

# TO BE THE POET



Maxine Hong Kingston

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The William E. Massey Sr.  
Lectures in the History of  
American Civilization

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To Earl, always

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TO BE THE POET



I CHOOSE  
THE POET'S LIFE



chapter one

I have almost finished my longbook. Let my life as Poet begin. I want the life of the Poet. I have labored for over twelve years, one thousand pages of prose. Now, I want the easiness of poetry. The brevity of the poem. Poets are always happy. I want to be always happy. No plotting any more plots. For the longbook (about the long wars in Viet Nam and in the Middle East), I sacrificed time with my child, grown and gone, and my husband and family and friends, who should have been loved more. The longbook has got to be done soon, and I'll be free to live. I won't be a workhorse anymore; I'll be a skylark. Free of obligations. I am sixty years old; I have enough reputation and fame and money. Poets don't care too much for money. I declare to you: I'm making a try for poetry. Say one becomes Poet by grace . . . beauty and truth hap upon the Poet

... all gift, no labor ... the Muse flies over, and drops jewels upon the Poet's head and into open hands ... I will go about lifting an empty basket to the air.

I want poetry to be the way it used to come when I was a child. The Muse flew; I flew. Let me return to that child being, and rest from prose. My mother used to hold me by the waist, and boosted me out the upstairs front window. "Sing to your grandfathers," she said. "Tease them." My mother's hands at my waist squeezed poems out of me.

Som Goong ah.

Say Goong ah.

Nay hoy nai, yah?

Mah hai cup cup,

say ngyeuk, yow say ngyeuk,

Nay hoy nai, yah?

Here's the translation of my very minor Chinese dialect:

Hey, Third Grandfather.

Hey, Fourth Grandfather.

Where are you going?

Horse shoes clippity-clopping  
four feet, then four feet,  
Where are you going?

My two grandfathers sat atop the stagecoach drawn by two black horses, and laughed, and clapped their hands. "Ah," they said. "Ah-h-h." Let me have poetry to be like that once again, and I shall die happy.

When I was in the fourth grade, Mrs. Garner taught us to make a copybook entitled *Gems*. *Gem* was another word for *poem*. She fitted five pieces of chalk into the fingers of the wood-and-wire thing, drew music lines on the blackboard, and copied gems. We copied them into our books, and we owned them. One day, I heard and felt a rush of wings. Down through the roof and in through the windows came golden light, and words streaming in couplets and quatrains and long, long stanzas. ... *fly* ... *I* ... *sky* ... *cry* ... *die* ... *why* ... *fly* ... *fly* ... All the important words rhyme. They blow out of the sky, and all I have to do is write them down.

I want days as a Poet. Not the workaday life of the prose-writer. I am still on the longbook job. The workhorse day is

never over. You can make yourself write prose into the evening, and on into the night. Rise before dawn to elude the people you live with. Think, think, think, plot, plot, write, write, write. Faithfully go at it. Apply yourself to a question, explain things, follow the characters wherever they go. Labor away, and there will be yield—the longbook.

The Poet's day will be moment upon moment of gladness. Poets do whatever they like. They take off whenever they please—to the garden or the shops or the park for strolling or rollerblading. They dine with friends. They go dancing. They go to the library, and read a book that has nothing to do with research. They nap in the hammock, cook, have tea and cookies, invite people over, visit them, pick up the ringing telephone, play music, watch t.v., do nothing, do nothing but breathe. The Muse will find you, and hand over poems. The writing down will be short, and the day long, hardly any of it spent actually writing. The poem comes unworked for. You just pick up the gold fountain pen or the glass pen with the spiral nib, dip it in ink, touch the fine linen laid paper, and out flows the poem. Practicing, I am writing this lecture at my parents' roll-top desk, which they took from the gambling

house. My father used to sit here with fountain pen and brush pen, writing, and my mother with pencil and ballpoint, first draft, later drafts. They both wrote letters and histories. Once in a while, he'd write down a poem, then a poem from memory, then another poem "that just came to me." My father did the calligraphy on cloth; my mother embroidered the poems. And they sang them a cappella.

