

APRIL GIFTS

2013

Created by: Susan F. Glassmeyer
Cincinnati, Ohio, 2013

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I came close to abandoning this year's project for a number of tedious reasons, any one of which would have made good sense. After struggling with the pros and cons, the decision to forge ahead came in an clarified moment last December. I woke up one morning with my hand resting on a book of poetry next to the bed, opened it to a (seemingly) random page, and found today's poem by Jack Gilbert. Discovering *Failing and Flying* is what I like to call a purposeful accident, a moment of delightful synchronicity. The poem triggered for me something so identifiable in my own life, all the self scourging I'd done over so many kinds of perceived "failings", including a "failed" first marriage, and even the angst I created over not doing this year's April Gifts "good enough". Emotion welled up as it sometimes does when a breakthrough arrives to purify you. If I had any doubt left about offering these poems yet another year, Jack Gilbert's poem swept them all away.

Failing and Flying

Everyone forgets that Icarus also flew.
It's the same when love comes to an end,
or the marriage fails and people say
they knew it was a mistake, that everybody
said it would never work. That she was
old enough to know better. But anything
worth doing is worth doing badly.
Like being there by that summer ocean
on the other side of the island while
love was fading out of her, the stars
burning so extravagantly those nights that
anyone could tell you they would never last.
Every morning she was asleep in my bed
like a visitation, the gentleness in her
like antelope standing in the dawn mist.
Each afternoon I watched her coming back
through the hot stony field after swimming,
the sea light behind her and the huge sky
on the other side of that. Listened to her
while we ate lunch. How can they say
the marriage failed? Like the people who
came back from Provence (when it was Provence)
and said it was pretty but the food was greasy.
I believe Icarus was not failing as he fell,
but just coming to the end of his triumph.

—by Jack Gilbert

POET NOTES

The following information is taken from the Poetry Foundation website and from an obituary in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Born to a poor family in Pittsburg, Jack Gilbert (1925-2012) worked as a steelworker and exterminator before launching his literary career. When he won the Yale Younger Poets prize in 1962 for *Views of Jeopardy*, he attained a kind of allure usually foreign to poets. His photo was featured in *Esquire*, *Vogue*, and *Glamour*, and his book was often stolen from the library. A Guggenheim Fellowship enabled him to go to Europe; he spent much of the ensuing two decades living modestly abroad.

Although the literary world embraced him early in his career, he was something of a self-imposed exile: flunking out of high school; congregating with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Spicer in San Francisco but never really writing like a Beat poet. The poetry of the Beat Generation was in full flower all around him, but Gilbert and his work were no fit. He disdained poseurs, avant-garde language experiments, and the comfortable life of tenure-track university professorship, which he thought was anathema to the well-lived life. He and his then partner, the poet Linda Gregg, soon struck out for the Greek islands and “vagabonded around”.

A self-described “serious romantic,” Gilbert was later married to sculptor Michiko Nogami, who died of cancer at age 36. Many of his poems are about relationships and losses. Gilbert’s fourth book, *Refusing Heaven* (2005) contains, as poet Dan Albergotti describes, “poems about love, loss, and grief that defy all expectations of sentimentality. All of them are part of the larger poem, the poem that is the life of the poet, perhaps the most profound and moving piece of work to come out of American literature in generations.”

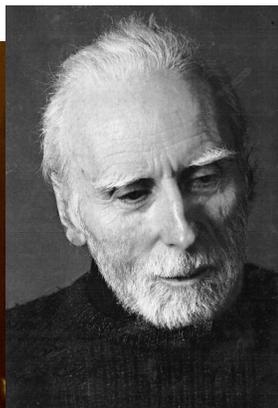
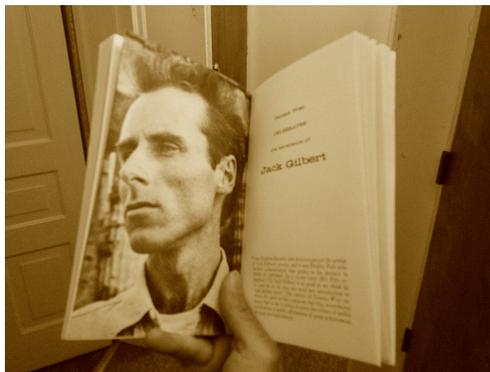
Some critics have ignored or dismissed Gilbert. Meghan O’Rourke, writing for *Slate* in 2005, pondered why: “Gilbert isn’t just a remarkable poet. He’s a poet whose directness and lucidity ought to appeal to lots of readers . . . the poet who stands outside his own time, practicing a poetics of purity in an ever-more cacophonous world—a lyrical ghost, you might say, from a literary history that never came to be.”

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Jack Gilbert

Publishing only four books since he began writing over 50 years ago reinforces Gilbert’s love of economy. *I am by nature drawn to exigence, compression, selection*, he wrote.

One of the special pleasures in poetry for me is accomplishing a lot with the least means possible.

It’s not a business with me . . . I’m not a professional of poetry, I’m a farmer of poetry.



Poet **Mary Karr** dedicated today's poem to her writer pal, David Freedman, the co-author of *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder—How Crammed Closets, Cluttered Offices, and on-the-Fly Planning Make the World a Better Place*. Freedman's contention is that messy people, like Mary Karr, are actually more efficient and creative than folks whose lives appear to be well organized.

A Perfect Mess

—for David Freedman

I read somewhere
 that if pedestrians didn't break traffic laws to cross
 Times Square whenever and by whatever means possible,
 the whole city
 would stop, it would stop.
 Cars would back up to Rhode Island,
 an epic gridlock not even a cat
 could thread through. It's not law but the sprawl
 of our separate wills that keeps us all flowing. Today I loved
 the unprecedented gall
 of the piano movers, shoving a roped-up baby grand
 up Ninth Avenue before a thunderstorm.
 They were a grim and hefty pair, cynical
 as any day laborers. They knew what was coming,
 the instrument white lacquered, the sky bulging black
 as a bad water balloon and in one pinprick instant
 it burst. A downpour like a fire hose.
 For a few heartbeats, the whole city stalled,
 paused, a heart thump, then it all went staccato.
 And it was my pleasure to witness a not
 insignificant miracle: in one instant every black
 umbrella in Hell's Kitchen opened on cue, everyone
 still moving. It was a scene from an unwritten opera,
 the sails of some vast armada.
 And four old ladies interrupted their own slow progress
 to accompany the piano movers.
 each holding what might have once been
 lace parasols over the grunting men. I passed next
 the crowd of pastel ballerinas huddled
 under the corner awning,
 in line for an open call—stork-limbed, ankles
 zigzagged with ribbon, a few passing a lit cigarette
 around. The city feeds on beauty, starves
 for it, breeds it. Coming home after midnight,
 to my deserted block with its famously high
 subway-rat count, I heard a tenor exhale pure
 longing down the brick canyons, the steaming moon
 opened its mouth to drink from on high□...

—by Mary Karr

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 Liars' 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. Karr takes a stand in favor of content over poetic style. She argues that emotions need to be directly expressed, and clarity should be a watch-word: *characters are too obscure, the presented physical world is often "foggy" (that is imprecise), references are "showy" (both non-germane and overused), metaphors over-shadow expected meaning, and techniques of language (polysyllables, archaic words, intricate syntax, "yards of adjectives") only "slow a reader's understanding."*

IN HER OWN WORDS—Mary Karr

One prayer of mine is to try to imagine myself inside the face of every single person who passes. A Buddhist pal told me that's a Tibetan exercise for compassion.

About why the poem "A Perfect Mess" ends with an ellipsis, Mary Karr says: *Because the city is still breeding beauty the way yeast makes dough grow plump. You only unplug from it, the current never stops ...*



I never tire of **William Stafford's** poetry. This is the fourth time in seven years that one of his poems has made the cut. Don't be surprised some April if I surrender completely and offer you all 30 days of his wonderful work! I dedicate today's poem to those of you who dread coming to the end of a good book. You know who you are, slowing your reading to a snail's pace, reluctant to read the final few pages, never wanting the glorious experience to end.

An Afternoon in the Stacks

Closing the book, I find I have left my head
inside. It is dark in here, but the chapters open
their beautiful spaces and give a rustling sound,
words adjusting themselves to their meaning.
Long passages open at successive pages. An echo,
continuous from the title onward, hums
behind me. From in here the world looms,
a jungle redeemed by these linked sentences
carved out when an author traveled and a reader
kept the way open. When this book ends
I will pull it inside-out like a sock
and throw it back in the library. But the rumor
of it will haunt all that follows in my life.
A candleflame in Tibet leans when I move.

—by *William Stafford*

POET NOTES

Most of today's notes have been borrowed from my earlier April Gifts archives . . .

William Edgar Stafford was born in Hutchinson, Kansas, on January 17, 1914, to Ruby Mayher and Earl Ingersoll Stafford. The eldest of three children, Stafford grew up with an appreciation for nature and books. His family moved often so his father could find work. Stafford helped by delivering newspapers and working in farm fields. Stafford died of a heart attack at his home in Lake Oswego, Oregon, on August 28, 1993, having written a poem that morning containing the lines, "'You don't have to / prove anything,' my mother said. 'Just be ready / for what God sends.'"

Stafford managed to graduate from college and earned a master's degree in English from the University of Kansas. As a registered pacifist, he spent 1942-1946 working in camps and projects for conscientious objectors in Arkansas, California, and Illinois. His pay was \$2.50 a month for assigned duties such as fire fighting, soil conservation, and building and maintaining roads and trails.

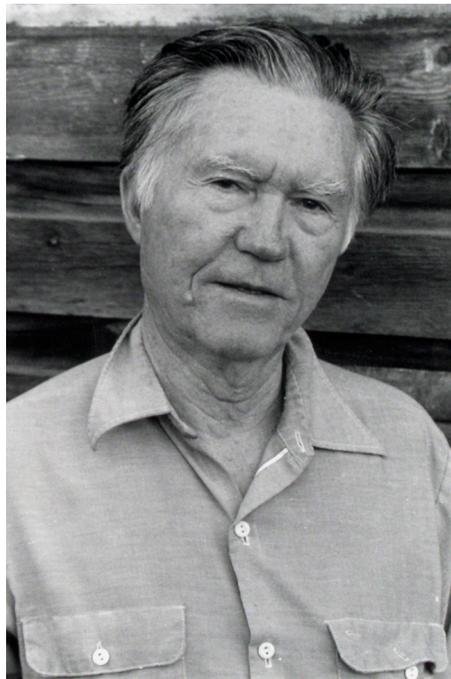
It could be said that the one grand theme of Stafford's poetry is how to live in the world, how to be a survivor, but there isn't much practical advice in his poems. What we learn, instead, is how to listen to the signals that people and nature are constantly offering us. William Stafford's poems invite us to think about how we are taking care of our inner life as well as our

relationships with family, friends, and the earth. And we are asked to consider what we think about the social and political issues of our times.

Stafford's habit was to rise in the early morning dark, make himself coffee, recline on the living room couch and write while the light came back to the world. He wrote a poem every day of his adult life (including the day he died), never judging it by anyone's standards but his own.

IN HIS OWN WORDS—William Stafford

A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them. This sentence begins an essay first published in Field (1970) in which Stafford reports that he sits alone in the early morning and writes down whatever occurs to him, following his impulses. *It is like fishing,"* he says, and he must be receptive and *"willing to fail. If I am to keep writing, I cannot bother to insist on high standards.... I am following a process that leads so wildly and originally into new territory that no judgment can at the moment be made about values, significance, and so on.... I am headlong to discover.*



Take a little time to read this poem quietly and slowly out loud and you will discover more of its magic. Your mouth and brain already know what I mean. If ever you are physically hungry and can't get to your coffee or bagel, try reading a poem that requires the masticating wisdom of your tongue, teeth, mouth and jaw. I'm not kidding. Who says there ain't no such thing as a free lunch.

Neglect

Is the scent of apple boughs smoking
in the woodstove what I will remember
of the Red Delicious I brought down, ashamed

that I could not convince its limbs to render fruit?
Too much neglect will do that, skew the sap's
passage, blacken leaves, dry the bark and heart.

