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Nine Poets To Change Your Life

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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Nine Poets To Change Your Life

Osher Institute 2014 * Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

Ground Rules

1. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, and most of all, making sense.
2. Write what you know as well as what you don't know.
3. Follow your writing, not the suggested exercise, the facilitator or what you think you should write. Write what wakes you up the most.
4. Feel free to experiment with poems, stories, dialogues, essays, letters, and whatever other form the writing wants to be.
5. Practice trust. Trust yourself to write what you need to write, how you need to write it.
6. Remember that all revealed in this workshop is confidential.
7. Treat all newborn writing with great respect and tenderness so that it can grow.
8. Reading your writing aloud is always optional.
9. No self-deprecating remarks allowed (especially when preparing to read your work).
10. Strive, as much as possible, not to compare your writing with the writing of others, and not to critique, interpret or analyze away what your writing is trying to show you.
11. Witness others. Listen carefully with your full attention. It will enhance your ability to listen to your own words.
12. Please share your responses to one another's work—what moves you, what stands out for you – but please refrain from critiquing or analyzing the work.
13. Treat all you do as a delicious and invigorating experiment. Play. Take chances. See what way leads to way, and what words lead to words.

1. Rumi, Poet of Everyday Mysticism

Jelalludin Rumi was, born Sept. 30, 1207 in Balkh, Afghanistan (when it was part of the Persian empire), and fled with his family to Konya, Turkey sometime between 1215-1220 because of the invading Mongolian army (Genghis Khan and company). His father, Bahauddin Walad, was also a mystic of “uncertain lineage” according to Coleman Barks (who translated and popularized Rumi) in his introduction to *The Essential Rumi* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), and both father and son were prone to visions and also writing an awful lot about what they saw. When Rumi's father died, Rumi became sheikh in the dervish learning community in Konya, and he soon met Shams of Tabriz in 1244, who pretty much blew him away with his spiritual understandings. When they reunited a little later, the story is that – according to Barks – “they fell at each other's feet, so that ‘no one knew who was the lover and who the beloved’.” Eventually Shams was murdered (possibly by Rumi's son, but that's another story). In any case, the friendship filled Rumi's poetry and poetic, dancing life journey, and Rumi felt at times that he was writing Shams' poetry (he even published a huge collection of Shams odes and quatrains). Rumi later had a very powerful connection with Husam Chelebi, his scribe and favorite student, and he decided the work of the final twelve years of his life to Husam. Rumi died Dec. 15, 1273.

1. Write deeply and without thinking too much about what you long for the most.

Love Dogs

One night a man was crying,
Allah! Allah!

His lips grew sweet with the praising,
until a cynic said,

“So! I have heard you
calling out, but have you ever
gotten any response?”

The man had no answer to that.
He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.

He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls,
in a thick, green foliage.

“Why did you stop raising?”

“Because I’ve never heard anything back.”

“This longing
you express is the return message.”

The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.

Your pure sadness
that wants help
is the secret cup.

Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.
That whining is the connection.

There are love dogs
no one knows the names of.

Give your life
to be one of them.

2. Small Rumi poems - read one, and write from it, using a line that inspires it as your diving board.

Keep walking
Though there's no place to get to.
Don't try to see through the distances.
That's not for human beings.
Move within
but don't move
The way that fear makes you move.

*

I have lived on the lip of insanity

Wanting to know reasons
Knocking on a door, it opens
I have been knocking from the inside!

*

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened.
Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.
Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

*

Your grief for what you've lost lifts a mirror
up to where you're bravely working.
Expecting the worst, you look, and instead,
here's the joyful face you've been longing to see.
Your hand opens and closes, and opens and closes.
If it were always a fist or always stretched open
you would be paralyzed.
Your deepest presence
is in every small contraction and expansion,
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated
as bird wings.

*

Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing,
There is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other
doesn't make any sense.

3. Write your own dialogue between what's calling to you and yourself.

Talking Through the Door

You said, "Who's at the door?"
I said, "Your slave."

You said, "What do you want?"
"To see you and bow."

"How long will you wait?"
"Until you call."

