



# **CAUTION: POETRY AT WORK!**

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College of Saint Benedict / Saint John's University**

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## **Welcome to *Caution -- Poetry at Work!***

Weekly entries offer a poem, some thoughts about poetry and the work it does in the world, and invitations to work with poetry yourself. Each month explores a new theme and expands our discussion of the images, sounds, challenges, gifts, and transformative power of poetry.

A word about us: Mara Faulkner, OSB, is professor emerita of English, and Karen Erickson is professor of French at the College of Saint Benedict / Saint John's University. On a whim, nearly thirty years ago, we created an informal writing group. Our monthly meetings have sustained and challenged us, as we urged one another to submit poems and to create chapbooks. We hope you find in this webpage and downloadable workbook some of the delights and insights — into the world and into our lives — that poetry has brought to us.

A word about our title, or *how poetry can change the world...* James Baldwin wrote:

You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can't, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world. ...The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way...people look at reality, then you can change it.

To grasp the revolutionary power of poetry all we have to do is read the somber rollcall of poets exiled, imprisoned, or killed by dictators and totalitarian governments. One of many is the Russian poet Osip Mendalstam whom Joseph Stalin exiled to a Siberian labor camp for poems so filled with life and ecstasy that they threatened Stalin's determined efforts to control thought, expression, and the life of the spirit. More recent examples are landays, poems composed by Afghan women. A landay is an ancient two-line form of oral folk poetry that even today is usually passed on by word of mouth, woman to woman, anonymously or under a pseudonym. Why? Because Afghan women are forbidden to write poetry, especially on such bold subjects as love, sex, war, and separation. (You can read some of these dangerous poems in an article by Eliza Griswold, *Poetry*, June, 2013.) If dictators around the world are afraid of poets—and they always are—then there must be a subversive power in those spidery black words that can change us, one person, one millimeter at a time. As Juan Felipe Herrarra, the United States poet laureate, says, poetry is far from passive; it is action and a call to action.

Poets aren't exiled or killed in the United States, partly because of our commitment to free expression of ideas and beliefs. There may also be a less positive reason, having to do with notions about what poetry is and does. If we think of poetry as an impenetrable thicket of words hiding an obscure meaning you can't get at without a machete, it won't seem dangerous or world-changing. It will be simply irrelevant to most people's lives. Even knowing that we write poetry, many people have said to us over the years, "I don't get poetry," as they mentally wash their hands of the whole puzzling business. Our website, "Caution: Poetry at Work," is certainly meant for people who already read and appreciate poetry and who may write some themselves. But we also want to invite people who have felt shut out of poetry's alien and exotic world to take a fresh look—and try their hand at this dangerous, beautiful work that's so important to the life of the world. We look forward to the year ahead!

## September 2016: Earth Works

September 8



September's theme engages the beauty, fragility, power and force of nature, and the ways the earth works with and upon our human understanding. Sometimes it takes a contemplation of the natural world to make sense of an inner reality, to accept something in us we are struggling to accept.

### **I am probably an oak**

I want to be a maple, to spark gasps of marvel  
at dazzling crimson aware of near falling  
trumpeting color all the same.

But I give shade, drop acorns  
for the squirrels to store in their cheeks,  
their caches, their forgotten places;

I hold onto my leaves--burnished, earthy  
even into the winter wind.  
Or I could be sumac, flamboyant and shocking,

Electric, poisonous, dangerous  
invasive and unmanageable – Carmen, Liszt  
virtuoso and flagrant with many secrets.

But I am probably an oak  
a rooted canopy, slowly big  
my wealth useful, ordinary, my richness brown

a church choir in solid pews ready to sing each Sunday

rising and sitting and kneeling in a familiar cycle  
wide arms relaxed at my sides

no triumphant *hurrah* at the end of the whirling dance.  
I want to be loved just once with a fatal passion  
to be a whip, a crack of lightning

not to stand firm, bending only in hurricane,  
uprooted by tornado and nothing less  
I want the fragile, breathless, beloved filigree

But I am probably an oak.

--*Karen Lynn Erickson*

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***Invitation for your writing:***

Follow the model of this poem, filling in what comes to you from the works of nature: I want to be a(n)..., but I am probably a(n)... How does the mirror of nature help you see your nature?

## September 15

Because poetry depends on sensual language, poems can be revolutionary—world changing—in their ability to help us see, hear, touch, smell, and taste the world we live in. And because the Earth and all its inhabitants are in grave danger, this alert sensing and fresh savoring seems like an essential prelude to the determination to confess the damage we're doing to our beloved home and then pool our intelligence and energy to halt and even reverse the damage.

In the fourteenth century, St. Catherine of Sienna wrote, "Cry out the truth as if you had a million voices. It is silence that kills the world." Her world was threatened by religious and civil strife; no one was worried about threats to the natural world. Now, a million voices are crying out, but we humans have a hard time hearing the voices or understanding their message. Poetry tries to give voice the mountains stripped of their trees; the rivers and oceans, choked with pollution and no longer healthy homes for fish or coral reefs. Poets try to put into words the urgent underground voice of drying aquifers and the ancient voice of glaciers, melting into the rising seas, or the whisper of the morning air, in some parts of the world already unbreathable. Poems like this one may help us hear the fading voices of the animals and plants facing extinction.



### The Chain Saw Man

is the artist of our age.  
 He cuts down redwoods as ancient and wrinkled as the world  
 and rainforests whose slow breathing  
 fills the lungs of black bears  
 four thousand miles to the north.  
 His hungry saw eats  
 dream birds—scarlet, azure, emerald—  
 whom no one has ever seen  
 nor will.  
 Their tongues cut out they call  
 like dead poets  
 from steaming piles of sawdust.

Thirty species a day of bird and mammal,  
 insect and reptile, flower and herb,  
 gone even from the compost heap of memory.

Who will come to take their place?

Only the creations of the chain saw man.  
 Masked, feet braced, muscles bunched to hold  
 the heavy saw  
 he makes wooden bears  
 from the hearts of felled trees.  
 Clumsy and still, there is in them  
 no shadow of swift black flanks  
 grown furry and supple  
 in northern woods.

He tries to carve birds  
 but the trees are gone and he can't remember  
 their glancing flight.

To the artist's bidding only  
 vultures come.  
 Hungry for gold  
 they wait for the carnage of the saw to end  
 their song the rasp of teeth in wood.

--Mara Faulkner, *OSB*

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***Invitation for your writing:***

Let random sensual details take you where your rational mind might never think to go. Begin with the line, "In the beginning..." and write a poem that includes all of these words: *railroad tracks, orphan, Harley Davidson, blues n the night, car keys, scratch, prairie sage, shriek, velvet*

## September 22

Nature embodies deep rhythms and cycles that work within us as human creatures, and that can help us see the fullness within the brevity of life. A poem can celebrate the joys and ecstasy of moments when we feel we could live forever, just as it can help us navigate the passing of time and the pangs of mortality, loss and grief.



### We go west

We start at the edge of the old world,  
surrounded by portraits and resemblance  
and family recipes, and then the plains,  
traveling light in the wagon,  
friends fast made, fast lost.

We homestead by a river or pond,  
and when our tether frays, when the sod houses settle  
and the mounds are full, we go on to the Rockies  
daunted, chill – if we get over,  
it's a lonely triumph.

Some days we crack the shell and see at the center  
the golden ring of pride and loss and place.  
It seems we can almost grasp it and hold it high,  
a far-off bell would surely declare us the winner,  
but we go west.

We may see the Pacific at the end,  
currents from the south and stroking dunes  
and inlets with a surge of surf and strange winds –  
we arrive where we will never be  
and know we have indeed left home.

--Karen Lynn Erickson

*Invitation for your writing:*

Imagine a poem titled, "We go north (or south or east)." Would that poem lead to something different, simply by changing direction? This poem is inscribed within the North American continent; think about how the geographical setting in which you live might affect the way you imagine the span of life, and play with how you might capture that in a poem.

## September 29

Poets, like many people, turn to the natural world to find what Wendell Berry calls "the peace of wild things," when "despair for the world grows" in us. That respite is essential, but the real work of poetry calls us to steadfast attention to the many faces of the world, natural and human, in all its vast and terrible and glorious complexity and contradictoriness. A poem that has changed my life as a poet and an inhabitant of this world is "Brief for the Defense" by Jack Gilbert. (I urge you to read this remarkable poem at <http://www.poemhunter.com/best-poems/jack-gilbert/a-brief-for-the-defense>). These are the lines from that poem that I don't want to forget: "If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,/ we lessen the importance of [suffering people's] deprivation./ We must risk delight." This week's poem and the photo that accompanies it "risk delight," even in a dangerous world. *(Photo courtesy of S. Tamra Thomas.)*



### Dear heart,

There where you lie curled in a thicket of daisies  
 having learned the first lessons of life  
 after love—fear and camouflage—  
 come out now into the flickering light,  
 the pungency of clover and wild rose.  
 Walk lightly through tall prairie grasses,  
 big and little bluestem,  
 penstamon and yarrow.

Come out into the open field  
 where the yellow finch rocks  
 on a black-eyed susan,  
 in danger  
 but singing,  
 blooming.

--Mara Faulkner, OSB

*Invitation for your writing:*

Free write about three things that delight you, especially in the midst of fear, sadness, or loss. After a couple of days, read your free write, looking for a line or detail that draws and holds your attention. Begin your poem there, letting your free write and your imagination take you where the poem wants to go.

## October 2016: How sound works

### October 6

In the olden days, most poetry rhymed, partly because poems were passed from person to person orally, and rhymes made the lines easier to remember. But that wasn't rhyme's only reason for being. Pretty much everyone, from the littlest kids listening to *Green Eggs and Ham* to rappers and slam poets, delight in the music language creates through rhyme, rhythm, and a host of other appeals to the ear. We love the ring and friction of words alongside each other and the rhythms of lines and sentences. Rhyme and other sound devices are silent partners, helping to make both music and meaning.

Rhyme has gotten a bad name, maybe because we poets too often reach for the expected word combinations rather than the surprising, meaning-making ones. In this week's poem, "How Poetry Comes to Me," although I hope that the letters and syllables echoing off each other help you hear the sounds and silences of the poem, there is only one exact rhyme tying the last two lines together. When you have a word like *prayer*, it's tempting to reach for an easy rhyme like *share*, *care*, or *bear*. But our minds hydroplane over that slick surface. *Prayer* and *despair* do rhyme's double work: even as their meanings pull in seemingly opposite directions, the rhyme tells us that they are closely connected, even inseparable.

### "How Poetry Comes to Me"

*I go to meet it  
At the edge of the light.  
--Gary Snyder*



Poetry leads me by the hand  
to where an old man sits  
clasping one by one the hands of friends  
who've come to mourn his daughter—  
the third of his children laid to rest in this church.

