

Shifting

by

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Abstract

This collection of poems is about love and loss. It spans over 35 years, from the death of my father to the death of my mother 33 years later, and much in between. As I age and experience more and more loss, I have learned to look at each loss as a shift—not an ending, just a slight shift in context. Loss seems so final, so done. A shift has no bad connotation, no dire consequences; it's simply a change, not good, not bad, just different. That is what life has become about—shifting to new circumstances. Therefore, I have titled this collection *Shifting*.

As a poet I have been shifting as well. I am finding my process, my style, and my voice. I tend to work in stages: first free-writing in journals, and then drafting which includes time for it to settle, be it days, weeks, months, or even years. Over the past four summers studying in Sewanee, I have finally learned how to revise. I really had no tools before then for what revision really meant. Now I know that is where the real work is done. I always thought poetry was a gift—either you had it or you didn't. Now I know that for me, poetry comes alive in the revision stage. I finally know what I am supposed to do in revision—well, mostly, some of the time at least. The magic has to be coaxed out, but with direction and purpose in the revision stage, I have learned to lasso it.

I think of the revision stage as having two parts: crafting and polishing. This helps me to play and experiment where I used to be too attached to my first drafts, therefore reluctant to take chances. The term crafting has an experimental fun connotation to it, leaving me to feel at ease and curious. That first stage of revision is discovery for me, playing with possibilities, breaking the rules. It's where I may turn the poem upside down; or delete the whole last stanza; or change the point of view; or cut everything but

one stanza which then gives birth to a whole new poem. I have learned to let go in the playful crafting stage, cutting every unnecessary word. This is where I separate from the poem, looking at it through the eyes of a reader to identify the jewel in the rough. Then I move on to part two, polishing. That is where the line by line work happens, the questioning of every word, looking for muscular verbs, inspecting each punctuation mark, each line break, the shape and white spaces. This is where the nitpicky work is done, the slow grueling chisel work.

While I can see how far I have come in these last five years, I also am aware of where I need more work. I tend to start off with too much explanation and not enough trust in my reader, especially at the end, often making the poems fall flat. I know most of the time I over-expose in early drafts, so I'm learning to pull back, to leave inspection and mystery for the reader. I also know I still need to reach for stronger imagery and find the flow that comes from stringing image to image, phrase to phrase, sound to sound. While I am strong in narrative, I am pushing to add more lyrical and musical qualities to my work. I need to work on embodying my writing, and by that I mean writing through the body, really striving to use all the senses. I can get to that place where the writing has taken me somewhere else, beyond my temporal experience, but I long to learn to get to that level of writing more often and more easily. I am working on these aspects of my poetry, but still have lots of room for improvement.

Numerous poets and writers have influenced me in the development of this thesis. At Sewanee I have had the opportunity to work with a variety of mentors and some determined blooming writers like myself willing to push through the difficult work. They have been gracious and inspiring, and with their help, I have found my way here.

Classroom activities from the in-depth study of Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop in Danny Anderson's class, to working on form and structure with Charles Martin, and finally to two years of working on imitation and revision with Nickole Brown, have stretched and pushed me further than I could have ever imagined and more than I could ever find a way to thank them. My own studies of Walt Whitman, Anne Sexton, and Sharon Olds expanded my horizons of what poetry could do. An early workshop experience with Dorianne Laux inspired my determination to pursue this passion. Numerous books have added to my education from craft books like *Structure & Surprise* by Michael Theune and *Sin and Syntax* by Constance Hale, to poetry collections by Ross Gay, Nick Flynn, Matthew Olzmann, Ellen Bryant Voigt, Patricia Smith, and Brigit Pegeen Kelly that have shown me how it is done. Every one of these people, and many more, have helped me develop and shift into this new role of poet.

After completing this thesis project, I intend to pursue my new goal, that of publication. I am lucky to have developed connections with other Sewanee MFA candidates and graduates here in Nashville. We have a writing group that meets monthly, and one colleague is very active with The Porch, a local writing community, and I plan to attend some of their workshops and events in the next year. I also will be attending at least one writer's conference or residence a year, and I plan on becoming an active participant in the writing community through social media and attendance at various readings and poetry events around town and the surrounding area. I will start the process of submitting to journals and contests, using *Poets and Writers*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, and "Submishmash Weekly" from *Submittable*, in an attempt to gain publication credentials. I will also work on a chapbook, which will hopefully lead to my first book of

poetry. I know I still have a lot of work to do, but the shift from my dream of being a poet to the reality has begun.