

Poetry Series

**Don Winslow**  
**- poems -**

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## Don Winslow(8/17/1929)

As an 80-year-old research chemical engineer who was 23 years into his retirement, I never expected to start writing poetry. My college training and 37-year career were exclusively technical, with a minimum of courses in the humanities.

Prostate cancer for me and breast cancer for my wife Marion jolted my calm, relaxing lifestyle and led me in a very different direction.

While recovering from radiation and a subsequent operation I took a workshop at The Wellness Community in Del Marva from John Fox on Healing Through Poetry. This new outlet for my raging emotions led to a whole new world for me, a world of exciting and expressive words.

I live in Ocean Pines, g the summer I work as a volunteer naturalist at the Assateague National Seashore. I teach visitors how to clam, crab, fish in the surf, and to better understand our coastal environment.

The subjects of my poetry have expanded from just cancer and pain to include my whole world. I now see metaphors and similes in everything I do. My daily walks have become meditative walks where I have worked out poems on clamming, body surfing, bait fish, and old age.

# 101,102,103.....

I count, I love to count, and I don't think I'll ever stop counting.

In 1982 I counted 3,594 clams our family dug out of Barnegat Bay from July to September.

In 1998 I counted 7 Flounder,60 Herring,170 Striped Bass,11 Weakfish,20 Shad,49 Croakers, and 19 Bluefish I caught off the Route 50 Bridge.

In 2002 I counted 2039 visitors I talked to at Assateague National Seashore,

On May 31st,2007, I counted 16 male and 8 female Horseshoe Crabs mating at high tide

at Slaughter Beach in Delaware,

On December 6th,2008, I counted 1 red breasted nuthatch,2 Cardinals,2 Juncos, and a White Throated Sparrow in my backyard,

My problem is that I think it is now an obsession. I've recently been counting toothpaste tubes as I finish them. I want to see how many I use up before.....

Help me.....

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Back in 2005 I was advised that writing about my passion for counting could never become a "poem". However, recently I read Raymond Carver's poem, "The Car", and decided to ignore the advice. After all, a poem is just an essay that's been written in your own personal shorthand.

Don Winslow

# A Policeman At The Door

1950, New Years Day

The doorbell rings, a policeman at the door-  
Your father is dead  
My Mother is screaming, crying.

1990,40 Years later

The doorbell rings, a policeman at the door-  
Your son is dead.  
My wife is screaming, crying.

If bad things come in threes  
There's another policeman out there,  
Somewhere, sometime,  
Waiting to ring a doorbell.

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This poem is very personal. I don't think it has any "universal truths" in it.

My father went to work on New Years Eve, had a heart attack on the way, he was found dead in his car. My son died in his apartment from an overdose.

This kind of poem might be difficult for some people to read, it might sound negative and depressing, but it helps me. This kind of poem helps me to avoid negativity and depression. Of course that was the whole point of writing my first poems about Cancer..

I just realized that my current age is one more year than the combined ages of my father and my son. Is there a message in there somewhere?

Don Winslow

# A Tale Of Mehitabel

Life lines stretch from Alpha to Omega

As my Omega looms Alpha is just a faint memory

Agility and Alacrity are no longer in my Lexicon

But like Mehitabel my tail is still up

Jauntily waving in the breeze like a joyous banner

Don Winslow

# A Tale Of Two Fishes

One is shiny, the other is dull.  
One is streamlined and smooth, the other is blunt and chunky.  
Their names tell all—Siversides and Mummichog, aristocrat and commoner.

The Silversides is translucent with a sparkling silver streak.  
The Mummichog is painfully plain, a muddy olive green.  
Yet, the same brackish water holds them both.

There is one more difference, one that speaks of life..... and death.  
The pretty, modeled Silversides dies within minutes of capture,  
While the stubby Mummichog can and does live all day.

Is this a penalty for outward beauty?  
Or is it a reward for a life of drab and dowdy?  
Whether from Darwin, Deity, or Design,  
There is mystery and wonder in this tale of two fishes.

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I see a lot of these fish during the summer when I volunteer at Assateague National Seashore. They're both baitfish- Mummichogs (Killies) for flounder (fluke in NJ) and Silversides (Spearing) for snapper blues. Their behavior when caught in a trap is so different. I can keep Mummichogs alive and active on a tray, out of water, all day in a cooler. Silversides will die within minutes although kept in fresh seawater-probably from shock.

Don Winslow

# A Tiny Drop Of Water

Why am I here?

Is there some purpose to this life I lead?

It may not change anything, but it would be nice to know.

How long will I be here?

Is there a life after this Here-and-Now that I'm living?

