

# IF YOU'RE NOT, WHY NOT?

FIFTY POEMS



VIVIENNE YEO

If You're Not, Why Not?

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## Contents

The First Time, Each Time 10

### **Fifty Poems**

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#### **Beauty**

I'm Not into Verses	20
Lovely Title	21
Word-Drenched	23
<i>Petits Mots</i>	25
Sheer Love	27
Push	28
Holding Hands	31
A Soft Heart of Strength	33
Snack in Your Pocket	34
Closest and Dearest	35
Making Love	36
Beautiful Moment	38
I Have a Lover (Love Doubled)	39
Many Worlds	41
Frolic	43

#### **Truths**

The More I Walk	46
Get Your Groove	47
I Steer Life	48
I am Happy	50
Commitment	52

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Persistence	54
Suppose	55
Love Scenes	57
Untangle	60
Firsts	62
This and That	64
Strike a Balance	66
Strike a Balance (An Afterthought)	68
Don't Spurn What You Learn	69

### **Darkness**

Forever	72
Exit Plan	73
Returning Phone Calls	75
People are We, aren't We?	77
Blameworthy	79
I Don't Care	80
Boxed	82
Complete	84

### **Snares**

If Not, Why Not?	88
Lazy	89
Delusions	90
Boringness	92
Miss	94
Closest Not Dearest	96
I Have a Lover (Love Dismantled)	99

### **Going Forth**

Going Forth	102
My Goal So Bold	103
Passion	104
Fine Time	105
Divine Impatience	107
Let's	108

### **Glimpses**

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Beauty	112
Truths	120
Darkness	126
Snares	131
Going Forth	134
Sources of Inspiration	139
Acknowledgments	141
About the Poet	143

For my parents

## The First Time, Each Time

This collection of poems represents for me the ideal of embracing life and living in the present moment as if it were the first time, each time. All my life, I have been a meticulous planner. But I soon began to realize that it is not the planning that counts; it is the execution and action. Beyond the planning, the execution and the action, the most important thing is to realize that all of this is the stuff of life. We must live it – every single moment of it.

I have always found myself daunted by some of the goals I have set, especially the bolder ones – such as devoting my life to writing poems, my one true passion.

For the longest time, I have stalled in my writing because I lacked courage and confidence. I worried about this and that and every conceivable thing in between – from money to finding a publisher to whether I would be good enough. The list was endless. “Who reads poetry anyway?” is a question I’d always pose just so that I could convince myself it was a pointless endeavor to be a poet. Deep down however, I wanted so much to write verses.

Each time I write a poem, I feel my heart leap and my soul soar. Other times, I cry with joy.

Abraham Maslow once wrote: “A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is ultimately to be at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be.” For an entire decade in the corporate world, I spent my life working not on what I could be, but what I had to be. It was my own silly way of defining success.

Corporate life was exciting and many times invigorating

– you talk fast, walk fast, work fast, earn fast. It was fast everything. I don’t disparage it at all. It was just not me.

Soon, I wrote verses whenever inspiration hit me. When I swooned with love, I’d write. When I fell out of love, I’d write. When I mourned the loss of two dear friends, I’d write. When I missed a friend dearly, I’d write. When I waxed lyrical, I’d write.

Then one day, five days into the New Year, I wrote a poem called *My Goal So Bold*. I had dedicated this verse to a small group of young students with whom I share the joys of my craft. In a way, I must admit that I wrote the poem for myself. I felt it was just as important to give myself encouragement as it was to receive same from those who are dear to me.

Without giving myself due credit, I never realized that with each poem I wrote, I was slowly tuning in to “what I can be” and embracing my precious moments of poetic epiphany. The year began and I drifted along planning. But the question is: how can one drift and plan at the same time? Thankfully, I let myself drift more than plan this time. After *My Goal So Bold*, I wrote a handful of others over a short period of five days during which I was reading Yann Martel’s masterly told *Life of Pi*.

