

TWO JOURNEYS

Is what follows a fiction by Balzac? It would seem unlikely, for there is no one standing out in the dark on a rain-swept night as a carriage pulled by six gray horses splashes down the Boulevard Raspail on the way to the apartment of that singularly beautiful woman, Madame La Pointe, although it does involve a beautiful and singularly gifted woman. Is it a fiction at all? That is a harder question to deal with. If Norman Mailer had written it and its central character were a novelist living in Brooklyn, the author of an astonishingly successful first book called *The Naked and the Dead*, a man deeply immersed in an ongoing depiction of the CIA, he would describe it as a fiction, and he would most likely name the central character Norman Mailer. One of my central characters is named Philip Levine, he is a poet from Detroit, he lives mainly in Fresno, California, where he has an awful job teaching too many courses in freshman comp at the local college, and on this particular summer day he is traveling with two fellow poets by train to give a reading almost no one will attend. It is twenty years ago, he is in his fiftieth year, as I was then, and though I cannot call it a fiction, I will begin now to fictionalize this tale.

I will say the local railway has a reputation for first-rate service, they are never more than a few minutes late even in the worst weather, and on this day the weather is a delight: blue sky with a few puffy clouds overhead as the poets head for the provincial town where their reading, though almost entirely unadvertised, will become the event of that summer's cultural history, a history that will never be written except for the present effort, which

since it may be a fiction may not be a history at all. Shall I say that the events I am about to recount are as true as an old man's memory allows them to be? No, that would not be true, for I am about to give the other two poets fictional names and disguise them so as to protect them. Protect them from what or from whom? Neither does anything to be ashamed of; indeed both behave with marvelous integrity. I will protect them from me, that untrustworthy poet who might alchemize them into former production line workers or assemblers of universal joints and thus ennoble them to a degree that would appall both them and you. I will remain Philip Levine, 49 years old, six months from my seventh book of poetry, *The Names of the Lost*, and my first terrible reviews by that great friend to poetry, the *New York Times*. The other two poets I will give fictional names. The man, just approaching middle age, is slender, taller than I, and though still in his thirties his hair is beginning to go gray, but he is far more youthful and youthful-looking than I, and unlike me he dresses with good taste. His name, Gabriel Sienna. The woman is even younger; she is fair-haired, delicately constructed, and in the soft light falling into our car very beautiful—I shall call her Elaine Langer—though she cannot be much over thirty her poems have already begun to attract enormous attention.

I am pleased to be here with these two who I am beginning to like far more than I expected. Sienna, I had heard was something of a dandy and a political conservative, but for the past several days I have observed him treating working class people—waiters, maids, cab drivers, cops, train conductors—with a grace and regard that I immediately recognized was part of his democratic nature. Elaine had been a mystery to me. I had met her only twice before when we'd read together in New York City and Iowa, and both times she had insisted on referring to me as the star. To me a star was Marlon Brando or Willie Mays, so I had assumed—incorrectly—that she was either ditzy or sucking up to me in the hopes I might advance her career, but it was now clear to me that she was not so stupid as to think I was endowed to advance anyone's career, even my own. In the few days we'd been traveling together it had become clear that she was neither ditzy nor a careerist: she was simply a shy woman. That she had not the least interest in me or Sienna as sexual or romantic beings was clear from the moment we'd assembled in the capital, for

she was mad about a very handsome, stylishly dressed young man who sat sleeping across the aisle from the three of us, perhaps exhausted by the previous night.

To our mutual delight Sienna and I had discovered that before this trip we had both been rereading *The Prelude* by Wordsworth and finding it both awesome and inspiring. For me this was largely unexpected, for I had not read the entire poem since my undergraduate days when my professor had forced a class of a dozen students to race through it in less than a week and to keep our eyes open for the key passages which might indicate its deeper themes. Rereading the poem in my own sweet time I discovered the majesty of passage after passage, which reaffirmed my belief in this art I seemed to be giving my life to. Elaine broke in at one point to express her astonishment that two active poets would spend so much of their summers on so dated a text and would both feel the experience had fueled their own work. She was not in the least critical. To the contrary; she was utterly charmed and vowed that when these readings were over and she was home she would sit down with Wordsworth and Keats (who had been the topic of the previous day's train conversation) and discover for herself these treasures. Here the fiction or the history or the poem—for as Edwin Muir has reminded us, "the poet's first allegiance is to imaginative truth" and "if he is to serve mankind that is the only way he can do it"—grows crucial, for one of us, Sienna or I, asks where she had received her education in poetry. (For the purposes of this "history" I will invent a university and place it in Peoria, the University of Ambition, famous for its dedication to the arts, often referred to as "the Athens of Central Illinois.") Elaine answers, "U of A," and Sienna then inquires if she had not been obliged to read the great Romantics. At this point tears well up in her eyes, and it is clear that some memory just come upon her is devastatingly painful. The three of us are silent for several minutes.

