

Revealing Secrets, Writing Poems

Sondra Perl



Sondra Perl spends her academic life writing, teaching writing, and reflecting, often, about both. She has conducted research on how college students write, written books about teachers' lives in the classroom, and recently published a memoir on the way dialogue can lead to reconciliation between the descendants of Nazis and Jews in post-Holocaust Austria. Sondra Perl lives in New York City where she is Professor of English at Lehman College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her writing of poems is no longer a secret.

Poetry always seemed obscure and stuffy to me, the purview of English majors, not what really mattered as I tried to make sense of my life. At least, that's what I thought for most

of my adolescence and early adulthood. But as I began to teach writing and then to write, my view of poetry began to change. In writing workshops, I stopped drafting essays and wrote poems instead. I didn't feel particularly skilled, far more the novice than the expert, but I liked what poetry allowed me to do: to reveal a memory by narrowing it to a few telling details, to portray a family member by focusing on a seemingly minor moment, to use something small to say something big. I also discovered that I liked the chiseled quality of poetry, how spare it could be, how the form allowed me to take the sharp edges of my life and turn them into texts.

I didn't think of myself as a poet nor did I think about publishing my poems. My professional writing consisted of articles and books that told stories about teachers and their lives both in and out of the classroom. But privately, especially when something nagged at me or I was feeling unsettled or experiencing a sense of loss or regret, I began to explore my thoughts and emotions by composing poems.

This chapter, then, is itself a revelation: it reveals a kind of writing that for most of my life I have kept private. The poems included here, presented chronologically, are also revealing in another way: they explore moments from my past that, with one exception, were hard for me to live with, moments that called for understanding and clarity, which is one of the reasons I think they emerged as poems. I was, at the moment of composing each one, a writer seeking to understand her life, and as I crafted them, so I also crafted my own knowledge of what was happening to me and around me. What follows, then, is not only a series of revelations about my life and how I think about these events in the present but also a testament to the way the act of writing itself allows for revelations.

The year is 1993. I am living in Riverdale, New York, leading a summer institute for teachers on the teaching of writing. I am married and have three children. I've spent almost all of my life in school, first as a student, then as a teacher, ultimately as a teacher of teachers. My college years are long gone, but somehow, this summer, as I sit with a group of middle and high school teachers, all of us searching for something to write about, I become acutely aware of a memory that lives beneath the surface of my life.

Nose Job

In 1968, my mother and sister checked into
Manhattan Eye and Ear for nose jobs.
My father asked for a package deal:
two for the price of one.
Had I gone too, he would have asked for even more:
three new noses, bumps flattened, curves straightened,
nostrils narrowed,
each cut of the scalpel
eradicating Jewish identity
for a cut rate.

He asked me, teased me, cajoled me,
tried hard to convince me
to go with them:
to have needles inserted up my nostrils
to deaden the pain,
to have the bone broken and reset
so I could be prettier.

My mother and sister had no doubts,
thought it made sense,
this woman's way
to self-improvement.
I couldn't see it,
had a distinct failure of imagination,
couldn't see ~~submitting~~
to the doctors who would lay me down,
break my nose and reshape it;
to my father who wanted
a better-looking daughter;
to the culture that said
beauty can be bought.

My father and I left them that night,
in their hospital room,
in hospital gowns, and went to see

a play by Harold Pinter. My choice.
He fell asleep as he did the one other time
I asked him to a cultural event. I loved
the starkness of Bergman
and took him, on my college's Father-Daughter weekend,
to see *The Seventh Seal*.
He would have preferred
something lighter, he'd said.

My mother and sister ~~came~~ home,
wore hats in the car,
Covered their faces with chiffon scarves.
Holed up in my mother's bedroom,
in the round bed she shared with my father
and had their meals brought to them on trays.
~~Came~~ home, eyes red with blood,
skin purpling, faces puffy,
with helmets and straps
to keep the swelling down, to keep
the newly-set bones in place.
Whispered to each other,
finding it hard
to move their jaws.

I wandered the house alone,
wondering at their choice,
their ability to withstand pain,
their desire to be beautiful.
Went to the bathroom mirror, turned sideways,
held up a second mirror,
examined the bump on my nose and
tried to envision
how I would look without it.

Aimlessly I took the car keys.
Made my way to the movies.
Lost myself in Katherine Hepburn's cheekbones

watched as Sir Thomas More gave his life
for what he believed in
and cried.

This is the world I recall when I think of my teens: a world regulated by my mother and father with an overriding focus on surfaces and self-improvement. I escaped it, to some extent, by attending college. It was there that I realized one could improve one's mind instead of one's nose, and while I missed my parents, I didn't miss their desire to reshape my face. I was trying hard, at age twenty, to reshape the path my family had planned for me, to chart something of my own, something I could believe in. I didn't know then how often I would repeat this process.

