

**APRIL GIFTS**  
**2015**

Created by: Susan F. Glassmeyer  
Cincinnati, Ohio, 2015

## APRIL GIFTS 2015

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The year was 764 A.D., nearly 700 years before the Gutenberg Bible launched the era of printing in Europe. In Japan, **Empress Koken Shotoku** had just reascended the throne, her kingdom still reeling from a deadly smallpox epidemic followed by political upheaval. To signal her gratitude for the end to these disasters, she commissioned one million small pagodas, each containing a Buddhist prayer (dharani) chiseled into wood blocks and printed on paper scrolls. These tiny scrolls, only 18 inches long and 2 1/2 inches wide, were the world's first printed texts on paper.

### Empress Shotoku Invents Printing in 770

Smallpox, insurrection. Was her kingdom not ravaged enough already?  
Had the gods of disfigurement not been appeased?

She would not abide, would not acknowledge impediment.

The priests' advice to order prayer in all the village temples  
was enough to excite her mind to invention:

She would construct a million tiny pagodas,  
commission architects of the written word

to print dharani for each of them  
to ward off the demons of disease and war.

Amplified, repeated, the prayers would reach  
the ears of Buddha in unison,

so that the loneliness of one priest praying,  
the vulnerability of one prayer floating in black ink,

the unpredictability of a scrap of paper against a universe  
of rain and wind and wayward candle flame,

might be fashioned into mystical choruses  
rising into the air with simultaneous intention.

She would pray for her invention, she would give her priests the vision  
to see multiplicity, to make a stone, a block, a metal sheet

empowered to copy whole prayers in rapid succession  
like the singing of the stars, the flutter of bamboo leaves.

Were a million dharani not a million times more powerful?

And her private prayer, her wish for immortality,  
would it not ascend on a million whispering tongues?

—by *Teresa Cader* (*Poetry*, Vol. 166, May 1995)



### POET NOTES

**Teresa Cader** is the author of three collections of poetry. *Guests* (1991) won the Poetry Society of America's Norma Farber First Book Award and The Journal Award in Poetry from the Ohio State University Press. The third section of her next book, *The Paper Wasp* (TriQuarterly Press, 1999) won the Poetry Society of America's George Bogin Memorial Award. *The History of Hurricanes* was published in 2009 by TriQuarterly. Ms. Cader is on the core poetry faculty of the Lesley University (Cambridge University) Graduate Program in Creative Writing. She lives in Lexington, Massachusetts.

### POEM NOTE: dharani

From the Eyclopedia Britannica: In Buddhism (and Hinduism) *dharani* is a sacred Sanskrit phrase of great efficacy, used as a verbal protective device or talisman and as a support or instrument for concentration. The dharani is a short summary of the essential doctrine contained in a much longer sacred text and serves as an aid to its retention. Properly recited, the dharani conveys the same merit as reading the entire work. The meaning of a dharani is often very difficult to determine and may sound to the uninitiated like a string of meaningless words, the accuracy of which is, nevertheless, carefully guarded when passed on from teacher to pupil.

### IN HER OWN WORDS—Teresa Cader

*I have many poems about the invention of paper and printing and about language as an invention. All of that came from a seminal experience when I had an artist's studio in the Munroe Center in Lexington where I was the only writer. I was wildly jealous of the other artists who always seemed to have something to do—stretch canvases, mix paints, fire pottery, dye cloth, scavenge in the woods for bird feathers, whatever—while all I had was a piece of paper, a pen, and some books. And often, no ideas for poems. One day I held the paper up to the window, turned it in all directions and realized I didn't really know what it was, where it had come from. And this was my medium! I stared at a few words that had somehow plummeted onto the page and the letters of the alphabet looked like camels struggling against a sandstorm. What were these? Where had they come from? How could it be that I was using 26 abstract shapes to say everything I wanted to say? I felt submerged in mystery and intellectual passion. For me, that's always visceral—my spine undulates or something—and I knew I had embarked on a very personal artistic journey.*

*I like to inhabit the mystery and the unknown. I like to push beyond what's comfortable to a place where I don't know where I am. Push beyond what you know. The process is where the discoveries happen. Trust it.*

*Students are hungry for a kind of emotional truth that they're not getting; they're hungry to integrate their feelings and their learning—they are hungry to have someone speak truth about life. They are hungry for poetry.*

***I need to be emotionally moved by a poem, though it should not set out to do so. I have a metaphysical sensibility. I look for the marriage between intellect and emotions.***

**Regarding Teaching Philosophy:** *I develop an individual mentoring relationship for each student, according to his or her level of experience. Teaching this way allows me to understand not just what is on the page, but what could emerge. I urge my students to write the poems only they could write. This requires a willingness to be brutally honest with oneself, push past inhibitions, and let the poem-in-process take charge. One wants to hear the poet's deepest self through the poem's idiosyncratic speech. I believe this can only be achieved by rigorous study of poetic craft and extensive reading across the centuries. I require my students to pay attention to every word they read or write - for its sound as well as its meaning.*

Today's poem by **Lauren Camp** references **Tillie Olsen** who wrote an anthologized short story titled, "I Stand Here Ironing". The unnamed narrator, a mother, is ironing while speaking on the phone with an unnamed individual who is most likely a social worker, teacher, or counselor. The mother likens the back-and-forth motion of the iron to her own mental process as she considers the cautionary comments made by this outside party about the narrator's daughter "Emily". You can find this wonderful story in *Tell Me A Riddle*, a collection of short stories by Tillie Olsen published in 1961. I'm dedicating today's poem to my younger sister who still loves to iron.



**Tillie Olsen** (1912-2007) was an American writer associated with the political turmoil of the 1930's and the first generation of American feminists.

### Drama Class, 1989

No set or costume, no one else on stage,  
just the thin sound of my tongue uttering  
a long sheet of Tillie Olsen's weary words.

It was the wrong choice, this monologue.  
I had not yet pressed my life into creases  
or folds, hadn't even a small furrow of pain.

In class, my soft hands sprawled along  
an invisible board, ironing abstract air.

I groped for next lines, my right arm floating  
in an eccentric display of space.

Steadfast on the script, my light voice  
draped with youth. The iron zigged  
and scorched, then nosed up. Poor Mrs. E,

the drama teacher, who pressed on me  
to let exhaustion settle in, to let it steam  
from Tillie's worn dark story.

*Slowly!* she warned, all stiff and calicoed.  
*Iron as you do at home. Concentrate.*  
*Be particular about the sleeves and seams.*

But I had never shaped a shirt, never  
laundered a mistake, didn't know to poke  
toward sags and puckers, how to wait.

That fake iron couldn't straighten any life.  
I needed time to bend and smooth  
some dangers, to snag and mess again.

Back then my life was long, unrolled —  
everything flat, still frivolous, unwrinkled.

—by *Lauren Camp*



## POET NOTES

A native New Yorker and long-time resident of New Mexico, **Lauren Camp** uses art, voice, poetry and sound to move others. Her first book of poems, *This Business of Wisdom*, was published by West End Press in 2010. Her second book, *The Dailiness* (Edwin E. Smith), was published last December, and was soon selected by World Literature Today as an “Editor’s Pick.”

Lauren is also a visual artist, working primarily with the medium of fabric. Her artwork has found its way into children’s hospitals, public housing, police stations, community centers, United States Embassies in Ukraine, Turkmenistan and Mali, and other organizations around the world. As an artist, she is perhaps best known for “The Fabric of Jazz,” her series of jazz portraits. This series toured museums in ten U.S. cities between January 2004 and September 2007.

Also, since 2004, Lauren has been a producer and host for KSFR-FM, Santa Fe Public Radio. Her show, “Audio Saucepan,” intertwines a genre-defying mix of music with contemporary

poetry. The program airs Sundays from 6-7PM Mountain Standard Time. Lauren teaches creative writing workshops and works one-on-one with writers. Whenever she can find a moment, she offers thoughts on poetry and fine writing on her blog, Which Silk Shirt. Lauren Camp holds a BS in human development from Cornell University, and a dual concentration Master's degree in oral interpretation of literature and advertising / public relations from Emerson College.

### **IN HER OWN WORDS—Lauren Camp**

#### **Excerpts from an interview with Michelle Aldredge of Gwarlingo:**

*For a long time, I believed my mediums were entirely separate and needed to be kept that way. I figured I should never mention all three (art, poetry, sound/music) together, but pick the correct one for a particular conversation and stick to that. At some point, though, it became difficult to differentiate these parts. I realized that they each borrow from, or lean on, the others. I am not representing who I am accurately, and I am not whole, without all three.*

*I visualize music as colors and, sometimes, as shapes. This mirrors my sense that poetry should fill a page, or an ear, with shape and sound. (I value, too, negative space and silence. Those are equally critical to any composition, whether literary or visual.) Musically, I'm entranced by Thelonious Monk's pauses, Romare Bearden's magnificent collages, Cy Twombly's scribbles, Eva Hesse's strange repetition. I'm delighted by visionary artists and by my students' uncertain attempts at writing.*

*I love the extremes of being an artist—of having my mind endlessly busy with color, vibration, space and language, and in writing, especially, of being forced to be so honest with myself that something opens, something expands. There are, of course, great problems in all this creativity, besides the finances: the issue of time; the self-doubt that wings in now and again; the exhausting, repeated lesson of patience; and the overactive sensitivity that is the underside of looking, listening, attending, caring.*

**Grandmother, Cleaning Rabbits**

I shot this one by the upper pond of the farm  
after watching the rings trout made rising  
to flies, watching small birds pace the backs  
of cows, hoping all the time she would run.

My grandmother told me they damaged her garden.

I think it was a way to make the killing  
lighter. She never let me clean them, only asked  
I bring them headless to her. I bring this one  
to the fir block near the house, use the single-  
bitted axe with the nick in the lower crescent  
of the blade, smell the slow fire  
in the smoke-house, salmon changing  
to something sweet & dark. A fly turns  
in a bead of blood on my boot. I tuck  
the head in a hole beside the dusty globes  
of ripened currants, talk quiet to the barn cat.

In her kitchen my grandmother whets the thin blade  
of her Barlow, makes a series of quick, clever cuts, then tugs  
off the skin like a child's sweater. This one was  
pregnant. She pulls out a row of unborn rabbits  
like the sleeve of a shirt with a series of knots.  
The offal is dropped in a bucket. Each joint gives way  
beneath her knife as though it wants  
to come undone, as though she knows some secret  
about how things fit together. I have killed  
a hundred rabbits since I was eight.

This will be the last.

I am twenty, & about to go back  
to the war that killed my cousin in Kin Hoa,  
which is one more name she can't pronounce.  
I haven't told her about the dead,  
and she won't ask. She rolls the meat  
in flour & pepper & salt, & lays it  
in a skillet of oil that spits like a cat.  
She cannot save a single boy who carries a gun.  
All she can do is feed this one.

—by *Samuel Green*

## POET NOTES

**Samuel Green**, born in 1948, was raised in the fishing and mill town of Anacortes, Washington. After four years in the military, including service in Antarctica and South Vietnam, he earned a BA from Highline Community College and an MA from Western Washington University. His poems have appeared in hundreds of journals and he has ten collections of poems. In his latest book, "The Grace of Necessity," Green explores themes of death, love and family history. In 2007, he was named Washington's first poet laureate.

Green recalls his childhood, when his father quoted Robert Service poems to him. He read and wrote poems in elementary school but was never encouraged to pursue either. After barely graduating high school because of behavioral problems—he says they were caused by boredom and an inability to be academically competitive—Green never thought about going on to college. He didn't think he was smart.

Since 1982, Sam has lived off the grid on remote Waldron Island (4 ½-square-miles) off the Washington coast in a log house he and his wife Sally built themselves. "We decided to dedicate our life completely to poetry." For two years they lived in a canvas Army tent while Sam finished building the cabin. They didn't use electricity or running water, so there were no bills for the first few years. Solar panels on the cabin's roof now power their laptops. Together they operate **Brooding Heron Press & Bindery**. Sally does the letterpress printing, Sam the binding. They produce finely printed and bound volumes of verse by poets such as Denise Levertov, Ted Kooser, Donald Hall, among others.

At a bookbinding workshop at Seattle Pacific University, Green got a twinkle in his eye as he rubbed a bonefolder tool on the side of his nose. That's the secret to a really clean fold, he told those attending the workshop. "Face oil is the best," he said, continuing to rub. "Although my wife has a favorite spot in her hair she likes to use."



Sam Green

Sally Green

**IN HIS OWN WORDS—Sam Green** *When I was in my 20s and 30s, I paid only desultory attention to how I spent my time. It seemed I had a chest full of currency, the various-sized coins that represented minutes, hours, days, the large heavy ones of years. Even though I reached blindly into the chest, and so could not see how much was there, it still seemed like a lot. Yesterday I turned 60. I'm well aware now that when I reach into the chest, I can feel the wooden bottom of it in places, and I'm more and more selfish with how I spend that time. . . . Even so, some of it has been beyond my immediate control. For the past 26 years, nearly all of our small income has come, in one guise or another, from poetry: teaching, readings, the sale of books from our own small press publishing enterprise. The bulk of that has taken me away more and more from the small island on which we live, and where I've learned the lessons about community, right work, and the value of place that have helped me shape my poems.*

Today's poem, by **Genine Lentine**, is inspired by the Buddhist Full Moon Ceremony, or *Ryaku Fusatsu*, a monthly renewal of the bodhisattva precepts. On the evening or morning of the full moon, sangha members gather to give voice to their intentions and to invoke the energies of the ancestral bodhisattvas alive within themselves. Genine had been thinking about her murky relationship to the bodhisattva precepts. The result is her humorous and perhaps more realistic "half moon ceremony" what she calls Ryaku Demi-Fusatsu.

The ceremony has been described as "*an ancient Buddhist chanting and bowing ceremony of atonement and purification that provides us with the opportunity to acknowledge our deep karmic entanglements.*" The ceremony is not about self-recrimination, but rather it's a chance to accommodate one's fallibility and give stuckness some room to find mobility. The word *Fusatsu* means, "to continue good practice," or, "to stop unwholesome action (karma)."

**Poem Glossary:**

Bodhisattva—an enlightened being

Dharma—the teachings of the Buddha

Doshi—the Buddhist priest who officiates at services

Gaitan—the lobby just outside the zendo

Sangha—Buddhist community

Tenken—the sangha volunteer who keeps track of time in the meditation hall

Zendo—meditation hall

The Three Treasures—The Buddha, The Dharma, The Sangha

**The Ten Grave/Grand Precepts:**

1. Not killing
2. Not stealing
3. Not misusing sex
4. Not lying--- speaking falsely
5. Not abusing intoxicants
6. Not talking about others' errors and faults
7. Not elevating oneself and blaming others
8. Not being stingy
9. Not being angry
10. Not speaking ill of the Three Treasures (The Buddha, The Dharma, The Sangha)

**I Kinda Vow (or Ryaku Demi-Fusatsu, The Half-Moon Ceremony)**

**ALL:**

Half my ancient twisted karma  
From well-nigh beginningless greed, hate and delusion,  
Born through body, speech and mind  
I now kind of avow.

**GRAVE PRECEPTS**

[Doshi reads each vow, and the assembly recites the vow in response]

### *One*

I vow not to kill.

Well, except when it comes to some very small,  
very icky, perhaps sentient, but nevertheless very icky,  
very tiny, very numerous beings, beings who walk on food surfaces,  
or crawl on my skin, especially those beings whose bites line up in threes—

I made the mistake of googling these beings

I mean, have you seen pictures of those beings on the internet?

Here, I'll show you, do you want to look at some now?

### *Two*

I vow not to take what is not given,  
but just to borrow it, or only take it if I think  
the person who owns it would have said, take it  
if they'd been there, or if they had so much  
they'd never notice the little bit I took.

Okay, also, I should say in a.m. service, I have stolen glances.

I have held my gaze well above 45 degrees.

I have in fact, held my gaze at 60 or even 70 degrees,

I have, I will tell you, held such a glance

far longer than would be required

for finding my place in a row.

Using service to check people out

is decidedly less than wholesome

but some people do look mad hot in their robes.

### *Three*

I vow not to misuse sexuality?