"How long will you cook?"
"Till the Resurrection."

We talked through the door. I claimed
a great love and that I had given up
what the world gives to be in that love.

You said, "Such claims require a witness."
I said, "This longing, these tears."

You said, "Discredited witnesses."
I said, "Surely not!"

You said, "Who did you come with?"
"The majestic imagination you gave me."

"Why did you come?"
"The musk of your wine was in the air."

"What is your intention?"
"Friendship."

"What do you want from me?"
"Grace."

Then you asked, "Where have you been
most comfortable?"
"In the palace."

"What did you see there?"
"Amazing things."

"Then why is it so desolate?"
"Because all that can be taken away in a second."

"Who can do that?"
"This clear discernment."

"Where can you live safely then?"
"In surrender."

"What is this giving up?"
"A peace that saves us."

"Is there no threat of disaster?"
"Only what comes in your street,
inside your love."

"How do you walk there?"

“In perfection.”

Now silence. If I told more of this conversation,
those listening would leave themselves.

There would be no door,
no roof or window either!

2. Li-Young Lee, Poet of Intimacy

Li-Young Lee was born in Jakarta (Indonesia) to Chinese parents in 1957 after his father moved there to found Gamaliel University. Lee's great grandfather was the first president of the Republic of China, and his father had been Mao Zedong's personal physician to Mao Tse-Tsung. Anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesia led to Lee's family being arrested and jailed as a political prisoner for a year. Once he was released, the family fled the county, wandering for five years through Hong Kong, Macau and Japan before arriving in the U.Ss., first in Seattle, and later settling in Pennsylvania. Lee's books include a memoir, *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance*, and poetry: *Behind My Eyes*, *Book of My Nights*, *The City in Which I Love You*, and *Rose*. He's published widely in anthologies and literary journals, and travels frequently to give readings and workshops. Lee lives in Chicago with his wife Donna and two sons.

1. Write of the sky inside you.

One Heart

Look at the birds. Even flying
is born

out of nothing. The first sky
is inside you, open

at either end of day.
The work of wings

was always freedom, fastening
one heart to every falling thing.

2. Write of a song important to someone in your parents' or grandparents' or great-grandparents' generation.

I Ask My Mother To Sing

She begins, and my grandmother joins her.
Mother and daughter sing like young girls.
If my father were alive, he would play
his accordion and sway like a boat.

I've never been in Peking, or the Summer Palace,

nor stood on the great Stone Boat to watch
the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake, the picnickers
running away in the grass.

But I love to hear it sung;
how the waterlilies fill with rain until
they overturn, spilling water into water,
then rock back, and fill with more,

Both women have begun to cry.
But neither stops her song.

3. Write about an “impossible blossom” in your life. Or write about a piece of fruit that was/is important to a family member and/or you.

From Blossoms

From blossoms comes
this brown paper bag of peaches
we bought from the joy
at the bend in the road where we turned toward
signs painted Peaches.

From laden boughs, from hands,
from sweet fellowship in the bins,
comes nectar at the roadside, succulent
peaches we devour, dusty skin and all,
comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat.

O, to take what we love inside,
to carry within us an orchard, to eat
not only the skin, but the shade,
not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
the round jubilation of peach.

There are days we live
as if death were nowhere
in the background; from joy
to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
from blossom to blossom to
impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.

3. Adrienne Rich, Poet of the Personal As Political

Adrienne Rich won the Yale Series of Younger Poets award in 1951 at the age of 22, launching her as a poet with her first book *A Change of World*. Other books that followed included *The Diamond Cutters*,

Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, Leaflets, Diving into the Wreck, Dark Fields of the Republic, An Atlas of the Difficult World, The Fac tof a Doorframe, The Dream of a Common Language and many more. Her award-winning prose includes *Arts o the Possible, What is Found There*, and the groundbreaking book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Poet W.S. Merwin says of Rich, "All her life she has been in love with the hope of telling utter truth, and her command of language from the first has been startlingly powerful." She has won numerous awards, and was known especially as one of the leading poets of the feminist movement, and much of her poetry examined the nature of power and voice. She died in 2012 at the age of 82.

