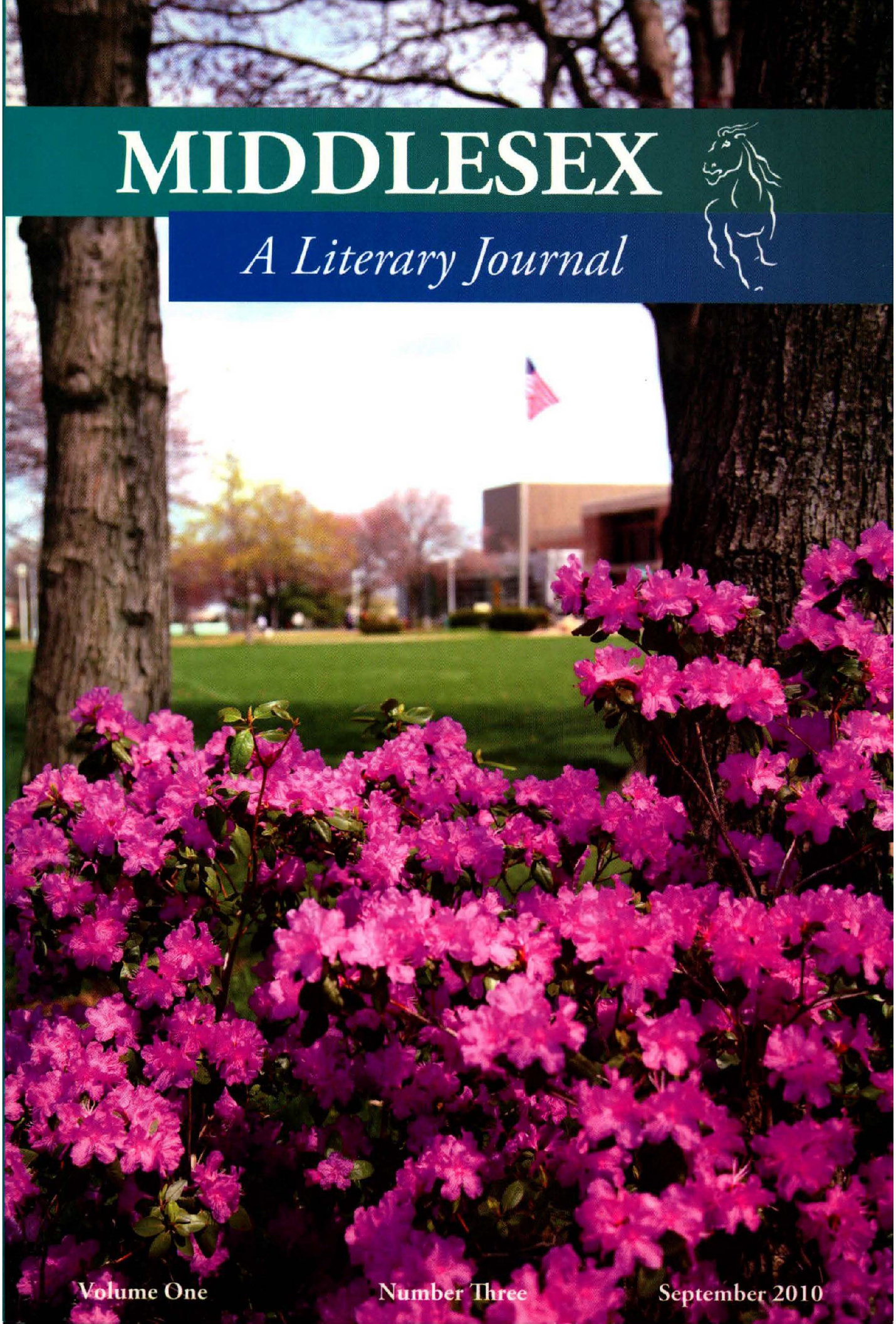

MIDDLESEX

A Literary Journal

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MIDDLESEX

A Literary Journal

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Middlesex: a literary journal

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Praise For Middlesex County College

Students rush in the wide mornings along the green fields
Willows by Chambers Hall bow to them
And the blue firs by Edison and College Center swirl
The free limbs of students flow like waterfalls
In spring the steady push of trees spills into branches
The lilacs by Center II reach out, grape clusters
Blackbirds and finches that know neither rust nor hurrying
Lower their heads and drink from rainbow puddles
Then lift their heads and swallow
Small lakes spin in front of Johnson Hall
Small rocks lie thoughtful over water
In a world born over

— Emanuel di Pasquale

Emanuel di Pasquale

Early Fall East Brunswick's Pond By The Public Library

(for Steven Barnhart)

The world of God metes out its sweet boredom
Not one tree is untouched by Fall
Bunches of leaves surrounded by brown halo
Small squirrels sniff and scratch soaked woodchips
The aerator shoots out
Three climbing waterfalls
So carp can keep on living
Geese work their wide wings
Croak and run across the pond
Signs for Peace, scarves,
Embrace a young birch
Next to a marble monument
For boys and girls lost to the last war

Inside the library
Sleek fans
Drones pinned to the ceiling
Scatter cool air

Measured click clock of heels
Of old women ambling
To the latte counter
Fast flip flap of children
Rushing to computers
An aged man forming poetry
On two pink scraps of paper

EQUALITY

And that's always been Her story —
Banned for biting the apple,
For wanting to know

Branded dirty, impure for giving birth

Only vestal virgins go to heaven, not the mother of any Jesus

Boys hunt them down like wingless she-birds
Then blame them for being caught in nets

Let the blood flow on dusty floors

(and let death follow)

A Student's Lament

Five thousand years and thousands of gods,
Murder, incest, and nothing has changed.
We must accept mortality.
Be tight with our morality.
Be Enkidu or Patroklus
And die and pave the way
For haughty Gilgamesh or Achilles.
So much to read.
When all I want is wine
And ashish
Thousands of words
That I try to read
But stay mere words
I cannot even breathe
Let alone read
Thank god for pot
And wine

Good Friday

(for my parents)

We wake to find two trout waggling in the sink.
The olive green polka dots and stripes of steel pink
plume father's threadbare blue handkerchief —
a jagged anemone tucked under the plug.
Soon, they lose all interest in the forefingers
my brother and I, perched on stools, dip and wiggle.

By noon, we've assembled scales into necklaces and fingernails.
Mother tops our roe jar with one last film of heather pink.
Garlic and parslied lard melt upwards and pelt
kitchen walls dressed top to bottom in cut-out brides
(*Gone with the Wind* sweeping gowns, cascades of tulle,
pearl-beaded bodices, crinolines perfectly flounced),

and when we gather around the garnished fish
we hardly speak: the meticulous defleshing — a supplicant's work.
Mother presses her lips to Father's cheek,
then smudges the deep coral with her wrist.

Father cuts the heap of coarse corn porridge
— *mămăliga* — with a butter-combed string,
brushes Mother's fingers in the lemon & garlic dip,
parts the crisped sheath to let the succulent flesh cool.

She kneads each morsel of fish between her lips,
then entices us with the inspected bits
— *For good luck*, she says, which I take to mean
being first to spot the ration truck,
take the ninety stairs in double strides,
grab my brother, and hurtle to the doubling line.

I try to read my brother's eyes:
he dreams the next truck hauls not
bread, fish, or flour, but oranges —
hard sweet foreign fruit brighter than our full moon.
I cannot ask him if I've guessed:
we never say our wishes aloud,
never name our fish.

"Destroy The Family, You Destroy The Country"

--Lenin

Romania, 1987

When she complains to the school nurse about her bile
— it's been filling her mouth with green anger —
she's given the prerequisite "fertility" check and found
two and a half months pregnant. "Ninth to twelfth grade"
the speaker booms, "emergency assembly,"
and our uniformed bodies pleat into a perfect
rectangle.

> *Dear comrade teachers and united young communists, as you all know, last week a disgrace befell our school: the suicide of student Isabela Volovici. Today, however, we are proud to report an act of deep patriotism: Mara Pop has decided to contribute a new life to our multilaterally developed society.*

What bad luck, we think, and promise smilingly
to come see the baby. Mara returns to the four siblings
she's been looking after since her mother's death, to the cousin
who helps with the cows and who fathered the baby.
Once a week, the village doctor and the police drop in
to make sure she's still pregnant. They lift her dress
to confirm the *protuberance* is *authentic*, remind her of the medal
she'll receive for being the youngest mother in the village.
Another emergency assembly —

Dear comrade teachers and united young communists, your former fellow student, Mara Pop, has committed a most reprobate act killed her unborn, betrayed our trust, mocked the party's directives. She's here to talk about her crime — Mara Pop, take the microphone. Louder, girl! ***Louder!***

I do not lift my eyes from the runs in her stockings, each gone its own distance, each strangled with red nail polish. Applause. Assembly dismissed. Mara leaves with the village cop and we return to Marx and Lenin. Her words hang above us, curved blades without handles, glances of light that make hearts rise.

To Ovidiu, Whose Voice I Still Don't Remember

Once I broke a window and for three months
had to share the first-row desk with you, Ovidiu,
Gypsy boy whose companionship
teachers used as punishment.
I had forgotten you and your eight years
less than a rod away from the teacher's desk
till that 3:00 a.m. when the crowning baby
was no baby at all but the sharp push
of a new terror: when did I blot out
the memory of being cruel,
for I must have...
Did I make sure my leg never brushed against
yours, did I dodge your look by convincing
myself the ink stains on my palm required
full attention, did I believe the coarse
charges or wonder, at least once, about your mother,
a nurse, admonished publicly at the biweekly meetings?
I'd have had to care enough to make even indifference
matter, make it send forth its ghost. But there is
no ghost twenty years later, and I *could* say this:
we all suffered. At ten we each had at least one
alcoholic parent (your father the only one mentioned),
at twelve we used few words to seal friendship,
fearing each other — anyone could be the informer
— even this baby waiting to turn in the birth canal.

The Owl Calls For Grandmother

Remember, grandmother says, *far-off cry*
for near death, near cry for death far off.
At the kitchen table, we scan owl echoes,
winnow rice, pencil crosses on rationed eggs.

At midnight we mount the rooftop
to spot the owl's yellow globes.
When I was young, grandmother laughs,
I twirled naked in our drying yard

and he remained silent for weeks,
calling forth rain, forgetting death.
Above the warm tar we find only stars
— wise sage turned God

of the underworld, corpse bird, ungrateful
offspring, stolen bride, sorcerer:
you let the dark prince step out
from behind the third eyelid, and give us no cry.

CHERNOBYL

...and then those babies were born
and we hoped this was no longer God.

Women curtained carriage tops
with brocades severed from dowry pillows

hurried down alleys, near-smiling,
helloed back when hailed, but did not stop,

did not force us to hear the feral wailing,
did not force us to see the grotesque

heads, and we, expectant caryatids,
did not flinch.

GENTIAN I

Gentiana Acaulis: "Used in all female weaknesses"
--Romanian Guide To Medicinal Plants

You nursed my childhood with tinctures
bled from soft plicae — cured colic, cauterized
cankers, restored appetite and laughter.

Still, I never would have remembered you,
gentian blue, if on the fourth day my nipples hadn't
given in, one crack at a time, if by the sixth night

I hadn't lain there creviced, undone.
The silver-haired pharmacist opened his fist
into my palm. "I knew someone would come for it.

It's been discontinued for years."
To you I owe the first drop of milk,
my son's unparching lips, so this is for you,

Dear Unprescribéd.

Vacant Windows

"The city itself
is ruined"

and the photos
in pixilated color

on the front pages
of the papers

at the Wawa
bear out the words

of the refugee
in Tskinvali

that I read in
The Chronicle

on a Wednesday
when Michael Phelps

won his fifth
gold medal

and the feds issued
retail stats

that put in numbers
what we all know

all too well,
that our pockets

are as empty
as Mother Hubbard's

bare cupboard,
though the bills

keep arriving
with the frequency

of nightfall
or the trashmen

on Wednesdays.
Broken buildings,

the rubble
in the street,

it's like I've seen
these pictures before,

the smoke billowing
upward from blackened

apartments, upper stories
bombed out and burned,

blacker than the Black Sea,
vacant windows like

the eyes of the dead
before the pennies

are placed to pay
Charon, before

the ferry comes, before
the coffin lid's secured.

Near The Leipsic River

fragility's face --
four white wooden crosses

in the grass beside a
Delaware freeway

names obscured
by the seventy mph speed

as we head home
to New Jersey

Convenience Store 2 A.M.

"How many cents for the sleepy eyes and fingers?"
-- Carl Sandburg, "Mill-Doors"

How many cents
for the man in hair net filling bottles that roll by on a conveyor,
who comes into the store, 2 a.m., shift break, for cigarettes and
sandwiches, every day the same, ham and cheese, mustard, a roll, bottle
of Coke, some gum, a porn magazine from behind the counter that he
rolls and stashes in his back pocket, ripping the cellophane from his
cigarette pack, popping out a butt and lighting it as he slips out the
door with a nod?
How many dollars
for the woman cutting meat, meting it out, weighing it,
only so many ounces per sandwich say the guidelines taped to the cooler
door, out of sight of the hungry streaming in from the bar down the
road, last call sending them into the night with beer breath and empty
stomachs, her fingers smelling of greasy cold cuts despite gloves, despite
soap, no matter how much she scrubs?
And how much
for the kid, 19, working the overnight to cover coffee and books,
who boosts packs of Kools and Marlboros to share with his friends,
who sneaks out back to smoke a joint, to get away from those same sad
stories she tells, night after night, always the same, as if her memory was
stuck on redial, slowly unfolding tales, little morality plays invented
from a life she'd wished she'd lived but didn't, stuck working the deli
slicer after midnight at the convenience store on the highway?