At the time of the nose jobs, I held my own. I refused to submit. I think now that I was, frankly, as scared of the pain as I was of the potential alteration of my face. But it wasn't easy. I can still recall how restless I felt, wandering the halls of our home, knowing my mother and sister were together, behind closed doors, sharing something I had rejected. But mainly, I was embarrassed. I understood the messages about beauty and selfhood that permeated upper-middle-class culture. I knew, as a female, that a woman was frequently judged by her looks. Certainly, this was the message that had been communicated to me by my mother. And, yes, ~~from time to time~~ I acquiesced, going to the hair salon in search of a new hairstyle or on special occasions for a manicure and pedicure. But I found the idea of plastic surgery appalling. It seemed so drastic. I just couldn't embrace the pursuit of beauty in the wholehearted way my mother and sister did.

It took over twenty years for me to return to this memory, to begin to explore what it felt like to me at age twenty, a college sophomore, to accompany my mother and sister to the hospital and to be a witness to their desire to become more beautiful. It was hard to acknowledge how unseen I felt as the daughter of a man who seemed to have little interest in the ideas that interested me. But once their bandages were removed and their bruises healed, I returned to college and moved on. I ended up majoring in art history, spending hours in museums, looking carefully at and writing about paintings. I found what I considered to be beautiful, an aesthetic I could admire, an aesthetic that gave me

pleasure and that brought me peace. It astounds me now, as I write, that what fascinated me most, what moved me most, were Rembrandt's portraits, the ones that reveal the blemishes and the wrinkles, that expose the signs of aging, rather than hide them. They still do.

A few years later, I am leading a writing workshop for women in my local community. We gather on Monday mornings in my dining room around the large wooden table laden with pens, paper, cake and coffee, and I lead us all in a writing exercise. Sitting there one morning, I glance at the stairs that lead to the second-floor landing and an image of my mother-in-law comes to me. I write this poem:

Bebe

My mother-in-law strides through life
with a forbidding scowl
her nose and breasts protruding
like so much armor,
a three-horned triceratops *
ready to defend herself
against attack.

"If you ever divorce,
I'll take his side,"
she once told me
ready as ever
to fend off the imagined hurt
of a failed marriage,
the imagined recriminations of
an ungrateful daughter-in-law,
all of this three years before
we marry.

The owner of a cemetery,
she worked hard, this
mother-in-law of mine,
burying the dead
fighting with the grave-diggers' union,

full of angry black men
who refused to open the earth
on Christmas. She bought
oriental rugs for the bereavement rooms,
planted mums and forsythia and basil
on the grounds of the memorial park
she inherited, the business of burying bodies
passed on from father to daughter.

A tough bird, they called her
those other owners of burial scenes,
the paunchy men off to Miami or Cincinnati
for their annual conventions. Her friends
dressed in dark suits, drank Jack Daniels and
treated her as one of the crowd.

A good sport, she played the game well,
sending her daughter to a junior college,
her son to Harvard. She learned
to order *coquilles St. Jacques*
and to keep her affairs to herself.

Too heavy, with a pacemaker in her
heart, she pants now
as she climbs the stairs
to the guest room.
For three months each year
she visits with us,
reads Dr. Seuss to her grandchildren,
keeps the air conditioning on high,
and occasionally bakes a potato.

On the days I take her shopping,
I'm no longer surprised
when she cocks her head
stares straight into the eyes
of a salesman at Neiman's

and dares him to respond
to her proud claim:
"I'm an old broad, dear.
You can't fool me."

This woman prefers
the company of men,
preferring too
her son to her daughter.
Throughout all the years of childhood,
she drew him close
to those breasts,
tickled his back,
and delighted to see her face
reflected in his.
This woman for whom all men
are objects to charm,
no longer so charming herself,
lives on borrowed breaths
regulated by a machine
buried deep within
the thickening walls of her heart.

As I drive her to the doctor
an irregular heartbeat leaving her faint
I wonder what else lies buried
beneath that skin.

My mother-in-law was as conscious of beauty as were my mother and sister. She cared enormously about her clothes, about the latest styles, about hair and nails and furs and jewelry. But life dealt her a different hand. Unlike my mother and sister, she needed to work to support her family, and she did, for years, own and run a burial ground, a memorial park on the outskirts of Philadelphia, a tough business by anyone's standards. And perhaps it was all those years working in such a hard world that led her to develop, like protective coloring, such strong armor, such a hard exterior.

But, still, as I revisit this poem, written more than a decade ago, I am aware of how many secrets it contains. I realize how little we actually know about people, even those who are close to us. What lies beneath the surface of our skin? I ask. Did I really understand this woman? Over the years, she visited us, living in our house for months at a time. And, slowly, I came to love this woman who loved my children. But did I ever understand what moved her, what touched her, what hurt her or brought her joy?