It may not change anything, but it would be nice to know.

Will I change my form, my body?

Will I stay separate, or join some indefinable?

It may not change anything, but it would be nice to know.

Thus spake the round, tiny, questioning drop,

As she flew through the air,

Torn from the waterfall when

The yielding mountain stream

Crashed against the massive steps of stone.

Don Winslow

# Biopsy

With every Biopsy, a part of me dies,  
A part of my body, a part of my spirit,  
Like a rock beaten down by the constant drip-drip of water,  
Slowly, surely, wearing, gnawing.

Variable is the location,  
Constant is the anger, the worry, the despair.  
A needleful of my Prostate, a snip of my skin, a scrape of my mouth..  
Death of tissue, death of psyche.

The bliss of benignity, or the malice of malignancy,  
Which will it be?  
Push the pause button on your life,  
Don't start anything new!  
When, Dear God, when will that Doctor call?

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I spoke to several people recently about the wait for their Biopsy results. It is awful. My last one took three weeks, by which time I assumed everything was OK. WRONG! !

Up till this poem I had never thought about the death of my tiny samples- they're me, a living part of me. The snips of skin have come from all over my body, probably dozens of them.

Don Winslow



# Compassion 101

Do Doctors take Compassion 101?  
Are they taught how to treat us with kindness?  
Can Considerate Cancer Care be instilled from without?  
Compassion must come from somewhere, but where?

If Doctors do take Compassion 101  
Do they get marks from the teacher?  
Are there A students and B students?  
And what about the dunce of the class?

Three doctors knew my prostate well,  
One said, 'Call me at anytime! '  
The second said, 'Daytime or nighttime! '  
The third said, 'Do you realize how many patients I would have to call? '

Should I feel lucky to have had two doctors with A's and only one with an F?

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This is my first "anger" poem. It was written just after I took the workshop on healing through poetry at The Wellness Community. John Fox, poet and workshop leader, told us that we could release our anger and frustrations by getting it down on paper. I can tell you that it works!

Don Winslow

# David's Choice

Six of us sat in a circle  
Talking about David, with David.

Too much radiation, more and more chemo,  
Which way to go, what to do next?

Ours to advise and support,  
His the decision to make.

Continue chemo? Open Wound Clinic?  
Any new treatments to try?

And then with a thunderclap of clarity,  
Came a quiet whisper of wisdom!

It's all right David,  
It's all right to let go!

David went home, Hospice came to him.  
Family and friends, he in his favorite chair.

Go gently, dear David,  
Go gently into that good, peaceful, healing, night.

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David was a member of my Cancer Support Group. His metastasized cancer was spreading further and further. This poem is a faithful recollection of our last Support meeting with David.

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Don Winslow

# Half Full Or Half Empty

Should I be happy that I still have a lifetime ahead of writing poetry,

Or should I be sad about the poems I could have written for the last 55 years?

Awake is awake, make hay while the sun is still shining!

Write, write, write.

Don Winslow

# Hug Me Again

I hugged someone today, and I thought of you.  
It's been 19 years, but I still thought of you.  
Men don't hug men, but we did, we always did.

I hugged someone today, and I thought of you.  
19 years since you reached down to embrace your Father.  
I can still smell your cologne, feel your lips on mine.

Why did we hug, my strapping son John?  
wanted to hold on to you,  
To keep you from slipping away.

Perhaps I

Holding you on this earth didn't work,  
But I still hold on to those hugs,  
They're all I've got to keep away the cold.

Don Winslow

# I Am The Wave

The ripple swells, a wave is building.  
I wait, standing in the warm ocean.  
I feel the energy nearing me— growing, bulging

As the crest reaches for the sky, it is judgment time  
Will it be a smooth ride or a tumbler, kitten or killer,  
The choice must be made—do I stay or do I go?

Now is the time, the choice is made!  
Push off with the toe, one pulling arm swing is enough  
I am in the wave, I am on the wave, I AM THE WAVE!

As I'm carried along, I rise to the top of the curl  
Looking down at the world, I am the King of the moment  
Like a baby's gurgling giggle of joy, I scream out with delight

This wave face is a sliding board without a board,  
It's a roller coaster without a track  
I am a skater on iceless ice, I am Jesus walking on the Lake.

Arms back, hugging my body,  
Head up to survey my domain  
I slide, I glide, I ride down this slippery slope

Wearing water bubbles on my lips,  
Hearing the hiss of the foam go past my ear,  
I reach bottom, level out onto a flat blue plane.

Like a naked-to-the-waist figurehead  
On the bowsprit of an amorphous Barque  
I lead the way to it's water's-edge port.

