

EVERYDAY ALCHEMY: BEHIND THE CURTAIN OF THE COMMONPLACE

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To Rick for always encouraging me to pursue my dreams and for making this long journey by my side. I will always love you.

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Critical Introduction: The Poetry of the Commonplace

Before the scientific age, those who studied alchemy, an early forerunner of chemistry, believed that it was possible to change a base metal into gold. Poetry does its own sort of alchemy by taking an ordinary moment and transforming it into something equally precious. Even before Walt Whitman wrote his poem about a patient spider, poets had already celebrated common subjects, but Whitman went farther; he also celebrated common people. A poet focused on common subjects is forced to pay attention to the trivialities of life, to think of everyday happenings, poke them, prod them and turn them inside out so the reader can see the beauty and enchantment that was in plain sight all along. Ironically, however, many of today's readers aren't aware that much contemporary poetry is written particularly to be accessible and enjoyable to them.

Poetry for the Common Man

In 2006, The Poetry Foundation (United States) published a study on American attitudes toward poetry in which over half the respondents who claimed to read poetry endorsed statements about poetry such as "reading poetry is boring" and "poems are irrelevant to daily life" (Schwartz 51). As critical of poetry as it is, this response does not surprise me. Many readers who were exposed to poetry in school think that reading poetry is both a mystery and a chore. It is any wonder, then, that they have so little interest? Although I believe that there is a place for "difficult" poetry, I also believe there is equal value in poetry whose accessibility of language, subject matter, and form makes for a pleasurable as well as meaningful read.

Not that a poem can't have figurative and literal layers, but if I read a poem through the first time and can't make any sense of it, I probably won't go back to it unless I'm forced to. It should then be no surprise, then, that the style of my own poetry is straightforward, image-driven, and narrative. I want my readers to get it—to be moved, inspired, or entertained by my poems. My poetry focuses on the ordinary, everyday happenings that touch that creative place: whether they be memories, observations, or emotional experiences tied to my life. I find value in looking at an ordinary life and finding the universal. C.D Wright puts it this way: "It is left to the poets to point out the shining particulars in our blunted lives" (389). My work has a Midwestern sensibility—it is no-nonsense and plain speaking. At the same time, however, as a poet I can't help but push the constraints of my life, questioning my religion, my upbringing, and my life as wife, mother, and life-long learner.

Paying Attention

Many things can inspire me to write a poem, from the universal questions of faith to the mundane, misunderstood dandelion. The key is to pay attention to the everyday and its potential to be inspiring. It can be hard. So many distractions get in the way. I have four loads of laundry to get done today. I have to make sure the chicken is defrosted in time to make supper. Can I fix the publishing issue I'm having with the online course I'm developing so I meet my deadline? It is infinitely easy to let life get in the way of inspiration, but as a writer, it's imperative to make time for it, to *pay attention*. Like those ancient alchemists, poets must examine the world they live in and try to turn it into gold. In Sage Cohen's inspirational craft book *Writing the Life Poetic: An Invitation to Read*

and *Write Poetry*, she writes: “When we pay careful attention to the potential of the extraordinary, its blossoms will burst through our ordinary everyday lives” (33).

Anne Lamott says the same thing this way in *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*: “I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent.” Reverent. I really like that word. Lamott goes on to say, “Let’s think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world....Think of times those times when you’ve read prose or poetry that is presented in such a way that you have a fleeting sense of being *startled* by beauty or insight, by a glimpse into someone’s soul (99).” Reading poetry, I believe, helps to teach reverence. As I have immersed myself in the study of poetry for this thesis, I am paying more attention. One day recently, I felt a little thrill when I heard someone on the news feature show *CBS Sunday Morning* compare the clarity of a singer’s voice to that of primary colors. This simile was so right that I wish I had thought of it.

Some poems embody this call to attention. One of those is this poem by Leo Dangel in *American Life in Poetry*:

“Behind the Plow”

I look in the turned sod
for an iron bolt that fell
from the plow frame
and find instead an arrowhead
with delicate, chipped edges,
still sharp, not much larger

than a woman's long fingernail.

Pleased, I put the arrowhead

into my overalls pocket,

knowing that the man who shot

the arrow and lost his work

must have looked for it

much longer than I will

look for that bolt. (337)

Most people wouldn't think that looking for a bolt buried somewhere in a field would inspire a poem, and for most people it wouldn't. But Dangel is paying attention. Then he takes it a step further by connecting the arrowhead he finds to its original owner. This is where the magic occurs, but if Dangel hadn't picked up this arrowhead, felt the weight of it in his pocket, and wondered about it, there would be no poem.

Like Anne Lammott, Billy Collins urges poets to read others' work in his introduction to *The Best American Poetry 2006* but provides a slightly different perspective. He writes, "If you are a poet, you read other poets for inspiration, that is, for opportunities to steal, or for the possibility that another poet will open a door for you that you never knew existed" (xxi). It has been this way for me, both with reading poetry and reading craft books. The study of poetry, by its very nature, inspires and facilitates the practice of paying attention.

Most of my poems begin simply, usually starting from a memory, a particular event that provokes a poetic response, or an exercise or experiment. My memory poems

will often ignite from a small snippet of memory or an image—for instance my grandmother darning socks or the cistern that took up a big chunk of the basement real estate of a house I lived in growing up. It's a memory that smolders in a back corner of my brain and every once in a while flares up so I notice it. Eventually, I pay attention to it. A poem by another writer might also spur my desire to write. A poem might also be tied to an event like a local news story I relate to for some reason and can't seem to escape. This happened with a murder of a young local girl that I heard about on the news. When a poem starts as an exercise or experiment, it is not always successful, but often I will find some nugget or phrase worth paying attention to that ends up in a different poem.

Like many writers, I grew up in a house of books. When I was young, I loved a set of children's classics that included nursery rhymes, fables, and fairy tales. Dr. Seuss was also a favorite, with his bright rhymes and whimsical drawings. It didn't matter that the binding was cracking or that one of my brothers had scribbled in it. My mother read all sorts of things, from mysteries to historical biographies to poetry. When I was a teenager I helped myself to her collection of Mary Stewart and Isaac Asimov. My mother had been educated at a Catholic girls' school in the days when the nuns made students memorize poems. When I was in high school, I was working on a report on illegal immigration and I asked her if she knew the poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. She quoted it for me word for word on the spot. After that, my only problem—back in those pre-computer days—was trying to figure out how to cite my mom as the source in the

bibliography. Her influence has fueled my writing, fostered my love of books, and helped to form my literary sensibilities and poetry topic choices.