What strikes me now is the line I never forgot: "If you ever divorce, I'll take his side." When she spoke it to me, we were sitting in a restaurant at the Westbury Hotel on Manhattan's upper east side. It was the first time we were ever alone. Her son, whom I was dating, was working that night, and I naively thought that taking her out to dinner by myself would be a caring gesture. In fact, she proceeded to drink too many martinis, and, eyeing me hard, she made that startling pronouncement. Sitting there, I realized that this son of hers had already divorced once, that she had had too much to drink and wanted to protect herself. But still, I was startled by her comment and realized I was out of my depth. What's so strange, of course, is that life plays tricks on us. Years later, her son and I do divorce. She is no longer here to take anyone's side, but I am convinced that if she were, it would be mine.

Another secret about my mother-in-law:

The Bebe Gun

My mother-in-law died
on New Year's Eve.
Alone in a hospital bed
on the Gulf Coast,
she refused food and medication,
closed her eyes and withdrew
from a world grown tired and old.
No more, she said. I choose to go
without a fight, no tears, no final farewells,
not even a simple embrace.
Her final act
an act of refusal.

Her will, always strong,
now bent on dying.

We traveled to Tampa
to dispose of her remains—
this woman who spent her life
burying others
requesting not to be buried.
I spent a day cleaning out
her closet, opening drawers and boxes
filled with lace handkerchiefs
and pennies from 1935.
In the very last box
on the very last shelf
hidden behind a pair of red leather shoes
I found a silver revolver
a .22 in a brown leather case
with a small box of bullets.

I held the gun in my hand,
feeling its weight.
I sighted along its lines
and wondered how to get it home.
I couldn't imagine leaving it there
or carrying it with me on the plane.
I took the gun and slipped it
inside a beaded bag and had
it shipped, committing I imagine an
interstate violation concerning the
transportation of firearms across state lines.

It rests now, this revolver of hers,
among her hats and stockings and photographs,
now on the top shelf of my closet.
I think of it from time to time
and wonder what it must have looked like
in her hand.

This discovery is truly a mystery. My mother-in-law kept a gun in her bedroom closet. Did she ever take it with her when she went, perhaps, on late night calls to a funeral parlor or to the memorial park? Was she afraid, sometimes, of going out on her own? After her husband died, did she fear living alone? Did she fear being attacked? Was the gun a gift from a male admirer who thought she needed protection? Or was it like her diamond ring and her pearl necklace, something to finger, to hold on to, to reassure her that she'd be okay?

Bebe's son also ends up as a mystery to me. In our twenties, when we meet, we spend our vacations traveling. Together we journey to India, Japan, Bali, and Thailand. Drawn to Eastern philosophy, we visit temples and ashrams and imagine that we can partake of the rich traditions of other cultures. At home, once we begin a family, we return to our own religion, Judaism, and raise our children within that tradition as modern, secular Jews. Then, one year, my husband decides he wants to explore the orthodox side of our heritage. I don't understand this desire. I feel unsettled by it, and one night, I try both to describe and understand my shock by composing this poem:

The Return

He dons *talit* and *kipah*
bends from the waist
and prays now
to this God
he claims
to know.

I sit there
watching
bewildered.
Who is this man
I married? Why do I
not recognize him
in his new/ancient garb?

And why do I,
a daughter of Sarah and Rachel,
Ruth and Rebekah
not rejoice
at his spirituality come home
wrapped around him now
like a familiar blanket?

What for years seemed to both of us
silly and old-fashioned
arrogant and rude
stiffnecked and worst of all
embarrassing
he welcomes now with
open arms and heart.

When we smiled smugly
at the earnest young men
in their black hats and payis
we knew ourselves to be
modern
and aligned in our new worldedness.
Speakers of romance languages,
we meditated with monks
in Ladakh, stretched with the yogis
in Delhi, and together moved far away
from our roots.

And now he's returned.
T'shuvah.
From sin to repentance.
His prayer-shawl packed away
since the day of our wedding
fifteen years ago,
hangs prominently now among his suits.
The gi he wore to aikido
abandoned on a top shelf.

I look at this man
and again I ask,
who is he?
who has he become?
And what
wrapped comfortably
~~in my smug modernity~~
scars me?

My husband's transformation struck me as odd. I did not understand his reciting Hebrew prayers at all hours of the day and night, his wrapping *tefillin*, the black leather straps around his head, his left arm and one of his fingers. I knew that halfway measures never suited him, that when he did something, it was always with a full heart. But adopting orthodox Judaism felt alien to me.