I should have lopped the dead limbs early
and watched each branch with a goshawk's eye,
patching with medicinal pitch, offering water,

compost and mulch, but I was too enchanted
by pear saplings, flowers and the pasture,
too callow to believe that death's inevitable

for any living being unloved, untended.
What remains is this armload of applewood
now feeding the stove's smolder. Splendor

ripens a final time in the firebox, a scarlet
harvest headed, by dawn, to embers.
Two decades of shade and blossoms - tarts

and cider, bees dazzled by the pollen,
spare elegance in ice - but what goes is gone.
Smoke is all, through this lesson in winter

regret, I've been given to remember.
Smoke, and Red Delicious apples redder
than a passing cardinal's crest or cinders.

—by *R. T. Smith*

POET NOTES

Poet **R.T. (Rod) Smith** was born in Washington, DC in 1947, and grew up in Georgia and North Carolina. The South, the natural world, childhood, and the work of James Dickey are often cited as influences on Smith's poetry. In *Poetry*, Bill Christophersen commented, "Smith uses a free verse as spare as a whittled stick to probe nature's and childhood's epiphanies and his Irish Catholic heritage."

Smith taught at Auburn University. Since 1995, he has been the editor of *Shenandoah*, the literary magazine from Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, where he is writer-in-residence in the Department of English. He lives in Virginia with his wife, poet Sarah Kennedy.

IN HIS OWN WORDS—R.T. Smith

From an interview with R.T. Smith by J.M. Spalding for The Cortland Review Does music of film ever inspire you to write? *Well, I can't wait for inspiration. I write more from a hunger, but sometimes a fiddle break or sax riff, a flashback from Altman or Kurasawa will perhaps inspire a word or phrase in the middle of a session.*

What is the status of Poetry today? *I'll be glad to see fewer announcements of poetry slams, when the din dims. They're a little like pro wrestling with words, aren't they?*

What do you think of "Magnetic poetry?" *Magnetic poetry? Well, "magnetic sensibility" is "the ratio of the magnetic permeability of a medium to that of a magnetic vacuum, minus one." That's how I feel so far, but I'll enjoy it more when the magnets offer words like "dollymop" and "flitch" and "cornage."*

Now lets get to the serious stuff: what is your favorite color? *There's a heron-blue cloud shadow that eases across the local mountains when they're bare with winter. I could look at it forever.*



Hudson's Geese

' . . . I have, from time to time, related some incident of my boyhood, and these are contained in various chapters in *The Naturalist in La Plata, Birds and Man, Adventures Among Birds'*

—W.H. Hudson, in *Far Away and Long Ago*.

Hudson tells us of them,
the two migrating geese,
she hurt in the wing
indomitably walking the length of a continent,
and he wheeling above,
calling his distress.

They could not have lived.
Already I see her wing
scraped past the bone
as she drags it through rubble.

A fox, maybe, took her
in his snap jaws. And what
would he do, the point
of his circling gone?

The wilderness of his cry
falling through an air
turned instantly to winter
would warn the guns of him.

If a fowler dropped him,
let it have been quick,
pellets hitting brain
and heart so his weight
came down senseless,
and nothing but his body
to enter the dog's mouth.

—by *Leslie Norris*

POET NOTES

George Leslie Norris (1921-2006) was born in South Wales where he had a cheerful childhood. Up to 1974 he earned his living as a college lecturer, teacher and headmaster. In 1974, at the urging of his wife Catherine (Kitty) Morgan, he started his career as a professional writer of poems and stories. He combined full-time writing with residencies at academic institutions in Britain and the United States. Today he is considered one of the most important Welsh writers of the post-war period.

Norris's works deal with such themes as his Welsh home, his past, especially the pre-war period, his experiences as a teacher, nature, and the life of the instinct. He is considered to be a fine technician. Interviews and lectures with Leslie show that he never sat down planning to write. He simply played off inspiration he received at various times of the day. When he would resume writing after stopping for the day, he would re-read everything he had so far, so as to maintain the style. His poetic voice was pure, authentic, and deceptively simple.

IN HIS OWN WORDS— George Leslie Norris

A professor friend said of Norris: “He sees what he sees because he’s ready, because he’s always on duty, because he doesn’t miss anything.” That includes something as mundane as a wall. Norris had an epiphany at the age of 12. He was walking home alone one hot summer afternoon when he noticed the sandstone walls of the houses he was passing. As he tells it, *“I put my finger on the wall and it was rough and I could feel the individual grains, and then I put my hand against the wall and little grains fell to the ground, tiny things, and I suddenly knew that my life was going to be the recognition of solid things like this and making relationships of the real world, of the material world, and that the only way to do that was to have the words that stood for stones and rocks and mountains, and that the rhythms would create the formation of such things, and I was going to do this all my life.”*



We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light. —Plato

Holding Light

My father took me to the shed
Sunday afternoons to fix piecemeal
wood into frames for selling.

He didn't talk unless
something displeased him,
like when I tripped over the scrap pile
and sent the bag of nails flying.

Then he would open his mouth
and shut his hand. He'd pound me
like a fence post, say he'd fix
that posture if it was the last thing.

On quiet days we worked
in separate ends of the shed,
sanding and squaring as light built
and collapsed around us

until the dark air finally came
inside. Then father would twist his head
until just the corner of his cobalt eye
met mine and bark for the lantern.

And some days he would strike
the match himself, hovering over
wick until he felt flame lick
through fifty years calloused on his palm.

On those days he would turn
his face and mutter at me,
and I would stand beside him
and I would hold the light.

—by *Kristin George Bagdanov*

ABOUT THIS POEM

The origins of today's poem may surprise you. **Kristin George Bagdanov** says: *Truthfully, the seed for this poem came from a reality home-makeover show on a very boring morning at the gym. A very small seed, rest assured, but once again it reminds me that to write is to be aware, to find reason to pause during even the most ordinary and mundane activities.* Kristin's debut chapbook, *We Are Mostly Water*, was a finalist in the 2011 New Women's Voices contest and was published in Spring 2012 by Finishing Line Press.

IN HER OWN WORDS— Kristin George Bagdanov

From an essay by Kristin George Bagdanov . . .

*Few things in life are as deeply satisfying as the moment when I set down my pen and feel content with a poem. **I am proud when a poem is published or praised, but this pride does not penetrate. No—what endures is the incredible fullness of doing something well, of coming so close to truth that it burns.** Of course, this heat fades as self-criticism and reproach take back their rightful hold on my perspective (rightful because they do, for the most part, urge me to continue working toward my greatest potential), and I am left again with a yearning to live inside that brief moment of truth-fullness.*

*You also have experienced this fullness. The upwelling of joy shared between loved ones after a sickness is cured. **The deep inhale when you reach the summit.** The tenderness shared between lovers. The purity of grief. There are moments when our souls crest with fullness, when we glimpse life's deepness and know its pull. **This exact fullness is both the pursuit and (hoped for) result of poetry.***



Sometimes a Man Stands Up

Sometimes a man stands up during supper
and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking,
because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.

And his children say blessings on him as if he were dead.

And another man, who remains inside his own house,
dies there, inside the dishes and in the glasses,
so that his children have to go far out into the world
toward that same church, which he forgot.

—by *Rainer Maria Rilke* (translated by Robert Bly)

POET NOTES

Rene Karl Wilhelm Johann Josef Maria Rilke was born in 1875 in Prague, then Capital of Bohemia in Austria-Hungary. The poetically and artistically talented boy was pressured by his parents into attending a military academy, until 1891, when he left due to illness, going on to study literature, art history and philosophy in Prague and later in Munich. In 1897, he met and fell in love with the widely traveled, intellectual woman of letters Lou Andreas-Salomé, already married and significantly older than the young Rilke. At Lou's urging, he changed his first name from "René" to "Rainer" because she thought that name more masculine, forceful, and Germanic. Though their romantic relationship ended in 1900, she continued to be Rilke's most important confidante until the end of his life.

A move to Paris and close association with visual artists in the modernist movement (especially sculptor Auguste Rodin and painter Paul Cezanne) resulted in a prolific time for Rilke. However, his work was interrupted by two events: a turbulent two-year affair with painter Lou Albert-Lasard, followed by the onset of World War I. Rilke was drafted into service at the beginning of 1916, but was so traumatized by basic training that he was discharged some 5 months later. He returned to Munich, but it would be more than five years before his poetic voice emerged again.

By 1922, Rilke had found a suitable place to live in an artist's commune near Valais in France, and another period of intense creativity followed. By then, however, his health, always frail, declined steadily in a battle with what was eventually diagnosed as leukemia. Despite pain and fatigue, he continued to write and publish many lyric poems in French, up to his death at the age of 50, in 1925.

IN HIS OWN WORDS— Rainer Maria Rilke

If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches; for the Creator, there is no poverty.

I want to be with those who know secret things or else alone.

For one human being to love another—that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation. I hold this to be the highest task for a bond between two people: that each protects the solitude of the other.

Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue, a wonderful living side by side can grow, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole against the sky.



Twenty-five ago someone gave me a Sounds True audio tape of the book *Open Secret, Versions of Rumi* read by Coleman Barks, one of the book's translators of the Persian mystic's poems. I fell pretty hard for that voice and more so those poems, found the book at New World Book Store in Clifton, and carried it around with me wherever I went. I wrote to Professor Barks who was teaching at the University of Georgia at the time to thank him for the exquisite translations and to swoon a bit over his luscious Tennessee drawl. He wrote back a penciled note of appreciation on his lunch sack, a lard-stained paper bag smelling delightfully of peanut butter. A couple of years ago, I had the pleasure of hearing Coleman Barks read his own poetry at the Hocking Hills Poetry Festival, held every April in Logan, Ohio. Today's powerful poem is from Coleman's latest collection, *Winter Sky: New & Selected Poems 1968-2008*.

Lard Gourd

In the 19th century in Georgia
there was a clever dog who found he could
secretly dig his way under the foundations
into the back of a meathouse.

The meat was hung to smoke too high
For his leap, but there were gourds
Loaded with lard nearer his level.

The night he made his entry
Was early in the century. The new residents
Of the land were intruders themselves,
Scared and cruel, so when they heard
The banging about, they did not investigate
Until morning. The dog had gotten his head stuck
In a lard gourd. He could not see,
And he had almost smothered out there
In the helpless percussion of his night.

This ancient local color
Allegorizes three of my troubling conditions:
Blind desire, panic, and blackout drinking.

I have felt at times that I might be carrying
The living thread that connects
The sufi and zen currents,
Also the vedantic and the high mountain shaman.

Then I get drunk, talk trash to a sweet saint
Woman, fall out my top bunk, scare the children,
Pee indoors, and I know the golden thread
I hold is pissant bad behavior
and not being present for the events of my life.
I am a bad dog with sex and alcohol,
I do not lead a pure life.

Then I remember the dog inside his lard
inside his gourd inside himself,
the dog that grows still and quiet.
I have somehow achieved those breathing holes.
I cannot see where I am going,
but I can breathe. Others have died
on nights like this. Maybe some human type
will find me and ungourd my head
and scrape this shit off
and groom my face with turpentine.

I fall on my knees to beg forgiveness
for meathouse-rude intoxication
and give all praise to the being
that lives and watches out, dog or not,
from the gummed-together eyes
of the lard gourd dog.

For those not of a monkish cast,
I'll explicate. The lard is the mind.
The gourd the container of that.
The meathouse, this temptatious world.
The dog is me. What gets quiet
Behind the dog's eyes, survives and looks out,
Has no name, except maybe *you*.

—by *Coleman Barks*

POET NOTES

Poet and translator **Coleman Barks**, born and raised in Chattanooga, Tennessee, went to school at the University of North Carolina and the University of California, Berkeley. He taught poetry and creative writing at the University of Georgia for thirty years. The father of two grown children and grandfather of three, he is now retired in Athens, Georgia. His first publication of the Rumi work, *Open Secret: Versions of Rumi*, was awarded the Pushcart Writer's Choice Award by William Stafford. Barks wrote that he "*had never even heard Rumi's name until 1976, when Robert Bly handed me a copy of A.J. Arberry's translations, saying, 'These poems need to be released from their cages.'*" Barks "*felt drawn immediately to the spaciousness and longing in Rumi's poetry,*" and "*began to explore this new world....*"



The Intruder

My mother—preferring the strange to the tame:
 Dove-note, bone marrow, deer dung,
 Frog’s belly distended with finny young,
 Leaf-mold wilderness, harebell, toadstool,
 Odd, small snakes roving through the leaves,
 Metallic beetles rambling over stones: all
 Wild and natural!—flashed out her instinctive love, and quick, she
 Picked up the fluttering, bleeding bat the cat laid at her feet,
 And held the little horror to the mirror, where
 He gazed on himself, and shrieked like an old screen door far off.