He won't talk about it, they whisper, worried.

His stricken, puzzled face,  
his big hands as warm and grained as weathered oak  
say all there is to say: No words can wake my Mary.

Poetry leads me to his garden  
where he kneels  
his crippled hip resting on an overturned bucket.

He stakes the tomatoes  
lays the onions to dry in the late summer sun  
gathers spent vines for the compost heap  
sweet corn to feed his living children  
the old-fashioned flowers his wife loves—snapdragons, asters—  
and seeds for next year's planting.

All we hear are crickets, the wind,  
and the sudden plop of plums too ripe to hang on the tree.

Poetry comes mute with compassion  
carrying the bodies of children.  
Knowing it can neither save nor redeem them  
still it refuses to lay them down  
or let me turn away.

Poetry comes to me like prayer—  
the last resort before despair.

--Mara Faulkner, *OSB*

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***Invitation for your writing:***

How does poetry come to you? Free write from this poem's first line, going wherever that line takes you. Then write a poem on that subject. See if rhymes appear, either at the end of the lines or within the lines. Ask yourself if each rhyme is fresh and if it pulls the two words together, even as they are pulling apart. Then try writing the same poem without the rhymes. Which one is truer to the experience the poem is about?

## October 13

When a poet chooses to write a poem in a pre-existing form, with an expected rhyme scheme, there is a particular pressure on each line, and pressure on the poet to avoid the kind of easy rhymes Mara described last week. When we write in free verse, we are free to improvise, but there is still pressure to make the most of every word, and the form, line length, and repetitions of sounds have to come from within the poem itself. This poem began as a notation, an effort to capture a sound-thought, an experience of listening, and gradually emerged from the block of prose like a carved figure.

*(Photo courtesy of Joe Sullivan)*



### Out of the beat

The drummer looks left,  
 far offstage; wrists supple,  
 he brushes the skins  
 clips the cymbal, hangs something  
 I can't hear in the air.  
 It seems to me he left out a count  
 but they all dive in after the solo,  
 perfectly together,  
 no bumps on Route 66.

I nod, tap a toe, a finger,  
 watch the horn player trace the melody  
 before escaping on a musical ATV  
 off-road, off the leash.  
 I catch a note here and there  
 like a blaze along a rough-hewn trail.  
 They track with shoulders down  
 almost without looking –  
*I am listening to jazz.*

Once or twice I lose myself and  
 forget I don't know where I am –

muted horn calls to the sax  
piano anchors in thin air  
a chart that tells them  
where to go and who they are  
sequentially alone  
playing with the beat  
toying with it all.

A cool nod recognizes  
the applause of the crowd.  
It was never about making time --  
It's the space between pulse and life,  
silence lost and a paradise regained.

*--Karen Lynn Erickson*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Choose a sensory experience you wish to capture in language, in order to relay it to someone who was not with you at the time. Write a prose paragraph describing the sensations, and then transform the paragraph to free verse. How many words can you remove without losing the evocative power? Where will you create breaks between the lines? Do you find yourself revising your text to create rhyme or to emphasize the pulse of the poem?

## October 20

Poetry helps us hear the music of language. It also helps us hear the eloquence of silence, endangered in our noisy lives and world. The white spaces within and around a poem's words are filled with meaning and emotion. William Stafford's wonderful poem "Sayings of the Blind" alerts us to all we miss because sight dominates the perception of the world for most of us. The poem includes such wit and wisdom as this: "Edison didn't invent much" and "What do they mean when they say night is gloomy?"

(<http://www.inwardboundpoetry.blogspot.com/2006/03/85-sayings-of-the-blind-william-stafford>) Inspired by Stafford, I tried to imagine what a silent world is like and what sensual wonders I'm missing by depending so much on my ears.

### Sayings of the Deaf

(after William Stafford's "Sayings of the Blind")



Silence has big soft hands that say,  
"I want to be your friend."

Even in winter the earth vibrates.  
My feet feel the early seeds  
Stretching and yawning.

People's mouths move constantly  
But their hands  
Are dumb as dodos  
Long dead.

Pockets are prisons for poetry.

Even in the heaviest gloves  
With one hand behind my back  
I can say  
I love you.

Sometimes the flag says hello.  
Sometimes it says goodbye.  
Sometimes it's too sad to speak.

Why do hearing folk love mimes  
But want to fix me?

Silent jokes are the funniest.

There are two kinds of words:  
The splintery kind  
Black and spare as trees in winter  
And the voluptuous ones  
Shaped by warm-blooded hands  
And bodies  
Swaying in the wind.

*--Mara Faulkner, OSB*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Make lists of words that appeal to each of the five (or maybe six) senses. Start at the top of the page and don't stop until you get to the bottom. They can be words you love, words that describe things or people you love, or words/things/people that are distasteful or ugly. Then start anywhere, grabbing words from your lists as you go along. Let the words take you someplace unexpected. You might want to concentrate on a sense that you usually neglect.

## October 27

Hearing this poem at a reading, our friend, the exquisite soprano Dr. Carolyn Finley, said the poem really "spoke to her," and said she would gladly sing it if I set it to music for her. Though I had set other poets' work for choir or soloist, and had written songs for guitar as a young person (mostly with horrible, predictable lyrics), I had never tried to set a poem of my own. This poem had provided me with an avenue for grief at the death of my grandmother, and it was a poignant challenge to shift from spoken to sung word.



### In a certain light

In a certain light if I stretch just right  
my ribs crest again, thin cage from Adam  
drawn right around my softened heart  
cushioned now with the dough of years

Almond crisps, angel cookies  
ginger snaps, one by one hugged my tongue  
my waist, my hips, thighs, just as I would hug  
my grandma as she baked and let me taste

Swelling in the heat they'd soon cool to comfort.  
I remember my first swells and worries of new  
contours, the first "No" to diet-banished sweets.  
My grandma, terse, says, "If God wants you fat,

you'll be fat," impatience vying with love.  
There's no fighting with God, the cook's  
theology maintains, and there she must be right.  
In her high heels and hats her round form was beauty

She danced us all off the floor at the legion hall,  
polka, schottische; she danced the way she cooked  
and it went on rising, rising. In the soft, chewy center  
I always knew she'd love me, plump or thin, as I loved

all the pillowed laughter and fragrance  
 of her zest, wooden spoon heaped with yeast  
 and doughnuts frying in the crisp air  
 After her stroke, her mind at rest elsewhere

Her heart would not stop hugging life.  
 Her body thinned and sank beneath her ribs  
 as she slowly passed away. It is my waist now  
 that is comfort, my chest a warm pillow.

If I stretch just right I feel her round my heart.

--Karen Lynn Erickson

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***Invitation for your writing:***

The French Renaissance poet Pierre de Ronsard advised poets to read their verses aloud, and even better, to sing them out, to test their quality and power. Singers learn to project their sound by using the resonant cavities of mouth and sinuses, and by making the most efficient use of their breath. First read this poem silently, then read a stanza aloud. Read another stanza, but sing it out. What kind of melody are you creating as you read out the lines? Finally, [listen to the recording by Dr. Finley and Dr. Turley](#) (mp3 file) from their album, *In a Certain Light: Mostly Minnesota Composers*, produced with colleague Dr. Kent, and used by permission (available on [Digital Commons@CSB/SJU](#)). What do you hear in the poem when professional musicians interpret the text in a musical setting created by the poet? Now choose one of your own poems or write a poem about an experience filled with strong emotion (grief, joy, fear...); read your poem silently, then aloud, then by projecting in a singing tone. Does the act of "voicing" give new insight into your poem and into your experience?

## November 2016: Life Works

November 3



All people deserve the right to speak for themselves - to say, "This is who I am," "These are my experiences," "This is what I believe." Poets exercise bedrock human freedom in every word they write. But not everyone has this basic right. In every age and place, including ours, there are individuals and whole groups whose voices are silenced; their words, when they do speak or write, are suppressed, erased, discounted. Part of the work of poetry is to give a voice to the voiceless, until they can speak for themselves. Speaking in the persona of another person is an act of empathy and imagination that changes the poet in some subtle way. It often rests on the sturdy foundation of research, which is also an essential part of poetry's work.

This poem imagines what a young woman buried alive in the so-called Magdalene laundries in Ireland might have thought, felt, and said, had anyone been listening.

### The Magdalenes

*Mary Magdalene stood weeping beside the tomb. Even as she wept  
she stooped to peer inside, and there she saw two angels.  
"Woman," they asked her, "Why are you weeping?"  
She answered them, "Because they have taken my Lord away  
And I do not know where they have put him." (John 20:11-14)*

My name is gone too, stripped away by the sisters  
of Our Lady of Charity who tell me Jesus will love me again

only when I am scrubbed as clean as the priests' linen shirts and my belly  
is as flat as prison sheets wrung through the mangle.

My scared parents sent me here at the first whiff of sex  
and now the great green Connemara world has shrunk

to these high convent walls and this round aluminum tub  
where my hands, pale as flounders swimming among the priests'

underwear, will have only each other for comfort when the baby  
my body will never get to love is borne away

to Australia or the orphanage. They'll swear she has no father, her mother  
is dead, and there's the end of it.

The nun keens Our Lady's rosary—"the Angel of the Lord  
declared unto Mary and she conceived of the Holy Ghost. . ."

She's shapeless under her habit but she was young once too,  
jolly, maybe, with curves the boys liked. But out of all those girls

one had to go to the convent, every Irish family knows that.  
Now she hasn't wit or will and takes a sour joy

in cutting our hair short and ragged and drowning our voices with her prayers.  
My face crinkles in the steam, cooks to a pudding,

featureless and red. I imagine smuggling us out,  
myself and the baby inside me, in one of those great bags

hidden among the prison uniforms or parish napery, but whose hands  
would we tumble into? The priest's, with his dour mouth turned down in a C

like the first word of a curse? Not Christ's, for they have squeezed him so small  
he's a stone fit only to be hurled at wayward girls.

In this place only the birds are free. Ah, Jesus,  
maybe the skylarks, singing as they rise

on strong brown wings, will carry this Magdalene's name  
to the living world.

--Mara Faulkner, OSB

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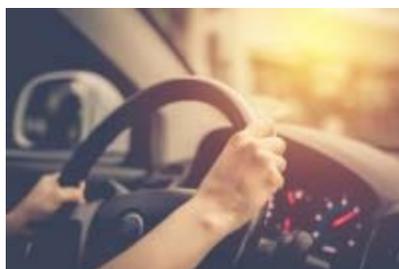
***Invitation for your writing:***

Listen to the recording that accompanies this poem. Then take a favorite poem of your own or  
someone else's; read it out loud and think about the sounds you might add to amplify the silent  
voices in the poem. If you feel inspired to do so, record the poem with the sounds. Send it as a  
gift to a friend.

