

Interview with Dorianne Laux

FRONT PORCH: In an interview with *Poetry Magazine*, you name as some of your influences playwright Tennessee Williams, photographer Walker Evans, and a young-adult novelist Betty Smith. You also cite popular musicians such as Joni Mitchell and films such as *Harold and Maude* (which is one of my favorites!) as sources of inspiration for writing. Will you talk a little about what you feel the roles of other art forms are in poetry or a poet's work?

DORIANNE LAUX: My husband and I recently returned from a residency at VCCA where we met a filmmaker, a composer, a ceramic artist, photographers and a number of painters. There were gallery showings and performances a few times every week. We were excited by the exchange and influence these others artists had on our work. We began writing poems about paintings, trying out new rhythms and *film noir* images. I'm not sure those influences will be lasting, but they do enliven the work in the moment and free you up to try new things. I'm more influenced by the art and music I grew up with (pop, rock, folk, classical, show tunes) and the art that first impressed me (Van Gogh, Rembrandt, the photographer Walker Evans). The role those first impressions made on my work are sometimes readily apparent. I've written poems about some of the icons of my time (Cher, Mick Jagger, the Beatles), and I've written poems about the artist Manet and his subject, Olympia, a failed poem about Van Gogh's room in Arles. Those are obvious influences. But I think other influences are subtler and more profound. The music of my time included the harmonic complexities of Joni Mitchell, Simon and Garfunkel, The Beatles, the rough-edged energy of the Rolling Stones and Janis Joplin, the lonely solo of Otis Redding singing "Dock of the Bay." This is a music I try to bring to my poems and look for in the poems of others. There's the cacophonous coming together of a community of individuals in the novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, the tenderness and taboo-breaking and dark humor in movies like *Harold and Maude* and *Midnight Cowboy*. Van Gogh is said to have painted at night with candles stuck in his hatband. That quality of a weak, wavering light in the darkness is something that compels me, his earthy portraits of the human face and the wet aliveness of the eyes. Rembrandt's dark figures set against an even darker void with touches of light to outline the deepest character of the human. The gaunt faces of the Dust Bowl rendered in the stark medium of black and white. As an artist, I'm moved by that and want to somehow reproduce it in words. All that haunts the poems moves them forward.

FP: If I'm not mistaken, you came to poetry without the guidance or umbrella of the Academy, but instead wrote as you worked in the "real world." Having taught now at two universities full time, I'm interested to know what you think the role of academia is to a young poet.

DL: I think young people interested in contemporary, ethnic and world poetry can find it now in the universities. This is a big change. And undergraduate classes in poetry taught by senior poets and MFA programs around the country have nurtured many terrific new poets. On the other hand, they have also created a systemized program for poetry, which has its problems, such as a "one size fits all" method of teaching poetry. I think poetry is best taught by books, and a teacher is there only to provide as many examples of good poetry as they can to the student, allowing them to search among those examples for something they can respond to with passion, and then try to understand why the work affects them this way, and what they have to say in response. Poetry is a kind of "call and response" to the literature of all times, voices crying out to be heard and understood. I have no problem with a poet working to understand why and how poems create the effects they do. Just as a painter would study the works of the masters to understand how to make a line that has energy, or how shading can create dimension and a sense of physicality. I think

the problem is that students are brought to poetry and then immediately asked to begin analyzing a poem vs. simply responding to it, pondering on it, getting it by heart. They are asked to be experts before they are invited to be lovers of poetry.

FP: So you exist in this world of poets as both a contributor and a teacher. Where do think poetry will go in the next ten years, and where do you hope it will go?

