



“The language and imagery  
awoke something inside of me...”

–Tammy Cook

*tweetspeak poetry*

## A Little Book of Poetry Stories & Poems

people told us their  
personal poetry stories,  
in prose and poetry, during  
national poetry month 2021.

now you can enjoy them, too.

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## *fell in love*

I fell in love with “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” by John Keats as an adult student taking an English Lit class at a community college. The class was part of the basic gen ed required of everyone working towards an associates degree. My degree program was Human Services, but I was enthralled by Keats’ poetry. The language and imagery awoke something inside of me that I had never experienced as an avid fiction reader. That poem brought me to tears, and I became a poetry reader after I read it in class. I have recently begun writing poetry at a life stage where I have little time to write anything else. I find it easy to compose a poem in between household chores and caring for an aging husband. Most importantly, I’m finding that it helps me cope with the challenges of my own aging process.

– Tammy Cook

## *she gave me*

The very first poem I read was on cross-stitch hanging in my grandmother’s hallway that is now in MY hallway! She was amazed I could read it in kindergarten; who knows if I’d memorized it? “Come, dear old friends, Drive up in state. Your welcome extends, Both early and late.” I think actually my grandma was a great influence, because she gave me a book of poems for children in 1966 for Easter. It was there I first read about Winken, Blinken, & Nod, AA Milne, and the Pirate Don Durk of Dowdee. I still have that wonderful book, now falling apart after decades of love, with my beloved grandma’s handwriting in the flyleaf!

Why do I stay with poetry now? Because it’s music and color in words. Because I teach future teachers, and there’s so much of life to be celebrated with poetry– I want them to rejoice and laugh and even cry a little with their own students! Because predictable books with rhyme help little ones develop reading fluency. And because poems help us process our feelings, paint pictures of our souls. I don’t think I’d have survived a rough adolescence without journaling and poetry.

– Patty Rieman

# *fill the heart*

Ms. Leah says...

I am Leah!

Leah, I am!

My love of poetry started with fam.

A favorite of mine is Green Eggs and Ham!

As I grew up and got to 5th grade,  
my teacher grabbed me with poems she made.  
A journal we started for her in class,  
and my love soared with each page passed.

Mrs. O'Brien

My teacher of English class

Poetry she taught

Now, I'm a para in a 5th grade classroom,  
and convince children poetry does not mean doom!  
We read poetry and tear it apart,  
to dig deep a meaning to fill the heart.

—Ms. Leah

# *ink & tears*

I dabbled a little in poetry all the way back to elementary school, when words always entertained as well as intrigued me. But nursing school, a busy nursing career, and raising a family left little time for playing with words on paper. My daughter has been blessed with a writing talent far greater than mine, and reading her work has inspired me to dust off my pen. I have found writing poetry to be a superior form of therapy for me. My ADD mind is generally roaring like a hurricane and condensing my thoughts and feelings into poetry helps clarify and distill my emotion down to manageable portions. The words often fall like tears onto my paper, and editing my work is as if I am blotting those tears... When ink and tears are both dry, I have revised my thoughts and my life.

Writing has thus allowed me to reframe and manage much distress as of late. Being a mom and a nurse during a pandemic has not been the only challenge I have faced. I was recently told, at the

age of 51, that I unexpectedly and rather urgently need heart surgery. This is the most current poem-turned-therapist...

### **Curtain Time**

My heart and mind become night.  
Do I think dark thoughts;  
Does death stalk me;  
Do I find peace and rest;  
Amidst the cadence of the sterile theater?

I choose peace.  
I choose the stillness of my beloved lake at dawn,  
Birds quietly stirring from their slumber as the morning  
mist wanes.

I choose trust.  
I choose trust in the maestro with his hands in my chest,  
Conducting a symphony to restore the percussion  
of my life.

I choose faith.  
I choose faith in the God who created me and

guides my life,  
We have more work to do.

I choose love.  
I choose the love that surrounds me, waiting  
to exhale,  
As if it starves all fear until I wake.

Let's get started,  
Let's get started,  
Let's get started.

I choose peace;  
I choose trust;  
I choose faith;  
I choose love;  
This is my new beginning.

—Cheryl Mann

# poems like air

**High school English**, and everyone always complained, even laughingly, that the poems didn't make sense.

They were so hard; what were they trying to say? I would sit quiet in my corner desk, keeping the truth to myself: actually, the poems always meant something. They unfurled like flowers on the page before me. One summer, I read Shakespeare on my own, for fun. (I still catch a warm, weighted shift in the air when I think about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and can picture that gorgeous painted cover, feel the blush-colored slip of a book in my hand.)