The shore is coming near, time to make a docking.  
Sliding in smoothly, coming up out of the water,  
Onto the wet, smooth, rounded-grain sand.

Resting there is so, so sweet!

Will I ever ride this ride again?  
It's not important, I don't need to, I'll remember!  
You see the wave is me, I AM THE WAVE!

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I've been body surfing since I was about 16, taught by a returning Marine who served in Hawaii. It has frustrated me not to be able to adequately explain the thrill of riding waves. Poetry gave me the tools to make an attempt at a description of the sensation.

Don Winslow

# Introspection

If everyday of your life was cloudy,  
How would you ever know there was a blue sky above?  
If your busy everyday life keeps you from looking inside,  
How would you ever really know there was a YOU?

Don Winslow

# Marion's Garden Of Hope

Last year's garden was bleak,  
A few annuals were all she could do,  
Mammograms and Mastectomies, Radiation and Reconstruction,  
They took up most of her time.

This year's sun is stronger and brighter,  
She's planting perennials now,  
Marigold and Meadowsweet, Rudbeckia and Rose of Sharon,  
Perennials for all those years to come!

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"Last year" was 2006. Marion was diagnosed with Breast Cancer, broke her hip a few days later. Obviously it was not a good year.

She is a Master Gardener and really missed getting her hands in the dirt for an entire season. What was even worse for her was watching me trying to follow her directions to get a few plants in the ground.

2007 was much, much better. That's when the poem was born. My only problem in writing it was finding names of Perennials that started with M and R.

Don Winslow



# Meditation

No goals, no expectations.  
Whatever is, is.  
For now- just Be.

No future, no past,  
Just the present.  
For now- just Be.

Ups, downs,  
They don't exist in this instant of time.  
For now- just Be.

Cares and woes?  
Don't worry, they'll still be there.  
For now- just Be.

Wishes are good, Prayers might be better.  
But not for now.  
For now- just Be.

For one minute, for one hour,  
It doesn't matter.  
For now- just Be.

Breathe in, breathe out, focus on the present.  
For now, just for now-  
Just Be.

Don Winslow

# Metamorphosis

Why was I writing my 1961 thesis on the Antoine Equation when I could have been writing poetry like my 2005, "What is Love"?  
Because I didn't know that this Caterpillar could fly.

Why was I writing a 1975 Patent Application on "Novel Copolymers" when I could have been writing poetry like my 2006, "Why is the Rhyme so Sublime"?  
Because I didn't know that I was trapped in an emotional-block chrysalis for 75 years.

Radiation Treatments have ruptured that hard, confining cocoon.  
Out went the cold, analytical, objective writing,  
In came the soul-warming, expressive, subjective musings.  
The Caterpillar is gone; the Butterfly flexes its wings!

Don Winslow

# My Search

I know not what you are,  
I know not if you are,  
But I search, and the searching is GOoD.

If you are there, I may find you,  
If you are not there, that's no great loss,  
Because I search, and the searching is GOoD.

Don Winslow

# My Wellness Shelter

I stand on a barren, ravaged, plain of pain  
Isolated on this tortured mesa of malignancy.  
Here, far from the world of normalcy  
I search for a place of solace, a place of consolation.

In the distance, only one sanctuary in sight,  
A tent-like structure beckoning to me.  
A covering not of Deer or Buffalo  
But thinner, in a patchwork of subtle pinks, browns, and tans.

This skin pulses gently, in and out  
Sighing like the deep, quiet, breath of Yogic meditation.  
No tent poles inside as I enter,  
Just a circle of people standing tall, arms stretched up.

Like in a game of "Trust Me"  
They have fallen forward, hoping to be caught and held.  
As the upraised hands meet and join in the center  
They form a supporting teepee of trust.

A medicine woman sits on the ground  
Helping us face our fears and nightmares.  
Those fears and nightmares are burned away in the campfire,  
A fire that gives us warmth and strength -and hope.

Don Winslow

# The Campfire

The party was over everyone in their tents  
No flames from the campfire  
His work was done

He had given them what they wanted  
A blazing roaring good time  
He'd used all his tricks

Gouts of flame shooting high  
Exploding pinecones louder than pistol shots  
And sparks rising rising lighting up the darkness above

But now he was tired  
No more red-orange tongues no more crackling of wood  
This was all he had to give

His color was gray his color was white  
There was no sign that he was still there  
Unless you knew where to look

Bring your hand close to the ashes  
You'll feel warmth still there still there  
He remembers the good times he is content

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Just a reflection, old age talking to the young. A child would look at the ashes  
and think the fire was dead. Not so, not so.

