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Kansas Arts Commission Poetry Pen-Pal Project 2010: Toolkit for Pen-pals

Kansas Arts Commission

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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Poetry Pen-Pal Project 2010
Toolkit for Pen-pals

Kansas Arts Commission
Poet Laureate of Kansas
Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

Toolbox

*“We do not ‘correct’ a piece of writing;
we question a life.”
-- William Stafford*

Getting Started with Your Pen Pal.....	3
Examining One Another's Writing: Compassionate Critiquing.....	4
Groundrules for New Writing.....	5
Staffordism.....	6
Some Things to Consider in Poetry Writing.....	8
Avoiding Writer's Block.....	10
Some Considerations About Revision.....	12
Writing Exercises: A Sampling.....	13
Recommended Reading.....	22

Getting Started with Your Pen Pal

The purpose of the pen pal project is to help writers make community with other writers, and through such connections, share writing, publishing and public reading ideas, considerations about crafting strong poems, and general inspiration and encouragement. Here are some ideas for getting started with your penpal.

- WEEK ONE: Email your pen pal and exchange information about you and your life. You could tell him/her how you got started writing, what you're hoping for in your writing, and a little about your life, your home, your background. Also, suggest a date each week you might exchange poems you've written or even just poems you love and want to share with someone.
- WEEK TWO: Write a new poem to share with your pen pal. One idea is to use Exercise #0, "Where I'm From," which is also a great way to introduce yourself poetically to your pal. When you send your poem to your pal, tell him/her what kind of feedback you want: ideas about revision, or even, if this poem feels new and a little tender, only some encouragement about what works well for now.
- WEEK THREE: Share feedback on your pal's poem from the week before, and share a new poem. There are poem prompts in this packet you can use, and also many in the books listed. You may have writing ideas of your own to share with your pal, or you may just want to write whatever you want for each exchange and surprise each other. Remember, life is a writing prompt, and there are writing ideas everywhere you look. You can open a book, randomly turn to a page, and take 10 words off it, telling yourself you need to write something using these words. You can look outside the window and name 20 things you see, and then write a poem that uses all 20 things in some way.
- WEEK FOUR: And so on and so on and so on...

If you have any questions or concerns, please be in touch with me at KSpoetlaureate@gmail.com

Examining One Another's Writing: Compassionate Critiquing

*“We do not ‘correct’ a piece of writing;
we question a life.”
-- William Stafford*

In the spirit of William Stafford, we won't be correcting one another's writing, but examining the life of the writing and our own lives as readers. Most of all, we are looking at the life of what's written: what the writing wants to become, and how we can help it unfold to its full self. Here are some guidelines:

- When your pen-pal sends you a poem, print it out, and read it aloud. Writing can look quite different than it is on a computer screen, and email particularly tends to flatten emotion. So take some time to hold the poem in your head and read it.
- Write comments about what speaks to you most. If the poem were a landscape you were walking through, where would you naturally pause and look around? What lines, images or rhythms draw you most?
- Write comments about what seems not yet fully developed. What do you want to know more about in this poem? This is not to say that everything needs to be spelled out, but if there are any sections or lines that seem a little unclear or obscure, note them.
- Where is the writer telling when s/he could be showing? For example, if the poem says, “I feel tired,” you can suggest to the writer that s/he puts in an image instead, such as, “I feel like that tulip that's been blasted open and apart from the wind and rain.”
- Where is there unnecessary repetition, something that feels off when you read the poem aloud because of too many syllables or too many words or too much of the same thing repeated? Note this.
- Look for ways you can help with editing. You can suggest or show different punctuation if you think it would serve; you can correct spelling. Remember that each writer has his/her own style, and while some would begin each new line with a capital letter, many wouldn't, so try to direct your editing comments to support whatever style the writer is using (such as if s/he is only using small letters).
- REMEMBER!!!! This poem is the writer's poem, not yours, so don't edit as you would “if it were my poem.” Put your ear to the page, and try to listen for what wants to be said.
- As for sending your comments to the reader, you have several options, but one of the easiest ways to share comments right where you want them is to use the Review/track comment option on Word (or in Open Office). You click on “Edit,” and from the drop-down menu, click on “Changes” and then “record” and “show” or whatever other various you have in your program. You can then write in comments and share editing suggestions.