In college, majoring in English Ed and then English Lit itself—all the books before me! I thought I loved novels the best. Introduction to Poetry was a sweet breeze, though (I still have the anthology with my markings, my favorites), and oh, Poetry from the North of Ireland. Now that was a class. One week, we were to memorize and recite and present, each student teaching one of Yeats's poems. I sailed to Byzantium, and talked and facilitated my way through the whole 50-minute period. That old bearded British teacher man smiled wider and

wider as the minutes passed. I am still looking to art—and books—to be my singing school.

Still, life goes on, and reading is a luxury when you work 9-5, which is fine. More of those novels. So many, ravenously. Then the kaleidoscope shifted; I left off working in my early thirties, ready for a reprieve. I found it in my first baby and in—why had I never thought to read them before?—essays. I tried my hand at them, too, and now that was the genre for me, Annie Dillard and Anne Fadiman at the apex.

“Do you like to read poetry?” A new friend in those years asked. Well ... yes. I do love poetry. That old reading table laden with fresh flowering lines from years ago and “Joy, gentle friends! Joy and fresh days of love” accompanying my heart and my mind. But read it in the hours my days? Now? Go to it with a lively hand when an empty hour allows? No, I visited Tinker Creek, rather, or the streets of 1930's Oxford with Harriet Vane, so many times I had them memorized. “But why not read poetry?” the friend insisted. “If you

love it.” The truth: I didn’t know how. Sure, I knew the way to unpack a poem, to make the verse work for the world, for me, but it was work. And I had enough jobs at present. I didn’t know how to find rest in a poem, that kind of work so akin to repose that I might as well be sitting still among a field of wildflowers, a bracing cup of black caffeine tea sharpening my senses.

What would it take, then? A pandemic. A sudden shut-down, a stretch of months at home that stretched on and on, and a slew of senseless deaths, soon enough, more weight than my emotions could bear. My appetite for words slowed and changed, no longer consuming books by the day, but sinking into long stories. (Michael D. O’Brien’s “Island of the World” sorrowed and sang me through the second, third, fourth month of all that confusion, fear, and pain) ... and, unexpectedly, into verse. I began thinking in lines, in interior rhythm and rhyme and enjambment. I began writing in verse when the essays wouldn’t come. After all, who could make any comprehensible sense of Covid deaths following a funeral or the lungs of George Floyd crying for air?

It was like they were waiting for me: all the poems I’d ever known and loved, and ones I’d never known. They were everywhere I looked, the poems and the poets. Everywhere I read, and everywhere I wanted to read. Seamus Heaney and Edwin Muir and Aimee Nezhukumatathil. Edna St. Vincent Millay and Billy Collins and Naomi Shihab Nye. Poems like air, like life. So I guess I didn’t make them mine, actually. That’s how the poetry took ownership of me.

—Rebecca D. Martin

# heartbeat

The table was set with our favorite teapot and mismatched teacups with saucers picked up in our latest thrifting adventure. Poetry books were scattered around the table, waiting to be opened and a favorite poem read. I called my children to the table for our first “Poetry Tea” and they ran through the house as though it were the best day of the year. After pouring tea in everyone’s cup, and passing around the cookies I grabbed at the store the night before, I invited them to pick up a book and choose a poem to read out loud. To break the ice, I went first, reading a poem that they had learned to recite a year ago—one we all knew and loved:

There is no Frigate like a Book  
To take us Lands away  
Nor any Coursers like a Page  
Of prancing Poetry –  
This Traverse may the poorest take  
Without oppress of Toll –  
How frugal is the Chariot  
That bears the Human Soul –

~Emily Dickinson

Once I had gone first, they were eager to read the poems they had selected, and we spent an hour and a half reading poetry to each other on that rainy afternoon.

I hadn’t read poetry in years. My high school English teacher’s question of “But what does it mean?” still rings loud in my ears, but this time with my children made me start to see that poetry is not about meaning; poetry is about emotion. Prioritizing poetry for my children has become my own gateway to loving poetry. The more poetry I read to them, the more I want to read poetry for myself.

I started a poetry journal a few weeks ago and am learning to write my own poetry. There’s something so freeing about being able to write all my emotions without worrying about whether or not it’s appropriate. Poetry is the heartbeat of humanity, I’d like to think.

—Crystal Rowe

# *bloom & nest*

## **Poetry in Bloom**

Poetry is  
Dancing in the rain,  
Watching the stars at night,  
Planting the seeds in the ground  
Like the droplets  
Of life giving water  
That make the flowers bloom.

Poetry is  
Sharing scary stories  
By the campfire  
That keeps the darkness at bay,  
It's a way  
To connect with my past  
And summon the future,  
To heal and to grow  
And learn new things.

Poetry is  
Owning my life,  
Living my truth,  
It's taking a step  
Into the unknown  
Just to see

Where the road  
Will take me.

