



MARY
MACKEY

Creativity

WHERE POEMS BEGIN

"SENSUOUS, COMPASSIONATE, AND UTTERLY UNFLINCHING." —JANE HIRSHFIELD

CHAPTER ONE SERIES

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Creativity

Where Poems Begin

Mary Mackey



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For A.W.

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INTRODUCTION

What Is Creativity?

What is creativity? Where do creative ideas come from? What happens at the exact moment a creative impulse is suddenly transformed into something that can be expressed in words?

To describe creativity is extraordinarily difficult, because the moment of creation comes from a place where language does not exist and where the categories that determine what we see, hear, taste, and feel are not immediately present.

In our daily lives we tend to live on the surface, unaware of the complexity and richness of what lies below. Poetry creates itself, bubbling up from the depths until it reaches that part of our brains that transforms consciousness into words. Like music, a poem can be understood in a dozen different ways, all interacting with one another. This means a poem can form a continuous bridge between the moment of creation and its incarnation in language.

Poems can also be taken apart line by line, metaphor by metaphor and held up for rigorous, logical inspection; but when this happens, there is always something essential missing. For this reason, almost every chapter in this book begins and ends with a poem that illustrates and often comments on its contents, enfolding and enriching the prose with elements that the prose alone cannot express.

Poetry chose me; I did not choose it. Call it an involuntary act of creation, a constantly surprising connection between self and non-self, a movement from seen to unseen and back again. Call it at its best moments the movement of an adult mind back to the radical innocence and vision of the very young child who sees, not only the reality we all share, but all those unnamed, unclassified parts of reality we learn to overlook as we grow older.

This book is a journey to the place where poems begin. I invite you
to join me.

—M.M.

CHAPTER

1

Words

Nothing of my birth. No memory of the womb, the darkness, the warmth. But there is a low hiss that comes to me in dreams like the flow of a great river, and a rhythm—a sound—something that pulses in me for the rest of my life: controlling my tongue, the measure of my thoughts, the timing of my heart.

My memories go back a long way, too long to be true, people tell me. And yet they are there, stored in a wordless space in my mind, because they came before words, existing in a place that someday I will come to understand is the source of my poetry, perhaps the source of all poetry. It is a country without borders, a place without language, a universe that has not yet been talked into being.

For an infinite period, I rest outside of time. There are colors, forms, sounds, smells, but they sweep through me undifferentiated and unrecorded. Every moment is new. Nothing makes sense, but this does not bother me, because I have no expectation that it should. I feel pleasure but do not grasp at joy, because I have no sense that joy is finite. I feel pain but do not fear suffering, because I do not yet know that pain can persist, grow worse, or return.

I float in the material world as I floated in my mother's womb: conscious and unconscious at the same time. I float in infinity, and it is beautiful. What a pathetic word to describe such greatness. "Beautiful?" Say rather "ecstatic," and even that does not begin to capture the bliss of it.

Slowly, my parents and the other humans who surround me talk me into reality like people welcoming a child to live in a great mansion if she will only abandon all that exists outside its walls. Their words are the stones, their emotions and gestures the mortar that will seal me off from wordless infinity.

Yet I need to live in the world of other humans, the world of time, the world of words. Something in me craves this, grasps for it; and as I seize their words, suck on them, unfold them inside myself and let the long tendrils of their sounds attach to objects, that fragment of the whole that we humans have all agreed to call 'reality' begins to congeal around me. And this is where my real memories begin, sharp and defined, and undeniably experienced; because later I check them out with my parents and find that they remember the same things:

A wooden crib, slick with yellow varnish. Two teddy bears painted on the panel at my feet: one wearing a pink dress, one wearing a blue one. Wooden bars that look like the naked trunks of trees. A cream-colored enamel saucepan with a red stripe around the rim attached to a broom handle and stuck out the window to catch snow which is mixed with sugar and vanilla. A small child's table with a square hole in the middle where I am placed to eat.

What do these things have to do with anything? What do a crib, a table, and a saucepan have to do with becoming a poet?

The answer is: everything. These objects are not important in themselves. They are only crucial because I remember them by name. This marks a momentous divide. At this moment, I am still poised between a wordless infinity and the sharply defined, limited, and absolutely necessary world of common human experience and culture that recognizes, among other things, cause and effect, time, reason, and death. This is a transitional moment, a moment when I have acquired my first words—priceless tools, which will allow me to communicate with other human beings and, to a limited extent, with animals.

As I sit at that child's table eating sugared snow cream, I am still capable of sensing the infinite wordless space of my infancy, and at the same time, because I have words, I can remember that timeless floating well enough to attempt to describe it to you. At the age of two, I am in touch with a boundless source of inspiration, and I have language. In other words, I have everything I will need to become a poet except education and experience.

And words. I will need many more words before I actually begin to write, because ultimately words are what will make me into a poet instead of, say, a painter or a musician.

Words will become my tools and my most treasured possessions. I love them from the very first. I fall on them the way other children fall on candy. I beg my mother and father to tell me what things are called, and my parents, who believe a rich vocabulary is one of the best gifts parents can give a child, are happy to comply.

"Say 'hippopotamus,'" my father urges, as he teaches me my first multisyllabic word. "Here is a picture of one. They live far away in a place called 'Africa.'"

"Don't say: 'Can I have a popsicle,'" my mother tells me. "Say 'May I have a popsicle.' 'Can' means you are asking if it is possible to have one. 'May' means you are asking my permission."