My grand goal was – and is – to write a collection of poems and many more in my lifetime. I just had no idea in what form it would take, what theme it would follow. No matter how much I tried to plan, I found I could not give it shape and form. But I kept close to my heart the

words of Sarah Orne Jewett, in a letter to her close friend, Willa Cather – one of the great American novelists of the 20th century and an important writer who has inspired my writing life:

*You must find your own quiet center of life, and write from that to the world.*

It is indeed from my own quiet center that I write best. On the 10th February this year, I wrote *I'm Not into Verses*, the first poem that graces this collection. It was on this fateful day that I saw the birth of an idea. I followed my heart's story: there are so many reasons why people should read poetry, as spelled out in *I'm Not into Verses*. Ultimately, I also wanted my verses to be accessible and hence, practical.

I welled up with chutzpah and a fierce mission from within my soul.

Forget the question “who reads poetry anyway?” Pose the other question instead: “why not read poetry?” This is exactly the question raised in the last line of *I'm Not into Verses*: “If You're Not, Why Not?” It is a call to action, a call to experience the beauty of verses. And so it is. That's how I named this collection of poems.

With drifting taking the spotlight – and not planning, it dawned on me that the poems that soon followed in the course of the following weeks were not all didactic in tone. Most of them just painted the various aspects of life. And so I began to group this body of work into five parts:

Beauty, Truths, Darkness, Snares and Going Forth.

It was at this time that I composed the line, “Glimpses of Life Through Poetry's Eyes”. This, I later incorporated into the collection's second poem, *Lovely Title* – which essentially paints my life story. Glimpses would also become the name to the behind-the-scenes narrative accompanying my poems.

Once all this was done, I let planning take over. Alas! A leopard can't change its spots, but it still can embrace life and all the beautiful adventures it offers. I got into frenzied planning and started making checklists. How it delighted me perversely! I gave myself poem quotas for the week, and worked towards a grand total of 50 poems. It was exciting working towards a goal, doing a countdown and ticking my checklist with each brand new poem I wrote.

For the love of numbers (but not as much as for words), I planned my writing so that I could achieve a sensible balance across the five sections. I was utterly frustrated whenever I couldn't meet my quota for the week. I hit snags and dry spells. But then, I'd step back and tell myself: life is full of this and that (and yes, I do have a poem called *This and That*), up moments and down moments.

The lessons I learned from writing this collection of verses have been enormous – they were not just writing lessons, but life lessons. I had to conquer numerous fears and frustrations throughout the writing process.

My fears: Would people really identify with what I write? How can I develop compelling story lines for the

numerous titles I have? Where can I find food for inspiration?  
Who's going to buy my book?

My frustrations: Reworking lines that never ever look or sound good after endless edits. Becoming too self-conscious. Worrying about whether I come across too self-indulgent. Vexing over style and technique.

Whenever this happens, I always look upon the writing legends that came before me, and find comfort in their achievements and the odds they themselves overcame. It is also during such times that I invoke especially the words of Susan Sontag and E. B. White – both authors and social critics in their own right. Their words always serve as dependable succor for my tormented moments; and I am referring in particular to the ones that hail the virtues of curiosity:

A writer should be “*someone who is interested in everything.*”  
– Susan Sontag

“*The essayist is a self-liberated man, sustained by the childish belief that everything he thinks about, everything that happens to him, is of general interest.*”  
– E. B. White

This may sound rather simplistic, but the quality of being curious does conquer many ills. It keeps you open-minded, possibly even childlike when you just let go of all your inhibitions. You become your natural self, free of encumbrances, embracing everything as a possibility.

For this reason, this collection was born out of numerous sources of inspiration, including of course, life itself.

I feel blessed that “curiosity is the soul of my mind” (from the poem *Boringness*) – a line I composed in 2003 to market myself as a communications professional while I was still a fast-talking and –walking corporate executive.

In a sense, curiosity made me ponder a friend's suggestion to have some type of narrative accompany my poems. I was at first resistant to the idea, but thought about the possibility of how a narrative could offer a compelling story to this body of work, otherwise it would just be “another collection of poems.” And so, I posed the questions: What would it be like to read a behind-the-scenes story? Would it add color?

That was how the last section *Glimpses* came about. It is not meant to be a series of annotations. It not only offers up glimpses of what went behind each of the poems; it also serves to make them as accessible as possible.

And indeed, everything is accessible and possible when you set your mind to it.

So, gentle reader, go forth and live life and discover its beauty and truths, darkness and snares through the world of verses. The grand secret is that verses “need to be discovered / Like a hidden treasure or a lost love.”

