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Voices de la Luna, 15 January 2014
Voices de la Luna

Is Pleased to Announce

The HEB Annual Youth Poetry Contest

HEB Youth Poetry Contest

For Submission Guidelines Please Visit

at www.voicesdelaluna.com/submissions/

Submission Guidelines

To submit material for publication in Voices de la Luna, go to voicesdelaluna.submittable.com.

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Poetry and Arts Presentation

Every Fourth Wednesday, January through June
and September through December

Poetry Workshop at 6:00
Featured Poet at 7:00

Poetry, Music, & Open Mic at 7:30

Barnes & Noble at the Shops at La Cantera
15900 La Cantera Parkway, Bldg. 27
San Antonio, TX 78256

Voices de la Luna is a quarterly publication dedicated to the artistic expression of a wide range of perspectives and topics. In the service of that goal, we welcome diverse, well-written submissions from every quarter.

Senior Editor’s Note

James Brandenburg

As I reflect on the community work that Dr. Mo Saidi and I are doing at Haven for Hope, I am reminded of the healing power of poetry and writing. It is important to revisit occasionally the following portion of our mission statement: “The organization is committed to use its leverage to inspire youth, promote poetry and arts through their involvement, and use the magazine as a platform for all poets and artists to share their work with others, and it is dedicated to use poetry and arts both for educational and healing purposes in the communities.” We have a great team of collaborators and workers doing this valuable outreach work in the community, including Jimmy Adair, Lou Taylor, Carol Reposa, Santo Randazzo, Jerry Robledo, Maripat Munley, Janie Alonso, Maria Alonso, Josie Mixon, and Debra Peña.

Working with the homeless at Haven for Hope touches me deeply. The ladies I work with there have encountered addiction, physical and emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and the worst kinds of neglect. Haven for Hope provides many positive outlets for the homeless and offers hope through counseling, job retraining, support groups, literary groups, and a safe environment. Our workshops offer participants the opportunity to speak about their problems through poetry and prose. There is something healing and cathartic about putting one’s problems on paper in a literary format. It allows the participants to gain distance from their problems and helps them to objectify their issues through writing. Some of their poems and pieces we publish in Voices de la Luna. For many it is their first publication.

Dr. Saidi and I have also conducted workshops at the San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind, a co-sponsor of this year’s fundraising gala, which was held on April 9. The gala was a success, but we encourage you to make your donations to Voices de la Luna throughout the year, as it is through your generous donations that our non-profit organization survives and provides the services that it does to the community. In April 2015 Voices will join hands with Haven for Hope for our annual gala. We are excited about our community outreach programs and the difference we are making in the community.

Issues of addiction are pervasive in our community and negatively impact individual and family lives. Society’s way of dealing with addiction is often to incarcerate the addicts. Addicts go to prison, and their prison sentences result in felony records. As a result of their felony records, addicts can’t find a job when they get out of prison and end up back in the throes of addiction and often on the streets again. It is a vicious cycle. Our society needs more institutions like Haven for Hope and more programs like those that Voices de la Luna provides that offer alternatives to addiction.

Voices editors encourage you to solicit your community leaders to provide adequate funding for mental health programs that help those who have fallen into the dark abyss of addiction. We can make a difference, and Voices is making a difference in our community. We at Voices de la Luna are committed to the idea that poetry and the arts heal. Thank you for your support.
Religion and Spirituality, Literature and the Arts

“Protector of the World” is an image from the Buddhist tradition, one of the oldest and largest religious traditions in the world. According to adherents.com, more than 80% of the world’s population identifies with one or more religious traditions, and a growing number of people, whether they see themselves as part of a particular religion or not, self-identify as spiritual. Religion and spirituality have long played a vital role in literature and the arts, providing themes for storytellers, artists, and dramatists. The earliest surviving Greek plays were presented at a festival in honor of the god Dionysius. Ancient Sumerian, Egyptian, Akkadian, Chinese, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Arabic poetry was inspired by and suffused with sacred images. Archaeologists often associate the female figurines discovered at many ancient sites with the primeval mother goddess. Art and music in many cultures, whether ancient or contemporary, often reflect ideas, figures, and concerns drawn from religion.

Many of the pieces in this issue of *Voices de la Luna* interact with the worlds of religion and spirituality. Some interactions are positive, others negative, and still others reflect the complex attitudes that many contemporary people have concerning religion. Regardless of one’s personal views on religion, no one can deny its historical and continuing influence on the way human beings express themselves artistically.

Featured Poet  
San Antonio’s New Poet Laureate  
Laurie Ann Guerrero

Babies under the House

In Memoriam: Siblings,  
Sariyah Garcia, fourteen months old & Sebastian Lopez, four months old  
San Antonio, Texas, March 2007

When you open your eyes again, Sariyah,  
this’ll just be one of those things—like rice and bean  
tacos every night, having to go to the free clinic, buying gas with food stamps  
at Ben’s Ice House at the corner of Pleasanton and Petaluma. But you know that, don’t you—

know that your body will never grow completely?  
When you open your eyes, your skin will be smooth  
as the day you were born, not what it was when they found you and the tiny thing that was your brother. The dirt around you will have licked away mother’s milk from your lips, absorbed the sour scent of mother’s breath on your neck. The iron-heavy taste of blood in your mouth, you won’t even remember.

When you open your eyes again, Sariyah,  
you will be the mother. Your tart Mexican heart won’t let you be anything else.

No need for grownups—Child Protective Services who were too busy, the legislators who couldn’t give medication, education to this poor neighborhood, this city, La Raza with no muscle, no voice. Hope decomposing in a couple plastic bags. But there are two things you will have that your mother never did:

a whole Sariyah, a whole Sebastian.

From A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying, University of Notre Dame Press, 2013

Ode to el Cabrito

More than sheep and cow and butterfly, I love you.  
No envy between us like the rooster-footed.  
In your belly, I live like warm milk, goat-thick and cloud heavy,  
lick you from the inside until the slaughter—when your mother cries like my mother. When fire sends its last breath to the stars,  
I tear away your muscle, bubbling fat, and warm tortillas over coal.  
In the onion and cilantro, you do not recoil like the burnt skin of the pig, but spread yourself: sunbather. The rest of you still on the spit, gap-mouthed, your fleshless head tossed back:

you love being loved.  
In the sweet meat of you—l little hooved, little horned—
I taste my own skin.

New Poet Laureate of San Antonio

On Tuesday, 1 April 2014, San Antonio Mayor Pro Tem Cris Medina formally inducted Laurie Ann Guerrero as the 2014-2016 Poet Laureate of the City of San Antonio to a cheering crowd in the City Council Chambers. Felix Padrón, executive director of the Department of Culture and Creative Development for the city, played a major role in managing the poet laureate search. Six nominees arose from the pool of distinguished San Antonio poets. They in turn were judged by four renowned national literary figures whose individual, blind votes crystallized without any communication among them. They unanimously chose Laurie Ann Guerrero as the single finalist.

Born and raised in the Southside of San Antonio, Laurie Ann Guerrero received the Academy of American Poets Prize, among others, at Smith College. Winner of the 2012 Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize, her first full-length collection, A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying, selected by Francisco X. Alarcón, was released by University of Notre Dame Press in 2013. Guerrero’s poetry and critical work have appeared in Huizache, Texas Monthly, Bellevue Review, Women’s Studies Quarterly, Global City Review, Texas Observer, Chicana/Latina Studies, Feminist Studies, and others. Guerrero holds a B.A. in English Language & Literature from Smith College and an MFA in poetry from Drew University. Guerrero’s chapbook, Babies under the Skin (2008), won the Panhandler Publishing Award, chosen by Naomi Shihab Nye. A CantoMundo fellow and member of the Macondo Writers’ Workshop, Guerrero’s work has been highlighted in various publications, including LA Review of Books, The Yale Daily News, and Poets & Writers Magazine. She is the winner of the 2013 Alfredo Cisneros del Moral Award, a grant created by Sandra Cisneros to honor the memory of her father, which supports Texas writers who “exhibit both exceptional talent and profound commitment” to their craft. Guerrero has served on the faculty at Palo Alto College, University of the Incarnate Word, University of Texas at El Paso, and Gemini Ink. She is also a visiting writer at Our Lady of the Lake University.
Select Poems
by San Antonio Poet Laureate Nominees

For a Rose
Carol Coffee Reposa

I watch the lyric petals slowly droop
Into their death, the elegant long stem
Sway softly toward the earth. Their colors swim
Toward darkness (once a desert sunrise), sloop
Blurred in twilight, or a polished troop
Of weary ballerinas, each of them
Magnificent, despite their dusty hems
And aching arms, but eager now to stoop,
Remove their slippers, and recline in some
Soft armchair covered in the finest plush.
Their scent, still fresh, will linger in the vase,
A memory of one fine dance, one plum
Performance resonant with form, the brush
Of perfect footfalls echoing through space.

Nerve Gas Victims in Syria
Mobi Warren

My eyes mourn
faces mild as the moon
framed in white shrouds,
cocoons waiting rebirth
or maggots lowered into soil.

To April from September
Rod Stryker

We cross
deltas painted
in deep September,
born in debt
and
Wonder bread dreams,
raised w/picket fence lies
spitting argyle sunsets
across the delta’s
gaping mouth
and lend
credence
to counterfeit
horizons.

Laconic
Jesse Cardona

I am two years old when the supersonic
doomsday atomic bomb zooms to earth.
I seldom speak. Mother buys tonics
for her seemingly moronic son.
She does not consult a priest
for fear neighbors will think demonic.

Instead she takes me to Blanca, la curandera
on Morgan Street in Corpus Christi.
Rolling a Lobo Negro cigarette,
she tells my mom it’s nothing chronic.
I try to read her smoke rings.

At school teachers tell my mother
to trust in the power of phonics,
but I remain laconic until seventh grade
when my social studies teacher
from Nashville, Tennessee, takes me out
into the hall for a talk; I guess he saw in me
something of a refugee. He wore penny loafers.
I heard he died one summer in a car wreck.

The Power of Poetry
Carmen Tafolla

Inaugural Poet Laureate, City of San Antonio

There is such power in poetry. It is the essence of meaning, beyond logic, beyond restrictions, but coming straight from the gut and penetrating each cell and every idea. The city may not have known this when they agreed to appoint, for the first time ever, a City Poet Laureate, but surely there was some intuitive draw that brought them to the conclusion that this was of great importance to our city’s future—not just as a decoration, not just as another festive “event,” but somehow linked to our future literacy and our cultural expression of who we were and who we could be. In April 2012, I became San Antonio’s first and inaugural poet laureate, and so began an adventure that was soon to become fast and furious and full of surprises. And San Antonio became the first major city in Texas to appoint a poet laureate, though soon many of the nation’s cities, and two of our state’s cities, began to follow suit.

Being poet laureate of San Antonio was a moving experience. There was such excitement across town at the concept of what a poet laureate was and could do. There was a newness to it that allowed the dynamic of “holy ground” to take place, that creative openness where all things are possible. It got people to thinking, and when people think, dreams come into place. I tried to encourage all these new wild ideas and visionary projects, because there’s no telling where dreams can lead, and how they can transform us. Hope, growth, miraculous transformations—are the stuff dreams are made of. So I got approached by a lot of people with a lot of ideas that were...
amazing in their scope or content. A week or two after the induction, I was sitting in a taqueria when three older Anglo ladies walked up to me, beaming with pride and said, “That’s OUR poet laureate!” It was funny, but it was touching too. The sense that I belonged to the community, the property of, that I was “theirs.” Others approached me to discuss an educational or sociolinguistic plan, a visual art or musical composition idea, or to sound out a professional or personal plan. I was the same person I had been before, with the same qualifications, but the new role defined me with a cultural symbolism, an ethical authority.

I was asked to do some peacekeeping functions, some symbolic mediation, and I even wondered if the word laureate had some confusing me with a Nobel Peace Laureate, but I realized that it was the functional power of poetry to strike what was most profound in people, and to move them to compassion.

I have always kept a busy speaking and performing schedule. In this last decade, I would average a minimum of seventy-five presentations a year, sometimes significantly more, but in these last two years as Poet Laureate, I presented and performed to more than 300 groups. And it wasn’t just the number of presentations that stunned me; it was the range of groups, the great diversity between different elements of the community. I had to watch, to be careful I didn’t overextend myself, working harder than ever before, and earning less because so many of these functions were freebies, presentations made without compensation because it was such an opportunity to make a difference in our community. But the range included everything from keynoting the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children, to writing and presenting an original poem to the final stage of SA2020; from sharing a sense of who we are and where we came from with the National Parks Service’s Latino Legacy Summit in San Antonio to presenting to Korean Fulbright scholars interested in our school system; introducing and motivating a reading by teens and elderly people on the southside of San Antonio or performing to young Syrian artists hoping to use art to resolve conflict in their homeland.

There were five projects I was specifically responsible for during my laureateship, in addition to the presentation and planning of the induction ceremony, and I am proud of all five—one transformed a middle school with poetry on the walls, the stairs and in the classrooms; one established what will hopefully be a tradition of blessing our beginnings and reclaiming our identity as a city, a home that has been here for thousands of years, creating art and music since before European settlement. And many other creative opportunities presented themselves—including the creation of seven short films based on my poems, and a collaboration with composers to create new musical pieces based on my poetry—but perhaps the most enduring part of my legacy will be the SA Poet Source website (sapoetsource.com), which has been a full two years in the planning and is preparing to open now—a place where schools, social and professional groups, and community centers can access information and contact points with a whole community of poets in our area. It means that they don’t have to land the poet laureate to get a poet in their program—they can select from a full community of amazing and diverse poets, and hopefully poets themselves will benefit too, not being such well-kept secrets in our society, but being able to present, perform, and be paid to practice their art in our city.

On April 1, 2014, we induct San Antonio’s second poet laureate. This new poet will have a different style, a different voice, different emphases, but still the same beautiful community, the same mission to transform the society, to deepen our humanity, and to increase our compassion, our vulnerability, and our sense of community via poetry. No finer role could be asked of any writer, and our city will be a different place because of it.

San Anto’s Mezcla Mágica
Carmen Tafolla
Poet Laureate of San Antonio, 2012-14

What it means to co-exist, to bloom together, is that the lines grow fuzzy, optical illusions with two different faces appearing at different times there is not a street that marks a neighborhood others have not crossed into eaten, loved, lived in, tasted in a different way

Even in Alamo Heights, tamales end up on the “Old Texas” families’ Thanksgiving tables, while “Graciela’s” sells designer suits in sarape colors

Even on Nogalitos Street the Chinese tamarind seed is the top-selling snack at the Mexican food counter, Indian curry gets scooped up in comal-warmed pita bread Vietnamese eggrolls brim out of toasty tortillas made from German-milled white flour

At the corner of French and Fredericksburg Road Martinez Barbacoa pairs steaming barbacoa with ice-cold, carbonated Big Red, imports El Milagro tortillas from Austin and Virgin of Guadalupe wooden bracelets from Mexico,

stacks avocados just lusciously ripe enough but not too soft, in front of the lusciously Olympian Aztecs posed on a calendar that only distantly layers echoed rhythms of the Aztec Calendar

After barbacoa and corn tortillas for breakfast we want “something different” for lunch and pair black-smoked Jamaican Jerk Bar-B-Q with chile-roasted corn

So nighttime at Sam’s Burger Joint we are not surprised when in the Music Hall out back a tall, blonde Chicana named Patricia Vonne (née Rodriguez and freshly back from concert tour of Europe) rattles the cage of the stage sings a blend smooth as honey to the harmony of a rock electric guitar country fiddle and Spanish castanets.
Reyna Grande Speaks at UTSA
Carlos A. Lopez

On February 7th Reyna Grande gave a reading of her latest work, The Distance between Us, at the University of Texas in San Antonio to an overly enthusiastic “anglicized” audience. The almost closed, very reflective, and introspective eyes of Grande stood alone in front of an almost-full lecture room of professors, writers, students, and a couple of photographers. Her name, “great queen,” brings a presumption of great expectation, and Reyna Grande carries her name well. Her works include two novels—Across a Hundred Mountains, Dancing With Butterflies—and her most recent memoir, The Distance Between Us. Her talk wasted no time in shattering the border between herself and the crowd. Grande spoke of this common ground—this third space of identity—found between her being a Mexican and American woman. In an interview, she relates this third space to a life lived between the two countries, found especially in her memoir:

Carlos Lopez: There is a lot of talk about what is called the “third space”—a unique kind of identity that is neither fully American nor Chicano/Chicana. Anzaldúa called this “nepantla”—that space between two identities which is not fully one or the other. Would you say that your work explores this idea of a “third space”? If so, in which books primarily does this happen? And do you identify yourself as an individual within this third space identity?

Reyna Grande: My books explore what it’s like to live in two countries. I write about not feeling “American” enough even though I’ve lived here for almost thirty years. When I visit Mexico, even though I was born there, I’m made to feel that I’m not “Mexican” enough. When I speak English, I speak it with a Mexican accent, and when I speak Spanish, I speak it with an American accent… I consider myself Mexican-American because both countries exist in me. They have shaped the woman I am today. My writing is the bridge that connects them both.

Such a “third space” is what Anzaldúa calls a nepantla—an identity “pulled between opposing realities. You feel torn between ‘white’ ways and Mexican ways, between Chicano nationalists and conservative Hispanics. Suspended between traditional values and feminist ideas, you don’t know whether to assimilate, separate, or isolate.”

In your talk, you mention as a child having a dream of one day moving to home in America, which was—as a child—the ideal image of prosperity and perfection. Why America? Is the American dream an ironic one? One which is more fantasy than reality?

When I was a child I dreamed of going to America because that’s where my parents were. I was too young to really understand what it was. I just knew my parents were there. The image I had of America came from the things I heard from people, of how beautiful it was, and how there everyone had food to eat, and money was easy to make. My aunt even told us that the trees there grew dollars! Most immigrants don’t like talking about the harsh realities of living in America. They don’t want their families back in their countries to worry, so they only tell the good stuff… This perpetuates people’s image of the US as a place of abundant opportunities where life is easy and where dreams come true. But oftentimes for immigrants, that’s not what they find once they get here.

The sueño of America seems to be a fictional and creative force for Grande. In Grande’s talk, she speaks of the product of this failed sueño—a fantasy—as having power, as found in the mysticism in folktale.

Also, in your talk, you spoke of this moment of transformation in your becoming a writer. You spoke of listening to folktales as a child, specifically the folktale of the Three Little Pigs. Can you elaborate on the power of storytelling and how it has impacted you as a writer?

Stories are very powerful tools. They help explain the world around us. They teach us lessons. They help us escape and travel to distant lands and times. They help us face hard truths and explore emotions we didn’t even know we felt. Stories save lives.

Stories take different shapes: a movie, a book, a comic book, a newspaper article, a song, a video game, a poem, a joke, a painting, etc. Stories have been part of the human experience since the beginning of time. The cavemen drew their stories, and through those images we’ve learned about them. Now society has gotten fancy in its storytelling, but it comes from the same need, the need for self-expression, the need to connect with others, to leave a legacy, to be understood and to understand.

Many lessons can be learned from Grande’s work, and many are still to be discovered.

Border Ethics: An Interview with Jill Hernandez
Carlos A. Lopez

Jill Hernandez is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Some of her major fields of study are existentialism, utilitarian ethics, and border ethics. She has received numerous awards, including the Robert B. Papazian International Prize in Ethics (2013). Hernandez received her Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Memphis in August 2006. Her work as a modern day philosopher is profound. In this interview, I asked Hernandez to share some information on her work within the field of border ethics, along with her opinion on the impact border ethics has on the lives of people living in San Antonio...
You cannot tell the dancer: quit the dance. Not while Little Mike, serving eight to ten, sits seething in a cell, and Annie’s got the cancer. Fired by the bindery, he grasps a chance to pay the rent, pressed against a drooping stranger, strutting, striding, slipping, sagging. If life is a fight, he might be Braddock, slugging flesh into submission. But after seven weeks, even nimble Fred Astaire would not jig gingerly. It’s all or nothing now, this endless tango, tussle against insolvency, mortality, Totentanz, a gruesome way to foot the bill. Only a connoisseur of calamity could bear to park himself and stare. See the smug man in the stand? Like a patron at a painting show, he gawks at waltzing misery. Five hundred dollars to buy a place at the gala suckers’ ball. Now don’t that take all?

