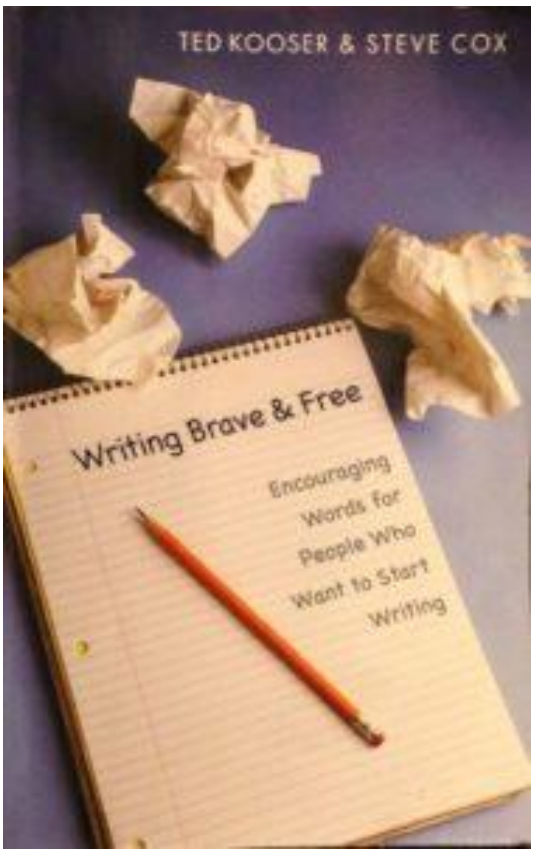
Link to the post: https://www.catherinestover.com/for-poems-are-not-words-after-all-but-fires-for-the-cold-ropes-let-down-to-the-lost-something-as-necessary-as-bread-in-the-pockets-of-the-hungry/

Link to her poetry: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mary-oliver#tab-poems

Link to discussion of power of poetry: https://www.csmonitor.com/1992/1209/09161.html

“A writer’s goal is to light up the sky.”

Posted on July 7, 2016



As a fan of Pulitzer-Prize winning poet Ted Kooser, I couldn’t wait to see what he would say about using metaphors in this little-known book for people who want to start writing. He writes, “. . . an apt metaphor opens a door out of a box, gives you a way to express something difficult, a tool to convert something physical and visible into language that is abstract and portable . . . ” The most effective writing, he says, “seems to reach through the opaque surface of the world and offer a glimpse of that universal order beyond.”

Kooser, Ted and Steve Cox. *Writing Brave & Free: Encouraging Words for People Who Want to Start Writing*. University of Nebraska Press, 2006, p. 104.

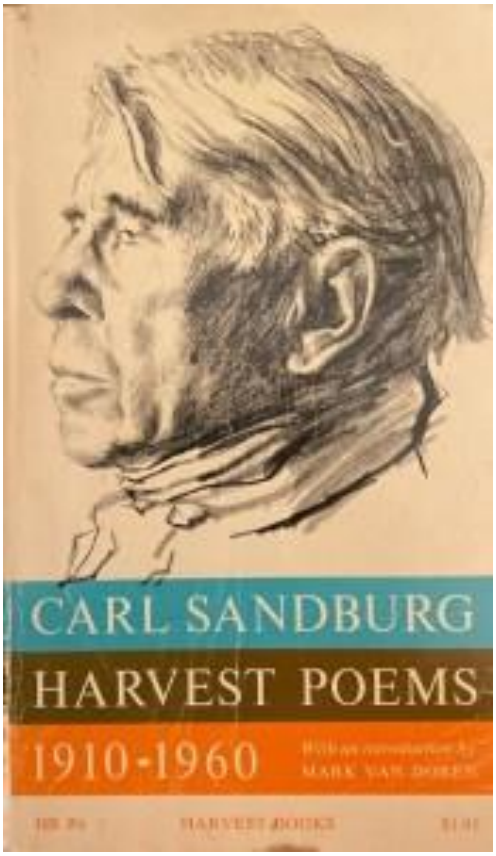
Link to the post: https://www.catherinestover.com/a-writers-goal-is-to-light-up-the-sky/

Link to bio: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-kooser

Link to interview: https://www.npr.org/2005/07/04/4728857/talking-with-the-nations-poet-laureate

“The inexplicable is all around us. So is the incomprehensible.”

Posted on January 8, 2021



Are you as astonished as I am by the events in Washington this week? During uncertain times like this, I like to reach for the works of the wise poets who are drawn to things that they find inexplicable because they believe that the process of achieving clarity is a worthy lifelong quest – not a burden. In his “Notes for a Preface,” Carl Sandburg tells us that at age 72, he is “still traveling, still a seeker” and is still hoping to write “sentences truly alive, with verbs quivering, with nouns giving color and echoes.” His goal is to learn.

Sandburg, Carl. “Notes for a Preface.” *Harvest Poems 1910 – 1960*. Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960, p. 11.