I dabbled at writing here and there as a teenager, but didn't do any serious poetry writing until I went back to school in my late twenties and took a poetry class led by Karl Elder, an imposing man who was also head of the English Department at Lakeland College. In his poetry workshops, he was blunt in his criticism, but also sharp with his insight. In one of the first workshops I attended, I remember him berating a young male student who thought that the Doors' Jim Morrison was a brilliant poet and sought to emulate him with obtuse references and wandering imagery.

Karl scared me a little bit, but he taught me a great deal about writing. Karl also exposed me to great poets with his Great Lakes Writers' Festival. Through these festivals, I was able learn how fun poetry could be by listening to Billy Collins and how chilling it could become when Karl brought in Sapphire, the same woman whose later novel *Push* was turned into the movie *Precious*. Her poems were raw, aggressive, and filled with profanity, but as a guest in a workshop, she was a generous and thoughtful critic.

Since my days at Lakeland, I've learned to recognize what appeals to me when I read poetry and what I strive for when I write it. Two poets I've connected with are Billy Collins and Ted Kooser. I identify with Kooser in particular because of his grounding in the Midwest. Both past poet Laureates, Collins and Kooser have used their positions to promote poetry to the masses. Appointed by the Librarian of Congress, the Poet Laureate usually serves a one-year term, although that term is sometimes extended. Collins, Poet

Laureate from 2001 – 2003, is responsible for the Poetry 180 project, which brought a poem a day to high school students. In the first book based on the project, *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry*, Collins describes its poems as “short, clear, contemporary poems which any listener could basically ‘get’ on first hearing—poems whose injection of pleasure is immediate” (xvi).

During his 2004 – 2006 term, Kooser started the American Life in Poetry project, which offers a weekly column on poetry to local newspapers in the U.S. Kooser is happy to wear the moniker of a poet who writes “accessible” poetry. He has said that poems should be “pleasurable experiences that we can take into our lives and use however we wish.” He continues: “I’d like to be on record as saying that anybody can write a poem that nobody can understand. That’s really easy. On the other hand, it might be really hard to write a poem that everyone in a room found meaning in. I would fail at that, even though I would like to reach out to everyone in this room” (Kooser Interview). Collins agrees that writing accessible poetry is risky. When he started writing poetry, he wrote difficult poetry because he thought that’s how poetry worked:

...when I wrote I took on the role of the despondent and difficult to understand person. Whereas in life, I was easy to understand, to the point of being simple-minded maybe. The change came I would say when I began to dare to be clear, because I think clarity is the real risk in poetry because you are exposed. (Collins Interview).

Just because a poem is clear and gives pleasure to the reader doesn’t mean that an accessible poem isn’t legitimate or can’t be critically acclaimed. And some poems

provide even more satisfaction upon repeated reading. Ted Kooser's poem "A Spiral Notebook" does this for me. Nearly everyone has used a spiral notebook so most people are not going to be intimidated by a poem about one. The poem starts with an image built to draw the reader in: "The bright wire rolls like a porpoise. / in and out of the calm blue sea / of the cover..."

"A Spiral Notebook"

The bright wire rolls like a porpoise
 in and out of the calm blue sea
 of the cover, or perhaps like a sleeper
 twisting in and out of his dreams,
 for it could hold a record of dreams
 if you wanted to buy it for that
 though it seems to be meant for
 more serious work, with its
 college-ruled lines and its cover
 that states in emphatic white letters,
 5 SUBJECT NOTEBOOK. It seems
 a part of growing old is no longer
 to have five subjects, each
 demanding an equal share of attention,
 set apart by brown cardboard dividers,
 but instead to stand in a drugstore

and hang on to one subject
 a little too long, like this notebook
 you weigh in your hands, passing
 your fingers over its surfaces
 as if it were some kind of wonder.

(The Writer's Almanac)

Upon a first reading, we are likely to understand that this poem is about aging. When the poem is read again, we may wonder about the five subjects that demand “an equal share of attention.” Then they might contemplate the rigidity of structured learning and speculate about what Kooser was really getting at. They might notice how the motion of the hand at the end mimics the motion of a porpoise on the surface of the ocean. Then they might wonder why Kooser used *porpoise* instead of *dolphin* and realize how much *porpoise* sounds like *purpose*. “Spiral Notebook” is a simple poem, yes, but it has plenty of depth.

Of course, Kooser’s style of poetry can be traced back to Walt Whitman, the first major American poet to write for an audience of common people. While extolling their virtues, Whitman proclaimed that common people “too (were) unrhymed poetry”.

Whitman broke new ground by turning his poetic eye on ordinary subjects. He valued it all. “If he breathes into anything that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe.” Whitman also valued the reader and intended his readers to see what he saw and feel what he felt: “You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me” (Whitman).

Even though in his poetry Whitman treated women with an equality that was forward thinking during that time, it is unlikely that he could have predicted the way Sharon Olds has epitomized his call for candor. Olds is known for very personal poems about family, sex and womanhood, including a whole book of poetry that chronicles the death of her father. Olds' frankness about her abused childhood and her openness about her sex life have garnered her fans and critics, and yet, she is, according to the Poetry Foundation, "one of contemporary poetry's leading voices" (Poetry Foundation). When asked in a *Salon* interview why she writes poems that are somewhat accessible, Olds said, "I write the way I perceive, I guess. It's not really simple, I don't think, but it's about ordinary things -- feeling about things, about people. I'm not an intellectual, I'm not an abstract thinker. And I'm interested in ordinary life. So I think that our writing reflects us" (Olds Interview). A recent poem by Olds posted on her blog centers on a very ordinary subject, that of a toilet. The poem, "Ode to a Composting Toilet," includes a long descriptive list of the people whose excrement is returned to the earth through this toilet, including Yankees and Red Sox, vegans, Halliburton employees, and poet chicks. This disparate list illustrates our oneness in a way that is universal at its most elemental level:

...fertilizer of

New Hampshire, Kenya, New York, Boston—

Yankees shit, Red Sox shit,

in excremental harmony;

vegan shit, kosher shit,

slow food, fast, vegetarian,
 fruititarian, even the sorrowful
 wisps of anorexic shit,
 and Calvinist shit, and Kabbala shit,
 Halliburton employee shit,
 Orthodox shit, Puritan shit,
 lesbian shit, nympho virgin
 poet chick shit. Seas and rivers
 love the composting toilet lakes and
 streams sparkle its praises, and the small
 creatures of the pond and creek
 keen for it—dark green machine
 like a porcelain throne, though its royal flush
 is inside it. Come sit on it, come be
 its queen or king. (Olds)

By shining a light on the ordinary in my poetry, I am following the tradition started by
 Whitman and carried on by poets like Olds, Kooser, and Collins, among many others.