Philip Evergood, Dance Marathon, 1934, oil on canvas, 152.6 x 101.7 cm. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, 1991. Used with permission.

Steven G. Kellman is the author of Redemption: The Life of Henry Roth (Norton), The Translingual Imagination (Nebraska), and The Self-Begetting Novel (Columbia) and editor of M.E. Ravage’s 1917 memoir An American in the Making (Rutgers). He is a professor of comparative literature at the University of Texas at San Antonio.
Born in San Antonio, Cary Clack is a graduate of St. Gerard High School and St. Mary’s University. In summer 1984, he was a scholar-intern at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, and he wrote CNN commentaries for Coretta Scott King. Cary Clack earned his B.A. in Political Science from St. Mary’s University in 1985. He began writing a column for the San Antonio Express-News in 1994 and later joined the Express-News Editorial Board before becoming a Metro Columnist. He has won the Dallas Press Club’s Katie Award for Best General Column, and in 2008 he won the Friends of the San Antonio Public Library’s Arts and Letters Award for his writing. For six years in a row he won the San Antonio Current Reader’s Choice poll for Best Columnist in the city. He was also selected Best Columnist three years in a row in the San Antonio Magazine Editors’ and Readers’ Choice Poll. As recently as 2009, Trinity University Press published a collection of his columns. His last column for the San Antonio Express-News ran on October 9, 2011. Clack is currently the district director for Congressman Joaquin Castro.

Mo H Saidi: Your departure from the San Antonio Express-News was called a depressing trend in the departure of black writers who stop writing columns for the media. Do you have any regret about your decision to leave the paper?

Cary Clack: First, my departure from the Express-News came at a time when other black columnists across the country—some of whom I knew—were, sadly, losing their columns or being let go by their newspapers. My leaving was my decision. What is depressing is that the number of black columnists is so low that when a few leave it’s very noticeable.

The question I’ve been asked most often since I left is if I have any regrets, and I can honestly say that I don’t. It doesn’t mean it wasn’t a difficult decision, because it was. The Express-News will always be my home, and the people there, past and present, will always be my family. It was a good and necessary transition for me. But what I didn’t expect was that nearly two years later, there’s not a week that passes where someone through email, Facebook, or in person doesn’t tell me they miss me. It’s very moving and appreciated.

As a local writer, what is your most comfortable genres?

I was fortunate that the paper allowed me the latitude—at least until the last three years—to do different things and use different voices, styles, and techniques. I’m especially fond of humor and satire which, while harder to write, can leave a more powerful and indelible impression. I also enjoyed the long front-page features that I did while I was a columnist and that gave me the opportunity to do a lot of reporting. If I ever have a second life in journalism, long-form journalism is what I’d most love to do.

You were a scholar-intern at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. What did that experience do to shape your approach to current social issues, e.g., the voter registration controversy?

Well, it made me more sensitive to social issues and the responsibility we all have to address them and try to make things better. But, most importantly, it made me understand that if I was to truly embrace nonviolence as a way of life—by the way, nonviolence and pacifism are not the same thing—then I also had to reflect it in my writing. That meant that even when I disagreed with someone I was writing about that I never tear them down and dehumanize them. The same with people I engage with every day whom I may disagree with. With nonviolence you never forget the humanity in each of us, nor do you deny them their dignity. Nonviolence commands your conscience to always be on call.

President Obama, the first African-American president, celebrated the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King’s famous speech of 1963. Is he doing enough to secure Dr. King’s dreams about freedom in America?

I think he’s doing the best he can. I’ve been an unabashed but not uncritical Barack Obama fan since I read “Dream From My Father” before he was even elected to the United States Senate. He understands King and he understands nonviolence, but a President can’t necessarily be prophetic. Prophets try to get the attention of THE MAN, of the powers that be. Obama is THE MAN, is that power that be. Prophets and activists don’t have to necessarily be pragmatic, but politicians do. But even then, if you look at King’s career, you’ll find examples of him being pragmatic and disappointing many of his supporters with what they considered selling out or being weak.

You worked as a writer and columnist and editor for the San Antonio Express-News for almost twenty years. What was your impact on the paper’s social and political policies?

I honestly don’t know.

What is the most memorable column that you wrote for the San Antonio Express-News?

For me, it would have to be the thirteen columns over thirteen days written after the New York from the 9/11 attacks.

You were a popular columnist mostly because of the sparkle of wit and wisdom that was always visible in your work. How did you learn to become such a likable person?

If there’s anything about me that’s considered likable I credit my mother, grandmothers, and a lot of nuns.

In your book Clowns and Rats Scare Me, you write about Texas politics, pets, and friends. Who are the clowns in your columns?

The actual clowns. I mean, the painted white faces, big red nose, painted smiles and frowns, come on. I’m thinking about them now and want to hide.

You credit the late Maury Maverick, Jr., the legendary civil rights lawyer and journalist, for jump-starting your career. What was the extent of his influence in your career?

He took credit for “discovering” me and he was right. Maury not only opened the door for me but took me by the hand through it—metaphorically speaking, of course. Maury was half-blind yet he saw something in me. God, I miss that old man!

Naomi Nye in the foreword to your book praises you as a writer who draws his readers. That’s not an easy task, Cary,
especially in the era of iPhones and iPads. How do you do that? I always tried to write in a way that no one else did; to come at an issue from an angle or unique slant that no one else would. I wanted to have a style that was so me that even if my name or photo didn’t accompany the piece, people would know it was me who wrote it. They may not think it was the best, but they would know it was me. That hook, that lead, is so important when I write something that I can’t proceed in writing a piece if I don’t have the lead down.

Please comments on the horrific situation in Syria, the use deadly gas against civilians, children. Only monsters do something like this. And only monsters put other nations in the heart-breaking dilemma of wanting to stop the murders, stop the suffering, but also not wanting to make matters worse or get our nations engaged in wars.

What should United States do to stop the bloodshed in that country? That’s the dilemma. We’re torn between the humanitarian impulse to intervene and the understandable caution of not wanting to do something just to do something if it accomplishes nothing. I mentioned earlier that nonviolence isn’t the same as pacifism. The nonviolence I embrace commands us to stop suffering when and where we see it. What happens if we don’t try to help? Yet, I also know—and this is painful to accept—that we can’t go to all the places where people are being slaughtered. I haven’t given you an exact answer as to what I think we should do because I wouldn’t want anyone to think I was speaking for Joaquin. All of us can and should discuss and debate this.

Born in San Antonio and knowing your genuine popularity here and in South Texas, will you one day run for office in San Antonio? The funny thing is that no one suggested I run for office while I was a columnist, but now people ask me about it. I see speculation in blog posts, and there are members of my family guessing what used to be Eugene Coleman’s newspaper, The Snap, where, while in college, I started writing columns and dropping them through the transom early in the morning, too shy to be seen. Continuing on, I drove past the Express-News, which ran my first published piece—an op-ed advocating that Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday be a national holiday—in 1983.

Years later, an old man in a typewriter shop changed my life. Maury Maverick Jr., after checking me out with the Rev. Claude Black, brought me to the attention of Bob Richter, then an associate editorial page director with the Express-News, who asked me to write a piece.

I did, and it was published, which led to lunch with Bob and Lynnell Burkett, the other associate editorial page director. Their boss, Sterlin Holmesly, gave me a column in 1994. About a year later, I was hired full time in the newsroom. This motorcade of firsts, from first grade to first meetings to first columns, brings me to today’s destination: my last column for the Express-News.

By this time tomorrow, I will have started my new job as communications director and senior adviser for the Joaquin Castro congressional campaign.

The decision was difficult because the Express-News is family and has been my home for a third of my life. What it has done for me is immeasurable in ways I can never repay.

My unavoidable regret is that news of me leaving broke the same week of three other high profile departures from the paper—unavoidable because these departures are unconnected.

I leave this newspaper on excellent terms, fortunate to have worked for two outstanding publishers and gentlemen, Larry Walker and Tom Stephenson, who, in ways that I saw and in ways I heard about, always had my back. My editor, Features/Niche Products Editor Terry Scott Bertling, has been a friend, sounding board and advocate.

Like every other column I’ve written, I can’t say all that I want to in this one. But to everyone I’ve worked with at Avenue E and Third, thank you for being my colleagues and friends and for making this ride so memorable and joyful. The newsroom that I leave is an astonishing blend of gifted youngsters and talented veterans committed to producing quality journalism for a strong and, yes, profitable newspaper.

But my career wouldn’t have been possible without you, the readers. I still find it astonishing that anyone would care what I had to say on anything, but thank you for being interested, even if you disagreed. I’d buy each of you a meal if I didn’t have to give up my corporate credit card.

You’ve also been like family. Thank you for being in my life. You’ve moved me with the gifts of your generous words and have overwhelmed me with your kindness these past two weeks in phone, email and Facebook messages. To each of you I’m thankful. My life has been enriched by yours. Because of you, I promise to do better in thanking people for the work they do, whether it’s the waitress and busboy or the lady at the checkout line. Take care of yourself and someone else.

I’ll always be Gary Clark — I mean, Casey, eh, Clyde or ... never mind.

Cary Clack’s Last Column
October 8, 2011
from http://www.mysanantonio.com

I’m thankful that you’re lovin’ me
My one desire/ Is to love you ‘til
I’m no longer here and never tire
God has been so good to me/ I’m so thankful.
If I Should Die Tonight, Marvin Gaye

I was driving because I didn’t know how to say goodbye. When I’m having trouble writing, I drive. On Wednesday, I drove through the neighborhood I’ve known longest. Riding shotgun was a lined yellow-paged notepad with days-old scattered notes begging to be made whole.

Late afternoon shadows were crossing and darkening Iowa Street as I passed Friendship Baptist Church. It used to be Cuney. I mentioned earlier that nonviolence isn’t the same as pacifism. The nonviolence I embrace commands us to stop suffering when and where we see it. What happens if we don’t try to help? Yet, I also know—and this is painful to accept—that we can’t go to all the places where people are being slaughtered. I haven’t given you an exact answer as to what I think we should do because I wouldn’t want anyone to think I was speaking for Joaquin. All of us can and should discuss and debate this.

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Carlos Lopez: What work(s) / projects have you completed / contributed to that deal with border ethics?

Jill Hernandez: My colleague Alistair Welchman and I were visiting scholars at the Institute of Texan Cultures last year, and we organized a “Border Ethics” event that included a public debate and panel on the issues surrounding the border. We’re the only people we know who use the term “Border Ethics” in philosophy, but we’re keen to inquire into its nature and increase its use. My own work is particularly focused on the ethical issues that surround the border, including education, family issues, health, safety, development, and disparity. I’ve written on the Affordable Care Act and immigration, immigration enforcement in the workplace, as well as standpoint and the border.

Why is the issue important to you?

I think the issue should be important, truly, to everyone in San Antonio and in Texas. It is a genealogical fact that all of our families at some point crossed a border, had a border drawn across our property lines, or engaged with the border. Losing sight of that in some way makes us lose sight of who we are as Americans. Of course, on a personal level, I am married to a naturalized US citizen who was born in Mexico, and our children are Latina-Americans. Most of his family still lives in Mexico, and so the moral issues that are shared between the countries (development, safety, etc.) impact our ability to be with them, to spend time with them, and to ingratiate our girls into their Mexican culture.

How does the issue impact San Antonio?

The border is not binary—it isn’t either/or—we are the United States, yes, but our sister is Mexico, and in San Antonio that means that the border isn’t something that cuts through us; it’s an idea that permeates our identity and something that must be responded to appropriately, with care and nurture. San Antonio should be concerned when our youth are traded as sex slaves, guns move South, and drugs move North, and when we and those in the Valley are presented as “Other.”

Book Reviews

Between A and Z
by Mo H Saidi
Reviewed by Carol Coffee Reposa

The title of the book is apt, as its contents take the reader from Tehran to New York, Soweto to Lhasa, Antarctica to drought-parceled San Antonio. The sixty-two poems in this collection comprise far more than a travelogue, however; their topics reach from sea to metaphoric sea as well, from the virtuosity of a cellist and the habits of swans to environmental degradation and budding romance in a piano bar.

Much of the work draws on the author’s long and distinguished medical career. In the haunting poem “Birth,” Saidi memorably captures the instant of life’s beginning, the “sudden whimper” and “fresh voice.” Elsewhere, he examines with equal clarity the moment of life’s end, along with all the physiological events between those milestones, including the ravages of Alzheimer’s, which he conveys poignantly in “Quiet George”: “He doesn’t remember the first son / who never returned from Vietnam, / his daughter who now lives in Japan, / his high school sweetheart, / his wife—their / honeymoon in Cancun—her recent funeral.” In all the poems inspired by his life as a doctor, Saidi brings to bear on the scenes he depicts an all-encompassing compassion and a willingness to look without blinking.

Saidi’s poetry also explores the sometimes tenuous boundary between the literal and the figurative, the everyday and the visionary. In the tradition of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, Saidi harnesses the energy of myth, allegory, and fable to express present-day complexities. In “ Fifty-Five Percent,” the poet combines humor and satire to reinvent the Biblical Adam and Eve, recasting them as clueless millennials who consume mindlessly, spread disease, and pollute the earth. Another cautionary fable, “Narrow Streams,” also involves a visit to the book of Genesis, but this time God himself is the culprit: in a drunken reverie abetted by Satan, God creates The First Couple, who then proceed to despoil everything around them. God, having sobered up and repented, moves to another part of the Universe, selects a promising planet, and vows to start over. Once again, though, Satan takes a hand and serves God “fermented nectar,” causing history to repeat itself. God and his creations, it seems, are slow to learn from their mistakes.

Even a quick reading of this volume reveals Saidi’s strong social conscience. “The Songs of Sorrow,” for example, takes an unflinching look at the brutalization of women in the author’s native Iran, a subjugation which includes honor killings, marital rape, and the public stoning of homeless prostitutes. Even recreation there consigns females to the ranks of the less than human: men take the waters along a pleasant shoreline, while women, fully robed, are sent to “a remote rocky beach / next to heaps of garbage where / a sewage line defines their desolation.” Similarly, the intensely anti-theocratic “Tomorrow” contrasts the world view of Osama bin Laden—who views himself as “the shadow of God” and seeks to extinguish from civilization all traces of Darwin, Freud, Einstein, and Lincoln—with that of the scientists and humanitarians who strive desperately “to save the ailing planet.” Saidi celebrates the presence of the Divine wherever he happens to see it. In “Nonbelievers,” he finds God in the face of a homeless man, a personified oversoul for the Millennium: “He pushes His cart loaded with rags, leftover meals / squashed fruit taken from garbage cans. He takes / refuge under a bridge decorated with graffiti among / discarded beer cans next to a patch of stinking sludge.” The poet ultimately finds as much to praise as to condemn in the space he inhabits, and some of the poems are unambiguously utopian in outlook. “We the Wanderers” extols the courage of people ready to leave their homelands to build new lives: “We arrived / aboard ships and planes or on foot /… We long for freedom, fall in love / and seek work. We build warm / abodes, read and write… / we are farmers, tool makers, musicians / and writers. We sing and work; unhindered…”

Few human events escape the author’s notice—or his laser pen—but in the end it is love in all its permutations that drives his poetry: joyous love of family; of music, art, and travel; of medicine, friends, and nature; of the entire cosmos. For Mo H Saidi, the proverbial wine bottle is not half full; it is endlessly brimming. Between A and Z spreads before the reader a poetic feast.
Before Albert Schweitzer became a world-renowned doctor and humanitarian working in Africa, he wrote a 1906 doctoral dissertation whose title is generally rendered in English as *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. In it, Schweitzer traces numerous scholarly attempts to write an account of the life of Jesus based on historical evidence drawn from contemporary Roman and Jewish sources, and of course from the New Testament itself. The challenge, as scholars from the time of H. S. Reimarus in the eighteenth century realized, was distilling the historically reliable kernels of fact from the amalgam of faith that constitute the four canonical gospels. Another way to put the research question is this: how can the historical Jesus be distinguished from the Christ of faith?

Many scholars from a variety of backgrounds—Christian, Jewish, nonreligious—have undertaken to write a “life of Jesus” in the century since Schweitzer’s groundbreaking work, but Reza Aslan brings a unique personal perspective to the task. Before undertaking the formal study of the history of Christianity, Aslan began life as a member of a Muslim family in the U.S., converted to evangelical Christianity as a teenager, then returned to his Muslim faith as an adult. Although Aslan’s competence to write a book about Jesus was questioned in an infamous FOX News interview in 2013 (because he is a Muslim), his approach to the task is consistent with that of other historians in the field.

Readers not familiar with the field of historical Jesus research may find some of Aslan’s claims about Jesus surprising or puzzling. For example, he asserts that Jesus was born, not just raised, in the village of Nazareth (not Bethlehem). He states that Jesus saw himself and presented himself to others (albeit somewhat cryptically) as the legitimate king of the Jews and thus posed a threat to Roman authority. It was only in the aftermath of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE that the Christian community downplayed the revolutionary character of Jesus’ words, transforming him into the Prince of Peace, a messiah whose kingdom was not of this world. These claims, though largely unknown to the general public—including regular churchgoers—are rather commonplace to those familiar with Aslan’s chosen field of study, and the value of his book lies not in any groundbreaking new theories or startling new discoveries. Instead, Aslan’s book is important because, unlike most books of its genre, it is directed to the educated general public. It is a book written by a scholar for interested non-scholars, religious and nonreligious alike. He reminds his readers that the gospels are witnesses to the early Christian community’s faith, not academic biographies in the modern sense. In fact, they were not even written by eyewitnesses, nor were the rest of the books of the New Testament. Such assertions may offend some readers, who see historical reconstructions like Aslan’s as attacks on their faith, but for people who are interested in examining a portrait of Jesus that is different from common Sunday School fare, *Zealot* is an excellent entrée to the subject.

As San Antonio’s inaugural poet laureate, Carmen Tafolla leaves a long-lasting legacy probably unmatched by poets laureate from other cities or states. But we have faith that Laurie Ann Guerrero, the next poet laureate of San Antonio, will follow in her footsteps and surprise all of us with her own outstanding performance. Both outgoing and incoming poets laureate were performing together at “San Antonio, Mi Pueblo,” a medley of poetry, singing, and music highlighting the themes, sights, and tastes of San Antonio at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center on Saturday, 29 March. The program also featured twelve local poets, artists, musicians, singers, and actors, with original music composed by George Cisneros. During the program Felix Padrón, Executive Director of the Department for Culture and Creative Development of the City of San Antonio, introduced Laurie Ann Guerrero as our fair city’s next poet laureate. Under the green, white, and red glow, Tafolla tread on the stage voicing the city’s cultural heritage, and others followed, singing “Mi Pueblo, Mi Pueblo,” a refrain that ended the ninety-minute program of music, arts, and poetry. But Tafolla was the star, leading the group like a grand diva, and all of us left filled with the spirit of red, white, and blue.

