Fooling with Words

Good. Nose too large, eyes too closely set, hair not glorious blonde, not her mother’s red,
nor the glossy black her younger sister has, the little raven I loved best.

The conversation goes on.

Yes. That’s absolutely right. The conversation goes on.

She is definitely of this world. That’s a flesh-and-blood woman at the microphone, speaking of “the ordinary hours, this ordinary earth.” And yet the effect of her words is otherworldly, like the sound of far echoes in a canyon. The audience is spellbound, as if some visitation had taken their breath away. A few people begin to clap, awkwardly, the way a congregation will do when the choir is inspired and the moment transfigured and you want to applaud although applause seems too meager a salute to the sacred. The scatteredness of the clapping in this tent is unnerving; people stir, wanting to respond approvingly but uncertain how to do so. Gently, she puts us at ease: “In a large and generous audience like this,” she says, “what I ask may not be possible, but I know that many of my poems don’t evoke clapping, and I
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want to assure you that I take silence as a high compliment. If you could find in yourselves a way not to clap at all until the end, I would deeply appreciate that. We could try it. Maybe I shouldn’t ask this, because if one person fails, or a few people, I know that will make everyone feel uncomfortable—but let’s at least try.”

And we do. She finishes the next poem to silence, the silence of deep contemplation. Once she said that a good poem can set its listener adrift in a small raft under a vast night sky of stars; at this moment we are drifting. She has written that we “travel by poem,” as by any other means, so that we might see for ourselves more than would otherwise be seen. For Jane Hirshfield, poems are diaries of the journey. When we read them, “One person’s word-wakened knowledge becomes another’s.”

It happened this night. The poet gathered her listeners into an intense Zen presence, into this moment’s particular now—“the richest place to be.”

Are you aware, at the end of a reading, of how the audience has been affected? Applause is only part of it.

When I read my work in public, mostly what I do is reinhabit the poem—its words, its feelings. I reenter the place where it originally unfolded within me in order to speak it back into the world again. But, of course, you can’t help but also feel at some intuitive level how those words are being heard; a reading is actually very intimate in that way. Sometimes, at a reading’s close, there is a great stillness. At first, that startled me, but I’ve learned to recognize that such a silence emerges when the audience has come to some deeply interior experience—and that is what I wish for myself when I hear or read a good poem.

Do you anticipate this kind of response when you are writing a poem?

Yeats once said that rhetoric is the argument you have with others, poetry is the argument you have with yourself. It’s a wonderfully perceptive notion, because if you weren’t arguing with yourself—figuring something out for yourself or working through some issue that’s pressing itself upon your life—you could probably rest quite happily in silence. But because there is a fertile dilemma, a rich imbalance somewhere in your life or heart or understanding, you write a poem. I turn to poetry in order to address some flood or some gap, to stitch across a place of puzzlement or overspill or bewilderment or sorrow. When you first take a poem public, though, there’s no way to know how the listener will react—all you can do is make it as meaningful, beautiful, and variegated for yourself as you can.
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So you must know, before you start writing, what that fertile dilemma is—that puzzlement or bewilderment you need to address.

It depends. There are poems which come so clearly and immediately out of my experience that yes, I do know. Some large thing happens in my life, and a poem, for me, is the only possible response. But many other times, I don’t really know what it is I am pondering at some deep level until I sit down to write. The poem is then the gate, as well as the field behind the gate. I discover my questions by entering my questions.

As you talk, I have this image in my head of you sitting in a quiet room, in the stark light of a lamp, writing. That image comes right out of “The Poet.”

The Poet

She is working now, in a room not unlike this one, the one where I write, or you read. Her table is covered with paper. The light of the lamp would be tempered by a shade, where the bulb’s single harshness might dissolve, but it is not, she has taken it off.

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Her poems? I will never know them, though they are the ones I most need. Even the alphabet she writes in I cannot decipher. Her chair—Let us imagine whether it is leather or canvas, vinyl or wicker. Let her have a chair, her shadeless lamp, the table. Let one or two she loves be in the next room. Let the door be closed, the sleeping ones healthy. Let her have time, and silence, enough paper to make mistakes and go on.

Could you say something about how that poem came to be written, and about that shadeless lamp?