Don Winslow

# The Seagull And The Clam

Shells, broken shells- everywhere,  
On boardwalks, parking lots, crunching, crackling underfoot!  
Poor Mercenaria Mercenaria, what happened to you?

Your first time out of the water,  
Your first time up in the air,  
Why did Fate choose you to feed the hungry Herring Gull?

Don Winslow

# The Secret Place

Do you have a Secret Place like mine?

A place deep down in your soul?

A silent, shadowed, shrouded place

Where long buried things are forever hidden from the cold, unforgiving, light.

Don Winslow

# The Tree Of Life

If I must live my season  
As a leaf on the Tree of Life  
Please let me be a leaf that lives on the edge.

Let me see the sun, let me see the stars,  
Let me feel the wind, let me feel the rain,  
I want no sheltered place in the middle.

Too much sun may burn me,  
Too much wind may tear me,  
And leaf-miners may tunnel within me.

But o, how I will have lived!  
A life full of blossoms, a life full of thorns,  
Leaving nothing more for this heart to taste.

-----  
This one started with the leaf miners. They reminded me of my Cancer, burrowing within me. Next I had to resolve the what, where, why, etc. of the leaf and the tree. The leaf miner now takes a lesser place (but still there) . It's more of a statement on my entire life. The last stanza has it's origin in the Chinese proverb/curse- "May you live in interesting times".

The Wellness Community- National put this poem in their Fall Wellnet news alongside of a picture of a gorgeous tree in a meadow. It just blew me away.

Don Winslow



# The Two Naturalists

We knelt together, me at 80, she at 3,  
Both looking in my pail,  
A pail of tidal water filled with salt marsh creatures.

I led her hand to pick up a clam.  
She held it, turned it over and over,  
And smiled- a beaming, radiant smile.

How could she smile?  
I hadn't told her yet about Mercinaria, Mercinaria,  
About its' life span, reproduction, and value to the Marsh.

I placed a little baitfish in her palm.  
She giggled as it wriggled back into the pail,  
And smiled- a freeform, joyous smile.

How could she smile?  
I hadn't told her yet about Menidia, Menidia,  
What it eats, and what eats it.

Now it was her turn.  
She reached down and put a tiny grain of sand in my hand,  
Looked up at me, and waited, patiently.

She waited for me to look as she would look,  
No words, no books, no cataracts on the mind,  
Just a simple "what is", clear and uncluttered

I now saw what she saw in that piece of quartz,  
A world of worlds, an infinity of infinities.  
In silence we looked at each other—and smiled.

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I recently found a picture from 2005 of a little girl "helping" me examine some clams, mussels, fish, etc. that I had just collected. Looking at it I wondered how I had communicated with her. This poem is the result

Don Winslow

# The Wheel Of Life

He sat at the head of the Thanksgiving Day table,  
Head down, staring at-nothing.  
Words of conversation slipping and sliding past him,  
He heard not the sounds, he heeded not the words.

"How's the new job Jim? "

"Where is Liz going to school next year? "

Subjects of interest to the young, long ago gone from him.  
He said not a word, not a murmur from him.

He is nevermore; 22 years have passed.  
I now sit at the head of the Thanksgiving table,  
Head down, staring at-nothing.  
I say not a word, not a murmur from me.

The wheel is still turning, kin of mine.  
Someday, you'll be at the head of the Thanksgiving Day table.  
Head down, staring at -nothing.  
He became me, I am he, and thee will be me!

Don Winslow

## Three Meditations

I found my inner peace in St. Margaret's Church,  
Repeating the names of Saints, ending with "Pray for us".  
My mind quiets and contemplates.

I found my inner self in my own silent room,  
Breathing mindfully, calming all my senses.  
My psyche quiets and examines.

I found my inner soul in Sinnepuxent Bay,  
Focusing, feeling, finding clams with my mind-eyed toes.  
My spirit quiets and reflects.

Inner peace, inner self, inner soul—all the same goal,  
But each road, each path, is so different.  
Does it matter which one I take?

Don Winslow

# Vibrations

In my soul there is a room, a poetry room,  
And in that room there is a crystal goblet.  
The goblet listens to every word of yours that I read,  
And it waits, and it waits, and it waits.

Poem after poem go by, the goblet sits quietly,  
Until its search is rewarded.  
It rings, it sings, it clings to those special words,  
Words that make my heart vibrate in tune to your heart.

I don't know if it's just me, but some poems resonate with me, most do not. In a book of poetry I can enjoy and admire the poet's work, his skill, but it may be just a few poems that truly move me. I'm sure it has a lot to do with the subject matter; perhaps all of it is the subject matter. Ah, subjectivity!

Don Winslow