

POEM CENTRAL

WORD JOURNEYS WITH
READERS AND WRITERS

SHIRLEY McPHILLIPS

CONTENTS

WITH GRATITUDE	VII
PART 1: COMING INTO A WORLD OF POETRY	I
POEMS THAT SPEAK TO US.	10
THE SOIL OF POETRY	21
BUILDING UP A FRIENDSHIP WITH POETRY: STRUCTURES AND RITUALS.	24
POETRY MTWTF (AKA POETRY FRIDAY)	32
YOUNG POETS BLOGGING	36
PART 2: READING A POEM: AN IMMENSE INTIMACY.	45
THE SHAPE OF IT.	50
TITLES LEADING US INTO A POEM	55
THE MUSIC OF IT: READING FOR SOUND.	59
CONNECTING WITH A POEM.	68
DEALING WITH DIFFICULTY.	76
POEM TALK	93
WHO IS THE SPEAKER IN A POEM?	105
PART 3: FINDING POEMS, MAKING POEMS	111
DANCES WITH WORDS	115
POEMS WAITING TO BE FOUND.	131
LINE BY LINE.	147
THE OCCASIONAL POEM.	168
POEMS FOR ALL SEASONS	178

POEM CENTRAL

POETS FACING ART: EKPHRASIC POEMS	196
PUTTING ON THE MASK: PERSONA POEMS	225
HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU: HOMAGE POEMS	245
THE GREAT SHOUT-OUT: INVECTIVE POEMS	254
WRITING IN THE WAKE OF A POEM	262
POEM CENTRAL: THE MYSTERY AND MIRACLE OF WORDS	270
RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS	272
REFERENCES	279
CREDITS	289
INDEX	291

© Hawker Brownlow Education

COMING INTO A WORLD OF POETRY

FROM TENTATIVE DEFINITIONS OF POETRY

Poetry is a journal of a sea animal living on land, wanting to fly the air.

Poetry is a pack-sack of invisible keepsakes.

*Poetry is a series of explanations of life, fading off into horizons too swift
for explanations.*

*Poetry is a search for syllables to shoot at barriers of the unknown and the
unknowable.*

*Poetry is a theorem of a yellow-silk handkerchief knotted with riddles,
sealed in a balloon tied to the tail of a kite flying in a white wind
against a blue sky in spring.*

*Poetry is the silence and speech between a wet struggling root of a flower
and a sunlit blossom of that flower.*

*Poetry is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through
to guess about what is seen during a moment.*

Poetry is the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits.

—CARL SANDBURG (1970, 317–319)

Once Mrs. Melville, wife of the author of *Moby-Dick*, wrote a letter to her mother:

Herman has taken to writing poetry.

You need not tell anyone, for you know how such things get around.
(Rukeyser 1996, 10)

When I started researching for this book, I had the feeling that in many ways poetry was still in hiding. It seems a difficult challenge in the hurly burly of life to find a spot where the seeds of poetry might sprout. Or, it's a frilly ruffle, an emotional muddle, a mysterious rune. If it's anything at all.

And yet, there are those who believe America is experiencing a poetry renaissance, with more readings and workshops and books and MFA programs than we can shake a stick at. Others argue that this belief gives us a superficial picture of the real place of poetry in our culture.

At this point I'm optimistic. And often inspired. Granted, in many places the seeds of poetry are moldy, the earth depleted. But in some places poetry still springs from organic soil. The National Cowboy Poetry Gathering celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in January 2014 in Elko, Nevada. Thousands joined musicians, artists, and poets to share a love of rural life in the West. (For a treat, watch respected cowboy poet Joel Nelson recite the classic poem "Lasca" by Frank Desprez at <http://www.westernfolklife.org>.)

In other places opportunities for poetry pop up like dandelions in early spring. That longed-for yellow after a long winter. Madeline Schwartzman, professor of architecture and filmmaker, gets on a New York City subway train each day and asks complete strangers to write a poem in her notebook. She's on her fifth notebook with over a hundred poems. Often, connections are made in that moment that go far beyond the subway ride. (Visit Schwartzman and read some daily poems by New Yorkers at <http://www.poemsbynewyorkers.com>.)

As I will show in later sections, the Internet can be a place for the worst poetry and the best. But it's out there, and thousands of people are engaged. Poetry websites, poetry blogs, poetry organizations, poetry prompts, poetry slams, poetry skypes, poetry forums, poetry goodreads, poetry newsletters, poems-a-day, poetry

podcasts, poetry columns, poetry getaways, poetry profiles, “Poem Sunday,” on and on.

I lean in with Yusef Komunyakaa, who writes in *The Eye of the Poet*, “By all signs, poetry in America seems to be alive and well . . . This is the case because, in part, poets themselves have become mentors, teachers, workshop instructors, and curators, and are active in poetry organizations. Together, a poet and a group of initiates cherish the art that sustains them” (in Citino 2001, 148).

Our national poets laureate, who serve as Consultants in Poetry at the Library of Congress, have found practical and creative ways to engage the public. Robert Pinsky’s “The Favorite Poem Project” acknowledged the impact of poetry in our everyday lives by asking people to share their favorite poems with fellow Americans. You can access videos, online resources, and an archive of Americans’ favorite poems at <http://www.favoritepoem.org>.