When I wrote “The Poet,” I was a fellow at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Center for Scholars and Artists in Bellagio, Italy. It’s an extraordinary place, a centuries-old villa overlooking Lake Como, where extraordinary care is taken of you. I couldn’t help but be aware of all the writers who will never have such good fortune—writers who may not have access to paper or ink or a bright enough lightbulb, writers for whom a quiet moment in which to work has to be stolen from the day. That person may write without the possibility of publication, or in a language not
much translated, yet it matters immensely to me, and to us all, that her (or his) words and singular genius come into existence. That is one source-level of the poem. But there’s another level as well, in which the figure in “The Poet” is something like my imagination of the Muse herself, working under every circumstance, in every place, and always in the service of increased light. She will do whatever she needs to do to magnify and clarify our experience of the world. That portrait of gift and determination lies also under the poem.

* * *

When did you first start wanting for yourself the time and silence that poem speaks of? When did you start writing?

I took to writing as soon as I was taught to write, in first or second grade. I wrote all through my childhood, secretly, in the middle of the night, hiding the evidence under my mattress. The written page was the field in which I developed the self that I became. I have no recollection of how it started—probably my first teacher, Mrs. Barlow, made one kind remark, and that was all it took: I was set on my course for life.

* * *

You’re not the first poet to tell me she started writing early and wrote secretly and hid the poems away, in the closet or under the mattress.

* * *

Poetry is such a private and intimate exploration of self and world, at least for a person like me. There are writers who are natural extroverts. I imagine that extroverts write in an outward direction, to speak to somebody else. Introverts are different—we write to talk to ourselves, to find out who and what we are. How can you do that if you feel exposed, if you feel like you’re performing? It’s quite strange to me, even now, that my poems begin in utter solitude and privacy and yet I can somehow end up saying them, as I did here last night, in front of two thousand people. That’s a difficult transition for a lot of introverted poets to make, and it was for me. And yet you do it, because you’re so grateful that other people did. I owe so much to the poems of other poets, and to having heard other poets reading their work when I was young. They showed me the path to a viable life, a knowable life. When the world began to ask me to reciprocate, how could I say no?

* * *

I’m glad you’re willing to read aloud—to perform, as it were. When it comes to poetry, some people are good readers and some people are good listeners. I have to confess that a poem often comes alive for me only when I hear it read—and by the poet herself.

* * *

It’s a marvelous gift if you can hear the voice of the actual author, but then what do we do about works from
the past? When you love poetry for a while, I think you come to develop an inner voice which is somehow chameleonlike, able to offer itself to whatever it encounters. You learn to listen to the musical scoring which inhabits the words, to the hints about tone which occur at the line breaks and in the punctuation. You can also say the poem aloud to yourself, and hear it that way. When you memorize poems by other people and put them through your own body and voice, the very musculature of the person who wrote the poem enters your body. Your mouth moves the way that person’s mouth moved when he or she first “said” the poem by writing it—and that’s true whether the poet spoke it or wrote the words in silence. The throat and larynx and breath are always moving a little when words travel through us.

*What do you hope happens when you read in public?*

That’s an interesting question. Mostly I try not to hope at all. I try simply to be with the poem, to be in the poem. If I were more conscious of all the people in the audience, I would doubtless fall utterly silent. But if you are asking me what in the long run do I hope for when I give a poem to other people, it is that they might find in whatever caused me to articulate those particular words, feelings, thoughts, ideas, rhythms, something that also touches and changes them. I do think that a good poem alters you. How remarkable, if someone is touched by a poem of mine, if they too are altered and changed.

*For that to happen, the poet first has to find her own true voice. I’m curious as to how you found yours.*

My path was an odd, indirect one: I fell silent. I was a full-time student of Zen for eight years during my twenties, three of them in a monastery. During those three years I didn’t write at all. But I learned how to pay attention, and I learned how to inhabit my own being a little more fully, and how to live in greater companionship with the rest of existence, both human and other-than-human. I don’t think I would have managed to do that if I’d just gone on in the usual way. If you’re not familiar with Zen, this probably sounds exotic, though Zen practice is really the opposite of exotic—and obviously I don’t think every aspiring writer needs to follow such a path. Sometimes I think only a really slow learner like me needs to sit down for three years of silence in a Zen monastery before she can write.

*What led you to the monastery?*

I had read a number of Japanese and Chinese poems that communicated the essential feeling of Zen, and
those images and ideas caught me. I was twenty-one when I began to study Zen—it was what I did instead of going to graduate school. You could say that intuition took me there, along with the usual measure of suffering. How does anyone decide their life course? You follow something you don’t yet know but begin to feel is the right way for you. You dip in one finger. I went to look, and what I saw seemed like a good way for human beings to live. I also liked that in the Zen tradition, monastic practice is generally viewed as a limited period of intensive training, especially for a layperson. You’re supposed to return to normal life, to a life that looks like everybody else’s. But you return having learned how to pay attention, how to concentrate, and how to enter the experiences that concentration brings. You learn a little more about your relationship to the rest of existence—that your self is not quite what you thought it was, that in fact you are completely connected to all of life.

