

Old Beginnings; or a Beginner's Guide to *A Beginner's Guide*

...the present is what your life is...

—Mary Oliver, “Mornings at Blackwater”

For sixty years I have been forgetful,

Every minute, but not for a second

Has this flowing toward me stopped or slowed.

—Jalal al-Din Rumi (tr. Coleman Barks), “The Music”

1.

WHEN I FIRST posted news of this book on Instagram, a good friend replied with a question: “A Beginner’s Guide—to what? To Poetry?”

It’s not really a guide to anything, I replied. It’s a collection of poems, some recent, some from way back, and that’s its title, which I take from one of the poems in it (“A Beginner’s Guide to Wabi-Sabi”).

But if the book is any kind of a guide, it’s a guide to beginning. Beginning is what it’s about—beginning again and again each time, as if each moment were a new world and a last chance and your life were a poem that wanted you to write it.

Which is to say: this collection gathers, around some loose themes, the poems I have written recently, sometimes not so recently—the poems that I have written and rewritten and kept. I guess there are many themes in these poems, almost as many as there are poems, each one being and recording a moment as new and wild as each moment is; but beginning is one theme that runs through them all.

2.

There is not one way to live. Your life is not prescribed; you make it up as you go. Each life is its own, to be fathomed and fashioned at the same time. A boat to be built as you sail it. And the truest beauty may be the deepest authenticity. A good life and a lucky one is a life begun as long as it lasts—a making of your way with wonder and curiosity, with discernment and finesse and forgiveness, a way made against tall odds, lived with as much hope and care and kindness and gratitude as you can remember how to practise. Well, that’s the way I try to go about it, imperfectly, daily. And these poems record my failure.

“If you do with conviction the next and most necessary thing, you are always doing something meaningful and intended by fate.” So wrote Jung in 1953 to someone who wanted to know what constituted a good life. There is no prescribed course, he said. The authentic life is the one lived moment by moment, taking the best course one can steer; by such means, open-minded, clear-headed, attempting always what seems right and true and helpful and generous and shapely, I would add, you are likely to go the way your soul hopes you will, and so you will keep coming true.

3.

There is an idea about that a book of poems, like a life, ought to cohere, congeal even, around a concept or a plot. But poems happen the way a life happens: you make them the way you make your way, as well as you can, in

response to what you meet where life lands you. The best lives are enacted intuitions, adaptations to circumstance, navigations steered by love. Not by fashion or expectation or the dictates of the market or the fiat of another, or in conformity with some ideology. Lived as grass grows, as birds fly, as tides come and go. The collections I love best go like that, too. They are curations of the best of what—the sense and the form—one has been able to make of what happened.

A good life is a beginning that goes on and on, getting better at doing what it alone can do, the more practice it gets, the wiser it grows through time. True change, I have often thought, is not how you become different, but how you grow more and more like who you, alone, are. And that's not a project you can perform in theory; it's a life you fashion in real time, the way a cricketer fashions an innings out in the middle, ball by ball.

4.

Two early poems in *A Beginner's Guide* strike the chords and dance the figures on which these poems might be said to improvise (though most of them did not know they were doing that when I wrote them).

In "Standing" I write—speaking of the shade three roughbarked apples (angophoras) throw across a meadow by a lake—that is "how I'd like to dwell/ my days—theirs the kind of trace/ I'd like to leave: a shifting/ Mark, downstream of every weather." And in "Jazz," speaking of poetry as if it were jazz, as if both were a metaphor, I conclude: "It's a life/ that makes you up as it goes down:/ No plan; just a fistful of chords/ and a lightness of touch and some bird song.../ An improv so tight someone must/ surely have scored it, but no one/ ever did. Or ever will again." "Standing" comes from 2020; "Jazz" from 2010. Ten years apart, each poem part of the same piece, though each was a beginning again, a starting fresh.

And from 2015, splitting those two poems like a log near the middle, is the poem "Why You're Here: In Case One Day You Need to Know," which says in so many words what many of the poems in this book of beginning imply: "You're here to learn/ To walk the way that only your feet can/ Teach you." And:

You're here to divine
The world a bit, to walk the god in you
Out with you, to make your moment
On earth worthy of the suffering it costs
You. And those you love. And the earth.
You're here to keep coming undone, to
Keep opening, like an answer toward its
Question...

5.

