

Like it or not, we are a part of our time. We speak the language of our time. For poets, it may be more rarefied; it may be more adorned or convoluted, but, nonetheless, in some way it is reflective of our culture. I, for instance, as a very young man, was relieved when I first read William Carlos Williams and I realized I could stop trying to write like Algernon Swinburne.

I know I am not alone when I confess that I have stared at a blank sheet of paper for hours, day after day. Why? Why is it so difficult? Because I want to travel to a new place. Not only do I want the language to be new, I also want the ideas to be new. I want the whole world to be new! We know that that is impossible, but desire is not rational.

Well, we know Columbus did not set sail for America. But what he got was not so bad. We concentrate all we know into the moment, with some fearful peeping into the near future. When I make the mistake of imagining how a whole poem should unfold, I immediately want to destroy that plan. Nothing should supplant the true act of discovery.

The poem is like a very demanding but beautiful pet. It says, "I want this. No, I don't want that. Now I need this, and more of that. But I don't want any of that," and so on. Corrective move. Wanting both truth and beauty, the beauty of language in pursuit of truth.

Some poems want to do their work in the quietest way, like a spider working in a corner. Others are very noisy, banging words against one another as if they were tin cans. One kind of poem is not inherently better than another.

Amazingly, year after year, surprising, subtle, profound, funny, and sad new poems are written and published. Poems we could not have imagined; poems we now know we needed. There is no end to our needing poetry. Without poetry our Culture and, more importantly, our collective Spirit, would be a tattered, wayward thing.

The daily routine of our lives can be good and even wonderful, but there is still a hunger in us for the mystery of the deep waters, and poetry can fulfill that hunger. It speaks to that place in us that seems incomplete. And it can assure us that we are not crazy or alone, and that is a tall order.

What we want from poetry is to be moved, to be moved from where we now stand. We don't just want to have our ideas or emotions confirmed. Or if we do, then we turn to lesser poems, poems that tell you killing children is bad, chopping down the rainforest is bad, dying is sad. A good poet would agree with all of those sentiments, but would also strive for an understanding beyond those givens.

The poet arrives at his or her discovery by setting language on edge or creating metaphors that suggest dangerous ideas, or any number of other methods. The point is, language can be hazardous as it is our primary grip on the world. When language is skewed, the world is viewed differently. But this is only effective if the reader can recognize this view, even though it is the first time he or she has experienced the thought.

When you come upon a poem you especially like, what separates it from so many other well-made poems is the quality of its insight. And for this word "insight" I would happily substitute the loftier words "revelation" or "epiphany."

Style and voice serve as a means of seduction. They are the rites of courting. They help create the appropriate tone and ambiance and set of possibilities whereby the revelation may occur. I say "may" because there are no guarantees. The poet can only hope for it. Revelations known beforehand are by definition not revelations.

The act of writing poetry is a search for the unknown. Each line written is searching for the next line. And as the weight, the length, of the poem accumulates, so too does the pressure accumulate for a revelation to occur. Each image or idea should point the way to another image or idea. And each of these indicates the need for further development if the poem is to achieve its maximum potential. Each poem dictates the magnitude of the revelation. An extremely small insight can be satisfying. Simply offering the reader a new way of seeing a common object or familiar experience qualifies as an insight or epiphany. Charles Simic *begins* a poem called "Fork" like this:

This strange thing must have Crept
Right out of hell.
It resembles a bird's foot
Worn around the cannibal's neck.

We are in a provocative, new world from the get-go, but also one that the reader can immediately see. It is very clear, when reading Ovid or John Clare or Edna St. Vincent Millay or John Ashbery, that human beings don't change. Their

circumstances, their life expectancies, and, yes, their languages change, but their emotions do not. Their joys, their heartaches, their griefs, their jealousies, etc., are remarkably the same as they were two thousand years ago. Still, poets persist in penetrating the mysteries surrounding our condition and enlivening our language while doing so.

Writing a poem is like traversing an obstacle course or negotiating a maze. Or downhill skiing. We tell ourselves, for the sake of excitement, to up the ante, that the choices we make could prove fatal. Anything to help us get where we must go, wherever the hell that is. When poets are actually working, theorizing is the last thing they have time for.

Once the poem is heated up and seems to be going someplace exciting, there is very little the poet would not do to insure its arrival. And of course it is always supposed to appear easy and natural. (About as natural as baking a live yak pie.)

Some fine poems are written in one sitting; others take a year or more. That doesn't seem to matter. Just as it doesn't matter if they are written with lipstick on the back end of a pig. It doesn't matter if they are written about a mite or the end of the world. One of the things that matters is the relationship of all the parts and elements of the poem to each other. Is everything working toward the same goal? Is there anything extraneous? Or if there is some kind of surface disunity, can that be justified by some larger purpose?