Um, misuse sexuality? Trust me,

you won't find me misusing anything,

If you know what I mean. Ask anyone.

But okay, I'm giving the six-month rule a spin.

Six days is more like it, but I'm doing my best.

I tell myself: Penetration—only that of wisdom,

only that of realization, like a long summer rain,

that kind of warm august rain

when you're out walking barefoot in grass,

and the air is just shy of liquid,

and the mist is so fine, and so deep, and so slow,

you don't even notice you're wet

until you're soaked, until your white dress,

your very thin, very sheer, white dress

is just drenched and clings to your body.

I ask myself, When the dharma soaks your dress

Can you then ever really take such a dress off?

I say to myself, Arousal: only that of the Bodhi-mind.

But sometimes, nothing more than a shadow

passing through my own, cast onto the zendo wall,

can bring on a shudder—or a sleeve brushing my bare arm,

or in a very quiet zendo, the sound of a certain person's breathing,

is quite more than enough, so maybe after all,  
Six months won't be so long.

#### ***Four***

I vow to refrain from false speech.  
Speech is just too potent and precious to be reckless with it. L.O.L.  
Thus, I would never, under any circumstance, tilt the truth,  
even a little, and especially, not on the tenken pad.

#### ***Five***

I totally vow to refrain from abusing toxicants  
Seriously. I mean, abuse this excellent bud?  
That would just be wrong.  
Plus, Dude, is using it when I need it, abusing it?  
Have you ever had super harsh insomnia?  
Also my back is whacked, I got a card.  
I keep it chill. I don't overdo it.  
Like when Luke and me were driving out to Mad River Beach?  
And he totally cashed the bowl,  
vacuumed it, did not hand it to me once,  
and I'm like, Dude! and he's like, What?  
Fire up another one, he says,  
and so I pull off Old Arcata Road,  
and as the wheels turn onto the gravel it's just freakin' weird  
because my favorite song is on  
and it's right at that point, you know  
where Kurt says, a mosquito, my libido,  
the most awesome part of the most awesome song,  
and at that exact moment this huge deer leaps out  
right in front of the car and Luke is like, Dude!  
You almost killed that buck. And right then I was just all like,  
I haven't had one hit off that bowl  
and I'm just feeling how precious everything is  
and this hum, like, my legs, are shaking  
and these rays of light just, I kid you not, pour out of my body,  
and Luke's looking out the front window,  
and he's all, This is my mom's truck, J, watch your driving,  
and I'm like, Friend, Friend, Friend, you know I love your mother.  
And he's all, I'm sorry man,  
And I'm all, No worries,  
and—Wait, wait, wait, what was the question?

#### ***Six***

I vow not to slander, but to gossip mindfully about juicy tidbits.  
Granted, haphazard talk is corrosive,  
But once in the gaitan, I was standing behind a person,  
—I won't say his name here now—  
and he stepped into the zendo with the foot  
farthest away from the doorframe,  
and I raised this with my practice leader, and with his,  
complained about it to my roommate, and we both rolled our eyes

as if to say, of course,  
and in a small group I brought it up without mentioning his name.  
I was just trying to help his practice, but I would be lying  
If I didn't say it was also because this guy  
really works my nerve.

### ***Seven***

I vow not to praise self at the expense of others.  
If only other people would follow my example on this!  
Oh this one's very up for me right now in my practice.  
I've been practicing with this one a lot recently.  
Not praising self at the expense of others. It's a big one,  
but you know I take it as an opportunity  
to really look and see what's going on for me.  
What's coming up for me at the moment around this,  
in my interactions with others,  
is how when my needs aren't being met,  
and I make a request, and it's simply not heard,  
instead of just being able to take this up with the person,  
what I'll usually do is take it on and make it my own problem,  
but then I'll just vent with my partner about the whole thing.  
I'm really looking at this closely and practicing with it,  
seeing, what if I just try asking for what I need with the person.  
And then another thing I noticed when I looked at it  
Is that I'm more likely to praise others at the expense of self.  
I was feeling my friend from outside about this  
But she couldn't hear what I was saying.  
She doesn't understand things like I do.  
But then, she hasn't been practicing as long as I have.

### ***Eight***

I vow not to be avaricious.  
That's why if there are only three cookies  
in the small kitchen, I figure it isn't enough  
for everyone, so I think in such a case, isn't it better  
if I just have them myself  
so no one else will suffer from wanting them?

### ***Nine***

I'm all about not harboring ill will,  
It's fine, really. It's not a problem.  
I accept it. Some. things. you. just. have. to. let. go.

### ***Ten***

I vow not to abuse The Three Treasures.  
Sure, I'm basically on board with this one.  
Abuse sex, I get it. Abuse drugs, okay.  
But how do you abuse the Three Treasures?  
Am I missing something?  
Should I try it once just to know what I'm giving up?  
I'm not totally clear on what I'm actually vowing to do

or um, not do, but come on, I'm all for it.  
I mean, what I'm all for, is not abusing them.  
It's the Three Treasures we're talking about!  
Count me in, I mean, or out, you know, of abusing them,  
but for sure, I vow not to abuse The Three Treasures,  
whatever that means.

***Dedication***

Thus, on this half-moon midafternoon,  
at this time that is otherwise perfect for napping,  
though we cannot yet see the moon in its fullness,  
we know it is there, in the shadow,  
we're at least pretty sure it's there—  
let's say we can go to the bank on its being there,  
somewhere—  
Let us, thus, this afternoon, tolerate the broken,  
the irregular, the flawed the not so swift,  
the not nearly quite there yet, the best guess,  
that which we just barely manage to muster, the half-asterisked,  
through all world systems, to the unborn nature of all being.

—by *Genine Lentine*



**POET NOTES**

**Genine Lentine** is the author of *Poses: An Essay Drawn from the Model* (Kelly's Cove Press, 2012 chapbook), *Mr. Worthington's Beautiful Experiments on Splashes* (New Michigan Press, 2010) and co-author with Stanley Kunitz of *The Wild Braid: A Poet Reflects on a Century in the Garden* (W.W. Norton, 2005). She received an MS in Theoretical Linguistics from Georgetown University and an MFA in Poetry from New York University.

This year, she will continue a series of interviews, *Mattress Talks: Artists Discuss Discomfort* at the McRoskey Mattress Company. She has received grants and fellowships from Southern Exposure Gallery, Montalvo Arts Center, Headlands Center for the Arts, University of Arizona Poetry Center, and Hedgebrook, and the Boomerang Foundation. As Artist-in-Residence at San Francisco Zen Center (2009-10), she curated *The Expert's Mind: Ten Interdisciplinary Talks*, and *Nothing is Hidden*, a series of readings, screenings and artist talks. She teaches at the San Francisco Art Institute.

### **POET QUOTES ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF THIS POEM— Genine Lentine**

*In my own relationship with the bodhisattva precepts, I have found this ceremony very helpful and anchoring; voicing something so clearly as “I vow not to harbor ill will” is very useful in routing out where some residue of offense might be lingering, and in that room with others, it becomes possible to experiment with releasing into that vow.*

*My own relationship to the moon has long been one in which I've felt very attuned to its cycles, with my own patterns of accumulation and release paralleling lunar cycles. So of the many ceremonies that happen at SFZC where I lived for five years, I've felt particularly close to the Full Moon Ceremony.*

*One night, as I looked at a perfect half-moon above San Francisco, I imagined what a half-moon ceremony might entail, that such a ceremony, might explore the grayer areas of one's relationship with the precepts, and play with the form of the chants themselves which are generally concise and just a few lines long, and become more conversational. I amused myself with the idea of a speaker getting carried away in working out loopholes and workarounds. It's inspired by observing in myself and others the way that, as Blake suggests, to know what is enough you have to know what is too much, in other words, one way to be intimate with a precept is lean into it, to break it, or at least stretch it.*

*I wrote this poem in the fall of 2010, on the occasion of Skit Night at SFZC City Center.*

### **P.S. POETRY BONUS**

Poet **Stanley Kunitz** was assisted by **Genine Lentine** in creating his beautiful book, *The Wild Braid: A Poet Reflects on a Century in the Garden*. To be continued tomorrow.

*I can scarcely wait till tomorrow  
when a new life begins for me,  
as it does each day,  
as it does each day.*

—Stanley Kunitz—

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Poet **Stanley Kunitz** was assisted by yesterday's poet, **Genine Lentine**, in creating his last beautiful book, *The Wild Braid: A Poet Reflects on a Century in the Garden*, W.W. Norton & Company Ltd, 2005. Genine conversed with Stanley while working alongside him in his garden for six years. One month before Kunitz died, at 100 years old, *American Poetry Review* published *A Curious Gladness: A Garden Conversation with Stanley Kunitz and Genine Lentine*. You can Google a PDF of this rare conversation which includes a discussion of today's poem "Touch Me", one of the loveliest poems about aging and mortality I've ever read.

Make room in your busy day for this video link of Stanley Kunitz reading "Touch Me", <http://vimeo.com/36987644>

## Touch Me

*Summer is late, my heart.  
Words plucked out of the air  
some forty years ago  
when I was wild with love  
and torn almost in two  
scatter like leaves this night  
of whistling wind and rain.  
It is my heart that's late,  
it is my song that's flown.  
Outdoors all afternoon  
under a gunmetal sky  
staking my garden down,  
I kneeled to the crickets trilling  
underfoot as if about  
to burst from their crusty shells;  
and like a child again  
marveled to hear so clear  
and brave a music pour  
from such a small machine.  
What makes the engine go?  
Desire, desire, desire.  
The longing for the dance  
stirs in the buried life.*

One season only,  
    and it's done.  
So let the battered old willow  
thrash against the windowpanes  
and the house timbers creak.  
Darling, do you remember  
the man you married? Touch me,  
remind me who I am.

—by *Stanley Kunitz*



## POET NOTES

**Stanley Kunitz** was a generous soul whose passions were words and flowers. He died in 2006 at the age of almost 101, leaving behind a long trail of books, poems, impressive gardens and devoted friends. There are harsh and tragic aspects of his life, but Kunitz triumphed, and suggests that we can too. Believing that “community” was critical to the health of poetry and poets, Kunitz helped establish the Fine Arts Work Center, in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and founded Poet’s House in New York — a 45,000 volume poetry library and meeting place that brings poets and the public together. Kunitz received many awards for his poetry, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the Robert Frost Medal. He also served two terms as United States Poet Laureate (1974-76 and 2000-01), as well as New York State Poet Laureate (1987-89). Kunitz lived, worked, and gardened for many summers in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

At fifteen, Kunitz moved out of his Worcester, Massachusetts, home and became a butcher's assistant. Later he got a job as a cub reporter on *The Worcester Telegram*, where he would continue working during his summer vacations from college. Kunitz graduated *summa cum laude* in 1926 from Harvard College with an English major and a philosophy minor, and then earned a master's degree in English from Harvard the following year. He wanted to continue his studies for a doctorate degree, but was told by the university that the Anglo-Saxon students would not like to be taught by a Jew. During World War II, he was drafted into the Army in 1943 as a conscientious objector, and after undergoing basic training three times, served as a noncombatant at Gravelly Point, Washington in the Air Transport Command in charge of information and education. After the war, he began a long teaching career including a 22-year stint at Columbia University.

Many consider that the symbolism in Kunitz's poetry is influenced significantly by the work of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. Kunitz himself influenced many 20th-century poets, including James Wright, Mark Doty, Louise Glück, and Carolyn Kizer.

### **IN HIS OWN WORDS—Stanley Kunitz**

One of **Stanley Kunitz's** greatest loves was gardening. *"It's the way things are . . . death and life inextricably bound to each other. One of my feelings about working the land is that I am celebrating a ritual of death and resurrection. Every spring I feel that. I am never closer to the miraculous than when I am grubbing in the soil."*

*Poetry is the medium of choice for giving our most hidden self a voice--the voice behind the mask that all of us wear. Poetry says, "You are not alone in the world: all your fears, anxieties, hopes, despairs are the common property of the race." In a way, poetry is the most private of all the arts, and yet it is public, too, a form of social bonding. It gains its power from the chaos at its source, the untold secrets of the self. The power is in the mystery of the word.*

***When you look back on a lifetime and think of what has been given to the world by your presence, your fugitive presence, inevitably you think of your art, whatever it may be, as the gift you have made to the world in acknowledgment of the gift you have been given, which is the life itself. . . . That work is not an expression of the desire for praise or recognition, or prizes, but the deepest manifestation of your gratitude for the gift of life.***

*End with an image and don't explain.*

A master of the image and a hidden treasure of Midwestern poetry on par with poet Ted Kooser, **Tom Hennen** has been called “A Great Neglected Poet” by Thomas R. Smith who further says: “Despite his lack of recognition, Mr. Hennen, like any practical word-farmer, has simply gone about his calling with humility and gratitude in a culture whose primary crop has become fame. Hennen’s poetry arrives on the page free of literary ambition and the egoism that has nearly become de rigeur in the work of many poets in the 21st century. In fact, the very goal of Hennen’s work seems to be to “dissolve” the self—or at least to reduce its pull—by finding a greater consciousness in his outer world.”

I only recently discovered Tom Hennen while reading a review of his book *Darkness Sticks to Everything: Collected and New Poems*. A compilation of Hennen’s six chapbooks, plus newer poems, it was published in 2013 by Copper Canyon Press. Hennen’s poems ask us to slow down and pay attention, listen and look, sense the earth, its animals, the weather.

### What The Plants Say

Tree, give up your secret. How can you be so satisfied? Why don’t you need to change location, look for a better job, find prettier scenery, or even want to get away from people?

Grass, you don’t care where you turn up. You appear running wild in the oat field, out of a crack in a city street. You are the first word in the vocabulary of the earth. How is it that you are able to grow so near the lake without falling in? How can you be so alert for the early frost, bend in the slightest breeze, and yet be so hard to break that you are still there, quiet, green, among the ruins of others?

Weed, it is you with your bad reputation that I love the most. Teach me not to care what anyone has to say about me. Help me to be in the world for no purpose at all except for the joy of sunlight and rain. Keep me close to the edge where every wild thing begins.

—by *Tom Hennen*



## POET NOTES

**Tom Hennen** was born into a big Dutch-Irish family in 1942 Morris, Minnesota, where he grew up on farms. After abandoning college, he married and began work as a letterpress and offset printer in 1965. In 1972, backed by Robert Bly and Carol Bly, he helped found the Minnesota Writer's Publishing House, printing with a press stashed in his garage work that included his first chapbook *The Heron With No Business Sense*. He then worked for the Department of Natural Resources wildlife section in the 1970s and later as a wildlife technician at the Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge in South Dakota. Now retired, he lives in St. Paul near his children and grandchildren.

### IN HIS OWN VOICE—Tom Hennen

*There is some secret that water holds that we need to know. I edge up close to the creek and peer into it for a revelation of some kind, an explanation of the world. Some things I think I know: that the sun rises, that the darkness heals, that animals are intelligent, that rocks are aware, that the earth has a sense of humor.*

*The world is full of bodies. It's a happy thing and they should all be loved . . . Sometimes I forget which body I'm in, like now, as I rest on my favorite log, an old aspen near Muddy Creek. The log, warm in the spring day, seems to lose more weight each year. It is dissolving as it dies. Before long it will be light enough to lift off the ground, rise past the treetops and into the sky . . .*

*Lying here in the tall grass / Where it's so soft / Is this what it is to go home?*

To hear **Tom Hennen** read from his book *Darkness Sticks to Everything*, go:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1uKjLoQ2xg>

On the coldest day of this past winter, I bundled in layers and braced against sub-zero wind chill to visit my Cincinnati big-box retailer up the road. I went for the orchids. I went for beauty. And I fell in love with two rangy but gorgeous moth orchid plants relegated to the sale table, only \$5 each. *You're taking these home with you . . . on a day like this?* the clerk asked. I came prepared with insulation, double wrapped those lovelies and brought them home where they continue to blossom on the window ledge in the dining room.



Today's offering is from *Like a Beggar*, the fifth book of poems by **Ellen Bass** who I met at the Hocking Hills Poetry Festival in Logan, Ohio a few years ago. Ellen's writing influences my own. Her poems can be lush, or biting, or both. In any case, you can count on them for their accessibility and earthy intimacy. If you are unfamiliar with Ellen's work, pick up any one of her books and be prepared to swoon.