## November 10

Mara invited us last week to think about how writing poetry can give us an imaginative avenue to understand the experience of a person from another place, time, or culture. The process of exploring, creating and refining a text into a concentrated poem can also give us access to empathy or understanding for members of our own families, people in our inner circle whom we assume we know fully. Like the DNA that links us to one another, our features, talents, preferences, fears and joys, tendencies and reactions can follow a complex and intertwined pattern. There can be moments of surprise that enlighten us to radical differences. There are also moments of great awareness of kinship beyond what we thought or knew; the recognition can be both grounding and liberating, both terrifying and comforting.

### Close Encounters



Heeding the yellow light at Warner Road my foot squeezes the brake, eyes roving left, right, back to the mirror. The red light gives me time to reach into the marshmallow bag, hand three to each quarrelsome car-seated voice (Pink! I want a pink!) and to grope for the ones that dropped. I manage to catch the light changing to green, and swivel again to the seething Alma School Road before anyone can honk or race an engine at me.

It was then for a second my mother looked out from behind my eyes, through my eyes – she saw the same intersection riddled with danger streets steeped in uncongenial movement on the lanes. I blinked and shook my head, felt the hair on my neck begin to rise. Suddenly I was driving an enormous station wagon, no seat belts in sight, four children all elbows tumbling into each other at every turn, a roiling, bickering mass of juvenile confusion. I want to cry, Stop that screaming! Do you want me to hit a truck? That would have been my mother's voice, her threat I now realize was her fear. I say, Let's use calm voices for the car and hand back another dose of sugary pillows.

It happened again just before we got to school. I felt my face reshape itself and we were stern worried women alone in a car hurtling toward a crash, shepherding kicking lambs along a high speed chase, and very much afraid. All the safety features and vigilance quiver

as the mother's eyes rake the road ahead.  
What will hit my children? And how hard will they land?  
Will it be a tragic accident (news at eleven) or a violent hand,  
or the sound of glass tinkling above depression, eyes tightly closed,  
arms flung about their heads? Or will there be a cushion of drugs,  
or the lostness of vague plans that never quite take shape?

A clammy smell lingers in the air as I park the car in a shady space.  
I take a small shaky breath, my face firm again behind my hands.  
My children, still secured, bored in their separate safety,  
wait for me to come around. I hold tight to the illusion of control,  
which has worked better than you'd think for a long, long time.

It's now I can't keep the wheel from bucking in my hands.

*--Karen Lynn Erickson*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Write a paragraph full of concrete details describing a family member who is very like you. How do you resemble one another? Then write another paragraph about a family member who seems very different from you. How is this person unlike you? Compare the two paragraphs, and note if there is any surprising resemblance between the two descriptions, any unforeseen kinship or paradox or new awareness. Write a poem about the surprises and insights arising from family likeness, and from perceptions of individuality within kinship.

November 17



In an interview with Bill Moyers, Lucille Clifton said, “Poems are about questions, not about answers. We don’t know. We know very little.” I think she’s right. One of my students said that a trustworthy pattern for a poem is question → answer → deeper question. Though poetry tries to put into semi-comprehensible words the puzzlements of human life, its destructiveness and generosity, its murky confusion and its brilliance, most poems ask questions, sometimes subtly, sometimes right out in the open. They ask with anguish and wonder, “Why?” “Why not?” as they probe the mystery of goodness and evil. This poem questions war and especially war’s deadly habit of claiming religion and even God as allies for their side.

### Knytting

*"The genes have to go to war." (Oliver Stone)*

*"God knytt us and onyd us to hymselfe." (Dame Julian of Norwich)*

How, Julian, "shalle alle be wele  
and alle maner of thyng  
be wele" while war  
still lurks in our genes  
like moths morosely  
eating?

Even if we confess ourselves  
foxhole atheists  
and denounce  
those who scream the Name  
as war-cry  
prayer  
or curse

and even if we throw away  
our holy flak-deflectors—  
those steel-cased Bibles  
guarding hearts  
that beat out rage  
and hate—

even then we bear

God into battle  
 and back home again  
 on the banner of our flesh—  
 one cunning strand  
 of the double helix.

But maybe God goes willingly.

For were she to unknytt  
 herself from trigger-  
 happy fingers and grenade-  
 glad hands  
 would humankind  
 unravel  
 and incarnation be  
 undone?

--Mara Faulkner, *OSB*

***Invitation for your writing:***

This idea comes from poets Rita Dove and Eva Hooker: Write five questions that "rattle your heart." Then:

- Write a line with a color of two in it.
- Make a one-line statement about a place you loved as a child.
- Write a line describing a broken object, person, or place.
- Finish a line that begins, "I wish. . ."
- Write a line about work or a job.
- Finish a line that begins, "Next year at this time. . ."

Then write a poem in which you answer one of your questions, using as many of these lines as you can, in any order, changing them as the poem requires. If you can and if the poem lets you do it, end with a new question—or a new version of the first one.

## November 24

This poem ponders the relationship between dreams and life, between the stories we tell about ourselves and our deepest truths. How do we narrate, revise, retell and talk over our life-work, our essence? Poetry can give a slanted entry to other modes of consciousness, to reminders of the untamed portions of our stories.

### Hide and Seek

*palimpsest: a manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain. (Oxford Dictionary)*



We inscribe our day on the palimpsest  
of last night's dream;  
the scratching of the day-pen crowds out  
the murmur of night voices  
that whisper inscrutable things.

If we could remember,  
our lives would be changed utterly  
but we dip the pen instead  
and mark the page.  
This is life, we write, what I write with my hand

And so we are not what we dream  
but neither are we entirely what we seem  
as we follow the slow progress  
of our pen on the vellum of our skin  
our day, our year.

We write a story on the palimpsest  
of the shaved-down hide of our dreams.

Sometimes I see I am leaving too much behind  
too much unsaid, my deep self scratched down  
and covered over by someone else's text.

--*Karen Lynn Erickson*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Leaving a blank space under every line, write or type a lyric description of a dream or memory or imagined experience. Free-write for 10 minutes -- just write without planning or editing what you are writing; simply try to capture the image without worrying about accuracy or consistency. Next, in the spaces between the lines, revise the description with a more logical, consistent, "reality-based" version. Which elements do you retain? Which do you replace or revise? Is there anything "more real" about the dreamscape version, in terms of insight or perception?

## December 2016: Works for an occasion

### December 1

Poems composed for a special occasion are not always "sharable" to those outside the circumstances of the writing. Sometimes, though, an occasional poem captures something that has potential to go beyond the situation. I wrote this poem for my son, who had decided on his birthday to purchase a digital piano for his tiny Manhattan apartment (with headphones, of course). I started out simply wanting to wish him a happy day, and by the end, realized there was something about the two images of beads and keys I would perhaps like to explore further one day. This is the poem for the occasion, used with permission of my son, to whom the poem now belongs.

#### A tiny birthday poem

Birthdays thread charms on a chain  
 each one speaking the language of its now:  
 womb by favorite chair in the library,  
 lullaby by the vendor's morning banter,  
 pastrami piled high on Saturday pancakes  
 and after-school zucchini bread.

It is all one and unimaginable in its strangeness,  
 one bead knowing nothing of the other  
 except that they stroke the same wrist.  
 It will have been a known unknowing,  
 a knocking against a depth of time  
 that stories long to tell.

Add this bead to the string –  
 a table readying itself for a keyboard,  
 88 keys enfolding primers and progress  
 and meeting of hands and minds  
 and a space to keep safe all the wild fragments  
 that make us wholly who we are.

*--Karen Lynn Erickson*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Choose an occasion within your family's traditions or from the calendar of your culture. Generate a list of objects, sounds, smells, memories, images, thoughts that you associate with that occasion. Write each one on a different slip of paper or card, and spread them out before you. Move them around, looking for connections of sense, texture, taste, emotional resonance, or any other organizing theme, then re-organize them by color or size or chronology, or any other category you see emerging. Then write a poem incorporating the pieces that fit whatever threads you discovered as you improvised.

## December 8

Poets have lots of secret partners. We couldn't do our work without them. We've described some of them in past weeks—the music of language, the shapely power of forms, and, of course, the world itself with its insistent pleas for our attention. One silent partner is death. Some of the world's greatest poetry is called to the surface by death's patient, shadowy presence in every life, as poets rage, weep, console, accept. Poetry might pay tribute to a loved one or try to untangle and reconcile a troubled relationship. It might be about our own impending death when we face a serious illness or even when we're perfectly well but suddenly aware of our mortality. We often hear that young people take crazy risks because they think they'll never die. It might be true that a lucky few haven't come face to face with death; but by the time they're teenagers, many have lost friends or family members to sickness, accidents, suicide, or violence. In some neighborhoods and cities, here and around the world, young people like my student Hawo watch as government soldiers gun down her brother. Hawo wrote these lines in her "Childhood Memory Poem":

I remember the killer living and smiling.

I remember one naked face.

Like love, death draws to itself a swarm of clichés and truisms, usually in a sincere effort to give comfort. Poetry's work is to put into words the ways in which every death is the same and every death is different and to honor but not smooth out the entanglement of death and life. I wrote this poem shortly after my friend's partner died; I'm simply telling the story as he told it to me.



### **After**

*For Ozzie and Stephen*

He could walk through the house and garage dry-eyed  
 even though the grand piano, its lid open hopefully  
 was silent  
 and the bench was still raised  
 to fit his long legs;  
 even though half-read books lay on his night stand  
 with flower bookmarks  
 to show the page where he had to stop reading;  
 and even though his camera's bright eye was shuttered  
 and his garden tools—hoes, trowels, clippers—  
 were clean and ready for Spring planting  
 and his bicycle oiled and shining  
 eager for long rides in the countryside.

Each left only a bruise as he passed by  
and a dull ache.

Then, after the guests had left,  
he carried a bucket of funeral food and spent flowers  
to the compost pile.  
He turned up the compost with the old spading fork  
as Stephen had showed him.

All alone, except for memories,  
He held the bucket close and wept,  
as the smells rose up—of death and decay  
and the brown warmth of new earth, forming itself  
from scraps of life.

--*Mara Faulkner, OSB*

***Invitation for your writing:***

What objects, gestures, or habits—the more ordinary, the better—would bring back to the life of poetry a lost relationship or a person who has died? If you like, call your poem "After" or "Before."

