

Life in the Raw with the Personal Muse.

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No-one ever told us we have to study our lives, / make of our lives a study —Adrienne Rich

When I was a professor, I professed to know. Since leaving that job, I often feel that what I really know—all I really know—is within my personal experience. Inside the life we live, we have it all—with its flaws and failures, its sadness and triumph—that's where we survive and struggle: intimately, ignorantly, courageously. Where better to find our muse, our personal voice, than in the lived lives we have?

When I think of the idea of 'The Muse', or 'The Personal Muse', what comes to mind is the image of the nine fluttering Greek goddesses of the arts, or the designation of Sappho as the 10th Muse, a label later given to various women poets such as Anne Bradstreet. Robert Graves made popular the idea of the Muse-Poet based on Celtic tradition. 'No Muse-poet grows conscious of the Muse except by experience of a woman in whom the Goddess is to some degree resident,' he wrote. 'It is through the experience of a love with a woman in whom the Goddess resides that the muse-poet writes.' There is a certain amount of maths in this: Male equals poet; Muse equals woman.

This may leave women poets in something of a quandary. In the book *My Self, My Muse* (2001), Irish women poets explore their forceful movement away from the traditions of the Celtic muse. Eavan Boland writes of the difficulty of the definition of poet being closely associated with a canon dominated by male poets, yet one on which all poets are expected to model themselves. Each of these Irish women poets discusses the difficulty of trying to write when the identity of 'woman' is seen to be so different to the identity of 'poet'. When women write about their lives the work is often seen as 'domestic', while the 'grand themes' of poetry deal with much more 'important' topics.

In Australia, having no powerful muse traditions of our own, women poets are left with none but ourselves. No male nymphs for us. Women poets tend to subvert the male tradition. Struggling with the domestic, and a male canon that respects 'distance', we are challenged to find where inspiration actually resides: and that place is within.

Looking back on my own work for this essay, I was surprised to see a poem from my first book, *Filigree in Blood*, recognising something like a muse. In that poem, 'Visitation', the

experience is sensual and sexual, in fact ‘loss of virginity / to a gentle man’. But the lover/muse brings ‘the crystal of moonlight, / all female, / that writes the black line, / clean strength’. In my third book, *Fiery Waters*, nine years later, and after many years of poetic silence, there is a poem ‘Lost Muse’. That muse is part of myself, the ‘otherness’ in me, intimate and shadowy, that is required to merge with the more corporeal ‘me’ for the creative moment to begin. The muse has been laid down to rest but I, preoccupied, have wandered off into barren and strange places alone, losing her, calling for her and searching. She too is calling and searching for me and when finally we are mutually found, she is near death:

She says we may not be able to lie down
in each other again & even the tempest of
colour & light we made may be gone, blanched,
and the baroque indulgence of sense & word
smudged pallid & the bloody rich lines wrung
out into dust. So I hold her wanness
to me tongue to tongue, thigh to thigh, our ragged
pulse waiting for rain & there may be a death here.

There were nine years between my poems referring to the muse. In the years between I had become involved in social and feminist politics. Political work used a different part of my brain: analytical, organisational, even confrontational. I stopped writing poetry. Unexpectedly though, when ‘Lost Muse’ arrived, it seemed to spring out of the unconscious. The style was dream-like and flowing. I realised then that the personal Muse is the embodied unconscious, the unknown and unknowable factor that bursts forth into the line on the page. It can also be the vacancy of the creative moment and the process of the poem itself. In the years I didn’t write, something was seething, something was growing in the dark. Finally it pushed itself forward, imposed itself in my mind, requiring me to craft its rebellious energy, its intense passion, into the thing itself: the poem. Now ‘the gristy poem, / murmurs my name’ (‘Visitation’). This surging out is necessary because, as Virginia Woolf said: if the moment passes, ‘all may vanish as a dream; worse, future creation be endangered, for only removal and development of material frees the forces for further work’. It’s exciting, elemental, fragile. And personal.

The writing of poetry is lived. It is not something we *do*, but something we *be*. It requires a life of observation, an openness to experience, an ability to empathise, an engagement with the transforming power of image and metaphor. It requires a moment when the self is put aside, akin to mediation: an absencing of the self, so that the poem may appear. Often the word ‘muse’ appears here—in trying to explain that momentary self-absence. Many writers have tried to understand the moment of that creation. It requires what Virginia Woolf called ‘receptive waiting’.