This is hard to talk about because the language of Zen is so interior. We don’t yet have a spiritual vocabulary to talk about it publicly—certainly not in the West.

Mostly, of course, you don’t explain Zen, you experience it. And so it’s not surprising that, whether in the East or the West, you have to rely on metaphors to do the work of telling about that experience. Take, for example, one traditional image for awakened being, “snow in a silver bowl.” Try to imagine, where does the snow end and the bowl begin? You can’t quite tell, and so a sense of both containment and vastness inhabits that image. There’s a whole constellation of such phrases, all of them like fingers pointing at the moon. In that way, the language of Zen isn’t that different from the language of poetry.

Lyric poetry, as I see it, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. For instance, in a poem in which a fence appears, the mind of the writer and the mind of the reader each inhabit “fence life,” so to speak, for the moment that word appears in the poem. We enter into a much broader existence when we experience the stones and the weather, the material objects and the ongoing life around us, as a part of ourselves. The same is true, of course, for ideas, which can graze inside us like animals who reshape the landscape with their grazing. Poetry moves the mind and heart through so many different realms, so swiftly, so unnoticeably, that you can be carried by that current into a widened existence. The utter permeability of our life is made visible by the very nature of poetry.

What can you say about your own experience of Zen—I mean, insofar as it influences your writing?
The specific meditation practice is one of developing attentiveness to this moment, at first by settling your awareness within the breath while keeping your body centered and alert. You aren’t doing anything but offering up your attention, yet somehow that “doing nothing” allows mind, body, emotion, the rain on the roof, to come together and reveal themselves. It’s as if you were to sit very quietly in the woods: after a while, the animals begin to emerge, and you see the full amplitude of life that is in fact already there. The intention is to live your whole life in that kind of awareness. To be translucently awake—which should be simple, but somehow is quite hard—instead of living in a haze of distraction, hope, and fear, as we usually do. And you don’t want to come to this state only in meditation; you want to be awake when you sand a floor or speak in a meeting or tie up the newspapers for recycling.

I try to be awake when I write a poem, and I think that Zen training showed me a way to do that. The combination of focused awareness and open permeability that goes into writing poetry is very similar to meditative mind, but the difference is that when I write, I am leaning my attention and my intention a little more into the realm of language, thought, and expression. Zen pretty much comes down to three things—everything changes; everything is connected; pay attention. It is simply a path toward entering your life more fully, a way of knowing the taste of your tongue in your own mouth. The path of poetry and shaped words is much the same, I think—each increases what we can know of human experience.

Isn’t this connected to the Buddhist notion of mindfulness?

Yes, very deeply—mindfulness is the way that we open ourselves to both the inner and the outer worlds. Mindfulness, for instance, means that even as we’re talking, I’m not only aware of what’s going on between us—between our minds, our bodies, the air and space between us—but also aware of the fact that several people are attending to our conversation just now, quietly and politely on the periphery, and of the sound of the airplane that’s passing overhead. Mindfulness recognizes that all this is part of what you and I say to each other. Even the person who ground the lenses in your glasses is participating in this conversation. And the driver of those trucks on the highway over there, and the carpenter who made the picnic table we’re sitting on. In a state of open mindfulness, a broad subliminal attention is going out in many directions at once. Now, when you write a poem you are doing this all the time, sending out the tendrils of your attention, but you’re also selecting which one of those directions is the most fertile and meaningful, which might add the most to the poem’s
communication and experience. Did that mosquito I just brushed away help or hinder our conversation? We didn’t expect that mosquito to show up, or to talk about it once it did. If I were writing a poem, some part of me would be thinking, Do I let the mosquito in, or thank it and allow it to go on its way?

So much of your poetry strikes me as a meditation on mindfulness. For example, in a poem I especially like, you challenge us to look around and see.

That’s an early poem, from 1982. I’m never sure whether I should call it a love poem or an end-of-love poem, because it is both those things.

For What Binds Us

There are names for what binds us:
strong forces, weak forces.
Look around, you can see them:
the skin that forms in a half-empty cup,
nails rusting into the places they join,
joints dovetailed on their own weight.
The way things stay so solidly
wherever they’ve been set down—and
gravity, scientists say, is weak.