Fruit Picker Blues

On a story in The Independent

That they were locked in a van
and others in cars and a shed
on a palm-tree-lined property

in rural central Florida
where they were held until
some industrial orchard called

to say it needed some pickers,
forced into debt and paid
crap wages, just forty-five cents

a bushel or two hundred bucks a week
and lodging in a steamy van
where they were forced to empty

their bowels and bladders
in the same place where they slept
sometimes standing, sometimes

with pain so bad in the knees, the back
and finger joints, strength sucked out
by the sweltering sun

like soda through a straw,
like seeds and juice from tomatoes
that go for two and a half

dollars a pound at the ShopRite,
an expensive haul, tucked in
my shopping cart beside the carrots

and broccoli and berries, bananas
and boxed juices we keep on hand
for my two young nephews,

the cantaloupe we'll slice
into chunks that we'll mix
together with deep red strawberries

and intensely purple blackberries,
the green grapes and sweet pears
that tumble together in

our morning salad, the blueberries
on my yogurt. I remember unpacking
crates of cellophane-wrapped lettuce

when I wasn't working the register at the A&P
on Route 27, unloading
the trucks at night, a high school job

that paid me much better than
minimum wage, the sixty or seventy bucks
that came to then, almost 30 years ago,

as much as lettuce-pickers were making
in the fields, and maybe more,
and I got to sleep in clean sheets,

in an air-conditioned room, with
the television glowing and the soft
sounds of crickets chirping

in irregular rhythms, a suburban lullaby
far from the joint pain
and pesticides of the fields.

Poem On The Eve Of Rosh Hashana

The count is more than 300 and the calculation
is not so simple, dead children
and building boulders scattered like
so many leaves on an autumn lawn.

What is terror but desperation, a political calculus
born of a sense that there is no future
but in violence. But violence is just violence,
the dead lacking the symbolic grace

of the High Mass or the Shofar's trilling call.
I can't watch the news anymore, filled with
so much pain and personal anguish.
I wash the coffee pot and measure out the beans,

pour them into the grinder and start the maker,
the harsh whir exploding the morning's silence.
The television drones in the background:
a hurricane batters Florida as the candidates

swing through the Midwest stumping for votes
and college teams get ready for their season.
The president's in Pittsburgh talking about jobs
and Kerry's in Ohio talking about taxes

as 13 Americans die in Iraq defending a lie.
I want to ask the president how often you need
tell a lie before it becomes a fact,
how many times you must repeat a wish

before the wish becomes reality.
But then I think of convoys destroyed
by rocket propelled grenades and American bodies
lying dead roadside and Iraqi bodies strewn

across burning cities, and language fails me,
words seeming woefully inadequate to the task.
Our toast has popped and the eggs are burning on the stove.
There is ethnic cleansing in Sudan, the refugees fanning out

across the plains, the rebel forces ragtag and hungry,
running roughshod over small villages as the government
terrorizes its own citizens, the nation breaking apart
under the weight of memory and too many guns.

Hamas takes credit for a bus bomb that kills 16
as if it were awaiting an award nomination
or signing its name to a painting like Picasso or Matisse.
The Israeli government responds with airstrikes that

kill another 14, retaliation begetting retaliation,
the circle of violence replacing the circle of life.
Who is to blame when the oppressed become the aggressor?
And how can we apportion blame when none of us is blameless?

How can we be so smug when we help create the conditions
that drive the young boy in Jenin or Ramallah to strap
a bomb to his chest and blow himself up on a
crowded bus or boulevard in Tel Aviv or Beersheba?

We have too much to atone for this year, too many lives
lost in the haze of never-ending violence,
a war of attrition taking aim, breaking our spirits,
its vast weight suffocating our souls.

Gertrude Coleman

Bay Laurel As Poetic Motif And Life Lesson

I like stories. No, let me be honest. I love stories. I read and teach stories for a living. Descriptions of herbs, flowers, plants and trees can help to depict setting, work as images, symbols and metaphors to add atmosphere and psychological depth to plot and characters, and chronicle the use of plants in the depicted culture.

Bay laurel (*Laurus nobilis*) generates the bay leaf universally used in soups, stews, chilis, casseroles, and sauces. A beautiful ornamental, bay enhances foyers, terraces, and gardens, and offered solace in cemeteries from Pompeii and ancient Greece to contemporary Britain.

Bay also serves as a poetic motif. Don't get me wrong. I love bay trees. But bay's role as a poetic symbol for women's roles in society has long made me uneasy. Bay's mythical underpinnings resonate through much of European and American culture.

In the Greek myth of Daphne and Apollo, beauty causes trouble when the trickster god Cupid (Eros) enchants Apollo, the god of reason, with uncontrollable desire for lovely Daphne, who flees his lustful ardor. Exhausted, she calls upon the gods for help who turn her into a bay tree. Transformation into trees is common in ancient myths, but this portrayal as a viable solution to rampant lust fails to recognize the magnitude of Daphne's loss. When Apollo comes to his senses, he mourns and builds a temple in her honor, saying, in John Dryden's 1670 translation of Ovid's verse,

...Because thou canst not be
My mistress, I espouse thee for my tree:
Be thou the prize of honour, and renown;
Thou shalt the Roman festivals adorn,
And, after poets, be by victors worn.

In her memory, noted in bay's European names *Laurier d'Apollon and Daphne Mezereon*, bay trees became a symbol of honor and protection,

signifying nobility, victory, and success. The roof of the Apollo temple at Delphi was made entirely of bay leaves; his priestesses chewed the slightly narcotic bay leaves to enhance divinatory powers before giving prophesies.

Being transformed into a stationary tree to escape being ravaged seems like a major sacrifice but, according to Dryden and Ovid, Daphne is resigned to her fate:

The grateful tree was pleas'd with what he said;
And shook the shady honours of her head.

I have trouble with the image of Daphne's transformation. Daphne can still grow, and is much admired, but can never again walk or laugh or be a viable part of human society. Was stultification the only solution?

In William Butler Yeats' 1919 poem "A Prayer for My Daughter," the bay laurel tree reflects the poet's ideal of womanhood. One stormy evening, brooding over the Irish Troubles and his turbulent times, the narrator prays that his little daughter will lead a stable life filled with kindness by marrying a traditional, socially-approved husband.

O may she live like some green laurel
Rooted in one dear perpetual place.

He hopes that she will be a quiet, demure woman, neither opinionated nor shrill, and that she will have just enough beauty to attract a mate (supporting unmarried daughters can be costly), but not enough to cause trouble or vanity: "... yet not/Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,/Or hers before a looking-glass." Yeats' concept of happiness for a woman has engendered much feminist criticism, particularly as bay's mythical underpinnings resonate throughout much of European and American culture.

Bay's Latin name *Laurus nobilis* illustrates how Greek and Roman roots enrich the English language. *Laurus* derives from *laudare*, to praise, and *nobilis*, from *nobilito*, to make known. To be crowned with laurels is a symbol of high esteem. Throughout ancient Greece and Rome, laurel wreaths crowned the heads of kings, priests, prophets,

warriors and scholars as well as the champions at Olympic competitions. *Bacca lauri* refers to the berries of the bay tree from which derive the contemporary terms *bachelor's degree* and *baccalaureate. Poet laureate* is a prestigious title conferred on a poet.

Andrew Marvell (1621-1678) used bay and the legend of Daphne and Apollo in "The Garden":

When we have run our passion's heat
Love hither makes his best retreat.
The gods, that mortal beauty chase,
Still in a tree did end their race:
Apollo hunted Daphne so,
Only that she might laurel grow...

Marvell further reminds us that bay crowns winners for their hard work and training but does not console losers. Not all can attain high recognition in all arenas:

How vainly men themselves amaze
To win the palm, the oak, or bays...

Beyond the retelling of legends in poetry, bay leaves and laurel wreaths resonate as motifs of death, success, and loss. In his poignant poem, "To An Athlete Dying Young," A. E. Houseman (1859-1936) uses laurel leaf imagery to mourn a fallen athlete, ironically seeming to celebrate the concept of leaving the field before one's glory fades:

Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay,

And early though the laurel grows
It withers quicker than the rose.

The narrator returns to the bay circlet, symbol of victory and success, to recount the mounting sadness and ensure our fullest empathy:

And round that early-laurelled head
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl's.

Finally, bay laurel can symbolize a first line of defense. Folklore suggests planting a bay tree near the house or doorway to protect the house and prevent evil spirits from entering. Bay laurel is a fairly hardy tree and difficult to kill, so a withered bay tree can portend disaster. An historical event reinforced this legend. In 1629 pestilence broke out in Padua, Italy, just days after all the bay trees there died. Shakespeare offers the image of withered bays as a bad omen in *Richard II*. Here the speaker looks for portents to decide what to do:

The bay-trees in our country are all wither'd
And meteors fright the fixed stars of heaven;
The pale-faced moon looks bloody on the earth
And lean-look'd prophets whisper fearful change."
(Act II, Scene iv)

Like Daphne, bay quietly endures, bay perseveres, bay is a life lesson.

THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE HEADWATERS

(for Bob Urbanski)[1]

It was through the sacred practice of fly-fishing that I came to know Bob best. Bob and I fished together on the trout stream once a week for the last 20 years or so. It quickly became clear to anyone who fished with him that the trout stream was Bob's church and he was its high priest. Those of us who attended Bob's services knew that weekly attendance and participation in the ritual of fly-fishing was mandatory, no matter the conditions. It was expected that we would fly-fish through rain, snow, sleet, dark of night, lightning storms, floods, sheer cliffs, hangovers, sleep deprivation. Bob wouldn't have it any other way. We fished most of the trout waters in the area, but focused mainly on stretches of the North and South Branches of the Raritan River. The names of our favorite fishing holes became sacred names — shrines in our personal mythology: Three Bridges, Neshanic, the Ken Lockwood Gorge, Hoffman's Crossing, the old Lipton Tea plant, Duke Island Park, Clausen Hole, the 4-H Fairgrounds, etc.

Populating these sacred places were the local deities — the fish that would occasionally allow us to catch them and glimpse their otherworldly beauty if we sacrificed our time and effort, approached them with due humility, and performed the rite of fly-casting properly. We caught all kinds in these holes and deep runs — bass (smallmouth, largemouth, rock bass); panfish (blue-gills, pumpkinseeds, crappies, yellow perch, chubs); carp, suckers, catfish, and, of course, the trout — brilliantly colored rainbows, browns, and brookies. Much of what we caught we threw back (the practice of our denomination was "Catch and Release"). Other kinds of catches didn't come on rod and reel-- these catches involved our experiences of the magnificent array of life that thrives in the river ecosystem. On the surface and beneath it, we

[1] Bob Urbanski was a loving husband, father, teacher and friend. He served his country bravely in the Korean War, and for thirty years, he taught mathematics at Middlesex County College, ten of those serving as Chair of the Math Dept. For several years, he also taught at Rutgers University, where they honored his passing with a ceremony and flew the flag on the Old Queen's campus at half-staff.

discovered our own version of nixies, naiads and nymphs: all manner of mayflies, caddis flies, midges, and grass shrimp. Occasionally, we spotted crayfish, snakes and freshwater clams. The river also called down the lords of the air whom we met, praised and often cursed for out-fishing us: the herons, kingfishers, owls, hawks, eagles, and ospreys. From their underground dens, the gods of the underworld often emerged — the odd muskrat and even minks threading the rocks along the stream, fishing for trout. On two occasions, we came upon river otters who took a perverse pleasure in swimming in between the nervous fishermen lining the bank on Opening Day, confounding their casts. One spring, a black bear appeared on the Ken Lockwood Gorge to try his hand at fishing after a long winter slumber — Bob said he found out just how quickly fishermen in chest waders could tread water and gallompf back to their cars.

As it was for Thoreau and Emerson, nature was a shrine for Bob--a conduit to the divine, a place where one could tap into the divine source directly. When I think of him now, I think of a passage from *Walden*, slightly modified for Bob:

> I went to [the stream] because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear ... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan like as to put to rout all that was not life...

No doubt, Bob lived fully and deeply. He wasn't interested in fishing passively — waiting for the fish to come to him — he would seek *them* out. He was always on the move, hiking for miles, even scaling cliffs, wading through dangerous rapids, always searching for a better stretch of water, another mayfly hatch, another deep run — always searching for a better place, and he always seemed to find it. He had the same approach to life — go out and CATCH it, don't wait for it to happen to you. He LIVED "Carpe Diem" (not "seize the carp," but "seize the day" — his joke). He was passionate in his pursuit of catching fish, tying the perfect rig, making the perfect cast. He kept fishing

after everyone else went home — in all conditions---and he almost always caught fish, counted them, and reported the results to all his family, friends, the mailman and anyone else who would listen. There was a purity, grace and innocent joy in the way he immersed himself completely in whatever he was doing. He gave himself totally to the task ...and that included friendship. If Bob was your friend, you could bet he'd do anything for you, be there for you always...totally.

And then there were Bob's sermons. Between fish on the trout stream, there is quite a bit of time waiting, time sometimes used for silent contemplation and reflection — but not for Bob. Bob would fill you with jokes, anecdotes, political commentary, you name it. We'd talk about teaching & sports, and he would ALWAYS give me updates on the family: the fantastic meal he had enjoyed with his wife, Maud, and mother-in-law, Rachel; Maud's completion of her Ph.D.; the big test his daughter Jackie aced; his son Michael's achievements at work; the mystery novel he was reading with his daughter Susan; his son John's achievements; and how much the grandchildren had grown. He was fiercely proud of everyone and loved all his family and friends dearly. And, of course, Bob had the best fish stories — mostly featuring himself in the heroic lead role. There was the giant striped bass that he nearly landed at Duke Island Park; the monster pike he wore down at the Ken Lockwood Gorge; the leviathan-like White Marlin he conquered off The Canyon; the behemoth brown trout he vanquished at Clausen Hole; etc.

While he told these stories, he was immersed in them — immersed in time — and yet at the same time, curiously, he stood apart from it all. The characters and events he spoke of while standing waist deep in clear river flowed around him, and he plucked them at will from the current as he would the trout that rose to his dry fly. At moments like these, Bob seemed completely at his ease, straddling the flow of events in his life — making his peace with them and enjoying fishing from them. Thinking of him in this state makes me think again of Thoreau:

> Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born.

