

Letter to a Young Writer

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Dear Friend,

I must start by telling you I can never think of Poetry as anything but a loving power, a god who sometimes visits me and visits you along its bright unfolding way. It seems quite fine to me that Jack Spicer called these visits “dictations,” and equally fine that William Blake should choose words like “Everlasting Gospel.” A poem is the efflorescence of a power, evidence of something whose purpose is, I truly believe, our happiness and even our delight.

And so invited to offer advice to poets younger than myself, I choose a text whose pretext is just such a happiness: powerful, sudden, and shared. I’m saying I carry a poem in my pocket. It’s not a mantra or a model. It’s good news and evidence. These days, it’s a later poem of William Carlos Williams’s—“Iris.”

a burst of iris so that
come down for
breakfast

we searched through the
rooms for
that

sweetest odor and at
first could not
find its

source then a blue as
of the sea
struck

startling us from among
those trumpeting
petals

All the reminders and advice I could hope to share are here. (And, of course, elsewhere—always a good idea to change the poem in your pocket to remember poetry never changes.) And so, again, to begin:

A poet, whatever else he or she may be, is not a creative writer. As Emily Dickinson opined, “Unto the Whole—how add?” The world creates itself, and poetry is pleased to show its new creation to our words. Williams’s “burst of iris” is the author of the poem. What Williams writes is the record of its authority and of his coming to his senses, all of which lead to an iris.

And so, clearly, there’s no need for imagination. It would be a downright hindrance. The poem is entirely of its real place and moment. Nothing is missing which imagination might supply. Write where you are. Our art is simply one form of attention, a going out to meet the world that comes so freely, so effortlessly to us and to our senses. It would be an effort not to smell the “sweetest odor,” an effort not to seek its “startling” source. Imagination is just such an effort, and who needs it as long as there are flowers?

Always welcome distraction. Remember Baucis and Philemon. They were eternally rewarded. Williams’s poem is one delighted upshot of distraction, something much better than the breakfast for which he’d come downstairs. You cannot come to your senses by closing your ears and eyes. Poets don’t need retreats; they advance. Poetry is a wild god, and our piety consists of an always grateful bewilderment. (I love the 17th-century form of *bewildered*, i.e., *bewildernessed*!) To be amazed, one must enter, willingly if unintentionally, a maze. Think of the first line of John Ashbery’s “Some Trees”: “These are amazing.” And God knows what prolixities “Kubla Khan” might have sunk beneath without the blessed haphazard of a person from Porlock. After all, it was the same Coleridge who found himself redeemed by distraction in his great “Dejection: An Ode.” A raving wind blew him out of his mind and into the next valley, where he was loved. Leave the window open. Answer the door. Catching the fragrance of a flower, go and find it.

I come to a plain distinction, and there, I find, is everything I know about being a poet. There is mind, and there is mindfulness. Throw away your mind; it is a ragbag of wishes and words. Mind can only recognize the wearing and worn-out measures of itself. If you find yourself in a cave, you needn’t unpuzzle the shadows on the wall. Turn yourself round and walk into the sunshine making them. I forget what wonderful American preacher it was who once said “If you find you’re rubbing the cat the wrong way, turn the cat around.” Whoever he was, he knew a very great deal about Poetry. He was mindful. Mindfulness has eyes and can be surprised by joy. It can find an iris.