

Writing From The Earth: An Essay on Place, Poetry & Prose

I write in the field, sitting in my house in the center of a west-sloping circle of half-brome, half-native prairie surrounded by hills of forest. Sometimes I sit in the grass and write in the wind. Sometimes I huddle behind my desk staring at the ten or more shades of tan that create winter in the distance. But it is always the field that surrounds me, that I remember when I'm apart from it, the field that teaches me most about how to write.

In the field, I hear the rhythms that climb and run, fall and sleep through and around me. In the field, I let go of finding the words enough to find the words. Over and over, I have the sense that everything I need to know about poetry is right here. Just listen. Just stop.

My writing comes from this stopping, this listening. My poetics is best described by poet Li-Young Lee who, in a recent interview, said: "The whole Universe is humming, is vibrating. It's that hum that I want to hear. That's the subject of my poems....The words are like birds that perch on this frequency of sound." **(Continued from site) →→→** In the 25 years that I've been writing poems, it has always been this humming, this vibration, this frequency of sound that draws me to the page. The words drop in to hold up the rhythm, and the rhythm carries forth the voice of the poem, the essay, the story.

The humming is everywhere, those rhythms of one place or another give us a deeper sense of where we truly are and who we truly are. To be awake enough in any place is how we let fall away enough of the other noise of the world to hear what sings beneath the human-made world. But, of course, what place, just like what muse, resonates for one person may not touch another.

It took me a while to find my place. Growing up in Brooklyn, N.Y. and central New Jersey, I rarely felt at home. I would stare at trees through an apartment window, or years later, walk past the bounds of our housing development, and pace along corn fields, making up poems in my head. I dreamed of living far away, and my Polish grandfather, who emigrated here as a child, told me that when I was very young, I told him I was going to live in Kansas when I grew up. In my early 20s, I discovered not just Kansas in general but this field in particular -- this land that had been in my husband's family for five generations. Immediately, I wanted to be here, and now that we've built a house, and tend the prairie grasses we're growing in a conservation program, I'm learning where I am.

Now that I've been a Midwesterner longer than I was an easterner, I'm finally starting to see more clearly the patterns that sift through the land, season by season. I'm slowly building a relationship with particulars here -- Butterfly Milkweed, Big Bluestem, deer birthing season, spider migrations, thunderstorm season, Sumac.

So I wake up in the morning and always go first to the windows to see what crows call out their domain over our compost pile, what deer linger along the woods or walk slowly near the kids' swing set. So I go to sleep at night staring at Orion through the window while coyotes fight each other on the hill or owls call in a broken harmonic. In the summer nights, I walk out to the herb garden to watch lightning bugs in the grasses even if it means I'll have to shower right away to knock off quick chiggers. In the fall, I watch

the sumac glowing red in the rain. In the spring, there's the redbud that's never red and the slip of bobcat or bluebird in the nearby woods if I look the right place at the right time.

And here's what tends my words, in the middle of a field, in the middle of the continent. I'm very grateful to have found this place.

While I always had this strong draw to place, to sky, to breeze, to tone of color on the horizon or flit of bird through a tree, and I remember wanting to create something - a drawing, a poem, a song - from the flood of impulses these signs of the living earth unleashed in me, it's just in the last 16 years or so that these impulses to create have led me to the borders in, and deep into the territories, of teaching. "But you can't teach writing," conventional wisdom says. And perhaps such wisdom is true, but what I know even more to be true is that many, many people of all ages and backgrounds having an increasing need to find and forge some meaning for themselves through the act of telling and writing and listening to their stories.

My writing workshops with adults often undergoing big transitions in their lives or working the daily drudge of trying to recover from the wounds of addiction, abuse, estrangement, or even just years of not feeling heard or seen for who they are constantly show me the simple miracles that can happen when people gather together to create a space in which they can write and then speak their truths. Creating this space together though is probably not the most accurate way to describe what happens: it is more like tuning into a space already there, the quiet when we collectively try to put aside the rapid-fire hit parade in our minds and listen to one another.

There is something analogous between witnessing one another and witnessing the earth. Both acts require a surrendering of what we usually swim, drown or flood over the banks of our minds. Both require the suspending of disbelief in a sense, the putting aside of everyday judgments and opinions and well-worn stories we tell ourselves of who we are supposed to be and how the world is supposed to work. Instead, we come together and just listen - both to what rises up and comes to the page when we write, and to what one another reads aloud or says. For those being witnessed, there's a powerful sense of safety that often allows them to connect with a wider view of themselves and the world. For those witnessing, there's a freeing too of how deep and open the world, beyond our prior conceptions, can be.

But it also means dwelling in what we don't know. Sitting on the earth and trying to contemplate the mysteries inherent in a square inch of dirt could take you a lifetime. The same is true for a square inch of our, or anyone else's, being. Furthermore, listening to another means learning somewhat of a new language: the awake language they use...(and we each use to write of ourselves.....)

Maybe it's a way to tune into whatever that collective humming is in the universe, or at least how the wind tangles itself through the branches of a small cottonwood at the edge of a field.