But Bob had no such regrets — at least not during these magic moments on the trout stream when he indeed seemed to take on the childlike innocence and wisdom implied by Thoreau. The stresses and problems that accumulated throughout the week seemed to wash away in the stream within the first few casts of his fly line. The world was reduced to the bare essentials of fly-fishing — matching the hatch, making a good cast and presentation, getting the fish to rise for your fly, fighting and landing it. The only kinds of regrets one has on the trout stream have to do with lost flies, tangled lines, an occasional "swim" in the stream, and, of course, a fish that gets away. Substituting these regrets for those more painful "real life" ones off the trout stream is the magic and therapy of fly-fishing, the same kind Hemingway's Nick Adams found when "the one that got away" erased the painful memories of all that got away from him on the battlefield in WWI:

> There was a long tug. Nick struck and the rod came alive and dangerous, bent double, the line tightening, coming out of water, tightening, all in a heavy, dangerous, steady pull. Nick felt the moment when the leader would break if the strain increased and let the line go.
>
> The reel ratcheted into a mechanical shriek as the line went out in a rush. Too fast. Nick could not check it, the line rushing out. the reel note rising as the line ran out...
>
> As he put on pressure the line tightened into sudden hardness and beyond the logs a huge trout went high out of water. As he jumped, Nick lowered the tip of the rod. But he felt, as he dropped the tip to ease the strain, the moment when the strain was too great; the hardness too tight. Of course, the leader had broken. There was no mistaking the feeling when all spring left the line and it became dry and hard. Then it went slack.
> His mouth dry, his heart down. Nick reeled in. He had never seen so big a trout. There was a heaviness, a power not to be held, and then the bulk of him, as he jumped. He looked as broad as a salmon.

> Nick's hand was shaky. He reeled in slowly. The thrill had been too much. He felt, vaguely, a little sick, as though it would be better to sit down.

At such moments, those rare occasions when Bob did lose a big fish, even in his disappointment, he seemed elated. "Lose something?" I would ask casually, teasing. "B-B-B-B-BIG FISH!" he would shout, his eyes like saucers, his big grin maniacal. Then he would go through the play-by-play of how he had hooked the fish, played him, and lost him. I would always laugh as he tipped his cap to the now quiet stream. He seemed to intuit what Norman Maclean described — namely, that "Poets talk about 'spots of time,' but it is really fishermen who experience eternity compressed into a moment. No one can tell what a spot of time is until suddenly the whole world is a fish and the fish is gone."

Perhaps such experiences accounted, in part, for Bob's extraordinary generosity. Bob was big-hearted: my fly-fishing line still has sections and knots that he tied for me, symbolic of the ties that bind him the lives of all he touched; my fly-box is filled with things he gave me on the trout stream. You name the fly, and Bob had it in one of the 10,000 tiny white boxes crammed into the trunk of his car: Blue-Winged Olives, Elk's Hair Caddis, Sulphurs, Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ears, Wooly Buggers, Muddler Minnows, Gray Ghosts, Black Stoneflies, and many more. You didn't even have to ask — whatever flies were hatching that day, he'd give you six. He always gave people equipment, advice, even lessons. He taught me to fly-fish. Watching the High Priest practice his sacred rite was a truly religious experience — the fly would whisper through the air in graceful spirals, brush the surface of the rapids, thread the gnarled tangle of talons of an enormous overhanging oak, and set down without a ripple in the deep pool along the far bank. Although I have never approached this level of mastery, I was grateful that he taught me the basics. He was a wonderful teacher, surprisingly patient and compassionate.

At his funeral, I was not surprised to meet many of his former students and many other fly-fishing disciples and "fishing buddies" like me. Despite the sadness of the occasion, there was a surprising amount of laughter — mostly from stories about Bob. I couldn't get the image out of my mind of Bob, smiling, looking down on the proceedings and unfurling an enormous fly-line which branched, reaching out to all

present and pulling us all together.

I heard a few favorite "Bob stories" surfacing again and again throughout the room. One involved his strangest catch. On a rainy autumn morning on a river in South Jersey, Bob was fishing for bass with heavy gear and line when he snagged what he thought was a large branch or submerged tree trunk. After 30 minutes of slowly hauling the water-laden object to the surface, he jumped back in horror. What had emerged was the decomposed head and torso of a missing duck hunter. He had been out on a pram with two friends just after a heavy autumn rainstorm. The swollen, wild river tossed the pram sideways and flipped it like a child's bath toy. The bodies of two of the drowned hunters had been found, but the authorities had not yet recovered the third. With nobody else around for miles, Bob stood alone, wrestling with what to do next — the thought crossed his mind to cut the line and leave the body at peace in the river. But then he thought of the widow — the uncertainty, the inability to collect on the life insurance, etc. So he hiked five miles upriver to the nearest house to call the police.

Another favorite tale involved a time on a rainy PA trout stream in June. Bob was fly-fishing (even in the downpours) and catching trout; the only other angler on the stream wasn't catching a thing and made his way upstream to Bob and asked what he was using. Bob told him which mayfly was hatching and gave him several of the flies. The man was baseball legend Ted Williams, and Ted then insisted on taking Bob to dinner afterward. When Bob tried to politely decline because he had to get home to grade exams for his summer course, Ted replied "Bullshit! I'm Ted Williams, and I am taking you to a God-damned steak dinner! Thanks for the flies!" As it turned out, they had a wonderful meal together, their lives more intertwined than they realized — both Korean War veterans, both in the Air Force, both master fly-fishermen, and both pretty darn good hitters (Did I mention that Bob was a heck of a ball player, once going 3 for 4 with a double off of Sandy Koufax in the minor leagues?).

One of Bob's favorite books, not surprisingly, was Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It.* Coincidentally, the movie was on TV just the day before Bob passed (we used to call each other every time it was on). I tuned in right at the scene at the very end of the movie when Norman, now in his later years, is fishing alone and reflecting on

the loss of loved ones in his life. Here is the narration from that scene (slightly adapted for Bob):

> Then in the half light of the [Ken Lockwood Gorge], all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the [South Branch River] and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise. Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless rain drops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

Nobody could read the river better than my friend Bob. He read it and knew just how precious it is, as is all the life that it flows into and feeds; he knew how to make the most of this miracle of life and in so doing fulfilled its purpose beautifully.

I remember one autumn day on the trout stream with nobody around, the colors of the maple leaves rising above us along the banks and reflecting off the water like stained glass windows, the mayflies rising off the water like tiny angels. Bob said this is what Heaven is like, and he meant it. I think he was right. That's where he is now — at the sacred source of all of the waters that brought him divine beauty and fulfillment in his life. May they flow down to us as well.

Mathew Spano

The Fisher King

Who builds a concrete dock that cuts
Into a trout stream, all but castrates it,
And strangles off the sacred flow?
I guess a guy with his wound
wouldn't think of wading.
The best they can do is wheel him down
to the darkened waters.
We whisper bitter wishes
that his dock will wash away
with the first spring squall.
But for now, it's still winter.

Every Sunday, they park the black Escalade
Where the river rocks and sand lie
Entombed in blacktop
And dried runnels and rivulets
Have been whited into parking lines.
Every Sunday it's the same
From sun-up to Sunday service
At the Church of The Holy Fisher of Men.
The Church it was who built the dock,
Bound in steel guardrails,
And the empty parking lot just for him —
A small tribute for his donation of a legal team
To submerge a sex scandal that had started to surface.

Watch him pluck a peacock from his cap
And, with weighted line, fish wets and streamers only —
Grey Ghosts and Lazy Leeches,
Lifeless and limp, darkening
the current, defying it, darting all unnatural,
Anchored in concrete.
He likes to think he's diving deep for the big ones

Lying barely breathing on the bottom,
Carp-like corpses.
But he casts only lies — the flies
From the Davis catalog. Nothing in nature
Looks like that — no way he can match the hatch.
Even kingfishers mock his empty creel.

Why don't we help him?
Why should we?
When he's on the water, it's all a waste.
The fish all turn off like throwing a switch.
He brings bad luck like a cold snap,
A frigid wind that scatters mayflies
And takes our lines into tangled deadfall.
No hatches happening. Nothing rising.
A mood that puts down the fish
And saps the river's soul.
We curse him and wade for more fertile streams.
No use complaining — it's his park,
His land,
His estate,
His castle,
His river, even underwater,
His underworld.

How'd he get this way?
Some heirs have all the luck.
After daddy left him the keys
To the drug company (built on a Viagra patent
And named "Anfortas" after him), he strutted
Like a Peacock — or a cocky heron —
Through these waters, hoping to win his woman
By landing her the biggest rainbow around.
When out of the woods on the far bank wades
A wild man,
A dry-fly kid with a quick-draw cast
who could sling a fly-line like a lasso —
His rod and his flies hand-tied
to match the local hatch. He blends in

with wood, water and rock like a shaggy bear
rambling down rocks to snatch salmon.
His hair falls loose over his temples,
berries and leaves — even a stray mayfly--
twining through tangled loops.

They both come to cast to the same rise
And have words about a woman —
First shouts,
Next curses,
Fists and feet,
Finally filleting knives.
They roll and sputter in the current
Until just one surfaces,
The other's fish blade lodged in his groin.

Hours of surgery, they said, until the shaft
Was removed, but the tip remains —
The word "GRAIL" shocked the doctors
When it glowed forth from the X-Ray —
A nervous laugh
Said it was the kid carved it there
For luck.

And there it remains today,
A curse that keeps the king from wading these waters
And castrates us all.
No one thinks to ask, "What ails you uncle?"
We've all been trained too well
And wouldn't anyway — after all,
He's *not* our uncle.
We cast our lines into the barren wind
And wait for some Parcival to cast the healing spell
And summon rainbows from the depths
Where they lie hiding, almost dead,
And refuse to rise.

Bequest

stone money of the heart
worn story-smooth
stays in its nest, hungry
for desserts of glory
after feast after feast of
regurgitated cost —

confections, fables
winged by Pegasus
to slay chimeras, those
adversaries cobbled
of the ordinary, proof

— like the blended
family resemblances
of children — of death.

a currency of laughter
gets hearts out of hock,
as pigs, too, fly
to surmount the pen,
bringing home their bacon.

women and children and men,
again and again,
couple and double and shock
the next generation.
the heart's stone money
makes no change, knows no rest.

Chrome

words spoken like water find stone.
some glisten, spill over lips, fit
for fishes. some dissolve; some
prematurely carve their speakers'
epitaphs, ingratitude in granite.

they fatten or slim like the rest of us.
they ride on our shoulders like kids.
they never leave. late listeners,
likely to misconstrue or, worse,
remember them correctly, do.

The Corner Of My Eye

the other horn
announced a dilemma
where the moment
scrutinized straight on
seemed shorn.

mistaking a disease
for its cure
would make more sense
than confusing apology
with scorn.

to catch a unicorn
convince it
virgins are a myth.
it's easily done:
marry one.

Baby

A mound of pink blotchy flesh,
Blue tinged lids and tips,
Jerking sporadically the first time I saw you,
I was young enough to be intrigued,
And old enough to know what I was seeing,
And treasure each insight,
Next time you were pony-puffed,
And fashioned up,
And had eyes,
But you still looked stiff like a marionette,
But you were beginning —
Like Pinocchio,
To turn into a real girl inside somewhere,
Then finally,
You looked entirely put upon,
And your eyes,
Alert, sharp and drinking in,
Already cynical and strong,
Note even cute,
Almost fiery,
Were you even a baby?
Somehow that seemed beneath you,
Like you were sent here in a body,
And simply had the indignity of a being a child
Because it couldn't conveniently be helped.

Closer

Dark waters swirl and break
surfers ride short hard waves
on short hard boards
a coarse beauty
rakes the sands of the jersey shore

September leaves her tiny footprints beside mine
as we skirt the sea

I gather blackberries, prepare the fire,
and hope she'll love good food simply made.

I've not been this hungry before.

A Wound That Brings Us Life

The line of the sea and sky
is straight as an arrow
it moves too fast for me
strikes too deep

the heat hurts
it roars with light and wind

Each morning the sun is a wound
that brings us life.

Miss K

Her name was Miss K and she was a fairy princess. Of course, most people recognized her as the local children's librarian, a capable patient young woman who helped the children with school projects.

But for me, this slender, brown-skinned lady with a subtle smile was indeed a fairy princess. For with her determined steps toward the multitudes of bookshelves, and a sweep of the hand, magically she gave me the world. And truly, books were the world in which this shy introspective eight-year-old could soar above the clouds to unfathomable lands, or be transformed to the sophisticated sixteen-year-old out on prom night. At least once during the week, after completing the rigors of school, I would walk to the Lakewood Public Library, sink unobserved into the familiar armchair alongside Miss K's desk, and wait for her to finish her business with one of the other students. When she was done, Miss K would always smile and ask, "Have you finished those books already?" adding, "I think you'll love the ones I picked out today." Then, she would lead me into a maze of bookshelves as I gleefully followed. There they sat silently awaiting our return, or so I thought.

Here, amongst my books, it seemed as if I had entered an enchanted land. A land where, paradoxically, I felt most at home. The varicolored books rested, thickly bound, some worn, others shining proudly, showing off their plastic apparel. And one by one Miss K would pluck these books from their quiet domain and drop them, like radiant pearls, into my arms. Once the small round table was covered with the texts, we two would sit and pore over the merits of each adored book by the likes of Beverly Cleary and Janet Daly, and assiduously make checklists for series like Nancy Drew. Miss K never rushed me as I made my choices; instead, in her patient way, she simply drew her tapered fingers along each line of the summary on the jacket cover. Nor did she laugh or grimace as she propped all ten books, the maximum, into my skinny girl arms.

My parents never discouraged me in these weekly sojourns, for as immigrants from Eastern Europe where they had witnessed volumes savagely destroyed in the wake of Nazi domination, they knew the value of a book. At home, these library books would become the constant companion of a girl who was to move to a new town every couple of

years. It was the serial books of which I was most fond, for here I found best friends who would accompany me without complaint as I moved to a town full of strangers. As long as there was a library filled with books, I knew I had a friend. A friend that I would take to breakfast, sit down with at the playground during recess, and learn secrets from, under the covers with flashlight at night. And my parents encouraged me in this heartfelt friendship, knowing that these companions would never abandon or lead astray.

As I grew older, I sometimes shared my secret joy with another girl. I recall sitting in the library with a friend, turning the pages of a children's poetry anthology whose width and breadth seemed then to take on gigantic proportions. Saddened at the prospect of having to return the book in two weeks, we copied each poem meticulously onto looseleaf paper. I think we made it halfway through. As a teenager, I discovered the library was more than an enchanted land where flights of fancy could be fulfilled, and I reveled in its resources, while still on occasion being distracted by the likes of Charlotte Bronte or Charles Dickens. Eventually, my readings led me to the greatest challenge — trying to emulate the works I loved, but with my own style.

