

Top Writing Tips

Jacob Sam-La Rose helps writers search for the heart of the poem...

As a poet, I spend a lot of time working with people who lack confidence in the value or potency of their own writing. Poetry can be viewed as particularly challenging with all its perceived rules and limitations. There are a few key points I often raise:

—Don't TRY to write a poem.

Let me explain. People who don't often engage with writing poems try to write what they think a poem should be, and often end up shoehorning their ideas into a shape that doesn't fit, failing to explore the parts of the idea that really do need exploration because they're more worried about whether the idea sounds or looks like a poem. Stop. Concern yourself with the shape of the idea first, let the rest come from there. Give yourself a license to speak in your own true voice, and listen to what you say.

—Where does the REAL heart of the poem lie?

The heart of the poem—it's reason for being—is something that may not reveal itself until the 2nd, 3rd, 5th draft, and perhaps even later still. You may think you know what the poem was supposed to be, but really, you have to challenge yourself to be true to whatever the poem becomes as you help it into being. Your first draft is often like a first date. Love at first sight is possible, but you've still got to get to know a person. It may take a good few dates before you decide what this piece of writing you've been flirting with actually means to you.

—Facts aren't worth as much as truth.

If you're writing about your personal experience or your perspective on the world as you know it, you don't necessarily have to be factually correct, but there should be a bone of truth at the heart of whatever you're saying... and all the better if it's the kind of human truth that you have some proprietary ownership of, but that we can all recognise intuitively. As you redraft, imagine yourself writing both for no one but yourself and for everyone you know.