It also requires what Seamus Heaney called ‘technique’, ‘a definition of his [*sic*] stance towards life, a definition of his own reality’. That technique is the form the poet’s voice takes in bringing forth the poem out of experience, feeling or thought. Elsewhere Heaney writes on the ‘voice’ of the poet as being a poem written in such a way that no other person could have written it. This is an ethereal definition; but a true one. Something about the finished poem aligns itself with and within the poet in an almost physical sense. The rhythms, movement, breath moments, images, colour, shape of the poem indicate the poet’s inner voice. Here is unconscious invention—the beginning in experience, the allowing of the poetic moment to open, the capturing of some placement of words, some rhythm interior and familiar to the poet themselves.

Then comes the real work—the shaping, the editing. The first set of experiences can’t be learned; the second, the editing, takes decades to develop, a study that, for me, is unfinished. Often the result is a poem that seems as if no process has occurred at all.

Too often free-verse writers are seen as merely ‘gushing’ onto the page, as if somehow no effort has gone into craft, as if the line-endings are random and without intent. To offset this, some free verse has its own internal logic in the placement of fullstop/sentence endings in the middle of the line. I don’t often use this method, but want rather to create a layering effect of image as particulars build up, and to create a dramatic moment in the poem. I want to guide the reader’s breath and have the emphasis fall on a particular word. My line endings are mulled over for a long time and often changed and rearranged over many drafts.

Free verse has to work hard. It needs internal rhythms, sometimes internal and subtle rhymes, a certain ‘voice’ or feeling in the placement of words, and strong reliance on image or metaphor to carve its place into poetry as opposed to prose. And all the time it should seem as if the poet has simply ‘spoken’ to you. I want to avoid obscurity, difficulty that loses the ‘common reader’ (Woolf’s term). Irish poet Eavan Boland has written of the need to have poetry located in life, to be accessible to readers who draw on poetry in times of exploration, ritual and common life. She was writing of the impact of modernism but the terms she used are useful here. The reader has a ‘centuries-old, bright partnership’ with the poet, ‘an ancient trust’, and poetry can follow ‘a man or woman through life, whispering in their ear from their first infatuation to their final sickness’.

Kris Hemensley once wrote to me that my book *Shadows at the Gate* was ‘a deeply consoling’ book. He made an important point about the accessibility or undressed/unobscured nature of the poetry and its relationship to ‘truth-telling’, as well as the ‘*semblances* of simplicity’, which as he notes, are also made, crafted, constructed:

Reading your books, following your saga, was a strange consolation to me because it wasn't a dressing up of language, even of the kind I was wont to practice; it seemed a fairly straightforward story telling, where the truth of it was the impetus more than its effect. Of course, for the poet, the truth is as it's trusted to emerge. The poem finds & accrues its ways via the poet's truth-telling impetus. In addition, the consolation I felt was on the rebound from meta-poetic sophistication & obfuscation. I was ready for the semblances of simplicity & transparency, knowing that these had to be achieved, made if you like.

My poetry has always been about my life, and that can be the interior life as well as the love affairs (mostly doomed!), the health crises, the political positions. In 1996 I was professor and foundation head of the School of Social Inquiry at Deakin University and foundation director of the Australian Women's Research Centre. I had developed three women's studies programs and worked over twenty years for women's rights. As a researcher I had published three academic books, delivered more than a hundred papers and had written sixty book chapters and journal articles on women's issues, women's health, mothering sons, reproductive-technology issues and human rights. I was editor of a number of international journals. I was, for eighteen years, involved in international debates concerning reproductive technology and genetic engineering. I was a well-known public critic who brought the debates about the ethics of reproductive technology, IVF technology and so-called surrogate motherhood into the public arena through extensive media appearances.

Then, in 1996, I was diagnosed with breast cancer and burnout, leading to a forced retirement due to 'disability'. Life changed. Work and achievement, both of which had defined my sense of self, faded in significance. My full attention went to my sons, who were only two and five. I had been a single parent for a year but now that took on new meaning. I had to retire and deal with ongoing panic attacks and, increasingly, depression. I turned inwards, beginning a Buddhist path of reflection and meditation practice.