### Moth Orchids

If you are ill, or can't sleep, you can  
watch them spread their wings — the hours  
it might take for a baby to be born —  
the furred sepals arching, until  
the petals splay like a woman stretched, flung  
open, blood blooming through her veins.  
And then stillness, the white fans glisten  
day after day like sunlit snow  
tinged with a greeny kiss.  
Intricate, curved labellum like bones  
of a tiny pelvis and the slender tongue reaching out  
to the air as though the parts of the body  
could blend: mouth fused to hips, face to sex,  
the swollen pad where the bee lands.  
Here they float:  
eleven creamy moths, eleven white egrets  
suspended in flight, eleven babies in satin bonnets,  
eleven brides stiff in lace, the waxy pools  
of eleven white candles, eleven planets  
burning in space.

—by *Ellen Bass*



## POET NOTES

**Ellen Bass** was born in 1947 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She lives in Santa Cruz, California with her partner of many years, Janet Bryer, an entomologist. Ellen has children from a previous marriage.

Ms. Bass attended Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland where she graduated *magna cum laude* in 1968 with her bachelor's degree. She pursued a master's degree at Boston University and graduated in 1970. Bass currently is teaching in the low residency MFA program at Pacific University in Oregon and has been teaching Writing About Our Lives workshops since 1974 in Santa Cruz, California.

Her poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. Ellen's most recent book of poetry, *Like a Beggar*, was published in April 2014 by Copper Canyon Press. Her previous poetry books include *The Human Line* (Copper Canyon Press), and *Mules of Love* (BOA Editions). Among several prizes, **Bass has received the Elliston Book Award for Poetry from the University of Cincinnati.**

## PIONEER IN THE FIELD OF RECOVERY FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

**Ellen Bass's** nonfiction books include *I Never Told Anyone: Writings by Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (HarperCollins, 1983), *Free Your Mind: The Book for Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth* (HarperCollins 1996) and *The Courage To Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (Harper Collins 1988) co-written with Laura Davis, which has sold over a million copies and has been translated into twelve languages. This last book was, and still is, considered the bible of healing by psychotherapists and body workers worldwide. Highly recommended.

## GRATITUDE TO TWO OF HER TEACHERS

*I am a very, very, very slow learner and I didn't really show much promise early on. The learning process for me was slow and arduous. I am particularly skilled in teaching, I think, because of this. And part of my slow learning was because for many years I suffered from a lack of exposure to good teachers. My most amazing mentor has been **Dorianne Laux**. I began working with her in the late*

*nineties after a long time being away from writing poetry. I had been writing non-fiction and I longed to return to poetry, but I was at a stuck place and needed a teacher, the right teacher. People often say, I couldn't have done it without so and so, and sometimes it's just a way of expressing appreciation—they really could have done it. But in this case, it's literally true.*

*The other teacher who was essential to me was **Anne Sexton** who I studied with when I was getting my MA in Creative Writing at Boston University in 1970 (in those days they didn't yet call them MFA's). Anne's public persona was dramatic, flamboyant, but as a teacher she was very thoughtful and respectful of students and she loved teaching. Anne encouraged me to expand and write more and she plucked me out of the waters of acerbic criticism. Without her, I might have given up right then.*

### **IN HER OWN WORDS—Ellen Bass**

*My parents were both, in very different ways, devoted to precision. My father was a classic perfectionist. My mother a devotee of doing everything with as much grace as possible. I've written in poems about the way she'd wrap a bottle of liquor from the store so the package looked like a modest work of art and she'd fold our clothes so beautifully they looked like they had just been taken off the shelf. **There was nothing sloppy about my parents! And that's good training for a poet—precision, patience, perseverance.***

*Poetry is the means I use to grapple with life; to handle and knead it; to struggle with it until I can see its shape, its irony, its tragedy and beauty. Poetry lets me work with life until I can accept it in its commonality -- accept its shadows as well as its beauty in others and also in myself. It helps me stop wanting things to be different, to accept the way people are, however they are, and to approach life with the desire to see more clearly, without judgment, the truth of what is before my eyes.*

***I want the reader to actually understand what I'm communicating. It's not a theoretical process for me. It doesn't exist outside of relationship. The elements that I use in the poem, like metaphor or image or a particular language construct, are clearer rather than just decorative. But I can write only how I can write. I do try to keep stretching how I can write. But ultimately it does wind up being a pretty direct voice.***

*I believe that the unity of mind and body is an objective reality. They are not just parts somehow related to each other, but an inseparable whole while functioning. A brain without a body could not think.* —Moshe Feldenkrais

I could not be writing this sentence, or even forming it as a concept, if I did not have a body. As a somatic therapist and Feldenkrais® practitioner, I was most eager to attend **Marianne Boruch's** presentation at the Elliston Poetry Room at University of Cincinnati this past year. Through an initiative at Purdue, where she has spent most of her professional career, Ms. Boruch purposely studied illustration and Gross Human Anatomy Lab to enliven and inform her life as a poet. Today's poem is from her beautiful collection *Cadaver, Speak* (Copper Canyon Press. March 2014)

### The Body

has its little hobbies. The lung  
likes its air best after supper,  
goes deeper there to trade up  
for oxygen, give everything else  
away. (And before supper, yes,  
during too, but there's  
something about evening, that  
slow breath of the day noticed: *oh good,  
still coming, still going ...* ) As for  
bones—femur, spine,  
the tribe of them in there—they harden  
with use. The body would like  
a small mile or two. Thank you.  
It would like it on a bike  
or a run. Or in the water. Blue.  
And food. A habit that involves  
a larger circumference where a garden's  
involved, beer is brewed, cows  
wake the farmer with their fullness,  
a field surrenders its wheat, and wheat  
understands *I will be crushed  
into flour and starry-dust  
the whole room*, the baker  
sweating, opening a window  
to acknowledge such remarkable  
confetti. And the brain,  
locked in its strange  
dual citizenship, idles there in the body,  
neatly terraced and landscaped.  
Or left to ruin, such a brain,  
wild roses growing  
next to the sea. The body is  
gracious about that. Oh, their  
scent sometimes. Their  
tangle. In truth, in secret,

the first thing  
in morning the eye longs to see.

—by Marianne Boruch



## POET NOTES

**Marianne Boruch** was born in 1950 in Chicago. She received a BA at Illinois-Urbana in 1972 and completed an MFA program at Amherst in 1979. Ms. Boruch has taught at Tunghai University in Taiwan, and at the University of Maine at Farmington. In 1987, she developed and directed the MFA program in creative writing at Purdue University where she continues to be on faculty. Since 1988, she has also taught in the low-residency graduate Program for Writers at Warren Wilson. Ms. Boruch has published seven collections of poetry, and several books of poetry-related prose. In 2011, she was the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award Winner (a \$100,000 prize) for “The Book of Hours”.

## IN HER OWN WORDS—Marianne Boruch

*I always tell my students the whole notion of writing is so idealized. The bottom line is we're like carpenters or plumbers, our heads down, working steadily—as William Carlos Williams said—on our “small machines of words.” We can only hope that our work might be at times as useful to the world as what those carpenters and plumbers manage!*

*. . . poems are very odd, mysterious things, more so to me the longer I work toward them. But there are certain ones that have the source of poetry itself in them. They look back at those who write them. You don't report in a poem; you get in there and discover something you never thought of before, about self or world or both. And as [Robert] Frost tells us, “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.” No formulas allowed. That's the maddening thing about poems: One is always reinventing the wheel, and hoping for transformation.*

*The great subjects of poetry include love and death, knowledge and time—and nature. I feel strongly that every generation has to deal with those. The natural world is absorbing and strange, and with our smarts and worry and opposable thumbs, we think ourselves outside of it somehow. But we're not. I had this perverse impulse to take the more "poetic" solacing view of nature—as a benevolent and peaceful place and state of mind—and mess it up some, tell the unpretty truth about it. Some of the truth. The natural world is endlessly complex but really, it's mainly sex and violence in the woods.*

***I'd like to say I'm of the begging bowl theory of poetry. You put out your begging bowl and see what drops into it. I really don't want to know where the poem is going. And of course revision is a great thing. You get a draft and start tinkering and find out where it really wants to go.***



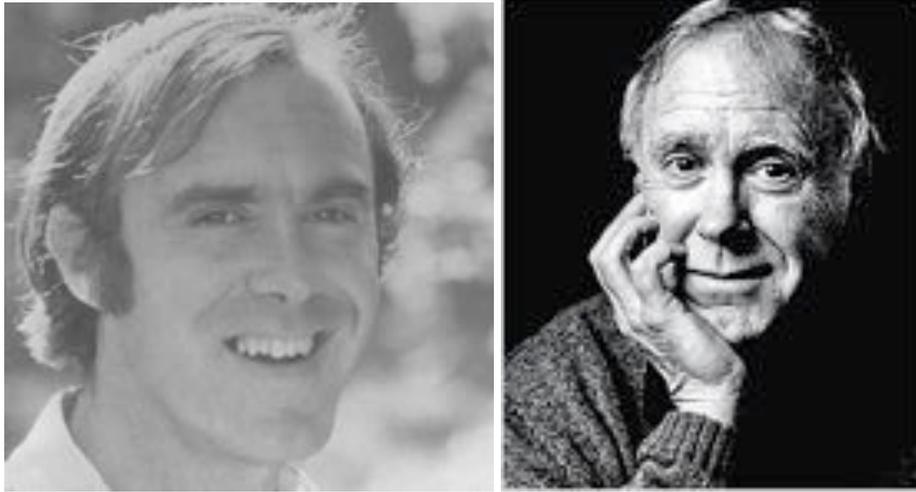
My first dynamic writing instructor was Sister Thomas Rita—fourth grade, St. Michael the Archangel School, Monroe, Michigan, 1959. She endeared us to the storyline of the paragraph, teaching us how to carefully consider subject, predicate and object to construct a five-sentence short story that would captivate the reader. Along the ledge of the chalkboard, Sister lined up colorful pictures she had pasted to cardboard, often the covers of the Saturday Evening Post depicting a variety of Rockwellian stories. How remarkable, I thought, that several of us nine-year olds chose the same picture to write about, yet created unique interpretations of what we saw. What our beloved teacher instilled in us was the value of understanding the world from many perspectives through the art of writing, and in doing so, prepared us for the next semester's subject: How to write the best short story of all— the poem.

Today's haunting poem by **Robert Hass** is a short prose poem (a single paragraph). Haas says: *I found myself experimenting with discursive and narrative prose inside the limits of the paragraph. I became interested in the idea of the paragraph as a form.*

### A Story About the Body

The young composer, working that summer at an artist's colony, had watched her for a week. She was Japanese, a painter, almost sixty, and he thought he was in love with her. He loved her work, and her work was like the way she moved her body, used her hands, looked at him directly when she made amused and considered answers to his questions. One night, walking back from a concert, they came to her door and she turned to him and said, *"I think you would like to have me. I would like that too, but I must tell you I have had a double mastectomy,"* and when he didn't understand, *"I've lost both my breasts."* The radiance that he had carried around in his belly like music—withered, very quickly, and he made himself look at her when he said, *"I'm sorry. I don't think I could."* He walked back to his own cabin through the pines, and in the morning he found a small blue bowl on the porch outside his door. It looked to be full of rose petals, but he found when he picked it up that the rose petals were on top; the rest of the bowl--she must have swept them from the corners of her studio— was full of dead bees.

— by Robert Hass



## POET NOTES

**Robert Hass** was born in San Francisco on March 1, 1941. He attended St. Mary's College in Moraga, California and received both an MA and Ph.D. in English from Stanford University. Hass served as Poet Laureate of the United States from 1995 to 1997. In a self-described "act of citizenship", Hass criss-crossed the country lecturing in places as diverse as corporate boardrooms and for civic groups, or as he has says, "*places where poets don't go.*" He lives in California with his wife, poet Brenda Hillman, and teaches at the University of California, Berkeley.

His books of poetry include *Time and Materials* which won the 2007 National Book Award, and *Field Guide* (1973), which was selected by Stanley Kunitz for the Yale Younger Poets Series. About Hass's work, Kunitz wrote, "*Reading a poem by Robert Hass is like stepping into the ocean when the temperature of the water is not much different from that of the air. You scarcely know, until you feel the undertow tug at you, that you have entered into another element.*"

Both in his writing and in his speaking there is an unwillingness to generalize. One thing that characterizes his work is his curiosity and attention to details, no matter what the subject. Hass has written poems that are very closely linked to or drawn from his personal life and history, often about nature, as well as political issues such as war and human rights abuses. Hass is also known for his work as a critic, editor, teacher, and translator, most notably of the Polish-Lithuanian Nobel-winner Czeslaw Milosz.

### ROBERT HASS, ON JUGGLING THE WRITING LIFE WITH ALL ELSE—

*It is, of course, difficult to juggle family life and writing. So, to be a writer in America, one needs to work hard at two jobs. You can have art and love in your life, or art and friendship, but you can't really have all three. . . . One really needs an orderly, bourgeois life to get work done. As an older writer, I find that the demands of family life are now less, but the demands of community life and work life and social life greater, so the problem never really goes away. A work ethic as an artist seems the nearest thing to a solution. . . . The connection between art and the soul's loneliness--each soul's separate task--the part of the self that isn't absorbed by other people's needs or answered entirely by love of another--is the reason why there is a need to juggle family life and writing. Anyway, it's difficult for me. I've never figured it out.*

Listen while you read: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiS8q\\_fifa0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiS8q_fifa0)

### Embarrassed

I thought it was OK.  
I could understand the reasons.  
They said, "There might be man or a nervous child seeing  
this small piece of flesh that they weren't quite expecting."  
So I whispered and tiptoed with nervous discretion.  
But after six months of her life sat sitting on lids,  
sipping on milk, nostrils sniffing up piss,  
trying not to bang her head on toilet roll dispensers,  
I wonder whether these public loo feeds offend her?  
Cuz I'm getting tired of discretion and being polite,  
as my baby's first sips are drowned drenched in shite.  
I spent the first feeding months of her beautiful life  
feeling nervous and awkward and wanting everything right.  
Surrounded by family until I stepped out the house,  
it took me eight weeks to get the confidence to go into town.  
Now the comments around me cut like a knife  
as I rush into toilet cubicles feeling nothing like nice.  
Because I'm giving her milk that's not in a bottle,  
wishing the cocaine generation white powder would topple.  
I see pyramid sales pitches across our green globe  
and female breasts banned — unless they're out just for show.  
And the more I go out, the more I can't stand it.  
I walk into town, feel I'm surrounded by bandits.  
Cuz in this country of billboards covered in tits  
and family newsagent magazines full of it,  
WH Smith top shelves out for men —  
Why don't you complain about them then?  
In this country of billboards covered in tits  
and family newsagent magazines full of it,  
WH Smith top shelves out for men, I'm getting embarrassed  
in case a small flash of flesh might offend.  
And I'm not trying to parade it.  
I don't want to make a show  
But when I'm told I'd be better just staying at home,  
and when another friend I know is thrown off a bus,  
and another mother told to get out a pub —  
even my grandma said maybe I was "sexing it up."  
And I'm sure the milk makers love all this fuss:  
all the cussing and worry and looks of disgust  
as another mother turns from nipples to powder,  
ashamed or embarrassed by the comments around her.  
And as I hold her head up and pull my cardy across  
and she sips on that liquor made by everyone's God,  
I think, for God's sake, Jesus drank it  
So did Siddhartha, Muhammad and Moses and both of their fathers

Ganesh and Shiva and Brigid and Buddha  
and I'm sure they weren't doing it sniffing up piss  
as their mothers sat embarrassed on cold toilet lids  
in a country of billboards covered in tits,  
in a country of low-cut tops, cleavage, and skin  
In a country of cloth bags and recycling bins  
and as I desperately try to take all of this in,  
I hold her head up.  
I can't get my head round  
the anger towards us and not to the sounds  
of lorries offloading formula milk  
into countries where water runs dripping in filth —  
in towns where breasts are oases of life,  
now dried up in two-for-one offers, enticed by labels  
and logos and gold standard rights  
claiming "breast milk is healthier powdered and white,"  
packaged and branded and sold at a price  
so that nothing is free in this money-fueled life.  
Which is fine if you need it or prefer to use bottles,  
where water is clean and bacteria boiled.  
But in towns where they drown in pollution and sewage,  
bottled kids die and they knew that they'd do it.  
In towns where pennies are savored like sweets,  
we're now paying for one thing that's always been free.  
In towns empty of hospital beds,  
babies die, diarrhea fueled that breast milk would end.  
So no more will I sit on these cold toilet lids,  
no matter how embarrassed I feel as she sips.  
Cuz in this country of billboards covered in tits —  
I think we should try to get used to this.