I began writing poems and short stories, even making a rudimentary attempt at a mystery novel, *The Secret of the Three Red Gowns*. I equally loved to read aloud to my friends, and discover hidden insights in the novel, only later to point them out to my delighted parents and teachers. So, it was only natural that I would pursue teaching and writing as careers. And, in fact, today I am a professor at a college in New Jersey. I have been a reporter and editor, and will soon see the publication of my first book for children. Yes, libraries have changed my life.

Somehow, I still find the time to go to the library, but nowadays it's with my own children. This time, that "enchanted place" is the public library in East Brunswick. While my eldest son fills his arms with historical novels, my middle one ponders a list on computer, and the youngest goes in search of another Bailey School Kids reader, I sneak off with a Jonathan Kellerman mystery, or an Amy Tan saga, or even, yes, a tattered book by Beverly Cleary. It is there, falling into a familiar armchair by a corner window, I remember the Lakewood Library and Miss K. And it is there that I do what I have loved since the time I was eight--I read.

North

This darkness like a cloud of cold air leaves a chill in the depths of her heart. It is a darkness that stretches deep into the night, runs along the railroad tracks until the tracks disappear and there's nothing.

The tracks offered her direction, running like a line on a map, connecting destinations across great distances, a grand grid of possibilities.

This is where the story begins, so long after its start, following a line into the night, away from the past, into a future that has to be better.

This is where she was headed, into the night, away from the heat of tight quarters, away from the shelter and the smell of mildew and sweat and decay.

This was her life, moving, always moving, always seeking a place better, safer than the place before. She fled her village in the deepest dark of night, during a lull in the fighting, escaping on the back of a flatbed truck heading north. She rode with the chickens, sitting between cages, wrapped in an old wool shawl the driver gave her, a shawl that smelled of chicken shit and feed and a hundred other odors, each more pungent and horrible than the next. A shawl whose once bright colors reminded her of the night of the fever that burned out her heart, that washed the wonder from her eyes, that left her with an emptiness as cavernous as the night was dark. Fever burning in the village, like a punishment from the heavens or maybe hell, the priest telling her to pray and repent, the doctor rushing from house to house, her baby son covered in cold, damp cloths that offered him little relief, wrapped in a shawl of many colors to keep away the chills.

She rode through the night passing villages and vast open spaces, riding north across the horizon. The driver stopped at his small farm where his wife fed her tortillas and thick strong coffee and she slept a dreamless sleep that gave her the distance she needed to keep herself in motion.

Her story is motion, continuous, ceaseless, a creeping forward toward something unknown but desired. Her story is the long journey north on foot at night, setting off from the farm with tortillas and a small amount of beans wrapped in a cloth and a small jug of water,

making her way in the shadows, sleeping in roadside ditches when the sun was high, hiding from the patrols and bandits until she reached the river, crossing with dozens of others who paid with all the coins in their pockets for this chance, this passage to that mythical place, into the dark Texas night. She crossed in silence, wary eyes fixed on the darkness and the rocking of the raft, ears tuned to the rush and slap of water, entering the Texas town, wandering its streets, seeking solace.

She ended her quest in a shelter at the edge of the city where old men with whiskey breath pawed her like she was their nourishment, a ripe melon at a roadside fruit stand, their old craggy fingers running hideously up her belly, rough and dangerous fingertips tracing the caesarian scar, her last and only link to the young boy lost to fever what now seemed so long ago, clawing her small, firm breasts, pinching them, squeezing them as if they were testing their ripeness. The men swam in her youth, entering it, drank it in, recycled it in their minds to fuel them through one more spent and dying day.

She stayed there a week, frozen in indecision, unable to move, unable to fight, each unwanted advance further draining her of power, sucking her dry, leaving her limp and beaten and emotionless until that night she woke to see those feral eyes staring at her, yellow, veiny, poisonous and powerful, eyes of a ferret, eyes that seared into her a fear so deep she could feel herself for the first time in a long time awakened, the burn lifting her to action, to reaction, to reclaim herself, her need to live.

The next day she stole a knife from the kitchen of the shelter, wrapped it in newspaper and hid it behind a radiator so she could retrieve it later. That night she lay in wait, burning with a hate so heavy it made it hard to breathe, her heart racing, her hands shaking. She was alive for the first time in a long, long time.

She lay there for what seemed like hours, waiting for those eyes, those randy fingertips, the smell of cheap liquor, the knife tucked beneath her mattress on the cot. She exploded into violence, pressing all her strength into the knife blade as she plunged it into the animal, pulling back and lunging again, repeatedly, all the hatred and rage, the fear and self-loathing, emptying into the old man's bleeding form.

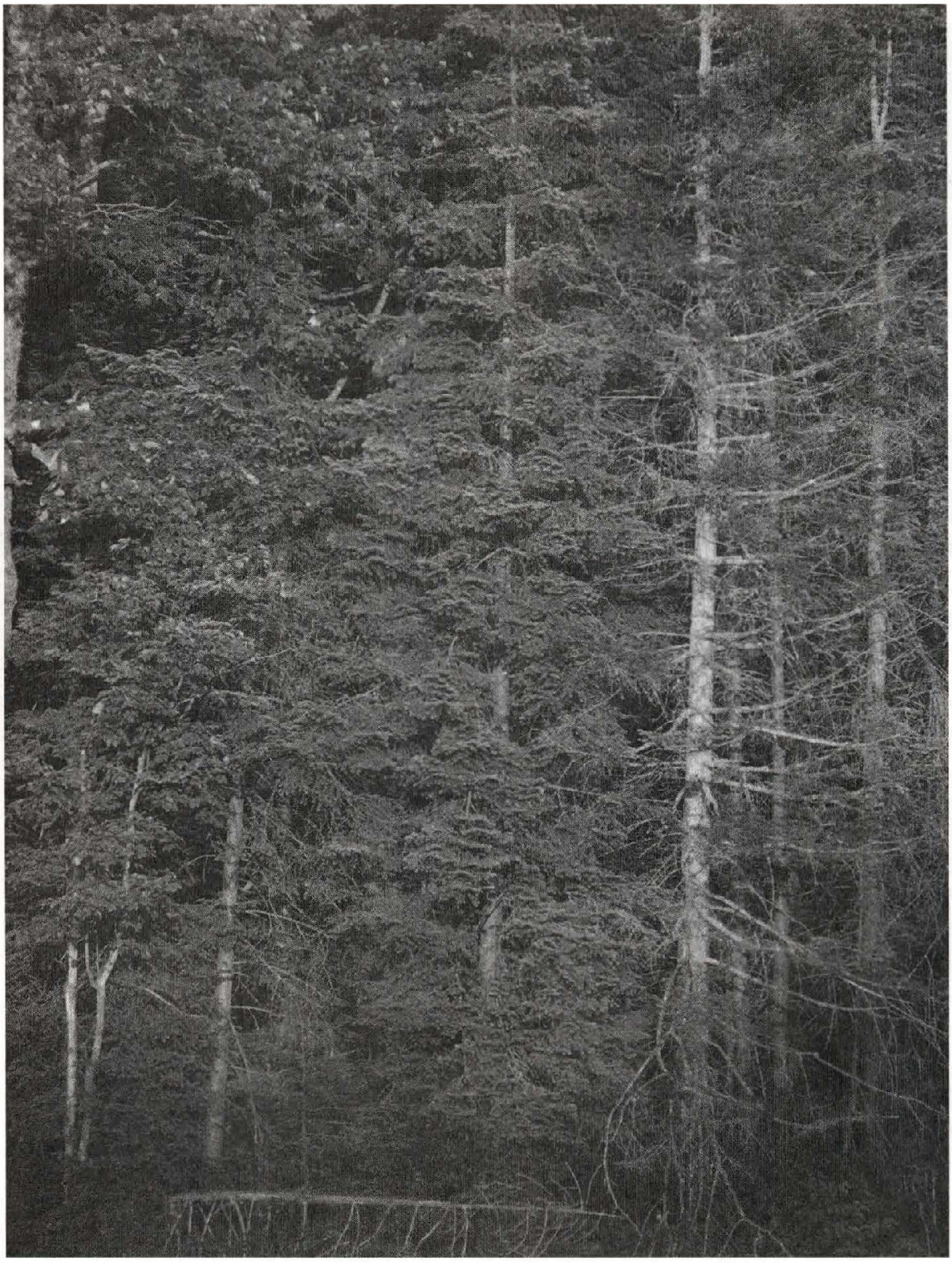
She fled the shelter into the night, down empty streets to the place where the world begins again, to the dark edge of night, where the street lights end and the city disappears, where the grid of connections are like the lines on a map, reaching northward, toward the possible.

Pool

Alane Poirier

Faith

Tree Wall



Morning Storm

A Moment Of Light

Scattered images through a broken reflection,
reminder of a longing lost to the night.
Lullaby of darkness, flesh succumbs to its might.
Sweet slumber embraced, heart void of affection.

Darkness's depths pierced, in a moment of light,
holy bliss of eternity within the soul is felt.
Present, past and future, in silent suspension held,
their assignment determined, awakened by the light.

Shirley Russak Wachtel

The Day Before

The campus sleeps on Sunday
I linger in the hammock of a late day shadow
And watch as winds chase golden leaves
Across the freshly cut grass
The switch is off today
No opening of double doors
No long legged boys
Hunched over with their book bags
No spilling forth of pens and yellow markers
No girls chattering on cell phones,
The fringes of their scarves flying in the breeze
No professors today
Wiping chalk dust from their pants
Looking at their watches before quietly closing doors
No music today
The Spanish Russian Urdu blending to create their own unique song
No quiet buzz of busy computers
No scrape of metal legs against the floor
No muffled sound of buzzers signaling the end and the beginning
No splash of water in the pool
No bounce of basketballs
Or Frisbees sailing in the air

Today the campus sleeps
And I am in private communion
With the anxious limbs of trees held high
The flag that still flutters proudly when no one sees
The library books unopened on their shelves
The dormant ceiling lights
The silhouettes of empty desks
And questions so many questions
Still waiting to be born.

Ten Years Gone Now

Ten years gone now
And everyone knows your name
Your humiliations
The sound of your laughter
The heat of your tears
Your deepest secrets
Because I told them
I told anyone who would listen
Of the touch of your sister's hand
The breasts you bound in secret
The dizziness when they put your grandfather in the grave
The shoes
I told them all
Of the curly-haired nieces who climbed onto your lap
The baby brother falling down the stairs
The tall twin brother who loved you
Whom you loved less
The screams as they ripped you from your mother's home
The kindness of a Catholic woman who gave you bread
The photographs you hid next to your chest
Your ragged hands as they worked the sewing machines
Quickly piling uniforms one atop the other atop the other
How good the snow tasted as it melted on your tongue there in the forest
The joy of seeing your brothers, the elder, the younger, again
Your first kiss with the man who would be your husband
"He will do," you said
I told them
How you let me sleep in your bed at night
How tightly you wound my hair in one long braid until it hurt
How ashamed you were that you never completed school
How ashamed you were of the crooked way you wrote your name
How you told me I was the best

Even if I wasn't
How you withstood our father's jealousies
How you stirred his oatmeal after he grew ill
How you went back home the day after he died
How you rang us on the phone, my brother and me,
And told us about the newsman calling your name right through the TV screen
How you cried and asked for forgiveness when you forgot *our* names
And gave your grandsons bars of chocolate
And how you repeated "You're the one"
And went to sleep.

And now that you are ten years gone
I want you to know
I told them all
I admit it-it was me.
But it wasn't about me this time, Ma.
It was you
It was you
It was you
It was you
It was you
It was
You.

HANDS

When you were little I took your hand
and placed a spoon in it so you could eat.
And then pressed your hands in clay,
five tiny fingers.
The impression remains.
I folded that small hand in mine
as we crossed streets and jumped the puddles.
And I stretched on mittens
to keep them warm.
I guided that hand to make purple letters on a page,
and trace the words so you could read.
And helped you scrub them clean
and hold the handlebars tight.
And watched as you opened them for candy and coins
and later, the car keys.
Yesterday you took your hand and placed it in another.
When you were little I took your hands
and placed them in the clay of my heart.
The impression still remains.

Who Remembers Rose?

What were you like as a child?
Were your eyes a gentle green like his?
Eyes that flashed fire when you were angry?
Or brown or blue?
And when you placed your head upon the pillow
did you dream of a day when you would save the world
and all would know your name or
perhaps the day when your children would light candles
for you, their own years already weighing heavy?
And they would say, "Ah — there was a mother?"
Or did you not dream at all but stay awake
eyes poring into the blackness fearing the sun
might never rise again?
What was your favorite color?
The name of the doll you held close at night?
Did you peel your apples letting the skin fall
like a bright red ribbon?
Or eat them whole?
Did you hate your name as much as I hate mine — the middle one, I mean —
for its utter simplicity, its unprettiness, feeling jilted
somehow by a loss of letters?
Were you a rose too?
Dainty and fragile?
Or did you laugh at the paradox of you,
a sturdy firebrand?
A different rose, this one,
not like the others at all.
Were you the one who molded my father into the hero,
the father he would someday be?
Who were you, Rose?
Did you kiss his cheek at night?
Did you braid your young daughter's hair?
Was her face as pale, her skin as soft as mine?

Did she look like me, Rose?
Did you light the candles on Friday nights?
And say the names, your grandbabies, your children,
sweet husband whose breath had long faded from your withered lips
Did you feel it still?
Poor Rose.
Who lights your candle now that your last son has cooled in the grave?
Did you like to dance?
Did you eat honey straight from the jar?
Was your laughter free like the wind?
Or soft like a tinkling bell?
And when they came for you, did you tremble
and soak the ground with tears?
Or did you look into the Devil's face
And walk head held high
like a rose,
Like a proud and shining Rose?

Hank Kalet

Notes On An Engaged Poetry

"The cities break up
The land is a train of dust
Only poetry knows how to marry this space."
- Adonis[1]

Politics is about power, poetry about truth.