The Poetic Voice

I must admit, one of the most difficult tasks of writing poetry is knowing when a poem rises above the dreck that can dribble onto the page into something that is worth pursuing and possibly sharing with readers. Trying to be cute or obtuse usually makes for a bad poem. It's just not me. I lose my voice. Billy Collins says in the introduction to *The Best American Poetry, 2006* that trust plays an important part in the connection between poets and readers. Readers used to be able to trust meter and rhyme, but with the advent of free verse, these are no longer predictable. Instead, Collins declares that tone of voice is the way to establish trust:

As a reader, I come to trust or distrust the authority of the poem after reading just a few lines. Do I hear a voice that is making reasonable claims for itself—usually a first-person voice speaking fallibly but honestly—or does the poem begin with a grandiose pronouncement, a riddle, or an intimate confession foisted on me by a stranger? Tone may be the most elusive aspect of written language, but our ears instantly recognize words that sound authentic and words that ring false” (xxii).

Ted Kooser calls this phenomenon “presence” (*The Poetry Home Repair Manual* 30).

Now, there are probably people who have known me for a long time who might not immediately recognize my voice in poetry, but if they thought about it, they'd find it in the topics I choose and the words I use. I'd like to think that my poems reflect my inner voice. My hope is that if someone had only read the personal essays I've written and then came upon my poetry, she would say, “Yup, that's Laura.”

Structure and Mechanics

Poetry, by its very nature, is defined by its structure and sound. Most Americans are introduced to poetry early on through the rhyme and meter found in children's literature. From "Hickory Dickory Dock" to *Good Night Moon*, young ears learn to appreciate the sounds and rhythms of these simple poems. Rhyme and meter are especially important to poems that are frequently read aloud, such as those that are read to children. Yet even though contemporary free verse does not always follow the strict structure produced by iambic pentameter and measured rhyme scheme, structure, rhythm, and even rhyme are important to its composition.

In free verse end rhymes, inner rhymes, and near rhymes add emphasis and melody to a poem. Billy Collins uses rhyme in his poem "Reading Myself to Sleep." Here is the second stanza:

and the only movement in the night is the slight
swirl of curtains, the easy lift and fall of my breathing
and the flap of pages as they turn in the wind of my hand.

(*Questions About Angels* 15)

Collins also uses the words *bright*, *night*, and *daylight* at other points in the poem. None of these are used in the traditional way rhymes are used in poems but they still resonate. This first rhyme helps to set the poem to its rhythm, like a parent giving a child a push on a swing.

Books written about poetry craft devote significant time to the discussion of structure: how a poem looks and how it's put together. Of course, structure means nothing if the poem doesn't touch the reader with its artfulness. Kooser emphasizes this

important point about structure: “Every successful sonnet is a good poem first and a good sonnet second. The poetry must lead and the form follow, if only a heartbeat behind” (*The Poetry Home Repair Manual* 38). With free verse, a poet has more freedom in structure, but freedom also means that a poet must pay attention to the structure so it enhances the poem instead of distracting from it.

Stephen Dobyns writes about the “sense of space” that is essential to the structure of a poem, that “give[s] the impression that it is larger than its actual size” (127). Instead of examining a poem to make his point, Dobyns dissects a paragraph from a Henry James short story, focusing on each sentence. James, asserts Dobyns, uses many “syntactic effects” (128) that poetry uses, and spends a page and a half discussing the first sentence, including its rhythm at the syllabic level. While I found Dobyns’ examination very instructive, I have to wonder how much great writers get down into this kind of details as they write and revise their work and how much is simply delivered by the instinct of a great writer. Did James consciously decide on the iambic rhythm within the paragraph, or was this choice based on an innate sensibility that James possessed? I think that most writers would throw up their hands in defeat if they really thought it was the former. On the other hand, if such form is arrived at by a conscious decision, there is the possibility that this attention to detail can be taught. Perhaps some of the syntactic effects of a poem are happy accidents of a poet’s innate sense of what works and some are chosen purposely during the writing process. I know this is what I’ve found with my work. Regardless, Dobyns’ analysis is a useful exercise to consider, especially for a poet who

writes in free verse. Because Dobyns illustrates how these small decisions can affect the meaning of a prose paragraph, it behooves the free-verse poet to pay attention.

The structure of a poem also supports its progression to the central question of a poem. Sometimes this support is obvious, as it is in poems that have numbered stanzas. In my poem about dandelions, for example, each numbered stanza signifies a change in perspective around the simple subject. Sometimes a structure's support of a central question is more subtle. Miller Williams wrote about this indirect support when discussing his poem "Love Poem and Toast": "This progression—the shape of the poem, apart from but in support of what it says—is something for a reader taking part in the poem to recognize as an enhancement of the statement, though the recognition may not be on a conscious level" (314).

The physical structure of a poem is determined by its line breaks. Mary Oliver, a Pulitzer Prize winner, calls it "turning the line" (54) in *A Poetry Handbook*. She writes of the difference between traditional poetry forms and free verse by pointing to the difference between listening to or reading a poem: "The regular, metrical line gave assistance to a listener who sought to remember the poem; the more various line breaks of the visual poem gave assistance to the mind seeking to 'hear' the poem" (56). Turning a line affects the rhythm of a poem, either lending to a natural cadence or disturbing it for some reason. Kooser concurs: "[T]he closer your writing gets to the pacing of conversational speech, the less it's likely to call attention to itself" (*The Poetry Home Repair Manual* 118).

