

*“On Becoming a Poet* gratifyingly is not a how-to for becoming one. These are the stories of what transpired as and when the realization occurred. Or: ‘The first time it happened,’ to use Mary Mackey’s phrase. ‘It’—the proximate cause, and then the poetry itself—was a pepperwood tree. It was a Mrs. Sullivan who stopped to care. It was the nomination of Robert Bork. It was the school chorus as an opt-out from gym. It was a translation of a Tang dynasty poem into English. Find these instigations here and then find yours.”

**AL FILREIS**

**Kelly Writers House, University of Pennsylvania**

---

*“On Becoming a Poet* is a necessary text for any active and engaged reader. Whether you’re a practicing poet, a teacher looking for more sources, or a lay reader who is just interested in poetry, you’ll find something in this text for you. The scale of this text alone makes it worth readers’ while: 25 poets from diverse backgrounds revealing their meaning-making strategies and poetry origins stories! The personal component of this text is so compelling and helps the text to teach without being overly didactic. This book is a blessing and needed addition to the archive and canon.”

**DOUGLAS MANUEL**

**Bayard Rustin Fellow, Whittier College**



On  
Becoming  
a Poet



# On Becoming a Poet

25 ORIGINAL  
ESSAYS +  
INTERVIEWS

---

EDITED BY SUSAN TERRIS

SERIES EDITOR: SANDY McINTOSH

---



Essential  
Information  
About the  
Writing Craft

---

Marsh Hawk Press · 2022

EAST ROCKAWAY, NEW YORK

Copyright © 2022 by Marsh Hawk Press, Inc.

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher, unless faithfully conforming to fair use guidelines.

Marsh Hawk books are published by Marsh Hawk Press, Inc., a not-for-profit corporation under section 501(c)3 United States Internal Revenue Code.

Book design & typesetting: Mark Melnick

Page 11: photograph of Kim Shuck by Douglas A. Salin

Page 87: photograph of Geoffrey O'Brien by Nina Subin

FIRST EDITION

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Terris, Susan, editor.

Title: On becoming a poet / edited by Susan Terris.

Description: First edition. | East Rockaway : Marsh Hawk Press, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021062847 | ISBN 9781732614130 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Poets, American--20th century--Biography. | Poets, American--21st century--Biography. | Creation (Literary, artistic, etc.) | Poetry--Authorship. | LCGFT: Interviews. | Essays. | Autobiographies.

Classification: LCC PS135 .O6 2022 | DDC 811/.609--dc23/eng/20220124

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021062847>

[clmp]



Council on the Arts

Publication of this title was made possible in part by a regrant awarded and administered by the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP). CLMP's NYS regrant programs are made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature.



Marsh Hawk Press

P.O. Box 206, East Rockaway, NY 11518-0206  
mheditor@marshhawkpress.org

# Introduction

**THIS ANTHOLOGY FEATURES THE ORIGINAL MEMOIRS** of outstanding poets from diverse backgrounds, recalling the ways by which they found their start as writers. It includes twenty-five original essays and interviews appearing here in print for the first time. While modern creative writing programs seek to develop the talents of maturing writers, essential information about the initiation, development and processes of the writing craft can be discovered in the early memories of established writers—material that has not usually been available in the classroom.

Reading the essays and interviews in this anthology, you'll discover:

- How poets find their voices
- How they perfect their craft
- How they deal with racial and gender discrimination
- How, despite rejection and disappointment, they keep on writing
- Why many poets will need a Plan B to support themselves outside academia
- Why high fevers and near death-experiences inspired one poet
- Why another's success prompted him to apologize to his high school English teacher
- Why two poets began to write inspired by story-telling fathers.
- Which poet believed a pepperwood tree taught her how to write
- You will meet a poet who focuses on the door inside her head
- A poet who created and illustrated her first book when she was five
- A poet inspired to write because of an alleged UFO invasion
- And much more . . .

These amusing, compelling and inspiring memoirs return to the ideas and visions the contributors found as young poets, and the experiences that have defined the path for their writing over a lifetime. There are, of course, far more than twenty-five ways to become a poet, but these are some of the most compelling.

Sandy McIntosh

Series Editor | Publisher, Marsh Hawk Press, Inc.

