

Thresholds

Poets in residence

Remember: poems are not descriptions of things.

Don't look for 'something to write about'. Let it look for you. Poets don't really write 'about' things – they write with them.

When your object finds you, make a meticulous description of it, so you can remember it. Take a picture on your phone if you can. Make notes on its history, use, inventor – you never know which of these details will spark a great poem.

As we say, 'subject matter is pretext'. That means that despite the fact you *think* you're writing about Newton's prism – it'll often turn out to be an excuse to write about something else. Chances are your object will really be a symbol or a metaphor of some feeling, event, situation, idea, person, buried memory – that will surprise you.

The object will not appear in front of your nose but (often quite literally) the corner of your eye. Poets pay great attention to their peripheral vision.

Don Paterson's advice to young poets visiting museums

Read poetry! If you don't love reading poetry, you're no more likely to write a half-decent poem than a person who hates music is to write a great song. Once you've read a lot of great poetry, read some rubbish poetry, and try to say what the difference is.

Write about... whatever you're avoiding writing about. There are dragons guarding all the good stuff.

Make your poems up. "Poem" just means "a thing made", so don't steal them - even from yourself. "Interesting or poetic things that happened to me" rarely are, in a poem. Your job is to shock the reader into a moment of wakefulness. This means the poem will have to surprise, delight, scare you or blow *you* away first - *in the actual writing of it*, not the idea you had for it. Write the poem you're writing, not the one you want to write. The poem will have ideas of its own, and they're better than yours.

Write with feeling, not about your feelings.

Be bold and be original. Poems must speak memorably. Don't confuse originality with novelty. For something to be original, it needs to be already partly known to the readers, otherwise they can't tell if it's original, only that it's weird.

Don't be too abstract - or too concrete. Most great poems achieve a natural balance between thought and image. Find a happy medium between imagistic clutter and airy abstraction. Stanza means "room", so furnish it accordingly. Think of images as pieces of furniture, and thought as the space that relates them meaningfully. Don't make rooms where there's no room to move, and don't make rooms with nothing in them. You want people to linger there, walk around, look at things, and think about them. Don't be afraid of thinking aloud in a poem.

Sound and sense are the same thing for poets: unify one and you unify the other. Poets like to use repetitions of the same consonantal sounds, and contrast them with careful variation of the vowel sounds, against which their rhyme and assonance can leap out. Form and rhyme and metre should be the very engine of your writing, things that direct what you write - not something you tart poems up with towards the end of the process.

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Many poems, for all their brilliant imagery and metaphor, are boring because of their repetitive syntax. One easy way to cure this is to think about the way a poem moves through time and space; in other words, shoot your poem like a Hitchcock or Spielberg. (A poem of Seamus Heaney's will often go something like: tracking-shot/zoom/flashback/dissolve/pan/fast-forward/jump-cut/tracking shot/still.) To accommodate those movements, you naturally have to write interesting, varied sentences.

Break lines on words you'd like the reader to linger on and think about more than others.

Use metaphor. Poems try to say things normal speech can't, and make us look again at the familiar by making it strange it. Train yourself to experience the world anew, to see the pavements frying with rain, the black wheat in the sea at night, nerves in bare trees, or hear the whoopee cushion in the saxophone, the distant gunfire in your Rice Krispies. With enough practice, this stuff should flow like water from a tap. (The trick is learning how to turn it off. See under 'insanity'.)

Be patient. A poem is a process and not an operation. The only real joy you get from poetry is writing the stuff! Anyone who is desperate to get the writing over with as quickly as possible is no poet.

Towards the end of the process, read your own poems as if they were someone else's: only then will you see the really bad lines. This is the hardest lesson of all, and the one thing that marks out the serious poets. Read them to poem-writing friends, and learn to take criticism. Remember the poem isn't you, and poetry must be a generous act. You're trying to give it away, not keep it, so make it something someone else will want to have. That's usually the same as something *you* would want – something strange, beautiful or surprising.

Don Paterson

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