Yet, sometimes the political and the poetic converge, and the truth that poetry attempts to illuminate is political in nature. The poetry that results can help create a new way of thinking about society, as the people who have been hidden in the shadows step into the light and challenge power with passion.

Martin Espada calls this the "poetry of the good fight," which he described during a lecture[ii] at the University of Washington in 2007, as "poems and poets that emerge from political struggle" and "the ways in which political activism makes life poetic. There are politics in the poetry; there is also poetry in the politics."

Poets of the good fight, according to Espada, are "driven to create a record of human suffering — and resistance to suffering — without the luxury of measuring our impact on the world, which cannot be weighed, measured or otherwise quantified. We do not write such poems because we necessarily believe that our side will win, and that conditions will change; we write them because there is an ethical compulsion to do so."

I have been writing poetry for almost 30 years and have been a working journalist going on 20, covering municipal and state government, crime and social issues. I have written regular political columns for more than a decade for three different publications, but I am always a poet first.

What I've learned over the years is that I can no sooner separate my political instincts and beliefs from my poetry than I can divorce my fascination with the English language, with sound and rhythm and sense, from my political prose.

The political issues I tackle in my columns — war and the economy, racism and homophobia, the rights of gays and lesbians to marry, the impact of residential and commercial development on rural

areas, and so on — often make their ways into my poems alongside my love for my wife, my awe of nature, my spiritual self.

This, I believe, is as it should be. And, I should add, how it always has been.

Shakespeare's historical plays were defenses of divine right and hereditary succession, the usurpers like Henry III always punished — with death or madness or both. Dante took vengeance on his political enemies by assigning them to the various rungs of his literary hell. Yeats, Neruda, Byron — all of them participated in the political struggles of their day, as Espada and other contemporary poets like Sam Hamill do today.

Hamill, the editor of Copper Canyon Press, used poetry to protest what was then the impending invasion of Iraq, creating a poetic movement at poetsagainstthewar.org (more than 11,000 poems, in fact) and hundreds of poetry readings around the country. The project resulted in the 2003 anthology, *Poets Against the War*[iii], which he edited.

In his introduction, Hamill writes poetry "is born in the act of questioning."

"Since most poets write in the same language politicians are given to abuse, in the language of everyday common speech, they must struggle to reveal clarity by way of musical and imagistic expression, and transparency of emotion," he writes. "We question ourselves, our art and certainly those who rule. And through a miraculous marriage of intuition and scholarship, we are 'given' poetry to write."

"Sloganeering," he adds, "accomplishes nothing," but poetry, is "a source of revolution from within" that can lead those who write it and those who read it "to question, to meditation" — and possibly to a transformation of mind, as in Hamill's poem "Sheepherder Coffee" (from *Poets Against the War*):

> I used to like sheepherder coffee,
> a cup of grounds in my old enameled pot,
> then three cups of water and a fire,
>
> and when it's hot, boiling into froth,
> a half cup of cold water
> to bring the grounds to the bottom.
>
> It was strong and bitter and good
> as I squatted on the riverbank,
> under the great redwoods, all those years ago.

Some days, it was nearly all I got.
I was happy with my dog,
and cases of books in my funky truck.

But when I think of that posture now,
I can't help but think
of Palestinians huddled in their ruins,

the Afghan shepherd with his bleating goats,
the widow weeping, sending off her sons,
the Tibetan monk who can't go home.

There are fewer names for coffee
than for love. Squatting, they drink,
thinking, waiting for whatever comes.

Hamill's poem makes the link — one often disregarded in our comfortable consumer culture — between a simple pleasure, that cup of strong and bitter coffee, and the hardships and uncertainty of those living half a world away, those living with war and terror and repression. It is a connection of contrast, one that says , "there but for the grace of god go I."

"We have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives," Denise Levertov writes of war in "Life at War" from *To Stay Alive*, "gray filth" having coated the "mucous membrane of our dreams." It is the tragedy of man, a creature "whose flesh / responds to a caress, whose eyes / are flowers that perceive the stars," capable of wondrous music and laughter, that humankind

still turns without surprise, with mere regret
to the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk
runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies,
transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments,
implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys.

Our insensitivity, as we "convince ourselves / it is necessary," belies our belief that we were "mirrored forms of a God we felt as good."

Levertov believed the poet should be engaged with the world.

She was a regular presence for years at anti-war demonstrations, both against Vietnam and the first Gulf War (she died in 1997), and

was involved in other political causes over the years. Beauty and wonder co-existed in her poetry with the ugliness and injustice that she witnessed — the darkness in the heart that drives us to war, the arrogance that allows us to subjugate people, to view our fellow men and women as less than human.

"While the war drags on, always worse," she writes in "An Interim," a poem from *Relearning the Alphabet* that would become the prologue section of Staying Alive,

> the soul dwindles sometimes to an ant
> rapid upon a cracked surface;
>
> lightly, grimly, incessantly
> it skims the unfathomed clefts where despair
> seethes hot and black.

The lines are more than 40 years old, yet remain relevant, an apt description of the moral vacuum into which we have been drawn by our own ill-considered descent into war. The soul — the center of our being, our moral and ethical core — has been reduced to a scurrying insect, lacking capacity to understand how far we have fallen or even that we have.

Levertov, however, would probably bristle at being characterized as just a political poet — she believed deeply in the need for both a poetry that "depicts and denounces perennial injustice and cruelty" and a "poetry of praise, of love, for the world" ("Poetry, Prophecy, Survival" from *New and Selected Essays*). "The separation between poetry of political content and all other poetry," she adds, "is an artificial one."

That's because the separation between politics and everyday life is equally artificial. Politics, in the modern formulation, is about gamesmanship, the machinations of gaining and retaining power — it is spectacle, as the journalist Chris Hedges would say. It is a characterization underscored daily on the cable news shows, which cover politics as if they were covering the NBA. Everything is about political advantage and the impact on the polls and the next election.

So it is understandable that we have a limited — and negative — view of the political realm. That is unfortunate, both for political coverage and for the receptiveness to a poetry of engagement.

Politics, however, should be viewed through a much broader lens, as implied by its roots in the Greek: *polis*, the city-state and its citizens. The political, therefore, should include not just the games and

power struggles, but the all of those things that concern the city-state and its people; that have made government a necessary evil.

Politics, in this broader conception, is the process by which society sets its rules, allocates its resources and determines who wins, who loses and whether the losers have any recourse.

Consider the poem "Shirts," by Robert Pinsky, which juxtaposes historical, literary and material detail, bringing all who have toiled in the garment industry into the simple piece of fabric he buttons as he dresses. The impact of the poem comes from its layering of image, its movement from an American present to the sweatshops that exist both in American cities and in the poor places of the world and ultimately to the tragic past, the Triangle Factory fire of 1911, in which 146 workers were killed "in the flames / On the ninth floor, no hydrants, no fire escapes." The horror of the image, a young man helping three young women to jump from the ninth floor "As if he were helping them up / To enter a streetcar, and not eternity," before he joined them:

> He stepped to the sill himself, his jacket flared
> And fluttered up from his shirt as he came down,
> Air filling up the legs of his gray trousers--

Like Hart Crane's Bedlamite, "shrill shirt ballooning."

And then, Pinsky back in the present, reveling in the stitching, the patterns — before he shifts time and place again: "The clan tartans"

> Invented by mill-owners inspired by the hoax of Ossian,
> To control their savage Scottish workers, tamed
> By a fabricated heraldry: MacGregor,
>
> Bailey, MacMartin. The kilt, devised for workers
> To wear among the dusty clattering looms.

And back again and so on, connecting the workers with the product of their work, the cost in human flesh and sweat and blood laid bare.

Poetry can and should engage with these questions, though it cannot allow the political intent to overwhelm the poetic, the inventiveness of language, sense and sound that set poetry apart from other writing.

Basically, good politics cannot save bad poetry — though bad politics, as D.W. Griffiths' film *Birth of a Nation* (Ku Klux Klan as heroic defenders of the South) proves, does not necessarily result in bad art. A similar comment could be made about the descent into fascism by Ezra Pound or Merle Haggard's classic country song, the reactionary "Okie from Muskogee."

The key is the art itself. The chase sequences in *Birth of a Nation* are thrilling and invented an entire new approach to cinematography, while Haggard's ragged anthem to red necks captured the latent disaffection that ultimately would result in Nixon winning the White House.

The particular politics matter little; what matters — since we are talking about poems — is the literary artifice, the passion, the intensity and the ability of the poem to engage the reader. Poems, after all, are meant to be read and heard and engaged with.

And yet, we shouldn't make too much of this engagement; as I wrote in my own poem "Y is a Crooked Letter," "poems are just words ... and words are meaningless when you have to face a woman whose son was killed by a roadside bomb."

But that's not exactly accurate. Poetry is both "just words" and more. That, writes Seamus Heaney in "The Government of the Tongue," is the "great paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general."

"Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are practically useless," Heaney writes. "Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil — no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed."

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[i] *Adonis*

[ii] "The Poetry of the Good Fight: A Reading and Talk," University of Washington, May 29, 2007; www.martinespada.net

[iii] Sam Hamill, *Poets Against the War*

Daniel Zimmerman

HAIKUOGENY

On vacation in the Adirondacks at age 12, by then disaffected by tourist traps, I found a copy of D. T. Suzuki's *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* in one such shop, nestled among paperbacks unworthy even of a single read. I perused it to tatters over the next few years while enlightenment eluded me.

My introduction to haiku came from the purchase, c. 1963, of R. H. Blyth's four-volume, hard cover classic on the form, for the then-hefty price of $4 each. A few years later, a linguistics course in Japanese morphology gave me some guidance on how to pronounce the transliterations that Blyth provided.

Though enlightenment still eluded me, equipped with the knowledge of a dilettante and admiration for the form's practitioners, I managed occasionally to shuck my deer-in-the-headlights burdens and bound into a forest that suddenly morphed to a single, welcoming, birdcall-crowded tree.

I found haiku became me. I learned to count to seven on one hand. Skeptics frowned: you call that poetry? they wrinkled. Well, yeah. (No Rinzai, I spared them a whack with my drafting pen.) Yeah: any villain can write a villanelle. Haiku's burst chrysalis asks more: vulnerability while wings dry.

Why haiku? It blindsides the blind side, restoring sight. (This befell the widow Kell of Leicester who, in1912, rose from bed, hit her head on a table, sustained a severe blow & regained her lost vision.)

The antimatter twin of the Man from Porlock, haiku's destructive interference eliminates noise.

Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, who coined the term *ostranenie* — defamiliarization — wrote:

> The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be

> prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important. (Shklovsky)

Someone, apparently unable to distinguish the familiar from the unfamiliar, once asked Robert Creeley, after a reading, "Was that a real poem, or did you just make it up?" Equivalent to: a tablet from Sinai — or a parable? I would say yes, and yes: yes by selection and yes by completion.

Haiku < *hokku*, a ***start***; the beginning of a longer poem (a *renga*). Haiku wake me up, make me up, get me real. They seem to me a kind of "found poetry" — concrete, quotidian moments defined by a Saussurean but unconventional contrast, as in my poem about insects droning out a graduation ceremony:

Graduation Day
cicada Brood XIII
emerges

or by conspicuous lack of the contrast expected of the genre, as in Basho's famous:

old pond
frog jumps in
water-sound

which substitutes persistence for contrast. (For a more nuanced discussion of *matters haiku*, see Mathew V. Spano's definitive essay in this issue.)

This "found" element suggested beachcombing or what Thoreau called "ambling" through nature — sometimes remotely, as in a haiku in response to a story told by a resident of the Heritage at Clara Barton, where Mat and I have done haiku workshops. A woman remembered the deep silence she felt during a visit to Mt. Rushmore. By way of example, I wrote:

Rushmore
even the presidents
hold their breath

OK: I made it up. Still, it remains indisputably true. Indeed, an imagined perception can sometimes productively exceed a "true" one, as I hope it does in one of my first haiku:

a chrysanthemum
balanc't upon its cut stem
the famous swordsman

Whether I made that up or it made me write it down, I can no longer tell. The swordsman left long ago, but the flower stays balanced.

Later, resorting to a version of the transgressive "cut-up technique" developed by Brion Gysin and used by William Burroughs in *Naked Lunch* and *The Ticket that Exploded*, the swordsman returned, my Yojimbo. For example, reading through *Teach Yourself Japanese*, I noticed a few phrases of five and seven syllables, and wrote them down: *tera no ato* (the ruins of a temple) and *tada de hairimasita* (I got in free). Lacking a seasonal reference — traditional for haiku — I went to an online translation site, and typed "winter moon." By a stroke of luck, it returned the five-syllable phrase *fuyu no tsuki*. I had just *composed* a haiku in Japanese — backwards!

冬の月

fuyu no tsuki
tada de hairimasita
tera no ato

○

winter moon
I got in free
the ruined temple

When I wrote this, I did not know that computer scientists Naoko Tosa, Hideto Obara, and Michihiko Minoh had published Hitch Haiku: An Interactive Supporting System for Composing Haiku Poem (Springer Berlin / Heidelberg, 2008) :

> Human communication is fostered in environments of regional communities and cultures and in different languages. Cultures are rooted in their unique histories. Communication media have been developed to circulate these cultural characteristics. The theme of our research is "Cultural Computing", which means the translation of cultures using scientific methods representing

> essential aspects of Japanese culture [1]. We study the reproduction of a traditional Japanese Haiku by computer. Our system can abstract an essence of human emotions and thoughts into a Haiku, a Japanese minimal poem form. A user chooses arbitrary phrases from a chapter of the essay "1000 Books and 1000 Nights" [2]. Using the phrases chosen by the user, our system generates the Haiku which includes the essence of these words. ("Abstract")

This approach seems more computer whimsy than literary art, but I have found a few uses for the computer as an ancillary and exploratory device. Recently, a student extended his hand after I had helped him with a scheduling problem. When I shook it, I found it cold, damp and lifeless as a cadaver; the chill suffused my arm to the elbow, and even prolonged ablutions with warm water did little to abate the Arctic invasion of my bones. With fingers still gray and bloodless, I pecked out the following haiku:

winter rain
his graveyard
handshake

Discovering a web site that generates barcode, I made an illustrated haiku (a *haiga*) as follows:

The resemblance of barcode to the oppressive rain of the poem struck me, though I doubt that I will ever use the barcode site again, since it worked so well in this haiga.