1. Write about how one of your wounds comes from the same source of your power.

Power

Living in the earth-deposits of our history
Today a backhoe divulged out of a crumbling flank of earth
one bottle amber perfect a hundred-year-old
cure for fever or melancholy a tonic
for living on this earth in the winters of this climate.
Today I was reading about Marie Curie:
she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness
her body bombarded for years by the element
she had purified
It seems she denied to the end
the source of the cataracts on her eyes
the cracked and suppurating skin of her finger-ends
till she could no longer hold a test-tube or a pencil
She died a famous woman denying
her wounds
denying
her wounds came from the same source as her power.

2. Adrienne Rich speaks directly to her reader in this poem, imagining what longing, loss, bitterness, anger and other challenges bring the reader to this moment. Write about why you are reading this poem, using the phrase repeatedly, "I know I am reading this poem....."

Dedications

I know you are reading this poem
late, before leaving your office
of the one intense yellow lamp-spot and the darkening window
in the lassitude of a building faded to quiet
long after rush-hour. I know you are reading this poem
standing up in a bookstore far from the ocean
on a grey day of early spring, faint flakes driven
across the plains' enormous spaces around you.
I know you are reading this poem
in a room where too much has happened for you to bear

where the bedclothes lie in stagnant coils on the bed
 and the open valise speaks of flight
 but you cannot leave yet. I know you are reading this poem
 as the underground train loses momentum and before running
 up the stairs
 toward a new kind of love
 your life has never allowed.
 I know you are reading this poem by the light
 of the television screen where soundless images jerk and slide
 while you wait for the newscast from the intifada.
 I know you are reading this poem in a waiting-room
 of eyes met and unmeeting, of identity with strangers.
 I know you are reading this poem by fluorescent light
 in the boredom and fatigue of the young who are counted out,
 count themselves out, at too early an age. I know
 you are reading this poem through your failing sight, the thick
 lens enlarging these letters beyond all meaning yet you read on
 because even the alphabet is precious.
 I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the stove
 warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your hand
 because life is short and you too are thirsty.
 I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language
 guessing at some words while others keep you reading
 and I want to know which words they are.
 I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn
 between bitterness and hope
 turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.
 I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else left to read
 there where you have landed, stripped as you are.

3. Using the structure of this poem, take a phrase (such as “It will not...” or “You are...”) and write. Feel free to use a few phrases in one piece of writing.

Final Notations

It will not be simple, it will not take long
 It will take little time, it will take all your thought
 It will take all your heart, it will take all your breath
 It will be short, it will not be simple
 It will touch through your ribs, it will take all your heart
 It will not take long, it will occupy all your thought
 As a city is occupied, as a bed is occupied
 It will take your flesh, it will not be simple
 You are coming into us who cannot withstand you
 You are coming into us who never wanted to withstand you
 You are taking parts of us into places never planned
 You are going far away with pieces of our lives

It will be short, it will take all your breath
It will not be simple, it will become your will

4. Sharon Olds, Poet of the Body and Family

Sharon Olds not only is known for writing about the personal in a way often seen as liberating but for writing poems with long, breathless lines that build the energy of the story she's unfolding. Her poetry tends to often focus on family -- her family of origin (particularly her abusive father), the family she made with her husband of many years (and subsequently, the break-up of that relationship), and her children (particularly in all the sensory details of their growing up). Olds was born and raised in San Francisco, exploding onto the poetry scene with her first book, *Satan Says*, which won much critical praise and many readers. Her book *The Dead & the Living* (1983), received the Lamont Poetry Selection in 1983 and the National Book Critics Circle Award. *Stag's Leap* (Knopf, 2012), may have been largely about the dissolution of her marriage and the grief that followed, but her hard life material did win her a Pulitzer Prize and the T. S. Eliot Prize.

