

# ashevillepoetryreview

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—Rob McDonald

Kathryn Stripling Byer

## **“Trawling the Silences”: A Last Interview with Kathryn Stripling Byer**

**Tim Peeler:** Thanks, Kay, for offering your time and insight to our readers. I consider it an honor to be able to interview you.

Could you tell our readers a little about your background, your childhood in Georgia, how you became interested in writing poetry, and how you ended up in Western North Carolina?

**Kathryn Stripling Byer:** I was born and raised on a farm in southwest Georgia, near the Flint River, which we had to cross every time we traveled to the “big city” of Albany. My maternal grandparents lived on a farm a few miles down a dirt road, about 4 miles from us, and I had a large extended family. Lots of cousins. My father’s mother had been a school teacher, born in Dalonega, GA., though she’d lived for a time as a young girl in Lead, S.D., where her father was an Irish-born gold miner. Her mother, Ella Valentine, had come to this country with her German family when she was, I believe, five years old. She was, among other things, a proficient painter in oils, and her canvases hung around our house while I was growing up. Many of them are still there. She was also, for a time, a Pentecostalist preacher. And school-teacher. Both she and her daughter were well-educated women. My grandmother taught Latin and Rhetoric for years. My maternal grandmother married when she was sixteen and began having children. She was very much a country woman. So, I had two very different types of women for role models.

I ended up in Western North Carolina because of my paternal grandmother, who died wanting to return to the North Georgia mountains she loved. She likely suffered from post-polio syndrome as well as spinal stenosis and spent her last years in pain, addicted to morphine. After her death, we often traveled to her mountains, and I fell in love with that landscape, vowing I would live in the Blue Ridge someday. I would do what my grandmother had not been able to do.

Because my grandmother and great-grandmother had been interested in the arts, I followed their lead, at first leaning toward singing, taking voice lessons for a couple of years, then toward the visual arts, taking some beginning art courses in college, but over and above these interests was my passion for reading. And daydreaming. So, when I took my first creative writing class at Wesleyan College (Macon, Ga.), I was hooked on words and their stories. At that point, I wanted to write fiction and follow in the

footsteps of Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, and Flannery O'Connor. A passion for poetry came a little later, and has stayed with me ever since.

**TP:** I have recently re-read *Descent* and *The Vishnu Bird* and both books share an interest in people who pay attention to and are intentionally part of the natural world. Your careful observations and ability to describe this world make these poems sing with life. Could you tell us about your relationship to nature and whether or how it enables you to create such keen descriptions?

**KSB:** I'm so glad the poems "sing with life" for you, Tim. I spent a lot of my free time as a child walking the woods and the fields around my home. These landscapes had a presence that pulsed with life for me. I've often said that I could not live in a place that didn't have trees nearby, surrounding me, filling with wind. And birds, even though I'm not much knowledgeable about bird calls. Or birds in general. I just need to have them around. I'll make up my own names for them, if I have to, as I did in *The Vishnu Bird!* I don't pretend to be able to name every wildflower, fern, or lichen that I see—I rely on my husband for that—but once I know the names, they wield a great deal of power, as if the names hold the mystery of the thing itself. Mostly I revel in watching the light moving through the landscape and above it, the clouds, the river of clouds, as fascinating to me as the Tuckasegee that flows below our house. Often I wish I'd studied natural history instead of literature, had gone out in the field, observing, listening, taking notes. These days I prefer reading natural history rather than fiction or poetry; two of my favorite books are Scott Weidensaul's *Mountains of the Heart*, and Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*. I go back to those books often. They stay on my nightstand.

**TP:** As I read through these books, I started marking poems that struck me as outstanding, but soon it became obvious that I was marking all of them. However, the one that I keep coming back to in *Descent* is the long poem, "Drought Days" which is dedicated to your grandmother. Could you talk about the genesis and construction of this wonderful poem? And perhaps about your writing process in general.

**KSB:** Oh my, this poem lay about for a number of years, waiting to be completed. It began after I read—and studied—Seamus Heaney's work. He was one of my first models, and I still return to his poetry when I need to be re-awakened to what a poem can do. What drew me so potently to Heaney was his ability to make a common landscape, his Irish farmland, the bog, and harvest wreaths come alive. As if his language rose right up from the ground itself. My maternal grandmother was a wonderful cook and seamstress. She could make that treadle sewing machine sing, believe

me. She lost her first child, Kathryn, to juvenile diabetes and a son, many years later, to the same scourge. By then there was insulin, but there was no insulin when Kathryn developed the disease. My grandparents struggled through the depression on a farm that sounded so much like the one that Heaney wrote about, right down to the smoke house. I shuffled and re-shuffled those poems to get the sequence that seemed right. I adored my grandparents and I still dream of that house, burned to the ground as it was. In dreamtime I inherit it and live in it.

**TP:** As the poet laureate of North Carolina, you were very active both online and with a physical presence throughout the state. How did you perceive your role and what would you like our readers to know about the literary/poetry scene in North Carolina?

**KSB:** As many of your readers probably know, we had a crisis regarding the Laureate position summer before last, when the Governor ignored the procedure for selecting the Laureate and named a woman with no experience whatever, someone who worked in one of the State offices and was a Republican. She had been suggested to him by one of his staff, I believe. The huge outcry that followed surprised him, and we were able to put enough pressure on him to follow through with the traditional search process, information about which the NC Arts Council had already sent him weeks before this flap. The newly assigned Laureate resigned a few days after being “chosen.”

This crisis really helped pull the NC literary community together, and I'm hoping that renewed sense of community lasts. Thanks to the state arts council, local groups, and our Laureates, we have over the years supported writers, students, teachers, and worked to build connections among the various regional organizations devoted to our literary legacy. While I was Laureate I maintained a blog, “My Laureate’s Lasso,” attempting to feature the work of our practicing poets, as well as student work. And the Arts Council itself maintained a lively, helpful website devoted to new books, portfolios of individual poets’ work, and special features that literature director Debbie McGill and I put together. I also wrote a monthly newspaper column, “Language Matters,” that ran in several NC newspapers. I considered the Laureateship a public service job, and I tried to bring as much energy and innovation to it as I could.

**TP:** I know that you are politically active in social media and care greatly about the direction of our country regarding a variety of issues. What do you feel the role of a poet should be when it comes to politics and world events? Do you think poets are meeting their obligation as change agents?

**KSB:** Hard to say. I'm sure every poet would have a different take on whether we are meeting our obligation to help bring about the change that will enrich our democracy and culture, not diminish it. Many of our greatest poets, Auden and Heaney, for example, have spoken and written about the poet's role in the modern world. We must keep speaking about it and discussing ways in which we can bring clarity and occasional eloquence to a too often distracted audience. The onslaught of social media, iPhones, big and little screens everywhere we go trying to grab our attention, trying to sell us products, ideas, the last yoga pose.... good lord, it's maddening. Poetry invites us to go into the silences and discover our own interior landscapes and voices.

**TP:** Could you tell us who your writing has been influenced by and if that has changed dramatically over the years? Who should we be reading in 2015? And why?

**KSB:**As I mentioned earlier, Seamus Heaney was a huge influence, and so were the Romantic poets. Southern women fiction writers like Eudora Welty, Lee Smith, and K.A. Porter, for sure, and naturalist writers, such as Barry Lopez. Fred Chappell's poetic narratives, as well as his current work on fables, not to mention the amazing book, *Familiars*, which was about cats, constantly surprises me. I'm more and more intrigued by Carol Ann Duffy's work and some of the Irish women poets, Nuala ni Dhomnaill, for instance. I recall one of my first professors, a thorough-going Agrarian-Fugitive true believer, telling me that a particular poem of mine was good because it didn't sound like it was written by a woman. Allen Tate once dissed in conference one of my poems by calling it "domestic." I'm still working through some late life rebellion about such episodes. More and more I value the work of European and Indian writers. Because American culture has become so narrow, our sense of history so increasingly compromised, we need to be reading beyond our cultural and historical comfort zones. I would really like to see more attention given to our own Native American writers. Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko were huge influences for me, Momaday especially. I still love his work. And a book I've just discovered is a collection of African praise songs/poems. We have to keep widening the hoop of our reading. Like those embroidery hoops I remember from my girlhood.

**TP:** As you know there are a plethora of writers out there now trying to find their niche in the literary world. As an accomplished poet who has navigated that journey, what advice would you give to younger writers?

**KSB:** Maxine Kumin told me years ago, as I was struggling to get my first book published, “You have to be stubborn to make it as a poet.” The so-called poetry scene was less competitive back then, the avenues to “making it” seemed clearer than they do now, though the way through them wasn’t at all easy. Still, my “journey” was not like that of most young writers today. The plethora of MFA writing programs has swelled the ranks of poets trying to, as you say, find their niche, and the surge in social media self-promotion and publication has contributed to what I consider an unhealthy focus on what everyone else is doing, being clever enough to get noticed, win awards, rack up the publications and reviews. “Poetry is earned with silences,” Seamus Heaney observed in an interview with Michael Huey years ago, but silence is not our current mode, is it? Nor is waiting, and so much of being a poet involves waiting and letting the silences deepen one’s voice. James Dickey’s famous remark that poets are like crabs in a bucket needs updating. Now the bucket has become a vat, filled to overflowing. So, to Kumin’s advice I would add a line from a recent poem of mine, “Trawling the Silences” (which will be the title of my next book) let’s “keep our mouths shut, our windows wide open.” There is a time to be silent and listen. Stubborn silence, passionate listening.

**TP:** Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. You are welcome on my front porch any time.

Kathryn Stripling Byer

## Drought Days

*for my grandmother, Carrie Mae Campbell*

1.

Rain, because prayed for,  
was always called God's answer,  
God being what gave  
or withheld whatever we needed.

A merciful God, we'd smell dirt beginning  
to dampen. But judgement? Then He in the sky  
would become in my nostrils the odor  
of earth at its most forgiving.

God stank like a singed field.  
His taste in my mouth like a rusty nail.

I wanted him kept well away  
from the places I loved,  
his narrowed eyes raking the world.

2.

The sky must have shone back a message  
on drought days, the way  
she'd look into it over and over

to see if a cloud might be forming,  
and inside that cloud a small storm seed  
of hope from the heaven side.

*Let's pretend we could walk through  
the mirror. What would we find on the other  
side?* She never liked that game,

it went against God's design,  
and too much like walking into her own dark  
as if through the eye of a hurricane.

To enter the kingdom,  
she'd stand in the kitchen and look  
out the window at what He

had wrought, corn that sang when  
 the wind came, a husband that shoveled hay  
 into the cow pen, the empty yard waiting

for the child growing inside her, her life  
 seeming suddenly all mass,  
 and her knees almost too weak to bear it.

3.

Every shining surface seemed mirror.  
 The shaft of a carving knife.  
 Kettle-shank polished to clarity.  
 Windows that framed her by day  
 and at night by the oil lamp  
 revealed her as lost in a ghost forest.  
 Suddenly she'd set to work  
 righting lopsided hair ribbons.  
 A lapsed curl.

Even the yard that she walked upon  
 served as a backdrop for shadow  
 while she flounced her skirt like a jonquil.

Or playing at age,  
 humped her back like a guinea hen,  
 clucking her way toward the garden,  
 grown old in a trice.

Was this vanity?  
 To look on what she had been given  
 and see herself everywhere in it?

4.

After supper she roamed to the highway  
 to watch how the sun swelled,  
 a hot-air balloon,  
 or else threatened to melt like a butter-pat

after which heat began loosening its tourniquet.  
 Then came the jays back, the grass-singers  
 piping up. Then came the moon over pitch pines.  
 Came wind and the screech owl.

She ducked into woods  
where the sun seen through  
pine needles wavered  
like wild fire when she winced.

Just one spark.  
That's all she ever wanted.

5.

At the moment of death he'd hear  
rain, he joked.  
Drought over. The pond  
rising. Flint River cresting to record  
heights. Heat lightning

banging its anvil. Sparks  
flying. Rain thumping tin  
like the school marm's rebuke  
she knew he'd not forgotten.  
The ruler's pop. Three times.

Swarmed by the dust he stirred,  
he clenched his fists  
round the tractor's wheel.  
He ground his teeth  
on the grit of his field.

6.

Now take this, she'd say, her mouth  
full of pins—a bird's tail  
of fastenings held tight  
against revelation. What now?  
And where? I was lost  
till she lifted the limp tape

and held my hand hard on  
the selvage while she reckoned  
grain-line and measurement.  
Taking the straight of it  
so that the garment would fall  
clean to plumb. What she called a good

finish. A clean sweep to hem-level,  
 a dress in which she could walk out the front door  
 or be laid down at last like the lady she knew she was.

7.

To measure the cloth needed,  
 she'd hold each bolt against our flesh,

folding the crisp panels over  
 by arm's length till she had her estimate.

She could spend hours stroking broadcloth  
 and dimity, mulling the question of how much

of what and for whom while we watched  
 our identity come down to color and texture.

Which of us orange-flowered broadcloth  
 that shone like her kitchen linoleum,

which the cerulean-blue-dotted swiss  
 (marked to half-price) that tickled her palm

or the lavender crepe de Chine  
 sliding through fingers that soothed it?

8.

With feathers she had plucked herself,  
 she stuffed two pillows  
 for my marriage bed and crocheted

with silver hook a chain of white lace  
 to stitch round the edges of two pillowcases.  
 Soon her fingers could not thread

a needle, nor hold fork or spoon.  
 By then her man was gone,  
 wrapped tight inside a dream of trees

that leafed out every spring: time  
 to plow, time to seed, time to bury  
 yet again what he had sown.

(I wonder, do the trees commiserate  
about the leaves they let go,  
all the loosening they must live with?)

If I could, I'd stitch a Double Wedding Ring  
against the morning when they woke to sun  
stuck, days on end, to every window pane.

9.

When the pond dried up,  
my cousins and I filled oil drums  
with my grandfather's hoses

and pulled on our bathing suits,  
climbed in like daughters of lawyers  
or bankers and stood there pretending

we dawdled at Myrtle Beach  
or Sanibel Island. The clouds passing over  
might that very morning

have darkened the boardwalk  
in Panama City. Her white Leghorns scratched  
in the sand. His pigs wallowed.

The water began to smell  
rusty, more tractor oil to it  
than tropical coconut. We hauled

ourselves out, feeling  
silly and shriveled, our skin flecked  
with rust, knowing we were still stuck

on the farm. We would always be  
hicks. Pink and flabby like pickled  
pig flesh in our grandmother's jars.  
*Soul food*, I grew up to hear it called,  
as if the collards and side meat  
we set on our table had been sanctified

but by stories we knew were not ours,  
in which we were no more than  
bystanders, and not always innocent ones.

## Kathryn Stripling Byer: The Voice We Have Lost

When Kay died June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017, it was hard to imagine North Carolina without her. She had been Poet Laureate from 2005-9 and had transformed this honor into a service to the state. She had been instrumental in starting NetWest, a program area of the North Carolina Writers Network, had led workshops all over the state and elsewhere, and had championed and mentored poets by featuring them on her blogs and writing blurbs for them. And she sponsored workshops for children in Jackson County and had written editorials about the importance of the Arts in education. Recently, she had written about the hidden roots of racism in our Southern psyches and had posted numerous statements about the president on her Facebook page. Those who knew her loved her writing, her courage, her generosity, her humor, her eagerness to help, and her honesty.

But for many of us what we will miss most is her voice. We will still have her books. We can find her essays in books and periodicals. We will have access to her blogs, *Here, Where I Am, Mountain Woman*, and the blog she created during the time she was Poet Laureate, *My Laureate's Lasso*, however long they are kept active. And we will be able to read about her in magazines, books, and dissertations. But her voice, the actual sound of it will be what we miss. And her friendship and her presence in our lives. That is why we grieve.

In her essay, "From the Southernmost Reaches of Night," in *Carolina Writers at Home*, she talks of how art is an act of restoring our homes, "word by word, line by line, grace note by grace note." She says, "Like the Finnish poet Paavo Haavikko, I want 'a voice I can live in.' A home," (198). In many ways, that is the essence of Kay's poetry, a voice finding its home. "Like most young poets I worried about 'finding my voice.' Now in middle age, after serving for five years as North Carolina's Poet Laureate, concentrating more on a public voice than my inner one, I now worry about finding it again," she wrote in "Voice Lessons: Two Poetry Prompts" in the on-line journal stilljournal.net. That voice came back completely.

Listening to Kay read was a transforming experience. Though she never lost her Georgia drawl, her voice had a lilt and seriousness that evoked mountain ballad singers, echoing their solitude, their longing for presence, and their experience as women in a harsh world alone. To hear her read was to enter into a realm where stories of loss, longing, and remembrance come to life as songs we have yearned for, songs we won't forget.

In an article noting her death in the *Sylva Herald*, (June 5, 2017), Kay was quoted:

I grew up wanting to be a singer.... I sang solos in our small town church, I wanted to be Emmylou Harris, shiny boots and fringe. Or Dolly Parton singing, "Fair and Tender Ladies," sounding so high lonesome, she gave me goose bumps. I still sing along sometimes with her and Emmylou while I drive to the grocery store or over Cowee, heading down south to where my mother lives. I didn't give up singing, I just found another way to sing. I found poetry.

In her essay, "Deep Water" in *Blood Root: Reflections on Place by Appalachian Women Writers*, she explains that while growing up in rural South Georgia she rarely heard singing except in church which she felt was "singing under duress," (63). The deep emotions rising out of family loss, love and conflict she found echoed in black rhythm and blues and country music she heard on the radio rather than the Presbyterian church of her childhood. Sometimes she heard a train whistle that she said sounded "like a high-pitched woman's wailing, a sound that I later came to know as 'high lonesome' its song reaching out to the distance from a bottomless chasm of lament and longing," (64).

It is no wonder the first poem in her first book, *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest*, begins with "Wide Open, These Gates," catches us up in song rhythm: "Going down the road feeling good, I snap / my fingers, Hear, hear!" That poem ends, "The gnats sing, and I'm going / to sing. One of these days I'll be gone," (3). The next poem, "Corn Walking" is about a girl walking into the thick of a corn field where no one could find her:

I reached the middle of three thousand corn rows  
to sing at the top of my lungs  
with the gathering wind in the corn itself  
singing, "We are growing everywhere.  
What is the world but our song?" (4).

In "Daughter" she says, "Here I am. / When I look up the future's a field for me. / I am the girl in the midst of the harvest. // I am the harvest." (7). Those words, "Here I am," become her refrain, a stance in the world, not a Southern Belle, not a domestic woman in the house, but a woman finding her place and her voice in the world. Those early poems are exuberant, almost music, expressing a yearning to leave the hot, Georgia farmland where she had grown up and move on.

In “Deep Water,” Kay talks about her paternal grandmother who had once lived in the mountains and had always wanted to return but had not been able to. She became addicted to morphine and a source of questions for the young Kay wondering what she had thought about leading up to her death.

Had she tried to sing her way out of her solitude and back home?  
 Sometimes I think that all of the poems I have written since I came  
 to the mountains have been an attempt to find a song that would  
 sail her away, out of the sad story in which she had become trapped,  
 back to the mountains where she belonged and longed to be. (65)

That tension between the coastal plains of her childhood home in Georgia and the mountains where she lived the rest of her life is the source of many of her poems. It was also the pull in her private life, going back to Georgia to check on her father and mother and then returning to the mountains. Where was the home her voice could live in? She explores this question throughout her poetry and essays as her books focus first on her Georgia background and then the voices of mountain women, and back and forth. It leads her to explore family history and its hidden prejudices, its unspoken expectations of girls, its religion’s hypocrisy, and yet the nostalgia and warmth of home. And she explores what it must have meant and means to live in the mountains.

Her first chapbook, a limited edition called *Search Party*, later collected in her first book, *Girl in the Midst of the Harvest*, gives voice to a woman searching the desert in the west for her lost mother. What was stunning about this set of poems were the voices. Kay’s ability to inhabit the voices of other women is unmatched. When Kay included these poems in *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest*, she added a letter her grandmother might have written about Kay’s great-grandmother who was according to legend was the “first white child into the Black Hills.” The sequence begins with a poem in italics that seems to be the voice of the desert that speaks to the grandmother searching in the desert.

*You set out*

*to find her. You carry your dust  
 to her dust. On this journey no maps  
 chart the landscape [. . .]*

*Who*

*are you? You stumble into the mesquite  
 still looking for one perfect skull  
 with a family resemblance which you will hold*

*up to the light. Through the holes  
that were once her eyes you see the sky come  
to meet you, panoramic as history. (28)*

Here are the words of the woman the search party is seeking:

My daughter, this letter  
will never arrive.  
You will search for me someday  
but you will not find me. (29)

The sequence ends with another segment in italics that signifies the challenge Kay gives herself:

*You think you have found her?  
You have not found her.  
Do you think this dust is her body,  
these bones wrapped in tumbleweed*

*hers? You will find her in water  
you draw from the well,  
in the dusty streets no one is travelling,  
in the women who welcome you  
onto their porches, say nothing  
then turn away  
when you look down at their hands. (35)*

Those voices recovered from lost family history are at the beginning of Kay's extraordinary occupation of other voices as she searches for her own. Like a ventriloquist, the voice of those others speaking in the poems are actually the voice of the poet. She looks for her voice in the water, the dust, the everyday world, and in the voices of women who welcomed her onto their porches.

When she came to Western Carolina University with an MFA from UNC-Greensboro to teach composition, she soon found local women who introduced her to quilting, ballad singing and mountain culture. One semester she went with her new friends as part of WCU's outreach to the Asheville Mall. Ella Mae Pressley quilted, Annie Lee Bryson made corn shuck dolls, and Kay taught poetry writing. Their stories and songs continued to inform Kay's poetry for years. After marrying Jim Byer, Kay began hiking with him in the Smoky Mountains. On one hike at Kanati Fork they came upon an abandoned house site. In the opening poem of *Wildwood*

*Flower* “Kanati Fork”, she said she heard a “long skirt rustle” of a woman who was “wind in my ears / singing ‘Sail away, ladies.’” The poem continues, “Who are you? I asked the shade,” (xi). It calls to mind the “Who are you?” in *Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* quoted above.

That experience triggered her second limited edition chapbook, *Alma*, which was incorporated in her second book, *Wildwood Flower*. Alma was the name of the neighbor and kin of Willa Mae Pressley and Annie Lee Bryson. What is so remarkable about these poems is the striking voice. We hear the words of this imagined woman who spends much of her day alone, sometimes regretting marriage, but left to deal with the cold, the hoeing, the fragility of the life of her daughter, her longing for the lights of cities, her hands busy with the work of the kitchen or, “Woman’s work they also / call it making something / out of almost nothing,” (21). By exploring that voice Kay was finding her own voice.

In her essay, “Deep Water,” she acknowledges the influence of another local woman, Linda Mathis who told her stories and sang songs that

sounded like a sister to the unfolding voice of a woman I was just beginning to know through my own poems and whose name I had not yet discovered, a woman, solitary and abandoned, strong yet susceptible to the shifting of seasons and memory [...] She became also, in some personal, ancestral sense, my lost grandmother’s voice yearning for the high places, all too familiar with the low. (68)

The poems of *Wildwood Flower* are almost all in the voice of this woman Kay heard at Kanati Fork, a voice speaking of what it means to be a woman mostly alone in the mountains yearning for more:

I want him to come here  
and say for once that he remembers  
  
when I led him up the darkest  
side of Snowbird like a blind man (7)

It is the voice of a woman remembering being wooed “in the underbrush,” and

his voice filling my ear  
with my name. Soul of Sweet Mercy.  
I should have covered my head with my shawl

and kept silent! Though we spoke of love,  
 I know now it means little  
 but loneliness. ("Trillium," 22)

As Kay explains in "Deep Water," the poems in *Wildwood Flower* were only "the beginning of a poetic weaving together of the voices that has continued up till the present" (68) In *Black Shawl* the voice she inhabits is that of Delphia, modeled on Delphia Potts, the mother of Willa Mae Pressley and Annie Lee Bryson, who had been a teacher and had made sure her daughters knew how to quilt and weave and crochet. The first section of the book is titled Voices. The first poem in the section, in italics, is "The Ballad Singers." It about the women brought over to America in the early years who settled these hills and who sang the old love ballads in their solitude:

*How else journey  
 into those distances*

*where they heard night  
 after night in the new world  
 the dark itself howl*

*like a woman cast into  
 the wilderness? One by  
 one, I see them open their mouths.*

*Here I am,  
 they sing,  
 having become their own voices. (4).*

The voices in the poems in the first section have the same harsh tenor as traditional Appalachian ballads. The women are not drawn in by the promises of circuit riders: "Soul? Oh, that flimsy of silk hand-me-down, / it does not want to snuggle in Abraham's / bosom! It wants strong wind." (7).

In section II, Blood Mountain, the speaker in "Storm" recalls a time when "lightning snaked down / like the whip he made dance / round her feet when he got drunk // and she wanted to

scream / at him, "Go ahead, / strike me I dare you." (24). The same voice scrubs stains from her dress from when "she lay beneath him" "babbling / such words as *forever, // forget-me-not, full moon, forever,*" as she lay in a field of snowy phacelia, white "as what a bride calls (oh //why can't she hear / what she says?) *Sheer / Illusion.*" (25).

The third section, Delphia, begins with the poem “Delphia” who is teaching quilting, the sewing together of patchwork that otherwise would fall to pieces to the speaker in “Timberline” who needs to “bear witness/to all I cannot keep from dying.” (37). In the last poem, “Tuckasegee,” Kay herself speaks about the river that she hears wherever she walks in her house, concluding, “our time is the music / the water makes, leaving / who’s left of us listening.” (51) We read her words but miss her voice and grieve.

*Catching Light*, her fourth book, begins with a section called “In the Photograph Gallery” which incorporates poems from her chapbook, *Eve*, published by Blue Nose Books. In an online interview entitled “Speaking of Marvels” she said:

I’ve been drawn to chapbooks since I first began writing poetry, and when I look back at my writing and publishing years, I could call them “My Life in Chapbooks.” Each chapbook I’ve published heralded and prepared the way for a full-length collection, helped me focus on the underlying structure and imagery of those collections. Early on, publishing a chapbook was a way to get my work out to an audience while I struggled, and I mean struggled, to find a publisher for my first collection, *The Girl in the Mist of the Harvest*, an AWP award winner in 1986, republished by Press 53 in Winston-Salem last year. ([chapbookinterviews.wordpress.com](http://chapbookinterviews.wordpress.com)).

Her chapbooks include, *Search Party*, *Alma*, *Eve*, *Wake*, *Aretha’s Hat*, *Southern Fictions*, and *Vishnu Bird*.

In late 1990s I discovered the photographs of Louanne Watley, her Evelyn series, capturing the last years of a woman named Evelyn, living in her large, cluttered family home outside Chapel Hill. These photographs called forth yet another voice, that of a woman in her 80’s, living through her old age with wit and spirit. Louanne and I put together one very limited edition of poems and photographs, then a smaller edition, pocket-sized, of the same contents. These poems formed the core of my fourth book of poetry, *Catching Light*. ([chapbookinterviews.wordpress.com](http://chapbookinterviews.wordpress.com)).

Even though *Eve* was Kay’s response to photographs by Louanne Watley, in *Catching Light* the poems of the first section become images of Kay herself who is facing aging. She asks in one poem, “And where is my place? / In this mirror / I don’t want to look into?” (8). The second section begins with “Old” where the speaker wonders about “the difference / between what I see / in this mirror and out / there. But what does it matter. // I look into both. / See the same woman’s life around me. // Old. / Old as creation.”

(15). As the book continues Kay returns to thoughts of her girlhood in Georgia, when she was dressed up with lace “Because I was their girl.” (20). In “Handiwork” she says, “I am done with this longing / for lace as a way of ending / things gracefully [...] *Let the end / come, no matter how / ragged the finish.*” (27).

The third section begins with the poem “Dark Hour” with the speaker having drunk too much and eaten too many hors d’oeuvres saying,

I’m in no hurry to lay down  
my fork and be bullied  
  
or spooked,  
by Night’s blank windows  
shining my ghost faces back at me  
when I look straight through  
myself into darkness  
before I extinguish the lights. (36)

In “Sleepless,” her mind flutters to the old dreads, the moonlight, night sweats, and even back to when she could not breathe,

The trouble with light?  
There’s never enough at the end. I imagine a garden  
the dying walk into as they take their last breath  
before the gates slam shut.” (57).

By the time Kay comes to *Coming to Rest*, she relies less on using other women’s voices to speak for her. She has found a voice she can live in, a home, harking back to her quote from Paavo Haavikko. This is a book that begins with her origins and sweeps through her travels to return her to home. The first section is called “*Again*” with a quote from Seamus Heaney:

We come back emptied  
to nourish and resist  
the words of coming to rest:  
  
birthplace, roofbeam, whitewash,  
flagstone, hearth. (“The Birthplace,” ix).

In the first poem, “Coastal Plain” Kay takes us through the landscape and its illusions to the roots, and the night soil:

Pull up the roots  
and what do we see but the night  
soil of dream, the night

soil of what we call  
home. Home that calls

and calls  
and calls. (3-4)

Many of the poems in this book give voice to memories re-examined. For example, in “The Still Here and Now,” Kay recalls her experience as a young girl entering Wesleyan College, learning new words and styles and expectations.

Again and again I come back  
to the start of this journey. I stand looking down  
at the fountain, as if to say, *Here I am.* (44)

In “Nobody’s Baby Tonight,” which Kay calls “A blues paradelle,” after dropping her daughter off at the University of Chicago, she wonders, “How many more times will I have to say goodbye?” and concludes, “Now time is driving Interstate 65. / Turn on the radio! Let’s be nobody’s tonight.” (19) We hear the voice of someone travelling, to Utah, Colorado, the Continental Divide, Tennessee, and finally to the Blue Ridge and home. In “Stopping” she notices the silence when they stop the car:

Home again,  
precious little to show

for my journey. I’m ready to say let  
the crickets begin! Let me stand  
in the darkness a little while listening  
before I walk into my empty house.

The voice in these poems echo loss, and the coming of the end. In “Halloween Again” loss becomes a litany, “Easy to get lost / time of year. / Lost letters. / Lost memories. / Lost copper / earrings a friend / gave me.” (60). The poem explores the legend of All Hallows Eve when the separation between the seen world and the unseen world becomes as thin as silk. She says, “if we come close enough” we will

see  
the other side  
waiting for us

as a mirror waits  
to be filled  
with the bright face of forever. (60-61)

Anyone reading Kay's poems with the knowledge that she has died will see those lines as a portent. *Descent*, her last book, at first seems like a return to family and memory. It is dedicated to her father who had died in 2006, and begins with "Morning Train," a blues song. "So long, so long the train sang" finding her as a girl getting eggs and not wanting to hear the voice calling her, a name for "nobody I knew as yet." (1). The first section deals with her parents and the waiting for rain and the voice of an aunt, for whom Kay was named, who had died young. The third section in the poem "Lost" evokes how each of us

bargains with death  
saying let me spend  
one more night in the bed  
[...]  
Let me open

my mouth,  
knowing this is my end  
of the bargain, this yearning  
to say *Here I am*  
but am not. (22).

The second section includes poems from *Southern Fictions*, a limited-edition chapbook with the cover made from shredded Confederate flags. The sonnet sequence explores the racism that Kay had not fought growing up and which she confesses, "I still can't get it right, / the way those dirt roads cut across the flats / and led to shacks where hounds and muddy shoats / skulked roundabouts." (26). In the next poem in that sequence her father is upset because he had not stood up to racial bullying and picked at his food as "The black / girl come to clean house stood outside / calling, *Here I am*." (27). Those words we've heard before we will hear again in the final section of the book.

"Last Light," a poem in four parts near the end of the book, begins, "Almost the age when memory falters, / I fear being made to count backwards / by sevens [...]" and continues in the third part, "I don't know how long

names can last / if there's no one to care where they live," (55). Those words surely seem like an arrow to the heart of the reader of those words. She recounts a vision on a trail of a young woman who represented "every spring wildflower ever named anywhere" (56).

In the last poem, "Here," she ends the book asking is it any wonder

I came  
to this place where sky huddles over the Balsams  
and lingers awhile every morning  
as mist lifting off the weeds clasping the edges of Cullowhee  
Creek? Over thirty years I've watched the way  
light begins here. It still wakes me up. Lets me be  
*Here. Where I am.* (57).

Kay's last publication was *The Vishnu Bird*, another chapbook, dedicated to her Buddhist friend who had died. The elegiac tone of this publication seems a foreshadowing of our own grief and her own at the truth of impermanence of all of us. In "Her Road" she says, "She knew nothing more waited / for her at the end of the road. She had / everything she needed *right here.*" (5). She rejects the preacher's promises saying, "*This is it.*" At the end she asks, "*Bless me, cornfields / for I have laid down unto night all that I am.*" (5).

Kay left unpublished books and other writings. In the latest issue of *The North Carolina Literary Review*, she included a long poem based on the operatic structure of aria and recitative. The last poem in that collection is "Water's Edge." It is almost too difficult to listen now to the words but not her voice:

Have I too become a ghost  
fearing I cannot cross over  
  
and so sit astride this rock scooped  
by the passage of time into a basin  
  
where rainwater, now that the sun  
has burned through fog's overhang,  
  
offers my morning ablutions? [...]  
  
you on the one side,  
I left behind on the other. (25)

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## The GathERing of Sister Dust

*“Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole.”*

—Derek Walcott

My bond with Kathryn Stripling Byer, our Kay, transcends the actual amount of time we spent together. Kay possessed the uncanny art of embracing us all so closely and so fully that we believed that we were the only one receiving her warm light.

It’s hard to remember a time in my spirit and heart when Kay was not a presence in my life. I did the math. I met Kay around forty years ago through mail correspondences. Kay contacted me regarding publishing my poems in a poetry journal she created. Those publications led to Kay inviting me to read at Hallelujah Asheville that was held at Lake Junaluska in 1980.

Thirty-seven years ago with my nursing three-month old baby, my former husband Sam and I answered her call, climbed that mountain, and landed in the bosom of Kay and Jim’s magical whimsical space. Kay covered us in the loving heirloom quilts of her women folk. I nursed baby Eva in a wondrous kitchen, a “making place” a place only a poet could dice and blend into soulful soups that poems are seasoned with. Over the years I’ve thought of that journey westward, not only as a geographical direction but as a heartfelt compass that delivered me to a woman who remains now more than ever my spirit sister.

Our sisterhood remains validation that maybe it’s the same journey we take over and over again with each poem we write. I know she was a mid-wife to so many writers. She never asked what we needed. She showed up and in the vernacular of southern grandmas, “she showed out.” Over the years Kay has shown up the way some women truly know how to show up; especially between August 2008 and June 2009 during my daughter’s powerful dance with cancer. Kay called several times a week throughout Imani’s chemo, radiation and surgery treatments. She showed love. She sent flowers. Many gifts. Lovely handcrafted medicine bags for Imani. Books. Shawls. Crystals. When Imani died she continued to call me. She sent poetry, flowers, books, healing energy, and more and more of her grace and generosity of spirit.

In 2011, Kay held steadfast and spiritual vigil around what doctors, family, and friends believed to be my death bed. Her deep sisterhood was a soothing balm that covered me. I couldn't talk but she called my husband several times a week. She sent lovely emails that I read and named magical "*sister dust*" which tickled her. Kay knew how to wrap magic inside an envelope so tight it was undetected by the postal service. I've been reading all the "*sister dust* emails" she wrote to me since her death. Here is an excerpt from one of many...

*"Hello Jaki, You are in my thoughts, even though you haven't heard from me today.... Jaki, I want to help as much as I can, so I'll be sending you weekly "sister dust." I hope you are beginning to heal from that fall; of all things to have happen when you were doing so much better. Makes me want to gnaw through the wood of my bedroom door. I wish you could come over to the mountains this spring and just be here to rest. I think it would do you good. We need each other's voices. I hope you know how much you are loved around the state and beyond. And never hesitate to let me know what you need. I can always send more "sister dust" your way. There's an endless supply of that, you know. Love, Kay*

I grieve the loss of a true sister friend. However, there are so many memories of deep conversations we shared that have blessed me with guiding revelations and instructions so I can continue to lift her long skirts out of the dust and march on with the guiding light she continues to provide.

