

Questions from undergraduate students in English 330: Poetry in/and the Community, for *Segue* 4.2 poets Sheila Black, Andy Jackson, Alyce Miller, Steve Mueske, Martin Ott, and Eve Rifkah. 3.22.06

*Can you describe the writing process behind the poems you published in Segue? Where did the ideas for them come from, and how did you go about developing those ideas into these poems? Is this your typical writing process?*

### **Sheila Black**

The writing process varied depending on the poem. For example, “The Global Multiplication of Common Ailments,” was inspired by an ordinary trip to the supermarket during which I heard 1) a story about global warming, and 2) a short piece about a local unsolved murder on the radio. I don’t know how much of this is visible in the finished poem, but what interested me in the writing was how large disasters (like global warming) become linked to events and feelings in our actual everyday lives. I was also interested in how in modern times we seem increasingly to live in a space in which different voices, images, etc., are continually entering so that we can be, for example, in a kitchen in New Mexico, hearing voices from Liberia or Iraq. “Sunland Park Would Be Bank Robber Dead,” was directly inspired by a day in which the building where I work was sealed off while police searched for a would-be bank robber (he had not actually robbed a bank but behaved as though he was going to and refused to stop when the police ordered him to.) The bank robber was shot dead a block from my work place. As facts emerged about the shooting, the life of this man became more and more mysterious to me, as did his shooting, which in many senses seemed almost a suicide (he pulled a toy gun on the police). The poem was originally quite narrative and over three pages long. I kept cutting it down because *what seemed important to me was that essential sense of mystery I had*, partly because the day when all this happened was one of those piercingly beautiful early spring days when the world seems to fill with possibility—a terrible contrast to the story of the would-be bank robber. “The Deer that Has Her Name,” was directly inspired by a story my then four-year-old daughter told (and told) during a camping trip to the Lincoln Forest. I made her five in the poem because someone in my writing group said no one would believe a four-year-old would say all the things I had her saying in the poem—but she did! I guess what fascinated me was the sense that my small daughter had absorbed the form and substance of epic in her story of the deer that has her name—the way those epic stories present in a way all of us can understand the hardest and most tragic facts of our existence. These stories also never go out of date. There is always a fallen world, war, greed, death, etc. “Metaphors” was the only poem in the bunch that was inspired by the work of another poet. I had been reading the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski, particularly his great poem “To Go To Lvov,” and I thought I wanted to write a poem that let the metaphors extend and open out as they do in Zagajewski’s often-surrealist poems. I suppose reading over what I’ve written so far you could say that most of the ideas for my poems come from events or observations in my everyday life, but that I tend to be more interested in ideas generated from these events than in narrating them. I also tend to write long fairly narrative first drafts and then cut, cut, cut until I feel the poem is compressed enough to retain the force and energy of the original experience.

### **Andy Jackson**

Most of the poems I write come about as a result of my own experiences. Something happens, and I can't just shake off the experience—I feel the need to translate what is happening in my body into words—to make sense of it, but also to leave the physical sensations and mystery of it intact, which is the value of poetry, I think. I want to say “this thing that happened is significant, and it might imply X or Y”.

I should say that “Impossible space” isn't typical for me. It's a little armchair-like in its perspective—it comes from reading about a protest in Northern Ireland, which I have no experience of. Still, I'm sure I felt a need to write it because of some affinity I feel with the prisoners in it.

### **Alyce Miller**

It's always tricky to talk about where ideas for poems come from. “The Uninvited” was triggered by several experiences I had years ago when I was living back in Berkeley, California. Over a period of time I came home to discover very disturbing messages on my answering machine but the callers hadn't left numbers, and this pre-dated caller ID. I worried about these strangers who had “entered” my life and left something behind. Then I imagined them coming to sit down at my table. I also had a neighbor who was dating several men. Her boyfriends would show up and if she was with someone else she wouldn't answer the door. I used to watch her juggling these boyfriends and wonder how she did it.

