

How to Keep a Poetry Journal

Yes, I keep a poetry journal. I have since 2002.

If you are a writer, perhaps you find back-to-school season as thrilling as I do—whole aisles full of notebooks and spirals and composition books and every flavor of pen and pencil. Of course, you can journal digitally, with the electronic device of your choice. But when it comes to poetry, I am old-school.

Materials List

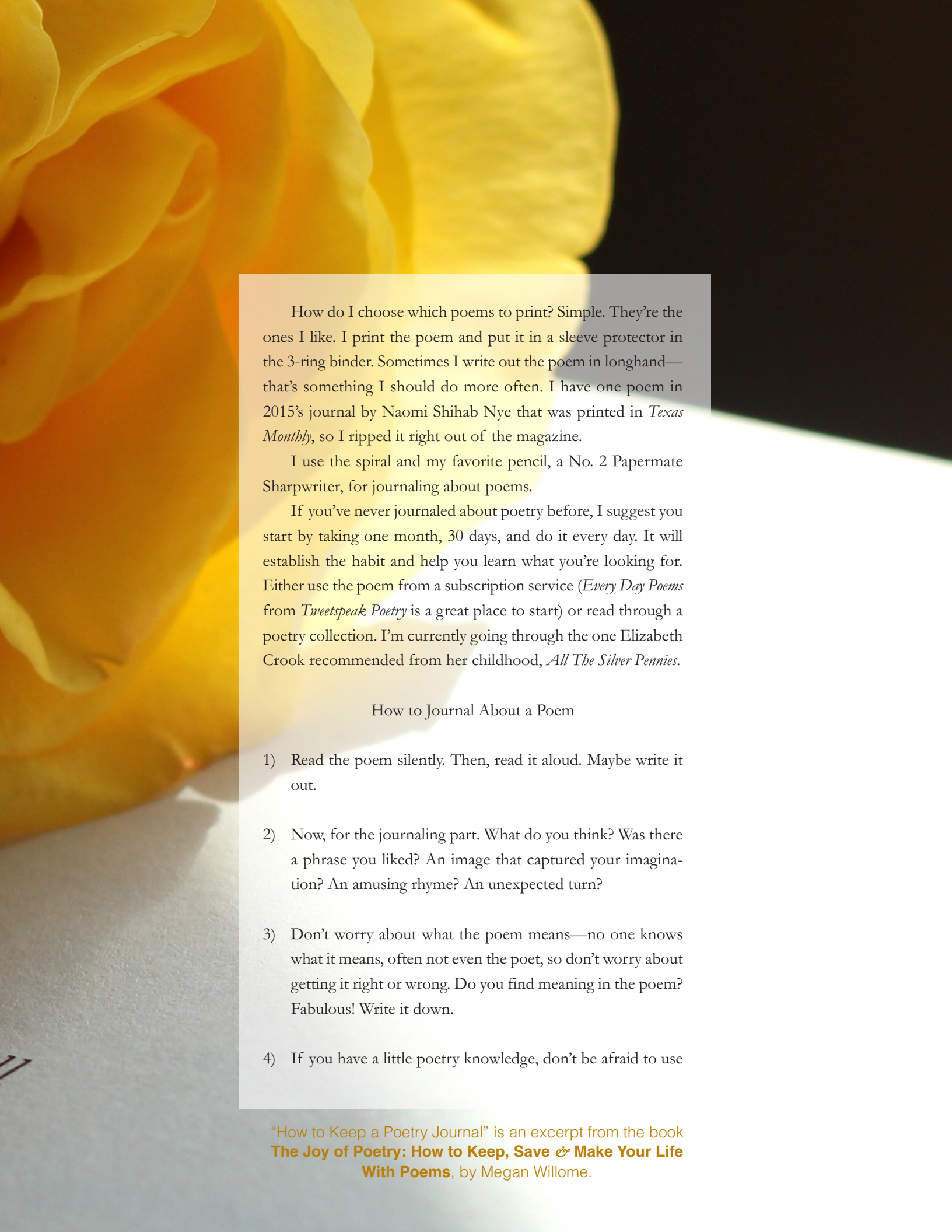
- 3-ring binder
- sheet protectors
- spiral or composition notebook or a nice Moleskine® if you like leather
- pen or pencil
- alternate: The most expensive laptop on the market (if you need justification for such a purchase)

My poetry journal has two parts: the poems I collect and the poems I journal about. Those may be one and the same, but occasionally I print a poem that is so perfect I can't think of anything to write about it. All I can do is read it aloud and sigh with pleasure.