And see how the flesh grows back
across a wound, with a great vehemence,
more strong
than the simple, untested surface before.
There’s a name for it on horses,
when it comes back darker and raised: proud flesh,
as all flesh
is proud of its wounds, wears them
as honors given out after battle,
small triumphs pinned to the chest—

And when two people have loved each other
see how it is like a
scar between their bodies,
stronger, darker, and proud;
how the black cord makes of them a single fabric
that nothing can tear or mend.

Love as a “scar between their bodies” is a very powerful image. It’s something I would never have contemplated except for a poet’s imaginative use of language. That raises a question. I first knew your work as a translator—bringing us the poetry of others. Someone gave me a copy of your anthology Women in Praise of the Sacred, with its scores of poems by women across the centuries. What gives you more
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pleasure, creating your own poetry—your own images—or translating the works of others?

If I had to choose, it would be my own work—but when you're truly engaged in translation, the great joy is that it feels precisely like writing. The inspiration has been given you in the original text, but that magic act—that out of silence, language somehow begins to arise—provides the same thrill. Paul Valéry wrote that when he was translating the Aeneid, he'd occasionally find himself saying, "Well, it might have been better like this . . .," as if he could revise Virgil. That thought occurs because, in the translating, the poem has come to feel as if it were the translator's own. Ethically, of course, a translator has to draw back from that temptation. But the experience of translating is as heady as being in love—the excitement, the anticipation, the joy of meeting and joining with the unknown.

Do you remember the turning point—how it happened that you fell in love with other women's poems?

In college, I had read a handful of poems by the two great Japanese women poets Ono no Komachi and Izumi Shikibu, who lived some thousand years ago. I read their poems and I saw in them my own life, and wanted to read more. I waited fifteen years for some-

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one else to do that translation before taking it up myself, with a Japanese co-translator, Mariko Aratani, for what became the book The Ink Dark Moon. The truths and beauties of these poems are absolutely human truths and beauties. Their words were arrows that went directly to my heart, to its various hungers and turmoil. The fact that they came from an entirely different culture was a great confirmation for me of our basic human commonality, and of the ability of art to allow essential truths to cross great differences of time, culture, and language and still manage to speak as intimately as someone whispering into your ear in your own bed.

What kind of truth were those poems speaking?

In this case, the two great subject matters were erotic love and Buddhist awakening—two things which, as an eighteen-year-old, mattered a great deal to me. As they still do.

A good poem takes something you probably already know as a human being and somehow raises your capacity to feel it to a higher degree. It allows you to know your experience more intensely. When you meet your life in a great poem, it becomes expanded, extended, clarified, magnified, deepened in color, deepened in feeling. That path of knowledge started for me the day I
bought my first book of poetry, when I was nine years old, for a dollar. It was a collection of Japanese haiku. I didn’t really understand it, but I felt warmed as I read it, felt myself expanding, as if I were growing a larger set of roots. Whether from reading the New England Transcendentalists or Eskimo poetry, I feel that everything I know about being human has been deepened by the poems I’ve read. They’ve taught me how to be a human being.

And being human, for you, clearly includes a spiritual dimension. Many of the poems you have translated fall into that realm.

Yes, though I rather dislike that word, even when I find myself forced to use it. The abstract labels for what we call “spiritual” are all too narrow—they can’t catch it, they’re diminishing terms. If you turn instead to image or metaphor, the world begins to awaken. Here’s an example of an awakening image, a poem Izumi Shikibu wrote that made a huge difference in my life.

Although the wind
blows terribly here,
the moonlight also leaks

between the roofplanks
of this ruined house.

Now, moonlight is a traditional symbol for Buddhist enlightenment. But even if you don’t know that, even if you understand the poem simply through the imagery of “weather,” what it tells you is this: If your house is walled too tightly, if your psyche is so defended that it won’t let in the cold winds—won’t let in suffering or anger, won’t let in grief—neither will it allow entrance to the desirable, beautiful moonlight. If you don’t allow yourself to experience the full spectrum of human life, you won’t wall out only the hard parts, you’ll close yourself off from the luminous as well.

That poem taught me to be grateful to my difficulties. It has affected every day of my life since I translated it. Yet when I first worked on it, it was hard to understand: the words were there, but I didn’t know what they meant. When finally the meaning fell into place, it was as if I had become that house and the moonlight had suddenly entered, changing everything.