1. Write your own pledge of alliance.

Topography

After we flew across the country we
got in bed, laid our bodies
delicately together, like maps laid
face to face, East to West, my
San Francisco against your New York, your
Fire Island against my Sonoma, my
New Orleans deep in your Texas, your Idaho
bright on my Great Lakes, my Kansas
burning against your Kansas your Kansas
burning against my Kansas, your Eastern
Standard Time pressing into my
Pacific Time, my Mountain Time
beating against Your Central Time, your
sun rising swiftly from the right my
sun rising swiftly from the left your
moon rising slowly from the left my
moon rising slowly from the right until
all four bodies of the sky
burn above us, sealing us together,
all our cities twin cities,
all our states united, one
nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.
~ Sharon Olds

2. Write about the first meeting of your parents, imaging whatever facts you don't know. Or go back to any moment before damage was done, and describe that precise moment.

I Go Back to May 1937

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,
I see my father strolling out
under the ochre sandstone arch, the
red tiles glinting like bent
plates of blood behind his head, I
see my mother with a few light books at her hip
standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks,
the wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its
sword-tips aglow in the May air,
they are about to graduate, they are about to get married,
they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are
innocent, they would never hurt anybody.
I want to go up to them and say Stop,
don't do it—she's the wrong woman,
he's the wrong man, you are going to do things
you cannot imagine you would ever do,
you are going to do bad things to children,
you are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of,
you are going to want to die. I want to go
up to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,
her hungry pretty face turning to me,
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
his arrogant handsome face turning to me,
his pitiful beautiful untouched body,
but I don't do it. I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to
strike sparks from them, I say
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.

3. Go to a moment after a difficult experience, a week or year or decade later, and write about what you discover over distance.

A Week Later

A week later, I said to a friend: I don't
think I could ever write about it.
Maybe in a year I could write something.
There is something in me maybe someday
to be written; now it is folded, and folded,
and folded, like a note in school. And in my dream
someone was playing jacks, and in the air there was a
huge, thrown, tilted jack
on fire. And when I woke up, I found myself

counting the days since I had last seen
my husband -- only two years, and some weeks,
and hours. We had signed the papers and come down to the
ground floor of the Chrysler Building,
the intact beauty of its lobby around us
like a king's tomb, on the ceiling the little
painted plane, in the mural, flying. And it
entered my strictured heart, this morning,
slightly, shyly as if warily,
untamed, a greater sense of the sweetness
and plenty of his ongoing life,
unknown to me, unseen by me,
unheard, untouched-but known, seen,
heard, touched. And it came to me,
for moments at a time, moment after moment,
to be glad for him that he is with the one
he feels was meant for him. And I thought of my
mother, minutes from her death, eighty-five
years from her birth, the almost warbler
bones of her shoulder under my hand, the
eggshell skull, as she lay in some peace
in the clean sheets, and I could tell her the best
of my poor, partial love, I could sing her
out with it, I saw the luck
and luxury of that hour.
an in a fire.

4. Describe a quiet moment you shared when learning of your diagnosis, or a loved one's. Write of the line that has been crossed for you.

The Line

When we understood it might be cancer,
I lay down beside you in the night,
my palm resting in the groove of your chest,
the rachis of a leaf. There was no question of
making love: deep inside my body that
small hard lump. In the half-light
of my half-life, my hand in the beautiful
sharp cleft of your chest, the valley of the
shadow of death,
there was only the present moment, and as you
slept in the quiet, I watched you as one watches
a newborn child, aware each moment of the
miracle, the line has been crossed
out of the darkness.

5. Rita Dove: Poet of Freedom and Family

Rita Dove was born in Akron, Ohio in 1952, and went on to earn a MFA at the Iowa Writers' Workshop where she met her husband, the German writer Fred Viebahn. Her books include *The Yellow House on the Corner*; *Thomas and Beulah*, which won the Pulitzer Prize; *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (1999); and *Sonata Mulattica*. In addition to poetry, Dove has published works of fiction, including the short story collection *Fifth Sunday* (1990) and the novel *Through the Ivory Gate* (1992). Dove was named US Poet Laureate in 1993 at just 43 years old, the first African-American poet laureate.

