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The print issues of *TAB: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics* are special editions, each published at the beginning of the calendar year. These issues reflect *TAB*'s mission to create an environment that celebrates poetry in various forms and venues. The annual print issue engages the reader with poetry as a material object and asks that the reader negotiate between image and text. The design of the first issue does not assume a traditional role of quietly framing content; instead, design actively shapes the reading of the entire page. The special print editions of *TAB* will continue to experiment and explore the intersections between form and content, object and space, and reader and reading.

Monthly electronic issues follow each annual printed issue. Using these differing formats—print and digital—allows experimentation with design and materiality in a time when print and electronic dissemination coexist. *TAB* will not force either format to adapt to the other. The reading experience in virtual spaces is different than that of a printed journal. The electronic issues are shaped by Open Journal Systems, a federally funded, open-access system from the Public Knowledge Project designed to serve the public good globally. While the electronic files can be printed, each electronic issue will be formatted for ease of reading on the screen. Decisions about page size, typography, and composition are driven by the online reading experience, rather than to merely mimic a print version. *TAB* also makes use of the audio/video possibilities of digital dissemination.

To order a copy of the print issue, please send a check for \$10 made out to Chapman University to *TAB: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics*, Department of English, Chapman University, One University Drive, Orange, CA 92866. *TAB* will be available at the AWP book fair.



A N N A   L E A H Y

**EDITOR'S NOTE ON WHY I WRITE POETRY: SPECIAL ISSUES**

The September and October 2013 issues of *TAB: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics* are devoted to the question “Why I Write Poetry.”

U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey says, in her lecture entitled “Why I Write,” that *every* writer must face this question—is *required* to answer this question of why we write. At *TAB*, we are interested especially in how poets answer this question.

In her essay “Why I Write,” Joan Didion, an essayist and novelist, describes herself as many writers might: “a person whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper.” Do many, if not all, writers do it because the process absorbs us? If so, why might the writing process enthrall us?

Trethewey begins her lecture, just as I began my own search for reference points as I grappled with this question as a poet, with George Orwell’s 1946 essay “Why I Write.” Trethewey was drawn to Orwell’s claim that his writing emerged from a sense of isolation, but that he could speak about and for others. Trethewey spent hours reading the encyclopedia—as I did, too, as a child—and the information it contained made her think about her relationship to the world. Trethewey writes “to tell a fuller version of American history.” While she and I are almost the same age, she and I were born into different families in different places. She is a mixed-race woman from the Deep South, whereas my familial predecessors are Irish transplanted to the American Midwest. We both write poems. We are not the same as people.

Trethewey finds things with which to disagree in Orwell’s piece, for no writer can speak for why all writers take to the page. We have different backgrounds, both personally and in our training and practice as poets. We have different drives, desires, and needs. Our purposes vary. We disagree. Moreover, in yet another essay titled “Why I Write,” Terry Tempest Williams asserts, “I write out of my inconsistencies.” A writer may shift her own reasoning. “Do I contradict myself?” Walt Whitman asked in “Song of Myself.” “Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)[.]”

These variations on the theme of who we are, what we do, and why we do it as poets leads to these special issues of *TAB*. These two issues deal not only with why we write but also with why we write poetry in particular. We are grateful to those writers who submitted work to this call, and we had tough editorial choices to make. We are proud to create a conversation about *Why I Write Poetry*, and we encourage readers to bring this conversation beyond the screen so that it will contain multitudes.

MAUREEN ALSOP



## WHY I WRITE POETRY

An opal sea churned / in my cup. Waves closed / over the shores. // But this memory of salt salvaged my thirst— // like a skittish horse / bearing the scars / of its own blood / I rode // over thigh high hills / into mingled light. *Apparition Wren's* opening poem, "At the Table of Longing," though not labeled directly as such, is an ars poetica. It is also a slant declaration for why I write. The reasons for writing are as a *raison d'être*, and deeply intertwined with the nature of poetry itself.

\*\*

It's never what you think exactly, what the flesh calls off, what is handled. When everyone is parts of me. And from me I am anyone whose been pushed. Most direct? My indirectness. Beautiful in the slow hurt witnessed down to the figure of my smaller slowness.

\*\*

Father's too are pressed, they drive the dark wake in the after-life's laboratory. Under small reading lamps, lead pencil's scrawl angled silhouettes, images of a remembered geography. The metallic scent of stone strains their mouths. Once, I shelved my father's dream when we met in the library corner. Our minds were two sunlit lakes stretched perfectly still. It might have been concrete, that frozen uniformity we prescribed to time.