My earliest experiences with Kay impressed upon me that she was a "*celebrationist*" who gave others new respect for the complicated and oppressive world we live in (consciously or not) through her reverence for it, a reverence that manifested as attention, an attention that wove awareness for all things beautiful, wondrous, and yet terrifying. Toni Morrison comes to mind with her description of the three gifts James Baldwin gave to her (and by extension, world literature): Language, courage, and the ability to cut anger with tenderness. Like Baldwin, Kathryn Stripling Byer also possessed "*the courage of one who could go as stranger in the village and transform the distances between people into intimacy with the whole world.*"

Kay taught me as a writer to be more open to vulnerability. To have greater sympathy for everything... for in the end what truly remains are the poems that become masterpieces not in the intellect but in the hearts of others. In our world she remains a figure of moral and intellectual statue. She wasn't afraid of taking a stand on political issues and facing possible obloquy for doing so. Kay always managed to step around the pit of self-importance and to keep her membership of the ordinary human race in front of her mind and her writing.

Beneath the lightness of their surface, her poems have always been deadly serious to me, musically impeccable, and have an inexhaustible depth and complexity. Her poems float, but they are also solid fortresses.

Kay gifted us an extraordinary platform during her reign as the first woman NC Poet Laureate. In tribute to her legacy, I commit to fortifying and enlarging this platform to reach and celebrate all the voices of all the villages she honored and cherished across the state.

Her life work in the literary arts community provides immense wisdom to shed light on the most urgent of concerns. Her life offers x-rays of the human spirit.

I will forever be harvesting “*sister dust*” and cherishing the work of Kathryn Stripling Byer as one of the finest poets of our lives.

Jaki Shelton Green

## **The Heavens Are Lined with Sister Dust**

Walk this way my sister my friend my sage  
Let this dust paint your mouth a new color of alive  
Let the wind caress the pages of your divinity  
Let the ocean whisper your name as you approach Tehom\*  
Dropping seeds from your mystical skirts  
You stand in the middle of this firmament  
Sweet water salt water begging your feet to sing  
We will sing new songs for your journey  
We will stare straight into all the truths you leave  
We will carry all your broken vases  
We will continue to gather in all the places that say your name  
We want to rename this mournful absence of your presence  
You look back, tell us that it is only a dance your heart has been rehearsing  
We are forever remembering you as the one who offers us words for the  
renaming of our own fragmented seas  
Flow gently flow deeply flow onward  
Listen at every star  
The mothers and grandmothers are calling you  
Sweet water and salt water are kissing you home.

\*Tehom (Hebrew), literally the Deep or Abyss, refers to the Great Deep of the primordial waters of creation in the Bible.

My sweet friend helped me realign my heart when my daughter died. My lovely Kay reminded me that it is more courageous to offer gratitude to death than to rebuke death. Kathryn Stripling Beyer died June 5, 2017. Imani Shelton Green died June 5, 2009. My heart is opened wider to receive this bittersweet gift.

I want to believe that Imani and Kay are forever dancing and weaving radiant “*sister dust*” together.

## Nameless

The black men massacred in my hometown  
lie unnamed in a graveyard called Sunset.  
Nobody talks about this,

nor the lynching tree still standing outside  
the courthouse. *No blacks in those mountains  
you're moving to*, nodded my Uncle.

My great-grandfather worked laying railroad track  
after he left Ireland. No Black Irish  
was he, no petty larceny charges to cast him

in shackles like those that dragged nineteen men  
down to their deaths in an ice-laden river,  
December of eighteen and eighty-two, drowned

in the same Tuckasegee that runs past my driveway.  
My ancestor moved on to gold mining in the Dakotas  
before coming south to run Crown Mountain mine

in a town called Dahlongegah, gold at its source,  
as the Cherokee named it before being forced from  
their homeland at gun-point. What could the youngest

of those convicts, laying the tracks for a future  
he would not be part of, have known of their history?  
At fifteen he might have resembled the teenager killed

because he wore a hoodie, his dark skin becoming too black  
on a rainy night, calling attention to what he was doing.  
Dialing his pals on his cell phone. Lingered outside a window.

The old Sunset Cemetery's shadowed  
by live oaks, the train depot less than a hundred  
feet down from its gateway. The railroad tracks still rattle.

The bodies beneath the sod still wait to be named.  
The bones of the black men who died laying track  
over Cowee still wait downriver from where I live,

shackles still fastened round ankles that tried to kick free  
of the ice before being dragged down  
by the weight of so many doomed nameless.

About two weeks after I heard from the kindly, solicitous Richard Krawiec that Kay Byer had died, two copies of *North Carolina Literary Review*, No. 26 (2017) arrived in my mailbox. I opened the journal idly, not seeking any specific piece, and was freshly heartstricken.

I had turned to the sequence of poems titled “This, When Your Heart No Longer Desires to Keep Beating.” The NCLR editor, Margaret D. Bauer, had given the five-page series of lyrics a characteristically handsome presentation with notes by Kay and soulful, wonderfully apposite photographs by Linda Foard Roberts. I wish Kay could have seen this publication. It now serves as a kind of memorial to her, modest but fitting.

The poems are spoken, or sung, by the ghost of a woman who cannot join her lover because a stream of swift water runs between them. Kay claims that she learned about ghosts and the restrictive stream from Ron Rash; he dropped this information during a reading she attended. She says too that the poems were inspired also in part by the character of Ada Monroe in Charles Frazier’s magnificent novel, *Cold Mountain*. She had learned that the composer Jennifer Higdon was to work with Frazier to make an opera. That work has since been accomplished and performed with great success.

Her notes continue to say that she has hoped that a North Carolina composer might set her new lines to music. Perhaps she was thinking of Harold Schiffman. Harold had set a selection of Kay’s earlier work. This collaboration premiered in Budapest and their appearance there together was one of the happy events of Kay’s career.

But I am told that Harold no longer composes. His wife, the brilliant concert pianist, Jane, has fallen victim to Alzheimer’s and...

It is like Kay to give generous credit to anyone even tenuously connected to her projects.

I read through “When Your Heart No Longer...” and closed the *Review* and closed my eyes, whether to remember or to try not to remember, I cannot say. These lyrics were familiar. Kay had sent me versions over the last months and I marveled, and we chatted through our correspondence as always.

This was an accustomed exercise. For a good thirty years at least, we had exchanged letters filled with literary and other kinds of gossip, complaints about editors and politics, accounts of gardening and groundskeeping, low-key bitchery about poets unjustly lauded, and matters of health, personal and family. Jim Byer’s father was elderly and ailing and they traveled to see to his welfare. Kay’s mother had endured a series of dire problems and

these too demanded frequent travel. Other complications abounded. I was often surprised, even amazed, at the amount of literary work she was able to get done.

When she succeeded me as our state's Poet Laureate, she transported that post to a different era. As a cranky trogluddite, I have stubbornly refused to go online, operating sometimes with telephone, but mostly with snail mail. This horse-and-buggy setup was adequate for five years, but Kay established a website and widened the poetry audience, discovered and championed new talent, and brought attention to the causes of North Carolina literature. She never complained that these labors subtracted time from her own writing. She gave the Laureate title the depth and breadth that I did not.

\* \* \*

I have been asked lately to name my favorite Kay poems. That is difficult to do for a number of reasons. To some of her works I have sentimental attachments, having watched them through our correspondence, develop and burgeon over time. But the major problem is that so many of her dramatic lyrics are linked one with another to form sequences and even whole books. For me, *Black Shawl* reads as a unified work, and I find I cannot extract certain favorites without weakening the whole. Another problem is that many of the lyrics are elusive, even puzzling, in meaning when detached. These pieces are often spoken by personae whose identities are established, sometimes only lightly, in other pages.

One of Kay's achievements was to inhabit her personae even more thoroughly than a great actor could do. She does not voice a speaker's state of mind; she becomes it; the figure's interior world is the world of the poem and all outward circumstance is seen and felt through that sensibility. Because she so often chose lone women as speakers, much of her work is suffused with mournful solitude and intense wistfulness. Often these women are watching, straining to see something that is not there, or not yet there.

It must be about twenty years ago now that I published in the print journal *Shenandoah* a lame essay on Kay's work. She was graciously tolerant, but we both recognized that I had missed the mark. Some of the reasons for my failure may be discerned in the preceding paragraph. She did not *choose* her lone-woman personae. They chose her. She did not choose Appalachia as subject matter or as place of residence; she was called as earnest ministers are gathered to their vocations.

But I am drawing her as much too solemn. She liked to laugh. I was careful in my letters to be entertaining if I could. She sent me serious, heartfelt, soulful poems and I sent her epigrams, verse fables, jocular adaptations of Horace or La Fontaine. She enjoyed being teased and I was pleased to do so because I was certain she would never take offense. Many poets I have known who regard themselves as precious, unblemished gifts to the universe. Kay held them in the same skeptical regard that I did.

We were fast friends, but we were not closest friends. I have thought that Kay placed her warmest confidence and deepest trust in other women poets. She held in highest esteem Betty Adcock, Claudia Emerson, Isabel Zuber, and other ladies of the metrical persuasion. And she greatly admired the older matrons of her local area, the “granny women” of the mountains whom she portrayed with soulful carefulness.

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The last communication I received arrived in mid-May. My reply is dated May 18 and in it I praised some new poems she had sent. They are among the most remarkable in a very remarkable body of work. It would be extremely unwise for me to insert any of them here; it might well be illegal.

But I will quote my own words in response, in the hope that someone can find a way to publish these last lyrics. “If *de la Mare* wrote in a more nearly modernist idiom and with such personal feeling, he might have produced some things like these, in which the very light is suffused with otherworldliness, with premonition, with the strength of dreams.”

These last poems are separate from the two finished manuscripts she had already put together. One of them had already been submitted to Louisiana State University Press, and Kay was awaiting the reader’s report. When these collections appear in print, the occasions will be of profound tragic happiness, her great bright spirit spreading wings of light yet again.

## Old Orchard Road Again

This winter there's not much to do.  
He can drive till the gas runs out, walk home  
on mud frozen into a sculpture of tiretracks  
and hoofprints, the thud of his boots flushing  
quail from the underbrush. Nobody's waiting  
to scold him when he peels his socks  
from a ripe blister. Birds in the rafters  
stir all night like warnings he's almost forgotten.  
*Lie still while the doctor is talking. That window  
stays shut. Don't walk out in the blinding sun.*

No need to worry now, he'd rather drive  
long as he can hear Hank Williams singing his faded love  
over the rattle of rusty chrome. Pigs fat on nothing  
but corn cobs and solitude lie straight ahead  
like temptation he can't resist. One lonesome honk  
of the horn and they stand up like drunks,  
strewing shoats from their flabby teats. Bouncing clear  
off the seat spilling its stuffing around him,  
he yells out the window, "Here's mud in your eye!"  
but the sows stagger off into dust his truck's churned  
up so thick he can't find his way back  
to the gate. Surely Hank never sang such a sad song  
as wheels spinning into the sand. Damn the static!  
Where's Orange Blossom Special? He strips his gears  
clean as the sugar cane stalks he sucked dry  
every summer and charges through blackberry thorns

onto Old Orchard Road again. Praise be the cattle gap  
clattering under him! Perched on a water trough  
three girls are waving their straw hats beribboned with ivy  
and broom sedge. He no longer cares why  
they're waiting here, clad in their pale cotton dresses  
as if it's dead summer and somehow the sun  
never disappeared into their childhood.  
*What took you so long, they call,*  
climbing in back with the oil cans and greasy tools.

*Look out for low limbs, he motions to them through  
the rear window, grinning when he sees a dirty foot dart  
under petticoats. Why should he mind  
if they're not wearing stockings and black  
lace-up shoes? Let them wiggle their toes  
all the way to the house almost hidden  
in trumpet vines. Through the broken glass  
he sees a white curtain yearning toward apple trees  
and as his head bows against branches closing  
around them, he thinks of the birch rod  
held over them all in the school room,  
his sentence prayers muttered at morning devotion.  
*Thank you for the green grass.  
Thank you for clear water.  
Thank you for eyes that cannot look too long at the sun.**

## Mary Adams

Since I met Kay 22 years ago, I loved her sort of like a mother—or at least with the same fraught admiration. Kay was hard to share a stage with. When she disapproved she could be so devastating, and when she was beautiful, she was so much more beautiful than I was. But she encouraged my writing, or tried to. She started a small press and invited me to publish with it, hiding my poor sales with the unsold copies in her apartment. She devoted a blog on her Poet Laureate’s site to promoting my work. She constantly supported the literary festival she bequeathed me against my will, bringing in wonderful panels of NC poets and even paying their stipends.

Kay had a caustic sense of humor. The day before she died, the Cybersphere began posting elegies in advance of her passing. While we urged the mourners to hold off, I couldn’t help but think she would have appreciated the pre-mortem and laughed at its timing. One time the local paper donated stacks of uncirculated newspapers with her photo to the Humane Society, where I work. As I lined several kitten cages with her face, I wanted to shake my fist at Auden and say, “See there! Poetry does make something happen.” She would have liked that. Well, sort of.

A guilty pleasure we shared was lamenting—I might say trashing—the inexplicable or tedious poetry of current kings and queens of Po Biz. At one of her last chemo appointments I, a recent veteran, joined her and Jim in the Hall of Vinyl Recliners. We noted with some pleasure that one of the reigning stars of Po Biz was looking awful, until I realized she was fighting breast cancer in the photo. But Kay waved off my remorse and assured me that my snarkiness had a higher purpose. Laughter is not always easy in the chemo room.

What I realized only recently is that for Kay, these reigning stars and their claim to the mainstream posed a life-long frustration she felt keenly. For me, who had studied with some of them, their work was pretentious and dull, and they made me wonder who I was writing for. But Kay always knew who she was and why she wrote. In the American literary landscape, regional poetry by women remains largely invisible. I say women because the nostrils of book agents have caught the scent of masculine “grit lit,” often set in Appalachia. And I say invisible, or inaudible, because an Appalachian woman poet must be conversant in the echo chamber of urban, northeastern poets, while knowing her own register is outside their range and beneath their notice. After Kay’s first two books, R.T. Smith observed, she was pigeonholed as “a shawl woman, a porch voice, a kitchen healer.” And yet, as novelist Lee Smith once said, “Kathryn Stripling Byer’s poems are absolutely necessary to me.”

When Hugh McDiarmid created a national poetic language from Scots, he was hailed as revolutionary and post-colonial. When William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound announced there would be “no ideas but in things,” they invented English modernism. But when Amy Lowell took up the charge, Ezra Pound called her work “Amygism” and stormed off to broadcast for the fascists. Kay did not invent Appalachian poetry, but she made it literary and complex as well as diverse and original. But to know that you needed to spend the kind of time she devoted to others’ writing. While many loved to hear her read because of her characteristic dactylic lilt and her deceptive clarity, each line was carefully crafted. I compare her to Robert Frost because her poems could seem simple enough to read at a college graduation while having sardonic depths that could pull you under if you waded too far in, because she could be funny and cranky and full of thwarted longing, and because she used readability to drive home an idiom that was as strange as it was inevitable. Unlike Frost, Kay wrote about a matriarchal world and gave a voice to women’s work and female experience. And unlike Frost, her poetry was political, as she was. That’s why we lament the loss of her powerful advocacy as much as we mourn her voice’s hardening into mere print.

Kay’s dactylic lilt—not her only meter, but the one I associate with her too—is an instrument of enormous range. It can be hard and full of earth: “Goodbye swallowtails cruising the pigpen.” It can be funny and melodramatic: “I begin to fear sickness. I wait for pneumonia and lockjaw.” It can be unearthly and full of longing:

its shimmer  
 is merely the shimmer  
 of one more illusion that yields  
 to our crossing as we ourselves yield  
 to our lives, to the roots  
 of our landscape. Pull up the roots  
 and what do we see but the night  
 soil of dream, the night  
 soil of what we call  
 home.

It knows how to call back the moments that haunt us, and it understands something of the circling of time:

Time, say some physicists, does not exist.  
 Sheer Illusion. Each moment a still frame,  
 as though in a movie reel unspooling out to the edge  
 of the universe. Each now forever.

....

Again and again I come back  
to the start of this journey. I stand looking down  
at the fountain, as if to say Here I am.

There you are, water sings to our gathering voices.  
The loggia is filling with girls wanting supper,  
and now she whose fragrance awakened my senses  
so many years back brushes by and the wake  
of her passage still trembles around me.

For me it's astonishing and musical in the way Beethoven was musical—full of sighing and drumming and hard edges and flirtatiousness, of long vistas and small rooms and windows, of skies and streams, but seldom oceans.

Here are a few things I know about Kay: She loved fluffy dogs, and she liked their hair to grow into a ponderous cocoon about them until they were hard to tell apart. She liked to have wine on a little table in her back yard next to the huge beautiful trees that defined her and grew up with her. She always wanted to redecorate her house, but in the way some of us want to move to Paris—as if it weren't possible. She worried about her daughter. She liked shawls. She taught for much of her life in a place that never appreciated her—or maybe any woman. She made people love poetry who had never thought about poetry. She was the most generous writer and person I knew, and she had many friends, but she could also be also dour, sad, and intensely private.

What's hard about losing Kay is stumbling across her name in my phone or seeing her last email and thinking, with relief, I need to tell Kay about this, about what just happened, how we dreamed she was gone and we had to do without her, how we feared we had suddenly all we would ever get of her scarves, her love of home, of her wine and her dogs (the fluffy ones), of the tree of her marriage, of this world only fully luminous on her page until the brain is wrenched by its hard edges and dark music. And then for a second it's real. We're only just starting the long task of missing her.

What's hard is that Kay would understand that. Kay would have the words for that.

**I still can't get it right**

I don't know. I still can't get it right,  
the way those dirt roads cut across the flats  
and led to shacks where hounds and muddy shoats  
skulked roundabouts. Describing it sounds trite  
as hell, the good old South I love to hate.  
The truth? What's that? How should I know?  
I stayed inside too much. I learned to boast  
of stupid things. I kept my ears shut tight,  
as we kept doors locked, windows locked,  
the curtains drawn. Now I know why.  
The dark could hide things from us. Dark could see  
what we could not. Sometimes those dirt roads shocked  
me, where they ended up: I watched a dog die  
in the ditch. The man who shot him winked at me

Joseph Bathanti

## Letter to Kay from Havre

*Avanti!*

*Lightly,*

*lightly*, I sing to myself...

From: "Open"

—Kathryn Stripling Byer

I write from Montana, Kay, because of you and Richard Hugo: that afternoon, in your mountaintop home in Cullowhee, the two of you at opposite ends of the table—formidable bookends, visually antithetical. You, a young pretty mother, with a golden toddler named Corrina, on the cusp of what would prove a storied career as a poet; and famous Hugo, a grizzled hard-drinking Northwest poet—like a maudlin bear in a voluminous shirt. The Smokies and all of Jackson County beyond the blazing bank of windows exulted you.

What a memorable afternoon, but I remember only flashes of it—like an impressionistic rough-cut film. I'm still wondering what you found to like in those poems I sent you so long ago, what cheek on my part it took to lick the stamp, the jig I danced in my Shuffletown cottage at your thunderous acceptance on pink stationary, that gorgeous penmanship. Whatever the chain of events, I'm yet jolted by the voltage forked thirty-five years ago between your handsome chairs. You and Hugo liked each other: your shared ken for the grit of shoulder-to-the-wheel-hand-to-mouth in a world that grinds its boot on peasant fingers. Sad Hugo said I had a "wild and accommodating imagination." Could he have meant it? I sped on that fuel clean back to Shuffletown only to get news of his death mere months later.

It's his poem, *Letter to Mansch in Havre*, from his beautiful green *Selected Poems*, that inspired this note. I'm traveling on the Empire Builder—hobbled with a fractured patella (a softball injury, too much hubris, though it nicely ties into his poem)—on my way to Spokane to read at a Jesuit university, founded by a Sicilian, and we have a smoke stop in Havre.

I gimped on crutches out of Coach-class. I had to get a look at Havre, after his poem, after reading in a railroad brochure that catacombs snake beneath the town's sidewalks, which "at various times, hosted a brothel, a Chinese Laundromat, a saloon, a drugstore, at least three opium dens, and rooms used for smuggling alcohol during Prohibition." Like the Underworld—with opportunities to make a buck and have some fun. No wonder

Hugo wrote a poem about it. Crazy, you say. What a jackpot! Acrobatically, crutches flared like broken wings, I genuflect and fetch under the big sky a rock for you, enormous and homely, the same color as a potato. I'll add it to the reliquary.

Standing under clouds that float like your poems, I scout them for the proper epigraph, but end up clutching one of your last letters: "Was just listening to some Neapolitan songs and was in the mood for a little Italian." I'm picturing you and Dick (what he urged me to call him, though I sheepishly couldn't get past *Mr. Hugo*) in the big Triggering Town, hashing out all that's wrong now that we have this new mean president you called to answer so elegantly, Kay; and Dick (we're on a first name basis now) flew 35 bombing missions during World War II to stop the likes of.

Up there, sipping *spumante* from the grapes of Foggia, the wellspring of my ancestry, in advance of the antipasto, you're bound to run into *mi famiglia*. It's Sunday. The table is set. *Zia Vincenza's* fresh *tagliolini*, *Bitto storico* Petrarch himself grated, and a sauce from the vaults of Dante. They know all about you, Godmother.

Embrace my parents. A big hello to Dick. I hope this makes you laugh.

*Va bene, Caterina.*

## Timberline

Looking up at the ruins of them,  
ragged edges those dead trees  
raise against the sky, and beyond  
them the cut of a hawk's wing,  
the curve of the river  
of cloud shapes, I'm likely to squander  
this morning with dreaming them  
turned back to women again, having grown  
old along with these mountains

and left here to die like the rest of us.  
I'd sit for hours and watch,  
if I could, how the wind through their branches  
keeps trying to make them sway,  
supple as girls again, line dancing  
over the rocky horizon of Snowbird.

But not much of morning's left.  
I should be piecing a new quilt or mending  
my husband's socks. I should be stirring

the beans left to scorch in the pot.  
What does the wind whisper  
up there of death? Or is dancing  
the gist of it? As for my need to bear witness  
to all I cannot keep from dying,  
the truth is I've never liked loose ends.

Just look at my quilts: a succession  
of rings, wreaths, and whirligigs.  
Threaded since daybreak,

my needle waits here on the table  
as if to remind me how stitches too small  
to be known save by touch  
of the thread toiling under my fingers  
can fashion a way out of one death and into  
another. So stand up, I tell myself.

Shake out your stiff limbs and sway  
like your sisters up there on the ridge,  
still in line for the next dancing lesson.

We all know a lot of lovely writers. Most of us have also known creative writers who were kind of (how shall I put this) jackasses. There are writers to whom other writers' talent or success is anathema; and writers who can only recognize talent in people who share their own demographic; and people who'll talk trash about other writers and happily step on those writers' heads if they think it will benefit themselves in some way... or even if they don't (what we might call the Bush Doctrine of the literary world—do it first, while you have the chance.)

Worse, some of us have also been those jackasses ourselves—hopefully not always, but sometimes. We've given way to jealousy, or cruelty, or the urge to dominate. When we see good work, we might check the author's publications list, in the hope of finding that our own is better (whatever that means.) We might not offer that author the kind of support we could, because we're envious, as if someone else's good work diminishes ours.

Some of us can be jackasses incidentally—because we're maybe not the sanest people who ever came down the pike, and our issues manifest in unfortunate behavior; or because we never learned how to be otherwise; or because we haven't noticed that we're jackasses in the first place. Others of us seem to think that jackassery is the proof of temperament, which is the proof of genius, the proverbial cart we put far before the horse of any actual talent we might possess. For some writers, nastiness (sometimes misleadingly gift-wrapped as honesty) is somehow both the sign and the privilege of the writer.

If you knew Kay Byer, of course, you know where I'm going with this: to one of those negatives which are actually so positive. For as long as I knew her, Kay did her considerable best to eschew nastiness and jackassery in favor of engagement and involvement. While I expect her bad angel had a lot to say, because bad angels are generally pretty chatty, she chose to behave otherwise.

Believing in education, as most of us do, she gave a great deal of time (as not all of us do) to public school work, to sponsoring contests for young poets, to reading and giving feedback on the work of people who'd taken her workshops years before. Believing in justice and equality, she wrote the scalding sonnets of *Southern Fictions*, and read them aloud, often in a south which did not welcome such sentiments. She used her social media platforms to share her rage and despair whenever justice and equality were diminished. Her Facebook page wasn't always comfortable reading, but it was the voice of someone involved with humankind, who felt personally injustices done to others. Believing in human connection, she was a spouse

and a mother as well as a poet laureate, and a co-founder of NetWest. And, believing in poetry as a means of connection, she treated other poets with kindness: promoting our work on her blog *Here, Where I Am*, praising whenever there was any cause for praise, reviewing our books, and sharing our triumphs with joy.

Like many of us, I was lucky to witness (and benefit from) this kindness at first hand. When I moved to western North Carolina in 1998. Having read *Wildwood Flower*, I was too shy to say much more than, “Nice poems” when I did meet her. Over the next years, I read *Black Shawl* and *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest*, and got even more nervous about imposing or presuming. I’d been shopping a book of my own around for several years, to no avail, including at least one rejection from LSU Press, where Kay published; but it was several years more before I got up the nerve to ask Kay if she’d take a look. She did, though; and she not only gave me feedback, but wrote a note to her own editor, to encourage that press to take another look. And she didn’t stop there; she also showed the manuscript to Fred Chappell, and asked him to write a similar note, which he also very kindly did.

The press did reject the book one more time, but with a revise-and-resubmit recommendation, and the third time was the charm. That was *The Memory of Gills*, which came out in 2006 and began my relationship with the press. So my book publications are a direct result of Kay’s kindness and thoughtfulness, which means that my tenure and promotion are largely so as well—in other words, a huge chunk of my professional and creative life. That’s what I owe her, and it’s the kind of life-changing generosity and investment of time that not every poet offers, especially to unknowns who aren’t their students, especially to female unknowns.

And there’ll be plenty of other people who can tell essentially the same story. How much time did Kay take from her own work, which she loved and did so well, to support people like us? We’ll never know exactly, but it’s a lot.

So if we want to honor Kay, we can, and should, share her poems, and refuse to let them be forgotten now that she’s no longer here to speak them. We can, and should, encourage bookstores to keep her work in stock, for the upcoming generations who’ll need what Kay had. But we can also review and promote one another’s work. We can share what we know about words and language in the public schools; we can use those words to speak out against evil, when speaking out isn’t welcome. And perhaps, too, we can try to be accessible, and to take the kind of time Kay took for me and for so many, when other poets need that kind of help.

A writing life isn't always easy. For the vast majority of us, the money's not there; the awards will always be too few to acknowledge all the good work. It's easy—too easy—to regard our fellow writers as competition for ever-scarcer resources, rather than as fellow gamblers in a game that's sometimes rigged. But Kay resisted this ease. She refused to be a jackass, and she didn't kid herself that jackassery was justified either by success or by the pangs and troubles of a writing life. So if I can offer some tribute to her, to whom I owe so much, maybe it should be an ongoing effort to be a little less of a jackass today than I was yesterday.

Kathryn Stripling Byer

## Wa'ya

Hunted to death  
for a five-dollar bounty,  
the wolf has been gone  
from these mountains

a hundred years,  
save in the blood  
of some yellow-eyed stray  
with a fierce opposition

to choke chain  
and all human boundaries.  
The Cherokee knew him  
as Wa'ya, the watchdog

of huntsman Kanati.  
No mortal dared track  
him for fear  
of the wolf spirit's vengeance.

When Wa'ya howled  
over the snow-cruled passes,  
the fire in the sacred lodge  
trembled. The young braves

grew restless when Wa'ya's pack  
milled at the border  
of broomsedge surrounding  
the cornfields of Oconaluftee.

When wolves roam the stories  
we tell about taming these mountains  
where, strangled by kudzu, the old dens  
still wait in the darkness,

we listen for echoes  
of what used to challenge the drunken  
brag passed around hunter's fires.  
Shape notes of night itself.

Blood  
on its breath,  
after which followed nothing  
but silence.

Richard Krawiec

“...What do the dead/have to teach us? The wisp / of a last breath? Smoke rising / out of the ash? “Walk in/the world for me,” a friend said...”  
—from *Awake* (The Vishnu Bird)

Years ago at a writer’s colony I had the great fortune to meet the esteemed Slovenian poet Tomas Salamun. We were sitting at a round top, sharing a meal with a group of other writers, some of whom were discussing their place in literary history, comparing their accomplishments with those of the previous fellows named on the plaques inside their work studios.

“The best we can hope to do,” said Salamun, amused, “Is make a wound on the world. Then hope that wound is large enough that it will take a while to heal.”

Kay got a kick out of this story. Not because she didn’t take her poetry seriously, strive to write work that would survive her passing, but because she had no truck with discussion of one’s place in the literary pantheon. While she appreciated awards, received them as she would any gift—a bottle of wine, a bouquet of hand-picked flowers—she didn’t live her life chasing them. She was too busy writing poetry for that. The poems are what mattered to her, not praise for the poet.

Once I told her I thought she might one day become the first Southern U.S. Poet Laureate and she just laughed and waved her hand.

When she was appointed as the first woman NC Poet Laureate, she radically changed the position. Rather than using it to promote herself, she created a blog, “Here, Where I Am,” where she proceeded to feature as many North Carolina poets as she possibly could. To help them all make their little wounds on the world. She saw her mission as Laureate not to aggrandize herself, but to draw attention to the work of others. She began the page by welcoming everyone:

“Welcome to where I am, where my kitchen’s always messy, a pot’s (or a poet) always about to boil over, a dog is always begging to be fed. Drafts of poems on the counter. Windows filled with leaves. Wind. Clouds moving over the mountains. If you like poetry, books and music—especially dog howls when a siren unwinds down the hill—you’ll like it here.”

Her welcome to others extended beyond her life as a poet. She spread her arms quietly, behind the scenes, to embrace others in need. She lobbied publishers to take a chance on writers she believed in, helped organize for political causes she felt mattered, sent money, without fanfare, to those she

knew were sick or struggling, offered support for those dealing with loss and grief. She was attentive. She was present. She walked in her world, and in doing so helped others to see where they might walk, too.

She kept an apartment over City Lights Bookstore in Sylva that was always a welcome haven to those who needed a space to write, or just get away and clear their heads. Last Fall, when I was going through a particularly rough time, she pressed me to come up, take some time to get away, sort things out.

When I arrived, amidst the wonderful disarray of shelves crammed with books, counters and floors covered with tottering piles of poetry collections, I happened to notice—impossible not to—half a dozen seemingly randomly placed books on depression topped a number of piles. A quiet offering, should I need their advice.

“Now, after so many dark mornings, / I walk the world awake... Taking one step at a time.”

In the months since her death, I find myself looking for her, trying to see where she went, trying to understand how she moved through this world, somehow follow her example in some small way. Like a child trying to walk inside a parent’s footsteps, I know my feet are too small, can too easily fit inside the impressions she left on the soil she pierced, and I have to stretch to make my strides to even come close to matching hers, and that makes me totter, as if I might fall.

But what else is there to do? What else would Kay expect from us?

## Woman Hollering Creek

Whoever she  
was, she is  
raising herself  
from her squat  
behind wind-  
throttled sage  
bush and holding  
the terrible  
things she would  
show me before  
I cross over,  
a rattlesnake  
twisted to rag  
in her hands,  
a man's heart,  
his muddy scalp,  
black tongue,  
her maidenhead  
seeping away  
through her fingers  
and into this  
creek drying up  
in the east Texas  
sun. She makes  
scorpions crawl  
from their dark  
pockets, vultures  
scoop low as  
a body can lie  
on this plain  
without being laid  
under it, she  
makes me see  
with a mad woman's  
vision that measures  
the distance by  
how long a flagon  
of water lasts, how  
many men she  
would kill for  
a drink of it.

## Girls in the Midst of the Harvest: A Friendship

I first met Kay in the early 80's, I can't even remember where, but what I do remember, vividly, is that after an hour, I felt like I had known her forever. I felt like she was an old friend, a sister, an old soul—an old soul sister. Despite the challenge of busy lives and distance, our friendship would last until her death, buoyed by telephone calls, letters, and, later, emails. Any writers' festival was always a chance for a real visit, a chance to steal away from the group for a while and take up right where we had left off the last time, even if it had been months earlier. When we were together, we laughed so much—we had the same sense of humor, the same politics, the same dark and ironic world view, the same passionate opinions about books and writers and even clothes—why, we could have traded wardrobes! We both loved long skirts, scarves, dangly earrings, boots... and of course, mountains, music, dogs, friends, travel, good food, good wine, music, our husbands and children even though they wouldn't do a thing we said! (more wine, more laughter). And neither one of us knew the actual real color of her hair! Well, we were young then, not much more than “girls in the midst of the harvest,” to use the wonderful title of Kay's first book of poetry.

And we always had a remarkably close communion of the mind. This came back to me recently upon reading the public interview I did with her at the Kathryn Stripling Byer Festival which took place at Emory and Henry College way back on October 19, 2001. I began the interview by saying, “Every time I read Kay's poetry, every time I hear her read her own poetry... it activates something in my brain, in my heart, that makes me want to write. I don't know what it is, but I think she has this effect on many other writers, too. I think I'm just one of the many who is inspired by her language and the rhythm of her poetry, which is unique. The whole time I was working on *Fair and Tender Ladies*, the novel I've written that has meant the most to me, I was reading a manuscript that Kay had sent me of her Alma poems. Somehow the more I read it, the more I became able to sink deeper and deeper into my own novel. So those poems meant everything to me. And then when I was almost through with the book, Kay sent me a copy of her poem ‘Weep-Willow,’ and I read that poem and thought, Oh my God, it's taken me four hundred pages to write this novel, and everything the whole novel is about is in this poem. She did it in one page! It just didn't seem fair. But that's what poetry is: a wonderful kind of condensation, a concentration of prose thought, of narrative.

“It also seemed amazing to me that my novel-in-progress was named for the ballad *Fair and Tender Ladies* and that Kay was writing about ballads, too, in ‘Weep-Willow,’ where a woman is singing the old ballads to put a child to sleep. One of the main ideas in the novel was its focus on a woman who is always writing letters to her sister and to other women who mean a lot to her, the writing itself a way to make it through the night, a way to make sense of her life, to find meaning and to order events. And of course that’s what Kay’s poem “Weep Willow” is all about, though the metaphor there is singing, singing the ballads—which, again, are narratives, are stories—singing to make it through the night. That’s the purpose of art of any kind; it’s an ordering of experience, a way to make it through our lives and understand them. This confluence of thought and imagery still amazes me, and it would continue through all our work.

But even on that day back in 1991, in the shadow of the big blue mountains of southwest Virginia, two other very important aspects of Kay and her poetry were already evident. I pointed out that she really *was* the girl in the midst of the harvest, “fully a part of the place you were and fully a part of the people who formed you, and yet you had the perspective to know it—and then to be able to go on and say ‘I *am* the harvest’ is even more powerful. I don’t think I’ve ever read a poet whose work is as much a part of the actual world as your poetry is.” Kay said that this trait had intensified when she moved to the mountains in 1968, and heard the mountain music and “the women’s conversation, their life stories.” By the time of her death, her website is entitled “Here, Where I Am.” It reads: “Welcome to where I am, where my kitchen’s always messy, a pot’s (or a poet’s) always about to boil over, a dog is always begging to be fed. Drafts of poems on the counter. Windows filled with leaves. Wind. Clouds moving over the mountains. If you like poetry, books, and music—especially dog howls when a siren unwinds down the hill—you’ll like it here.” Here in the real world. Community. Involvement.

Which in Kay’s case, led naturally to activism. That early conference took place scarcely a month after 9-11, which was on all our minds. So I asked her “What can poetry say in a time of disaster? Obviously it’s something, or we wouldn’t have this flood of poems in our emails on September 12.”

