

# Profiles in Poetry

## TERRY GODBEY—ON DOORS AND DIGGING DEEP

*The author of four poetry collections, she will be a special guest speaker at the FSPA Spring Fling convention in May. Terry sat down with her old friend, Al Rocheleau, to share her thoughts on artistic expression.*

**Al:** Terry, did you come to poetry early or later? Did it come originally as a pastime or as a drive?

**Terry:** I wrote a few poems in my early 20s after I discovered Joni Mitchell and began playing guitar, but I don't really count them because they were terrible. I didn't want to be a poet then; I wanted to be Joni. I was too poor to afford a typewriter, so I wrote the "poems" by hand on paper and taped them to the walls of my ratty little garage apartment. I have always read constantly, but that was the first time I had put words to paper for pure pleasure.

I stopped, though, for a couple of decades as I focused on my journalism career and starting a family. I immersed myself in poetry, though, and that's important. You can't write well if you don't read what others have written. Stephen Dunn, Sharon Olds, Linda Pastan, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton were early favorites, but I felt no inclination to write anything myself.

Then, one morning in 1998, as I rushed to get my son to preschool on time (we were always late), he insisted we stop and watch a passing train. He taught me, not for the last time, the importance of living in the moment. I wrote a poem about it called "Trains," which launched me into two decades of intense, nearly constant writing and publishing. I was driven and went all in. As with every creative pursuit I embrace, be it photography, cooking or guitar, I became a bit obsessed, worked hard and aimed high. Nothing halfway for me.

Most of all, though, writing is enjoyable, especially the first drafts. I wouldn't do it otherwise. Since writing "Trains," I've placed in the neighborhood of 160 poems in literary magazines and published four poetry collections. I'm not writing as many poems now, partly, I think, because I write eight hours a day as lead writer at Darden. It's the perfect job, but it's still a lot of sitting at a desk, and when I'm off, I'd rather play guitar or wander off with my camera.

**Al:** In its more direct form, personal narrative can become "confessional" in its cast. Does your work tend to cut deep or do you tend to observe or comment from a distance?

**Terry:** I bristle at the term "confessional poetry" because it implies that all the poet does is spill secrets or recount the past – and it overlooks the artistry involved. That term has been used to denigrate women writers. I tell stories – and although most of them

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Photo by Judy Watson Tracy



*Do I Look Fat in These Feathers? Tiny burrowing owls ham it up, Cape Coral, Florida, February 2017, Terry Godbey*



*Bubbly. Guerlain perfume shop attracts attention along the Champs-Élysées, Paris, May 2016, Terry Godbey*

are mine, I also write persona poems. Even in the poems conceivably sprung from my experiences, they are not all about me. I make things up; I borrow from other people's lives.

I'm writing poems, not memoir. My truth is the emotional heart of the poem, not a careful accounting of this happened, then that happened. My poems had better be universal and evoke emotion or I have failed. I am drawn to narrative poetry because I love stories, but I'm proud of the one lyric poem I've written, "Night." It was inspired by the Patty Griffin song "Florida," and I end most of my readings with it. I'd like to write more lyric poems. I sat down once to write a lyric poem about apples, and the next thing I knew, two girls were climbing a tree and vowing not to be like their mothers. I seem to need action in my poems and quite a bit of conversation as well.

**Al:** Can you give us insight into the provocative title of your book *Behind Every Door*?

**Terry:** It was as difficult to title that first book as it was to arrange the poems, but the collections that followed came together easily. *Behind Every Door* is an excerpt from my poem "Fourteen," but I also chose it for the title because I noticed there were many doors in my book (they also feature prominently in my photography). Not only are doors distinctive and beautiful (especially in Paris), but they serve as entrances and exits at the same time. All of us are different people behind the door than we are once we step through it into visibility. I'm fascinated by those contradictions.

