



Letters to a Young Writer

WILLIE PERDOMO

To my son, Willie Neruda,

I am writing you this letter from the Children's Defense Fund headquarters in Clinton, Tennessee. It is located on what used to be a farm that belonged to a famous writer named Alex Haley, who wrote a book called *Roots*. The CDF was created to ensure that poor children get the basic necessities of life—food, health care, and education. To that I would like to add poetry.

I'm here to talk about the influence that Langston Hughes, a poet who lived in Harlem, where I was raised, had on me as a writer. Langston Hughes is one of my favorite poets, an African-American man who wrote poems about landladies, numbers runners, bar owners, dancers, and the regular folk on the street. He had access to the wealthy and their habits, but preferred to be closer to people who were common; shoeshiner stories, garbagemen tales, and seamstresses who could sing. I've been called a Street Poet because I write about these people—the people who I grew up with in the El Barrio section of New York City. I like to write in their voice.

Langston was designated the Class Poet when he was in eighth grade because his classmates, who were all white, thought he had rhythm. Now you need some rhythm to write poetry, but the exciting thing about poetry is that you can write to your own rhythm.

You are only two weeks old, and I'm writing you this letter because one day you will want to know why I became a poet. I always loved words, the way they are put together to make a picture. In first grade, I used to pretend-write. Zigzag lines from the left side of the page to the right side until I had a healthy stack of zigzag compositions. The act of writing was as fun a game to me as duck-duck-goose or tag.

As a teenager I was slower than Larry Bird and I didn't know how to talk with girls I liked, but my sensitivity was being fine-tuned by the sounds I heard while trying to go sleep. The arguments in the alleys, the bottles crashing on the street, the games being played in the yard, dogs barking and cats meowing kept me wondering about the life that was being lived on the street while I slept. I felt power and excitement in being able to describe those sounds.

The first poem I ever wrote was called "El Barrio."

It was a short poem with rap lines like

walls crying with gunshots
girls talking to boys
boys walking with poise.

I was trying to give the reader a feeling for what it was like to live on my block. Since then I have always tried to use poetry as a journey through my neighborhood. While my friends were all getting reputations for being fighters and great athletes and notorious lovers, I was writing poems. The day that my first book came out, my childhood friends celebrated and started showing it off to their families and friends. Since that day I am known as "that kid from Lexington Avenue who writes poetry."

One of my favorite poets said that you need to ask yourself if you can live without writing poetry, and if you can, then you really don't need to be writing poetry. I have a friend that says sometimes you don't find a book as much as a book finds you. Poetry found me while I was trying to find who I was and why I was here, on this earth, in this world.

It was your mother who suggested we call you Neruda. I like the sound of your name: Willie Neruda. Neruda is the last name of a very famous poet named Pablo. I know many people who fell in love after reading his poems.

They say that every son thinks about following in his father's footsteps. I don't want you to think that you need to be a poet because your father was a poet and your parents named you after one. If you came up to me one day and said you wanted to be a poet, I would give you what my first mentor gave me: a copy of *The World According to Apples* by John Cheever and *Leaf Storm* by Gabriel García Márquez. I would also give you a copy of *Letters to a Young Poet*, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, and *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas. If you don't read, you will not have the tools to build verses, and no sentences to tell stories.

If you wanted to be a poet, I would tell you that your poetic voice is *your* poetic voice, and you have to work hard to discover it. I would tell you that some of the greatest love stories ever written are about men who have been in love with the same, unavailable woman for 66 ½ years, and that some poets write poems about the same lover for the same amount of years. If you decided to write poetry, I would tell you that there are some people who think that being a poet is like being a saint. Poets devote themselves to poetry with every bit of energy and conviction they can find.

You come from a family of storytellers and musicians. Your uncle was a conga player who could talk with drums. He could create the sound of fire by slapping on a bongo. Your grandfather loves a good bolero and is a great orator. Your great-grandfather is a troubadour. I visited him two years ago. While your mother was talking with his wife, he played a recording of his music. When his favorite song came on, he closed his eyes, and with rhapsody in his voice he said, "Listen to those words, listen to those words...."

