

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Highway 90

An owl lands on the side
of the road. Turns its head
to look at me going fast,
window open to the night
on the desert. Clean air,
and the great stars.
I'm trying to decide
if this is what I want.

Linda Gregg¹

Reflections

For 11 of the 12 years that I taught writing, I handed out the same essay the first week of class: Linda Gregg's "The Art of Finding" (you can read it in its entirety here <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/art-finding>)². That brief essay was the only thing in my teaching repertoire that stayed exactly the same, semester after semester, and it never fails to inspire me. It inspires me not only to be a better teacher but a better reader, a better listener, a better *finder*.

In the essay, Gregg articulates the difference in "finding" a poem and "writing" a poem and explains that it was in reading Gerard Manley Hopkins' work that she came to experience God in art as a particular shining, a mysterious luminosity or vibrancy that convinced her of poetry's true task: to marry "the sacred to the world, the invisible to the human."

"It may be that the major art in poetry," she writes, "is the art of finding this shining—this luminosity. It is the difference between a publishable poem and one that matters. Certainly one can make good poems without feeling much or discovering anything new. You can produce fine poems without believing anything, but it corrodes the spirit and eventually rots the seed-corn of the heart. Writing becomes manufacturing instead of giving birth." The primary work, she'd say, is the work of finding, of seeing, of locating. The writing itself is secondary.

¹ "Highway 90" by Linda Gregg from *In the Middle Distance*, Graywolf Press. Used by permission.

² <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/art-finding>

Having studied with Gregg, I can tell you first hand that to write poems with the very “seed-corn of the heart” at stake is no easy task. As a teacher, she asked nothing less than that very thing, that we write not *as if* our lives depended on it because they *actually do*.

One of the genius trademarks of a Linda Gregg poem is how much she can do with so little on the page. In “Highway 90,” for example, she relies almost solely on single syllable words; the language is straightforward, undecorated, perhaps even unremarkable. But look closer, take a breath, think: an owl on the side of the road turning its head is remarkable indeed, a vision not many of us will see and, if we were to witness such a thing, we might exclaim over it rather than deliver the news as Gregg does, without pomp and pageantry. In fact, the owl is not even the primary subject; rather, it is the desert landscape that occupies the poem’s central space and precipitates that existentially charged question at the end: what is it we want?

That word “want,” of course, is powerful and two-fold: Gregg refers simultaneously to what *is* as well as to what *isn’t*, what’s existing and also what’s missing. Want: a desire and an absence. In this case, the poet sees her expanse of night—its “clean air, /and the great stars”—and is led to wonder whether this is a glimpse of the life to which she has aspired or if this is a vision of the kind of life she lacks. Highway 90, then, becomes both a literal geographic marker and also a metaphoric treasure: is this the road that leads us out and away or the road that leads us back? In which direction dare we travel? It is this question, I think, that inspires an even larger one: how is seeing what we need vital to loving what we have?

Just as there is a difference in wanting and needing and in hearing and listening, so too might there be a distinction between simply looking and really seeing. Learning to see with a poet’s keen eye is exactly the kind of work Linda Gregg would call the art of finding, the work on which a life may very well depend.

✧ About the Poet

Linda Gregg taught in the creative writing programs at the University of Iowa, the University of California, Berkeley, Princeton University and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She published several collections of poetry, including *Too Bright to See* (1981); *Alma* (1985); *Things and Flesh* (1999), a finalist for the Kingsley Tufts Award for Poetry; and *All of It Singing: New and Selected Poems*, a Los Angeles Times Favorite Book of 2008 and winner of the Poetry Society of America’s William Carlos Williams Award. Raised in Marin County, California, and educated at San Francisco State University, Gregg lived in New York until her death in March 2019.



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