

“These poems conjure magic from the quotidian.” – Troy Passey, Artist

POETRY *for* STRANGERS

Elisabeth Sharp McKetta

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poems by

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stories that change people

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*To all of the strangers who bravely
offered words in exchange for a poem.*

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Introduction

THIS BOOK IS MADE UP OF POEMS WRITTEN FOR STRANGERS. Every week, over the course of two years, I asked a stranger for a word to use in a poem. I had only two rules: The person had to be an actual stranger. The word had to appear in the poem. Aside from that, the poem could be about anything. And so each poem became about many things: the word itself, the stranger-encounter, and the world as I encountered it.

Poetry for Strangers began as a new year's challenge and it evolved into a project of repair—it sought to repair the rift that made so many people feel that poetry was irrelevant, simply not useful or necessary to their lives. I wanted to write poems that mattered to ordinary people. I wanted to get ordinary people to care about poetry. How? My answer was to write poems for strangers I met in the course of ordinary life.

Because poetry should matter to people. Poetry is about finding moments of giant beauty in a small individual life, and we all need that. Poetry has always worked to distill the world's clutter into a single moment: an image that makes us pause, reflect, and find meaning where we otherwise might not have. A poet's job is to say, *Look!* and *Be here now*. A poet asks for our attention. And never has our world needed more reasons to pay attention than it does today.

I recently wrote my 100th poem for a stranger (the word: innovate). This book contains a diverse 50 of these poems. The project continues as a blog with new poems each week, as well as poems on the week's word contributed by poets worldwide. *Poetry for Strangers* reminds us that every stranger is a potential friend, and every life is worthy of a poem. Join our community at poetryforstrangers.com.

THE STRANGER Salman | THE WORD Strangers

Boise State University invited Sir Salman Rushdie to speak at this year's Distinguished Lecture Series. During the Q&A, someone asked which book has influenced him most. "Which day of the week is it?" he asked. But then he answered: *The Arabian Nights*. "They teach us that stories are untrue." At a small gathering afterward, a conversation broke out about fairy tales being sanitized. It took me half an hour to gather the courage to ask him for a word. When I asked, he thought for a long minute. Then he said, "Strangers."

THE POEM

I gave my girl the stranger talk
last night. We were going
to a performance, the kind
where she could split off
and be gone from me forever.

Strangers are as unmapped
as caves. Inside there might
be water, squeezes, the absence
of light. Bats or other things.

Perhaps we might make up
a password. Something silly
like "glowworm" that only family
will know. As I tell her this,

I think of the other thing I want
her to know: how people are good.
People want to know other people,
they want you to say hello.

We all were strangers once, before
a word surprised us. Before
some old mumbled story changed
the alignment of our stones.

Open sesame. Repeat the spells
that raise the oceans. Stay alive
if you can. With each stranger
we meet we see again that yes,
words open caves.

THE STRANGER Kyndall | THE WORD Dangerous

We had an oops and got a puppy! So now our 10-month-old baby is teething, trying to eat everything, and mostly sleeping nights; and the puppy is teething but with sharper teeth, trying to eat everything, and rarely sleeping nights. The baby and the puppy get along well. They chew on the same toys, though sometimes the puppy tries to eat the baby's ear. What this all leads up to is that we've been out in the evenings doing dog walks. And on one of these walks I met Kyndall; I was impressed by the good behavior of her dogs.

THE POEM

There are gifts we don't ask for that descend
on us, those long afternoons in bed. Enjoy
her, they say. She'll grow up. Days like this
the only cure is the verb to grow, spindly
as it is without foliage on its branch. We
enjoy them like spinach. Barely and with iron
threads between the teeth. What we need
is a big fat goose: something ridiculous
to feed ourselves while the young can't
watch: some gift that fattens, that lifts
the sheets and us out of bed, forcing some
dangerous taste in our mouths: we made this
life. We did it and brought it into our mad-
house, one petal-print at a time. To home
a thing is a rented curse: this is your face,
goofball. It's your play today, so out
of bloody bed. You can't turn
your back on it, after all.