\*\*

No more to be made. The greasy grass, the lean hill's evolutions and altitudes: "the other," whose magic pleases the working so that what one thinks the working actually extracts is some experimentation on misery or love.

\*\*

Beside, alone, are you what withstands cultivating or the moonlit river, snow blackened by the synchronized tongue of the current? There is a degree of belief I stand before. There is a flame-black linnet that drives twigs and roots thorough my casement. Swift refugee, your gloss mouth builds nests with an over-green sincerity.

\*\*

Wait where the water rasps. Unrepentant, the river resists the frost.

\*\*

The speaker's glass hewn face is an accidental algorithm.

\*\*

I am seldom in the deep breath of this one's body though I abide its house of air.

\*\*\*

Someone listens with a memory for listening. Someone holds the horizon's photograph. Someone is swallowing brine, unfinished stars. Someone leans in the heirloom grass. Someone's shadow thin gesture, the gaze of horses.

\*\*\*

You tell the specter there is something mineral in language, but failed at the center, with a mottled pattern streaked by the swizzle and distinction of the throat. You had not named it loose. A Eucharist, the color-blind ring of ghosts, they plead sometimes.

LOUISE COOK





## ON PAPER

I write because I am timid. Because I wonder about. Because I don't know.

I write to remember. I write that one day my children may have a history, that they will remember what they already understand. I write to feed their blood memory with detail.

I write because I love language, love the cascade of sound, the path that rhythm forges, because I have felt the addictive sooth of syllables, because at age fifteen I read Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* and I knew I wanted that, whatever it was he wielded with his hand, I wanted to do what the poet could do, touch Life's sensitive surface with words. Now I write because they all have inspired me, Emily Dickinson, Lucille Clifton, A. R. Ammons, Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, Pablo Neruda, Billy Collins, Langston Hughes, Lisel Mueller, Joy Harjo, Rainer Maria Rilke, W. B. Yeats; because, as Margaret Atwood has written, *a word after a word / after a word is power*, and because, as Olga Broumas has written, *like amnesiacs / in a ward on fire, we must / find words / or burn*.

I write to reveal truth, to uncover the bottom layers of nuance and uncertainty and contradiction. I write to say there is more to every story, there is something trembling underneath, something that has yet to be spoken. I write to find the wisdom within, to discover the tender parts of character, to help each one (and I am one) come to an understanding of self and find meaning. I write to engage life. I write to make life bigger, to give it color, to give it motion, to give it flavor. I write to hold it in the palm of my hand.

I write to preserve the hero story. I write as witness to injustice, as witness to the love and dignity that confront damaging winds. To write it, to speak it, is to start a path toward healing and wholeness and reclamation. I write rather than take up arms; I write rather than leap from a bridge; I write instead of scream; I write to keep from popping pills; I write to dance, but never bed, with insanity.

I write on paper. I am not afraid.

ELLEN MCGRATH SMITH



## WHY POETRY? BECAUSE POETRY

Because there were sounds in the dome of my sickness, rhythms and rants beating down on the tent full of oxygen, then when the dome was removed, still a drum all around me. I live in a drum, that is why.

I live in a drum and you live in a drum and someone must beat back from inside, I guess.

Mother at the kitchen table reading a letter from some glamorous place in the world where her friend has a layover, dropping a line, saying, Look at me flying the friendly skies; who would have thought it when we, barely into our twenties, wore stockings and swam in the secretarial pool? All the men in suits who flirt as she unlids the tiny airplane bottles of whiskey! All the exotic destinations! Mother on a layover from three kids under five, at the kitchen table writing back about her grounded life. I'm the one she's named after her stewardess friend. I'm the one, she tells her friend, who babbles on and on and makes up songs. Mother tells her friend in the same letter that she plans on writing stories, since she has a little time at home to write. She doesn't say *impossible*, or mention the fights with my father she's already learned she'll never win.

I'm the one who babbles on and on and makes up songs.

Two forms of input: the radio and a succession of books from the library whose floor looks and smells like packed brown sugar. News from beyond. The heart has no shape until someone instructs you to fold the red paper and cut where the curves have been drawn with a crayon. This is a heart? you ask, showing the shape to the teacher. When she nods, you have a name and a picture and now are aware of your insides.