Ground Rules for New Writing

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. 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.
9. 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.

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.”

(Writing the Australian Crawl 3)

“Every person, if pitched right, meets things with a song – a just right resonance.” *(The Answers are in the Mountain 4)*

“Speaking of writing, I usually welcome all kinds of impulses and ideas, not making an effort, during that first movement of encounter, to restrict the cadence or pace or flow of the language. The feel of composition is more important than any rule or prescribed form. Swimmers after much practice can achieve a sense of catching hold of the water; the hand enters quickly and quickly adjusts to ‘the catch,’ the optimum angle and sweep for propulsion. I believe that the speaker and writer can cultivate that kind of readiness to accept and use the feel of the language.” (46).

“Treat the world as if it really existed.” (50)

“What’s on the page is more important than who is the writer.” (51)

“Of all places, a workshop requires of me an absolute commitment to the text prescribed. How deep can I read? What profound realizations can come from this *evidence*? It is more than intention: -- it is *revelation*.” (57)

“What students write is not good or bad – it’s evidence.” (62)

“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?” (90)

“A poem knows where you already are, and it nails you there.” *(Crossing Unmarked Snow 3)*

“Always do your writing in the wilderness.” (4)

“Language can do what it can’t say.” (6)

“A writer must write the bad poems in order to approach the good ones – finicky ways will dry up the sources.” (8)

What’s in My Journal

Odd things, like a button drawer. Mean things, fishhooks, barbs in your hand.

But marbles too. A genius for being agreeable.
Junkyard crucifixes, voluptuous
discards. Space for knickknacks, and for
Alaska. Evidence to hang me, or to beautify.
Clues that lead nowhere, that never connected
anyway. Deliberate obfuscation, the kind
that takes genius. Chasms in character.
Loud omissions. Mornings that yawn above
a new grave. Pages you know exist
but you can't find them. Someone's terribly
inevitable life story, maybe mine. (23)

"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." (*Early Morning* 135)

"Yesterday in a discussion...students asked whether an artist had to be a rebel. My impulse was to say that it is the society which the artist feels to be rebelling. I feel that I am a Greek chorus – speaking deliberately and measuredly the central truths of things, while all around me people – bankers, generals, kings, my children, everyone – all speak the wildest kind of impulsive, mistake things." (154)

"Understanding too soon is overrated." (157)

"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." (160)

"You can legislate freedom of speech, but you have to learn how to accomplish freedom *in* speech." (161)

Your exact errors make a music
that nobody hears.
Your straying feet find the great dance,
walking alone.
And you live in a world where stumbling
always leads home.

(from "You and Art," 163)

Some Things To Consider in Poetry-Writing

1. Poetry is largely image-based. The specific-ness of images is what brings the poem alive and gives readers something tangible to hang onto and use to enter the poem fully. Look at what you perceive with your senses – what you can taste, touch, feel, see and hear, and focus on communicating those experiences as ways to illustrate larger abstractions. Don't just say "trees," but focus on a specific tree – "the black green clump of cedar trees along the driveway."
2. When it comes to abstractions – words that connote emotions or ideas (democracy, loneliness, love,

freedom, etc.) – it's best to use them as sparingly as possible or not at all. Let the images illustrate your points. For example, Adrienne Rich writes, "We walk on tiptoe" in "The Fact of a Doorframe" to illustrate the need to move carefully.

