

CIRCUMSTANCE AND SERENDIPITY

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POEMS BY ART NAHILL

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INTRODUCTION

It would be anathema for many poets to explain their poems or to provide any commentary on their origins. Poems, they would argue, should speak for themselves. But if a poem speaks and no one is listening, is it really speaking at all?

According to the 2025 National Reading Survey conducted by Read NZ, only 32% of adult New Zealanders reported reading any portion of a book of poetry in the preceding 12 months. While these numbers are happily an increase from the 2021 survey where 25% reported doing so, they pale in comparison to the 80% who have read a work of fiction.

Part of this wide disparity is down to the way many of us are taught to read poetry, as though it were some kind of inscrutable secret code that has to be cracked in order to be enjoyed, with all the urgency and consequence of those charged with figuring out the German Enigma machine. And many of us are left feeling stupid as a result. We are born with an innate love of words, rhymes, and rhythms (think of nursery rhymes and Dr Seuss books) but this love is driven out of us by feelings of fear and inadequacy.

We don't instil a love for any other art form in quite the same way. We don't typically ask those new to that art form to figure out why, for example, a painter placed a certain brushstroke where she did or what a composer was 'trying to say' in a certain musical passage. We usually start with, 'does this speak to you at all?' or 'does this make you feel anything in particular?' Detailed analysis can, and often does, come much later in the journey.

While many poets are loathe to provide explanation for their works, in my experience audiences are hungry for it. They want some connection with the poem and the habitual urge to ‘break the code’ often gets in the way. Which is why, in this volume of poems I have tried a new approach: sharing with the reader after each poem where the poem may have come from or something I may have had in mind when writing it. I’ve even started this book with a collection of poems about poetry itself and about what it’s like for me to write poetry and try to live a writing life. After that, the book meanders all over the place, a reflection of how my mind works. Unlike many NZ books of poetry, this one does not coalesce around a central narrative or theme, but rather, celebrates the many small occasions for poetry.

Of course, you, the reader, are free to ignore me altogether and read the poems unblemished by my commentary. In any case, I hope you enjoy them!

* * *

Ars Beatitudo

You start
by leaving out
a bit
of sweetened bread.

Maybe a small saucer
of milk.

And then you wait.
Sleep if you can.

If in the morning
your offering is gone
then

repeat this over
and over

unti it is no longer
afraid.

Eventually
it may let you
touch it.

Ars Beatitudo is a Latin phrase meaning the 'art of blessedness'. Happiness, like poetry, is a timid, skittish thing that often shows itself when we are not looking for it. It is like a faint star best seen when looking slightly away.

A Writing Life

To truly love a garden
you must sometimes

keep yourself
from weeding

let it spill
beyond its boundaries

To love a thing
you must be willing

to write a poem about it

to write a poem
you must be willing

never to mention
the thing you love

to let it traipse
through empty rooms

leaving
muddy footprints

You must be willing
to live with ghosts

the noisy ones that rattle
dishes late at night

and the quiet ones that