My husband's return to religion may have been one of the fissures in our twenty-two-year marriage. I can't say for sure. It takes another five years or so for the marriage to end, and this, too, comes as a surprise. The signs are all there, but I choose not to read them. I suspect that I am better at busying myself with work and with parenting, better at teaching classes and writing books than examining the underside of relationships. Perhaps, like my mother and sister, I am actually more concerned with appearances than with what lies underneath. Whatever the reasons, or the blind spots, I do not see what is coming. I capture the changes, though, in a poem I write after we separate.

After 25 Years of Marriage, Arthur Becomes Artie

The day you changed your name
From Arthur to Artie
I should have known.

I should have seen it coming—
Not only a new name
But also a new hairstyle,
The curls I loved cut off,
Your thick black hair flat now,

Slicked back against your skull,
Like the coat of some cat.
Left out in the rain.

You morphed
From clinical psychologist
To multi-level marketer,
Selling vitamins
And skin care products
On the internet—
How blind could I be?

The cover story was a good one:
You wanted to make money
So you could return to Viet Nam
So you could build schools
And churches
In a personal act of retribution,
Repairing the damage
You thought you had done.

But, really,
You were reinventing yourself,
A delayed midlife crisis.
It should not have surprised me
That in all this reinvention:
A new name
A new look
A new professional identity
Complete with a gold business card
You'd also want
A new woman.

My husband left, one day, to live with another woman. Ah, that had certainly been a secret. It would have been easy to see myself as the victim, the unsuspecting wife. But while I did not suspect, I also knew it takes two people to make a marriage succeed—or fail. Over the years, we grew apart. We stopped confiding in each other; we stopped

finding each other as fascinating as we once had. I don't think I would have ever initiated the break, even in those moments when I recognized my own unhappiness. But having the break thrust upon me freed me in ways I could not have imagined. As we were separating, my husband predicted that one day, I'd be grateful to him for making this move. In truth, I am.

It takes a while for me to regroup, to find the path I now want to pursue. I talk endlessly to family and friends, clean my house from top to bottom, travel by myself and with others, and begin to study the flute. One summer, on advice from my brother, I take a trip to British Columbia. There, I chance upon a piece of property that is for sale. I realize that I can afford it, and while it is far from my home in New York, I know there is something right about staking a claim to something I want. Had I always wanted a house on an island? Is this another secret buried deep within? What gives me the confidence to take this step? In another poem, written while I am leading a writing workshop in 2004, along the Pacific coast in Big Sur, California, I try to understand what this step means to me.

Where Contraction Dies

I have known the pain of contraction:
The squeezing into small places,
The desire to please,
To accommodate,
To make myself over
So that I'll fit
Into this man's world.

I have known this pain
Since I was three, five, ten.
Each year, it became easier to read the signs,
To obey the commands:
"Be good."
"Be nice."
"Do well."
"Smile."
"Save."

I got good at it:
At pretending,
At looking the other way,
At denying what was true for me.
So good,
I almost lost my soul.

Until one day,
Almost by chance,
I said yes to a place,
To a house
On an island
In British Columbia.

I've spent only three days there,
Slept in the bed
On the second floor
For only three nights,
Sat on the wooden stairs
That lead to the beach below
For only one
Star-lit evening.

And yet
When I entered the house
For the first time
I cried.

This house
Came to me
The way good things often come
By surprise.

It stands high on a bluff,
Overlooking a bay.
The snow-capped mountains
Of Vancouver Island

Visible in the distance.
 It is enclosed by a carved wooden fence
 Built to keep out the deer,
 Graceful creatures who eat the flowers
 Whose names
 I don't yet know.

On the land are apple trees,
 Three different kinds,
 An outdoor shower,
 136 steps that wind down
 To the rocky beach below.

It speaks to me,
 This house,
 Of peace,
 Of serenity,
 Of expansion.
 Here, it says,
 Your soul can soar
 Like the eagles
 Who glide on air currents,
 And then settle themselves,
 Stoically,
 Eyes unblinking,
 In the treetops.

This is where,
 It says,
 Contraction dies.

Looking back, through these poems, I see a young girl struggling to find her way, someone who was brought up to please her parents, particularly the men in her life, someone who wasn't particularly comfortable taking risks, who preferred to fit in and to play it safe unless her values were threatened. And then, if pushed hard enough, she stood up and said no.

This girl grew up, got married, had children, taught writing, traveled, and became an adult. She kept herself busy with projects, with work, with family. It was—and still is—a good life. What mattered to her—and still does—is that life has meaning, that actions have purpose, that she continues to grow and to explore both the sharp—and the soft—edges of her life.

Now, as I compose the final section to this chapter, I do so from the house in British Columbia described above. I do it not alone but with a partner at my side, a man who shares this journey of discovery with me. This relationship, almost five years old now, also comes as a surprise, and with it the revelation that love knows no age limit. Now when I write poems, I explore, more often than not, moments of pleasure and intimacy. I won't include them here, not because they are embarrassing or painful, but because they are private, as some writing must be.

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