1. Write your own fifth grade autobiography.

Fifth Grade Autobiography

I was four in this photograph fishing
with my grandparents at a lake in Michigan.
My brother squats in poison ivy.
His Davy Crockett cap
sits squared on his head so the raccoon tail
flounces down the back of his sailor suit.

My grandfather sits to the far right
in a folding chair,
and I know his left hand is on
the tobacco in his pants pocket
because I used to wrap it for him
every Christmas. Grandmother's hips
bulge from the brush, she's leaning
into the ice chest, sun through the trees
printing her dress with soft
luminous paws.

I am staring jealously at my brother;
the day before he rode his first horse, alone.
I was strapped in a basket
behind my grandfather.
He smelled of lemons. He's died—
but I remember his hands.

2. Write your own tribute to freedom (or a symbol of freedom).

Lady Freedom Among Us

Dn't lower your eyes
or stare straight ahead to where
you think you ought to be going
don't mutter oh no
not another one

get a job fly a kite
go bury a bone
with her oldfashioned sandals
with her leaden skirts
with her stained cheeks and whiskers and
heaped up trinkets
she has risen among us in blunt reproach
she has fitted her hair under a hand-me-down cap
and spruced it up with feathers and stars
slung over her shoulder she bears
the rainbowed layers of charity and murmurs
all of you even the least of you
don't cross to the other side of the square
don't think another item to fit on a
tourist's agenda
consider her drenched gaze her shining brow
she who has brought mercy back into the streets
and will not retire politely to the potter's field
having assumed the thick skin of this town
its gritted exhaust its sunscorch and blear
she rests in her weathered plumage
bigboned resolute
don't think you can ever forget her
don't even try
she's not going to budge
no choice but to grant her space
crown her with sky
for she is one of the many
and she is each of us.

3. Write about a moment you danced.

American Smooth

We were dancing—it must have
been a foxtrot or a waltz,
something romantic but
requiring restraint,
rise and fall, precise
execution as we moved
into the next song without
stopping, two chests heaving
above a seven-league
stride—such perfect agony,
one learns to smile through,
ecstatic mimicry
being the *sine qua non*

of American Smooth.
And because I was distracted
by the effort of
keeping my frame
(the leftward lean, head turned
just enough to gaze out
past your ear and always
smiling, smiling),
I didn't notice
how still you'd become until
we had done it
(for two measures?
four?)—achieved flight,
that swift and serene
magnificence,
before the earth
remembered who we were
and brought us down.

6. Joy Harjo, Poet of Native Land and People

Joy Harjo is one of the most prolific and dynamic writers around: she writes poetry, prose, plays, film and more, and she performs with her band widely. She is also one of the most well-known and respected Native American writers. Harjo, a member of the Mvskoke Nation, was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She grew up writing, and some of her more lauded books including *She Had Some Horses*, *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*, *How We Became Human*, and *For a Girl Becoming* (a young adult coming of age story). She is equally skilled and gifted in her music, having released four award-winning and critically-acclaimed CDS, and winning a NAMMY (Native American Music Award) for Best Female Artist of the Year for *Winding Through the Milky Way*. www.JoyHarjo.com

1. Write about what you're ready to release.

I Give You Back

I release you, my beautiful and terrible
fear. I release you. You were my beloved
and hated twin, but now, I don't know you
as myself. I release you with all the
pain I would know at the death of
my children.

You are not my blood anymore.

I give you back to the soldiers
who burned down my house, beheaded my children,
raped and sodomized my brothers and sisters.
I give you back to those who stole the

food from our plates when we were starving.

I release you, fear, because you hold
these scenes in front of me and I was born
with eyes that can never close.

I release you
I release you
I release you
I release you

I am not afraid to be angry.
I am not afraid to rejoice.
I am not afraid to be black.
I am not afraid to be white.
I am not afraid to be hungry.
I am not afraid to be full.
I am not afraid to be hated.
I am not afraid to be loved.
to be loved, to be loved, fear.

Oh, you have choked me, but I gave you the leash.

You have gutted me but I gave you the knife.
You have devoured me, but I laid myself across the fire.