Line breaks help also determine the sound of a poem. “The question of how you want the poem to sound will often determine where you break your lines, for to some extent your line breaks act as part of the poem’s musical notation, determining pauses, tension, emphasis, and pace” (Kowitz 170). A short line speeds up the pace and a long line slows it down. A recent poem written by Sarah A. Chavez and published in *American Life in Poetry* caught my eye with its interesting line breaks.

“In Childhood”

In childhood Christy and I played in the dumpster across the street
from Pickett & Sons Construction. When we found bricks, it was best.
Bricks were most useful. We drug them to our empty backyard
and stacked them in the shape of a room. For months
we collected bricks, one on top another. When the walls
reached as high as my younger sister’s head, we laid down.
Hiding in the middle of our room, we watched the cycle
of the sun, gazed at the stars, clutched hands and felt at home.
(Chavez)

The long lines of this poem help the reader savor the memories of childhood and establish the feeling of nostalgia in the piece. Chavez doesn’t play it safe and more often than not chooses not to end sentences at the end of lines. On closer inspection, each line break either emphasizes a meaningful end word (*street, backyard, laid down*) or leads us on to the next line. Chavez uses enjambment to great effect. We want to know what has happened *for months* or *when the walls....* The line breaks also help highlight important

words at the start of lines, like *bricks* and *hiding*. Examining unconventional line breaks in other poems is a useful endeavor for any aspiring poet because it teaches us how to take risks that work.

Sometimes a poet wants to call attention to a particular word or feature in a poem and line breaks can assist in this. In my poem “Paper Rape,” I use enjambment by ending five lines with the word *don’t*.

We need to protect ourselves: don’t
 let your guard down, don’t
 go down dark alleys, don’t
 walk down the sidewalk, don’t
 talk to strangers, don’t
 go anywhere alone.

I chose this unconventional line break because I wanted to call attention to the word *don’t*. The word itself is restrictive and becomes more so by placing it at the end of a line. The litany of the admonitions becomes stronger and more insistent because of the choice. I’ve used very short lines in my poem “Geometry” to help emphasize the urgency of the encounter that’s depicted in the poem. In “Junction” I’ve taken the opposite tact. By lengthening the lines, I hope to simulate the length of the trains that stop on the tracks as well as the narrator’s wait while the train blocks her path.

Sound also plays an important part in the mechanics of a poem, helping to establish its melody and atmosphere. Besides the obvious sound devices associated with poetry, rhythm and rhyme, a poet can also use alliteration, assonance, and consonance.

Alliteration is one of my favorite tools to work with in poetry. Here are a few lines from “Breakfast at Eats” that make use of alliteration:

Of course, Eats has a counter
with stools sprouting along one side,
stainless steel stems with red vinyl blossoms.

These lines also have a bit of consonance in the words *course*, *eats*, and *blossom* that works well with the *s/st* alliteration in the other words. Can a poem have too much alliteration? Probably, but too much alliteration is easy to avoid when trying to write a poem that sounds natural. In the poem “Touch and Goes on 9/11,” I consciously chose words with *v* sounds for their vibration and resonance of their sound, an attempt to mimic the sounds of the jets.

Assonance works in a similar way but in some ways is more subtle. A reader will notice a repetition of *b* sounds sooner than the repetition of *ah* sounds, but assonance may do more work toward the atmosphere of a poem. Some vowels are quiet and promote a sense of peace and relaxation. Some words with vowels that fit this description are *good*, *wall*, *morning*, and *sun*. Some vowels bring automatic tension, excitement, or harshness, as in the long *e* in *sheet*, or the *i* in *climb*. That makes it all the more important for poets to choose just the right word every time.

The Right Word

One of my favorite quotes about writing is attributed to Mark Twain: “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between the lightning and the lightning bug.” I don’t think Twain wrote much poetry, but I believe this quote

applies to poetry, with its rhythm and condensed form, more than any other kind of writing. When writing poetry, the right word appears just as often during the revision process as it does in the initial flurry of creativity that gives birth to a poem. When it happens, it's like the universe of the poem clicks into place. Finding the right word is a small victory that, I believe, drives all poets. "Serious poets are concerned with every syllable they set to paper. They will search for just the right phrase, rewriting their lines over and over until they have just the sound they are after" (Kowitz 61). Stephen Dobyns goes into more detail:

The poet is constantly juggling synonyms to create a particular rhythm, exchanging a two-syllable word for a one-syllable word, a one-syllable word for a two syllable word. Many synonyms of small words have the same meaning: someone, somebody; just, only; start, begin; seem, appear; out of, from; another, each other, etc. These words are interchangeable, as are many others and the addition or subtraction of a single syllable or noise can affect the rhythm. (183)

One example of this from my own poetry is in "The Tree." This poem includes the line *as we passed by it*. Initially this line read, *as we walked by it*. While I liked the alliteration of "we walked," I liked the æ sound of *passed* better. It also is the sound in *sat*, and *as* and *plastic*, all of fall within one line of *passed*. Poets make small choices like this every time they write.

Sometimes a word will hold a particular importance for a poet. One word I've found that resonates in my poetry is *obligation*. I unconsciously included that word in three poems this collection: "Grandma's Mending," "Echoes of Faith," and "The Tree."

You'll also hear its echo in a few other poems even though it isn't specifically mentioned. Obligation has seeped into me from my mostly traditional upbringing, my faith, and the above-mentioned grandmother. I think it's one of those universal concerns that women struggle with on a regular basis, trying to strike the right balance between home, work and personal fulfillment. I also like the sound and rhythm of it. A word like *obligation*, exposing a subconscious preoccupation, is a word not to be ignored when it's recognized, but a word to be written toward, around, away from, and about. With this in mind, during the revision process, I renamed one of my poems "Obligation."

Revision and the Art of Tinkering

My husband says that when he retires, he's going to be a tinkerer. He likes to fix things and he envisions taking apart recalcitrant lawnmowers and outboard motors, finding out what's going wrong inside, and then making them whole again. He already has a good hoard of spare parts accumulated over the years. He might mull over a particularly tricky issue before going to tackle it. He might let an especially daunting project sit in a back corner until he feels compelled to tackle it. Either way he will be happy in his cluttered pole building poking around amid the grease and grime.

