

SUGAR
the
BLACKBERRIES

Selected Poems of
JOAN PECK ARNOLD

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WRITING POETRY IN OUR EIGHTIES AND BEYOND

“Poetry is my home,” I often say. It is where I go to feel comfortable and where I do my self-exploration in writing. It is also where I go to be uncomfortable when my writing is changing or the subject matter is verging on the unfamiliar.

I didn’t consciously choose to write poetry. It just happened. One night I started writing, because I badly needed to express myself, and, much to my amazement, a poem emerged. Why a poem? I still can’t answer that question.

Another question I can’t answer is why, after a short time of writing poetry, it just became something I *had* to do. Perhaps it has happened to you, too. You may be maneuvering through rush-hour traffic when suddenly you find yourself thinking about yellow leaves on the trees and what they say about passing time, or the haunted life of a favorite painter, or the illness of your brother or husband, and before you know it a new poem begins to form. There is nothing to do but pull over at the next rest stop and start writing. Hopefully you still carry a pen or pencil with you. The back of a receipt will do for paper. The love of words carries you, and the words begin to form—rich, smooth, powerful ones—and you write, and you are hooked.

Writing poetry can be invaluable in deepening your understanding of yourself and the world, especially if you are facing a change or a difficult loss, as you will have done by the time you are eighty. So you write. And you begin to find your way with words, using them intuitively or purposefully. You may reach for the advice of others, as I did when I kept returning to that famous line of Emily Dickinson’s:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant—

Although I had read Dickinson's poem long before I began to write my own, even studied it, I had understood it only on a cognitive level. It was only after I had written poetry for a long time that I began to understand it experientially.

On February 19, 1995, I had my routine yearly mammogram. Afterward, the oncologist came to the waiting room and tapped me on the shoulder, saying, "Can we talk in my office?" Immediately my knees started to shake. He showed me the results of my mammogram, and there it was: the lesion in the milk duct in my left breast. What I had always dreaded. My mother had had breast cancer, so I had expected a similar diagnosis someday, but I'd always prayed, *Please, not this time*. But now was the time.

I slept little that night, my mind in that terrible "awfulizing" mode. Finally, I got up in the dark, went downstairs, opened my journal, and started doodling. Doodles turned into words, and words turned into a poem. My busy mind had scared a first poem out of me at the age of sixty-three. In that poem, "The Waiting Room," I focus on the décor of the waiting room to escape the frightening enormity and unknowability of the real subject while still confronting it, wrestling with it. "Telling it slant" felt natural and necessary here. See what you think.

Now, more than twenty years after I wrote that first poem, I can say what a multifaceted gift poetry has been to me. I can tell you how satisfying and healing it has been to reflect on life's changes and losses in this way. If poetry is my home, I can invite you in.

VAN GOGH'S UNIVERSE

No longer will the wild mistral winds
of southern France disturb your psyche.
Nevermore need you listen to crows
squawk black warnings
as they flap into the weathered sky
above the wheat field.

Perhaps you are on a joyous ride
through the universe, threading your way
among the galaxies, where you've found
gardens of greater delights than iris
and sunflower and a palette of brilliance
beyond cerulean and the colors of earth.

Or do you paint starry nights
from the other side and render
landscapes of stellar terrain?
Is the back of the moon
edged with circular swirls?
Do they tempt your eye again?

THE WAITING ROOM

I.

A few of the women have companions.
Silence and discreet distance
separate those who don't.
The room is dressed in safe colors:
maroon and gray
with a dash of ashen blue.

A watercolor hangs a touch
crooked on the wall, showing
paint tubes and flustered brushes
placed at odd angles as if an unseen
artist can neither clear the confusion
nor muster the courage
to continue her still-life.

Sheer curtains by a cliff
of windows tremble.
In the corner is a granite
memorial sculpture, a naked woman
who still bears her smooth and perfect
breasts. Her head is bowed,
her eyes are closed.

II.

She can't recall the oncologist's name,
the one she's supposed to see—
it's something two-syllabled,
begins with an *A*, or is it a *P*—
but she won't forget the hospital's colors:
maroon and gray, like a cheerleader's
pom-poms. She's grateful that someone
is rooting for the patients.

She thinks about the solitary woman
with the reddened eyes who's sitting on
the maroon-and-gray sofa. Does she
sleep through any of these awful
eerie new-moon nights?

She considers the black granite
memorial statue, a woman with two
shapely unmarred breasts.
She thinks: *How inappropriate.*
But then she thinks: *Well,*
they wouldn't make a statue
of a woman with one breast,
or none—not a naked one.
Would they?

ON THE EDGE OF THE ROAD

Songs of wisdom and truth
pass from Eve through Ruth to Mary
to enter the whorls of my grandmother's
ears. Deep in the night of her life,
she grabs me with a strength not hers,
entreating, *Life is hard, my dear,*
so dance.

And I do. I dance and sing
to primeval rhythms of past
gardens, a snake writhing
among the grass and stones,
stones that call from the roadbed,
Dance, dear woman, for life is hard.

So I listen to lyre and harp
and dance to the ancient songs.
I loop and sway and stomp,
snapping my road-worn skirt.
When rougher stones bloody my feet,
I move to the edge of the road,
but still I dance,

knowing that sisters and daughters
and daughters of theirs
will open their ears, loosen
their tongues, and sing,
Dance, dear woman. Dance.
Dance for the joy of survival.

JOAN PECK ARNOLD was born in 1931 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and spent the later half of her life in Massachusetts and Maine. Her work has been published in several journals, including *Soundings Review*, *Maine Review*, and *Slant: A Journal of Poetry*. She received an International Merit Award from *Atlanta Review* and an Honorable Mention from *Writer's Digest*, and she was featured on Boston's public radio station, WBUR, where she read her poem "Van Gogh's Universe" on *Here and Now*—a work that reflects her lifelong fascination with the artist. Joan has read and written poetry in her search for truth and beauty in her life and the world.

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