I tell you this 'story' to draw attention to the differences between merely relating a tale and embodying it into the craft of poetry where it sears into the reader; lodging there in a place close to the heart. This is merely factual, rather dry in its presentation, not elevating, not transformed into a line you might take away and roll over and over on the tongue of the mind. It's a story all right, but not changed in intensity by the craft of poetry, the use of images, rhythm, the line control of breath and the transforming power of metaphor.

Obviously I choose the more dramatic parts of life to write about. Writing is always a selective process—but in many ways those instances choose me. These are the moments or experiences I simply can't live in any other way. Only in the poem can I capture them and therefore leave them behind. I am a recorder, a historian of private life. I need to have it all down there so I

can move on. I need to share it with the reader because they know about this too. I am bringing it into re-remembering. And, through personal poems, we connect with the lives of others.

When I wrote the sequence ‘Dead Mother Poems’ in *Silence & Its Tongues*, it nearly killed me. I drafted the whole thing in three weeks at Varuna Writers House. It was hugely emotional. I had been waiting for sixteen years to do it; the sixteen years since my mother’s death. I had notes and half-written poems and photos and letters. They had been written at the time of the experiences about to be covered. But I also had a storehouse of feelings never put on paper before.

It took me through the journey of my childhood and my mother’s depression. It came after nearly three years of therapy for my own depression, which I came to realise had been a part of me since I was about eleven. It was both learned and inherited. I wrote of my caring for her in her dying, and then, the realisation fifteen years later, of the damage she had done. In that sequence there is forgiveness and anger and love.

During this writing I discovered how much I had related to, and lived inside, silence. How little I had been listened to as a child in the land of my mother’s depression. That place became almost a character in the sequence: the ‘Dark’. And in the book as a whole, the Dark recurs as a place of silence and loneliness. The loneliness in the initial poems is palpable and exerts itself in nature, even in ‘Venice’, and in the soundless ‘dome’ of the first poem where the poet is trying to send out dispatches through the walls.

After the work was drafted it took a year of editing to get it into shape. I had a difficult time with it—became stuck. I couldn’t let it go. Cutting lines felt like cutting out pieces of my flesh. I needed help in the form of a poet-friend, Alex Skovron, who said to me: ‘*You* need to read all of it, Robyn, but does your *reader* need to read it all? What does the reader need in order to have to have the poem whole?’ It meant shifting to the listener of the poem, the reader—how to get the ‘truth’ of that experience across without too much detail, so that, yes it was memory, story, and ‘truth’, but not the *whole* story.

Though the sequence is personal memoir in poetry, and therefore the ‘truth’, I also left out some pivotal poems because it would really distress my father. Self-censoring out of care. And does that reshape the truth?

If writing is personal, is it cathartic? When people say ‘it must have been really cathartic to write that’, it irritates me. It’s a statement that casts poetry into the realms of therapy—and creative writing is not therapy. It’s an art, one that requires practice and patience and skill. Yes, the writing can *be* therapeutic in the sense that it may uncover for us our own understanding of what we feel or

believe. But that individual experience needs to be made universal so that it reaches out to the next person.

In love poems, the 'I', which may be of my experience, needs also to be the 'I' of the reader's experience. To do this the poem needs to be crafted using images or metaphor, to speak for the experience, to enter into it, to present it as new and in a new way. The use of line length and form to control the reader's breath and to generate the kind of rhythm we want, re-creates story, uncovers the song in it.

Poetry can animate everything, so that life itself breathes through the line. It can make us alive to something new or remembered. Coming out of the ordinary or the mystical, it calls us to ourselves; drawing into view the inner working relationships between the conscious and the unconscious; the passionate intensity of the feeling life as well as the corrugated pathways of thought. Using image to speak, it inspires awe at the way the poet can condense experience on the page. In these poems then, conscious general listeners/readers hear themselves and everything they know and do not know of living. Poetry can inform, renew, move, uncover understanding, create change.