I like to tinker with language in similar ways. As every poet knows, most poems aren't fully formed on first draft. As Wanda Coleman writes in *Contemporary American Poetry: Behind the Scenes*, "I usually allow a work to 'stew' or sit a few days—if there's no deadline—to give myself some distance from the content and allow my biases toward that content to cool. Then I go back and trim as much dead and/or extraneous language as I can detect..." (58). It's a challenge to take that draft and take it apart, poke around on

the inside—rearranging lines, taking out old words and replacing them with shiny new ones—and then make it whole again. The act of revision is different from the act of creating. “The shift between composition and revision is the shift from the imaginative to the analytic, the nondiscursive to the discursive, the expansive to the controlled, from freedom to restraint, license to judgment” (Dobyns 172). For me, as a person who tends to be logical, once the first draft of a poem is done, the pressure is lessened. I have something to work with and can now play around with different word choices and line arrangements.

Yet, tinkering is a sentimental occupation and sometimes we tinkerers will hold on to something long after its usefulness has passed. My husband has stereo components stuck in a closet in my office. In this age of iPods and earbuds, will we ever have a stereo system like we did a decade or two ago? Probably not. But he can’t get rid of these soon-to-be dinosaurs just yet. He’s too fond of the memories: “Spirit of the Radio” cranked up all the way with the bass reverberating in the corners of the room, or discovering the tight harmonies of The Eagles on “Seven Bridges Road” with the equalizer fine-tuned to pick out each voice. Even though most of the clutter will never be useful again, there’s always the chance that somehow something will earn redemption, like the old CDs in Windows 6.0 that now protect our raspberries from being ravaged by birds.

My own shelf of spare parts is stored in my computer and scrawled on pieces of paper; little snips of magic that started in a mound of drivel and don’t have a home yet. Sometimes they are pieces of poems I just can’t seem to part with. Sometimes they’re just phrases that come to me when I’m not writing. One fall day I was watching a line of

geese move across the sky and thought it looked like a pencil scribble. This image has made its way into a couple of drafts, but I'm not sure where the scribble of geese will finally end up. Recently, I found this start of a poem scrawled on a piece of legal paper:

Stay with me, you say
 Don't turn off my light.
 Mommy, lay by me for just a minute.
 I relinquish my grip
 on the chores that still need doing
 and rest my head on your pillow
 for just a moment
 Peace is a gentle hand on my cheek
 your eyes bobbing with reluctant sleep.

I've since revised these lines and added three more stanzas, to make a poem about my relationship with my daughter. It's called "Wonder."

As often as I can piece lines together, some poems need a complete overhaul. When my mother was dying of cancer, I spent her last day with her as she struggled with the pain. By afternoon she was unconscious and she died late that night. It took a while for me to create the distance from which I could write a poem. My first attempt was a raw jumble of half-formed images: the May sunlight streaming through the window, the way my mother kept her mouth open trying to get a breath, how she stoically accepted her fate. Since that first start, I've worked on this poem and set it aside a number of times over a five year period. I want to juxtapose the promise of spring with the finality of

death and wrap it all in my complicated relationship with faith, as a semi-practicing Catholic who called a priest to deliver my mother's last rites.

Conclusion

Life is full of moments, big and small, that touch us at very basic levels. For many people, these moments pass by before they can settle in. We simply forget the shiny parquet floor in our high school gym or the gold we saw under our friend's chin when we held a dandelion up to it. We overlook the frazzled waitress at our favorite breakfast spot and push away the spider web that brushes against our face on a dark night. A poet's job is to pay attention to these commonplace moments, examine them carefully, and then, using the instruments of the poet—meaning, metaphor, and mechanics,—create a poem that coalesces that everyday occurrence into something both memorable and magical. It's pure alchemy.

Poetry: Everyday Alchemy

I. Drown in Daylight

Dandelions

1

Fistful of flowers, yellow orbs
held tight in tiny hands. Mother's pride
gathered in a juice glass.

2

I remember flinging a string of cartwheels
across the lawn.
The dandelions applauded.

3

Golden reflections on chins proclaim
a love of butter. Dandelions don't lie.

4

A science experiment for seven-year-olds:
Split dandelion stems in a bucket of water.
Watch them twist.

5

Pouting with resentment, I sit among dandelions,
popping their tiny heads with glee.

6

I dig out the white vein,
tap root to emancipation.
I toss it on the compost pile.

7

Liquid summer, dandelion wine.
Sweet amber blossoms in a bottle.
I drown in daylight.

8

This evening I walked to clear my head,
storm clouds collecting in the west.
The dandelions closed to me.

9

Sun-inspired flower condemned to weed-dom
by virtue of its exuberance,
bane to lawn farmers everywhere.

10

Yellow dots like chickenpox
across the lawn—infection that spreads.
Tiny floating fuzz on the wind
an influenza of flowers.
My lawn chugs Round Up like cough syrup.

11

A crack in the sidewalk.
A dandelion escapes and lifts its head to the sun.
Optimism unrestrained.

Real Estate

Nothing to do but dream and drive,
so we stop to tour the abandoned house
sleeping in the middle of the long prairie grass,
behind a green flickering fog that hides
forgotten farm equipment:
a faded orange Allis-Chalmers grill,
the rotting handle of a scythe,
a rusting cattle trough.

We pick our way past a pile of PBR cans
and mount the crumbling cement stoop
to the kitchen, where we notice
that even the sun has abandoned this place.
The memory of a heavy wooden table
lingers along one wall,
and we imagine a woman in floral print shift
sweating over the rounded top of the stove.

Battered linoleum softens our footfalls, and
crumbling plaster reveals wooden slats;
yet the walls still stand.
We deem the steps to the upper floor
too unstable to chance, and so
we prowl around the parlor,
where faded floral wallpaper
covers the walls in embarrassment,
and cottonwood seeds cling to the baseboards.
The scent of stale cigarettes
has penetrated into the woodwork.

When the room turns suddenly cold,
we feel our intrusion.
The house's memories cling to us like spider webs
we wade through to escape.

Del Rio, Texas

On this piece of delinquent earth
that people insist on rehabilitating.
Fierce rain falls in floods;
potholes sprout like dandelions.

Summer earns its reputation
heating up lungs
as sprinklers rage against each morning sunrise,
casting worthless promises
across optimistic lawns.

Monarchs rest their wings
in this man-made oasis,
hanging from trees as priceless ornaments
worn in casual disarray.

Winter brings its own migration:
Seniors seeking relief
from cruel cold and aching joints.
departing when Winter fades.

