

Ooh! I love this book, love hearing others speak about their craft, their muses and monsters. Filled to the brim with all things poetry, this book offers beginners (and experienced writers because there is always something more to learn) a place to start, where to go next—and what might happen there. These essays are enabling and encouraging and useful. They speak not only to process but also to the life of the poet, the business of poetry and the need for literary citizenship and community. This is a book I'll return to again and again! Readers will, too. And get a fountain pen!!

—**Karla Huston**

The special pen, or sliver of eavesdropping, or the book that will change your life; the night table or bus ride where scraps of writings happen—these are just a few of the magical elements the practitioners gathered in this inspiring anthology call on to sing and to guide new poets inside the mysteries of poem-making. The marketplace of publishing beckons and glitters, but these poet-essayists remind us that the best feeling in the world is finding oneself in the middle of writing a poem. Humor, sharp prosodic strategies and prompts, advice about submitting, and some very cool personal anecdotes, alongside several daunting and stark accounts, hallmark every section of this anthology. There's wisdom and guidance in every essay. *Far Villages* is invaluable for beginners, to be sure, but also for poets teaching new writers, poets in-between poems, and poets who've been writing a while and are thirsty to refresh. This smart and unusually various academic and personal text serves as revivifying reminder that the welcome itself sustains new American writing.

—**Judith Vollmer**

*Far Villages* freely invites the novice poet into a company of friendly strangers who recast the anxiety of influence in terms of mentorship. Readers will find that the innovative chapter headings, beginning with “Hello and Welcome...” all the way to the final chapter called “A Way of Seeing the World” are likewise refreshing in the willing patronage the book offers to the apprentice poet. Drawing from diverse poetic traditions, *Far Villages* is a vital addition in the field of new and evolving poetics.

—**Claudia Keelan**

# FAR VILLAGES

Welcome Essays for  
New & Beginner Poets

Edited by  
Abayomi Animashaun



Black  
Lawrence  
Press

for  
makers gone  
here and still to come

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“This poetry. I never know what I’m going to say.  
I don’t plan it.  
When I’m outside the saying of it,  
I get very quiet and rarely speak at all.”

—Jalaluddin Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*

## INTRODUCTION

At the heart of this anthology is the belief that poetry is open to everyone but also the recognition that substantial progress within it takes years of apprenticeship, of experimenting, of trying, of failing—that there’s a difference between randomly picking it up and choosing to make it an essential part of one’s life.

For a writer new to the craft, this can sound like a daunting task. And it is! Poetry is “connate with the origin of man”, as Shelley reminds. Not only is it practiced the world over, in countries, among peoples, and tribes, it’s also written and oral. There are so many voices, so many books, and an infinite number of approaches. Where does one begin? Yet, for many poets, the journey often begins with a perceived silence on the *what* and *how* of poetry.

This seeming silence often belies an on-going, sometimes fierce, conversation about what poetry is, what it should do, *and* how it should be approached and pursued. This conversation is as old as poetry itself. But, for those outside of it, this back and forth—to echo William Stafford—can be hard to see.

For some, this seeming absence of conversation about poetry can contribute to initial fear and paralysis due to the lack of know-how. For others, it can contribute to the idea that poetry has no other beginning and end than inside themselves, that instantly they know what they are doing, that they are masters with nothing to learn, and that the millennia worth of songs and works are secondary or in some cases irrelevant to their immediate concerns.

This is how many poets start out—with initial fear or with a self-assuredness that betrays a lack of understanding about the nature of poetry, how it refuses to be pinned down, how its landscape is greater than any woman or man.

These responses also point to foundational questions, among them: How does a poet become? And, in her journey, what markers should she take on, ponder, or avoid?

Questions like these, in the end, can only be answered by the poet herself. Given that, in poetry, there are no absolutes. What the poet knows as *truth* she

must come to herself and mature into over years. Still, all new *makers* must learn from those that come before them, because poetry is among the oldest trades in the world and among the most traditional. Poets learn their art and craft by studying other poets' perspectives, approaches, and discipline.

Thus, this anthology is conceived in the spirit of other poetry handbooks and manuals aimed at demystifying the bewildering nature of poetic craft and the poetic life *and* closing the gap between beginners' passion and steady practice, so that the new poet can begin cultivating a viable path outside false confidence and initial paralysis.

*Closing the gap*, however, does not mean hurrying the journey or being a poet instantly. No manual can, or should, promise this. There is no "Easy Guide to Becoming a Poet." What's true is that by reading and listening to others, trepidations can lessen, false confidence can be managed, and the poet can, in time, slowly begin the climb into that inexact space where aesthetic principles inform artistic vision, where artistic vision shapes aesthetic principles.

Also true is that the new *maker* must start somewhere. And, in the first section of this anthology, titled "Hello and Welcome", a number of poets discuss initial considerations beginners may choose to take on. For instance, David Shumate, whose essay comes after Christine Riddle's welcome letter and Tanis MacDonald's prologue, describes a partnership with silence that's akin to "following the brush". In other words, following where the poem leads.