3. One of the main rules in poetry, which has to do with going for images and avoiding abstractions, is "Show, don't tell." Use strong images, and trust your images to communicate for you. In this way, poetry lives in the realm of the symbolic. Don't say, "it's nice outside," but instead say, "the sun is shining like a red sport scar, balancing itself on the lip of the horizon."

4. Line breaks (how and where the end each line) is what makes poetry look like poetry and not prose. Generally, there's two ways to break lines – by the rhythm of the words, or by the meaning you want to evoke. For example, you could write:

I like to dream. It makes me happy.
It shows me how to wake with images
of elephants and apples.

Here I broke the line where the rhythm naturally dipped. But I could also build in other meanings to break lines differently:

I like to dream. It makes me
happy. It shows me how to wake
in a school of elephants and apples swimming
into the mouth
of the old ocean.

Here the breaks imply that dreaming "makes me" (makes me alive? makes me what?) And that it shows me how to wake (and also how to wake with images).

5. The first word and last word in each line weigh more than the words in the middle. The first line and last line of the poem weigh more than the lines in the middle. This has to do with how the eye takes in poetry. Also, short lines tend to be read more slowly, and long lines tend to be read faster. Avoid one word lines unless that one word is very strong and needs to be on its own line (a rare thing).

6. Rhythm and sound everything in poetry since poetry exists part way between prose and music. Read the lines how you have them on the page and listen for where you need to revise or adjust. Listen to both the sounds of the words and how those sounds add up. For example, rust, brisk and luck have very different connotations in their sound than dream, lamb and lush. Also, tap out the rhythm of a poem to hear where the stresses and lulls are, where the missing notes and extra notes are too.

7. Poetry is made by avoiding clichés, worn-out ways to say things, and finding fresh ways to use language. Anything that looks like it belongs in a greeting card probably is a cliché.

8. It's also very important to try not to be so logical in poetry so that you can find a deeper logic and way of connecting with your topic. By diving into images and letting the rhythm of the words guide you, you can find those greater connections even if they don't look very logical.

9. The most important way to know what a poem needs is to read it aloud, preferably alone, perhaps standing on a chair in the basement to take you out of the ordinary. Listen to what's happening.

10. Poems are community things, for the most part. A private poem full of code words and secret allusions is just a private poem, which is fine, but which isn't fair game to send out into the world. If you

want to write poetry that reaches others besides yourself, you need to cut the secret references, and write for someone who doesn't necessarily know you or understand you or care about you even. If you can make your poem real and alive for a reader you've never met, then your poem is something that carries your perceptions, ideas, experiences of language, etc. out into the realm of community. Remember that all (non-private) poetry is written for readers as well as for writers.

Avoiding Writer's Block

A true (and lucky) confession to make: I don't know that I've ever had writer's block. That's maybe because I write in several genres, and just go where the action is, and if I don't feel like I have anything to give to my writing, I do something else. If only I could live the rest of my life that way! In any case, here are some suggestions I found help others (and that I seem to do regularly) avoid fretting over the times when the words don't come, or come well.

1. Be a genre slut! Why limit yourself to poetry or essays or novels? Maybe the words want to come out of you in a different way at this moment, so let them. My friend, Denise Low – a poet and essayist – says that when you turn on the faucet, you just accept whatever it is that comes. If you can't write more on

your story, start writing some dialogue, or a poem, or a letter to one of your characters, or a list of things you need to do today or before you die, or a description of the perfect latte.

2. When there's no writing that wants to come, don't force it. Go for a walk, take a bath, wash the floors, read "Frog and Toad" stories to your kids, cook something. Don't force it, just create a loving home for it, and it will return to you.

3. Treat your writing well. Insulted, rejected or belittled creativity is going to hide in the closet like any of us would. Treat yourself, and your writing ability, like you would the most beloved creature on the earth. Treat yourself as you would expect the perfect angel would treat you. Treat your writing as if you've a loving and ever-present god here to bless it and call it all good. That means never insulting yourself as a writer or your writing.