It is estimated that there are one million distinct words in the English language. At the age of two, I probably know 150 to 200. By the time I am three, I know something in the range of 1,000 to 1,500 words and can use them more or less in context. I don't understand everything my parents are telling me, but without realizing it, I have begun to assemble my poetic toolbox. I talk to myself, to my stuffed animals, to trees, rocks, birds, cups, and other people; and in doing so, I learn that I have a talent for remembering and reproducing sounds. I can order them properly. I have a general grasp of what they mean.

Almost immediately, I start playing with words like toys, combining and recombining them. I ask my teddy bear: "Can a hippopotamus

have a popsicle? No. Popsicles are too cold. Can a popsicle have a hippopotamus?”

I imagine a popsicle eating a hippopotamus. *Cherry, I think. A cherry popsicle with a big red mouth. Hard to chew on a hippopotamus. This popsicle needs teeth.*

I go on spinning out that idea, and in the process, I discover something important: In an English sentence, when you turn the order of the words around, they sometimes create a world different from the one you live in.

I find this highly entertaining. I can do it for hours at a time. I invent an imaginary friend and invite her to join me, my teddy bear, and the imaginary hippopotamus-eating popsicle for a tea party. I hear a recording of “Frere Jacques” in English and French, and begin to make up “French” words, not having any idea what a foreign language is and not realizing that multiple speakers have to agree on what a word means, and that not just any old sound will do.

I am only a small child who cannot yet read, but in an incomplete, awkward way I have produced my first poems, because the essence of poetry and of imagination itself involves playing with language, inventing new combinations, turning things on their heads, and defying expectations.

I make mistakes. I forget. I pronounce words improperly and am corrected, primarily by my mother for whom proper pronunciation and grammar are Articles of Faith in a religion that falls just a notch below Methodism. I welcome her corrections. I persist in loving words, and my vocabulary grows rapidly. By the time I am an adult and have been writing, reading, and studying for more than half a century, I will possess an English vocabulary of more than 60,000 words and a considerably more modest vocabulary in several foreign languages. And I will have become a poet.

Words made this possible. Words turned me into a writer, but with each word I acquired, I lost something vital, something important that most of us are taught to abandon at a very early age.

When, for example, I learned the word “chair,” I came to see tens of thousands of objects as “chairs” no matter how different they were from one another. In essence, when I acquired language, I entered a world of categories and abstractions and stopped actually seeing what was in front of me. This was, of course, necessary. If I had preserved an awareness of all the individual details of the world—every shift in light, every whorl in wood, every leaf and stone and grain of sand—I would have been incapable of action.

I needed a filter that would allow me to focus primarily on things important to my own survival. I needed to be aware of cars speeding toward me when I crossed the street and not be distracted by oil making rainbow patterns in puddles. I needed to be able to recognize other people even when they had lost weight or cut their hair. Most of all, I needed to become oblivious of and unresponsive to the immense amounts of sense data that constantly competed for my attention.

My brain, restructured to a large extent by the language and the culture into which I was born, became that filter. Freed from a constant bombardment of information, I embraced an attenuated consciousness of reality and became a normal, sane adult human being. The price I paid for this was to become blind to much of what surrounded me. But I was not blind all the time, because as I grew to adulthood, I retained a partial ability to stand on the threshold that marks the boundary between childhood and adulthood and see and not see at the same time.

When I write a poem, my mind continues to move fluidly between the real and the surreal. I experience ordinary, plain, unadorned reality; and at the same time, I see the alternatives that reality offers, the dream-like possibilities that cluster around objects, the barely-conscious connections between words, images, scents, sounds, and touch. I can look at a bowl sitting on a table and see it simply as a white china bowl; but at the same time I can see it—as I have written in my poem “The Breakfast Nook”—as “a white sound/ swirling into a depression/ of unspeakable depths.” I can pick up a fork and see it

simply as a fork, which is what I do most of the time, because to do anything else would be impractical when I am eating. But if I concentrate on that fork, focus unwavering attention on it, I can see it as a “long shining road/that branches at the end/into four paths/that lead nowhere.”

I don't drink alcohol or take drugs to enter this state of mind. It comes as naturally as breathing. All I need to do is shift my attention and look at something as if I have never seen it before. The world we have agreed to call “the surreal” is hidden in plain sight. It always clusters around the real the way the petals cluster around the central disk of a sunflower. I can choose to ignore the surreal, ignore the real, or use both in a poem. But I don't create either. They just exist simultaneously.

Which brings me back to words. Valuable as they are, words, by their very nature, aren't good at describing the wordless state. But of all word forms, poetry—spoken, sung, or written—comes the closest, and poems speak for themselves:

The Breakfast Nook

the vision comes
twice
the object out of context:
first ducks
that look like snorkelers
black silhouettes
against a void
then at breakfast the next morning
the bowl that is no longer a bowl
but a white sound
swirling into

a depression
of unspeakable depth
the tea
a brown ocean
reflecting eight moons
my hand
a crippled starfish
naked, albino
floating up from the depths
holding a fork that has become
a long shining road
that branches at the end
into four paths
that lead nowhere

the spoon explodes
clicking and ringing:
bell sounds
rain on a tin roof
water beaded on flesh
and metal
domes of water
sliding down the side
of a glass
miniature worlds
distorted and luminous
all the senses systematically
deranged

the reflection is pitted
against the void
where no reflection
is possible

death can only be seen upside down
through a pin hole camera

the cat in the mirror
attacks itself

Mary Mackey
from *Breaking the Fever*