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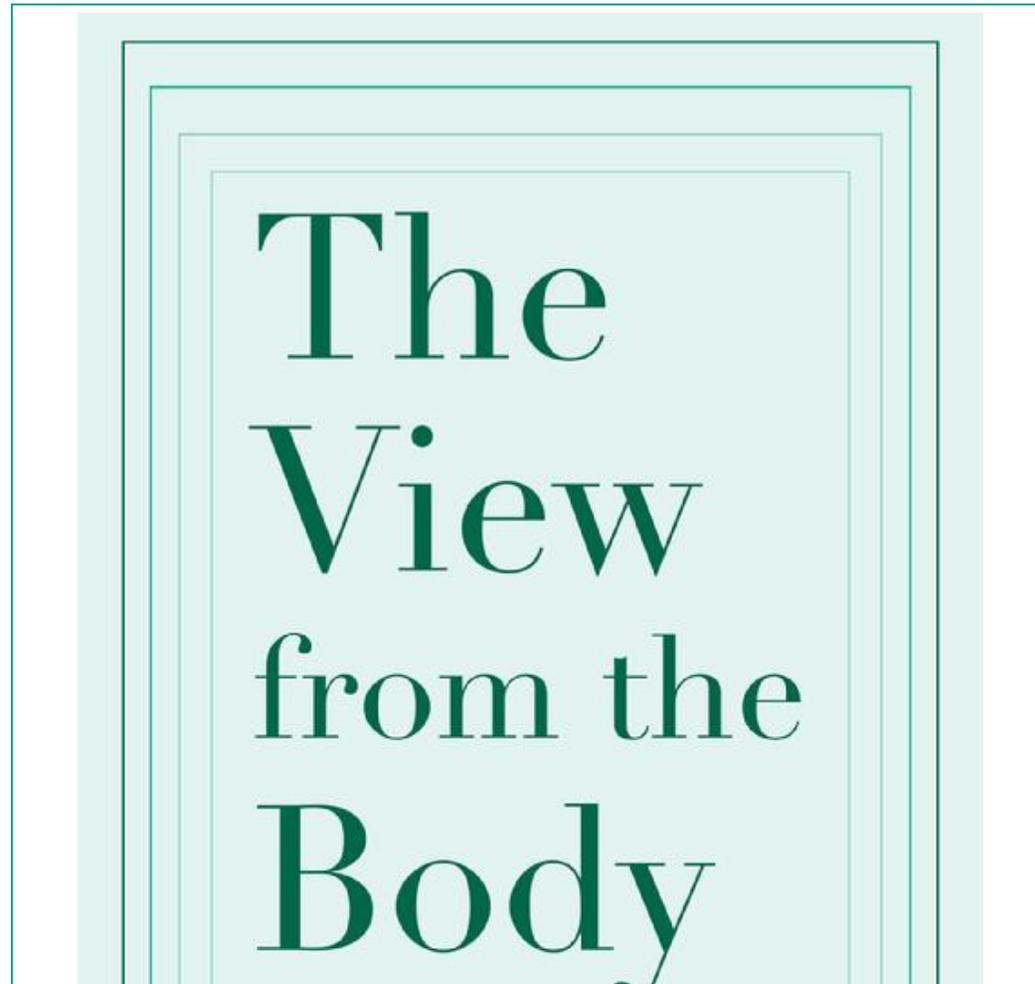
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Cover image of *The View from the Body*; visit <http://reneeashley.com/> and <http://www.blacklawrence.com/the-view-from-the-body/> for more info

We sail into uncharted waters in our autumn-winter issue. Though poetry has always flowed through to the very heart of the magazine in reviews, content, contests, special features, essays, and more, we realized—much to our surprise—that there had yet to be a full formal interview focused on this medium that vitally saturates the soul. Who better to captain our voyage than the dynamic Renée Ashley, whose poetic maritime adventures exploring the vast, sometimes raging seas of life, language, truth, and self-discovery, have yielded knowledge of the flowing inner worlds that shape our experience. There is a quote by poet Diane Ackerman that describes this beautifully: "Because poets feel what we're afraid to feel, venture where we're reluctant to go, we learn from their journeys without taking the same dramatic risks. Think of all the lessons to be learned from deep rapture, danger, tumult, romance, intuition. But it's far too exhausting to live like that on a daily basis, so we ask artists to explore for us."