Spring sneaks in under the mild curtain
of a Southwest winter,
without applause,
teases with blue mornings,
and vents its anger in afternoon storms.

Paper Rape

He rapes again each day—
at the grocery store
in the library
while we're reading the evening paper—
and each time we see his penciled face
staring from wanted posters
tacked onto every available surface.
He looks like the guy across the street
trimming his hedges with a clippers
or maybe he's the UPS driver
knocking on the door.
We need to protect ourselves: don't
let your guard down, don't
go down dark alleys, don't
walk down the sidewalk, don't
talk to strangers, don't
go anywhere alone.

The warnings slice through
with every pencil sketch we pass:
It's not safe to go out at night—
not even here in Sheboygan.
His penciled eyes pursue me in restless dreams.
I wake with paper cuts.

Five-Minute Evasion

It is dark and too late to be out;
yet here I am walking the dog
in the trees out back,
through the dense shadow of maples,
past the heavy scent of nicotiana blooming.
I feel the vague caress
of an errant web across my face.
In the distance I hear the constant whir
of traffic on the highway.
I look back to the house,
as dew seeps into my shoes,
and I don't want to go back inside.

Breakfast at Eats

The key to picking a breakfast place
is looking for old people.
Find a gaggle of gray-haired men,
gathered around coffee cups
discussing the local crop conditions.
Where pancakes come as big as plates
and your coffee is bottomless.
The breakfast special—
two eggs, bacon or sausage, hash browns and toast—
will run you six bucks or less.
The waitress wears an apron with pockets,
hopes her tips incubate like Joeys,
and mature into grocery money.
Joking with the regulars,
she brings out overloaded plates
balanced across one arm.

Of course, Eats has a counter
with stools sprouting along one side,
stainless steel stems with red vinyl blossoms.
When the breakfast rush passes,
the dishwasher's uncle will still be
sitting with a newspaper open,
coffee rings circling unread ads.
and through the pick-up window the underpaid cooks
sweat over sausage and Denver omelets,
buttering toast with pastry brushes.
You'll hear the clamor of conversation
and the clink of spoons against coffee cups
as creamer and sugar mingle
and smell of coffee rises and falls
like rhythmic breathing.
and a neon sign flashes "Eats."
I'll be there too. Sitting in a corner,
watching you and writing this poem.

Geometry

He watches as I fold sheets
across my body,
a geometric striptease
as the rectangles grow smaller.
The cotton,
still warm from the dryer,
forgotten
as my cheeks catch fire.

We end as a tangled triangle
of arms
and legs
and sheet.
Our bodies meet
between
abandoned hospital corners.

Touch and Goes on 9/11

We sit with the Sunday paper strewn between us,
windows flung open while summer hangs on,
the finches still yellow against the blue horizon.
Our lazy reverie is broken by the roar of F16s
thundering into the potential of the morning.
“Sounds like touch and goes,” he says
with the conviction of a veteran.
Afterburners reverberate like giant lungs
expanding with each assent.
Military jets are not common at our small airport.

Memory returns as the world rumbles—
We had been momentarily oblivious
to the significance of this day.
Peace peeled apart like steel scaffolding
suddenly made vulnerable
by hot jet fuel and unearned vengeance,
forcing me to notice the virburnum blazing red
with the inevitability of fall.

II. Abandoned Apprentice

Grandma's Mending

The needle, her conductor's wand, darts
in and out of fabric, creating
new life for old cotton,
weaving lessons of devotion and duty with
thick darning sock thread.

I sit at her feet,
hardly realizing
she's measuring me for
a sweater of obligation:
morality, marriage, motherhood.
Her wrinkled mouth chewing straight pins;
lessons punctuated by metallic periods.

Hoarders

My great grandfather's letters
from the Spanish American War—his tent
was cold and nothing but beans to eat.
An old hairbrush, bristles hard and bent.
The hundred-year-old faded photo of a stern-faced woman
dressed in her black-and-white best;
“Ma” written on the back, but whose?
My great aunt Frances' report card from 1914: all A's,
perhaps foreshadowing her feminism,
a woman who worked when most didn't.
Ornately floral calling cards
embossed with the name Mary Bourne,
my great grandmother's.
I consider my own stacks of gardening magazines,
my son's fanciful drawing of his tennis shoes inhabited by aliens,
and colorful stubs of burned down candles.
I am keeping the junk with the treasures,
just as my foremothers did,
a dubious legacy for my own descendants.

Rose-colored Faith

My gardens put on hold this year
to sit by her bedside.
Helpless, I watch unspoken prayers
drift in the dust of the sunny window.
Bees hover among rosebuds,
diligent in their mission.

She said she could throw herself on the floor
and pitch a fit, but what good would it do?
Those unsaid expectations keep my back straight
as I ponder my motherless destiny.

Soon her pain becomes penance for both of us.
A burden carried silently until,
long past modesty, she pleads
to God or some long-gone relative
whose presence on the periphery of this moment
connects the living and the dead.

Faith is merely rose-colored hope.
I'll find no miracles here. But I pray
anyway, for her release. How does faith
survive your asking for the one thing you don't want?

Lord have Mercy on her,
on me.

The smell of fresh mown grass
comes through the cracked window,
hiding the indiscriminate smells
of invalids and antiseptic.

Hands in my lap, I tell her it's okay for
her to go, that God is waiting.
In a moment of lucidity, she says she knows,
her voice certain and strong.

Soon she is quiet except for her labored
breath, mouth open, waiting for Communion.
The dignity she clutched close,
like her patent leather purse, matters little now.

I wrap my prayers in rose-colored
tissue paper, pack them next
to crumbling black and white photos,
fragile as my faith.

Then the garden beckons and I dig.

Legacy

Sometimes I hear your voice,
the tone,
the cadence,
even the words--
as if you are in the room with me
cooking dinner or playing sheepshead
just beyond my shoulder.
Then I realize the voice
is mine.

I cross my legs the same way you did,
hold a book with one hand
curled up on the couch,
just like you.
These gestures are not intentional.
When you were alive,
I did not study you covertly
through my eyelashes.
Nor did I practice your walk,
study the sway of your hips
and the way your toes skimmed across the floor.
But somehow, I imitate,
replicate, emulate.