Depended from her pinched thumb, each wing
 Came clattering down like a small black shutter.
 Still tranquil, she began, “It’s rather sweet ...”
 The soft mouse body, the hard feral glint
 In the caught eyes. Then we saw,
 And recoiled: lice, pallid, yellow,
 Nested within the wing-pits, cozily sucked and snoozed.
 The thing dropped from her hands, and with its thud,
 Swiftly, the cat, with a clean careful mouth
 Closed on the soiled webs, growling, took them out to the back stoop.

But still, dark blood, a sticky puddle on the floor
 Remained, of all my mother’s tender, wounding passion
 For a whole wild, lost, betrayed, and secret life
 Among its dens and burrows, its clean stones,
 Whose denizens can turn upon the world
 With spitting tongue, an odor, talon, claw,
 To sting or soil benevolence, alien
 As our clumsy traps, our random scatter of shot.
 She swept to the kitchen. Turning on the tap,
 She washed and washed the pity from her hands.

—by Carolyn Kizer

POET NOTES

Poet **Carolyn Kizer** was born in 1925 Spokane, Washington. During the mid-1950s, she studied poetry at the University of Washington under the tutelage of Theodore Roethke. Later, Kizer who also studied with Stanley Kunitz, cofounded the prestigious *Poetry Northwest*, a journal she edited from its inception in 1959 until 1965.

Kizer’s experience as a woman and poet in the male-dominated world of 1950s America has shaped her work in countless ways. It’s been said that she was a feminist practically before the term existed, and she has consistently spoken out against injustice both in her work and in her

life. Kizer said that most women poets of her generation didn't dare take themselves seriously, because the men didn't take them seriously. She was almost middle-aged before the idea sunk in. "But Ted (Theodore Roethke) took poetry seriously, and taught me to do so eventually."

IN HER OWN WORDS— Carolyn Kizer

*In some ways painters have been more important in my life than writers. Painters teach you how to see—a faculty that usually isn't highly developed in poets. Whether you take a walk in the woods with a painter, or go to a museum with one, through them you notice shapes, colors, and harmonies, relationships that enhance your own seeing. My joke always was that when I was at Sarah Lawrence, my music teacher told me that if I wanted to keep at the same level of skill at playing the piano I'd have to practice four or five hours a day just to stay where I was. And that did not appeal. And also **I thought it would be easier to go through life with a pencil rather than a Steinway.** It is very good for a peripatetic person like me, who writes poetry wherever I am. **I guess the thing that really clinched it for me was the notion that I wanted to stay as far away from capitalism—buying and selling, the material world—as I possibly could, and poetry was clearly the solution to that.***

—ON METER

Meter is as natural as breathing or the heartbeat. I think my childhood asthma had a lot to do with my consciousness of the breath unit—in a sense I've never really taken breathing for granted. It's that significant pause, that caesura, the time-out to breathe, which is why we need to hear poetry as well as see it on the page. Because we don't get the full sense of its music if we just look at it. It's always a revelation to hear a poet read his or her work.

—ON LINE BREAKS *Shall I go into my whole riff about line breaks, and about how angry I get with young poets who break lines like sawing kindling, so that it looks nice on the page and violates the integrity of phrase? **Line breaks are one of our major forms of punctuation—**compared to music, for example, which has infinite numbers of ways of telling you how fast, how slow, when to breathe, when to stop, when to pause; we've got the standard punctuation marks and we've got the line break, and you've got to use the line break to work for you.*

—ON REVISION

The lines, which seem to the reader or critic the most spontaneous, graceful, and natural are often the ones laboriously revised, far into the night, with an obligato of curses and an outpouring of sweat. With practice, revision itself becomes a creative act. One learns dispassion, judgment, and a certain limited faith in one's powers of discrimination. . . . Ah yes, those who think that their first impulse is so wonderful that they cannot alter it—in the words of a student I had at Stanford, to revise "would be to violate the integrity of the poem." But what you do through revision is to find the integrity of the poem. I've always believed that the poem inside is perfect.



My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears

My grandmother puts her feet in the sink
of the bathroom at Sears
to wash them in the ritual washing for prayer, *wudu*,
because she has to pray in the store or miss
the mandatory prayer time for Muslims
She does it with great poise, balancing
herself with one plump matronly arm
against the automated hot-air hand dryer,
after having removed her support knee-highs
and laid them aside, folded in thirds,
and given me her purse and her packages to hold
so she can accomplish this august ritual
and get back to the ritual of shopping for housewares.

Respectable Sears matrons shake their heads and frown
as they notice what my grandmother is doing,
an affront to American porcelain,
a contamination of American Standards
by something foreign and unhygienic
requiring civic action and possible use of disinfectant spray
They fluster about and flutter their hands and I can see
a clash of civilizations brewing in the Sears bathroom.

My grandmother, though she speaks no English,
catches their meaning and her look in the mirror says,
I have washed my feet over Iznik tile in Istanbul
with water from the world's ancient irrigation systems
I have washed my feet in the bathhouses of Damascus
over painted bowls imported from China
among the best families of Aleppo
And if you Americans knew anything
about civilization and cleanliness,
you'd make wider washbins, anyway
My grandmother knows one culture—the right one,

as do these matrons of the Middle West. For them,
my grandmother might as well have been squatting
in the mud over a rusty tin in vaguely tropical squalor,
Mexican or Middle Eastern, it doesn't matter which,
when she lifts her well-groomed foot and puts it over the edge.
“You can't do that,” one of the women protests,
turning to me, “Tell her she can't do that.”
“We wash our feet five times a day,”
my grandmother declares hotly in Arabic.
“My feet are cleaner than their sink.”

Worried about their sink, are they? I
should worry about my feet!”
My grandmother nudges me, “Go on, tell them.”

Standing between the door and the mirror, I can see
at multiple angles, my grandmother and the other shoppers,
all of them decent and goodhearted women, diligent
in cleanliness, grooming, and decorum
Even now my grandmother, not to be rushed,
is delicately drying her pumps with tissues from her purse
For my grandmother always wears well-turned pumps
that match her purse, I think in case someone
from one of the best families of Aleppo
should run into her—here, in front of the Kenmore display.

I smile at the midwestern women
as if my grandmother has just said something lovely about them
and shrug at my grandmother as if they
had just apologized through me
No one is fooled, but I

hold the door open for everyone
and we all emerge on the sales floor
and lose ourselves in the great common ground
of housewares on markdown.

—by *Mohja Kahf*



POET NOTES

Poet and scholar **Mohja Kahf** was born in Damascus, Syria, in 1967. Her family moved to the United States in 1971, and Kahf grew up in Indiana. She is currently a professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas.

Her poetry collection *Emails from Scheherazad* (2003) caught the attention of New York Times columnist Neil MacFarquhar, who praised her creative voice in May, 2007: “Occasionally it just takes a few lines, as in “Hijab Scene #2,” a poem that reads in its entirety: “ ‘You people have such restrictive dress for women,’ she said, hobbling away in three inch heels and panty hose to finish out another pink-collar temp pool day.”

Her novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) is a coming-of-age tale set in Indiana, where Ms. Kahf spent much of her own childhood. The novel turned Ms. Kahf into something of an idol among Muslim American women, especially younger ones, struggling to reconcile their faith with a country often hostile toward it.

Kahf co-writes a column on sexuality for the website *Muslim Wake Up* which has drawn ire, even a death threat, from the orthodox. One column described a dream in which a revered medieval Islamic scholar is described in flagrante delicto, while another depicts a Syrian village where the local imam has declared that women too can take more than one spouse.

Ms. Kahf's readings are rather un-self-conscious. She waves her hands. She sings, she dances. In fact, she can sometimes seem almost oblivious to her surroundings. Treat yourself to this youtube clip of her reading "I Love A Man Who Does My Dishes:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxfAyADwM1w>

Poet **Michael Ondaatje** (pronounced on-dot-chay) first published *The Cinnamon Peeler* in 1982 as part of his book *Running in the Family*. *The Cinnamon Peeler* appeared later in Ondaatje's collection *Secular Love*. As most critics note, this collection was influenced heavily by events in Ondaatje's life, namely his 1979 separation from his wife, Kim Jones, and his subsequent affair with another woman, Linda Spalding. The book is arranged into four different sections, which collectively detail the pain of Ondaatje's breakup and his path through despair to newfound love. *The Cinnamon Peeler* is located in the fourth and final section, "Skin Boat," and is one of the poems that glorifies love. In the poem, the speaker gives a very sensual description of his wife and their courtship, using the exotic qualities of cinnamon, especially its potent scent, to underscore his love and desire. Ondaatje's use of cinnamon, a plant found in his native Sri Lanka, indicates his desire to focus on his former homeland. Ondaatje, who has been a Canadian citizen since he was a teenager, often includes discussions of Sri Lanka in his works. Although critics responded favorably to the poems in *Secular Love*, this response pales in comparison to the critical and popular response that Ondaatje received for his third novel, *The English Patient* (1992), which was adapted into a blockbuster film in 1996.

The Cinnamon Peeler's Wife

If I were a cinnamon peeler
I would ride your bed
and leave the yellow bark dust
on your pillow.

Your breasts and shoulders would reek
you could never walk through markets
without the profession of my fingers
floating over you. The blind would
stumble certain of whom they approached
though you might bathe
under rain gutters, monsoon.

Here on the upper thigh
at this smooth pasture
neighbor to your hair
or the crease
that cuts your back. This ankle.
You will be known among strangers
as the cinnamon peeler's wife.

I could hardly glance at you
before marriage
never touch you
– your keen nosed mother, your rough brothers.
I buried my hands
in saffron, disguised them
over smoking tar,
helped the honey gatherers...

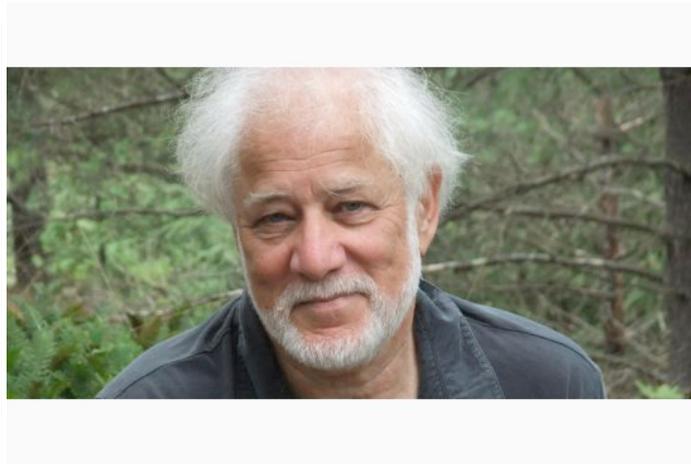
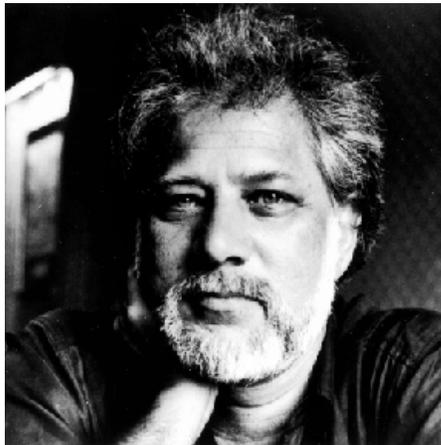
When we swam once
I touched you in water

and our bodies remained free,
you could hold me and be blind of smell.
You climbed the bank and said

this is how you touch other women
the grasscutter's wife, the lime burner's daughter.
And you searched your arms
for the missing perfume.
and knew
what good is it
to be the lime burner's daughter
left with no trace
as if not spoken to in an act of love
as if wounded without the pleasure of scar.

You touched
your belly to my hands
in the dry air and said
I am the cinnamon
peeler's wife. Smell me.

—by *Michael Ondaatje*



POET NOTES

Michael Ondaatje was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in 1943 and moved to England in 1954. After relocating to Canada in 1962, Ondaatje became a Canadian citizen. A prolific writer, Ondaatje has published 13 books of poetry and 6 novels. Already well known in Canada, he broke through in 1992 with his novel *The English Patient*, which won the Booker prize, and was adapted by director Anthony Minghella into the hit film (nine Oscars) of the same name in 1996, with Ondaatje a valued consultant. Ondaatje lives with his wife, novelist Linda Spalding, in sunny New Mexico.