I have more than a lifetime's supply of ink. My father made his own ink, and left a dozen liters in ridged and beveled bottles, corked like wine. It settles and separates into pretty layers, like *pousse-café*. Shaken, it turns blue or brown. I decanted some into an inkpot; the dip pen stood in it, ready. That ink is so strong, it ate away the nib.

I can will a longbook. The novel can be willed. But a poem is good luck. "Lucky," said my mother. The poet is lucky. I can't help it; I am willing poetry. I will poetry.

I take after my father, worrying over poetry. I inherit his ink; I inherit his questions. "What is a poem?" he'd ask. "Is this a poem?" "Why don't poems come to me constantly, the way they came in China?" My mother tried nagging him into poetry: "Where are the poems, Poet?" William Carlos Wil-

liams would answer: Poetry comes out from the ground, and from people. My father couldn't hear language in America as he could in China. "How can a poem ever be translated from one language to another?" Chinese and English—different tones, different tunes, different hemispheres of world and mind.

Why does the Muse of Lyric Love Poetry have a name that sounds like "Error"? Is it that she has wandering wings? What if she doesn't choose me? I'm still occupied with the long-book. She's waiting for me to be free. The Poet is free. Worriers and fretters do not attract poetry.

Ten years ago, I turned 50 at a party where a lot of men were also turning 50—Malcolm Margolin, Bob Hass, Richard Nelson, Lee Swenson. They gloated—the luckiest generation, born in the luckiest year, dragons all—children when there was still country, farm life, and wildlife, young men without the draft, didn't go to any of the wars, had sex during the sexual revolution—the pill—and they bought a house before real estate cost too much. And they were alive to hear such musicians, such Poets.

Gary Snyder, elder, responded, "Poets get away with a lot." I asked what he meant. Poets leap? They skip scientific

proofs and mathematical steps? And alight wherever they please? Poets don't have to build bridges?

Gary Snyder, who is now writing much prose, including footnotes, said that critics don't criticize poets. "For some reason," he said, "the people who read poetry are shy to criticize it. Prosewriters get criticism and scrutiny. But readers of poetry are shy to criticize poets." So, poets are even free of critics!

Whenever I meet a poet, I ask: How will poetry come to me? What are the ways?

At a dinner party that Nick Delbanco gave for Raymond Carver and Tess Gallagher, with Jay McInerney and John Aldridge also there, I asked Tess how she gets poems. She said that the night before poetry-writing day, she reads poems. Poetry-writing day is a free day; she is quiet and alone. She lights candles, and "invites the poems." "I face the coming or not-coming of the poem with neither hope nor despair."

On the deck of a boat sailing the Li River between the mountains that look like the mountains in ink brush paintings, I was standing between William Gass and Allen Ginsberg. Allen made up a poem on the spot—an exact description of the people around us, and the sunrays that fanned from a mountain's cleft. (Well, not perfectly exact, calling peo-

ple "Japanese tourists" who were Cantonese tourists.) I asked Bill Gass, "How do you feel, watching him do that when you've been working on your longbook for twenty years?"

"It took him twenty years to learn spontaneous composition."

Allen Ginsberg instructs: "First thought, best thought." Oh, to have my every spontaneous thought count as poetry! No draft after draft like a draft horse.

Clayton Eshleman, laughing, said, "First thought best thought' is not 'First *word* best *word*.' Ginsberg does rewrite. I'm sure he does."

I have noticed that prosewriters like the company of prosewriters, and poets, poets. Barry Lopez looked over at *them*, and said, "Amateurs. We're the pros. They're the amateurs." Jim and Jeanne Houston's address is "The Prose Channel."

Writing and reading have to do with time, playing with time, stretching it into eternity, pinning its moments down. The reader of the longbook lives with the story and its characters for a long time. The reader of poetry is awakened to the one moment. The Poet truly lives the happening moment, and gives the very bodily feeling of it to whosoever would

read. To put myself into the state of poetry, I need to learn the habit of living constantly within the present moment.