Elaine wipes her eyes with the back of her hand; she does not cry. She begins a slow explanation: she had gone to the university with the express purpose of becoming a poet. She was some years older than the other entering students having done "other things" after finishing high school, and one of the other things was to try to become a writer on her own, chiefly a writer of poetry. She knew no one in her New Jersey town who wrote poetry

so she had to go it alone and discover what she could. In the local library and in New York City bookstores she happened upon three kindred spirits: Louise Bogan, James Wright, and Theodore Roethke, but she was sure there were many others and hence her enrollment at U of A. Her entrance scores were good enough to allow her into poetry writing and a "period course" in the Romantic poets, courses usually reserved for juniors and seniors. "So you've read Keats and Wordsworth," I say, "and you've been sitting here for two days listening to us mis-describe their great poems." Once again I had it wrong. While they were still on Blake and what her teacher termed "the Pre-Romantic poets," he had asked her to visit his office so that they might discuss her Blake paper. And then she laughs, her face full of lively animation as well as sorrow. They never got to her paper. Tweedy Professor X put down his unlighted pipe and launched into a spiel about the evils of nursing an unacted desire, both his and hers, for he was quite sure they felt *that way* about each other. The lust of the goat, he assured her, is the bounty of God and one law for the lion and ox is oppression (he didn't say which one he was); he placed a long-fingered hairless hand on her knee. "Long fingered and hairless," she repeats, "I will remember that hand for as long as I live." She felt the sweat leap from her pores, and for a moment she thought she would faint. "What did you do?" asks Sienna. "I just got out of there." She dropped the course.

Elaine goes on to explain that it was actually more serious than it sounded in the telling, for she began for the first time in her life to doubt the value of poetry, to doubt the whole enterprise. This of course was noticed by her poetry-writing instructor, a short, balding man much impressed with his own wit and vitality. He required the students to turn in poems written according to strict formal demands. He had lavishly praised her first two attempts, ten heroic couplets and a Petrarchan sonnet, which were followed by no villanelle, no pantoum, no narrative in blank verse. Professor Y, or Mac, as he insisted his students call him, asked Elaine to stay after class on their sixth meeting. When the other students had departed, he closed the classroom door, turned suddenly toward her, and literally shouted, "What the fuck is going on?" He began a long rap on the theme of her special gifts and his generosity in allowing her into the class in the first place. Before she could begin to describe her own problem,

he launched into a tirade on the need for these beginners to follow the proper path, the path their elders had followed, the path that had produced such giants as Nemerov and Justice. She tried to assure him that her situation had nothing to do with the ongoing quarrels over formalism and free verse. "You have the talent to become a published poet within a year, and I have the clout to see you are published. I've done it for others." And then he began to rattle off the poets he'd "made," a word he used before each woman's name. His hands were short and plump; they looked as though they'd never picked up anything heavier than a check, and he placed one on her shoulder and began to slide it down toward her left breast when she rose and called him a "fat pig." She dropped out of the university that afternoon. "I'd had such hopes for the place," she says and goes on to describe her bus ride to Chicago, her confusing hours there, wondering if she'd done the right thing, and then the even longer lonely trip back to New Jersey. She spent the year as an office worker for a textbook publisher in New York City commuting from her parents' place.