IN HIS OWN WORDS— Michael Ondaatje

When asked if he would describe his poetry as free verse, Ondaatje answered: *I have trouble with the term "free verse", because it suggests that there is no structure or order at all. For me, poetry is a very tight machine. As William Carlos Williams says, you say it in the least number of words. It may not have a rhyme structure, but the poem is tightened down, as laconic and suggestive as I can get it. It also has to suggest bigger things than the words you used in the poem.*

Do you prefer writing poetry or prose? *I guess for the last few years I have been writing prose more. I sort of miss poetry and I hope I'm going to write more in the future. But I like the landscape of a novel, so that rather than building a big room, you are building a big house. In poetry it is one voice, or one intimate whisper, and I love that element to it, but I try to take some of that element into my fiction.*

Meeting the Light Completely

Even the long-beloved
was once
an unrecognized stranger.

Just so,
the chipped lip
of a blue-glazed cup,
blown field
of a yellow curtain,
might also,
flooding and falling,
ruin your heart.

A table painted with roses.
An empty clothesline.

Each time,
the found world surprises—
that is its nature.

And then
what is said by all lovers:
"What fools we were, not to have seen."

—by *Jane Hirshfield* (from *The October Palace*. © Harper Perennial, 1994)

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.

IN HER OWN WORDS— Jane Hirshfield

In an online interview with Marissa Bell Toffoli, Hirshfield gave insightful answers to basic questions facing poets.

What does she hope readers will take from her work?

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.***

Where to look for inspiration if you're having trouble getting started?

Outside. Literally—out the window, out the door—or else outside figuratively, to the inspiration of others. The creative is always an act of recombination, with something added by new juxtaposition—as making a spark requires two things struck together.

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.

Inspirational quotes about writing?

R P Blackmur: *Poetry expands the available stock of reality.*

Goethe: *Never let what matters most be at the mercy of what matters least.*

Tolstoy: *Make it strange.*

Galway Kinnell: *The title of every good poem could be 'Tenderness'.*



Blue

Blue, but you are Rose, too,
and buttermilk, but with blood
dots showing through.
A little salty your white
nape boy-wide. Glinting hairs
shoot back of your ears' Rose
that tongues like to feel
the maze of, slip into the funnel,
tell a thunder-whisper to.
When I kiss, your eyes' straight
lashes down crisp go like doll's
blond straws. Glazed iris Roses,
your lids unclose to Blue-ringed
targets, their dark sheen-spokes
almost green. I sink in Blue-
black Rose-heart holes until you
blink. Pink lips, the serrate
folds taste smooth, and Rosehip-
round, the center bud I suck.
I milknip your two Blue-skeined
blown Rose beauties, too, to sniff
their berries' blood, up stiff
pink tips. You're white in
patches, only mostly Rose,
buckskin and saltly, speckled
like a sky. I love your spots,
your white neck, Rose, your hair's
wild straw splash, silk spools
for your ears. But where white
spouts out, spills on your brow
to clear eyepools, wheel shafts
of light, Rose, you are Blue.

—by *May Swenson*

POET NOTES

May Swenson was born in 1913 in Logan, Utah. She received a bachelor degree from Utah State University in 1934 and moved to New York City the following year where she remained for most of her professional life. She found work as an editor and ghostwriter, and found a welcoming home in the progressive literary world there, a far cry from her Mormon upbringing in Utah. Swenson's first collection of poetry was published in 1954. Nine more followed, along with several plays and short stories. She received countless honors including artistic fellowships from the Guggenheim and MacArthur foundations, and served as chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 1980 to 1989, the year she died.

Swenson's poetry, which focused on romantic love, sensuality and deep spiritual curiosity, was informed instantly and permanently on an evening in May of 1949, when love-at-first-sight paid a visit. In an unpublished diary she kept during 1949 and 1950, Swenson chronicled from first glimpse, the ascendance of and depth of the passion and love she shared with Pearl Schwartz, a medical attendant ten years her junior. This intimate diary was entrusted to Swenson's brother Paul Swenson, and some of the content was presented in a paper at a symposium in 2004 by him under the title "*A Figure in the Tapestry: The Poet's Feelings Run Ahead of Her Imagination.*"

Within days, Pearl, affectionately called "Blackie", "Jay", or simply "J." by Swenson, was a fixture at Swenson's Perry Street apartment, where she would live for 16 years. Within weeks, love poems began emerging, that would be central to Swenson's work for decades. Some four months into the affair, Swenson penned this entry, in the virtually punctuation-free prose that was used throughout this journal: "*I have never known greater delight than with her—it is beyond the imagination's power and I had always thought that desire conjures images of fulfillment beyond reality's possibility, but here it is in the opposite, and my joy these days running the gamut of passion on a physical plane, the gamut of tenderness on spiritual levels, weaving everything, small and large, into a great rich tapestry of wonder, beauty, delight, is more varied and more immense than anything that I can express no matter how I try—feeling runs ahead of imagination, reality sweeter than any dream, life a thousand times more fascinating, subtle, surprising than any art. So, I am carried, a figure in the tapestry, instead of weaver of it, outside it, and this is disconcerting for I'm not used to that . . .*"

IN HER OWN WORDS—May Swenson May Swenson once said that her experience of poetry is "*based in a craving to get through the curtains of things as they appear, to things as they are, and then into the larger, wilder space of things as they are becoming.*" The poet's task became, for her, a lifelong quest for a means of interpreting "*the vastness of the unknown beyond [one's] consciousness.*"

When I talk about my work, I don't say, "I wrote", I say, "I made" or "I am making." I want my poems to be like three dimensional objects instead of just words on a page. I want them to have immediacy, as if you could walk around them, see them from several aspects, notice many facets.

Four months before her death, May Swenson wrote: "*The best poetry has its roots in the subconscious to a great degree. Youth, naivety, reliance on instinct more than learning and method, a sense of freedom and play, even trust in randomness, is necessary to the making of a poem.*"



In an interview I read with Michigan poet Diane Seuss, she expressed high praise for her mentor, poet **Conrad Hilberry**. I had not heard of Conrad Hilberry, but spent a couple of evenings engaged in what I call 'poet sleuthing'. I listened to a touching reading he did for the Fetzer Institute, a Kalamazoo Michigan foundation that fosters awareness of the power that love, forgiveness, and compassion can have on our world. Hilberry read a poem titled "For Katherine", about one of his daughters who disappeared from their train during a European family vacation when she was just nine years old. Her body was later found and returned to their home in Indiana. The simplicity and tenderness of his words led me to more of his excellent poems. I hope you like today's choice, a love poem for his wife, Marion, who for many years taught English as a second language.

Love Poem With Scenery

Our friends are dying—Kitty Steele,
Don Kinsman—while we mourn here
on the roof, wrapping sun and wind

around our necks like a long scarf
woven there to the west
in Guanajuato. They die—

still funny, quick, generous,
no tapering off, just dead.

And that's us, gone any minute now
to some bright dust out there.

What will be left? Daughters,
students, friends—and a long love,
a love so steady I almost forget

I walk in it all day
like air, like the down-winding call
of the canyon wren, like the faint smell swung

from some censer far upwind, blessing me
with woodsmoke. To think that I,
awkward, unhandsome, should have been

loved, just matter-of-factly loved
with no subjunctives, no riffing
through old possibilities.

We knew each other a few months
and were married, ignorant
and lucky. I was baffled,

gradually getting the hang of this
new tongue in which you were
so fluent. You've always had a gift—

tutoring foreigners desperate to speak.
Gradually, I slurred my way
to new inflections, rolled r's,

idioms that can't quite be translated.
And now, after daughters, deaths,
lives lost and found, love eases back

toward silence—or no, not silence
but a half-speech that slips
into the curve of back

and belly, spooned together
under the blankets, calling each other
out of bad dreams,

as, here on the roof, sun and wind
move through each others' body.

Wind and sun twist in your hand, becoming
this quick light.

—by *Conrad Hilberry*



POET NOTES

Conrad Hilberry was born March 1, 1928 in Melrose, Illinois and grew up in the small town of Ferndale, Michigan. Hilberry went to Oberlin College for his undergraduate Bachelor of Arts, and continued his studies with a Master of Arts and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He was a professor of English at Kalamazoo College from 1962 to 1998 where his students were devoted to him. Hilberry's literary works have been recognized and highlighted at Michigan State University in their Michigan Writers Series. He is the author of nine books of poetry. In 2009 Hilberry co-authored *This Awkward Art: Poems by a Father and Daughter* with the poet Jane Hilberry, his daughter.

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Conrad Hilberry

When asked what makes a poem great, Hilberry said: *It must be understandable. I don't want to have to puzzle it out. It must be so personal that I feel I know the poet when I read it ... imaginative, creative, written with care and skill ... and with an ending that just socks you.*

His own poetry, he admits, is more revision than not. Sometimes Conrad writes in a style of stream of consciousness, then picks out the lines that work and intrigue, and then polishes those. Sometimes he reads older material, thinking it is finished, only to find that it could use revision—and he gives it another go. *The first step of editing is always to know what to leave out.*

Pencil

My drawing teacher said: *Look, think, make a mark.*
Look, I told myself.
And waited to be marked.

Clouds are white but they darken
with rain. Even a child blurs them back
to little woolies on a hillside, little
bundles without legs. Look, my teacher
would surely tell me, they're nothing

like that. *Like* that: the lie. *Like* that: the poem.
She said: Respond to the heaviest part
of the figure first. Density is
form. That I keep hearing *destiny*

is not a mark of character. Like *pilgrimage*
once morphed to *mirage* in a noisy room, someone
so earnest at my ear. Then *marriage* slid.
Mir-aage, Mir-aage, I heard the famous poet let loose
awry into her microphone, triumphant.

The figure to be drawn —
not even half my age. She's completely
emptied her face for this job of standing still an hour.
Look. Okay. But the little

dream in there, inside the *think*
that comes next. A pencil in my hand, its secret life
is charcoal, the wood already burnt,
a sacrifice.

—by Marianne Boruch



POET NOTES

Marianne Boruch was born in 1950 in Chicago. She received a BA at Illinois-Urbana in 1972, married, had a son, and found her way to an MFA program at Amherst which she completed in 1979. Her first collection of poetry drew substantially on the influence of painter Marc Chagall. Saying in an interview with Brooke Horvath for the Denver Quarterly, that she's "always loved" Chagall's work and would like her own poetry to possess the qualities she sees in him: "*the effect of both being representational and playing lightly, freely with that quality . . . so one is both grounded, on one hand, and let loose by the more lyric, sometimes more surreal elements.*"

She has published seven collections of poetry, and several books of poetry-related prose. Boruch is due to publish another collection of poetry that tells a story from the eyes of cadavers. Through an initiative at Purdue, (where she has spent most of her professional career) Boruch studied illustration and anatomy, which influenced "Cadaver, Speak," to be published in 2014. She lives with her husband in West Lafayette.

IN HER OWN WORDS—Marianne Boruch

Her third collection, eight years later marked a movement toward more representational and narrative directions. She explains: *Before, I had childhood available, but at 42, there's enough distance that my twenties are opening up . . . I can see those years in context, more clearly how they were, not only for me but for a generation. So an historical weight can come into the poems, but that seems to require more narrative to pull off.*

Now, in her prime, her work is diverse and mature. *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.*

"When you write in prose, you cook the rice. When you write poetry, you turn rice into rice wine. Cooked rice doesn't change its shape, but rice wine changes both in quality and shape. Cooked rice makes one full so one can live out one's life span . . . wine, on the other hand, makes one drunk, makes the sad happy, and the happy sad. Its effect is sublimely beyond explanation."

—ancient poetry critic, Wu Qiao

How then, I wonder, might Wu Qiao describe **prose poetry** given his rice analogy. If you can concoct a definition of prose poetry—rice or no rice—please send it on to me. I'm a collector. Today's poem by writer **Campbell Mcgrath** is its own definition.