---

Online Resources for Students, Instructors and Readers are available at

*[chapter-one.marshhawkpress.org](http://chapter-one.marshhawkpress.org)*

Writing Prompts & Insights | Poetic Influences | Poet's Biographies | Videos

# Contents

<i>Introduction</i>		7
<hr/>		
Mary Mackey	<i>Fever and Jungles: On Becoming a Poet</i>	13
Indigo Moor	<i>A Long Overdue Apology</i>	21
Kim Shuck	<i>Maybe the Pepper Tree Taught Me to Write</i>	29
Philip F. Clark	<i>Sustain Wonder</i>	34
Gail Newman	<i>Alphabets of a Lost Tongue</i>	37
Basil King	<i>The Past Is as Present as I Want the Future to Be</i>	41
<hr/>		
David Lehman	<i>Opening Shot</i>	46
Denise Low	<i>The Womanly Lineage of Writerly Mentors</i>	57
Sandy McIntosh	<i>Writing Influences: Why Should I Write Another Book?</i>	61
Jane Hirshfield	<i>A Continuously Accidental and Precarious Thing Interviewed by Mary Mackey</i>	64
Jason McCall	<i>Who Are You?</i>	69
Phillip Lopate	<i>Poetic Influence: John Keats' "When I Have Fears"</i>	77
Denise Duhamel	<i>Mr. Rogers and Me</i>	79

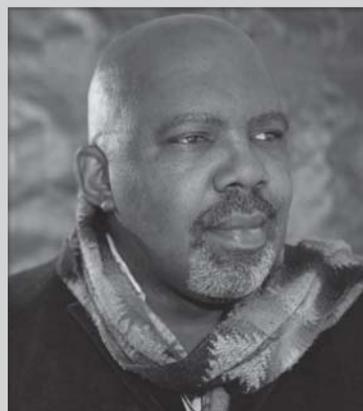
Geoffrey O'Brien	<i>Where Did Poetry Come From: Two Early Encounters</i>	89
Lynne Thompson	<i>Father Tongue</i>	95
Alfred Corn	<i>A Writer's Beginnings</i>	104
Arthur Sze	<i>Revealing and Reveling in Complexity Interviewed by Jim Natal</i>	112
Sheila E. Murphy	<i>Sound. Silence. Privacy. Confidence.</i>	117
Burt Kimmelman	<i>My Tutelage</i>	120
<hr/>		
Eileen R. Tabios	<i>My First Book</i>	130
Dennis Barone	<i>These Hills, These Mountain Laurels</i>	134
Rafael Jesús González	<i>The Gasp</i>	139
Tony Trigilio	<i>Passing Through Our Brief Moment in Time: A Poetics of the Ordinary</i>	147
Stephanie Strickland	<i>Late to the Party</i>	154
Julie Marie Wade	<i>Small Doors</i>	158
<hr/>		
	<i>Biographies</i>	161



---

Mary Mackey

---



---

Indiigo Moor

---



---

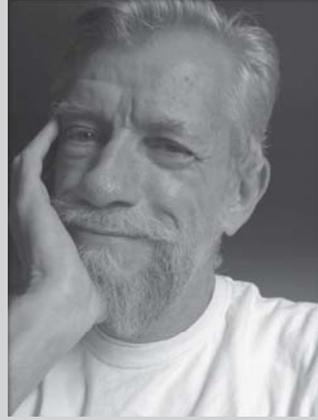
Kim Shuck

---

---

Philip F. Clark

---



---

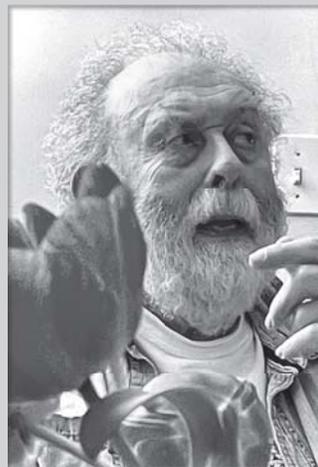
Gail Newman

---

---

Basil King

---



# Mary Mackey

## Fever and Jungles: On Becoming a Poet

**I DO NOT HAVE AN MFA.** I became a poet by running high fevers, tramping through tropical jungles, dodging machine gun fire, and being caught in volcanic eruptions, swarmed by army ants, stalked by vampire bats, threatened by poisonous snakes, and making catastrophic decisions with regard to men. And then there was reading.

I read constantly, compulsively: secretly under the covers with a flashlight after I had been put to bed; defiantly when I was supposed to be doing the dishes or sweeping the kitchen; sneakily in any class that was boring. As proof that my reading addiction was out of hand, I offer the fact that I was quite possibly the only student at North Central High School ever to be sent to the principle for being in illicit possession of a collection of the poems of William Blake. (Fortunately, when she busted me, my math teacher did not find Ovid's highly erotic *The Art of Love*, which had somehow made it into our school library uncensored.)

How did Jungle Woman and Bookworm come to inhabit the same body? How did they combine to make a little girl born in Indianapolis, Indiana, during the height of McCarthyism into a short, scrappy woman who began writing poems at the age of eleven and never stopped? The answer is both simple and complex.

