

EDITOR'S NOTE ON WHY I WRITE POETRY:  
SPECIAL ISSUES  
Anna Leahy, p. 4

WHY I WRITE: THREE SNAPSHOTS  
*and* WHY I WRITE: POEM  
Susan Johnson, pp. 5–7

WHY I WRITE POETRY  
Kristin LaTour, pp. 8–10

BLAME  
Jason McCall, pp. 11–12

WHIMSY AND DUTY  
Kirk Nessel, pp. 13–14

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#### **DESIGN STATEMENT**

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.

S U S A N   J O H N S O N



### WHY I WRITE: THREE SNAPSHOTS

**Snapshot One:** I am sitting on my bed in a house in the Boston suburbs a late fall afternoon. I am 12, in 8th grade, and I have finished my homework so I can take out my notebook and begin to write. My older brother and sister have gone off to college, my father has gone to work in Maine, and my mother, who is slowly dying of cancer, has gone to take a nap. I have not gone anywhere. I am not going anywhere. I would like to go somewhere but I need to stay here in this house to help Mom. So instead I sit and write. I write because it helps me understand what is happening in my life now, a life that is confusing, a little scary, and blurry around the edges. I write to help bring the edges into focus, like the microscopes at school. It helps me to pin parts of my life down so I can see them and the connection between them more clearly. But most of all I write to create something new, something that is far more interesting than my bedroom on a late fall afternoon.

**Snapshot Two:** I have known forever that I want to major in Biology. I walk in the woods, I walk on the shore and there is so much I don't know. What is that bird? That fish? That tree? This insect biting me? And why are they here? How do they live? So I major in Biology, first Honors then Masters and after gathering data for two years I sit to write a thesis on the timing, sequence, and behavior of migrating shorebirds. But what I write instead is poems because science just doesn't capture it—flight and tides and the immense loneliness of sitting for hours for days for months watching slivers of silver wing unfold. And I want to capture it—the warm breathing bird that shits in my palm before I let it go. The lighthouse's Cyclops roving eye. The fog that transforms gulls into ghosts.

**Snapshot Three:** Every day I write bits, poem bits, pages of bits, books of bits. Every couple of months I extract the best bits and type them onto my laptop. File of bits that I cut and paste, cut and paste grouping those that seem to go together, refer back to each other, bump each other creating a little buzz, a little heat. I love how bits of language do this, how they grab me and tug me along. I love how the bits begin talking to each other and I love to sit and listen to their snap, crackle, pop. And then the next phrase that follows, because there is always the next string of bits as they slowly begin to coalesce into what feels like some instrument I am trying to tune until it hums. It's like I am following Orpheus out of a dark subway stop and I just keep writing and listening, hoping he won't turn around.

**WHY I WRITE: POEM**

Because this wood was once an owl before it went AWOL.  
Because the geese on the pond can't keep down their din.  
Because the little girl is always left in the stroller  
while her brother gets to throw sticks in the mud.  
Because nettles only appear to sting.  
Because phrases connect like scrabble tiles, creating conversations.  
Because chaos is my favorite of the Greek isles.  
Because we're all God's little Oreos, cranked open and licked clean.  
Because in memory all winters are one.  
Because a tiger carries the stripes of long grasses with her even after the river has dried.  
Because a squid can mimic a fish that mimics a squid.  
Because we want more penuche, less marshmallow creme.  
Because that is one hungry fox in my kitchen.  
Because smoke rises when it's free of its fire.  
Because with leather this soft who needs velvet.  
Because your car stopped just inches from the quarry  
and those are your toys tumbling over the edge.  
Because if you can't see my mirrors I can't hear your encore.

K R I S T I N   L A T O U R





## WHY I WRITE POETRY

Every day, I try to pay attention to the wider world, listening and reading news reports, watching videos and movies about others' lives. I see injustice and pain and suffering, and I think about what those people who are in trouble are going through. Because I teach at a community college, and I ask my students about global events, I'm painfully aware of how unaware most people are of others' lives around the world. Given most people's reaction when they are told I write poems, which usually ranges from how much I can make at it to incredulity that anyone older than the age of 16 keeps writing, I am also aware of how ignorant most people are about poetry. Neither of these makes for great inspiration to either teach or write, except my inner voice says I must teach them to think differently.

My students are just a small portion of the larger American population. I have rich and poor, every ethnic and religious group, people who learned English just a year ago, single parents, vets, you name it. I've had pregnant homeless students, suicidal students, physically abused students. I've even had students who have confided in me that they aren't here legally, that they don't have driver's licenses and fear getting pulled over, that they pay their tuition in cash. Almost every student I teach worries about paying bills, either now or later, and whether or not next year, or next month, they will be any better off. It's hard for people in situations as stressful as theirs to pay attention to what is going on next to them, let alone what's going on 2,000 miles away. It's hard for them to focus on their education, try some critical thinking, or even enjoy learning. I remind myself of that when I have a woman who is chronically absent or a man who can't stay awake in my class. That woman might be a single mom who has a kid with chronic asthma. Maybe the man works overnight because his parents kicked him out when he turned 18 two months ago, and he desperately wants to take classes to get a better job and not have to live in a dump apartment with four other guys.