The poet poem is actually based on a real poet who is quite famous and with whom I once had dinner, and who behaved very badly. I was so angry about the event I thought I'd write a short story about him. Then I realized the story would fail if all I did was rail about how he'd acted. I began working on it as a poem. It was a way of working out some of my annoyance with a terrible evening. I made much of it up, but there are a few true facts (he did order expensive wine that he expected my students to pay for, and he did offer to read the girls' poems, and he did say he was painting these days).

### **Steve Mueske**

Both poems were composed over the span of several years and something like 50 revisions. A few years ago, I was reading the novel *Ahab's Wife*, by Sena Jeter Naslund, while waiting for the bus outside work. There is a scene in the book where the protagonist, as a young girl, is climbing the stairs of a lighthouse in the dark. This triggered a memory of climbing a fire tower's stairs when I was eight or nine. I had not, to my recollection, ever remembered that particular event before and I became intrigued by the whole notion of memory, the implications of it, what gets assigned to it, etc. In early drafts the poem was very short and only focused on the scaffolding of the situation. As the poem developed I began to see that there was a relation between the idea of power (place in life) and height. In earlier drafts, I was so obsessed with memory, that I failed to understand this relationship. In later drafts I expanded the sensations both of climbing and the details of tower itself and in this I was able to create a sense of existential nausea. Once I had that, it became a fulcrum to explore these two themes further.

Where I live, the fog gets very thick several times a year. I had been reading Charles Olson and became very interested in the idea of writing a poem as a form of dialectic: the physical

and the implied; life and death; words and white space (At one point, I was very frustrated with how the words appeared on the page and began to spread them out—this opened many doors for me in the poem); presence and erasure. Once I had the form, the poem only took another 2 or 3 drafts to finish.

I don't really have a typical way of writing. In a big picture sense, yes, this is very typical. There is first a trigger. There is a series of exploratory drafts, a period of thinking, a breakthrough, and a final series of drafts.

### **Martin Ott**

I don't have a typical writing process. Sometimes I work from a concept. Sometime I experiment with form. Sometimes a poem develops from a free writing.

The two poems in *Segue*—"Roswell Cowboys" and "Craters of the Moon"—represent vastly different processes. Roswell Cowboys took many years of contemplation and a short time to write. Craters of the Moon took seven years of writing and editing until I brought the draft to completion.

I heard the phrase "Roswell Cowboys" in a song and started to write a short story about a man reclaiming his life after serving jail time for kidnapping a politician to inform him about aliens arriving on earth. The story became a screenplay that got me an agent. I wrote several drafts with a screenplay partner and even tried to produce it. When I sat down to write a poem inspired by the same concept, I realized that the core of this idea was my own love of daydreaming about whether life exists on other planets. This concept propelled the draft of the poem and it came out almost in final form.

I began writing "Craters of the Moon" in grad school and it wasn't very good because it was about ideas, not things. Three years later, I placed a man and woman into the poem and it got a little better. A few years after that, I added a thread about the moon spliced from another failed poem, and I liked the final collage effect.

### **Eve Rifkah**

The poems in *Segue* began with one poem and then snowballed into a series. I usually begin with a series in mind but this one took off on me. The Kid poems are memoirs in the 3rd person with a different voice. I want to escape the "me" that is too prevalent in poetry today and still write about the events of my childhood.