She answered my question at length, seriously: “There’s a temptation in the current poetry scene to say that poetry can’t. I believe our national poet laureate has suggested as much, that poetry just could not take on such subjects, that it was too large for us. That view would be foreign to Shakespeare or Milton or Yeats or any number of our major poets. This is when we need poetry the most. When you think of the spontaneous overflow of emotion into language that comes with the writing of a lyric poem,

September 11 clearly prompted such overflow. Think of how you felt when you saw those events occurring, that overflow of horror, of strong emotion. Poetry needs to be there—and it *is* there. We cannot banish poetry from these huge issues in our lives, and certainly if we do, we must not complain that no one needs poetry any more because it has become irrelevant. We’ve helped to make it irrelevant if we don’t rise to the challenge of expressing our grief, our anger, our outrage, through poetry. We just can’t let that happen.”

And as we all know, Kay never did let that happen, rising to each challenge in politics, the arts, education, human rights, and especially the environment—presented to the world, and especially to her beloved mountains. She was tireless in her activism, both through pen and presence—poems, editorials, blogs, participation. She spoke out and showed up. When Governor Mike Easley appointed her North Carolina’s Poet Laureate in 2005—the first woman to hold this position—she took it as a bully pulpit to speak out and speak *for*, on a scale and with an intensity that was unprecedented. Kay was everywhere, all over the state, literally from Murphy to Manteo. Today, in these dark days for our nation, I read her poem “Mountain Time,” from *Black Shawl*, 1998, as prophetic; I’m quoting here its final lines:

All roads seem to lead  
 to Millennium, dark roads with drop-offs  
 we can’t plumb. It’s time to be brought up short  
 now with the tale-tellers’ Listen: There once lived  
 a woman named Delphia  
 who walked these hills teaching children  
 to read. She was known as a quilter  
 whose hand never wearied, a mother  
 who raised up two daughters to pass on  
 her words like a strong chain of stitches.  
 Imagine her sitting among us,  
 her quick thimble moving along these lines  
 as if to hear every word striking true  
 as the stab of her needle through calico.  
 While prophets discourse about endings,  
 Don’t you think she’d tell us the world as we know it  
 Keeps calling us back to beginning?  
 This labor to make our words matter  
 is what any good quilter teaches.  
 A stitch in time, let’s say.  
 A blind stitch  
 that clings to the edges  
 of what’s left, the ripped

scraps and remnants, whatever  
won't stop taking shape even though the whole  
crazy quilt's falling to pieces.

The message seems clear: no matter what happens, even in the face of the Millennium, we can't stop making those blind stitches, we can't stop writing those poems, we can't ever stop writing and speaking out and trying.

Publicly and privately, Kay wore her heart on her sleeve. Most of all she loved and cared for her family, her long-lived parents and extended family back in Georgia and especially her beloved husband and daughter in Cullowhee. She was always compassionate and engaged in the lives of her many friends, too. There is a cost, of course, for such passionate involvement in life, for caring so much; disappointments and loss hit hard, too. It can be a rocky road—that goes with the territory.

It seems to me that Kay told her own story in her poems, a book by book record of being a woman in these times, so that her work as a whole becomes not only her own metaphorical memoir, but also an everywoman's journey, a passage through time on which we can accompany her. When we first come to the image of the black shawl in *Wildwood Flower*, it's sort of scary; but later on it becomes a positive symbol, a gathering together of women's voices into a community that will shelter us. Kay's black shawl wraps around me and comforts me as I keep walking this rocky trail that we've been walking all our lives, though she has gotten ahead of me now, she's gone around that big bend up there, and I can't see her any more. But I am not far behind.

## Wildwood Flower

I hoe thawed ground  
with a vengeance. Winter has left  
my house empty of dried beans  
and meat. I am hungry

and now that a few buds appear  
on the sycamore, I watch the road  
winding down this dark mountain  
not even the mule can climb  
without a struggle. Long daylight

and nobody comes while my husband  
traps rabbits, chops firewood, or  
walks away into the thicket. Abandoned  
to hoot owls and copperheads,

I begin to fear sickness. I wait  
for pneumonia and lockjaw. Each month  
I brew squaw tea for pain.  
In the stream where I scrub my own blood  
from rags, I see all things flow  
down from me into the valley.

Once I climbed the ridge  
to the place where the sky  
comes. Beyond me the mountains continued  
like God. Is there no place to hide  
from His silence? A woman must work

else she thinks too much. I hoe  
this earth until I think of nothing  
but the beans I will string,  
the sweet corn I will grind into meal.

We must eat. I will learn  
to be grateful for whatever comes to me.

## Extolling Kay Byer

Let's long remember and read Kathryn Stripling Byer, voice of conscience and sound-rich poet from Western North Carolina. Her passing on June 8, 2017, at age 72, leaves so much unsaid that I go back to her work for a re-immersion.

Kay established her voice with the first poem of her first published book, *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest*.

"Going down the road feeling good, I snap/ my fingers," the poem, "Wide Open, These Gates," begins. The line breaks with a finger-snap, and then the girl, heading out from her grandparents' farm, plays with words in her head.

"Crabbed youth/ crab apple/ crepe myrtle, I mumble," Byer relates, "as I shuffle downhill, my crabbed youth behind me like gnats singing." We're with the girl in her head, enjoying saying the words.

Byer then writes, "I've come a long way/ from what's been described as a mean and starved/ corner of backwoods America. That has a ring to it."

Byer switches, in voice, from lyricism to commentary, from the girl to the granny, whose quip, "that has a ring to it" could be said two ways and mean two things. It could be a sardonic comment about how un-lyrical her statement was; or an enthusiastic reflection on the resonance of her backwoods upbringing. Then we learn that "backwoods" is another ironic term because, contrary to the stigma, her family's farm in Georgia had given her a life full of music. Her grandmother's bread-making had a rhythm and her grandfather's farm duties included cooing to chickens. Kay's word-play encapsulates and connects her to moments of devotion and sensuality.

"Some words are gates swinging open," Byer muses. "The gnats sing, and I'm going to sing. One of these days I'll be gone."

We next move to "The Backwoods," the book's fifth poem, which makes an ancestor goddess of Byer's maternal great-grandmother. The poet remembers, as a girl, dressing up the old woman as an Indian at family reunions. She recalls seeing her go off to hoe corn, and return with beads of sweat on her high cheekbones like eyes in the wilderness. The woman had given birth to a daughter, who had straight black hair, and married a farm boy.

"A moment she stood in her white dress / and smiled back at us," Byer writes about the black-haired girl, her grandmother, "then she grew fat and

sighed / in the kitchen. Four daughters she bore..." Byer has taken on an ancient Anglo-Saxon cadence.

At the end of the first section of *The Girl*, we find the poem, "My Beautiful Grandmother," in which the poet tells of her paternal grandmother's wasting away in her last years and of how "she'd wanted to leave / for a long time, she wanted / the mountains." The grandmother yearned "to go back to where she had been / when she wore the red plume in her hat," a dashing girl who would marry her love and become a housewife in Georgia.

"I was her granddaughter," the poet states in a clarion call, signaling Byer's move to Jackson County, N.C.—her grandmother's region—in 1966. "And it's been years / I've spent leaving that small town in Georgia / where my beautiful grandmother stayed."

In Cullowhee, teaching at Western Carolina University, Kay met and married fellow teacher Jim Byer and they had a daughter, Corinna.

"Homecoming," the third part of *Girl*, expresses Kay's experience as a housewife and loving mother, keeping an eye on the view out the window and the arrival of sacred moments. Distracted from the sight of an "oak tree transfigured by the sun" when her daughter rejects breakfast and dips into the honey, the poet in "Heaven" then drifts into a reverie about stroking her baby's bronze body, feeling like Mary awed by an angel. On the farm or in the house, Byer is a dreamer, singing her reality.

In subsequent books, Byer assumes personae other than the poet. In *Wildwood Flower*, the speaker is Alma, a mountain woman of two generations ago, often left alone by her husband. "I watch the gray sky through the eye of each needle (which) my fingers have ever held up to the light," Alma says in the poem, "Extremity," "and I wait for the mousetrap to spring / in the pantry where peaches still cling / to their stones. I have made my house ready / for ice."

Byer's women, though they hoe corn and scrub clothes, have unrecognized poetry in them. Those last lines, about holding the needle up, chime in plain-talk.

In an interview I conducted with Kay in 2001, she told me how she'd found Alma. One day, hiking along Mingus Mill Trail with Jim, she saw the remains of a home site and, she said, "I began to think what it would be like to live in a place that small way back in the woods... I heard the voice. Things started coming together (and) one day it occurred to me—this woman is Alma. Once I had a sense of her, I let her loose with quilts, fire-building, frost."

Alma is critical of forgetting. About the ghosts coming from the graveyard, she says, “They know we will pay them no heed. / It’s the wind, we will say... NO wonder they go away / always complaining how little the living / have learned.”

As a girl, Kay watched her maternal grandmother farm, cook, and sew, and wanted to identify with her. She wanted a “merging,” she told me.

Byer’s fluidity in moving into other personae leads, in *Wildwood Flower*, to Alma getting into the mind of Mother Mary; and then into the mind of a mountain folk singer who, in “Weep-Willow,” “sang sad all night long... Come down among the willow / shade and weep, you fair / and tender ladies left to lie alone.” The folksinger recedes into myth, disappearing by the Toe River, leaving behind her shawl.

“And so,” Byer writes in the book’s last poem, “River Bed,” “I lie down / and let water throw quilt after / quilt on me”; and the wind “scatters dry leaves like a lifetime / of scraps from an old woman’s sewing box.”

I have sometimes wondered which poems I would put into an anthology, such as an update to Louis Untermeyer’s *Treasury of Great Poems*, a big part of my life when I was little. “River Bed” would be of them, and there would be other Byer poems, too.

The shawl of *Wildwood Flower* transmits to Byer’s next book, *Black Shawl*, which leads off with a quote from *Wildwood Flower*, in which rustling leaves are compared to the speaker’s thoughts about “those rag / taggle gypsies she sang / about, all of them black / shawled.”

Byer is connecting her old women to the ballad tradition. The poems of the book’s first part, “Mountain Time,” take us to a girlhood characterized by lonesome song, sweet-times with a boy, fear of losing a daughter, and talking back to a preacher whose words don’t make sense. In “The Devil’s Dream,” the girl wards off a figure who wants to take her into deep water, his “hand on my head / meant to save me from / hearing again how / the hatchling frogs down / by the river sing / some other god’s resurrection.” Her ancestral connection is also an aboriginal one.

Part 2 of *Black Shawl* promises a blood story from Blood Mountain, and delivers with great sex; running off with Gypsy Davy; and dying in the woods. The concluding poem, “Let’s Say,” fantasizes that the girl had only wrenched her ankle, and had been abandoned. She’d gone home to become an old woman who stirred blood in a pot. What follows is a meditation on blood-letting, ending with biting her tongue when she hears news of another girl’s flight, “leaving no more than a fiction of snapped twigs to follow.”

Part 3 wraps up the myth with Delphia, a Baba Yaga, who wraps you in her snowy shawl; identifies with trees; had once studied Latin; connects to Cherokee myth; and is called the “Hag of Blood Mountain.” The final poem, “Sile,” imagines folksinger Sheila Kay Adams going down to the barn to sing with an old woman. They conjure Gypsy Davy until the old woman is caught up “in a last kiss so wild she can’t / stop him.”

*Catching Light*, Byer’s fourth book of poems, takes on a new persona—Evelyn, an aging woman who, in the first part, we see walking around an art gallery, looking at pictures of herself. One print shows her going away from her house, as seen from inside through a window. “Come back,” the woman says to herself, imagining writing her name on glass. “*Eve.... Evelyn,*” she says. “Where are you going without me?”

The woman calling herself “old as creation” in the next part. She wants to die gracefully, like a brown leaf. She lies in her garden and imagines her body sending roots to “memories / nobody knows how / to see till our eyes have been shut / for a long time.” Poems focus on her elders, including a grandmother who, in “Her Porch,” “would pour out her hair / from her Sunday hat and sit rocking the sermon away, / looking deep into the shade.”

Then, to conclude, Byer embraces an old maid persona and welcomes Frida Kahlo into her mythos. It is the first Spanish connection that Byer has made since “Santiago the Fisherman” in *Girl*. Kahlo, who decorated her room with skeletons, “stared at Death... for so long she called him / *El Viejo,*” Byer writes in “El Día de los Muertos.” Like Kahlo, Byer stares at death, and looks into the darkness, and asks “Adonde?”

One of the mysteries of Byer’s work is the source of her sensitivity to aging and death. She grew up with old people; and, in the poem, “Sleepless,” we hear of a girl who’s sensitive to “a garden of fears,” including the sound of trapped birds in the chimney.

“When I couldn’t breathe,” Byer writes, “my mother would turn on the light” and spoon “frozen / milk into my mouth, as if she’d freeze / the dark in my throat where those wings / trembled.” Byer achieves a villanelle-like effect by interweaving repeated words: freeze, sweat, wings, throat, breath, light.

*Catching Light* ends with an old woman thinking she might don a girlish hat, swing the door open, and walk out into the blazing day, singing to herself. It’s not only a return to Evelyn looking at the photo of herself standing at an open door (reproduced on the cover of the book), it is also a return to the girl in the midst of the harvest, swinging the gate open. And it connects

to the speaker in the poem, “Early,” who says that on “the very last / day of my life / I will wake, saying / morning again.”

Byer’s next book picks up the word, “Wake,” as its title and refers to three things: 9/11’s aftermath; the funereal remembrance; and the call Byer answers to address world hurt. The image of a girl’s face in a hijacked plane’s window conjures up the faces of children who once mobbed Byer in Mexico.

In “Tijuana,” Byer writes, “For a block they ran circles around / us, tugging my skirt when I tried to walk faster... not a one older / than my little girl holding tight / to my fingers.” World misfortune resonates with Byer’s mountain women, who weave life into story quilts. At the end of *Wake*, an ancient woman casts dice and asks, “Which way?” Byer produced a CD for *Wake*, reading her poems to cellist David Moore’s performances of preludes composed by Harold Schiffman.

If *Wake* is the mournful change, Byer’s sixth book, *Coming to Rest*, is the new life. Lyricism re-emerges, for instance in the second part of the title poem with a Persian “ghazal,” in which the same phrase, given different spins, ends each couplet. One of the line variations is: “Wake up you dumb cluck and take hold.”

Part I, “Singing to Salt Woman,” following the poet’s return home from the desert, derives a chanting rhythm from the native culture. Part 3, “Closer,” latches on to sensual moments. It begins, “This fragrance I’ve never been able to name, / floating past on the skin of an eighteen year old, / still invites me to stand on the loggia again.” Then Los Muertos come, begging to stay, and Byer conveys the aboriginal dream world: haunted, seeking the Beloved, tending toward home.

What does Byer mean by the title of her last book, “Descent”?

The first part pays homage to her elders, and includes the image of a girl “lost in a ghost forest,” who, “playing at age, / humped her back like a guinea hen.” Lying in bed, she muses, “If I imagine a narcissus outgrowing its sheath, / I must also imagine a girl with my name... having outgrown her life.” She wishes to see snow, and her elders remind her that there are plenty of wonders at home.

Part II is a descent into the racism Byer witnessed in her Southern rural childhood. In “Shadow Sister,” she calls out the girl in the midst of the harvest, inheritor of a Miss Scarlett upbringing; and, in subsequent poems, looks at the fates of Southern belles. She recalls the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing, and sets out to cross “an altered state line.”

In the end, Byer revisits her backwoods. “I inherited a dark wood,” she quotes Tomas Tranströmer’s “Madrigal,” in an epigraph, “but today I am walking in the other wood, the light one.” Byer was well-read, and quoted poems in general conversation. In the poem, “Last Light,” the epigraph is from Adrienne Rich: “The tests I need to pass are prescribed by the spirits of place who understand travel but not amnesia.”

Byer leads us finally to the place where she is, on Cullowhee Creek watching light dispel mist coming down from the Balsams. “Over thirty years I’ve watched the way / light begins here,” she concludes her last poem, “Here.” It still wakes me up. Lets me be. / Here. / Where I am.”

Now, I contemplate the gifts Kay has given us: a connection to the places her spirit resides; a distinctive sound-sense voice that weds lyricism and testimony; a body of work that culminates perfectly in her supreme last book; and a path to responsibility.

## Wide Open, These Gates

Going down the road feeling good, I snap  
my fingers. Hear, hear! At an auction my father  
bid sixty-five dollars for a fat Hampshire pig  
just by rubbing his nose. When my grandfather  
scattered his seed to the four corners, corn stood up  
tall as his hat brim. My grandmother's sheets  
flapped like bells on the line. Crabbed youth,  
crap apple, crepe myrtle, I mumble

as I shuffle downhill, my crabbed youth  
behind me like gnats singing. I've come a long way  
from what's been described as a mean and starved  
corner of backwoods America. That has a ring  
to it. Rhythm, like my grandmother's hands  
in the bread dough. Her food made the boards creak,  
my grandfather mellow. He had a wild temper  
when he was a young man. Most folks talk too much,  
he'd say, aiming slow spit at a dung beetle.  
He never mumbled. Sometimes he talked nonsense

to roosters and fierce setting hens. My nonsense coos  
like a dove. Goodbye swallowtails cruising  
the pigpen. Goodbye apple dumplings. Goodbye  
little turkeys my grandmother fed with her fingers.  
Big Belle was a nanny goat. Holler "Halloo"  
after sundown and all the cows come home. Some words  
are gates swinging wide open, and I walk on through  
one more summer that like this road's going  
down easy. The gnats sing, and I'm going  
to sing. One of these days I'll be gone.

**Kay Byer's *Black Shawl***

So silly of me it was, looking back—being nervous to meet Kathryn Stripling Byer.

To be fair, I only knew her then by her poetry and accolades, both of which were formidable. I was hesitant, brought up short when I was less introduced than pointed out to her, as if we'd surely met before.

She still was Poet Laureate of North Carolina then, the first woman to wear those laurels. I was the new director of the North Carolina Writers' Network, the first man to hold that position in more than 20 years. I very much hoped I would not say something stupid, something unworthy.

Soon I would learn that the only thing unworthy was my hesitance itself, my failure to greet the world and all in it with a grace and empathy anywhere close to Kay's.

In my defense, who can?

As a poet Kay had little in common with Walt Whitman. Most of her poems are finely wrought, concise and precise, and local to the southern Appalachian Mountains. In Kay's mountains there were no open roads. Her mountains had footpaths, slim and serpentine, barely worn from bare rock, crowded by vines and briars that snatch and snag your skirts, bordered above by laurel hells that shut out the sun, and below by sheer drops into void. In the midst of vast wilderness and epic grandeur, the speakers and subjects of Kay's poems suffer from claustrophobia. They long to ride off with a gypsy, a fancy man, a stranger passing through with "gypsy-black boots / in the stirrups."

Like Whitman nonetheless, as a poet Kay was large and contained multitudes. Her spirit and learning (but that is redundant, for what is any learning but the expression and desire of one's spirit?) were capacious enough to take in and reconcile what most would hold in opposition. She kept some part of the southwest Georgia farm girl even as she traveled and took in the world, sought advanced degrees, taught and accepted honors. In her poems she could invoke Vishnu, old-time quilting techniques, ballads of the borderlands, wildflowers by their ancient names, medieval Welsh poetry, myths not just of the Celts and Cherokees but the Greeks and Romans, too, all with unshowy elegance.

After her unexpected death on June 5, I turned to my favorite of her books, *Black Shawl*. Published by LSU Press in 1998, *Black Shawl* won multiple awards, so the collection is not an obscure or hipster choice, not a deep dive into the back pages of her work. *Black Shawl*, though, is the book I take with me into the mountains, the book I read between acts at MerleFest. This book always has felt to me like a culmination: not, by any stretch, her final reckoning with the mountains where she made her home, but a satiation of the poetic hunger whetted in her first two full-length books, *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* and *Wildwood Flower*. I long have felt that *Black Shawl* freed her to widen her scope, to let her poet's eye wander beyond the mountains, though I have no idea if it felt that way to her.

The effect on me of reading *Black Shawl* straight through is like breaking the tree line onto an Appalachian bald: the sudden burst of sunshine, the yawping space of the peak after the long shadows of the dark wood, the glorious realization of the height you've reached after the grinding myopia of a steep climb.

I suspect Kay meant for that to happen, whether she planned it or not. The structure of the book seems to suggest that she did. Part I, "Voices," begins with "The Ballad Singers," a poem that follows the women of its title from the Old World docks, "nursing their babies / and watching the gangplanks beginning / to rise on the ships," and into "the new world" of the mountain fastnesses, with their "laurel / hells, rockslides / and bottomless chasms." There "they sing / their solitude into / those old songs of love / and betrayal."

The speaker of the poem makes clear these are not eager pioneers: "Having no say / in their journey, they came / here." From the very first words, the poet has dispensed with sentimentality: "They had no use / for such romance as clings / like the stubbornest / ivy." (I'm reminded of Auden's question, "When Norsemen heard thunder, / did they seriously believe / Thor was hammering?") The rest of the section follows these early, unwilling settlers and their daughters, trying not quite to civilize but to make bearable the wilderness in which they find themselves trapped, trying to make their voices heard "into the ceaseless / wind sounding the bedrock." This struggle for voice provokes and piles resonances onto Byer's oft-repeated phrase, syntax tumbled slightly with each use, "Here I am."

Part II, "Blood Mountains," sinks into the lives of the settlers' descendants, for whom "one story's / good as another / so long as there's / blood in it." They live in a violent, possessive, ridiculous patriarchy that would be laughable if it weren't so damaging. The section tells the story—or a story, or a couple of different stories, or more—of a girl who maybe gets away,

escapes the abuse, the straitjacket strictures of a community on the edge, the beatings and rapes and blind eyes turned to her plight and “the same boast: That little gal’s not going anywhere.”

Instead she took “some two-day-old cornbread / and left the back door / open.” She rode off with a “Gypsy,” the title of the section’s fifth poem, just like in the ballads sung by her grandmothers, even though “his breath / in her face smells like death / or close to it.”

But the section’s last poem, “Let’s Say,” conjectures, “she didn’t.” The gypsy left her behind:

Let’s say she hobbled back home  
and proceeded to live out her days  
either waiting for blood  
or else scrubbing its tracks

The girl grows old, soaked in the blood of the game and stock she butchers to feed her family, so like her own blood of menstruation and childbirth and wounds, and she bites her tongue till it bleeds “whenever she heard round / the quilt circle tales of another girl / gone down the mountain.”

And then, Part III, and “Delphia.”

Already alluded to in the perambulatory poem, the somehow cheeky-but-magisterial “Mountain Time,” Delphia belongs with Scout Finch and Faulkner’s Ratliff as one of Southern literature’s great Inside-Outsiders. Not full-on outsiders like Boo Radley or Joe Christmas, these Inside-Outsiders are welcomed within their communities, but warily, and with reservations on both sides. Delphia is set apart from her neighbors twice over: first as a quilter “whose hand never wearied,” and therefore an upholder of traditional craft and women’s traditional place; but second as a self-employed, self-appointed, itinerant teacher, teaching mountain children—boys and girls alike—to read, and therefore a herald and vanguard for the breakdown of tradition, the liberation of women (and men), maybe even the end of the community itself.

Her intelligence—like Scout’s and Ratliff’s—makes her valuable, and a threat, a bridge-builder and –burner at the same time, because she has the ability to see these mountains from a higher vantage, to place in context and critique.

“Delphia,” the poem that bears her name, begins, “told them the truth early on.” While the girl’s kinswomen in “Blood Mountains” submitted to the

violent patriarchy “or else, goodness knows, / what’s running wild might come too close,” Delphia teaches her (female) quilting students,

What keeps the whole blooming  
patchwork from falling to pieces  
is stitches no bigger than pinpricks

Delphia’s is not a happy story, really, for through her Byer explores questions of aging, decay, and death—not only of Delphia herself, but of the mountain community and way of life, which Delphia knows she cannot save and isn’t entirely sure she wants to. How to pass on the ballads, without turning them into kitsch, but without passing on the loneliness and voicelessness that their ancestors sang into them? How to—should you?—pass on the beauties of a way of life, continue a community, that so abused and curtailed its members? How to emulate, or at least admire, the strength of women who endured so much, while working yourself to the bone to make sure the girls around you never have to endure the same, never have to summon the same kind of strength?

O, the kitsch we make of our mountains.

Upon them we are closer to God. Within their folds and hollers they preserve a life and culture truer and purer than the hectic commercial plasticity of the flatlands. The Scots-Irish settled there by choice—for the beauty! for the freedom!—and not because speculators had priced them out of all the decent farmland down below. (For who in their right mind wants to try to make a living plowing thin and rocky soil at a fifty-degree angle?)

The Czech novelist Milan Kundera spent all of Part 6 of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* exploring kitsch of various kinds. He defined it, among other ways, as “the aesthetic ideal of... a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist,” excluding “everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence.”

Our kitsch requires the mountain folk to be our new Noble Savages, now that American culture finally admits we’re supposed to feel guilty about the Cherokees those mountain folks’ ancestors displaced. Our kitsch requires us to prettify and simplify how miserably lonesome mountain life could be, then, and now, and to admit no exceptions, no subtext, no complications.

Byer’s poems in *Black Shawl* cut through the kitsch and myths of the mountains like a pair of sharp shears. Her empathy and ear for story will let her do no less. A cheap reading of the poems will hide this, may even suggest its opposite, for what has become kitschier about the mountains than bonneted grannies singing ballads and stitching quilts? Her study of,

and identification with, two of the mountains' most famous—and most feminine—arts lets Byer more effectively subvert the stereotypes and sentimentality through which we want to see those granny women, and all their neighbors, too.

If in kitsch, as Kundera said, “all answers are given in advance, and preclude any questions,” then it must ignore or eliminate those whose existence, whose being, pose questions with no clear answers. Delphia warns outright, “Don’t ask me the big questions / none but a fool tries to answer / straight.” Kitsch must ignore those like Delphia.

Delphia could have escaped.

If Kathryn Stripling Byer knew comforts, honors, status, and travels that Delphia could not have imagined, like Delphia she gave herself out there, where she was, just the same. She was, as Network board member Nicki Leone said, “instinctively generous,” but I never quite shook the sense that some of her generosity was learned, too, the result of the training that every white girl in the South receives: training in how to serve, training in how to please, training in how to smile through the pain and put others first. Since her death, her friends and admirers have crowded the Internet with stories of her giving: the poems she wrote for us, the poems of ours she read and nudged to be better, the writers encouraged and befriended, the human kindnesses performed. I wrote one for the North Carolina Writers' Network website, about that time she emptied her house of blankets and (of course) quilts to bring to students staying in an over-air-conditioned dorm.

If Delphia could cross and re-cross the ridges and peaks to teach children to read and to stitch, then Kay could, and would, and did, cross and re-cross the state to teach any and all to write or write better, to feel and think fully. She critiqued with an eye and a pen that never wearied. Like Delphia she was set apart by her knowledge, her skill: in the Writingest State, she wrote better than all but a few. She read with a keener eye. She gave that back until she had no more to give, teaching her last workshop only a month before she died.

I rack myself asking what I could have done for her, but that is mostly male ego, for I'm thinking not of kindness but of rescue and repaying debt. I would, now, happily take a less generous Kay Byer, if it meant she'd still be with us.

I am not ready for this.

I am not ready to end this essay, because I do not know what I want its conclusion to be. I am tempted to say that's because whatever that conclu-

sion proves to be, it will be my last goodbye to Kay, and letting sympathetic readers aww and sigh. But no, that is rank sentimentality, cheap and easy, and Kay deserves better.

I thought—no, expected, thoughtlessly—to have a few more years to learn from her, to take on some of her wisdom and empathy and generosity, or at least their appearance, and in the meantime to hide behind her when I had to. I thought to have more time before we, the writers who looked up to her, would have to take responsibility, to try to be authorities, advocates, consciences for our community, our state.

I'm not sure that we can, through no fault or failing of our own. We write in a different state, a different world, than that in which Kay made her name. The paths she followed are closed to us, and we are still hacking out our own, not sure of what we will find, or want to find. If Kay in her poetry chronicled Delphia watching the end of the ballad singers and quilters, what is left to us? Can we make poetry of bloggers and Etsy? Can we make poetry heard in a state now overrun by those with an unsurpassed devotion to kitsch, to cliché in place of memory and image in place of story, who believe they've answered every question because they can think of no worthwhile questions to ask?

I'm rushing to get these thoughts down, to reach some coherent conclusion, before my baby daughter wakes up and ends my writing time for this morning. In the meantime I've been using the baby monitor to hold *Black Shawl* open to the pages I need, my daughter's restless form curling and rolling atop the Delphia poems.

I will conjure or stitch no better conclusion than that.

(Originally published by *Change Seven Magazine*, June 2017, reprinted by permission)

**On “Chicago Bound” from *The Movable Nest: A Mother/Daughter Companion*,  
edited by Marilyn Kallet and Kathryn Stripling Byer**

On the day you turn twenty-one,  
we arrive at the airport,  
plenty of time before take-off,  
the rain steady, ugly gray  
sky while the radio cheers us

on, Jimmy Rogers and Sweet Home  
Chicago just what we need on  
this Friday you turn twenty-one.  
Come on, come on, let's get a move on.  
I'm ready, Daddy, to leave this town.

I hold my breath while the plane rises,  
muddy clouds all the way up  
till we come out the other side into  
the stratosphere, lapis lazuli and white  
shag carpet all the way there.

Nobody at home up here. Makes me  
feel lonesome till I see the beverage cart  
rolling toward us and lower my tray.  
What's for lunch? Nothing much.  
Cookie, sandwich, a small Baby Ruth.

Captain's voice from the cockpit  
keeps telling us how long before  
we'll come down. Soon it's time for a snooze  
while this plane flies us over the heartland  
to you in your Shakespeare class,

old boss man Lear raving blank verse,  
still crazy after all these years. Just a little while  
longer, we'll be on the ground  
where we'll hop a train south to the campus,  
a place I like better than this flimsy

carpet of clouds on which I cannot walk  
to you. I need green fields  
to do that, some tough city blocks,

Kimbark, Ellis, East Hyde Park.  
Give me boulevard, avenue,

*chemin, rue, strasse, calle,*  
*Avenida, el camino,* whatever  
you want to call it, Baby, if it's down  
there on earth where you are,  
it's Sweet Home. I'll take it.

In our conversations about motherhood and letting go, Kay Byer and I spoke of our hope to accomplish a more positive, less guilt-ridden job than our own mothers had done with us. In our efforts to encourage joyful independence in our daughters, Kay Byer and I hatched a plan for *The Movable Nest: A Mother/Daughter Companion*. We canvassed our writer friends, mothers who had bid goodbye to their daughters, and asked for poems that covered the complex topic of leaving the nest. Kay and I agreed that we liked Pat Mora's concept of a "movable nest" better than an "empty nest." When Kay's daughter left for University of Chicago, when my daughter Heather left at sixteen for the North Carolina School of the Arts, we felt many things: pride, sadness, love, emptiness. We did not anticipate the joy we would find in the "returns," the homecomings, the phone calls and strengthened bonds. That's the movable part of our heartland.

Kay wrote a lyrical, unsentimental essay, "Last Day," for our volume; her daughter Corinna Lynette Byer offered a poem, "Citrons," in which her footsteps leaving the farm echo those of her mother, departing decades earlier. Several writer-daughters provided graceful poems that responded to their mothers' songs of blessing and leave-taking. We were in this together, this letting go and finding new connections, this art of bearing witness to each stage of our lives, our loves.

Kay chose her poem, "Chicago Bound," for our collection. She composed this lyric on a visit to Corinna at the University of Chicago. The poem clears the air of excess sentiment with images like "muddy clouds all the way up," and "white shag carpet" for sky; the lunch cart offering is small. "What's for lunch? Nothing much. / Cookie, sandwich, a small Baby Ruth." But our poet lets the feelings soar toward the end, where the poem turns into a love poem without apology:

Give me boulevard, avenue,

*chemin, rue, strasse, calle,*  
*Avenida, el camino,* whatever  
you want to call it, Baby, if it's down

there on earth where you are,  
it's Sweet Home. I'll take it.

There's no love like this one. Yet Kay Byer's poem in five-line stanzas evokes a contained, formal feeling, like that which arrives after great pain, according to Dickinson. But now the poem bears great joy—the expectation of seeing the daughter—and travels weightlessly, like a smooth flight over Chicago, preparing to land smoothly and to deposit both parents onto the city streets. Our unsentimental poet declares the need for both “green fields” and “tough city blocks” in order to travel a path to her daughter. She needs the complex, solid ground of reality rather than greeting-card sentiments. Below, the daughter is in her Shakespeare class studying some of the best verse our language has to offer. “Boss man” Lear may be raving in the background, “still crazy after all these years,” but from a distance the voice is sweeter and more modern, like Paul Simon's. Like a ballad that continues, Kathryn Stripling Byer's poetry endures.

(Originally published by *Blue Fifth Review*, Spring 2017, reprinted by permission)

Kathryn Stripling Byer

## **Like a Mother Who Never Sleeps, Rain**

wants to fill up the ditches  
and chicken coops till there is nobody left

in the world but herself mumbling, “Buckles  
and laces for sale. Pretty buckles

and laces.” How can I pretend  
I don’t hear when this yearning for keys

in my breastpocket, books cradled  
under my scarf makes me stand for too long

at the window where I can find nothing  
to give to my daughter but words for what’s wet

and unwelcoming? Old Mother Hubbard,  
I’ve whistled home stray dogs

and danced with a billy goat,  
gone round the mulberry bush till I’m dizzy

and yet she will think of me sad by a shut window  
wanting to drive away into the sky

I can’t see in the gray water flooding  
the streets. She wants Snow White awakened,

a kiss on both cheeks. I want wind  
on my face. We are caught

in a story with no happy ending. Rain  
always comes back singing

pretty lies. Where is the sky,  
the way out of this house where I hold her

so tightly, she cries out against  
me, brushing my lips with her eyelashes?

“Death’s dark door stands open day and night...”

—*Aeneid* Book VI—Virgil (trans. by Seamus Heaney)

This might be the hardest thing I’ve ever had to write. Kay was like family to me. I loved her, of course, like everyone that met her (except GOP congressmen or governors, perhaps) loved her, particularly if you were a writer of any promise and you showed her that you were serious. Because poetry was deadly serious to Kay, and she made sure that you knew it. First time we met was after a reading of mine in Asheville. I was maybe 28 or 29, my first book was just out, and I was plotting to start the *Asheville Poetry Review*. “I just came to see what the fuss was about,” she said, in an almost withering drawl. “You got *some* balls.” I had no idea what that meant. Had I said “fuck” too much during the reading? Should I have not sung? Had I jumped some protocol, tripped an unspoken code, insulted her? She never said. That’s the first time I understood that she did not indulge in elliptical phrases, small talk, or vague generalities. She was direct, and language was the most important thing in her mind. It could drive a person crazy, and Kay definitely heard voices, the most important voices in the Appalachian hills, those of the women that carved out a mellifluous life between the hard choices, that made and raised the babies, that tended the hearth and worked the soil, that bled and sacrificed so others would not have to.

Our relationship was conducted on the phone. It was the 90’s, pre-social media, and though we wrote letters back and forth, I was always on the road in a band, and she was teaching at Western Carolina University. I was steadfast on the phone, booking shows, so if we hadn’t communicated in a while, I called her and we caught up. You’ve got a voice that makes people do things, she said. I also admired her voice, but it was her laugh that got me, that worked me, that took me out of myself. She made me a vicious gossip and boy, would we let it go. We told dirty jokes. We shared recent stories, we insulted high and lowbrow alike. We regaled one another with poetry, in slashes and giggles, and earnestly tried to push each other. Kay was only four years younger than my mother, but she felt like my weird and crackling smart older sister, who was dying to let her hair down and say some heartfelt, slightly evil things. I told her about the backstage antics of being in a rock band. She would ply me with books and the latest poet to look out for. She turned me on to Seamus Heaney, and Betsy Adcock, and Robert Morgan, and Lee Smith, and Barry Lopez. I screamed about the Surrealists and Stevens and Steely Dan and Borges and Nina Simone. We argued the merits of the Popul Vuh and The Mabinogion. We were almost exact opposites in some ways, but we loved the same things. We loathed the same things. We talked and talked and talked.