What helps me as a teacher is that I know these problems plague my students and that I have a lot in common with them. I still often live paycheck to paycheck. Six years ago, I went back to school full time and kept teaching full time. It is common for the people who find themselves sitting in a desk in any community college classroom to be working and going to school full time. When I show them how a 12-credit semester is supposed to work, with two hours spent studying for their classes for every hour they spend in class, they laugh. Who has that much time to study? No matter how rough my life is, I know someone out there is having a harder time than I am. Often those people are next to me at a stoplight, or waiting in line to pay for groceries, or in front of me when I'm teaching. At least I had the luxury of getting a degree in creative writing, which meant I could write and read what I loved, while I went to a career I loved. I have the luxury now of calling on my creativity to bring me out of and through difficult times. Many of my students don't have the time or energy and don't believe that there is any poetry in themselves or the world they live in.

My students by and large don't *like* poetry, mainly because they don't *get it*, again mirroring the larger U.S. population. They might write poetry, but it's in a notebook no one sees, and they don't read others' poetry at all. Their exposure to it was at a young age. They have forgotten that the Dr. Seuss books and nursery rhymes that they memorized and sang and loved are poetry. They had teachers who taught them the form of sonnets and haiku and required them to write their own without taking time to show the beauty of the form, how form and meaning go hand in hand. Those assignments made poetry into a form of torture that shackled them to doing what was in an assignment. They were told to take a poem apart like a jeweled

necklace, going at it with hacksaws, putting similes into one pile and images into another until all they were left with was a mound of scratched rocks and useless metal. They weren't shown how to savor a line for its sound, to enjoy the playfulness of metaphor, but to behave like sloppy student-surgeons, to cut out symbols from their connective meanings and poke and prod them until all that is left is a bloody mess that is no longer recognizable.

Teaching and poetry are my life's work. They go hand in hand. I teach through analogy and metaphor. I communicate in imagery. I write about the people I meet and learn about through all sorts of interaction and media. Is it not my job in writing and teaching to get people to open their eyes, ears, and hearts to others' lives and sufferings? If I want my students to be good critical thinkers, shouldn't the 20-year-old boy sitting across from the 50-year-old woman understand something of where each is coming from? Shouldn't they both understand something of what it is like to live under a dictatorship which would deny the woman an education and which would send the young man into an army to kill his own people? Wouldn't our whole country be better off if everyone were better at paying attention, thinking, learning, and really seeing?

I often end a semester wondering whether I did any good. I explain to my students at the beginning of the semester that because they have been in the education system for at least 12 years, they have been molded and formed habits. If they are bad spellers or can't tell the difference between a statement and a question, one semester with me won't cure that. I work really, really hard at trying to get them to think, though. I try different topics, approaches, words, films, being funny, downright ridiculously goofy, even. All that work for maybe one student out of 100 to *get it* and leave my class understanding that our lives really are affected by what goes on next to us, outside of us, across the world. It's the same with my poetry. I write and craft and agonize over a poem, which might get accepted at a journal, and maybe one person will see it and change her mind about something, learn a new way of seeing. Come to think of it, I probably have better odds with teaching. My students are not always happy or enthused about being in my class, but they are there two or three days a week for 16 weeks. The chances a person who isn't enthused about poetry will find a poem of mine and bother to read it are slimmer than my chances at reaching a student who starts out not really caring, just wanting a passing grade so he can go on and do something *important*.

In the end, teaching and writing poems are both often exercises in futility. What keeps me going is knowing there's always something new on the horizon to inspire me or be inspired by me. For all the dud classes and poems, there are gems that lift me up and make me keep going.

J A S O N M C C A L L



## BLAME

Isn't this where I blame the muse? Blame some god for putting words at the edge of my tongue? The tip of my pen?

Blame Homer. He never flat out said "Don't like Hector." I read the book when I was in third grade. What did I know about foreshadowing? About picking the winning team, the right career? I'm a Bills fan.

Blame Jesus. I want to be like him. I just want to tell the world about my awesome dad. He could have been Neil deGrasse Tyson, making nerds swoon while he (incorrectly) calculated the heft of Thor's hammer. When I watch Tony Stark snap together new sets of Armor, I see my dad hunched over a potato light bulb or a Styrofoam Panama Canal with a dumbstruck boy handing him speaker wire and glue. What could he have done with a billion dollars and a dream? What could he have done with a Merit Scholarship and a Physics lab?

Blame my mother. One day, I was young and curious enough to ask her what she wanted to be before she ended up being a mother. She said she never thought about it. Oldest of seven, she had been mothering for decades before I came along with my questions and white girlfriends and Classics major. Hope was one more mouth to fill. Blame her for going to sleep early every Thanksgiving so that she could serve the Black Friday crowds. Blame her for telling me she watched the Obama inauguration in a JCPenney staff room. Blame her for telling me that she was thinking of me while she watched it.

Blame rap music for making me love gold and shiny things. Depending on the day, I wanted to be Biggie before or after Los Angeles. I got a trophy in second grade because I could spell *neighbor* and kid next to me couldn't. Words let me shine. Everybody got a trophy for football. Why the hell would I keep playing football?