*In general, at what point during the writing process do you attend to issues of craft-things like imagery, rhythm, meter, line breaks, form, etc.? How separate is craft from the poem's subject matter during the writing process?*

### **Sheila Black**

Craft is never separate from the writing process. It is the writing process. Having said that, I don't consciously think about craft when writing a first draft; it is only afterwards that I go over and over a poem and try to make those kinds of decisions. I imagine this process is

different for everyone, but I almost never write poems in stanza form the first time around, and often my first revision is to look at whether I feel a poem should be broken into stanzas or given more a more formal shape. I also tend to write first drafts very quickly and make up for my quickness there with my slowness in revision. I rely heavily on my ear—reading poems aloud is embarrassing but it will tell you where you are going wrong. Important for me in revising is often looking at groups of my poems together or thinking about how they would work in a manuscript. Looking at groups of my poems can often help me see the weaknesses in individual poems—for example, certain turns of phrase or types of images I rely on too much tend to become very noticeable when I look at groups of poems. That helps me make some of the hard decisions about revising—such as cutting that extra flourish or trimming back that image that is much loved by the writer but may do little for the reader. The Russian short story writer Isaac Babel wrote some wonderful essays about writing that I often mentally refer to when revising. He said basically that when he was young he often tried to write in the most elaborate and inventive way possible but that he had learned through much trial and error to remove those flourishes, pick them out as one would pick out lice from one's hair (!). He said the essential thing to writing well was that every word be as simple, accurate and beautiful as possible.

### **Andy Jackson**

These days, when I start writing a poem, the writing is quite quick and semi-conscious—blurting out lines and phrases onto the page or the computer, trying to keep within the state of mind that initially prompted the writing, trying to follow that state as far as it will go, trying not to over-think. When I first started writing, that was all I did. But now that I'm addicted to self-editing and re-writing, I find that after a few drafts of a poem, I become more hard-headed and critical. Clichés tend to sneak in, and I try to be ruthless in rooting them out. If I were to divide poetry into art and craft, I'd say that it starts with art and ends in craft. But of course it's not that simple—I can't stop thinking about imagery and line breaks even while I'm doing the first draft, and while I'm adding (or deleting) the final touches I still want to access the feelings and ideas that are the core of the poem. Poetry for me is always form and content, both inevitably implicated in the other.

### **Alyce Miller**

There is no separation. Form and content and craft are all part of a piece. I can't imagine choosing one over the other. Craft supports your vision. It's like in music—you have to have technique or you play like lead.

### **Steve Mueske**

I think it's nearly impossible to separate writing from craft. As the draft progresses, I tend to pay more attention to sound, pacing, word-choice, etc., but in truth a lot of this is subconscious in the early stages. Writing, poetry especially, is a continual practice; the form in which it appears is necessarily tied into the creative process. On one end of the continuum there is content and the form in which the content appears (words, images, etc.); on the other end, the poem already has form but needs modeling. It can't move from one end of the continuum to the other without modeling. To be sure, this is the longest part of the process: deciding which words are carrying their weight, setting up rhythmic sequences to speed up or slow down the reading, best words / best order—all the matters we place

under the rubric “craft”. The term, though, is sort of a catch-all. You can’t get two poets to agree on what poetry is, much less how it gets to be poetry.

### **Martin Ott**

For me, a poem’s first draft is about electricity and the loss of rational thought. In edits and rewrites, I think about structure, meter, line breaks and form quite a bit.

### **Eve Rifkah**

Craft comes in from the start. The form of a poem follows the voice in the poem. There is no separation.

*In general, how do you go about deciding what imagery, rhythm, meter, rhyme, form, etc., is appropriate for a poem? What criteria, if any, guide those decisions?*

### **Sheila Black**

I don’t know that you make those decisions entirely consciously; I think most poets have to rely on instinct (and luck) about this at some point—the poem has to be alive, first and foremost, and thinking too hard about questions of “appropriateness” tends to make it harder to let the poem come into itself. Poets who are lucky find a voice and form that allows them to convey the information they must. I also think poets (and writers in general) must often make their own luck. I think what you can do is read and read and read other poets as much as you can and work to develop your own personal taste—following the best models never hurts, even if at first you fail miserably. Over time you will learn to feel what works for you as far as imagery, rhythm, meter, etc., and what works is usually what feels most natural. I know I became a much stronger writer when I began reading in depth more of my contemporaries. Before that I had taken much of what I knew of poetry from Keats, Shakespeare, and poets of the fifties and sixties (Plath, Berryman, Elizabeth Bishop, etc.). It helped me a great deal to start learning more about what poets today are doing...