—by *Hollie McNish*



## POEM GLOSSARY

**WH Smith** is a large British retailer.

**Cardy** is British for a cardigan sweater.

**Lorries** are large transportation trucks.

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## POET NOTES

**Hollie McNish** is a published UK poet and spoken word artist who straddles the boundaries between the literary, poetic and pop scenes. She was UK Slam poetry champion in 2009, representing the UK and finishing 3rd behind Canada and the USA in the World Poetry Slam Finals in Paris. She has released two poetry albums, *Touch* and *Push Kick*, both to critical acclaim, and a first collection of written poetry, *Papers*, published by Greenwich Exchange, London. She is currently working on her third album.

Hollie's online videos have repeatedly gone viral, with *Mathematics*, a poem focusing on UK immigration, receiving over 1 million youtube views in just over a week. Her latest poem “*Embarrassed*” was tweeted to fans by renowned singer Pink.

As well as the UK, Hollie has toured and run residencies in Belgium, Australia, France, Germany and Portugal, and for the British Council in Latvia and Poland. She has won Substanz, Germany's largest poetry slam, as well as being crowned Latvia's Poetry Slam Champion in 2011. Although mainly in English, she also writes partially in French and German.

Ms. McNish is from Reading. Her parents are both from Glasgow. She graduated from Cambridge University in 2005 and has a Masters in Development Economics from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. She lives between Cambridge, London and Glasgow with her child and partner.

### IN HER OWN WORDS ABOUT THIS POEM—Hollie McNish

*I wrote this poem in a public toilet after my 6 month old baby fell asleep. I was in town on my own a lot with her and the first time I fed her someone commented that I should stay home. Baby's need to be breastfed every 2-3 hours. It's impossible to run home. It's a stupid argument anyway. But I was embarrassed and for 6 months took her into toilets when I was alone without the support of boyfriend, friends, mum etc. I hate that I did that but I was nervous, tired and felt awkward. And now I find it weird that our TVs, media etc., never show breastfeeding in soaps, cartoons, anything. That we and the US are so bloody scared of it. It's weird. I find our culture weird and even weirder, when people are so strapped for cash. It is costing parents a huge amount of money paying for something which most of us, those of us who are lucky enough for our bodies to do so, get for free. I have a lot of mates who complain they're broke but stop breastfeeding because they feel awkward, and pay for formula. Why are we paying billionaire companies for something our bodies produce for FREE. It's really good marketing that we feel so wrong doing something like this I think. And it makes me sadder every day.*

—UK Spoken Word Poet Hollie McNish—

**My Skeleton**

My skeleton,  
you who once ached  
with your own growing larger

are now,  
each year  
imperceptibly smaller,  
lighter,  
absorbed by your own  
concentration.

When I danced,  
you danced.  
When you broke,  
I.

And so it was lying down,  
walking,  
climbing the tiring stairs.  
Your jaws. My bread.

Someday you,  
what is left of you,  
will be flensed of this marriage.

Angular wristbone's arthritis,  
cracked harp of ribcage,  
blunt of heel,  
opened bowl of the skull,  
twin platters of pelvis—  
each of you will leave me behind,  
at last serene.

What did I know of your days,  
your nights,  
I who held you all my life  
inside my hands  
and thought they were empty?

You who held me all my life  
inside your hands  
as a new mother holds  
her own unblanketed child,  
not thinking at all.

—by *Jane Hirshfield*



## POET NOTES

**Jane Hirshfield** was born in New York City in 1953, and received her bachelor's degree in the first Princeton graduating class that included women. Her post-graduate studies were not in the academy, but at the San Francisco Zen Center followed by three years of monastic practice at the Tasajara Zen Mountain Center. She has never been a full-time academic, but has taught extensively in workshops and Visiting Poet programs, including serving as Elliston Visiting Poet at the University of Cincinnati in 2000. She lives in Mill Valley, California.

Today's poem is from Ms. Hirshfield's brand new book, *The Beauty* (Alfred A. Knopf, March 2015). Hirshfield has nine other poetry collections. I particularly favor: *Given Sugar, Given Salt* (HarperCollins, 2001). I also like her collection of essays: *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* (HarperCollins, 1997) as well as *The Ink Dark Moon*, her co-translation of the work of the two foremost women poets of classical-era Japan; *The Ink Dark Moon* was instrumental in bringing the tanka (a 31-syllable Japanese poetic form) to the attention of American poets.

In 1979, Hirshfield received lay ordination in Soto Zen at the San Francisco Zen Center.

### A 3-MINUTE SKELETON TREAT

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gu0eKSkn0MI>

### IN HER OWN WORDS—Jane Hirshfield

*Mostly, I work without any kind of hope. My intentions in writing a new poem have nothing to do with thoughts of its effects upon others. But afterward, if my work is going to be read by others at all, I might wish my poems to bring some sense of enlargement to their readers. Poems want to awaken intimacy, connection, expansion and wildness.*

*Advice for aspiring writers? Learn how to pay attention with every one of your senses, inner and outer. Read. Live. Love. Write. Then do these things more. And last, keep the window open some inches more than is comfortable.*

*I sometimes feel like I'm the last poet in America who's not writing a poem every day. [laughs] It seems that everybody else has taken up William Stafford's practice of writing a poem every day before breakfast. But, as I say when this question comes up in public, I'm the poet with the bad work ethic. There are times when I do write every day, but there are many more times when I don't. I write so terribly badly when I have nothing to say that, as Emily Dickinson used to say, "It would embarrass my dog." [both laugh] And my dog's been dead eight years [Fox laughs] and she'd still be embarrassed. And that then depresses me, and I really do feel, "Why write anymore?" **I don't want my relationship to poetry to be dutiful. Poetry is not obligatory, it's not work. It's an inner request far subtler and deeper than that.***

*Habit, fear, and laziness conspire to keep us in the realm of the deeply familiar.*

I could fill an entire April with stellar poems by **Alden Nowlan**. I was introduced to his work through Canadian poet Robyn Sarah who was featured in April Gifts 2008. Nowlan's poems have appeared twice before in these offerings. You can find "He Attempts to Love His Neighbors" (April Gifts 2008) and "He Sits Down on the Floor of a School for the Retarded" (April Gifts 2014) in the archives at Little Pocket Poetry.

*Perhaps no other poet in Canada is as versatile by genre (poetry, fiction, journalism, history, drama for stage, radio, film and television and political speech writing) and as prolific as Alden Nowlan. There are 12,000 leaves in his correspondence, for example, in his papers at the University of Calgary. His eclectic devouring of available libraries (private and public) since he was a child allowed him to avoid the pitfalls of formal education—the most critical pitfall being the standardization of our thinking (brainwashing). He had an immense capacity to identify with the "other." In fact, it is so powerful that the poet himself becomes the third person, the "other," as he says in his notebook pages, in his work and in his life. This last feat is his most complex feat, but he achieves it with a magical simplicity that nearly defies analysis. Of course, empathy (entering) is the antithesis of analysis (circling around).*

—Gregory M. Cook—

author of *One Heart, One Way: The Life of Alden Nowlan*

### Great Things Have Happened

We were talking about the great things  
that have happened in our lifetimes;  
and I said, "Oh, I suppose the moon landing  
was the greatest thing that has happened  
in my time." But, of course, we were all lying.  
The truth is the moon landing didn't mean  
one-tenth as much to me as one night in 1963  
when we lived in a three-room flat in what once had been  
the mansion of some Victorian merchant prince  
(our kitchen had been a clothes closet, I'm sure),  
on a street where by now nobody lived  
who could afford to live anywhere else.  
That night, the three of us, Claudine, Johnnie and me,  
woke up at half-past four in the morning  
and ate cinnamon toast together.

"Is that all?" I hear somebody ask.

Oh, but we were silly with sleepiness  
and, under our windows, the street-cleaners  
were working their machines and conversing in Italian, and  
everything was strange without being threatening,  
even the tea-kettle whistled differently  
than in the daytime: it was like the feeling  
you get sometimes in a country you've never visited  
before, when the bread doesn't taste quite the same,  
the butter is a small adventure, and they put  
paprika on the table instead of pepper,

except that there was nobody in this country  
except the three of us, half-tipsy with the wonder  
of being alive, and wholly enveloped in love.

—by Alden Nowlan

## POET NOTES

**Alden Nowlan** (1933-1983) was born into poverty in Windsor, Nova Scotia to a 15 year-old mother and an alcoholic father. Nowlan left school in grade 5 and during his adolescent years worked at a variety of jobs, all of them menial, manual, or both. He was a pulp cutter, a farmhand, a sawmill worker, a night watchman, a ditch digger and a logger. Primarily self-educated, he later went on to work as a newspaperman.

At 19, Nowlan's artfully embroidered résumé landed him a job with *Observer*, a newspaper in Hartland, New Brunswick. While working at the *Observer*, Nowlan began writing books of poetry. His job at the newspaper put him in contact with Claudine Orser, a divorcee who was a linotype operator. The two started dating, and Nowlan soon fell in love. He began to look for better-paid employment that would take him out of Hartland and provide a life for him, for Claudine and for her nine-year-old son, John, who Nowlan adopted. In the summer of 1963 he, Claudine, and John moved to Saint John, where Nowlan found a job as a reporter for the *Telegraph-Journal*. He quickly rose to the position of provincial editor and then night news editor.

In 1966, Nowlan was diagnosed with throat cancer. His health forced him to give up his job, but at the same time the University of New Brunswick offered him the position of Writer-in-Residence. He remained in the position until his death on June 27, 1983 after being in a coma after collapsing at his home.

## RECOMMENDED BOOKS

*An Exchange of Gifts: Poems New and Selected*, by Alden Nowlan (1985)

*What Happened When He Went to the Store for Bread*, by Alden Nowlan (1993)

*If I Could Turn and Meet Myself: The Life of Alden Nowlan*, by Patrick Toner (2000)

*One Heart, One Way: The Life of Alden Nowlan*, by Gregory M. Cook (2003)

## IN HIS OWN WORDS—Alden Nowlan

*As a child I had three choices: madness, death or verse..... It's hellish what the sicknesses of our culture have done to us all. So that love sometimes becomes simply protection against loneliness when it should be an exchange of gifts.*

*The day the child realizes that all adults are imperfect, he becomes an adolescent; the day he forgives them, he becomes an adult; the day he forgives himself, he becomes wise.*

Diagnosed at the age of 33 with thyroid cancer, Nolan's illness marked a major turning point in his maturity as a poet. From one of his letters during the early years of his illness: *Ever since I got sick I've become less and less hypocritical and more and more honest. Since we're all of us going to be out of the world so soon it seems silly not to tell one another what we really think and feel.*

Grand Canyon



Eiger Mountain, Swiss Alps

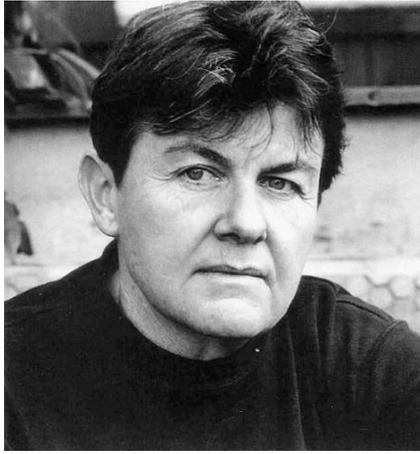


I am not a seasoned traveler, but I have had the good fortune to experience the majesty of the Grand Canyon. I have been dwarfed by the Red Woods, minimized by Half Dome and El Capitan, and humbled by Big Sur where the mountains rise abruptly from the Pacific Ocean overwhelming the coastline. Only once have I been abroad, to beautiful Norway where the fjords and mountains left me awed and speechless. Mother Nature on steroids, I say under my breath, uneasy with such grandeur. As grateful as I am to have experienced those monumental natural formations, I am always eager to return to the Midwest comfort of shallow rolling hills, familiar farmland, manageable hikes through deciduous woods, and fresh water streams and lakes where nothing can eat me alive. I unashamedly prefer the “blandeur” to the grandeur of the earth’s landscape. Grateful to Kay Ryan for stating this so beautifully.

### **Blandeur**

If it please God,  
 let less happen.  
 Even out Earth’s  
 rondure, flatten  
 Eiger, blanden  
 the Grand Canyon.  
 Make valleys  
 slightly higher,  
 widen fissures  
 to arable land,  
 remand your  
 terrible glaciers  
 and silence  
 their calving,  
 halving or doubling  
 all geographical features  
 toward the mean.  
 Unlean against our hearts.  
 Withdraw your grandeur  
 from these parts.

— *by Kay Ryan*



## POET NOTES

**Kay Ryan** was born in San Jose, California in 1945, and was raised in the San Joaquin Valley and the Mojave Desert. She has two degrees in English from University of California, Los Angeles. Since 1971, she has lived in Marin County, California, and has taught English part-time at the College of Marin in Kentfield. Carol Adair, who was also an instructor at the College of Marin, was Ryan's partner from 1978 until Adair's death in 2009.

In 1976, Ryan rode her bicycle on a four-thousand-mile trip, along back roads from Oregon to California, hoping that the trip would help her decide whether or not she wanted to be a writer. When she reached Colorado's Hoosier Pass, she felt her mind sharpen "like a laser beam" on the fact that writing gave her "pleasure like nothing else." She had found her answer, but she had no idea how to go about becoming a poet. For inspiration, she turned to an unlikely source, the *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* books, which taught her to "utilize the fanciful." The books served as fodder for her eight-year, self-imposed apprenticeship, during which she wrote "a gazillion" poems before publishing her first collection in 1983—self-published with the help of friends.

While she found a commercial publisher for her second collection, *Strangely Marked Metal* (1985), her work went nearly unrecognized until the mid-1990s, when some of her poems were anthologized and the first reviews in national journals were published. Ryan became widely recognized following her receipt of the \$100,000 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize in 2004. Her book *The Best of It: New and Selected Poems* (2010) won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.

Ryan's tightly compressed, rhythmically dense poetry reveals her barbed wit and unique facility with what she calls "recombinant" rhyme—hidden rhymes that appear in the middle, rather than at the end of her short lines—a product of years of thought. Ryan has said that her poems do not start with imagery or sound, but rather develop "the way an oyster does, with an aggravation." Ryan says her meandering approach to her subject, "*gives my poems a coolness. I can touch things that are very hot because I've given them some distance.*"

### IN HER OWN WORD—Kay Ryan

From an interview in *The Paris Review* by Sarah Fay

**Are you still generating poems all of the time?**

*If I'm lucky, I probably write twelve keepers a year.*

**During the nine years between *Strangely Marked Metal* and *Flamingo Watching*, were you writing every day?** *No, not every day. I shingled the outside of the house. That took three years. All these shingles are by me.*

**Do you feel that you take too long between collections?** *I think there's too much poetry out there. I don't need to add to the waste stream.*

**How much time do you spend away from your desk as opposed to sitting at it, working?** *I spend vastly more time away from my desk. I've spent maybe one hundredth of my time writing. It seems like many people think that if you drive yourself crazy, then you can write. I'm absolutely not interested in that. It made sense to me to be as whole and well as I could be, and as happy. I wanted to see what a fortunate life would produce. What writing would come out of a mind that didn't try to torment itself? What did I have to know? What did I have to do rather than what can I torment and bend myself into doing? What was the fruit on that tree? I've had a terrifically fortunate life. Which is not to say I'm talking nothing but sunshine. A certain kind of perhaps rather unwholesome-looking distortion or lopsidedness is necessary to the writer's mind, but I never wanted to add to the grief of being human, the burden of it, or have my work do that. I never wanted to make things harder for people, or to make them feel more weighed down or guilty.*

**How do you feel about giving readings?** *I like to read my poems, but I don't like to hear other people read theirs.*

**Didn't you want to be a stand-up comedian at some point?** *Yes, though I didn't really have the iron nerves for it. But I do love to hear laughter at a reading. Laughter creates a kind of contact. I hate that atmosphere at a poetry reading where everybody sits there being subtle and sensitive . . . People have trouble with my work because they want to say it's humorous the way Billy Collins's poetry is humorous, and that it's witty. But there's something else, this cartoony thing. When I read my poems to any audience there's a lot of laughing, but I always warn them that it's a fairy gift and will turn scary when they get it home.*

**Have you ever tried to write fiction?** *I could never ever write fiction. I have no idea what people are thinking.*

## Ornithology

Walking toward the library, I pass three children  
staring down at a dead crow and daring each other  
to poke it with a stick.