I use the computer more often for a procedural form of poetry I invented in 1997: **Isotopes**, based on anagramming four-by-four word squares. This kind of "procedural" poetry, similar to the cut-up technique, derives from the Oulipo (***Ouvroir de littérature potentielle***) or Workshop of Potential Literature, founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais.

Any word square unfurls an indeterminate number of Isotopes (poems, each line using each letter of the square once). I send the 4 x 4 word square's 16 letters to the Internet Anagram Generator at http://www.wordsmith.org/ -which immediately returns most of the hundreds (or thousands) of pages of lines potential in the square. Each poem derived from the same word square constitutes an Isotope of that square. These Turk's head/braids of chance, constraint and choice admit various iterations, and their reduced phonic sets dictate a prosodic gait unique as a Tennessee Walker's. The form invites the creation of poetic siblings of each word square. (Zimmerman,"Preface")

Gold may lurk even in the low-grade ore that Anu Garg's Anagram Generator churns out, which I Rubik and cobble into "narrow sonnets." For example, from *ISOTOPES*:

F I R E
O D O R
L E A S
D A R E

I defer: a lord arose
for a real Eros died.
so, idle, order a fear,
or so, if elder, a dare:
I defer a sad role, or
lead a side of error;
I dread a freer solo,
so I add a freer lore.

I do feel a sad error
or ease a riddle, for
if a rose red ordeal
erase a dire lord of
error, a sad foe lied:
Lear died for a rose.

Whether one finds inspiration in an immediate perception of nature or in more mediated venues, the value of a compositional technique — haiku, terza rima, the radio in Cocteau's *Orpheus*, Jack Spicer's Martians — depends on its result, not on the nature of the initial experience or technique that produced it. (What came first: the chicken or the egg? Answer: two non-chickens.) The salubrious strangeness of art transcends its origins.

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Mathew Spano

Haiku Way, Beginner's Way: Writing And Living With "The Beginner's Mind"

Wiping the Slate Clean: Beginning Again With Haiku

Forget everything you have ever been told about haiku. Forget all of the mantras of well-intentioned grade school teachers: the 5-7-5 syllable counting; mandatory seasonal references; insistence on cleverness, irony or profound philosophical insights rooted in nature. Forget all of that, and more, and we can begin.

Why begin this way? We must first wipe the slate clean because despite its now being a global phenomenon, haiku is probably one of the most widely misunderstood art forms. Perhaps this is the result of its having migrated from Japan and taken root around the world so recently (the migration only began in earnest just after WWII). American educators early on misunderstood haiku's deceptive simplicity and brevity as childish and so relegated the writing of haiku to grammar school exercises for children and banished it from more serious and professional poetic forms. Or perhaps its explosion with the advent of the Internet makes it difficult to pin down: pseudo-haiku and joke haiku dominate the Web and have become the rule rather than the exception of how to define haiku in the popular culture.

So let us begin anew — with what might seem like a new definition: A haiku is "a short poem that uses imagistic language to convey the essence of an experience of nature or the season intuitively linked to the human condition" ("Official Definitions"). A haiku is born of the poet's experience, of what has been called the "haiku moment." As much as this may sound like the goal of some kind of Eastern mystical practice, it is really a fairly common experience for people around the world. The counterpart in the West might be the literary epiphany, in the sense that James Joyce used it — i.e., an experience when one suddenly and fleetingly sees revealed, as if for the first time, the soul and beauty of an object or situation (Joyce 289). For Joyce, "...it [is] for the man [or woman] of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments" (288). In a haiku moment, one often feels that time has stopped — or that one is outside of time, in

a kind of eternal present. Wordsworth called these moments "spots of time" and the American writer Norman Maclean wrote that such moments are common experiences for fishermen (44). They are also likely common experiences for anyone involved in an activity involving nature in some way in which one does not feel isolated or alienated from the world, but instead feels linked to the natural world (its creatures and processes) and to the activity itself.

Having such an experience usually inspires people to try to capture it, usually in some art form. For some, it is photography, for others it is painting, or, perhaps, music. Writers may choose from a number of forms, many opting for lyric poetry. Haiku, as a poetic form, often draws writers who have had such an experience because of the form's brevity and evocative potential.

As a poetic form, well written haiku have *most* (but not necessarily all) of the following:

- three unrhymed lines totaling 17 syllables or fewer
- lines arranged in 2, 3, & 2 stresses
- two central images (one involving nature or the season) skillfully juxtaposed to evoke in the reader the experience that inspired the writer to compose the poem
- a pause or "cut" between the main images, sometimes indicated with punctuation
- no titles, abstractions, or figures of speech (haiku *show*; they do not *tell*)
- emphasis on the present moment
- few capitals and little or no end-punctuation; few verbs (mostly nouns); few modifiers

Consider the following poem:

A crow
has settled on a bare branch —
autumn evening (Basho 13)

What makes this a good haiku is NOT the syllable count, not some sort of feeling of Eastern mysticism or Zen meditation that might be projected onto it. What makes it a haiku is the way the poet captures in

imagery and language the feelings and emotions he had when initially experiencing this moment — and how he evokes those feelings in the reader. That is the magic of haiku — it is, first and foremost, a poetry of *evocation*. Evoking feeling, thought, emotion is the haiku poet's craft, and the primary tool of the trade is imagery. In the poem above, Basho shows us a crow lightly touching down upon a bare branch before "zooming out" to place that image within the broader image of the autumn evening. A crow landing, the day ending, the autumn ending (note "bare branch"). Feelings of peace, quiet, settling in for the winter are evoked as well as, perhaps, feelings of things coming to an end — the moment, the day, the season. A hint of loneliness and death pervade the poem — but not in a frightening or threatening way. Shakespeare does something of this sort in his sonnet # 73, which also features images of a tree's barren branches in late autumn and the sun's afterglow as twilight fades into night. Both Shakespeare and Basho ease us into the end of things — the peace and tranquility involved — and also the possibility of their renewal (after all, as Shelley asks, if winter comes can spring be far behind?). Basho conveys all of this primarily through imagery.

Haiku poets don't spend time and words telling you how they felt or reacted to an experience; instead, they seek out the images that evoked that reaction. They then offer up those images to readers in the hopes that they will have a similar reaction. Hence, a haiku poet must first know about imagery; s/he must know that "an image is the language equivalent, or mental equivalent, for a physical sensation or set of sensations" (Higginson 115). After experiencing a haiku moment, the poet must distill it down to the two or three images that capture the essence of that moment. It goes without saying that a poet should always have a notebook handy to list these sounds, sights, scents, tastes, textures, etc. Such lists will provide the seeds with which to grow a haiku later on in the writing process.

Sitting down with one's field notes and conjuring up the haiku moment again in one's mind, a poet can start to compose the poem. The real secret lies in how these few images are juxtaposed on the page. Arranged in the right way, the images *resonate* with one another like two prongs on a tuning fork, resulting in tones, moods, feelings, sounds in the reader's mind. Resonance can be created by juxtaposing the images in such a way as to suggest specific types of relationships between them, from fusion to substitution to various kinds of shifts (Higginson 115-119; Gilbert 21-44; Gurga 38-42). Consider the following poems paying special attention to the central images and the kind of relationship that the poet evokes between them:

Effect ❦ cause:

piercing chill
my dead wife's comb in our bedroom
under my heel (Buson 113)

Contrast:

into the blinding sun . . .
the funeral procession's
glaring headlights (Virgilio 264)

Zoom-in:

The distant mountains
Are reflected in the eye
Of the dragonfly (Issa 137)

Zoom-out; time lapse:

a little child:
he laughs and then
autumn nightfall (Issa 7)

Aural match:

the sound of the scouring
of the saucepan blends
with the tree frog's voices (Ryokan 189)

Layering:

my fingerprints
on the dragonfly
in amber (Kacian 26)

Fusion:

Cat eating fish heads
all those eyes
in the starlight (Kerouac 34)

Shadows of the trees:
my shadow wavers with them
in the winter moonlight. (Shiki 30)

A Beginning Verse: A Short History of Haiku

Haiku have evolved into such an array of different forms that it might be hard to imagine that originally they had a much more limited role. Originally, haiku were called "hokku" — a term that referred to the first stanza of a linked poetry form called renga, which was a kind of clever writing game popular among the Japanese merchant class in the 16th century. Friends would gather for a party at the host's house, and one would get things started with an opening verse — i.e., the hokku, which was meant to be the beginning of the chain. Hokku usually had seventeen or fewer syllables, a seasonal reference, a reference to the host's setting and arrangements, and a feeling of incompleteness (to be filled in by the rest of the chain). By the 17th century, writers began to see the possibilities of the hokku as an independent form. The seedling form sprouted when Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) revolutionized Japanese poetry by giving the hokku depth and directness and removing its wit and emphasis on word play. Through Basho's influence — his own poetry, his teachings, and his disciples--hokku had moved from a word game to a respected and versatile literary genre (Gurga 4-5). After Basho, a succession of haiku masters reinforced the new genre, giving it firm literary roots while at the same time exploring the range of emotion and experience it might evoke. Along with Basho, these are considered to be the Five Pillars of Japanese haiku: the painterly poet Yosa Buson (1716-1783); the clown prince haiku poet Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827); the Zen monk haiku poet Ryokan (1758-1831); and the father of modern haiku Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902). It was Shiki in the late 19th century who coined the term "haiku" and formally established it as its own independent genre, emphasizing the qualities of realism and verisimilitude as defining features.

The first haiku seeds settled on Western shores in the first half of the twentieth century, and following WWII, they began to take root. Several groups contributed to tilling the soil and making fertile ground for haiku to sprout. Prior to WWII, the Modernist and Imagist poets Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams all read and experimented with haiku, often integrating them into their own poetic visions, but mostly these poets had to rely on poor translations (Gurga 9). Scholars and translators, such as D.T. Suzuki and R.H. Blyth provided critical analyses and explanations that remain among the most valuable regarding haiku to this day. Blyth's classic four-volume *Haiku* (1949-52) still ranks among the very best translations of classic Japanese haiku. Both Suzuki and Blyth defined haiku as a Zen art with Suzuki noting that a haiku "does not express ideas but puts forward images reflecting intuitions" (qtd. in Gurga 2). In essence, both scholars recognized the critical interplay of experience and image and the evocative power of haiku that are at the heart of the genre. Nevertheless, their work was in part misunderstood by those who insisted upon reducing haiku to (nothing more than) Zen meditations as well as those who insisted that haiku were (solely) a Japanese art form. After WWII, the Beat poets made haiku a major part of their movement, but only Kerouac truly understood the potential of haiku as an American genre. While Ginsberg's and Snyder's haiku mostly imitated the Japanese masters, Kerouac mastered the form and developed uniquely American haiku in the American idiom both in his own haiku collections as well as in his novel *The Dharma Bums*, several key passages of which include imbedded haiku and haiku-like moments.

Ironically, the Beat movement failed to pick up on Kerouac's work, but some others, like Richard Wright, who discovered haiku while convalescing in a hospital, worked in Kerouac's direction on their own. Only by the late 1960's and early 70's did a true American haiku movement evolve and blossom with the poets J.W. Hackett, Robert Spiess, Cor van den Heuvel, Anita Virgil, Nicholas Virgilio, and others (Higginson 63-76). Their outlets were the rapidly spreading haiku journals, such as *American Haiku, Modern Haiku, Frogpond, Haiku West, Dragonfly,* and *Cicada*, among others. Prominent haiku anthologies and scholarly texts on the genre also attracted top American haiku poets and focused the movement, among them Cor van den Heuvel's *The Haiku Anthology* and William Higginson's *The Haiku Handbook*. Today, the movement continues to grow with *Modern Haiku* still going strong and *Frogpond* serving as the voice of the Haiku Society of America. The journals *Simply Haiku* and *The Heron's Nest*, as well as Lee Gurga's book *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*, have clarified for thousands the mysteries and

misconceptions about haiku, and they have given scholars and poets a chance to share and build upon one another's work. Jim Kacian's *Red Moon Anthology* has showcased the best haiku written in English from around the world each year for over a decade.

A similar fertilization occurred, and continues to occur, in other countries as well making haiku the most widely disseminated, the most widely written and read poetic form — truly a global phenomenon. With the advent of the Internet and dozens of international conferences each year, haiku poets and societies now interact with one another at a level beyond anyone's expectations.

What is most remarkable is the way in which poets in various countries and cultures have embraced haiku as the poetic form of choice to express what is truly a universally human experience — the haiku moment or epiphany. What is perhaps just as remarkable is the way in which different cultures have made haiku their own — so that there are uniquely Italian haiku, Mexican haiku, Indian haiku, etc. Consider the following example of a Croatian haiku:

a small pool of blood —
killed in the air-raid, a little girl
and her huge blond doll (Devide)

Rather than trying to write Japanese-sounding haiku, poets around the globe like Devide have discovered that haiku can effectively capture their unique experiences, and they have grown their haiku in this spirit. In America, many haiku poets continue in Kerouac's footsteps, producing poems based on their own experiences and in the American idiom. A particularly interesting example may be seen in American haiku poets' recent fascination with baseball. The very successful publication of *Baseball Haiku: The Best Haiku Ever Written About the Game* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2007) reveals the flowering that has resulted from a cultural cross fertilization that began at the start of the twentieth century and continues to blossom into the present day — i.e., Americans adopting and integrating haiku and the Japanese adopting and integrating the sport of baseball. Not surprisingly, the collection credits Kerouac with having written the first American baseball haiku. The haiku in this collection are mostly based on the experience of baseball — of having played the game or of having watched it as a fan, and they offer many examples of uniquely American haiku:

Empty baseball field
--A robin,
Hops along the bench (Kerouac 9)

Through the blue sky
The tape-wrapped baseball trails
A black streamer (van den Heuvel 14)

Leaving the game
The click of his cleats
Fades into the clubhouse (Pizzarelli 81)

Alone
In the autumn night
The home run ball (Spano 135)

A chill wind
Whistles through the bleachers
The locked equipment box (Spano 137)

Several Frogs, One Pond: Haiku and Related Forms

What are commonly referred to as "haiku" actually encompass a half dozen or so different kinds of poems and related genres. Today, at least five other poetic forms are associated with haiku — some of these sprouted as offshoots of haiku long ago while others are more recent branches. **Renga**, the linked-verse form out of which the haiku evolved, is still written today, albeit with far more emotional and poetic range than it had in its early days as a witty word game. **Senryu** is a poem that looks and sounds like a haiku in form but that emphasizes *human* nature over outer nature, usually in a humorous or touching way; it often lacks a nature or season reference. **Zappai** is also a poem that looks and sounds like a haiku in form, but that is really a mock or joke haiku (Gurga 55-58). Two forms have evolved that integrate haiku in with related art forms: the **haibun**, a prose poem with haiku inserted in important spots, especially at the end, and the **haiga**, a combination of visual art (painting, photo, etc.) and haiku.

