



Lisa Westberg Peters

Earthshake
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Lisa Westberg Peters tells us a bit about her book *Earthshake: Poems from the Ground Up*. Read on to see how her experiences turned into wonderful poetry!

Nearly all 22 poems in *Earthshake: Poems from the Ground Up* come anchored with adventures or misadventures. To give you an idea, here's the title poem:

Earthshake

*Sea cliffs
pounded into
sea caves
pounded into
sea arches
pounded into
sea stacks
by the crashing surf.*

Delicious Washington coast.

To see that delicious Washington coast I had to backpack with a group of college students more than two miles in the dark through relentless rain.

My left boot leaked within seconds. My right boot held out for at least 500 feet. My flashlight died after a mile. For the rest of the hike, I had to rely on the kindness of college kids in order to see anything.

Surely this hike through deep mud would be the worst part, I thought. Once we reached the legendary Shi-Shi beach on the Pacific coast, I would be fine.

We inched our way down the steep cliff to the beach and started setting up our tents. The geology professor who was leading this weekend field trip asked if I could share my tent with one of the other students and of course, I agreed. It was still raining! Who would deny someone shelter?

But after we settled in, my young tentmate, resting just a foot or so away from me, began to regale me with the sordid stories of his past — stories that began with anger, degenerated into assault and ended with the criminal justice system. In the dark, my eyes grew wider and wider. I began thinking about home, my doting husband and my adorable daughters — why wasn't I with them? Who was this guy? Get me out of here!

And then I realized my tent was leaking from the bottom. It was an old, dirty tent. A week earlier, I had washed it and I had apparently washed the waterproofing right out of it.

Everything — my sleeping bag, my layers and layers of clothes, and my enthusiasm for the trip — grew damp. It was a long night.

In the morning, the sky over the Pacific was wide open and rain-free. The coffee was steaming. The beach was a work of art with its rocky headlands, soaring arches and glittery garnet sand. You can imagine how delicious it looked after a night of cold, damp confessions.

I signed up for another class. This time we drove through the Cascade Mountains to eastern Washington. I touched and smelled plate tectonics by touching and smelling rocks that had formed at the bottom of the sea and were now several thousand feet above the sea ("*Continental Promises*"). I scrambled up and down fresh faults ("*Instructions for the Earth's Dishwasher*") and waded into braided mountain streams ("*Alaskan Stream*").

Returning home, the back of the van was filled with sleeping students. The professor drove and I was sitting just behind him, too aware of the hairpin turns and mashed guard rails to be able to sleep. I gradually realized that the van was veering.

It's odd. Most of us have this ingrained deference to teachers. My first thought was, Well! This professor must know what he's doing. Maybe he saw a great roadcut and he's going to stop to show us.

But this was a slippery, aimless veering. I turned to look at his face and sure enough, his eyes were closed. I don't know what would have happened to us if I (still feeling a little guilty for bothering a professor) hadn't shaken him.

But I do know why I was the only one awake: I was the only mom on that bus. My level of alertness had already been mother-high for three or four years: Watch out for the stairs, sweetie. Don't cross the street yet, hon. Let's leave that snake alone, OK?

One last tale.

Camping is not my favorite thing (leaky tent?). But I love the mountains and sometimes the best way to see them is to camp in them. One year on the Fourth of July, my husband and I set up our tent in the Big Horn Mountains of central Wyoming.

It snowed. It snowed several inches and the tent sagged with the weight. The snow buried the purple delphiniums that had filled the view outside our tent.

In the morning, we cooked breakfast in our winter jackets and mittens, which we had packed as a lark. I ate my oatmeal in the car with the heat on and a little scowl on my face.

We couldn't hike in the snow, so we invented Plan B. We drove downhill to the dry, sunny canyon country. It was there, in a place I never intended to visit, that I found the inspiration for another poem, "*Plain Old Rock*".

Dull, round, fist-sized rocks were scattered by the side of a gravel road.

*Plain old rock
by the side of the road*

Should I roll it into the ditch?

I picked them up and rolled them around in my hands.

*Round rock
by the side of the road.*

*I pick it up
and feel its weight.*

I tried to split them open by dropping them onto the road. Maybe they have something cool inside, I kept telling my skeptical mate.

*Light rock
by the side of the road.*

*I take aim with my hammer
and split it.*

I never did succeed in splitting those plain old rocks. I now suspect they had nothing interesting inside of them. This was not a satisfactory ending.

So I made up a new ending. Art diverged from life.

*Geode
by the side of the road.*

Gleaming jewels inside.

In my poem, I found the surprise I'd been looking for. The idea that beauty can be found in unexpected places is not new. But I like to think I've passed this idea along to my young readers in a fresh way.

I haven't told you about the time I was on the Big Island of Hawaii, walked across Kilauea Volcano alone at night, and discovered the true and terrifying meaning of the words pitch black.

That will be another set of poems.