I stop, too, because I know a little about crows –  
how, for instance, they are different from ravens.  
I could tell these well-dressed children that:

ravens are black with a purple tint while crows  
are denied that royal hue. A crow's tail is squared-off  
like the crew-cut on the boy at Menchie's who hands  
them the expensive frozen yogurt

while a raven's tale is triangular, a shape discovered  
by the Persians and beloved by the 17th century  
mathematician Blaise Pascal. Furthermore, ravens  
love solitude and prefer remote hills and woods  
while a crow will perch on a stop sign and brag  
about it endlessly.

But that isn't what they are concerned about.  
They want to know about Death. And for that  
I would have to fetch the skull from my desktop  
and ask the sun to hide its face behind a dark,  
galleon-shaped cloud and then –

Oh, wait. They're offering me the stick. All  
they really want to know is will I poke the corpse.

Of course. And when I do and it moves, they  
run away shrieking and delighted. More alive,  
if possible, than before.

—by *Ron Koertge*



## POET NOTES

**Ron Koertge** (pronounced KUR-chee) is a prolific writer who has published widely in seminal poetry magazines and journals. Koertge also writes fiction for teenagers, including many novels-in-verse: *The Brimstone Journals*, *Stoner & Spaz*, *Strays*, *Shakespeare Bats Cleanup*, and *Shakespeare Makes the Playoffs*. All were honored by the American Library Association and two received PEN awards. He lives in South Pasadena, California. A recently retired teacher of English and creative writing (Pasadena City College 1965-2002), all he does now is write, go to the movies, and bet on thoroughbreds. Chronically immature (says he), writing for teens is a perfect medium for him, as a decade of honors and awards attests. Koertge says, “If you think writing fiction is tough, try picking horses.” He is married to Bianca Richards and considers himself a lucky man.

**IN HIS OWN WORDS—Ron Koertge** (from an online interview)

**Your poems cover a range of topics, from the inner life of superheroes to relationships to writing, how do you get these ideas?** *I tend to read somebody else until something they’ve written about or said. A single word in somebody else’s poem will just get me going. I mean, I don’t get elated particularly about writing well, and I don’t get depressed about writing badly. I go to work. I take my little lunch box upstairs and Buddy the cat and I go to work.*

**What advice would you have for an aspiring poet or someone who’s just starting out writing?** *Take another medium, take pottery. You can’t just sit around and wait to be inspired. You have to sit down and work with the clay, the language. It’s what you’ve got. If I don’t work literally every day, I get very hard to live with. I’m cranky, and I go to the track in the afternoon and I lose a couple hundred dollars, and I’m really cranky. My wife will just say to me, “Jesus, shut up and go to work.” So I do.*

**If you had a soapbox topic about writing (something you're passionate about), what would it be?** *I think prose writers should read more poetry. Out loud. I read a lot of really infelicitous prose: the plot drives the story, the characters are riveting, but sometimes the sentences are so clunky. A discipline of reading poetry out loud would help that.*

**What advice do you have for poets and/or fiction writers?**

*Write a lot and don't be afraid to write badly. Some of the pages I turn out are so embarrassing but my motto is this: what's the gift of this terrible poem? This cringeworthy page? This rough rough rough draft? There's always one.*

**Any other thoughts?**

*It's a pleasure to be able to write. I've never understood the so-called agony of the blank page. Just fill it up!*

*There (in Buchenwald) I learned that poetry is an act, an incantation, a kiss of peace, a medicine. I learned that poetry is one of the rare, very rare things in the world which can prevail over cold and hatred. . . . A medicine, neither more nor less. An element which, communicated to the human organism, modified the vital circulation, making it slower, or more rapid. It was, in short, something whose effects were as concrete as those of a chemical substance, I was convinced of this. —Jacques Lusseyran*

The holocaust is a subject most writers shy away from for fear of seeming false or assumptive. **Cyrus Cassells'** masterful ability as a poet, along with his empathic spirit, have allowed him to amplify moments of impossible beauty in the midst of terrible despair. His gorgeous poems in *The Crossed-Out Swastika* (Copper Canyon Press, 2012) are difficult to read, but they will enrich and deepen your life.

### The Ravine

In my fifth  
holy year on earth,

undeterred,  
I climbed out of a corpse-filled,

breakspirit ravine,  
clutching the roots of trees

(so beautiful,  
the god-tall cypresses,

the grandfather pines  
in that part of the Crimea),

and groped my way, gingerly,  
toward my twilit village,

the lone, itinerant survivor.  
The pull, the rose light

of home  
is unkillable.

—by *Cyrus Cassells*

## POET NOTES

Poet and translator **Cyrus Cassells** was born in 1957 in Delaware and earned a BA from Stanford University. He is the author of a number of award winning collections of poetry, including *The Crossed-Out Swastika* (Copper Canyon Press, 2012) —stories of both fictional and real-life young Europeans caught in the violence and terror of World War II. Cassells has worked as a translator, film critic, and actor. He currently teaches poetry in the MFA program at Texas State University–San Marcos.



## POEM NOTES

Between 1941 and 1944, almost one and a half million Ukrainian Jews were assassinated when Nazi mobile firing squads invaded the Soviet Union. Today's poem, from Cassells's collection *The Crossed-Out Swastika*, is based on the testimony of Nina Roufimovna Lisitsina, a Crimean girl born in 1939 who was the only member of her village to survive a mass-grave execution.

### IN HIS OWN WORDS—Cyrus Cassells

*My poetry is deeply rooted in my world travels and spiritual questing; it is characteristically panoramic, multicultural, and internationalist in spirit. I consider myself an African-American seeker, ambassador, and citizen of the world.*

*I have a powerful sense of history as very human and individual, as a lived, individual experience, not as a master narrative overlaid on people's lives. I'm mostly interested in what it felt like to be a particular person in a particular place at a particular time, for example, of what it really felt like to be a kid or a younger person in World War II.*

*My impulse is to move to beauty as a healing approach for things that are really horrific or challenging . . . beauty that is in some way not ornamental.*

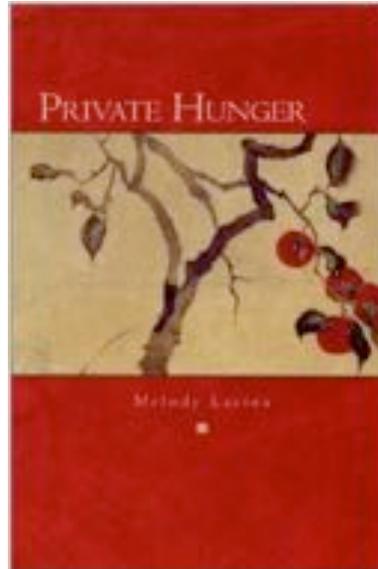
**After I Die**

Sell everything. Promise me  
an auction, an old guy hollering  
prices in a broken yodel,  
his voice so rough you'd swear  
he used to shuck corn  
with his throat. Better yet  
a yard sale. Strangers can finger  
bowls and coats and wonder  
why I ever bought them and whether  
they would like them any better  
marked a couple dollars down.  
Don't let the quilt go cheap—  
Amish ladies in Iowa went blind  
stitching it. The bed frame still folds  
reluctantly into a sofa,  
and anyone who wants a hard  
mattress will not mind  
how stiff the futon has grown.  
Be sure the labels  
on the sweaters from Venice  
are showing. You know how  
people will buy anything  
Italian. Give away the books.

Burn the body. Keep the ashes  
in a mayonnaise jar,  
the way we used to hoard  
lightning bugs until they stopped  
glowing. When no one is watching,  
tap out a handful of the ashes  
on the beach at Limantour.  
A slow crooked line  
behind the tide, as if I were dragging  
my toes, complaining how cold  
the water leaves the sand.  
Then buy plane tickets  
with the yard sale money.  
Pack the mayonnaise jar  
carefully. Unwrap it in what was  
my parents' backyard to scatter  
bone shards beneath the lilac bushes.  
After that go to Spain, and don't forget  
the jar. Open it on the first  
stone street above the cathedral  
in Granada, where an old woman  
fierce with her broom will not

look up. Drop what you have  
left of me in front of her.  
Ashes to dust. And always  
someone sweeping.

—by *Melody Lacina*



## POET NOTES

**Melody Lacina** grew up in Iowa and now lives in Berkeley, California. Her work has appeared in the anthologies *I Feel a Little Jumpy Around You* (edited by Naomi Shihab Nye) and *bite to eat place* and in various journals including *Rain City Review*, the *Berkeley Poetry Review*, the *Alaska Quarterly Review*, the *North American Review*, and *Rattle*.

## ABOUT *PRIVATE HUNGER*

*Private Hunger*, Melody Lacina's first collection of poetry, begins as a book of snapshots from a family album, becomes a carousel of color slides from travels in Europe, and concludes as a gallery of poems celebrating the vitality of the body and its enormous appetite for life. It was published by the University of Akron Press in 2001. It is a book about passion and "private hunger", familiar with unsatisfied longings, losses, grief, and death, understanding how our desires sustain and torment us from childhood to the end. Lacina's poems are written in spare lines and taut rhythms, in a voice comfortable with both anxiety and ecstasy. Lacina's writing evokes sensual pleasures, but with a delicate sense of restraint, balance and control.

## IN HER OWN WORDS—Melody Lacina

*I believe in the underside ... the rhythm and off-rhyme of the ordinary.*

Verge

A month at least before the bloom  
and already five bare-limbed cherries  
by the highway ringed in a haze  
of incipient fire

—middle of the afternoon,  
a faint pink-bronze glow. Some things  
wear their becoming:

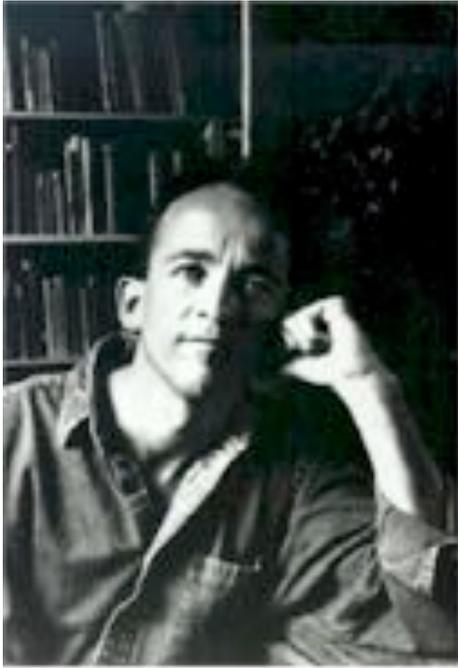
the night we walked,  
nearly strangers, from a fevered party  
to the corner where you'd left your motorcycle,  
afraid some rough wind might knock it to the curb,  
you stood on the other side  
of the upright machine, other side  
of what would be us, and tilted your head  
toward me over the wet leather seat  
while you strapped your helmet on,  
engineer boots firm on the black pavement.

Did we guess we'd taken the party's fire with us,  
somewhere behind us that dim apartment  
cooling around its core like a stone?  
Can you know, when you're not even a bud  
but a possibility poised at some brink?

Of course we couldn't see ourselves,  
though love's the template and rehearsal  
of all being, something coming to happen  
where nothing was...

But just now  
I thought of a troubled corona of new color,  
visible echo, and wondered if anyone  
driving in the departing gust and spatter  
on Seventh Avenue might have seen  
the cloud breathed out around us  
as if we were a pair  
of—could it be?—soon-to-flower trees.

—by *Mark Doty*



## POEM NOTES

*Often we don't seem to know when something new—maybe something major—is beginning. 'Falling in love' is, in truth, a recognition of something that's already happened; when you know you're in love, you've already arrived there. But can you ever tell when you're just on the brink of something exhilarating, disruptive, lovely? — Mark Doty*

## POET NOTES

**Mark Doty** is the author of numerous books of poems, including “Deep Lane,” which is forthcoming from W. W. Norton in 2015. He is a professor/writer-in-residence at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., and a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

Doty was 17 when he met poet William Stafford. Then, a “dedicated surrealist”, Doty was intent on showing Stafford a packet of his poems. Stafford told him that he had a feeling the poems were in heaven, still, and not on earth yet. Between his teenage years and his ascension to a mainstay in the contemporary poetry scene, Doty, if anything else, has managed to tug his poetry to earth and anchor it there.

## IN HIS OWN WORDS—Mark Doty

*Love, I think, is a gateway to the world, not an escape from it. Intimacy, says the phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, is the highest value. I resist this statement at first. What about artistic achievement, or moral courage, or heroism, or altruistic acts, or work in the cause of social change? What about wealth or accomplishment? And yet something about it rings true, finally—that what we want is to be brought into relationship, to be inside, within. Perhaps it's true that nothing matters more to us than that.*

—from *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon: On Objects and Intimacy*

*Into the paradise of euphony, the good poet must introduce hell. Broken paradises are the only kind worth reading.*

*In the museums we used to visit on family vacations when I was a kid, I used to love those rooms which displayed collections of minerals in a kind of closet or chamber which would, at the push of a button, darken. Then ultraviolet lights would begin to glow and the minerals would seem to come alive, new colors, new possibilities, and architectures revealed. Plain stones became fantastic, “futuristic...” Of course there wasn’t any black light in the center of the earth, in the caves where they were quarried; how strange that these stones should have to be brought here, bathed with this unnatural light in order for their transcendent characters to emerge. Irradiation revealed a secret aspect of the world. Imagine illness as this light; demanding, torturous, punitive, it nonetheless reveals more of what things are. A certain glow of being appears. I think this is what is meant when we speculate that death is what makes love possible.”  
—from *Heaven’s Coast**

**Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised As A Love Poem**

Here's what I've got, the reasons why our marriage might work: Because you wear pink but write poems about bullets and gravestones. Because you yell at your keys when you lose them, and laugh, loudly, at your own jokes. Because you can hold a pistol, gut a pig. Because you memorize songs, even commercials from thirty years back and sing them when vacuuming. You have soft hands. Because when we moved, the contents of what you packed were written *inside* the boxes. Because you think swans are overrated. Because you drove me to the train station. You drove me to Minneapolis. You drove me to Providence. Because you underline everything you read, and circle the things you think are important, and put stars next to the things you think I should think are important, and write notes in the margins about all the people you're mad at and my name almost never appears there. Because you make that pork recipe you found in the Frida Khalo Cookbook. Because when you read that essay about Rilke, you underlined the whole thing except the part where Rilke says love means to deny the self and to be consumed in flames. Because when the lights are off, the curtains drawn, and an additional sheet is nailed over the windows, you still believe someone outside can see you. And one day five summers ago, when you couldn't put gas in your car, when your fridge was so empty—not even leftovers or condiments—there was a single twenty-ounce bottle of Mountain Dew, which you paid for with your last damn dime because you once overheard me say that I liked it.

—by *Matthew Olzmann*



## POET NOTES

Poet **Matthew Olzmann** was born in Detroit and lived for 15 years in Hamtramck, Michigan. He earned his BA from the University of Michigan-Dearborn and MFA from Warren Wilson College. His first collection of poems, *Mezzanines* (2013), won a Kundiman Poetry Prize and was published by Alice James Books. Olzmann has received praise for his thoughtful style and wide-ranging subject matter. His honors and awards include fellowships from the Kresge Arts Foundation, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop. He is the poetry editor of the *The Collagist* and currently teaches at Warren Wilson College. Olzmann is married to poet Vievee Francis.