Senryu and **Zappai** are particularly important since they are

the two forms most commonly confused with haiku. Keeping the above definitions in mind, consider the following examples:

Senryu:

blue popsicles —
the children
compare tongues (Forrester 129)

Pointing, laughing
As they try on wigs —
Children on chemo (Deluty 56)

tropical fish tank —
fingerprint smudges
on the "Do Not Touch" sign (Spano 210)

Zappai:

A file that big?
It might be very useful
But now it is gone. (Anonymous)

"What's this?"
says the carpenter as he
cuts it off (Anonymous)

Granted that the distinctions aren't always so clear, the definitions by and large hold true and offer beginning haiku poets some options. It is important to note that the zappai is NOT considered a true literary genre — more joke than poem, it constitutes doggerel and while appropriate in casual situations it is not considered serious poetry by the vast majority of haiku poets. Hence, if you write or read something like the zappai above, don't expect it to be taken as anything above the level of a clever joke.

Beginners should also beware of the reality that poems that appear to have more depth than zappai might not necessarily qualify as haiku. Just because a poem looks like a haiku and sounds like a haiku it doesn't mean it is a haiku. Haiku poet and scholar Lee Gurga advises writers and readers of haiku should take care to avoid the following in any poem that is presented as a haiku:

- Abstraction, Generalization
- Ideas, Explanations, Conclusions (remember, haiku do not tell; they show via imagery)
- Reportage
- Excess Description
- Zappai
- Ambiguity
- "Summing Up" the Images (a form of telling or explanation)
- Line-Bleed (confusion as to whether the middle line goes with the first line or the third)
- "Tarzan-Speak" and "Yoda-Speak" (inverting word order; omitting articles; etc.)
- Wordiness (telling too much)
- Stilted, "Fortune-Cookie" Sound (Gurga 106-116)

Some typical examples should illustrate these pitfalls:

a friend's funeral —
how fleeting is our time
in this world (abstraction)

summer morning —
I wake up and see
the rain outside (reportage)

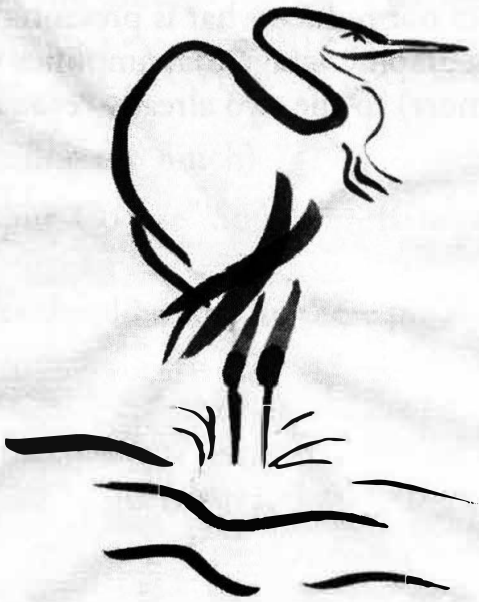
a friend's funeral —
deep snow melts
makes deep puddles (ambiguous; "fortune cookie" sound)

a friend's funeral —
autumn's end makes me think
of the arc of his life (explanation)

a friend's funeral
taking me back to childhood
honeysuckle scent (ambiguous; line bleed)

the last autumn leaf
clinging to its branch
life is tenacious (summing up the images)

With the advent of digital cameras and photo imaging software, **haiga** have blossomed over the last ten to twenty years. Traditionally, haiga emerged out of the art of Japanese calligraphy and the Japanese ink-brush paintings called sumi-e. Traditional haiga are still popular today with artists using many of the same tools and techniques that were practiced centuries ago. Modern haiga artists make use of photography and collage creating layer upon layer of images which resonate on multiple levels. The key to all haiga art is to make sure that the graphic image does not reduce what is presented in the haiku. Done properly, haiga offer a graphic image that amplifies the haiku adding a third dimension (or more) to the two already resonating in the haiku (Gurga 122-123).



imagining old age
in the river mist
the ghost of a heron

(Haiga by M.V. Spano)

the boot prints end,
but the brook keeps flowing
into the deep woods

(Haiga by M.V. Spano)

Why-ku? The Beginner's Question About Haiku:

Writers who explore haiku tend to appreciate its literary and artistic qualities, but in a world of economic and environmental uncertainty and a world that tends to undervalue and marginalize the arts, haiku poets, like all poets, have to confront the big question posed by those of the culture's dominant utilitarian mindset: Of what practical use is haiku for people today? Why write them? Why read them?

Haiku poets are lucky in the sense that their art form can provide concrete answers to these questions, hopefully opening the eyes of the questioners to just how much this little, "trivial" poetic form can offer. The ailments of contemporary American (and arguably global) living might be diagnosed as follows: we suffer from a hyperactive lifestyle and life pace; we emphasize speed and instant gratification, often settling for the superficial and expedient; we are narcissistic, often failing to consider the broader context of our actions and decisions; we feel alienated from each other and from the natural world; we feel the urge to compete and to dominate in arenas ranging from the stadium to the board room; we feel the urge to consume everything from material goods to food to energy in order to fill an emptiness inside — a lack of identity and self esteem.

Without overstating the case (haiku cannot solve all of the world's problems), a haiku poet might argue that the practice of writing and reading haiku — i.e., cultivating the haiku sensibility and perception — at least addresses, and compensates for, many of these ills of modern living. Haiku encourage us to slow down and reflect on our position in larger contexts of the natural world — its timeless cycles and endless beauty. In the haiku moment, we experience the inter-being of things — the connectedness that we feel with the mayfly who lives out her entire adult life in just one day, not so different than the way our lives must appear to the ageless stars. If part of our purpose for living is to bring conscious thought and reflection to Nature (i.e., to help Nature get to know itself), then haiku serve as a perfect vehicle for us to carry out this sacred office.

Haiku motivate us to live deeply and fully — the "small" moments with others and with nature that we might overlook in our subconscious rush to "get everything done" suddenly appear as the big moments where we consciously *choose* to invest our time and emotion. We can capture such moments in haiku, and reading these poems encourages us slow down and reflect. One's own collection of haiku often serves far better than a photo album for recalling and re-living moments in our pasts. Their powers of evocation are especially well suited to conjuring up memories and experiences that we choose to revisit to remember and reflect on the people, places, and moments that have the most meaning for us.

Of course, writing and reading haiku make us more receptive to those moments when we discover the divine hiding in the commonplace — moments of epiphany that we might otherwise have rushed past in our race to get to the finish line. Haiku make us consider that the kingdom of heaven might be right here, right now waiting for us to discover it — what a waste it would be if we thought that heaven were only waiting for us somewhere on the other side of the finish line. Haiku allow us to share our epiphanies and evoke in others reactions and insights like the ones we experienced. Haiku show us how to go back home to nature — especially important in a world where our technological devices pull us farther and farther away from our mother, the Earth.

We live in a consumer culture, and the attitude of passive consumption of goods promotes materialism and greed. Here again haiku offer a response by stressing the transient and ephemeral in the haiku moment. Rather than pushing us to acquire more and more "stuff" in an effort to stave off change and impermanence, they teach us that we are part of Nature's process of constant change and that we must cherish those moments that we ultimately must let go of. Moreover, as one of the most democratic of art forms, haiku by their very nature invite us to participate actively in the haiku moment and in so doing, they promote community. Writers can start to compose haiku fairly quickly and easily and share their poems with others. We don't only have to "publish or perish" in the literary journals; we can and do include haiku in letters, cards, e-mail messages, tweets, etc. The act of reading haiku is also especially active. When reading haiku, we must help the poet to compose the poem — i.e., the poet gets the resonance going, but there will be no music without a sounding board. Imaginative, intuitive and sensitive readers are essential for a haiku to work. They are the sounding board and body of the instrument, so to speak, and without them, the resonating strings would make no sound.

Finally, haiku may be very therapeutic for those going through difficult times. As one poet put it, haiku allow one to "find things of value in life in an attempt to break [one's] large unhappiness into small pieces of happiness" (Anakiev 35). In this spirit, the poet Ryokan wrote the following haiku after returning home one night to find that a thief had stolen virtually all of his worldly possessions. What Ryokan chose to focus on was not the absence of his material possessions and money, but the beauty of the moonlight, which at that very moment, filled the now "empty" room:

the thief
left it behind
the moon at the window (Ryokan 189)

Haiku Moods

Although haiku can express a wide range of emotions, there are certain moods which it is particularly effective at evoking, and these have been cultivated and explained by haiku poets for centuries. The previous haiku by Ryokan evokes the mood of wabi, which may be described as an appreciation of the beauty in poverty — an austere beauty (Powell 6). It is said that the fullness of **wabi** arising from living simply & deeply. **Sabi** is the mood evoked by an appreciation of the beauty in something old & worn eliciting the sense of loneliness and sadness (Powell 7):

spring cleaning
the final notes
of an old music box (Spano 70)

Aware is evoked when one is emotionally touched or stirred by a particular object
(Powell 195):

deep in rank grass
through a bullet riddled helmet
an unknown flower (Virgilio 260)

Finally, **yugen** has been described as an appreciation of the beauty in something strange, mysterious, & ultimately unknowable (Powell 198):

Evening coming —
the office girl
Unloosing her scarf. (Kerouac 97)

Like other forms of poetry, haiku can fall victim to sentimentality and emotionalism, but when composed properly they are often saved from these pitfalls by the poet's adherence to image and, sometimes, by a feeling of ironic detachment & selflessness.

How-ku: A Suggested Haiku Writing Process

The beginner's mind is everything in haiku. Even Basho once said, "to write good haiku, find a three-foot child." Perhaps this is why some children seem to find writing haiku such a natural activity — that is until they are told that it isn't a haiku unless the syllables add up, the seasonal reference is included, etc. When I hear teachers and so-called "haiku experts" say this to children today, I can almost feel all of the life getting sucked out of the room. It's as if a lush green plant suddenly wilted in seconds. The kids are shut down and change their beginner's mind to an "expert" mind — telling their uninitiated friends that their poems can't be haiku because they don't follow the rules. Haiku are not about rules, though there are some general formal guidelines. Haiku have to do with a way of seeing the world — experiencing miraculous moments within the ordinary and everyday the way a child might who sees a firefly for the very first time and cups it in his/her tiny hand before releasing it back into the sweet, warm air of a June night. Young children possess the beginner's mind, but they often lose it fairly quickly (and not only when it comes to haiku).

The most important and fundamental first step in writing haiku, then, is to try to recapture the beginner's mind. How does one do this? Not by becoming a Zen Buddhist. Not by learning Japanese. Not by reading books on the literary and artistic development of Japan. Not by taking courses in Eastern philosophy or by mastering Eastern meditation techniques. Certainly, these activities might enhance a haiku poet's ability...but all of these added up will not make a haiku poet of a person who has not first recaptured and fully integrated the beginner's mind. Basho, who had his fair share of imitators tailing him, often told his students to "learn about pines from the pine, and about bamboo from the bamboo" as well as "Don't follow in the footsteps of the old poets, seek what they sought" (Hass 233). In other words, haiku poets should *value their own* haiku moments and *their own* artistic expression of those moments and avoid merely echoing or parroting the masters. Even experienced haiku poets may find themselves trying to sound like Basho or Issa — the result is that the haiku can sound derivative, "have the stink of Zen" or, at worst, sound contrived, "like the cheap lacquer imitations of Japanese pottery," in Alan Watts' words. A haiku poet should be true to his/her own experience first — it is the experience, the haiku moment out of which the best haiku grow.

Some editors of haiku journals have claimed that they can tell a haiku based on actual lived experience from one that is not. Some have even questioned haiku workshops in which poets "invent" haiku out

of thin air in a closed room without windows, and activities in which poets try to write from someone else's experience. And more than a few have challenged the entire notion that a haiku can and should be composed spontaneously (or at least within the time span of the workshop activity). While it is true that Basho emphasized spontaneity in the composition of haiku (Hass 234), this idea has likely been misinterpreted by Americans seeking instant gratification at a workshop they paid for. What Basho likely meant by his emphasis on spontaneity was staying true to the immediacy of the haiku moment — to keep that moment alive and present throughout the composition process, which, in Basho's case, we now know often took many revisions over days and weeks.

How, then, does one go about remembering what it was like to see the world in this magical way? One way, as Basho suggested, is literally to spend time with children. Issa watched and learned from his young children as they crawled, cooed, counted and discovered tiny creatures close to the ground. Ryokan loved to play hide n' seek with the village children, losing himself in the game to such an extent that once, when the children played a trick on him and left him hiding while they went home, he was discovered still hiding behind an outhouse the next morning. When the field workers who saw him asked him what he was doing, he replied, "Shh, be quiet, please...or else the children will find me!" (Stevens 14). One should not be afraid to immerse oneself in the world of children — to sing and shout with them, listen to them, play with them, get down on all fours in the grass and roar with them. Watch how they find connections between seemingly unrelated objects — some stones and a stick become a game; a dandelion and a doll talk to each other and become friends; the wind becomes a friend helping bubbles escape a wizard's prison by lifting them over the hedge. Imagination and curiosity, then, are two important qualities of the beginner's mind — not necessarily in the sense of making the "real" into something fantastic, but more in the sense of intuiting relationships between seemingly dissimilar objects. Children can do this because they are not yet locked into the grid of categories and definitions imposed by the culture. That grid can become so entrenched that it dictates the initial reaction we have to experience--e.g., seeing a dandelion, an adult's first thoughts are typically "plant, undesirable, weed, useless, kill." The trick is to see and experience a thing or things in the world directly — without projecting over top of it a grid of preconceived utilitarian notions about what it is called, how it is defined & categorized, and how it can be used.

