



## House Poem Still Life (—it's a testament of decay)

There is such richness in the course materials in this our first week back together after a season of postcards. Hopefully, from these Week One readings, viewings and listenings, you can begin to recognize patterns or methods consistent with a poetics that are a cosmology and a life that is a rehearsal for your poem. If you are a journal writer, this course and these writing exercises will be easier for you. If you are not, you may want to consider journaling in the morning for the next five weeks. Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* is a life-changing book, if you implement her suggestions.

Robert Bringhurst's section of *Cascadian Zen* Volume I is one of the most potent sections in the book. In the essay "Lucky Truth" there is this passage:

If only, in his language, poetry had happened to be called something like *ὄντοφιλία* (ontophilía, love of what-is) or *φιλογαῖα* (philogaîa, love of the earth)—something descriptive of poetry's posture.

There is also a poem entitled "Going Down Singing." While he might be writing about someone who truly lives the life of a poet, he's also talking about water, rivers, waterfalls and maybe philosophy. Dig this part:

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The voice is speech  
and breathing, yes,  
and yet it's no one  
and it's nothing without  
what there is to say.  
And so we call it  
rock and water.  
Water takes its shape  
from what it shapes  
and leaves that shape

behind. It's what  
the voice does, leaving  
footprints in the ear,  
a little moisture  
on the window or the wind  
and moving on.

And writing ought  
to do this too,  
instead of getting  
caught in its own motion,  
walking head down,  
fully occupied  
with filling its own shoes.  
The use of a river,  
said Thoreau,  
is to not float on it.  
What a waterfall isn't  
is what you'd do with it.  
A waterfall  
is water falling:  
power, water, memory,  
enlightenment  
and beauty falling  
straight on through  
and past your hands.

“Leaving footprints in the ear!” What a great example of “surprise mind” and yet it is not a stretch and totally fits the context of the content of this poem.

Sylvia Plimack Mangold comes from a similar place, as a person totally committed to her art, and from the interview with her by The Brooklyn Rail's John Yau there is this:

Rail: Corinth is responding to the landscape and making marks; he's not composing but *interacting with the situation* and the changes going on in it...



Mangold: ...I don't really want to be a romantic painter, but I do like romantic painting. I mean, Caspar David Friedrich, but he has this other quality too. To me romantic means calendar art. I don't like that connection to anything commercial. *I'm really about looking, to see what I might not see with the eye but then discover as I paint.*

—*it's a testament of decay*

(Italics, ours.) The aversion to “anything commercial” can be seen in our art (poetry) as an aversion to conventional poetry, or that which is easily anthologizable, but also quick to be forgotten. How to create something memorable, but also sourced in the deepest part of your self? Bringhurst continues:

But a poem is a well,  
not a waterjug:  
nothing a thief  
could walk off with  
and nothing a yahoo  
would know  
how to put on display.

A thief can't walk away with your poem if it goes far enough down your throat to reach to the level of personal mythology and deeper. What can you discover —not as you paint — like Sylvia Plimack Mangold — but as you *write*? Start with your house. Take a few minutes to survey your surroundings. You may want to take notes in your pocket journal. (Do you carry a pocket journal? They can help you live the 24/7 life of a poet and is recommended. If not, a cellphone will do if you can text or email to yourself, though that seems more complicated.)

Once you've taken a few minutes to see what is in your surroundings, take a line from Going Down Singing such as”

*So the earth slips away  
like water,*

or



*The voice is speech  
and breathing, yes,  
and yet it's no one*

or

*It's what  
the voice does, leaving  
footprints in the ear*

or

*But a poem is a well,  
not a waterjug*



Imagine your house is a poem that lives the life of a poet 24/7. It's luminous details are enormous clues into your own personal mythology, but that is not something that needs to be at the top of your consciousness as you write a House Poem Still Life. If you get stuck while writing, look around the room. Associations you have from the stuff in the house could lead you to interesting places. Always steep yourself in luminous details, at least enough to earn what abstractions inevitably come up, but only emotion *objectified* endures, as Zukofsky tried to tell us and without emotion the poem has little risk.

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### **Works Cited:**

<https://www.amazon.com/Artists-Way-Spiritual-Higher-Creativity/dp/1585421472>

*Cascadian Zen Volume I: Bioregional Writings on Cascadia Here and Now*

<https://brooklynrail.org/2009/12/art/sylvia-plimack-mangold-with-john-yau/>