"When did you get back to poetry?" Sienna asks. Within a month or so she realized she could not let herself be scarred by those two creeps; poetry was something she had to write, if only for herself. "It's a long story," she says, "but I had the good fortune to discover through a course at the 92nd Street Y a true mentor, also a man, but one who cared about me as a person as well as my work." Her lover, Daniel, has wakened across the aisle and is stretching himself. The train is drawing through the green suburbs of our destination; we pass tennis courts, most of them in use, a small white church, and then enter a darkened tunnel only to emerge into the terminal. We rise and that conversation comes to an end forever as Daniel struggles with the two huge suitcases loaded with the clothes, makeup, and tchotchkes of this small and determined woman.

Is the fiction you've just heard true? If Aristotle in the *Poetics* is right then it is truer than history, or to quote Edwin Muir again, it is "a symbolic stage on which the drama of human life can play itself out." Let me ask a more essential question: Is it of any use? Does it contain any nuggets of wisdom you can take with you on the long voyage toward a life in poetry, or if you would prefer, a life without poetry? Poetry itself we know is of use. How do we

know such a thing, stated so finally by me as a fact that might sit beside such assertions as "all men are mortal," or "Michael Jordan wears Nikes"? I could answer as Keats would have, that I have tested it on my pulse and felt that pulse surge—a fact—and I knew that I was alive to a degree rare in my experience. Or as the contemporary poet Jane Cooper has written, "Poetry can be *useful* in providing us with a theater of total human responses." Cooper was in the process of defining the essential qualities of that very essential poet Muriel Rukeyser, who herself wrote in her book *The Life of Poetry*, "The making of a poem is the type of act which releases aggression. Since it is released appropriately, it is creation." If your nature is totally pragmatic you might demand to know if Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," when heard by his beloved—for surely he intoned it to her in his rich baritone—caused her to become so much less coy that she rewarded his advances. A question I, of course, can't answer, but if Rukeyser is right, and I believe she is, it hardly matters, for the poem itself was an act of creation the rest of us have had to joy in for centuries. If that other act of creation never transpired it may have mattered enormously to Andrew Marvell or perhaps not at all, for the poem may merely have been that symbolic stage Muir referred to.

Before I get back to the three poets in the provincial terminal waiting impatiently on wooden benches for the promised host to collect them—and Daniel, the lover, as well—and escort them to their hotel and there complete arrangements for that night's dinner and reading, I have something of a parable to share with you, one that deals with a life with poetry and a life without poetry. At age eighteen when I found the poetry in English of the last century and a half, Stephen Crane first, then Eliot, Auden, Spender, Wilfred Owen, Dylan Thomas, Yeats, Hardy, Stevens, Frost, Dickinson, Whitman, and finally Williams—I thought that without these words life would be a pale thing. I took Williams' famous words from "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower" very seriously and recited them to any innocent victim I could corner: "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there." I took them to be about me and everyone else. To the credit of my patient students, many of whom went on to become poets while others opted for careers in law, medicine, wine making, journalism, or-

ganic farming, housewifery, and the military, when I stated and restated the absolute need of poetry in every life, no one laughed in my face or contradicted me.

Fortunately not everyone was so docile. At a poetry conference in Bisbee, Arizona, about a dozen years ago I went into my usual rant about the essential need for poetry in each life. No one in the audience blinked, but on the panel with me was that wonderful and very wise poet Robert Duncan who after hearing me out gently corrected me. He reminded me that we are not all alike: what turns some of us on bores others to death. He asked me if that indeed had not been my experience. Indeed it had been, I agreed, for at one time I had hoped that all productions of Wagner's operas be staged underwater, music which Mark Twain had once remarked was not as bad as it sounded. From then on I stopped badgering my students and friends and any other captive audiences. After listening to Duncan I came to believe that the teacher's function was not to force an art down the throats of his students but rather to help them find the art that thrilled their hearts.