**Texans Shine at Berlin Film Fest**

The recently completed Berlin International Film Festival, the largest film festival in Europe, was graced with the presence of several Texas filmmakers and a San Antonio artist. Houstonian Wes Anderson won the Silver Bear Grand Prize of the Jury for his film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Austin filmmaker Richard Linklater’s movie *Boyhood*, filmed over twelve years with the same actors, won the Silver Bear award for best directing. A powerful Mexican film, *César Chávez*, starring Michael Peña, the story of the labor leader’s fight to organize migrant workers in the U.S., also has a Texas connection: its publicity poster was created by San Antonio artist Vincent Valdez.
Youth Poems

A Sunday Afternoon in November
*Courtney Collins*

Light shines through nude
Branches, dull and grey

A sea of amber-gold and
Dead-brown covers the ground,
An endless task

A brisk wind rushes
Blasting across my bare face,
Stinging dry eyes to tears

Chapped hands burn red,
Arms straining, a never-ending
Rake of fire across my shoulders
    *Wuscht, wuscht, wuscht.*

---

The Pen
*Hanne Arts*
*Bratislava, Slovakia*

My neck
Clutched in your grasp

Ink tears
Rolling away

Your thumb
Stroking my flesh

My vein
Emptied by you

My love
Used against will

The pain
Locked up inside

Losing my strength, my blood,
In my last note ever written.

---

The Fire
*Hanne Arts*
*Bratislava, Slovakia*

I started off so small, so small
A tiny licking flame
I grew and grew and grew and grew
So large and yet so tame

So innocent, yet violent red
The people all would scream
I often felt misunderstood
And hoped it just a dream

The shouts, the suffocating coughs
The want to help them out
I slowly then moved onto them
To shield them from the cloud

The ashen sights, the crumpling sounds,
The want to gain their trust
My hot embrace, so misconceived
Turned all there was to dust

---

The Border
*Hanne Arts*
*Bratislava, Slovakia*

You crossed the border,
Breath on my neck
And lips on my cheek

Invaded the domain,
Legs interlocked
While my body was weak

Took over the terrain,
Hands on my breasts
You forbade me to speak

You crossed the border,
Now the vengeance I seek.
Select Poems

From Marx to the Ayatollahs
Lahab Assef Al-Jundi

I planned to use Marx’s quote
“Religion is the opium of the people”
as a springboard to a new insight:
Oppression is what pushes people
to the deliriums of that drug!
Oppression of “secular” dictatorships.
Coercion of communism.
Tyranny of military juntas.
Cruelty of class exploitation.
Subjugation of economic inequality.

But looking at the full excerpt from which
Marx’s quote was taken, I discovered he
had more insight and power behind his words.
He had already, and poetically, said
much of what I intended to say:
“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature,
the heart of the heartless world,
and the soul of the soulless condition.
It is the opium of the people.”

That narrowed down my original insight to this:
Sooner or later, people will rebel.
Defeat their oppressors.
Shortly afterwards,
they will realize
freedom remains a delusional trip
as long as opium and its dealers
are their masters.

Crossing Frozen Water
Jerry Bradley

Fallen again, legs open like scissors, I gather myself
and rise, try to catch up, and call across the frozen glaze.
My leather soles skip, unbalanced on the slippery waves,
as I inch from foot to foot. Once a river, the ice
threatens to tump me yet again, stares like an ancient god.

If this temporary sidewalk gets me to the other side and you,
I promise I’ll pay him back. But facts blur with fiction.
The darkness below the freeze seems to have a human face;
it bares its teeth and smiles as down again I go.

I return my body to its rightful owner, reassemble, and adjust
my cap, utter another curse, voice quavering in the chill.
I vow to break the water’s bones, but I’m always tougher close
to shore.
I’ll pay him back. I swear to God I will.

The Alive Time
Mark Hierholzer

It is the alive time,
When the breeze picks up
For no other reason than to say,
I am alive. The guitar plays, the wind
Sways the trees and the stars. I have nothing
Else and everything. Alone and all to the world
Everything. Was that a star, or an ocean, just one
Emotion away from the divine sequence that promises
And promises a world tomorrow, against petty trials
Of deprivations and sessions of grave selfishness
And sickness, a sickness that comes not from the earth
But from the lingering selves of laziness and despair.

Where does the helplessness come from?
The loneliness that knows every fear against those which
Know none but that of ever evaporating streams of idea.

Outside the sweeping giving no light
To the pity of a thousand years. Help me
For I need none. I will be easy to carry and you will
Call me to my place of destination, my shelter and my home.

Who You Are
Rachel Jennings

Hopkins, Jesuit poet, loved contrasts
in pied or dappled design:
“Swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim.”
He would have loved you and me,
Father Joe, cater-cornered in quixotic
crosstalk in your holy office:
Catholic, Protestant;
Plainsman, Appalachian;
V owed, lay; straight, fay.

You tell me God is in my keyboard.
You give me sanctuary, solitude,
in the woods and the tool shed.
Conduit of wisdom, kindly director
of Protestants and like heretics,
you are kin to Father Staupitz, a cushion
of two fabrics between Luther
and Leo X. Your ministry, Father,
is teaching through listening.
“Through you, the light of the Gospel
began to shine out of the darkness
of my heart,” Luther wrote.
You turn words on their backs.
Where stones or spirits spark, flash!
Where tiller turns soil, sillion!
You say and (somehow) mean it:
be who you are. Be who you are.
Metaphor
Bryce Milligan

I need a metaphor that will transform
this skeleton of passion into some
thing that breathes fire rather than the still air
of overly considered conundrums, into some
thing that stands of its own accord against
time and these chill unseasonable winds.

I need a shape-shifting incantation
to turn the shaman’s cape into the shape
of the panther it once contained, to take in
whole the one mind, the one soul that called forth
the transforming morpheme, that piece of sound
that like some particle born of theory
remains unfound, unseen, but whose effects
attend all the invisible powers that force
all our hours into vectors pointing
to new futures rather than past cycles.
I need a metaphor to change,
I need a metaphor, a master rune,
a word, a sign unspoken since time was
set in motion.

Deus erat verbum.

I need to warp this, our reality,
to be the body that bends your body,
to create the pulsar, the double star.
I need a metaphor to change, to change.

The Higher Pantheism
Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the hills and the plains,-
Are not these, O Soul, the Vision of Him who reigns?

Is not the Vision He, tho’ He be not that which He seems?
Dreams are true while they last, and do we not live in dreams?

Earth, these solid stars, this weight of body and limb,
Are they not sign and symbol of thy division from Him?

Dark is the world to thee; thyself art the reason why,
For is He not all but thou, that hast power to feel “I am I”?

Glory about thee, without thee; and thou fulfillest thy doom,
Making Him broken gleams and a stifled splendour and gloom.

Speak to Him, thou, for He hears, and Spirit with Spirit can meet-
Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet.

God is law, say the wise; O soul, and let us rejoice,
For if He thunder by law the thunder is yet His voice.

Law is God, say some; no God at all, says the fool,
For all we have power to see is a straight staff bent in a pool;

And the ear of man cannot hear, and the eye of man cannot see;
But if we could see and hear, this Vision-were it not He?

Upon Touching the Image of Jesus
on the Stained Glass Window
Cyra S. Dumitru

It was a day of wind
and the underside of winter stones.

How startling to discover such blaze:
almost unbearable to brush my hand across
the flowing folds of his cloak
as he strode along the road. A single flame
poured from my fingers along my spine
into my feet and the very ground.
I stood burning from some invisible root.

The multitude was engulfing me
when I heard, “Where are you,
you who touched my robe?”
Through the thickness of the throng,
his eyes locked onto mine
with such oceanic kindness
I could neither speak nor look away.

He flowed like blue water across the hard ground.

He flowed over to me,
along the road. A single flame
poured from my fingers along my spine
into my feet and the very ground.

Standing in the Gap
Martha Grant

It is not clear to me whether
the view from my window is up,
into the infinite expanse
of the night sky,
or down, through the grid
of a glass-bottomed boat,
into equally mysterious depths
of a raging sea.

I stand in the gap.

This is not the first time
I have not known
down from up.
This is not the first time
Light has shone
in an uncomprehending
darkness.
Distractions at High Mass
(St. Patrick’s Day, 2013)
Nora Olivas

Sitting in a crowded pew
close to the aisle in the century old
church dedicated to Ireland’s patron saint,
I sat enraptured by the organ music
piping joyously prophet Samuel’s ready
response to God’s call: “Here I am Lord …”
and the God of Wind and Sky promising to
make the darkness bright and hearts of stone
melt into hearts of love alone—

My rapture deepened with the arrival of
the First Responders—The Sons of Columbus
processing in full regalia up the aisle—
their colorful capes and chapeaux
topped with ostrich feathers indicating
their ranks in the Fraternal Order;
red baldrics fitted with scabbards for
ceremonial silver swords, the triad
emblems of the fourth degree
fashioned to encode divine
intervention in our human world:
the white dove of the Trinity hovering
over the Western hemisphere and Isabella’s
cross blessing a Conqueror’s enterprise—
to save a savage world—no questions asked!

My rapture slowly fractured into curiosity
as the procession of aging clerics—mostly Irish—
headed two by two into their reserved pews and
not one daughter of Mother Church among them!
The young Nigerian Pastor brought up the rear
mounting the altar steps for a Sacrifice that would
bear all the prayers, longings, and distractions
of the assembled faithful in one grand
swing of the thurible of incense.

Bread and wine were shared but not exactly
in banquet style like the iconic Last Supper
when Jesus dipped the bread in wine as
a peace offering to a traitor at the table of
unsuspecting brothers. In this solemn moment
so timeless and quotidian, it’s easy to dismiss the
heavy weight of history suffused with symbols
often contradictory or dubious in their relevance.

I couldn’t help but wonder if Mother Church herself
is not already jaded with preferential options
for her mitred and sworded sons while her servant
daughters quietly shoulder Her mission of mercy
with their bodies, souls, and finances.
It seems only right and just to honor those who bake
the bread and gut the fish in preparation for our
Communal Banquets.

Troubled Sleep
Robert Allen

When all attempts to lose consciousness fail,
when all uncounted sheep begin to fall
into some ditch, and can’t leap single file
through wide green meadows for your dreaming fuel:

When life seems so precariously frail
you think your garden leaches chlorophyll,
your gilded cage has lost its singing fowl,
and your prized stallion cannot sire a foal—

If only you’d try meditation, fill
your head with happy thoughts, banish those awful
blues, make room for your blessings to unfurl
and march tall in review. Instead you foil
these soft pretensions, and prefer to shuffle
through tomorrow, hardly the wiser fool.

Luck
Rebecca Balcárcel

Twice that morning, on a 3rd grade Thursday,
I saw it, interrupting my bus stop walk,
winking in the alley’s white dust. Green glass.

Good luckies mashed in gravel.
They parked my Mary Poppins song,
my chim chiminies, between two neat lines, these
wedges glinting near galvanized trash cans,
and further on, curved shards at a shed door
swelling out of rocksand like smiles under stern moments.

Once, a girl whose freckles told the future, said
green was luckiest, then brown, then clear,
and I peered down an Emerald City telescope
all the way to Miss Hamilton’s class where Kyle Willis
sent across four desk rows a folded note
that said Check this box if you like me,
which I did, and I found that Mom packed
a ripe pear in my paper lunch sack,
then a fire drill freed us from Chapter Five,
and I figured the green haze had worn off when
Mom surprised me with Let’s get watermelon.

After dinner Dad sang with his guitar, and Mom harmonized in
thirds,
their voices like train rails curving and straightening together.
I fell through sleep in a green glow, thinking
trees, frogs, leaves, bugs, sleeves, logs, sleep, God—
A suspect presence of form
without matter, an empty storage hold
in the galley of the mind for a knowing
before knowing, shaped in the form
of knowing...may one day be traced
to a random snip of DNA, slipped
—decidedly unwanted—into your double helix:
affiliation with old soils, memories of passion
played out in brown hills through dry times: nostalgia
lives here, though you have not. Suspension
of belief is the norm, comic...desultory;
choice is yours. These sidewalk kiosks
are full of green beans, for instance,
escarole and figs, all fresh,
ripened on the vine, all in season—like us—
some not...as if
the severed head of your favorite language poet
had stolen into the cantaloupe exhibit,
disguised as a notepad, had slipped into
your grammar and purloined your tongue..., is
now cruising down the Champs-Élysées, or
squatting in a dungeon along the fog-
lost coast of the southeastern Pacific...
has changed to white p-j’s and a black mask
to sniff a po’-boy on Fat Tuesday
on St. Francis Street.

Traveling north from stone towns,
Apulian hills pass by
as if worn down from age alone
beyond ticked-time and erosion. No outbreaks
of malaria, real or forgotten, no armies today
or the face of another unfamiliar god
—the narrow vias of Foggia are made
only for lovers wishing nothing more
than to copulate, to taste the rich and
intensely familiar cheeses, with red
wines in the afternoon
and for writers
as if, up and down the coast and valleys
the memory of old lords and bitter rice
were all legend, fun and bitter laughter.

Now, there are distant hills, groves of olive,
day pilgrimages and picnics of the poor
in the Shadow of the Black Madonna
—L’Incoronata—, reconciliation
of the people to her soil.

And I listen from the outcrop
of my topography to next rooms brimming
with ancient foods and conversation, not
knowing melons from the portraits they speak.

They say that until today it almost
never rains, though memory is often
kept on a short leash.

They say that tourists come and tourists go
to the heartbeat of the spider dance,
agendas of travel and longing tucked
in their pockets.

A Necktie and a Hijab
R. Scott Yarbrough

I wondered how far this woman had traveled to stand
in this grade school lobby in Plano, Texas: Middle-Eastern,
coal-eyed, young mother, hijab, looking in desperation at
her son, her fingers trembling over an untied American tie.

He was due onstage in several minutes. Her eyes pleaded,
locked with mine—against her culture. I took the tie, stood
behind the boy, turned his collar up. He looked
up, backward at me, smiled upside down.

Fix the length of the short end and around once,
like every time I went to work after school, Piggly Wiggly;
up and through and over back like getting ready for college graduation;
around and through like I did for my son’s first recital;
pull tight, down to snug, square the knot like before my daughter’s funeral.

I turned him around and showed him his reflection in the trophy
case’s glass. He gave me a “thumbs up,” the mother’s
smile reflected over my shoulder; I moved to hug her.
“It’s disrespectful,” she whispered to me. “Instead, I will hug
you with my eyes.” I, then, realized how far I had
traveled from a West Texas farm town to be hugged
by a woman’s eyes in this grade school lobby of Dallas suburbia.
A necktie and a hijab woven together in one dignified embrace.

from A Sort of Adam Infant Dropped: True Myths (Ink Brush Press, 2013)

Ocean
Eric Lee

Sacred vessel of the wine-dark sea
The daily deluge of all I must endure

An ocean moves in me
Secret shadow no one else can see

Black water; sadness lending poise
to everything I do

I scan the distance, the difference
between what I want to be

and what they’ve made of me
What I wished to be—

and what they’ve left for me—
Solo sailor of the storm-swept sea

Diminished, yet defined
by all that I have lost

An ocean moves in me
Poemas Internacionales

Al Poeta

Manuel Ortiz Guerrero

Luminoso charrúa de los versos fragantes,
fue muy larga, muy larga, para mí tu tardanza:
de mirar tanto el río, de tu arribo anhelantes,
hoy ya tienen mis ojos un color de esperanza.

Visitante llegado de una tierra sonora
a esta otra historiada de perfume y leyenda;
cárganos las espaldas con tus fardos de aurora:
para nuestras heridas déjanos una venda.

Allá, poeta, en loma que tu mirada abarca,
está el árbol solemne cuyo tronco fue asiento
del Artigas proscripto, de aquel gran patriarca
que unir quiso la América en un gran pensamiento.

Aquel árbol, poeta, dice algo al oído,
algo de tu leyenda, semejante al latido
de algún gran corazón,
porque allí el patriarca, como fantasma herido,
memoraba en cien noches su gran sueño perdido,
enfermo de nostalgia y de desolución.

Olvidé de decirte que en una tarde lila
he visto a tu indio dulce de paso por aquí:
Tabaré melancólico de verdosa pupila,
in search of his lost brother, Guaraní.

Oh mártires sin nombres, sin gestos y sin huellas
que muerto habéis ya siglos y os enterró el olvido:
poet, your tears have poured
into your sacred abyss like falling stars…

Ataviado, poeta, de tus versos fragantes,
Tabaré se ha perdido en la azul lontananza
y … también es por eso: de su vuelta anhelantes
que hoy ya tienen mis ojos un color de esperanza.

A Manuel Ugarte

Guillermo Molinas Rolón

Como un ángel, el alma de las ansias latinas
te sopló el optimismo generoso que anida,
puesto el dedo en tu frente, con el ala extendida
sobre veinte ciudades cuya unión vaticinas.

Desde entonces por sobre las oscuras inquinas
hasta el turbido fondo de la masa dormida
flamearon tus verbos como tea encendida
y al derecho humillado tras tu paso amotinas…

¡Y en la paz de mañana ya, en Europa y Oriente
nos vendrán nuevas razas a este azul Continente!
Serán uno el latino y el mongol y el sajón.

¡Y serán victoriosos tus anhelos humanos,
vibrará Sud América con sus dos Océanos
como un grande, hiperbólico y colossal corazón!

International Poems

To the Poet

Manuel Ortiz Guerrero / translated by Gerard S. Robledo

Charrúa, vibrant with fragrant verses,
for me your delay has been too long, too long:
I long to see the river, I long for your arrival,
today my eyes are the color of hope.

Visitor arriving from a land of sound
to this other storied place of perfume and legend;
on our backs we carry your bundles of dawn:
and we leave a bandage for our wounds.

There, poet, on that hill caught in your stare,
is the solemn tree whose trunk was the seat
of the outlaw Artigas, that great patriarch
who wanted to unite America in one great thought.

That tree, poet, speaks something in the ear,
something of your legend, resembling the beating
of some great heart,
because there the patriarch, like a wounded ghost,
recalled over a hundred nights the loss of his great dream,
sick of nostalgia and desolation.

I forgot to tell you that one lilac evening
I saw your sweet Indian while passing through here:
Tabaré, melancholy with his green pupil,
in search of his lost brother, Guaraní.

Oh martyrs without name, expressionless and trackless,
dead for centuries, buried and forgotten:
poet, your tears have poured
into your sacred abyss like falling stars…

Poet, dressed in your fragrant verses,
Tabaré is lost in the blue distance
and … it is because of that: of my longing to return
my eyes now are the color of hope.

To Manuel Ugarte

Guillermo Molinas Rolón / translated by Gerard S. Robledo

Like an angel, the soul of the Latin desire
blew your generous optimism nesting within,
placed a finger on your forehead, with the wing extended
over twenty cities whose union you prophesy.

Since then and over the deep seeded grudges
even the turbulent bottom of the sleeping masses
blazes with your speech like a flaming torch
and to the right humiliation follows your inciting steps…

And in the tranquility of morning there, in Europe and Asia
new races we come to this blue Continent!
The Latino, the Mongolian, and the Saxon will be one.

And your human desires will be victorious;
South America will vibrate between its two oceans
like a large, hyperbolic, and colossal heart!
**Hoffnung**
*Hejo Müller*

Lastend liegen
Jahrhunderte über dem Land
Und das Dröhnen
der Leiden und Schmerzen.

Endlich! Finsternis weicht
zähltem Licht!
Lärm und Gebrüll
verenden—und siehe:
Da lebt eine Stille!
Da lebt eine Stille auf

Und gebiert ihre
schönste Tochter: MUSIK.
Der aber wächst
ein Sohn und heißt: TANZ!

Maranatha!

---

**Hope**
*Hejo Müller / translated by James Brandenburg*

The burdens of centuries
weigh heavily over the land
with the din
of suffering and pain.

Finally! Darkness gives way
to light’s tenderness!
Yelling and noises
cease—and look:
There a quiet reigns!
There a quiet is revived

And gives birth
to a most beautiful daughter: MUSIC.
And from her a son
Is born one day and is called: DANCE!

