

WHY DO I WRITE?

By Michael Escoubas

Early in life my mother said, *You have a gift for words; you should do something with that gift.* I write poetry, in part, because of my mother's encouraging words. I believed in her; she believed in me. I also write poetry because I believe that poetry brings people together. Wallace Stevens in a letter to his daughter in 1950 wrote, "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right." I doubt if it ever occurred to Wallace Stevens that a personal comment made to his daughter would be important to anyone interested in his poetry. Yet, it has proven helpful to me when I ask myself the question, *Why do I write?* Poetry helps us see ordinary events in extraordinary ways and helps us find the common ground that allows us all to walk side-by-side.

In her book *Ten Windows, How Great Poems Transform the World*, Jane Hirshfield writes, "Good art is a truing of vision, in the way a saw is trued in the saw shop, to cut more cleanly. It is also a changing of vision. Entering a good poem, a person feels, tastes, hears, thinks, and sees in altered ways." (Page viii, Preface)

In keeping with Hirshfield, I'm hopeful that my poetry will enlarge and transform lives. In my poem *River Trout*, the reader is offered a question the trout has already answered, *Where do I go from here?* The ordinariness of nature brings the reader face-to-face with this basic life-question. As a poet, one of my missions is to allow nature to inject important questions into the reader's thought process. Poetry, then, opens doors previously latched tight. We may never know the difference our work makes in a life. Yet we write in faith that we are difference-makers albeit behind-the-scenes.

Given the above observations, two more questions seek attention: How do poems work? And, how do we, as poets, work?

Since life is constantly changing, poems have a way of saying, *Pay attention, things are different today*. In *Nine Gates, Entering the Mind of Poetry*, Hirshfield mentions six things (concentrations she calls them) that good poems feature. These six elements help writers and readers pay attention to the changing nature of life. Hirshfield's six concentrations are: music, rhetoric, image, emotion, story, and voice. (Page 7, *Nine Gates*)

Poets, whether by intuition or by intention, will use these energies in varying degrees. Sounds that poets weave through poems should delight the reader. I write to bring the reader moments of pleasure through the *music* of my poems. When Wallace Stevens writes in *The Idea of Order at Key West*, "She sang beyond the genius of the sea," (Page 97, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*), I'm drawn into the poem through the gentle flow of diction and by his use of vowels and sibilance. The line sings and as I move through the poem my soul also sings. I'm drinking a martini with Stevens watching the sea frolic with the shore.

Rhetoric is the poet's tool to engage the reader's mind in the poem's context. I'm saying to my reader, *come with me, let's go this way together*. Since I want my reader to stay with the poem I respect him by grounding him in time and place. I give him my best grammar. This means that my chosen words must be the *right* words. What words are the so-called *right* words? I strive for simplicity in word choice. Readers will not appreciate my showing off with words intended for the academic reader when my intended audience is anything but academic. As a poet I think of my readers as friends, I'm meeting them for coffee and I'm buying.

Poets use *images* to bring together the inner and outer worlds of experience. Each shines light on the other. In *River Trout* the outer world of the river and its action flows into my inner world, *At least his life has a plan*. The image of the fish "drifting transparently/in

and out of memorized/crevices” enlivens and enhances both worlds. This image prompts the reader to think about life without any hint of “telling” on my part.

Emotion or *passion* is a powerful tool for poets. When I first began writing *River Trout* I focused on the pleasures of fishing. I seldom experience success at fishing but this fish and his cold creek surroundings--the way he blended in, made me envious. As the fish and his world collided with my world I came to “value him beyond/how he will taste/(if my heart lets me catch him).” There was just a touch of emotion in my experience, enough to make me human and vulnerable.

Next in Hirshfield’s list of poetic concentrations comes *narrative*. Though most poems are brief artistic creations, they nonetheless include narrative or storytelling. Narrative gives poetry its shape, its sense of continuity. The reader asks, *where are we headed, how will all this turn out?* While ambiguity is a hallmark of good poetry we should give our readers a fighting chance to “work things out.” I’m hopeful that *River Trout* helps the reader experience the journey of the fish but more importantly to examine his own journey as time’s relentless rush devours life.

Finally, let us consider the element of *voice* in poetry. Voice is the living presence of any poem. What force or energy resides here? What message is hidden here? Is the poet angry, argumentative, kind, funny, contemplative, compassionate, aloof, or philosophical? Voice sends out an endless stream of messages to sensitive readers. Hirshfield says that voice is the body language of a poem. (Page 29, *Nine Gates*) Just as singers stay in tune with their accompanying music, so poets must be aware of both their inner and outer voices. I love the trout with my heart – I could never have him for supper. I also appreciate him for the deeper intellectual/spiritual contribution he makes to my life.

Poets ask one favor from their readers: read poems on the poet's terms. When tempted to say, *I can't relate to this*, we trust that the reader will allow himself to enter the poet's world. The poet has created a world with the reader in mind. This created world is there to enter, look around, touch, and question. Poets and readers are collaborators with the same goal: living life to the fullest.

Why do I write? I write to honor the craft of poetry. Like a devoted cabinet-maker whose goal is to make the best cabinet his skill allows, I want to present to my reader the best poetry I am capable of writing. Poetry leads me, and hopefully my readers, into rivers of thought about the nature of being. Through each poem I write, I find illumination that guides my journey home.

Endnotes

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- ✚ *Nine Gates, Entering the Mind of Poetry*. Published by HarperCollins Publishers. Copyright © 1997 by Jane Hirshfield.
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Bio

Michael Escoubas studied poetry and poetics for thirty years before writing for publication. In 2013, after retiring from a 48-year career in the printing industry he joined the Illinois State Poetry Society. ISPS has been instrumental to his growth as a poet.

Michael's study of great poets has included but has not been limited to Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and Emily Dickinson. Among more contemporary poets, Etheree Taylor Armstrong, W.S. Merwin, Mary Oliver, Billy Collins, and Wendell Berry, are among his favorites.

His poems consistently receive honors in competitions sponsored by ISPS as well as in similar competitions sponsored by the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (NFSPS).

Michael is contributing poet for Limited Magazine, a business-lifestyle publication produced and distributed in Bloomington, Illinois. His poems have appeared in The Avocet; Whispers On-line Poetry Journal; Quill and Parchment; and Your Daily Poem, among others.

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