Things that I said to some kids and adults confused them at first and then they became furious. Bruising and bruised.

Because lawns and lawns and lawns and lawns. Because flowers. Because the Goodyear Blimp floated over my city each summer and I fixed my sights on the miniscule cabin's invisible pilot. Because stone-throwing. Because sticks and names and never will they hurt you. Because bones. Because boom.

Because all things were possible outside of driving, arm-wrestling, and guns.

Because nothing I ever could say would make anyone happy, though I heard my drunk father downstairs playing song after song on the hi-fi looking for something essential.

Because I still think that one little song could change everything, lift up the needle and lower it into the first groove until there's no groove anymore. Suddenly, it's all a pod fastened tiny to my daughter's waist as she's jogging through Kensington

Gardens. And I realize how small all these decades have been, they can fit in \_\_\_\_\_.

Because when his work friend was killed during an arrest, he screamed in the middle of the street in his uniform, gun in his holster, whiskey in his blood, and the neighbors all watched and heard and pitied and thought how ironic it was that they thought they should call the *police*.

My first poetry reading: the speech he gave the neighbors about how hard it was to be.

Because an old woman opened her door to me each night to pray the radio rosary. I kneeled against the stereo console, made a steeple with my hands. The glorious, joyful, and sorrowful mysteries blew through the days like the gust, gale, the whip, and the breeze through the metal screens of summer doors and windows. In the winter, Amen shriveled like a gourd in which a candle stub still burns though you can't see it.

Because from East to West a perfect offering is made. Because life would be ecstasy, you and me endlessly. Because crimson and clover over and over. And this is the forest primeval.

Before I went to Catholic school, I went to the public school where there was an experiment underway. Instead of learning the alphabet, we were given 26 beetles. Each one was different from the other, some more strikingly different than others. They were kept in a box until the teacher said, "Time to write." Then, we were allowed to lower one side of the box; as from a ramp releasing circus animals and weary handlers from a box car, the beetles crawled down to a wide plain of newsprint. Without touching them or prodding them into position, we had to make sounds to try to influence their arrangement relative to one another. These were my first written sentences.

It went so well with beetles for me, I trained this on the rest of the animate world. Einstein's definition of insanity. Marx's definition of history. Ghandi's definition of change. My mother's definition of Norman Vincent Peale.

Because of little notebooks left around the house, in hampers even, like those bottles women in sad movies tried to hide.

Because I found a carrel in the library for studying in college, and when I was there I was nowhere but not dead, and outside the window, Berryman, Icarean, was falling to the Mississippi River, and Plath was stopping up the gap beneath the bedroom door with an old blanket, and Cummings referred to a blue-eyed boy who was somehow both me and my father. Both Berryman and Berryman's father had the same name as my father.

Names will always hurt me.

Because fat ass. Buck teeth. Bitch. Trash. Teacher's Pet. Cunt. Acid-tongue. Yinzer. Killjoy. Overachiever. Lush. Nympho. Wanna-be. Codependent. Tomboy. Instigator. Dilettante. Bleeding-heart liberal. Dog. Cow. Pig.

Because nostalgia, rage, and sentimentality wander in search of a body. They fill the air like fumes of gas or heat rising up from the pavement, like radiation leaked from Pennsylvania, Chernobyl, Nevada, or Japan. Like radio waves. Like echoes. At the same time, I struggle to stay in my body. When I do I'm a dish: satellite, petri, urn, patten, pelvis. It's a perfect combination, or a quaintly missed connection.

So it's stanzas instead.

Stanza means room and adding on and adding on and adding on, the self manufacturing fascia and gathering glue where it can.

Or the world of discourse in one's certain time including all that has ever been thought or said up to the point of one's certain time is a wall of prose, and poetry's the mortar—a metaphor that gives a central role to poetry. Unless one considers the dry wall.

Because to build a dry wall you must put all of the right stones in the right order.

Because something there is that does like a wall, and something there is that doesn't.

Or less central because the mortar is interstitial and incidental and replaceable.

Because Raymond's wall contains his business card and a short poem I wrote about a man who shot three cops who came to his house on a domestic call. Because the poem and the card fit in a metal cigarillo box. Because people in the future should have their screens scratched a little with our tawdry pasts.

To be sure, there are iambic walls in the suburbs. A shopping mall sits like a caller in their midst and the line dance of development proceeds apace.