The Prose Poem

On the map it is precise and rectilinear as a chessboard, though driving past you would hardly notice it, this boundary line or ragged margin, a shallow swale that cups a simple trickle of water, less rill than rivulet, more gully than dell, a tangled ditch grown up throughout with a fearsome assortment of wildflowers and bracken. There is no fence, though here and there a weathered post asserts a former claim, strands of fallen wire taken by the dust. To the left a cornfield carries into the distance, dips and rises to the blue sky, a rolling plain of green and healthy plants aligned in close order, row upon row upon row. To the right, a field of wheat, a field of hay, young grasses breaking the soil, filling their allotted land with the rich, slow-waving spectacle of their grain. As for the farmers, they are, for the most part, indistinguishable: here the tractor is red, there yellow; here a pair of dirty hands, there a pair of dirty hands. They are cultivators of the soil. They grow crops by pattern, by acre, by foresight, by habit. What corn is to one, wheat is to the other, and though to some eyes the similarities outweigh the differences it would be as unthinkable for the second to commence planting corn as for the first to switch over to wheat. What happens in the gully between them is no concern of theirs, they say, so long as the plough stays out, the weeds stay in the ditch where they belong, though anyone would notice the wind-sewn cornstalks poking up their shaggy ears like young lovers run off into the bushes, and the kinship of these wild grasses with those the farmer cultivates is too obvious to mention, sage and dun colored stalks hanging their noble heads, hoarding exotic burrs and seeds, and yet it is neither corn nor wheat that truly flourishes there, nor some jackalopian hybrid of the two. What grows in that place is possessed of a beauty all its own, ramshackle and unexpected, even in winter, when the wind hangs icicles from the skeletons of briars and small tracks cross the snow in search of forgotten grain; in the spring the little trickle of water swells to welcome frogs and minnows, a muskrat, a family of turtles, nesting doves in the verdant grass; in summer it is a thoroughfare for raccoons and opossums, field mice, swallows and black birds, migrating egrets, a passing fox; in autumn the geese avoid its abundance, seeking out windrows of toppled stalks, fatter grain more quickly discerned, more easily digested. Of those that travel the local road, few pay that fertile hollow any mind, even those with an eye for what blossoms, vetch and timothy, early forsythia, the fatted calf in the fallow field, the rabbit running for cover, the hawk's descent from the lightning-struck tree. You've passed this way yourself many times, and can tell me, if you would, do the formal fields end where the valley begins, or does everything that surrounds us emerge from its embrace?

—by *Campbell McGrath*

POET NOTES

Campbell McGrath was born in 1962 in Chicago, Illinois, and grew up in Washington, D.C. Author of more than a dozen books of poetry, McGrath is known as a master of the long line as well as the long poem; his opus “The Bob Hope Poem” runs some 70 pages. In his college days in the early 1980s at the University of Chicago, he helped produce art of a less complex nature as a member of the punk band “Men From The Manly Planet.” McGrath and his wife now reside in Florida with their two sons where he teaches poetry at Florida International University.

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Campbell McGrath

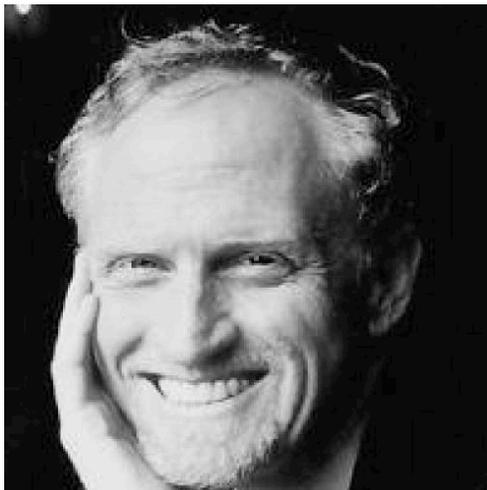
Notes below are taken from an interview for *Fugue*, Summer-Fall 2006

When you talk to students of poetry, do you help them realize what they are writing about should mean something to them but also to an audience who might object? How do you strike a balance between technical or formal aesthetic devices and voice when a student argues that all poetry is art? In MFA programs we spend our time analyzing the text, in poetry slams people are bowled over by the sonic power of the art. But poetry exists in their intersection – it is the music and the message.

What do you say to students who say "all poetry is art?"

I say – maybe. I say – prove it.

When you compose, what do you generally consider first – theme or technique? What is your writing process? At first, most poets spend a lot of time trying to turn weeds into oak trees. But eventually you learn to differentiate, to learn from the poem what it is likely to become and nurture it in that direction. But one should err on the side of generosity and positivism. Never throw away a draft, a stanza, a line – someday you may wake up realizing the rest of the poem it belongs to, or how to fix it, or what transformation it might be subject to. That is, poems that appear to be tomato plants sometimes grow into oak trees. And even weeds may turn out to be dandelions – which are beautiful things in summer.



A funny true story: A man suffering a series of sore throats schedules an appointment with his family doctor, who also happens to be his friend. Priding himself on using correct terminology in all manner of conversation, the man matter-of-factly asks the doc to take a look at his sore “vulva”. The doc explains that would be impossible, but asks his friend if he would like to have his “uvula” (fleshy extension hanging from the back of the throat) examined instead. Well, I guess so.

Today’s smart poem by **Leah Nielsen** illuminates this little anecdote while putting a smile on my face. Enjoy.

Teaching Slant Rhyme

I have always wanted to write a poem in which *lavender*
rhymes with *vendor* or *scavenger* but mostly *cadaver*,

but the image—imagine a literary journal’s response —
seems inadvertently humorous—and there seems no nonchalant

way to pair them, to *rhim* them, as my students
say, which is a marked improvement

over their DO NOT RHYME policy
and their almost comic cacophonies

composed confidently through alliteration,
and when they get it, it becomes an addiction—

one kid rhims *porridge* with *dirigible*,
another, having fallen in love with Prufrock’s dreariness

and his own cleverness suggests *fellatio* and *go*,
and another student, in earnest, asks what’s *fellatio*,

and I try not to laugh, to let
another student

say it, but no one does—a blow job,
I blurt, having reached an all-time teaching low,

and another, seeing I am losing control
suggests *go* and *polka dot*

and they go down the cananendwordbetowords path
and come back to *craft*,

which kind of goes with *Pabsts*, which one argues
is not that bad a beer, and so the impromptu

debate on the virtues of PBR,
which one declares sells well in this recession—or so he heard

on CNN—a connoisseur, he also notes the virtues
of Natty Light and when I ask for a 50% rhyme for *virtue*

he says *river, rivet, turtle, true*—here I should note that I stole
the percentage concept from an old

mentor who does not like to be called old. But never mind.
What do you say to a twenty-year-old who hears *Kevlar*

and thinks *larva, lava, valley, ale*, and just because
he can, adds *vulva* and *uvula* and pauses dramatically for guffaws?

I'm sorry, kid, but you're going to be a poet.
And *poet*

is an *orphan*,
a word for which there are no pure rhymes, like *orange*.

I'm sorry you have a gift for words.
I'm sure your parents would have preferred

even geology over writing,
but here you are spiraling

spite, rips, lipid, dalliance, nascent, land,
and *pyrrhic, hiccup, puce* and *pedal*.

—by Leah Nielsen

POET NOTES

Leah Nielsen was raised in Norway and Williamsburg, Virginia. A graduate of Syracuse University and the University of Alabama, she currently teaches at Westfield State University in Massachusetts. Her poems have appeared in *Cream City Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Passages North*, and *Puerto Del Sol*, *Indiana Review*, *Rattle*. *No Magic*, published by Word Press, is her first collection of poems. Ms. Nielsen teaches at Westfield State University and lives in Westfield, MA, with her husband and two wild and crazy dogs.

IN HER OWN WORDS— Leah Nielsen

My mother read my Dr. Seuss' One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish. My father read my Robert Louis Stevenson's A Child's Garden of Verses. Then he died (my father, not Stevenson, who was dead before this story started). By my teens, I was hanging out in Howard Johnson's, chain smoking, drinking coffee, quoting T.S. Eliot, "I grow old. I grow old," as I exhaled, not that I had ever truly inhaled. Seuss and Stevenson and Prufrock stuck. The cigarettes did not. I now drink ridiculously expensive organic coffee, which is almost as good as the coffee HoJo's served.

When asked: Who would you take a punch for?

Emotionally speaking I'd take a punch for almost anyone I love, my students included. When I was in second grade, my teacher (jokingly) threatened to hang me upside down until all my tears came out. Which is to say, I think I was just naturally a bit too sensitive to the pain of others. But it's true. I don't want others to have to hurt. Physically, I am a total sissy. I would block a punch for my dogs and my mom and my nephews and nieces, but that's about it.

When asked: What are you never allowed to throw away?

Memories of my father, who died when I was 12... the good ones and the ugly cancer-ridden ones... I hoard them. And the teddy bear he gave me when I was born. And, apparently, by the looks of my office, any paper handed in during the past 5 years. Same goes for the mail... though I'm working on it.

Dear Poetry Loving Horde,

In response to yesterday's poem ("Teaching Slant Rhyme" by Leah Nielsen) a reader sent this youtube link of teacher/poet Taylor Mali delivering a very funny piece (while sharing the stage with Billy Collins)—"The The Impotence of Proofreading"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OonDPGwAyfQ>

When I discovered today's poem some months ago, I immediately knew it would take one of the 30 coveted spots in this season's **April Gifts**. I first featured poet **Susan Blackwell Ramsey** back in 2008 with her masterful poem *Aftereffects of Bell's Palsy*. You can find the poem through the link at the end of today's post.

There are poems that recycle jokes and spin new truths out of them, but its hard to top this sestina by **Susan Blackwell Ramsey**. Enjoy.

Tell Me If You've Heard This One

Surprise is what we value in a joke
we think, a different reason for the chicken
to cross, a deeper basement to the blonde's
bemusement, some new group screwing in a lightbulb,
odder animal walks into a bar,
the final wise word from the patient rabbi.

A priest, a Baptist minister and a rabbi
walk into a bar. Barkeep says "Is this a joke?"
Sure, and a good one, a world where every bar
is just as apt to host a talking chicken
as an ecumenical conference, but no lightbulb
ever flashing on above the blonde.

It's compensation, making fun of blondes,
just like giving the punchline to the rabbi.
The proud are humbled, the oppressed triumph, the lightbulb
goes on – we get it, and laugh. A joke
turns power upside down until a chicken
can be the hero and walk into a bar.

And everyone seems welcome here, bar
none, not just the always-welcome blonde
but those who'd be justified in feeling chicken
about walking in, the solitary rabbi
stranded amid goyim who wouldn't get the jokes
he tells at home, grateful that these lightbulbs

are dim. You'd have to be a pretty dim bulb
not to know that everyone in this bar
has been the butt of the lowest kind of joke,
history's hotfoot, fate's yanked-out chair. Blondes
took over one dark night and riddled the Polaks, the rabbi,
Cletus hazed Rastus, but yo' mama fried that chicken

so good everybody was happy, even the chicken.
It's verbal potluck: Luigi brings a bulb
of garlic, knock-knock the drummer delivers pizza, the rabbi
adds a little schmaltz, everyone in the bar
is flaunting their roots, eventually even the blonde,
The melting pot's a plate, a glass, a joke.

"Rabbi, how many moths to screw in a lightbulb?"
asks the blonde chick at bar, "Only two." "No joke?"
"But like us, you've got to wonder how they got in there."

—by *Susan Blackwell Ramsey*

POET NOTES

Susan Blackwell Ramsey, was born in Detroit in 1950. She earned a degree from Kalamazoo College and liked the town well enough to stay there and raise a family. She taught high school, gardened for hire, and worked as a horticultural transparencies librarian, but has primarily been a bookseller. Susan worked at Kalamazoo's oldest independent bookstore and began publishing poems, receiving an Irving S. Gilmore Emerging Artist Grant. When the bookshop closed she was admitted into the University of Notre Dame's Creative Writing MFA program, where she was given the department's Mitchell Award. Her work has appeared in numerous journals. Susan won the Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Poetry for 2011 with her manuscript *A Mind Like This*. She currently teaches spinning, knitting, and creative writing at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts.