Poetry is  
My "me" time,  
My safe space,  
My flowers in bloom.  
It's as close  
As I can come  
To having a perfect day.

—Tatiana Lyulkin

## **Affiance of Poetry**

"Greater than the achievement of poetry I cannot envisage,  
Poetry enters one's heart and soul brings life to one's melancholy,  
It can come into your life leaving you with a promise of future,  
So that one will be clutched to affiance of poetic peroration,  
I am now that which is clutched to such an affiance,  
As that of a nest in the tree clenched to sapling twigs,  
And so I shall vow to accept this affiance for all perpetuity"

—Andrew Guzaldo © 2019



# *inviting me out*

**I started writing poetry** in grade school. In fact, I won a contest in second grade for a poem. Its first lines are: “When I was just a little kid / I did a lot, that’s what I did.” I went on to describe an almost godlike me who created all sorts of things. When I showed it to my mother she made a “correction” I knew was wrong, but caved to her authority. I had written “I made all the churches where preachers preach,” which she suggested I change to “clerics preach.” Bad decision, and an important lesson.

I wrote on and off through high school and college (where I studied with Conrad Hilberry, one of the most generous poets ... and, if one can have a favorite ... he’s mine). I quit writing when school was over and life was ho hum humdrum. Then one wonderful spring day I was stuck in an incredibly boring lecture at a conference being held at a building on the grounds of the West Virginia State Capitol. Glancing outside, I saw a stately oak inviting me out. So I brought the pad and pencil I had been doodling with

and sat under that tree the rest of the afternoon. There, I decided to make a poem for my two kids, then six and four. It began “Archibald Pedalman lived in a cup. When he tried to see out he could only see up.” It was a decent kid’s poem. I thought, with a good illustrator, it would make a fun book, but I never moved on that. It was the first of many poems I wrote for my kids. They were coming thick and fast, it was like I was in the zone for a couple years, then ... nothing ... till COVID. I have been working hard every day, now writing “adult” poems which are helping me through these strange times. A few people are encouraging me to submit somewhere, but ... I don’t think they’re yet ready to meet strangers. But I’m working toward going public sometime!

—Alex

# *belonging*

**What does a little girl know of love?** Something to hold onto. Something for comfort. Poetry was that for me—short to the point—no waiting for the mystery. Just beauty in my hands, and if I could say them, could memorize them I could hold the beauty within myself. Because we didn't have books of poems in my home, I knew I would always need to give them back.

Fourth grade I heard “Little Orphant Annie” by James Whitcomb Riley for the first time—read at Halloween—and after that, we students would begin to plead for it beginning the first of October, and then all join in the chorus “ef you don't watch out.” It was in that recitation with classmates that gave me a sense of belonging.

“Sea Fever” by John Masefield was the first poem I memorized—before then it was states and capitals, Presidents of the United States and the Gettysburg address. This was an accidental find in the library—

I copied it down to carry with me. The beach, the water was always a refreshment for me, and this again was my way to have it with me. It was also the first “literary” gift I gave my parents—a picture of a tall ship sailing, cut from a magazine and pasted onto the the page and the poem in my best 6th grade handwriting pasted on top of the ship.

“Little Boy Blue” by Eugene Field was the next poem I memorized. The images stay with me to this day. Poetry became those dusty toys. Throughout high school and into college there were too many other classes—the sciences, the maths, the composition, the foreign languages. No time or courage to explore poetry beyond the requisite introductions. No one was really saying to me I could write poetry. That was for those creative types who somehow found people in their lives whispering *write*.

When I began teaching high school in Holly Springs, MS, it was 90% African American and not a single book in the library by a person of color. I spent the next two weekends typing up poems selected from Dudley Randall's *The Black Poets*, a text from a Southern Literature class I had taken as a final elective before graduating, typing them onto purple mimeograph stencils to be run off on Monday morning in the school office. Twenty pages of typed and retyped packets, for twenty-two students, to have an introduction to their own heritage in poetry. The next year, teachers were offered some free classes through the local university—no credit which meant no risk for me. I took a creative writing class and wrote poetry and prose. It opened a window for a short time, then closed again. There just wasn't going to be time to write poetry and do everything else I was supposed to do.

That was 45 years ago. Looking back I see times I sneaked it in—to read or write. Letters to grandparents about their first grandson were often in poems, college sorority “songs” were my poetry set to com-

mercial theme music, poems written for celebrations, family member memorials, as recognition for the “greatest generation” being recognized at an annual church dinner. So little kept. That wasn't how I was raised—not practical.

Right now I have a more steady relationship with poetry and a community of friends who have been mutual support during Covid. But like a lover rediscovered after years of separation, there are thoughts of really how much time we have left together. And like newly rediscovered lovers, we're making those sweet and bittersweet moments poetry.

—deb y felio