The simple part is that I desperately wanted to get out of Indianapolis. About the time I turned eleven, I started to realize that everything interesting was happening somewhere else. I had even heard rumors that in Paris people sat around in things called "cafes" and talked about ideas.

Paris, Rome, Antarctica, Mars: how, despite an impaired sense of geography, I longed to see them firsthand. Books had already taken me to exotic places—OZ among them—but I had never really been anywhere unless you counted trips to the family farm in Kentucky and a brief jaunt to Niagara Falls where I got to enter a foreign country for the first time, albeit not a very exotic-looking one.

I imagine many of the children I went to school with also longed to go somewhere interesting, but I had an advantage. I knew that there were places so different from Indianapolis that they could not be described in ordinary words; and this is where it gets complex, because the thing that brought me this knowledge, the thing that did more than anything else to make me into a poet, was fever. But first it almost killed me.

The first time it happened, I was six months old. I don't remember any of the events of my near-death experience, but I'm told I turned blue and went into convulsions. According to my mother, I would have died except that my father, who was completing his medical training in a military hospital, had access to penicillin—a drug not at the time available to civilians. The stuff was nasty: preserved in wax in a small glass bottle that had to be boiled before the penicillin was injected via a very large, hollow needle.

For most of my childhood, I dreaded that wax and that huge needle so much that I had to be chased and pinned down like a cat being taken to the vet, but on the night I nearly died before I had lived, the penicillin brought down my fever and saved my life. But fever was not done with me.

The next time I nearly died was just before my third birthday. I remember that experience well, because it was the first time I saw how thin and bright the world could be. I remember lying on a green couch in a overheated room. It must have been winter because frost coated the window panes, and snow lay on the bare branches of the trees in big lumps. My mother had given me a bottle of Coca-Cola on the principle that I needed to take in more fluids. My temperature must have been somewhere between 105° and 106° Fahrenheit, because I was already experiencing that wonderful, detached, floating feeling I always get above 105°.

Just for the record, the path from 98.6° to 105° is nasty: filled with aches, pains, uncontrolled shaking and the pure misery of sickness, but once you reach 105° everything changes. You start to feel irrationally happy. Your body becomes light and buoyant. By the time you get to 106°, you begin to discover that you are incapable of worrying, even though everyone around you is frantic with fear. The best is yet to come. Teetering on the edge of 107° brings the real poetic gifts, because a fever that high does something strange to your brain.

As I lay on that green couch, warm golden light—the kind you only see for a few moments at sunset—flooded our living room. My parents moved toward me so slowly that I could see their clothing billow out and

collapse in an invisible wind. Bending over me, they lost their faces, and floated toward the ceiling like huge birds. The coke bottle on the coffee table multiplied into dozens of coke bottles, which flew up and circled in a huge glassy aura around their heads.

Behind my parents' bodies, the light turned into a veil composed of long, rainbow-colored ribbons. The veil expanded, consuming the green couch, the blankets, the windows, and my parents. Suddenly it parted, and I saw trees with red and gold leaves (impossible, because it was the dead of winter), and little children stretching out their hands and calling to me.

I couldn't have had much of a vocabulary at that age. Nevertheless, words suddenly streamed into my mind and came out of my mouth, combining and recombining into entirely new things. I believe this was the moment I was given the gift of poetry, a gift which I did not yet have the skill or understanding to use, but a gift nevertheless.

I have captured this childhood experience best in a poem entitled *Breaking the Fever* in my collection by the same name (*Breaking the Fever*, Marsh Hawk Press 2011). Although fever is far from the only topic of my poetry, it has provided the specific inspiration for well over a dozen poems and subtle inspiration for many more, many of which are in my most recent collection *The Jaguars That Prowl Our Dreams: New and Selected Poems 1974 to 2018* (Marsh Hawk Press, 2018).

What does fever show me? Are the things I see real? Your guess is as good as mine. I don't claim to be a prophet or an oracle. All I know for certain is that something strange happened to me on that afternoon just before my third birthday, something that would happen again at least half a dozen times as I continued to run extraordinarily high fevers. The logical explanation is that I was hallucinating. Yet hallucination does little to explain how well-organized the words I babbled were, and how I sensed them as objects that regrouped and changed forms. Nor does it explain why, much later in life during high fevers, I spoke in rhymed couplets—sometimes for several hours at a time—and was unable to stop until my temperature dipped below 106°.

Actually, I am less interested in discovering an explanation for why these things happen to me than in the result, for starting at a very young age, fever gave me priceless poetic gifts: metaphor, because it showed me how one thing could easily become another; rhythm, because it organized the speech centers of my brain; a love of words, stories, and ideas,