### **Andy Jackson**

I'd like to say the poem chooses its own form. At the core of the poem is a feeling, an experience, a situation, and while it might have a vast number of appropriate forms, one of them usually just occurs to me as being 'right'. The seed is usually a phrase—something that sticks in the mind and stirs up emotion or thought, preferably both; something that sounds like it's going to lead somewhere that's interesting to me. I then try to go wherever it's leading. Sometimes it goes nowhere. Other times it goes where I didn't expect it to. I'd like to say the poem is in charge. In reality, I'm sure the poem is swamped in my own habits, tendencies, almost unconscious preferences for particular metaphors or images.

### **Alyce Miller**

You hear it in your head, for starters. You hear a line or a voice or an image and then you just go for it and see where it takes you. Sometimes it dead ends. Sometimes it eludes you for a while. And sometimes if you're open to it, and follow it, it will take you with it.

I love form and many of my poems are very "formal." I have always found that "formal limits" allow for possibility. For example, I have written sonnets that have allowed me to access subject matter that I couldn't access in fiction or nonfiction or even free verse. Form and content—they're inextricable.

### **Steve Mueske**

I work almost entirely by intuition. I very rarely work in form because I'm not a huge fan of formal or metrical work. As far as imagery goes, it depends on the context. For metaphors, there needs to be a fresh comparison, but the ground (unifying element between compared things) needs to be universal enough to make the connection between writer and reader. The language needs to support the tone of the poem (a unified conceit, believable personification, consistent diction, etc.) For "straight" images (images that are not comparative), the physicality of the image depends entirely on word choice. This has many components: how the word feels in the mouth, the length of syllables, qualities and characteristics of phonemes, arrangement, context, and rhythm. The same word can be used to much different effects in different situations. The color purple, just as a quick example, has two plosive sounds. In one context (bruising, the color of storm clouds) this might indicate violence. In another, it might be paired with softer words to achieve a quality of lushness.

### **Martin Ott**

As an early poet, I worried quite a bit about meter, rhythm and form. My early work was much like that of a musician's who is technically savvy, but thinks too much to write a song that "grooves." The best thing you can do is read a lot, study the poems you love and understand why they work. Apply those learnings to your own work.

### **Eve Rifkah**

I write a lot of persona poems, mostly historical documentaries. The voice guides the form, the diction, rhyme etc.

*What part of the writing process do you struggle with most, and how do you work through it?*

### **Sheila Black**

Revision is always the hard part for me. I love writing the first draft—the rush of words and instinct. I hate the slowing down, the necessity of weighing every word, and thinking about it from every direction. I change lines, change them back, and change them again. Over the years, I have come, however, to see revision as deeply, intimately, colossally necessary—what has helped me value it so is looking at my original first drafts against my agonized-over final fifteenth or sixteenth drafts. The latter are always much better even if it didn't always feel that way during the making of them. I should add that there are those occasional perfect first drafts—the poems that come out fully made and make being a poet feel like being on holiday....

### **Andy Jackson**

Achieving enough distance from the poem. I mean, the capacity to see the poem's flaws and weaknesses. I'm quite willing to do the pruning once I can see how a particular image or phrasing is holding the poem back—the trick is developing the sensitivity. I've only been editing my poems seriously for around six years now, so I'm still very attached to my words.

Time helps. The more I write and edit, the more I'm able to recognise clichés and prosaic expressions. But also, if I leave a poem for a while, when I come back to it, I'm more able to bring fresh (inner) ears to it. The other thing which is invaluable is feedback from other poets. I get together with two friends once a month or so for mutual discussion of drafts. They're people who are able to tell me what they think works and what doesn't, and they're often right.