Now for the parable. It bears some resemblance to the "history" or fiction of the three poets journeying to their reading, though there is one difference: it is composed of nothing but facts. It involves a poet journeying to a reading, a lone poet, one of the very same three, Levine, now a bit older, a bit tougher having survived a number of bad reviews, but not so tough that passing over the island of Manhattan where he will spend the weekend with his oldest son and then read for a small mob at the 92nd Street Y, he does not feel his secret heart swell with excitement, his pulse quicken, his breath surge as though he had just heard Galway Kinnell recite one of those magical passages from his great poem "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World." So excited and perhaps foolish is he at that moment that he turns to the man seated next to him and says something profound, like "Isn't that amazing!" The man, a large, besuited fellow who has had his head stuck in a huge tome depicting some of the world's longest bridges, leans across Levine's lap to have a look and says, "My." A conversation ensues. The large man, it turns out, is headed for a conference on the uses of reinforced concrete. It will convene on Monday, at noon, in a large hotel that is part of the complex known as Dulles Air-

port. He had planned to change planes at La Guardia and fly directly to Dulles although this is Saturday afternoon, and he could just as easily spend two nights in New York City, for he is on an expense account. Levine calms the fellow's fears regarding the dangers of the city and assures him that if he stays away from the wrong neighborhoods he'll be just as safe as he'd be in Indianapolis where he works and lives. What could he do in New York? he wonders aloud. Almost anything, Levine replies. What are you interested in? No response. Does he like painting? The museums are among the best in the world. Painting is OK. How about theater or movies? A tepid response. Levine tries food, for every sort of ethnic food is available. Well, the fellow has to watch his weight, and he jabs a thick forefinger into his barely pouching waist and goes on to describe his incredible exercise regimen, though he avoids lifting weights for that can give you a false sense of power. Levine runs through dance, jazz, classical music, rock—which it turns out gives the fellow terrible headaches—; just walking the streets of what is probably the world's most energetic city can be a heady experience. The cement maven sits impassively. Levine offers to share a cab in from La Guardia and direct him to a nice hotel. After a long silence the poet says, I think it's probably best if you get to Dulles as quickly as possible.

So while I believe Duncan was right and since receiving his tactful remarks on my position regarding the situation of poetry in the world, I have never again browbeaten those who do not respond to it, write it, care if it exists at all. I have come to believe that something must be there to, as Jane Cooper so aptly put it, "provide us with a theater of total human responses." My seatmate on that flight into La Guardia is the perfect example of someone who lacks that theater, who seems to have no idea such a thing could exist. An educated man with a degree in engineering from Purdue, he must once or twice in his life have attended to a poem and barely noticed it as it flew by him on its way to glory. In my description of our conversation I left out one detail which occurred near its end: out of some growing distaste for the man as well as to determine the degree to which he had stopped being a total person, I added that Manhattan was full of the sexiest people I had ever seen, both men and women, and their styles of walking, talking, dress, made it clear

just what treasures they possessed. For all he seemed to care I might have been describing varieties of apples. I went on: "You just see them on the streets in midtown or in the Village or Soho at all hours, bodies and faces the likes of which never filled the streets of the Midwest." His only response was, "I am married," which suggested to me not his moral rectitude—which may have been wonderfully intact—but his total lack of curiosity as to how people have been behaving for the last few thousand years.

I have at times considered a world totally without music and reacted with a horror so absolute that I immediately knew it was the art that fired my heart and blood like no other even though I have no talent for it. Thanks to the discoveries of Thomas Edison I have it even without New York City. Indeed in Fresno, where I have lived longer than anywhere else, I have it each morning when I waken to the mockingbirds doing their thing from on high in the Atlas cedar that grows in my front yard. But the art I have pursued for better or worse for over fifty years is poetry, and I have found it an enterprise worthy of a human life, and I haven't the least notion if anything I have written will in the hearts of others outlive me. Why, you might well ask, with that knowledge do I call it an enterprise worthy of a human life? Because I have been part of something far larger than myself: I have been part of the attempt to verbalize as precisely as possible what it has meant to live through the great depression, the horrors of World War II, the fiasco of anti-communism, the long, painful failed struggle for racial justice, and wind up in old age in a country gone to ruin through the greed of capitalism with a technology that can take us to the moon while our streets are stained by the lives of the poor and the homeless, the present world of Microsoft, unfettered pollution, the epidemic of murderous drugs, and the economic policies of Ronald Reagan. I have been part of the generation of Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery, Galway Kinnell, W. S. Merwin, Robert Creeley, Anthony Hecht, Denise Levertov, Etheridge Knight, Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder: we have done our best to capture the century in verse. We have told America, and the rest of the world should it care to listen, what it's been like living through this age. We have been useful.

