EDITOR’S NOTE ON WHY I WRITE POETRY: SPECIAL ISSUES
The September and October 2013 issues of TAB: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics are devoted to the question “Why I Write Poetry.”

U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey says, in her lecture entitled “Why I Write,” that every writer must face this question—is required to answer this question of why we write. At TAB, we are interested especially in how poets answer this question.

In her essay “Why I Write,” Joan Didion, an essayist and novelist, describes herself as many writers might: “a person whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper.” Do many, if not all, writers do it because the process absorbs us? If so, why might the writing process enthrall us?

Trethewey begins her lecture, just as I began my own search for reference points as I grappled with this question as a poet, with George Orwell’s 1946 essay “Why I Write.” Trethewey was drawn to Orwell’s claim that his writing emerged from a sense of isolation, but that he could speak about and for others. Trethewey spent hours reading the encyclopedia—as I did, too, as a child—and the information it contained made her think about her relationship to the world. Trethewey writes “to tell a fuller version of American history.” While she and I are almost the same age, she and I were born into different families in different places. She is a mixed-race woman from the Deep South, whereas my familial predecessors are Irish transplanted to the American Midwest. We both write poems. We are not the same as people.

Trethewey finds things with which to disagree in Orwell’s piece, for no writer can speak for why all writers take to the page. We have different backgrounds, both personally and in our training and practice as poets. We have different drives, desires, and needs. Our purposes vary. We disagree. Moreover, in yet another essay titled “Why I Write,” Terry Tempest Williams asserts, “I write out of my inconsistencies.” A writer may shift her own reasoning. “Do I contradict myself?” Walt Whitman asked in “Song of Myself.” “Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)”

These variations on the theme of who we are, what we do, and why we do it as poets leads to these special issues of TAB. These two issues deal not only with why we write but also with why we write poetry in particular. We are grateful to those writers who submitted work to this call, and we had tough editorial choices to make. We are proud to create a conversation about Why I Write Poetry, and we encourage readers to bring this conversation beyond the screen so that it will contain multitudes.