Ashley embraces a fluid freedom in her poetry that pours itself into readers, having definite volume, but no fixed form, so it can be just as they need it to be. With her daring skills of navigation around themes of desire, death, dreams, and the divine, we acquire the courage to go deep, to drown in these concepts, knowing it's actually the way to survive.

In our interview, a distinct pleasure to conduct from start to finish, we discuss balances between what is said and what is evoked, the inside and outside of a poem, the intimate and the infinite. We speak of the differences between ideas and impulse in terms of inspiration, how limitations can push us forward, and defining those things that are truer than true.

Renée Ashley is the author of six volumes of poetry: *The View from the Body*, *Because I Am the Shore I Want to Be the Sea*, *Basic Heart* (X. J. Kennedy Poetry Prize), *The Revisionist's Dream*, *The Various Reasons of Light*, and *Salt* (Brittingham Prize in Poetry), as well as two chapbooks, *The Verbs of Desiring* (New American Press Award) and *The Museum of Lost Wings* (Sunken Garden Poetry Prize), and a fiction novel, *Someplace Like This*. She shares her passion and insight as an instructor in Fairleigh Dickinson University's low-residency graduate programs, including the MFA in Creative Writing and the MA in Creative Writing and Literature for Educators. She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (poetry) and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts (both in poetry and prose), as well as a Pushcart Prize.

Interview with Renée Ashley by Nicole M. Bouchard

1) This first question is about a liberating notion of balance implicated in your shared perspectives on the writing of poetry. In an interview for the *Wild River Review*, you discuss connection fostered through writing small, writing “microscopic” with what can be assumed is the kind of specificity (personal or generally detail-oriented) that pinpoints individual meanings and applications of larger, universal themes. You’ve also discussed in numerous interviews, the importance of a poem being “bigger than the poet.” That there is something beyond an idea, beyond what the poet intended to say, something beyond their internal environment entirely. It’s reminiscent of concepts in fiction that ask the writer to step aside and allow the story to speak for itself with a voice that not only teaches them more about themselves, but introduces another dimension of unintentional meaning that goes beyond the self.

This broader view being utilized for poetry, however, struck me as rather novel and exciting because I’ve seldom seen it explored. I believe poetry would be regarded as more widely accessible a medium to writers and readers if it were regularly perceived as a balance between the intimate and infinite.

Despite the characteristic fluidity and freedom of poetry, it can also be formalized, governed with rules and restrictions, and construed as a raw, vulnerable means of individual emotional expression—a view to one’s soul at night with the lights left on in a bedroom. You’d said in an interview with Michele Lesko that if “you want to run away, you’re probably on the right track.” Poetry is potent in its petite form, not diffused by the veil of anonymity in fiction with characters and plot. Writers get torn between whether it’s worse to be misunderstood or be understood *exactly*. Readers with limited perceptions of what poetry is, can get intimidated by the idea that they won’t understand at all (whether regarding content or if there’s inability to relate) and that the lack of understanding is somehow a reflection on them.

Having worked with instructors of young writer programs for poetry, we’ve learned that there are inhibitions to overcome on both the writing and reading ends. Once these are conquered, the unbridled beauty, passion, and catharsis of poetry takes over.

Yet this adroit balance you suggest would seem to me to attract everyone in, saying the water's fine, so that it needn't be a cautious process of dipping toes first, but a cannonball jump into the deep end. It assures writers, *Don't worry, it's not all you, nor all about you*. It assures readers, *Don't worry, it's not all them and much of it is about you*. From the poetic vantage point, talk to us about the how's of attaining this balance—writing small (how you characterize and enact it in process) and writing to leave space for something bigger than one's self (how you characterize what the bigger scope is as well as its origin and how you consciously or unconsciously step to one side and make room for it for the sake of the poem and indirectly, its audience).