What has become of the three poets just arrived in the provincial town of X, justly famous for its great cathedral and its filthy brown river that drags slowly through the town? With Daniel the two men grow restless and begin to pace the gradually emptying train station while Elaine sits composedly staring off into the dusty building at nothing in particular. At last the emissary arrives with two taxis in tow, thank heavens for no single taxi can handle all the luggage Elaine has loaded upon the shoulders of her young lover as well as the three poets and their host. She, the emissary, is breathless and apologetic, and her apologies are quickly accepted, for the poets have learned they in fact have hotel rooms, plans for dinner, and an almost totally unannounced reading to give that night. The emissary, Catherine, who prefers to be called Cate, is both a younger and more attractive woman than those usually strapped with these functions; today she seems flustered and more than a little overwhelmed by her duties. Even before we reach the hotel we are warned that it is not top-notch as the local arts council is strapped for cash and also that due to a screwup by some hireling of the council the only advertising for the event consists of small posters placed "in just the important places" that very Saturday morning by Cate herself. "To have great poetry you need great audiences," Whitman had written, but I learned that night what I had suspected for years, that for once at least good father Walt was wrong.

After being deposited in our mediocre digs—one room with two single beds for Sienna and me, bath down the hall—we are free for some hours to walk the almost deserted town, inspect the massive local cathedral, and gaze longingly into the sluggish river a dozen local boys find suitable for a dip. We return to our room in time to shower and dress in the expected jackets and ties and meet with Elaine and Daniel in the tiny chairless lobby where a waiting Cate leads us a few blocks to a modest restaurant. The meal begins with something I still believe the waitress called sorghum soup and goes rapidly downhill from there. Cate keeps reminding us not to expect a crowd. No, there will be no books available for signing and sale; no one at the arts council knew how to go about obtaining them. When we arrive on foot at the community house at which we will read there is no audience at all besides the three young men arranging the lights and moving some of the furniture out of the way, for in fact we will

be reading on the set of a Pinter play that will have its first performance the following week. We wait in silence until fifteen minutes past the assigned hour, but no one arrives. I ask the lighting technicians to stay and along with Cate to become our audience, and two agree to do so; the third has made arrangements for the evening but promises to return as soon as possible with his girlfriend. I read first after introducing myself, for Cate has confessed she has no idea who we are, what we have published if anything, and what our work might be about. I read as well as I have ever read, finding unusual strength in my voice and aiming my words toward my two fellow poets who have heard me for several nights in a row but never before seemed so alert to what I was reading. Elaine reads next after a short introduction by me; it is by far the best reading I have ever heard her give. She is usually nervous to the point of being almost inaudible, directing her attention not to her listeners but rather to an invisible audience riding ten or twelve feet above the actual one, but this night she looks directly into my eyes. I hear the fullness of her language, the delicacy of her rhythms, and the startling freshness of her tropes as I've never heard them before. She introduces the poems with only their titles and launches them into the utter silence of the room in a strong alto voice. Sienna comes next. He begins with no wisecracks or small talk but instead goes into a long and extraordinarily moving elegy to his father which he follows with three short lyric poems; this is far more daring and powerful work than he is known for. When he finishes, the six of us—Elaine, Daniel, Cate, the two technicians, and me—rise and applaud this stunning presentation and its creator. Before we can leave for drinks at the local watering hole “on the arts council,” the third technician returns with his stunningly attractive friend in tow, and they are assured they have missed something astonishing. I suggest that each of us poets read one poem for these two, and to my surprise my fellow poets are equally enthusiastic. The magic is still there.

What startled me most and what I recall most clearly from that night was my sudden and overwhelming discovery of Elaine's poetry. For the first time I was truly getting it. Even in the theater of my mind, alone with the poem on the page, I had not attended to it with the intensity and passion it demanded. I had been reading her work as a series of bright moves, of smart deci-

sions, I had been hearing harmonious phrases and lines moving gracefully from one to another, careful pacing and lovely ploys that brought the poems to a satisfying closure. That night I heard a unique human voice calling out from the deepest roots of its nature, calling out to be heard by what was deepest and most human in me. I was hearing poetry. We here in America have been practicing this art for hundreds of years almost without an audience for the single reason that we must in exactly the way a born dancer must respond to the music. That night Elaine had an audience—I know that as well as I know anything—and though it may have been only an audience of one, the act was complete, for one human being had reached across the immense gulf our education has taught us exists between each of us, had reached across that gulf through the magic of her language to remind me I was human.