Blame my memory. Blame the boy who laughed at me the one time I sang in church. Blame the art teacher who laughed and erased my brick and erased my dreams of drawing Superman punching Batman through a star. I get to tell people when to laugh in my poems, most of the time.

Blame my belief in fairness. I never cheated on homework, never played a 3-on-2 basketball game. Languages are not equal, but they're fair. Pick Spanish. Pick Farsi. Pick a side. My friends decided that soccer was the world's most popular sport because it's the world's cheapest sport. Everyone has access to a ball and earth. We talk about poverty and access while we drink \$8 triple IPAs, high-five when the failed state beats the G-8 powerhouse. *That's what happens when the world is fair*, we say and nod. Of course, we are wrong. Language is the cheapest sport. There's no sign-up fee, no tryouts, no scramble for second-hand cleats, no flat balls, no cheap rims.

Blame ink and its permanence. Ink has a defined place and space. I don't. I'm an African-American. Do you know how big Africa is? If I got drunk and you had to take me home and I told you that I my home was Africa, what good would that do us? After a headstone or three, my family tree is Yggdrasil. My story is a myth. Who first set foot on the plantation; who took the first step off? Sure, I've got pharaohs in my blood. I joke about being a Mick on St. Patrick's Day. My first name is Greek, and I use it to justify a Classics degree. Every word is a signature. Every piece of ink is a cave painting, a heart carved in a tree telling somebody I was here.

K I R K N E S S E T



## WHIMSY AND DUTY

I write poetry because it's not a grown-up activity. I like starting the day with paper and pen, before the world begins, linking words and phrases in childish ways. I like the rudimentary daring of toying with language, the fitting, re-fitting, knocking and tamping little globules of sound: phonemes, glottal stops, clauses, consonants, umlauts, and vowels. As a process it's idle and willful at once. And not unlike fishing, as William Stafford observes, the writer teasing and tapping in the quiet near-dark, hoping something will bite, the imagination at work with body and faith to create a thing not yet imagined. I like noticing, too, as collisions occur, as sound and sense interfuse, that a design or pattern appears, or begins to appear, at which point the stakes are raised. A fish bites; the child's game glows with destiny, purpose. Charles Simic, in his essay "Why I Still Write Poetry," has compared writing poetry to chess, each process constituting a series of moves "in which every single move is of momentous significance." As poets, of course, we're not playing live, advancing and positioning words; we are, in a way, but only initially. We return to the draft again and again, revisiting *real time* to reveal and distill, trailing that original impulse to its inevitable, searing end: checkmate (a line or lines the child would have nailed had the adult not interfered).

In each case, each poem, there's mystery, something to explore or unfold, if not comprehend. Dorianne Laux, in an interview with *Front Porch*, has said her first book began not so much as a collection of poems as "a need to understand the basic questions that all human beings ask: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? What is beauty? Why is there suffering?" Like Caedmon, and like Laux, who writes poems "to know the questions," I measure what I know with what I don't know, and can't, sifting the rhythm and grit the world offers. Nonsense makes more sense than plain sense, I am finding these days. Questioning and measuring isn't specific to poetry, of course, but given the constraints of fiction and nonfiction, exposition and story, poetry seems to me most suited to mystery. Its nature is wayward, disruptive, infantile, inherently revolutionary.

Writing poetry is for me an act of coherence. Of noticing what does and doesn't conjoin, and allowing that to guide me, to arrange sound and sense to say what seems to need to be said. It's about negotiating what I know concretely, here and now on earth in this form, with what I can't possibly know, but sense, and know in my cells, and know again when I hear, baffling however the song is that appears. If this sounds like prayer, well—I guess that's what it is. Kathleen Ossip, in her essay "Why I Write," calls poetry writing "an intense mode of paying attention to (marvelous, delicious) words," not unlike Zen meditation. Dorianne Laux writes "to concentrate, to feel a sense of purpose rise up," guiding her in the framing of unanswerable questions. Finding voice and truth in a poem, I have found, involves an open-eyed, childish receptivity, the kind of attentive softness the monk maintains in *zazen*. In a world that seems daily less sane, bent on destroying itself, such truth is grace, I believe, at once a response to and a refuge from madness and a reminder that there's more here than we see on the surface. For me, accordingly, writing is both whimsy and duty. If I can be remade by words, surely the world can be, too—and sanity and peace, surely, are catching.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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JASON MCCALL

Jason McCall is an Alabama native and currently teaches at the University of Alabama. He holds an MFA from the University of Miami, and his collections include *Silver* from Main Street Rag, *I Can Explain* from Finishing Line Press, and *Dear Hero*, winner of the 2012 Marsh Hawk Press Poetry Prize.

KIRK NESSET

Kirk Nessel is author of the fiction *Paradise Road* and *Mr. Agreeable*, as well as the poetry collection *Saint X*, translations in *Alphabet of the World*, and the nonfiction *The Stories Of Raymond Carver*. His work has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Southern Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, and elsewhere. He teaches at Allegheny College.