[This year's feature consists of almost all contributors answering the same two questions.]

25x2 Questions

1. Who is a poet that has been especially important to you? In answering this, feel free to celebrate someone already well known, an obscure master, or a close friend.

2. What is an activity other than writing that is important to you in your life? This could be a hobby, a passion, something you've just recently picked up, etc. It occurs to me that we don't really separate our writing from ourselves, so the other things that make us up, and move us, are critical parts of our writing lives too.

2. Probably cooking. Unlike writing, cooking seems almost always to lead me to something that pleases me and that I can share with others. And cooking is its own sensual experience. And I find that cooking provides space for meditation—many of my ideas for lines to include in a poem will first come to me while I'm cooking.

Mira Rosenthal

1. C. D. Wright's work remains a sustaining source of poetic engagement for me, especially her book length, genre defying projects like *Deepstep Come Shining* and *One with Others,* but also her writing about writing. I love her difficulty, her audacity, and her ethics. Here's one snippet from *The Poet, The Lion, Talking Pictures, El Farolito, A Wedding in St. Roch, The Big Box Store, The Warp in the Mirror, Spring, Midnights, Fire & All:* "The goal is to make not sense but art of this story. The goal is not to make a story but to experience the whole mess." Reading her work, I have that feeling of wanting to read so slowly that I never finish it, or upon finishing, to instantly turn back to the first page and begin again.

2. I live in a little seaside village in California off all major roads. Even Highway 1 veers inland before it reaches the estuary that bounds the northern border of our town. From my house, I can hear the ocean, which sometimes sounds like low-grade traffic noise, even though I know the highways are far away. But sometimes I hear it clearly, more like a whisper reminding me of something important. Lately, I've been heeding that reminder by going paddle boarding. I love the glide of being on the surface of water, the calmness that sets in, how strong my body feels standing in balance in the midst of wind and birds and otters surfacing. The hush adjusting me to where I'm placed in the world.

Glenn Shaheen

1. Two poets very important to me who are gone too soon are my pals Paul Otremba (author of three books, all on Four Way) and Tom Jungerberg (who had a couple of posthumous poems appear in this very journal. I urge you to seek out Paul's books, especially his last collection, *Levee.* Hopefully Tom will have a collection out soon you can pick up as well.

2. I've always loved playing the guitar. I never really "got gud" at it, but it's just fun to scratch out some basic punk rock originals or follow along with favorite albums. We have this urge sometimes as artists that every endeavor in which we engage must be to the fullest, but I like being a mediocre guitar player who noodles around aimlessly with no stakes. We need parts of our lives without any stakes to balance out the pain we extract for our other art.

Derek Sheffield

1. November 8, 2024

There are many answers to this question, of course, depending on the time of my life. Early on, it was Robert Hayden, Emily Dickinson, and William Stafford. I am who I am, in part, because of reading these poets deeply. I live more palpably, more fully, in a more multi-dimensional way because of their poems.

As for right now, the poet most important to me shared a new poem with me yesterday. It's called "I, Owl" and includes these lines:

> Let me talon you closer,
> Let me clack and rip your hair in bows.
> Body in beseeching pose, snow-hardened skin, begged.
> Fall and winter-wither from clasp,
> Brace my faults, and yours.

The power in her voice and unflinching turns inward call Plath to mind. I read many poems these days that are prose with some line breaks sprinkled in. And that's fine if that's what you look for from poetry. As for me, I always listen for a special kind of distilled singing. That word music is what helps the poem slip past my defenses and make me *feel*. In "I, Owl," it's the rounded vowel of the O sounds amid the plosive B sounds. The slant rhyme in "closer" and "bows." The onomatopoeia in "clack" and how "clasp" calls it back.

As she sings, this poet also frequently surprises. I am pleasantly baffled and simultaneously hooked by these lines from "Shell":

Are we not all victims and rulers of the pelagic biome?
Are we not lovers of mist swarms, kissing crawling stars, and
lichen? We cleave to wonderous young years finding fossils
The same
As the mossy hidden eye sleeping in my knuckles

And these from "Self Portrait with Magpie":

Magpie is back,
and it's past morning. And his feather-speech is late.
We can both enjoy our displacements. We can both be praiseful liars. The magpie
and I, listen and wait.

Such surprise helps steer these ecopoems away from the trite. This poet consistently honors the animacy of the non-human world in engaging ways, and this is something that keeps me coming back to the temple of poetry. I rely on such reminders of the wider family, the mystery of being here, now, together.

I'll never forget the first time I read this poet's work. In August of 2013, I walked into my "study," a room in our garage I'd painted green. It was the early dark, around 5 AM. I flicked on the light and found my notebook in the middle of my desk, opened to a new page, and written there I saw a new poem. I was puzzled because I had no recollection of writing it, yet it had to be mine, of course, here in my notebook on my desk in my study. As I sat down, I saw the handwriting was big and blocky and jumbled as if the words had been formed from the letters of alphabet cereal:

Peace and Rain

The raindrops fall
on all that is quiet.

A soft wind blows
a tear off your face.

The cents of a penny
is less than your love.

A good night.

This was my eight-year-old daughter's hand. But...when? And, reading it again, how? True, "quiet" was spelled "quit," but that was all that was potentially amiss.