Let me return to a question I asked earlier as a way of avoiding the question of the truth of this narrative: what use is this story? I think it contains two extraordinary truths about a life in poetry. The first is that we as poets (and no doubt also as people) need each other. As a boy first composing poetry at age thirteen I truly believed that some day I would be addressing the world. I was perfectly able to wait for that day, for the composing itself was such a delicious experience. Even at eighteen when I began my second career as a poet—my first was quite short, lasting less than three years and fortunately producing nothing that is extant—I thought that what I wrote in both prose and verse would have an enormous influence on the way my fellow citizens behaved toward themselves and each other. I had every reason to believe this, for the writers I was reading, especially the fiction writers (Dreiser, Dos Passos, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Sherwood Anderson) were creating a me I had not known could exist. Within a year I would read Keats's letters, for me the most extraordinary document on what it means to be a poet, and again become someone else. Through the agency of his letter to his brother George on the world as the *Vale of Soul Making* I felt myself becoming a religious person. In the letter he asks George, and because the letter has been preserved those of us who will follow, what the use of a world like ours is and goes on to define that use. "There may be intelligences or sparks of divinity in millions," he writes, "but they are not Souls till they acquire identi-

ties, till each one is personally itself." And how will this happen? "How, but by the medium of a world like this?" In order to clarify what he only dimly perceives he puts it "in the most homely form possible," and he goes on to tell George and us that the world is the horn book from which each intelligence learns to read, that is, to become what it is capable of becoming, a singular identity, a soul; without the education our experience of *this* world can give us we remain less than a soul, merely a potential. It is an extraordinary vision for a twenty-three year old man to coin to account for human suffering, which Keats knew full well as an apprentice surgeon working in a London hospital, but then Keats was one of the most extraordinary twenty-three year olds who ever lived. As the oldest of four siblings and with both parents long dead, Keats was deprived of what most of us take for granted, an adolescence. He had to become a man at a very early age; he had even to nurse his younger brother Tom through the final stages of TB to his death at eighteen. When he asked after the use of a world like ours he knew that world in its glory—his poems attest to that—and in its savagery. If Keats is right, the experience of this world can school each one of us into becoming a soul, and of course literature is part of the experience the world gives us. That night of the reading with an audience of no more than eight and no less than one, Elaine revived a human soul.

A genius such as Rimbaud or Dickinson or Blake can go it alone. There are those among us who are so gifted and so furiously and originally motivated that nothing can stop them from becoming poets except themselves. The rest of us need each other; we need to know this largely ignored art is still cherished and useful to others, and we need each other's counsel and encouragement to stay the course. (I suspect many of you have learned this or you wouldn't be at a place like this.) In my thirty-something years of teaching I've seen it over and over: one truly gifted and generous aspiring poet can excite an entire class and direct them to a poetry they did not know they possessed. In the fall of '61 a psychology major trying his hand at writing in my first poetry writing class rose in the back of the room and asked if he might offer a poem to the class. Thinking no harm could come from this I let him recite a piece he had not yet written down. It began thusly:

If a broken-down roan in a fenced-in field had only two legs
 would it be a man?
 If a spotted dog wearing a napkin had one leg would it be a
 Republican?
 If a man had common sense would the governor make him
 pick clover for the next two thousand years?
 In my last incarnation I looked for the perfect apple and so
 walked from Albany to Sacramento
 And chain-smoked the entire way.
 My health is better for it so don't believe anything you read.