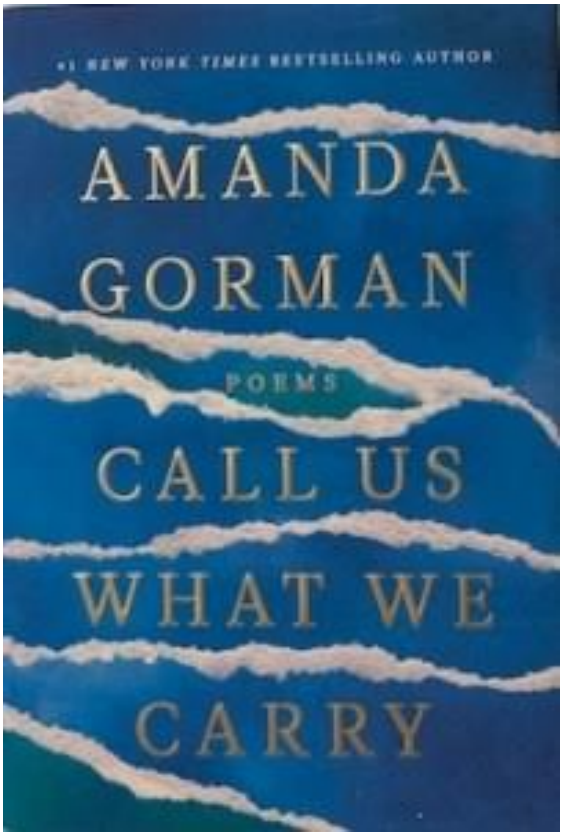
Link to the post:
https://www.catherinestover.com/the-inexplicable-is-all-around-us-so-is-the-incomprehensible/

Link to Notes for a Preface reading:
https://wnyc.org/story/carl-sandburg/

Link to bio: https://poets.org/poet/carl-sandburg

“Shall this leave us bitter? Or better? Grieve. Then choose.”

Posted on February 11, 2022



In an interview with Michelle Obama, Amanda Gorman says that for the last six years, she has been challenging herself to write what she called the “Inauguration poem” that is “worthy of a new chapter in the country.” Her goal was to be “brave enough to be hopeful.” Wow! I am fascinated by this young poet’s determination to cajole and celebrate a nation. Dr. Jill Biden selected Gorman to read at the Inauguration after reading the poem “In This Place,” about a poet who “rewrites this nation, who tells a story . . . to breathe hope into a palimpsest of time . . .”

Gorman, Amanda. ““The Shallows.” *Call Us What We Carry*. Viking, 2021, p. 24.

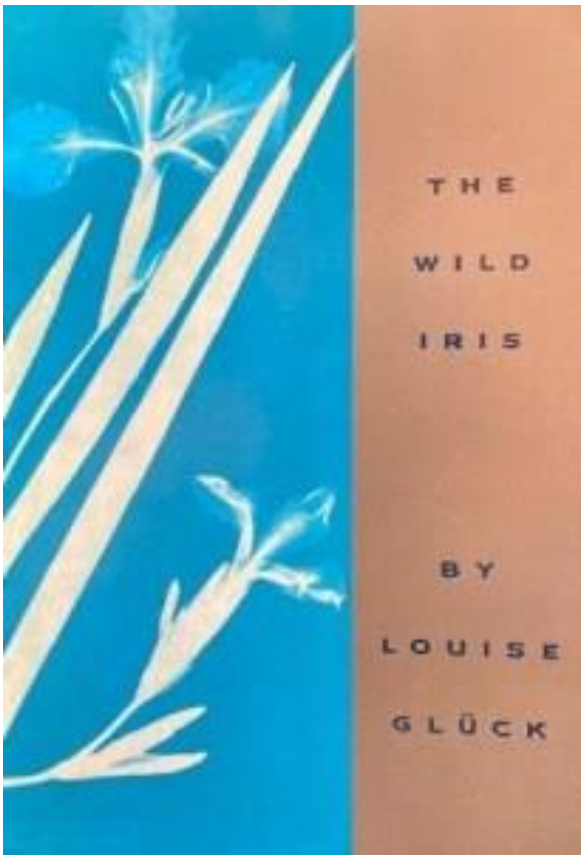
Link to the post: https://www.catherinestover.com/shall-this-leave-us-bitter-or-better-grieve-then-choose/

Link to Gorman’s selection: https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/12/amanda-gorman-poetry-call-us-what-we-carry/621019/

Link to the poem: https://poets.org/poem/place-american-lyric

“At the end of my suffering there was a door.”

Posted on October 9, 2020



It’s best to eat chocolate, I think, when reading the strong poetry of Louise Glück, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature this week. She goes for the jugular. Glück is known for her clarity and her interest in the abandoned, the punished and the betrayed. To be successful – and by that I mean interesting – with dark subjects is a lot harder than it may look. An “electrifying undercurrent” gives her poems power when, for example, the reader understands that she is writing about a flower – a wild iris – who “returns to find a voice.” Survival is conceivable.

Glück, Louise. “The Wild Iris.” *The Wild Iris*. Ecco Press, 1992, p.1.

Link to the post:
https://www.catherinestover.com/at-the-end-of-my-suffering-there-was-a-door/

Link to the Nobel Prize commentary:
https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2020/bio-bibliography/

Link to a tribute by Colm Tóibín :
https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/09/louise-gluck-colm-toibin-on-a-brave-and-truthful-nobel-winner