Maranatha!

---

**Editors’ Poems**

**The Contenders**
*Joan Strauch Seifert*

...you’re only as good as your last win—Anon.

We were the hubs of great know-how.
Our spokes reached out, loyal with behavior,
held our round world aloft and without void,
ot one misshapen thought allowed.
Our image was expert,
every phrase correctly primed to rule.
Our words were de rigueur, chosen with great care.
Never clumsy; our advice was satin.

It seemed we’d roll forever then, decreeing,
then you said *Don’t fall,*
and I said *Who would ever think of falling!*
*We are the hubs! They need us!*

And we grew cavalier, overlooked the spokes;
we, the always certain, they the order-takers.
Our rare air began to fail; flatness stalled our speed,
progress was a heavy push
and marshaling the spokes, a challenge.
As they worked loose, we let them scatter.
Too late to pull back now, the roundness gone, and
wobbled words went everywhere.

No one asked us why; we opined anyway —
our last wisdom left to the contenders:
*Once we were the hubs; we had it all, remember us?*
*And you’re only as good as...well, you’ll find out.*

---

**Expulsion of Lucifer, Sistine Chapel**
*Carol Coffee Reposa*

His pallid buttocks
Are all we see of him,
His face turned away
As God hurls him from heaven
In elongated rage

That sweeps through time,
And a lurid sun glowers beyond.
God watches this retreat,
His luminous finger
Pointing the way to ruin.

Lucifer does not yet know
What awaits him,
How he’ll darken
Hour by hour
Age by age

Until his thoughts are opaque
As the space around him
And he has no memory
Of light
That he once bore.

Above him
Saints are saved
Prophets speak
The sky stays blue
And God remembers.

From Underground Musicians, Lamar University Press, 2013
Waiting for Bluebonnet Time

Clyta Coder

Vanilla clouds
amble across an indigo sky
that blankets the park
where only weeks ago
sleet sprinkled grass.
With earth for a pillow,
stubble pricks my t-shirt.
I celebrate gentle warmth,
icy winds forgotten.
Green tufts tickle the toes
barbeque scintillates the nose

“You all right, lady?”
someone wants to know.
“Just resting, lazy me.”
My soul seeks anonymity.
A thought sublime:
Spring
will come and find me
waiting
for bluebonnet time.

I’ll Probably Die in Florida

Alice R. Friedman

I’ll probably die in Florida
but not on a Wednesday
that’s my Jazzercize day.

Perhaps I’ll die on Tuesday
my free day
I write all day
and it’s garbage day.
Tuesday will be better.

Yes, I’ll definitely die in Florida
on a Tuesday.

I’ll sit at the computer in my
condo at the corner of
Woodridge and Goodridge
stuck in the middle of a poem
sick of Spider solitaire
marbled silk soy coffee blend
steaming by my side
not giving inspiration.
I’ll look out the window
at the dog walkers strolling by
All of us ready for a new reality.
I’ll Probably Die in Florida

From What Now, Courage? published by Alice R. Friedman

Joseph: In Labor

Billy Jackson

Today I have labored over wood
alone, trusting the wisdom of hands
to restore order among the words
brawling in my heart.

Words of Law, that would free me of her,
flow but do not cleanse, like used wash water
clouded by the dust of too many feet,
while words from the Dream strike,
insistent and clear:

“Take Mary and the unborn child
as they are. Do not think
of them as grain grown wild from another’s field,
but as grain grown wild in no man’s land.”

It will be dark soon, and I shall be
like this piece of wood before me,
stiffly awaiting the next cut.

Joseph on Parenting: “Enough of John”

Billy Jackson

Were he not related
I’d run him off
and stop these rambles
he and Jesus take
into the countryside.

Against my wishes
they’ve gone again
where thirteen year-old boys
should not be –
listening to zealot prophets
and eating unclean food.

Our boy is good at studies,
could yet become a Teacher,
but chooses for companionship
this son of Zacharias,
a gust of wind in animal skins
who brays like a donkey
at the smallest load.

I must go now
and bring them back.
Finding them will be
the easy part.
Then Jesus will defend
where John has led them,
and his words
will stone my heart.

These two poems are part of a cycle of poems focused on Joseph, the
father of Jesus.
Seven Sacred Songs
Majid Naficy

I. Eve’s Song
My breasts are beautiful,
And my buttocks even more.
Why not be naked?
Why not become naked?
Oh, waters of Eden,
Pouring into four rivers,
Be my witness.
I saw my nakedness in your mirror,
And God forgave me not.

We were coming
From behind big fig trees,
And our kisses were blooming
Like bits of ripe fig.
Adam’s fingers
Were sliding down my skin
Like a curious snake,
And fig leaves one by one
Were falling from my body.
Then we heard the sound
Of your fearful strides
And the lightning of your wrath
Struck us down.

Do not peek
From behind high thatched walls.
A wide world
Is opening before us.

II. Cain’s Song
I made a porridge of my wheat
To repay your water-carrier clouds.
But you were more pleased
With Abel’s fat lamb.

He is my brother.
Every morning he comes out
From behind his sooty stone pen
And drives his flock
Beyond my rain-fed farm
Every evening
He gives me milk
And receives bread.

We milk into one pail.
We bake bread in one oven.
We lie down on one earth.
We open our eyes to one sun.

I can do without your fatherly love
And give my sorrow to my brother
So that he plays it like a flute
And I send you back this bloody dagger
That you have thrown to me.

III. Abraham’s Song
The horns of this ram charm
And his eyes talk to me.
No! I will not sacrifice him
In place of my son.
My soul is revolted at shedding blood.
My Lord,
I offer you this song
Because a beautiful word
Is the best proof of admiration
And gratitude.

IV. Moses’ Song at Death
I was eighty years old
When I began this journey.
Now I am a hundred and twenty.
The earth does not smell of
Fresh plowing anymore
And God’s fire in the mountain
No longer warms me.
From my rebellious generation in Egypt
Only a few have remained
And the wrath of God in the desert
Annihilated all the rest.

I was free only in Egypt
When, in the quarrel between a Jewish farmer
And an Egyptian constable,
I did not remain silent.

From here I can see
The Promised Land, Canaan.
Oh, you River of Jordan,
Do not cry.
Do not cry for me.
I want to die here
On this border mountain.

V. Ruth’s Song
Ah! What a sweet smell
Comes from this threshing floor.
In my homeland, though,
Wheat has just become ripe.

The man that I love here
Is sleeping by a heap of chaff.
I am not a Jew,
But the oracles have told me
That David, the King of Jews,
And Jesus, the lord of Christians,
Will be born of my descendants.
Oh, God,
Do not unsheathe their swords
And make their hearts gentle.
Give David a beautiful voice
Such that he sings of the pains of exile
And give Jesus a healing hand
Such that he gives hope to the hopeless
And do not take from them
The power of weeping
So that they sob like me
In this quiet night.

There is a footstep
And the light of a lantern.
I hide myself beneath an old blanket
And become filled with the aroma of wheat.

VI. Ezra’s Song

The god of Babylonia
Forced us into exile,
Destroyed our temple,
Put our women in servitude,
Cut off our men’s heads,
And gave our dead to vultures.
The Jewish God turned His back on us
And called Nebuchadnezzer
The whip of His wrath.

Now we build a New Jerusalem
And shouts of our joy
Mingle with cries of our grief.
No matter if Jews
Have married Gentiles.
Let us all gather at this tall wall
And cry out in one voice
Towards the dark sky,
“Oh, you blood-shedding gods,
We do not want you.
Stay on your heavenly thrones
And leave alone the soil of the earth.”

Only our gentle hands
Can rebuild this wall.

VII. Job’s Song

Curse you, oh day!
The day that I lost hope in him
And found myself lonely.

Praise to you, oh day!
The day that I believed in myself
And was filled with hope.

Hail honesty in despair!
Hail honesty in despair!

Coyote
John Grey

Starved out of the forest,
a coyote treads warily
through unfenced suburban yards
in the pit of night
Trash cans beckon.
Feral cats hide in fear.

“Did you hear something?”
the half-dozing woman asks.
“Yes,” replies the man,
“I heard the intrusion
of the wild on our supposed civilization.
Like just last week,
when our neighbor stabbed his wife
with a kitchen knife.
Or the hit and run driver
who killed that little girl.
The armed robbery at the garage.
The fights in the poolroom.
The brawls in the schoolyard,
etc. etc. etc.”

“Well,” thinks the scrawny coyote,
“so that’s the competition.”

The Exact Moment when Sadness Settled into My Birthdays
Michelle Price

Leaving my 12th birthday dinner of Rooty’s root beer and burgers,
I blast Celine Dion’s ballad, “My Heart Will Go On.”
Tears slip silently down,
Smearing the pink and purple icing stains.
Staring out the car window, I mourn my recent loss.

Memories of the awkward love scene in Titanic flood me with shame.
The first racy picture that my mom allows.
Such sweaty passion and embarrassment,
Now eternally intertwined,
Validating what neighborhood kids mention with hushed whispers.

Breasts appear on the screen.
When her hands don’t reach to cover my eyes,
I fear she must know that I have them too.

Burning pink and orange through the tinted window,
The sun sets on this day, and on my youth.
Cheeks flaming with the memory and
Realization that nasty puberty has overtaken my soul,
And I understand,
It provides no exit for my escape.
Anubis
Bill Livermore

I have a recurring dream:

In the dream I’ve flown to San Francisco to visit my favorite tattoo artist—the one who did the magnificent fresco across my back that depicts the entire history of the universe (the twentieth century is an ugly blot at spine’s end). In my dream, I tell my artist (Jimmy) what I want and he grimly shakes his head like a practiced auto mechanic and says it’s going to cost me—a LOT. I say that I know and proceed to sign the waiver, hand over payment in full, and give him my watch as a bonus (because I like Jim, despite his faithless regard for my vision).

So he places the rubber mask over my nose and mouth and gasses me, but I still am conscious in that mysterious way of bad television or troubled dreams. Jimmy then slits open the skin of my chest, takes a pair of sterilized tree loppers and cracks open my ribs like lobster claws at Joe’s Crab Shack. He pushes the lungs aside to reveal my heart, pounding at a healthy jogger’s rate of fifty-two beats a minute. And—this is how good he is—even though the heart is still pumping away, my organic artist manages to inscribe an accurate replica of an Egyptian tomb painting on the roiling sheath of muscle.

The painting depicts Anubis, jackal-headed god of the afterlife, weighing the hearts of the newly-deceased. The heart is placed on one scale balance, the Feather of Truth is placed on the other. If the dead heart is so heavy with the sin and sludge of this world that it outweighs the feather, then the guard-jackal of heaven devours it on the spot, causing the soul to expire. And if the Feather of Truth is not lifted by the heart, then underpopulated Paradise gains another lonely inhabitant.

The Anubis myth is close to my heart for reasons deeper than ink-stained scar tissue. For each of us has our own Anubis, a guardian jackal that allows a select few to join with our souls, while grinding up the hearts of the rest. It may weigh with the Feathers of Truth, Illusion, or Need, but the result is the same. And this is why my protector is engraved in cardiac muscle: a reminder to inflict pain wisely and with compassion, a reminder to chew well before swallowing.

Silverio
Jesse Cardona

Every street scribe has a dream client. For Silverio it’s Ninon Sevilla, la famosa rumbera.

If only she would drop by with her seductive ankles, wishing to dictate una nota to the latest guapo in her life or perhaps requesting the right words to end una aventura. Just for her, Silverio pops in a fresh ribbon, and with every clack of his máquina electrónica, he immortalizes la rumbera’s sultry breath.

The Naked Future
Shinji Mimura

I have a recurring dream of unfettered fleshlings wispily sauntering for their next social encounter. And when I wake up I drink in last night’s view of yearnings acted upon by all manner of unmotivated.

I have a recurring dream of anti-vapid children whose fingertips reach like tendrils and seep into commensal skin. And as I doze on Inevitability brightens. It tears into my excited brain, filling it with rainbow streaks. When I’m asleep I gaze to that future contentedly and cradle it in my blanket.

Just a Taste
Janet McDaniel

I know, deep within the recess of my heart; I know as fact, without a solitary doubt, together our spirits have flown, tho’ often apart. Yet, I have found you again and I want to shout out loud from the rooftop in the summer breeze, as the warm familiar breath from ages long past stirs memories and brings me to my knees.

I know, this time our connection will last. Let my eyes once again linger upon your face, here in this moment, that fine line between where we’ve been, or are going, in this crazy rat race. All I know for certain is the gods have deemed that across eternity with your spirit I am imbued.

In my mouth, forever will I carry… a taste of you.
Ascension
Burns Taylor

I stand in this empty parking lot,
listening for the cries, the laughter,
40 years gone,
blown into the past by these desert winds.

Where is the magic of those transient nights:
the bar fights, the liaisons,
the dreams sent up like prayers to the rafters?

Vanished, now, beneath this pavement
into the maw of space/time:
the bar, the piano, the jukebox.

The wind blows a piece of trash across the spot
where the bar stools spun;
a bird drops a speck where the pool table stood.

Where is the music from the jukebox now:
The words of the poets who ranted and strutted here?
The dancing, the actions,
all that energy buried beneath this asphalt.

This parking lot,
the roof of another world dissolved into memory.
Life is like a building with a one-way elevator going up.
Each floor, a unique chapter in our lives,
a different place in time,
sealed forever by history.

We climb through the stories of our lives
like Sherpas on the way to the summit.
Born in the basement among strangers,
we die on the roof alone,
Like birds.

Burns Taylor is an award-winning poet, essayist, inspirational speaker,
and public servant. Blinded by a gun blast at the age of three, Taylor has
been involved with agencies for the blind and disabled stretching from
the National Center for the Blind in Baltimore to the Braille Institute
in Los Angeles. Holding a B.A. in English from the University of Texas
at Austin and an M.F.A in Professional Writing from the University of
Southern California, he has taught composition and literature classes
for twenty years. For more information, see www.burnstaylor.com.

The Queen Kolam

The kolam is a geometric shape that the women of
South India have been making for over 5,000 years as
a religious practice. Women make them with rice flour in
front of their houses, businesses and temples on a
daily basis to honor Laxmi, the Hindu Goddess of Prosperity. This photo was taken
at a Kolam Festival in Chennai, one of San Antonio’s sister cities.

Lighthouse for the Blind Poetry Contest

The following three poems were judged the winners of the Voices de la Luna Annual Fundraiser Poetry Contest.

Seeds (First Prize)
John Woolridge

What kind of seeds are these?
dropped from the digestive tract of wild birds fleeing the winter freeze
dried by unseasonably hot Texas heat blown by a wayward breeze
then landing in a crack at a vacant asphalt parking lot covered by
a log from a stray barking dog
sitting in the crevice with soil and moisture waiting for sunlight
synthesis
you might guess what plant it will become but I am not
convinced it is
that makes me of little faith
set a time-lapse vigil til it grows
let’s wait
to see what seed the fleeing bird sows

Decisions (Second Prize)
Joe Schuerger

The salty taste of a bad decision
Dripping in the back of my throat
Betraying my spirit, protecting this moment as it will another
tomorrow

To live in the past that I threw into a locked drawer in my heart
And now I lie awake, with my memories in a glass,
and toast yesterday’s success,
today’s pain
and tomorrow’s mistake

Just Memories (Third Prize)
Amelia Cantu

When I was a little girl I never saw a flying plane.
I could hear the noise above, but it was too far away.
My young mother used to tell me, don’t you worry hija mia.
When you grow up, free to fly in one of those, you fly high.
I used to work, and work a lot, at my father’s little farm in early
mornings and late nights.
There was no time to read a book.
My mother would tell me go to the kitchen, see what to cook.
That was no fun.
It was a challenge winning a race, with my brothers and sisters.
Such as racing horses, milking cows or getting wet on a cold
rainy day.
It makes me sad, just remembering those days.
Moon
Paul Byers

Once in the National Air and Space Museum
I saw a replica of the newspaper
that was printed when the astronauts
first landed on her surface,
I’ve sampled gouda, cottage, feta, and Swiss
in a desperate attempt to taste her
I don’t know which Earth cheese comes closest
but I’ve tried them all,
I read The Distance to the Moon
by Italo Calvino
how an old man lost his never-lover to the milky mistress
drifting further away,
in a movie a man lassoed the moon
and pulled her in close
I tried to pinch the crater-caked rock with my fingers once
but I only ended up making her disappear,
one day I will stand on her dusty surface
in the purest definition of complete solitude;
I will sit on the shores near the Sea of Tranquility
closer to the stars

Poetry Therapy

Poets use poetry to deal with such issues as heroin/alcohol addiction,
death, abandonment, and sexual and emotional abuse. The following
authors illustrate the use of writing to deal with these issues.

Why I Cried This Morning while Waiting for My Oatmeal to Cook
Cyra Dumitru

Because his name is Joaquin, a name which sounds like
a single wave breaking against a boulder on the shore.
Because beneath the black shaggy hair falling across his face,
there is an openness.
Because his face lights up when he speaks softly about his guitar,
encased and waiting for him at home.
Because yesterday was his first day sheltered on the eating
disorders unit,
and he sat slumped in a wheelchair—too thin, too spent
to be allowed to walk, because even walking threatens his life
at the moment.
Because I can imagine the fear of his parents, how the magnitude
of their son’s illness descends upon them, landing
layer after layer of black wings: each one brushing, brushing,
against the contours of death.
Because when I asked the circle of teens who might want to read
the poem
“Dolphin”, he shyly lifted the hand that was not holding up
his head,
while he sat in the wheelchair.
Because when he read his own poem, perhaps the first poem he’s
ever been
invited to write, he said, “I feel so shattered.
I have a long way to go.”
Because I really do believe that the yet-unspoken poems
strumming in his soul, like fingers across a guitar
can save him, nourish him back to health
long as he keeps leaning
inward to listen, feel
and speak,
literally eating the truth
of his own words.

In Motion
Steve Bain

A composition of confusion
Fed by an urge to move forward
Yet feeling deeply that something has been left behind
That I need to have taken with me.
Yet on the threshold of being somewhere
That I no longer need what I left behind

What I Believe
Josh Stewart

I believe, the sky was never meant to be dark.

That every shadow,
Is only the outline to the light.
That every star,
Is the meaning to the night.

I believe, that every storm is a blessing.

Every tear that falls,
A flower then grows.
And for every dark cloud,
The silver lining shows.

And that every man who looks to the sky,
Will always find his way home,
And the clouds will guide him to it.

Paul Byers and Josh Stewart are students at San Antonio College.

The Andromeda Galaxy
The Thief in the Night
Tommi Thompson

I’m constantly watching you—seeking, searching, planning and plotting. I not only want your money and personal possessions. I want your life and your soul. I will take it without consciousness, sympathy or empathy. Not only am I around every corner waiting to rob your pockets. I rob your mind. Beware, oh beware because if you put your guard down, I’ll strike. So watch out and be wary. Be very, very careful where you tread. I’m Addiction and I’m constantly watching you.

My Green Monster
Amanda Waters

It came to abduct beauty, so frail, alone. Delusional in cowardly despair.
Corruption, dismay, deviant attitudes portrayed, compare.
Eventually broke, tired and disgusted, it sank in not willing to give anything back.

Dare I ask—where’s the light that sparkles bringing beauty back? Brilliant light bringing smiles and eyes of faith is resilient.

Addiction
Reashante Finney

When I think about my past it makes me sad
But in front of my babies I don’t want to cry
So why, why, why
You are evil, ugly and mean
How dare you bully me to your liking.
But it’s okay because my Higher Power who I kind of lost, will always be there
My new life. My new me.

Disgusted
Trusted.

