

SYMPOSIUM



Q. Where does your writing begin? Where does it stop?

Jennifer Martelli: These are the two toughest questions! I am best at beginning my writing when I am in the world of writing: a workshop, a poem-a-day, a sprint. When I'm in this world that demands writing, I'll write, and I'll start writing without judgement or censor. I find that I have an evil editor (she has my voice) in my head that will stop my writing before I even begin; when I have these outside groups that demand a poem, I'll just do it--and I'll do it on a regular basis. When do I stop? I can tell you that each poem is different. I have poems that have taken 15 years to write, or to call what we might say, "finished?" In terms of a daily practice, if I'm doing sprints, I do 30 minute blocks, with a timer. It's amazing how long that can feel, but then I'm surprised most of the time of that one line or one word that I discover. Revision can take longer, but I enjoy it more. I like wringing out a poem until it sings.

Laura Eppinger: My writing begins when I wake up in the morning and try to remember my dreams. I dawdle and try to put off going to work, jotting down a few words here or there. I make my commute and listen to music, loudly, and sing along. I work with kids--brilliant, frustrated, creative, loud, exhausting, beautiful kids--and they tell me their secrets and hopes and fears. Their phrases dance in my ears and I steal from them, liberally. Phrases stick out to me throughout every day. When I pick up more part-time work, or volunteer at a food co-op, or get lost in a knitting project, I am constantly struggling to break away and write, just this sentence, just that word. Writing nags at me and tells me to stay awake all night and keep tinkering with the pen and page. It ends when I go to sleep, I guess, but I always try to remember my dreams.

Sally Deskins: In terms of my art and writing, very broadly the easiest answer is that it began when I was born and it will stop when I die. Ideas are constant and changing, but innately inspired by my past. More specifically of course, when I get an assignment for a writing piece, the writing will begin there, with the assignment; I'll start researching, reading, looking if the case may be, and taking notes and making mental notes when I can't take them literally. Writing then begins with the first key on

the keyboard, then editing and rewriting, and perhaps, for a specific assignment, ends when it's turned in or even, when it's printed or published live. With art, it perhaps begins with an idea, whether that is with a collaborator as in my works with Laura Madeline Wiseman or Rachel Mindrup and Fran Higgins. I may read Wiseman's poetry and then do further research and thinking on the themes or narrative, all the while making process-based artwork with my kids or on my own, with the poetry in mind. After several rounds of this, perhaps I'll see a piece that I feel fits a poem or verse, draw or paint with it more, then set it aside, and this process may continue for weeks or months until I feel a piece is ready for print or exhibition, though really I can continue to work on art forever. In undergrad I was so obsessed with getting my lines right, one of my professors finally told me, "sometimes you just gotta let a line be," so that is what I try to do. I still look at that specific piece and want to work on it more, but that piece to me now is more evocative of the moment. So in general art making is never done, projects are never done, they're ongoing but can reach an "endpoint" for the purposes of getting something out! I have projects started with one layer, some in progress and some deemed ready to photograph/exhibit in piles in my studio. Concepts come to mind persistently, some make it to fruition and some don't, and I make work with my kids as well, all contributing to the fluidity of my life and work.

Jonathan Duckworth: I don't think a writer can ever really afford to stop. If I count the minutes and hours I spend typing poetry or fiction onto my computer each week, I seem to only be writing for 12 hours a week, sometimes less. But that's if you're only counting the compositional phase of writing. If you include all the other phases of the writing process, the only time I'm not writing is when I'm sleeping, and even then I sometimes dream dreams that I'll remember long enough after waking to write down. While I'm awake, everything that I experience has the potential to inform or texturize my writing. I'm not the first person, or even one of the first million people, to give this speech, but I want to highlight an aspect of the process that often gets left out: what I'd term "real-life stuff".

This is a painful, excruciatingly uncomfortable experience for a writer, who prefers to spend his or her time daydreaming or stringing words together. It could be a car accident, a fight with your parents, a slip in the bathtub that almost breaks your tailbone, anything that's so solid and unequivocal that your body's fight or flight reflex hits control-alt-delete and shelves all non-essential mental processes, including the

writer in you. But even here, the writing doesn't really stop; it's just put on hold. In fact, these are the most critical moments of the writing process, because while you may be brought down to Earth for a time, once you go back to being your old impractical self you'll get a great view from the clouds of your mishap below.

Michaela Cowgill: I find that my writing begins before I sit down with ink and paper. It's a little mysterious to me, but as I move about my daily life I have the vague feeling of a poem beginning before I've written it. It begins in my surroundings, in overheard conversations and in the pieces of my day that I record in my notebook. When I finally sit down to write the thing, if I'm lucky, it already has a bit of its own momentum. My writing stops when the poem feels as close as it can be, to finished. I decide that it's finished with half intuition and half wanting to leave it alone.