I've taken to crossword puzzles,
antiques, and dry red wine.
But I'll never have your recipe for
snickerdoodles,
and I'll never be able to play
Beethoven on the piano.
I'll never have a chance to
ask your advice
about planting cucumbers.

I am a reluctant replica,
an unfinished opus,
an abandoned apprentice.
A daughter
motherless.

Echoes of Faith

I shook limp hands in peace,
prayed for a brother's wife's cousin—
a special intention.
I sang the hymns,
lips moving in rhythmic obligation.
I chased stained-glass daydreams
in front of disapproving
or oblivious saints.
I prayed for a short sermon,
or at least a meaningful one,
perhaps about equality or integrity.
I spent the blessing of bread and wine
playing mental hopscotch
on the plaid jacket
occupying the pew in front of me,
I searched for God,
found only faint echoes of faith.

Mourning Doves

The mourning doves sing
a low, sorrowful song.
Another day hung
with persistent fog.

Mourning doves lost
in melancholy reminiscence
of when my mother scattered
sunflower seeds at her feet.
Now they're forming prayer groups
on the lawn.
Are they praying for her
or for me?

III. Forgotten Music

More Than a Feeling

A song on the car radio, a 70s song,
brings back a moment
so clear I smell pines and feel wind
rushing through the windows.
When the day dims to inscrutable darkness,
and the suburban road fades and folds into hidden curves,
I know nothing except that the night is crisp with hope;
the darkness beyond the headlights nothing to fear.

Junction

We lived in the southeast corner where two tracks met,
the Milwaukee Road and the Soo Line,
a silver 'x' stamped upon our town.
The trains crisscrossed our lives:
My father worked for the Milwaukee Road,
and the engineers would signal their hello
long and loud at three in the morning.
My brothers made a game of throwing
green apples, wormy and sour, through open boxcar doors,
and I wore a flattened penny, Abe Lincoln
crushed by tons of train on a chain around my neck.

The trains rolled night and day, barely slowing
—unless they stopped to block my path home from school.
My father always told me, never
try to outrun a train. If it stops, just wait.
And so I did.
On nice days I'd sit and throw gravel under the boxcars.
Other times I'd pace as a cold wind shivered through my old wool coat,
the house warm and waiting on the wrong side of the tracks.

Grace

Patent leather purse, sensible shoes
and a floral print dress.

A pantry half full: boxes of Jello,

chicken noodle soup,
cinnamon graham crackers.
Every morning she walks

the three blocks to the hospital
to take patients
through the antiseptic corridors

for cat scans and MRIs.
In the evening, she walks home,
checks her empty mailbox,

and waves at the neighbor across the street,
who nods absently in her direction.
When she closes her door,

the sound of wood on wood
echoes in the front hall.
She heats a can of soup

and gazes out the window by the sink,
remembering a yard full of kids
and the smell of cookies in the oven.

She carries the soup to the table
sits down, casts her gaze low,
and puts her hands together.

Practical Melancholy

Its gray cement walls,
stand sturdy against the years,
collecting rain water,
the cistern replaced
by indoor plumbing--
lead pipes,
chlorination.
Its usefulness evaporated.

Two t-shaped poles
lean a little to the east.
Rope sags between them
like forgotten music;
the wind passes
without interruption.
The laundry
smells like
“mountain rain.”

Beyond the clothesline,
the garden lies
fallow,
weeds overtaking
neglected corn rows,
overgrown rhubarb,
and patches of strawberries.
My bagged lettuce
wilts in three days—
more refuse
for the landfill.

The Falls

Every summer we camped at the falls,
chasing each other across the moss-covered rocks,
dangling our white feet in the chilly water,
lifting our faces to the warm sun.
We yelled without worry that anyone would hear;
all our cares drifting away with the river.

Or sometimes we'd sit quiet by the river,
digging by the bank and letting the wet mud fall
through our hands, too mesmerized to hear
our mother's call echoing off the rocks
She'd come looking for us in her pretty blue sun
dress, smiling when she found us at the water.

We loved the rush of cool water
against our legs as we waded in the river:
The silver flash of reflected sun
flirted as we hunted crayfish in the pools by the falls.
We'd scoop up the crayfish hiding between the rocks.
Good sport, catch and release practiced here.

Sometimes in the early evening we'd hear
the sound of a flute floating across the water,
weaving in and out among the rocks,
a melodic overlay on the flowing river
as it thundered a steady bass over the falls.
Music and nature in harmony with the season.

One afternoon, heat consumed us when the sun
beat down, making us drowsy. We didn't hear
Allison as she wandered alone to the falls.
She liked to scoop up the foam on top of the water
and blow the bubbles into the river.
Her four-year-old legs propelled her toward the rocks.

As she reached the muddy edge, she rocked
on the slippery bank and then Allison
was gone. No one saw her tumble into the river,
the current taking her further. No one heard
her calls for Mother over the rushing water.
We don't know how long she lasted, only the falls

know. And the falls aren't telling. The rocks
stand stunned in the water. The shining sun
mocks. Now we only hear our mother's crying at the river.

Wheat Fields and Plywood

We met
at a room in St. Mark's,
on Seventh Street,
writers and would-be writers,
coming together
to share our work.

I listened
to the woman in her eighties
with indelible numbers on her arm
compelled to remember
(what she should have forgotten)
for her great grandchildren,
and to the local celebrity writer
whose topics included airplane building
and biofeedback
and who was convinced he could forecast
the sex of my baby.

I learned
about being a poet
from Uel Ramey,
white-haired, Kansas transplant
and informal poet laureate
of Sheboygan.
He inspired me
with his ageless passion
and gentle encouragement.
His weathered voice,
hinting of wheat fields
and plywood,
still echoes with good intent
whenever I face the page.

Retirement

The truck nestled in sumac,
blue paint flaking off
rounded fenders,
many years abandoned
as the fencerow slowly consumed it.
The truck became as much a part of the landscape
as the hayfield and the cow path.
We discovered it one day
during a game of hide and seek.
And for a while it settled into retirement,
an indulgent grandfather happy
to have children climbing into its brittle seat
and tugging on its gear shift.
Our imagination cleared the cloudy windows
through which we spotted
bank robbers and pirates
as real as mosquitoes
and a mother's call to supper.

A Holy Night

We came together, a whole town,
to sing for a night.
We *felt its worth*,
music majors from the college,
high school choirs—public and private,
church groups. All together to sing
sweet hymns of joy.