I start a new poetry journal every year right after Thanksgiving, which is my personal end-of-the-year celebration. On that Thursday or maybe the day before or the day after, depending on our holiday plans, I brew a pot of tea and reread all the poems I've collected over the previous 12 months. The collection inevitably becomes a commentary on the year.

I do look over the poems as the year unfolds, too, maybe on a lazy Sunday afternoon, or maybe when I feel a case of writer's block coming on. Poetry usually clears that right up.

"How to Keep a Poetry Journal" is an excerpt from the book **The Joy of Poetry: How to Keep, Save & Make Your Life With Poems**, by Megan Willome.



How do I choose which poems to print? Simple. They're the ones I like. I print the poem and put it in a sleeve protector in the 3-ring binder. Sometimes I write out the poem in longhand—that's something I should do more often. I have one poem in 2015's journal by Naomi Shihab Nye that was printed in *Texas Monthly*, so I ripped it right out of the magazine.

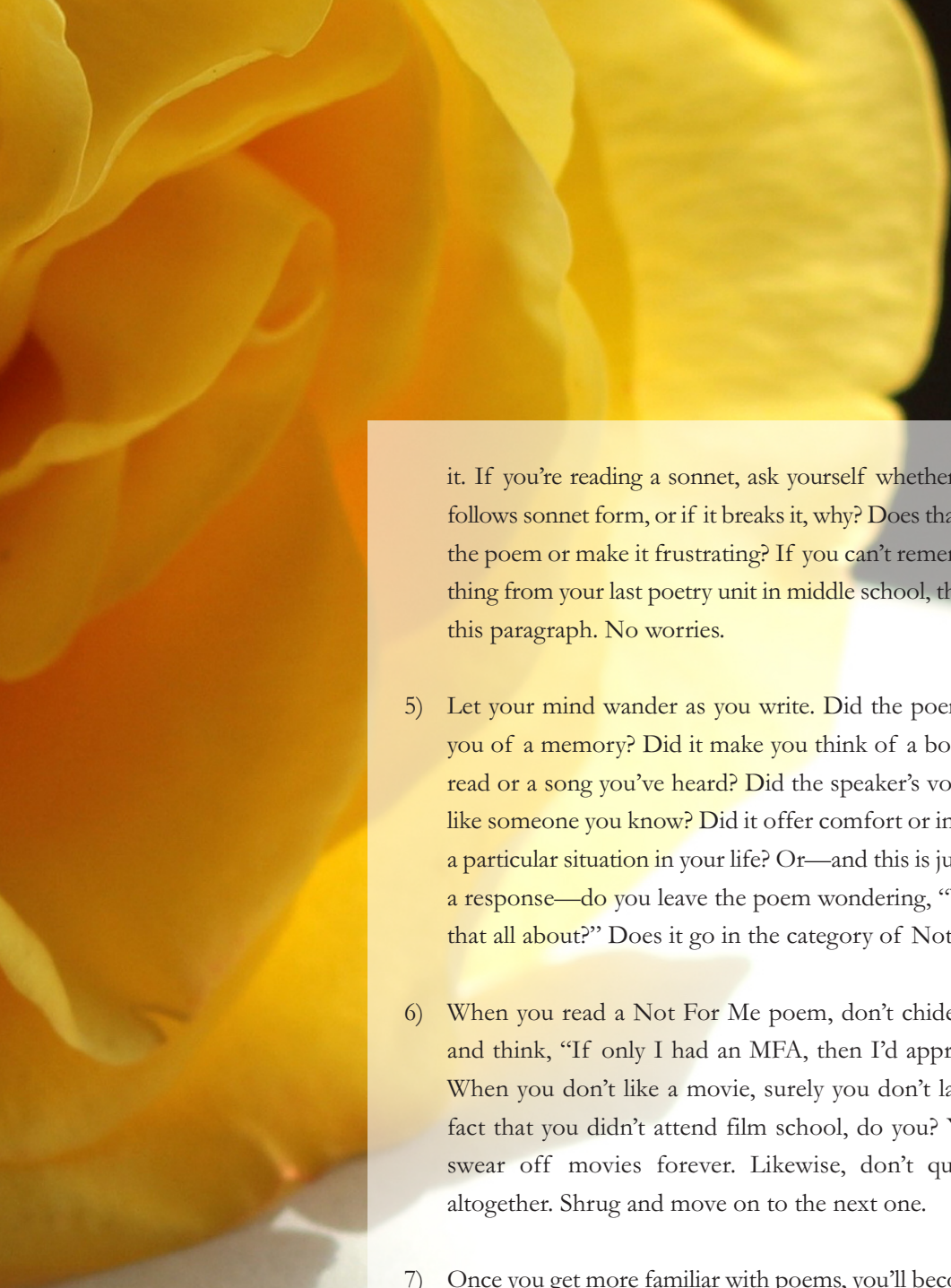
I use the spiral and my favorite pencil, a No. 2 Papermate Sharpwriter, for journaling about poems.