4. Random acts of kindness are necessary non-evils for writers. The more you give, in discreet ways, the more you affirm the magical workings of the world, which opens you wider for magical things to come through. Go downtown and put dimes in all the expired parking meters, drop a dollar on the ground and walk away, weed around a neighbor's mailbox, leave brownies at someone's house (or blintzes in a good friend's refrigerator), give generously in all the ways you can. It greases the wheel for your own magical creative renderings to start rolling.

5. Speaking of which, be the opposite of anal-retentive about your art. Loosen up, try new things, don't judge, relax.

6. When truly stuck, write yourself some love letters, send yourself some flowers, buy yourself a great new pair of socks, or do something really lovely for yourself. Or do something lovely for someone else, especially if they don't deserve it!

7. Try sitting down and just writing at a set time each day or week. Tell yourself that you're just going to mess around, and if nothing happens, well, then you were just priming the pump for another way. Another great technique some of my friends use: tell yourself you will write two sentences, just two if you want, on whatever you're working on. In many cases, you'll want to write more once you get started.

8. Remember that jumping in and playing with words is the fastest way to often invite your own words back to the page. Remember that writing is a way of knowing. Treat it with great respect and playfulness.

9. What is the purpose of all this writing? Marge Piercy says, in the poem, "For the Young Who Want to," that when it comes to art: "You have to love it more than wanting to be loved." Write because you love writing. If you get published, do public readings, gain critical acclaim, a fantastic agent, piles of money and your picture in *People* after brunching with Oprah, that's all just frosting. Writing is the real cake, and it's made from scratch.

10. Writing is also a practice – like a spiritual practice, or surely a spiritual practice (depending on what you believe) – and when it comes to a practice, you can't do it right or wrong; you just do it. Some days you're more flexible, some days you're stronger, some days you're more inspired, some days you're exhausted. But you keep doing it.

11. Speaking of inspiration, remember that the bolt of lightning form of inspiration is sweet but who has the time to stand in the field in a thunderstorm and hope to get hit? I mean, we're busy people! Invent

your own inspiration by writing, and in the writing, finding something that wakes you up and makes you exuberant.

12. When you're stuck, make lists – and from the lists, you'll find great possibilities for what to write about at the moment. Lists could be of any of the following, or whatever other list topics you come up with first: *All the firsts in your life, everything and everyone you love, things (and people) lost and/or found, great furniture of your life, great clothes of your life, great nights of your life, early mornings of significance, powerful or strange or scary weather, all the trips you've ever taken by car or train or plane or bus or foot, people you hung out with 10 or 20 years ago, everything you believed about the world as a child, all cars you've owned, attractions, fears, favorite books or paintings or music or...., moments of pure hell you survived, moments of pure heaven, all the animals you ever lived with, what you would buy if you won a million dollars, embarrassing moments, exhilarating moments, everything you've ever grown in a garden, all your mistakes big and small, all your strengths or graces, all the places you want to travel, things that piss you off about other people, great purchases of your life, great things you discovered in surprise, all the possible lists you could make.*

13. Pick up poetry or prose that blows you away, and read some of it aloud. (Don't do this if it tends to make you feel like you're never going to be good enough.) Or see a movie that amazes you. Or enter a gallery, walk into a glowing field at sunset, or just immerse yourself in anything that feels beautiful and alive.

Some Considerations About Revision

1. It's not about the actual poem or prose you're writing. It's about diving into language, story and silence more deeply to see what you discover.
2. It's also about what you're writing ("Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I contain multitudes!" – Whitman). It's about putting your ear to the piece of writing and listening carefully. What wants to be said? What needs more space or more words? Where are the too-compressed notes, the places begging for harmonics?
3. It's all about composing. Writing is a kind of music – the individual sounds of each syllable, and the ways in which you can add up syllables to create rhythms. Revise by sound and rhythm as much, if not more than, meaning.
4. In other words, how do we help this piece of writing become more alive?
5. Lean into the rules of craft as they serve you in making the writing more alive.