### **Alyce Miller**

Hard to say. Each piece is different, with its own demands. Sometimes it's getting the first draft down on the page that's the hardest. Sometimes it's revision. I recently published a poem that went through about 50 drafts. I kept wanting it to be something it wasn't. Finally, the poem won out. It went from being a rambling 3-page monster to a tight 20 lines. I think I wasn't "listening" to it.

### **Steve Mueske**

Each poem presents its own particular problems and each phase of the writing process is different for each poem, but I think it is hardest for me to get a solid first draft written. When I say "solid" I mean getting the first draft of the poem as good as I can get it. I think it is important to separate roles while writing—It's one of the best ways to get around the voice of the internal critic. After the first solid draft is done, the poem enters an editing phase: what words are necessary? what are the central themes? are there rhythmic patterns, stresses, recurring words or images? This is where I start to work on structural concerns. The rewriting phase is a long process of generating new material, modeling the old, taking out lines. I love revision, and this process involves a constant back and forth between editing and rewriting. This is where the poem really starts to take on a life of its own. I've talked in the past about a certain sense of invisibility – after the poem has arrived, you surrender, in a certain sense, to a kind of attentive intuition about the way the poem should develop. There is no wrong or right way to do this, but for me, it means not forcing the poem to be what you wish. This is the quickest way to make it stale and lifeless.

### **Martin Ott**

I struggle with faith. In myself. In the world. In the power of art. I work through my doubts by writing through the bad times and the good times. If writing feels like torture, don't do it! Play racquetball, cook a soufflé, fly a kite. Life's too short to do activities you are not passionate about. Return to writing when your self-editor is asleep.

### **Eve Rifkah**

It is all a struggle! How do I work through it—well it is all part of the writing process—all the rewrites—all the work—any craft taken seriously is a struggle.

*We don't want our poetry to be "formulaic"-over-thought, overwrought. We want it to look and feel organic. We also want our poetry to contain an element of "mystery"-to engage the reader's imagination and curiosity, and not simply tell the reader what the poem means. How do you decide if a poem has enough detail to be clear and coherent, but not so much that it gives its meaning away too easily? And how do you know when a poem is finished?*

### **Sheila Black**

As someone who tends to always write in that extra line, that extra flourish in my first draft, I have learned the craft of making the poem feel less over-thought, over-wrought. Here's what I often do: I read over the poem and ask myself where the highest point of energy is—the part where the poem seems most fully to live, most fully to draw in the reader. I find this point in the poem will often for me be four or five lines from the end, and often what I do then, if I can, is simply end the poem there. I also often experiment with beginning the poem at a later point. In my case, the first four or five lines are frequently where I am writing my way into the poem. Beginning later often makes the poem feel more organic, energized and gives it “the element of mystery” that lets in the reader. I also look for places where I give the image away—a common problem with me, basically you give the reader the image twice and usually you can see pretty clearly in revising which version is the most interesting. Once is enough almost always. I have also become more daring in leaping from image to image. Often you can create the effect you want by simply laying two images side-by-side and cutting out the explanations in-between. I suppose my philosophy if I had one would be that a poem should teeter on the edge of coherence but should also be held together indelibly by some deeper coherence. A strong voice can often allow you to do this. Tony Hoagland, who has written some excellent essays about poetry, has a couple that are very helpful in thinking about voice, “Self-Consciousness,” and “Negative Capability: How to Talk Mean and Influence People.” You never know for sure that a poem is finished. Think of “The Moose,” by Elizabeth Bishop, which it is said, took her twenty-six years to write. I am always still tinkering with poems. I guess I consider them provisionally finished when they get published, but even then....

### **Andy Jackson**

This is something I'm wrestling with right now. I'm building up a collection of around 80 poems which I'm hoping to get accepted for publication, and part of the feedback I received on an early draft of the manuscript was that there was too much of my own opinion—the poems were often too spelt out. I've come to believe that it's one thing to write a poem whose parts all fit together, that sounds right, that expresses ideas you're passionate about, but it's another thing to write a poem that welcomes the reader in, but then can also bear repeated readings, that is flexible and multi-faceted.