Seamus Heaney put it so well in his essay 'The Government of the Tongue'. Speaking of Elizabeth Bishop's poem 'At the fishhouses', he wrote that the lines at the end of the poem 'do what poetry most essentially does: they fortify our inclination to credit promptings of our intuitive being. They help us to say in the first recesses of ourselves, in the shyest, pre-social part of our nature, "yes, I know something like that too. Yes, that's right: thank you for putting words on it ..."

R.D. Laing once said 'The self is the story we tell ourselves of who we are.' Everything is story. That's how we know ourselves; that's how we survive ourselves. Poetry is the way I survive. Through writing, especially poetry, comes the opportunity to really communicate deeply with another person. Maybe it has to do with the time they need to take in reading your work. In that space, that pause, your intention in your writing has its chance to work the magic of real communication.

At the Australian Poetry Centre's National Regional Festival in Castlemaine in April, I chaired a spotlight session for Judith Beveridge and Canadian poet Lorna Crozier. I raised the issue of 'truth' in lyrical poetry. Crozier had written that her first poem on her dog that had died was an invention—it hadn't. The death had been feared and imagined but not real. She wrote:

What I learned but would not have been able to put into words at the time was that although there needs to be an essential truth at the heart of poetry, poets often lie to get there. A more polite word

would be ‘invent.’ My love and worry about my dog had been real, but I intuitively knew what bit of reality I had to change to make the poem more moving. I learned that the ‘I’ in the poem is not 100 per cent the author, but that it is partly a made-up character that puts herself at the demands of the poem. The poem was better if the dog was dead; ergo, the dog was dead.

I can see what she means. The ‘I’ is partly constructed out of the reality of that life. I’d feel uncomfortable and untrue to myself if the ‘I’ in my poem were not directly me and the story located in fact. Where the ‘not me’ comes in is in the way I might condense the experience or slightly change the season and so on, to make the story more intense. It will be *truthful*, but not totally *accurate*. I feel more ‘right in myself’ writing of an experience I’ve had or been told directly or read. It’s as if I need to get inside the experience to write about it. Ironically I may be able to climb inside the stories and experiences of others because of that terrible ‘merging’ during childhood. My political poems are also written like this—taken from personal experience (see ‘Red threads’ in *Fiery Waters*).

There is also a fiction within truth. We condense, change time, change place maybe—but the poem can still be a truth about grief or love, even if the facts are changed. The truth may be in the feeling experienced—in Crozier’s case the grief over a lost dog is real, though the poem changed factual details.

Poetry gives us the chance to enter the lives of others in a new way; to be guided by that entry into experiences that are less our own but that enrich just the same, a sense of common humanity. The first person, in my experience, connects directly with the reader. But change is always possible. Perhaps the third person might in future books become a renewed way into the poem, or the first person a new character with just enough distance to maintain its own veracity and yet be the story we tell ourselves of who we might be.

During the process of writing *Silence & Its Tongues* I realised something close to the ‘muse experience’, but again it was a very interior feeling. Some of those poems are about the way a depressed mother can fail to delineate the boundary between herself and her daughter to the point where confusion of identity occurs and a merging takes place. This is, of course, unhealthy for the child, who doesn’t learn where she begins and her mother ends. But I began to understand one of the reasons I write personal poetry: so I can hear myself. My muse is the one who stands within me, loves me, and who will always listen. No audience needed—just her. This has been both startling and confronting as I have been finally cutting myself away:

Once words are down here, you’ll be on the outside.

They do it to conjoined twins.
It's bound to hurt.
It's sliding along my spine now —
the filleting knife. ('Adhesion')

So, my own poetry emerges directly from my own experience. But it's more than that. The poetry emerges from the array of experiences that come to many of us in our struggle to live and understand life and death. It is written in the desire to really connect, to communicate. I hope that when people read these books it is themselves they see, with all their vulnerability and strength, their pain and their ordinary courage. This is the universality of our shared life. In all my work, there has always been a desire to find truth as I know it, a belief that speaking and communication are crucial to our connection with our humanity. For me, whether it was my book on identity, *Woman Herself* (1988), or the analysis of reproductive and genetic engineering in *Living Laboratories* (1992), or in my poetry, I want to hold up life for a good viewing. This is, I think, a moral enterprise.

NOTE

An earlier version of this essay was presented as a paper at the Major National Library of Australia in Canberra in May 2008.

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