**Al:** How much bravery comes with saying in a poem what you really want to say?

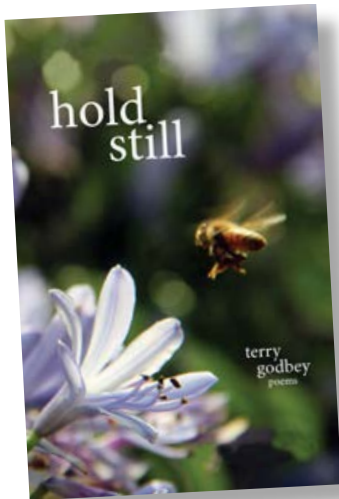
**Terry:** Several reviewers have mentioned how brave I am. That always perplexes me, and I wonder if they think I'm too forthcoming. But I write for myself, first, and I dig deep and try to be honest even when it's painful. I don't worry about what anyone will think about me. If I did that, my poems would lack heart. Some of my poems cast me in a bad light, but I'd rather explore being a flawed wife or mother than a perfect one. I've got sweet poems about my son, but I've also got ones about how incredibly difficult and frustrating parenting is. That's honest and more compelling. When I start a poem, I don't know what I'll discover. If I knew ahead of time, I wouldn't bother. It wouldn't be any fun. And, to paraphrase Robert Frost, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." I'm fond of "pow" endings – very few of my poems end quietly.

**Al:** How important is humor and irony in your work?

**Terry:** It's very important. It's part of my voice because I see humor even in the darkest places. I was kind of a class clown in school, and to this day, if something is funny, I have to share it with whoever is nearby, even a stranger. I enjoy the humor in Billy Collins' work and in the late Tony Hoagland's. My dear friend, Susan Lilley, writes wonderfully funny poems. Even my latest book, *Hold Still*, which is mostly about my cancer battle, contains a surprising amount

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[Link to purchase her latest book](#)

Godbey offers signed copies of all four books from her website. [Here is a link](#)

Visit her online at: [www.terrygodbey.com](http://www.terrygodbey.com)

Her website also has a photos tab that links to [her Flickr page](#).

of humor, even if it's dark. Once, during a radiation treatment, the song "Disco Inferno" by The Trammps began to play. "Burn, Baby, Burn!" Priceless! Another experience calling out to become a poem. If I can't laugh and be sarcastic, then let me out of this cage right now. I'm done.

**AI:** How has your poetry changed over the years, from the work of your first book on to *Beauty Lessons* and *Hold Still*?

**Terry:** That's a good question and difficult to answer. Many poets dislike their first books and wish they had waited to publish. I don't feel that way about *Behind Every Door*, but some of those early poems do seem to lack a bit of depth as I look back. I'm proudest of my latest book, *Hold Still*, but that pride may be tangled up with my complicated feelings about surviving cancer. When I share those poems at readings, even the young people react and relate to them. People tell me that it's about time someone was honest about what it's like to have cancer.

When I was diagnosed, I wanted to read artistic depictions about what I faced, but I found overly optimistic versions from people who said they were grateful for their cancer. That drove me nuts and still does. I wrote the book that I had wanted to read. I didn't intend to write at all then because I was so ill. I didn't want to deepen my experience, I wanted to dull it. But the words kept coming so I had to write them down. I wrote in the depressing chemo room. I wrote in my bed and in the bathtub. My purse was stuffed with poem drafts, along with the bottles of anti-nausea drugs that didn't work well. The poems worked, though. I processed my experience and emotions through the prism of language, the one thing I could control. Are these poems better than my early work? I don't know. That's a question for others to answer.

**AI:** How has your recent foray into photography informed your art? What are the differences and similarities of the two arts, and how do they complement each other?

**Terry:** As a poet, I tend to wallow in the past, mining for narrative jewels, and as an overachiever and recovering journalist, I'm hard-wired for deadlines and schedules, the enemy of spontaneity. Behind my camera, though, I can quiet my mind's incessant play-by-play, be cradled only in this moment, and then the next, and then the one after that. Photography became my meditation, and it gets me out of the house.



The hardest part of writing has always been keeping my butt in the chair, looking out the window while wanting to be on the other side of the glass. I am starting to move on from wild-life and nature photos to travel photography, and I enjoy my favorite photos every day. My house is filled with framed prints from Paris and Alaska, and I'm leaving a space for Italy, which I'll visit next year. Photography hasn't really informed my poetry, but it's expanded my creative life in new ways. It's pure joy and instantaneous.

*Skeptic. This gray wolf has seen photographers before, and it's not impressed, near Anchorage, Alaska, July 2017, Terry Godbey*