6. Turn away from the rules of craft as they block you from bringing that life to the writing. Examining the rules (Stafford): “First, we can remember the usual warnings: ‘Show me, don’t tell me.’ ‘Avoid clichés.’ ‘Get images and sense impressions into the lines.’ ‘Don’t just say “love,” beauty,” “heart,” “tears”.’ ‘When you find yourself terribly fond of what you are saying, watch out!’ ‘You can’t do it with adjectives....’ We can observe these warnings. We can curvy our writings by applying remedies. But somehow just observing such rules is not enough. They trim away, but they don’t supply the fire we need. And they don’t invite us to cut loose with our whole sentient being.”
7. Look at what your writing has to show you about this particular piece and about what else may come from it. Stafford again: “Could your poem (or prose) be revised *outward*, be the start of something you have just glimpses and then not developed? Could you poem (or prose) be revised *inward*, dropped back on itself (for instance, at the end) to live by its stronger elements and not doiled up for admiration of readers who like merely to nod their recognitions?”
8. In the words of Anne Lamott, write shitty first drafts. Everyone does.
9. Revision is a romance: you know who you’re dating, and your first night together was glorious even if a bit wordy. Now you’re going to start really getting to know each other, even after the rush of infatuation. It’s about moving from the first attraction to deep love.
10. Revision is also all about writing (editing, on the other hand, is about editing). Treat this as a time and place to create something with words.
11. Like writing first drafts, you can’t rush revision. Sometimes you need to grow into revising something. It’s a practice, it’s evolutionary, it’s magical, it’s ordinary. Respect it.
12. Pay attention and don’t pay attention as you revise. A good way to do this is to copy things over by hand, or retype them (or parts of them).

Writing Exercises: A Sampling

ALL POETRY AND PROSE QUOTED FOR EDUCATION PURPOSES ONLY

0. Write a poem or story or letter about where you’re from, landing on as many tangibles as you can. The example below by George Ella Lyon, from her book by the same title, gives you some great ideas. You can also begin each line you write with “I am from....”

Where I’m From

I am from clothespins,
 from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
 I am from the dirt under the back porch.
 (Black, glistening
 it tasted like beets.)
 I am from the forsythia bush,
 the Dutch elm
 whose long gone limbs I remember
 as if they were my own.

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I'm from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons,
from perk up and pipe down.
I'm from He restoreth my soul
with a cottonball lamb
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.
Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments –
snapped before I budded –
leaf-fall from the family tree.
-- George Ella Lyon

1. Check out the podcasts and radio shows at http://arts.ks.gov/poet_laureate/podcasts.shtml, where you can download some of these exercises. You can also see the columns for these podcasts at www.CarynMirriamGoldberg.wordpress.com (in the right-hand column, scroll down).
2. Write about the life you would be living if you weren't living this one: invent another job you would enjoy, another place you might live, and other activities you might engage in, and write about a typical day in this life.
3. Remember a school you attended (elementary, high school, even a college), and describe the school, starting with the outside of the building, then walking into the building, finding your way down the hall, entering your classroom, sitting in your seat, and observing all that's happening. Pretend your writing is a movie camera that follows you into the classroom. You can also try this with a childhood home (or the home of your grandparents). Side activity: draw the floor plan of the place first, and then start writing.
4. Go to a photo album in your home (or random pile of old photos), and find a photograph that really grabs your attention. Write about what was happening when that picture was taken, and also, about the story behind the story – what was happening outside of the frame.
5. Write from the point-of-view of a piece of furniture in your home or in the home of a close family member. Tell what you've experienced and witnessed from the viewpoint of a couch or refrigerator or bed or piano, etc.
6. Write the earliest memory you can recall. Tell as much as you can remember – or conjure up – about what you saw, felt, heard, realized at that time. If you just remember a vague outline of what happened, start writing about it, letting yourself invent the details (or remember them) as you go.

