

Rachel Zucker and Arielle Greenberg

On My Poetry Mentors

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I was lucky enough to stumble into an important mentoring relationship at a very young age: the poet Lyn Lifshin happens to own a house in the small upstate NY town where I grew up, and offered workshops at local community centers, one of which I attended with my mother when I was about ten. I was already about as serious a writer as one can be at that age (though not a poet), and I guess Lyn recognized this from the little exercises I did during the workshop, because she offered—or my parents asked—if she'd be willing to give me private poetry lessons. We met together for about a year when I was eleven or twelve and she gave me wonderful, non-prescriptive feedback and assignments and reading suggestions. But perhaps even more importantly, she treated me like a real poet, took me seriously, and showed me that a poet was something a grown-up woman could be. Lyn never had children—something she writes about often—and her home was completely unlike any of the suburban family homes I was accustomed to: striking modern architecture, real art on the walls, serious and serene, no kids or husband getting in the way. I can still vividly remember the atmosphere of quietude, the way the air felt different in her home, and how it all seemed so conducive to writing. Also, Lyn is a poet who has never held an academic post, but who has managed to make her (small) living as an independent teacher, reader and publisher of poetry, and her utter devotion to the artist's life was inspiring.

This of course is not what my life has turned out to be like at all: I have a family and a full-time academic job and although we aim for as much quietude as possible, dedicating myself to writing is often the very last thing on my priorities list, after walking the dog, loading the dishwasher, and shopping for winter clothing for my child. But I'm so glad I was exposed at that young age to the kind of writer's life Lyn works hard to maintain: it gave me a sense of possibility, a view into an alternate adult woman's life than the one I knew best, and I've always kept it with me. And Lyn continues to be a loyal friend and teacher.

I've had other encounters with living women poets who've influenced my life and work. Ruth Stone taught my first real poetry workshop when I was a freshman in college, and was generous presence who encouraged me to pursue close friendships with other female poets, something I've done my whole life. My high school English teacher, Karen Ludwig, who held a degree from Brown and was a serious intellect, suggested that I pursue a career in teaching, and invited me back while I was in college to practice in her own classrooms. In my late twenties I was accepted into a master class with Barbara Guest through the 92nd Street Y, and to my great delight, she defended the weirder aspects of my poetry to the less-impressed peers in the class. In graduate school, I was mentored by the poets Malena Morling, who taught me, in the face of po-biz and competition, to focus on just writing a decent poem: that this is all a poet can and should

do; and by Mary Karr, who took me aside one day after class and said that all women poets should have a kid, so that they keep at least one part of themselves grounded in the real world.

All of these experiences, as well as the wonderful experience of beginning my own career at a time when so many other young American woman poets were launching successful careers of their own, and the experience of a deep and crucial friendship that began as a poetry workshop acquaintance with a poet exactly my age, Rachel Zucker, led me to want to document how different it is to make one's way as a woman poet now than it would have been thirty years ago.

Rachel says:

A few years ago Arielle and I went to hear a tribute for Sylvia Plath at the New York Public Library. I was pregnant at the time and was worried about what would happen to my writing life when my son was born; I also wondered if going to anything Plath-related when pregnant was a good idea. Jorie Graham was one of the presenters. She had been my teacher and thesis advisor at Iowa. Before she read a selection of Plath's poems she told a story about going, while pregnant, to visit Emily Dickenson's desk. Graham explained that all of her major influences were men: Keats, Stevens, Pound, Eliot. The women poets she had on her shelf—Dickenson, Moore, Bishop, Plath, Sexton—were all childless or unable to survive in the world. The story she told—a legend in both senses of the word—had all the elements of a modern Jane Eyre or Grimm's fairytale, all the richness and slippage of an ancient myth. It had no easy moral or answer—in the end Graham finds the desk has been replaced by a cradle—but was a story I needed to hear. It was the story of an older woman poet, my teacher, on the verge of motherhood, imagining, just as I was, that poetry might be over. I was not alone and I was not the first and here was Jorie, years and books later, as living proof the motherhood might not mean the end of writing.

I treasure stories of the living, writing, amazing Jorie Graham as mother, teacher, wife, woman, mentor. Meeting Jorie Graham's daughter, Emily, and Brenda Hillman's daughter Louisa—hearing Ms. Graham and Ms. Hillman speak openly about writing and mothering—although much of what they said only made sense to me in retrospect—sustained me when I became a mother. And later, when I fell passionately, deeply in love with Alice Notely's poems, when I held on tightly to the example of this woman-mother-poet living outside of academia, outside of America and writing book after extraordinary book—when, in a deep, postpartum nightmare that had gone on for months, I came across these lines, “for two years there's no me there”—I felt that this woman I'd never met had reached out through the page and thrown me a lifevest. How lucky, how life saving, that, unlike Jorie Graham, I need not survive with only on Dickenson, Moore, Bishop, Plath.

In addition to my early poetic influences: Sylvia Plath, James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Bishop, Jorie

Graham, Alice Notley, Sharon Olds, Brenda Hillman, Heather McHugh, Leslie Scalapino, Lyn Hejinian, I am sustained and inspired by the work of my female peers and by those women a half-generation before me.

This anthology project was born out of many desires, political, personal, intellectual, social. I wanted to challenge the old Romantic notion of poetry as a solitary activity: of the poet as a frail consumptive sitting by the dying light of a stub of candle suffering out his verse. I wanted to document, some of the mentor-relationships between two generations of women. It was also created as a kind of wonderful excuse to work closely and collaboratively with my brilliant friend Arielle. Although it is not the overt subject of this book, the project is also a document of a friendship that has spanned several moves and jobs, four children (and one on the way), five books (and more on the way). We didn't need this project but it was so nice to have.