Because I fail at everything else and probably fail at this too.

The cops died that day because a dog pissed on the rug. Hence the argument that led the young man's mother to call.

Because success is the soles of one's feet, and bank statements are eloquent in their own way.

Because Santa's wide lap is a slippery slope and the miniature train that circled his department store throne no less primitive than the drawings in the caves of Lascaux.

Though to point this out is not only not helpful but redundant.

Because it makes nothing happen and saves no one from death or oppression or drink or dementia or dogs that are foaming at the muzzle. Because through it one opts out of usefulness and so relies on offerings from the worldly community, in the manner of monks and nuns. Because look how many people opt out or try to opt out while still getting daily bread!

Because cynicism seeks its own level, as does joy, and when the two meet, there's a struggle in the air, as when gods grapple, then a bit of pyrotechnics followed by a safe re-seeding of the ground with sparks

which yield only the next day, which would have come anyway.

But maybe it comes with an unbidden something tucked behind the ears, little tubes that are tight scrolls the pulp of which could hold: a prayer, a curse, a recipe for being kind or cruel, a list of groceries or friends, a reversible version of The Serenity Prayer, a poem that is an axe that breaks the frozen sea or rip-rap on the slick rock of metaphysics or simply a way of touching under the skin without having to touch the skin.

Because routine domestics should not lead to death. Because everything leads there, and nothing leads back from.

Because Horseman Pass By.

June is a pair of parted lips, and January glares from behind the chicken-wire glass of the door whose sign reads, Elopement Risk.

The story where it finally stopped for me, I tossed a sheet over the window-sill, we went to tie the knot. But it's a slipknot, poetry.

W I L L I A M   S T O B B



## SOMEWHERE NEAR PAYNESVILLE, MAYBE

I might've been ten. Or it's possible I wasn't born yet. Or I could've been fifteen at the oldest. It's not an elegant story, so don't get your hopes up.

Central Minnesota is flattish, maybe rolling at the most. But there are a lot of trees and so when you're driving it feels kind of cloistered. Around 1980, some old trucks still functioned—trucks from the 1930s, with the rounded hoods and bug-eyed headlights. Though the trucks still ran, there was nostalgia already for them. Men in their forties had been born in the heyday of these old trucks: their dads drove them and their grand-dads (if their grand-dads drove at all).

I was around ten, when a man's car broke down on a highway near Paynesville, about an hour from my hometown of Little Falls, where my parents live to this day. This other man's name was also William, and when his car broke down outside Paynesville, which is a real town and not selected for symbolic resonance (i.e., "Painsville"), some men picked him up in an old truck. My father owned two old trucks—a 1939 and a 1940-something. Those trucks were *old*. There was a high-pitched whining, grinding sound when they ran, and a chug and hesitation to the engine. You could practically feel the sputtering of ignition as fuel was delivered to the pistons by some old pump. You could definitely *smell* the oil and dust when you sat on the decomposing cab bench with your father to go haul firewood. If you were like me, you felt the smell was weird. The whole experience felt weird—full of unspoken disappointments and hopes, riding in the radio-less truck with your father across the central Minnesota landscape.

But it's this other William in this other truck this day. I might've been playing Dungeons & Dragons, or tromping through the frozen river marsh in a snowmobile suit and a hat with a facemask, occupying my private world. But this other William, who was a man of my father's age, had broken down and been picked up by men in a truck, and on their way south from Paynesville, they came upon an old sow in the road. Fell off a stock truck, they think. Its back was broken and it struggled on the frozen highway. William would later describe it swiveling, "a pink lazy Susan turning on the yellow line." I still appreciate the human crudeness of that expression. It's not *right* to think such a black-comic thought but it's not like you can help it. Thoughts come at you. Later, I would meet a friend of this other William who would say "there's no glory in being born. No shame in it either," and that feels right to me. Some things I can control, maybe, but sometimes it feels like life comes at me and through me. If I ever grasp it, I know it will pull free again.

So, what does one do when one comes upon a broke-backed old sow in the road? Well, William was not in charge of the moment. He was a stranded traveler riding in an old truck. Had he seen horror movies? Scary things were popular then, but I don't know if this William would've been susceptible to a cultural trend. Would he have been *afraid for his life* in the moment that farmer, or that wood-hauler (I later met a man who classified central Minnesotans as either "stump-jumpers" or "rabbit-chokers," but I don't know the defining characteristics of the classifications) brought his truck to a grinding, sputtering halt along the shoulder and reached back for his shotgun? Probably not. I feel as if the goodwill of people was easier to rely on then, but that may be nostalgia. Already there were serial killers in America. Have there always been serial killers? Were there serial killers, for instance, in Athens? Jerusalem?

