

Meanderings: A Collection of Poetic Verse poet interview

In celebrating the release of *Meanderings: A Collection of Poetic Verse*, our first poetry anthology, we asked our poets a few questions about inspiration and writing. Here are their answers:

What inspires you to write your poetry?

“I am inspired by anything that emotionally and intellectually attract my five senses,” Richard Eric Johnson.

"I'm inspired to write when I think about the timelessness of the craft. Poetry is an essential component to human life, dating back to the very beginnings of recorded history, and such a large span of time is both intimidating and inspiring. So, I write because of the poetic tradition, because of all that has come before, and that, hopefully, has yet to be produced," Matthew Henningsen.

“Other poets inspire me as well as images and experiences from everyday life,” Cecilia Milanes.

“I write whenever the moment grabs me - most often while I am observing, listening or reading something or someone. I am mostly inspired by others' art, nature and human experiences throughout life - my own and those of others. Human experiences are so transferrable and almost every reader can relate to a poem, or interpret a poem in a way that resonates with their own experiences,” Nadine Stanford.

“My writing is inspired by my life. Everything I write is based on my interactions with the world and people around me,” Erika K. Lueker-Tarango.

“I don’t actually consider myself a poet. I’ve written very few poems. It was an interest in exploring a new medium,” Bill Mesce.

“There is nothing more inspirational for writing than going to a poetry reading or conference and being surrounded by other who are as in love with language as you are. For subject matter, I look to my backyard, my dogs, my family and anything else that I can spend time with. Sometimes I’ll immerse myself in a subject (like tomatoes, monkeys, trees) and see where that goes,” Allison Wilkins.

“It’s in the genes; my family is made up of passionate readers and committed writers,” Nancy Carroll.

“I’m a suburban guy. Born & raised in suburban Long Island; I’ve raised my family here as well. My poetry reflects those experiences and values. I find inspiration in family, especially my children, in growing up in a suburban area--sidewalks and lawns--and in the growing older, with all that entails,” Tony Iovino.

“Extremes of emotions, joy, sadness, anger trigger much of my writing. A gorgeous nature scene or a great injustice, either spectrum excites my desire to write,” Jane Herschlag.

“What inspires me to write my poetry is the clarity I find from expressing my feelings and thoughts through evocative, direct and clear images and then the intimacy it can create when shared with others,” Mary Oliver.

“Poetry offers me a unique format to make an impact in about two dozen lines. I strive for poems that deliver a message that is clear and unmistakable. I have something to say and I think the reader is entitled to my opinion. And the fewer words the better. Every word counts,” Steven C. Levi.

“I spent many years working as a healer, and I think that I view poetry in some ways as a form of healing work. I love telling stories, and I love entertaining. I also love to play with sounds and words. Sometimes I write just because a phrase or a sound or an image is stuck in my head and I have to get it out before it drills a hole through my brain,” Kristen McHenry.

“My adult poetry is inspired by emotions. Hard times. Happy Times. Sadness or Grief. Love. Poetry is a way for me to work out my feelings. My children’s poetry is inspired by what else? Children. Sometimes they say the craziest things. Their words become the kernel for a rhyming picture book or a simple stanza for a children’s magazine,” Gail Krause.

“The world around me, my personal life, eavesdropping, my dreams and the books I read,” Jeff Williams.

“I am inspired by several things, especially nature in its beauty and ugliness as well as the existential horror of living in a country like Nigeria,” Adeshina Afolayan.

Is there a season or time of year that you are able to write more poetry?

“There is no particular time,” Cecilia Milanes.

“Not really. I am equally inspired by rain and snow - as one year living in Maine last year can attest to - as I am by sunshine and fine weather (I am now living in Dubai),” Nadine Stanford.

“I find that I write more in the fall and spring. They are seasons of change, tumultuous times between the warmth of summer and the harsh cold of winter. They are unpredictable seasons, when you are never sure if you need a raincoat or a silk fan. Also, the change of these seasons is tied to so many memories. The turning

leafs reminds me of my college days and the budding flowers reminds of a childhood spent exploring,” Erika K. Lueker-Tarango.

“Because I am a professor, I have more time to write in the summer, although I try to make time each week during the semester to dedicate to writing. I find I write the best poems in the winter. I think it’s because I’m a fan of cold weather,” Allison Wilkins.