## December 15

Sometimes the partner that calls a poem into being is anything but silent. She or he is a live person asking us to write a poem for a specific occasion. (Think of the poems written and recited at presidential inaugurations.) These occasional poems can feel like drudgery—an assignment given by a stern teacher with a hard deadline. Worse yet, you're going to have to go public with your poem. It usually isn't what you wanted to be writing, but you said yes....

The real work, then, is to go deep and do what students have to do most of the time: turn this dreaded assignment into something you want and need to say by asking the poet's, the writer's questions: "So what?" "Who cares?" "What's at stake for writer and readers?"

I wrote "Illuminations" for the inauguration of CSB President Mary Dana Hinton. While I was delighted to be part of this wonderful occasion, I had all the resistances I just described. The theme President Hinton chose for her inauguration was "Become Illuminated," and that phrase became another silent partner. This is a selection from that occasional poem.



### **Illuminations**

For President Mary Dana Hinton

*Be flamboyant—*

Like a thousand luminaries lighting the path to Christmas

Like the sun condensed in a winter greenhouse hip-deep in snow  
where a riot of lettuce and spinach, peas and kale convinces us it's spring  
and like the questing students, in love with the Earth,  
who dreamed and dared and did it

Like the supernova of a star long dead  
scattering potent light across eons of time and space  
to reach us here, this night.

Like the sheer, brilliant fact of existence  
and steadfast resistance to all that would snuff out life. . .

*Burn through thickets of fear and doubt—*

Like kind-hearted people, not showy, often nameless  
but warm enough to save a life as hands reach out for hands to hold—

it doesn't matter whose. . .

Burn like peacemakers whose ardent love and courage  
quench even the flames of war

Or like God's reckless love and unquenchable mercy  
kindling flames in and among us  
until we all *shine like sparks in stubble*.

Like luminaries past and present, *make of yourself a light*  
*And then let your light shine.*

--Mara Faulkner, OSB

***Invitation for your writing:***

Write a partner poem. First, find a willing partner. One of you write the first couple of lines. Then pass it on to your partner without saying what you had in mind for the theme or direction. **Don't plan out the poem ahead of time!** Poet #2 adds a couple of lines and passes it back. (Sometimes it helps to stop in the middle of a line or thought.) Pass the poem back and forth until one of you decides that it's finished. Then, if possible, get together and read the poem out loud, or do it on-line. Change it in big or small ways, cutting, rearranging, adding, etc. Give it a title, and read it out loud again. Give it as a gift to a couple of people who might be heartened or delighted or challenged by it.

December 22



Mara and I have the good fortune of having friends and colleagues who write funny poems to commemorate events, in a mild poetic roast that makes the target feel known and loved. This poem began as an attempt to respond with humor to the fatigue some of my neighbors expressed at a long period of obstructed driving, as trunk lines were laid in to provide city water and sewer to what had been farmland. Under the lightness emerged a poignant expression of longing for a smooth way home.

### **Prayer to the Spirit of the Road**

*On the occasion of the installation of city services*

This is a prayer to the spirit of the open road.  
 Not the open road leading west, off to mountains  
 and rocky, lawless adventure.  
 The spirit of that road hoots and hollers,  
 cajoles and, when you least expect it,  
 bucks off on its bronco and leaves you  
 staring at its dust, as if it had all been a mirage.

Not to the spirit of the open freeway either,  
 guardian angel spirits hovering over those who drive  
 too fast, changing lanes and making time,  
 taking risks and turning long, flat curves into cliff edges.  
 The spirits of that open road fret and murmur,  
 willing us to want safety rather than speed.

No, this is a prayer to the spirit of the road that leads us home,  
 the road at the end of our driveway,  
 that sends us off each day and holds the very moment  
 of our return. This is the road that harbors our mailbox  
 and ties us to a place in this world where people  
 can address us, knowing they will find us.  
 This spirit makes no noise at all but smooths our going out  
 and our return. It wants our road open.

Spirit of the homeward road, comfort those in the last months  
 of water pipes and sewer pipes and gutters and curbs

and all the heavy machinery that for a time  
have made you their nest, raising their young asphalt  
on our doorsteps, like house finches nesting  
in the hanging planter, forcing us to skulk in  
at the side door until the little ones fledge.

Give strength to those who must yet a little while  
raise their thresholds,  
drive slowly through ruts and past stakes and over  
the earth piles  
that for a time have disguised you.  
Remind us that somewhere  
above the trench and beneath the cloud of noise  
you are there.

*--Karen Lynn Erickson*

***Invitation for your writing:***

The coming weeks provide a wealth of occasions in many traditions for celebration: religious observance, the new year for some calendars, family gatherings and cultural celebrations of identity. Choose an event and a recipient; see what happens when you set out to write a poem for the occasion, funny or tender or both, and then give it to the person who was in your mind as you wrote it!

## January 2017: Emotion Work

January 5



BECOME WHAT YOU ARE. THEN LET GO.

-DANNY SALLITANO, THE HOBbitMAN (A PARABLE)

*"Hi, how are you?"*

*"Fine, and you?"*

*"Fine."*

\* \* \*

*"I'm so sorry for your loss."*

*"Yeah, it's been rough."*

Many of our daily conversations follow this pattern, but not because we're uninterested in each other's lives or unwilling to talk about what's under the surface. Many times we can't do it because our feelings are too raw, too muddled, too contradictory; they frighten us with their bald honesty. Poetry, with its love of honest emotion, dislike for platitudes, and trust of ambiguity, leads us into the depths and lets us emerge with words that answer the question, "How are you, really?" This poem helped me answer that question after my brother's sudden death.

### **Baked Beans: A Word from the Dead**

How I long for a voice to break  
 the long silence,  
 a country strange and vast without sustenance.  
 A word in dream or vision to say, "I'm safe home. I'm happy.  
 I'm myself and more, the person you knew and loved  
 and didn't know."  
 Day and night I'm listening  
 but not a word  
 my brother as silent in death  
 as he was in life

when his mother and sisters waited months or years  
 for a letter or a call  
 as he trudged West, shedding possessions and people.  
 Just at the end he turned and flashed a smile,  
 and then was gone.  
 Though he's in that new place where distance disappears  
 in the twinkling of an eye, or so they say,  
 he is as silent as God  
 withholding comfort  
 in the conspiracy of death.

But then from the friendly darkness of my recipe box  
 I hear his voice, laughing, defiant—sandwiched between beets  
 and broccoli bake  
 his instructions for baked beans, sent just before he died:  
*"I use pinto beans but I suppose great northern would  
 work too. I just don't trust anything that is white.  
 (Does that make me racist?)  
 Mix in two tablespoons of mustard (make this stone ground  
 not that yellow crap that people put on hot dogs.)  
 Bake at 250 for 9 hours."*

These are earthy words.  
 Like dreams and visions they tell me only what I know:  
 In a kitchen smelling of onions and molasses  
 feed each other food cooked slowly while you laugh and talk  
 and do good work.

It isn't much.

People have lived on less.

--Mara Faulkner, *OSB*

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***Invitation for your writing:***

Answer the question, "How are you, really?" Keep answering new versions of the question until  
 you get to the true answer—the one that eases your heart.

## January 12

If foods can enfold us in memory, so too can a song or a fragrance or sensation bring back to our conscious mind whole layers of experience. Returning to a place can be wistful or painful if it reminds us of loss -- we might feel it is too soon; returning to a place we have not seen since a time of loss can also help us see, help us accept the process of grief and healing.

### Revisiting St. Martin-in-the-Fields



So this is what closure feels like – a mild lengthening of clipped phrases and a lingering, solid and full of grief, over memories and places I had to skate over quickly before.

Closure is not release – it is a cadence resolved, a weight anchoring the end of something no longer left hanging, no suspense, no airy wondering, no habit of pain, no self rich with suffering.

Closure is the signal clicked off. Closure is the floor swept clean of all the remains of the party, the confetti and the broken heel and the water stain on the table, the gift wrap torn in festive frenzy and the cigarette burn on the prized piano.

Closure is the door latching after a long walk on the beach, the cleaning of the shells, the setting them in a bowl where they invariably look less lovely than you thought they would, dried, unpolished, washed clean of debris. We come to an arrangement, a done thing, a habit soon quite silent, indifferent, like bones.

Closure is not life and it is not death. It is an attitude toward the endlessly moving tide that flings up shells for us to find, and pocket, and clean, and then forget. Closure feels like loss when it settles on the heart, but it is rather a solid presence, a window opened so the bee can escape.

We did not know she was there  
when we closed it just as the storm was breaking.

*--Karen Lynn Erickson*

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***Invitation for your writing:***

Choose a strong emotion like grief and experiment with the puzzle of absence and presence. In what ways is your chosen strong emotion well represented by things that are there, present, taking up space, even blocking passage, in the way? In what ways is absence a better category to express the experience?

## January 19

A character in one of John Updike's novels says, "We've lost whole octaves of feeling." I think that the octaves we've lost might be the quiet emotions that flow from simple, ordinary events and experiences. Those quiet emotions and the events they accompany make up most of our lives, but they easily get drowned out. Here, too, poetry has important work to do. With its ability to see beauty shining through plain and even dirty surfaces, it can help the poet and readers feel the quiet delight and thankfulness in even the most mundane of tasks, such as planting seeds and pulling weeds.



### Summer #1

"It must be therapy for you,"  
 the visitor says,  
 eyeing my garden clothes  
 ragged, filthy, and 10 years out of date.  
 She keeps her distance  
 suspecting that I smell  
 or fearing I'll touch her with hands  
 that won't be clean till Thanksgiving.

Therapy!  
 What would that word mean  
 to the poplar shimmering silvergreen  
 and pushing little rootlets through the asphalt of the driveway  
 or the maples scattering their seed?

Did creating every fruitbearing plant cure God  
 of some primordial angst?

I see my mother up early every morning for 60 summers  
 small and weathered at the far end  
 of 200-foot rows of tomatoes and cucs.  
 Not *therapy* but darn hard work  
 to feed her family and surround with flowers  
 a ramshackle life.

I think of the seeds still underground  
and their sweet, precise names—

Detroit Dark Reds

Scarlet Nantes

Sugarbush

Straight Eights.

Soon the birds and I will vie for the berries.

Before long I'll eat green beans

savory with onions

each flavor distinct and sharp.

And then I'll carry russets and red Norlands home

in the basket of my hands.

Wishing I could say that gardening is nothing

but life itself

eating and being eaten

feeding and being fed

I only wave and smile

and bend to my weed-friendly rows

as the cage of my ribs swings wide.