IN HER OWN WORDS Susan Blackwell Ramsey —
from a Prairie Schooner Interview from February 2012:

You're an expert at writing in forms—sestinas, sonnets, pantoums, etc. In a mind like yours, do poems begin in specific forms or do you typically nudge them into forms as you revise them? *As a bookish teenager I set out to learn forms; it was only later that I realized that forms are skeletons, not corsets, and that different forms correspond to different emotional states. So while I occasionally set out to play with a particular form (I still don't have a villanelle I'm proud of) or notice that certain words would be fun to try in a sestina to see where they lead, these days I'm more likely to notice that this argument feels like a sonnet, or that obsession is reflected by a pantoum.*

A book of poetry is successful not only because the individual poems in it are good but also because its poems are interesting in relation to each other. For example, you bring up lace, subtly and overtly, in three poems in a row; what advice do you have for writers regarding selecting and ordering poems for a full-length manuscript? *Cultivate your obsessions. For a well-ordered life it's a good idea to read Jane Austen and seek balance, but your writing profits from egging on your most extreme quirks. I have a mind like a junk drawer, and discovering I*

could string apparently disparate subjects together—like the awfulness of Clapton's acoustic Layla and Brahms' "Academic Festival Overture"—has given me a lot of pleasure. I just finished a poem where St. Francis and St. Clare double-date with Thoreau and Evita and it just makes me very happy.

Knitting and gardening appear in many of your poems. Seemingly delicate objects such as lace and tulips are made sturdy through your exacting, thorough descriptions of them. Are you attracted to these subjects because of their perceived fragility or hardness? Of course both gardening and knitting include plenty of time for thought; one of my favorite garden writers observed that the problem with gardening is that it's a metaphor for everything! I've gardened for pay as well as in our own much smaller garden for decades and knitted for longer, and I'm increasingly intrigued by both as process—a good thing, when product is so far from guaranteed.



Recognize these song lyrics?

*In the winter of '65, we were hungry, just barely alive
By May the tenth, Richmond had fell
It's a time I remember, oh so well **

or these?

*I pulled into Nazareth, was feelin' about half past dead
I just need some place where I can lay my head
"Hey, mister, can you tell me where a man might find a bed?"
He just grinned and shook my hand, "no" was all he said ***

A year ago today, Levon Helm of The Band died peacefully at age 71 after a battle with cancer. Two-thousand people showed up at his wake. Levon, a stellar musician and an unpretentious soul, was born in Marvell, Arkansas and grew up in nearby Turkey Scratch, a farming community in the Mississippi Delta cotton country. As a child, Mr. Helm was inspired by Elvis Presley, Sonny Boy Williamson and Conway Twitty, among others.

Music was the gateway to today's poem. **Tracy K. Smith**, was struggling with a poem revision while Levon Helm and The Band played in the background where she was working. Out of that frustration, a new poem was born. *Alternate Take: for Levon Helm*, was published in The New Yorker on September 21, 2009.

Alternate Take: for Levon Helm

I've been beating my head all day long on the same six lines,
Snapped off and whittled to nothing like the nub of a pencil
Chewed up and smoothed over, yellow paint flecking my teeth.

And this whole time a hot wind's been swatting at my door,
Spat from his mouth and landing smack against my ear.
All day pounding the devil out of six lines and coming up dry

While he drives donuts through my mind's back woods with that
Dirt-road voice of his, kicking up gravel like a runaway Buick.
He asks *Should I come in with that back beat*, and whatever those

Six lines were bothered by skitters off like water in hot grease.
Come in, Levon, with your lips stretched tight and that pig-eyed grin,
Bass mallet socking it to the drum. Lay it down like you know

You know how, shoulders hiked nice and high, chin tipped back,
So the song has to climb its way out like a man from a mine.

—by Tracy K. Smith



POET NOTES

Tracy K. Smith, born in 1972, is an African American poet and educator. She has published three collections of poetry. Her book *Life on Mars* won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.

Smith is a native of Falmouth, Massachusetts. She was raised in northern California in a family with "deep roots" in Alabama. Smith received her B.A. from Harvard in 1994, and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Columbia University in 1997. She has taught at the City University of New York, the University of Pittsburgh and Columbia University. In 2005 she joined the faculty of Princeton University, where she currently teaches creative writing.

IN HER OWN WORDS— Tracy K. Smith

Maybe the important thing about a poem that works is not what it reveals about what the poet has been up to as a person, but rather what it can teach the poet (or even a reader) about what he or she must begin to see or ask or remember or feel or even do. And when I think about how I've been impacted by other writers, a large part of it has to do with witnessing the degree to which the self, when it is honest and brave, can teach itself things it did not know it knew.

*I always encourage my students to seek analogies between their outside interests and their process as poets. **Everything should make its way into the poems, because everything makes a mark upon the poet.** I think the risks of too rigid a self-identification as a poet (as opposed to an artist or a maker or a person with questions that lend themselves to exploration in words) can be tantamount to a relationship in which two people put all of their energy into one another and nothing more: things can become repetitive, stunted, and eventually break down.*

I think the I is paramount to poetry — it's the link between the reader and the world that the poem creates. I also think that every I is, in fact, many I's — every speaker is a kind of composite sketch of fantasy, elements of the poet's life or mind, and something completely its own that the poet cannot will into being or entirely control.

.....

For a listening treat . . .

* The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down (written 1969 / from *The Last Waltz*) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VShpcqd3zE>

** The Weight (1968 Woodstock)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFhXd1BQzLc>

Poet *Anna Evans* explains, “I wrote ‘Zeitgeber’ in my studio at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (an artist’s community in Amherst, Virginia), as part of a series of poems arising from my work with Alzheimer’s sufferers. The order and faint repetition of the sonnet sequence seemed the only way to make sense of this nonsensical disease.”

Zeitgeber

I

One hour in sunshine every morning is the best zeitgeber. Residential group settings for people living with Alzheimer’s... often include access to a garden designed for safety, way-finding and place-awareness. —John Zeisel, I’m Still Here: A New Philosophy of Alzheimer’s Care

The courtyard’s small, but pleasant in its way:
 young birches, laurel, and a bed of roses,
 a winding path, picked out in red and gray,
 the painted wrought iron chairs where, one supposes
 two residents could sit and play at chess
 upon the table, basking in the sun,
 while sipping tea...but here I must confess
 such fantasy breaks down as soon begun.

For Iris fidgets there, among the blooms.
 She says, *Is this a maze? I think I’m lost.*
 The single door leads back into the rooms,
 which keep her warm and safe, despite the cost.
 Still, sitting in the rich September light,
 I think she knows how far she is from night.

II

I think she knows how far she is from right.
 Her body clock is faulty, but the sun
 can tweak her ancient mechanism just right,
 and for a while at least, the thing will run.
 She can’t explain what day it is, what year—
 such things are social constructs that we learn—
 but she can tell you autumn’s drawing near,
 and that she likes to see the maples turn.

All that remains was tattooed on her brain
 by repetition or the changing seasons:
 the poems of her school days, and the rain
 are hers by heart with no regard for reasons.
 While her clock ticks, we’ll oil, rewind, adjust:
 we come from dust and return to dust.

III

We come from dust and we return to dust,
whether it happens piecemeal or comes at once.
This painted table has small specks of rust
that barely spoil its Grecian elegance,
a testament to all the storms it's known,
and to the many more that it can bear,
still the day comes that no one can postpone:
rust will have stained it almost everywhere.

Who knows, perhaps instead of grinding rains
a lightning strike will split its center first?
Meanwhile its latticed surface entertains
Iris, who's been favored with—or cursed?—
this place to savor her last hours of day:
a courtyard small, but pleasant in its way.

—by *Anna Evans*



POET NOTES

Anna Evans' poems have appeared in the *Harvard Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Rattle*, and *Measure*. She received her MFA from Bennington College, and is the Associate Editor of the *Raintown Review*. Her chapbooks *Selected Sonnets* and *Swimming* are available from Maverick Duck Press. Her poetry has been nominated three times for the Pushcart Prize.

Ms. Evans is a former President of the Burlington County Poets of New Jersey, and a member of the Quick and Dirty Poets in New Jersey. She is accredited by the New Jersey Artists in Education program to work with Children in Grades K-8, and she teaches poetry at the West Windsor (New Jersey) Art Center.

Near Misses

The truck that swerved to miss the stroller in which I slept.

My mother turning from the laundry basket just in time to see me open the third-story window to call to the cat.

In the car, on ice, something spinning and made of history snatched me back from the guardrail and set me down between two gentle trees. And that time I thought to look both ways on the one-way street.

And when the doorbell rang, and I didn't answer, and just before I slipped one night into a drunken dream, I remembered to blow out the candle burning on the table beside me.

It's a miracle, I tell you, this middle-aged woman scanning the cans on the grocery store shelf. Hidden in the works of a mysterious clock are her many deaths, and yet the whole world is piled up before her on a banquet table again today. The timer, broken. The sunset smeared across the horizon in the girlish cursive of the ocean, *Forever, For You*.

And still she can offer only her body as proof:

The way it moves a little slower every day. And the cells, ticking away. A crow pecking at a sweater. The last hour waiting patiently on a tray for her somewhere in the future. The spoon slipping quietly into the beautiful soup.

—by *Laura Kasischke*

POET NOTES

Poet and novelist **Laura Kasischke** was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1961 and teaches in the MFA program at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She lives in Chelsea, Michigan with her husband and son.

Kasischke is the author of 8 books of poetry and at least as many novels. Her novel *The Life Before Her Eyes* is the basis for the film of the same name, directed by Vadim Perelman, and starring Uma Thurman and Evan Rachel Wood. Kasischke's work is particularly well received in France, where she is widely read in translation. Her novel *A moi pour toujours (Be Mine)* was published by Christian Bourgois, and was a national best seller.

IN HER OWN WORDS—**Laura Kasischke**

I guess I am always trying to write the kind of poem that I would want to read, and that's what I really enjoy. Like what Emily Dickinson said, she knew poetry because when she found it, it would take the top of her head off. I feel that way when I find poems in which I'm taken from the dog's water bowl to another world in the course of five lines or so.

When I write poetry, my first drafts are ... I really am trying—not in a super mystical way but maybe more of an aesthetic way — trying to find my subconscious, trying to grapple with that. If you do that, when it works, which is mostly if it works, you do find yourself just automatically marrying the strange with the ordinary. If I am writing a poem—I don't sit down ever to write a poem, but I will sit down with a journal to get ideas for a poem, and that's when it works, that's where the poems come from—I'll be in the middle of the day, I just dropped my son off from school, I have laundry to do, the cats are meowing, and I've got to be at work in an hour. So there is the ordinary for you. And then hovering around it, if anybody stops and really looks at it, there's all this strangeness. Where did all of this come from? Look out the window at all this leafy green stuff. What's it doing there? How did it just happen to work out that we would be animals who would eat it and thrive?



Feeling The Draft

We were young and it was an accomplishment
 to have a body. No one said this. No one
 said much beyond “throw me that sky” or
 “can the lake sleep over?” The lake could not.
 The lake was sent home and I ate too many
 beets, went around with beet-blood tongue
 worrying about my draft card-burning brother
 going to war. Other brothers became holes
 at first base at war, then a few holes
 Harleying back from war in their always
 it seemed green jackets with pockets galore
 and flaps for I wondered bullets, I wondered
 how to worship these giants. None of them
 wanted to talk to me or anyone it seemed
 but the river or certain un-helmeted curves
 at high speed, I had my body
 and flung it over branches and fences
 toward my coming sullenness as the gravity
 of girls’ hips began and my brother
 marched off to march against the war.
 I watched different masses of bodies on tv,
 people saying no to the jungle with grenades
 and people saying no to the grenades with signs
 and my father saying no to all of them
 with the grinding of his teeth he spoke with.
 I’d pedal after the nos up and down a hill
 like it was somehow a rosary, somehow my body
 was a prayer I could chant by letting it loose
 with others like me milling around
 the everything below five feet tall
 that was ours, the everything below
 the adult line of sight that was ours
 to hold as long as we could: a year,
 a summer. Until the quarterback came back
 without . . . well, without. When the next Adonis
 stepped up to throw the bomb.

—by *Bob Hicok*

POET NOTES

Bob Hicok is an American poet, born in 1950, one of seven children of a Michigan businessman who owned tool and die companies supplying the auto industry. Hicok was very successful and completely self-taught as a poet, publishing four books of poetry while establishing his own company in the family’s manufacturing trade. The “Great Recession” of 2008 led him to pursue poetry as a career, at least partially for economic reasons. He discussed this irony, and his identity with working people in a 2009 interview recorded for the PBS News Hour aired on April 30, 2009.