### IN HIS OWN WORDS—Matthew Olzmann

*I've heard it said that most of literature, in some way, grapples with only one question: what does it mean to be alive? I'm probably not capable of answering that question, but if the idea of mortality hangs over a lot of these poems, it's because I often get stuck thinking in binary terms; I get at things by considering their opposites. What does it mean to be alive? Not a clue. What does it mean to not be alive? Now I'm sufficiently terrified. What I'm saying is I tend to be the type of writer who understands the dark only by flicking the lights on and off a couple dozen times. I understand the deep end of the pool by splashing through the shallow side.*

*If I haven't written something in three months, there's a lot of pressure when I actually return to the writing desk. In those moments, I feel whatever I write has to be good. If I haven't written for a long time, I become less likely to write at all. I'll start trying to create the ideal situation for writing: I have to have three hours of uninterrupted time, a clean desk, a cup of coffee, all my other work must be done first, inspiration, and appointment with the muse, etc. I have to make it count because it's the only thing I've written. However, when I'm writing every day—even a little bit—it clears some of that away for me. If what I write is garbage, then I'll be back at it tomorrow and the next day and the next. You write as hard and as well as you can, punch out at the end of the day, eat dinner, go to sleep, and come back to work tomorrow.*

**How She Described Her Ex-Husband When The Police Called**

He's the man who wants to live on Park Place  
but can only afford Virginia, the Pennsylvania line  
running through his backyard, fast as a chance.

He's the hat who owes a luxury tax.

He's a no-trump bid without all the aces. A queen finesse,  
eight ever, nine never, that fails to fall  
into the dummy just right.

He's down a trick.

Just call him Colonel Mustard, pinning Miss Scarlett  
against the conservatory wall but rubbing noses (literally)  
with Mrs. Peacock, endowed by her old money.

He needs cash and carries a lead pipe.

Slow to ante up, he's jackpot dreams, quad or flush  
scraping the felt for another card  
odds turning on the river.

He's a bluff on junk.

He's the joker pinned in bicycle spokes  
vanishing down the street.

—by *Martha Clarkson*

—from *Rattle #29*, Summer 2008  
2009 Neil Postman Award Honorable Mention



## POET NOTES

**Martha Clarkson's** poetry and fiction can be found in *Crab Creek Review*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *descant*, *Seattle Review*, *Portland Review*, *monkeybicycle*, *elimae*, and *Nimrod*. She is a recipient of a Washington State Poets William Stafford prize, a Pushcart Nomination, and is listed under “Notable Stories,” *Best American Non-Required Reading for 2007*.

Ms. Clarkson manages corporate workplace design in Seattle and has been instrumental in evolving the workplace for Microsoft around the world. She also conducts research on the workplace and produces videos and story-telling to communicate the visions with customers in the industry.

### IN HER OWN WORDS—Martha Clarkson

As former Poetry Editor of online magazine Word Riot, Martha Clarkson answered these questions:

#### **What are the top three things you look for in a poem and why?**

*Vivid imagery/Unusual descriptive voice for this concrete imagery/attention to line breaks.*

#### **What are the top three reasons a poem is rejected,?**

*If a poem rambles, without purpose, it will be rejected. If it rambles without concrete imagery, it will be rejected. If it is trite in any way, it won't make it in.*

#### **What other mistakes do you encounter that turn you off to a poem?**

*"Untitled" always turns me off -- make the effort. Figure out a good title. Typos in submissions, while they can be corrected, show a lack of attention by the writer.*

#### **Do you provide comments when you reject a poem?**

*Sometimes I provide comments, depending. I will make the effort especially if we are interested in a poem but see a couple minor edits that could really help. I hope to have interactive dialogue with the poet about this.*

*I got a scholarship to the University of Arizona. In the catalogue I found “English 9—Intro to Poetry—No Final,” and another, “Fiction Writing 9—No Final.” I signed up. I ended up in the English department, which is the last place I thought I would be. It felt like a big trick and I loved that it was on me. I keep waiting for that big final in both genres. —Alberto Rios*

**My Criminal Notebook**

I am stealing things All the time.  
I steal what I can from everywhere,

The light, the air, The music that matters most to m]

I carry them away neatly, invisible in word

Valises, inside unfathomable  
Thoughts, attached to the magnet

Harvest of a song I'm singing—nobody,  
Nobody is the wiser—I carry everything away with me

Using rhyme dollies and spelling knots.  
The police have not caught on.

But I am at large,  
Unwieldy, and unstoppable.

I walk freely  
Every day, anywhere, all the time

In spite of having stolen  
Horses and kisses—the stars themselves,

More than one, more than once.  
I steal, I steal,

I have always stolen.  
Be careful of me. When you see me,

Speak quietly and do little.  
Do not let me notice you.

Get away  
If you want to be safe.

Get away.

—by Alberto Rios



## POET NOTES

**Alberto Alvaro Ríos** was born on September 18, 1952, in Nogales, Arizona. He received a BA degree in 1974 and an MFA in creative writing in 1979, both from the University of Arizona. Since 1994, **Alberto Rios** has been Regents Professor of English at Arizona State University in Tempe, where he has taught since 1982. In 2013, Ríos was named the inaugural state poet laureate of Arizona.

His ten collections of poetry include *The Smallest Muscle in the Human Body*, a finalist for the National Book Award. His most recent book is *The Dangerous Shirt*, preceded by *The Theater of Night*, which received the 2007 PEN/Beyond Margins Award. Published in the *New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, and other journals, he has also written three short story collections and a memoir, *Capirotada*, about growing up on the Mexican border. He holds numerous awards, including six Pushcart Prizes in both poetry and fiction, the Arizona Governor's Arts Award and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

### IN HIS OWN WORDS—Alberto Alvaro Rios

*I first started writing in about second grade, but it had nothing to do with putting pencil to paper. I was a good student, but **I got in trouble for daydreaming—the terrible crime of childhood. That daydreaming, I know now, was the beginning of my writing.** It was not just listening to what I was being taught, but I was doing something with it. My parents were called to the school. I remember the ride home thinking I was in so much trouble—no dinner, no TV. But they gave me a great gift: They said nothing. It left me to figure out that those acts of imagination were mine.*

*I know there is writing I can do that is good and effective and clear and all those things, but I know there is another moment when I'll sit down at the page and write something out and I'll go, "Whoa, I don't know if I can say that," or literally your heart beats faster, or I think, "God, I don't think I could let my mother see this," or whatever it is that I think. I know the second kind of writing is different. But if writing is also those first things—clear and to the point—then I know I am at the right place, and I think that is the moment of shouting. It is when you physically feel something a little different, because it just triggers something. It's the body again. Somebody once said that one of the worst things for a writer is to have your parents still be alive. That is a terrible thought, but a useful way to look at this. It's not so much an act of censorship, or whatever it is that you might at first think. It's just that you know you are writing something that is in the arena of grown up, in the arena of something you haven't been so far up to now. It is some new place of understanding.*

**Ballad of Orange and Grape**

After you finish your work  
after you do your day  
after you've read your reading  
after you've written your say –  
you go down the street to the hot dog stand,  
one block down and across the way.  
On a blistering afternoon in East Harlem in the twentieth  
century.

Most of the windows are boarded up,  
the rats run out of a sack –  
sticking out of the crummy garage  
one shiny long Cadillac;  
at the glass door of the drug-addiction center,  
a man who'd like to break your back.  
But here's a brown woman with a little girl dressed in rose  
and pink, too.

Frankfurters frankfurters sizzle on the steel  
where the hot-dog-man leans –  
nothing else on the counter  
but the usual two machines,  
the grape one, empty, and the orange one, empty,  
I face him in between.  
A black boy comes along, looks at the hot dogs, goes on  
walking.

I watch the man as he stands and pours  
in the familiar shape  
bright purple in the one marked ORANGE  
orange in the one marked GRAPE,  
the grape drink in the machine marked ORANGE  
and orange drink in the GRAPE.  
Just the one word large and clear, unmistakable, on each  
machine.

I ask him: How can we go on reading  
and make sense out of what we read? –  
How can they write and believe what they're writing,  
the young ones across the street,  
while you go on pouring grape in ORANGE  
and orange into the one marked GRAPE –?  
(How are we going to believe what we read and we write  
and we hear and we say and we do?)

He looks at the two machines and he smiles  
and he shrugs and smiles and pours again.  
It could be violence and nonviolence  
it could be white and black        women and men  
it could be war and peace or any  
binary system, love and hate, enemy, friend.  
Yes and no, be and not-be, what we do and what we don't  
do.

On a corner in East Harlem  
garbage, reading, a deep smile, rape,  
forgetfulness, a hot street of murder,  
misery, withered hope,  
a man keeps pouring grape into ORANGE  
and orange into the one marked GRAPE,  
pouring orange into GRAPE and grape into ORANGE forever.

—by *Muriel Rukeyser*

from *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, Random House Inc., 1973



Listen to Muriel Rukeyser read today's poem: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UN-NaxSRN4E>

## POET NOTES

**Muriel Rukeyser** (December 15, 1913 – February 12, 1980) was an American poet and political activist, best known for her poems about equality, feminism, social justice, and Judaism. She was also a teacher, biographer, screenwriter, dramatist, translator, and author of children's books. Rukeyser attended a private school in The Bronx, then Vassar College in Poughkeepsie. From 1930 to 1932, she attended Columbia University.

Her literary career began in 1935 when her book of poetry, *Theory of Flight*, based on flying lessons she took, was chosen by the American poet Stephen Vincent Benét for publication in the Yale Younger Poets Series.

“It was the silence at home” that first influenced Rukeyser to become a writer. This silence manifested itself not only in a lack of verbal communication among family members—“there were three things that were never talked about: sex and money and death”—but also in a spiritual and intellectual void. There were no books in Rukeyser’s home (when her sister Frances was born in 1921, Rukeyser’s books were thrown away to make room in the nursery), with the exception of Shakespeare and the Bible.

## **RUKEYSER AS SOCIAL ACTIVIST**

One of Rukeyser’s most powerful pieces was a group of poems entitled *The Book of the Dead* (1938), documenting the details of the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel Disaster (West Virginia), an industrial disaster in which hundreds of miners died of silicosis, a lung disease. Her poem “To be a Jew in the Twentieth Century” (1944), on the theme of Judaism as a gift, was adopted by the American Reform and Reconstructionist movements for their prayer books. As a reporter for the Student Review at Vassar, Rukeyser covered the 1932 Scottsboro trial in Alabama in which nine black youths were accused of raping two white girls. This incident was the basis of Rukeyser’s poem “The Trial” and according to some may have been the genesis of her commitment to the cause of the underdog and the unjustly condemned. Rukeyser supported the Spanish Loyalists during the Spanish Civil War, and she was once jailed in Washington for her protest of the Vietnam War.

## **RUKEYSER AS FEMINIST**

As a woman, Rukeyser was a courageous precursor to the feminist movement of the 1960s. She was independent enough to marry and divorce painter Glynn Collins (the marriage lasted only six weeks) and to give birth to William, first named Laurie, out of wedlock. She was brave and daring enough to write about such issues as pregnancy and the possibilities of loving another woman.

## **POEM NOTES**

Yesterday’s poet, Tony Hoagland, discusses Muriel Rukeyser’s poem.

*Charming and didactic, “The Ballad of Orange and Grape” asks what it means when language is allowed to be unreliable. What, it wonders, happens to culture then?*

*Rukeyser’s poem delivers its crucial idea in brief and forceful form, and although poems need no motive of instruction to justify themselves, hers accomplishes its mission memorably. The American who has read it will never take as given the duplicitous, inaccurate language that surrounds us commercially and politically in the way that Rukeyser’s speaker does. She urges us instead to see the corruption of language as it should be seen: as an ethical betrayal, as nothing less than an existential insult, one with snowballing consequences. Orange for grape, grape for orange — such a commonplace misrepresentation may seem trivial alongside fibs about weapons of mass destruction, yet it can lead into the valleys and mountains of bad faith. “The Ballad of Orange and Grape” provides anyone who has encountered it with a correlative, a reference point by which to recognize how certain worldly forces (in this case, indifference) anesthetize our language and thereby steal our reality.*

**IN HER OWN WORDS—Muriel Rukeyser**

*What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?*

*The world would split open.*

*If there were no poetry on any day in the world, poetry would be invented that day.*

*For there would be an intolerable hunger.*

*A poem does invite, it does require. What does it invite? A poem invites you to feel. More than that: it invites you to respond. And better than that: a poem invites a total response. This response is total, but it is reached through the emotions. A fine poem will seize your imagination intellectually — that is, when you reach it, you will reach it intellectually too — but the way is through emotion, through what we call feeling.*

**For My Son Traveling To Dallas**

I wonder if other Americans are like me  
this morning, reaching in to their  
medicine cabinets and pulling out  
the 70-proof rubbing alcohol, maybe the 90,  
and swabbing down the various handles  
of dubious repute in the vicinity.  
How many of us—terrified by tsunamis,  
radiation, global warming, terrorism, black  
mold, EMF's, flame retardants, swine flu,  
asbestos, fatty plaque, severe weather,  
high blood pressure, pink slime, BPA, SIDS,  
hydroplaning, MRSA and mercury—are now  
focusing on Ebola, target of the hour  
for all the subterranean fears we have  
no idea exist and could care less.  
When will one of us raise her polite hand  
and interject the voice of reason?  
We do not need news of what's coming  
at us out of the blue, as much as we think  
our life depends on Doppler radar and  
MRI scanning, satellite detection and Google  
earth; eyes everywhere, even in our funiculus,  
we are reaching the point of paralysis.  
Otherwise competent people asking their  
husbands in the middle of the night after a  
loose stool if they have Ebola. The hope is  
that somewhere in the Western world,  
at least one couple after such behavior  
is laughing so hard at their madness,  
they wet their sweet asses.

—by Valerie Chronis Bickett

**POET NOTES**

**Valerie Chronis Bickett** was born of Greek immigrant parents in Birmingham, Alabama in 1947. Ms. Bickett has an undergraduate degree in Special Education from the University of Cincinnati, and an M.A. in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing from Florida State University. Valerie has taught writing most of her working life in all kinds of settings including the LeBlond Boys' Club in Over-the-Rhine, Cincinnati. She's taught Composition and Creative Writing at the University of Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky University, and Mount St. Joseph College. For over ten years, Ms. Bickett taught classes at Women Writing for (a) Change, a feminist writing school founded in Cincinnati. She is a poetry critic for the Greater Cincinnati Writers League and continues to teach creative writing and poetry courses in and around Cincinnati, often affiliated with Little Pocket Poetry. Valerie is married, has three children, and is a grandmother. In addition to her writing and teaching life, she is also a Licensed Massage Therapist.

Ms. Bickett's poetry has appeared in a variety of journals. She is the author of the chapbook *Valerie*, published by Anhinga Press, and *Triandafilo* (Athanasia Unlimited, 2009), a memoir in verse exploring her relationship with her mother. She is currently working on a second memoir in verse about what happens to a father and daughter when their relationship to place is broken.

**IN HER OWN WORDS—Valerie Chronis Bickett (from an interview)**

**Is there any critical turning point in your life when poetry became a stronghold?**

**When you knew you couldn't live without it?**

*I believe the first person to really see me in this lifetime was my high school English teacher, Dan Scuro. It had been a long time coming; I was 15. If he had been an auto mechanic, I would be living under a hood somewhere. When I write, when I teach writing, I am giving back the love.*

**Do you find any value in keeping the revision drafts of poems you have written? If so, why?**

*Until I'm satisfied with a poem, I see a real need to keep the drafts because I have been known to revise the life out of a poem and so at that point, I need to retrace my steps.*

**Do you have other interests, artistic or otherwise, that 'feed' your poetry writing?**

*Oh, yes. All things Greek, gardening, the GAPS diet, alternative medicine, massage, constellation therapy, the local/slow food movement, cooking, community, dreams, faith.*

**If you could come back in a next life, would you like to be a poet again? What, if anything might you change if you could?**

*I love being a poet. I love this particular way of being mindful even though sometimes the words trip me up and keep me from living deeply my life.*

**Is there any poet, living or dead, you would like to go for a walk with? Have a conversation with?**

*Yes. C.K. Williams. He's the man of the hour for me now. I want help with the long line, the long-bordering-on-prose poem. Most of the writers I love have made themselves so available in their writing; I wouldn't want to intrude on their solitude or give up mine. I think the world of Louise DeSalvo, Pat Schneider and Parker Palmer.*

**Are you ever afraid of writing a poem? If so, how do you address that?**

*If the subject comes to mind, I am usually willing to write about it. I'm sure there are plenty of topics though that stay undercover. In that case I depend on my dreams and the conflicts I have within and without.*

Researchers suggest that we think about 50,000 thoughts each day, and that's a modest estimate. This winter I had the opportunity to participate in a silent Zen retreat. Three days of sitting and walking meditation, interspersed with short dharma talks by the teacher on the myriad ways we create trouble for ourselves—identifying with our thoughts being just one of them. It's simply the nature of mind. I hear a bump in the night and within seconds I've conjured up enough storyline to parallel a Stephen King-esque tale, complete with subplots and haunting soundtrack for the eventual movie. The good thing about imagination and even misperception is that it can sometimes be channeled into beauty and art. Like today's narrative by Native American poet **Sherman Alexie**.

