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How I Write

ALWAYS I HAVE TO COMMIT something to paper as soon as possible after the initial inkling of a poem. Most writers use notebooks. Some use audio recorders, others their phones. Though first drafts are always terrible, what I'm doing is laying a path back towards the first emotional impulse, a way for *myself* to return there. So you'll often find me re-reading notebooks to pick up such trails among barely readable, fragmentary scribbles.

These scraps are what may develop into poems. I like W. H. Auden's view of the poem as a 'verbal contraption'. It reminds me a poem (actually, any piece of writing you are doing) is a purposeful device. It needs to be an effective device and poems look to impact a reader's feelings. This view downplays one of the commonest stumbling blocks about creative writing, which is that what poets try to do is express their own inner moods. If that's all I focus on I'll pay too little attention to the writing's receiver, my reader.

Anyway, what I want 'to express' is seldom fixed at this stage. It's important I'm willing to add on – simply write more connected material – even beyond the point at which I might think the job done. That tempting voice claiming early completion may be a lazy demon or a censoring one. It's my practice at this stage to draft loosely, with as much energy and freedom as possible. If I watch children playing, I see them enjoying an *excess* of energy, movement, voice, and it's out of this that the real creativity arises — new moves, ideas, developments, reformed, revised,



played again, played *better*. So in writing: spinning off new phrases or metaphors leads not only to decorative grace-notes but often to the still-hidden, true, heart of the poem. And this is why poets often talk of writing as a process of discovery.

For me, most of these stages still take place using pen and paper. The shift to a screen, a keyboard, remains a critical transition. On screen, or on a phone, typed lines acquire an inertial resistance to being changed. On screen, I find my eye starts to narrow down to look at the poem's physical shape and appearance on a would-be page. Such aspects are important in the long run, but they can prematurely cool the fluidity of the molten drafting process if they dominate too early. Beware the linearity of the screen!

But once there, now I'm thinking 'economy'. A linguistic cosmetic surgeon, I cut off verbal flab, repetition, redundancy. Crossing out is my most familiar activity. The American poet Louise Glück says that a writer's only real exercise of will 'is negative: we have toward what we write the power of veto'. One of the keys to this is reading aloud. I go the whole hog: standing as if to deliver to an audience: loud; and clear. This helps me listen to the rhythm, the line breaks. Actually, for any writer of poetry, prose, essays for your course, reading aloud highlights stumbling blocks of all kinds. My sense of the ebb and flow of a poem is always clarified because I distract myself in the physical act of standing and speaking. I experience my words more objectively, more as my potential reader would. Try it. It's a revelation!