

Brenda Ueland Prose Prize – Honorable Mention

Su Smallen

ON POETRY

On Not Being Understood

For years I thought: “She is difficult,” until one day it occurred to me to say it the other way: “She is easy. I am difficult.”

Judy Grahn on Gertrude Stein

I don't get it. I hear you. I am difficult and you are difficult; our lives are large and complex. Then poetry asks both of us to alter our perception. Poetry is simple, like meditation. Like accepting the fourth day of unending rain. Like walking across a lit stage in a leotard. I give you my thoughts, not as they come to me, but as I carve them so that you might also come to these same or similar thoughts. As a sculptor chisels eyes with hollows for pupils.

On the Flower

“Give the audience a flower,” composer Lucia Dlugoszewski said. She meant that one should always include a disparate element to surprise and delight. This could be done, for example, by inserting among several measures of eight, one measure of one, a breath, a gesture. With this, her partner Erick Hawkins came to be known as “the poet of modern dance.” Somehow this flower gives the audience that *aha* feeling. Something *to get*. “That is the whole,” Virginia Woolf wrote. “It seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower.” For Woolf, this flower is “a token of some real thing” that appears from “behind the cotton wool of daily life.” If I remember to ask myself to receive, to get out from behind the cotton wool, there will be a flower. “There are always flowers for those who want to see them,” wrote Matisse. Certainly some poems are vases, each containing one flower. Some vases contain many flowers. Some poems are not vases but a field of uncut flowers. Some of these flowers are weeds. Our lives are vases and fields. Poetry is A Flower.

On Not Understanding

Sometimes I look and see only hollows. Then reading is like walking the rarely-walked dog. She muscles, strains the leash forward, faster. It takes all of my strength to hang on, stay on my feet. I say, “If you would just quit pulling!” Dog says, “If you would just let go!”

On Balance

My art is just about paying attention.
Robert Rauschenberg

The ideal thing in dance class is to *dance* the warm-up, because it is more fun that way and more beautiful. Oh, but this hurts and I don't feel at all like dancing. But if I *can* dance the warm-up – which is letting go and pushing for it at the same time – then momentum starts to sing. Dancing exists in the doing. Writing is exactly like this, except that writing has a physical existence when I'm done. Even so, “poetry is not future driven in spirit,” writes Alice Fulton. Throughout Erick Hawkins' warm-up I would hear *one; two; contract; decontract; integrate; let go; do it; don't think about it*. Looping sensation. Variations. Doris Humphrey's dance technique is based on fall and recovery. Walking is a sequence of falling out of and into balance. All movement is a state of balance, and all states of balance are movement. Writing is movement.

On Shadow

The sculptor makes hollows so that shadows do the work for light. In order to write about happiness, one of my professors said, you must write about its shadow – loss. “You don’t have a reason to write poetry without loss,” he told me. I thought, we have enough loss. Loss has a palpable existence when it’s done. Loss is self-renewing. Whereas happiness exists in the moment, in now. To continue, happiness needs attentiveness. This is cultural and the reverse could easily be as true. I said, “I want to write about happiness *without* loss.” “You probably can,” he said, “but why?” Chiseling my loss has not done the work for happiness. If a shadow of something is what allows us to see it, then loss is not the shadow of happiness. The shadow of snow is not grass, nor even water. In order to paint snow, I must paint how snow is received by trees, by mountains, by animals. I paint these as if they have bites out of them. I also paint how trees, mountains, and animals are received by snow. I paint their shapes like reflections in blue, violet, yellow, gray, brown, pink, or green depending on how I see and on how I think you will see. Also, depending on what paints I have, and what surface. These four things. What is shadow is variable.

On Living Inside a Question

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?
Mary Oliver

It is already late when you wake up inside a question.
Anne Carson

The verb is not *to do with*, it is *to be in*. It *was* late. There is not
An Answer. Answers are variable.