Vivienne Yeo  
Singapore, November 2005

# FIFTY POEMS

BEAUTY

## I'm Not into Verses

It's fine if you're not into verses;  
They don't owe you a favor  
Neither do you, them.

But verses have a way about them  
They do so much with so little.

How they bear remarkable emotions,  
Paint glorious pictures,  
Speak volumes of the human spirit:

From sadness to love,  
From loneliness to anger,  
And every possible emotion  
The world could ever hold.

It's fine if you're still not into verses;  
They need to be discovered  
Like a hidden treasure or a lost love.

Once found, your world blooms,  
Uncovering a view so vast and free,  
So potent and full of possibilities.

I'm so into verses.  
If you're not, why not?

## Lovely Title

My life is like a great book with a great cover  
Graced with a lovely title;  
How quietly it was written  
Without even my knowing!

Word by fine word,  
Page by slow page,  
A story unfolded  
As my time expended.

No title was there at first –  
Just dust and dirt,  
All grime and grit,  
A life so facelessly lived.

Tasteless, how coverless,  
My life was thirsting for meaning,  
Craving the flavor of a name  
Filled with vision full of verve:

Glimpses of life  
Through Poetry's eyes.

What lines finely carved in my lifeline,  
Undiscovered then uncovered,  
Amidst a joyous frolic in words  
On a fine day of glorious gift revealed.

Words now master-stroked on cover and face,  
I may walk aimlessly, but not mindlessly –  
What a turn I took on this avenue  
To seek vignettes of old for retelling anew!

My book bears a name and a title:  
Both mine as much as the world's.

## Word-Drenched

Bella Tuscany is famously sun-drenched;  
Bush's rhetoric infamously God-drenched.

These aren't musings on the bench  
By one called Judi Dench.

Only simple games of a simple girl,  
Playing with words in a giant swirl.

This swirl is no rift  
Between girl and gift;

It is no hurricane  
Foreboding some cursed pain.

See what it gives  
So that life lives.

What swirl of words that teach,  
And thankfully don't preach.

How could I ever be stuck,  
When this swirl leaves me word-struck?

Where is life's lesson?  
Why ask, just listen.

Take to any park bench –  
Even in a drench.

Listen. Reflect. Write. And be.  
I am as utterly soaked as can be.

So word-drenched am I,  
And happily so without a sigh.

### *Petits Mots*

Little words aren't exactly little –  
In fact, they're not.  
Especially when written,  
They speak as loud as they're tall.

When tummy's upset,  
Or nose's all stuffed;  
And heart's torn asunder,  
Knees bloodied and grazed –

What calm your little words bring,  
So special from the depths of you:

*I'll make you tea with honey,  
'Cos hey, you are my honey;  
Drink it up, with all your heart:  
"Fly away, Flu; go, fly away!"*

Touched and melted away  
In my needing neediness:  
How blind I've become  
To words, how sickly sweet.

Mawkish words so against my grain –  
What treasure they've become,  
This ticklish pander so childlike,  
Of simplicity, purity and revered honesty.

Judge not the small,  
They can be big;  
Wash me sentimental,  
Forever, I'm yours.

## Sheer Love

Sheer love is *über*  
Like a sublime stupor –  
Kissed by consistent passion,  
Sparking infinite possibilities.

It drives the soul  
Towards a goal;  
And stiffens one's resolve  
No matter the odds.

What a love that surges forth  
From waters of turbulent froth,  
Emerging triumphant  
No matter the odds.

Sheer love conquers the impossible,  
Making all else possible;  
Sustaining a noble fire,  
That keeps life resiliently aglow.

How unseen, yet seen  
So invisible, yet visible.

## Push

Pushed by you that fateful day,  
 I sloshed around in a dark dizzy daze;  
 Oblivious to your labored pain,  
 Unknowing of that joyful anguish,  
 I perversely resisted this giant push of victory –

The world's only mother tongue  
 That cuts across time, space and color.

Dragged in a squeeze,  
 I emerged in a slushy pop:  
 What a rude gasp and then a slap!  
 For all that pushing and gentle explosion,  
 I finally moved, then arrived.

Thanks to you, sweet mother,  
 Your grand push has inspired  
 My life's first and only real mission –  
 To live and to be,  
 What shall I make of it?