(I don't know why I think out of situations so frequently. What am I trying to escape? The end of any thought is death,



maybe—if you reach the end of a thought, you get the game over screen and the Casio keyboard jingle plays.)

I don't know what Other William was feeling when the truck driver, in an act of mercy, carried his shotgun out onto that highway and blew that broken pig's head off. He would later write that its "face said everything I'll ever say until I'm either dead or alive as that sow at that moment wanted so badly to be." And what's odd about it is that I *do* believe that animals feel pain. I don't believe that they want to live, or fear death, or that a pig understands a shotgun. We have the words *agony* and *terror*, and those may best translate that pig's final conscious moments.

So maybe Paynesville *was* a selected detail. Maybe this took place outside of Spicer or Osakis, or Sebeka, or Backus. Maybe none of it even happened.

My life went on and I had no awareness of this incident. Years passed, however many. Like other obedient children of my generation, I went to college. I went to the University of North Dakota and eventually took a class from this nice Irish hippy-Buddhist-humanist English professor who assigned regional poems. One was called "Old Sow in the Road," by Bill Holm. Before then, I assumed authors only lived in Los Angeles or New York. I assumed they wrote romance, mystery, fantasy, and horror. No one would write about a pig, a truck, and a highway near Paynesville. When I read the poem, I thought of my dad's old trucks, all the weird feelings, the unspoken things. My dad grew up on a farm but left it for a bureaucratic job that he hated. He kept these old trucks, and when he drove in them with his son, who just screwed around all day and begged for an Atari, there was regret and despair involved.

I began to understand that *everyone's life is profound*. And that sometimes meaning can't be explained. A lot of times, we're just *in awe*. "[E]verything / I'll ever say until I'm either dead / or alive as that sow at that moment / wanted so badly to be." Inadequate language. Speechless in the temple. Something. Life elapses through us, as energy elapses through all structures that assume and relinquish form within the brief flash of light and warmth we call the universe. I would later know a religious scholar who would say, "there is an ecstasy in life unfolding over billions of years."

I wanted to write my own poems, which was interesting, because I hadn't written creatively. Within a year, I had written the first draft of one of the poems that would be published in *For Better Night Vision*, my first chapbook. It was called "The New Development"—a man wanders among some half-finished houses on the outskirts of a central Minnesota town. Cheaply built places, on lots subdivided from pasture. The developers were calling it "River Hills." Writing it, I felt many lives and dreams associated with the place. I felt generations passing.

## CONTRIBUTORS

### MAUREEN ALSOP

Maureen Alsop is the author of two full collections of poetry, *Mantic and Apparition Wren*. She is the winner of *Harpur Palate's* Milton Kessler Memorial Prize for Poetry and *The Bitter Oleander's* Frances Locke Memorial Poetry Award. Her poems have appeared in various journals including *The Laurel Review*, *AGNI*, *Blackbird*, *Tampa Review*, *Action Yes*, *Drunken Boat*, and *The Kenyon Review*.

### LOUISE COOK

Louise Cook is a writer, teacher, community lawyer, and parent living in St. Paul. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Adventum*, *Eleventh Muse*, *Stringybark*, and two anthologies, *The Rust Belt Rising Almanac* and *The Poet's Quest for God*. She runs the "Witness Project," a series of community workshops that enable the narrative development and dissemination of stories of, by, and for populations underserved by the justice system.

### ELLEN MCGRATH SMITH

Ellen McGrath Smith teaches at the University of Pittsburgh and in the Carlow University Madwomen in the Attic program. Poems have appeared in *Cimarron*, *Bayou*, *Quiddity*, *Now Culture*, *Sententia*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Cerise*, *The Same*, *Kestrel*, *Oranges & Sardines*, *Diner*, *5 a.m.*, *Oxford Magazine*, *The Prose Poem*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Descant* (Canada), and others.

### WILLIAM STOBB

William Stobb is the author of five poetry collections, including two in the Penguin Poets series, *Absentia* and *Nervous Systems*. He works as Associate Editor for *Conduit* and on the English Faculty at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse.