

## TEN LESSONS FOR POETRY

1.

Give it a try.  
Whatever you write  
will be no worse than *Hardcore Logo*.

2.

You stopped doing it because you never knew  
why you were doing it. You just did it  
for fun. So have some fun.  
If someone asks you to read poems again  
bless her. Bless Kate Braid.

3.

Recall the lesson of Yeats,  
who said we make rhetoric of our quarrels with others,  
poetry of our quarrels  
with ourselves.

4.

Don't forget hating  
and don't forget that hating yourself,  
so inevitable, so dissatisfying,  
is something to get through.

And remember that Terence Corcoran,  
Margaret Wente, Stockwell Day,  
Conrad Black, Preston Manning  
and free world dictators  
should be cooked  
but not eaten.

5.

Take advantage of the mistakes of an old friend:  
He and Larissa are in instant touch so they are able to insole one another.  
It's sort of like being borked  
in a closet.

Take advantage of a the mistakes of strangers  
like the dopes in Horseshoe Bay  
whose menu offers Matues Rose,  
spelling it, at last, in this bewildered new century,  
exactly as everyone has always mispronounced it.  
A splendid, self-imploding sort of paradox.  
Or like the Clairol hair-colour advertisement: "Become a blonde...a redhead...a  
millionaire." Advice that defies logic, human likelihood and, by offering five

different fonts on one page, all the laws of good typographic design.

6

Take advantage of rime.  
I've broken any vow I ever made;  
I've broken half the eggs that I've laid.  
My truths are always half ones;  
My thoughts are mostly calf ones.

7

Take advantage of a jaggedy  
right-hand margin, that free verse convention  
you used without any sure sense  
of what it did. Still don't.

Death. Never any sense  
in who it selects.  
When it's the youngest and brightest  
it makes no sense at all.  
We've every right to expect  
miserable, bottle-green Death to select  
some old crock or some utterly  
unsignifying, insignificant bit  
of humanity, all virtue spent,  
for the sudden chop.  
When Death can't be decently  
senseless, what's the sense?

8

If you write bad poetry, stuff that only rimes when it shouldn't rime,  
and stuff that has the moron's metre; like little moron tears that fall into  
my heart and lovely little thoughts that make the heavens fart,  
for heaven's sake, read it at funerals where everyone's  
too crazed by grief to notice.

But don't blubber and sweat and hog the stage and put the *core* in  
coarse the *pro* in inappropriate the *a* and the *ack* and the *ay* in  
amazing lack of grace.

As Alison said, sucking in her beautiful cheeks and popping out her  
beautiful eyes, "Give poetry a break!"

9

Use characters from real life.  
Like my student: I'll call him Peter, since that's his name.  
He wrote, "This theme is death. Whether we like it or not it is a theme  
that is going to occur in most anthologies. As well, it's one

which at some point in your life you will have to deal with personally."  
I was intrigued. The spirit of David McFadden got into me.  
I wrote in the margin of his essay,  
"What kind of deals can be made?"

On the same theme there's another student whom I'll call Dianne,  
since that's her name. "One has to know," she wrote,  
"that the dead are also dealing with their own death."  
I was impressed. All these deals. And in death's dark place.  
That kind of spiritual energy, in those circumstances, is nothing  
short of inspiring, miraculous.

Then there's the car salesmen, the Pieter Brueghel cavalcade  
who ranged from Rob to robber, from Bob  
to boob, from Cook to crook, (one tried to sell us a pink car)  
and best, or beast, the guy with a push-broom mustache.  
He bragged how he bullied his daughter:  
"In my house I'm God!"  
Which certainly put the *ih!* in in, the  
*ai!* in my, the *ow* in house,  
and the *odd* in God.

Then there's Carol, my first wife,  
my only wife. Certainly a character from real life.  
She asks me, "Why do people wear hats  
like that, Mike? Are they from Alberta? Or just from Miracle Beach?"

The final character, our car  
that was stolen and recovered a month later unharmed  
a couple of days after we settled with ICBC  
and bought a new car from the boob named above.  
The old car stood patiently waiting for my last visit  
in the ICBC salvage yard, the last visit  
where I collected the stuff we wanted to keep.

It was like finding your mother in the last-stop ward,  
ravened corpses all around her, burnt husks,  
twisted bodies, sprawled in ferocious agony.  
And there was the car, fifteen years in our family,  
faithful service, never needed any major repair.  
Never got more than the most cursory maintenance or fixing.  
And now she looked at me, plain-faced, without pleading,  
a dignified sedan in sober medium blue.  
Daring me to be sentimental. And daring me  
not to see her as a sign or symbol of something.

Fifteen years in our family, and she never got a name.

Every other car we ever had was named. Cars  
we owned for six weeks got named. Cars that never started  
got names. Also-rans were named. Ne'er-do-well cars, suicide heaps, shit-bucket cars,  
bugs and beetles and monsters were blessed with names. Racist names like Jimmy,  
Charlie, pre-feminist monikers like Cassandra. A car we never owned  
but only looked at in used-car-lot speculation  
was named in giddy anticipation: Waverley.

And no name for this plain mid-fifties car,  
so durable and useful that you can see a dozen of her  
any day on any street. Fifteen years of service;  
now I clean her out of maps, old pens,  
a box of Fisherman's Friend  
the thief wasn't hungry enough to eat,  
an electronic key for secure underground parking in another city,  
a can of WD 40 for her rusty door hinges, two bottles of u-brew wine hiding  
in the rubble of the trunk, three umbrellas  
rendered useless by disease,  
shiny aluminum tools, never used,  
that should have stayed with the car.  
The goods and the debris of several of our lives.

I trudged away and then turned back.  
The car looked at me without a sound,  
without reproach, without a statement.  
I looked at her; she looked straight ahead,  
said nothing. I turned away, then looked  
again, and turned and went away.

10.  
Find a way to finish it.

I went back to my island  
and watched the cat and the hummingbird, the intent  
circle of concentration that can have no end,  
the smoulder, the flush, the blaze,  
the fire and iron  
that drive our lives.

—Mike Matthews