Accidental Poetry
A Literacy Autobiography

Carol Case

A friend once told me that she wrote because it was “cheaper than drugs and therapy.” I wrote because it kept me from killing my little sister. I waded through the melodramatic mire of adolescence, explored every closet skeleton I could find, and arrived at adulthood with my sanity, dignity, and sense of humor firmly intact.

I discovered poetry the same way most people discover it—by accident. It started with the usual “goo-goo” baby sounds and before long I was reciting performance pieces for the entire family. “Da-Da,” I would announce, and my parents would drop what they were doing and listen attentively. After several stunning performances, complete with applause and requests for encore, I upgraded my repertoire to include the ABC song, which was also very well received. After several years on the performance circuit, I had become proficient in “Twinkle, Twinkle,” as well as many other fine literary compositions.

When I was about four and tagging along on my mother’s grocery shopping trip, she mumbled to herself “I need tuna, tomatoes, and toilet paper.” I liked the sound of the words and started repeating the phrase over and over as I marched through the produce section, growing louder with every syllable. My mother frowned and told me to be quiet. Apparently nice young ladies don’t go around alliterating toilet paper up and down the isles of Delchamps. I stopped saying it out loud, but under my breath I was chanting this phrase like a mantra. “Tuna, tomatoes, and toilet paper . . . tuna, tomatoes, and toilet paper . . . tuna, tomatoes, and toilet paper.” It wasn’t like my old stuff. I wasn’t sure whether or not you could even call it a poem. This little ditty rhymed right up front. The beginning of the words matched instead of the ending. I was entranced with the sound. A few years later, in first grade, a classmate taught me to say, “Six slick slimy snails slid slowly seaward.”

I don’t know how my mother survived my childhood. The more I practiced alliteration, the more she shook her head and rolled her eyes. “If you say that one more time, I’m gonna skin you alive,” she would threaten. Or she would say, “I’m gonna tear you up” (whatever that meant!). Sometimes she would threaten to sell me to the gypsies or knock me into next week. Thus I learned the fine art of hyperbole in the same manner that I learned the art of alliteration—by accident.

Rhythm came next. I learned this on the playground while jumping rope. The sentences didn’t just have to end with the same sound; they also had to have the same number of jumps in them. (We didn’t know about syllables back then. That’s an adult word, created so that they could explain what the kids on the playground already knew.) When the recess bell rang, we dashed out onto the playground and began chanting: “Cinderella, dressed in yellow/went upstairs to kiss a fellow/Made a mistake and kissed a snake./How many doctors did it take?” We jumped our way through more poems than I can remember, and started making up our own improvised poems right out there in front of God and everybody. If I were to ask my students to make up poetry on the spot, out loud, in front of the class, they would die. They would moan and groan and act as if they were being abused, but put them on the playground, give them a rope, and they’ll recite poetry at the top of their lungs until the cows come home.
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By the time I was twelve, I had come to the conclusion that poetry inside the classroom was totally different from poetry outside the classroom. My uncle was a fisherman who spewed metaphors like some men spit tobacco. In middle school, I sat with one hand propped under my chin, listening to the teacher drone on about how the clouds were a metaphor for loneliness and the river was a metaphor for a long journey. Then I went fishing with my aunt, uncle, and older cousin. I listened as they described how their next-door-neighbor “drank like a fish.” My cousin explained that the guy was usually “three sheets to the wind,” and my uncle nodded saying that the man was indeed “high as a kite.” Of course, my uncle was known to be “backwards as a yard dog.” My aunt said that he was “one brick shy of a load,” and had the occasional habit of “going off the deep end.” She also complained that my cousin was “hell on wheels,” and drove “like a bat out of hell.” I never learned to fish, but I learned the meaning of the word metaphor. Of course, my mom was “madder than a wet hen” when she heard some of them, but she “cooled her jets” after a while. She exclaimed that although my uncle wasn’t “wrapped too tight,” he was “all wool and a yard wide,” which I knew to mean that he was honest and sincere. I don’t know how I knew that—I just did. Like everything else about poetry, the idea of speaking metaphorically just snuck up on me.

With the onset of puberty, poetry suddenly became desperately private. All through high school, I kept a diary hidden above the shelves in my cedar closet. It was tucked behind my pack of Virginia Slims and my forbidden halter-top. I wrote deep, angst-ridden poems, contemplating the meaning of the universe and all the wonders of nature. I wrote these poems behind my locked bedroom door with my arms huddled around my journal for fear that my little sister would find a way in and peek over my shoulder, or that my older brother would snatch the journal out of my hands and read it out loud to the neighborhood boys.

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The world revolved around me, and my poems were confirmation of that fact. I discovered the ranting beat poets of the sixties, absorbed Carl Sandburg’s “Fog” imagery, and started writing my own free verse. My poetry became something more than simple wordplay. I grew less concerned with the sound of words and more concerned with the abstract concepts of love, peace, justice—concepts that did not apply to siblings, of course! I experimented with this new style, wrapping words around an image until I felt profound and mature. This stage of writing produced my absolute worst poetry, but it was a necessary part of my development. I imitated every new style, blatantly copying the form and language of each new writer I discovered. I came as close to plagiarism as you can get without being sued.

The angst and ire of teenage hormones lead us all into uncharted territory, and I used my diary as a sounding board, writing things that I would not tell a living soul. This form of self-therapy has helped a great number of people get through the rough spots of life. Who knows? I may have warded off a serious bout of insanity simply by keeping a journal. A friend once told me that she wrote because it was “cheaper than drugs and therapy.” I wrote because it kept me from killing my little sister. I waded through the melodramatic mire of adolescence, explored every closet skeleton I could find, and arrived at adulthood with my sanity, dignity, and sense of humor firmly intact.

If I were a tree, you could cut me open and count the rings. If I were a book, you could flip from front to back and see all the stages I’ve been through in my writing journey. I sit here at the keyboard night after night, waiting to see where this poetry path will lead. I’m thankful that I have the desire to write, that I don’t find it a chore, and that I have come to understand my life more for having written it down. I don’t know what stage I’ll go through next, and I don’t know if my poetry will ever make a difference to anyone other than myself, but I do know one important thing about writing: Life is too interesting not to take notes.

Carol Case teaches middle-school language arts at Holy Family School in Mobile, Alabama, and is working on a master’s degree in creative writing at the University of South Alabama. Her poems have appeared in Astaria, Touchstone, Will Work for Peace: An Anthology of Political Poems, The Vanguard, Ordinary and Sacred as Blood: Alabama Women Speak, Louisiana Literature, and Gumball Poetry. She is a teacher-consultant with the Mobile Bay Writing Project.