Kay grew up in North Georgia, and wanted more than anything to live in the Blue Ridge mountains. I grew up in the Blue Ridge mountains and wanted more than anything to get out of them. Being called a Southern poet was akin to being accused of witchcraft, I thought. I wanted to experiment. Kay mastered the Appalachian voice, in a first person tone that was unlike any other I had read. I discovered the work of the poet Ai when I was in college and admired her mastery of the first person narrative voice and how she was able to inhabit the interior of almost any historical figure, and made their stories her own. Kay understood that history is what happens as a culture unfurls itself, and bangs against the restrictions of other cultures, and other appetites. She took the patchwork of women's voices and wrapped them around her like a *Black Shawl*. She absorbed their pain, their lyricism, their bone-weary bravery. She was our Queen and fought for every inch of her reputation.

We met at the beginning of the literary renaissance that was taking place in Western North Carolina and though it seems quaint now, after all the fellowships, awards, and recognition the writers in the West have received in the last few years, then we felt that all the money, influence and prizes were disproportionately fixed and distributed in the Eastern part of the state. We strategized and pushed and supported and blurred and published and threatened and begged and sang when a good plan worked out. It felt like she had the back of every hard-working poet in the state, and no one in the last thirty years has done more to support women writers of every stripe and persuasion than Kay did. There are scores of young women who wrote to her for some morsel of approval, and she gave all she had. She was not perfect (who is?) and suffered bouts of depression, particularly as she aged, as both she and her husband, Jim, were faced with the declining health of their parents. She talked often of her daughter, Cory, and her travails, and she became increasingly political after she served as NC's first female poet laureate. She took the post with the both hands and drug the position single-handedly into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, using the new tools of the internet to spread the gospel of poetry to anyone who showed interest, particularly high school students. Kay understood that the disdain for poetry was an unnatural act, and that the germ of literary interest could infect an English student in their teens, and then the love of poetry was lifelong and everlasting.

I married and divorced and married again. I started *The Asheville Poetry Review*, which I thought was a temporary gathering of the regional output of poetry, but it grew and grew and became an international publication. Thousands of poems poured in from all over the world. Kay was always reminding me that the local output was just as important as the work that came from Europe or either of the American coasts. She was unfailingly

generous with her time, her work, and her advice. Ten years passed, then twenty, then a quarter century and Kay and I made our books and touted one another to anyone that would listen, and tried our best to carry the state's banner of excellence wherever folks would bring us to speak. Kay won national prizes and her poems became deeper and wider. She became a fiercely political figure, a bit more guarded, a smidge less joyful. She was more famous than she realized, and less famous than she wanted to be. She began to feel uncomfortable in the constraints of aging, but she knew we were now residing in a dark time, with the shocking election of Trump, and marshalled her energy to post political diatribes against intolerance and xenophobia, as the forces of white supremacy and nationalism were populating the airwaves and daily doses of presidential incompetence and autocracy threatened to roll back all the liberal achievements on the environment and civil rights and marriage equality.

I'm just tired, she would say, I need to focus on my work. Her generosity may have worn thin spots in her own fictive covering, but she would not complain, and I never really ever heard her feel sorry for herself. She was courageous and creative and self-contained and regal, right to the end. We were closer in the '90's and early aughts, when we used to talk on the phone several times a year. Our lives became so busy that we didn't have time for phone calls anymore, which became an antiquated way of communicating anyway. Now we had cyber links and Facebook. Letters dried up and were replaced with instant texts, loving, but succinct emails, which didn't have the same intimacy as before. Whenever we saw each other, one or the other always lamented that we missed our old wicked phone conversations. She would say, "I always know you're here and that comforts me." She knew I felt the same way. I'm crying now as I write this sentence and only now realized that I've not really gone through the grieving process.

I was devastated to miss the gathering for Kay in Sylva, NC. I had to be with my wife at the Neuroscience Clinic in Cincinnati, getting the latest test results from a debilitating illness that she has bravely fought for the last six years. Sitting in that glaring white antiseptic waiting room, I anxiously thought of Jim and Cory, in their last hours with Kay, realizing that the end was coming far sooner than anyone expected or predicted, and I dearly hoped that the great outpouring of love and grief from all corners of the state would help in some way to assuage the fear and pain they were going to have to carry forward. Now, in October of 2017, as I write the last of these lines, I am three days from the funeral of my stepson, Ramon, my wife's youngest son, who died a week earlier, tragically gone at the age of 38. George Clooney handsome and classic Rust Belt sweet, Ramon took care of his grandmother, bringing her dinner every Monday and making sure to pay her bills, fix her gutter, tickle and hug her when he left. The

entire family sat in shocked silence at his memorial service. This brutal year cannot end soon enough.

Like the other writers whose gracious and moving words are filling this issue in praise of Kay, I'm having a hard time imagining the landscape without her. Maybe it's because her spirit still felt so young and vital that it is hard to believe that she is really gone. There are poems left that will be published, and they will serve to remind us, along with a vibrant and lasting body of Kay's work, just how beautifully history, culture, and poetry can intertwine. When I was a young man, she made me feel silly, sometimes self-righteous, and occasionally I would shuck and jive for her, because I loved to hear her laugh. She had a great laugh. She always looked around when she did it, like she was getting away with something. You almost had to pull it out of her. But it was worth it. I would do anything to hear that sweet coy laugh right now.

**The Vishnu Bird**

greet me this morning.  
*Vishnu, vishnu*, he calls. No Vedic bird  
bearing Lord Vishnu himself on its back,  
just a local bird perched in the sarvis tree  
unfurling blossoms come Easter time,  
calling the faithful to worship.

Barefoot, I'm walking out to the garden  
in nightgown and bathrobe,  
my coffee cup half full,  
my head brimming over with yesternight's  
bird calls. A yellow eyed battle-crow mocking  
my sentiments, bespectacled owl warning Soon,  
Soon. No kingfisher diving  
for bugs in the silt-strangled creek.  
In the darkness, no whippoorwills.  
Mourning doves mute beneath  
crab grass, returning to dust  
to await reincarnation as Vishnu birds,  
singing the dharma of compost.

The scent of manure lingers over the pasture below,  
though the cows have been gone  
since our neighbor's wife auctioned the farm.  
If ever the kingfisher finds his way back  
to the mud where the creek waits,  
maybe our neighbor will be resurrected  
as cow herd and gather his cows  
on the hill where they used to graze  
until he died of the usual cancer.  
I'll watch him toss hay from his pickup.

His wife will no longer look sad  
in the checkout lane. Maybe I'll hear his flute  
singing me forth every morning.  
A jingle of Gopi bells.

Maybe I'll dance all the way  
to the garden like Lakshmi.

Who knows, I might even be soft spoken  
when I behold what the rabbits have eaten,  
the dogs trampled. Maybe  
I'll murmur in Sanskrit a blessing.

Poet and essayist Kathryn Stripling Byer was a native of Georgia, but set most of her poems in the mountains of North Carolina. Creating an identity that was both distinct and in line with the concerns of southern culture, Byer reclaimed in her poetry the traditions, customs, and voices of past Appalachian women. In doing so, she defined herself as an artist and, at the same time, addressed the concerns of women in today's South.

"American literature is going to miss her presence, and North Carolina is going to mourn her absence," Chappell, a Canton native, said Tuesday. "What set her apart is the fact she chose our part of Appalachia to live in and write about. She fell in love with us."

Byer's poems were deeply personal, but avoided meandering into the confessional. She used rich imagery that was deeply informed by the world around her. In the poem "The Vishnu Bird," written after a friend died, Byer said: "If ever the kingfisher finds his way back / to the mud where the creek waits, / maybe our neighbor will be resurrected / as cow herd and gather his cows / on the hill where they used to graze / until he died of the usual cancer."

"I grew up wanting to be a singer. I sang solos in our small town church," she wrote. "'In the Garden' was one of my favorites. So was 'Near to the Heart of God.' Later on, I wanted to be Emmylou Harris, shiny boots and fringe. Or Dolly Parton singing, 'Fair and Tender Ladies,' sounding so high lonesome, she gave me goose bumps. I still sing along sometimes with her and Emmylou while I drive to the grocery store or over Cowee, heading down south to where my mother lives.

"I didn't give up singing, I just found another way to sing. I found poetry."

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Byer was born in Camilla, in Mitchell County, in 1944 to C. M. Stripling, a farmer, and Bernice Campbell Stripling, a homemaker. She attended Wesleyan College in Macon and attained an M.F.A. from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. There Byer studied with Allen Tate, Fred Chappell, and Robert Watson and won the Academy of American Poets Student Prize. While at UNC-G, Byer decided to make the North Carolina mountains her home, in large part, she says, because the mountains were "the place my grandmother had wanted to be when she died."

Byer served as poet-in-residence at Western Carolina University (1988-98), UNC-G (1995), and Lenoir-Rhyne College (1999). Her work appeared in prestigious poetry and scholarly journals, including *Poetry*, *Georgia Review*,

*Southern Review*, and *Hudson Review*. She published numerous essays, including the autobiographical “Deep Water” in *Bloodroot: Reflections on Place by Appalachian Women Writers* (1998) and “Turning the Windlass at the Well: Fred Chappell’s Early Poetry,” which was published in *Dream Garden: The Poetic Vision of Fred Chappell* (1997). She received numerous awards, including fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the North Carolina Arts Council. Her second volume, *Wildwood Flower* (1992), received the Lamont Prize for the best second book by an American poet. In 2005, Byer was named the fifth poet laureate of North Carolina and the first woman. Byer published hundreds of poems over the years, earning induction into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 2012. Other accolades include the Thomas Wolfe Literary Award and the North Carolina Award in Literature in 2001.

\* \* \*

Byer focused on the power and liabilities of the solitude she finds in the mountains. In her essay “Deep Water,” she addressed that solitude and what it has meant, historically, to women:

To the women living in these mountains years ago, singing must have seemed the only way they could travel.... [T]hey remained. They knew their place. They knew its jump-offs, its laurel hells, its little graves grown over with honeysuckle and blackberry briars. They knew the lay of cloud shadows rolling down one ridge and up another. And their place knew them. Out of that reciprocal knowing, they were able to sing their way through their solitude and into a larger web of voices.

It is this “larger web of voices” that Byer worked to recover. *Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* (1986), her first volume of poetry and her only collection set in rural Georgia, describes the difficult, often ambivalent relationship of a modern woman to the culture of the past. As she explained in “Wide Open, These Gates”:

...I’ve come a long way  
from what’s been described as a mean and starved  
corner of backwoods America. That has a ring  
to it. Rhythm, like my grandmother’s hands  
in the bread dough.

Byer’s attempts to connect with her cultural past dominate this volume. It is in *Wildwood Flower* that she began her exploration of Appalachian culture, a theme identified in the introductory poem, “At Kanati Fork,” in

which the narrator encounters a ruined homestead and addresses its ghost, “a lone woman haunting the trail”:

*“Who are you?” I asked the shade  
where her milk bucket rusted to nothing  
but rim. I saw, half-buried  
under the leaf mold, a spoon catch the sun.*

*In her basin  
a mirror of water.*

Byer intensifies and extends the theme of identification and reclamation in *Black Shawl*, her third volume. In this book the distinction between the present and past fades away; the narrators who speak are often ghosts or local women, and often the difference between them is indiscernible. The continuity of their concerns, the sense of the past as an ever-present shadow, and the illusory quality of the present informs each woman’s perspective. All these women have, Byer suggests, is the sense of continuity, their crafts, their collective life experiences, and an ever-adapting wisdom to sustain them. In the light of that wisdom, many of them mistrust or refuse outside influences. As Delphia, one of *Black Shawl*’s many personae, tells us:

Don’t ask me the big questions  
none but a fool tries to answer  
straight. All I can tell you of why  
you were born is to take your own time  
once the needle’s been threaded,  
the stray thimble fetched from the cloth bag.

The strengths of these volumes are progressive, and each bespeaks the growth and vision of the poet, whose work continued to grow and deepen throughout her life.

Byer’s fourth volume of poetry, *Catching Light* (2002), deals with the experience of aging from a woman’s perspective. In 2003, she published *Wake*, a chapbook reflecting on the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. *Coming to Rest* (2006), her fifth volume of poetry, investigates the experience of homecoming. The last collection published before her death, *The Vishnu Bird* (2015), an elegy of sorts for her colleague, Patrick Morris, explores themes of aging, immortality and an intense spirituality.

Byer lived in Cullowhee, North Carolina, and was married to Jim Byer, a professor of nineteenth-century literature at Western Carolina University.

They had one daughter, Corinna Lynette. Byer died on June 5, 2017, after a lymphoma diagnosis. She was seventy-two.

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went dark,  
    leaving us  
undistracted, swelling inside  
every weakness we call home.

\*           \*           \*

In my twenties, one more construction job.  
A guy on the crew, someone  
I didn't know well  
    asked  
if we had a room to rent.  
    The night before  
a car hit its horn at 2 a.m.,  
a drinker coming home from the bars,  
and his roommate rolled out of bed  
screaming, "Take cover,"  
    then fired  
two shots out the window.

The week before he'd found the same roommate  
naked in the yard during a rainstorm.  
"Vietnam," he said, "fucked his head up."

\*           \*           \*

When it was feared that a century's turn  
would knock out electricity  
    long enough  
to collapse the memorized codes  
of civilization,  
    some stored food,  
ammunition. And some of those battalions  
of tuna, canned fruit, and vegetables  
still wait  
    like the cans we found  
in barn behind an old farmhouse once.  
With a pocketknife, we peeled open  
a rusted can of pears,  
  
    but would not  
eat one or taste its juice.  
    Years after







**“The first suffering arrived...”**

1

The first suffering arrived in the time of dinosaurs,  
when a mother lost her child to the crumbling of the valley.  
She crawled back to her cave and faced extinction,  
but her suffering did not end.

The birds taught their young to fly, to emigrate,  
The rivers pushed their gravel to the sea.  
Our ancestors climbed down from the trees,  
and this is how suffering came to stand on its feet.

To be  
is not a complicated philosophy.  
To be  
is a little suffering under a giant stone.

2

Where would the flower pot sit?  
And the coat rack—  
where should it stand?

and the rug,  
where might it lay?  
If they could move, where would they go?

I had a dream.  
I had a dream of an ax that longed to  
climb a tree and watch the sunrise, just once.

A manacle that longed to see freedom through its cuffs.

A wooden boat that preferred not to give its body to the waves.

But things are unable to choose where they go  
They are not able to emigrate,  
They are not able to return home.

3

An owl has been perched on the chandelier,  
 A baby lion reclines on the sofa,  
 If the room was a jungle, someday,  
 then a trout might hide behind the TV.

If the room was undersea, someday,  
 a giant eel could slither inside the sewer pipe,  
 A salamander would crawl across the kitchen floor.

If the room was a jungle,  
 my bed would be the crest of a deep volcano.

I'm afraid of opening the drawer,  
 of raising the corner of the rug,  
 of looking behind the dresser.  
 Who knows...  
 maybe the first human was born in this room,  
 he might fall in love in this room,  
 his heart might be broken in this room.  
 I turn off the light,  
 close the curtain.  
 I don't like thinking of the first human crying in this room.

4

In the next poem, your eyes would be like a switchblade  
 and I would go to the streets to kill anyone I wished to kill.  
 There would be blood strewn into the streets,  
 And the police officers would know the truth.  
 You should know—I'm not afraid of the walls of this prison,  
 I write on the walls:  
 Men whose eyes are not like yours  
 should die.

I return to the poem and to your eyes,  
 to your wardrobe,  
 to your clothes which drink tea with you,  
 to your clothes which read poems with you,  
 dance with you,  
 sleep with you, sleep with you  
 and I'm still alive

I'm still alive without slicing down my veil.  
How lucky are your clothes,  
white clothes, black clothes, red clothes  
all the clothes fit snugly on your body.

5

I covered the war with your skin.  
The artillery shells sputtered away,  
And the gun sat down by the river,  
and told us about the peace.

I covered the war with your hand.  
The bootlaces opened,  
the soldiers sat down by the river,  
and told us about the peace.

Your body depicts peace,  
and your name could end all war.

*(translated from the Persian by Shohreh Laici)*

**One Year Later**

Belovèd, brightest beacon-country,  
look how far you've fallen

in lifting up this spotlight-hungry  
Barnum crossed with Stalin.

*Nov. 8, 2017*

## Refusing Refusal: Political Poetry That Can No Longer Wait

*Hand in Hand: Poets Respond to Race* ed. by Al Black and Len Lawson. Chapin, SC: Muddy Ford Press, 2017. 116 pp. \$15, paper.

*Truth to Power: Writers Respond to the Rhetoric of Hate and Fear* ed. by Pamela Uschuk. Durango, CO: *Cutthroat, a Journal of the Arts*, 2017. 358 pp. \$20, paper.

*“We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society... when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness’—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.”*—Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963)

*“40 years later, and still white (and now Black) cops wild on Black youth —male and female!—beating, choking, shooting and torturing them with impunity. Forty years, and while there may be thousands of Black politicians, there is precious little Black political power, and much of that lies trapped within the cage of Democratic politics where promises are many but actions are few.”*—Mumia Abu-Jamal’s “Forty Years in the Wilderness” (2003)

*“I’m telling these tears, ‘Go and fall away, fall away’ / May the last one burn into flames”*—Beyoncé’s “Freedom” (2016)

In their individual introductions to the anthology *Hand in Hand: Poets Respond to Race*, editors Al Black and Len Lawson display a similar ethos, explaining that their respective purposes are to “respond to the moment” (6) and to garner “a community of voices to establish a gateway toward the tough conversations about race and racism” (8). The etymology of *respond*, the key word found in the Muddy Ford Press collection’s title and in the *Cutthroat Truth to Power: Writers Respond to the Rhetoric of Hate and Fear* anthology, comes from the Middle English *respounde*—to reply. These anthologies engage in a dialogue, rather than a monologue, responding not just to the voices within these pages, but also to the communal cry that arose amidst the 2016 Presidential Election—a cry that refuses to dissipate.

As the words on the page in these two anthologies (blessedly) remind us, this is a dialogue many of us, not just a select few, are eager to engage. Though in these times of political and social unrest it can seem as if one is all alone in shouldering the Sisyphean burden of a white supremacist,

LGBTQ-phobic, misogynistic, and capitalistic society, Bill Wetzel's speech "One Drop" consoles us through his repetition of the word "to," the Dine' word for water. This repetition could be an analogy for each poet in the anthology: "Those droplets become a torrential storm. Then they become a flood. Together they are a force of nature that cannot be stopped until it runs its natural course" (*Truth to Power* 336). To open the page of each collection is to open the floodgates. Let us open our eyes, ears, and mouths in rapture.

While words can be like baptisms (as John 1 states: in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God), cleansing and holy, so, too, can fire purify in restoration ecology; however, when let loose, fire is unquenchable in its hunger. Fire abounds in these two collections, both literally and figuratively, as a symbol of violence, destruction, rage, hope, and resurrection. Pamela Uschuck's poem "After the Election We Watch The Super Moon Rise over The Rincon Mountains" begins, "The mountains are burning and we cannot sleep." The light pierces the sight and consciousness of the poem's narrator, albeit not a heavenly light of salvation, but one more sinister: "burning out of control, flames higher than our dreams of peace, eating pine / trees, the hearts of deer, flames higher than the orange-faced despot's fiery rhetoric of fear" (*Truth to Power* 316). Uschuck's enjambment on the word "pine" creates a double meaning of both the coniferous evergreen going up in flames, as well as the fire swallowing yearning, and all hope, like an ouroboros devouring its own tail.

The fire's destruction also becomes a metaphor for Donald Trump, though many of the poets, including Uschuck, refuse to name 45, opting, instead, for Comedy Central *Broad City's* approach where creators Illana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson bleep Trump's name (as opposed to profanity) to avoid "sharing airtime [with Trump]" in Season 4. Poets like Melissa Studdard (executive producer of *VIDA: Voices & Views for VIDA: Women in the Literary Arts*) refer to Trump as "he" in her titular poem, describing him as an industrial farmer where "everyone eats sawdust / off the barn house floor / & some of us are dying / while others are convin- / ced that sawdust is gold" (*Truth to Power* 295). Studdard's deft touch renders Trump as a 21<sup>st</sup> century King Midas gone rural and rogue. Ann Fisher-Wirth's piece "Day After" describes Trump as a man "just elected who despises you. Who will only hurt you more" (*Truth to Power* 103). And in Beth Alvarado's narrative "Thanksgiving, 2016" Trump haunts like a specter when she writes, "Disembodied heads, like Trump's—male, blustery, bullying, blind—had been hanging over my landscape for decades. Limbaugh, Gingrich, Cheney, to name a few" (*Truth to Power* 18). The wounds from Trump's sexual assaults, his gas-lighting, his racist rhetoric, and his call for violence smarts like a burn. Peggy Shumaker ends her poem "Parenthood, Unplanned,"

“*Let women live. // Let women be*” (*Truth to Power* 285); the word “women,” in the context of Trump’s America, is easily interchangeable with anyone not straight, white, and cis male.

In Roger Bonair-Agard’s poem “Excerpt from the Elegba interviews / treatise /,” he writes in section two, “Someone is burning black churches. Someone is setting fire to blackness / in the night and watching it be ash / by morning” (*Hand in Hand* 28), and he ends his poem in the fifth section with the alliterative directive “These three things / Be alive / Be black / Burn. Build” (30). The burning of black churches could well describe Trump’s America, the Civil Rights Era, or the Jim Crow South. It is impossible to pinpoint when in America’s history such an act of racialized violence might occur because it has always been among us, within us, during these, as King wrote, “340 years [of waiting] for our constitutional and God given rights.” Bonair-Agard’s poem ends with a command, the alliteration leaving no room for breath, no room to suss out past from present, the blisteringly blunt last line suggestive of a phoenix rising, triumphant, no matter how hot its scorching heart.

While Bonair-Agard’s syntax does not allow us the room to wait amongst his words, Cortney Lamar Charleston’s “I Said ‘Give Me Liberty, Or Give Me Death’” (*Hand in Hand* 32) evokes the “nobodiness” Dr. King also described. The poem ends:

My body is always in mourning.                      I walk into the night  
and  
disappear.                      They’re out looking for me because  
I fit a description.                      Somehow, I spend my whole life in  
prison  
but was never even alive.                      I call a stillborn nation home.

The gaps between words and sentences in this conclusion intimate an erasure, the “disappearance” embodied by Lamar Charleston’s narrator who lives, not in any singular violent aftermath, but in a constant state of “mourning,” in a constant “prison.” The collapse between our past, present, and future smarts acutely, sharp as the unexpected enjambment leading us to the *self’s* erasure, not just the line.

Poet Patricia Smith addresses how people of color’s narratives become erased, specifically in police reports, in her searing “Excerpt from Saga of the Accidental Saint” (*Truth to Power* 289). The poem’s epigraph features

three identical reports for Victor White III, Jesus Huerta, Chavis Carter, all of which state: “shot himself while handcuffed in the back of a police cruiser.” Smith’s poem opens:

He reached back and found  
 his own hands with his own  
 hands, worked his bound  
 fingers to set his free fingers  
 loose, then used that shackled  
 hand to free the other shackled  
 hand, and the freed shackled  
 hand, still shackled, was still  
 bound to the other hand once  
 both were freed. Once free  
 in the shackles, the shackled  
 hands turned to the matter  
 of the gun, which couldn’t be  
 there because they’d searched  
 my baby twice and a gun is  
 a pretty big thing unless it isn’t

Smith’s relentless repetition seethes with the utter absurdity of the policemen’s original claims, as does her tongue twister “then used that shackled / hand to free the other shackled / hand.” The word “shackled,” repeated six times, becomes a punch to the proverbial gut. Over 500 years ago, Sir Thomas Wyatt claimed *for in a net I seek to hold the wind*—these policemen’s claims are just as full of holes. Smith’s poetic ethos evokes Honoree Fanonne Jeffers’s “Singing Counter” (about the lynching of Hayes and Mary Turner), with its bald proclamation “Yet here I am, refusing refusal” (*Hand in Hand* 63). Like a wick, this line lights Jeffers’s poem, dazzling in its defiance.

The men Smith memorializes in this poem and Jeffers’s honoring of the Turner’s recalls, again, the interchangeability of the past and the present in our current political climate. Teri Hairston’s “Invisible... but not today!” describes her reaction to the 2016 Presidential election: “I told myself that I had to believe it. This is, after all, America. And this feeling that I was feeling, of helplessness, was no new thing. I have felt it before. I have never had any real power” (*Truth to Power* 121). The lynching of the Turners in 1918 seems as real a possibility in 2008 or 2018 when men who are handcuffed are deemed responsible for their own murder. When Dasan Ahanu’s “Wilted Flowers” asks, “When the next young black tomorrow / is laid in a casket / What features will be claimed?” (*Hand in Hand* 11), the names sift through our mental landscape like petals: *Emmett Till. Addie Mae Collins.*

*Cynthia Wesley. Carole Robertson. Carol Denise McNair. Trayvon Martin. Tamir Rice.* The distance between the years, the deaths, is the span of a hangnail—rubbing, raw.

And the inability to distinguish between *then* and *now* recalls the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Aisha Sabatini Sloan intimates as much in her epistolary “Dear America,” which describes the 2016 election as “fear waiting for us in the living room. I realized at that we seemed to be moving beautifully through the real live stages of grief—depression, denial” (*Truth to Power* 286). And as Howie Faerstein writes in “Hung Jury,” “The dead unarmed man / on the ground even now. // You don’t need to visualize. This is the United States after all” (*Truth to Power* 100). In a poem whose title refers to a jury’s inability to reach a verdict in the murder of Walter Scott, acceptance and anger are like identical reflections in a Rorschach test—two sides of the same coin. This is an America where many of us have never been safe—and still aren’t. Ashley Harris’s poem “Savages” bristles against the binds of acceptance, keening toward pure ire when she states, “Underneath the terrain of your white privilege my roots are / splitting pavements / And pumping drums of war to my heart louder / Than your police sirens” (*Hand in Hand* 55).

While racial conflict, racial violence, and police brutality are at the fore of many of these narratives, each collection also traverses topics such as abortion rights, Standing Rock, immigration, Guantanamo, refugees, Flint, MI, environmental activism, rape, incest, and contaminated water. Keith Flynn’s poem “Look for Me in Liberia,” in tribute to singer Nina Simone, states, “Backlash / is the leather / on this breeze / says Stokely / squeezing me” (*Hand in Hand* 47), and sometimes these slender lines, these spitting rhymes, and these hurts that heave from one piece to the next wring us plumb dry, bereft of air, bereft of light. Yet, Luis Alberto Urrea’s “Hymns to the Broken: my manifesto” asks, “Do we write to escape? Do we write to afflict the guilty? Do we write to comfort the wounded and the betrayed? Or do we take the hardest step? Do we take a machete to that thicket of overgrown shame, hack our way to ourselves and take our hands and lead ourselves back to the light?” (*Truth to Power* 310). These are the very questions each collection answers; these are the questions that elicit the *responde* (reply): the dialogue that will “lead ourselves back to the light.” When Beyoncé rejects her pain (personal, political) in *Lemonade* and embraces her titular “Freedom,” she wills her tears to “burn into flames.” So, too, in these collections do our own words, our tears, roar to flood or to flame.

Listen: the lyrical reckoning is upon us. Strike your own match to magnify the wildfire of these words, bare yourself vertical before their burnishing blaze.

**Anthem**

*Oh say what you have seen.*

Did we amuse the gods with our murmurings,  
our turnings of the earth?

An intensive revolution—horticulture, gender  
roles, binary data of seeds.

//

In the penumbra of twilight, meteors flash—  
evidence of impacts in the dew-strewn fields.  
The evening tests our small symbols.

//

We observe immense migrations, constellations  
over urban battlements. We rename  
the wolf Adze, the waterfall Bacteria.

//

Oh say. Oh say.  
Open your mouth saying  
it was all worth something—  
the flashing past: Göbekli Tepe,  
ochre handprints, red cave deer.  
The psychotropics of Australia,  
the warm salt beer of China.  
The shaman buried in her headdress.  
The astronomer kneading his eyes.

*We sleep star-spangled. We rise  
in compliance with the light.*

//

From dusk we come, by dusk we are redacted,  
and when death breathes its condensation

on the backs of our necks, when tenderness  
constricts the heart, when darkening

eyes cannot discern the fortified  
from the unguarded—

who can say, oh who can say  
what we, finally, we hailed.

**Frida Kahlo — El Venado Herido, Oil on Masonite, 1946**

Crowned with antlers, no angel

dares to touch you. Our Lady of Stillbirths,

Mother of Animal Sorrows,

what did you think when you saw the arrows

robed in wind, whistling

towards you? *A mi, las alas me sobran.*

A kingdom

tucked in your brush hand,

you donned a thorn branch necklace,

a dead hummingbird

hanging like an emerald pendant, loose beads

of blood stuttering down your chest.

Holy wobbler,

on the Sabbath the lines inside your hands

were spackled with green paint,

tarnished

by the scent of tobacco & marijuana.

The world pushed

itself into you, your bus crashed, the skin

of your abdomen opening over a handrail,

ribs split

like wishbones, your spine

a string of cracked pearls.

In the name of the Father, no.

In the name of Ink, Blood, & Odor

you walk the aisle of oaks in a tick-riddled pelt.

Ave Maria, heiress to plaster casts

& crutches. Nuestra Señora de Las Tristesas,  
condemned to the gurney & needle,  
you will explain the voices away  
in heavy rain,  
counting off like thunder  
while morphine & storm water  
melt the windows.

In self-portraits, flanked by dragon flies

& howler monkeys, your eyes glint like the tips of knives. Hair  
a garland of black snakes braiding  
around the flowers on top of your head.

Apple of Sodom, *Tripas de Judas*.

*A mi, las alas me sobran.*

No smile. Just a cigarette slanting from your fingers  
tipped with emerald rings, lipstick  
dragged across the ridges of your lips,

a pigeon's blood tint.

Even children know our shadows  
are always two steps ahead. Still you would leap  
from the hospital bed & trip  
over your phantom leg. A disassembly or rekindling?

The worms delivered their verdict

by morning.

**The Body of Her Work***for SW*

She's obsessed with bodies,  
her body, her partner's body,  
anybody, a body of work about  
bodies, colliding, changing,  
longing to mingle with other  
bodies, to swim a sea of other  
bodies, become other bodies,  
to find somebody to prove  
nobody can deny a body for  
what it is; for what it wants  
to be, nobody owns the patent,  
the recipe for right body versus  
wrong body, for him versus her,  
nobody is immune  
to loneliness rooted  
in solemn corners of every  
body, yours, mine, theirs, hers,  
foreign as it is, unwelcome  
as it is, unacceptable as it is,  
it is undeniably her body, an anti-  
body in a sea of somebodies,  
wholly connected and detached  
from a greater body by  
a prankster god who gifted her  
this life, this body to which she clings  
relentlessly unrepentant, still  
wishing she could make him  
take it back.

**I AM THE ONLY ONE I KNOW WHO CAN  
COOK THEM, AND MY GRANDPA DID,  
WAS IN FACT KNOWN FOR SEVERAL COUNTIES ROUND  
FOR HIS WAY WITH A POT, SO**

After hearing the great poet read  
about chitlins I cried in my car for an hour without  
succor. I had said, *I 'get' your poem and not many of us will  
bite into chitlins anymore and you and I are covering similar  
material in our poems...* but the poet heard a 'local,' and  
was busy signing books while I was busy being embarrassed.  
I was no yokel, but there I was with my sun-mottled face,  
and my memories of ham-hocked collards and the cloy  
of cornbread and yams like a cologne coming off my skin,  
betraying my background of jukes and long-horns, head-wraps,  
Christmas coon, the rusting hoes and spades. But  
I'm the kind of goat that means to get up the god-  
damned mountain no matter what howls or rips into me  
so years later when the great poet, having heard of me,  
whispered, *I'm gonna take you to my secret B-B-Q joint,*  
I knew I was not off the mark, that we held in common  
a kind of heat: brine from the mason jar, Hot Jim, whatever  
slides easily from the bone. And anyone Texas-born like myself  
knows the secret joint is the for real god-almighty sauce  
where there's mud on the floor and the pork smells like the lover  
you wish you had, (or do). Where there's a fan overhead and  
it ain't coolin nothin down, and you know your uncle would love the place  
so he don't need to know. Neither does your daddy.  
Where as you spoon up peppers, your tongue remembers itself  
and the vernacular you let go, and climbs your leg like a good bitch  
lost to a hound, or down your spine like a red ant under the collar,  
and then you come back to yourself, know yourself now  
for the earthy motherfucker you are, *ain't that right though?*  
You'll leave this place stained  
and smoked and grateful you stayed so long where nobody blinks  
when a bit of brisket is spit accidentally through the gap of a smile,  
where no one is embarrassed by what they must eat, or love to.

**CANZONE IN BLUE THEN BLUER**

There wasn't music as much as there was  
terror so the music became as much a  
part of the terror as the terror it-  
self the swell of the arpeggio building  
and breaking, building and breaking, upon the  
shores of you. Your shores washed slowly away but  
not slowly enough, you feel it, every grain  
of sand a note going under, bluing the  
body, granular and wet. This has happened  
before. You were not special. You belonged to  
no group of any more particular concern  
than another. But the music has become  
you. The hurt coming out, from your open mouth, could  
open a grave. Let every done-wrong hain't throw  
its head back and groan. Not done-wrong as in some-  
body loved left, somebody is always left,  
but someone who deserved to live as much as  
anyone else who died by another's hands  
or neglect or the indifference of someone  
who cared less or just not about you. And you sang  
like you cried until the music of leaving,  
of long-gone became you. Does it matter how  
many strings? It only takes one to make this  
music. But let's say it was the sound of  
a choir that accompanied the run of  
blood down a leg. Let's say a violin sped  
its notes down the side of a neck, a tirade  
of pricks. Or a high C from a voice thrown sharp  
as the pieces of skull a bullet through the  
head would leave. Or the river, the river rush-  
ing cold and rock-bottomed, with its own furious  
song carries you with it, sings you right over  
the falls. That is when terror is not blue but bluer,  
blue, as capillaries bursting from an eye,  
blue as the vein under this razor, blue as  
the skin beat so far it breaks into song, a  
song like this. I've sung this so many times dear  
my voice has almost given way, and I'm so scared.

Phebe Davidson

## Balls and Strikes and Tensile Strength

“Poetry can do a lot of things to people.”

—Billy Collins

“The game’s afoot...”

—William Shakespeare

Peeler, Tim: *Wild in the Strike Zone: Baseball Poems* (2016: Rank Stranger Press, 129 pages)

Owens, Scott: *Down to Sleep* (2016: Main Street Rag Publishing Co., 91 pages)

I’m convinced. Poetry can do any number of things to people: poets and readers alike. This is, in some measure, because language is capable of great versatility and tensile strength. One reader may find an allegory where another finds a factual account. Different writers may rise to the challenge of context and metaphor, the joy of shifting meanings, or even the simple force of words themselves. Poets Tim Peeler, in *Wild in the Strike Zone: Baseball Poems*, and Scott Owens in *Down to Sleep* are cases in point.

*Wild in the Strike Zone* embraces time past, passing, and present through baseball, finding in the game context and metaphor for life itself. The book’s five sections are identified as CHAPTERS (in all caps) in the table of contents. Even the poems are titled in capital letters. The typographical effect lies somewhere between a shout and a headline font—an intriguing authorial choice given the game at hand.