Olivia Olson: A long time ago, I read an essay by a man who had just returned to the United States from an African safari. I can't remember much about the article except that the man was struck by how there seemed to be a "field of notice" (my words, not his) around the lions. If he stood outside the field, the lions would be oblivious to his existence, but the second he stepped inside that circumference, the lions were able to see and smell him, and therefore recognize him as prey. That moment, he said, when the lions would begin to stir and stare at him with interest, was exhilarating. That always seemed to me an apt metaphor for the catalyst of a poem. Once an idea, an image, a character steps inside my field of notice, I am overcome with that exhilarating, "hey, I could say something about that," and writing begins.

I wish I could say I have an equally exhilarating rush after finishing a poem—"it's done!"—but in my experience, the writing never stops. A poem is never done. A chapbook is never finished. A book could always use some editing. I can't tell if that's the most gratifying or the most frustrating part, but I'm willing to keep at it either way.

Marcia Hurlow: Usually, my poems begin with a sound—a phrase of language or a sound in nature. However, the two poems published in this issue of *Hermeneutic Chaos* are the result of a challenge I gave myself to write some ekphrastic poetry. I had been

thinking about how the other arts speak to poetry and specifically what about two-dimensional visual art, such as paintings by Edward Hopper, for example, creates narratives in our minds. How does a painting appeal to other senses besides sight? With this idea, I went to an art museum in Budapest, between sessions of a conference, and was floored by the sarcophagus in the basement. I returned the next day and wrote other poems based on other artifacts in the same exhibit, generally with looser connections to the objects themselves. Later in the week, somewhat fearfully, I ventured upstairs and saw “Three Boys Throwing Pebbles.” Writing about the Egyptian artifacts had gradually given me more permission to move from interpreting the literal before me and using it as a starting place for narrative, which is evident in the difference between these two poems.

As for the second question, real revision never stops. Paul Vallery said, “A poem is never finished, just abandoned.” That has certainly been my experience. I have often read poems I wrote a few years ago and seen new possibilities for connections, metaphors, and details that I missed. Sometimes I add these to the poem, and sometimes I write a completely different poem.

Maureen Kingston: *Begin* and *stop* suggest intentionality, destination, a map. I can’t handle the pressure of planned writing trips. I prefer aimlessness—lounging in train stations, eavesdropping, observing. I must find ways to pass the time while I wait for my lyric brain to make the connections *it* wants to make. Forcing the issue, lashing myself to a writing desk, never works. My muse is a drama queen. It’s only after I’ve abandoned all hope of ever writing again—when I’ve moved on to more productive tasks such as scouring the sink or shredding insurance come-ons—that she shows up, pouty, tempting me with wondrous thoughts, exotic imagery, burlesque humor. As dope fiend is to drug pusher, I follow her because she entertains and I’m an entertainment junkie. My writing process of any individual piece usually ends once I’ve stopped tinkering with it for a decent interval. Still, the act of hitting *send* or *submit* can throw every decision I’ve made about the piece into doubt and I have to check it again...and again!

Clio Velentza: Writing begins when the pebble hits unseen the bottom of the well. For a while my ears are ringing. Everything comes filtered through the sound, gets

broken down and reassembled, and then tossed into the lost and found box. There are times when I have to stare for a while at this motley in the box before making up my mind. There are times when I close my eyes and dip my hand and wait for something to bite. Long before the paper comes to view I become enamored with the trinkets: the limbless doll that plays the voice of the dead, the crumpled words wrapped around broken bone flutes, the shred of papery sky with the forgotten stars. I nudge them around. When they're crackling with static electricity, I know it's time. Afterwards, when I've consumed even the empty, stained cardboard, writing stops. But it's not long until I'm digging around the attic again, looking for a new box.

Audrey Carroll: My writing starts and ends with my experiences and the experiences of those around me, each experience a potential inspiration or a collection of details that breathe life into the words.

Sonya Vatomsky: My writing is a snake eating itself, an external monologue I shed as time passes. Words are a huge comfort to me; they're how I experience things almost moreso than through sight or touch, and they allow me to create & manifest without costs and materials and the things that make so many other crafts feel like a constant sprint between art and consumerism. It's such a pure, undiluted type of creation, so -- where does it begin? That I can't answer, but I know it doesn't ever end.

Jinny Koh: My writing begins when a thought takes root in my mind. I'd turn it over and over again until the words are on paper. But even then, the writing doesn't end. There is always something else I can add, whether it is to enhance the story, or to take it to a different direction.

Kim Peter Kovac: I come from theater, by training and profession, and think it began of the dawn of civilizations, where people gathered around a fire on a desert, in a cave, in a forest, and the elders, the griots, the hakawatis, the bards, told stories of the lives of their people - as they had been, as they were, and as they would be in the future. I came into writing poetry later in life, wanting to tell stories, as the plays I

produce/commission tell stories. So my writing begins with a story I want to tell - literally or abstractly. There's a word, an image, an emotion that I want to understand better. This piece grew from wanting to articulate, even a bit, a very beautiful kinetic light sculpture. My writing ends (or the piece ends) when the story is told.