Why is it that you can't just take some well-written prose, divide it into lines, and call it poetry? (Thank you for asking that question, you jerk.) While most prose is a kind of continuous chatter, describing, naming, explaining, poetry speaks against an essential backdrop of silence. It is almost reluctant to speak at all, knowing that it can never fully name what is at the heart of its intention. There is a prayerful, haunted silence between words, between phrases, between images, ideas and lines. This is one reason why good poems can be read over and over. The reader, perhaps without knowing it, instinctively desires to peer between the cracks into the other world where the unspoken rests in darkness.

Well-meaning friends and colleagues are forever offering me ideas for poems, bizarre scenes they've witnessed or comic ideas they themselves have hatched. Thankless creature that I am, I've never even been tempted to take advantage of these gifts. And when I was young I had the idea that if I was going to make a go of it as a poet I had better get out there in the world and have some big adventures so that I would have something to write about. And I did go out there and seek big

adventures and found them aplenty. Sad to report not one of them ever found its way into a poem, not even a little bit. And so, too, today, a certain bird is more likely to find its way into a poem of mine than a train wreck I witnessed.

Is it that the train wreck speaks for itself, announces its tragedy so clearly, whereas the bird is subtle and can evoke a thousand possible suggestions? These are rather bald-faced examples. What I was trying to address is how the poet arrives at his or her 'subject matter.' First of all, it doesn't really 'arrive,' and secondly, most poets would tell you that the phrase "subject matter" is inappropriate when discussing poetry. All the elements of the poem make the poem, are the poem. You cannot extricate "subject matter" from them, unless you really believe that clothes make the man.

For me sometimes a poem at its most preliminary stage may begin by sensing texture. I walk around for hours wondering what this texture is and if I can find one or two words that would approximate its essence. Admittedly, this is a very slow way to start a poem, but it is one that has got me going many times. It is one that has opened doors that would have otherwise gone ignored. But these one or two words will then point the way to a few more, until eventually ideas and images come trickling or flooding in.

When one is highly alert to language, then nearly everything begs to be in a poem—words overheard on a subway or in a supermarket, graffiti, newspaper headlines, a child's school lesson blowing down the street. This is the most exciting state to be in. Commonplace words are suddenly mysterious and beautiful. Someone uses a phrase "baby farm," and your head spins with delight. "Savoy cabbage," "fine-tooth comb," "patrol wagon," it doesn't matter how mundane when the poet, almost beyond his or her control, is seeking language, questioning it, testing it. The poet will take that commonplace piece of language and "make it new."

In my experience poets are not different from other people. You have your dullards, your maniacs, your mild eccentrics, etc. Except for this one thing they do—write poems. And in this they are singularly strange. They may end up with an audience and a following of some sort, but in truth they write their poems with various degrees of obsessiveness mostly for themselves, for the pleasure and satisfaction it gives them. And for the hunger and need nothing else can abate.

And then, if given the chance, most are happy to publish their finished work, and, likewise, if given the chance, they are happy to read their poems in public and accept, perhaps even bask in, any applause that might be forthcoming. And for that

moment it may appear that the poet is in complete command of his or her faculties, and that he or she wrote these poems with this kind of audience in mind. And at that moment the poet may even believe it. But fortunately this is not true. I say "fortunately" because if it were true then poetry would only be a kind of entertainment. It is precisely because the poet has written his poems in solitude for himself to satisfy unanalyzable hungers and to please his highest standards with negligible prospects of any other rewards that the poem is incorruptible and may address issues unaddressed by many people in their daily lives. Therefore, when people hear or read this poem they may, just may, respond eagerly and take heart at hearing or reading what they themselves have never been able to utter, but now suspect is true. I suspect that if the poet were to pander to his, audience not much new would ever get said.

And it seems we are equally grateful for the serious and dark poem as for those that amuse us. This anthology has many of both kinds, and all shades in between. There is a very large and wonderfully diverse company of poets at work out there in America. This anthology is but a small reflection, and lacks many of my favorite poets. On the other hand, there were many discoveries for me, poets I had not heard of at poets whom I had not paid enough attention to before.

Now, after an exhilarating year of reading, it is time to say: Go, little book, make some friends if you can.

Love And Sleep

Algernon Charles Swinburne

Lying asleep between the strokes of night
I saw my love lean over my sad bed,
Pale as the duskiest lily's leaf or head,
Smooth-skinned and dark, with bare throat made to bite,
Too wan for blushing and too warm for white,
But perfect-coloured without white or red.
And her lips opened amorously, and said—
I wist not what, saving one word—Delight.
And all her face was honey to my mouth,
And all her body pasture to mine eyes;
The long lithe arms and hotter hands than fire,
The quivering flanks, hair smelling of the south,
The bright light feet, the splendid supple thighs
And glittering eyelids of my soul's desire.

To a Poor Old Woman

William Carlos Williams

munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her

You can see it by
the way she gives herself
to the one half
sucked out in her hand

Comforted
a solace of ripe plums
seeming to fill the air
They taste good to her