

An Introduction: On Being Mentored by Books

Last summer, I was talking with a poet friend about the ups and downs, the necessity or non-necessity of poetry mentorship. Ironically, it was during this time that my relationship with my own mentor was beginning to become more and more intense with nearly daily emails from the mysterious land of Brooklyn to the quiet New Mexican desert and back. This particular neediness on my part derived out of the publication of my first book and my struggles to find a ‘home’ within the poetry world. Shortly after, I proposed to edit a piece — this piece — on mentorship for *How2*.

In compiling my ideas for the project, I read the letters between Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams. Usually, letters leave me empty handed, but I couldn’t put these down. They led me to many considerations. What exactly is a mentor and do poets need them? What role does the MFA program play in replacing the mentorship system in a landscape with so many young people desiring the name *poet*? Are a teacher and a mentor interchangeable, and if not what is the difference? How do different life stories including differences in physical ability, gender, race, or age inform these relationships?

In 1996, I took a summer workshop with Jorie Graham and James Galvin at the University of Iowa. Graham told the class, “If you have enough money to take a workshop or to buy a stack of books, buy the books.” Now, this idea seems like obvious advice, but at the time, it struck one as sort of a scandalous. It was odd to hear that our money would have better spent on books while sitting in a workshop that we had, my God, *paid for*. And yet Graham was right. It was through *books*, not this workshop or any other, that I learned how to write this thing called poetry.

But, to mention Graham might be to start the end.

My ‘real life’ mentors and teachers have always been men (Frumkin, Olsen, Tarn, Bartlett). It just worked out that way — particularly growing up with a father who was a critic, poet, and reluctant supporter. I did have two fine women teachers at Vermont College: Betsy Sholl and Mary Rueffle. One of these connections was wonderful; the other riddled with competition and strife. I never quite found a female mentor that made a good fit. The female poets I wished to correspond with — Levertov, Rukeyser, Bishop, Niedecker — were always dead, or otherwise occupied.

That said, it was largely women’s books that taught me how to write, are still teaching me to write, and more importantly, how to *be*. Mei Mei Berssenbrugge taught me how to be romantic without being trite. Eleni Sikelianos and Brenda Hillman taught me how to make language sublime. Hillman’s work also gave me a renewed respect for my homeland, Northern California, and altered my hatred for it. Lorine Niedecker led me to nature and silence. Alicia Ostriker, Alice Notley,

and Rachel Zucker taught me how to address the complexities of domesticity. Notley's essay *Doublings* saved my life. Kristin Prevallet informed me on grief. Helen Adam and Anne Waldman taught me how to be wild. Norma Cole taught me about birds and bravery. Elizabeth Bishop taught me how to be perfectly formal. Anna Akhmatova taught me how to be stubborn. Betsy Sholl taught me how to be kind. Fanny Howe taught me all of the above, and provides continuous concrete proof of how poetry saves lives.

I heard Jorie Graham read for the first time at Harvard. I had never seen or heard Graham before. I was caught. I made a beeline for the bookstore. When I began writing, I was stuck between poetry and prose, not knowing much about either. I 'grew up' reading and imagining fiction. In writing prose, though, I couldn't sustain a plot to save my life. So I thought, 'Oh, I must be a poet!' I began writing prose poems, but as I fell more in love with language, these weren't going to cut it. I needed a new *line*. A major consideration was *borrowing* Graham's broken left margin and uneven line. The jagged left margin struck me as a technique, a method, to make a common narrative spectacular. Perhaps it fit with my disability, how others perceived a jaggedness in my body.

While Graham's work was helping me develop a line of my own, Denise Levertov was helping me develop as a person. Seeing her read 'Life at War' on the 1960's video USA Poetry was a major turning point. Levertov's prose and person have informed the person I desire to be. In Levertov, I deeply admired someone who not only wrote about peace, but actually went to Vietnam and Korea and tried to forge it. She wasn't just political behind her desk, but a force to be reckoned with in the world. Similar to Levertov's travels, as a person with cerebral palsy I didn't have the choice of fighting the norm as an abstract gesture. I have no choice but to reckon with the world. Every mundane gesture is a political one, simply because it's not what people expect from a person with a disability.

Not far behind Levertov was Muriel Rukeyser, bi-sexual mother-goddess, peacemaker, injustice-exposer, superhero protector of Commies. In addition to educating me on a thousand political issues, Rukeyser taught me that a poet does not have to live inside any one style or agenda — political or poetic. Levertov, Rukeyser, and the rest have taught me to be myself, *unforgiving*.

This Condensary coincided with Rachel Zucker and Arielle Greenberg's forthcoming anthology *Women Poets on Mentorship: Efforts & Affections* (University of Iowa Press, May 2008). Zucker and Greenberg were kind enough to allow me to present selections from their anthology as part of this feature. Although we have chosen to work with different poets and various concerns, I hope that this piece can speak to theirs in some way. Zucker refers to the anthology as a "project that 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." And, Zucker, also transformed by a Graham reading, saw her as "living proof that motherhood might not mean the

end of writing.” Greenberg speaks of a desire “to document how different it is to make one’s way as a woman poet now than it would have been thirty years ago.”

I hope that the interviews presented in this project will show that each woman has her own considerations and preoccupations in poetry and life — disability, feminism, gender, class, war, child abuse, birthing rights, and race.

I hope that through this project readers realize that each woman, each poet, each mentor is her own movement.