### Missed Connections

—*at the Santa Barbara Airport*

Descending, in our forty-seat airplane,  
I saw an older man had parked his car  
At the edge of the runway. He waved  
At us, so I waved, but we were too far

Apart to see each other, and he was not  
Welcoming me anyway. Near the back  
Of the plane, a woman, hair in a knot,  
Clutching a tattered Vintage paperback,

Waved and smiled and hugged her seatmate.  
"That's my husband," she said. "I haven't seen  
Him in ten years. It's so great, it's so great."  
She shook and wept; it was quite a scene—

A mystery—and I was hungry to know  
Why a wife and husband had lived apart  
For a decade. I wanted to ask, but no,  
I decided to imagine the parts

They'd been playing: She was the Red Cross  
Nurse who'd been kidnapped by militant  
Rebels, then blindfolded and marched across  
The border, but he'd remained diligent

For ten epic years, pressuring despots  
And presidents, until the March dawn  
When Australian tourists spotted  
Her staggering across a Thai hotel lawn.

Starved and weak, she fell into their arms.  
"I've been released," she said. "I've been released."  
Traded for ammunition and small arms,  
And treated for malnutrition and disease,

She was only now, six weeks after rescue,  
Reuniting with her husband. She was first  
Off the airplane—we all gave her the room—  
And she, aching with a different thirst,

Burst through the security gates  
And rushed into her husband's embrace.  
Later, after they had gone, as I waited  
For my bags, I saw a friendly face—

A young woman who'd just witnessed  
What I'd witnessed. I wiped away tears.  
"Ten years," I said. "I'd die from the stress."  
"Oh, no," she said. "It wasn't ten years.

It was ten days." Jesus, I had misheard  
The old woman and created glory  
Out of the ordinary. Just one word,  
Misplaced, turned a true and brief story

Into a myth. And, yes, it was lovely  
To see how the long-in-love can stay  
In love. But who truly gets that lonely  
After only ten days away?

I thought I had witnessed an epic—  
A Santa Barbara elderly Odyssey—  
But it was something more simplistic.  
It was a love story, small and silly,

And this is cruel, but here's my confession:  
Depending on the weather or my mood,  
I'll repeat the myth because it's more impressive  
Than something as tender as the truth.

—by *Sherman Alexie*



## POET NOTES

**Sherman Joseph Alexie, Jr.**, born in 1966, is a poet, writer, and filmmaker. Much of his writing draws on his experiences as a Native American with ancestry of several tribes, growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Alexie was born hydrocephalic and underwent an operation at six months of age; he was not expected to survive. Though he lived through the experience, he was plagued with seizures as a child and spent most of his childhood reading.

He later had a successful academic career, but began abusing alcohol as a young man. In 1987 he began writing poetry and short fiction. In 1990 his work was published in *Hanging Loose* magazine, a success he credits with giving him the incentive to quit drinking. He has remained sober ever since, and has now published two dozen books and screenplays.

His collection *Face* (2009) includes poems written in forms like the sestina and villanelle, as well as unusual textual effects like extended footnotes and peripheral moments of self-awareness. Some of his best known works are *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), a book of short stories, and *Smoke Signals* (1998), a film of his screenplay based on that collection. *Smoke Signals* was produced, directed, and acted by all Native Americans.

### **BILL MOYERS INTERVIEWS SHERMAN ALEXIE**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X\\_F\\_jl3BE-k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_F_jl3BE-k)

### **IN HIS OWN WORD—Sherman Alexie**

*In 1987, I dropped out of Gonzaga and followed a high school girlfriend to Washington State University (it's called Wazoo). And by complete chance, I enrolled in a poetry workshop that changed my life. On the first day, the teacher, Alex Kuo, gave me an anthology of contemporary Native poetry called *Songs from this Earth on Turtle's Back*. **There were poems by Adrian C. Louis, a Paiute Indian, and one in particular called "Elegy for the Forgotten Oldsmobile."** **If I hadn't found this poem, I don't think I ever would have found my way as a writer.** I would have been a high school English teacher who coached basketball. My life would have taken a completely different path. This was this line of the poem: **Oh, Uncle Adrian, I'm in the reservation of my mind.** I'd thought about medicine. I'd thought about law. I'd thought about business. But that line made me want to drop everything and be a poet. It was that earth-shaking. I was a reservation Indian. I had no options. Being a writer wasn't anywhere near the menu. So, it wasn't a lightning bolt—it was an atomic bomb. I read it and thought, "This is what I want to do."*

*I guess I approach my poetry the same way I have approached every other thing in my life. I just don't like being told what to do. **I write whatever feels and sounds right to me.** At the beginning of my career, I wrote free verse with some formal influences, but I have lately been writing more formal verse with free verse influences. I don't feel the need to spend all my time living on either the free verse or the formal reservation. I want it all; hunger is my crime.*

*I think funny poems are seriously devalued in the poetry world. I'd love to edit an anthology of humorous poems that are serious and great by any standard. I'd call it "Funny Poems." I think Auden is hilarious. I think Lucille Clifton is very funny. And Frost is to my mind an incredibly bitter Bob Newhart.*

Against Order

*Tear the line into pieces.*

*Open it out:*

*Let silence be*

*part of all that must be*

*said.*

I can't.

I can't.

It looks so disorganized. I want  
to move it like furniture  
back into place.

*It's a curse, your obsession for order,*  
my lover says, wanting me

wild—

So, to justify myself, I point out  
that light in the night sky  
may be traveling, but the stars stay  
where they are.

Or do they?  
What if some night Cassiopeia  
fell apart,  
splashed down like water?

What use the well-appointed bed,  
the vacuumed rug,  
the alphabetically arranged books  
if a star came splashing down  
like water, fiery water,  
burning everything in its path?

All my molecules about to scatter—

just the thought of it makes me clutch  
the sheets, press myself into the mattress—

but ah, the wonder of it, to be  
moving inside my lover's  
arms then, any second bound

to explode—

—by Lynne Knight



## POET NOTES

**Lynne Knight** was born in Philadelphia but grew up in Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York. After graduating from the University of Michigan, and from Syracuse University, where she was a fellow in poetry, she lived for a time in Canada, where her daughter was born. She taught high school English for many years in Upstate New York and now lives in Berkeley, where she teaches writing at two Bay Area community colleges.

Ms. Knight is the author of four full-length collections, the most recent of which is *Again*, published by Sixteen Rivers Press in 2009. Her work has appeared in a number of journals, including *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Kenyon Review*, *New England Review*, *Ontario Review*, *Poetry*, and *Southern Review*. She won the 2009 RATTLE Poetry Prize.

## IN HER OWN WORDS—Lynne Knight

*I used to teach with an artist who told his students at the beginning of every year, “There are a hundred bad drawings behind every good drawing, so let’s get to work.” I pretty much have to write my way through bad poems to get to the good one. I think it was Frost who said that a poet’s lucky to get twelve good poems a year. That seems right to me—a dozen or so out of the 365 I write. I have a couple of rules, besides sitting down to work at roughly the same time every day. (I’ve arranged my teaching schedule so that I can write every morning.) **I don’t talk to anybody before I write, if I can avoid it (except my dog Mia), and I never read my e-mail before I write. That’s an inflexible rule. Once I have a conversation, in real time or cyberspace, I’m finished. The ear gets shut off. Sometimes the ear’s shut off even if I haven’t talked to anyone or gone online. When that happens, I grab a postcard from the basket of postcards I keep on my desk, all of them reproductions of paintings, and I write a poem about the painting.***

*Art really is necessary for our survival. We’re all mortal, and it’s been given to us as poets to help people understand both the terrors and the gifts of mortality. I regard one of those gifts as the ability to recognize and accept that we are mortal. Does the bird know it’s going to stop singing? Probably not. But we do, and I think each of us—this is so pervasive a feeling in me that I can’t help but think everybody feels it—harbors a secret notion that somehow we’ll be the one to escape death. We’ll be the one chosen.*

**My Brother Buries His Dog**

He moves furniture for a living, oversized bureaus and beds for the rich. He is big now and dumb with love that animals sense—cats, dogs, squirrels, birds, his pygmy turtles and rabbits, tree frogs—they all take him in, nuzzle his childhood scars, forgive his bad jobs and girlfriends. The middle child who grew up telling us all to fuck off—now a grown man, calls me crying, *Why my puppy!* (His Great Dane is dead.) He sobs, and I remember how we beat him—Mom, Dad, nuns, coaches, teachers—I know I did. And like animals before a storm, he has premonitions—this time a dream of me crying over Nina’s corpse. He says, *I want you to think about that*. He says it because I’m the godless eldest son who knows everything. So we carry his huge dead dog from the vet to his truck to his backyard. He digs a hole all day then lays her black body in the dark. Weeping, he seals her in with a last block of sod, and between the kiddie pool and the garage we embrace. He whispers, *I love you*. And in that moment I knew what animals know.

—by *Chris Green*

**POET NOTES**

**Chris Green** is the author of three books of poetry: *The Sky Over Walgreens* (2007), *Epiphany School* (2009), and *Résumé from Mayapple Press* (2014). His poetry has appeared in such journals as *Poetry*, *New Letters*, *Verse*, *Nimrod*, *RATTLE*, and *Black Clock*. He recently edited the anthology, *Brute Neighbors: Urban Nature Poetry, Prose & Photography*. Green co-founded LitCity ([www.litcity312.com](http://www.litcity312.com)), a comprehensive literary site for Chicago. He lives in Evanston, Illinois, where he teaches writing at Loyola University and DePaul University.

**RATTLE: POETRY FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

Okay, so here is my unapologetic commercial for a journal that’s become (for me) the poetry equivalent of *Sun Magazine*. Today’s poem was published in *Rattle: Poetry for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in 2004. Based in Los Angeles, California, under the direction of Tim Green, *Rattle* is a diverse ad-free print publication of poetry and opinions from all walks of life. Established writers such as

Philip Levine, Jane Hirshfield, Bill Collins, Sharon Olds, Gregory Orr, Patricia Smith and others have appeared in *Rattle*, although the magazine also prides itself on its publication of new and emerging poets. Poems from the magazine have been reprinted in *The Best American Poetry* and Pushcart Prize anthologies. Here's a link:

### **IN HIS OWN WORDS—Chris Green**

Rather than the usual poet quotes that grace this section, I'm breaking with tradition to offer you another poem by Chris Green. "Where Poems Go", also published by *Rattle*, is a response poem to "My Brother Buries His Dog". Enjoy.

### **WHERE POEMS GO**

In Tampa, Florida, Irene Ledbetter sits at her desk to write to me. She holds the magazine with my poem about my brother and his dead dog. She has two dogs herself and admits she has the habit of rescuing baby rabbits, baby birds...even unhatched eggs. She writes to me as a friend in long merry sentences, great streams of herself and uses words like *kisses* and *hugs*. She says her father is a big man who grew up without a puppy. She tells me everything. She says Lizzy was her long-time pet chameleon she saved from a tree. She swears Lizzy knew her name and came when called to eat. She fed her meal worms and water from a leaf. Lizzy died, possibly from too much to eat. *In your poem, it says, 'In that moment I knew what animals know.' I still talk to Lizzy today, and when I see lizards outside of my house that look like her, I know it's her telling me that she's o.k.* Irene has written every paragraph in a different color ink, and there are stickers in the corners of cartoon bears holding hearts and stepping over rainbows. She sighs and drinks some Diet Coke as she seals the envelope. Now it is dark. Tomorrow, she goes back to high school, and I consider my odd lifespan, and how I taught students like Irene, girls in their prison blue Catholic school uniforms. Not one now remembers my name, not one recalls my lecture on the rabbits in *Of Mice and Men*—so poetic, I actually teared myself up, when I overheard a girl in the front row

turn and ask her friend, “Are my lips chapped?”  
The evenings in Florida are cold,  
grapefruit trees hold tight to their heavy fruit  
and the winds shake the heavy green  
and buggy land. Weather there has teeth—  
I once saw a man on a golf course killed  
by lightning from a blue sky.  
There is a hint of the sea in every suburb,  
and instead of dirt, you find sand and shells  
outside your door. Irene’s hopes mingle  
with the scent of ocean and orange groves.  
Of her fears for puppies and the future,  
*I cry. Oh I cry. I’ve got to continue to live.*  
When I read the letter again today, I feel blessed  
to be drifting and deathless, bearing up like Irene.

—by *Chris Green*

**Kissing a Horse**

Of the two spoiled, barn-sour geldings  
we owned that year, it was Red—  
skittish and prone to explode  
even at fourteen years—who'd let me  
hold to my face his own: the massive labyrinthine  
caverns of the nostrils, the broad plain  
up the head to the eyes. He'd let me stroke  
his coarse chin whiskers and take  
his soft meaty underlip  
in my hands, press my man's carnivorous  
kiss to his grass-nipping upper half of one, just  
so that I could smell  
the long way his breath had come from the rain  
and the sun, the lungs and the heart,  
from a world that meant no harm.

—by *Robert Wrigley*

from *Earthly Meditations: New and Selected Poems*, published in 2006 by Penguin



**POET NOTES**

**Robert Wrigley** was born in East St. Louis, Illinois in 1951. He was drafted in 1971, but was discharged as a conscientious objector. Wrigley was the first in his family to graduate from college, and the first male for generations to escape work in a coal mine. He earned his MFA from the University of Montana, where he studied with Madeline DeFrees, John Haines, and Richard Hugo.

Wrigley has taught at Lewis-Clark State College, Warren Wilson College, the University of Oregon, the University of Montana, Warren College, and currently at the University of Idaho. He teaches poetry at the University of Idaho along side his wife, fiction writer Kim Barnes.

Wrigley believes that poetry can influence the world and people's lives rather than just reside within the confines of academia. His poems are concerned with rural Western landscapes and humankind's place within the natural world, and he aims to "tell all the truth, but make it sing." He has several collections of poetry and has been awarded fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Idaho Commission on the Arts.

### **IN HIS OWN WORDS—Robert Wrigley**

*Poetry can have a redemptive function. It can look at the chaos you see and make a kind of sense of the smallest part of it.*

*I'm a relentless fly fisher for trout. I catch them (which usually involves them being at least momentarily foolish and seizing a fake bug from the surface) then I admire them and let them go. I think the foolishness of the trout is just a sort of absolute ease within its own skin, something tremendously uncommon in human beings. Perhaps this is due to our abilities with language, with ideas and abstractions, with that sense that we not only might die but will die. But the trout, feeling hunger or desire, seeks what will deliver it from, or to, that desire. . . . Poems are that way for me. It's the lunatic difficulty of the art that addicts one to pursuing it. If it were easy, well, why would anyone do it? So, in a sense, writing poems at all is an essential foolishness. The key in that phrase, however, is the modifier. Essential. Once you're committed to making poems, you will continue to be foolish.*

**Reading a poem is, or ought to be, a whole-body experience. What I look for in poems is delight, instruction, and wounding. Some poems do one of those things; some two; some all three. The ones that do all three are great poems.** You might sit down to write hoping to do all three things to the reader, but sometimes you do just one. That's fine. But you should always aspire to do the impossible. A poem that can be paraphrased, or reduced to a theme, is dead on arrival.

