

Letters to Young Poets

DAVID LEHMAN

Dear Karl. I'm glad your reading list includes the mother of all lofty letters to young writers, Rilke's: "There is only one way. You have to go into yourself. Determine why you write. Has the source spread its roots in the depths of your heart? Ask yourself whether you would have to die if you couldn't write. This above all—ask yourself in the stillness of the night: must I write?" Yes, read *Letters to a Young Poet*; his elegies and sonnets, too. But don't stop there. Read Keats's letters, Emerson's essays, Gertrude Stein's lectures, Randall Jarrell's criticism, Auden's prose. Read the Metaphysical Poets, Milton, the Romantics, Byron's comic epic, Poe and the Americans, Whitman and Dickinson, Meredith's *Modern Love*, the French Symbolists, Mayakovsky, Apollinaire, Eliot, and Stevens. Read everything and everyone, and imitate someone great. The best exercise is to imitate something great. Next best is to write in forms.

Dear Allyson. I loved what you said about resisting the impulse to write a motherlove poem and think, "There, that's perfect, that's lovely."

Dear Danielle. I agree. Adding "you" to an "I" poem almost always improves it. There are other tenses besides the present, other points of view besides the first-person singular, other things to write about besides the errands of the day and the horrors of war.

Dear Carly. The enemy of poetry is *should*.

Dear Peter. James Merrill in an interview warned against the tendency to rely on "the first-person present active indicative." The present tense is, Merrill said, a "hot" tense that "can't be handled for very long without cool pasts and futures to temper it; or some complexity of syntax, or a

modulation into the conditional—some alternative relation to experience. Otherwise, you get this addictive, self-centered immediacy, harder to break oneself out of than cigarettes.”

Dear Mark, Mia, Patrick, Huy, Shobita, Matthew, Erin, John, and Alex. You can rescue an unsatisfactory poem by wrecking it. You wreck it by scrambling the lines or running them backward, omitting every second word, or replacing every noun with, say, “Ohio.”

Dear Christine and Anita. Keep a notebook. Write every day. Compile lists of possible titles, pages of similes, overheard phrases of interest. Collaborate.

Dear Loretta. Feel free to dislike anything. As James Schuyler put it: *Ulysses* is a masterpiece “I suppose,” but “freedom of choice is better.”

Dear Chris. Hello. Sometimes it is easier to write love poems when you are not in love. A love poem does not have to be written to anyone in particular. A love poem invents its recipient. P. said: The reader comes into existence when the writer ceases to be. Not sure I agree with that. O. said: Sincerity is a bogus virtue in poetry. You don’t respond to Shakespeare’s sonnets by testing their sincerity. E. said: the less autobiographical, the truer the poem. If you write “my father,” the reader will assume you’re writing about your father even when you aren’t. So be it. The last sentences of Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy* describe the universal origin of all writing: “Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining.”

Dear Anne and Mark. Don’t feel you need to make sense all the time. Your poems don’t have to change the world. They just have to give pleasure.

Dear Ruth. Good revision. The ending is lovely, as is the personification of the car (“hot yellow eyes”) and the streak of monosyllables in line five. Cut “the crunch of leaves underfoot.”

Dear Len. You might want to give William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* OKAY? a second chance. Don’t worry about the ten-page paper due in December. You have already fulfilled the requirement.

Feel free to dislike anything.
As James Schuyler put it: *Ulysses*
is a masterpiece "I suppose," but
"freedom of choice is better."

Dear Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel. Do not read reviews. Many people with strong opinions and the need to air them are loudmouths or bullies, and if you could see them for what they are, you wouldn't crave their approval.

Dear Victor. Ignore the a@\$hole. It's hard enough to be a writer. It's even harder to be a thin-skinned writer.

Dear Nikki. Writing about what you know may not be as great as writing about what you don't (yet) know, but it sure beats writing about the dialectics of loss, bullshit without a dream, gnostic visions of critical theory as the latest capitalist rip-off plot, ambition without heart, energy without mind, or the satisfactions of the flatterer, who masturbates in hell writing self-aware narratives.

Dear Laura, Justin, Matthew, Erin, and Phoebe. Eight drops cedarwood oil, two cups sea salt, two cups baking soda. Soak for twenty minutes.

Dear Sami. I think "ain't that a mother"—great title—could use a little work. I'd cut "the silent scream" (too familiar) and "all I can say is / I love you."

Dear friends. There will come a time when someone else will win the prize that you deserved, or the job you coveted, or the publication you were banking on. It might even be the person sitting next to you right now. And you will feel envy, you will feel resentment—you wouldn't be human if you didn't. But you cannot afford to give in to these feelings, because envy and resentment, if allowed to fester, can turn easily into bitterness and even spite, and these things are poison to a writer. To ward them off, you will need to go deeper into yourself, into your heart. You will need to remember that awards and publications and jobs—great as they are to achieve—are not the reason you undertook to do this work in the first place.

Dear Victoria. Pity the envious, the resentful, the spiteful. They communicate their disappointment in life.

Dear Shanna. Hello. It is one fifty A.M. and no one is sleeping.