SHARON DOLIN

Leave no offerings for the goddess Envy

—Horace

I know you feel lost, that you're on the wrong path, and that somehow I have the answers you seek. But let me tell you, first, that that is not the case. If Rilke, many years ago, advised a young poet to "live the questions," I am urging you to avoid living other people's answers. Or wishing that you could. I should know. I spent my twenties—and thirties—lost. The only goddess I served was the goddess of Envy. (And even now, I still sometimes leave her offerings—perhaps, even, this letter.) I recognize in your letters and e-mails the incipient sting of envy and I urge you to quell it now. I hope that telling you a bit about my life will help serve as negative inspiration.

I can remember many an afternoon at bookstores, scanning the tables, lifting volumes, and paging through to the all-crucial author's biographical note. How had this poet gotten to where she was? Did she teach? I was so busy pulling up my own roots to see if they had taken that I remained rootless, free-floating, always regretting where I was, and certain that the road not taken would have made all the difference. Oh, if only I had been as devout as Herbert, whose faith kept him from envy:

I envy no man's nightingale or spring;
Nor let them punish me with loss of rhyme,
Who plainly say, My God, My King.

But in my experience as a Jewish poet, I began to find a place for doubt, a way to keep writing in spite of uncertainty and envy. I would mouth the prayer of the legendary Reb Nachman: *Ribbono shel olam* ("Master of the universe")—the same prayer he uttered two centuries ago when he was filled with doubt about the existence of G-d.

Now I am here to forewarn you—at what feels like the ripe middle age of 45 (*nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*), ten years later than I intended (Dante was 35 when he entered the dark wood), but hoping my lifespan will exceed Dante's 56 years—never to sup at Envy's table.

How can you avoid her?

Know that no one's path is your path. Think of

A. R. Ammons, who was born in North Carolina and grew up during the Depression. His circuitous route led him through the U.S. Navy in World War II, a science degree, a job in real estate, even the position of manager at his father-in-law's glassware factory in South Jersey. It was not until he was 38 that he began teaching poetry at Cornell University, where he would remain for the rest of his life. How could he have foreseen where he would end up, or the poems he'd write in that landscape of gorges and waterfalls in Upstate New York called Ithaca? In "Cascadilla Falls," Ammons picks up a "handsized stone" and thinks "all its motions into it" as a way to contemplate

each thing's place in the universe. After imagining the large "motions" of the earth and sun, he drops the stone in order to see the micro-motions of the stream, planting himself in the middle of that wonderment:

oh
I do
not know where I am going
that I can live my life
by this single creek.

Of course, it was only by surrendering to that one place, that "single creek," that Ammons could write this poem and so many others. But he couldn't have known in advance.

Paths are, by definition, divergent, labyrinthine. Perseverance is probably the one trait a poet can't afford to do without. I learned that lesson while still quite young from W. E. Hickson's poem, now a self-help platitude:

'Tis a lesson you should heed, Try, try again;
If at first you don't succeed, Try, try again;
Then your courage should appear,
For, if you will persevere,
You will conquer, never fear; Try, try again.

I began writing (if you care to know) as a scribe and typist, making my own personal copies by hand or by pecking out letter by letter on a manual typewriter when I was six and seven years old. I still remember Robert Louis Stevenson's "My Shadow":

I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me
And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.

And I still have the tattered manila envelope containing these treasured copies of poems I handprinted and typed. What strikes me now is not the choice of poems (Eugene Field's "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod" and Emily Dickinson's "Autumn" ["The morns are meeker than they were—"]) among them), but that all are transcribed without attribution. Here was the opposite of envy. As a scribe, what I wrote I believed I possessed.

I was still happily breathing inside others' words. At what point did I trade in my adulation of others' words, dismount from Pegasus, and become a votary in the Temple of Envy? I must have been in my twenties when I began to gaze at the photographs of poets, then down at their biographical notes, as if I could divine some magic recipe for getting there. I never did. You never will.

If Rilke advised a young poet to “live the questions,” I am urging you to avoid living other people’s answers.

Teach me to hear mermaids singing,
Or to keep off Envy’s stinging . . .