I will be selfish. There's a wonderful moment I have on the verge of sleep—I have nothing to do but feel my feelings, look at the pictures behind my eyes, and go to sleep. Consider no one but myself. Rest from the social responsibility of prose. Don't care about people's antics anymore. I will be socially irresponsible. I will be a Poet.

I'm going to set up a place somewhere, an orderly, beautiful place, where I will be alone and happy and poetic. Phyllis Hoge, who lived in the Poet's Cottage downhill from my Big House, wears headphones to hear no noise but white sound. I would be wandering about in the old blue-ginger garden, and espy her. I evaded her, and she evaded me.

I asked Alice Fulton how she gets the poems to come. She says that she clears the coming day. No appointments on poetry day. She finds a comfortable place—she likes comfort; she called the dinner I cooked for her "comfort food"—and she stays in bed surrounded by things and books that she loves. Have fun, and the poems come. You have to give it all day. "I need the expanse of the day." Alice gets such a day but once a

week. She tells students with poetry troubles to watch mute t.v. and invent the sounds, use their own words. "Students work so hard; they need permission to watch television. Play, and the poetry comes."

I'm teaching school this Spring semester, but the longbook is almost done. I should be able to make more than one day per week an empty day. I'll bring my fountain pens and nib pens and inkwells and a notebook of beautiful paper to the meditation room, sit on the tatami floor, and use the bamboo bench as a desk. I will start on the first day of Spring.

One of my god-daughters was told at the age of 12 that she will never be a prima ballerina. She's only good enough for the corps. I hate that. There shouldn't be disciplines—ballet, football—where you don't get a chance to existentially construct yourself, yes, even the physical body. Learn, work hard, and make your very body.

I was there in Ho Chi Minh City when Larry Heinemann said his poem to Vietnamese listeners. He told of beginning the day, standing in the back yard, drinking his morning coffee. Suddenly, rushes of winds—wings—fly close over his head, fan his skin, lift his hair. A pair of Canada geese ar-

row past him, and call him, call him. "Just tell it like it happened. Tell how it came, and you have your poem. A piece of cake."

I witnessed Fred Marchant in the act of making a poem. Poets of Hûé took us to the top of a pyramid in the middle of the night, and sang poems at a place on the stone that amplifies voices. Fred felt pressure to come up with poetry on the spot. (I, prosewriter, felt no such importunity.) He described the moment we were living—us looking at one another, the stars and the moon (full that night) looking at us, the headlights of our car (turned on so we could see to climb) looking too. "I think sometimes Hûé is the center of the universe, / that thousands of eyes have turned towards us here. / . . . The blinding eyes of the van's headlights. / And the soft pinpoints of candles cradled on the river. / The eyes of the many no longer here. / And the loving eyes of friends who are." At publication of "Hûé, in Darkness," Fred changed "loving eyes" to "living eyes." "And the living eyes of friends who are." Touring Hûé in the morning, I saw temples with an eye painted above the entrance, and a gigantic global eyeball next to the altar. The idea of eyes, seeing and being seen, must

manifest itself powerfully here, and the poets and religious people feel it.

I *have* written what has passed for poetry. (My father would ask, "Are these poems?") Gary Gach invited me to contribute to *What Book!? Buddha Poems from Beat to Hip-hop*. I was still working on the longbook, no time for poetry, so I gave him my diary-like notebook, a daybook, and he included me as a Zen Poet. Read these, and you decide: are they poems?

25 December

Write before other people get up. Dress.  
Let the other people have at the day.  
Stay conscious. Give them insurance  
to ink. Afternoon—write when they leave.  
Go to Carmen's house, see Joseph.  
Evening before bed—write.

26 Dec.

An idea—that the process is  
best when easy. "Calm. Ease."  
Drive to Berkeley. Call John.  
Dinner out—S.F.?—

And the way to control anything  
is to be aware of it.