As I sat there in silence, the early dark beginning to lighten toward dawn, I pored over and marveled at every tilted line and lopsided loop, seeing where "and" had been partially erased into "a." I imagined her sitting here, moving her pencil slowly across the page, looking up now and then for the right word. I remembered when I met her. I was holding her ruddy little body in my arms as she opened her mouth to cry out and I first saw her dimples. I mean my dimples. I mean ours. I might say that I was about to "break / into blossom," but that was someone else's miracle. This was ours. This moment is one of the most transcendent of my life, a grace that shines in me in the darkest times.

My daughter, Zoey Sheffield, is the most important poet in my life.

2. I do so many things other than make poems. I am passionate about any sport with a racquet or paddle. I have a nearly unstoppable turnaround jump shot. Or, at least, I used to. I love being with friends and being part of wide-ranging, silly, and meaningful conversations. Just the other day, some of us were sitting around a fire and I asked my friend about her religion, Shinto. The resulting interchange was marvelous and resonant and surprising. Conversations, like poems, have a life of their own.

I don't know of a verb to describe the activity I'm most passionate about. Maybe "worlding." I love to world. That is, to saunter through the world and pause frequently to get to know every stem and flower and trunk. Knowing the names of other beings makes me feel more alive. I love being able to hear a bird's voice and know that Swainson's Thrush is perched over there in the Fir trees and singing away. The act of hearing that song is a delight. While I'm thinking about names and habitat, I love attending to my senses. To walk up a steep ridge and suddenly step into the scent of sun-warmed Pine duff...now that's living! I love doing this alone and with others. The noun for worlding, mostly, I think, is naturalist.

I can't help but be a naturalist. I can't turn off my curiosity. Some thoughts that inform the way I world include a Thai proverb: "Life is so short we must move very slowly." On the other side of the coin, Theodore Roethke: "The greatest assassin of life is haste." Was it Ezra Pound who said, "I have seen everything I have seen"? Oh, American Robin, I sometimes think and don't bother lifting my binoculars to my eyes for such a common bird and so miss an opportunity for more life. But typically, I do look closely, and I am never disappointed. Every time, I see something else, some new shade or shape. Something in the way his eye picks up the light. Something about the almost imperceptible curve of his dark bill. There is so little time and so much to behold.

Lisa Russ Spaar

1. I have a host of poets whose work helps me to write, to live—some alive, some dead—ranging from my undergraduate and graduate students to folks like Shakespeare, Plath, and Keats, and, more contemporarily, Carl Phillips, Lucie Brock-Broido, Arthur Sze, and Charles Wright. But the poet whose work has most affected me and continues to astonish and teach me is Emily Dickinson, with her "Campaign inscrutable / Of the Interior" and her poetics of "no," her horsepower of "yes." I love the poems' compression, their erotic torque, their ruptured syntax, their lexicon of the experience of ecstatic aftermath. The poems are alive with God Hunger, desire, ambition, and an acute perception of the natural world. There is a hyper-textuality to her manuscripts, with their variants pushing and shimmering beyond the confines of the page, that I find thrilling. "A transport one cannot contain / May yet, a transport be—" Yes, yes, yes!

2. My friend, the fiction writer Christopher Tilghman, talks about how important it is for writers to have "a second art." I engage in a few non-verbal artistic activities: gardening, cooking, painting and drawing. I'm untrained in these areas, and I love experimenting with them as an amateur, a "lover." I feel free to make mistakes, be wrong, take risks, and this helps me be more fluid in my writing praxis as well. I also like that I can listen to music when I transplant lilies or attempt a bouillabaisse (I'm not a poet who can write to a sound-track.) But I would say that right now the most passionate and important engagement I have beyond my writing is my relationships with my

four grandchildren, all aged four and under. It's been a deep pleasure to witness them enter the realm of language. I love their humor, affection—their questions! Their deep sense of play, which comes so naturally to them and which is crucial, I think, to the process of writing as well. To paraphrase a poem Gregory Orr wrote for one of his daughters, their birth redeems the fallen leaf.

Kareem Tayyar

1. I don't think there's been a poet whose work has influenced, inspired, and moved me more consistently over the years than Mark Strand. There was consistently something magic-realist about his work, and that fantastical quality brought a sense of wonder to verses that were otherwise deeply melancholy. And it was this mixture of the playful and the sad that continues to amaze me: what Edward Hopper was able to achieve in his painting, Strand was able to achieve in his poetry.

2. A few years ago some friends of mine and I began playing beach volleyball every week, and it quickly became one of my favorite things to do. Partly because, as a reluctantly retired pickup basketball player, it replaced the camaraderie that I'd come to miss after having hung up my sneakers, and partly because spending two or three afternoons a week at the beach is about as nice a way to spend one's time as I can imagine. Am I any good as a volleyball player? Not particularly. But that's alright. It's enough to just be out there enjoying the friendship and the sunlight.

Cammy Thomas

1. I love the poetry of Alfred, Lord Tennyson because he's musical, lugubrious, and thoughtfully ambivalent about most large issues of his (and our) time. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on women and the feminine in his work, and have never tired of it. "The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,/ The vapors weep their burdens to the ground./ Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,/ And after many a summer dies the swan" (from "Tithonus").