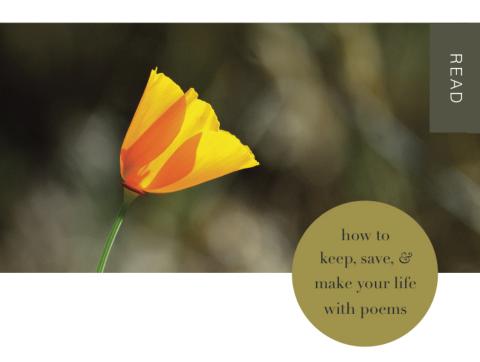
megan willome

THE JOY OF POETRY



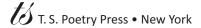
masters in fine living series

THE JOY OF POETRY

how to keep, save & make your life with poems

megan willome

masters in fine living series



T. S. Poetry Press Briarcliff, New York Tspoetry.com © 2016 by Megan Willome

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Cover image by Pai-Shi Lee. www.facebook.com/SomewhereInLife

ISBN 978-1-943120-14-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data: Willome, Megan

[Nonfiction.]
The Joy of Poetry/Megan Willome
ISBN 978-1-943120-14-7
Library of Congress Control Number: 2016935923



Table of Contents

Chapter 1 • As Much As She Could Carry:	
Collecting Poetry	13
Poem: Monsters	15
Poem: The earth's economy	17
Chapter 2 • Every Day Uncrossed: Everyday Poetry	19
Poem: Winter Sunrise	20
Poem: New Year's	24
Chapter 3 • Reeking of Sunshine: Symbols in Poetry	26
Poem: There's Sunshine Ahead	26
Poem: Prayer for Joy	28
Poem: Shell	32
Chapter 4 • The Wing of Her Hand: Poetry Buddies	35
Poem: Mare Draws Her Lover Fishing at Dusk	39
Poem: Cutthroat	40
Poem: 4 (from "Bird on the Mountain")	43
Chapter 5 • Open Your Throat: Poetry in Song	44
Poem: What to Sing	45
Poem: Uncloudy Day	48
Poem: With My Mother, Missing the Train	49

Chapter 6 • Brilliantly Hydrated: Love Poetry	53
Poem: Bottled Water	56
Poem: Valentine's Chai	59
Chapter 7 • Get Out the Eggs: Weird Poets	
Poem: S'More	
Poem: On the Eve of Your Thirteenth Birthday	63
Chapter 8 • Ten Thousand Daffodils:	
Understanding Poetry	69
Poem: Still	71
Poem: I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud	72
Poem: The Wordsworth Effect	74
Poem: Unattended	78
Chapter 9 • The Radish Rises: Weird Poetry	79
Poem: Write About a Radish	83
Poem: Blue Moon	84
Poem: Night	85
Chapter 10 • Someone Came Knocking:	
Poetry in Fiction	86
Poem: The Mimosa Lady	86
Poem: Some One	
Chapter 11 • Easier Than Giving Up: Writing Poetry	95
Poem: Last Words	
Poem: St. Margaret's Chapel: Edinburgh	
2	

Chapter 12 • What I Haven't Done: Poetry and Biogr	aphy102
Poem: Monument	103
Poem: Thanksgiving Pie	106
Poem: Fragile	
Chapter 13 • Undammable Song: Good vs. Bad Poe	try109
Poem: The Dipper	110
Poem: At Mile 37	114
Chapter 14 • Come Night: Old Poetry	116
Poem: Pied Beauty	117
Poem: Beauty Shop	119
Poem: Up-Hill	120
Poem: From Romeo and Juliet, Scene III, Act II	121
Chapter 15 • There Will Never Be Enough:	
Poetry of the Crisis	123
Poem: The Woman at the Stoplight	124
Poem: Instructions for Grieving	
Poem: In the Low Countries	
Chapter 16 • In the Wake of Our Sleep:	
Poetry and Dreams	129
Poem: Seal Lullaby	129
Poem: What Lives in the Wake of Our Sleep	
Poem: Who Am I?	
Chapter 17 • For Nothing: Why Poetry?	137
Poem: The Dogs at Live Oak Beach, Santa Cruz	

Chapter 18 • But Wait: Poetry and Charlotte	143
Poem: The cure for writer's block	143
How to Keep, Save & Make Your Life with Poems	148
How to Keep a Poetry Journal (As an Individual)	148
Materials List	149
How to Journal About a Poem	150
How to Be a Poetry Buddy (With a Friend)	152
How to Do a Poetry Dare (With a Community)	154
Notes	155
Permissions	159
Acknowledgements	162

1

As Much as She Could Carry

Collecting Poetry

The first poem I ever published was due to the efforts of my mother, Merry Nell Drummond. I was 13 at the time and had an assignment to rewrite "The Night Before Christmas." I wrote about a man helping his neighbor and re-titled it "A Visit of Charity." I'm not sure how my poem ended up on the front page of our town's weekly newspaper, the *Westlake Picayune*, but I'm pretty sure my mother had something to do with it.

I had no idea that more than 30 years later I'd still be writing poetry. I didn't know I'd have scrapbooks of collected poetry, a new one for each new year. I didn't know I'd read at least one poem every day. I didn't know I'd journal about poems that were especially meaningful or especially clever. I certainly didn't know I'd write about poetry in a book. But if I had written a letter to my 13-year-old self with the benefit of hindsight, it would have said, "Stick with poetry. You'll need it."

