You’ll never be able to make a living writing poems. We’d better get this money business out of the way before we go any further. I don’t want you to have any illusions. You might make a living as a teacher of poetry writing or as a lecturer about poetry, but writing poems won’t go very far toward paying your electric bill. A poem published in one of the very best literary magazines in the country might net you a check for enough money to buy half a sack of groceries. The chances are much better that all you’ll receive, besides the pleasure of seeing your poem in print, are a couple of copies of the magazine, one to keep and one to show to your mother. You might get a letter or postcard from a grateful reader, always a delightful surprise. But look at it this way: any activity that’s worth lots of money, like professional basketball, comes with rules pinned all over it. In poetry, the only rules worth thinking about are the standards of perfection you set for yourself.

There’s no money in poetry because most of my neighbors, and most of yours, don’t have any use for it. If, at a neighborhood yard sale, you happened to find the original handwritten manuscript of T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” you could take it to every quick shop in your city and you wouldn’t find a single person who would trade you ten gallons of gas for it.

Part of the reason for our country’s lack of interest in poetry is that most of us learned in school that finding the meaning of a poem is way too much work, like cracking a walnut and digging out the meat. Most readers have plenty to do that’s far more interesting than puzzling over poems. I’ll venture that ninety-nine percent of the people who read The New Yorker prefer the cartoons to the poems.

A lot of this resistance to poetry is to be blamed on poets. Some go out of their way to make their poems difficult if not downright discouraging, because difficult poems are what they think they’re expected to write to advance their careers. They know it’s the professional interpreters of poetry—book reviewers, professional literary critics—who most often establish a poet’s reputation, and that those interpreters are attracted to poems that offer opportunities to show off their skills at interpretation. A poet who writes poetry that doesn’t require explanation, who writes clear and accessible poems, is of little use to critics building their own careers as interpreters. But a clear and accessible poem can be of use to an everyday reader.

It is possible to nourish a small and appreciative audience for poetry if poets would only think less about the reception of critics and more about the needs of readers. The Poetry Home Repair Manual advocates for poems that can be read and understood without professional interpretation. My teacher and mentor, Karl Shapiro, once pointed out that the poetry of the twentieth century
was the first poetry *that had to be taught*. He might have said *that had to be explained*. I believe with all my heart that it’s a virtue to show our appreciation for readers by writing with kindness, generosity and humility toward them. Everything you’ll read here holds to that.

One other point: Isaac Newton attributed his accomplishments to standing on the shoulders of giants. He meant great thinkers who had gone before. Accordingly, beginning poets sometimes start off trying to stand on the shoulders of famous poets, imitating the difficult and obscure poems those successful poets have published. That’s understandable, that’s harmless. But they soon learn that, somehow, no literary journal is interested in publishing *their* difficult poems. If these beginners were to study the careers of the famous poets upon whose work they’re modeling their own, they’d find that those writers were often, in their early years, publishing clear, understandable poems. In most instances, only after establishing reputations could they go on to write in more challenging ways. In a sense they earned the right to do so by first attracting an audience of readers, editors and publishers with less difficult poems.

*We serve each poem we write.* We make ourselves *subservient* to our poetry. Any well-made poem is worth a whole lot more to the world than the person who wrote it. In one of Tomas Tranströmer’s poems he says “Fantastic to see how my poem is growing / while I myself am shrinking. / It’s getting bigger, it’s taking my place . . . .”

There’s an essential difference between *being a poet* and *writing poetry*. There are, in a sense, two poets, the one alone writing a poem and the one in the black turtleneck and beret, trying to look sexy. Here’s an older poem of mine:

*A Poetry Reading*

Once you were young along a river, tree to tree,
with sleek black wings and red shoulders.
You sang for yourself but all of them listened to you.

Now you’re an old blue heron with yellow eyes
and a gray neck tough as a snake.
You open your book on its spine, a split fish,
and pick over the difficult ribs,
turning your better eye down to the work
of eating your words as you go.

At the beginning, too often it’s the idea of *being* a poet that matters most. It’s those sexy black wings and red shoulders. It’s the *attention* you want, as the poem says, “all of them listening to you.” And then you grow old and, if you are lucky, grow wise.

I’m in my sixties, but I too was once young and felt flashy as a red-winged blackbird. I don’t remember the specific date when I decided to be a poet, but it was during one of my many desperately lonely hours as a teenager, and I set about establishing myself as a poet with adolescent singlemindedness. I began
to dress the part. I took to walking around in rubber shower sandals and white
beachcomber pants that tied with a piece of clothesline rope. I let my hair grow
longer and tried to grow a beard. I carried big fat books wherever I went—like
Adolph Harnack’s *Outlines of the History of Dogma* and Kierkegaard’s *Fear and
Trembling*. I couldn’t have understood a word of these books if I’d tried, but they
looked really good clenched under my arm and, as a bonus, helped me look as if I
had big biceps.

There were, it seemed to me, many benefits accruing to a career as a poet.
There were fame and immortality: the lichen-encrusted bust of the poet on his
monument in the town cemetery, standing throughout time in a swirl of autumn
leaves. There was also the delicious irresponsibility of the bohemian lifestyle: No
more picking up my room, no more mowing the yard.

But best of all was the adoration of women. *That* was what I was most
interested in. In those years I desperately needed some sort of a gimmick, for I
was thin and pimply, my palms sweated, and my breath was sour from smoking
the Chesterfields that despite the claims of magazine advertising had failed to
make me irresistible.

I got the idea that being a poet might make me attractive by reading *Life*
magazine, which occasionally profiled some rumpled, unshaven, melancholy poet
(never a female poet, as far as I can remember), and I got the idea from the
accompanying text that these guys were “lady-killers,” as people used to say. I
especially remember a photograph of grizzled old John Berryman surrounded by
dewy-eyed co-eds, a smile on his lips. It had to be the poetry that made the
difference, I figured, because were it not for that, disheveled old Berryman
wouldn’t likely have gotten to first base with the women.

It didn’t occur to me for a long time that in order to earn the title of Poet, I
ought to have written at least one poem. To me, the writing of poetry didn’t have
all that much to do with it. Being a poet was looking the part.

I was an artificial poet, a phony, when, by rubbing shoulders with poetry,
I gradually became interested in writing it. I’d begun to carry books less
cumbersome than Harnack and Kierkegaard, and one day I picked up the New
Directions paperback edition of William Carlos Williams’ *Selected Poems*. It
weighed no more than a few ounces and fit in my pocket. I began to read
Williams and soon discovered other poets whose work I liked: May Swenson,
Randall Jarrell, John Crowe Ransom, to name a few. I began to read poetry
whenever I had a moment free from pretending to be a poet, and soon I started to
write a few poems of my own. The two sides of being a poet—the poet as
celebrity and the poet as writer—began to fall into balance. I read poems, I wrote
poems, and at times, sometimes for hours on end, I was able to forget about
trying to attract women.

Today I read poems, I write poems, and at times, yes, sometimes for hours
on end, I forget about women. Yet there are still the two poets present, the one
who quietly concentrates on perfecting the poem and the one who wants more
than anything else to be celebrated and adored. I’m delighted and nourished by
the first poet and embarrassed by the second.