

Composting

IT TAKES A WHILE for our experience to sift through our consciousness. For instance, it is hard to write about being in love in the midst of a mad love affair. We have no perspective. All we can say is, "I'm madly in love," over and over again. It is also hard to write about a city we just moved to; it's not yet in our body. We don't know our new home, even if we can drive to the drugstore without getting lost. We have not lived through three winters there or seen the ducks leave in fall and return to the lakes in spring. Hemingway wrote about Michigan while sitting in a café in Paris. "Maybe away from Paris I could write about Paris as in Paris I could write about Michigan. I did not know it was too early for that because I did not know Paris well enough."²

Our senses by themselves are dumb. They take in experience, but they need the richness of sifting for a while through our consciousness and through our whole bodies. I call this "composting." Our bodies are garbage heaps: we collect experience, and from the decomposition of the thrown-out eggshells, spinach leaves, coffee grinds, and old steak bones of our minds come nitrogen, heat, and very fertile soil. Out of this fertile soil bloom our poems and stories. But this does not come all at once. It takes time. Continue to turn over and over the organic details of your life until some of them fall through the garbage of discursive thoughts to the solid ground of black soil.

When I have students who have written many pages and read them in class, and the writing is not all necessarily good but I see that they are exploring their minds for material, I am glad. I know those people will continue and are not just obsessed with "hot" writing, but are in the process of practice. They are raking their minds and taking their shallow thinking and turning it over. If we continue to work with this raw matter, it will draw us deeper and deeper into ourselves, but not in a neurotic way. We will begin to see the rich garden we have inside us and use that for writing.

Often I will stab many times at something I want to say. For instance, you can look in my notebooks from August through December 1983 and see that I attempted several times a month to write about my father dying. I was exploring and composting the material. Then suddenly, and I can't say how, in December I sat transfixed at the Croissant Express in Minneapolis and a long poem about that subject poured out of me. All the disparate things I had to say were suddenly fused with energy and unity—a bright red tulip shot out of the compost. Katagiri Roshi said: "Your little will can't do anything. It takes Great Determination. Great Determination doesn't mean just you making an effort. It means the whole universe is behind you and with you—the birds, trees, sky, moon, and ten directions." Suddenly, after much composting, you are in alignment with the stars or the moment or the dining-room chandelier above your head, and your body opens and speaks.

Understanding this process cultivates patience and produces less anxiety. We aren't running everything, not even the writing we do. At the same time, we must keep practicing. It is not an excuse to not write and sit on the couch eating bonbons. We must continue to work the compost pile, enriching it and making it fertile so that something beautiful may bloom and so that our writing muscles are in good shape to ride the universe when it moves through us.

This understanding also helps us to accept someone else's success and not to be too greedy. It is simply that person's time. Ours will come in this lifetime or the next. No matter. Continue to practice.