I take myself back, fear.
You are not my shadow any longer.
I won't hold you in my hands.
You can't live in my eyes, my ears, my voice
my belly, or in my heart my heart

my heart my heart
But come here, fear
I am alive and you are so afraid
of dying.

2. Write about an ordinary place where the world begins or ends (or both).

Perhaps the World Ends Here

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.

3. Using the same structure as this poem (This is my heart.....head.....soul.....song), write.

This is My Heart

This is my heart. It is a good heart.
Bones and membrane of mist and fire
are the woven cover.
When we make love in the flower world
my heart is close enough to sing
to yours in a language that has no use
for clumsy human words.

My head is a good head, but it is a hard head
and it whirrs inside a swarm of worries.
What is the source of this singing, it asks
and if there is a source why can't I see it
right here, right now
as real as these hands hammering
the world together
with nails and sinew?

This is my soul. It is a good soul.
It tells me, "Come here forgetful one."
And we sit together with lilt of small winds
who rattle the scrub oak.
We cook a little something

to eat, then a sip of something
sweet, for memory.

This is my song. It is a good song.
It walked forever the border of fire and water
climbed ribs of desire to my lips to sing to you.
Its new wings quiver with vulnerability.
Come lie next to me, says my heart.
Put your head here.
It is a good thing, says my soul.

7. William Stafford, Poet of How to Live in Place

Stafford was born in Hutchinson, Kansas in 1914, earned a BA and MA from the University of Kansas in Lawrence, and a PhD from the University of Iowa in 1954. He was a conscientious objector during WWII, which landed him in civilian public service camps and brought him a lot of heartache but also clarity about the importance of holding to his beliefs. After the war, he married Dorothy Hope Frantz, and they soon moved to Oregon where Stafford, and later one of his four children, Kim, went on to teach at Lewis and Clark College. Stafford is known for being wildly prolific, having published over 65 books of poetry and prose. His books on writing are particularly superb, including *Writing the Australian Crawl*, *The Answers Are In the Mountains*, and *Crossing Unmarked Snow*. His first collection of poetry, *Traveling Through the Dark*, won the National Book Award in 1963. Stafford went on to win many awards, most notably "Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress," which is now known as the Poet Laureate of the United States. He died at home in 1993.

1. What does the earth say to you?

In Response to a Question

The earth says have a place, be what that place
requires; hear the sound the birds imply
and see as deep as ridges go behind
each other. (Some people call their scenery flat,
their only picture framed by what they know:
I think around them rise a riches and a loss
too equal for their chart – but absolutely tall.)

The earth says every summer have a ranch
that's minimum: one tree, one well, a landscape
that proclaims a universe – sermon
of the hills, hallelujah mountain,
highway guided by the way the world is tilted,
reduplication of mirage, flat evening:
a kind of ritual for the wavering.

The earth says where you live wear the kind
of color that your life is (gray shirt for me)

and by listening with the same bowed head that sings
draw all into one song, joining
the sparrow on the lawn, and row that easy
way, the rage without met by the wings
within that guide you anywhere the wind blows.

Listening, I think that's what the earth says.

2. Take any of the questions in this poem, and answer it.

You Reading This, Be Ready

Starting here, what do you want to remember?
How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?
What scent of old wood hovers, what softened
sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world
than the breathing respect that you carry
wherever you go right now? Are you waiting
for time to show you some better thoughts?

When you turn around, starting here, lift this
new glimpse that you found; carry into evening
all that you want from this day. This interval you spent
reading or hearing this, keep it for life –

What can anyone give you greater than now,
starting here, right in this room, when you turn around

3. Starting with the line, "You will never be alone..." write.

Assurance

You will never be alone, you hear so deep
a sound when autumn comes. Yellow
pulls across the hills and thrums,
or the silence after lightning before it says
its names – and then the clouds' wide-mouthed
apologies. You were aimed from birth:
you will never be alone. Rain
will come, a gutter filled, an Amazon,
long aisles – you never heard so deep a sound,
moss on rock, and years. You turn your head –
that's what the silence meant: you're not alone.
The whole wide world pours down.

4. Write about something you know because you saw it twice, including the way it really is.

Bi-Focal

Sometimes up out of this land
a legend begins to move.
Is it a coming near
of something under love?