Now while John Donne may have thought it was impossible to keep Envy from stinging, I have discovered the best way to ward off Envy is to keep busy with your own work. For I believe there exists a rather strong connection between the vice of Envy and that of Sloth. As Ovid, in his *Epistles*, writes:

Envy, slothful vice,
Never makes its way in lofty characters,
But, like the skulking viper, creeps and crawls
Close to the ground.

Now, in my mid-forties, an elder in the house of Envy, I have asked her, at last, to release me so I may reside in the house of a different muse—one I’ll call the Filial Muse. For what I realize (as certainly you must) is that poems (and lives) are inspired less by envy (*pace* Harold Bloom; remember, critics are not poets) than by exhilarated admiration. For Livy, in his *Histories*, envy amounts to a kind of backhanded praise: “Envy like fire always makes for the highest points.” The same for eighteenth-century poet John Gay:

Fools may our scorn, not envy, raise.
For envy is a kind of praise.

Oh, of course there’s Rivalry, but if you allow it to rule, it will not make you write better poems. It will only make you gnash your teeth, lose sleep, and get an acid stomach. Remember: Envy and Wrath shorten the life, as it is written in Ecclesiastes. And you want to live long enough to write your best work.

Lorine Niedecker had the least enviable life of any poet I know, yet aren’t her poems inseparable from the life she lived, mostly on Blackhawk Island in rural Wisconsin? She went to Beloit College for two years but had to return home to care for her mother who had gone deaf. She worked at the public library, then at a radio station, and as a proofreader, though she had very poor eyesight. By 1954 both her parents had died, leaving her with very little money. What struck me hardest was that for five years, from 1957 to 1962, she worked at the Fort Atkinson Memorial Hospital as a cleaning woman in the kitchen sterilizing plates and silverware and scrubbing the cafeteria floors. As Marjorie Perloff describes in *Poetic License*, “Every day she walked the five miles or so to the hospital and back again to her one-and-a-half room cabin without plumbing on the riverbank.” This was right before she married, somewhat happily, at age fifty-nine, a man who didn’t even know (or perhaps care) that she wrote poems. She died of a stroke in 1970 at the age of sixty-seven. What a seemingly hard, sad life she led, from the outside. And yet it was out of that “unpoetic” life of drudgery, in contrast to the rustic beauty of the banks of the Rock River, that Niedecker’s poems of compressed luminosity arose. Think of “Poet’s Work,” where she practically brags:

No layoff
from this
condensary

as though to say, “I’ve got nothing to lose and nobody to envy.”

Or think of Elizabeth Bishop, at the other extreme. At age 40 she took a steamer to Brazil. I often wonder how differently her life—and thus her poems—would have been if she hadn’t taken ill through eating the fruit of the cashew and stayed on with the woman who became her lover, Lota de Macedo Soares, for what turned out to be fifteen years. Think how her geography—which is what her poems are (little maps of going, really)—would have been altered: the country not taken, even “One Art” and its continental losses would probably not have happened. Would Bishop have been the same poet if she’d stayed at home? And which home would that have been—Nova Scotia, Worcester, New York City, Key West—unmoored as she was (so unlike her Brooklyn-based mentor Marianne Moore)?

Earlier this year, I tried once more to rid myself of

Envy by writing her out:

On Such a Day as This

nearly summer in fall
to see what Pieter Brueghel the Elder
has to say about Pride, Lust, Anger
and your chief sin, Envy: that undaunted darling
who has stood for four centuries amid the hubbub
pointing to a turkey and eating her own heart
an unripe persimmon the pulp sticking
to her tongue and mouth roof it tastes
good to her it tastes godawful it
tastes
good to you.

Yes, at the end of the poem I am riffing off of William Carlos Williams’s “To a Poor Woman.” For Williams has always been my poetic grandfather—a poet who inspires filial love. And I urge you, too, to find your poetic family: the one you would have chosen to be born into or descended from, poetically speaking.

I leave you with Ovid, who spent the last ten years of his life in exile in Tomis on the Black Sea, after having lived in Rome, the cultural and imperial center of the world, always hoping for a reprieve that would allow him to return home (it never happened):

Live without envy, spend your peaceful years
Unknown to fame, and choose your peers for friends.