Basho, whose name means "banana tree," chose his name from a gift given to him by his students. The banana tree they gave him did

not bear fruit, but Basho loved it anyway. He loved the tree because it provided beauty with its green leaves, because it provided shade, and, perhaps, especially because it did not bear fruit. He saw the beauty of the tree itself instead of reducing it to the function that is commonly projected onto it. Shunryu Suzuki's famous saying seems particularly applicable to Basho's view of the banana tree: "In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few" (21). A banana tree can be many things beyond a machine for producing bananas. To illustrate this point to his college class, a professor once took a box of matches out of his pocket. "What's this?" he asked his students. Instantly hands went up and the air was filled with names, definitions, categories, uses, etc. After the din had died down, the professor paused. "No," he said, "It's THIS!" and he instantly tossed the box of matches to an astonished student in the front row who caught it as if it were alive — perhaps really seeing it for the first time (Watts 130).

So spending time with children and remembering how to be childlike is one wonderful way to recapture the beginner's mind. Another way is to read great haiku poetry — i.e., poetry written by those who have cultivated the beginner's mind and can successfully transmit it through their poetry. Finding great haiku poetry and poets, however, may be more difficult than it at first seems. Poetry sections in bookstores and libraries, not to mention the glut of haiku web sites, e-journals, etc. on the Internet are too often laden with bad haiku and bad translations. It is imperative to read haiku in good translations (please see the list of haiku collections in the "Works Cited" that follow this essay — the translators who worked on these collections are universally recognized as the very best).

These are just a few of the ways to recapture the beginner's mind, but there are a few important caveats to consider. First, if one cultivates the beginner's mind, it should not be necessary to seek out haiku moments. Beginning haiku poets risk becoming vultures circling every experience for a whiff of the haiku moment and often feeling like failures if they don't find what they were looking for. Having the beginner's mind creates an openness to experience, a readiness for experience, without having to probe each and every moment for its haiku potential and discard it as waste if it fails to produce. People who spend time in the outdoors, and are therefore comfortable and relaxed in the wilderness, have an uncanny ability to spot wild animals — not because they were looking for them, but because their minds and eyes are ready and open for any life that might emerge from the trees and rivers. Contrast this with the tourist, visiting the wilderness for the first time, seeking to spot wildlife because s/he paid to have such an experience.

Second, to say that one should work on recapturing the beginner's mind is NOT to say that one should *become* a child or act in a childish manner. Although children possess this wonderful gift of seeing and experiencing the world directly, they lack the wisdom, the language skills, the wider context with which to gain insight into their experiences. Being open and having the experience is just one part of writing haiku. It is also essential to hone the skills necessary to capture that experience in poetry. These skills include, first and foremost, juxtaposing the images on the page so that they resonate and evoke the moods and reactions that the poet wants them to. Poets also have to consider how to arrange the lines on the page so that they "unfold" to the reader in a way that startles or awakens the reader as s/he proceeds line-by-line through the poem. Haiku poets often anticipate the expectations of their readers and use this to surprise them from one line to the next.. Of course, poets have also to choose from a toolbox of poetic devices, including mainly alliteration, assonance, rhyme and rhythm, and, to a lesser extent, figurative language, symbolism, etc. Finally, there is the revision and editing stage in which the poet checks that s/he has avoided some of the aforementioned pitfalls that many beginning (and even experienced) haiku poets may fall into.

Keeping all of this in mind may seem overwhelming, so a stripped-down process might be in order here. A suggestion for a simplified writing process for haiku might look something like the following:

- **Preparing the Ground:** Cultivate the beginner's mind so that you are open and ready for haiku moments
- **Gathering Seed and Planting:** Experience the "haiku moment." Take field notes on the images that made up this experience. Make two columns: 1.) "season or nature" images — i.e., images that are part of the moment but that are also universal in their association with the seasons and/or with nature, and 2.) "moment" images — i.e., those peculiar or quirky images that are unique to that particular moment. Now try to sift through these lists and select the 2 or 3 most crucial images (choose at least one image from each of your columns)
- **Cultivating and Arranging:** Try to juxtapose these images in a haiku draft that evokes the "haiku moment" for the reader. You might try

putting your poem aside for a while and then going back to it later and trying to read as if you were a reader coming to the poem for the first time.

- **Pruning:** Revise and edit as needed. You might have to go back and shape the lines and language of the poem so that it best evokes the intended response.
- **Pollinating:** Share your haiku with an audience (on a letter, e-mail, greeting card; at a poetry reading; in a submission to a journal; etc.)

Please note, again, that this is only a suggested process, and since the creative act is by nature a miraculous and mysterious force of nature, a poet should always be suspicious of such processes and formulas. Nevertheless, such a suggested process might be enough to get a haiku poet started, and we all have to begin somewhere.

The best way to begin (and end) as a haiku poet, then, is by cultivating a state of mind that leaves you open to haiku moments; staying true to your own experiences, intuitions and feelings; relying on your own senses; employing concrete imagery; tightening and honing your language; and ultimately writing poems whose primary measure of value is their power to evoke similar experiences and emotions in your readers. Then they too can begin.

* * *

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Mathew Spano

The Struggle Not To Forget: A Review Of Mihaela Moscaliuc's *Father Dirt*

The words "arresting" and "poignant" appear often in reviews of Mihaela Moscaliuc's impressive debut collection entitled *Father Dirt* (Alice James Books, 2010). No doubt many of the poems in this book will startle readers with striking images of suffering, survival, tenderness, and the triumph of the human spirit. What has gone underemphasized and un-asked in many reviews, however, is the question: *toward what end* are these images and themes moving? Curiously, this question has been circumvented despite the fact that Moscaliuc makes her answer quite clear: the bleeding of the human spirit perpetrated by communist governments and their penchant for deteriorating into oppressive dictatorships. Make no mistake about it, *Father Dirt* is a political book, but political in the truest and deepest sense of the word, for it traces in strokes both bold and subtle the human face and consequence of failed political ideology and policy.

Mihaela Moscaliuc, now a professor at Monmouth University, grew up in Nicolae Ceausescu's communist Romania, a regime that remains one of the starkest reminders of the kind of dictatorship communist regimes could, and often did, deteriorate into. Though Ceausescu's initial decade as Secretary General of the Romanian Communist Party was marked by openness to the West and to the world, upon becoming President of Romania in 1974, he increasingly consolidated power and imposed a growing number of restrictions upon his people. Much of this was done behind the scenes, certainly behind the Iron Curtain, while the dictator presented a kind and open face to the rest of the world (Romania was one of the few Eastern Block countries to participate in the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles). All the while Ceausescu tightened his grip with policies aimed at fostering a growing population, a tightly controlled and brainwashed legion who blindly follow his cult of personality. History books in schools and libraries were removed and replaced with revisionist history glorifying the dictator and his regime. A secret police, the *Securitate*, was empowered to conduct random body searches, spy on citizens, and arrest those who criticized the government, arresting even those who uttered anti-communist sentiments. Those who continued to speak out were sent to insane asylums. Travel outside of Romania was banned

for all citizens. Expressions of religious faith were banned. Private residences and properties were seized by the government and the owners displaced without compensation. Divorce and abortion were outlawed, fertile women were under government surveillance and pregnant women were rewarded.

The results? The world in which Moscaliuc and her family grew up and struggled to survive. There were massive shortages of food and basic living necessities, and the jails were swollen with innocent citizens. Most disturbing were the increased number of suicides among young pregnant women and the squalid and barbaric conditions of the state-run and now overcrowded orphanages. In short, there was economic, political, sociological and psychological depression. The oppression finally ended with the execution of Ceausescu and his wife in 1989, but the country felt the aftermath of this nightmare for several more years as it tried to heal.

This is the world that Moscaliuc reminds us of and warns us about: indeed, in the middle of the book, she poignantly quotes Milan Kundera: "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." Moscaliuc makes it difficult to forget the Romania in which she grew up. In a poem titled after a quote from Lenin, "Destroy the Family, You Destroy the Country," a young high school girl named Mara, mired in poverty and forced to raise her four younger siblings after her parents die, must submit to the school's routine "fertility check" and is found to be pregnant by her cousin. Though she is forced to have the child, Mara's pregnancy is announced over the school PA system as her own choice and described as an "act of deep patriotism." Mara is praised for her choice and contrasted with the "disgrace" of another girl, presumably in a similar situation, who committed suicide the week before. Soon after, however, at another "emergency assembly," it is announced that Mara has "committed a most reprobate act: killed her unborn, betrayed our trust, mocked the party's directives." Mara is forced to denounce the act publically as the principal shouts at her to speak "Louder!" into the microphone. The speaker, presumably the then teenaged Moscaliuc, is forced to watch:

I do not lift my eyes from the runs in her stockings, each gone its own
Distance, each strangled with red nail polish. Applause. Assembly dismissed.
Mara leaves with the village cop and we return to Marx and Lenin.
Her words hang above us, curved blades without handles.

Two of Moscaliuc's most effective gifts are on display here: her subtle and arresting images (the runs in Mara's patched up stockings) and

her transformation of these images into metaphor (the runs terminated by being "strangled" in red — i.e., blood). The culminating image of the sickle, along with the hammer the symbol of communist labor and productivity, takes on ironic meaning in this context, a situation Moscaliuc exploits with metaphor and imagery that further drives home her point: Mara's words are sickles, but the kind that harvest human lives before their time — Mara's, the baby's, and potentially the other girls at the assembly upon whom the sickles may fall at any moment. Without handles, they cannot be stopped or controlled — i.e., if and when they fall, one is sure to be cut.

Other such tragic young mothers haunt the pages of *Father Dirt*: the "retarded gypsy" mother whose boys were taken from her by the state in "Annunciation," the young "Florina" who, forced to live on the streets and raped by drifters, now sits in a clinic waiting room with a double grocery bag "outside handles nosed around her left wrist, / inside braided airtight":

> She has to go now, but will be back.
> She needs advice, she says, lifting the doubled bag.
> The smell makes stray dogs go mad,
> so she can't keep it another night,
> yesterday's flesh, her
> blue fetus.

Indeed, it is mothers who dominate *Father Dirt*, but not just the young, tragic mothers. There are strong, vital mothers here as well — mothers who not only survive but thrive and who fight back with a weapon, an ancient weapon that could not be wrested from them by the communist government: their connection to the earth.

In poems like "How to Ask For My Hand At My Grandmother's Grave," "Gentians I," "Drink Water Out of Thine Own Cisterns" and "Taste of Earth," mothers and grandmothers summon nature and folk wisdom to survive the oppression, abuse and bleakness of their world. Moscaliuc celebrates this wisdom directly and openly in "Taste of Earth" where she sings of a great-grandmother, "who chewed mud while birthing nine daughters" and a grandmother who was a healer and wise old woman:

> I want to consecrate my grandmother's laughter
> While her geraniums cheat the winter
> (recipe: egg shell with pinch of sugar)...

I want to sing her trust in heal-it-all unpasteurized beer,
Bandages of cabbage leaves, tinctures of propolis,
Her one-room flat pungent with the sweat of yeast fairies
And her apron, floured continent rich with buttery oceans

In the particularly graphic and memorable "Self-Portrait: Pinworms," medicinal teas and "tinctures of wormwood" save the young speaker from a near fatal parasitic infection. Sometimes, the mothers are not so fortunate, and the healing lies beyond their strength, love and folk remedies. In "Chernobyl," the mothers of babies affected by the radioactive fallout of the now infamous nuclear reactor haunt the village streets:

[They] Hurried down alleys, near-smiling,
helloed back when hailed, but did not stop,
did not force us to hear the feral wailing,
did not force us to see the grotesque
heads, and we, expectant caryatids,
did not flinch.

In "Cul-De-Sac," another mother, this time of an infant boy, catches a glimpse of a teenage boy in a wooded area behind her dwelling; the teen is a child of the streets, who, with his gang, continually rapes a favorite dog, nearly killing it. The mother worries and wonders if her son will one day be one of those street boys.

Still, it is the strength of these mothers, their sheer endurance to survive in such a wasteland, and, above all, the way that they embraced life, cherished and nurtured it that remains with the reader long after putting down this book. The conclusion to "Taste of Earth" could also serve as an apt closing to this book:

Grandmother, I've forgotten how to braid the airy dough
Without bruising it, but you'd be pleased to know
I carry my love the way you carry fresh loaves:
In both arms, swaddled in white towels, but for one corner
--so heat can escape and the crust seal in true flavor.

Overall, in *Father Dirt*, Moscaliuc proves that she is a true poet, and this first book serves as a tour-de-force of her varied poetic gifts: evocative and startling imagery, moving character portraits, effective integration of dialogue, and a skillful use of narrative. While some critics have taken her to task for sacrificing economy and music/word-song in her verse

for occasionally wordy, journalistic and prosaic poems, these faults may be forgiven as they may be ascribed to the contemporary movement in American poetry in general. And any shortcomings in these poems are minor and greatly outweighed by the beauty and passion of Moscaliuc's verse. Furthermore, in reading *Father Dirt*, one is reminded of some of the great Chinese poets of the T'ang dynasty, who defined in their work one of the oldest and truest functions of poetry — to reveal the human face behind political policies and abstractions. Moscaliuc taps into this tradition and reminds us of its importance. *Father Dirt* is necessary in light of the short memory of the American public, whose international radar is now focused (understandably) on terrorism and radical Islam. How quickly we forget the terrors that went unseen for too long behind the iron curtain. Moscaliuc's is a courageous and authentic voice, and we can only hope for many more literary gems like *Father Dirt* in the future. Very highly recommended.

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Mihaela Moscaliuc is an award winning poet whose first poetry collection (winner of the Kinereth Gensler prize 2008) was published by Alice James in 2010. Her poems, reviews, translations, and articles appear in *The Georgia Review, Prairie Schooner, TriQuarterly, New Letters, Poetry International, Arts & Letters, Pleiades*, and *Soundings*. She teaches at Monmouth University and in the low-residency MFA Program of Poetry and Poetry in Translation at Drew University, and lives in Ocean, NJ.

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