7. Describe yourself as a landscape: a forest, a mountain, a prairie, a swamp, an ocean, whatever comes to you. Wander through this landscape in your writing, describing what you see and what you discover. Or describe someone you love deeply as a landscape you're traversing.
8. After reading Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," write "___ Ways of Looking at ___" in poetry or prose.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

1

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

2

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there was three blackbirds.

3

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

4.

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

5.

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

6.

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

7.

O thin men of Haddam,

Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the woman around you?

8.

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

9.

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

10.

At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

11.

He road over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

12.

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

13.

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing.
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.

9. Make a list of everything you believe in or enjoy most, focusing especially on what you know through your senses: what you can see, touch, taste, smell or hear. Get as specific as you can (not just hot chocolate, but hot chocolate made with cream served in a thick, warm mug that says, "Jesus is coming, and boy, is he pissed!").

10. Write the story of a special family gathering in your life. Describe how people arrived, what they wore and how they looked, how you felt throughout the gathering, what food was served, what conversation

happened, what other activities took place, and how people parted. Now pull the camera way back and show the stories in corners and pockets.

11. After reading Louise Gluck's poem, stare at a tree and write.

Elms

All day I tried to distinguish
need from desire. Now, in the dark,
I feel only bitter sadness for us,
the builders, the planers of wood,
because I have been looking
steadily at these elms
and seen the process that creates
the writhing, stationary tree
is torment, and have understood
it will make no forms but twisted forms.

-- Louise Gluck
(*The Triumph of Achilles*)

12. Write about the long falls you're rolling toward in your life.

From "West Wind"

You are young. So you know everything. You leap
into the boat and begin rowing. But, listen to me.
Without fanfare, without embarrassment, without
any doubt, I talk directly to your soul. Listen to me.
Lift the oars from the water, let your arms rest, and
your heart, and heart's little intelligence, and listen to
me. There is life without love. It is not worth a bent
penny, or a scuffed shoe. It is not worth the body of a
dead dog nine days unburied. When you hear, a mile
away and still out of sight, the churn of the water
as it begins to swirl and roil, fretting around the
sharp rocks – when you hear that unmistakable
pounding – when you feel the mist on your mouth
and sense ahead the embattlement, the long falls
plunging and steaming – then row, row for your life
toward it.

-- Mary Oliver
(*West Wind*)

13. After reading Jane Hirshfield's poem, take her title and use it to propel you into prose or poetry about what the heart really wants. Don't worry if you don't completely understand everything in the poem: just let the rhythm wash over you, and start writing.

What the Heart Wants

See then
 what the heart wants,
 that pliable iron
 sprung to the poppy's redness,
 the honey's gold, winged
 as the heron-lit water is:
 by reflecting.
 As an aged elephant answers
 the slighted, first gesture of hand,
 it puts itself at the mercy –
 utterly docile, the forces
 that brought it there vanished,
 fold into fold.
 And the old-ice ivory, the unstartlable
 black of the eye that has traveled so far
 with the fringed, peripheral howdah
 swaying behind, look mildly back
 as it swings the whole bulk of the body
 close to the ground. Over and over
 it does this, bends to what asks.
 Whatever asks, the heart kneels and offers to bear.
 -- Jane Hirshfield
 (*The October Palace*)

14. Take any of the questions in the following poem, and answer.....or write your own collection of questions.

Some Questions to Ask During Your Reading

*Have you a place where, when the world
 ends, you want it to be? Have you
 a person who will be there when
 you put out a hand? When the sky
 weeps, whose fall will you weep?
 Look steadily into the fire – what face
 or sign do you see? If a fault is yours,
 what forgiveness? Who will understand?*
 -- William Stafford
 (*Even in Quiet Places*)

15. Write what your fool or death or night watchman or other parts of you (however you name them) says or asks.

Little Round

My fool asks: Do the years spell a path to later
 be remembered? Who's there to read them back?

