

ENRIQUE LEAL

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COURTESY THE ARTIST

MAGGIE PAUL

The Poetry of Precision:

An Interview with Dorianne Laux

Dorianne Laux is the author of several collections of poetry, including The Book of Women (Red Dragonfly Press, 2012); The Book of Men (W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), which won the Paterson Poetry Prize and the Roanoke-Chowan Award for Poetry; Facts About the Moon (W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), which was the recipient of the Oregon Book Award, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and a finalist for the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize; Smoke (BOA Editions, Ltd., 2000); What We Carry (BOA Editions, Ltd., 1994); and Awake (BOA Editions, Ltd., 1990), which was nominated for the San Francisco Bay Area Book Critics Award for Poetry. She has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, and has been a Pushcart Prize winner.

Laux is coauthor, with Kim Addonizio, of The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry (W. W. Norton & Company, 1997) and, most recently, of a chapbook entitled Duet, which she coauthored with her husband, the poet Joseph Millar. Laux has taught at the University of Oregon's program in creative writing and currently teaches in the MFA program at North Carolina State University and in the low-residency MFA program at Pacific University. Her poems have been widely translated.

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Maggie Paul: I understand that you are a fan of lists when it comes to generating new poems. How does this work for you? How can poets draw upon lists to create their own new work?

Dorianne Laux: Lists are revealing. And mysterious. Have you ever noticed a list left on the counter at the grocery store, or on a bench, dropped on a sidewalk or the floor of a taxi or a bus? Unless you're in a hurry, or worried about germs, you can't not pick it up and sneak a look. What was this person in need of, what did they want? Immediately the list reveals something about the writer. *Spaghetti, heirloom tomatoes, fresh parmesan, toilet paper, flowers.* Hmmm . . . Who's coming to dinner, a homemade dinner with flowers on the table, the bathroom stocked. A large group? An intimate candlelit affair? *Screwdriver, candles, pomegranate.* Hmmm . . . something broke that needs fixing while nibbling on an antioxidant snack? Or the makings of a stiff drink, fancied up with candles and a sprinkle of exotic fruit. A late-night assignation? With a lover or a video?

A list is evocative, it reveals as much as it conceals. It tells us something about the person who wrote it, and yet they remain an enigma. I do like a good list. It's a no-fault way of getting into a subject without being tempted to say anything about it. Let the list speak for you. With my list poem "Gold," I only had one object in mind: think of everything in the world that's gold. A poet's flight of fancy. And the list kept leading me toward the unlikely.

Color of J.C. Penney's jewelry, trinket
in a Cracker Jack box, color of roadside
weeds, candy wrapper in a gutter. Color

of streamers tied to the handlebars
of a rusty bike, color of rust on the bike's
dented fender. Color of food stamps
and welfare checks, dirt swept
into the long hole of the missing board
on the back porch, the untended sore,
phlegm in the hotel toilet bowl. Color

of mold in the broken refrigerator, light
bulb hung over the dog-shredded screen,