This is a book of beginning, then. Of living originally, as if each moment were the first morning, as if the dew were still on it, and this were your first coffee. It isn't really a guide, of course. It's a book of poems, of instances. Horace felt that a poem should delight and instruct. By "instruct" I'm pretty sure he didn't mean to tell people how to lead their lives. Poetry is for witness, for seeing deep and saying fresh what has long been felt but rarely said. Because it demands vulnerability and honesty and integrity, poetry always models, and may sometimes enjoin, a more careful consideration of how a life might be practised—with a little more humour or grace or tenderness or toughness, for instance. One might try to live one's days as if they were poems you were trying to write, as if life were a work of art you'd like to make good before you go: this may be the kind of instruction Horace thought a poem might perform. And I'd be with him.

These poems are a celebration of wakefulness, of moments of world, an invitation always to begin. For to begin is to be; “‘begin’ is an anagram of ‘being’”. But don’t worry: there’s a fair bit of beginning but not a lot of guidance in this beginner’s guide. There’s quite a lot of noticing, though. And sadness. And delight.

6.

Each poem here tries to see something—in one’s heart, in one’s life, in the world, in others’ lives, in the song of birds—originally, truthfully, and to get it justly said. Some poems here are about keeping going when life is hard; others are about finding depth when life feels light; some are about the practice of making art (playing a piano again after thirty years, being Matisse, being a lake that goes dry for decades and then rises into lake-hood again overnight, making a poem). There are love poems here, too, poems for dogs and birds and places and children and weather and moments. Each is an enactment of (inevitably flawed and partial) wakefulness, of openness of heart and eye.

But don’t worry: you won’t learn how to begin anything here. These are reminders a poet is giving himself about how important it is always to start and keep on starting. That ancient craft.

One’s own life is hard enough to understand and fashion freshly, moment by moment; your life is up to you.

7.

“The present is what your life is,” writes Mary Oliver in “Mornings at Blackwater.” The present is what your life is. Yes. This is another way of saying what these poems are trying to practise. Presence is what one’s soul seems to want of you; it’s what we need of each other, and it is the beginning of what the earth needs from us—to belong as well as one can to each moment of the world you are given.

A remarkable number of Mary Oliver’s poems happen in the morning. In the worst times of my life mornings have been the hardest moments to get through. So it was, I think, for Oliver. But morning—the phenomenon of morning in the world, and the practice of morning in a human life, of waking and beginning again daily—was her lifelong metaphor for presence. For turning up in your life and in the world, notwithstanding everything that makes that hard, and bearing witness and taking small good steps. I suppose these poems of mine, without very much awareness that is what they were trying to do, practise what Mary Oliver, and Henry Thoreau and many others, have preached.

Looked at another way, this is a book of mornings, then. Not so much mornings as a subject (though there are some mornings among the moments here), but morning, dawning, beginning, *as a way*. *A Beginner’s Guide* is a long aubade, regretful about what has already passed, about love lost, but stubbornly glad, as Jack Gilbert puts it, and determined to keep paying attention and living deliberately. Elegantly. Well. To make of one’s life a world of mornings.

8.

To begin is to lay yourself open to what might come, without presumption; it is to be vulnerable. A good poem is a vulnerability made manifest and shapely—made habitable, durable. So is a good life. To be fully alive is to live beyond categories and nomenclature. To be a beginner is to stand on the edge of embarrassment and risk and delight and awe—prepared and expectant, but never too sure, never presumptuous. Cynicism and ideology preclude openness—the schooled innocence, the profound attention, of the beginner. Love made wise by form and care: this is the way of beginning. We live in an era of stereotypes and categories; poetry is how we refuse to conform. Beginning is what poetry insists on.

9.

Presence, the art these poems essay, is hard work, and I know that in many of the moments these poems record, I was halfway absent.

But still they reached me. “For sixty years,” Rumi wrote, “I have been forgetful.” Me, too. But the world is not forgetful. The trick seems to be to stay open—to what the world is always offering, whether or not we have the sense to notice. Or at least, to be attentive enough to language to let it trawl into awareness most of what you missed at the time. This is what I think I’m talking about in my poem “The World is Here for Its Own Delight”:

My mind today has no account to make
Of joy. In this it fails the world. And lets
My body down, which wants the day to have
Her way with it. Later the light and the water
Low in the dam and the flowers that spike on gums
High on the scarp and the heron that overflies me
As I take the pass south... these fingerprints
The real world wants to leave on me, imprint,
Anyway, on a speeding mind that knows
Too little sense to feel them when they land.

One has a partner in this work of apprehension: *the world is more than half of it* (and of our being in the world). Being—in a way that’s useful for the world beyond one’s mere self—is a kind of *being-with*. One’s self is not reducible to one’s mind or mood or biography or self-story. Perhaps, as William James would have it, the Self is a community—of all that one’s affection reaches out to, of all that reaches you, in your self-absorption. The moments leave fingerprints if you let them.

