The Shadow

According to the psychologist Carl Jung, each of us has a daily, more pleasant self with which we identify—our ego—and a hidden self which we tend to reject and deny—what is known as our shadow. While the division into ego and shadow comes from Jung, it's an idea that humankind has recognized for centuries and that we all immediately understand: that the self is both dark and light, that the world contains both good and evil.

Our personal shadow lies in the unconscious and is formed when we are young, when we learn to identify with what our culture tells us are acceptable behaviors, thoughts, emotions. Poet Robert Bly calls the shadow "the long bag we drag behind us," explaining that as we learn what others don't like or accept in us we start "bag-stuffing." By the time we reach adulthood, Bly says, there is only a "thin slice" of us left—the rest is in that long bag.

The problem is that while the shadow is necessary to the formation of who we are, we end up denying its existence, or at best fearing it. And that denial causes problems, because the dark side of ourselves contains not only what we consider negative traits but also our undeveloped talents and gifts. We all have powerful creative energies locked inside; to deny them is to deny the possibility of wholeness.

On a larger scale, entire societies have their shadow, which they are busy suppressing. When we refuse to acknowledge the shadow we not

only lose the chance to integrate it, but risk being dominated by it. Coming to terms with both our personal shadow and the collective one is one of the important ways the artist can function in relation to his or her own art, and in relation to his or her culture. The artist can try to show the culture issues it doesn't want to look at, can explore those frightening areas of the psyche. The French novelist Colette said, "Look hard at what pleases you and harder at what doesn't." Poets can't afford to be "nice" if they're to explore the more troubling realms of human experience.

Does this mean that poems shouldn't be beautiful? Of course not. Light is important. Affirmation is important. Poetry isn't all about wars and unhappy childhoods and failed love affairs—and shouldn't be. But we've encountered a number of people who have difficulty with going deeper, who splash in the shallows and never dive down into the scary, murky depths—and their poetry reflects that. They have trouble accessing that deeper self, so that when they write they are constantly, consciously *thinking*: "Where am I going next? Is that the right grammar? Does this make sense? Is this too weird? Who's going to read this after I've written it?" Such thoughts can stop the creative impulse dead in its tracks. And the writing that results is likely to be tepid, perhaps pretty, but ultimately unsuccessful in conveying something meaningful about human experience.

How can you gain access to the shadow, and mine it for poetry? It's important to get past the voices that tell you what you "should" write, the voices that say you want people to like you, to think you are a good person—the "writing as seduction" school. It means going into territory that may be labeled "forbidden," or that may be personally difficult. It's important not to censor yourself. Give yourself permission to explore wherever the writing takes you. Of course, this kind of writing—going towards what is hardest to speak of, whether that's the suffering in the world or your own personal obsessions—takes a certain amount of courage. Your normal, denying self doesn't want to deal with those things. But sometimes, writing may be the only place you can express them. There's a great feeling of relief and catharsis when you manage to get something that's been buried or hidden out

onto the page. And such a process, whether or not it eventually results in a poem, helps to integrate that part of the self.

Many poets have struggled with that chaotic, difficult part of their psyche, and some of their writing has been about their personal demons. John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Anne Sexton—these were some of an earlier generation of American writers who coped variously with depression, alcohol or drug dependency, deep-rooted self-destructive urges. We aren't suggesting that mental instability or unhappiness makes one a better poet, or a poet at all; and contrary to the romantic notion of the artist suffering for his or her work, we think these writers achieved brilliance in spite of their suffering, not because of it. Still, Jung also said that there were no heights without the corresponding depths; and these poets reached deeply into themselves.

Jane Kenyon writes about depression in her poem "Having It Out With Melancholy." Here is the first of the nine sections:

I. FROM THE NURSERY

When I was born, you waited
behind a pile of linen in the nursery,
and when we were alone, you lay down
on top of me, pressing
the bile of desolation into every pore.

And from that day on
everything under the sun and moon
made me sad—even the yellow
wooden beads that slid and spun
along a spindle on my crib.

You taught me to exist without gratitude.
You ruined my manners toward God:
"We're here simply to wait for death;
the pleasures of earth are overrated."

I only appeared to belong to my mother,
to live among blocks and cotton undershirts
with snaps; among red tin lunch boxes
and report cards in ugly brown slipcases.

I was already yours—the anti-urge,
the mutilator of souls.

Kenyon addresses "the anti-urge," the weight of depression which, the narrator claims, has pressed down on her since childhood. In another section she calls it "a crow who smells hot blood," which arrives "to pull me out / of the glowing stream" just when she has managed to feel, briefly, a sense of connection with all of humanity. Later, she describes how it feels to live in such a state of psychic misery:

A piece of burned meat
wears my clothes, speaks
in my voice, dispatches obligations
haltingly, or not at all.
It is tired of trying
to be stouthearted, tired
beyond measure.

(from part 7., PARDON)

By the end of the poem, the narrator has managed to come to a hard-won but fragile truce with that other that lives inside of herself; and her readers have taken the journey with her. ✓

We think that, for poets, integrating the shadow side also means training yourself to *see*. We once gave an assignment in which we were focusing on the making of images—creating vivid, evocative, sensual descriptions of things in the world. It was suggested that everyone describe a homeless man or woman and render him or her in such graphic detail that each of us could conjure up this person before us in the classroom. One woman had difficulty with the assignment because, she said, "I never really looked at a homeless person closely." Poets need to train themselves to look closely at the world, to observe it carefully and continuously. True of all writers.

