**Poetry from Daily Life: Only you can write a poem in your voice**

By Ellen Hopkins

*This week’s guest on Poetry from Daily Life is Ellen Hopkins, who lives in Cape Girardeau. She has been a writer for more than thirty years and particularly likes to write contemporary verse novels. She refers to some of her best poetry in People Kill People, a hybrid verse/prose novel in which the voice of violence is cast in verse, calling to the characters, written in second person, who invite readers to “become” them. A unique fact about Ellen is that she has visited every state in the United States. Her favorites are in the West. ~ David L. Harrison*

**A Poem Comes ...**

You might wonder where poems come from. *I’d like to write a poem,* you think. *But what should I write about?* From poet Sharon Olds: “What you know that I don’t know is what you can tell me in a poem. After all, what else is there? I cannot write about anything else. I can only tell you what I know.”

Ideas don’t have to be sweeping. You don’t have to write about war or love or life-or-death experiences unless they call to you. I have written about all of the above, but many of my best poems are about simpler things. So maybe start there.

Open a window. Take a walk. Look into your dog’s eyes. Investigate a garden. Bake cookies with your kids. *Okay*, you say, *but other people have already written about those things.* Yes, but only you can describe them in your unique way. That is your voice, and no one owns it but you. To hone it, consider sensory details. (All quotes below are mine.)

What scents blow in on the breeze through the window? (“The green perfume of alfalfa, fresh from the mow.”) What do you hear when you walk through the woods, or along the shore or sidewalk? (“... brilliant cockcrow alarms; quiescent cricket lullabies.”) What wisdom do you see in your dog’s eyes? (“Why, when lights go dim and soft black curtains close, why do young ones cry?”) How do rose petals feel, or blades of grass beneath your bare feet? (“... the ebb of silk and flow of leather.”) What do you taste in your kitchen? (“Fruit, coaxed ripe by northern sun, sugared just beyond tart ...”)

Keep your images accessible. Don’t make readers work too hard. Your goal, always, is to invite them in. Let them see your world through your eyes. Let them feel the emotions you hold in your heart.

A few words on the poem I’ll end with. We moved to northern Nevada in 1990. It was there in Carson City that I joined a poetry group and grew my own poetry for 33 years, until a recent move to Missouri. Most of the storms swept in over the Sierra from the southwest. But once in a while, a backdoor storm would surprise us. I hope the images I give you here paint a lovely picture.

**A Poem Comes**

a backdoor storm

sliding in from the northeast.

A surprise.

It reveals itself as sunrise

lifts its countenance above muted hills.

It scatters, silver

light across the winter-plumped valley.

It swells, contracts,

bursts with the brass song of saxophones.

It floats on a wind-risen

mist perfumed with rain-spattered sage.

It says goodnight,

paw prints in a sponge of desert sand.

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*Ellen Hopkins is a poet, former freelance journalist, and the award-winning author of fourteen New York Times bestselling young adult novels-in-verse, two middle grade novels-in-verse, and four novels (two in verse) for adult readers.*