This theme of being open to the writing process, trusting one's intuition, following where the poem leads, and being careful of the over-determined poem is one that many poets hold true and one that runs through this anthology.

Another theme that threads through this anthology points to an earlier sentiment—there are no absolutes. Kyle Flak articulates this in his essay, when he says that there is no one "correct kind of poem." Rishi Dastidar takes this a step further by saying that "... there isn't one single obvious way of going about [being a poet]. You end up trying a lot of things, some of which are, in retrospect, ludicrous."

In addition, Michael Angel Martín reminds readers about the futility of trying to pin down something as inherently elusive as poetry with definitions. "Any ruminative pursuit about what poetry is will only lead us back to

poetic language.” “Any essay chasing a definition of “poem” would probably only have probed itself into either a poem or white space.”

If there is no correct kind of poem and no correct way of being a poet, perhaps the point, as Flak suggests, *is* to “have fun” and for each poet to find what works for her.

Yet, beneath poetry’s fractured overlay, along with its endless entry points, is a long and vibrant conversation about its praxis and nature. A conversation that, when embraced, allows the poet to develop principles, tastes, postures of mind, and marrows of similitude with current and ancient practitioners. Without this sense of tradition, if we draw from T.S. Eliot, the new poet runs the serious risk of being stunted at the start. “I don’t read others because I don’t want to contaminate my genius.” “I *only* read my contemporaries.” Sentiments such as these will only leave the new poet frittering away at the gates.

In the second section, titled “Some Essentials of Poetry”, contributors discuss issues of craft and provide engaging exercises for beginner and experienced poets alike. David M. Harris, from whose essay the title of the section is taken, provides the reader with some essentials of poetry “in no particular order.”

Among these essentials is that it’s not enough to want to write. One has to actually do it. It helps too for poets to be open to accidents, while also being open to the various approaches and forms that have been used over time.

Poetry *is* about operating in that matrix where old and ancient works form a nexus with new and contemporary approaches. But, it is also about play—play with ideas and language(s). David Bergman in his essay, “The Pleasure of Reading”, speaks partly to this when he calls poetry “the first Montessori school.”

Playing with language(s) and ideas! For the new poet, it’s a notion worth keeping in mind given that poetry requires doing, constancy, and a realization that our abilities will “evolve over time” as we grow “from the obvious to the more subtle in our younger years; from the literal to the more abstract and metaphorical as we age” as John Langfeld asserts.

This discussion of craft is taken further in the section titled “Contemplating Form”, where contributors address a myriad of concerns—from Kelly Cherry’s insights on style all the way to Nathan McClain’s discussion of Elizabeth Bishop. And, again, one is reminded that poets with informed resolutions to aspects of craft are the ones most willing to study what other

poets have said and are saying. Thus, these poets have more tools at their disposal, which gives them more to work with and more to talk about . . .

On the contrary, if a new poet, for instance, becomes resolutely married to the idea that representational poems that are confessional are the only real poems no *ifs*, *ands*, or *buts*, such a poet might altogether miss Zoe Brigley's well-articulated argument that "being honest does not necessarily mean having to confess" and that "dream-work can be particularly useful to the poet who wants to write about difficult, personal material."

Poets must remain in conversation with works of the past and those of their time. As Chaun Ballard points out in his essay titled "Peas in the Pocket: The Practice of Fixed Poetic Form"—"Exploring form gives me the opportunity to be in conversation with a community of poets, both past and present, and by reusing structures that had long been in circulation, I follow in tradition."

In order to gain mastery, Ballard continues, the poet's skills "must be honed and sharpened repeatedly . . . this comes through the reading of other poets, corresponding critiques, and the composition of a number of drafts and revisions." Ballard goes on to say that he approaches poetry the way an athlete approaches his/her sports—by practicing every day. "Poets" he says "must put in the time and effort."

For poets looking for a structured environment to put in the time and effort, becoming part of a literary community might be a viable choice. In the section titled "Poetry Workshop", contributors provide hands-on suggestions for the poet thinking of pursuing this option. Literary communities can be found, for instance, in cafés, retreats, workshops, and MFA programs. They can include hundreds of people or they can be a simple community of two. What matters is for the poet to find what works for her in tone, rigor, and dynamic while keeping in mind that to "enter the community of writing" is to step "into a living stream that has a long history—and an unknown destiny" as Thom Tamaro points out.

Also true is that after working for a while—whether alone or within a collective—the poet might feel compelled to send his poems into the world to be considered for possible publication. When he finds himself at this stage, the poet must be resigned to the reality of rejection. Difficult as it is, he must learn that rejection is the business of poetry. He must learn to see rejection as an opportunity to return to the tool shop and fine-tune his work.

What the poet doesn't want is to be distraught after each rejection. In the section titled "Publication and the Literary Community", Helen Ruggieri and Whitney Sweet discuss situations when the poet might consider "rejecting rejection."