On Walking

I walked, keeping my
favorite temple on my right,
the world on my left.

Like a yoked burro
I walked, turning a slow wheel
thinking of Buddha,

Grandma praying to Jude,
patron of the hopeless,
Anj, microbiology,
Doris Humphrey's fall
and recovery,
Yancey's cutting and stitching,
Martha hearing chords in discourse.

I turned my wheel until
my mind hummed with my heel strikes
and the spokes melted

into the snow-covered lake.
In the dark open center,
geese lifted, resettled.

On Answering Every Day

We can know something well in one part of our lives and
completely miss it in another. I know I can't make a one-time vow for a

lifetime of love with another. Love must be chosen daily. Once we forget this, we are, as my friend Susanna says, toast. I was toast inside my question. Many days I am still toast. I would have preferred a vow. Sometimes I write to choose the day's answer. Sometimes I write to get myself outside of the question.

On Thought

The poet thinks with his poems, in that lies his thought, and that itself is the profundity.

William Carlos Williams

Thoughts are poem-sized, poem-like to begin with, a sensory shorthand from self to self, telegraphic and telepathic. Writing the poem is translating that impulse and creating a *something* to think with. The poem is a translation, not the impulse itself. “The moon you are describing is the one you are creating,” writes William Stafford. The poem is both a particle and a wave. Thinking is holding the particle and moving within the wave. Thinking with the poem is like unwinding a roll of caps and then hammering on it to get all the shots. Firing the synapses for as long as it holds your attention.

On Daily Gaze

A print hung in my childhood dining room that I thought was strange: a creature, a she, with a wide face and cat-like features; a gray-

green uniform torso; and for legs, what looked like thickly treaded tires. I thought she was looking at her reflection, another gray-green torso amidst daubs of light blue. Or, I thought she was with her lover if those shapes could be arms. Yet her gaze was not on her reflection or lover, but out of the frame, forward but indirectly, as if she were trying to remember someone. After some time, my mother told me the print was called “Mother and Child.” I never thought of this print as art. I never asked it questions about light, color, texture, line, or perception. It existed as an odd, familiar fact of our dining room. Just as I took in the sunshine through the overarching elm trees, the patterns of light and shade were something to move through. How I have returned its indirect gaze indirectly. How my thoughts have steadied within that print. Some pain, some happiness, and some liver slipped to the dog. How much this picture has asked of me in order to see it apart from everything else, and still I have not seen it completely. That print is a lesson in seeing. Objects that have been infused with my daily gaze are worth questioning; they are asking me to focus my attention; they are offering their assistance.

On the Farm

Everything gets used. It's like this amazing farm.

Deborah Keenan

I don't remember the exact context for Deborah Keenan's comment, whether she was speaking about that particular class, or writing,

or life. For her, it is usually all of that. She is one who sees everything at once. On the Amazing Farm everything is food for art: sensation, experience, dream, what we have been given, what we have accepted. Food exists before we are hungry, and the more we eat, the more food there is. Answers exist long before we wake up inside of our questions that hammer at our synapses like a pop quiz. So, we go out in our fields with a combine to cut, thresh, and clean our grain. Maternal dirt; glittering rows of wheat, corn, and trees; dusky barns and sheds; sharp machines; vocal animals. All that sky – mystery, like the wind, lofts it all together. Something hangs within the immense shimmering beauty of a farm. This is danger, wildness, unpredictability. The Amazing Farm is a thing balancing.

On the Tea House

In order to write, I must enter the tea house door. It is a half-sized door. I must bend to enter; I must alter my perception. The tea house door opens behind the cotton wool. Each time I wonder, how do I enter? Can I do this? I pace the entrance path like a dog rearranging and rearranging its blanket. I bend my head; I fold at elbows, thigh sockets, knees. I write. If I succeed to cross the threshold of the little door, I find myself inside the tea house. White space. A blessing. A flower. Poetry is a Tea House.