In this next poem Corrine Hales makes us look closely at a commonplace domestic scene which immediately makes us uneasy, even before the terrible act at the heart of the poem is revealed.

SUNDAY MORNING

Crowded around the glowing open mouth
Of the electric oven, the children
Pull on clothes and eat brown-sugared oatmeal.

The broiler strains, buzzing to keep up
500 degrees, and the mother
Is already scrubbing at a dark streak

On the kitchen wall. Last night she'd been
Ironing shirts and trying her best to explain
Something important to the children

When the old mother cat's surviving
Two kittens' insistent squealing and scrambling
Out of their cardboard box began

To get to her. The baby screamed every time
The oldest girl set him on the cold floor
While she carried a kitten back to its place

Near the stove, and the mother cat kept reaching
For the butter dish on the table. Twice, the woman
Stopped talking and set her iron down to swat

A quick kitten away from the dangling cord,
And she saw that one of the boys had begun to feed
Margarine to his favorite by the fingerful.

When it finally jumped from his lap and squatted
To piss on a pale man's shirt dropped below
Her ironing board, the woman calmly stopped, unplugged

Her iron, picked up the gray kitten with one hand
And threw it, as if it were a housefly, hard
And straight at the yellow flowered wall

Across the room. It hit, cracked, and seemed to slide
Into a heap on the floor, leaving an odd silence
In the house. They all stood still

Staring at the thing, until one child,
The middle boy, walked slowly out of the room

And down the hall without looking

At his mother or what she'd done. The others followed
And by morning everything was back to normal
Except for the mother standing there scrubbing.

This is a poem we grow uncomfortable reading; like the boy who leaves the room, we don't want to look. But Hales has engaged us already; by the time we get to the mother's violent act, it's too late. Worse, we even feel a bit complicit with her. Anyone who's been around little children knows how they can strain one's patience to the breaking point; we can see this frazzled woman trying to deal with kids and animals and just losing it. This is the dangerous underside of the family, and it's not a pleasant experience to read about it.

We believe that to be a poet means that as a person, you must be willing to feel the emotions that come from facing the world, and your particular truths about it, unflinchingly. You may be able to craft gorgeously cadenced lines, full of fresh, surprising metaphor, sonorous combinations of words, and multilayered allusions—but all this, without *seeing*, will only produce what we might call pseudo-poems. They may be very good, by current standards—many of them find their way into respected literary journals. But true poems, and poets, are difficult to come by. They have to have what the Spanish call *duende*—what poet Federico Garcia Lorca described as "the mystery, the roots that probe through the mire that we all know of, and do not understand, but which furnishes us with whatever is sustaining in art." Lorca defines *duende* by quoting the German writer Goethe: "A mysterious power that all may feel and no philosophy can explain." What matters in your work, ultimately, is not how much it pleases an editor, but whether it has integrity—integrity of vision as much as language.

IDEAS FOR WRITING

there are exercises in self-examination & empathy . . .

1. As a warmup, write something that you would never show to anyone, that you are afraid even to put down on the page. Get it out, as much of it as possible, in as much shameful or horrifying detail as you can manage. Afterwards, feel free to tear it up or burn it; the exercise is successful if it has enabled you to get in touch with that place in yourself.

2. What repels you—the smell of garbage? Sloppiness? People who never shut up? Make a list of things you dislike intensely. Choose one or more and try to transform them into something appealing or beautiful.

3. What positive qualities do you consider are part of your personality? Are you a good listener? Generous to your friends? Concerned about the suffering in the world? Take a trait that you are proud of and find the opposite trait within yourself. Write a poem describing and exploring all the ways you are not a good listener, are selfish, and so on. (We got the idea for this from a line by Sharon Olds: "And what if I am not good, what if I am a taker?")

4. Imagine that your shadow has a name, a face, certain habits, likes and dislikes. Describe your shadow. Then describe what your shadow's reactions are to a particular action you perform—such as tucking in a child, making love, going for a walk, writing a poem.

5. What would you consider a taboo subject for a poem? (You may think of several things.) Now break your own taboo—transgress. If you feel very uncomfortable doing this, you're on the right track.

6. Write a "confession" poem detailing an emotional crime and how you committed it.

7. Write a poem in the voice of a murderer. Make the reader sympathetic to the murderer.

8. Write a poem about an incident which caused you to feel a sense of shame.

9. Take a negative aspect of the self—fear or depression or paralysis or cruelty—and find a concrete image for what it feels like. Remember Kenyon's "black crow." Maybe it is like the weight she describes pressing down; or like walking into an abandoned house; or sinking into a deep chair; or slogging through mud. Once you settle on your topic and the image for it, develop that image in a poem titled "Fear," "Depression," etc.

10. The traditional imagery for good and evil is light and dark, white and black. Brainstorm a list of images called up by the two opposites, light/white and black/dark. Then write a poem that inverts and reverses those traditional associations. That is, what is beautiful, fertile, inspiring in the dark, in night, in deep caves? What's awful or terrifying in daylight?