10.

Presence takes a lifetime to learn. It takes an eternity to arrive in each moment wide awake. To live as a beginner, you serve a long apprenticeship, and I’ve been at it sixty years, and see how far short I fall. Hokusai, the great Japanese landscape painter, whose work influenced the way the impressionists and many others taught themselves to see, painted the work for which he is best known, “The Great Wave at Kanagawa” when he was seventy. And he wrote: “Until the age of seventy, nothing I drew was worthy of notice... When I reach eighty, I hope to have made some progress, and at ninety to see further into the underlying principles of things, so that at one hundred years I will have achieved a divine state in my art, and at 110 every dot and every stroke will be as though alive.”

It takes a long time, then, to arrive in the present moment, ready for it, awake to it and what it requires and some of what it yields. A life, like a work of art, is a practice at which you will fall short most of the time, but at which you will get better if you keep turning up. All living, and all art, entail a falling short: this Hokusai believed; it is *how* we fail (with what devotion and hope), in other words, not so much in how perfectly we achieve the witness—it is *how* we take “the next and most necessary step”—that counts. There is an idea in Japanese culture that a degree of hand-madness, of imperfection, makes a face, a life, a work of art, most beautiful. I have that idea in mind in the poem from which this collection draws its title: “A Beginner’s Guide to Wabi-Sabi,” and Hokusai has it in mind in his words above.

We never, in other words, arrive, and what falls short is part of how a work or a life achieves itself.

I find myself at sixty deeply drawn to another idea that prevailed in Hokusai’s time: one starts a new cycle of life at sixty—one in which, if you’ve continued to serve that long apprenticeship in living, you might begin at last to make some progress. Toward beginning.

11.

These are times infatuated with newness; some see these as end days, and the past as a failed enterprise. These are times intolerant of many things, mostly old things, including especially the idea of craft and the idea of slowness and devotion. I am already old and long out of step with fashion. The beginnings I have in mind are profoundly respectful of oldness and perpetuity—and of crafts it takes time and attention and humility to learn. The beginning we need now is the kind we always did—the kind poetry practises, a kind of presence it takes a while to learn. It is the kind of beginning you perform in your heart and mind and life daily, a molecular revolution you wake to each morning—a refusal of cant and platitude, a commitment to do justice to the world and everyone and every moment we encounter in it.

So let this book be a beginning of that old sort.

What we need is more of what poetry practises: small, uncompromisingly truthful and kind gestures, vernacular and authentic and always human. And please, you young and Messianic ones, keep Hokusai's words in mind and beware the certainties of youth and the ruthlessness of piety and iconoclasm. And take your time while you still have it.

12.

Beginning, then, is the oldest trick in the world; true beginnings may be the oldest; they've been a long time coming. What's old about good beginnings, what is past about presence, may be this: the readiness one slowly learns, the tolerance, the humility and acuity. The oldness of good beginnings is what you have learned from missteps and bad luck and good grace and heartbreak and devotion to the craft of staying the course and waking again the next day and getting after it a little better. It's the experience you bring to the innocence of your being with the world.

13.

As I close these thoughts on beginning, I hear a story on the car radio about a collection of the songs of endangered birds that has flown to the top five of the ARIA (Australian Record Industry Association) charts, putting Mariah Carey and the lugubrious Adele in the shade this Christmas. The songbirds are the original artists, nature's poets, the lyricists of the beginning of time. And each of the birds on the album is a bird—among them, the gang gangs, the red goshawk, the golden bowerbird, and the night parrot—endangered or extinct, by virtue of human occupation of the earth. *Songs of Disappearance* is the beautiful name of the album, which plays as I write now.

Poetry, it strikes me, is to human culture what birdsong is to nature. On the face of it inessential, like love. In how tenuously and tenaciously both birdsong and poetry hold on, they sing the peril and holiness of the earth. And of all lives upon it.

May these songs of beginning, then, remind us that we are living through a time of endings. For we are, the scientists tell us, inhabiting already a mass extinction event, and already much of what had animated our being on the earth is diminished or dying back or lost to us for good. Poetry, even passionate attention to what is left, feel like flimsy strategies against catastrophe. But without them we are all truly lost. We will have forgotten why we came and what it is that we live: our presence, our note or two in the lyric of this moment of all existence. May we begin again at last to recall the beauty we lay waste to—in our lives and in our places—by the profligacy and violent neglect with which we occupy our lives and this earth. May we find in the bird songs and the poetry of lives begun again each moment the radical reimagining that may begin the salvation of this canticle of a spinning earth.

14.

May we not have left our beginning too late.

—Mark Tredinnick