DL: I think we might begin to see more political poetry in the near future. The ongoing war, the economic situation, the secrecy and deceit of the money magnates, distrust of the government, a growing poverty in so many areas that seems destined to overtake the middle class. All this while at the same time we are seeing the fruits of those who labored in the 60s and before and after, to end racism, sexism, poverty and war, to promote health, local and global communities and sustainable forms of energy, come to fruition in the form of our presidential candidates only to be shattered by a crisis in world politics and economics. I think the veil is being lifted in terms of our innocence as a nation and that more poets may respond to that in the time to come. I also think we may see a return to the comprehensible poem, the poem of and by the individual. As chaos spreads and our individual voices are snuffed out by forces beyond our control, I think we will not have the luxury of dabbling and experimentation. There are so many issues that command our attention, and so much double speak and incomprehension, I think the poet might see his or her job to make things crystal clear.

FP: You've put together four collections up to this point (*Facts About the Moon, Smoke, What We Carry, and Awake*). As I, and possibly some of your students both current and former, begin to think about putting together a thesis manuscript, I find myself both excited and nervous. I'm wondering if you have any words of wisdom about approaching something like putting together a collection of poems.

DL: A first book of poems is what I call "a wisdom project," which comes from Susan Sontag, who says in her forward to *Another Beauty*, a collection of essays and prose pieces by the great poet Adam Zagajewski, "...autobiography is an occasion to purge oneself of vanity, while advancing the project of self understanding—call it the wisdom project—which is never completed, however long the life." I am still hard at work on this project of the self. The self as an individual, as well as the self in relation to the world and the unknown universe we swirl around in, uncertain of our purpose or future. When I wrote the poems that would become my first book, I didn't think of it as a book, but rather as a need to understand the basic questions that all human beings ask: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? What is beauty? Why is there suffering? Where is truth? These questions would arise in me in the form of poems, and in making the poems into a collection, I tried to arrange them in a shape, find a path for them to travel to make clearer those questions. And so I looked for themes and created frames for those areas of interest. I teach a course on the manuscript and have put together a checklist for those preparing a first book manuscript. It's a list of questions to ask of the poems as a whole.

Checklist:

Have you identified your concerns, questions, obsessions, images, modes, forms?

Does your title reflect the theme or tenor of your concerns?

Are the poems varied: length, line length, form, and content?

Do you have multiple poems doing the same work? Which poem says it best?

Is the manuscript striped down to its essentials?

What questions or statements is the manuscript willing to leave unsaid?

Is the manuscript prescriptive or suggestive?

Is it balanced in terms of the intellectual, emotional and physical realms?

Is the manuscript dynamic? Is there a tension between poems?

How do poems speak to one another? Does it feel as if they are in conversation?

Are there parallels and dualities?

Is the imagery cohesive?

Does last the last line of one poem feed well into first line of the next, creating a sense of flow?

What is the quality of each poem? Are you including “filler” poems of lesser quality to fatten the manuscript or justify some arbitrary page count?

Does each poem stand on its own as a small working world, independent of the poems that surround it?

I then ask students to look at first books by a number of contemporary poets, among them, Li-Young Lee’s *Rose*, Mark Doty’s *Turtle Swan*, Sharon Old’s *Satan Says*, Lucille Clifton’s *Good Times*, Doug Anderson’s *The Moon Reflected Fire*, and address and discuss these questions. I also include books that are actually second books but that have the passion and rawness of a first book, a second book that is actually better, more cohesive than the first book because the writer had finally found his or her true subject or fullest voice or a larger readership. Carolyn Forché’s *The Country Between Us* is an example. There are first books I would love to use but they are out of print and difficult to get, such as Phil Levine’s first book, *On the Edge* or Gerald Stern’s *Lucky Life*. I’m also now including first books by some of my best students such as Matthew Dickman’s *All-American Poem* and Michael Dickman’s *The End of the West*. Major Jackson’s *Hoops* and Michelle Bitting’s *Good Friday Kiss*. There’s much to choose from and students come away with a sense of the diversity and vitality contemporary American scene as well as a real understanding of how and why a first book grabs the reader’s imagination. That’s what we’re all trying to do: find a reader and keep them.

—interview conducted by Aaron Deutsch via e-mail on October 12, 2008