CHAPTER I opens with “WILD IN THE STRIKE ZONE, 1965.” The voice of the poem is conversational, even reminiscent, introducing a 39 year old father who is head of a two-salary family (“a preacher and teacher”), who drives a Nash

With a bat bag in the trunk or a sermon  
With the first line in each paragraph  
Typed in red CAPITALS on an ancient Royal  
Tucked in his jacket pocket like a passport  
That he believed could win this game.  
 (“WILD IN THE STRIKE ZONE, 1965”)

The game is on. Poems will draw connections between baseball and jazz “[c]ousins on this continent / risen in prisons and fields” (“BASEBALL AND JAZZ”) and exhort a left-handed pitcher to “...Kick your leg high into / A perfect peaceful sky and feel / The history ride right through you” (“Shadowfax). Reader, in effect, becomes one with the poet, entering the

poems as he reads:

...nine years old  
 Listening to Dad's old radio  
 And Koufax is pitching,  
 Lanky quiet Sandy;  
 His fastball has  
 Eaten the edge off  
 The plate all evening.  
 ("DODGERS-BRAVES, 66")

Thus the book does its work. The reader, once caught in the game, cannot quite leave it alone. Titles wear insight with ease. From "THE DYNAMIC OF THE FOLDED CARDS IN THE SEVENTH INNING—" to "EIGHT HUNDRED LIVING PIRATES" the reader stays in the game, happy to imagine

eight-hundred living swash bucklers,  
 Manny and Matty, Willie and Big Bob,  
 Ken and Danny and Magical Maz—  
 ("EIGHT HUNDRED LIVING PIRATES")

"CHAPTER 2, "OUTLAWS" and "CHAPTER 3—REBELS" introduce a range of outliers—players a reader might otherwise not know. "THE BALLAD OF ALABAMA PITTS" (subtitled "gospel of no forgiveness"), introduces Edwin 'Alabama' Pitts, ex-Navy man and ex-con turned ball-player who played the game with mixed success, and died in a tavern of a knife wound at the age of thirty-one. CHAPTER 3 revives North Carolina's Hickory Rebels, a minor league team based in Hickory, North Carolina that existed off and on from 1938 through 1960—a team where "[t]he contracts always looked the same" ("REBELS 2") and "negroes sat the trees beyond left field / and those brave enough stood the fence / behind the right field bleachers." These are same rebels, in fact, that signed Alabama Pitts in 1940, by which time

He was just a mill hand  
 Playing mill ball  
 One step closer to the stabbing  
 That always awaited.  
 ("THE BALLAD OF ALABAMA PITTS")

The game may be fraught with peril, but its grace and its power persevere.

"CHAPTER 4—EXTRA INNINGS" shows us, in part, how this is pos-

sible. A team of old men who are years past play have climbed a “small mountain” to view their “small world.” They sit,

“For reasons they could not explain / in the team batting order” (HICKORY POEMS 1).

When the book, inevitably, comes to a close, it offers a heartfelt plea “Let it be like the old days: / a close call at the plate...” (“THE WAY IT ALL ENDS”).

\* \* \*

Scott Owens, in *Down to Sleep*, engages his own game on rather different terms. The book’s title echoes a childhood prayer (“Now I lay me down to sleep...”) that at first seems freighted with comfort and drowsy warmth. The single phrase “down to sleep,” however, also connotes the odd, indeterminate state of sinking into dream or nightmare, and this is where Owens begins.

*Down to Sleep*’s first section, “The Contumacy of Childhood,” begins in first person. The setting is indeterminate leaning to agrarian south. The voice may be that of a child, or and adult reliving a past in which

People shoot themselves on porches,  
hang themselves in barns.  
The ground is red.  
 (“Here Where I Am”)

This “red ground” may be blood-soaked earth or simple red clay. Present melds with past. There is great fluidity here as reader, by reading, becomes part of what is read: as in “me falling through the cracks / in my dreams” (“You In the Tomb of My Eyes” ), or the remembrance of a brother “who woke the house screaming” (How Some Things Bleed Through”). In effect, text becomes “memory clanging / like something loose inside you” (How Flowers Became Faces, Flowers Turned to Faces”).

The second section, “Deconstructing the Red Barn” begins:

Iconic red barn,  
iconic blue sky,  
winter trees full of air,  
distant mist rising.  
 (“Deconstructing the Red Barn),”

The image, reminiscent of Currier and Ives, is juxtaposed with a Derridean strategy designed to move beyond and even counter to the effect of a text,

to take it apart in order to unearth something counter or even subversive of apparent meaning. The question of what the text *is* (art or artifact) becomes key. The book's third section, "Holding His head in his Hands" furthers a sense of indeterminacy. Here, the opening tells us someone "has the blood of animals on his palette"—and though spelling clearly indicates an artist's tool, the impulse to hear "palate" (used to denote the sense of taste) is almost irresistible. The following stanza offers another pun: "cast" may designate a work of art or a medical appliance.

Each day he awakens with a bed  
full of plaster. He wonders if one day  
he'll find his leg turned into a cast.  
(“Holding His Head in His Hands”)

It is, in some sense, a relief when Owens reveals the “he” of the poem as artist:

...waiting  
For each pregnant sound to grow fat with ideas,  
for each word to wing its way to whatever  
ear would hear it, for every line he makes  
to find the life of an eye that watches.  
(“Holding His Head in His Hands”)

The book's final section, "In Front of Ashes," closes with the book's title poem. The first lines appear (or sound) almost plaintive:

I've heard what they call me,  
skulker, reaper, nightcaller.  
(“Down to Sleep”)

and ends, some 22 lines later:

I could sleep anywhere.  
The slightest open door  
is all it would take.  
Invite me in. I have lived  
in your dreams since childhood.  
(“Down to Sleep”)

That both Peeler and Owens have produced books so seemingly disparate in subject and so hauntingly close in effect owes much, of course, to their grounding in memories and in dreams, two things which—in some sense—become all we have, that powerful blend of image and sound. Poetry itself.

Doug Ramspeck

## Music of the Orchard

As a boy I would see them sometimes  
carrying blankets through the orchard,  
  
walking through our yard toward the river,  
and I would imagine that the dusk light  
  
was a hand touching the Braille  
of the treetops, the living grass.  
  
And I was old enough to imagine  
that the way bees swarmed around  
  
fallen globes of fruit was the way  
the lovers joined their bodies  
  
along the bank. My father told me  
once that mud was the only prayer  
  
that mattered, that our lives  
were made of it, and the lovers,  
  
I imagined, dreamed that the black  
hair of the sky was a kind of ladder,  
  
that the moonlight was a ladder,  
too, and the dirt beneath  
  
their moving bodies was a prophet.  
Come winter, I knew, I would hear  
  
the music of the wind whipping across  
the snow amid the trees, wailing  
  
through window jambs, but in summer  
I watched the distant birds sewing  
  
the needles of their wings into  
the clouds, studied the wild flowers

growing along the river where the lovers  
lay down in darkness, the words

they whispered close against an ear  
like the sounds of water over stone.

## **Ars Poetica**

After a long morning of shoveling snow and ice to begin  
His weekly routine of trudging hot coals to the office,  
Where he works as an intern on the top of a radio tower,  
Licking stamps and praying he'll be next in line to be fired  
By a fortunate stroke of lightning, the great emperor returned  
Home to the storage unit belonging to the last body he stole  
For purposes that remain vague at best, even to him, as he shrugs  
Off the weight of his last crown and uniform to put on a head  
More fitting for an evening set around a lonely table of cards,  
Which ends each night with the same game of Russian Roulette.

## **The Assassin**

Returning to my favorite fairy tale  
About the chicken that flies

Out of a children's pop-up book  
After stirring all night to finally

Turn around and face the mirror  
In which his own head has been

Sewn back on, only slightly cocked  
To one side and whistling in the dark—

Like one of those assassins who after years  
Slips out of your nightmare to finish the job

Joel Fry

## Sorrow

My sorrow is the slump of my pantomiming  
body, shadows richly veined, the kind I inhabit  
when I crash my car against a tree, or lose  
the lottery for the tenth time. I am stupid,  
like my son, whom I meant to father, as he  
wraps his mind around an ant. I live up front,  
in the space of suspicion, waiting to eradicate  
half my memory. No one else knows how I live.  
False notions, full of plots, write themselves  
into the record of my life.

Enemies scale the walls of my house  
and walk on the roof at night, dropping  
acorns at their feet, intercepting my thoughts  
when I try to calculate my lifespan.  
No one else touches me like them.  
The radio works my days and nights  
backwards through a song. I ask nothing  
of anyone anymore, but to feel smug  
and bewildered in my town, when I cannot  
become myself any other way.

**ghost love**

coming from where we haven't  
arrived    tears  
freeze on the road

we've been brothers & sisters  
lovers  
squirrels & stars

the domain of living    things  
to be & things to die:

the voice of the drowned man  
surfaces us—

Stella Vinitchi Radulescu

**remembrance**

this is time    ravaging  
hot inescapable clock  
steaming the earth  
the hour washed away by delicate  
hands the foam  
of our lives  
blended  
with your stillness  
the blueness of the world  
hills darkening on your tongue  
: silence is creeping up    a huge  
empty mouth  
I remember being    who knows—  
I should dump you into this  
nothingness

## Gwendolyn Brooks: Blues Deluxe

The magnificent Gwendolyn Brooks was born on June 7, 1917, and now that we have lived a century with her poetry, it is inconceivable to imagine American literature without her. Tough and tender at once, Brooks' characters do not shrink from violence, or from a challenge; they give as good as they get. Willie Dixon once wrote that the blues ain't nothing but a good man feeling bad. In the world of Gwendolyn Brooks, this theory often gets dumped on its head. For Brooks, the blues ain't nothing but a bad woman feeling good. This is from her poem, "a song in the front yard:"

I've stayed in the front yard all my life.  
 I want a peek at the back  
 where it's rough and untended  
 and hungry weed grows.  
 A girl gets sick of a rose<sup>i</sup>

Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas, but moved to Chicago when she was six weeks old, and learned to mimic the cool vernacular patterns and colloquialisms in the speech being spit on the street, like this last stanza from the poem quoted above:

But I say it's fine. Honest I do  
 And I'd like to be a bad woman, too,  
 And wear the brave stockings of night-black lace  
 And strut down the streets with paint on my face.

Though Brooks is sympathetic with the plight of her people, and knows their needs explicitly, she always casts her vote for gumption, not compromise, and endorses all that is "luminously discreet" ("The Sermon on the Warpland"<sup>ii</sup>). As a consequence, Brooks's work represents her enormous witness, explaining her city, and describing her community, in a dialect that can unfold into an elaborate diction, a mastery of her line that can suddenly explode into a refrain, or sharp rhythmic observation. Brooks brought black Chicago into full focus, for an American literary community that had devolved into critical theory and increasingly formal constraints. In her poem, "kitchenette building," Brooks gave her blues a bite and a smell, positing that she would like to have "a dream send up through onion fumes. / Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes / And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall..."<sup>iii</sup>

In an interview in 1994 with B. Denise Hawkins, Brooks talked about what Chicago meant to her development as an artist. "Living in the city, I wrote

differently... I am an organic Chicagoan. Living there has given me a multiplicity of characters to aspire for. I hope to live there the rest of my days. That's my headquarters."<sup>iv</sup> Always ambitious, even as a child, she was encouraged by the strong presence of her mother, a schoolteacher and classically trained pianist. "You are going to be the lady Paul Laurence Dunbar,"<sup>v</sup> her mother said, and little Gwendolyn believed her, taking her strong example as a template for her steely and independent female characters, a liberated feminine voice long before Confessional poets like Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop, and Anne Sexton became all the rage in the late 60s. Gwendolyn Brooks had already won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for her collection, *Annie Allen*, the first black author of any gender to do so, and had staked out her territory, preferring the wild girls to the safe ones, and especially liked the ones who jumped in with both feet:

Maud went to college.  
Sadie stayed at home.  
Sadie scraped life  
With a fine-toothed comb.

She didn't leave a tangle in.  
Her comb found every strand.  
Sadie was one of the livingest chits  
In all the land.

from "Sadie and Maud" (Stanzas one and two)<sup>vi</sup>

Maud eventually became "a thin brown mouse. / She is living all alone / In this old house." ("Sadie and Maud")<sup>vii</sup>. Brooks knew early on that she would work, earn her own money, and take charge of her own life, and many of the early models for free and fiercely independent black women were the classic blues singers from the 1920s and 30s.

In the first two or three decades of the twentieth century, the prized possession in most homes was the wind-up Victrola, playing a vast array of music, emanating through the needle and out of the horn from the early record's deep wax grooves. And every time the machine wound down, the listener had to wind it back up, using a crank on the side, singing back the music they had just listened to as they turned the crank. By 1920, Americans were buying 25 million records a year, and the most popular recordings were ragtime and jazz. But the music that jazz was based on, the blues, began to emerge in popularity during the 1920s. The first blues recording, "Crazy Blues," was released by Mamie Smith, to wide acclaim. A trio of women followed, each with their own distinctive charm: Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, and the sly and slinky Ma Rainey. Bessie Smith combined gospel chops with

a weary blues tone and a vivacious vibrato to become one of the biggest recording stars of the decade, influencing a whole generation of singers, most notably Billie Holiday.

Robert Hayden paid tribute to the trials of the blues queens in his “Homage to the Empress of the Blues,” and Sterling Brown was moved by her predecessor in his poem, “Ma Rainey,” which was the most popular and largely successful articulation of his own lyrical aesthetic. And though it may be impossible to state with certainty just how profound the influence was on all of the poets and songwriters coming of age in the Depression Era, little Gwendolyn was definitely paying attention. This is from her poem, “Queen of the Blues”:

Men don't tip their hats to me  
They pinch my arms  
And they slap my thighs,

But when has a man / tipped his hat to me?  
Queen of the Blues  
Queen of the Blues Strictly, strictly  
The queen of the blues<sup>viii</sup>

That refrain could be taken straight from the songbag of the previous Queen, perfected in the full-throated moan of the great Bessie Smith: “I got the St. Louis blues, / just as blue as I can be / He's got a heart like a rock cast in the sea.”<sup>ix</sup>

Classic blues is called “classic” because it was the music that seemed to contain all the diverse and conflicting elements of the black musical experience, from slave songs and ragtime, plus the smoother emotional appeal of “the performance” itself. It was the first black music that appeared in a formal context as entertainment, though it still contained the harsh, uncompromising reality of the earlier blues forms. It was, in effect, the perfect balance between the two worlds, and all of the great classic blues singers were precocious females. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and the others became professionals at early ages; Ma Rainey started when she was fourteen, Bessie Smith before she was twenty. Though the majority of all the formal blues in the 1920s and 30s were sung from the point of view of proud and confident women, they were forced to mature in a hurry.

Brooks published her first poem in a children's magazine, *American Childhood*, when she was 13 years old, precocious by any standard, but seemingly in line with the great female blues singers I've mentioned above, who also began to create in their teens. By the time she was sixteen, Brooks had

compiled a portfolio of around 75 published poems and had her work critiqued by poet and novelist James Weldon Johnson. At seventeen, she started submitting her work to “Lights and Shadows,” the poetry column of the *Chicago Defender*, an African-American newspaper. Her poems, many published while she attended Wilson Junior College, ranged in style from traditional ballads and sonnets to poems using blues rhythms in an irregular free verse. “I lived in a small second-floor apartment at the corner,” Brooks said, “and I could look first on one side and then the other. There was my material.”<sup>x</sup>

In her poem, “the ballad of chocolate Mabbie,” from *A Street in Bronzeville*, Brooks begins to form her ideas about black female identity and its requisite beauty, which seems to contain great promise, but dwindles due to continual rejection and injustice. Initially, seven-year-old Mabbie “cut from a chocolate bar / ...thought life was Heaven.”<sup>xi</sup> Then the poem begins to push against the child, opening her to an immediate rival. Mabbie waits “without the grammar school gates”<sup>xii</sup> for a little boy on whom she has a crush, but she quickly gets her first rejection, experiencing the hurt that Willie Boone inflicts because of his preference for a “lemon-hued lynx / With sand-waves loving her brow.”<sup>xiii</sup> Mabbie blames herself for the rejection as Brooks ramps up the poem’s tension through the incremental repetition of specific lines. In the six-stanza poem, stanzas 1 and 3 are identical; then stanza 6 turns ominous, changing the words slightly with each recurrence until “It was Mabbie alone...”<sup>xiv</sup> sharply accentuating the ultimate isolation that Mabbie feels as an alien presence, hidden in her blackness, or perhaps more importantly, she is aware for the first time that the color of her skin made her different.

In her autobiography, *Report from Part One* (1972), Brooks wrote: “I—who have ‘gone the gamut’ from an almost angry rejection of my dark skin by some of my brainwashed brothers and sisters to a surprised queenhood in the new Black sun—am qualified to enter at least the kindergarten of new consciousness now. New consciousness and trudge-toward-progress. I have hopes for myself... I know now that I am essentially an essential African, in occupancy here because of an indeed ‘peculiar’ institution... I know that Black fellow-feeling must be the Black man’s encyclopedic Primer. I know that the Black-and-white integration concept, which in the mind of some beaming early saint was a dainty spinning dream, has wound down to farce... I know that the Black emphasis must be not *against white* but *FOR Black*...”<sup>xv</sup>

Mamie Smith’s initial recording of “Crazy Blues” on February 14, 1920, was not expected to be a success, but from the outset it sold 8,000 copies a week for almost three years. Classic blues became big business and the lyr-

ics were saturated with sex, like Ida Cox singing “When your man comes home evil, tells you you are getting old, / that’s a true sign he’s got someone else baking his jelly roll.”<sup>xvi</sup> Or Sippie Wallace telling the girls “don’t advertise your man.”<sup>xvii</sup> Hoodoo, too, is a big part of the blues. Ma Rainey’s “Black Dust Blues,” for instance, tells about a woman who is angry because Ma took her man. “Lord, I was out one morning, found black dust all ‘round my door,”<sup>xviii</sup> the song begins, but the speaker starts to get thin, and develops trouble with her feet: “Black dust in my window, black dust on my porch mat... / Black dust’s got me walking on all fours like a cat.”<sup>xix</sup> The subject here is “throwin’ down” on someone; in African magic, the feet are considered to be a specifically vulnerable entry point for evil. Magical powder sprinkled in socks or shoes might bind the evil spell; in love spells, socks might be tied together.

One of the primary rules of voodoo is to never drink from an opened container that you did not witness being poured. Robert Johnson had broken this rule to his great detriment. Local legend held that a woman who wanted to gain love and control a man by exciting his passion beyond all reason, might put menstrual blood in his drink. An enemy might put any manner of potion inside; a charm could make snake eggs hatch in his belly, a powder from a witch could cause madness, a root extract could make a man’s legs swell up and his hands shake.

When Gwendolyn Brooks graduated from Wilson Junior College, she worked for a quack “spiritual adviser,” her job being to write hundreds of letters to prospective patients. Her office was in the Mecca Building on South State Street, where some of Chicago’s poorest families lived. When she refused to take on the duties of “Assistant Pastor,” she was fired from her job. Her book, *In the Mecca*, draws much of its material, as well as its title, from this period. It is a long poem about a mother’s search for her lost child in a Chicago tenement building, and was nominated for the National Book Award. The poem traces her steps through the long halls, revealing her neighbors to be indifferent or insulated by their own personal obsessions. The mother finds her the body of her little girl, who “never learned that black is not beloved,”<sup>xx</sup> who “was royalty when poised, / sly, at the A and P’s fly-open door,”<sup>xxi</sup> under a Jamaican resident’s cot, murdered. The murderer, Edward, is eventually captured, but no joy comes from this, and there are also poems for Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and for the famous Chicago gang, “The Blackstone Rangers” whom Brooks mentored in a series of workshops for years. Brooks describes them as “Black, raw, ready...” and “Sores in the city.”<sup>xxii</sup> “Their country is a Nation on no map,”<sup>xxiii</sup> she writes.

Gang girls are sweet exotics.

Mary Ann  
 uses the nutrients of her Orient,  
 but sometimes sighs for Cities of blue and jewel  
 beyond her Ranger rim of Cottage Grove.  
 (Bowery Boys, Disciples, Whip-Birds will  
 dissolve no margins, stop no savory sanctities.)

Mary is  
 a rose in a whiskey glass.

—from “The Blackstone Rangers” III. Gang Girls *A Rangerette*  
 (first nine lines)<sup>xxiv</sup>

In 1923, Bessie Smith made her first recording with the Columbia Gramophone Company. She hollered her vocals into a funnel, and sheer sonic vibrations were converted into grooves on soft black wax. The record was “Down Hearted Blues,” and would be an immediate smash, selling 800,000 copies in six months, and she was instantly known as the “Empress of the Blues.” She would go on to make 200 more records for Columbia and, when she died, she had been paid a total of 28,575 dollars. She was nearly six feet tall, weighed over two hundred pounds, and walked around with her money stuffed in her clothes. But Bessie was not to be trifled with. One man tried to rob her, stabbed her in the stomach, but she chased him down and tackled him, holding him until help arrived, and only then she collapsed. Once, to convince her husband she’d been hit by a car (and not on a two-day tryst with another man) she threw herself down two flights of stairs. The chorus girl who slept with her husband? The dancer exited the train in the middle of nowhere, at full speed, with Bessie’s foot firmly planted on her behind. Bessie met her demise on the mythic Highway 61 near Clarksdale, Mississippi, not far from the devil’s crossroads, after leaving a concert in Chicago. The car her husband was driving plowed into a parked truck in the dark beside the road. Bessie’s arm came out of its socket at the shoulder. A white doctor drove by and stopped, but instead called for an ambulance, supposedly to keep from bloodying his white car.

As much as Brooks decries the injustices done by men to her female heroines, and they are many, Brooks herself was a beneficiary of much admiration and support from male mentors for her entire career. There is a clear influence from fellow Chicago poet, Carl Sandburg, whom Brooks followed as Illinois poet laureate, and in 1941, Brooks was taking part in a particularly influential poetry workshop organized by Inez Cunningham Stark, an affluent white woman with a strong literary background, who

offered writing workshops to African-Americans on Chicago's South Side. It was here Brooks gained momentum in finding her voice and a deeper knowledge of the techniques of her predecessors. Already famous, Langston Hughes stopped by the workshop one day and heard Brooks read "The Ballad of Pearl May Lee." He would later befriend her and her husband, Henry Blakely, and they frequently threw parties at their apartment at 623 E. 63rd Street. It was in the kitchenette of that apartment that Brooks hosted a party for Hughes, who became a mentor to her.

Other men also championed the young Brooks, including Paul Engle and the novelist James Weldon Johnson. Brooks's first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), was published with Harper and Row after a strong show of support from Richard Wright, who wrote to the editors about her, saying that "There is no self-pity here, not a striving for effects. She takes hold of reality as it is and renders it faithfully...She easily catches the pathos of petty destinies; the whimper of the wounded; the tiny accidents that plague the lives of the desperately poor, and the problem of color prejudice among Negroes."<sup>xxv</sup>

If Mary came would Mary  
 Forgive, as Mothers may,  
 And sad and second Saviour  
 Furnish us today?

She would not shake her head and leave  
 This military air,  
 But ratify a modern hay,  
 And put her Baby there,

Mary would not punish men—  
 If Mary came again.

—Gwendolyn Brooks  
 "A Penitent Considers Another Coming of Mary"<sup>xxvi</sup>

Though the blues is often about irretrievable loss, loss that brings with it all the energy we commonly take for granted, it is still a presence, Richard Ellison says, "which mocks the despair stated explicitly in the lyric, and it expresses the great human joke directed against the universe, that joke which is the secret of all folklore and myth: though we be dismembered daily we shall always rise up again."<sup>xxvii</sup> Langston Hughes knew the hot blue jet of deprivation and it informed all his poetry with a brooding sense of solitary loneliness, the singular beauty of corrosive sadness. He was just

twenty-four years old when his first book, *The Weary Blues*, was published in 1926.

I, too, sing America  
I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well  
And grow strong.

—Langston Hughes (first stanza from “I, Too, Sing America”)<sup>xxviii</sup>

What Hughes said of the blues is often true of his own work, that “the mood of the blues is almost always despondency, but when they are sung people laugh.”<sup>xxix</sup> He published more than three dozen books during his life, starting out with poetry and then expanding into novels, short stories and plays. He also wrote liner notes for albums by Harry Belafonte and Nina Simone, who recorded a version of his poem, “Backlash Blues.” The blues is the closest music ever comes to imitating the human voice in all its complexity and tone, which is why the blues is the Rosetta Stone for the genres that have followed it, or blended into it, to form the consilience of all popular music to follow, folk, gospel, jazz, or rock. “If I can sing it, then I know it’s a song,” says Bob Dylan; “if I can’t, then I call it a poem.”<sup>xxx</sup>

“What is poetry?” Hughes was asked near his death. He answered, “It is the human soul entire, squeezed like a lemon or a lime, drop by drop, into atomic words.”<sup>xxxi</sup> He wanted no definition of the poet that divorced his art from the immediacy of life, and his influence on a maturing and ambitious Gwendolyn Brooks cannot be underestimated. “A poet is a human being,” he declared. “Each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

And far into the night he crooned that tune.  
The stars went out and so did the moon.  
The singer stopped playing and went to bed  
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.  
He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead.

—lines 31-35 from “The Weary Blues”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Since the time of Hughes and Brooks, the blues poem has become a viable form, often in the musical tradition of the blues in which a statement is

made in the first line, some slight variation offered in the second line, and a type of alternative, perhaps ironic, declared in the next or third line. Brooks described her own creative process as having evolved in a similar fashion, in this interview from *Artful Dodge*, where she speaks of forging “three stages of creativity. One, I call my ‘express myself’ stage, because I was writing about anything and everything in my environment just because I wanted to express myself—flailing about. And second, my ‘integration flavoring’ stage when I wrote a lot of poems which I hoped would bring black people and white people and all people together, and they didn’t seem to be doing that (laughter) in great numbers at any rate, and a third stage governed by that little credo that some of the Black poets had in the late sixties, ‘Black poetry is poetry written by blacks, about blacks, and to black,’ and then, I’m trying very seriously now to create for myself, develop for myself a kind of poem that will be immediately accessible and interesting, immediately interesting, to all manner of blacks, not just college students though they’re included too. That kind of poem will feature song, will be *songlike*, and yet still properly called poetry.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

From this song-like intention, Brooks has written some of the most powerful small poems in the language, such as the now-famous “We Real Cool”:

We real cool. We  
Left school. We

Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We  
Die soon.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Notice echoes from the Hughes poem above, but Brooks is more terse, and muscular, with a bunched line that allows the word “We” to reverberate at the end of every line break but the last, allowing the release of the line’s tension to resonate in the air. Rilke instructed the poet to start a poem in action already taking place, and leave a final abiding conceit to reverberate. In the ninth of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, he instructs us not to tell the gods about glory, or even the reflected glories of their presence, but to talk about the creatures and faces we know, the heroic accumulation of things and days. “We Real Cool” is bluesy (it almost swings), but it does not kowtow to the reader. Brooks is almost always direct, and although her poetic voice is objective, there is a strong sense that she—as an observer—is never far

from her action. Not to dwell overlong on the ethos or impact of the very different constructions invited by “We,” I add Brooks’s own commentary on the poem, which is delivered as stage directions for her public readings: “First of all, let me tell you how that’s [‘We Real Cool’] supposed to be said, because there’s a reason why I set it out as I did. These are people who are essentially saying, ‘Kilroy is here. *We are.*’ But they’re a little uncertain of the strength of their identity. The ‘We’—you’re supposed to stop after the ‘we’ and think about *validity*; of course, there’s no way for you to tell whether it should be said softly or not, I suppose, but I say it rather softly because I want to represent their basic uncertainty.”<sup>xxxvi</sup>

On one level, of course, Brooks is a protest poet; yet her protest evolves through suggestion rather than through a bludgeon. She sets forth the facts without embellishment or interpretation, but the simplicity of the facts makes it impossible for readers to come away unconvinced—despite whatever discomfort they may feel—whether she is writing about suburban ladies who go into the ghetto to give occasional aid or a black mother who has had an abortion. Whether it be Annie Allen trying on a hat in a milliner’s shop, or DeWitt Williams “on his way to Lincoln Cemetery,”<sup>xxxvii</sup> or Satin-Legs Smith trying to decide what outlandish outfit to wear on Sundays; Brooks’s exacting eye always retrieves the intimate details that make her characters reveal themselves. “The blues are the three L’s,” says B. B. King, “and that would be living, loving, and hopefully, laughing—in other words, the regular old E formation on the guitar with the regular three changes. The blues is like a tonic. There’s a blues for anything that bothers you.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Poetry changes by touching other poetry. In this manner, the composition of poetry is like the blues tradition. A constant borrowing takes place where ideas and lyrics overlap, and are passed down or shared from artist to artist, or one generation to the next, in seemingly different contexts. A blues song has life only as long as the musician is playing it, but it changes the player. Words are music; the poem and its sound have always walked together, or one inside the other, for the poet wears his music like a skin. The poem is the force the music exerts. Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry is made from music, but is not the same thing. Her poetry stops time, freezes historic instances on the page, and blues music depends upon the constant movement of a beat. Also, poetry and music are mongrels; when properly fed they gather things to them and are comprised of the things they gather. A poem has “a fictive covering,”<sup>xxxix</sup> but a song and its singer are naked, and must be so. But the radiation of sound guarantees we are not alone, and we call the others to us, by repeating our favorite sounds.

Poets and musicians have fostered a symbiotic relationship in America; especially in the last fifty years when they have begun to morph into the same thing. Brooks's influence combines a strong commitment to racial identity and equality with a mastery of poetic techniques, but she has also managed to bridge the gap between the academic poets of her generation in the 1940s and the young black militant writers of the 1960s. And the list of poets who have been influenced by the blues poems they have heard from Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks is constantly growing. Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Lucille Clifton, Marvin Bell, Michael Harper, John Berryman, Joy Harjo, Vachel Lindsay, Langston Hughes, Hayden Carruth, Jack Kerouac, William Matthews, Yusef Komunyakaa, Horace Coleman, Lyn Lifshin, Sonia Sanchez, Quincy Troupe, Rita Dove, Leonard Cohen, Patti Smith, Bob Kaufman, Natasha Trethaway, Saul Williams, and Kevin Young are just a few of the poets whose work would be impossible to imagine without a prolonged exposure to these poets. Improvisation is the art of presence, and what did not exist a moment before is the testament the next performer is building his instant upon. Communication (and history) requires two. Maybe music does, too. Rhythm forces everyone to join it, like birds overwhelmed by the sound of beating wings, compelled to take to the air.

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## Draft Dodger Blues

*No Viet Cong ever  
Called me a Nigger*

—Muhammad Ali

What the word was  
On the block was that they put  
All the black guys on point,  
Those white officers, who  
Carried that brand of American  
Onto those rice paddies,

And those black guys in those units was getting  
The shit blown out of them,  
Which fit what we knew, and saw  
In our neighborhood; the cops,  
Pulling down your pants in public,  
That anger, so easy, and on tap,  
Loaded and ready to be aimed,  
How questions earned you the kiss of the billy.

That meanness had turned into  
    a new, hard wind,  
And we knew that as well,  
The neighborhood term  
Was shit-storm, or fuck-up,  
And it lead to prison,  
Where the guys with  
The keys always waited,  
Then Attica could finish you off.

Now it had another  
Place to land you, and if it  
Didn't kill you,  
It would fuck you over—  
you could see how some of the  
Brothers came back, wound up  
Like a pissed off cobra,

Or missing things,  
Some physical, not that it mattered  
To the beat cops.  
They came back, but they didn't fit,  
They tumbled.

And unlike the guessing game of living  
On the block, this one  
Actually had a number that could  
Come up, and off you flew,  
To that cracker officer,  
Capt. Two Birds with One Stone, who represents,  
Like the principal who loves demerits, like  
The county application clerk whose pet word is denied,  
He's here to remind you the way things are.

That wind, that old, furious weather.  
First they want to put your black ass  
Into a body bag, then tell the world  
You were all for it.

## **Down by the Old Lynching Tree, A Flickering Light**

& a blindness. A dark silo scribbled  
onto night's thin skin. A young boy

who often dreams of dying waking  
for a change to a soft voice asking

how he's been all these years. & at  
the end of this vein of stars, a heart.

Right now, somewhere in the world,  
a bird is thrashing the glass surface

of a lake, coming up empty again.  
& a different boy, who often dreams

of living into his teens, is mapping  
his road to the sky in metal shards

held together by powder & fuse.  
A fire that consumes the blindness.

From this tired skin of night a rope  
snaps free from a burning tree.

## Underneath the Dark is Dark

Again the human voice. It's agonizing—  
    even with the blinds shut, even with the candle melted  
to honesty. Every emotion is filled with dazzling  
    bruises. I woke this morning faintly talking about the small  
gods of reason, but no one was there to wrestle  
    what I meant. The birds kept to their solving, faithful  
from angles of tree limbs. It didn't matter  
    that all they were touching was surface, the earth  
has always been filled with their secret  
    rules. In the future our tragic spatters and demands  
will be even heavier than want, even more  
    feverish, but now it gets late with tireless sighs.  
We shouldn't measure everything by the voracious past  
    —the battery of starlight, my father's remaindered  
chants and those crushing old guilts that I need  
    to keep carrying—but sometimes I'm a woman  
in a ward of tight strings. A clock. Sparse soil,  
    desert leather, right-hearted. I love the days  
I can't see monsters. What a bargain  
    when there's only leftover salt to thistle me.

## What Needed Saying

*The Mabel Dodge Luhan House, Taos, NM*

This house never had a complete pause. It was written  
all over with noises  
and symptoms, articulated language.

By evening, the moon extracts the crisp skin  
from the sky. The slight staircase wavers.

A truncated door borders the kitchen,  
its turquoise triangles, milkweed and roots.

This house understands  
the doves double mourning through summer,  
and the stay and momentum

when there's room to unfasten, but after some years,  
the house wouldn't offer its favors.

The moon laid its face on those slabs of stone  
where I walk between dark and ground,  
between answers and branches.

## **Awe And Understanding: On The Intellectual Work Of Poetry**

Bathanti, Joseph. *The 13th Sunday after Pentecost*. Baton Rouge; LSU Press, 2016. 77 pp. \$17.95.

Cherry, Kelly. *Quartet for J. Robert Oppenheimer*. Baton Rouge; LSU Press, 2017. 143 pp. \$21.95.

Morgan, Robert. *Dark Energy*. NY; Penguin Books, 2015. 80 pp. \$18.00.

Soniat, Katherine. *Bright Stranger*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2016. 81 pp. \$17.95.

Genres, by their very natures (by which I mean to suggest that it was always meant to be this way), tell truths and express knowledge differently from one another. Cherry's *Quartet for J. Robert Oppenheimer* demonstrates this point in her use of poetry to tell a life story in images so powerful and telling that they elicit empathic responses from her readers. As an example of the work poetry can do that is unlikely to be done in any other genre, take these lines about the young Oppenheimer from "Assistant Professor of Physics, University of California, Berkeley":

His students tried to *be* him,  
his charisma was that intoxicating

They copied his walk,  
his talk,  
his habitual smoking

the way he held the chalk

they gawked at him,  
mimicked his gestures...  
(ll. 7-14)

Expectations set up for me by the genre used here draw my attention in these lines not only to this detailed characterization of the young scientist, but also to the word play that employs the "awe"-sound, as in "walk," "talk," "chalk," and "gawked"—the sound of wonder that justifiably permeates the first half of this book. Cherry's thinking has evolved into this sophisticated understanding of the possible uses of poetry to make and articulate knowledge, and, in the theorization of this position, she is years ahead of most of us. Things are changing in poets' and educators' willingness to use poetry to reach and record our understandings, as the books discussed here suggest. Yet, writing the life of Oppenheimer in poetry seems more

appropriate as a record of his moods, idiosyncrasies, and fears than doing so in prose because poetry contextualizes events so well: “As Oppenheimer loved the poems of Donne, / so Donne loved science, and as Donne loved science, / so Oppenheimer loved the poems of Donne” (“Oppenheimer and the Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral,” ll. 9-11). Note the metrical balance in this expression. But more: we should be pleased to anticipate in Cherry’s poems of wonder a reliance on metaphorical conceit of the sort Donne employed to such great effect, the “penchant for yoking opposites / together, for seeing the sides of every problem” (“Oppenheimer and the Dead,” ll. 4-5). In “Oppenheimer, 1931,” Robert’s loss upon the death of his mother is expressed in terms no less awe-inspiring and all-encompassing than these: “loneliness is / a universe” (ll. 19-20).