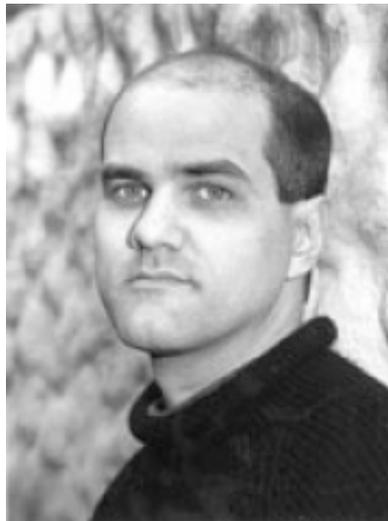
IN HIS OWN WORDS— Bob Hicok

I've always written about work, I'm never really sure why. I think part of it comes from the history I've seen in my own family, basically coming from farming people and factory people, and yet the generation before me, my fathers generation, in my family, there was always a movement up. He ran tool and die plants, it was a family of seven, so my mom stayed home and took care of kids. So I had both a working class and upper middle class sensibility about the world.

*As a writer, as a person. **I'm just not happy when I don't write. It's about my favorite thing to do. It's the unifying activity of my life. So when I don't write, I am, in the most basic sense, not being myself.***

There is not a correct kind of poem to write, or an incorrect kind. I want access to the whole spectrum. If I piss on the surreal, I won't let myself head in that direction. If I insist that the lyric is dead, that door closes. Being open to all kinds of poems allows for a fuller range of expression and helps the poet write out of different kinds of moods and sensibilities.

*I almost never have a goal in mind for a poem, so poems failing to do what I want them to do aren't usually a problem. **It's a large part of the joy of writing for me, to arrive where I didn't know I was going.** Writers talk about this quite often. I think it's why many of us don't want to talk in detail about what we're writing. I tend to run with the first line or image that arrives with force.*



The nuclear disaster in Chernobyl occurred in April of 1986. The long term effects of cancers and deformities are still being accounted for.

The Years We Will Know Them

Soon I will know if I am pregnant.
 I watch my blood, so willing
 to fill the vial, and the tiny blue bruise
 that instantly forms
 where the needle entered.
 In this waiting room I sit
 with a *Life* magazine—
Victims of Chernobyl in bold
 and photos of men without hair,
 skin peeling as if they'd lain
 too long in the sun.
 Some glance hopefully at us, wide-eyed,
 a part of History.
 But how young—
 they must have mothers
 who'd want to hold such heads and weep
 for the years they have known them,
 the ones they will not.
 Each morning nurses collect the hair
 in great clumps from the pillows
 till each bare scalp gives up
 boyhood scars and birthmarks,
 a shell bony and domed.
 Uncovered, the nape of the neck
 is a place a woman remembers
 putting her lips to.
 My name is called.
 Soon I will know if the tender bone
 of a skull is bedded
 like a pearl in my womb.

—by Lauren Mesa

“The Years We Will Know Them” was written during the years when I battled infertility. Five year’s worth. I was quite familiar with waiting rooms, but unlike many, had the precise joy of conceiving a few months after writing the poem. My son, now 23 years old, allows me to know that it’s true: a mother remembers her son’s scars. —poet Lauren Mesa

I read **Lauren Mesa’s** poem 25 years ago in the January 1988 issue of *Poetry*, the same month and year I conceived my only child, a son. I “starred” the poem on the contents page of that edition and put the journal on a shelf until just a few years ago when I began reviewing my collection of *Poetry* for gem poems. This winter, *The Years We Will Know Them* rose to the top thirty poems for my April project.

There were few remarks on the bio page of that issue of *Poetry*, except to say that Ms. Mesa was also an artist in California. It didn't take me long to discover on facebook an artist by the same name. Yes, the same Lauren Mesa who wrote this lovely poem. Lauren was thrilled that I had kept her poem for 25 years, and we have now become cyber penpals.

Lauren lives in Chico, California, with her husband Rick of 30 years. Her son Gabriel and daughter Kate also live in The City of Trees. It's true, Lauren says, they are surrounded by trees. Trees pop up all the time in her writing and art work.

For 17 years Ms. Mesa taught in a private school. Today she is a full-time artist. To see her work, check out her facebook page: LaurenMesaArt. Lauren creates beautiful ceramic work (mosaics, crosses, hearts) as well as multi media acrylic paintings. She's at work on a series of tree paintings with ceramic names on them - that's the "mixed" media aspect to the work. Shells, small stones, ceramic pieces added in precise places. Lauren just finished a tree named "Gladness" and another painting of three birches titled "Humility".

IN HER OWN WORDS— Lauren Mesa

I've always been a bookworm. Always written - whether it be in a journal, letter form, curriculum, poems, essays or stories. And I've always been involved with art. For years I sent work out for publication and enjoyed the results but today I'm more than content with the process of writing itself. Many years ago, the poet William Stafford wrote me a personal letter after reading one of my poems that he'd chosen as first place in a competition he was judging. His letter meant the world to me. So yes, being published has its compensations. When I unfold his letter and see his handwriting it all comes back to me. But give me a good day in which health prevails, and joy sneaks in. My loved ones well and safe.



Post Hoc

It happened because he looked a gift horse in the mouth.
 It happened because he couldn't get that monkey off his back.
 It happened because she didn't chew 22 times before swallowing.
 What was she thinking, letting him walk home alone from the bus stop?
 What was he thinking, standing up in the boat like that?
 Once she signed those papers the die was cast.
 She should have waited an hour before going in; everyone knows
 salami and seawater don't mix.
 He should have checked his parachute a seventh time;
 you can never be too careful.
 Why didn't she declare her true feelings?
 Why didn't she play hard to get? She could be out at some
 nice restaurant right now instead of in church, praying
 for the strength to let him go.
 It all started with that tattoo.
 It all started with her decision to order the chicken salad.
 Why was he so picky?
 Why wasn't she more discriminating?
 He should have read the writing on the wall; listened
 to the still small voice, had a lick of sense. But how could he when he
 was blinded by passion? Deaf to warnings? Really dumb?
 Why, why, in God's name, did he run with scissors?
 If only they'd asked Jesus for help.
 If only they'd asked their friends for help.
 If only they'd ignored the advice of others and held fast
 to their own convictions, they might all be here, now,
 with us, instead of six feet under; instead of trying to adopt
 that foreign baby, instead of warming that barstool
 at the Road Not Taken Eatery and Lounge, wondering how it might all
 have been different, if only they had done
 the right thing.

—by *Jennifer Maier*

POET NOTES

Jennifer Maier teaches literature and creative writing at Seattle Pacific University and serves as an associate editor at *Image*. A native of Seattle, she's a graduate of the University of Washington and Tulane University in New Orleans, where her doctoral research explored the relationship between photography and poetry in America in the early twentieth century. She began writing poetry about a dozen years ago (as a way to procrastinate and avoid studying for her oral exams). Her first poem, a mock heroic paeon to New Orleans's giant flying cockroaches, while failing to cure her phobia, succeeded in getting published, and she's been writing ever since. She now lives on Lake Washington, so rather than large, noxious insects, the migrating birds she watches from her window tend to turn up in her work.

Ms. Maier grew up in a family “obsessed with language and words”, giving her grist for the poetry mill. Her manuscript *Dark Alphabet* won the Crab Orchard Review First Book Award, an honor that included a 2006 publishing contract with Southern Illinois University Press.

IN HER OWN WORDS— Jennifer Maier

My father would read me poems I didn't understand, by Edward Lear and Robert Service. Something of their rhythmic cadences seeped into my unconscious mind. Around the dinner table, our family discussed the roots of words.

There's a strange dividend that comes, long after you write a poem. First you're writing a poem in your bathrobe and then, years later, somebody writes to say he was reading your poem in his bathrobe, and wants to publish it.

A good poem is economical, graceful, and it provides momentary insight or illumination at the end. Not that it's attempting to teach anything. Russian playwright Anton Chekhov said that great art shouldn't strive to answer the questions of the universe but only to frame the questions correctly. There's a little click in there, when you find a poem has framed the question well. Luminously, even.



to hurl at her eyes, nose, mouth,
ears, throat, breasts, and shoulders.

How big is my heart, I wonder?
How will it encompass these men dressed in black?

Now the fog drifts in over the passes,
screening the peaks into half-tones.
And then into no tones at all.

These goats with names,
with eyes that make you wonder,
these goats
who will be slaughtered today.
Why *these* goats?

There are reasons,
but they are human reasons.

I listened while my friend
spoke through his grief for his son,
shot to death in a pizza shop he managed
in Nashville
after emptying the safe
for a desperate young man with a gun—
 who my friend told me he'd forgiven—
spoke of consolation through his tears,
the spirit of his son still with him, he said.
The spirit of his son still with him.

Oak tree,
joy of my eye
that reaches in so many directions—
Are the birds that fly from your branches
closer to heaven?

The moon
shimmering on the surface of the pond,
its rippling reflected in your eyes,
of which you are no more aware
than the wind, just passing through this oak,
of the acorns still bobbing.

The mountains, resolute now
in fading light.
With her nose deep in the late-summer grass,
my dog calls up a new story.

—by *Dan Gerber*



POET NOTES

Daniel Frank Gerber was born 1940 in western Michigan and currently lives in Santa Ynez Valley, California with his wife. Dan Gerber's work has appeared in many literary magazines. He is also the author of three novels, a collection of short stories, and two books of non-fiction. Gerber's collection of essays, *A Second Life: A Collected Nonfiction*, describes his experience as a professional racing driver, journalist, sailor, and fisherman with a poet's eye and a novelist's gift for narrative, believing, as he states in his introduction, that our truest lives must be imagined. The book describes Gerber's return to racing thirty-three years after his career-ending crash, a story about saving his own life in the African desert by introducing a clan of Rendili warriors to ice, and the story of a clandestine sailing trip to Cuba.

BACKSTORY: BABY FOOD DYNASTY

Dan Gerber's father was co-founder of the Fremont Canning Company in Fremont, Michigan in 1901, and for a few decades the business had modest but unspectacular success selling packaged vegetables, beans, and fruits. In 1927 he and his wife Dorothy had their first child, a daughter named Sally. At some point during Sally's infancy, frustrated by the ever-present chore of cooking, chopping, mashing and straining solid food into a form that their toddler could eat, Dorothy Gerber suggested to her husband that there might be money to be made in mass-producing baby food. And the rest, as they say, is history.

How to Be Happy: Another Memo to Myself

You start with your own body
then move outward, but not too far.
Never try to please a city, for example.
Nor will the easy intimacy
in small towns ever satisfy that need
you have only whispered in the dark.
A woman is a beginning.
She need not be pretty, but must know
how to make her own ceilings
out of all that's beautiful in her.
Together you must love to exchange
gifts in the night, and agree
on the superfluity of ribbons,
the fine violence of breaking out
of yourselves. No matter,
it's doubtful she will be enough for you,
or you for her. You must have friends
of both sexes. When you get together
you must feel everyone has brought
his fierce privacy with him
and is ready to share it. Prepare
yourself though to keep something back;
there's a center in you
you are simply a comedian
without. Beyond this, it's advisable
to have a skill. Learn how to make something:
food, a shoe box, a good day.
Remember, finally, there are few pleasures
that aren't as local as your fingertips.
Never go to Europe for a cathedral.
In large groups, create a corner
in the middle of the room.

—by *Stephen Dunn*



When poet **Stephen Dunn** was a young man, he worked as a copywriter for the National Biscuit Company (Nabisco's original name) from 1962-1963. In his words: *I wrote in-house brochures that went to the sales force of (the) corporation. Even with that kind of writing, my soul was in danger, which was why many years ago I quit, and tried to see if I was good enough to take a chance at becoming the kind of writer I wished to be. What I hate about most commercials is what I hate about society-speak and political cant. The debasement of language.*

POET NOTES

Stephen Dunn, born in 1939 in New York City, has written many collections of poetry, and has won numerous awards including the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his 2001 collection, *Different Hours*. His most recent book is *What Goes On: Selected and New Poems 1995-2009* by Norton. He has taught poetry and creative writing and held residencies at several universities. Since 1974 Dunn has taught at Richard Stockton College of NJ, where he is Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing.

IN HIS OWN WORDS— Stephen Dunn,

The good poem illuminates its subject so that we can see it as the poet wished, and in ways he could not have anticipated. It follows that such illumination is twofold: the light of the mind, which the poet employs like a miner's beam, and the other light which emanates from the words on the page in conjunction with themselves, a radiance the poet caused but never can fully control. From the essay "The Good and Not So Good" in *Walking Light: Essays and Memoirs*.

In the presence of a good poem we remember/discover the soul has an appetite, and that appetite is for emotional veracity and the unsayable.