I try to get to that point by wrestling with it over and over, but also, as I said before, giving a poem time and exposing it to other people's opinions. I've read someone say that they've heard a little click when the poem was finished. For me, I know it's finished when every detail, right down to punctuation, feels like it couldn't possibly be altered or removed without damaging the whole thing. Of course, sometimes I think it's finished, and a few months down the track I read it again and one word or a whole stanza looks obviously out of place. It's also been said that a poem is never finished, we just decide when we're finished with it.

**Alyce Miller**

I am never sure when any of my writing is finished. That's the scary part. But there comes a point when you feel you've gone as far as you can. Maybe being finished is about reaching one's own limits as a writer at any given time. At any rate, I think it's important with poetry to allow it to lead you places you haven't expected. If you're surprised by what happens, the writing is likely to be stronger than if you simply plod along to a pre-determined ending. You have to be willing to go with the unexpected.

**Steve Mueske**

I think this is a question every poet has asked at one time or another. I have no idea how to tell when a poem is done. If you don't stop, you can ruin a poem's energy. If you stop too soon, it might not be developed as well as it needs to be. Often, I'll have to dig back in earlier drafts to recover a line or a word that worked better. All I can say is that I get the poem as good as I can get it and then accept the flaws it has. My perception of various pieces changes over time. What one day I love, the next day I hate (and vice versa). Some poems will never work. Some come after only a few drafts. Most, for me, take anywhere from 20 - 100 drafts and several years. What usually happens is, I'll think a poem is done and put it away for six months or so. I'll take it out and look at it, and I'll usually be able to tell, right away, what the remaining problems are. That last aging element, for me at least, is crucial.

**Martin Ott**

If you are writing out of anger, your poetry will probably lack in mystery. If you attempt to make political points or save the rain forest, your poem will probably fail. If you write circles around a subject or let the words drive you to places you have never been before, then you are on the right track. If you read your own poem and marvel at who could have done such a thing, then you've nailed it.

**Eve Rifkah**

Mystery is a great word here. And that old cliché—show don't tell. There is way too much bad narrative out there now. I see it all the time as a journal editor. A poem is more than the story it might tell, it is sound, and breath.

*Whom do you write for—yourself, another specific person, a community of readers? Do you have an ideal reader? How does knowledge of your audience affect your writing process?*

**Sheila Black**

I know many writers picture an ideal reader. Nabokov, for instance, always pictured a clever cultivated woman reading his books and used her judgments to shape his edits. I don't know that I've ever gone as far as picturing an ideal reader, but I do think to myself that poetry at its best leaps across time—in other words, I try not to write too hard for the fashion of the moment but to envision the poem read by anyone (wishful thinking perhaps) in fifty or a hundred years. I also think poets live in a world where there is not much fame or money to be had but there is almost always, wherever you are, a small community of poets or people interested in poetry. I often think I write for that—because the small community of poets and

poetry lovers is such a low-tech, personal alternative to the mass media global world we live in. It is a way of staying engaged on a very personal level. I think in learning to write you have to think about audience but at the same time you can't think too much about them. I always write my worst when I am writing hardest for a particular audience—a contest, a workshop, another person.

### **Andy Jackson**

Apart from poems that you write just for friends, you never know who your audience will be. You don't know who will turn up to the reading, buy the book or journal, who'll have the poem copied and given to them. And even when you have a pretty good idea, your idea of how they'll respond is never quite accurate—people are complex and other factors can influence how your poem is received. So, I believe it's counter-productive to try to second-guess them, as if an outcome can be engineered. That said, I don't just write for myself. I do want to communicate (though not in a straightforward, logical way). So, when I write, at one level I have a hypothetical audience in mind—attentive, sensitive, curious and intelligent.