The Thief in the Night
Anonymous

The cravings pull, tug and wrap around me so tight
I have to do the things I said I would never do.
My heart aches, I can’t please either side
Oh help me untangle the cravings I have
The waiting for help couldn’t be done.
I had to do the things I said I would never do.
It pulls so tight and my heart says “no”
But the other voice is louder.
How can I say “no”?

Art Therapy

I Want to Be Born Again
Maripat Munley

I want to experience my whole life again knowing in advance the joys and pains that made me who I am and be present to each moment with a vivid wakefulness.

I want to be born again
to feel myself slip from my mother’s womb,
my eyes wide open, to see her sister’s face as she welcomes me into the world.
I want to hear the thrill in my dad’s voice when he holds me for the first time.
I want to listen to my Nana’s prayer of relief when the call comes announcing her first grandchild’s safe arrival.

I want to live again my early childhood on Lynwood Ave in the house my grandfather built, to be with my aunts, uncles, cousins and all my family talking and laughing around the dining room table.

I want to relive my time at Old Blockley, to hear the Negro spirituals sung while walking the nights in the long, dark, hospital halls hoping I will have the needed nursing skills.
Oh! To be with those strong young nurses—survivors all—who would be my lifelong soul friends!

I especially want to live again the era when my one true love came to me and I knew for certain that only his love, becoming one, though still our own selves, would bring me truly alive.
And oh! Years later to experience the first moments of motherhood!

I want to live once more the joy of art and imagery and how those who shared their images with me shaped beauty in my soul.

I want to live my whole life again knowing as I do now that I would survive life’s challenges.
But most of all, I want to live each moment from today forward wide-awake to its realities and treasures.
Going
Frances R. Ford

Time keeps on ticking
and has no concept
of heartaches, births, or deaths.
It just keeps on moving
forward, what is its goal?
Bittersweet aches
Bittersweet tastes
I’m happy yet I’m sad
I’m glad yet I’m mad
Where does this road lead?
When will I trust myself again?
Time keeps on going, and
I’m still not knowing
what or where my purpose is.
Tons of emotions, zero understanding,
maybe life is a riddle and
to get to the answer we have to
keep moving, ticking, going.

Continue
Siara Foster

What do you do when you see your world falling apart
when there is nothing but agony and pain ripping at your heart?
What do you do when your head starts to spin
and you find yourself losing control over and over again?
Where do you go when you want to run away and hide?
How do you stop this roller coaster ride?
Why do the voices inside your head tell you
that you are better off dead?
You have no friends when you look around.
All you see is yourself shattered and lying on the ground.
When nothing has ever gone right,
do you give up or continue to fight?

Poetry & Dreams
Poetry, Dreams, and Interpretation

Initiation
Transcribed and Interpreted by James Brandenburg
San Antonio, Texas
Jan. 18, 2014

Dream: The dream takes place on a Hopi Indian Reservation. I
am climbing up the ladders of the adobes, which lead up into the
hills, with a young Hopi boy who is about eight years old. He is
almost nude except for a flap around his waist and speaks Eng-
lish. We are looking for a nest of black spiders. I am supposed
to do an initiation rite of some kind that requires a black spider.
The rite involves the boy’s touching one of these black spiders.
We are on the rooftop of the highest abode and climb another
ladder to a ledge that juts out of the mountainside. Together, we
stand on the ladder side by side. There is a glass container on
the ledge with spiders attached to the outside of it. The container
is covered with black spiders. I reach my hand out to touch one of
the spiders and accidentally tip over the glass container. Black
bodies spill all over the ledge. I reach out cautiously to touch one
of the spiders; it feels like a fuzzy blackberry. Indeed, the spi-
ders have been transformed into blackberries. The blackberries
are soft and hairy like spiders and are dry. My mouth feels ex-
tremely dry. I encourage the young Hopi Indian to touch one of
the spiders/blackberries. He relaxes after he touches it. I set the
container upright and place the spiders/blackberries inside of it
until it is about three-fourths full. At the bottom of the glass con-
tainer, a small snake (red and green with black spots) is coiled
tightly. It clings to the glass. It has its tail in its mouth, like an
uroboros. I touch the serpent’s skin and encourage the boy to do
likewise. The serpent flinches. It is alive. End of dream.

Brief Interpretation: In the dream, I have been chosen to do
an initiation—an older man with a young boy. The initiation
involves preparation for and the ritual of touching—use of the
sensation function. The Mason jar is used for canning and pre-
serving—a containing image. In alchemy things are transformed
in the vessel. The spider is often a symbol of the Great Mother—
image of Self. There is the touching, making contact with two
basic life principles. Red is the vital principle of biological life,
and green is the vital principle of plant life. There is something
archaic in the psyche that has developed. I tip over the container;
the spiders are no longer contained. The spiders are transformed
into blackberries. What is this dryness about? Drying out is the
removing of the unconscious. It needs liquid added to it. The
snake is coiled around the glass with its tail in its mouth, like an
uroboros. Is the snake containing this entire process? The snake
represents the energy of the unconscious. The Hopi Indian is ini-
tiated and touches the spider/blackberry and the serpent. The ini-
tiation is successfully completed.

The Day of Rain
Marisol Macías

Helios scorned us for an ancient wrongdoing
from fathers long ago
lying lost in secret tombs

we sing, unknowing of our calling
oracles marked to cry
when the thirst from the land
chastised our feet

cracked caliche
hot coals and razor blades

horned lizards hang on mesquite branches by acolyte children
praying changes to sky gods for rain
whispered from ear to ear to ear to ear
by river-borne grandmothers
half-wild sage roses

our lips charmed soon after birth
with blessings from cicadas
baptized in their canticle death

we turn
pinwheel dervishes
our pleas clinging to tattered feathers
of antediluvian winds

it is done!
it is done!
the parched yellow earth swells and blooms
sweet petrichor
rain cools my face
Poems That Create Sacred Spaces, Healing Places
Geraldine Connolly

There is a tiny Zen poem, a haiku by the hermit monk, Ryo-kan, written in Japan in the 1700s, that will help us to begin our discussion of the sacred: it’s a simple poem, one with great range and depth.

Like the little stream
Making its way
Through the mossy crevices
I too quietly
Turn clear and transparent.

In this poem, I find at least five qualities that lead to the sacred:

1. the elegant notion of mindfulness, of paying close attention to the ordinary details of the world;
2. the quality of being outside or away from the noisiness of social life;
3. the use of radiant metaphor like the little stream, the mossy crevices;
4. the idea of a border that can be crossed: moving in cold water to sitting quietly, changing from mossiness to clarity; and
5. the opening that occurs into the world of seeing and transparency.

I’d like to keep these qualities in mind as techniques the poet uses to transport or transform the reader into a space of otherness—the entryway to the sacred.

I define sacred as a deep capacity to be awake, conscious, and aware of space beyond the everyday. I have selected five poems that I admire, that I have always felt had an otherworldly quality, to examine their quality of awareness. These poems come from a deep inwardness, an ability of seeing the spiritual potential in the everyday details of life, setting a stage for the drama of the soul. Keep in mind how the map of Basho’s little poem seems to be evident in both the structures and in the image systems. Part of the definition of the word sacred includes the notion “of being set apart” or the state of being holy, from the Old English “hal” which means set to the side, uninjured, healthy and sound. “Sacerdos” is the word for priest and “sanctum” means set apart.

When you pray or meditate, you want to be enlarged and escape from the confines of the ordinary world. However, praying and meditating are different for every spiritual seeker. Some seek quiet, some wish for reverence or awe. Some prefer emptiness and others, rapture. But it is interesting to note that preliminary to sacredness is the importance of preparation: looking at the world, seeing it and savoring it, before you put it to one side.

This poem by Rumi, the great Sufi mystic and poet of 13th-century Persia, has always held a great fascination for me because of its acute spiritual perceptions.

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows
Who violently sweep your house
Empty of its furniture,

Still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
For some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
Meet them at the door laughing,
And invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent
As a guide from beyond.


I never grow tired of this poem. I learn something new each time I read it. The quality of dailiness described here is accurate, as it is in life. There is always an emotion coming or leaving, always a chattering in the mind. There is always a messy house that needs to be put it in order. Rumi reveals a great truth in the very simple and very human metaphor of a house that needs tending, a guest house crowded with guests, full of furniture and clutter. The human consciousness is like that house. Depression, joy, meanness—emotions that crowd the spaces of our minds and spirits, need to be cleared away to make way for the cleansing quality of nothingness.

Sacred space is space which is aware of something in a higher way. We are capable, says this poem, of moving beyond even a crowd of sorrows to something greater—an understanding that awareness may be the first step in “clearing us for some new delight.” The idea of the clearing proves essential in spiritual poetry. Rumi manages a beautiful turn or crossover, from messiness into spiritual clarity when he posits that behind every ugly thought may be a clean thought, behind every bad dream there might be a happy morning. It is possible to cross over from muddiness to clarity but one must first acknowledge and accept the muddiness. Preliminary to reaching the state of sacredness is looking at and experiencing the harsh reality of human emotion, acknowledging it before putting it to one side.

Being open, not judging but accepting, proves of utmost importance. Part of the poet’s job is to stand aside, and part of it is to respect the one image he or she is drawn to. Rumi’s “The Guesthouse” respects every emotion as a pathway to the soul. Whatever emotion arrives, welcome it inside, he advises, rather than ignoring or resenting or feeling threatened by it. This invitation in the fifth stanza prepares us for the masterful final stanza which is about gratitude. The word “beyond” completes the poem. The idea of escaping from reality to something higher beckons. The bell sound of the words keeps ringing in our ears as the image opens into infinity.
Mary Oliver is a writer who doesn’t shy away from great themes. Her “Morning Poem,” unlike Rumi’s poem, employs conventional Christian religious imagery and the creation myth. But like Rumi’s poem, Oliver’s work often involves the mystic’s experience of leaving one’s physical body before turning into something larger than one’s human self.

Morning Poem

Every morning
the world
is created.
Under the orange
sticks of the sun
the heaped
ashes of the night
turn into leaves again
and fasten themselves to the high branches—
and the ponds appear
like black cloth
on which are painted islands
of summer lilies.
If it is your nature
to be happy
you will swim away along the soft trails
for hours, your imagination
alighting everywhere.
And if your spirit
carries within it
the thorn
that is heavier than lead—
if it’s all you can do
to keep on trudging—
there is still
somewhere deep within you
a beast shouting that the earth
is exactly what it wanted—

each pond with its blazing lilies
is a prayer heard and answered
lavishly,
every morning,

whether or not
you have ever dared to be happy,
whether or not
you have ever dared to pray.

(from Dreamwork, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1983)

The religious imagery is conventional: rebirth, higher branches, lilies, the crucifixion, prayers heard and answered. But if you look deeply at the imagery and into the imagery, you can read the drama of the struggle of the soul. The orange sticks and heaped ashes, the black cloth, the thorn heavier than lead, exist in vivid contrast to the island, the painting of summer lilies, the swim along a soft trail to the pond which give the poem its tension, its drama. It is through these specific details of the natural world that we are healed, and the prayer to be healed is heard and answered. Oliver proves herself a keen observer of the natural world. I like the moments when the sacred and profane collide as in the beast shouting somewhere deep within you that the earth is exactly what it wanted. This is a paradox, yet there is a truthfulness to the idea. Both the earth and what is beyond have their own attractions. And the poem is generous. Part of the argument implies that even though one has never prayed or ever “dared to be happy,” these transcendent moments of joy in the natural world are uplifting and are readily available for anyone to experience at any given moment.

In this work, Oliver puts aside the night, the darkness and ashes for the rebirth of morning, which she likens to the rebirth of the struggling soul that “keeps on trudging” until it realizes radiant visions of the world. And then, imagination alights like a butterfly. Under the heaped ashes of the night appear fresh morning leaves. Below the “thorn heavier than lead,” there exists a radiant shouting beast, a pond of blazing lilies. There is another world beneath the surface of the poem. Like Rumi, Oliver is a mystic. His clearing is analogous to her walk into the radiant morning world as the way to connect to the other world, the higher world. It is interesting to note that there is a clue in stanza three as to how this might occur when the heaped ashes of the night turn into leaves again and “fasten themselves to the high branches.” To me, this reads as though the individual human’s spirit must “will itself” to fasten to something higher. There is a conscious act involved. Rather than being mired in the world of suffering implied in darkness, thorns and ashes, the spirit must resolve to reach higher, and will be able, through the music, sound, and colors of the world to attain some healing, and open into a prayer.

In the world of religion, a way to reach the sacred is through ceremonies, chants, bows, prostrations. Poetry can be another preparation, Mary Oliver is not a showman, but a solitary. Poetry, through its chants or music or attentiveness, is a means of discovering the sacred’s power. Poems remembered from childhood, for instance, can be calming to recite when one is stressed or confused, and often include poetic devices, rhythm, repetition. Both of these poems broach an entryway, enter the opening that offers itself, and cross the border into another consciousness.

Another work, “Eagle Poem” by the contemporary native American poet, Joy Harjo, is a poem of instruction on how to accomplish acknowledgment in order to enter the mystery of a higher consciousness in the other world.

Eagle Poem

To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To one whole voice that is you.
And know there is more
That you can’t see, can’t hear;
Can’t know except in moments
Steadily growing and in languages
That aren’t always sound but other
Circles of motion.
Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty.

(from In Mad Love and War, Wesleyan University Press, 1990)

This reminds me of Emily Dickinson’s poem no. 236: “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church / I keep it, staying at Home / … Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice— / I, just wear my Wings.”

She celebrates the divine apart from conventional religious tradition. And indeed, Harjo’s poem is comfortable with ambiguity and mystery.

The problem poets face is that space is wordless, so words are a path to the indescribable. Boldly, Harjo’s poem goes right to the opening. The poem instructs you to “open your whole self to sky, to earth, to sun to moon.” Joy Harjo’s vision of the eagle and its circles of motion, its sacred wings that “swept our hearts clean” is a commitment to the searching itself. Notice the almost direct correspondence to Rumi’s “violently swept house.” The violent sweeping signals an opening into clarity, into a vision of kindness and mystery. The violent sweeping signals an opening into clarity, into a vision of kindness or compassion, and being part of the larger order of things, what she calls the “circles of motion.” She identifies with the vision of the bird in flight over Salt River. Salt brings the connotation of stinging or wounding, and in this poem we skirt the border, sometimes between earth and water, sometimes between earth and sky, that must be crossed in order to come to understanding, compassion, peacefulness.

In searching for a definition of the ineffable, poetry and the sacred overlap. They are not equal. Sacred is without longing. Poetry goes toward sacredness, like an eagle circling the lake. And the Eagle, when we stare at it long enough, becomes in the poem “the eagle inside us,” the part that is free and able to feel lightness and the open dimensions of the mind. We must make ourselves available to look for it, wait for it, and we must listen.

Music provides direction and is one of the ways of accessing the sacred. It is the human acknowledging the non-human. We build cathedrals, write poems, compose symphonies, paint paintings. This is our quest. We struggle for the vocabulary to embrace that which is unknowable, that which is revelation. It’s about a state of ecstasy—a quest.

Another poem which has always been important to me is “Stone” by Charles Simic. It reaches some deep inner place in a skillful, hypnotizing way that you’ll hear as it is read aloud. I think of this as a surrealist/mystical poem. It’s a kind of open

parable. The story it tells cuts across all identities of race, age, ethnicity, social class to the quality of humanness.

Stone

Go inside a stone.
That would be my way.
Let somebody else become a dove
Or gnash with a tiger’s tooth.
I am happy to be a stone.

From the outside, the stone is a riddle:
No one knows how to answer it.
Yet within, it must be cool and quiet
Even though a cow steps on it full weight,
Even though a child throws it in a river;
The stone sinks, slow, unperturbed
To the river bottom
Where the fishes come to knock on it
And listen.

I have seen sparks fly out
When two stones are rubbed
So perhaps it is not dark inside after all;
Perhaps there is a moon shining
From somewhere, as though behind a hill—
Just enough light to make out
The strange writing, the star-charts
On the inner walls.

(from What the Grass Says, Kayak, 1967)

Part of the idea of sacred space is that it is “set apart” and holy because of this apartness. The idea of the outsider and his quest to enter this space is often the work of a poet. Accessing the other world, its mystery, calm, rapture, whatever one’s definition may be, is the job description of the poet. “Stone” is a poem that makes its claim for interiority, mystery, solitude, in the first stanza, wherein the poet announces his willingness to be ordinary: “I am happy to be a stone.” This poem advises that we should forget being a “dove,” which seems a symbol of conventional religion, and not bother gnashing with a tiger’s tooth, a reference to politics and its world of argument and contention.

The stone to others seems like a throwaway. Cows step on it, children throw it into creeks. But when it sinks to the bottom of the river where it is tossed, the stone has a magical moment when the “fishes come to knock on it / and listen,” sparks can fly out of it. Some fire of the spirit is ignited. A moon shines inside it, as it is in the poet’s mind. Simic’s imagery is not religious but scientific, of the astronomer who must find his way by celestial navigation and star-charts on the inner walls. How gorgeous and bone-chilling! It is interesting to note that the poem sounds its last note on the idea of the inner walls, the sacredness of Interiority, of being apart from the world, set aside, an outcast who is undervalued like some kind of desert mystic experiencing strange visions. To me, the parable could include the importance of being set apart, being a throwaway, which as an artist or a solitary offers a freedom with which to create or imagine. Many religions have silent

Voices de la Luna, 15 April 2014
Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies are not starving someplace, they are starving somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils. But we enjoy our lives because that’s what God wants. Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women at the fountain are laughing together between the suffering they have known and the awfulness in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody in the village is very sick. There is laughter every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta, and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay. If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction, we lessen the importance of their deprivation. We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil. If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down, we should give thanks that the end had magnitude. We must admit there will be music despite everything. We stand at the prow again of a small ship anchored late at night in the tiny port looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront is three shuttered cafés and one naked light burning. To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth all the years of sorrow that are to come.