Love is of the earth only,
the surface, a map of roads
leading wherever go miles
or little bushes nod.

Not so the legend under,
fixed, inexorable,
deep as the darkest mine
the thick rocks won't tell.

As fire burns the leaf
and out of the green appears
the vein in the center line
and the legend veins under there,

So, the world happens twice—
once what we see it as;
second it legends itself
deep, the way it is.

Staffordisms: Quotes from William Stafford about the writing life

Poetry is the kind of thing you have to see from the corner of your eye. You can be too well prepared for poetry. A conscientious interest in it is worse than no interest at all, as I believe Frost used to say. It's like a very faint star. If you look straight at it you can't see it, but if you look a little to one side it is there.

If people around you are in favor, that helps poetry to *be*, to exist. It disappears under disfavor. There are things, you know, human things, that depend on commitment; poetry is one of those things. If you analyze it away, it's gone. It would be like boiling a watch to find out what makes it tick.

If you let your thought play, turn things this way and that, be ready for liveliness, alternatives, new views, the possibility of another world – you are in the area of poetry. A poem is a serious joke, a truth that has learned *jujitsu*. Anyone who breathes is in the rhythm business; anyone who is alive is caught up in the imminences, the doubts mixed with the triumphant certainty, of poetry.

“Every person, if pitched right, meets things with a song – a just right resonance”

“Treat the world as if it really existed”

“The adjective is today our enemy. Salesmen, politicians, *soliciting* phonies over-use them: today’s writers preserve austerity about them; e.g., Dickinson’s ‘I heard a fly buzz’ – how far do you read into the poem before you reach an adjective?”

“Always do your writing in the wilderness”

“Language can do what it can’t say”

“I don’t want to write *good* poems. I want to write *inevitable* poems – to write the things I will write, given who I am”

“Understanding too soon is overrated.”

A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them. . . Back in school, from the first when I began to try to write things, I felt this richness. One thing would lead to another; the world would give and give. Now, after twenty years or so of trying, I live by that certain richness, an idea hard to pin down, difficult to say, and perhaps offensive to some. For there are strange implications to it. One implication is the importance of just plain receptivity.

8. Denise Low, Poet of Geography and Geology

Denise Low, Kansas 2007-2009 Poet Laureate, is active as a writer, educator, publisher, poet, and critic. Her books include *Mélange Block*, poetry based on geologic structures and mixed-blood experiences, and the forthcoming *Jackalope Walks into a Bar*. She is the author of over 25 books. She posts commentary about poets and writers on her blog. Members of the Associated Writers and Writing Programs elected her to the national board in 2008-13, and she served as president of the AWP board 2011-2012.

1. Write about looking through these two gates to see yourself in the past or future.

Two Gates

I look through glass and see a young woman
of about twenty, washing dishes, and the window
turns into a painting. She is myself thirty years ago.
She holds the same blue bowls and brass teapot
I still own. I see her outline against lamplight,
but she knows only her side of the pane. The porch
where I stand looks empty. Sunlight fades. I hear
water run in the sink and she lowers her head,
blind to the future. She does not imagine I exist.

I step forward for a better look and she dissolves

into lumber and paint. A gate I passed through
to the next life loses shape, and once more I stand
squared into the present, among mango trees
and scissor-tailed birds, in a Thai garden, almost
a mother to that faint, distant woman.

2. Write your own report about a place that speaks to you.

Report on the House on Cripple Creep

The mined-out mountain shifts against gravity.
Blasted rock terraces sprout scrubby grass.
A large raven sidles by, tail feathers down, submissive.
We are sorry to make it nervous.

Hummingbirds dive at my orange blouse, veer away,
buzzing pizzicato.

Amaranth is seeded already. Geraniums sprinkle lavender stars .
At night their flames rise in constellations.

Foxes burrow in granite catacombs under us.
At night soft weight shifts on the porch.

A spider lives in the sink.
Husks of brown moths litter the porcelain.