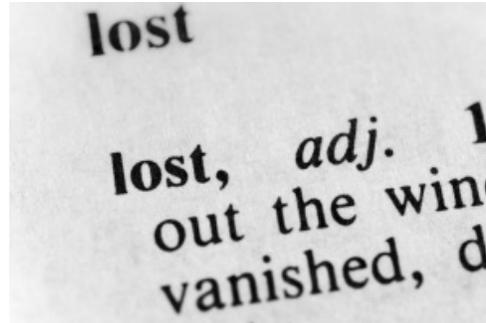
*--Mara Faulkner, OSB*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Make a list of the things you do every day or regularly, the more ordinary the better—changing diapers, grading papers, peeling vegetables, changing the oil in the car, emptying the kitty litter, harvesting sugar beets, mucking out the barn. Describe one of them in all its spectacular plainness.

## January 26

This poem began by questions, and the answers surprised me. Certain answers to the title question seemed obviously preferable, as normative and unequivocal; healthy people, integrated people, fully realized people would answer the question in a certain way. The poem invited a tangling with expectation that was as deeply troubling as it was comforting, as challenging as it was liberating. I'm not sure if this poem is finished or not, but I offer it as a signpost or a way station along a path where "finished" may not be the most relevant concern.



### Are you lost?

Are you lost, lost and wanting to be found?  
Can I help you find your way?

*I am lost, but have travelled far to get there  
and can be lost a little longer  
Strangeness, my familiar, knows me well by now.*

Are you found, found and wanting to be lost?  
Can I help you lose your way?

*I am indeed so deeply found  
I am lost in my familiar self, so ensnared  
by who I am that strangeness knows me not.*

Acquainted now with unfollowable pain  
and unquenchable communion,  
we tread the space between fervor and forgiveness.

We know that grief needs the well of being found  
*so it does not spill over and drown us –*

and the humility of being lost  
*to make us whole as it makes us hollow.*

--Karen Lynn Erickson

***Invitation for your writing:***

Write a poem that is nothing but a series of questions, and try to refrain from answering any of them too quickly. Or ask yourself if there are any quandaries or emotions, like anger, pain, fear, insecurity, expectation of difficulty, in your life or in the life of someone close to you that are so familiar they carry on almost unchecked, unnoticed. Ask questions and allow the answers to surprise you: *Are you lost? Have you taken up residence?* Write a poem to describe the familiar experience as if you are sensing it for the first time, to make it strange, and perhaps to let it go.

## February 2017: Poetry: Work or Gift?

### February 2

No question about it - poetry is work, sometimes *hard* work. A person who knows said that the ratio of gift poems to work poems is one to ninety-nine. If we wait around for inspiration to hit, and poems to fall from the skies, we'll probably write one poem every ninety-nine years. So, I urge myself and you to follow Gloria Anzaldúa's admonition in "A Letter to 3<sup>rd</sup> World Women Writers":

Forget the room of your own--write in the kitchen, lock yourself in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals; between waking and sleeping. . . . While you wash the floor or clothes listen to the words chanting in your body.

This is a work poem, written as a finger exercise with my students. It's built from scraps - a line from poet Adrienne Rich and a random cluster of words.



*in those years, people will say, we lost track  
of the river there where it wound  
through the yellow wheat,  
its brother, the breath of the west wind  
strumming its moist song,  
now in these dry times  
as rare as Indian silk  
or a reggae beat  
among the polka-loving Russians  
of North Dakota.  
Oh why did we do it?  
The answer as hard to find  
as needles in straw  
as willows in the parched river bottoms  
as meadowlarks, remembered  
but never heard except in stories  
the very old tell the young.  
"Beautiful," they say, "their song. . . ."  
These voices, too, fading*

like the tracks of a wild creature  
now extinct  
on blowing sand.

--Mara Faulkner, *OSB*  
*The opening line is from "In Those Years" by Adrienne Rich.*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Borrow a line from a poem you admire. Then ask a friend to give you a list of words, preferably random and concrete. Write your own poem with the borrowed line as a beginning. Let the words take you some place new. If you get stuck, borrow another line or two, being sure to give credit to the poet.

## February 9

This is also a work poem, drafted in a workshop on how to write in the bits of time that are sometimes all we have for writing (such as moments spent waiting in the car for someone we're driving somewhere -- have a mobile poetry bag ready!). The poem captures exactly how I sometimes feel about a poem that simply won't be cultivated or fixed or finished, even through hard work and numerous drafts.



### Weeding the Raspberry Patch

At the start I gently part the stalks to pull offending grasses  
and visiting bee balm out by their roots; I break each dead cane  
with a knowing snap, lay weeds and old growth carefully to the side.

Midway through it galls and I begin to yank whole clumps,  
green and hollow alike, stopping only to eat the few tender berries  
that somehow managed to ripen in the thicket of my neglect.

By the end, sweaty and sore and knowing I'll regret it in the morning,  
I take out the garden shears and begin to wrench and hack in a frenzy  
of frustration. I swear if my mower had gas, I'd level the whole patch.

Prairie intrusion temporarily subdued, I wrestle refuse into compost bags,  
survey my folly - to think I get things at the root, to crowd and then to mow,  
but sweet red still tips my tongue as nature breathes, *Yield*.

--Karen Lynn Erickson

*Invitation for your writing:*

Make a list of things you want and need to do, and "weed" it as if it were a garden. Which things are weeds (intrusions?), and which are intentional priorities? Are any of the "weeds" invasive to the point they are endangering the others? Are you giving the things that feed you enough space, air, attention? Transform the list into a poem, maybe in a conversation format where the weeds and the intended plants can tangle up again.

## February 16



But sometimes poems do come as gifts, unexpected and unearned. We see the lines on the page and can barely remember having written them. To receive the gift, we have to "listen with the ear of the heart," as Benedictines are fond of saying, and be humble and brave enough to follow where the poem is leading. This poem is one of a very few gift poems I have received.

### Things I Didn't Know I Loved

*"I know all this has been said a thousand times before and will be said after me."  
--Nazim Hikmet, writing in exile after 13 years in prison*

I didn't know I loved  
 the wrangle of phones and human voices, rough, insistent  
 until I entered this silence and closed the door. I didn't know I loved  
 this silence until the hooked voices reached for me. I didn't know I loved  
 didn't really know I loved the treeless prairies until green bars grew up  
 between my eyes, the airy sunset, and the moon. Didn't know I loved  
 the thorny green thicket of my self  
 contrary and bear-haunted, until I took the straight smooth road  
 and found it strewn with death. I didn't know I loved  
 black bears lumbering through my dream toward my sister  
 whom I didn't know I loved  
 even though I've lost her now in the blind thicket and she  
 doesn't love me any more. I didn't know I loved  
 my mother until her rose-heart burst and bled  
 red petals into her chest, didn't know I loved  
 the garden of her flesh. And you, my God  
 under her ashes so silent and so cold, I didn't know I loved  
 you until you woke every morning in my little stove  
 so lowly in your prison house of wood and flesh and fire  
 so eager and so needful of my hands. I didn't know I loved  
 my hands-clumsy, tender-until they stirred the fire and found

these words.

*--Mara Faulkner, OSB*

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***Invitation for your writing:***

How do these ideas of work poems and gift poems play out in your writing? Do poems sometimes come to you from out of the blue? What sustains you when you have to work with that inspiration to make a poem? To find out, take a line, image, or idea for a poem that comes as a gift; then work with it to see what it wants to become. Follow author Doug Woods' advice to writers: "Start. Finish. Edit."

## February 23

This poem came to me as I was listening to a sermon in a church during the Christian season of Lent. I promise I was truly listening to the sermon, until I got distracted by the image of stones calling out, and by the work of precursors and prophets, and how their voices must sound exactly like stones.



### The Grief Hosanna

The stones are shouting --  
*Are you listening?*  
 The stones are shouting out --  
*Why are we silent?*  
 From beneath the strewn palms they cry out  
*as we withhold the blessing of Hosanna.*

The Praise that does not stop death  
 rises from the bedrock, from the earth  
 crying blessing, asking us to prepare the way.  
 We know what is at stake,  
 where this *Hosanna* will lead --

I see someone arriving  
*Hosanna*  
 someone I do not understand  
*Hosanna in the highest*  
 who will bring change to me and mine  
*Blessed is the one who is coming*

Weeping over Jerusalem, *hosanna* flutters in my heart  
Denying as the dawn breaks, *hosanna* rises in my throat  
Looking to grieve where life is not found,  
*hosanna rolls the stone away*

--Karen Lynn Erickson

***Invitation for your writing:***

If you have had "gift poems," did the form come before the words and images, or did words and images arrive first, with the form emerging through your work, or did they come together? To play with form, take two (or more) images or concepts that seem dissimilar, and combine them in a title. Experiment with formats, giving one concept/voice in italics and the other in boldface, or one in capitals and the other in lower case, or one to the left and the other to the right, or one inside boxes and the other in circles, or one in the middle of the page and the other(s) all around it in the margins. How does the form of the poem constrain your writing? Is that constraint inviting or liberating in any surprising ways?

## March 2017: The Work of Translation

### March 2

Every poem is a translation in a way. Poets take the random, chaotic, mysterious, contradictory, clashing stuff of human life and turn it into words, lines, and stanzas that on the page look shapely and full of meaning. But every poet will tell you, with chagrin, that something is always lost in the translation from experience to words, no matter how eloquent and musical. Yet, we keep trying.

Poetry also performs other acts of translation, maybe because we want so badly to tell each other what we've seen, heard, and touched and watch their eyes light up with understanding. We translate poetry from one language to another and poetry to prose or prose to poetry. Poets also try to make the leap from one artistic form to another, to help us hear, for instance, the joyful, wordless rhythms and riffs of jazz or see a Joe O'Connell sculpture from an odd angle. That's what I have tried to do in this week's poem.

#### **Unbecoming: A Look at "Eve in Baroque"**

Joe O'Connell, Marble, 1990

*Emerging from the softly shining marble that was once the communion railing in a monastery of Benedictine women, Eve balances the unbitten apple on a plump and polished knee. Her marble skin glows faintest pink as if washed by earliest light or lit by a secret she's holding inside. She has a teenager's face, hair cut in junior-high bangs in front and wild as sea waves in back, and half-closed, dreaming eyes. She takes for granted the snake curled blissfully around her, sharing her warmth, her shape. Eve and the snake know each other, and are not afraid.*



It's taken my hands  
 more than fifty years to unlearn  
 one indelible summer lesson.

This I remember: three little tow-head girls  
 wandering in the dusty pasture between our house and the woods  
 breathing in the pleasant heat  
 the sharp sweet smells of clover and of manure dying in the sun.  
 We found a treasure  
 a burnished curve in the dust  
 a silky rope  
 mysterious and delightful to hand and eye.  
 We picked it up and ran  
 to where my father worked in the field.

Almost blind, his hands  
 grown huge with the effort of seeing,  
 he held it close to his one good eye.  
 A silky rope? The snake's eye  
 open in death  
 caught his.