A Brief for the Defense

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(from Refusing Heaven, Knopf, 2005)

The beginning of the poem is very strong. It assaults the reader like a John Donne poem. What an aggressive start: “Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere.” Babies starving. The stakes are high here. This big, risky poem throws a lot of difficult snapshots in your face with its very first lines and then proceeds relentlessly. How can we enjoy our lives when there are babies in Africa with flies in their nostrils, and caged prostitutes in the streets of Bombay? What powerful horrific detail. And Gilbert faces it head-on, paints a terrifying portrait. How to escape? He starts with the notion that the women in cages in Bombay are still capable of laughing, which is a very surprising turn because we anticipate tears, not laughter. He argues that happiness is important but that pleasure is even more important. Enjoyment, he says, is “necessary”; otherwise, why would such beauty exist in the world next to such horror? Why would summer dawn be so beautiful if it were not for our enjoyment (echoes of Mary Oliver)? Why would the Bengal tiger be so magnificent if not to bring us a shiver of joy? His argument that we must be stubborn enough to enjoy “gladness in the ruthless furnace of the world” is striking and memorable. This powerful detail of the “ruthless furnace” resonates strongly for me because, as a Pittsburgh native like Jack Gilbert and having that vivid imagery from childhood of driving past what seemed like rivers of fire and the black mills with their giant furnaces and smokestacks turning the entire landscape red with heat and smoke and blazing sunsets, I experienced its terrible glow. Gilbert’s writing is powerful, unforgettable, and creates a perfect image of the how the world burns us up. Thinking of injustice only, argues Gilbert, is a form of praising the Devil. Here again we have conventional religious imagery. But what Gilbert does with it is breathtaking. God and the Devil are painted in their perpetual struggle, but this god is the “locomotive of the Lord” and capable of running us down. The world is a devouring furnace where the Devil is trying to get us to pay attention only to misfortune and not joy. When this poem finally finds its clearing, its sacred space, in line 31, the concept of music arrives: “There will be music in spite of everything.” Music is one of the greatest pleasures of the world. We so take it for granted and there it is, a way of transport: the blues, fiddle music, bluegrass, polkas, Gregorian chants, Zydeco. There will be music, which can also be read as poetry, as a way of escaping. There is an image of a small boat in the harbor, a symbol of transport or escape, a way out of the ordinary world. There is the calming water and the tiny port and the sleeping island. All of this feels separate and safe, a harbor from the terrible world, and there is silence but for the tiny rowboat and its oars rowing faintly back and forth, as we veer back and forth between the profane and the sacred. The calm space, the quiet healing space is hard-won but “worth all the years of sorrow” that are to come. This huge fiery poem has finally overcome the devastations of the world and found a quiet space, a single light burning and a small boat that is crossing the water. All of the images we’ve discussed, the conventional religious images, the water images, the time of day, are used to great effect by Gilbert. The calm here is hard won. The tone of anger and outrage eventually gives way to a frantic embracing of joy and then the peace of the final lines. The Gilbert poem proves an interesting one because it is far less quiet than the other poems. It has stridency, a feeling of urgency before it reaches the sacred place outside the world at the end, which enhances its dramatic effect. I have learned something as a writer by studying these poems. Poetry is a perfect way to leave the world and a good way to access the sacred, but it is easy to shy away from ambitious themes and risky ideas that dare to deal with these large issues because of fear. It’s easy to be afraid of tackling something big and falling flat. Perhaps we’ve been over-warned in workshops about the dangers of the large idea, and therefore it is easy to write instead about the small life in an overly detailed way.
Rumi and Simic, across the centuries, teach us how to write about ordinary life in an extraordinary way, to find the way to a holy space of healing. These poems are a tonic because they reach for the transformational. They are what we want to experience when we approach poetry. They help us understand that there is a way through the complex sights and sounds, disappointments and terrors of the world to another quieter world filled with mystery and beauty.

Reading these great poems that forge correspondence between the inner and the outer is a rich and rewarding experience. They deal with the great philosophical problems of existence like “Who am I?” Why am I here” and “How do I deal with loneliness, suffering and other problematic emotions in one short life?” They help us confront the great human struggle with acceptance, with patience and forgiveness, overcoming the tragedies of the world as well as personal fear and terror of impending death. Confronting these large questions remains the essential work of poetry.

It’s not easy to embrace the unknown, but we can learn that what truly matters, what truly stuns the reader and the writer and makes a memorable work of art, is exploring the deep and almost wordless issues that involve treading new territory, taking risks, finding a way to dramatize the great human struggles. Who but poets can look at, name and be aware of how to navigate emotion to reach a space of clearing, of enlargement or mystery, rapture or emptiness? There is an unnameable space that we all hunger for, a way of looking that transports us beyond narrow concerns and challenges us to look at the world with fresh eyes.

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The Power of Silence
Lou Taylor and Carol Coffee Reposa

On April 22, 2013, Lou Taylor, business manager of Voices de la Luna, began a memorable journey: she packed her bags, locked her door, got into her car and drove 210 miles to a retreat located south of Kingsville, Texas. There she would spend the next four days collecting her thoughts and re-ordering her life. In the following interview with Voices poetry editor Carol Coffee Reposa, Taylor examines this experience.

Carol Coffee Reposa: What is the name of the facility you visited?
Lou Taylor: The name of the retreat is Lebh Shomea, which in Hebrew means “listening heart.” I have stayed there several times, usually three to five days. This center has been dedicated to contemplative prayer since 1972.

Why did you decide to go there?
Several friends whose opinions I respect have spent time there and found it to be a powerful experience.

What were your expectations of Lebh Shomea? What was missing here in San Antonio that made you want to look at alternative ways of life?
I wished to spend time in silence and contemplation. Although I live alone and in theory have access to silence, I always seem too busy. I am working on living a part of each day in the same attitude of silence and prayer that I find at Lebh Shomea. Another thing that I experience there is being in tune with nature, with the natural light and darkness of day and night, with sounds of animals, wind and waves. It reminds me that I am part of something much greater than myself.

In what specific ways does daily life there differ from its San Antonio counterpart?
The entire time is spent in silence and meditation except for Eucharist and prayer services. The day is divided by the ringing of bells to call us to prayer and meals. There are no outside lights, so it is very dark at night.

Could you walk me through a typical day?
Each day begins with a Eucharist at 7:00 am followed by breakfast, silence, lunch, silence, and supper. I would get up at 6:30 in order to be on time for the morning service. Bells rang for meals at 6:30, noon, and 6:00 pm. There are no set agendas, no speakers; Eucharist is optional. Participants may make an appointment with a spiritual director, but only if they want to. There is also a community room where those who wish to talk about their experience can gather from 1:00 to 2:00 pm, but again, only if they want to. Bells summoned us to meals, but that was the only “summoning.” I would walk in the wilderness areas, read in the library, drive to the beach at Baffin Bay, sit on the porch. I spent time in silent meditation, reading, writing, and walking. I retired soon after supper. There are few outside lights at Lebh Shomea, which reflects a conscious decision to live as close to nature as possible.

How is the physical space at Lebh Shomea arranged?
The present-day facility was once part of the Kennedy ranch. There is a large old Spanish-style ranch house with a huge front porch. Behind the main building are small dwellings made of brick, simple but comfortable. Each has a screen porch, oratory or prayer room, bedroom and bath. Additional guest rooms are contained in the “Big House.” A small chapel built by the Kennedy family for themselves and the ranch hands welcomes visitors, but the complex also features a newer house of worship, along with an extensive library where guests can read and do research. The entire center is surrounded by acres of wilderness and walking trails, brush country beautifully landscaped with palm trees and gardens. Deer and wild turkeys are everywhere, and because Lebh Shomea is part of the South Texas flyway, all sorts of birds inhabit the area. The management pays careful attention to the ecology of the space and to preservation of the land and wildlife.

How about meals?
They are very simple—cereal and fruit for breakfast; tacos, beans, rice and vegetables for lunch; sandwiches for supper. Meals are eaten in the lunch room in silence. Fresh fruits and salads are available at meals, and for snacks. Sometimes there is soup.

How much does an accommodation cost?
The cost is $55 a night, which includes meals. This is listed on the website as a “suggested stipend.” Guests who are able to pay more are invited to do so to enable those who can’t afford the $55 to come.

Did this experience change you? If so, how?
Yes, it did. Each time I go, I realize the power of silence and simplicity and try to carry some of that life back with me. It’s time to go again.
11/4/13: I awoke in the middle of the night and found myself back in Luang Prabang. My son sent me a text message that my email account has apparently been hacked. Using my aol account, the hacker - posing as me – asks for emergency cash to solve a dangerous situation at Manila Airport. I’m filled with anguish and embarrassment. The Filipino collective Anonymous has attacked thousands of websites in a worldwide protest demanding fairness, justice, and freedom. Thanks to Skype I can talk to my internet service agent stationed in Romania. He has already frozen my account and blocked further intrusion. Thankfully, all our friends and family figured it out and nobody sent money. As instructed, I change my password and ask my email contacts to disregard any unusual email purportedly coming from my account. I declare that we are fine and have plenty of resources to get along in Laos. Then I include two photos from Luang Prabang, which shows my wife and me visiting the Golden Buddha in Wat Xieng Thong.

11/13/2013: Aboard the Pandaw River cruise ship, we are sailing on the wide Mekong River, passing fishing villages with stilt houses bordering the water. Narrow canoes glide near the shore. The fishermen ignore the slow traffic of boats, large and small, including our cruise, and focused on their livelihood. I recall poems by the late Palmer Hall who had served in Vietnam during the war. He once told me how it astonished him to see the Mekong fishermen completely ignore American soldiers and keep fishing while helicopter gunships hovered above them. In a poem created during his tour of duty, he wrote: “This poem is not about the Central Highlands: / that place where three countries touch / and where blood spilled over a small hill / and nothing lived save through chance.” He concluded that his poem, “… is about soft passion / in the midst of drenching rains, small fires, and empty houses.”

11/15/2013: The young Cambodian students at Siem Reap’s Aspara Dancing School, boys and girls, begin their training around ten years old. The young dancers move deliberately in utmost tenderness and harmony. Later that night at the hotel we watch professional Aspar dancers perform on a stage under bright and colorful lights.

Our visit to Angkor Wat, first a Hindu then a Buddhist temple, was complicated by a heavy downpour. Yet the visit to this temple with its artful combination of Hindu and Buddhist mythological imagery was worth the long voyage. Angkor Wat, or the city of temples, is the largest religious monument in the world. The temple was built by Khmer King Suryavarman II in the early 12th century in Yasodharapura, the capital of the Khmer Empire, as his state temple and eventual mausoleum. Breaking from the Shaivism tradition of previous kings, Angkor Wat was dedicated to Vishnu.

As the best-preserved temple at the site, it is the only one to have remained a significant religious center since its foundation. The temple represents the peak of the high classical style of Khmer architecture. It has become a symbol of Cambodia, appearing on both its national flag and its money, and it is the country’s prime attraction for visitors.

11/17/13: After visiting the house of Hyun Thuy, the lover of author Marguerite Duras, where the main events of the novel _The Lover_ occur, we sailed on to Phnom Penh. In the morning we were supposed to visit the Killing Fields Memorial at Choeung Ek, but the road was closed due to bloody clashes between striking workers and police. Instead we visited the “S21” Genocide Museum. Before the Khmer Rouge capture of Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975, the place had been a school, but it was quickly turned into a detention and torture center. There in the museum, I met Chum Mey, one of only a handful of people from Phnom Penh who survived incarceration in Toul Sleng (S21) prison. A good mechanic, he was kept alive to train other mechanics to fix and repair machinery for the Khmer Rouge.

During the long Vietnam War, Northeastern Cambodia became a safe haven for the Vietcong, and a clandestine route for supplies to North Vietnam. The illiterate and poor Cambodian farmers became players in the war when they were organized by a French-educated radical communist who formed the ultra-radical Khmer Rouge party. Trained by Vietnamese Communists, they gradually captured the northern part of Cambodia and ruled with an iron fist. The departure of American military forces and imminent fall of Saigon gave the Khmer Rouge the opportunity to attack the weak Cambodian government, capture Phnom Penh, and establish a radical regime. They taught the northern peasants, especially the youth clad in black shirts, to annihilate all city people: government employees, old military personnel, teachers, students, and city dwellers, in order to transform the country into a primitive agrarian society free of Western influence, free of any doctrine but the Khmer Rouge vision of Communism. By the time their tasks were accomplished, 1.7 million Cambodians had been killed, or starved to death.

4/17/1975: In one of the chapters of the book _Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors_, Sarah P. Tun, a surviving child writes, “By this time, about half the people were gone. Some had died of starvation and illness. Some had been killed.” She writes that the Khmer Rouge decided no one could have private property or cook at home. Everything from sex to family life was tightly controlled. In the somber chambers of “S21,” rows and rows of black and white photographs of genocide victims are on display. Entering the torture chambers from the passageways, one can still see rusted torture tools scattered on the dusty floor around primitive metal beds. Later that evening I read a passage by Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, who wrote, “They evoke a time when, in the name of absurd and senseless ideologies, cruel rulers inflicted systematic suffering, humiliation, and death upon hundreds and thousands of their kinsmen. They must not be forgotten.”

11/18/13: Here in Indochina, we are walking through history, from the Vietnam conflict to the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia. Beyond the fertile Mekong Delta, behind Angkor Wat’s ruins, stands a horrific tale of the human dark side: civil wars, ruthless invasions by other nations (the United States’ involvement is only one episode, alongside the Chinese and French occupations) and the bloody suffering imposed by domestic tyrants. It’s no surprise that Buddhism thrives here—a religion based on accepting suffering in the present life, a fact of present times, and on meditation and silence as remedies to cope with it.
“Fred Johansson, what in the hell are you up to this time?”

The voice was distant, but I recognized without hesitation the mostly jovial but always slightly cynical tone of my neighbor from two farms over, Rogers Manning. He was easy to spot as he made his way across the field, being of far-greater-than-average girth and being, as well, clad in a nearly glowing red shirt. The combination of these attributes created the appearance, if one squinted, of a large crimson beach ball rolling toward me through the freshly cut grass. Prior to his exhortation, I had been languishing against the wood fence that delineated my yard proper from my twenty-acre north field. My arms were crossed and resting upon the top rail of the fence and I had been engaged in the surprisingly engrossing pastime of watching a man as he walked slowly around my back field holding extended before him a long Y-shaped stick, looking for all the world as though he were leading an invisible horse. The walking man was quite some way away from me in the field, which made him as yet extremely far away from Manning. My neighbor was, however, possessed of exquisite eyesight and astute enough to realize that something odd was indeed afoot out there in my north twenty.

I did not acknowledge Manning’s comment, but merely watched as he traversed the remaining distance to the fence where I stood, which he did with more alacrity than one might reasonably expect from one of such enormity. He at last reached the fence and stood for a moment catching his breath, looking out in the direction I had been prior to his arrival. He turned to me for a second but immediately returned his gaze to the man who was still walking around my back pasture in what seemed an utterly random manner. The man continued to hold the stick before him and he did not acknowledge our surveillance. Indeed, he appeared lost in concentration.

“Fred,” Manning said after a lengthy pause, “I have known you these many years and I know you to be a man of integrity and common sense. Which is why I know that that fellow out there in your back field cannot possibly be dowsing for water, unless, that is, he is doing so without your consent.”

Manning was the sort of fellow perfectly capable of carrying on an extended conversation with himself. I had seen him perform this incongruous act on more than one occasion, with my function being no more than to insert the occasional “Really?” or “You don’t say!” at certain strategic moments in his otherwise uninterrupted diatribe. As an experiment some months ago, I had answered his phone call and, following the initial formalities, simply set the phone down on the kitchen counter and watched a half-hour television show, at the conclusion of which I returned to the phone to find him continuing his discussion unabated. On this occasion, however, it seemed that a reply was in order.

“Rogers,” I replied with what I felt was a knowing smile, “why are you so quick to dismiss the inexplicable?”

He returned my gaze with an expression suspended somewhere between incredulity and dismissiveness. This look, though, slowly morphed into one that suggested a realization that he was being let in on some sort of private joke. After a few more seconds of silence it became clear he was looking for confirmation that he had, in fact, correctly interpreted the situation.

“He’s a relative, right?” Rogers said. “Someone whose lunacy you are obliged to indulge in the interest of domestic tranquility. I completely understand. My wife has an aunt who believes for all the world that she is a lost heir to the throne of England. My wife insists that we acknowledge her as such whenever she visits. Damnable thing, but entertaining in its own way.”

“No, Rogers, he’s no relative. In fact, I only met the man yesterday, down at the tractor shop.”

“And he, no doubt, overheard you talking with Sherman about the new well you’re commencing to dig out here.”

“Astute as ever, Rogers. It was—”

“Oh no, Fred, kindly allow me to complete the story, for I can see it clear as the stick in his hands.”

I stopped in mid-sentence and stood with arms crossed, encouraging Rogers to infer how the previous day’s conversation had transpired, a pastime he enjoyed deeply and one in which he had demonstrated some ability in past conversations.

“You were no doubt discussing with Sherman the relative merits of various auger types in anticipation of drilling your new well, a worthy undertaking necessitated by our incessant drought and subsequent depletion of the water level in your current one. Your new friend,” he said, gesturing with his chin at the man walking across the field, “overheard this conversation and, without invitation, volunteered that he was possessed of a unique and prescient ability to identify for you the precise spot in which you should drill your new well, and in so doing, to save you a good deal of wasted time and money in locating the optimal location.”

He paused for a moment, clearly satisfied with himself despite my failure thus far to validate the accuracy of his account.

“Fred, as God is my witness, please tell me you haven’t given this charlatan money.”

I did my best to muster a reassuring smile as I placed my hand on his shoulder. “Rogers, your gift for clairvoyance has suffered no diminution at all despite your advancing age. The conversation at Sherman’s was nearly exactly as you describe it. It’s as though you were a proverbial fly on the wall. And no, no cash has changed hands. I am merely intrigued to see in action a lost art about which I have heard plenty over the years but which I have never actually witnessed in person.”

“Fred, I am relieved that your wallet remains intact, but—trust me when I say this—all you are seeing here is a strange man walking about at random in your north field, holding before him a bifurcated tree branch. Forgive my crassness, but I could as reliably locate the water beneath your field by walking out there fifty paces in any direction and pissing on the ground.”

“And a fine well it would be, Rogers, of that I have no doubt.”

“You are, of course, aware, Fred, that they maintain a comprehensive library of reservoir maps down at the survey office.”

“I am aware,” I replied, gesturing to the bit of paper protruding from my shirt pocket. “Chalk this up to an afternoon’s entertainment for a bored man. I am keen to see if he comes up with anything that bears resemblance to what the map reveals. Besides which, he is a surprisingly curious individual to converse with, perhaps even more so than your wife’s royal aunt.”

“You mean curious beyond the fact that he spends his days walking about in fields practicing the black arts.”

“Oh, you have no idea, my friend, no idea at all.” I turned and said...

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Short Fiction

The Dowser

Brian Swain

The corpuscles ... that rise from the Minerals, entering the rod, determine it to bow down, in order to render it parallel to the vertical lines which the effluvia describe in their rise.

William Pryce, Mineralogia Cornubiensis, 1778
cupped my hands around my mouth, shouting to the man. “Mister Blackstone!”

Blackstone turned in response to my call. After a moment of hesitation, he lowered the dowsing stick with some apparent reluctance, and began making his way toward Manning and me. “And just what is it,” Manning asked, “aside from his affinity for walking about in fields, that makes this individual so different from you and me?”

“Well,” I replied, “he is convinced that neither he nor any of us is real.” I gestured expansively so as to suggest not just Manning and me but rather the entirety of humanity. Manning extended his lower lip a bit and nodded as though he judged this notion to be a perfectly ordinary thing. Blackstone arrived at our position by the fence and stood in silence, anticipating whatever reason I might have had for distracting him from his search. “Mister Blackstone, allow me to present my neighbor, Rogers Manning.”

Blackstone wiped his right hand across his shirt and extended it in Manning’s direction, while his other hand retained a firm grasp on the dowsing rod. He proffered a smile. “Averill Blackstone, sir, and a fine day to you.”

“You as well,” Manning returned, shaking the man’s hand. I knew my neighbor well enough to know that he was not one to brook anything he perceived as nonsense and that he would waste no time in challenging someone—even a perfect stranger—who felt was a purveyor of such. He did not disappoint. “My colleague here,” Manning gestured in my direction, “tells me you mean to determine for him the optimal location in which he should drill his new water well.”

Blackstone made the face of one who is less than keen to be challenged about his chosen field of expertise. “I made no promises, sir, but only offered to provide an opinion based on my many years of experience in this endeavor.” He raised his left hand slightly, the one still holding the branch. “And it is your intent to divine this location using no implement other than this thin bit of willow.”

“Hazel actually, sir. Though there are some who have come to prefer, as you say, willow, I am a bit of a traditionalist about these things. And yes, I mean to determine whatever I am able using nothing more than this divining rod and the feel of my hands and forearms.”

I knew Manning well enough to know that he could easily spend the remainder of the afternoon trifling with this man. What I did not know was to what degree Blackstone would endure Manning’s jibes without taking affront. In any event, it was worth a bit of my time to find out. “Would you mind terribly if I had a closer look?” Manning asked, looking down at the branch in Blackstone’s hand. Blackstone looked uncertain for a moment, but then handed the diviner to Manning with no small measure of uncertainty. “Hazel, you say?” Manning asked, turning the rod around and passing it from one hand to the other. “Can you cast any light on just how it works?”