### **Alyce Miller**

We all write, I think, to someone known as "the implied reader." I don't have a particular reader in mind, but I kind of have a vague sense of readers, either past or present, of "someone out there" who may read this. Writing for yourself strictly is a much more personal, private kind of writing, like what one does in a journal or diary. It's not meant for other eyes. But writing with others in mind is about expressing more publicly what and how one sees. So there is an element of communication there. I think there is so much to appreciate in a poem (language, image, sound, meter, rhythm, etc.) that it doesn't always matter if you "understand" it literally. There are poems I've read for years that I love, but have no idea what they're about. And usually when I hear other poets read and they "set up" a poem by telling about its origins and how it all connects up, I end up being very disappointed. But I also think you shouldn't be coy about a subject. If you're writing about love, racism, war, loss, or whatever, just go for it. Don't walk around it. Don't be overly-vague. Don't use abstractions. You can't force mystery. Mystery happens when you are paying attention and looking closely. Mystery comes out of specifics and particulars. Mystery comes from things concrete.

### **Steve Mueske**

In all honesty, I never write *for* an audience. This may seem idealistic, but I feel my real job is to usher the poem into being. Having said that, the more I publish work, the more I feel the presence of a community watching my work unfold; there is a kind of self-consciousness in this. I've noticed that I work more slowly now, more deliberately than I did, say, four or five years ago. So far, I don't think it's affected my writing process.

### **Martin Ott**

We write and share poetry because it is one of the few ways that we can engage in a larger dialogue about art, beauty, philosophy. It is tough to communicate meaningful ideas in IM or text messages. Poetry is not "cool" but it is life affirming. For me, that's reason enough to read, write and discuss poems with others.

**Eve Rifkah**

I write for the world. There is no ideal reader other than the one who is reading me. Publishing it validation of what one does. Think about picking up a phone and talking without dialing. Who are you speaking to? The same with writing.

**Why write poetry?****Sheila Black**

This is the hardest question of all. For me I think it is because my version of religion or meditation—a process that keeps me deeply and passionately engaged with the world, with observation, consideration, thought. I write poetry because I think it is beautiful. I write it because it has no particular useful purpose. I write it because some of the minds I love best wrote it so well, write it so well. I write it because I always get the chance wherever I am to meet other interesting people through poetry. I write it because it allows me to praise and protest. I write it because it keeps me awake.

**Andy Jackson**

See answer 1. and 6.

**Alyce Miller**

Because it's really fun.

**Steve Mueske**

This morning, on the bus ride into work, I was reading a book of poems by Jan Zwicky, *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth*. In the poem "Cashion Bridge," the line "this is the difficulty of beginnings" appears. As soon as I read that line, I had an itch and knew that I will have to write a poem called "The Difficulty of Beginnings". I write poetry because it demands a kind of attentive listening at all times, a devotion to the art. Writing poetry demands that we engage with the physical world in a way that transcends the linear progression of time.

I discovered poetry quite by accident. I was made to serve (almost daily) detention while I was in high school and needed a way to fill the hour of time I was required to sit in a desk and serve penance for my perpetual tardiness to classes. I checked out a book of poems by Carl Sandburg and remember quite clearly being taken with the way of speaking that was like speech but closer to song. I also remember not liking the content of the book very much, but I trace the itch to write to that circumstance, that realization that there was another way to speak. Early on, I think it was a kind of private language for emotions, and the quality of poems I wrote reflected that: I wrote several hundred pages of the worst poems imaginable. It wasn't until I'd got into my thirties that I really began to understand what poetry was, what it could do, what it demanded.

**Martin Ott**

If you ask yourself this question too often, you probably do not *need* to write poetry.

**Eve Rifkah**

Because I can't stop. It is part of my life, my sense of creativity, my love of sounds and language. The need to make something that did not exist before and hopefully will exist after I am dead.