First, Nicole, let me thank you for all the work you've done to put this interview together. Your questions, thoughtful and enormously complex, deserve real essays, responses much longer and deeper than I'm able to tackle in the time we have. I hope I'm able to answer them satisfactorily. I'll try to be succinct.

There are so many ways to address the individual/universal concept, your lovely intimate/infinite among them, but, I think, for the nonce, I'll offer the Fig Newton theory of poetry-making.

For a long time, there was a TV commercial that had a weird guy dressed in a fig suit and he'd dance this awful, funny little dance singing, "You put the inside in the outside. Is it good? Darn tootin'. It's a big fig—here's the tricky part—a big Fig Newton!" "[H]ere's the tricky part," as I recall, had some extra funny-stumbly footwork, and the second syllable of *Newton* was held a really long time while the fig-person did a cool, final, here-it-is thing with his hands, like *ta-da!* That's the whole Fig Newton theory of poetry-making: You put the inside in the outside, and there's a tricky part.

The *outside* is your material—the what-you-literally-say: the story you tell or the acts of language you write down. It's what you can see on the page or are *directly* cued to envision.

The *inside* is what is not visible, but what is evoked—not a single act of language by the author, but an act of mind on the part of the reader. The inside, in one sense, couldn't be easier—and in another sense is really difficult. You don't have to write the

inside; you have to make it *happen*. And that's the "tricky part." The inside happens because the poet has aligned tone, image, narrative, the discursive bits, form of presentation, and everything else on the page, so skillfully that the reader is led to the arena of recognition that the poet has set up (better than ballpark, but, of course, less than precise, because language is not the thing itself. It is imprecise by nature). The *outside*, then, is the carrier of rhetorical gesture and of substance, and it evokes, within the reader, the *inside*. The absent abstraction. The recognition. *The infinite*.

We're programmed to respond in such a way because we are pattern-seeking creatures, we seek "sense," we fill in gaps, then we provide the deeper meaning. We feel that meaning; when we name the sensation and its concomitant emotion, we generalize it, make it less than the initial response, and we lose a lot.

A critical part of that alignment, at least for most of us, is one subset of substance: image. We've all been told "Show don't tell," right? But I always wondered why, *why* does it work? And nothing I read told me. Then Janet Burroway, in her excellent textbook, *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft* answered my question:

"[I]t is sense impressions that make writing vivid, and there is a physiological reason for this. Information taken in through the five senses is processed in the *limbic system* of the brain, which generates sensuous responses in the body: heart rate, blood/oxygen flow, muscle reaction, and so forth. Emotional response consists of these physiological reactions and so in order to have an effect on your reader's emotions, you must literally get into the limbic system, which you can do only through the senses" (16).

Use image well and you've got, not just the cortex working away, but the limbic system as well. You've got physical engagement of the body along with intellect—so the reader's involvement becomes multi-valent. With images, the brain prompts *an experience* rather than *a thinking-about*. You don't want to depend on big, abstract terms because those tell the reader what to feel. You want the reader to feel it firsthand through their

recognitions in order to heighten their experience of and investment in the poem. That resonance of the unspoken in the poem is your *infinite*. And the infinite, the *inside*, is what I would say allows the poem to grow larger than the poet.

Balance has to do, I think, with paring away all that does not serve the emotional core, all those interesting but peripheral details or tangents. Even images. If they're not working in concert with the other images as well as with the inside, then out they go. By stepping away from the poem, seeing what the poem is really about rather than what you intended it to be about, then pruning attentively to isolate its effect, you can get there. Editing for balance can't be about the writer; it has to be about the poem—which is, despite the writer's investment, a very different thing.

2) There are four thematic d's that weave themselves through your work, inviting us to explore their questions, their mysteries, their many facets, and how they influence us in a myriad of ways—dreams, desires, death, and the divine (illusive gods and angels who've fallen to earth, while “pain's just a reliquary”—struggle containing the sacred?). Our deep, timeless yearning for understanding, both in the sense of comprehension and connection, tolls truly and loudly enough through the words to receive an answering echo from within us as we listen with our minds. Yet you also remix these four themes in such original ways that we're hearing things we've never heard before that hit us from all directions in surround sound mode, continually turning and challenging our viewpoint. Though you've spoken of not wanting to adhere to one particular idea when crafting a poem, what factors inform your fresh take on these complex themes?