We find poetry now in places where it rarely could be found before, though the belief in poetry’s social function as disseminator of knowledge may be traced all the way back to Wordsworth’s “Preface to the *Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads*”:

The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or the Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the Poet’s art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings.

(Perkins, p. 327)

Cherry explains the reason for this phenomenon in contemporary verse. “Pity Our Myths,” one portion of this long-poem in four parts based upon Cherry’s extensive research into Oppenheimer (“taking into account numerous, often conflicting, biographies, letters, reports, and reminiscences” [epigraph] to render the figure as she sees him) makes this point emphatically. Though Pulitzer Prize-winning biographers Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin insist in their title on the Oppenheimer/Prometheus comparison, Cherry notes that the old myths, no matter the parallels we try to force them to make between old thinking and the new, that she describes below as “the strangest tales of all,” fail to render insights into those new understandings:

Poor myths indeed, worn to bare bone, clacking  
the same old same old, while yet the scientists  
are telling us of new discoveries,

the strangest tales of all, narratives of  
materials, measurement, gravity, and mind.  
(ll. 16-20)

*Quartet* makes a range of rich arguments, not the least of which is that, by its very form, the old myth that biography must be told in prose has likewise been “worn to bare bones.”

But this book offers more than a challenge to privileged genres while simultaneously exploring Oppenheimer’s life which, in itself, seems a lot to do. One additional by-product of Cherry’s work is her support of the ironic comment that “what we think we know / we know not” (ll. 3-4), a sentiment pertinent to Morgan’s epistemology in *Dark Energy* as well. This insight into social and cultural awareness is tied to the timeframe this book focuses on, primarily from the last days of World War II to the end of the Cold War, a period in which Structural theories for understanding human behavior were made available, often in translation (see Saussure, 1959; Levi-Strauss, 1955). These changes in the way we understand the operation of language as a system of correspondences forecast other changes. For one, the old myths that proffered a structured universe were likewise shown by theorists of the time to be unreliable in helping us understand events during the Cold War period, a time unlike any the world had previously known. When Saussure announced that “The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary” (Leitch, et al., p. 964), he led us to the parallel if seemingly ironic conclusion that bonds between old myths and new human behaviors are likewise arbitrary: thus, “What we think we know, / We know not.” We moved beyond “the same old same old” when we lost our innocence and developed weapons of mass destruction, as this book so ably shows. We entered, then, a realm of living and knowing that Cherry traces for us through this carefully constructed poetic biography.

Cherry makes the case for this poststructural uncertainty concerning truth in her poem, “Jews,” when she writes, “Shouldn’t we find another word for what / we are? This poem is open to suggestions” (ll. 13-14). An approach to science and history such as Cherry’s, through poetry, requires that we test the special propositions poetry makes about the world, much as Darwin purportedly did when he read Milton’s *Paradise Lost* while aboard H.M.S. Beagle on his way to the Galapagos Archipelago. Awe and wonder reflect excitement over new understandings, and poetry uniquely articulates these understandings and, therefore, seems an apt genre for discussions of scientific breakthroughs.

This is not new territory for Cherry, and I think it is important to say so because it indicates the focus for nearly two decades of one of our country’s

rare intelligences. Cherry's perspective has evolved, and *Quartet* is, then, a collection of verse important to any assessment of her overall achievement. Some of this thinking may be found in her poetry—*The Life and Death of Poetry* (2013) and *Physics for Poets* (2015), for example—but it may also be found in her earlier collection of autobiographical essays, *Writing the World* (1995). The pragmatic vision given in these earlier works offers us a revised worldview, one that promotes a kind of silencing of the self in poetry—anti-self-consciousness, Geoffrey Hartman called it—enabling us to hear everything that is going on around us, a view featured in Soniat's book as well: "Self-consciousness deferred," Cherry writes in "A Sunday in Scotland" from *The Life and Death of Poetry*. Indeed, we will be in constant conflict over what should attract our attention if all things in the world must be heard over the roar of our considerations of the self, the noises of consciousness. The silencing of the self in Cherry's earlier verse has been read as an act of purification, a demonstration of "poetic listening."

This view rendered in poetry gives poets license to explore various matters outside the self, including matters that result in poetic biographies and versified reports of empirical data which, to facilitate our understanding, most often require the use of conceits and analogies of the sort that we find used so effectively in the first lines of "Scientific Director of the Manhattan Project":

As in a drifting silence like the void  
of outer space, young Robert moved among  
eternal numbers kindled like the stars  
with powers beyond the merely human - or  
could heroic efforts achieve such grand powers?  
(ll. 1-5)

In the way Cherry uses metaphor and sound in this book, we see how well suited poetry is to providing telling details through brave analogies and stunning metrics. Indeed, so telling are details as given in poetry that the understudied (understudied among literary critics, anyway) trend in many current empirical studies is to report research findings in poems. Poetry renders conceits that connect the earthly to the universal, as Cherry notes in "Poetry in 1922" in a line that connects the poet to the physicist: "The poet writing rides on a beam of light" (l. 12).

Questions of credibility are the logical consequence when we send a poem to do work traditionally done by prose in a biography or a research report. Cherry does both, telling the story of Oppenheimer's life and creating a context for understanding the events of his life by describing his scientific accomplishments. Her approach is well suited to elucidating the life and

work of Oppenheimer. In Cherry's hands, then, it seems natural to merge science and poetry. Nonetheless, this work must seem counter-intuitive to most poets nowadays. But note the emphasis on the social function of poetry that actualizes Wordsworth's claim for scientific discoveries "as proper objects of the Poet's art." If Wordsworth is an idealist, as he is often thought to be, there is, nonetheless, logical justification for employing poetry in reports of various data. Scientists attempting to work free of subjectivity and feeling, in describing the outer and inner universes, have long carried with them, as a result, the errors of Positivistic thinking. The poet does too, often quite self-consciously: "no one will be satisfied with a poem / by one who was not there" ("On Not Writing the Holocaust," ll. 4-5). Yet, scientists write about Saturn's moons as well as the nanosphere, and no one has visited those places either. The poem by itself is *never* "adequate" to its task. Is the scientific method adequate? This is the cultural conundrum Cherry must encounter in her verse, recognizing that the poetic experience cannot be replicated, at least not in the same way that scientific experimentation can. Therefore, historically, the poet "concedes," but yet "the poet bears / those images in her mind" ("On Not Writing the Holocaust," ll. 11, 14). The images that linger for the poet parallel the replication of research methodology when those images recur, often in new works by the poet. In doing so, they render complex experience in its natural complexity.

The genre too makes promises to a reader by forecasting a kind of truth and the way the process of writing, itself, which Cherry explores throughout the book, allows the poet to reach the kinds of understandings we can only reach by engaging the imagination. In "Invocation," for example, a poem which Cherry uses to begin this collection, Cherry recognizes the fact "that words appear upon / the page almost before one's thought of them" (ll. 2-3). This, of course, is the "magic" of imaginative writing that leads the poet to valuable insights. She asks her muse to "allow a poet sentences with which / to praise a man, if not his killing weapons" (ll. 7-8). The tension between Oppenheimer's heroic qualities and the destructiveness of his achievement keeps this book in a kind of balance between that which is clearly awe-inspiring and that which is simply scary and off-putting. Always the pragmatist, Cherry also longs to accept things as they are in her poems, resisting what, in the hands of a lesser poet, might end up as overstatement and hyperbole. Though she praises Oppenheimer and his part in developing the bomb, Cherry goes on to caution us against glorifying the sins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As a result, about midway through the book there is a turn in tone reflected in the limited use, thereafter, of metaphor and conceit to suggest wonder and awe.

The test of the bomb at the Trinity Site in New Mexico, detailed near the end of the book's second section, signals a changed perspective due to the

bomb's "fallout" for both Oppenheimer and Cherry. Note that this expression is given in a direct and emphatic statement rather than in an elaborate conceit of the sort noted earlier in "Scientific Director":

...What Oppenheimer knew before  
the bomb was not what he knew afterward.  
"Trinitite," ll. 6-7

Cherry too comes to a new insight, if this shift in tone is any indication. For hereafter, the conceit is less useful to the poet; awe is replaced by disillusion. In fact, we get an occasional denial of awe, altogether.

...The flood  
of light is only a metaphor, of course.  
In general, deserts are dry, and men  
measuring white sands are a mirage.  
"White Sands," ll. 14-17

The pragmatic voice here is characterized by unadorned and direct language—"The flood / of light is *only* a metaphor," I stress "only"—a statement that testifies to the poet's uncertainty about a world in which a device such as the bomb leaves a "shameful stain on this country's history" ("The World's a Place," l. 8). Elsewhere in "The World's a Place," Cherry asks, "And what mistakes are being made today / regarding crime and punishment and public / safety?" (ll. 12-14).

What is disarmingly powerful about this book is that a reader gets to see the evolution of Cherry's thinking on this subject and detects this change in the way language, particularly the metaphorical conceit, is used in her poems to crystallize her thinking, thinking many of us have done for ourselves but have left unrecorded. Sadly, contemplation leads many of us from awe and wonder to disillusionment and unhappiness.

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Morgan's *Dark Energy*, by its very title, suggests a connection with Cherry's poetic experiment. Like Cherry's sometimes difficult book of poems, Morgan's work too makes significant demands on readers, but demands well worth the effort. So, let's begin with a brief statement concerning scientific methodology as employed by Einstein, whose theories seem connected to both books thus far discussed in this essay.

An interesting and relevant model for scientific investigation employed by Einstein is an approach often designated by the descriptor, "thought ex-

periment,” what we might nowadays call rhetorical research. We might argue, if we had the inclination to do so, that some poems too are a kind of thought experiment. In his excellent biography, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, Walter Isaacson discusses Einstein’s methodology of choice, using the physicist’s 1919 essay “Induction and Deduction in Physics” to do so. Empirical research most often works inductively: “Individual facts are selected and grouped together so that the laws that connect them become apparent” (Einstein, qtd in Isaacson, p. 118). But Einstein’s understanding of the physical universe included the realization that it would be very difficult, indeed, to gather facts from an individual’s experience with a concept such as the speed of light, for instance, or the space-time continuum or the movement of planets through the galaxy, especially in the early twentieth century. His preference for deduction, then, was based on his belief that “[t]he truly great advances in our understanding of nature originated in a way almost diametrically opposed to induction” (qtd in Isaacson, p. 118).

This view of *a priori* knowledge is not new, of course; nearly one hundred years earlier, Immanuel Kant famously argued against an absolute reliance on empiricism in determining truth (see *Critique of Pure Reason*). This influential argument gave rise to the elevation of imagination as a way of knowing and of the sublime as a means for articulating awe and wonder. Kant argued that not all truths, to be understood as true, depend upon empirical research. Einstein said of such propositions based upon intuition rather than experience that “This is held to be the case, for example, in the propositions of geometry and in the principle of causality” (qtd in Isaacson, p. 83). The notion that some truths can be known without experiencing them directly appealed to Einstein: “in other words, they were *a priori* knowledge” (qtd in Isaacson, p. 83). This fundamental understanding provides a starting point for reading *Dark Energy*.

Morgan is inclined, in the first of four parts of this book, to use poems to test other people’s theories. By doing so, he works deductively. He begins with hypotheses long held by “Indians” in “Big Talk,” “first explorers” in “Big Bone Lick,” and “Lawson, Bartram [and] others” in “Jaguar.” The book begins by testing these theories, and those tests, in addition to being entertaining, serve to remind us that contemporary theories of the physical world that are likewise tested later in the book need to be understood in context: they may be first thoughts on a subject without being viable conclusions. They are likely to fall prey to “the hungry maw / of time” (“Abandoned,” ll. 12-14) as have other folk beliefs before them.

The book moves from tests of what we might call folk truths in the first section to a second section which seems a kind of “growth of a poet’s mind,” personal reminiscences by

Morgan similar in intent to those made by Bathanti in his new collection of verse. In "The Road to Arcadia," a poem about learning from his mother, as the poet puts it, "when I was stubborn at the age / of two or three" (ll. 1-2), the narrator "can't explain the powerful pull, / the magnetism of her voice" (ll. 13-14), Morgan's attraction to new insights. "Even Me" is a meditation on what Wordsworth called "a spirit in the woods" ("Nutting," l. 56 in Perkins, p. 212). Morgan begins with the dramatic situation: "When I was less than five years old / I sat beside a power line pole." In this, Morgan works inductively by providing the details of this experience and then concluding that "the song from the big wires" (l. 13) suggests a connection to the deep universe, beyond the trees that surround him, in its "hymn" described in all its wonders and resonating with the magnetism of his mother's voice:

...the voice of steel,  
of sky and light and woods and field,  
the voice of time from the beginning,  
before a pulse of heart was beating...  
(ll. 19-22)

We ascend from these temporal postulates to the universal, the awesome, and we climb an intellectual step-ladder to the conceit which reaches upward and outward, so this becomes

the sound of space beyond the stars  
and in between the atoms' spheres,  
a voice of primal harmony,  
still audible even to me.  
(ll. 24-27)

Morgan returns to these powerful sounds much later in the book, in "High-Tension Lines," to "sing the thrill of transmission" (l. 11). This is important work that characterizes the contemporary intellectual milieu, the new Romanticism, if you will.

The old Romanticism of a Frost, for example, is an unsatisfactory solution to complex problems posed by the universe as we have only recently, in the history of the universe, begun to understand it. In "Birches," Frost "likes to think" when "Birches bend to left and right" that "some boy's been swinging them" (ll. 1-3). In "High Horse," Morgan engages in the Romantic moment Frost immortalized, "upon the tilted trunk" ("High Horse," l. 5), but finds it dissatisfying as a means for understanding his experience of the world:

I tired and chose to alter course,  
 and backed down off the too high horse  
 to set my feet on unmoved ground.  
 (ll. 22-24)

Here Morgan's speaker does the work of Frost's personified "Truth," by rendering, as in Frost, a perception of the world with "all his matter-of-fact" ("Birches," ll. 21-22). Morgan thus separates from what one might "like to think"—which seems aligned in this book with other failed myths of the way humans connect with the universe—and finds a way to "return" to Earth. For Morgan, as he says in "11/22/13," "A way / of being confident had ended" (ll. 19-20). If we hold to the belief that the world is redeemable, this section seems to conclude, we are guilty of self-deception because all the evidence, which comes to us almost "sacramentally," suggests that we need Divine intervention to reach understanding and find truth, what seemed to the young Morgan "a miracle... / like water turned to wine" ("A Kind of Sacrament," ll. 8-9).

This outlook is described in "Cloud Farm," from part 3, as "the prevailing rhetoric." Morgan shifts our attention to the wonder of experience and the awe of representation. In "Heartbreak and Flight," it is the miracle of the seed which releases itself from "its jacket" like "a kind of Houdini" and turns "to face the sun with spreading wings" (ll. 1-2, 13). Something unseen, "something in the quickening heart," stirs it until "it springs" from the earth.

The next poem, "Cloud Farm," continues the sense of dreamy wonder over what is simply *there*:

...what thrives best on this high ground  
 is mist, the fogs that brood like ghosts  
 of ancient prophets on this height  
 so far above the fertile flats,  
 the vapors bright as angel wings  
 in fever dreams. Therefore this summit's  
 at best a farm for dreaming.  
 (ll. 13-19)

In the face of the miracle of nature, we advance toward infinity, "which we / will never see but still can contemplate" (ll. 8-9) as Einstein did in his thought experiments.

"Chance" orients us to the world of Morgan's understanding:

We feel the volt inside our veins,  
 inside the vines, inside the rain,  
 and through the capillaries of  
 a tree.  
 (ll. 1-4)

This is the human condition, if we are prepared to accept it: “We feel the pulse above,” the force that drives the universe, “in storms, vibrato of thunder” (l. 5). By opening ourselves to the activity of nature, we “[a]ll oscillate together” (l. 12).

*Dark Energy* seems a kind of extended meditation on what we can and cannot know. Many physicists, including Einstein, have concluded that their work has moved them closer to divinity, a view of the universe as driven toward some end we cannot quite see from here and in light of some beginning we likewise are blind to, “This play of chance / beneath the stars’ indifference” (ll. 13-14). The universe has been set in motion, and we must simply hold on ... together. Like other great thinkers—Spinoza and Einstein, for instance—Morgan sees divine design unfolding in grand laws that govern the workings of the universe rather, it seems, than through the workings of a personal God who interacts directly with us. Like the “snowy field” in “New Year,” we are “pure and blank, / a page unwritten on, intact” (ll. 1-2). Our task is the fundamental one, to live on humbly in spite of our desire to contemplate and understand, to continue to live a life of chance:

All wait the grime,  
 the wound, the signature of time.  
 (ll. 16-17)

We are cautioned in “New Year” and elsewhere in this collection against reaching conclusions that we hold as true and final. Morgan offers a critique and a caution in these poems, reminiscent of Cherry’s in *Quartet*. In the fourth section of *Dark Energy*, we see why:

That what we know is just  
 a fraction of what is  
 is nothing new  
 (“Dark Matter,” ll. 1-3)

We must accept the conclusion even our brightest minds have reached, that we do not yet see clearly into the darkness of unknown causes and unpredictable effects. We must allow ourselves “honest awe / and curiosity, / and lesson of humility” because it is likely that

what we touch and hear  
 and see is just the tip  
 of unseen realms and laws  
 may be the start of our  
 intelligence.  
 (ll. 9-13)

Like the folk knowledge debunked in the first section of this book, our current understandings teach the “lesson of humility.” What we consider great breakthroughs “may be the start of our / intelligence” and *only* “the start.”

The title poem ties much of this philosophical book together. The physical conundrum called “Dark Energy” is proof of our uncertainty. Morgan begins this poem with an admission of our limitations because “It’s odd to think that empty space / between the stars and galaxies / produces a repulsive force” (ll. 1-3), while everything else, including gravity, is characterized by attraction. The “repulsive force,” dark energy, “will push away / all matter” (ll. 4-5), yet, ironically, “between the worlds it would appear / the opposite is true” (ll. 11-12). It was exactly this view of the universe as dynamic, the view Morgan explains metrically, that led Einstein, who at first believed in a stationary universe, to an admission that his assertion of the necessity for a “cosmological constant” to prove the universe is static was his “biggest blunder” (Isaacson, p. 255).

Like Cherry, Morgan is contemplating very large questions about existence and the universe. What we really seek is “silence,” Morgan seems to conclude, “The dialectic of perfect calm” (l. 1), “the idiom of promised rest” (l. 16).

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My admiration for the poems discussed here by Cherry and Morgan arises in part from my appreciation of their ability to see and assess the big issues of the era they write about. For the sake of discussion, their views might be described as macrocosmic—in any event, as a large view of events that took place during the Cold War with special emphasis on scientific discoveries of the time. Both too give us reason to consider how the knowledge of the time was generated and, inevitably, is still made. What is the role of experience in making knowledge? How does subjectivity influence our judgments? Bathanti’s *The 13th Sunday After Pentecost* gives an enlightened perspective on subjectivity as a kind of cultural construct..

Bathanti takes a view less ambitious than Cherry’s and Morgan’s in terms of its conscious study of the way knowledge gets made but more ambitious

in its representation of a microcosm of roughly the same time period as that featured in *Quarter* and *Dark Energy*. Bathanti gives a view of the Cold War period from the subject position of an Italian-American boy, suggesting how his “education” came about in a mostly Italian neighborhood in Pittsburgh. Let us not forget that street smarts is knowledge too. This perspective offers a valuable counterpoint to the views of Cherry and Morgan, for certainly the era should be represented differently by a boy growing up in it than by scholars looking back upon it. How did fourth graders respond to the Cold War? Simple experience led some to connect Eros with Thanatos:

Fourth grade, the year I had Miss Manso,  
 the pretty lay teacher,  
 I sat next to the window  
 and watched dogs mate on Flavel Street.  
 (“The Cold War,” ll. 1-4)

The yet-to-be-initiated speaker of the poem goes on to admit, “In secret I loved her” (l. 7).

Other sources of education came from observations shared with the boy by family. The poet claims to have learned something about love and adventure by overhearing his mother and aunts discuss “Goldfinger” after seeing the movie. He came away with numerous valuable insights that might be generalized into a cultural ethos:

They saw right through Bond: *fit to kill*.  
 Never would they have never fallen  
  
 for the line he fed women.  
 Q was an ass—they cared little for the British—  
 his contraptions a little too fantastic.  
 Pussy Galore was going too far,  
 but they laughed.  
 Moneypenny was more their cup of tea;  
 they exulted sarcasm.  
 (“Goldfinger,” ll. 17-25)

These poems do not reflect extensively or primarily on the bomb or on the reliability of scientific methods that interest Cherry and Morgan. Instead, poems of Part I of Bathanti’s three-part collection, “Omega Street,” though the bomb and accumulation of knowledge are important to Bathanti, provide instead insight into the way people lived in immigrant communities in small cities during that same time period, background both appealing and

insightful in the context of our country's current confusion over immigration laws.

Later in "The Cold War," from the second section of the book, "Confiteor," where the subject is a boy's growing consciousness of the world, Bathanti skillfully provides the familiar historical context, and does so from the perspective of a fourth grader. Conceits of the sort typical of the first half of Cherry's book and most of Morgan's are seemingly beyond a child's contemplation in this book, as they should be; instead, lists are used by the poet to accurately express an overwhelming sense of awe as it presents itself to a young boy. What, during this intense political era, was a child to do? The answer was influenced by patriotism and Catholicism and is enhanced by a list of threats on the world's stage:

I prayed to be spirited off by the firmament,  
 far from the furnace of nuns.  
 A space race was on.  
 Castro was a monster.

In Cuba swam a Bay of Pigs.  
 Khrushchev vowed to bury us. Idolators,  
 we worshipped Kennedy.  
 ("The Cold War," ll. 17-23, sic)

The list suggests that a lot was going on during this time and much of it beyond the intellection of a child. What's more, by contrast with the more impersonal creator of the universe acknowledged by characters Cherry and Morgan focus on and permit to speak in their poems, the God of Bathanti's poems is portrayed as personal and accessible, concerned with individual lives. That God, if "bartered" with as people did "Caesar, the gypsy huckster" (l. 3) in "The Huckster," "could make anything happen" (l. 47), including the granting of forgiveness not only on this earth, but in the looming afterlife:

We were to pray silently for the Communists,  
 our separated brethren.  
 That's how we would save ourselves—  
 by bartering with God  
 for a niche in the hereafter.  
 The explosion would kill everyone.  
 (ll. 61-66)

Insights such as these succinctly describe the threatening world in which these children lived and the time during which death from the bomb or its

fallout seemed imminent. Of course, children had distractions too—and they were great distractions, important ones, like playing baseball—that helped them through each day, feeling “invulnerable” because of the games they played and the way they played those games. In “Baseball,” the swift boy reaching home plate felt as if he “had wrested from Jesus His promise / of eternal life” (“Baseball,” ll. 39-40). The world as described by Bathanti, then, makes an interesting juxtaposition with the same world as portrayed in the Cherry and Morgan books. We are given inside information about this neighborhood from the subjective perspective of a boy who is just living his day-to-day life in the midst of world chaos.

But to be fair, this book is more than a time capsule with certain specific artifacts, both material and historical, as the final two sections of the book promise by their titles: “Confiteor” and “Genitori.” The poems in “Confiteor” enable us to see the boy at school discovering the opposite sex; we understand his guilt over his discovery, and we see him at play. But this is just one facet of this excellent foray into growing up in the Omega Street neighborhood. We are introduced to cultural bias and the effects of jealousy, “the *malocchio*.” We see some of the prejudices of the time and how one young person moved beyond them. This experience is rendered with such clarity readers might recall in reading these poems the place of their own upbringing. These are not generic descriptions, though they focus on “Napolitano ghosts / of the diaspora” as Bathanti describes them in the excellent poem, “DiDomeni.” But they also remind us how we too were taught by our teachers and through our experiences as we interpreted them. Though great intellects of the time were challenging empiricism and developing new methods for research, children were still learning how to survive in their neighborhoods and on the city streets by engaging with the experiences available to them.

In a portrait of characters in the Omega Street neighborhood, we meet misfits like Pasquale Bellasario, who was “more than just a bad boy” (“Baseball,” l. 35), alongside the elegant Mrs. DiDomeni, neighborhood royalty, who, “as if just emerged from her bath, / silk summer frock, often barefoot” (ll. 34-35), peaked over loaves of bread in her bakery. She posed the first temptation to the boy, who was simultaneously seduced by the cookies she gave him for free: “I wanted to kiss her naked feet / to live inside her,” yet she “was too beautiful for the other women / on the street not to loathe” (ll. 45-46). We learn through experiences that will resonate with the lives of readers of a certain age (and from certain ethnic backgrounds) but also provide insights into life during the years of great international tension. During the years when great and important intellectual accomplishments were enacted on the world’s stage, the main concern of some children was the cookie they would be given in exchange for purchasing

cheap bread from Mrs. DiDomeni for their families, “a loaf of *crippled*,” the poet writes, “split heels, *brutto*, but cheaper” (“DiDomeni,” ll. 16-17), or choosing sides for a pick up ball game and, through sport, overcoming prejudices omnipresent during that era in American history:

We patched together teams of pick up:  
 the Negro brothers, Anthony and Raymond Jefferson;  
 the DiDomeni girl who became a nun;  
 straggled gypsy children, from the projects,  
 just off the boat, who spoke no English.  
 (“Baseball,” ll. 13-17)

But the bombed-out-earth metaphor too is omnipresent, as if it was on everyone’s minds and in their vocabularies, their involuntary metaphors, even as they played: playing fields satisfactory for the baseball they played came “Out of that parched yellow earth, cracked and scribed” (l. 19). The use of metaphors derived from a realization of what the bomb could do to the earth connects Bathanti’s poems to the growth of consciousness characteristic of Soniat’s *Bright Stranger*, too. But distrust was omnipresent; old world prejudice too, the understanding of which gave special insight to the poetic record Bathanti made of them, as in “Affliction”:

The summer baseball seduced me,  
 I’d begun to notice affliction.  
 Tazio, the handsome Polish man  
 Mrs. Scott rented to—his last name  
 a string of grinding consonants—  
 had on the underside of his throwing arm  
 a supernumerary nipple.  
 (“Affliction,” ll. 1-7)

The book presents us with distrust characteristic of immigrant groups of the time. Certain people were outsiders, especially if they had more wealth than others or even if they were just better looking. While insider Pasquale Bellasario was acceptable in spite of the fact “He was more than just a bad boy; / Lucifer had punched a needle in his arm” (“Baseball,” ll. 35-36”), the handsome Polish Tazio was held in contempt. We are told by the narrator of “Affliction” that “My mother held his good looks against him” and referred to him as “*Polack*.” Was the affliction the poet notices that Tazio had a supernumerary nipple on the underside of his arm, or that he was Polish, or that he was good looking?

The lovely bakery owner, Mrs. DiDomeni, though Italian herself, was likewise an outsider:

My parents, our entire family,  
 felt the DiDomenis held themselves too high  
 for what they were...  
 (“DiDomeni, ll. 25-27)

The poet learns the lesson, as he says, when “I learned to despise those with more than me ...” (l. 28). Social circumstances on the streets give context to life in America during the Cold War. The distraction play provided was essential to children whose games left them “so happy” nothing else seemed to matter—not Castro, the Bay of Pigs, or Khrushchev. In a world filled with threats and allegations, not to mention the bomb, children and childlike innocence are logically glorified. But, then, the children are introduced to the conundrum of religion—Catholicism, in this case—and in “Confiteor” they learn “how poorly words serve longing” (“Holy God,” l. 23).

In “Confiteor,” we see how the young boy learns cultural values and the way confessions of guilt ensue. Part II constitutes what we might call a source text for representations of Italian-American communities after the Italian diaspora and the living conditions of immigrant people.

Such representations provide important cultural information because, without them, representations of ethnic groups eventually precede through a history of simulations into representations of groups that have no known connection to the original, what Jean Baudrillard calls *simulacra* (see *Simulacra and Simulation*). We see influences from his mother and her sisters, who enjoyed *Goldfinger* but didn’t trust James Bond; his steel-worker father, who he recalls in several poems as being on strike; his teacher, who he realized he could not really love because she “wore black / orthopaedic shoes”; “Sister Mercedes and her fraternity paddle.” On the streets, the boy learns the hard lesson Cherry and Morgan find true in examining knowledge of a presumably higher order: “Everything would be subtracted from us. / The truth mattered less every day” (“The 13th Sunday after Pentecost,” ll. 42-43). Time is measured by holy days the poet traces “from the Table of Movable Feasts” (l. 70). We look back in these school poems to Patrick Henry and ahead to miracles of his generation: “July 20, 1963—my 10th birthday. / Six years to the day, a man stood on the moon” (ll. 75-76). A great time to be alive, to be sure, transitioning into adulthood but also into the pain ahead.

But with adulthood comes the losses of youth, of memorized belief, but also of those we love best. Part III, “Genitor,” focuses on loss of parents. It returns in “Angels” to the motif of baseball. The poet learns mortality in an event taking place in the game he loves:

In the hospital waiting room  
you watch a TV highlight  
of a Grapefruit League game.  
Randy Johnson, like a tetchel-  
faced prophet, lurches  
off the mound with a fastball.  
(ll. 1-6)

This televised event temporarily distracts those in the hospital room from the issues at hand, the imminent death of loved ones. We're told, "everyone's tired." Then, suddenly, unexpectedly, "Johnson's pitch / obliterates the bird— / a hail of feathers and dander, / as if inside a tiny bomb detonated" (ll. 12-15). No miracles can be called upon. We are faced with life and death. Bathanti allows us a view of the hospital where "Around you, people are dying" (l. 17). This consciousness of loss and doom comes with the irony of laughing at the dead bird, "the massacred dove" (l. 19). We laugh to ease the tension: "It's funny because it's not" (l. 24).

Irony follows the boy who narrates these poems. In "The Little Noise," the boy's mother is "Astonished to still be alive / after all these years," we're told, as she makes "the little noise" that makes the boy anxious to find out where it came from, "mewling like a lost violin" as she scrubs herself clean, "the last dignity" (ll. 13-18). This little noise permeates the household and seems to be on everyone's mind:

At vigil, my father sits in the living room.  
All night he listens for my mother,  
as one listens for a bedded baby,  
straining to reckon that sound,  
the little noise he's heard before ...  
(ll. 39-43)

In "My Mother and Father Falling," the mother's fall is "inevitable," as is death for each of us. In spite of the fact her fall must occur, she bravely goes about her usual activity rather than give in to her illness:

The cereal box is anathema,  
too far back in the cabinet  
for my arthritic mother to reach.  
She'd rather topple from the stool  
she drags over to climb than accept  
the gnarled hand my father proffers.  
(ll. 1-6)

They are suitably portrayed as a kind of aging team in this poem:

Fifty-eight years they've perfected this ritual,  
again and again, like high-wire mates...  
(ll. 14-15)

What is revealed to the narrator of these poems from the final section of the book is a consciousness of his consciousness, a means for better understanding himself, a goal poetry is well suited to achieving. I am drawn, as a result, to the excellent poem that concludes this volume, "Labriola's," because it enables us to see how subjectivity influences our knowledge-making, and it nicely connects Bathanti's new book with Soniat's. Labriola's website describes it as "an authentic neighborhood Italian grocery store." It is in Labriola's where reminiscence is most pronounced for Bathanti, where he reexperiences "Entering, through the medium / of *memoria*" and through olfactory recall, "the aroma / of *Italianata*, opera of olfactory..." (ll. 1-4).

This poem is rightly placed last in this book as if the thought experiment of a Bathanti poem has worked inductively all along and ends with this insight grounded in his recall of "Sundays after Mass." The list of sensory treats "spinning... back / over these scored plank floors" guides him in this analysis of the foundation for his most basic understandings:

Theology of pasta:

spool, labyrinth, conundrum,  
geometry—vowels following

like *pastina* from the rafters  
where a scratchy Vivaldi sonata

wafts like DeNobili smoke.  
(ll. 24-29)

These poems speak to me as a city-dweller, a first-generation Italian-American but also as a lover of poetry who sees in *The 13th Sunday* poems of clarity and intelligence that help us find our way through the ongoing arguments only poems can make about how we come to knowledge.

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The books studied here thus far may be read in a variety of ways, of course. But a reader's efforts are rewarded by each of these books. This is no less

true of Soniat's *Bright Stranger*, which I view as the author's excursion into consciousness.

When read from the perspective of intentionality as an assertion of consciousness, *Bright Stranger* is a unique and insightful journey into the extreme subjectivity that is individual consciousness (see Husserl; Merleau-Ponty). Soniat's poems are explorations of consciousness—consciousness of herself as a conscious being, we might say. Our attention is drawn to Soniat's awareness of philosophical thinking on the subject of consciousness in "Phenomenology with a Future," and I take that as instruction in how to read her poems. :

When she turned forty, he gave her Hegel's *History of Philosophy*  
and *The Communist Manifesto*, then tossed in that she had the  
personal insight of Byron in a sand storm.  
(ll. 1-3)

The narrator identifies these iconic works as "Such a fine assembly of rhetoric and persona to fall in with" (l. 4). She relates to these works as an intellectual being because they resonate with her perception of the world as an earth-dweller; she admits to "that nasty habit of seeing herself in everything, and vice versa" (l. 7). Phenomenology is critical to my understanding of this complicated book, not necessarily as Husserl or Merleau-Ponty employs it, but as a logical answer to the timeless question Soniat seems to be asking concerning what it means to be human and to obtain knowledge of the physical and psychical worlds, which in her work are rarely separated. The object of her perception is proof of her perception, giving consciousness intentionality. Indeed, this book might be read, like other books of poetry, from numerous perspectives. But phenomenology is especially relevant to poetry, as poetry is to phenomenology, and relevant here given Soniat's focus on her almost-solitary interaction with the world, experiences that underscore the connection of human consciousness to everything around us in nature, poems that display intentionality.

We too are inevitably present, then, in everything around us in nature, but that presence is reciprocal: "in everything and vice versa." A study of consciousness requires calmness, as Morgan points out in his new collection, and that calm is a function of solitude, in Soniat's case, her search for silence: "what silence can do it does" ("Things That Hang in the Air," ll. 20-21). This silencing of the self enables us to move past the roaring congratulations of selfness, characterized in the image of "Guys / on mules... yelling their way down / to the canyon floor" (ll. 14-16). This characterization is not one that demonstrates readiness for contemplations of consciousness. By contrast, the condition Soniat seems to believe is most

appropriate preparation for the task of what I have called above, in my discussion of Cherry, “anti-self-consciousness,” a thought experiment, if you will, that purifies the self and readies it for examination. This experiment constitutes all because it must transcend myth. We must walk forward bravely and without turning, without making Orpheus’s mistake, and thereby losing sight of everything that matters to our consciousness. Of course, Eurydice was the victim in the myth we associate with Orpheus, “She knew when Orpheus looked / around what would be extracted, her future spun / to cosmic reckoning” (“Eurydice Turning,” ll. 11-13).

At times our histories of consciousness “read / like a parallel history. Two points refer to a third, that being the vanishing point” (“After a Day at Busard’s Farm,” ll. 14-16). The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is especially pertinent here. Cut off from other consciousnesses and their peculiar intentionality, we must proceed “like wordless Eurydice whose thoughts carried on / past the story” (“Things That Hang in the Air,” ll. 10-11). We receive in any given moment a perception that proves us to be conscious of nature even if that perception is unique, one-of-a-kind, temporary, something that cannot be shared or replicated: “Who understands what *temporary* / means anyhow?” (“Things,” ll. 15-16). That is the nature of intentionality. Every perception of consciousness that proves consciousness is, by definition, temporary.

