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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

About This Book xi

1 A Poet's Job Description 1

2 Writing for Others 19

3 First Impressions 25

4 Don't Worry about the Rules 35

5 Rhyming, Ham Cubes, Prose Poems 45

6 Writing about Feelings 55

7 Can You Read Your Poem through Your Poem? 65

8 Writing from Memory 73

9 Working with Detail 93

10 Controlling Effects through Careful Choices 111

11 Fine-Tuning Metaphors and Similes 125

12 Relax and Wait 147

Source References and Acknowledgments 159

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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

Most of a poet's education is self-education, and most of what you'll learn you'll teach yourself through reading and writing poems. A good teacher may be able to nudge you along, may assign exercises like the how-to poem or the poem-in-answer-to-a-question, but eventually you'll get tired of doing literary sit-ups and knee bends and grow impatient to write the poems you *really* want to write, poems you feel inside you, poems like those you find in the books of writers you admire.

But the craft of careful writing and meticulous revision *can* be taught. *The Poetry Home Repair Manual* can assist you in making your poems stronger and more effective in finding an audience. I've been writing and publishing poetry for more than forty years, and in these pages I offer you some of my favorite tools for tuning up the poems you write. I'm confident you'll find them useful.

This is only one of many books about poetry writing. It's not very lengthy because there's only so much I know. I've learned a lot about writing poems, but I'll never get to the end of all the poetry still to be learned from, never make all the discoveries I'd like to make.

You'll find I pay lots of attention to a poet's relationship with readers. If you've gotten the impression from teachers or from reading contemporary poetry that poets don't need to write with a sense of somebody out there who might read what they've written, this book is not for you. Poetry is communication, and every word I've written here subscribes to that belief. Poetry's purpose is to reach other people and to touch their hearts. If a poem doesn't make sense to anybody but its author, nobody but its author will care a whit about it. That doesn't mean that your poems can't be cryptic, or elusive, or ambiguous if that's how you want to write, as long as you keep in mind that there's somebody on the other end of the communication. I favor poems that keep the obstacles between you and that person to a minimum. My

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approach is open to argument, of course, but even if you disagree with me on every page, even if I make you angry, I'm pretty sure you'll take away something worthwhile from what you find here.

My writing philosophy owes much to an idea that Lewis Hyde expresses in his book *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. He suggests that those who are gifted should give something back. With Hyde's thought resounding in my head and my own need to feel useful, I've shaped my own philosophy of writing, in particular a belief that people who have the ability to write have an obligation to offer something of use to their chosen readers. I emphasize *chosen* readers; later in this book I'll talk at length about the process of choosing your audience through the use of imaginary readers.

Throughout this book I cite examples of poems. Nearly all of these were written in recent years. There's much to be said in favor of studying the poetry of the past, but I want to direct your attention to poems being written *today*. It's the *now* of poetry you plan to enter, offering your own poems.

The poet John Ciardi once said that whenever in time, and wherever in the universe, any person speaks or writes in any detail about the technical management of a poem, the resulting irascibility of the reader's response is a constant. I hope I won't exhaust your patience.



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CHAPTER ONE

# A Poet's Job Description

Before we get to the specifics or writing and revision, let me say a few things about the job you're taking on.

## A CAREER AS A POET?

You'll never be able to make a living writing poems. We'd better get this money business out of the way before we go any further. I don't want you to have any illusions. You might make a living as a teacher of poetry writing or as a lecturer about poetry, but writing poems won't go very far toward paying your electric bill. A poem published in one of the very best literary magazines in the country *might* net you a check for enough money to buy half a sack of groceries. The chances are much better that all you'll receive, besides the pleasure of seeing your poem in print, are a couple of copies of the magazine, one to keep and one to show to your mother. You might get a letter or postcard from a grateful reader, always a delightful surprise. But look at it this way: Any activity that's worth lots of money, like professional basketball, comes with rules pinned all over it. In poetry, the *only* rules worth thinking about are the standards of perfection you set for yourself.