I see a comparison between Shikibu’s poem and your own “Letting What Enters Enter.” Both speak to opening oneself to the unexpected, to life’s opposites.
Letting What Enters Enter

Even in January rains
the blossoms open—
absence and longing
are also the plum-fragrant spring.
As the woman with her
sign and cart of rags is spring,
beside the highway, stepping slowly
through the undimmed flower of her life.
“What I now most want to happen
in my raving heart, make it happen—”
Sappho’s cry to the goddess.
Who knows if that prayer was answered?
Each part holds the rest in the chill
spring rain and the silence; let one animal
eat from your hand and the whole herd comes.
But the woman was not beautiful
or whole in her own heart’s raving,
and she forgave me nothing that I love.

That poem arose directly out of seeing a homeless woman by the side of the highway over a period of weeks. It was an early spring that year, and she was always there, exactly as I describe her in the poem. One day I thought, How can this woman not be

included in the spring’s beauty? Just as the blossoms have room for the rain, so the spring has to have room for her. But in the end I judge myself through her eyes for that thought. I had brought this woman into my poem and talked about her as being as fully a part of spring in California as the January blossoms and rains. Then, belatedly remembering her reality, I realized the ethical problem: I may see her life as an undimmed flower, I may say that, but she may not experience it that way at all. She could, of course . . . but more likely not. And so it came to the last line: She does not forgive me for putting her in my poem. Nor should she.

We journalists can also feel a guilt over using people’s stories and leaving their lives unchanged, but I think your including her is a tribute to the dignity of a life despite misfortune and adversity, and I find it so helpful to see how an image from your ordinary, daily experience comes to inhabit a poem. What about the images in “Mule Heart”?

That is one of a group of poems in The Lives of the Heart which I think of as a series of recipes for getting through difficult periods, times you feel you’ve walked over a cliff, times Winston Churchill referred to as “visits of the black dog.” There are a number of different
prescriptions throughout the book. The strategy of the mule’s heart is sheer stubbornness: grit your teeth and get through it.

The poem begins with reference to “two waiting baskets.” Tell me how those baskets became part of the poem.

I was in Greece many years ago and saw how they put pannier baskets on the sides of the mules to carry things up and down the steep coastline. In the poem, the basket placed on one side of the stubborn heart is filled with all the things you would want to keep: the fragrant lemons, the things you love. The other basket is for holding your griefs, your sorrows, everything that has abandoned you—which of course by the end of our lives will be everything, including our lives themselves. Each of these aspects of life the mule heart must carry: it carries our joys, and it carries our sufferings. Maybe the two baskets mean that they balance, somehow.

Many years passed between my seeing the little mules of Santorini and writing the poem. I wrote it to help me get through a time in my life when I thought a certain stubbornness would help. I told myself, “Just last out the moment, and rely on the truth that everything changes; if you can simply hang in there, you’ll be all right.” And from that feeling, the poem came. A wonderful thing about poetry is that at any moment a poem draws on everything you have ever known, seen, experienced. A poem is like those baskets, needing to be filled, and so your whole life must be available to each poem as you write it. This poem needed those mules, their flies and braided, belled bridles. Sometimes I think that poems use us in order to think, to do their own work. You know, most of the time I feel as if I am in the service of the poem—a poem isn’t something I make, it’s something I serve.

Mule Heart

On the days when the rest have failed you, let this much be yours—flies, dust, an unnameable odor, the two waiting baskets: one for the lemons and passion, the other for all you have lost. Both empty, it will come to your shoulder, breathe slowly against your bare arm. If you offer it hay, it will eat. Offered nothing, it will stand as long as you ask. The little bells of the bridle will hang
beside you quietly,
in the heat and the tree's thin shade.
Do not let its sparse mane deceive you,
or the way the left ear swivels into dream.
This too is a gift of the gods,
calm and complete.

I've read that the path you've chosen for yourself is what the Japanese call teahouse practice. What does that mean?

I think we may have just burned down my teahouse with this conversation. Teahouse practice means that you don't explicitly talk about Zen. It refers to leading your life as if you were an old woman who has a teahouse by the side of the road. Nobody knows why they like to go there, they just feel good drinking her tea. She's not known as a Buddhist teacher, she doesn't say, "This is the Zen teahouse." All she does is simply serve tea—but still, her decades of attentiveness are part of the way she does it. No one knows about her faithful attention to the practice, it's just there, in the serving of the tea and the way she cleans the counters and washes the cups.

That is the practice-path I've felt was right for my poems. Though the facts of my life seem to have become known over the years, there are almost no explicit references to Zen in my poetry—fewer than...