“Ah, Mister Manning, therein lies the rub. I don’t know how it works any more than I know how the grass grows or the sun shines.” He paused for a moment, uncertain how much detail he ought to volunteer. “By any chance, sir,” he continued, “have you heard of a German by the name of Otto von Graeve?”

Indeed I have not, Mister Blackstone,” Manning said. “Early practitioner of the art, I presume?”

“You presume correctly, sir. Also a great uncle on my mother’s side and good friend of my own uncle Carl, also an accomplished dowser. It was he—Carl—who introduced the practice of dowsing into my life.”

“And what then did these distinguished progenitors of yours have to say about the science underlying this pursuit?” Manning was taking an increasingly condescending tone and language, though Blackstone either did not yet discern it or chose to ignore it in the interest of civility. “There’s the thing, Mister Manning. My uncles offered no insight into the underlying mechanics of dowsing, nor have I heard any offered by the several individuals I’ve encountered in my life who engage in the activity. I know only how to go about it, but can say little indeed about why it works.”

“So do you suppose it be magic, Mister Blackstone?”

“Oh, quite the contrary. You see, magic is only illusion. The magician is no miracle worker. Rather he engages in various forms of subterfuge and misdirection for the purpose of entertaining his audience.”

“Whereas you, Mister Blackstone…” Manning allowed the unfinished phrase to hang in the air for a moment, suggestive of far more through its incompleteness than any words he might have appended to it. “Mister Manning, I can certainly appreciate your skepticism, and you will know, of course, that you are by no means alone in the low regard you have for my skills. I will be the first to acknowledge that it is an imperfect art, Mister Johansson here being an excellent example of a case in which I can, thus far, arrive at no concrete conclusion.”

Manning apparently determined that he had exhausted the topic of dowsing, at least for the moment, and so he embarked upon a rather abrupt non sequitur. “I am led to believe, Mister Blackstone, you are convinced that you do not, in fact, exist. Do I understand this correctly?”

Blackstone glanced for a moment toward me, since it was abundantly clear that I was the only person who might have plausibly provided Manning with this intriguing bit of intelligence. I effected a very subtle shrug, as though encouraging him to expand upon what he had shared with me earlier. “That may be a bit of a mischaracterization, sir. What I indicated to Mister Johansson,” he glanced my way again, “is that I am increasingly of a mind that none of us are real, rather that we are fabrications of an external and unseen power.”

Manning, ever given to discourse concerning the abstract, seized upon this with verve. “Seems to me all you are describing is a straightforward interpretation of religious theology, that we are all the products of a divine creator.”

“No, no, sir. It’s different than that. What I have determined is that we—myself as well as anyone with whom I happen to interact—are simply characters in a story being written by an unseen author.”

It is a surpassingly rare thing to witness Manning at a genuine loss for words, but he stood gazing at Blackstone for several seconds before turning to face me. I said nothing but offered only a palms-raised what-did-I-tell-you gesture. “So, Mister Blackstone, let me understand this.” He paused again, collecting his thoughts. “You, and for the moment at least
...the two of us as well, are characters in a story being crafted by someone ... somewhere. That our actions, our dialog—these very words I utter now—are the creations of ...”

He paused again before—I swear it to be true—actually glancing for a brief second up to the sky as though in search of someone. I had known Manning long enough so that he had to work quite hard to surprise me anymore. But his reaction to Blackstone’s absurd hypothesis caught me utterly unawares.

“Let me say, sir, that may be the most profound and disturbing notion I’ve heard in a very, very long time.”

Blackstone seemed taken aback as well, as he had by now discerned that Manning thought him to be a charlatan in the dowsing department, which reasonably led him to conclude that anything else he uttered would be dismissed as well.

“I should add, Mister Manning, that this is only a recent revelation of mine and still bears a good deal of consideration. I agree with you, though, as to its profundity, for the more I reflect upon the idea, the more it explains. Why, though, do you find it disturbing?”

Manning, having had a few moments to reflect upon Blackstone’s bizarre assertion, was clearly rising to the occasion.

“I find it disturbing on several levels, Mister Blackstone. Let’s start with the fact that what you propose cannot be in any way disproven. Meaning that even if I felt you to be an utter fool in this regard, I cannot definitively tell you that you are mistaken. That is merely bothersome. What’s truly troubling, though, is that if you are right, then you have, at a stroke, eliminated free will from any of us. We, all of us standing here, are capable of no more than what your writer decides we will do or say next. That, sir, is a terrifying prospect, so much so that I may not sleep tonight.”

“Unless, of course, our invisible author wills it to be so.” I interjected. Manning turned quickly my way but did not respond.

“Just to clarify, Mister Blackstone,” Manning said, “is it your assertion that it is only yourself who is the subject of this mysterious writer, or do you believe this concept applies to all of humanity?”

“Best I can determine so far, it applies only to myself ... and anyone else I happen to interact with as I traverse this life. It seems to me that this author would be a busy fellow indeed if he had to manage the lives of everyone on earth.”

“But what then do you suppose happens to Fred and me when you move on from here? Do we simply vanish into the ether or are we now somehow inextricably tied to your ... story for the remainder of time?”

“You raise a question to which I’m afraid I have no definitive answer, though logic would suggest the latter. The way I envision it, we have met, we have conversed, there has been, if you will, an interchange of, call it, narrative energy for lack of a better term. I do not comprehend how that can be extinguished simply by my turning and walking off down the road, whether or not we ever encounter one another again.”

“Ah,” Manning said, “so we will still be obliged to get up tomorrow morning as always, plow the fields, pay our bills.”

“Surely, sir, that is preferable to the alternative.”

“And presumably I will still need to dig a new well.” I added with a wry smile.

“Then we’d better let the man get back to his work,” Manning said, handing back to Blackstone the divining rod he had been holding throughout the surreal conversation. And the odd thing was that the way in which he said “work” almost suggested a measure of respect, as though his opinion of the stranger had somehow risen in the few minutes that we had been speaking.

Blackstone accepted the hazel branch, tipped his hat, and began walking back out into the field where he recommenced dowsing in precisely the same spot from whence I had summoned him earlier. As Manning and I stood in silence by the fence, Blackstone removed his cap, wiped his brow, and for the briefest of moments, glanced once more up to the clouds before rejoining his search.

continued from p. 33 ...

It is necessary for the poet to start in the physical world and to find details that draw the reader in, to access the world of mystery, calm, and rapture. So, being aware and being open are important. Finding a way to create some silence in one’s life, a place to turn away from the world and create, is crucial. To be mindful of images that the world presents us with as gifts each day remains our truest work, and to make use of these images, to learn deeply from them, remains our task both as writers and spiritual seekers. Poetry, as the accessor of emotions, the space that connects the spirit to its human vulnerability, is the area that a poem lights up and explores.

As a writer, one can access this space through the day’s details, the time of day, which is often morning in the poems we’ve looked at, except for Gilbert, whose poem takes place in a harbor, a threshold between a city and the ocean. We can access the space through words and their arrangement; the language can be the language of religion or of nature or of ordinary things or a vision of a spirit animal, a view of a pond, of a river, of an eagle, of a house being swept clean. We can access the extraordinary through the ordinary. The impact of carefully chosen language is important; that is one way of heightening the poem’s effect. The accumulation of language and thought helps in finding an opening into another way of seeing. Thinking about the argument is crucial, too. Gilbert’s poem is a great example of an assured tone and relentless logic. That there is a tension, between a crowded house and a house that is swept clean, and between the throne heavier than lead and the lightness of stars, is important. Being aware of borders, physical and spiritual, land and sea, earth and sky, is necessary for inspiration. Gathering and collecting imagery, reflections, scattered thoughts by keeping a journal, allows in your life a beginning to meditation and creation.

Thinking about poetic structure or argument is a valuable task. There is often a turn in a spiritual poem toward discovery. Even the tiny, five-line haiku manages a turn from mossy crevices to clear transparent water. The Zen poem by its nature does not value argument, but imagery. But it is important that a tension exists, between a crowded house and a clean one, between a thorn heavier than lead and a vision of morning lilies, between a heavy stone and the lightness of stars, which repeats the struggles of the soul and then may lead us to think of enlightenment.

And I’ll end where we began, with the beautiful simplicity of what we should aim for in our meditation and our writing—a space near a stream, away from the world, where we can be healed—where we too, like the muddy water, can quietly turn clear and transparent. We need more lightness of being, more space to roam and to be our quiet selves, whatever our spiritual or religious inclinations. In a world ever more full of unthinkable suffering, with barrages of images battering us from our newspapers, televisions sets, computers, iPads, iPhones, we are more in need than ever of quiet space, sacred space, apartness. We are more in need of the healing power of poetry.
Eleven years later in the deep darkness, a passenger airplane circled above Tehran. A huge building with a shiny golden dome in the center surrounded by four large, brightly lit towers stood out in the dark landscape. The structure was the brightest element in the entire city. The passenger in the next seat explained to Cyrus that under the dome was the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini, who had died several months earlier. Cyrus felt uneasy. He didn’t know what to expect in his hometown which had been governed by the Islamic Revolutionary regime for the past nine years.

Shortly after two in the morning the airplane touched down at Tehran Airport and stopped about a hundred yards from the airport buildings. Within a few minutes, the door of the plane opened and four armed men in the well-publicized beards and uniforms of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard climbed aboard. All conversation stopped. Apprehension spread through the cabin. The leader ordered the crew in peremptory tones to hand over the arriving passenger list and the schedule for their return flight. The senior cabin attendant, a man, carefully and politely presented the documents. Cyrus noted with astonishment that none of the Lufthansa stewardesses were observing the Islamic dress code and that the Revolutionary Guards were studiously avoiding eye contact with them. The quiet passengers watched every movement of the guards. After reviewing the papers, the leader told the head steward that the passengers could leave the plane now.

“Why aren’t you observing the Islamic dress code?” Cyrus asked a stewardess who was helping another passenger.

“They don’t bother us as long as we stay in the airplane,” she explained with a dismissive wave of her hand. “We prefer to stay on board for the two hours that we are here in the airport to prepare the airplane for the return flight to Frankfurt.” Later Cyrus heard the other attendant saying, “How things have changed! We used to love to hang out in Tehran. Not anymore!”

Cyrus followed his seatmate who was now totally wrapped in a black veil and struggled to manage her handbag and carry-on luggage, but she politely declined Cyrus’s help. “I need to learn how to manage on my own against this outfit.”

They climbed down the stairs to a bus waiting on the tarmac. A cool September breeze caressed their faces. The bus took them to the same building that had been merely provisional eleven years ago. Now it had become permanent. A large poster above the entry greeted the arrivals. The top line was a verse from the Koran, written in Arabic. The middle line had the largest letters, with “Islamic Republic of Iran” written in Farsi. The bottom line, “Welcome to the Islamic Republic of Iran,” was written in English. Portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini and of the Iranian president had replaced the portraits of the Shah, the Queen, and the Crown Prince.

Inside the building, passengers lined up in queues, separated by waist-high barriers, snaking toward the windows watched over by armed Revolutionary Guards. When Cyrus’s turn came, he presented his Iranian passport to the official behind the window. The man had a short beard and wore an open-collared black shirt. He leafed through a ring binder with tabs in alphabetical order till he found the page with listings for Sohrabi. After a moment he closed the binder, looked at the passport and the photograph several times, and bent the page to which it was glued.

He reviewed the entrance permit and asked Cyrus, “Is this your first trip to Iran since the Glorious Revolution?”

“Yes, it is.”

The official scribbled a short note on a pad and waved him on. “You may proceed to the next area, over there.”

A young Revolutionary Guard patted him down briefly but efficiently. Cyrus’s wallet and American passport were in his blazer pockets, but the guard did not pay attention to them. Apparently he was only looking for weapons. Afterwards, the guard directed him through a door to the customs section. Cyrus pressed his right hand over the pocket of his blazer and felt the solid presence of his American passport.

After a short wait, Cyrus’s luggage arrived in the customs section. An agent opened the briefcase and took out all printed materials and perused them carefully. They were only medical journals and books which Cyrus had taken along to study. The agent put them back and asked Cyrus to open his two suitcases.

Pointing at the large number of gifts inside, the customs agent inquired, “What are you going to do with all these items? Are you going to sell them on the black market?”

Cyrus was annoyed. “No, sir. These are only gifts for my family and friends.”

He had already witnessed an argument between an agent and another passenger regarding gifts and was prepared to field further inquiries. But the agent seemed to recognize his sincerity, grudgingly accepted the explanation, and told him to move on.

Cyrus proceeded into a large hall filled with family and friends waiting for arriving passengers. In the crowd he recognized Maryam, Parviz, and his nephew Jamshid, who were waving enthusiastically. They hurried over and greeted him one after another.

His sister became very excited and even shed some tears of joy. She touched his cheeks and said, “My dearest brother, I am so glad to see you again.” Then she adjusted the dark scarf around her forehead, took a step away from him and smiled. “I hope you’ll bring good luck to Mother. We are really pleased that you could manage to come here so quickly.”

The hall seemed to be a dusky scene from another age. All clothing was dark, only gray, brown, or black fabric. Maryam had aged much more than the eleven years since Cyrus had seen her last. Her face was wrinkled and pale and looked neglected without make-up. Cyrus wondered with annoyance why she kept her distance from him.

When Jamshid came forward and hugged Cyrus he explained in a whisper, “Women are not permitted to hug or kiss anyone in public, not even their relatives. The Islamic code doesn’t even allow her to hold your hand in public.”

Cyrus was taken aback by such rigid regulations. “I had not expected such minute and restrictive rules.”
“It has become second nature for all of us to observe the code in public. We can ignore it in the privacy of our homes but not here. Look around and you’ll see too many Revolutionary Guards watching everybody. Yes, the Savak is gone, but instead we have the religion police.”

When Cyrus could not hide his distaste, Maryam consoled him, “Don’t worry about it. You’ll soon get used to these limitations, like all of us.”

His older brother Parviz, in turn, shook his hand, and labored to produce a smile. A thin, dark mustache punctuated his somber face below his thick glasses. He offered only a few words of welcome and reminded Cyrus immediately to avoid talking politics while he was in Iran. After a short report about their mother, Parviz added that she had been waiting with impatience for his arrival.

Cyrus thought about the rest of the family and looked around for other familiar faces. He remembered Bahram and Reza, with whom he had spent so much time during his last visit to Iran. “How are Bahram and Reza these days?” Cyrus asked. “I was hoping to see them here.”

Surprised by this unexpected question, Parviz looked to Maryam for help, and when she kept quiet he replied with some hesitation. “We don’t see them anymore.”

Maryam added, “It has been several years since we have heard from them.”

Cyrus detected a disturbing reluctance in their demeanor, their unwillingness to talk about these two revolutionaries. He surmised that something undesirable must have happened to them, so he avoided further inquiries in this public place and at this time. There were enough other subjects to discuss.

Compared to his last trip, the austere appearance of his relatives was a big change. No one in the crowded hall was smiling. Covered with black chadors, the women seemed subdued and gathered in separate groups away from the men. Under the dim light the well-wrapped bodies of women seemed like abstract sculptures or oval patches of black paint that confined their groups and showed only their plain faces. Most of the men wore beards, no ties, and simple, dark-colored clothes. The artificial light cast a gloom over many sleepy, unshaven, and dusty faces. Cyrus wanted to use the restroom before leaving the airport, but Jamshid convinced him to wait until they were at Maryam’s house. “They don’t have toilet paper any more in public toilets. You are expected to use a hose to clean yourself.”

Cyrus followed his relatives as they elbowed their way through the crowded hall. In the parking lot they got into Jamshid’s old Honda Accord and drove past what used to be called Shahyad Square. Jamshid explained that the huge white marble structure had been renamed the Tower of Liberty. They were passing in front of Tehran University when traffic came to a stop. Revolutionary Guards had blocked the road and were inspecting cars and passengers.

Jamshid explained with an ironically raised eyebrow, “Nightly inspections by Revolutionary Guards are another recent invention we have become accustomed to. They set up roadblocks in different locations around the city every night and look for guns and violations of the Islamic code. This always happens between eleven o’clock at night and five o’clock in the morning.”

Two Revolutionary Guards, machine guns ready, were walking around their car. One of them asked Jamshid to open the trunk.

They saw the two suitcases and asked, “What do you have in there?”

Jamshid gestured toward Cyrus and explained, “These suitcases belong to my uncle. He has just arrived from the U.S., and we are taking him to my mother’s house.”

The guards stared at the luggage with suspicion and curtly demanded to see Cyrus’s passport and tickets as they pulled out the luggage and inspected it. Finally they slammed the suitcases closed and waved them on. Jamshid drove off in a hurry and muttered disgustedly, “These impromptu inspections are an ever-present nuisance. Sometimes the guards detain people at random for questioning. They are always looking for armed political activists or people who are returning home from parties where they consumed alcoholic beverages.”

Although Cyrus had read about these restrictions in the paper, the reality of it was utterly annoying. “Is that what you all struggled for? To have Revolutionary Guards search you in the middle of the night and force women to cover their hair?”

Jamshid replied, “The revolution has turned sour. This is the worst possible outcome for the country. We fought to have democracy, and now we are stuck in a religious dictatorship.”

Parviz and Maryam showed no interest in joining in a discussion about the revolution, and soon chatter ceased in the car.

Jamshid turned into Maryam’s neighborhood and angrily pointed at a store. “This used to be a liquor store where one could always buy good French wine.”

“How do you cope with the prohibition against alcoholic beverages?” Cyrus inquired.

Jamshid grinned sardonically. “Alas, people are now consuming more alcohol than before. We are all brewing beer and distilling vodka in our homes.”

Maryam added, “Can you believe it? My formerly law-abiding husband now buys Scotch whisky on the black market.”

Shortly after four in the morning they finally arrived at Maryam’s house. Their mother was asleep in her bedroom. Cyrus deposited his suitcases in the guestroom and gently opened the door to her room. He saw his mother’s frail body and her pale face. She breathed laboriously but appeared to be soundly asleep. He was astonished at how much older and weaker she looked, so he quietly shut the door and went to the living room.

Maryam sat next to him on the large couch, hugged him, and cried. “Our dear mother is really sick. She has to take painkillers and sleeping pills so she can at least rest at night.”

Cyrus asked, “Has her doctor performed any new tests?”

Maryam continued to sob.

Cyrus asked again, “What do you know about our mother’s diagnosis?”

Eventually she composed herself. “Dr. Shaad plans to perform a new biopsy. When he reviewed the X-rays, CT-scan, and sonogram of the abdomen four weeks ago, he told us that he suspected stomach cancer and wanted to proceed with gastroscopy right away, but Mother asked him to wait until you came.”

When Cyrus got up after a short nap in his guest bedroom, he found his mother at morning prayer, her head covered with a white veil. Her pale face looked calm as she faced Mecca and recited the Namaz, her gaze fixed on a piece of holy rock on the carpet. Because she was so weak, she recited in the sitting position instead of following the prescribed sequence of standing and kneeling. The scene brought back fond memories of his

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previous trips and of his childhood. He loved to watch his moth- er at morning prayer, and the image of his mother’s kind face framed by the white prayer garment in the quiet and peaceful moments of the early morning had always stayed with him. Even now, wrecked with severe disease, she still looked serene and content. The white veil around her slim body left only her face visible. He thought, “She is truly an angel.”

When she had finished the Namaz, Cyrus sat next to her and kissed her hand.

She smiled up at him. “I am so glad you came. Many thanks for coming so quickly.” She stretched out her arm, took hold of Cyrus’s hand, and gently pulled him down so she could touch his face and kiss his cheek. Sobbing, she pointed to her abdomen and sighed, “It has been very hard to live with this.”

“Yes, it must have been very hard for you,” Cyrus said.

“It’s all right. I’m very happy to see you, my son.”