There's no money in poetry because most of my neighbors, and most of yours, don't have any use for it. If, at a neighborhood yard sale, you happened to find the original handwritten manuscript of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," you could take it to every quick shop in your city and you wouldn't find a single person who would trade you ten gallons of gas for it.

Part of the reason for our country's lack of interest in poetry is that most of us learned in school that finding the meaning of a poem is way

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too much work, like cracking a walnut and digging out the meat. Most readers have plenty to do that's far more interesting than puzzling over poems. I'll venture that 99 percent of the people who read the *New Yorker* prefer the cartoons to the poems.

A lot of this resistance to poetry is to be blamed on poets. Some go out of their way to make their poems difficult if not downright discouraging. That may be because difficult poems are what they think they're expected to write to advance their careers. They know it's the professional interpreters of poetry—book reviewers and literary critics—who most often establish a poet's reputation, and that those interpreters are attracted to poems that offer opportunities to show off their skills at interpretation. A poet who writes poetry that doesn't require explanation, who writes clear and accessible poems, is of little use to critics building their own careers as interpreters. But a clear and accessible poem *can* be of use to an everyday reader.

It *is* possible to nourish a small and appreciative audience for poetry if poets would only think less about the reception of critics and more about the needs of readers. *The Poetry Home Repair Manual* advocates for poems that can be read and understood without professional interpretation. My teacher and mentor, Karl Shapiro, once pointed out that the poetry of the twentieth century was the first poetry *that had to be taught*. He might have said *that had to be explained*. I believe with all my heart that it's a virtue to show our appreciation for readers by writing with kindness, generosity, and humility toward them. Everything you'll read here holds to that.

One other point: Isaac Newton attributed his accomplishments to standing on the shoulders of giants. He meant great thinkers who had gone before. Accordingly, beginning poets sometimes start off trying to stand on the shoulders of famous poets, imitating the difficult and obscure poems those successful poets have published. That's understandable, but they soon learn that, somehow, no literary journal is interested in publishing *their* difficult poems. If these beginners were to study the careers of the famous poets upon whose work they're modeling their own, they'd find that those writers were often, in their early years, publishing clear, understandable poems. In most instances, only after establishing reputations could they go on to write in more challenging ways. In a sense they earned the right to do so by first



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attracting an audience of readers, editors, and publishers with less difficult poems.

### THE TWO POETS

*We serve each poem we write*. We make ourselves subservient to our poetry. Any well-made poem is worth a whole lot more to the world than the person who wrote it. In one of Tomas Tranströmer's poems he says, "Fantastic to see how my poem is growing / while I myself am shrinking. / It's getting bigger, it's taking my place."

There's an essential difference between *being a poet* and *writing poetry*. There are, in a sense, two poets, the one alone writing a poem and the one in the black turtleneck and beret, trying to look sexy. Here's an older poem of mine:

#### A POETRY READING

Once you were young along a river, tree to tree,
with sleek black wings and red shoulders.
You sang for yourself but all of them listened to you.

Now you're an old blue heron with yellow eyes
and a gray neck tough as a snake.
You open your book on its spine, a split fish,
and pick over the difficult ribs,
turning your better eye down to the work
of eating your words as you go.

At the beginning, too often it's the idea of *being* a poet that matters most. It's those sexy black wings and red shoulders. It's the *attention* you want, as the poem says, "all of them listening to you." And then you grow old and, if you are lucky, grow wise.

I'm in my sixties, but I too was once young and felt flashy as a red-winged blackbird. I don't remember the specific date when I decided to be a poet, but it was during one of my many desperately lonely hours as a teenager, and I set about establishing myself as a poet with adolescent single-mindedness. I began to dress the part. I took to walking around in rubber shower sandals and white beachcomber pants that tied with a piece of clothesline rope. I let my hair grow longer and tried to grow a beard. I carried big fat books wherever I went—like Adolph Harnack's



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*Outlines of the History of Dogma* and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. I couldn't have understood a word of these books if I'd tried, but they looked really good clenched under my arm and, as a bonus, helped me look as if I had big biceps.