Basketball hoops raised to the ceiling like
steel angels bending low to catch the melody.
The clean smell of snow clung to parkas
slung across the backs of metal folding chairs.
The parquet floor glowed florescent
as choirs arranged on bleachers circled the audience
like fans cheering their favorite team.
A thrill of hope.

Long lay the world,
quiet in the cold of winter.
Choir by choir the piano pushed along.

Finally, a familiar song
became new,
an affirmation
wrapped in a thousand voices.

Assurance that
all oppression shall cease resonated
deep from the basses,
trembled in the rafters and
low in our stomachs.
Supported by parallel harmonies,
ascending sopranos beseeched us to
fall on our knees.

We fell,
dropping our jaws in melodic supplication.
For an evening we heard
angel voices climbing, filling, lifting,
Divine.

IV. How I Got So Old

Named

For Kerrick, Michael, and Casey

Kerrick Cedric, my older brother,
born with a hole in his heart,
lived for two months
two years before I was born,
but I somehow miss him.

Michael Kerrick, Patrick's twin,
looks round in the family photo
where Patrick was thin,
and I see my mother's exhausted joy
spilling out of the frame
as she holds one twin in each arm.

One day my mother
found Michael in his crib,
cold and lifeless at nine months old.
Patrick never forgot that he was a twin,
and when he had his own set
he named his boy Michael.

My first pregnancy began
with great anticipation
but ended
before the tenth week.
I couldn't take my sorrow to my mother,
who'd lost two babies
she'd held in her arms.

Casey was my cousin's baby,
born accidentally, loved anyway.
He died at five months.
Mom told me afterwards of the chill
when she learned his name:
"We used to call Kerrick 'KC' for short."

Rhythms

As I rock in darkness
baby in arms
a single streetlight
glows faintly through the window.
The distant bass beat
of a car stereo
beckons
like some tribal call.
For a second I remember
I am young too
free to ride along,
traveling fast to who-knows-where
and who cares.

Then quiet breathing brings me back—
this ride I share
with my tiny companion
who finally breathes
his rhythm of sleep
with the tap of my feet.
I kiss his forehead
and I close my eyes.

Wake Up Call Too Late for Nancy Thao

Here on Day Street a Neighborhood
Watch was tried and failed;
people were too afraid to participate.
They stayed in their battered houses,
hid behind peeling paint and locked doors,
so no one saw him cut
a slash in the screen
and crawl through the window.

Today the neighbors wake
to a mother's screams;
she's found her daughter
bloody, in a garbage can
next to the garage.
Five years old,
taken
in the middle of the night.

Now the neighbors watch
as yellow tape binds them.
A white sheet lies on the green grass.

Nocturne

A few brief moments
of silence stolen while little ones
sleep their serene sleep.
Darkness obscures
the toys in the corner,
dishes in the sink,
the neediness of the day.
No small hands grab
my shirttail as I walk
uninterrupted through the house.
I admire the dim light
streaming through the front window.
The moon shares my moment
of tranquility,
content to let me wander
in the dark.
The dog thumps his tail
as I walk past his bed.
He knows this is not his time.
What trouble triggers my restless walking?
Perhaps it's global warming,
the war in Afghanistan,
the national debt.
Uncertainty
and guilt persist
like a cold chill.
still I hope
with the round optimism
of motherhood.

Coffee with My Daughter

She started drinking coffee this year
so we head for that little shop on Walnut
with the comfy chairs and great baklava.
While she orders the French vanilla
I watch her reflection in the mirror
behind the granite counter staffed
by the guy in her geometry class
and try to ignore their flirtation.
Once we're seated, we check out her junior year pictures,
two proofs outside a cellophane envelope.
I tell her that both are beautiful—
she looks like my mother when she was young,
and name the first my favorite
because she's flashing a wide smile.
But she says she doesn't like to show her teeth
when she smiles because of the tiny crease
that appears along the side of her nose.
How do I make her appreciate her smile,
crease and all?
I put the envelope down and pick up my cup;
the coffee is hot and bitter.

The Tree

Still in its box
the week before Christmas,
kept dormant
by obligations and disinterest.
The tree finally pieced together
in the corner sat for days
as we passed by,
plastic needles falling like tears.

When I finally add the lights
they blink
in defiant,
brazen luminosity.
Ornaments remain in their boxes,
so their stories remain untold.
The needles lie like thorns.

Finally, we hang a weary strand
of garland, a sparse mix
of icicles, bells, and balls,
in grim silence.
When Christmas passes by
and doesn't linger over sentiment,
we sweep up needles and disappointment
amid annual apologies and promises.

Wonder

I.

“Stay with me,” you say, dark eyes pleading.
“Mommy, lay by me for a minute.”
I relinquish my grip
on the chores that will keep me up late tonight
and rest my head on your pillow
for just a moment.
Wonder is a gentle hand on my cheek
as your eyes bob on tides of sleep.

II.

“I wanna come,” you say,
and I take you with me to the grocery store
even though it will take me twice as long
because we also need cookies and juice boxes.
You take my hand as we walk
across the cracked blacktop.
I wonder at my blessings;
your fingers are soft and warm.

III.

“You don’t understand,” you say
and it’s true, I don’t know how to fix
your grades or middle school social dramas.
When you roll your eyes at my concern, I wonder
how I got so old. Your hands fold
across your chest as you turn away.

IV.

“You’re one of the cooler moms,” you say
with the conviction of your sixteen years.
I smile, wondering if I’ve chosen cool mom
over good parent, and then your hands sweep
across my shoulders as you pull me close.

Unexpected Empathy

There's something they don't tell you
in all those books about becoming a good parent.
They don't tell you how
it will really change you in ways
not nestled between lines
about teething or getting your baby
to sleep through the night.

Yet you know you're a parent
when you feel another parent's tragedy,
taste the sorrow in back of your throat.
The six o'clock news reports
a child kidnapped while riding her bike
down a country road
or a third grader dies unexpectedly
falling through the ice—
everyone knows this is horrible.
But you feel it deep
as your gut tightens.
You know.
You feel the wound, the blood, the pain,
shiver with it.

You realize you're helpless
to keep your child safe.
Really. You know it could be
a cold too strong,
a car too fast,
a corner too sharp.
Yet hope defines your role. Hope
and empathy.

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