Thinking to protect his little girls he flung it far  
 across the summer pasture  
 a coppery arc shining in the sun.  
 In its place grew a stale terror  
 as twisted as the tale of Eve  
 and the snake-  
 the first unmaking  
 the breaking  
 of communion.

I've touched snake skins since then  
 dry and papery as words  
 and followed snake trails through poems  
 but my hands are lonely for the silk  
 of scales placed just so  
 and my body  
 like Eve's  
 imagines its sinuous  
 friendly  
 coil.

--Mara Faulkner, *OSB*

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***Invitation for your writing:***

Choose a piece of visual art that attracts you—a painting, photograph, sculpture, building, piece of furniture. Sit with it for a while, just looking at it, or, if possible, touching it. Simply describe your sense impressions as clearly and concretely as you can. Then see if your description itself is a poem, or if a poem emerges from it.

## March 9

I had the life-changing opportunity to study for an academic year in France twice, once at age 20, and again at 25. The first year gave me academic French - quite correct, mostly understandable, and not too heavily accented, but I sounded a little like a textbook most of the time. The second year gave me a chance to know children, meet for lunch with the mother of a friend, discuss and debate with colleagues of all ages, and *I learned to live in French*. I wrote this poem trying to express why learning another language was so empowering, and yet at the same time deeply humbling. I learned, from everything I now could say and hear, how much I still could not put into words.



### Langues étrangères

Langues étrangères  
 je veux toutes les apprendre  
 je veux les faire défiler comme des rois  
   les promener comme des enfants  
   les dresser dans ma bouche  
     comme des caniches  
 "Dis ça!" - Je le dirais

En fait, je n'en ai qu'une  
 Une langue encore si étrangère bien que  
   j'y travaille depuis longtemps déjà  
 je joue encore en prononçant ces mots  
 ça fait si drôle de les entendre sur ma langue!  
 Je sors des phrases et je m'amuse à vous  
   les lancer comme des ballons  
   un jeu dans l'air  
 J'oublie que pour vous ce ne sont que des mots  
   que vous entendez depuis toujours sans jeu  
   et sans problème, on dit, c'est sérieux  
 ces mots peuvent vous blesser, vous renseigner,  
   vous ennuyer et après tout  
 il me faut passer par eux pour dire  
 quand il m'arrive à aimer que moi, enfin,  
   j'aime enfin, je t'aime beaucoup ou même  
   je t'aime tout court  
 Comment le dire? sans jeu et sans problème?  
 Il faut encore une nouvelle langue

Langues étrangères  
 je veux toutes les entendre comme j'entends la mienne  
 je veux les faire fondre sur ma langue jusqu'à ce qu'elles  
   s'y confondent  
 et puis une seule me suffirait  
 et je saurai tout dire

*--Karen Lynn Erickson*

### **Foreign Languages**

Foreign languages  
 I want to learn them all  
 I want to parade them like kings  
   take them for a walk like children  
   school them in my mouth  
   like trained poodles.  
 "Say this!" - I would say it.

In fact, I have just one of them  
 a language still so foreign even though  
   I've been working on it for a long, long time  
 I still play around pronouncing these words  
 It's so weird to hear them on my tongue!  
 I take out sentences and for fun throw them  
   to you like toy balls  
   a game in the air  
 I forget that for you these are just words  
   that you have heard forever with no game  
   and with no problem, as they say, it's serious  
 these words can hurt you, inform you,  
   bother you, and after all  
 I have to go through them to say  
 When it happens that I love that I, well,  
   I finally love, I like you a lot or even  
   I just plain love you  
 How to say it? With no game or problem?  
 I need another new language

Foreign languages  
 I want to understand them all as I hear my own  
 I want to melt them on my tongue until they  
   are mixed up together  
 and then a single one would be enough for me  
 and I would know how to say everything.

*Invitation for your writing:*

Take a poem you love (your own or someone else's) in one language and translate it (from one language into another, or modernize a work in an older style, or change the historical context or setting and recast the poem, or change from rhymed form to free verse, or free verse to rhymed form). When does the play of translation/adaptation obstruct the emotional sense of the poem, and when does the play bring you closer to the depth of meanings in the original?

## March 16

A student once gave me a little blue cardboard box she bought from a street vendor in Nepal. It's about two inches by four inches and holds loose pieces of rough handmade paper. At the time, I was hopelessly busy, without the stillness and solitude that brings poetry to the surface. But in brief moments between classes or in earliest morning when dream scenes still filled my head, I "kept faith with my writing self," as Tillie Olsen puts it, by writing an image, an overheard sentence, a strange word or phrase ("crockpot ideas") on those 2 x 4 sheets of paper, hoping that they would somehow turn themselves into poetry there in the fertile darkness. Well, that didn't happen, but when my life slowed down I took a look at what had accumulated and found scraps I could translate into poems. I guess that's pretty much what poets do all the time. Here's one of those translations.



## Fall, 2015

If pages are leaves then books  
are trees swaying in the wind  
where kids in treehouses dream  
and wonder rises in them  
like sap.

Tree-books need someone  
to rake up the fallen leaves  
of red and gold and brown  
and save them in the bag of the mind  
to stack against the foundation  
warming us during the long winter  
just ahead.

Even the dour weatherman  
used to predicting drought  
and disaster  
calls this is the most beautiful October  
he can remember-  
clear days and nights with moons  
heavy and deep orange on the horizon.

Two eclipses-the moon, the setting sun.  
Every day we think this beauty has to end.  
And then the maples' embers  
glow red in the morning fog.  
There is, so far, no final eclipse.

Don't leave us  
maples  
yellow lindens  
wine-dark oaks.  
Friends, my brother  
this Earth  
God  
golden and gone.

*--Mara Faulkner, OSB*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Find a little receptacle for scraps of poetry. Anything small will do-a little box like mine, a notebook small enough to fit in your pocket, your cell phone. Collect every day for a while. Then, without expecting anything dramatic, take out the scraps and see if you and they can do the work of translating the randomness of life into a poem.

## March 23

This poem tries to capture a visual experience that was profoundly linked to my writing self. I wonder sometimes if it would have been an essay if I had had more time to write then and there, or if it would have been a photograph, had photographing been allowed at that time in that place.

### In the glass case with the Gutenberg Bible



A misty trudge through long-ago familiar streets leads me toward the graduate library, briefcase bristling with slips and note cards, references seeking fulfillment in my reading of their books -- a quest to reunite far-flung citations with their mother text through my scholarly eyes. Will they cry aloud at the reunion, relish the close embrace as I tuck the card into the spine, before I photocopy the fragment to ingest further at my leisure? Will there be a violence of good-bye, as citation slip follows not the volume to the stacks but the spineless copied ghost, a scrap I may or may not use in the great puzzle of my newly forming book?

I stop a moment before the Beinecke, remembering how this court was once one of the favorite places in my world -- white, grey, cream -- smooth granite and alabaster city glowing in morning sun, sighing in evening pearls while the carillon played, now quenched by drizzle but still smugly holding all potential to ignite the mind and strengthen the soul's firmament. I enter its hushed expanse and find again the Gutenberg Bible, spread nobly in its double self, proud to be one of the first of what I have known as books, one of the last to remain complete after nearly 600 years, glassed in from alien breath and the oily hands that might grasp or turn or marvel through touch at the bold type and hand-flourished margins.

This I cannot snap in my work as modern scribe;  
I can only look at its open face and drink it in, complete and utterly saved.  
My eyes tire of the black figures motionless after their birth in moveable type;  
I yearn to turn a page and see what's next.

I look up and see my reflection in the glass, first my face  
 on the near pane of the case, then my entire bust in the far side.  
*I am in the case with the Gutenberg Bible and thrill to see myself there.*  
 A smile turns my indistinct self into a Vermeer woman  
 arrested for just a moment in her daily tasks, pitcher, basket,  
 briefcase laden with a woman's work, stopped to see art created,  
 stopped to see self in art, to smile that inward knowing softening  
 that recognizes the complete in a fragment and the impossibility  
 of seeing the complete except in fragment after fragment.

Someone else will turn this Bible's page, wearing white gloves  
 and key jingling at their appointed side, turn it not to Sarah's laughter  
 or Jacob's wrestling as I itch to do, but to the prescribed academic  
 liturgical moment, to dose the public with proud pages,  
 portions measured religiously, reverently, within the hush of hard stone.  
 It is time for me to go, but I linger before this case holding  
 my image as reader of a first completed book.  
 For I too am moving type across a sea of virtual vellum  
 wresting words from their bindings and setting them in the glass case  
 of my monograph, in awe before the august CONTROL - P - PRINT.

--Karen Lynn Erickson

***Invitation for your writing:***

Think about your own images of published books, or public sharing of texts, and the material and immaterial elements of your writing. If you generally type, try writing longhand. If you generally read your poems silently, try reading them aloud. If you compose poems orally, experiment with different ways to record your work. If you've never memorized one of your poems, learn one by heart and recite it, perhaps while looking at your image reflected in some polished surface. If anything is holding you back from sharing your work, set yourself on a path to transcend all the limits you can, and imaginatively include yourself in the version of authorship that will help you do what you need to do.

## April 2017: The Work of Art

### April 6

Mary Oliver's often repeated advice to writers is: "Pay attention. Be Amazed. Write about it." Pay attention to what? Not just to new purple crocuses and plum blossoms, but also to the poet's self-body, mind, heart, spirit. A recent news article about older people gathering to read and write poetry asks the question, "Can Poetry Keep You Young?" This poem, in which I pay attention to a host of new aches, pains, and discomforts that may accompany aging, answers, "Maybe, as long as we keep on being amazed and telling about it."



#### **The Better Half (for my friends at fifty)**

Everything hurts these days.  
They call it arthritis, sinus trouble, allergies  
prescribe pills, sprays, salves.

But the body knows better.  
I think it is trying to grow back  
into the good ground.

The hair  
rides the slightest hint  
of moisture in the air  
coiling and uncoiling  
around the furrowed brain.

The ears lean into the wind  
pulling in distant thunder.  
The drums throb, vibrate  
are sometimes struck dumb by what they've heard.

Water in every joint  
 swells and roils  
 a sea listening to a moon.

The lips and teeth sense storms  
 way out in the West  
 and want to set up an electric chirping  
 with the sparrows in the lilac hedge.

The eyes  
 nests that scratch and burn  
 lose themselves in leaves.

The arms ache.

The heart pushes wildly against the ribs  
 a caged Canadian honker  
 frantic for flight.

What will happen next?  
 Is this how death begins  
 this gradual remembering of the dust

Or is it the golden-age marriage  
 of mind and mud?