“I am always looking for ideas for poems so there is no season or time or year that is best. Truth is stranger than fiction and I find irony and poetic fodder in the newspapers, magazines, in what colleagues say and, of course, political speeches,” Steven C. Levi.

“I write more in the winter months (I live in Minnesota), because in summer my soul needs the outdoor air and sunshine,” Nancy Carroll.

“I write in spurts. I find that life events—births, funerals, weddings, birthdays, graduations— churn ideas and emotions, and lead me to write more,” Tony Iovino.

“A particularly chaotic time in my life can cause me to write feverishly, or cause me to withdraw from my passion of writing, but generally, the seasons do not influence my output,” Jane Herschlag.

“So far, I've been inspired during all four seasons, for different reasons and with different moods,” Mary Oliver.

“I don't have one season that I write more than others; my writing tends to flux more with what's going on at my fairly demanding job. However, I love the Fall, and feel the most inspired during that time. I need darkness and quiet to write, so the noise and heat of summer is hard on my muse sometimes,” Kristen McHenry.

“No, not really,” Jeff Williams.

“I find it easier to write poems in the last three months of the year, Halloween through Christmas. Holidays are big inspirations,” Gail Krause.

“Poetry for me usually results from terrible inspiration any time,” Adeshina Afolayan

How many poems do you write per year?

“It varies,” Cecilia Milanes.

“In the year to date, I have written more than 300 poems,” Nadine Stanford.

“I write every day. Sometimes it’s a line here or there, a stanza scribbled into a notebook. These will often become the puzzle pieces of my larger works. In terms of clean, polished, finished pieces? I write about fifteen a year,” Erika K. Lueker-Tarango.
“I’ve only written a handful of poems over some 30-odd years as a writer. I’m in awe of people who write poetry regularly,” Bill Mesce.

“I’ve never thought to count. I’d guess more than 10 and less than 20. And that would include real poems, ones that are revised over and over again, not bad drafts or writing exercises,” Allison Wilkins.

“I am new to poetry, (I usually write short fiction or essays); writing it seriously only the past three years,” Nancy Carroll.

“About 20 to 30, though many don’t make it past two or three lines,” Tony Iovino

“Since I run a peer workshop twice monthly I am disciplined to produce, and write between 100-150 poems per year,” Jane

Herschlag.

“I’ve only been writing for two years and have written about three hundred poems so far, at a fairly steady pace. I assume I won’t keep up at this rate, but I guess I have a lot of expressing to catch up on!” Mary Oliver.

“I probably average a poem a week. Of these only about ten are good and three are very good and one, maybe, is great. But my great poems are really those I have re-worked over and over again. There is no short-cut to quality,” Steven C. Levi.

“I tend to be very slow to consider a piece finished. Sometimes I’ll work on one poem for months, although I’m always writing other poems at the same time, and experimenting with new ideas. Right now, I am in a poetry elimination competition called "Project Verse", and I’m learning to produce decent poetry very quickly, as we have less than a week to get our work up by the deadline. So, that’s getting me a poem a week for now, until they kick me off the island! Outside of that, I’m happy to average twenty four good poems per year...about two a month,” Kristen McHenry.

“I’m trying to get back into writing poetry. At present, I maybe write two or three poems a year, but when I was actively writing poetry some 16 years ago I would write two to three poems a week and maybe one of those would be a keeper or something that I would choose to edit and revise. Hopefully I will get back to those days soon,” Jeff Williams.

“I write approximately 35-40 poems a year,” Gail Krause.

“An average of four or five,” Adeshina Afolayan.

What advice would you give to new poets?

“Never get discouraged,” Richard Eric Johnson.

“Write everyday, even if only for a half hour,” Cecilia Milanes.

“Listen to what you hear. Be brazen. Share your art. Believe in yourself,” Nadine Stanford.

“Write daily. Write hourly if you can. I have a stack of small notebooks that are tucked into purses, backpacks, pockets, so that I am never without somewhere to collect my thoughts. Also, read daily. Find poets you like, poets you don’t like, poets you think you might like and read the heck out of their works. Go back and read Ovid, dive into literary journals to discover someone who just published their first poem,” Erika K. Lueker-Tarango.

“Voraciously read all the poetry – from narrative to experimental - you can get your hands on. Support the presses with your subscriptions to their journals/books. Then you help those who publish work and you familiarize yourself with what is going on in the writing world. And then write regularly. You can’t be a writer if you don’t write! The only way that you will develop as a writer is to read and write. And be patient,” Allison Wilkins.