There were, it seemed to me, many benefits accruing to a career as a poet. There were fame and immortality: the lichen-encrusted bust of the poet on his monument in the town cemetery, standing throughout time in a swirl of autumn leaves. There was also the delicious irresponsibility of the bohemian lifestyle: No more picking up my room, no more mowing the yard.

But best of all was the adoration of women. *That* was what I was most interested in. In those years I desperately needed some sort of a gimmick, for I was thin and pimply, my palms sweated, and my breath was sour from smoking the Chesterfields that despite the claims of magazine advertising had failed to make me irresistible.

I got the idea that being a poet might make me attractive by reading *Life* magazine, which occasionally profiled some rumpled, unshaven, melancholy poet (never a female poet, as far as I can remember), and I got the idea from the accompanying text that these guys were "lady-killers," as people used to say. I especially remember a photograph of grizzled old John Berryman surrounded by dewy-eyed college women, a smile on his lips. It had to be the poetry that made the difference, I figured, because were it not for that, disheveled old Berryman wouldn't likely have gotten to first base with the women.

It didn't occur to me for a long time that in order to earn the title of Poet, I ought to have written at least one poem. To me, the writing of poetry didn't have all that much to do with it. Being a poet was looking the part.

I was an artificial poet, a phony, when, by rubbing shoulders with poetry, I gradually became interested in writing it. I'd begun to carry books less cumbersome than Harnack and Kierkegaard, and one day I picked up the New Directions paperback edition of William Carlos Williams's *Selected Poems*. It weighed no more than a few ounces and fit in my pocket. I began to read Williams and soon discovered other poets whose work I liked: May Swenson, Randall Jarrell, John Crowe Ransom, to name a few. I began to read poetry whenever I had a moment free



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from pretending to be a poet, and soon I started to write a few poems of my own. The two sides of being a poet—the poet as celebrity and the poet as writer—began to fall into balance. I read poems, I wrote poems, and at times, sometimes for hours on end, I was able to forget about trying to attract women.

Today I read poems, I write poems, and at times, yes, sometimes for hours on end, I forget about women. Yet there are still the two poets present, the one who quietly concentrates on perfecting the poem and the one who wants more than anything else to be celebrated and adored. I'm delighted and nourished by the first poet and embarrassed by the second.

Poetry is a lot more important than poets.

### TOO MANY POETS?

A noted contemporary poet and critic has said we ought to keep poetry a secret from the masses. Another, the editor of a prestigious anthology of poetry, said that each nation ought to have no more than a handful of poets. Both sound pretty elitist, don't they? Well, we'll always have among us those who think the best should be reserved for the few. Considering the ways in which so many of us waste our time, what would be wrong with a world in which *everybody* were writing poems? After all, there's a significant service to humanity in spending time doing no harm. While you're writing your poem, there's one less scoundrel in the world. And I'd like a world, wouldn't you, in which people actually took time to think about what they were saying? It would be, I'm certain, a more peaceful, more reasonable place. I don't think there could ever be too many poets. By writing poetry, even those poems that fail and fail miserably, we honor and affirm life. We say "We loved the earth but could not stay."

### ISN'T IT DIFFICULT TO FIND ACCEPTANCE?

What makes the work of a poet most difficult is not that the world doesn't always appreciate what he or she does. We all know how wrong the world can be. It was wrong about Vincent Van Gogh when it refused to purchase his sunflower painting for the roughly $125 he was asking, and it is every bit as wrong to pay $35 million or $40 million for it today.



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What is most difficult for a poet is to find the time to read and write when there are so many distractions, like making a living and caring for others. But the time set aside for being a poet, even if only for a few moments each day, can be wonderfully happy, full of joyous, solitary discovery.

Here's a passage about the joy of making art from Louise Nevelson's memoir *Dawns and Dusks*. Nevelson was a sculptor, but what she says about an artist's life can be applied to poetry, too: "I'd rather work twenty-four hours a day in my studio and come in here and fall down on the bed than do anything I know. Because it is living. It's like pure water; it's living. The essence of living is in doing, and in doing, I have made my world and it's a much better world than I ever saw outside."