Thursday

Today, woke up remembering  
and looking ahead. Tried to  
focus by meditation.  
Then made alarm go  
off in pool house—the  
alarm had gone off  
at 3:50 or so, and I  
went out to fix it—  
Earll turned on the news,  
made him stop—  
Postum and wrote (an  
idea came during meditation)—now I'll  
have breakfast, write,  
make the bed, dress.  
At 9:00 or so—make calls—  
the architect, check list  
of calls. Write some more.

Maybe shower at Bessie's.  
 Invite her to dinner at  
 Faculty Club? Is there  
 anything I need at her  
 house? The mail &  
 calls. In the American  
Grain. School—go a  
 little early—apptmts.  
 Dinner. Work on  
 writing, letters,  
 insurance.  
 Saturday—Began w/ meditation.  
 Write. Decide whether to go to  
 the framers. Letters to Nikki  
 Giovanni, Mary Gordon,  
 Toni Morrison.

February 20, 1992

Very upset on verge of cold  
 & coffee. Today, concentrate  
 on one thing at a time—

you don't have to say or  
 do everything. Write—  
 then collect things for Bessie's  
 house. Check on plane  
 tickets. Have grapefruit.  
 Picture for Cal Book—  
 School. Go to *35 up*  
 movie? Get some black ink.

26 May

Today—plan the future—Phone  
 Jeannine to add another day.  
 Phone New York & change  
 the film date. Phone  
 Krueger to talk about the  
 plans. Go to school, shop  
 for the bed.  
 4:15 P.M. woke up from nap—earlier—bought  
 bed, called Krueger's & Joseph—  
 some writing—grades in.

This afternoon, do some writing,  
 clean the house. School  
is over—nice talking w/  
 Larry to end it—3 months  
 before school starts.

Do some writing. Organize house.  
 Maybe finish the insurance.

~

Forgot the mail. Forgot to  
 do banking

27 May

Not bad meditation—  
 normal, sweet—water  
 plants—  
 Last night's dream—  
 ladders take us to  
 heaven & other side  
 of darkness & bottom  
 of planet—it will  
 be a long time before

my father & I will  
 be together again.  
 The ladders up to  
 Mom's house / bedroom  
 where if we put food  
 the birds come, &  
 the animals are  
 from Pop's world.  
 Mom says don't feed  
 them & let them in the house.

~

Suddenly free from the lie  
 that my parents had me  
 for the purpose of torturing  
 me.

How did I become convinced  
 of such craziness?

And how did I get free?

~

Thought about 3:15 A.M. Oct. 27, 1992  
 written afternoon next day—

in the Japanese room.

The street corner orderly  
the lines, trees as is—  
just right.

The dawn took forever  
until I learned it  
was the middle of the night

and I was wide-awake  
jet-lagged

Dark with streetlights—  
still—no traffic and  
no people

Respite—the exact  
present moment

The way the light falls  
is perfect

A reader of *What Book!?* asked me to sign the part about  
my parents not having me in order to torture me. She said,

“Those words are very important to me.” To her, those lines are certainly poetic. But I think Gary Gach published my pieces because of the significant dates, Christmas, my birthday, and the names of famous people. Too much left out that needs explaining. The insurance was for the fire in the Berkeley/Oakland hills that burned 3500 houses, our house, and my longbook, and killed 25 people. We lived with friends, and took showers at this one and that one’s house. Poems shouldn’t rely on missing information for mystery.

In early February, to find a poem, I accepted my brother and sister-in-law’s invitation to see the elephant seals at Año Nuevo. Taking the day off, I was already acting like the Poet. The prose writer of the longbook never goes on spontaneous outings. After waiting for two hours, we were given places in a tour group and hiked toward the ocean. I saw my first elephant seal hiding behind a sand dune, alone and taking a nap, perfectly still. I thought she was dead. She looked like a dead cigar. Her nostrils were shut and she was not breathing. She can live underwater. Over and around the range of sand, we saw between us and the ocean, a valley, a field of elephant seals. Harems of elephant seals. Males were rearing up, fight-