Still, rare as getting published is, it happens! And, after publication, the poet will have to deal with the "Wow! Now What?" phenomenon. "Wow! Now What?" is the title of Laura M Kaminski's essay, in which she addresses this important question that often comes after one's work (whether a poem or book of poems) has been accepted by a literary journal or press. In addition, Joan Leotta cautions against success. With publication, the poet doesn't want to think of himself as "arrived". "The mountain of writing "perfection" has no summit—it's a moving target" Leotta says. Regardless of what we've achieved, "[w]e can always improve."

Writing is not all about publications, nor is it just about winning awards. Poets are part of a literary community. And, for someone like Nancy Reddy, poets should often ask themselves how they are contributing to the viability of that community.

However, just because poets are part of a collective doesn't mean all journeys are the same in poetry. If they were, then all the essays in the section titled "The Poet's Journey" would be on the same subject. Instead, we see Leonard Franzén take up the important question of when a poet might call herself *a poet*. After how many books published? After how many prizes won? After how many readings given or classes taught? Isn't it better to focus on the work than being hung up on the label?

On the other hand, Aaron Brown ponders if every experience can be made into a poem, while Jessamine Price talks about the beauty inherent in memorizing poems. For her part, Tanis MacDonald cautions against the mythologized image of the writer as a lonely genius. This notion (or image) of the writer living *completely* in the sealed world of ideas is, as Darby Price eloquently puts it, "bullshit!"

Each poet must walk his path and mountain pass as he tries to overcome limitations in writing as in life. Yet, some challenges can be difficult to overcome—especially, in situations where the scars of loss and trauma remain indelible. We see this with some of the essays included in the section titled "Reclaiming Artistic Space," which also contains essays by Megan Merchant and Claudia F. Savage about how the poet can preserve or reenter her writing space when that space is taxed by familial concerns.

For most poets, writing does not occur in airtight spaces removed from the demands of a world that daily seems on a downward spiral. Thus, poetry informs how many poets see the world and live in it.

In the final section of this anthology titled, “A Way of Seeing the World,” contributors explore this connection between poetry and place, to echo Stephen Page, in a variety of ways. For Gillian Parrish, who introduces poetry to her students as “world-making”, the actual *making* occurs in the “scarce between-times” of a “busy week”. Todd Davis asks how best poets can “be in the world, present to the sacred and desecrated, witness to grace and suffering which . . . is at the root of poetry?” While, José Angel Araguz writes about how identifying as Latinx “is not the end of a conversation but the continuation of one.”

The essays mentioned in this introduction are just a handful of the many in this anthology that provide insights into the art and the poet’s life. And, taken together, the eight section-titles of this book (which are from contributors’ essays) paint a rough picture of the poet’s evolution—a picture, which suggests that there’s no such thing as instant mastery, that poetry requires patience and discipline.

For poets unsure of who to read and how to begin, there’s an extensive reading list at the back of this anthology where each contributor suggests up to five works that poets might find useful as they journey into the ever-expanding field of meaning-making known as poetry.

Moreover, the number and variety of books on the reading list also show that the new poet has before him a long road of apprenticeship. To understand that poetry begins but also does not begin with oneself is an essential step toward being a mature poet.

With this in mind, I want to believe that the poet is someone who has set for herself the lifelong task of being in dialogue with the dead and living poets of her country (or countries), while also trying to find her place in that conversation through her own unique idiom. It’s precisely this conversation, however, that many poets avoid in their early years.

This notion of being in dialogue with the dead and living poets from one’s country is itself not new. It’s drawing from T.S. Eliot’s century-old essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, in which Eliot argues that “[n]o poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists . . .”

Of course, we must set the poet or artist in relation to living poets as well. But the point is not lost. And, this brings me to one of my takeaways from this anthology:

Rather than being overwhelmed with fear or being instantly sure of his own greatness, the new poet can begin by looking forward to his own limitations. He can take heart knowing that he has a long reading list, that while he'll not read every single book of poetry ever written, he's committed to reading and studying as much as possible while he breathes.

He can take his first steps into poetry knowing that some days will be better than others, on some days poetry will make sense, on other days it won't. He can proceed into poetry, this second country and the far villages within it, knowing that what matters is not how loudly he beats his chest and screams "poetry", what matters is his daily engagement with it.

He can relax in the fact that when it comes to his search for that union between artistic vision and aesthetic principles, he's in it for the long-haul. And, he can take those first steps as he is—whether troubled or bruised, kind or gentle, whether from Dakar, Paris, London, or Tehran, whether learned or new to the craft—especially if he's new to the craft! He should know that, since he'll grow from reading and studying others, how he arrives at the gates and what he brings are enough.

He can continue his devotion to poetry knowing that much of it is elusive and important to poetry is preserving its own mystery. What relief knowing that he doesn't have to be sure about all things poetry from the beginning, that he's allowed to practice, fail, and embrace *unknowing*.

And, he can look forward to studying the works and lives of masters—poets like Yeats, Stafford, Neruda. Glück, Elytis, Rilke—*makers* who found ways of placing poetry at the core of their lives, initiates who grew in their craft by reading contemporaries and studying prior masters.

Abayomi Animashaun