None of us knows  
 but the gnarly toes  
 Grip the earth

and the tongue  
 sings and sings  
 through its pain.

*--Mara Faulkner, OSB*

***Invitation for your writing:***

What would you like to say to your friends at twenty, eighty, thirty, seventy, forty? Write a poem offering the advice or wisdom you are learning from your life. If you go deep into your own story, you will find yourself face to face with people who have been there, too, or who might be teetering on the edge.

April 13



Writing a poem can help us focus our attention on habitual patterns that are invisible much of the time. How can we take what seems like the unavoidable architecture of reality (but which is actually a personal or social construction), and challenge all the assumptions, stereotypes and expectations that give it power? What are the patterns of exclusion, the habits of value that affect our actions and reactions without our even realizing it? This poem allowed me to wrestle with the repeated silencing that was part of the chilly climate for women in academia some twenty-five years ago. A male colleague liked to quote to me Samuel Johnson, who compared women at the pulpit with a dog walking on its hind legs (surprising they can do it at all, not surprising that it's not done well). I offer this poem to anyone who has felt resistance or faced impediments in their efforts to voice their thoughts, to relate their experience, to influence their environment, to change the world for the better.

### Dancing with Bears

I reach down into that "she" in grief,  
 torn from the softer one they like --  
 the funny one, the mom, the good soul  
 set aside and in a harsher light  
 strident, primordial and dismissed  
 like so much static on the line.  
*You know she just can't follow*  
 Insufficiency rests heavy on my chest  
 and I can't breathe  
 not a word, not a whimper  
 I am that *she* again.

They roll their eyes just a quiver,  
 they sigh and shake their heads;  
*You see what diversity brings us.*  
 I feel for a long moment the steady  
 comradery they had and no longer have,  
 the singleness of purpose and the confidence

that truth began with them, moved with their eyes  
 and rested on their liquid tongues,  
 their hands moved in a predetermined sweep.  
 My hands, trained to applaud, to applaud,  
 tremble in my lap, my eyes fit to gaze and perhaps to weep.  
 That was as it should be.

But the dancing bear grunts onto stage  
 and sways towards the pulpit  
 insight stunched in the bitter earthy smell  
 of matted fur, nose twitching towards the thing  
 I might say that they could hear.

I grasp the lectern, glance down at my notes;  
 they clear their throats and cross their arms.  
 I take them on and tell them *that I think*.  
 I interrupt their wild rejections and drive my words  
 deep under their skin and between their hairy arms.  
 They scratch and writhe, wait out my turn  
 and then go back to dancing among themselves.  
*She really doesn't follow, you know;*  
*That's what comes from diversity --*  
*No more excellence, no more clarity.*

How can I tell them that for once we all agree?  
 That all we share is a mumbled wail from bipedal snuffling shapes,  
 seeking the honey and finding only an empty comb.

-- *Karen Lynn Erickson*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Reflect on situations where you felt silenced, where you knew it would be difficult for others to hear you or take your message seriously. I chose to take a spot at a lectern, because speaking in public 30 years ago often happened in that venue. With the social media at our disposal now, speaking up and speaking out can take many forms. Write a version of this poem where the speaker chooses another venue - is the outcome more positive? Then think of a time you found it difficult to listen to someone else. How might you listen in a radically different way, welcoming voices that do not initially make sense to you? Can poetry be a productive avenue to share even clashing views?

**April 20**



Some photographers say that their camera lens and the frame it creates helps them look at parts of the world they might otherwise shy away from. A poem can do the same. But even with the framing and filters the poem provides, steady, unflinching attention is dangerous to our comfort, our preconceived ideas, and maybe even to our happiness. Having seen, we can't unsee what the poem's gaze sets before our eyes. That's as true for the poet as for the readers. "The Watchers" asks what will happen to me, the poet, if I let the poem's images and logic take me where they want me to go. This poem is a struggle between turning a blind eye and seeing. It asks but doesn't answer a pressing question.

**The Watchers  
(for Angeline Dufner)**

*"I looked out the window and saw a sparrow and I became the sparrow." (John Keats)*

The watchers rarely stick around  
to warn us of the dangers.  
Keats for one, made light with looking,  
flew away at age twenty-five.

I know a woman who looks at birds.  
Standing empty and alert as a shadow  
she's seen what others live a lifetime  
and never see:

A tree of land-locked warblers  
on a foggy morning

blue herons setting air-filled bones  
gently on hollow trees

pileated woodpeckers, shy as pterodactyls,  
their great shadows flowing across the snow  
just at sunset

and a sparrow  
 impaled on a long thorn  
 eaten alive by shrikes.

I'm watching closely to learn  
 the costs of her looking.

Will her cat begin to watch her  
 with narrow yellow eyes?

Will she follow the birds' migrations  
 her car, green as willow, flying down the freeway  
 and never be seen again?

Marooned and homesick in her classroom  
 will she mournfully teach "Ode to a Nightingale"?

Or will she die with the black and white bobolinks  
 whose numbers dwindle year by year?

I need to know  
 because I've watched too.  
 This boy-man Tom, for instance,  
 his schizophrenic mind, his blackbird eyes  
 his hands curled and shaking  
 without a swaying branch to still them.

He's flown all his life against windows and walls  
 and lights now only long enough to ask me  
 "Where do you get your peace?"  
 What will happen to me  
 if I watch him with the poet's intense gaze

when even a sidelong glance is enough  
 to carry me on long migrations away  
 from peace? And even if I could  
 choose blindness

what would keep my traitor hands  
 from reaching out, their feathery nerves  
 ready to catch on a face  
 the lightest sinking  
 into grief?

--Mara Faulkner, *OSB*

*Invitation for your writing:*

What are you afraid to pay attention to, whether in your life, the lives of those you love, or the life of the world around you? In a safe place where no one else will see it, write about that fear as truthfully as you can. Set it aside for a while. When you take it out and look at it again, see if there is in the midst of the fear a shining moment of courage that would help your readers and you.

**April 27**

As we learn to open up to the challenges, complexities, traumas and unbearable pain of the world, and to the beauty, truth, and insights sometimes found within them, we need to develop ways of remaining open as well, sustaining attention, maintaining energy and life. For some, disciplines of exercise, prayer, meditation, reading, or community work make this possible. For others, music, humor, cooking or dance provides outlets that keep the spirit from fleeing, from flinching at the task of really seeing. This poem describes an experience walking a labyrinth, an ancient practice that challenges visually and physically the notion that the real work is to get somewhere, rather than simply to be present and aware.



## Labyrinths

Walking the labyrinth, small puzzles unlock.  
 All the way in I tread upon tomorrow's tasks,  
 disrupt a clamor of what to do, controversies  
 dog each step, and I know what I should say,  
 what I should have said. I gauge how far I have walked,  
 how far I have yet to go, wondering if I am doing this right.

And then the center suddenly spreads.  
 The fumbling nail finally opens the clasp,  
 the locket rests in satin for the night  
 small fears nestle among the links.  
 Thumb becomes clever, measures the fit  
 of the shoe, one small length from tip to toe.  
 The pointer rises in a gesture of speech  
 but no argument, just the third line of a long-  
 forgotten poem tumbling onto a smooth tongue.

Measured steps enclose, and skirt  
 and seamlessly collide. Behind me,  
 the large puzzles stand arms lifted to the sun,  
 to the moon, to inner light, uninvolved  
 and unconcerned with small solutions,  
 sentinels marking the unlocked heart  
 and the insoluble path.

--Karen Lynn Erickson

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### ***Invitation for your writing:***

Make a list of activities, practices, or disciplines that help keep you present, open, and nourished on the path. Then look at your calendar or schedule - do you have time set aside for the activities that keep you whole, "uninvolved and unconcerned with small solutions"? Write a poem as invitation to your heart to keep aware, with a promise to provide the sustenance needed for the journey.

## May 2017: Working it out

May 4



Poetry can give us an avenue for entering imaginatively into what we know and don't know, about ourselves, about others. Some of our knowing and not knowing reveals itself horizontally through community groups that jostle one another, sharing space willingly or resentfully, perhaps most productively when we are seeking common ground. What we see in ourselves can be mirrored in people very like us, and very different from us. A few years ago, I wrote a poem called "Boarders," describing the feeling of being crowded out of my home by the refugees clamoring at the door. It ends with these lines:

Do I want to come inside this crowded  
Needy place  
Or run to where no bodies touch  
And isolation waits  
Armed sterile bright?

Since I wrote that poem, the world and I have changed. I've spent the last four years volunteering one morning a week as an English language tutor for adult immigrants. And though more people arrive in our classes and in our country every day, seeking refuge, the world and my heart now seem spacious enough to give all of them a home. In *Writing to Change the World*, Mary Pipher says, "Everything really interesting happens at borders. Borders teem with life, color, and complexity." One of those borders is the one between cultures and languages. Sometimes poets write beyond the end of a poem they thought was finished. That's what I did, and here's the new poem, called not "Boarders" but "Borders."

### **Borders**

In the crowded classroom at Discovery School  
waves of language rise up in a tangle of tongues-  
HmongSomaliNurUrduKoreanChineseFrenchSpanish.  
English is the *lingua franca* in this little world  
its devilish inconsistencies  
embellished with laughter and pantomime.  
Here in this haven

as we toss questions back and forth over the borders-  
 Are you scared of death?  
 Will wars ever end?  
 How can we raise good children?  
 rumors and terrors fade  
 and friendships flourish.

The students come day after day  
 walking as tall and straight as queens and princes  
 or bent under old wounds or burdens they can't lay down-  
 A sister dead of starvation in south Sudan  
 A brother shot before her child-eyes in Mogadishu.

I've learned only one word in Somali-*nur, hill*, with a river of  
 trills at the end.  
 Every day we climb the hill of language, my students and I,  
 celebrating small successes with high fives, 2 thumbs up, or a pat on the back.  
 Sometimes we're nourished for the climb with a feast of sambusas or kababs.  
 One day we'll reach the top  
 and though we all know that our classroom isn't Heaven  
 we can almost see it from there--  
 the world as God dreams it  
 drenched in the dew of kindness  
 green with hope for peace.

"See you next Tuesday," I say.  
 "Inshallah," they reply.  
 "God willing," I agree.

--Mara Faulkner, *OSB*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Write beyond the end of a poem you thought was finished (or at least abandoned some time in the past.) Or try writing between the lines of one of your poems. See if what appears between the lines is the real poem or part of the original.

## May 11

Last week we explored the ways cultures and communities interact in the same time and space. This week we consider how characteristics, skills, loves and hatreds can span generations. This poem tells the story of a surprising shared activity that helped me see something across four generations, though I will never know precisely what the activity meant to those who came before nor to those who follow.