I blossomed under your wing,  
 Feathered by prods and pushes,  
 This time differently labored –  
 Inching me closer to nest's edge,  
 Where suddenly I tipped and took flight.

I resented your clucking and fussing;  
 But once pushed,  
 What glee and immense amazement  
 Left me hovering O so high:  
 I soared but first I faltered.

You pushed just once, hardest  
 And many times more after, harder –  
 Is it no wonder that  
 Fruit of your making,  
 We're so wont to being pushed?

We adore your sweet nest,  
 Forever there we'd like to be;  
 But God gave us you  
 For even loftier a reason –  
 Beyond your enfolding, past your nurturing.

Every push you give us,  
 We learn to give some of ourselves  
 Flight by new flight;  
 Courage honed, we defy Doubt's fears  
 And question Fear's doubts.

Your push deeply seeded in me,  
Dissolved now into a whisper –  
No longer a push, hardly a nudge,  
Distilled in a line simply profound,  
Forever etched in my face:

“Do you want to be safe?”

## Holding Hands

At play, for fun  
Here are kids just holding hands:

A natural handhold,  
That says “I like you;”  
Hands creamed with ice cream  
Know only of fun not stickiness.

In love, in despair,  
Here behold the holding of hands:

A tender embrace,  
Fingers locked in a twine;  
A comforting squeeze of hands  
That spells, “I understand.”

At birth, at death,  
Here we witness the holding of hands:

A baby's fingers  
Clasping a mother's finger;  
A hand all limp and lifeless  
Lovingly held to a mourning cheek.

Holding hands is the language of man,  
So profound yet simple;  
Always touching, infinitely soothing,  
Whatever life's precious moment:

At play, for fun  
In love, in despair,  
At birth, at death,  
  
And all else in between.

## A Soft Heart of Strength

*“If a hard heart is necessary to a ruler...  
either take the empire from me or give me another heart.”*

*La clemenza di Tito*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

The strength of a heart  
Lies in its compassion;  
Its worth captured forever  
In how soft it can be,  
Not how hard it is.

## Acknowledgments

It's not often that I sit down to count my blessings. But when I do, I feel overwhelmed with gratitude: for my gift of words, friends and family, my students and the goodness in my life.

American poet, Maya Angelou, helped turn Oprah Winfrey's life around as her friend and mentor with just three words of advice: "Say thank you!" Today, I take these three words with me to a special few who have made a visible difference in my life.

In the same way Maya turned Oprah's life around, my longtime friend, Noel Low did the same for me, except his words were: "Find your passion." I would never have found the path of a poet and writer without Noel. His thoughts on following my heart's passion and living a fuller and more meaningful life inspired me to write *Passion*, my first poem ever. But that was in 2002. The seeds were sown, but I lacked courage to fulfill the vision of myself as a poet and writer.

Then came the spring of 2004 when I visited Japan and had dinner with my writer friend, Ko Shioya on a dreary rainy day. As he shared with me his wisdom on life and writing, he had three words for me as well: "Make haste slowly." Those words served as a jolt to pick up from my important discovery two years before.

The fact that this book exists – and that I'm all aglow with an even greater fire to write – is in no small part due to both Noel and Ko. I am forever indebted to them.

## About the Poet

Vivienne Yeo is a poet, writer and storyteller. She also dabbles with words in her capacity as a speechwriter, language mentor and creative writing coach. Once a denizen of New York and a former communications executive, she now resides in Singapore, her home country. *If You're Not, Why Not?* is her first published work.

I also give my love and heartfelt thanks to my lifelong mentor, David E. Coburn and my dear friend, Isabelle Chuvan. They always gave me cheer and a little steer in my writing journey. Their pride and firm belief in me would always serve as a pillar for my lonely moments and dry spells.

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How they inspired me before, and how they still do!

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Happiness is about living better;  
And living better  
Is simply living simpler.  
*I am Happy*

A surefooted path once distilled,  
Despite its forks, you knowingly walk.  
*Get Your Groove*

How blind we are on occasion  
When beauty flutters before our eyes:  
*Frolic*

How much sweeter making love is  
When first, you fall in love:  
*Making Love*

But verses have a way about them  
They do so much with so little.  
*I'm Not Into Verses*

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