His name was Charles Moulton, and he was a genuine Fresno surrealist. To say the class never quite recovered from the experience is an understatement. Moulton had managed in a few minutes to fire the imaginations of twenty young and not so young poets who suddenly understood it was open house and that whatever the brain concocted was material for poetry. A few years later it was an entering freshman, Larry Levis, who wrote, "He numbed himself to photographs / of farmers swatting flames off their faces. / He lived at least / as well as a cold rat, // waiting for his number to come up." Yes, even the draft was material for poetry; Larry's classmates began to write utterly surprising poems that struggled with the agony and humor of coming to age or middle age in their brutal Central Valley towns. Two years later it was the lyricism of David St. John, also a freshman, that did the trick; later the sardonic anger of Sherley Williams and Gary Soto. It's amazing how far we can go with each other's help. The myth is that we must remain solitary and write out of the sources of our deepest woundings. Keats describes something totally different in another letter: "Whenever I find myself growing vaporish I rouse myself, wash and put on a clean shirt, brush my hair and clothes, tie my shoestrings neatly, and in fact adonize as I were going out—then all clean and comfortable I sit down to write. This I find the greatest relief." He prepares himself for company—for he loved the fellowship of men and women—and invites his muse in. The truth is we form a family with all the poets, living and dead, or we go nowhere.

The second truth I also learned from Elaine. The impulse, the drive, if you will, to write poetry is incredibly powerful. In spite of the worst efforts of two terrible men disguised as teachers,

Elaine had only briefly been sidetracked. This young woman who at less than a hundred pounds and, as her early photographs attest, of a delicate beauty and, as I learned through the contact of some weeks, of a delicate emotional constitution contained an unkillable need to create true poetry, to build that "theater of total human responses." Each of us no doubt takes a differing and private route to this art (or in some cases away from it); those of us who need it, who see it as essential to our spiritual survival, will overcome the discouragements of an indifferent society and a corrupted literary world. We will do this simply because we have to. Why is this true? I believe the need to write poetry (and I assume prose fiction) is exactly like the need as Plato defines it to love, that is, to possess the halved soul's complement, to be whole. The sense of completeness that writing at our best gives is comparable to nothing else in my experience, but that is no doubt because I have no gift for music and can draw nothing that resembles anything. I don't see poetry as chief among the arts nor writing as chief among human vocations. Rather I see imaginative writing as one among many useful pursuits. Not long ago I heard the great tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins say of his life in music, "Everybody has something to do in this world." Being able to play the music he loves he found a blessing. Being able to play it with Gillespie, Hawkins, Max Roach, Clifford Brown, and Coltrane he found a blessing far beyond his early hopes. From what I know of Rollins's life—and I know a lot—like Elaine nothing could stop him.

Of course when Rollins said each of us has something to do he meant something useful. In his case it was the making of music, and if you don't know why music is useful then there's nothing I can do to help you. And how useful is poetry? Let me go to one of the great writers of the century for a little help. In his essay "Why the Novel Matters," D. H. Lawrence writes, "As a man alive you may have a shot at your enemy. But as a ghastly simulacrum of life you may be firing bombs into men who are neither your friends or enemies, but things you are dead to: Which is criminal when the things happen to be alive." For Lawrence it is in the novel that we learn exactly what a man or woman alive is; by reading novels, "You can develop an instinct for life, if you will, instead of a theory of right and wrong, good and bad." The only three great novels Lawrence names in the essay are the Bible,

Homer, and Shakespeare. He calls these "the supreme old novels," but as any reader knows, two are poetry and the other when it is at its most eloquent is also poetry. I don't have to lecture you on how completely contemporary life can deaden us to what is alive; you have all experienced it enough for me not to add an ounce to your burden. "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the Word of the Lord shall stand forever," quotes Lawrence and goes on to claim, "That's the kind of stuff we've drugged ourselves with," for the truth is the grass comes back, the flower dies and gives birth to new buds, but "the Word of the Lord, being man-uttered and a mere vibration on the ether, becomes staler and staler, more and more boring till at last we turn a deaf ear and it ceases to exist." But truly imaginative writing can bring us back to the living presence of the grass, to the fields that feed us, to the cities we live in and the nature of the men and women among whom we live.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
 It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
 It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
 It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken
 soon out of their mothers' laps,
 And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads
 of old mothers,
 Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
 Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

In fact the greatest of our poets can make us come alive to the world in all its richness to a degree we scarcely believe.