Out the window, hundreds of peaks intersect—
asteroids, mica sheets, bolts of blue silk.
~ Denise Low

4. Write of a garden, or a place that commemorates a loved one.

Columbarium Garden

Cold sun brings this mourning season to an end
one year since my mother's death. Last winter thaw
my brother shoveled clay-dirt, she called it gumbo,
over powdery substance the crematorium sent us
not her, but fine, lightened granules—all else
rendered into invisible elements. That handful
from the pouch, un-boxed, was tucked into plotted soil,
the churchyard columbarium, under a brass plaque
and brick retaining wall, scant semblance of permanence.
Now my mother is a garden—lilies and chrysanthemums
feeding from that slight, dampened, decomposing ash.
Her voice stilled. One ruddy robin in the grass, dipping.

– Denise Low

9. Wyatt Townley, Poet of Wind and Motion

Wyatt Townley is the Poet Laureate of Kansas. Her work has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize, read by Garrison Keillor on NPR, featured by Ted Kooser in his American Life in Poetry column, and appears in her books: *The Breathing Field*, *Perfectly Normal*, and *The Afterlives of Trees*. The confluence of poetry and poetry-in-motion has shaped Wyatt's life. Formerly a dancer, she has taught yoga for over thirty years and is the founder of Yoganetics®, a therapeutic system practiced in ten countries (www.yoganetics.com). As a dancer/yogi and poet, she says she straddles “the worlds of motion and stasis.....[continuing] along both paths and delights as they entwine.”

1. Write about an experience with wind.

Centering the House

All night Kansas
the lungs of the continent
takes a sip of the galaxy
swirling stars and barbed wire
sofabeds and willows
books and doors banging open
signs disappear whole towns
ditch themselves in the countryside.
I stir the coffee to center the house
the place our mothers and fathers
and theirs and theirs passed through
their aprons strung on telephone wires
this tunnel of wind this trial
makes trees throw back their heads
and the hair along our arms stand up
we're nothing but breath on its way through the woods

2. What's happening in the breathing field of your body?

The Breathing Field

Between each vertebra
is the through line
of your life's story,
where the setting sun
has burned all colors
into the cord. Step

over. Put on the dark
shirt of stars.
A full moon rises
over the breathing field,

seeps into the clover and the brown
lace of its roots
where insects are resting

their legs. Take in the view.
So much is still
to be seen. Get back
behind your back, behind
what is behind you.

3. Write of a childhood adventure in the woods, or of finding something you thought was long gone.

Finding the Scarf

The woods are the book
we read over and over as children.
Now trees lie at angles, felled
by lightning, torn by tornados,
silvered trunks turning back

to earth. Late November light
slants through the oaks
as our small parade, father, mother, child,
shushes along, the wind searching treetops
for the last leaf. Childhood lies

on the forest floor, not evergreen
but oaken, its branches latched
to a graying sky. Here is the scarf
we left years ago like a bookmark,

meaning to return the next day,
having just turned our heads
toward a noise in the bushes,
toward the dinnerbell in the distance,

toward what we knew and did not know
we knew, in the spreading twilight
that returns changed to a changed place.

The Breathing Field
Between each vertebra
is the through line
of your life's story,
where the setting sun
has burned all colors
into the cord. Step

over. Put on the dark
shirt of stars.
A full moon rises
over the breathing field,
seeps into the clover and the brown
lace of its roots
where insects are resting

their legs. Take in the view.
So much is still
to be seen. Get back
behind your back, behind
what is behind you.

4. Write your own prayer for a new.....(fill in the blank).

Prayer for a New Millennium

On the first evening
buzzing with the last
light that skids through everything,
let the body drink its deepest
breath, the lower back
spread like a constellation
with one lone star swerving.
Let the hands, lined with meteors,
open, releasing all they've held —
coins, hammers, steering
wheels and the silken
faces of children — to find
what on earth they really hold.
Let the crown of the head
move away from the shoulders
and into the distance
where another is waiting.
Let go of the forecast you heard
when you were younger
than the child now clattering
up the backstairs all
laughter and gasping
for what we're here to do.
Look down. Look at the stars.
We're here so briefly, weather
with bones.