It's true about ideas. And I take it even further: I don't work from ideas for poems; I work from impulses. A phrase or a rhythm or, far less often, but sometimes, a situation (for example a small newspaper article) will seem to quicken for me. It's not an *idea* at all; it's a sense that there are resonances associated with it that connect to something much larger that matters to me. Then I write to find out what that is, what the connections are within the circuit that has just been completed, that just made that little frisson of recognition in me.

Ideas, at least for me, are for essays, and, even then, I work associatively, though an idea is likely to set that in motion. I'm not an idea person at all; I'm not good with them. They're bullies; I'm a wimp. I think I'm a feeling person—and much too emotional to be of any practical use. It's a far less useful personality in the world at large when those feelings don't set off appropriate reparatory actions.

Someone said, and I have no idea who it was and would love it if someone who does would let me know, that a poet keeps writing the same poem over and over again her whole life. I think it's true; or, it's true, at least, for me. But it's not a conscious choice. There's a fabulous book by John Briggs, *The Fire in the Crucible*, and in it he says people have *themata*, their own set of obsessions that they can't get away from, that, especially writers, come back to time and time again. Totally true. And I think you have just outed mine: dreams, desires, death, and the divine.

There may be one more, or perhaps it's part of *desires*, but a man I didn't know once said to me after a reading, "You don't think much of love, do you?" I was shocked into silence which, I can assure you, doesn't happen often. His tone made it very clear that he did not mean I had a dearth of thoughts on the subject of love; he meant that it seemed obvious that I didn't think, in the end, that love's payoff was worth its grief. When a noise finally came out of me, I think it was a loud, nervous laugh. It's entirely possible, though, that I did say, "Bingo," which is what I tend to say when something's spot-on. He'd heard in my work something I'd never have consciously conveyed, but certainly had felt.

I do write to discover what I think and feel, and sometimes, when I find out what I've said, it surprises the hell out of me—and evidently there are times when I need a more objective eye or brain than my own to see it. I have a little scrap of paper taped to my computer desk. On it I scribbled, ages ago, "Never settle for what you meant to say." That time I guess I succeeded. Bingo.

3) Your poems often speak of the limits of bodies and language and how we use or essentially extend beyond them. Poetry itself makes grand use of its

limited size to have an impact that puts it amongst the most powerful creative forms of expression. Do you feel that sometimes it is our very limitations, our mortality, our obstacles, our vulnerabilities, simple parameters of life, even those walls “that would hold back the sea,” which make us and our art more significant, more unique and more motivated to strive toward scaling those walls?

Yes to everything.

Yes, I find the body a great frustration for many, many reasons. I just finished, last week, a short essay on body image that made me think about it far longer and in more detail than I would have wished. But, to keep it short, it’s likely that body image is the lens through which some of us see everything we do or think we are. It’s, no doubt, tinted differently for each of us. I didn’t use that metaphor in the essay. I wish I had. For me, my lens is how I see my body fitting in with the bodies and perceptions of others and it’s those beliefs, rather than my body itself, that create the limitations. I am sufficiently able-bodied. It does move about acceptably well, considering age and BMI. (It’s entirely possible that I’m the only one who believes this. My internist certainly doesn’t.)

Yes, language is fraught with limitations. We all know that, as soon as we articulate something, we’ve “smallened” it, as my husband would say. We’ve said it less than we mean it. Language is approximate. It has so many possible ambiguities, so many differences in reference and association in the language-receiver *and* the language-giver, so many connotations that are societal rather than personal, etc. It’s simply imprecise. We do the best we’re able.

(I am not saying that “a poem can mean anything you want it to,” which I’ve heard from people who should know better. It’s simply not true, though denotation is affected in myriad ways including the form and context in which a word is presented. If a poem could mean anything, then it’d have to be a really crappy poem—because words *do* have denotations. But, I don’t think it’s possible, in fact, to write something that can mean “anything”; though it’s possible, apparently, to write something that means

nothing. Even a bad poem says something. It may be purely literal. But it says or indicates something.)