“I was stimulated by a professional poet who is also a college professor and is outstanding in both areas - Ms. Deborah Keenan at Hamline University in St. Paul, MN; and continual encouragement and support from my writer friends,” Nancy Carroll.

“Go to readings and listen to other poets. You’ll hear some very good poetry, and some very bad poetry. It’s like a free creative writing class. And then, ass in seat and write. Finally, edit, edit, edit,” Tony Iovino.

“I would suggest that new poets spend lots of time critiquing, and

having their work critiqued by other poets. The old idea that teaching teaches the teacher, is very accurate; one learns as one pays close attention to and analyzes the work of others. I find that my work is dramatically improved after being workshopped by writers whose skills I admire. To me, revision is like playing in a sandbox, reshaping, redesigning my work. It is almost meditative,” Jane Herschlag.

“The best advice I can give to new poets is to make your best poems great. No great poem ever started that way. They blossomed through a labor of love. There is not a dime in poetry so there is no reason to join the rush for fame and fortune. Take your time. Rewrite. Rethink. Rewrite. And ignore people who think you are ‘different’ because you write poetry,” Steven C. Levi

“Read as much as poetry as you can. Read "Writing Down the Bones" by Natalie Goldberg. Look for a trustworthy mentor, but be very discerning. Try mastering a few types of formal verse. What you learn from that discipline will pay huge dividends down the road, even if you only want to write free verse,” Kristen McHenry.

“Write regularly, even if it is only one or two hours a week. Set aside a specific time and write, write and write. Also, read. Read lots of poetry, be aware of what is out there and what other poets are doing. Make writing poetry and reading poetry a discipline. You cannot write too much and you cannot read too much and you do not have to keep everything you write,” Jeff Williams.
“Don’t force the rhyme. If it flows from your mind fast, it usually works. If you must ponder the meter and rhythm or search for a “good” matching word, it usually doesn’t,” Gail Krause.

“Write, don't edit too much and have fun. Don't be afraid to share,” Mary Oliver.

“Listen to your muse!” Adeshina Afolayan.

In your opinion who historically is the most influential poet to you?

“I have been deeply inspired by Jack Kerouac, Leonard Cohen, and a host of traditional German poets. It helps immensely to be fluent in at least one foreign language and experience another culture's poetic insights,” Richard Eric Johnson.

“I think that Pablo Neruda is most historically influential because he's influenced all the poets I admire,” Cecilia Milanes.

“I'll always be attracted to T.S. Eliot. His verse, dealing so heavily with the concept of time, with the movement of human history, will always sound a chord. His "Four Quartets" is undoubtedly one of the most important literary works of the 20th century,” Matthew Henningsen.

“Rainer Maria Rilke (translated into English) has been the most influential poet for me,” Nadine Stanford

“Historically, it's Byron. But not for his work, but his life. There is something amazing in the idea of being free and young and reckless. Of being lost in your own romanticism and ending up the Quixote of your own story. Plus I have unwittingly fallen in love with a series of Byronic Heroes, many of whom have found their way into my poems and stories,” Erika K. Lueker-Tarango.

“For me personally, Sylvia Plath is the most influential poet. A close second is Elizabeth Bishop,” Allison Wilkins.

“There is no one; though I fell in love with Shakespeare in high school,” Nancy Carroll.

“J R Turek. She is a local poet-activist here on Long Island. She

has urged me, and countless others, to write and really enjoy poetry,” Tony Iovino.

“Edna St. Vincent Millay and Sharon Olds were my first inspirers. Millets ability to soar, and Olds’ attention to minute detail were crafts that I knew I had to incorporate in my work if I wanted my poetry to move others,” Jane Herschlag.

“Ferlinghetti, Homer, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Harte, Guthrie,”
Steven C. Levi

“To me personally, it was Anne Sexton. I credit her with saving my life. I think that she broke down a lot of barriers and taboos for women, and opened up a whole new territory for us,” Kristen McHenry.

“There is no one most influential poet for me. Certainly Walt Whitman is one I would mention and in reality all of the Prophets of the world's religions were first and foremost great poets and their influence is undeniable. In terms of recent poets, the historically remembered I have to include Jorie Graham, Joy Harjo, W.S. Merwin and Marvin Bell. In terms of poets I have known or met (the personal historical) and who influenced me and gave me personal inspiration there is Michael Fitzgerald, Roger White, William Stafford and Jim Simmerman,” Jeff Williams.