My Christmas poem was published in 1984, the first time my mother's cancer came back. She was originally diagnosed with breast cancer in 1981, when she was 35. Three years later the cancer returned in her cervical vertebrae. It was as if her neck suddenly broke. When the radiologist saw her scans, he fell to his knees and said out loud, "Oh, my God." Her oncologist thought with radiation and a hysterectomy, he could buy her

another year or two; the radiologist thought six months was a more accurate prediction. After undergoing the recommended treatment she went on, happy and healthy and apparently cancerfree for the next 23 years.

But she wasn't cancer-free. She had a lovely pause. During that pause she saw me and my brother graduate from high school and then college. He finished law school. She welcomed five grandbabies into the world. But the cancer reappeared in 2007 in her liver. Tests revealed it was the original breast cancer in a new location.

When cancer moves to the liver, it's fatal. Patients don't qualify for a liver transplant because once the cancer finds that pathway, it will find it again. Her treatment plan included alternating courses of hormone therapy and chemotherapy. Later, radiation therapy would be added. During her last three years, I began writing poems in earnest for the first time in a couple of decades.

After the publication of my Christmas poem I continued to write poetry in high school, when it was assigned, but I gave it up in college. For years I focused on marriage and children, not poetry. When I went back to work as a writer at a city magazine, I started reading a poem a day. It was my personal writing ritual—a poem from *The Writer's Almanac* and a pot of tea kept the words flowing. But until my mother's cancer returned, I only wrote a poem when the mood struck, and it didn't strike often. With the change in her health status, I needed the kind of sustenance I could store. I needed a mouse named Frederick.

Published in 1967, *Frederick*, by Leo Lionni, was a Caldecott Honor Book featuring a mouse who is also a poet. While the other mice gather food during harvest time, Frederick gathers sun and colors and words, which he shares with his fellow mice

Megan Willome • 15

in their stone den during the winter. When the mice are cold and depressed, having exhausted their store of nuts, they ask Frederick for his supplies. He gives them a poem about seasons. All these years later, the book still has a fine message: We need words during dark days.

Let's imagine our poet Frederick wrote more than the one rather sweet rhyming poem featured in the book. What if he wrote a silly one all the mouse children would memorize (and their parents would wish they'd forget)? What if he wrote a couple of really weird ones? Might dear Frederick write a sexy poem to whisper in the evening to his favorite lady mouse? Or a ghost poem about a headless squirrel who comes looking for hidden nuts? Maybe Frederick might write a monster poem, just for fun.

Monsters

furry, fluffy, feared. scaly, slimy, seen. ghostly, gassy,

pointed,

gone.

purple, possible.

monsters, under your bed, in your closet, waiting and watching.

-Katherine E. McGhee

Although the book ends with all the mice complimenting Frederick on his poetry, perhaps when spring finally arrives, each of them will gather their own words, along with berries and seeds. Maybe the next time winter comes, there will be more words from more mice to share.

Comparing winter to cancer is an obvious metaphor, but it is useful. In my mother's story, her cancer ebbed and flowed from 1981 to 2010. Some seasons were longer and more intense than others. Hers ended in spring. And during the late winter of her cancer I was Frederick, writing poems, 72 in all. This book contains some of those, as well as poems by others I discovered along the way, in every season. Some of them came to me after she was gone.

Don't expect a trove of maudlin poems. I needed variety. I needed every type of poem Frederick ever considered writing, along with poetry written by contemporary poets like Mary Oliver and Billy Collins, previous-generation poets like Sara Teasdale and Shakespeare, and a host of poets I'd never heard of, like Ruth Mowry, until, through serendipity, I found them.

The earth's economy

Just when I thought the day had nothing left to give, when heat was ladled across the shallow dry plate

of the nation, working or not, alive or not, my country road home from work an affair of sour radio news and roadkill —

the furred skunk, possum, cat, squirrel, raccoon, in the special economy of the outwardfacing nose, lost in final scent,

the surrendered open mouth, forehead pressed back in frozen tragedy, tension gone, time done, appetite dissolving into skull —

I find myself at the kitchen counter in a different Americana, tearing kale ruffles from their spines for a chilled supper of greens with lemon

and oil, Dijon, garlic, cucumber — live, wet and impossibly cool from the

earth garden just outside the door, where the farmer's wife one hundred

years ago also opened her apron like a cradle, gingerly receiving into thin billowing cotton pockets as much as she could carry

as much as she could carry

—Ruth Mowry

This poem surprised me like finding an unexpected nut in January. Often "when I thought the day/had nothing left to give" I'd read a poem, and everything would change. I love that road-kill (which I loathe) and kale (which I love) both appear in this poem. I am neither the woman in the kitchen, tearing kale, nor the farmer's wife, opening "her apron/like a cradle." I am the one "gingerly receiving" the gifts from the poem as it moves from the hard pungency of death to the joy of unexpected bounty. How much?

As much as I could carry. As much as I could carry.

Every Day Uncrossed

Everyday Poetry

In 2008, our family—my husband John, our son and daughter, and myself—spent the week after Christmas in Winter Park, Colorado, along with John's parents, his siblings, and their families. They all went downhill skiing, and I snowshoed with my father-in-law, the only other person in the family who enjoys slower snow activities.

I talked to my mother every day of that vacation as she began what turned out to be a very toxic round of chemo. The word "positive" does not even approach Mom's attitude toward cancer. In an email to her friends and supporters, she used words like *conquerors* and *warriors*, adding, "Another term we like is *champions* because victory over adversity is implied. Most of us are not too keen about the term *survivor* because it has a connotation of *victim*," she wrote.

I had an aversion to the very words she loved. Was it possible to be a *conqueror*, a *champion*, when the end was not in doubt?

On the first day of the new year, 2009, I sat on the porch of the cabin where we were staying, with a mug of hot tea, and wrote this haiku.

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