Yes, we all need to push against something—otherwise, we have no traction for movement. But whatever that something is for you, it's just as easily something different for me. I remember when my mom died. She and I had rarely seen eye-to-eye; name it, and, if it was something that mattered, we disagreed. I'd had her to push against for sixty-four or -five years! She died at 101 ½. And, I swear, I hung up the phone after the doctor had called to tell me she had passed, and I sensed that, suddenly, I was physically off-balance. It wasn't shock or sorrow. It was that I'd been pushing against her, leaning on that wall of I'm-not-like-her-she's-wrong-again my whole life! It had been holding me up, and suddenly it had been pulled away. A radical defamiliarization of who I was had taken place in an instant. All of a sudden she wasn't there to lean into; I had to stand up on my own, support my own weight.

It was sobering. Really sobering. And weird. But there's plenty to push against, including pushing against myself, pushing the writing to see who I really am. I'll never entirely figure it out. There are too many me's and flux is the rule, isn't it.

4) Truth is a topic that appears as a trail marker in your interviews, poetry, and fiction. It feels as though it is one of those quests with endless avenues to reach a destination, no one destination, yet the journey being the important thing. Truth is described as “a nebulous commodity,” and “a fitful thing.” One can believe “in at least a million truths and in time sweeping them into a heap like leaves,” one gathers them like passport stamps of places and spaces of belief they've been to. You've mentioned an affinity for the kind of poem “that surprises me into a truth.”

As we are largely ever-changing and “undefined,” just as “unfinished as the shoreline along the beach, meant to transcend [ourselves] again and again” in the words of author and former *WPWT* interviewee Joan Anderson, would you say that poetry, in its versatility, is one of the best ways to discover our own truths? If we “can see it on paper . . . like making up a room and furniture to scale in paper pieces and then moving the paper furniture around in the paper room to see if they fit,” can we sift out some things truer than true from “things as they are”?

Truth! Well, there's an abstraction to strive for, a sure-fire fail.

Growing up, truth *was* a nebulous commodity. It was just my mom and me, and my mom lied a lot. Why? Because her personal facts didn't suit the person she thought she rightfully should have been so she conjured new ones? because it was convenient at the time? because it taught me a lesson? because it saved her from having to do something? Who knows? Probably all of the above. I don't think, though, she was deliberately being cruel; I think it was her way of writing it out, her way of trying things on, or of dismissing something embarrassing or bothersome. But, since it was just the two of us, it's what my *reality* (another word like *truth*, eh?) reflected. I got to be very good at tone of voice. I could tell, before I hit my teens, at least most of the time, when she was lying.

About a year, I think, before she died, I asked her something about her life, some factual thing, and she said, "Oh, Renée. I don't know..."—she sounded just plain tired, too played out, too weary to make the effort to recall what she might have said in the past. "I've lied my entire life," she said. It was an astounding moment. Time slowed dramatically in that instant. It was the first time ever she'd acknowledged a lie. Anyway, there's that kind of *truth*.

And there are the *truths* that are altered by where and when you stand! We're talking Einstein and the train story, the special theory of relativity. And there's the *Rashomon* or *The Alexandria Quartet* truths! Ack! *The Alexandria Quartet*, Durrell's set of novels telling shared events from different points of view, changed my life. I was way too young to read those novels without getting a little bit wrecked. (I've never seen *Rashomon*, but should, I guess; it's the example of the phenomenon most people seem to recognize. But I just can't imagine it being enjoyable in any way.) It changed the way I understood human interaction. And didn't give me much hope for even a passable, objective truth.

And there are those larger truths, those abstract ones. I think that when we experience what we might call one of the *larger truths*, it's not a *truth* at all, in the denotative or absolute sense.

It's a *recognition*. And I think of Joan Anderson's quote, that we are as "unfinished as the shoreline" as a brilliant recognition. Totally, exactly right. That's a truth/recognition for *me* now. Metaphor is so often a far superior summoner of recognition than explanation. It's wild, that... Right?

This is probably a great place to stop, Nicole. Thank you so much for putting so much thought into this—it was such fun to work through your questions!

*Here we would like to thank featured past and present subjects for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss life, literature and art with them.

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