It All Comes Back

We placed the cake, with its four unlit candles
poked into thick frosting, on the seat
of his chair at the head of the table
for just a moment while Inés and I unfolded
and spread Spanish cloth over Vermont maple.

Suddenly he left the group of family,
family friends, kindergarten mates, and darted
to the table, and just as someone cried *No, no!*
Don't sit! he sat down right on top of his cake
and the room broke into groans and guffaws.

Actually it was pretty funny, all of us
were yelping our heads off, and actually
it wasn't in the least funny. He ran to me
and I picked him up but I was still laughing,
and in indignant fury he hooked his thumbs

into the corners of my mouth, grasped
my cheeks, and yanked—he was so muscled
and so outraged I felt he might rip
my whole face off. Then I realized
that was exactly what he was trying to do.

And it came to me: I was one of his keepers.
His birth and the birth of his sister
had put me on earth a second time,
with the duty this time to protect them
and to help them to love themselves.

And yet here I was, locked in solidarity
with a bunch of adults against my own child,
heehawing away, all of us, without asking
if, underneath, we weren't striking back, too late,
at our own parents, for their humiliations of us.

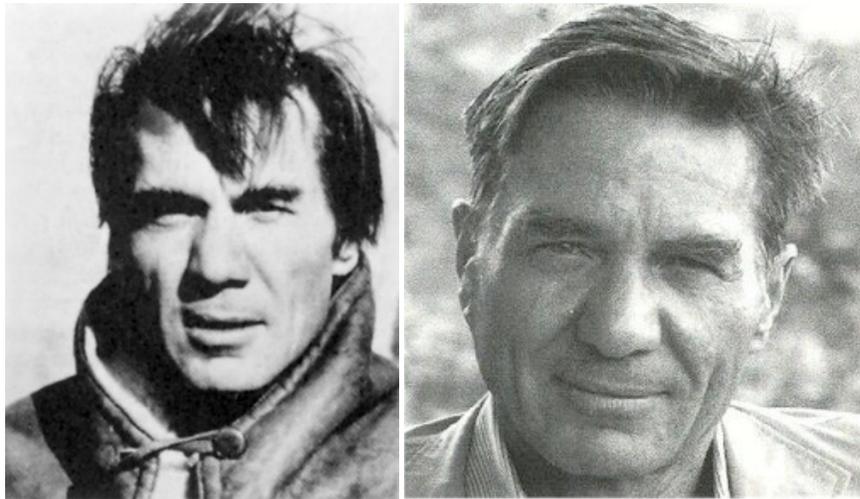
I gulped down my laughter and held him and
apologized and commiserated and explained and then
things were set right again, but to this day it remains
loose, this face, seat of superior smiles,
on the bones, from that hard yanking.

Shall I publish this story from long ago
and risk embarrassing him? I like it
that he fought back, but what's the good,
now he's thirty-six, in telling the tale
of that mortification when he was four?

Let him decide. Here are the three choices.
He can scratch his slapdash check mark,
which makes me think of the rakish hook
of his old high school hockey stick,
in whichever box applies:

- Tear it up.*
- Don't publish it but give me a copy.*
- OK, publish it, on the chance that somewhere someone survives of all those said to die miserably every day for lack of the small clarifications sometimes found in poems.*

—by Galway Kinnell



POET NOTES

Galway Kinnell was born in 1927 in Providence, Rhode Island. In a writing career that has spanned more than half a century, Kinnell has published more than 20 collections of poetry.

A self-described introvert as a child, he grew up reading reclusive American writers like Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickinson. Graduating from Princeton University—where he was classmates with W.S. Merwin—in 1948, Kinnell spent many years abroad, including extended stays in Europe and the Middle East. He has worked as a journalist and as a volunteer for the Congress of Racial Equality in the South. Kinnell is now retired and resides at his home in Vermont.

IN HIS OWN WORDS— Galway Kinnell

Kinnell once commented that poetry might be “*the canary in the mineshaft.*” *Of course I was thinking that one of the places and one of the ways of keeping the lovely and precious from dying out would be poetry,*” he says. “*I think you could extend that to: A whole culture of a country could be kept alive through poetry.*”

Though his poetry is rife with earthy images like animals, fire, blood, stars and insects, Kinnell does not consider himself to be a “nature poet.” In an interview with Daniela Gioseffi for *Hayden's Ferry Review*, Kinnell noted, *I don't recognize the distinction between nature poetry and, what would be the other thing? Human civilization poetry?*

How does he know when a poem is done? *When I can take a poem of mine that I think is finished and put it aside for a month and pick it up and read it and find it interesting, and if I encounter no place where I think it should be changed, and if at the end it surprises me, even though I wrote it, I think it might be done.*

I never call myself a poet. Robert Frost said that the term poet is a word of praise and therefore one must never apply it to oneself or it sounds like boasting. *But in any case, I was serious about writing my poetry even before I went in the navy and when I was in boot camp I was put in charge of 120 men who had also come into boot camp at that time and I was put in charge because I had taken a semester of college. Then I fell into the habit at night when everyone was in bed and it was very quiet of reading one poem before the lights went out. So, I've been interested in poetry, in writing poetry basically all my life.*

Today's poem has been tucked away in my heart since I first read it 25 years ago in *The Gold Cell*, a stunning collection by poet **Sharon Olds**. I chose the poem in the middle of the night when I woke up with it on my mind just hours after our son flew back to San Diego following a visit home for the holidays. After a few family photos and lingering hugs inside the airport, we watched Jake from the required distance as he wended his way through the labyrinth of security. On tiptoes, I caught a last glimpse of his dark head, the profile of his familiar nose, the athletic way he swings and hoists his backpack onto his shoulder, before he disappeared in a sea of people in the busy concourse . . .

The Signs

As I stand with the parents outside the
 camp bus, its windows tinted black
 so we see our children, if we can find them, as
 figures seen through a dark haze, like the dead,
 I marvel at how little it takes to
 tell me which is Gabriel—just a
 tuft of hair, like the crest on the titmouse that
 draws the titmice swiftly to its side.
 Or all I see is the curve of a chin
 scooped and pointed as some shining Italian
 utensil for milk-white pasta with garlic,
 that's my boy. All the other
 mothers, too, can pick their kid by a
 finger, a nose in the smoked mirror
 as if we have come to identify their bodies
 and take them home—such a cloud of fear and longing
 hangs above the long drawn-out departure,
 but finally its over, each hand made of
 just such genes and no others
 waves its characteristic wave,
 Gabey's thin finny hand
 rotating like a windshield wiper, and they're
 off in a Stygian stink of exhaust,
 and then I would know his bus anywhere, in
 any traffic jam, as it moves through the
 bad air with the other buses,
 its own smooth black shoulder
 above the crowd, and when it turns the corner
 I would know this world anywhere
 as my son's world, I would love it any time in his name.

—by *Sharon Olds*

POET NOTES

In the words of poet Michael Ondaatje, Sharon Olds' poems are "*pure fire in the hands.*" Her poetry has been translated into seven languages for international publications. She was the New York State Poet Laureate for 1998-2000. Most recently Ms. Olds won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for

Poetry for her book *Stag's Leap* which explores details of her divorce ten years ago after a 32 year marriage.

My favorite **Sharon Olds** book is *The Gold Cell* which includes today's poem, *The Signs*. Although her work generally moves toward love and reconciliation, Olds is regarded as controversial, described as self-indulgent and over-dramatic, with a predilection for shocking subject matter. Born in San Francisco, California, in 1942, Olds was raised as a “hellfire Calvinist” which might explain a few things. You might think of her intensely personal voice as the poetic equivalent of the aggressive musicianship of Metallica. Nothing wrong with that in my book. Her fiercely tender poems about her son and daughter are an exception to her harsher themes, and never fail to touch my heart. I can't tell you how many copies of *The Gold Cell* I have given away over the years. When Sharon signed my worn copy last month at a reading in Columbus, Ohio it was a sweet fulfilling moment.

IN HER OWN WORDS— Sharon Olds

I love odd words. A long time ago I wouldn't use them, because I would like to have readers who have never gone to university or even high school. I don't want them to look at it and, if there's a weird word in the first line, throw it across the room, as I might in the same position. But then I gave in to my love for strange words. There's a charm in that, maybe even literally a charm, like a good luck weirdness.

Before I give a manuscript to my editor, I run a "cliché round-robin" on it. So I go through whatever it is, galleys, proofs, and I begin to circle words that are happening more than once, twice, three times. I go through the whole manuscript. I love this part of putting a book together. I mean, the book is all together. And each poem is edited enough, as far as I'm concerned. But then I find out about these words, and then, I look at each instance of my most used words and see if it will please change. Most of them will not change. Some of them I change, and then in another printing I have to change them back, because it was obvious that someone was doing something literary here in order not to use too many clichés.

*I would hate to imagine living without writing poetry. It's where I discover what I think and feel and make something of it. I love doing it. **And it's physical. It's a ballpoint pen—it doesn't scratch and stick on the paper. I use different colored pens. I put in stickers.***

When writing poems, I try to take out half the adjectives and a third of the self-pity.



I Have News for You

There are people who do not see a broken playground swing
as a symbol of ruined childhood

and there are people who don't interpret the behavior
of a fly in a motel room as a mocking representation of their thought process.

There are people who don't walk past an empty swimming pool
and think about past pleasures unrecoverable

and then stand there blocking the sidewalk for other pedestrians.
I have read about a town somewhere in California where human beings

do not send their sinuous feeder roots
deep into the potting soil of others' emotional lives

as if they were greedy six-year-olds
sucking the last half-inch of milkshake up through a noisy straw;

and other persons in the Midwest who can kiss without
debating the imperialist baggage of heterosexuality.

Do you see that creamy, lemon-yellow moon?
There are some people, unlike me and you,

who do not yearn after fame or love or quantities of money as
unattainable as that moon;
thus, they do not later
have to waste more time
defaming the object of their former ardor.

Or consequently run and crucify themselves
in some solitary midnight Starbucks Golgotha.

I have news for you—
there are people who get up in the morning and cross a room

and open a window to let the sweet breeze in
and let it touch them all over their faces and bodies.

—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)

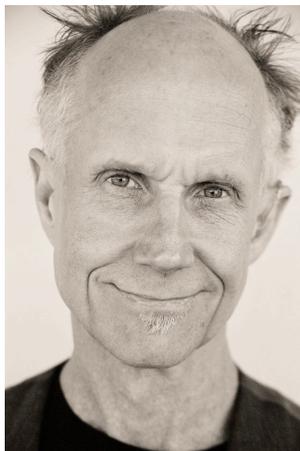
Sweet Ruin (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992)

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.



With today's poem, the 2013 April Gifts series comes to a close. All 30 of this season's annotated selections will be available soon on my website noted below. Thank you all for reading! As you know, due to a busy winter schedule of study and work, I considered not doing the project at all this year. There are a few people I want to acknowledge for helping me decide to go forward. Thanks first to Bucky Ignatius, good friend, poet and president of The Greater Cincinnati Writers League for his generous and immediate offer of help. Bucky researched much of the background material on nearly half of this year's poets, significantly reducing my workload so I could do other things, like sleep. Thanks also to Valerie Chronis Bickett, bosom buddy, poet and colleague who listened carefully through fall and winter while I stewed over my decision. Her ability to be fully present and ask good questions is something of an art form in my book. Finally, thanks to my dear husband, David Fabrey, who for seven springs has supported me in so many ways I can't list them all. I'll just say his patience and tolerance for taking second place to poetry on many a night was near virtuous, and his offerings of good food and hot tea nourished my heart as well as my body. . . . And so, dear poetry loving friends, let's come full circle with another striking poem by Jack Gilbert who began our month with *Failing and Flying*.

A Brief for the Defense

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies
 are not starving someplace, they are starving
 somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.
 But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants.
 Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not
 be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not
 be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women
 at the fountain are laughing together between
 the suffering they have known and the awfulness
 in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody
 in the village is very sick. There is laughter
 every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta,
 and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay.
 If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,
 we lessen the importance of their deprivation.
 We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
 but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
 the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
 furnace of this world. To make injustice the only
 measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.
 If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,
 we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.
 We must admit there will be music despite everything.
 We stand at the prow again of a small ship
 anchored late at night in the tiny port
 looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront
 is three shuttered cafés and one naked light burning.
 To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat
 comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth
 all the years of sorrow that are to come.

—by Jack Gilbert