If you've never journaled about poetry before, I suggest you start by taking one month, 30 days, and do it every day. It will establish the habit and help you learn what you're looking for. Either use the poem from a subscription service (*Every Day Poems* from *Tweetspeak Poetry* is a great place to start) or read through a poetry collection. I'm currently going through the one Elizabeth Crook recommended from her childhood, *All The Silver Pennies*.

How to Journal About a Poem

- 1) Read the poem silently. Then, read it aloud. Maybe write it out.
- 2) Now, for the journaling part. What do you think? Was there a phrase you liked? An image that captured your imagination? An amusing rhyme? An unexpected turn?
- 3) Don't worry about what the poem means—no one knows what it means, often not even the poet, so don't worry about getting it right or wrong. Do you find meaning in the poem? Fabulous! Write it down.
- 4) If you have a little poetry knowledge, don't be afraid to use

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it. If you're reading a sonnet, ask yourself whether it strictly follows sonnet form, or if it breaks it, why? Does that improve the poem or make it frustrating? If you can't remember anything from your last poetry unit in middle school, then ignore this paragraph. No worries.

- 5) Let your mind wander as you write. Did the poem remind you of a memory? Did it make you think of a book you've read or a song you've heard? Did the speaker's voice sound like someone you know? Did it offer comfort or insight into a particular situation in your life? Or—and this is just as valid a response—do you leave the poem wondering, “What was that all about?” Does it go in the category of Not For Me?
- 6) When you read a Not For Me poem, don't chide yourself and think, “If only I had an MFA, then I'd appreciate it.” When you don't like a movie, surely you don't lament the fact that you didn't attend film school, do you? You don't swear off movies forever. Likewise, don't quit poetry altogether. Shrug and move on to the next one.
- 7) Once you get more familiar with poems, you'll become more familiar with individual poets and may want to check out a collection of their poetry. If the collection is constructed as a unit and not a best-of compilation, the poems will comment on each other. That leads to a different type of journaling, more in-depth.

This may sound like work, but it only takes about 10-15 minutes for me to journal about a poem. Reading a poem a day will take

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less than a minute. If you read a poem twice, that's two minutes. Read it with your morning coffee or before going to bed. Read it wearing pajamas or a suit or workout gear or jeans and a T-shirt. You need not apply makeup beforehand or bother to tie your shoelaces. The goal of reading a poem a day is to demystify poetry and weave it into your daily life.

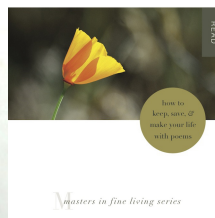
These suggestions are simple ideas to get you thinking. Don't feel like you need to answer every question I've listed here. If you spy your own wild hare, by all means chase it.

For the last several years, I've kept my journals separate from the poems themselves. That's because I can get very personal in my commentary on a poem. But now I sometimes combine my words with the poet's. I prefer to write in a spiral with perforated pages that I can easily tear out. Into the sleeve protector it goes along with the poem.

Recently, I looked over the poems in my very first journal. The first one I ever printed was "The Mercy" by Philip Levine. *The Writer's Almanac* featured it on December 1, 2002, and again on November 25, 2003. The way I count time—Thanksgiving to Thanksgiving—that meant "The Mercy" was both the first and last poem in my inaugural journal. If you get into poetry, I promise you'll find coincidences of your own.

m e g a n w i l l o m e

THE JOY OF POETRY



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