“You’ll be well again, Mother.”

“Look, there is a time to live, and there is a time to go.”

They both became contemplative for a moment. As a severe cramp hit her, she bent over and pressed her abdomen. She was now breathing heavily. A moment later when the cramp subsided, she said, “I get these all the time, especially often throughout night.”

Cyrus was saddened when he saw how skinny and fragile she had become. He assured her, “I promise! I’ll take care of you.”

Suddenly she bent over and moaned. Her pale face turned red, reflecting a sharp stabbing pain. Cyrus hugged her and repeated, “I’ll take care of you while I am here, I promise.”

He went out, brought a glass of water, and gave her an antacid pill and a painkiller. Cyrus watched her for a while. He wanted to reflect a sharp stabbing pain. Cyrus hugged her and repeated, “I’ll take care of you while I am here, I promise.”

Suddenly she bent over and moaned. Her pale face turned red, reflecting a sharp stabbing pain. Cyrus hugged her and repeated, “I’ll take care of you while I am here, I promise.”

He went out, brought a glass of water, and gave her an antacid pill and a painkiller. Cyrus watched her for a while. He wanted to know more about her condition. But as soon as she had recovered from the attack she rallied and became talkative. She wiped away tears of pain and asked Cyrus, “Tell me about your lovely wife and your children.”

“They are fine,” Cyrus replied.

“How did you manage to come so quickly?”

“Emily made all the arrangements.”

She smiled. “I would have definitely gone to Texas if you hadn’t come here. Parviz and Maryam had already submitted the paperwork to get me a new passport and exit permit.”

Cyrus replied, “It would have been really hard for you to travel, and I am glad I could come.”

Chapter Twenty-Two
This Stomach Ulcer Is Cancerous

“This stomach ulcer is cancerous,” their mother told Parviz and Cyrus when they were driving her to Dr. Shaad’s office.

“Well, some ulcers may become cancerous.” Cyrus tried to remain positive. “But I do hope not this one.”

“He should have obtained more biopsies,” Mother decided.

“I hate the word cancer,” Parviz said.

“And I hate this pain,” Mother retorted. “At least you can remove cancer.”

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Dr. Shaad received them with great cordiality. After the examination he took Cyrus to his office to discuss the procedure.

“I like to do the same gastroscopy with biopsies of the ulcer,” Dr. Shaad said. He complained that Cyrus’s mother had never returned to his office for the follow-up. “She should have had this procedure months ago,” Dr. Shaad said. “But I could not get your mother here to convince her to go ahead with the procedure. I’m afraid she didn’t trust me fully.”

“She is here now,” Cyrus commented, wryly.

“Good thing you traveled to Iran.”

“She wants to have surgery as soon as possible. She simply can’t take the pain anymore.”

“Well, I need to know what is going on first.”

“She is sure that she has a cancerous ulcer,” Cyrus said. “And you know, she may be right, Shaad,”

“Well, we will see.”

“Look, it could be a very slow growing tumor that arose from that old ulcer, the one you examined years ago, do you remember?”

Dr. Shaad dismissed Cyrus’s hypothesis with a wave of his hand. “For all I know, that was only a small ulcer.”

Cyrus reminded him, “In any case, cancer sometimes develops in patients with a history of stomach ulcers.”

Dr. Shaad nodded and went ahead and scheduled the gastroscopy procedure for the next day.

The next morning Cyrus took his mother to the hospital and accompanied her into the surgical suite where everything was ready to go. Dr. Shaad came in waving his gastroscope.

“By the way, madam, I want you to know I am using the same gastroscope that I used on the late Ayatollah Khomeini.” He beamed with pride. “Yes, indeed! I used this very same instrument for the Imam. However,” he conceded, “I was one of eight physicians who attended the Ayatollah Khomeini in that crowded operating room. Just to administer some light anesthesia, we had a team of three anesthesiologists. It was like a standing room only performance.” Dr Shaad chuckled. “Yet throughout all that, the Ayatollah seemed serene and content. When I kissed his hand and asked him if he had any special requests, he looked at me calmly and after a pause said, ‘God bless both of us.’ Then he closed his eyes.”

The light anesthesia had been established. Dr. Shaad inserted the tip of the gastroscope into the old lady’s mouth while he continued bloviating, “Yes, actually the Imam was well sedated throughout the procedure, so naturally he was relaxed and calm. And everything went flawlessly.”

The nurse and the operating room technician listened, enthralled. The nurse announced proudly, “I was there, too. Yes, the whole time. I was with the Imam in the holding area as well, but he didn’t look at me, not even once. I understand that he never looked at any women in his life.”

Looking into his patient’s stomach, Dr. Shaad noted a large ulcerated lesion. He moved the pointer and examined the edges and then the raised center of the lesion, which looked like a scraped and bitten piece of cauliflower. He turned his head and invited Cyrus to view the lesion.

“Look at the right wall of the stomach. See that wide and elevated ulcer? It’s sitting on a big tumor. Unfortunately, it looks very suspicious. I’m sure it’s malignant. You can even see some bleeding from the center of the lesion.”

Cyrus used the eyepiece and saw the cancer. The bleeding spots, the yellow growth, and the raised edges. He quit looking. The gravity of his mother’s illness saddened him deeply. A teardrop
rolled down his cheek.

Dr. Shaad took several biopsies and asked the nurse to send the tissues for frozen section immediately. Then he looked at his friend and shook his head with regret.

“It appears very ominous,” he muttered. “I wish we had examined this a long time ago.”

Cyrus was about to say, “You did,” but he bit his lip. No sense crying over spilled milk. After completing the procedure, Dr. Shaad stayed with Cyrus until the pathologist telephoned with his findings. He had identified poorly differentiated stomach cancer. Although these findings confirmed his earlier suspicion, Cyrus could not prevent tears from welling in his eyes.

Dr. Shaad tried to comfort him. “My friend, I am sorry for your mother.”

They walked to the waiting area where Parviz was waiting for them and immediately noticed the family’s grim faces. Parviz jumped up.

“I regret to tell you this…” Dr. Shaad coughed a few times and continued, “… she has a large malignant ulcer in the stomach.” He paused for a reaction, but Parviz was so upset that he could neither move nor talk. Dr. Shaad continued, “Unfortunately a tumor of this size and this age probably has already gone into the small intestine.”

Parviz’s face paled. He struggled to regain his composure and mumbled, “Isn’t there something that you can do, Doc?” He sat down on the nearby chair and pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his face. Dr. Shaad waited patiently until Parviz had taken a deep breath and was ready to listen.

“We have two options: chemotherapy or surgery,” the surgeon explained. Before the brothers could respond, he quickly added, “But I recommend we schedule surgery right away.”

“Dr. Shaad, please, wait until you see the CT scan,” Cyrus cautioned. He anticipated the scan would show that the tumor has already extended into the adjacent small intestine and probably even the liver. Based on this assumption, he reasoned that his mother’s advanced cancer was not suitable to surgical intervention.

“I am afraid surgery would kill her,” Cyrus decided, “and chemotherapy may be the only alternative we have.”

Dr. Shaad flushed with embarrassment and carefully modified his position. “Yes, of course, surgery may not remove the entire cancer and anyhow could be quite dangerous, but I thought it presented an option.”

Cyrus was now deeply annoyed by Dr. Shaad’s ignorance. “Unfortunately her cancer is very advanced, and surgery can only add insult to injury. She is so fragile I doubt she’d survive a radical surgery.”

Dr. Shaad waved his hands in surrender. “You’re right. Her cancer has gone too far, probably to other abdominal organs. Maybe even to the lymph nodes and the bones.”

The CT scan proved Cyrus’s suspicions. The tumor had already expanded into other areas of the abdomen. Dr. Shaad and Cyrus began discussing the chemotherapy and reviewed the list of available oncologists.

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The family’s reaction to their mother’s diagnosis was predictably mournful. Maryam took the news hardest and could barely hide her distress from her mother. Later that day, while their mother rested under sedation, Maryam, Habib, Parviz, and Cyrus congregated in the living room of Maryam’s house for a family discussion. Soon there was an intense argument about how to disclose the findings to their mother.

Cyrus stated his position. “Look, in the U.S. we tell our patients the truth,” but he saw utter disbelief on the faces around him.

Parviz objected loudly, “I think it is psychologically better to minimize the problem and tell Mother it is just another bad ulcer. That way she’ll keep her hopes up.” He volunteered to shoulder the responsibility of talking to her. Except for Cyrus, everybody agreed with the plan.

Later that evening, the old woman awoke with severe pain and called Cyrus to her room. She asked for medicine. Parviz, who had followed his brother and heard the request, immediately brought her tea, some antacids, and a painkiller. In response to her questions, Parviz assured her that the procedure showed only a stomach ulcer.

But the old lady was not convinced and pointedly asked Cyrus, “Cyrus, what did you see during the examination?”

Parviz suspected Cyrus would tell her the truth and left the room in disgust. He told Maryam, “Mother isn’t satisfied with my story, and she wants to know the truth.”

His mother took a sip of the tea and looked at Cyrus, again demanding the exact diagnosis. Her face begged for truth. “Come here and sit on the bed next to me. Tell me, what did you see?” She smiled slightly. “I am not afraid of the truth. I want to be prepared for the next step.”

Trying to abide by the family decision, Cyrus sidestepped the request. “The procedure went all right. Dr. Shaad encountered no complications.”

She was not satisfied and insisted, “I’m not a child. Please tell me, what did he really discover?”

Cyrus struggled to find a suitable but gentle way to disclose the truth. His mother’s bright eyes were fixed on his. Finally he murmured, “Well, he saw a tumor.”

“What type of tumor?”

“Unfortunately, it is cancerous and it is sitting on an ulcer.”

His mother had wanted to hear the truth. She now became quiet, and her face lost its faint smile. “My son, I am not surprised,” she sighed. “I expected it for a long time. I knew all that pain couldn’t be just a simple ulcer. I could feel it down here in my stomach. It has been with me all these years since before the revolution.” She rubbed and pressed her hand on her abdomen and massaged it slowly.

Cyrus was amazed by her courage. Although he was heartbroken, he tried to fake a smile. But she touched his cheeks and lips and said, “Don’t mourn for me. I have lived my life. The truth is, I suspected it was cancer. I have felt it growing in my body for years, since the early 1980s.”

Cyrus knew she was a strong woman. Still, her reaction increased his respect for her. What a stalwart old woman she was. They calmly discussed treatment options and compared benefits and risks.

Finally his mother held his hand and asked him with the complete trust of a loving, proud mother, “My son, what would you suggest?”

He replied, “I am afraid surgery may be both dangerous and unlikely to remove the entire tumor.”

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San Antonio Small Presses

PECAN GROVE PRESS

Established in 1988, Pecan Grove Press is sponsored by The Louis J. Blume Library of St. Mary’s University. The press publishes books and chapbooks of fine poetry and, very rarely, short works of prose. PGP also publishes a regular chapbook series for students at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio, Texas. Among the most recent poetry collections published by Pecan Grove Press is a new book by San Antonio’s Bonnie Lyons, Bedrock.

And So Now We Come to It, a collection of thirty-six elegies and five interludes written by H. Palmer Hall during the several months preceding his death, has recently been published by Louis A. Cortez, managing editor of Pecan Grove Press. The book may be ordered by sending a request and contribution check to:

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Between A and Z (2014)
Mo H Saidi

Poems of compassion and passionate observation that begin in Tehran, Iran, and end in San Antonio, Texas, with plenty of stops along the way to observe people, places and nature, and to gather stories. A great storyteller, Saidi’s poems are rich with the lives of people he has met around the globe. Published by Wings Press.

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The publisher, editor, and designer since 1995, Bryce Milligan, tries not to let commercial considerations cloud the decision to publish any particular work. What does get published is often called by Milligan “necessary work.” Since 1995, Wings Press has published over 130 books of poetry, novels, short story collections, historical and biographical works, works of literary criticism, and books for children by a wide range of authors, from unknown, first-book poets to the poet laureate of the United States (and the laureates of at least six states). Wings Press publications have been honored with the American Book Award, the International Latino Book Award, the PEN Josephine Miles Award for Literary Excellence, the Balcones Poetry Prize, the Premio Coatlicue, and the IMPAC Dublin International Literary Award shortlist.

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Again for the First Time (2013)
Rosemary Catacalos

The 30th Anniversary edition of Again for the First Time, the award-winning first book of poems by Rosemary Catacalos, the 2013-2014 Poet Laureate of Texas.

Beneath the Halo (2013)
Celeste Guzmán Mendoza

Beneath the Halo explores various aspects of Mendoza’s experience as a Tejana, bringing to life the landscapes and cultural life of her roots by delving into topics fundamental to her Tejana identity—family, land, faith, and marriage. Known as a “humorously sexy” poet, her insights into coming of age during a period of cultural (and demographic) evolution can be both heart-rending and hilarious.
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Announcing
The HEB Annual Youth Poetry Contest
for school students between 6 and 16 years
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The poetry and community services of Voices are funded in part by a grant from the Ruth Lang Charitable Fund of the San Antonio Area Foundation.

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### Poetry & Arts Events

**DISCLAIMER:** All venue information listed has been provided by third parties. These venues have not been verified. It is the sole responsibility of parties interested in attending these venues to verify the validity of the post.

**Mondays 8 pm – San Antonio Writers Forum** – La Taza Coffee House, 15060 San Pedro Ave – (210) 494-8292. Informal sharing and critiquing of poems, short stories, essays. Free and open for participants. Host: Dan at savwriters@gmail.com.

**2nd Tuesdays 7-9 pm – Awaken the Sleeping Poet at the Twig,** 200 E. Grayson, Ste. 124, Pearl Brewery (210) 826-6411. Featured poets & open mic. Host: Floyd L. Lamrouex.

**Tuesdays 6–9 pm – Jazz Poet Society** – Guadalupe Street Coffee, 1320 Guadalupe St.– (210) 573-5115. Bring poetry and songs and work with other poets and songwriters to present works on stage. A drum circle accompanies poets.


**Tuesdays 10:30 pm – Puro Slam** – The Heights–9315 N. Broadway (just north of 410). Weekly open mic certified by the National Poetry Slam allows poets to deliver their work and get heckled. DJ Donnie Dee spins before and after the show. Sign up begins at 9:30 pm. Slam begins @ 10:30 pm. For more information visit www.puroslam.com.

**1st & 3rd Wednesdays 7–9 pm – Barnes & Noble, Ingram Festival, 6065 NW Loop 410 (same side as Ingram Mall). Features and open mic. (210) 522-1340. Host: Josie Mixon.**

**Every Fourth Wednesday** – Barnes & Noble, The Shops at La Cantera, 15900 La Cantera Parkway, Bldg. 27, San Antonio, TX 78256. Host: Voices de la Luna: 6 pm Poetry Workshop / 7 pm Featured Guest / 8 pm Open Mic. Host: Rod Stryker.

**Thursdays 6:30-9:30 pm – South Presa Bar and Grill – Open mic: poetry, music, and storytelling Host: Andi.**

**Last Thursday of Each Month 7–9 pm – Awaken the Sleeping Poet** – Features and open mic – Northwoods Barnes & Noble–18030 HWY 281 N, Suite #140 (281 & 1604)–(210) 490-0411. Host: Floyd L. Lamrouex.

**2nd Saturday 7–9 pm – Gallista** – Features and open mic, Gallista Gallery and Art Studio, 1913 S. Flores – (210) 212-8606. Host: Thom E.

**3rd Saturday 1-3 pm – San Antonio Poets Association** – Monthly at Bethany Congregational Church – 500 Pilgrim Dr.

### Poetry & Arts Places

**BOTANICAL GARDEN** – The facility includes 33 acres of formal gardens, pools, fountains, and natural areas; Native Texas Trail, Lucille Halsell Conservatory. [www.sabot.org](http://www.sabot.org)

**CARVER COMMUNITY CULTURAL CENTER** – This venue traces its historic roots back some 85 years. It is both a gallery for contemporary art exhibits and a theater for performing artists. [www.theclarer.org](http://www.theclarer.org)

**GUADALUPE CULTURAL ARTS CENTER** – The center is dedicated to the development, preservation, and promotion of Mexican-American arts. [www.guadalupeculturalarts.org](http://www.guadalupeculturalarts.org)

**INSTITUTE OF TEXAN CULTURES** – The Institute is concerned with the people who produced Texas events—people who created the robust kaleidoscope that is Texas today. [www.texancultures.com](http://www.texancultures.com)

**JAZZ AT THE LANDING** – NPR’s acclaimed radio show, *Riverwalk Jazz*, is produced in San Antonio at The Landing, one of the country’s oldest jazz clubs. [www.riverwalkjazz.org](http://www.riverwalkjazz.org)

**LA VILLITA** – This restored Mexican village captures the charm of the past amid narrow streets and authentic adobe houses with arts and crafts shops. [www.lavillita.com](http://www.lavillita.com)

**MAJESTIC THEATRE** – Opened in 1929 and restored in 1989 as a performing arts center, the Majestic is said to be one of the finest “atmospheric” theaters ever built. [www.majesticempire.com](http://www.majesticempire.com)

**McNAY ART MUSEUM** – The mission of the McNay Art Museum is to maintain an art museum on the premises of the estate of Mrs. McNay for the advancement and enjoyment of modern and early art, and for the educational advantage of the public. [www.mcnamayart.org](http://www.mcnamayart.org)

**MEXICAN CULTURAL INSTITUTE** – This venue includes exhibits of contemporary Mexican artists. [portal.sre.gob.mx/culturamexsaing/](http://portal.sre.gob.mx/culturamexsaing/)

**SAN ANTONIO MUSEUM OF ART** – This six-building complex of renovated historic buildings, opened in 1981, focuses on art of the Americas, past and present, and also houses Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and East Asian collections. [www.samuseum.org](http://www.samuseum.org)

**PLAYHOUSE SAN ANTONIO** – Call the box office for tickets and more information: (210) 733-7258. [www.theplayhouseusa.org](http://www.theplayhouseusa.org)

**SAN ANTONIO SYMPHONY** – The mission of the San Antonio Symphony is to inspire, educate, and entertain the people of, and visitors to, San Antonio and South Texas through the performance of live music. [www.sasymphony.org](http://www.sasymphony.org)

**SOUTHWEST SCHOOL OF ART** – Housed in the city’s only remaining example of French Provincial architecture, the Craft Center was established as an alternative art school at the site in 1971. [www.swschool.org](http://www.swschool.org)

**WITTE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND SCIENCE** – Extensive exhibits cover natural history and natural science of Texas. Rebuilt on grounds are four early Texas houses and a furnished log cabin.

**GAGA Curated Member Show** – Rainbow Corpse, new collaborative work by GAGA artists: May 9 – July 3, Ursuline Hall Gallery, South-West School of Art. [http://gentileschiaegis.wordpress.com](http://gentileschiaegis.wordpress.com)

**Texas Watercolor Society** – 65th Annual Juried Exhibit - Texas Watercolor Society, April 7 to May 28, 9 AM – 5 PM, Radius Bldg, 106 Auditorium Circle, SA 78205. [www.texasswatercolorsociety.org](http://www.texasswatercolorsociety.org)

For more Poetry & Arts Places, see [www.voicesdelaluna.com](http://www.voicesdelaluna.com).

Voices de la Luna Monthly Literary Venue

Poetry Workshop, Reading, Open Mic

_La Cantera Barnes & Noble_

every 4th Wednesday – 6 to 9 PM

from September to June

Voices Mission Statement

Voices de la Luna publishes a quarterly poetry and arts magazine in four formats, focusing on writers and artists of South Texas. The organization is committed to use its leverage to inspire youth, promote poetry and arts through their involvement, and use the magazine as a platform for all poets and artists to share their work with others, and it is dedicated to use poetry and arts both for educational and healing purposes in the communities.