*The poem that matters is the one that surprises you, somehow. It may take you where you could not have imagined, or it may express something in a way you could never have thought it would. Same thing for the poet in the writing of the poem. . . . You know you're getting somewhere when you surprise yourself. But like everything else, there's no simply saying, "Okay, now I'm going to surprise myself." That'd be like saying, "Okay now I'm going to scare myself." You write your way to surprise, you write your way to a destination you never knew existed, you say what you say in a way you never thought yourself capable of. In theory, that happens regularly. In practice, not so much. It's the journey. It's the process that matters.*

**For a Dying Tomcat Who's Relinquished His Former Hissing  
and Predatory Nature**

I remember the long orange carp you once scooped  
from the neighbor's pond, bounding beyond  
her swung broom, across summer lawns

to lay the fish on my stoop. Thanks  
for that. I'm not one to whom offerings  
often get made. You let me feel

how Christ might when I kneel,  
weeping in the dark  
over the usual maladies: love and its lack.

Only in tears do I speak  
directly to him and with such  
conviction. And only once you grew frail

did you finally slacken into me,  
dozing against my ribs like a child.  
You gave up the predatory flinch

that snapped the necks of so many  
birds and slow-moving rodents.  
Now your once powerful jaw

is malformed by black malignancies.  
It hurts to eat. So you surrender in the way  
I pray for: Lord, before my own death,

let me learn from this animal's deep release  
into my arms. Let me cease to fear  
the embrace that seeks to still me.

—by Mary Karr (from *Sinner's Welcome*. Harper Collins, 2006)



## POET NOTES

**Mary Karr**, born in 1955, is an American poet, essayist and memoirist. She rose to fame in 1995 with the publication of her bestselling memoir, *The Liar's Club*. Karr is the Peck Professor of English Literature at Syracuse University.

Upon graduation from High School in Groves, Texas, Mary Karr traveled with a group of friends to Los Angeles, where she immersed herself in the lifestyle of the California hippie and surfer counter-cultures. Later that year, she enrolled in Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota, but left school after two years to travel again. Her political involvement in the anti-apartheid movement led her to meet African American poet Etheridge Knight who became an important influence on the development of her poetry. Karr eventually entered graduate school to study creative writing, and earned an M.F.A. from Goddard College in 1979.

## SINNER'S WELCOME

Today's poem is from Mary Karr's fourth poetry collection, *Sinner's Welcome*. From the jacket of that book: In her fourth collection of poems, self-described black-belt sinner Mary Karr traces her improbable journey from the inferno of a tormented childhood into a resolutely irreverent Catholicism. Not since Saint Augustine wrote "Give me chastity, Lord—but not yet!" has anyone brought such smart-assed hilarity to a conversion story.

## IN HER OWN WORDS—Mary Karr

*Every poem probably has sixty drafts behind it.*

*I usually get very sick after I finish a book. As soon as I put it down and my body lies down and there's not that injection of adrenaline and cortisol, I get sick. I have a medium-shitty immune system so that doesn't help. All of that said, writing feels like a privilege. Even though it's very uncomfortable, I constantly feel very lucky.*

*I write to dream; to connect with other human beings; to record; to clarify; to visit the dead. I have a kind of primitive need to leave a mark on the world. Also, I have a need for money.*

*When I went into a mental institution after I stopped drinking, my writing took a great leap forward — or at least people started paying a lot more for it. I was more clear and more openhearted, more self-aware, more suspicious of my own motives. I was more of a grown-up.*

*I still don't support myself as a writer. I support myself as a college professor. I couldn't pay my mortgage on the revenue from my books. The myth is that you make a lot of money when you publish a book. Unless you write a blockbuster, that's pretty much untrue. Starting when I was five, I always identified as a writer. It had nothing to do with income. I always told people I was a poet if they asked what I did. That's what I still tell them now.*

**The Roman Empire**

The lady in the park ducks her head when passing me  
And veers a little to one side to keep from touching me.

I understand. She only wants to get out of the park alive  
With her aging, high-strung Boston terrier.

And I retract my flesh as much as possible  
To let her by. We know,

Each time a man and woman pass, each  
Tim a man and woman pass, each

Time a man and woman pass  
Each other on an empty street,

It is an anniversary—  
As if history were a cake made from layer after layer

Of women's bodies, decorated with the purple, battered  
Faces of dead girls.

A visitor from outer space, observing us  
From some hidden advantage place

Would guess at some terrible historical event  
Of which our politeness is the evidence—

The man, attempting to look harmless;  
The woman trying not to seem afraid.

Look at that dogwood tree flowering nearby, with a bird in it.

After you. No, after you.

—by *Tony Hoagland*



## POET NOTES

**Tony Hoagland** was born in 1953 in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He grew up in white middle-class American suburbia with lots of money and monumental emotional upheavals within family. His father (an Army doctor), according to Hoagland, intentionally ruined his own marriage and then died of a heart attack a short time later. At seventeen, the young poet lost his mother to cancer.

Hoagland attended and dropped out of several colleges, picked apples and cherries in the Northwest, lived in communes, and followed The Grateful Dead. He eventually received an MFA from University of Arizona, and currently teaches in the graduate writing program of the University of Houston and in the Warren Wilson MFA program.

Tony Hoagland's publications include:

*Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty* (Graywolf Press, 2010)

*What Narcissism Means To Me* (Graywolf Press, 2003)

*Donkey Gospel* (Graywolf Press, 1998)

*Sweet Ruin* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992)

### IN HIS OWN WORDS—Tony Hoagland

*I want the creature and the angel to both be in the poem, you know. I don't want to write poetry of angels that doesn't have the beast in it, and I don't want to write a bestial kind of violent, craving, raging poetry that doesn't have some kind of possibility of transcendence in it. ... Another way to say it is **I believe that a poem is a body, and should have a body. There are poets who don't have body—I'm using that word sort of metaphorically—don't have body in their poems.** I don't know. There's room for everybody, but I like a lot of body in the poem.*

*My poetry has a loyalty to experience. It has a loyalty to poetry which grows out of suffering, and which attempts to name the sources and architecture of suffering as an act of empathy and analysis.*

*My poetry is very much congruent with mid-century poetry, and also what is still the mainstream of poetry. I still believe in poetry—I believe in its values of helping us to live our lives, and of connecting with each other and continuing to perform operations on the diseased patient of American culture and individual psyches.*

*As a poet, I was present at the beginning of the multicultural literary movement in the mid-'70s. There was great resistance in the academy. There still is. I was told that a voice against my hire in a major university believed that multicultural literature was a sham. This was in 2000. A colleague in my first university hired in the mid-'80s sauntered into my office and called me a primitive poet. And anything of indigenous/aboriginal origin often falls away into the "disappeared" or "exotic other" category. Some of us emerge despite the difficulties. Poetry is always diversifying. That is the nature of art. There will always be stalwarts of Euro or even other classical traditions, who dismiss any version or branch. This is true in Muscogean dance traditions, jazz, or any other form. . . . There's an investment in this country and perhaps all of the Western hemisphere to disappear indigenous peoples. It's not necessarily a calculated plan. The disappearance happened when physical, mental, and spiritual violence was used to take over lands, when indigenous peoples and cultures were pronounced inferior or even demonic. To accept that there are still indigenous peoples with major cultural and social accomplishments means that the story, or the wound, will have to be reopened and examined. I just have to keep moving and honor the indigenous presence within myself. That's not necessarily an easy thing to do in this American social structure.*

***Most Americans are in exile from where their spiritual core is, and they don't know it.***

—Joy Harjo—



Listen to Joy Harjo speak her poem **I Give You Back**:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAYCf2Gdycc>

### **I Give You Back**

I release you, my beautiful and terrible  
 fear. I release you. You were my beloved  
 and hated twin, but now, I don't know you  
 as myself. I release you with all the  
 pain I would know at the death of  
 my children.

You are not my blood anymore.

I give you back to the soldiers  
who burned down my house, beheaded my children,  
raped and sodomized my brothers and sisters.  
I give you back to those who stole the  
food from our plates when we were starving.

I release you, fear, because you hold  
these scenes in front of me and I was born  
with eyes that can never close.

I release you  
I release you  
I release you  
I release you

I am not afraid to be angry.  
I am not afraid to rejoice.  
I am not afraid to be black.  
I am not afraid to be white.  
I am not afraid to be hungry.  
I am not afraid to be full.  
I am not afraid to be hated.  
I am not afraid to be loved.

to be loved, to be loved, fear.

Oh, you have choked me, but I gave you the leash.  
You have gutted me but I gave you the knife.  
You have devoured me, but I laid myself across the fire.

I take myself back, fear.  
You are not my shadow any longer.  
I won't hold you in my hands.  
You can't live in my eyes, my ears, my voice  
my belly, or in my heart my heart  
my heart my heart

But come here, fear  
I am alive and you are so afraid  
of dying.

—by *Joy Harjo*

from *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems: 1975–2001*  
(W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 2002)



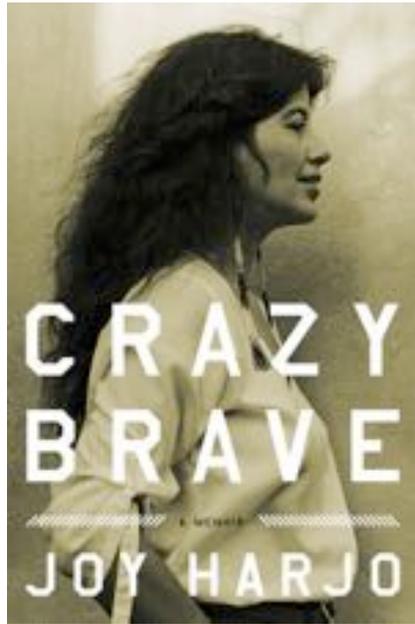
## POET NOTE

**Joy Harjo**, a Mvskoke\* poet, musician, and author, was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1951. She is a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, with partial Cherokee descent. Her mother is Cherokee and her father is a Creek Indian father—not a very popular union. She is often cited as playing a formidable role in the second wave of what critic Kenneth Lincoln termed the Native American Renaissance of the late 20th century. Ms. Harjo is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. Known primarily as a poet, Harjo has also taught at the college level, played alto saxophone with a band called *Poetic Justice*, edited literary journals, and written screenplays.

Harjo has won numerous awards, including the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas in 1995.

## MYSKOKE LANGUAGE NOTE

The Muscogee language (Mvskoke in Muscogee), also known as Creek, Seminole, Creek-Seminole, Maskókî or Muskogee, is a Muskogean language spoken by Muscogee (Creek) and Seminole people, primarily in the U.S. states of Oklahoma and Florida.



From Joy Harjo's memoir, *Crazy Brave*:

*There are people in my family who knew how to stop time or know how to do it. My aunt told me these stories about how Monahwee, my grandfather from seven generations back, could do that. When he'd go out on horseback with his warrior friends he'd always end up somewhere long before it was possible because he knew how to ride the currents of time. It's sort of like the concept of poetic, or dream time, but it can happen physically. . . . It happened to me once. On a trip I was taking, I get out to the highway and the sign says 'Atlanta 90 miles.' The next thing I know I hear the galloping of Monahwee's horse, and I feel his force and smell the horse and human sweat. Within five minutes I see a sign: 'Atlanta 60 miles.' I thought, "Ok. That's how it happened." Poetry and music are a lot like that. The rhythm is in everything.*

*There are three things that the saxophone has taught me about writing: You have to believe in yourself, you have to believe in the spirit of the music and your love of it, and you have to practice. The other thing would be patience. Some people don't publish till their 70s. Follow the spirit of your art and listen. You can't compare yourself to somebody else. You have to do it because you love it.*

*On how trauma in her early years acted as roadblocks to creativity: Sometimes, I think, in order to get to something that we really want or we really love or something that needs to be realized, that we're tested. I mean, I think if you look at any stories all over the world, they are usually set up as, OK, here's where I start, here is where I want to go, and here are the tests. And they were pretty intense tests ... I failed a lot of them, or you find a way around. And maybe there is no such thing as failure ... at least I've had to come to that in my life, to realize that this stuff called failure, this stuff, this debris of historical trauma, family trauma, you know, stuff that can kill your spirit, is actually raw material to make things with and to build a bridge. You can use those materials to build a bridge over that which would destroy you.*

**You Can't Have It All**

But you can have the fig tree and its fat leaves like clown hands  
gloved with green. You can have the touch of a single eleven-year-old finger  
on your cheek, waking you at one a.m. to say the hamster is back.  
You can have the purr of the cat and the soulful look  
of the black dog, the look that says, If I could I would bite  
every sorrow until it fled, and when it is August,  
you can have it August and abundantly so. You can have love,  
though often it will be mysterious, like the white foam  
that bubbles up at the top of the bean pot over the red kidneys  
until you realize foam's twin is blood.  
You can have the skin at the center between a man's legs,  
so solid, so doll-like. You can have the life of the mind,  
glowing occasionally in priestly vestments, never admitting pettiness,  
never stooping to bribe the sullen guard who'll tell you  
all roads narrow at the border.  
You can speak a foreign language, sometimes,  
and it can mean something. You can visit the marker on the grave  
where your father wept openly. You can't bring back the dead,  
but you can have the words *forgive* and *forget* hold hands  
as if they meant to spend a lifetime together. And you can be grateful  
for makeup, the way it kisses your face, half spice, half amnesia, grateful  
for Mozart, his many notes racing one another towards joy, for towels  
sucking up the drops on your clean skin, and for deeper thirsts,  
for passion fruit, for saliva. You can have the dream,  
the dream of Egypt, the horses of Egypt and you riding in the hot sand.  
You can have your grandfather sitting on the side of your bed,  
at least for a while, you can have clouds and letters, the leaping  
of distances, and Indian food with yellow sauce like sunrise.  
You can't count on grace to pick you out of a crowd  
but here is your friend to teach you how to high jump,  
how to throw yourself over the bar, backwards,  
until you learn about love, about sweet surrender,  
and here are periwinkles, buses that kneel, farms in the mind  
as real as Africa. And when adulthood fails you,  
you can still summon the memory of the black swan on the pond  
of your childhood, the rye bread with peanut butter and bananas  
your grandmother gave you while the rest of the family slept.  
There is the voice you can still summon at will, like your mother's,  
it will always whisper, you can't have it all,  
but there is this.

—by Barbara Ras

from *Bite Every Sorrow* (Louisiana State University, 1998)



## POET NOTES

**Barbara Ras** was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1949. She was educated at Simmons College and at the University of Oregon where she received an MFA in Creative Writing. Her first collection of poems, *Bite Every Sorrow* (LSU Press, 1998), was chosen by C.K. Williams to receive the 1997 Walt Whitman Award. She has taught at writing programs across the country and has been on the faculty of the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. Ras has lived in the San Antonio area, overseeing Trinity University Press, since 2005, publishing about a dozen books each year.

Her most recent work is *The Last Skin* (Penguin 2010). The second section of this book “Lake Titicaca” is drawn from her travels to this high Andean lake bordering Bolivia and Peru. She has traveled widely, with extended stays in Latin America.

### **POEM NOTE: *buses that kneel***

A kneeling bus is a bus that not only has no steps between the door and the bus floor, but also has an air-adjustable suspension. This feature allows the driver to actually lower the bus to the curb in a kneeling-like manner to make entering and exiting the bus much easier for the handicapped and the elderly.

### **IN HER OWN WORDS—Barbara Ras**

**Barbara Ras** describes travel as “one of the great equalizers” in her life: *It gets you outside your normal environment, she says, and you see things with fresh eyes so that what is highlighted is the new and different. Especially outside the U.S., you are more attentive, more expectant, to those things that stimulate your imagination. You have more time to incorporate images and meditate on the things you are seeing. It's what the Buddhists call 'beginner's mind'.*

She describes the similarities of finding great manuscripts with writing a decent poem: *That thrill of discovery you get in reading can bring you to experience that is fresh and eye-opening about writing, but there is something to the creative act that brings with it another level of gratification.*

Ras says she does not write with an audience in mind, nor for herself as a reader. *I write for that sense of discovery that comes with writing. Every writer hates that question, 'What do you write about?' I just say that I write about life and death.*