I confess I not only find poetry useful these days, I find it absolutely necessary. I am presently living in one of the most complex, turbulent, disturbing, unfathomable communities in the world: New York City. Even my twenty-six years in industrial Detroit failed to prepare me for this. But through the work of its poets—Whitman, Hart Crane, García Lorca, and Galway Kinnell—I have come not only to a degree of peace with all the tumult, I have also become so comprehending of its presence that at times I can see its ordinary diurnal street life as the arena of the sublime and the sacred:

It is night, and raining. You look down
 Toward Houston in the rain, the living streets,
 Where instants of transcendence
 Drift in oceans of loathing and fear, like lanternfishes,
 Or phosphorous flashings in the sea, or the feverish light
 Skin is said to give off when the swimmer drowns at night.

From the blind gut Pitt to the East River of Fishes
 The Avenue cobbles a swath through the discolored air,
 A roadway of refuse from the teeming shores and ghettos
 And the Caribbean Paradise, into the new ghetto and new
 paradise,
 This God-forsaken Avenue bearing the initial of Christ
 Through the haste and carelessness of the ages,
 The sea standing in heaps, which keeps on collapsing,
 Where the drowned suffer a C-change,
 And remain the common poor.

Through the magic of language I live my daily life in Kinnell's
 City of God without God; that's how useful poetry can be.

What became of our three poets after their triumphant,
 scarcely attended reading? Their host, Cate, walked them to the
 local pub and there stood them to a drink on the arts council,
 and then they stood her to one on their meager stipends. The
 place was noisy with Saturday night celebrants, and so the poetry
 party came to a rather abrupt ending. The poets went off on foot
 to their shabby digs, at least two of them with the intention of
 sleeping. Elaine and Daniel may have had more serious work to
 do, for as Rilke reminds us those who make love do a very essen-
 tial work. Exhausted, Sienna seemed to fall off before his head
 hit the pillow. Levine was too wired from the reading, and for
 more than an hour he sat on his bed writing in his journal that
 day's events without knowing that some day, perhaps today, he
 would find them useful. Finally he too grew weary and turned
 out the light and welcomed the darkness. Perhaps he slept. In
 any case all three poets rose the next morning from soiled beds
 to hurry off by cab to the station for still another voyage to still
 another tiny audience.

Let me close with a final cautionary tale. Some years ago I re-
 ceived a letter from a very dear man who also wrote poetry, had
 in fact published several books though none recently and alto-

gether only a fragment of what he had written. To put it bluntly he was and is what the world might call "a failed poet" though he is a gifted writer. He is both unlucky and without any clout in what I will call the "church temporal" of poetry, that world of ass-kissing and favor-trading that brings so much useless work to acclaim. He had decided that even without a publisher he would put together his complete poems, and he did so under covers supplied by Kinko's. His letter was a response to this event, a dignified and touching letter which described his own emotions as he beheld this utterly unique volume. But he used one phrase that by now even he would regard as suspect; he wrote "now the granary is full." He sat for some weeks with this volume finding its presence less and less satisfying and finally sent it off to a university press. Knowing the speed with which any press deals with poetry he grew restless and uncharacteristically crabby. He told me later he put his household into a state of anxiety it had not know for over thirty years, since the coming of children. The cure for these ills was his own and obvious: his need to be a useful person could not be quieted, so complete poems or not he went back to the day by day undramatic work of trying to make poems. The truth is, poets need poetry as much as poetry needs poets. This man knew, as all of us who write poetry know, that if the work is worthy eventually it will find its readers. It may take more years than we have, as it did in the case of Dickinson and Kit Smart, but our job is the work of creation and as such it never ends.

I'm frequently asked, especially by students, how I got into poetry and what kept me going. I always tell the truth: once when I was very young I heard a knock at the door; I was home alone and so I answered. There was a man in a bowler hat who asked if Philip Levine were home. "Yes," I said, "I am he." (Even then I was a stickler for grammar.) "My name is Tom Eliot," he said, "though you may know me as T. S. Eliot. I've come to tell you that American poetry needs you." What he was doing in a lower-middle class neighborhood in Detroit, a Jewish neighborhood no less, I wasn't sure, but as our only Poet Nobelist could I refuse him? You don't believe that and you shouldn't. No one asked me to try to become a poet; it's what I chose to do and it's what I choose to continue to do, and if it takes me nowhere I have no one to thank except myself.