In the following example from “Objective Interpretation,” E.D. Hirsch explains Husserl’s notion that states of consciousness are temporary: “When I look at a box, then close my eyes, and then reopen them, I can perceive in this second view the identical box I saw before. Yet, although I perceive the same box, the two acts of seeing are distinctly different—in this case, temporally different. The same sort of result is obtained when I alter my acts of seeing spatially” (p. 1690). A lone reader can be made to feel lonely reading some of these poems, which might be simply to say that we too become ready for contemplations of the sort Soniat shares in her poems. Soniat deftly defies the gravity that turns all walks into lazy strolls with signs provided to point the way. These are poems with a point the poems do not, themselves, want to relinquish. “Signs,” themselves, are points of perception moving toward “the vanishing point” that typifies consciousness. These poems suggest, by their very existence, that we all must make poems of our own perceptions to prove our own consciousnesses. Poems in *Bright Stranger* model the effort required: “anything possible with pen / and paper” (“Things That Hang in the Air,” ll. 1-2). And Soniat is clear that we need to do this in solitude. The task is to find and then explore life on the interior and to do this in spite of the natural tendency to listen to the voices of the self: “we’re busy thinking / thoughts that multiply and reinvent themselves” (“What Else There is to Do,” ll. 5-6). And we must

heed the warning that this is difficult work, work most of us are not up to, in final analysis: “Scrawled below in cursive, *Too Frustrating*” (“*Bussard’s Farm*, ll. 64-65).

How, then, do we enter the vision that is consciousness? And how does poetry make consciousness tangible as knowledge, as language? Soniat’s poems enable us to see the virtue of engaging with nature in a kind of reciprocity: how we act upon nature affects the way nature acts upon us. Many of the poems in this book portray a solitary figure in nature, sometimes entering it and passing through, sometimes calmly observing from a distance, much as “Chagall stared at barnyard animals / from his attic window, then beyond them / to the Volga” (“*The Volga*,” ll. 1-3). In “*Green is a Word*,” the narrator recalls what she has seen “along the canyon path” as the only proof of animal existence: “Turds...” (l. 3). And then the connection with nature beyond animal waste draws our attention to itself:

Before me spreads a human story—  
 cellophanes of candy and talk enough to numb  
 the brain, blind it to clear-cutting and how the  
 empty eyes of miners stare while magma shifts  
 Earth’s tectonic plates—an underworld on the  
 move again.  
 (ll. 8-13)

In the end, after the solitude she has chosen has been misinterpreted as her being “left behind,” the speaker claims, “I shed / my human tongue” to participate, without the dueling demands of self, as one with nature. Soniat’s salvation is always in her return to solitude, in her resistance to “the old decline of flesh to language” (“*A History of Religion*,” l. 4). In lowering the volume of the self and in resisting its various demands, the self is ready for “Heaven on earth” (l. 6). When the self is finally silenced, redemption here on earth is possible. As Blake said, “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man (sic) as it is, infinite” (Perkins, 73). To be clear, though Blake did not celebrate nature as the intentional object of consciousness, as Soniat does, he did celebrate consciousness.

These are four books that may challenge a reader. They take on issues that are increasingly important to humans in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. What long-term damage have we done to ourselves as people by employing science for destructive means? What methods do we still employ in making knowledge and why should we think our insights are any more permanent than those of thinkers from various cultures hundreds of years ago? How do we live on the earth, in our neighborhoods, while damage is being done to our planet? And, finally, how do we achieve a consciousness

of all of this apart from our commitment to our selves? These books spur us to deep imaginings that the authors hope, I believe, will make us more responsible around one another and on our planet.

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## **Quantum Rhetoric and The Social Turn: Ten Questions for Patrick Bizzaro**

I met Dr. Patrick Bizzaro my first summer as a doctoral student in Indiana University of Pennsylvania's Composition and TESOL program in 2010. Knowing his academic contributions as I did—particularly those in the field of creative writing—I was certain to take one of his classes at the first opportunity. A year later, he became my dissertation advisor, but for some time, he had already been my friend.

Pat, as his students affectionately call him, embodies so many titles: friend, advisor, mentor, educator, scholar, and confidante. He challenges students to evaluate and critically analyze readings in class, but I recall many class sessions that didn't end at the assigned time. Instead, we stayed, talked, and subsequently learned together. That's Pat's great gift as an educator: he makes you think.

Just last week, a colleague from my master's program at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland messaged me to say that she had found my dissertation by way of researching Pat for her graduate research across the pond. I wasn't surprised, but I was proud. Pat's thoughtful contributions to academic research have sparked scholarly evaluations around the globe. For these reasons and many others, I was honored to interview Pat about his work, his research, and his best advice.

Patrick Bizzaro has published nine books and chapbooks of poetry, two critical studies of Fred Chappell's poetry and fiction, a book on the pedagogy of academic creative writing, some textbooks, and a couple hundred poems in magazines. He is a frequent reviewer of his peers' work in magazines like *Asheville Poetry Review*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, and *Appalachian Journal*, among others. Bizzaro, first director of the University Writing Program at East Carolina University, is a UNC Board of Governor's Distinguished Professor for Teaching and ECU Scholar-Teacher Award winner. He is currently a professor of English in Indiana University of Pennsylvania's doctoral program in Composition and TESOL, after retiring from ECU. During his last year on the ECU faculty, he received the Outstanding Professor award from the ECU Department of Disability Support Services, the ninth award for teaching he has received during his career. His articles on composition studies have appeared regularly in *College English* and *College Composition and Communication*. His co-edited book on poet and pedagogue Wendy Bishop is forthcoming from Hampton Press.

**Can you tell us about the writing projects you're working on right now and (if you are) how do you balance working on more than one writing project at a time?**

This has been a persistent question during my 45-year career. Let me interpret your question a bit to make it fit the context I've been working in and then talk briefly as I can about my current projects. So, my appropriation of your question might read like this: how does one work in composition studies, creative writing studies, literary studies, and still take a credible identity as a poet?

The quick answer is, "Hell if I know, but I have given it a try maybe worth describing."

I have always tried to do the work that needs to be done in whatever department I've worked in. So when I've been needed to teach composition, I commit fully to that. Same with the other areas: basic writing, creative writing, literary studies, etc. I even taught journalism at a community college and then, after a year of that, left to become a sports writer in a suburban D.C. newspaper. My ideas for books and articles have always seemed to come from my teaching and, frankly, here within a month of my retirement date, I can say I've been glad to have the chance to teach at all, to leave it and be allowed to return to it, not to mention to encourage my students to be teachers if that's their goal! Where there's smoke there's fire, as they say; teaching has always jump-started my writing. But so has the absence of teaching, as my stint as a sports writer seems to suggest.

For instance, right now I'm writing my retirement letter. It's only a sentence or two, but it's my highest priority today, and I keep revising it. Secretly, I'm hoping it will become a poem! I am doing this interview while I'm also spending time worrying about my two new books of poetry that will be coming out in the next six months, one from Finishing Line Press and the other from Mount Olive College Press, and how I might do my publishers justice by selling the books. The selling of books is a particular scary thing for me. I don't self-promote very well; it is difficult and humbling work for me to do, but work that needs to be done. I love giving readings, but I am often so ill-at-ease in asking other writers if they will allow me to read at their university that I offer to throw in a workshop or lecture on creative writing studies too. I also promise to sit in a bar quietly and watch a sporting event while I drink beer. Anyone interested??

I just sent out an essay arguing for the existence of a genre I call Quantum Rhetoric, the adaptation of skills associated with creative writing for the purposes of assisting other disciplines in the description of new discoveries, discoveries at the cutting edge, that have heretofore not been described

(see Coleman Barks' "The Center"). I wish I had given it a less pretentious name, but Quantum Rhetoric describes it pretty well. It is a genre that I think has been around a long time and employs elements of creative writing to describe cutting-edge findings in all disciplines. Barks' poem describes a black hole in terms Steven Hawking would probably recognize. One reviewer has called my essay on quantum rhetoric "cosmic," which I'm not sure is a good thing. If I can't please myself with what I write, I need to keep working at it. I give up on a lot of things, to be sure, but seem always to come back to them. They often evolve into something else. I am constantly trying to understand audience(s). I have begun to see how this Quantum Rhetoric connects with other writing I like to read and think about.

So, while I was drafting the essay on Quantum Rhetoric, I began another project on the poetry and fiction of Ron Rash, whose writing I have admired for at least two decades. I found a very capable co-editor, Lis Aiken, who shares my interest in Appalachian literature. We thought a collection of essays, like my two books with LSU on Fred Chappell, would introduce Rash to a scholarly audience. But two other people had the same idea and started a year before we did. So the Rash project has been put aside for now, but I'm also considering something I might call *The Rhetoric of the New Southern Poetry*. I have written widely about "young" Southern and Appalachian writers and hope to have something to say about them as I attempt to introduce them to a wider audience. They include Rash, Keith Flynn, Tim Peeler, Alex Smith, Al Maginnes, Phebe Davidson, Janice Moore Fuller, and several others. The editor of *Asheville Poetry Review* has been kind enough over the past decade to give me a few pages each year to say something about these writers, and I think I have connected them through their use of rhetorical elements in their poetry, a position I have argued for in those essays. So I am planning to do something with this idea, especially if the Rash project falls through.

So, those are projects I have planned that involve me in thinking through issues current in poetry, literary studies and even rhetoric and composition. But when you reach the end of a career, you also think back on unfinished business. As an example, my NCTE book on responding to student poems seemed to suggest that the methods of response employed in that book might serve us well as alternative means of response to student essays in our composition courses. I had intended to follow through on this topic in the nineties (nineteen nineties, to be sure) but got knocked off track by various matters, professional and personal, during that time. I'd like to return to that project in the next year or two. I am disappointed that as a profession we haven't really done much to advance the cause of response. My old friend, the late Rick Straub, helped us better understand the status quo. But the ongoing issue still is teacher appropriation of the student text.

In a sense, Rick's work made us complacent. He and I presented at AWP just as his books were coming out and someone in the audience, objecting I guess to my effort to impose theory on creative writing, yelled me down, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" Well, it's real broke, my friend. So, I thought by now a lot would have been written about response, but in reality little attention has been paid to it. So, I have a proposal on my hard drive for a book that will explore innovative methods of response that return authority for the text to the students who wrote them. What has been done mostly so far has been reiteration of the same methods we have used for decades. It's time for something new, and I hope to offer something in the next two years.

So there are these notions of what I should write, and I work on my poetry every day, taking complicated ideas I'm reading in Baudrillard, let's say, or Jonathan Lethem, and rendering them poetically. I think something's in the air about ways of reporting data and that creative writing will be in the middle of it.

More importantly, I would really like to write something with my wife and something on the emerging topic of "alternative genres for teaching creative writing."

Thinking about these varied projects makes me recall an "evaluation" meeting with a department chair, probably 25 years ago. She looked over my publications for that year and asked as kindly as she could how I thought my career made any sense. I hope I responded by saying, "It depends on what you mean by sense." I journal all the time and find that I have a lot to say. On another occasion, four or five years later, another chair reprimanded me for publishing two books in the same year. I understand now he was justifying limiting my merit pay to just one of those books, as if the other one wrote itself. Oh, well, that's academe. That's why I left it a few years before I had planned to.

After all this, Tamara, I'm not sure I've answered your question. Let me try to make a point here: yes, I am working on a few things right now and see the publication of my new books of poetry as an opportunity to reflect on what I've gotten done, take a deep breath and see what might be up ahead. Because I'd been directing as many as 12 dissertations at a time at IUP, I sometimes thought during those years that all I could do is try to stay afloat. I've found that the writing I really want to do takes on an organization of its own. I might be working at the computer on an essay and see a draft of a poem on my desk. It's not uncommon for me to take a break from doing one kind of writing to work on another kind. Maybe I just don't see the differences in such a way that I feel inhibited by them.

More, by anecdote: a doctoral student of mine recently asked about my composing processes. I told her that I keep note books around the house with pencils near them so any time I think I have something to write that I'm certain I'll forget otherwise, I write it down. In fact, I have about five places where I spend the majority of time in my house (this includes my bedroom where I routinely wake up at 3:30 a.m.) and often spend time in those places writing bits and pieces of things or jotting down ideas I'd like to develop further. I believe in writing and the writing process as well as writing as a mode of learning. Writing has been a process of discovery for me. I know those ideas are dated, but I have to tell you the truth, Tamara. Somehow or other things get done. I've spent a lot of time, given my busy work life at IUP, fitting things in my daily routines so I can actually get a thing or two finished. I'm still trying to figure out retirement. I'll let you know how that goes. The retirement nap is much more complicated than it seems. Is it possible to have insomnia in the afternoon? I should probably see my doctor...

**Looking at your own writing, what challenges do you face when writing, and how do you overcome them?**

Because I always have something I want to write about, the biggest problem for me has been finding the time. I hope retirement gives me the opportunity to write each day and find out, at long last, what "the life of a writer" might be. On the other hand, writing is demanding and tiring work. My long-time friend novelist Richard Bausch in an interview in the *AWP Chronicle* says he spends an hour each day writing. That doesn't sound like much—especially to someone who might spend 8 hours each day framing houses—until you try to do it. As I recall from that interview, Richard is very inventive in what he means by the term "writing," including researching, editing, proof reading.

Okay, "challenges." As I think I've already said, anticipating an audience is a problem. As someone whose poetry has been published now in eleven books by small presses, finances and financial support for the publisher is a concern. And in my time as a poet I've had some editors make awful decisions about the appearance of my books that I have had to live with. Worse than dealing with faulty judgment among editors, I hate finishing a manuscript and then having to find someone to publish it. One recourse is to enter contests, but I haven't done well with that. Makes me think my poetry sucks, but that's the ongoing fear. Donald Hall says in "Poetry and Ambition" that "I see no reason to spend your life writing poems unless your goal is to write great poems" (1). So you keep going, if you're a poet, and hope you're not boring people to death by relying too much on traditional elements of poetry, for instance. I have a colleague right now who

doesn't think we should use simile and metaphor, for instance. So who knows what wins those contests? My new book from Finishing Line Press, *Interruptions*, was submitted to a contest but didn't win. It was a runner-up (which is another way of saying I lost!) Still, the editors apparently read through some of the manuscripts by losers like myself and decided they liked this one enough to publish it. I feel very lucky indeed about that. I've won some prizes, of course, but don't ask me how. Just stupid luck, I guess.

I might add, because it might make sense, that those poems in *Interruptions* all began as experiments with what I've called in my first answer Quantum Rhetoric. A former colleague of mine on a search committee for a creative writer complained that one of the people interviewed talked a lot about theory. "How can you think about that stuff and still write a poem?" he asked. Those of us who have committed to Creative Writing Studies have, no doubt, encountered this kind of thinking repeatedly. I reminded him I might be the wrong person to ask because I have at least one book with the word "Theory" in the title, and I have written extensively about Coleridge and Shelley, both of whom theorized the imagination and poetry but wrote pretty good verse too.

**What do you wish student-writers did or knew before they enrolled in creative writing courses or programs?**

In my long career, students have changed in terms of their preparation for creative writing. Our Dear Wendy [Wendy Bishop] was the first I know of who commented on this change in *Released into Language*. A few years before NCTE published Wendy's book, Donald Murray wrote an essay for Joe Moxley's *Creative Writing in America* in which he asserts his belief that some things creative writing students learn in composition class need to be unlearned. I tend to agree with that. In my opinion, one of the big things to combat is the belief that all writing has a beginning, middle and end. I tend to think that poems, for instance, are mostly middle. One of the tricks my students learn during workshop is to find the false introduction or unnecessary conclusion and revise accordingly.

We also seem to forget that genre in a creative writing class is as much related to what Pierre Bourdieu called "habitus" as dialect is in a composition class. Because creative writing most often gets taught generically—poetry, fiction, one-act play, creative essay—certain students already privileged by knowing these genres tend to do better in the course than others. I've said that one of the things I'd like to really think about in the upcoming years is alternative genres so we can begin with what students bring with them from their home cultures and do so respectfully as a bridge, maybe, to the more traditional genres. In this regard I especially like the work of Gwen

Pugh and younger scholars like Marcos del Hierro. As Mina Shaughnessy asserted so subtly many people missed it, some of the tactics we use in “foreign-language teaching” might be profitably used in helping students overcome “interference errors” common in the writing of students who come to college from homes that employ dialects different from the ones we sanction in school (see *Errors* 156-157). With this in mind, John Baker and I co-authored an essay for *TETYC* in which we make the case for having language learners bring in poems unique to their cultures and then practice English language skills by writing in those forms. Simply put, we treated “the first language and culture as a resource not a problem,” as Suresh Canagarajah puts it. Pisarn (Bee) Chamcharastri did a similar study with wonderful results by using haiku with Japanese students who were learning to write in English. Baker and I worked with a more heterogeneous group than Chamcharastri did.

In recent years I have been impressed by the growing but neglected body of literature on the uses of poetry in language learning, including the important work of my former colleague at IUP, David Hanauer. Poetry is larger than the poem. A good poem, as my teacher William Heyen might say, teaches the poet what the poem is about. It’s “smarter” than the poet. I love reading Percy Shelley’s “A Defense of Poetry” for his elevation of poetry and imagination: “poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the center and circumference of knowledge.” You don’t have to sit down and announce to folks that you’re going to write a poem to be a poet. Poets are all around us and prove their worth repeatedly in imaginings that change the way we see the world. I’d put some scientists in the category of poet and enjoy reading the work of the great physicist Richard Feynman when he writes about imagination, describing it as “beautiful tightropes of logic” (*The Meaning of It All*, 15). I see Feynman and Shelley connected in their views of the importance of imagination in poetry and science: “the center and circumference of knowledge.”

There’s probably nothing new here. But I think some skills usually taught only in creative writing, from the perspective of a Shelley or a Feynman, ought to be taught in all disciplines. Or maybe we will eventually teach creative writing by teaching alternative genres or at least have a section of the course that focuses on them. When I think about ways we might inadvertently exclude certain groups of students from creative writing, I think first and foremost of the poignant example bell hooks gives concerning “voice.”

It is easy for the well-intentioned but careless teacher to exclude certain students. Hooks writes, memorably, “In all my writing classes I was the only black student. Whenever I read a poem written in the particular dialect of southern black speech, the teacher and fellow students would praise me for

using my ‘true,’ authentic voice, and encouraged me to develop this ‘voice,’ to write more of these poems. From the onset this troubled me. Such comments seemed to mask racial biases about what my authentic voice would or should be” (*Talking Back* 11). Not only must we be careful with what we have long accepted as the best practices in teaching writing of all kinds, but we need to go further into developing methods of instruction that are receptive to all students.

**What are the top five lessons you hope your student-writers learn from you?**

Five? I don’t think I ever said I had five things students should learn from me. But I do value students who read *AS* writers. This is sometimes difficult to explain to young folks who just want to write. We need to model this for them by referring whenever we’re able to and without portraying ourselves as hopeless nerds by talking about the authors they probably have read in their lit classes and what those authors set out to accomplish as writers and how they went about it. I am very self-conscious that much of the criticism I’ve written refers to writers long dead. I just wrote a review of a new book of poems by the strong poet John Hoppenthaler by referring to Shelley and Wordsworth. I think they’re pertinent still, though reception theorists like Jauss remind us to read in historical context. I try to do that. That’s why there are so many quoted passages in this interview with me. Some ideas are timeless while others are tied forever to their place in history. Working from Foucault’s *The Archeology of Knowledge*, I wrote in the title poem of my new collection, *Interruptions*, “There are interruptions all around us / and they do not connect to ‘silent / beginnings’ or continuous futures.” I’m not sure if it’s history itself or the way history gets told that blows my mind. But I sit here dumbstruck from reading it.

Reading around randomly one day, which I like to do as often as I can, I ran across a quote from Allen Ginsberg in which he claims, prior to writing “Howl,” “I thought I wouldn’t write a *poem*, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go...” (“Notes for Howl,” 318). That worked out pretty well for Ginsberg, but I also feel compelled to say to my students that I saw the best minds of my generation with books in their hands and memorized passages from those book on their lips prior to writing (or saying) anything worthwhile.

So, Tamara, I hope all “five” of my goals with students connect them to the central issue that writers should be readers too.

I’d add to this one goal, that just as my students, once they’re rid of me, will probably continue to be readers. I’d want them to continue to be writers even if they don’t publish right away. The quote I like so much from

Ginsberg gives directions for that, write what you want and without fear. We make a lot out of audience and social construction. I still believe in the imagination and the individual experience. I sound hopelessly conservative here, but maybe that's who I really am. I'd like to talk for ten or fifteen minutes at a meeting like CCCC about the Ginsberg passage I've quoted. But who would listen to me? I'd want to say that I think teachers can take something away from Ginsberg too. We need to keep on and soon enough we all will be teaching using methods we have not yet thought of. I hope to be around for that and maybe even have a hand in it. That would be my greatest wish for these last years, though I don't want to be morbid and scare you, Tamara.

**When is it important for student-writers to start thinking about publishing their work, and how do you advise them to go about doing so?**

This is a difficult question because I don't think our students should write to be published. I suppose they think they should and the only thing standing in their way is editorial prejudice. LSU Press published two of my books on the poet and novelist Fred Chappell. In his "Poets on Poetry" book from Michigan, *Plow Naked*, Fred gives a detailed description of how he thought he'd look and act once he became a writer. I laugh thinking about it. But I believe our students have a persona in mind when they come to our creative writing classes and it might be fun starting out a course having them come to class dressed the way they think they might dress as writers and write a short something-or-other about why they dressed the way they did. But that might invite some problems. Chappell himself saw the poet writing poetry as someone plowing naked.

I have had young writers write poems and stories in my classes that I believe are ready to be published. I will always try to get them to read a journal that I think might be willing to publish it. There are editors who are looking for fine young talent, like my new friend novelist Amy Wilson from Oklahoma. Amy and others like her are doing a genuine service to young writers and the literary arts as a whole in this country. I also caution students about presses that end up as vanity presses, asking you to "presell" books. Young writers need to be careful but old as I am I get tricked over and over. I make one rookie mistake after another.

**Other than enrolling in creative writing classes or programs, what should student-writers be doing to advance their craft and/or careers?**

This is a difficult question because for so long so many of our writers had to support their writing habits by teaching. I'm in that group. I'd starve on what I make as a poet. Hell, what I've made as a teacher isn't great, but it has been steady.

I've come to a kind of "meeting of the minds" with Donald Hall in recent years that I had not had time to reach when I was younger. Every young writer should read "Poetry and Ambition." In it he claims MFA programs are producing McPoets who write McPoems. Hall's point, of course, is that literary art did just fine prior to the advent of the MFA. In fact, he is concerned that institutionalizing creative writing will do more harm than good. But I'd also have to argue that by keeping creative writing outside the academy writers from various backgrounds would be prevented from writing and reading, and literary writing would not evolve in an inclusive way. There's some good thinking going on related to issues of gender and race exclusion by the very smart people at Warren Wilson.

So while I think we can write without taking courses or entering programs, I also think the best programs have a real commitment to racial and social equality.

I have worked with ("taught") numerous young writers who have gone on to publish. Some of them were good from the very start and my goal was to not do any harm. I love getting their books and I often review them. I had a student this past spring who wrote a poem I envied. That's the burden of having really good students. Some of them will be better writers than their teachers. She would not send out the poems she wrote, though, and I would not pressure her to do so.

So what was the question? To "advance their careers," they should do what I begrudgingly said years ago characterized technical writers I knew, they should go to conferences and network. I haven't been very good at that myself and usually attend CCCC rather than AWP. That might change, though, as my view of myself evolves. I'd say after they graduate that students should write often and find like-minded people. Everyone at Starbucks is a writer, right?

**Can you share a favorite writing exercise you assign that students tend to find particularly beneficial?**

I guess I have taken what compositionists call "the social turn" in my teaching of creative writing. I used to have two or three pages of "exercises" I'd bring into my classrooms to get students to respond to. Every textbook has exercises. There are books that are entirely exercises. I've recently wondered if this is a good thing or if it gets students off track, if the goal is Ginsberg's "...just write what I wanted without fear." So any exercise I might advocate should start someplace outside the young writer but give the writer space enough to move back inside.

One of the best books I read as a young writer was Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town*. What I like about Hugo and Hugo's book (I met him as an undergrad at State University College at Brockport) was his absolute belief that writers need to find their own way. A teacher, then, needs to create opportunities and an environment where students find themselves as writers. I'm not talking about voice here though I could be and a few years ago might have been. I'm talking about Hugo's opening statement, "You'll never be a poet until you realize that everything I say today... is wrong. It may be right for me, but it is wrong for you" (3). So how do we help students with exercises if we want them to find themselves in whatever the student produces in completing the exercise?

Hugo again. The title of his book comes from his belief that we always start a poem in our hometown "but you have a better chance of finding it (the poem) in another" (12). I love this notion that we write best when we write "off the subject," as Hugo goes on to say. I like to tell my students that here in Indiana, Pa the main drag is Philadelphia Street. If you're a comp student, make a commitment to Philadelphia Street and follow it to the bloody end. But I tell my creative writers that they might begin on Philadelphia Street and when they get to the very exotic Thirteenth Street they might feel like taking a right turn. I tell them they should do it to find out what's up Thirteenth Street. In a few minutes they'll reach Water Street and if they turn right they might find themselves in the front yard of Jimmy Stewart's old house. That's where the poem probably can be found.

Those turns typify for me moving from the triggering town to another town. By moving in that direction, something unique will happen, something that can only happen to and in that writer. I see some exercises in the various books of exercises that help young writers complete this journey. Those are the exercises I'd want students to complete. A good book for these kinds of exercises is Behn and Twichell's *The Practice of Poetry*.

**What is the most valuable question a writer can ask himself or herself? And can you answer that question here?**

My excellent and long-time friend, the late novelist William Hallberg, used to ask his students in his fiction workshops at East Carolina, "So what?" I told him one day when we'd been drinking that I thought that question was rude and probably useless. But as I've gotten farther along as a writer myself, I've found myself asking that question of myself. But what does it mean?

Bill meant it as a real question in the context of actions in stories. If someone does or says something, "so what?" I always thought he meant it in a belittling way. No doubt I was wrong.

I see the pertinence of that question now in my late career. What does it all add up to? Was anyone listening? Did anyone learn anything from me? Did I teach mistakes and incorrect methods? I'm seeing the metaphysical conceit at the heart of more and more of my life experiences, especially as Resa and I prepare our son, Antonio, for the world. I want to see some lesson in running as hard as he can to first base after hitting the ball right back to the pitcher. I remember seeing the great Roger Maris in Yankee Stadium in the year he hit 61 home runs not run out a grounder to short stop. I recall everyone in our section of seats, my father included, standing up and booing. After he broke Babe Ruth's record, someone might have said about Maris's failure to run out that grounder, "so what?" I think it's clear "so what." We are what we do.

So you want to be a writer, "So what?" But if that's your goal, don't be satisfied with writing weak, imitative stuff. Find yourself in what you've written and know what's really yours. Write fearlessly!

**What potential developments do you feel should or will occur in the future of creative writing?**

At CCCC in St. Louis a few years ago, I was on a panel with some amazing writer/scholars: Dianne Donnelly, Stephanie Vanderslice, and Mary Ann Cain. That was one of my best experiences at that meeting. After we spoke, we were asked by the editor of a well-known journal if we would like to put together a colloquium for his journal based upon our talks. We were all excited and had coffee to discuss how we would go about doing this work. It was clear from our papers and the responses we received that our discussion of social issues in the teaching of creative writing touched the core of many people in attendance. For various reasons we never finished that project and so our papers did not appear in print together, in their natural context.

I think that was the start of my thinking in the direction of social equity in the creative writing class. I also met David Wallace at that meeting and became fixated on his notion (with Helen Ewald Rothschild) of mutuality. I've written about mutuality in the creative writing classroom for Alexandria Peary and Tom Hunley's book *Creative Writing Pedagogies for the Twenty-First Century*. I won't do an ad for that book here, though I could do so in good conscience. I will say that many new ideas are tried out rhetorically in that book, and I think I'd recommend the book to anyone interested in multiple answers to the question you ask here. My answer, as I've said, is that I'd like to see us teach for social equality not only to language learners by using forms from their home cultures, but for students who come from homes where certain nontraditional genres are valued. I have named hip

hop and identified Pugh and del Hierro as sources for reading about ways we might connect hip hop to our teaching of writing. I like the work that is connecting creative writing to technology, including Trent Hergenrader's work with teaching students how to create video games. And what's with all our snobbery about genre fiction? I think we have a lot of work to do in figuring out creative writing AS creative writing. I sense composition is about finished with us. So we need to make our way forward and we'll need a new paradigm for moving ahead.

**What question do you wish readers and/or writing students would ask? And can you answer that question here?**

I'd like them to ask, out of respect for my late and much-beloved colleague Bill Hallberg, "So what?" I'm still searching for the answer to that question...

## **Camped Again At The Needle's Mouth**

In the end I was left with cold iron, in which I walked. My lameness was a season: sparrows came and went, attracted by the holes I punched. I pretended I guarded an armory, a kitchen—one of those minor courts. There remained the mystery of my companion, whom I could not see. Into the dream of assonance crept my sister's death. The angelic equations—stop your ears, keep your gaze cast towards the path (prop it with a bone if you must). Because we glide through a star's musk, however painfully. I hand the child back, again & again. It always wants to go. Protestantism, Catholicism, road signs scythed by the night's plow. I adjust the bandages of the hostage. It's possible he (or she) mistakes these for bonds. I can't even inscribe my passage in the calendar of frost, which smells of camphor, as if it had been packed away over the course of some long wedding. Little could be deduced from the condition of the corpse's internal organs, though they were larger than expected.

## **Theology (I)**

I have never pleaded my lungs' cause before a jury of wounded deer. I have never drunk wine brewed from my or my lover's hair. I have never produced a theology of clothing for the republic, my republic. In my terror I take a razor to the bristled hide of my republic, gently. It's not as if I'm doing this for the money, after all. It's a healthy occupation, the sky insinuates itself where just a few moments ago I was removing an invitation from an album. It's not true, the sun's breasts, the path through the forest soaked in milk, etc. Say I once saw a steel mill in operation, its garden of sparks. I eat my pen, I am ravenous. God nods, He knows just this feeling.

## You Want It Darker

The day after the election, Leonard Cohen dies  
and my eye gets infected, and my daughter  
flies around the living room refusing to put on underwear.  
I can barely lift my head to see the smug sun  
pouring through the blinds, streaming its white spotlight  
on each darkened wall. I'm all in on grief and misery.  
All in shock and *Fuck this Country*, but it's still a day, a day  
I don't teach, but strap my son into his Cheerio-  
encrusted stroller and wheel him to his 'baby-taps'  
dance class at the Y. We arrive to find the teacher red-eyed  
and wrecked, her t-shirt wrinkled, acoustic slung low.  
Only one other parent has bothered to show,  
her kid wailing beneath the moon-glow of her phone.  
When it becomes clear no one else is coming,  
the teacher begins to strum and sing of fall, of piggies  
at the market and monkeys in our beds. We squeeze  
our fingers into spinning fists and imagine  
we are busses peeling out of town. It all culminates  
in the world's saddest rendition of "If you're happy  
and you know it," in which we're summoned to rise up  
off our multi-colored mats, to clap and stomp  
and shout, *Hooray!*—Oh, God. Oh, Leonard,  
who shed this life like a three-piece suit, who saw this mess  
and chose not to stay, but slip between the bricks  
in his Tower of Song, the sun is still out there,  
armored and gleaming. There is nothing I can say  
to make it stop.

## SECOND PLACE, WILLIAM MATTHEWS POETRY PRIZE

**The Last American Tour, 1953**

The money she wired him  
would be swallowed in drink,  
she knew that, but wifely duty  
or a perverse need to be right  
made her wire it anyway  
because she couldn't be there  
to slap sense in him or pull his hair,  
pound him on the back with her bare  
fists, raging redfaced and grim.  
But when they rang her in Swansea  
to say he'd not waked up in the bed  
at the Chelsea (19 whiskies, they said),  
she screamed bloody murder  
and got on a plane.  
At St. Vincent's she bobbed  
past reception: *Is the bloody man  
dead yet?* Getting no answer  
and no rise out of him,  
she jumped him in the hospital bed,  
pulled off by nurses who feared  
he'd smother in the oxygen tent,  
that plastic bag of breath  
momentarily smashed flat—  
the familiar stinky mouth  
of her little fat man kept from her  
at the last by what he needed to live  
though he wouldn't and he didn't—  
and she, fat too and alcoholic,  
could have torn him limb  
from limb. Instead, she cursed  
John Brinnin, said she'd kill him,  
but was seized and sent to detox,  
while the comatose poet lay dying.  
Days later, clean, still furious,  
she packed all the beautiful shirts  
he'd stolen so damned gleefully  
from his foolish and generous hosts,  
spat upon them, and snapped the bag shut.  
And that's what we call closure.

**Wren's Nest**

*for Jill*

The window of my sadness opened to a bird  
boisterous and chirping from the back porch lattice,  
piling her cradle of twigs beneath the spread  
of new leaves. It was spring, and the worst part  
supposedly past, but the sunlight was scoring through spotless glass,  
and there was no hanging roost where I could hide  
under the shade of a roof, behind a screen  
of geraniums. The flowers would slowly die.  
Inside, I heard the hollow of my baby's cry  
slice through the rooms. Sometimes I'd wanted to kill  
the bird, uproot her brood that brought mildew and drought  
to my plants, that, daily, squirming and pink, filled  
my eyes with new blindness. Nature bred  
pain. But then I saw, amid thin straw and birch down,  
snippets of thread, where she had sewn  
the cotton sacs of spider's eggs into the sticks;  
by instinct, she had known the unseen  
threat of mites, perils that lurked  
within her chicks' own feathers, and so she wove  
the greater danger underneath the fibers of her home—  
holding that darkness close, keeping  
her worry sharp against the things she loved.

**Breath**

I followed my breath so I might find it  
outside the thought of one breath or another.

To breathe is to breathe through a face unseen  
as others see it. I followed my thoughts

to a pause in the dialogue of breathing.  
The trees of nerves are beautiful in winter.

Sometimes I do it in a group, with one  
or two, who never are so friendly. After.

Not mean. Just solitary trees in winter.  
However inside or outside the difference

of thought, they, as them, are nowhere near.  
Call them the space around the thought. Or space

around the space, which in turn says nothing.  
Across the otherwise congregate silence.

\*

The call of freedoms other than our own.  
They make a language by human instinct

other than one's own alone. We all suffer  
the same illusions now, or so I imagine.

Those of us who meditate together,  
we all watch our solitude get longer,

more bearable, more negotiable. A part.  
This is not to say you have escaped.

Besides. What is there to escape.  
Something your father said that hurt you,

it is in there, inside the missing father.  
Books of dreams crackle into flame,

and just watching makes it all feel less  
unnerving. You here, fire there. Alive.

\*

Then I followed my breath to a place of rest.  
In the air a vague wind, an idea of rest.

Truth is, I am always in two places.  
I am always the writer who reads and finds

something missing. When I close my eyes,  
I see the friend who drank himself blind.

I read to him. Which comes easily.  
Too easily given the difficult things I say.

Sometimes when a dream breaks, I sleep  
a little more. The elms outside take on

the light I give them. But it is not my gift.  
Not mine alone, they wear the accent

of gifts that need a scarcity about them.  
Like lilies in the darkness of the pond.

\*

You can wander the sexual streets of London  
to where they lead, if you are patient.

And here you are, among the canvases  
of the free museums, the rivers of instinct

disciplined, held, released in the lilies.  
Walls rise flooded in the petals and vines.

Such holding gives back a better version  
of magnanimity and animal hunger.

This monster of light, this reaching for it,  
it says something beyond the blue movies

whose unions end in too many questions.  
Or too few. It says there is language

in the wilderness that sweetens the air  
it breathes and gives us. Long ago, in stillness.

\*

Say we speak a tongue we do not know,  
our nets thrown deep beyond the object,

past the rot and minnows of the water,  
the sizzle of the mayflies, the s in yes.

Say our instinct flowers into embrace,  
sunk, face-down, against the April water.

It just might loosen the noose of the collar,  
the burden of the language left unspoken.

Even dreams give us choices to make  
into the ways we read them. It is in there:

the afternoon a painter so loved the pond  
he placed a canvas in the way. So loved

the eye-black water bled through the iris.  
So he might step away, with us. And see.

\*

I follow my breath to a small museum  
of small objects I squint my eyes to read.

I have a will in me I barely know.  
As if desire has choices to make without me.

So, as I stand above the tiny house  
where I once lived, I talk. I confess.

The way loneliness does to a stranger  
or a cat. Do not touch, says the museum

guard to a child. And the door of the house  
squeaks on its hinges. Do not breathe,

says the violins of flies above the lilies  
and things so small you cannot reach them.