My death says: One bird knows the hour and suffers
to house its millstone-weight as song.

My night watchman lies down
in a room by the sea
and hears only the water telling
out of a thousand mouths,
the story behind his mother's sleeping face.

My eternity shrugs and yawns:
Let the stars knit and fold
inside their numbered rooms. When night asks
who I am I answer, *Your own*, and am not lonely.

My loneliness, my sleepless darling
reminds herself
the fruit that falls increases
at the speed of the body rising to meet it.

And my child? He sleeps and sleeps.

And my mother? She divides
the rice, today's portion from tomorrow's,
tomorrow's from ever after.

And my father. He faces me and rows
toward what he can't see.

And my God.
What have I done with my God?
-- Li-Young Lee
(*Book of My Nights*)

16. Make and keep adding to a list of everything you ever want to write about, whether very small (the best chocolate cake you ever ate) or very large (the death of your father). Every so often, pluck something from the list that feels ripe, and start writing.

17. Using one of those evocative fragmentary quotes, begin your own writing (and start making your own list of evocative fragmentary quotes):

“Come into the animal presence...” (Denise Levertov)

“I dwell in Possibility” (Emily Dickinson)

“The earth says have a place, be what that place/ requires...” (William Stafford)

“Every angel is terrible...” (Rainer Maria Rilke)

“There are names for what binds us...” (Jane Hirshfield)

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing/ there is a field.

I'll meet you there...” (Rumi)

“Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back...” (George Herbert)

“The point of life is to know what’s enough...” (Gensei)
 “Inside this jar the music of eternity, and a spring flows from the
 the source of all waters” (Kabir)
 “...we awaken as the Beloved in every last part of our body” (Symeon the New
 Theologian)
 “I felt a funeral in my brain...” (Emily Dickinson)
 “Let us go then you and I, when the even is spread upon the sky” (T.S. Eliot)
 “The things I did, I did because of trees...” (Marvin Bell)
 “...you are our true life,/ luminous, wonderful,/ awakening the heart/
 from its ancient sleep.” (Hildegard of Bingen)
 “Dear God, I am writing you a memory I hope I will have...” (Donna Gates)
 “Any minute now, something will happen” (Raymond Carver)
 “You split me, tore my heart/ open, filled me with love.” (Song of Solomon)
 “The Great Way has no gate...” (Wu-Men)
 “To the flashing water say: I am” (Rainer Maria Rilke)

18. Write about a time your life has opened. Don’t think – just write.

Three Times My Life Has Opened

Three times my life has opened.
 Once, into darkness and rain.
 Once, into what the body carries at all times within in and
 starts to remember each time it enters the act of love.
 Once, to the fire that holds all.
 These three were not different.
 You will recognize what I am saying or you will not.
 But outside my window all day a maple has stepped
 from her leaves like a woman in love with winter, dropping
 the colored silks.
 Neither are we different in what we know.
 There is a door. It opens. Then it is closed. But a slip of
 light stays, like a scarp of unreadable paper left on the floor,
 or the one red leaf the snow releases in March.
 -- Jane Hirshfield

19. Here are some poems from Rilke’s *The Book of Hours*. Simply take a line that grabs you from one of the them, and use it as a springboard into your own writing:

1.
 I live my life in growing orbits
 which move out over the things of the world.
 Perhaps I can never achieve the last,
 but that will be my attempt.

I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,
 and I have been circling for a thousand years,
 and I still don’t know if I am a falcon, or a storm,

or a great song.

* * *

11.

I find you in all these things of the world
that I love calmly, like a brother;
in the things no one cares for you brood like a seed;
and to powerful things you give an immense power.

Strength plays such a marvelous game –
it moves through the things of the world like a servant,
groping out in roots, tapering in trunks,
and in the treetops like a rising from the dead.

-- Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Robert Bly
(*Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*)

20. What is your pillow?

Pillow

There's nothing I can't find under there.
Voices in the trees, the missing pages
of the sea.

Everything but sleep.

And night is a river bridging
the speaking and listening banks,

a fortress, undefended and inviolate.

There's nothing that won't fit under it:
fountains clogged with mud and leaves,
the houses of my childhood.

And night begins when my mother's fingers
let go of the thread
they've been tying and untying
to touch toward our fraying story's hem.

Night is the shadow of my father's hands
setting the clock for resurrection.

Or is it the clock unraveled, the numbers flown?

There's nothing that hasn't found home there:
discarded wings, lost shoes, a broken alphabet.

Everything but sleep. And the night begins

with the first beheading
of the jasmine, its captive fragrance
rid at least of burial clothes.

-- Li-Young Lee
(*Book of My Nights*)

Recommended Reading

Susan Wittig Albert, *Writing from Life*.

Zoe Anglesey, *Listen Up! Spoken Word Poetry*.

Christina Baldwin, *One to One: Self-Understanding through Journal Writing*,
--. *Life's Companion: Journal Writing as Spiritual Quest*.

Joan Bolker, Ed. *The Writer's Home Companion*.

Carol Bly, *The Passionate, Accurate Story: Making Your Heart's Truth Into Literature*.
-- *Beyond the Writers Workshop: New Ways to Write Creative Nonfiction*.

Ray Bradbury, *Zen and the Art of Writing*.

S. Cassedy, *In Your Own Words: A Beginner's Guide to Writing*.

Lucia Capacchione, *The Creative Journal*

Laura Cerwinske, *Writing As A Healing Art*.

Allison Hawthorne Deming. *Writing the Sacred Into the Real*.

Annie Dilliard, *The Writing Life*.

Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down The Bones*.
-- *Wild Mind*

Margaret Hatcher, *Centering Through Writing: Right Brain/Left Brain Techniques Applied to Writing*.

Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*.

Elaine Farris Hughes, *Writing from the Inner Self*.

bell hooks, *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work*.
 -- *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life*.

Michael Howard, *Art as Spiritual Activity*

Charley Kempthorne, *For All Time: A Complete Guide To Writing Your Family History*.

Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*.

Anne Lamott, *Bird By Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and on Life*.

Denis Ledoux, *Turning Memories into Memoirs: A Handbook for Writing Lifestories*.

John Lee, *Writing from the Body*

George Ella Lyon, *Where I'm From, Where Poems Come From*.

Ken Macrorie, *Telling Writing*.

Susan McBride Els, *Into The Deep: A Writer's Look At Creativity*.

Linda Trichter Metcalf and Tobin Simon, *Writing the Mind Alive*.

Deena Metzger, *Writing for Your Life: A Guide and Companion to the Inner World*.

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, *Write Where You Are: How to Use Writing To Make Sense of Your Life*.

Tona Pearce Myers, Ed., *The Soul of Creativity: Insights Into the Creative Process*

Ira Progoff, *At a Journal Workshop: Writing to Access the Power of the Unconscious and Evoke Creative Ability*.

Gabriele Luser Rico, *Pain and Possibility: Writing Your Way Through Personal Crisis*.
 --. *Writing the Natural Way*.

J. Sapp, *We've All Got Stories: Songs from the Dream Project*.

Pat Schneider, *Writing Alone with With Others*.
 -- *In Our Own Voices: Writing by Women in Low-Income Housing*.

B. Selling, *Writing from Within: A Step-by-step Guide to Writing Your Life's Stories*.

Kim Stafford, *Early Morning: Remembering My Father, William Stafford*.

William Stafford, *Writing the Australian Crawl*.
 -- *You Must Revise Your Life*.
 ` -- *Crossed Unmarked Snow*
 -- *The Answers Are In the Mountain*

Brenda Ueland, *If You Want to Write*.