Ted Kooser founded “American Life in Poetry” (<http://www.americanlifeinpoetry.com>). To create a presence for poetry in our lives, to help poets reach a wider audience, he writes a free weekly column for newspapers and online periodicals that features a poem from a contemporary American poet.

Billy Collins founded “Poetry 180” (<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180>) to foster poetry in schools. Teachers and students can read aloud a poem a day, view a poem a day online, print them out, or purchase collections of yearly offerings (see “Resources for Teachers and Students”). This is a great way of introducing and supporting young readers as they make their way into a world of poetry.

In order to acknowledge and support the work of community colleges, Kay Ryan held a video conference and poetry contest, titled “Poetry for the Mind’s Joy,” for students from community colleges across the land. You can find webcasts and poems online at <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/mindsjoy>.

Current Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey has set up “office hours” when she meets with members of the general public to discuss poetry. Her *PBS NewsHour* features, among her other projects, continue to show the crucial role poetry plays in people’s lives. An image from the first program stays in my mind: Prospect Park, Brooklyn, New York. A group of children inside a circle of Alzheimer’s patients and caregivers, all reciting Wordsworth.

You may ask, Do many poetry books get published? I’m not sure of the facts, but as I write this, Poets House in New York, in its annual showcase of poetry books released in the past year, is displaying nearly 3,000 books by about 700 different

publishers. This seems to offer a lining of light at the edge of that perennial poetry doomcloud.

While all this good news lifts us up, of course we want more. There are those for whom poetry is a distant star. So we have to do better. Our hope for poetry lives in how we nurture our young people. As teachers, we need to experience for ourselves what we hope to inspire. Or, as bluesman Charlie “Bird” Parker once said, “If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn” (Reisner 1977, 27).

I never wanted to teach out of “cold storage,” to remove myself to some protective place away from the necessary struggles that any creative endeavor requires. To be a partner in learning with students and other adults has always kept learning alive for me. Workshops, seminars, and getaways for adults searching for the poet within them are many, and growing. People go to explore what poets Ellen Bass and Kim Rosen in their workshops call “the inspiration of hearing poetry, the power of speaking poetry, and the craft of writing poetry” (Bass and Rosen 2013).

One of poetry’s gifts, for me, is the nourishment of an inner life—the outside brought in, rearranged, and sent back out again. It is a meeting place for the objects and activity of the outside world and the inner world of consciousness and imagination. Recognizing, attuning, reaching out, connecting, responding. This is the place for poetry; this is the attitude of poetry. This is how it shows us a way we might face life.

Luckily, Mrs. Melville, “such things” do still get around.

SOMETHING ABOUT THIS BOOK

The first important thing to understand about this book—and it will be evident throughout—is that it is based on my belief that poetry is not an academic subject but an art. And therefore it belongs where life is. Everything discussed or demonstrated is based on the hope that teachers and students will find, read, and write poems for themselves as life brings them opportunity and need. It’s not so complicated for teachers to influence the lives of students in poetry, or anything else: show them what you love with all the passion you can muster. We all remember those who inspired us, and we know how they did.

If people feel fearful of poetry or even if the door to poetry is only slightly ajar, then I hope the company they keep with folks in this book will give them courage to peek in. Or pull up a chair, sit for a time. For some of the people in this book,

poetry is life. For others, poetry is not a long tradition, but they've made a start. They have copied from books, or the Internet, and started a collection in a folder. No books, they went to the library or to a colleague to borrow. No one to talk to, they sent a homemade card with a poem inside with an invitation for coffee. They joined poetry organizations and signed up for a poem-a-day by e-mail. No like-minded group, they took part in poetry blogs, wrote for online poetry prompts; they sent out fliers to meet over wine and cheese after school—and brought a poem or two. The teachers we meet in this book have brought that zeal into the classroom. "Show them what you love."

Finally, I haven't counted, but if you read this book through you will have scores of adult and student poems of the highest quality to enjoy and a host of ways to use them. And though a poem may be featured, say, in a section on "persona poems," it can just as well be used to look at the "speaker," or to "feel the effect," or look at "lines." Though I wanted to, there wasn't space enough to include the whole of every poem I mention. But I hope you will search for them. In today's world, they're easy to find.

Also, I use a lot of quotes from writers I greatly admire. These are carefully selected—many from works suggested in this book—and shared in places where they support the conversation at hand. I hope these words inspire and instruct as we take them in and share them with our students.

THE VOICES IN THIS BOOK

Since the ancients, information—wisdom, knowledge, news—has been carried along on the wings of a story. So I decided, for this book, to gather together a range of people—professional poets, inspired teachers, fledgling and seasoned artists and illustrators, musicians on the riff, feisty retirees, careful editors, brave students, folks hanging out on the Internet—sit them down in the catbird seat, and let the stories begin. They tell about such things as how they first met a poem, their delights and struggles with poetry, the role of poetry in their lives. They share how they find poems, how they read, respond to, and fashion them. They show how they demonstrate and nudge and nourish others in poetry. Their stories inspire and instruct me well. In many of them, I recognize some aspect of myself, as I am or as I would like to be. I think readers will be inspired too.