And so I watch the child. How he touches  
his face. And without thinking, I touch my own.

## Montages and Memories

*Camino Poems*, by Newton Smith. Argura Press. 102 pages. ISBN: 978-0-9976614-0-8.

*That Rain We Needed*, by Sam Barbee. Winston-Salem, NC: Press 53. 88 pages. ISBN: 978-1-941209-40-0.

*And everything together, all voices, all goals, all yearning,  
all suffering, all pleasure, all that was good and evil, all of this together was the world.*

*All of it together was the flow of events, was the music of life.*  
—Hermann Hesse, “Siddhartha”

Within and all around us are connections we may or may not realize, may or may not nurture. A life on one side of the globe may touch the other without a word exchanged; a chance compliment to a stranger may be just the confidence boost needed to help them through their day. The threads of our lives are not simply woven; they are part of and comprised of the multiplicity of what is now. Every succeeding moment of our life has necessarily taken our entire life to arrive. *Camino Poems* and *That Rain We Needed* both honor this, each in its own way.

Smith and Barbee collect shapes of their experiences and arrange them carefully, each in its sequence. Each is the portrait of a life, described in installments, stitched with memory and emotion. The result is a montage of moments: memorials and revelations are integral to both collections. Smith’s travelogue and Barbee’s memoir remind us that while we may not always understand our path, it is even so uniquely our own. In “Deciding to Go”, Smith alludes to this directly:

Here you see your finger  
like a saint’s relic pointing  
not at heaven or even at you  
but beyond to a place  
where you will go  
without knowing why,  
your Camino.

Barbee’s reference is not so straightforward, but no less resonant, in “Gestation Period”:

Soon this house will bear  
the rage of new confessions.



Rousing my children to  
 the scent of rain, I explain  
 delicacy in a petal and the  
 bracing of a hummingbird's wing.  
 For them, each day seems complete.

Yet as evening looms over treeline,  
 and oak boughs swell in night-winds,  
 my hopeful muse emerges [...]

This elegance of description is characteristic of Barbee's style. Unlikely juxtapositions create new depths, new perceptions for the reader. Touches become imprints, colors songs, and words a harbinger in "The Shade That Saves Me":

My imprint lingers  
 with the fallow clods  
 that long for planting,  
 that long for those colors

and songs that gorge  
 the tulips, hydrangea and rose.

Whether Barbee is relating a childhood baseball game or a backyard memorial service, his clarity and resonance enable the reader to connect with his poems on their own terms. Childhood insecurities; memories of time spent with family now gone; years invested in the relationships of a lifetime; every person can relate to these things, these elements of personal growth. *That Rain We Needed* is itself a coming-of-age, a testament to the bravery of a man who traveled from his beginnings in "Our Father's Son" as "that reincarnation" to create his own legacy and a place to belong:

I will follow. I will lead. I will, I will,  
 as it pleases you, my gardener, my partner,  
 nurture your blossoms, unbind your red ribbons,  
 and yield to your dominion of the spaces I adore.

—from "Fealty" (87)

The landscapes of Newton Smith and Sam Barbee are strewn with loveliness, loneliness, companionship, insecurity, and all the myriad things which are at work in every life. Smith's unvarnished elegance aids the reader's understanding of the Way as a thing not seen, but experienced:

Thoughts arrive  
then float away  
with the clouds.  
Back to the stones  
at your feet.  
This is why  
you are here.  
Pay attention.

—from “Pay Attention”, *Camino Poems*, 46

It is a testament to its own truth: it speaks for naught but itself, and in fact depends upon the reader for its full impact. As Smith remarks in his acknowledgements, “pilgrimages and writing poems are never the solitary acts we imagine them to be” (96). The Camino—the Path—is never traveled alone.

By contrast to Smith's “listening poems” which are shaped partly by the reader, Barbee's verses are communicated as deeply personal stories which reach beyond their shapes to speak to the reader's own experience. Barbee's introspection finds a different center for its subject matter; yet he as capably creates a written mirror in which the reader may see themselves readily. “Peripheral Vision”, a memorial poem for a beloved pet, recalls in part

...shared Saturdays when  
you tussled in the yard with the children.  
They shouted my name to join in  
and toss your ball so you galloped  
in that clumsy gait beside them,  
stirring up leaves I had just raked.

These down-to-earth lines, packed with imagery and noise, evoke memories and feelings for anyone who has ever played in the back yard with their dog—and any father who will have to again rake the entire yard once playtime is over for the day. Barbee's ability to share his story of personal growth by calling upon the familiar is part of his magic. While we may not have every experience he describes, we are able to identify in so many ways that we become his companions as well.

Both Smith and Barbee are consummate poets. Whether we are walking an ancient road or picking wild cherries, the vigor of these compositions instill in us a new appreciation, an understanding born of connection. Like the thousand voices of Siddhartha are the moments of our lives—and these chronicles both give shape to connections, relationships, and lessons each of us can understand. *Camino Poems* and *That Rain We Needed* are sensitive explorations as well as shared visions; the very experience of reading them changes their reader.

Chad Weeden

## Hotel Eleven

I am an echo between two windows. My aura  
distorted—ricocheting off the available chaos

since patterns bloomed like black umbrellas.  
I wade through motion sickness to plug holes

in parentheses because I crave the algebra  
of logical disasters that can't be outlined in chalk.

Eleven helicopters, counting. I churn a kaleidoscope  
and watch my equations dissolve like chemical dreams.

That's why you're flipping pillows. The fan struggling  
on low. I unzip my suitcase, pan for artifacts

and heartbeats as a knot of curtain cords shiver  
in a blizzard of analog snow. If reruns are forever,

then how vacant must the highway hum  
in order to calculate the temporality of home?

My erratic estimations. You were the air in a piano,  
the inertia of a rented room. And here I am again

punching buttons to dead-end elevators until  
I am left second-guessing the endlessness of a hotel hallway.

A paramedic performs open-heart surgery on a bench  
in the lobby. You cross mine every once in a while

so when we collide you walk through me. You make me  
want to float above myself and the towel cart that ambles

by with washcloths, clicking like a stuck revolver because  
drooping from every door handle reads: do not disturb

do not resuscitate, do not disappear into the folds  
of a trench coat. But you were already a ghost

dancing on my back, lazy pirouettes, always  
the same number, like a ballerina in a box.

## **It**

He did not mind part of it. But all of it bothered him. He had often been accused of loving it. Once, for a whole day, he had none of it at all—and he did not miss it. Like people said, there was nothing to it. There is nothing for it and nothing to be done about it. Nothing could come of it. He certainly had nothing to say about it. How did it make him feel, his wife wanted to know. Talk about it, you'll feel better. He could sense it sulking next to him in the waiting room, sitting there—and its feet did not even reach the floor. But he knew better than to underestimate it. He told people, Don't worry about it. It's OK. It's nothing, really.

## **My Neanderthal Ancestor**

Unlike the illustrations in books or dioramas, my Neanderthal ancestor was not beetle-browed, bowlegged and stooped over. He was tall, and his shirts and pants, made of antelope hide, were skillfully tailored by his wife to hang on his shoulders and hips just so. He even had a jacket made of camelops hide, with buttons carved of mastodon ivory. One night, unable to sleep, he went walking by the sea. He did not mind the storm that pelted him with rain. He noticed how the lightning, seeming to bolt from the clouds, was actually leaping up out of the shore and ocean toward the clouds. He was unaware that it would be centuries before anyone else noticed this phenomenon. He woke up on the beach—stunned. At first, he did not remember how he came to be there. The storm was gone and the sand had turned to glass. My ancestor tiptoed over the glass. He tried not to break it. But it crinkled under his boots, although they were soft, made of woven eiderdown, and fastened to his calves with buckles of mother-of-pearl. So he lay down on the glass and, gently rocking, pulled his weight across the glass without cracking it. He couldn't wait to bring his wife to this beach. I'll bring her at night, he thought, so she can see how the stars, so close to the earth, are smiling at themselves in the glass.

## Tate Street

In my next life, I will be the collegiate bohemian  
who just passed,  
clogs knocking on the sidewalk.  
Casual satchel swaying in my warrior walk,  
I will march into the ROSES 95 A DOZEN shop  
and buy just one, for my lover,  
a crimson deeper than my nails.  
Stem destined for a sports cup on a dorm dresser,  
previous home to cheap beer swigged  
at yesterday's ball game.

I will scream a furious street cantata  
to accompany the cyclist ticking his way up Tate.  
I will accost the ears of customers in the India Palace.  
My dress electric blue,  
all the campus scooters  
humming in our ears.  
I will break into the food service truck headed  
for the dining hall,  
plunder its racks of cool loaves,  
and gorge on the stolen edibles.

I will pitch a tent on Tate Street,  
live in its cacophony of rap and rumble,  
be like the El Carreton restaurant,  
bold flagged sign beating in the sun,  
Open for Delivery All Day.  
I will be the returning sparrow,  
a feathered cannon ball,  
ramming myself  
over and over  
against the palladium pane.

## **After the Fall**

No matter what swells  
over the seawalls  
of your love and buries you,

the plumbing still crumbles,  
the car still runs dry.  
At night I chew bits

of skin from my feet,  
catch mice with cracker  
crumbs in the sink.

We still watch  
the moonrise together,  
an atomic tangerine.

Looters roam the streets.  
We sit with shotguns  
across our knees.

Cradle them like babies.

Judy Kaber

## **Beyond the Final Chapter**

Books form cliffs. We fall  
into wanton characters' arms.

Nothing holds us. Just whispers. Whims.  
Each page turn, turns us into someone

dissolute. The author tells us we carry  
a nest of laundry. We finger undone buttons.

I found the unexpected villain at the end.  
A valley with trees tumbling down the sides. A gate

ruined. A gauntlet of afternoon light, a woolly ruff of heat,  
stone-faced cats and rusty bikes.

When he came to me, I followed him, through  
murmuring air, the wet suck of summer.

Now I wish for turbulence—disturbing,  
evocative. It rattles in the gravel

a broken tube of nickels.

## Contributors

**Mary Adams** is the author of *Epistles from the Planet Photosynthesis* (1999) and *Commandment* (2009). Her poems have appeared in *Shenandoah*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Antioch Review*, and *Black Warrior Review*, among others. She received degrees in creative writing from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop and the University of Houston. Her honors include grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Cultural Arts Council of Houston. She teaches at Western Carolina University and lives in the mountains with a few dozen pets.

**Joseph Bathanti** is former Poet Laureate of North Carolina (2012-14) and recipient of the 2016 North Carolina Award for Literature. He is the author of ten books of poetry, including *Communion Partners*; *Anson County*; *The Feast of All Saints*; *This Metal*, nominated for the National Book Award, and winner of the Oscar Arnold Young Award; *Land of Amnesia*; *Restoring Sacred Art*, winner of the 2010 Roanoke Chowan Prize, awarded annually by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association for best book of poetry in a given year; *Sonnets of the Cross*; *Concertina*, winner of the 2014 Roanoke Chowan Prize; and *The 13th Sunday after Pentecost*, released by LSU Press in 2016. His novel, *East Liberty*, won the 2001 Carolina Novel Award. His novel, *Coventry*, won the 2006 Novel-lo Literary Award. His book of stories, *The High Heart*, won the 2006 Spokane Prize. *They Changed the State: The Legacy of North Carolina's Visiting Artists, 1971-1995*, his book of nonfiction, was published in early 2007. His recent book of personal essays, *Half of What I Say Is Meaningless*, winner of the Will D. Campbell Award for Creative Nonfiction, is from Mercer University Press. A new novel, *The Life of the World to Come*, was released from University of South Carolina Press in late 2014. Bathanti is Professor of Creative Writing at Appalachian State University in Boone, and the University's Watauga Residential College Writer-in-Residence. He served as the 2016 Charles George VA Medical Center Writer-in-Residence in Asheville

**Patrick Bizzaro** has published nine books and chapbooks of poetry, two critical studies of Fred Chappell's poetry and fiction, a book on the pedagogy of academic creative writing, some textbooks, and a couple hundred poems in magazines. He is a frequent reviewer of his peers' work in magazines like *Asheville Poetry Review*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, and *Appalachian Journal*, among others. Bizzaro, first director of the University Writing Program at East Carolina University, is a UNC Board of Governor's Distinguished Professor for Teaching and ECU Scholar-Teacher Award winner. He is currently a professor of English in Indiana University of Pennsylvania's doctoral program in Composition and TESOL, after retiring from ECU. During his last year on the ECU faculty, he received the Outstanding Professor award from the ECU Department of Disability Support Services, the ninth award for teaching he has received during his career. His articles on composition studies have appeared regularly in *College English* and *College Composition and Communication*. His co-edited book on poet and pedagogue Wendy Bishop is forthcoming from Hampton Press.

**Bruce Bond** is the author of twenty books including, most recently, *Immanent Distance: Poetry and the Metaphysics of the Near at Hand* (U of MI, 2015), *Black Anthem* (Tampa Review Prize, U of Tampa, 2016), *Gold Bee* (Helen C. Smith Award, Crab Orchard Award, Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), *Sacrum* (Four Way Books, 2017), and *Blackout Starlight: New and Selected Poems 1997-2015* (E. Phillabaum Award, LSU, 2017). Five books are forthcoming: *Rise and Fall of the Lesser Sun Gods* (Elixir Book Prize, Elixir Press), *Frankenstein's Children* (Lost Horse Press), *Dear Reader* (Free Verse Editions), *Scar: A Trilogy* (Etruscan Press), and *Words Written Against the Walls of the City* (LSU). Presently he is a Regents Professor of English at University of North Texas.

**Hannah Bonner's** poetry has been published in *So to Speak*, *The Freeman*, *The North Carolina Literary Review*, among others. Her essays have appeared in *Bustle*, *VIDA: Women in the Literary Arts*, *Misadventures Magazine*, *Weird Sister*, and *ROAR*.

**Lauren Camp** is the author of three books of poetry, most recently *One Hundred Hungers*. Her work has garnered a Dorset Prize, an Anna Davidson Rosenberg Award, an Arab American Book Award

(honorable mention), an RL-International Award, a Margaret Randall Poetry Prize, prizes from *RHINO* and *Western Humanities Review*, and a Black Earth Institute Fellowship. She lives in northern New Mexico, where she teaches creative writing to elders.

Born on the eastern shore of Maryland, **Catherine Carter** lives with her husband in Cullowhee, near Western Carolina University, where she teaches in the English Education program. Her latest full-length collection (LSU, 2012) is *The Swamp Monster at Home*; her first, *The Memory of Gills* (LSU, 2006) received the 2007 Roanoke-Chowan Award from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association. Her chapbook, *Marks of the Witch*, won Jacar Press' 2014 chapbook contest and appeared in December 2014. Her work has also appeared in *Best American Poetry 2009*, *Orion*, *Poetry*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, and *Ploughshares*, among others.

**Annabelle Crowe's** poetry has appeared in *Asheville Poetry Review*, *diode poetry journal*, and *The Adroit Journal*, and has been recognized by the Princeton University Poetry Contest for High School Students and the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award. Annabelle is currently a freshman studying English and history at Rice University in Houston, Texas.

**Fred Chappell** is a master of many literary forms: poetry, novels, short stories, critical essays and book reviews. A native of western North Carolina his work is noted for traditional Appalachian settings and themes, but also fantastical elements. His first collection of poetry, *The World Between the Eyes* (1971) won the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Cup. Other early collections of poetry include *The Man Twice Married to Fire* (1977), *Awakening to Music* (1979) and *Midquest* (1981), which Fred has described as "a four-volume poetic autobiography." Other books of poems include *Family Gathering* (2000), *Backsass* (2004), and *Shadowbox* (2009). In novels such as *It Is Time, Lord* (1963), *The Inkling* (1965), and *Dagon* (1968), which won the French Academy's Prix de Meilleur des Lettres Etrangers, he explores madness, violence, and even horror. His later cycle of inter-connected short stories, *The Kirkman Tetralogy* included volumes such as *I Am One of You Forever* (1985) and *Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You* (1996), focuses on personal ex-

perience. His essay collections include *Plow Naked: Selected Essays on Poetry* (1993) and *A Way of Happening: Observations of Contemporary Poetry* (1998). A native of Canton in the mountains of western North Carolina, he taught at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro for over 40 years. He is the winner of, among other awards, the Bollingen Prize in Poetry, Aiken Taylor Prize, T. S. Eliot Prize, the World Fantasy Award, and Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Prize seven times over. He was the Poet Laureate of North Carolina from 1997-2002. His most recent books are *Familiars* (2014), and *A Shadow of All Light* (2016).

**Phebe Davidson** is the author of several collections of poems, including *Fat Moon Rising* (Main Street Rag) and *The Surface of Things* (David Robert Books). Her latest chapbook, *Seven Mile*, was published by Main Street Rag in 2012. Her poems and reviews appear in print and electronic media, including *The Southern Poetry Review*, *Arabesques Review*, *Tar River Poetry* and *The Cortland Review*. She is a staff writer for *The Asheville Poetry Review* and Reviews Editor of *Yemassee*. She resides in Westminster, SC.

**M. Scott Douglass** is the publisher and managing editor of *The Main Street Rag*. He grew up in Pittsburgh and lives in Charlotte with his wife Jill. His poetry has appeared in places such as *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Sundog*, *Gargoyle*, *Midwest Review*, *North American Review*, *Plainsongs*, *San Pedro River Review*, and *Slipstream*. He is a Pushcart Prize nominee and a NC Arts & Science Council grant recipient which was used to publish his first book, *Audition for Heaven*. His most recent poetry book, *Just Passing Through*, was released in October by Paycock Press.

Poet/Playwright/Songwriter **Cornelius Eady** was born in Rochester, NY in 1954, and is the author of several poetry collections: *Kar-tunes*; *Victims of the Latest Dance Craze*, winner of the 1985 Lamont Prize; *The Gathering of My Name*, nominated for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry; *You Don't Miss Your Water*; *The Autobiography of a Jukebox*; *Brutal Imagination*, *Hardheaded Weather* (Putnam, 2008), and the anthologies *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep*, *In Search of Color Everywhere*, and *The Vintage Anthology of African American Poetry*, (1750-2000). He wrote the libretto to Diedra Murray's opera *Running Man*, which was short listed for the Pulitzer Prize in The-

atre, and his verse play *Brutal Imagination* won the Oppenheimer Prize for the best first play from an American Playwright in 2001. He was awarded tenure at SUNY Stony Brook in 1995, and holds a PhD in the Arts (Hon) from the University of Rochester (2010). His awards include Fellowships from the NEA, the Guggenheim Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Traveling Scholarship, and *The Prairie Schooner* Strousse Award. He is co-founder of the Cave Canem Foundation, and was, before returning to Stony Brook, The Miller Family Endowed Chair in Literature and Writing and Professor in English and Theater at The University of Missouri-Columbia.

**Diana Engel** served as editor of two local poetry anthology projects, and has verse appearing in *The Visual Poetry Walk 2016*, *A Gathering of Poets*, *Wild Goose Poetry Review*, *Open to Interpretation*, *snapdragon*, *Wordworks*, *the shagbark review* and *fire & chocolate*.

**Keith Flynn** ([www.keithflynn.net](http://www.keithflynn.net)) is the award-winning author of seven books, including five collections of poetry, most recently *Colony Collapse Disorder* (Wings Press, 2013), and a collection of essays, entitled *The Rhythm Method, Razzmatazz and Memory: How To Make Your Poetry Swing* (Writer's Digest Books, 2007). From 1984-1999, he was lyricist and lead singer for the nationally acclaimed rock band, The Crystal Zoo, which produced three albums: *Swimming Through Lake Eerie* (1992), *Pouch* (1996), and the spoken-word and music compilation, *Nervous Splendor* (2003). He is currently touring with a supporting combo, The Holy Men, whose album, *LIVE at Diana Wortham Theatre*, was released in 2011. His poetry and essays have appeared in many journals and anthologies around the world and have been translated into seven languages. He has been awarded the Sandburg Prize for poetry, a 2013 NC Literary Fellowship, the ASCAP Emerging Songwriter Prize, the Paumanok Poetry Award and was twice named a Gilbert-Chappell Distinguished Poet for NC. Flynn is founder and managing editor of *The Asheville Poetry Review*.

**Vieve Francis** is the author of three books of poetry *Blue-Tail Fly* (WSU, 2006), *Horse in the Dark* (Cave Canem Northwestern University Press Poetry Prize, 2016) and *Forest Primeval* (Hurston Wright Legacy Award and the 2017 Kingsley-Tufts Poetry Award).

Her work has appeared in numerous publications including: *Poetry*, *Best American Poetry* 2010, 2014, 2017, and *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*. She serves as an associate editor for *Callaloo* and is an associate professor of English and Creative Writing at Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH.

Joel Fry lives in Athens, Alabama. He has had poems published in *The Florida Review*, *Off the Coast*, *Plainsongs* and many other places. He is currently seeking a publisher for his first book of poems, *The Secret*.

Richard Garcia's recent books *The Other Odyssey*, from Dream Horse Press, and *The Chair*, from BOA, were both published in 2015. His recent book, *Porridge*, was published by Press 53 in 2016. His poems have appeared in many journals, including *The Georgia Review*, *Spillway*, and in anthologies such as *The Pushcart Prize* and *Best American Poetry*. He lives in Charleston, S.C. and is on the staff of the Antioch Low Residency MFA in Los Angeles.

Tamara Girardi is an Assistant Professor of English at HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College. She writes young adult fiction, and her primary research interests are online pedagogy, student engagement, young adult literature, and creative writing studies. This year, she co-edited two essay collections: *Ideology and Identity in Young Adult Literature: Connections to the Composition Classroom* and *Hero or Villain: Essays on Dark Protagonists in Television*, both published by McFarland Press. She lives in a suburb north of Pittsburgh with her husband and three children. You can find her on Twitter @TamaraGirardi.

Sarah Gordon's poetry has appeared in a number of publications, including, most recently, *The Georgia Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Confrontation*, *Arts & Letters*, and *Christianity and Literature*. Her collection, *Distances*, appeared from Brito & Lair in 1999. She is founding editor of the *Flannery O'Connor Review* and author of *Flannery O'Connor: The Obedient Imagination* (UGA Press 2000) and *A Literary Guide to Flannery O'Connor's Georgia* (UGA Press 2008).

Jaki Shelton Green's books include *Dead on Arrival*, *Dead on Arriv-*

*al and New Poems, Masks, Conjure Blues, singing a tree into dance, breath of the song, and Blue Opal*, a play (all with Carolina Wren Press) and *Feeding the Light* (Jacar Press, 2014). Her poetry has been choreographed by the Chuck Davis African Dance Ensemble, in conjunction with the Kennedy Center and the Nasher Museum at Duke University; Two Near the Edge Dance Company; Choreo-Collective; Danca Nova Dance Company, in conjunction with the Colorado Naropa Dance Institute; and Miami City Ballet. In 2003, Jaki received the North Carolina Award for Literature. She is the 2007 recipient of the Samuel Talmadge Ragan Award for her contributions over an extended period to The Fine Arts of North Carolina. In 2014, she was inducted into the NC Literary Hall of Fame. A community arts advocate, Jaki Shelton Green creates and facilitates programs that serve diverse audiences and populations. She is the owner of SistaWRITE, providing retreats and travel excursions for women writers.

**Jared Har el** was awarded the 2015 ‘Stanley Kunitz Memorial Prize’ from the *American Poetry Review*. Additionally, his poems have appeared or are forthcoming in such journals as *Ecotone*, *EPOCH*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Newtown Literary*, *The Southern Review*, *The Threepenny Review* and *Tin House*. His narrative long-poem, ‘The Body Double’, was published by *Brooklyn Arts Press*. Har el teaches writing at Nassau Community College and lives in Queens, NY with his wife and two kids.

**Eric Helms** holds degrees from Furman University and Columbia University’s School of the Arts. Some of his work can be found in *Riprap Literary Journal*, *key\_hole*, *Prelude*, *Diagram*, *MadHat Lit*, *Souvenir*, *American Athenaeum*, and *Blunderbuss*.

**Judy Kaber’s** poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Eclectica*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Off the Coast*, and *The Comstock Review*. Contest credits include the Maine Postmark Poetry Contest, the Larry Kramer Memorial Chapbook Contest, and, most recently, second place in the 2016 Muriel Craft Bailey Poetry Contest. She lives in Maine.

**Marilyn Kallet** has published 17 books, including *The Love That Moves Me*, a collection of poetry from Black Widow Press. She has translated Eluard’s *Last Love Poems*, P eret’s *The Big Game*, and has

recently co-edited and co-translated Chantal Bizzini's *Disenchanted City* (with J. Bradford Anderson and Darren Jackson.) Dr. Kallet is Nancy Moore Goslee Professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville; and she also teaches poetry workshops for VCCA in Au-villar, France. She has performed her poems on campuses and in theaters across the United States, as well as in France and Poland, as a guest of the U.S. Embassy. Kallet was inducted into the East Tennessee Literary Hall of Fame in poetry, 2005. Her work has appeared in many journals and anthologies, most recently on "The Writer's Almanac," hosted by Garrison Keillor.

**Richard Krawiec** has published three books of poetry, most recently *Women Who Loved me Despite*. His work appears in dozens of literary magazines, including *New Orleans Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *Shenandoah*, *sou'wester*, *Dublin Review*, *Chautauqua Literary Journal*, *Spillway*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *Blue Fifth Review*. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. In addition to poetry, he has published two novels, *Time Sharing* and *Faith in What?*, a story collection, *And Fools of God*, and four plays. He has been awarded fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the NC Arts Council, and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. He teaches online courses for UNC Chapel Hill, for which he won their Excellence in Teaching Award. He is founder of Jacar Press, a Community Active publishing company that publishes full-length collections, chapbooks, anthologies, and an award-winning online magazine, *One*. Krawiec has worked extensively with people in homeless shelters, women's shelters, prisons, literacy classes, and community sites, teaching writing.

**Shohreh Laici** is a literary translator and author based in Tehran. Her translations and articles are forthcoming in several American journals, including *Ezra: An Online Journal of Translation* and *Two Lines Press*.

**Al Maginnes** is the author of ten collections or chapbooks of poems, most recently *Music From Small Towns* (Jacar Press, 2014), winner of the annual Jacar Press contest and *Inventing Constellations* (Cherry Grove Collections, 2012). His poems have appeared in such journals as *Poetry*, *Georgia Review*, *New England Review*, and *Southern Review* and many others. He lives with his family in

Raleigh, North Carolina where he teaches composition, literature, and creative writing at Wake Technical Community College.

**Rob Neufeld** is the author and editor of six books about literature and history, including *The Making of a Writer: The Journals of Gail Godwin, Vols. 1 and 2*. He has been the Asheville Citizen-Times book and history feature writer since 1999, and wrote the introduction to the first issue of *The Asheville Poetry Review* 24 years ago. He has organized events, such as Together We Read, a 21-county community reading program; and appeared on stage, TV, film and radio. He publishes the literature and history website, “The Read on WNC.” He and his wife, Bev Robertson, Mars Hill University library dean, moved to Asheville in 1988; and their two sons, Henry and Nathan, are natives.

**Mohamadali Nouri** (born in 1985) is a highly regarded Iranian poet. His first book of poems won several important awards, including the Iranian Journalists Poetry Book Award, which considers the work of Persian poets from Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan.

**Tim Peeler** is past winner of the Jim Harrison Award for contributions to baseball literature, and has also twice been a Casey Award Finalist (baseball book of the year) and a finalist for the SIBA Award. He lives with his wife, Penny, in Hickory, North Carolina, where he directs the academic assistance programs at Catawba Valley Community College. His most recent book is *L2: a Poetry Novel*.

**Stella Vinitchi Radulescu**, Ph.D. in French Language & Literature, is the author of several collections of poetry published in the United States, Romania and France. She writes poetry in English, French and Romanian and her poems have appeared in *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Pleiades*, *Louisville Review*, *Ginosko*, *Laurel Review*, *Rhino*, *Wallace Stevens Journal*, *Seneca Review* among others, as well as in a variety of literary magazines in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Romania. Her latest collection of poetry, *I scrape the window of nothingness: new & selected poems*, was released in 2015 from Orison Books Press. She lives in Chicago.

**Doug Ramspeck** is the author of six poetry collections and one collection of short stories. His most recent book, *Black Flowers*, is forthcoming by LSU Press. Individual poems have appeared in jour-

nals that include *The Southern Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Slate*, and *The Georgia Review*.

**Marty Saunders** is from Pittsburgh. His poems, which have received an Academy of American Poets Prize, a Shipsey Poetry Prize, and a Pushcart Prize nomination, appear or are forthcoming in *Meridian*, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, and at poets.org, among others.

**Lee Smith** is the author of 17 works of fiction, including *Fair and Tender Ladies*, *Oral History*, and a recent novel, *Guests on Earth*. She has received many awards including the North Carolina Award for Literature, and an Academy Award in Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her novel, *The Last Girls*, was a New York Times bestseller, as well as winner of the Southern Book Critics Circle Award. *Dimestore: A Writer's Life*, a collection of personal essays, was published in March 2016.

**Newton Smith** lives in the mountains of western North Carolina, where he enjoys hiking and gardening. He received his Ph.D from UNC-Chapel Hill, where he was one of the founding editors, along with Russell Banks and William Matthews, of *Lillabulero Magazine* and *Lillabulero Press*. He retired from the English department at Western Carolina University and for a time was the Chief Information Officer in charge of academic computing on campus. His work has appeared in numerous publications including: *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Foxfire*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Trace*, *Apple*, *Ann Arbor Review*, *The Miscellany*, *Pebble*, *Laurel Review*, *Quartet*, *Rivendell*, *Jonah*, *Main Street Rag*, *Pisgah Review*, and *International Poetry Anthology*. In 2014 he walked the 500-mile Camino de Santiago writing at least one poem a day. The result, *Camino Poems*, was published in November, 2016.

**Ed Southern** is the executive director of the North Carolina Writers' Network, a 1,400-member literary organization founded in 1985. He is the author of four books, most recently the short story collection *Parlous Angels*, and his work has appeared in *storySouth*, the *North Carolina Literary Review*, *South Writ Large*, the anthology *The Shoe Burnin'*, the *Winston-Salem Journal*, and the *Charlotte Observer*, among others. In 2015 he received the Fortner Award for service to the literary arts in North Carolina. He is a native of and, after living all over the place, a resident of Winston-Salem, NC.

**Leanna Stead** is a resident of Asheboro, NC and an associate editor of *Iodine Poetry Journal*. Her work has previously appeared in *Ibbetson Street Press*, *Kaleidoscope* magazine, and *Iodine Poetry Journal*.

**G. C. Waldrep's** most recent books are a long poem, *Testament* (BOA Editions, 2015), and a chapbook, *Susquehanna* (Omnidawn, 2013). His new collection, *feast gently*, is due out from Tupelo Press in 2018. He lives in Lewisburg, Pa., where he teaches at Bucknell University, edits the journal *West Branch*, and serves as Editor-at-Large for *The Kenyon Review*.

**Chad Weeden** lives in Charlotte, North Carolina. His work has appeared in *Pedestal Magazine*, *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *Main Street Rag*, *Kakalak* and *Great Weather for Media*.

**Robert West's** poems have recently appeared in *Alabama Literary Review*, *Algebra of Owls*, *The Bluestone Review*, *The Gravity of the Thing*, *Light*, *The Paddock Review*, *Snakeskin*, and *Still*. The latest of his three poetry chapbooks is *Convalescent* (Finishing Line Press, 2011). Co-editor with Jonathan Greene of *Succinct: The Broadstone Anthology of Short Poems* (Broadstone Books, 2013), he's also the editor of *The Complete Poems of A. R. Ammons* (W. W. Norton, 2017). He lives in Starkville, Mississippi.

**Chelsea Woodard's** first collection, *Vellum*, was published by Able Muse Press in 2014, and was a finalist for the Able Muse Book Award. Her second collection, *Solitary Bee*, was published by Measure Press last October. Her poems have appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Blackbird*, *American Arts Quarterly*, *Poetry Daily*, and elsewhere. She currently lives and teaches in New Hampshire.



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**Jeffery Beam** is author of over 20 works of poetry and prose. He is poetry editor emeritus of *Oyster Boy Review*, a retired UNC–Chapel Hill botanical librarian. He is author of *The Broken Flower* (Skysill, 2012), *The New Beautiful Tendons: Collected Queer Poems 1969–2012* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2012), *Gospel Earth* (Skysill, 2010), *A Snowflake Orchard and What I Found There: An Informal History of the Jargon Society*, and the *Rain Taxi* interview, *Tales of a Jargonaut*. He resides in Hillsborough, NC.

**Richard Owens** is the author of several volumes of poetry, including *No Class* (Barque, 2012), *Clutch* (Vigilance Society, 2012) and *Ballads* (Habenicht, 2012; Eth Press, 2015). His poetry has appeared in *Cambridge Literary Review*, *Hi Zero*, *Poetry Wales*, *Shearsman*, and elsewhere; his critical comments and essays have appeared in *Chicago Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Open Letter*, *Paideuma*, and the *Poetry Project Newsletter*. Since 2005 Owens has edited *Damn the Caesars*, a journal of contemporary poetry and poetics, and Punch Press, an imprint featuring broadside, chapbook, and book-length works. He currently resides in southern Maine.

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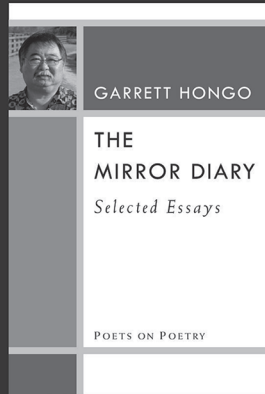
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**Garrett Hongo** is Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Oregon. He is the author *Volcano: A Memoir of Hawai'i* and the poetry collections *Coal Road*; *Yellow Light*; and *The River of Heaven*, winner of the Lamont Poetry Prize from the Academy of American Poets and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; he has edited or coedited several highly regarded collections of contemporary Asian American writing. Hongo has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, and was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the University of Florence.

Hongo's essays attest to the breadth of what he considers his cultural inheritance and literary antecedents, ranging from the poets of China's T'ang Dynasty to American poets such as Walt Whitman and Charles Olson. He explains free-verse prosody by way of John Coltrane's jazz; praises his contemporaries, poets David Mura, Edward Hirsch, and Mark Jarman; and acknowledges his mentors, Bert Meyers and Charles Wright. In other pieces he engages with controversies and contestations in contemporary Asian American literature, confronts the politics of race and the legacy of Japanese American internment during World War II, offers paeans to the Hawaiian landscape, and addresses immigrants newly arrived in America with a warm welcome. *The Mirror Diary* is the work of a poet fully engaged with contemporary politics and poetics and committed to the study and celebration of diverse traditions.



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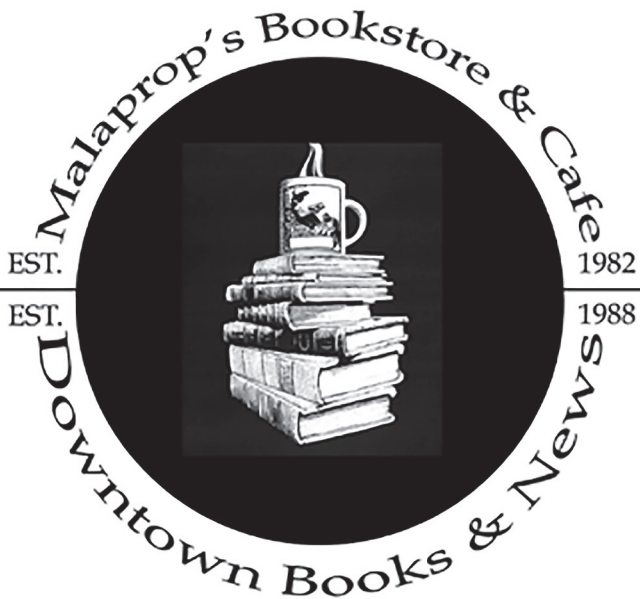
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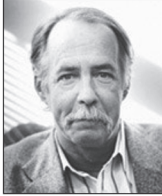
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