The essence of living is in doing, Nevelson suggests, and the essence of being a poet is in the writing, not in the publications or the prizes.

### BEING OF SERVICE

The Nobel Prize–winning poet Seamus Heaney, writing on William Butler Yeats, said (the emphasis is mine), "The aim of the poet and the poetry is finally *to be of service*, to ply the effort of the individual work into the larger work of the community as a whole." That's good enough to cut out and pin up over your typewriter.

In the following poem, ostensibly a description of a street scene, one of my favorite poets suggests something about serving, about how a single poem can alter the way in which a reader sees the world.

#### FIRE BURNING IN A FIFTY-FIVE GALLON DRUM

Next time you'll notice them on your way to work
or when you drive by that place near the river
where the stockyards used to stand, where everything

is gone now. They'll be leaning over the edge
of the barrel, getting it started—they'll step back
suddenly, and hold out their hands, as though

something fearful had appeared at its center.
Others will be coming over by then, pulling up
handfuls of weeds, bringing sticks and bits of paper,



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laying them in gently, offering them to something
still hidden deep down inside the drum.
They will all form a circle, their hands almost

touching, sparks rising through their fingers,
their faces bright, their bodies darkened by smoke,
by flakes of ash swirling around them in the wind.

Look at the first five words of this poem by Jared Carter: *Next time you'll notice them*. We're likely to breeze right past a phrase like that without thinking much about it, aren't we? By habit, we tend to look toward the end of a poem for the BIG revelations, the BIG messages, but that's not what happens here.

For me, those first five words are among the most important in the poem. Why? Because Carter is to some degree writing about the relationship between a poet and his readers, about the gift a poet gives an audience. Those few words make an important assertion: Once we have read and been affected by a poem, our awareness of its subject—in this instance a group of men huddled around a barrel—may be forever heightened and made memorable. With the confidence of someone who knows the effects of reading poetry, Carter suggests that it's likely that readers of his poem will never again pass a group of men warming themselves at a barrel of fire without a sense of heightened awareness. We are thus indelibly marked by the poems we read, and the more poems we read the deeper is our knowledge of the world.

Though it can be a lovely experience to write a poem that pleases and delights its author, to write something that touches a reader is just about as good as it gets. The finest compliment I've ever received came from a woman who had read a little poem of mine called "Spring Plowing" in which I describe a family of mice moving their nests out of a field to avoid a farmer's plow. The poem presents a playful, Walt Disney–like scene, with the mice carrying tiny lanterns, and the oldest among them loudly lamenting their arduous journey. This woman wrote to me and said that she would never again pass a freshly plowed field in spring without thinking about those mice. I'd given her something that changed the way she saw the world, and she was thankful for that. I was deeply honored.

Poems that change our perceptions are everywhere you look, and one



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of the definitions of poetry might be that a poem freshens the world. Take a look at this little landscape by A. R. Ammons:

WINTER SCENE

There is now not a single
leaf on the cherry tree:

except when the jay
plummets in, lights, and,

in pure clarity, squalls:
then every branch

quivers and
breaks out in blue leaves.

After letting that poem become part of your experience, will you ever be able to look at a blue jay landing in a bare tree without a special sense of recognition? As Jared Carter says, "Next time you'll notice them on your way to work."

That's the kind of thing you can give readers with your poems, a re-freshening of the world.

And just to show you that your gift—the *refreshment* you serve up to your readers—can come as a very small serving, here's a one-line poem by Joseph Hutchison:

ARTICHOKE

O heart weighed down by so many wings

Could you ever look at an artichoke in the same way after reading that?

There's a toy much like a kaleidoscope but without the colored chips. Like a kaleidoscope it consists of a mirrored tube. You look through it and see whatever is at the other end. Turn it toward just about anything and what's beyond you becomes more interesting. This is how some poems work. The poem is the device through which the ordinary world is seen in a new way—engaging, compelling, even beautiful.

## READING TO WRITE

The best way to learn the art of writing poetry is to read as much of it as possible—contemporary poems, ancient poems, folk poems, poems



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