### Dandelions



*You have to get it at the root*  
 my grandpa always said  
 as he dug into his perfect grass  
*If you just pull the top it comes right back*  
 He'd hold the forked spade sure and easy in his palm  
 putter eyeing the birdie cup  
 a divining rod seeking the source of all  
 He'd spy a weed and the tool would  
 furrow past lush blades of succulent green  
 down between the spiked leaves that dared invade  
 and sever the thing just beneath the surface of the ground  
*Ah, you see? That one won't be back*  
 The small town dentist of immigrant stock  
 made another clean extraction and  
 looked with pride at nature purified

Sometime after my grandpa died my lawyer dad  
 who cut and mended with words, not tools  
 began to hunt for weeds in his hitherto untended yard  
 A friend watching him one day puzzled over  
 his sudden love of unbroken turf  
 I told her about his sire, vigilant  
 against the yellow blooms and spreading leaves  
*Did he feel the thrust of an ancient seed?*  
 Or reach an understanding with the stoic Nordic son  
 who really did walk ten miles in the snow each day  
 to go to school? Which root did he find  
 when he sighted down the slightly rusting blade?

I too bought a dandelion fork  
one of the first things when I had a yard and kids and cares  
I try to keep the prickles down but they love to gather buds of pure gold  
and present them to me with anxious pride, breathe the seeds into the wind  
I leave a portion of the yard for them  
not just because of the ache in my lower back  
and the fatigue of stooping low  
but to leave some roots unbroken  
and work for my children's chosen tools

-- *Karen Lynn Erickson*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Think of an object that came to you from a parent, grandparent, or ancestor, or of a skill or characteristic that you share with one of them. Write a poem where you pass the object back and forth, telling one another what it means, or where you describe the recognition you feel at a tone of voice, a tilt of the head, a way of laughing, an ability that you share.

**May 18**



Martin Luther is supposed to have said, "If I knew the world would end tomorrow, I'd plant apple trees today." That bold statement pays homage to humankind's stubborn refusal to abandon hope. We continue to bear and raise children, teach them lessons for their future and the future of the Earth, plant trees whose fruit we may never taste. Martin Luther is also describing poetry, though he may not have realized it. There are certainly some moments in our personal and communal lives that feel like the end of the world, and then poets can only bear witness to tragedy. But poetry can help us resist the seductive voice of despair. We can write poems of difficult hope, facing oppression and suffering, and finding within ourselves and our communities the seedlings of resistance, kindness, and delight. I tried to do that in "Patches."

### **Patches**

*This is the day that the Lord has made.  
Let us rejoice and be happy today.*

Happiness is a crazy quilt stitched every day  
from scraps too good to throw away.  
We've learned from our mothers' mothers how and why.

They knew we need the warmth of color on long cold nights  
whether we lie together or alone.

Not that they thought about it much. No hard-working woman spent her days sewing.  
That was for the evening after the cows were milked, the dishes done up,  
the bread set to rise, when, by the light of the kerosene lamp  
her children did their homework at the table  
or someone played an old tune on the harmonica.  
Only then did she pull out her needle and patches.

Crazy quilts were made to last, the stitches  
tight and even, the fabric sound, the colors still cheerful  
though muted by wear and washing and drying in the sun.

So too the quilt of happiness. You end every day piecing together bright scraps-

the day's first laughter  
 the wren weaving her nest of twigs and grass in the end of the clothesline pole  
 friendship remembered, sturdy, made of rough cloth.

But as fast as you can set in a new patch, happiness is undone-  
 unstitched by the little hands of a child slave  
 by loved hands twisted by disease, now rigid and cold  
 by hands throwing bombs at peace treaties made and rent in a day  
 the edges frayed by exploding bodies.

*Yet this is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be happy today.*

The choice, my friends, is wrenching but plain:  
 surrender to the bitter cold  
 or in worn and faithful hands  
 take up our needles and patches again.

*--Mara Faulkner, OSB*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Try writing a poem of difficult hope. Here are a few suggestions:

- Create within the poem a place and time of respite.
- Dare to record delight, beauty, kindness, resistance.
- Look for humor and share it. Invite your readers to laugh.
- Show the world in all its vast and glorious and terrible diversity.
- Imagine alternatives to what is and must not be.

## May 25

During a visit to a retirement community's memory care unit, I met an elderly resident who periodically recited a prayer. This seemed to have a calming effect; though her recitation had no connection with our conversation, each time she said the familiar words, she seemed to relax. With its sounds, form and function, poetry can indeed bring comfort. Creating a poem can bring the deep and sustaining pleasure of capturing an experience or intimating a revelation. In this poem, the harvest figure is preparing for winter, where scarcity replaces plenty, trying to store up what will soon be gone, just as a poem can capture a fleeting moment. Whether it is in digging into the soil, or planting lovely blooms, or clearing the brush, or putting up jars for the winter, the work of poetry can please us and challenge us, calm us and keep us on our toes.



### Bringing In

Everything else waits  
while I gather herbs and plant new bulbs,  
pull carrots and onions from the chill ground,  
spread straw with cracked hands  
over garlic in the raised beds.

The kitchen floor is littered  
with bits of leaves and trails of fallen dirt.  
An impatient elbow shoves dishes aside  
to make space to wash and bundle the parsley and thyme.  
Work lies restless, untended on my desk  
and laundry mounds its way toward crisis -  
But this is harvest time.

I have come to love the snap  
of the wind saying the end is near,  
the aches in knee joints put to the test  
eager soon to rest until next year,  
the tables spread with the tangible fruits of a season's growth,  
even the massive compost heaps of empty or frost-stopped vines  
richly clinging to the last clods of crumbling soil,  
vines pulled from the earth in the

unrepentant wisdom of an autumnal soul.  
I hang high the rakes and tempered blades,  
scour rods and trowels, bent and nicked  
from hard use among glacial stones.

Inside I savor the smell of drying lemon balm,  
the plump feel of freezer corn and beans,  
the tang of tomatoes simmering in all the sun  
of so many summer noons.  
That sun seeps into the kitchen walls  
and rests in all the hidden summer corners  
where colanders and barbecue tongs lie still.  
That sun is now ground into my finger creases  
like the garlic and basil I've crushed and spread.  
The dark nights lengthen but harvest fills my cup.  
In every warm place I have  
I am harboring the sun.

--Karen Lynn Erickson

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***Invitation for your writing:***

Thank you for reading and writing with us this year. Look back over the poems that spoke to you and your own writings from the year. We hope you see a rich array of soul-nourishing words that will keep you company and lend you courage, joy, understanding, and tolerance for the mystery and unpredictability of human experience. Do you see themes or images or phrases that recur?

In the coming months, we plan to gather these entries into a form more easily downloaded, in parts or in whole, for use by individuals or groups. We will post a final message to our Facebook page when it is ready. It has been a marvelous adventure sharing this web experiment with you!

## September 2017: Transitions

### September 7



Today we celebrate the transition of "Caution: Poetry at Work." This year it will be the creation of Kyhl Lyndgaard and the tutors who make up the Writing Centers at Saint Ben's and Saint John's. Karen Erickson and I are delighted that Kyhl and his tutors will give the new light of their creativity to this site, devoted to the good work of reading and writing poetry. We're also pleased that they asked each of us to write one last poem to inaugurate the second year.

Speaking of transitions, some of you may have been lucky enough to witness the total eclipse of the sun on August 21, 2017. An eclipse is a spectacular transition from light to darkness and back to light, as the moon follows its leisurely orbit between Earth and sun. The moon's shadow gradually blocks out the sun's light until even a cloudless day turns into a moonless, starless night. As the moon continues in its path, oblivious of the awestruck watchers on Earth, light and warmth gradually reappear, as if it were the first day of creation.

In truth, this transition from light to darkness to light happens every evening and every morning without fail. But it might take an eclipse to make us notice this ordinary miracle and learn to love both day and night, darkness and light. In Salzburg, Austria, a total eclipse happened in 1999. When the light returned, instead of hearing a Mozart tune there in Mozart's birthplace, the visitors heard Louis Armstrong singing "What a Wonderful World" in praise of "the bright blessed day [and] the dark sacred night."

All transitions are, at least at the beginning, movement from light to the darkness of the unknown, untried - birth, the first month of college, new parenthood, the beginning of a new job, the transition from vigorous health to fragility. My poem this week celebrates "the dazzling darkness" life asks us to embrace.

## In the Dazzling Dark

*There is in God--some say--  
A deep but dazzling darkness. . . .  
--Henry Vaughan*

In the deep but dazzling darkness  
swim big-eyed fish in ocean caves no light has ever reached.

And all the shy animals at home only in darkness:  
bats asleep in caves during the day, floating silently alive at night,  
guided by unerring radar,  
black panthers with green eyes;

And owls calling "Who? Who?" Listening, gazing into the dark, we ask the questions  
that sleep during the day but rise up on strong wings at night: "Who am I?" "Who is my  
neighbor?" "Who, oh who, are you my God?"

In dark Earth the roots of ancient sequoias secretly reach out and clasp the long-  
fingered roots of neighboring trees, sharing food, helping each other stay alive through  
drought and fire, steadying the ground they need to grow.

In the glare of endless day, stars, dreams, and fireflies flicker out and fade.  
They're at home only in the velvet black of night.

So too the parts of each of us that find shelter in darkness-  
fears, dreams, hopes, sorrows, gladness too fragile and shy to bear the light of day.  
Only in the dark do we know ourselves, purely and without distraction.

In the pulsing darkness of the hive, bees are making honey and the wax for Easter  
candles that need chapel darkness to glow,  
as imagination glows in the dark hives of our brains.

In the darkness of our mother's womb God knits each of us into an intricate pattern,  
then knits us into herself. For nine months babies, their eyes sealed shut, navigate by  
touch, smell, and sound in that blood-rich darkness before they swim toward light  
and all its blooming wonders

The deep but dazzling darkness of God is a womb in whose shelter lives all that was, is,  
and still might be-  
deep space where God is creating new worlds, new wonders.  
The future, the moment after this one, intensely alive but still and always in shadow.

In the deep but dazzling darkness of God is the ocean of faith, the darkest virtue,  
where we trade certainty for possibility.

When we dare go into our undiscovered selves  
our roots grow toward each other, entwining, feeding, supporting, like ancient trees.  
And we grow together toward God, who at every moment, is growing deep  
underground toward us, leading us to unfathomable reaches of justice, mercy, and joy.

*--Mara Faulkner, OSB*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Think of a time when you made an abrupt transition from light to darkness (such as entering a bat cave) or from darkness to light (such as waking up to a bright light shining in your eyes.) Try to describe the experience. With sight all but useless, did your other senses take up the work of sensing? As you write, see if this experience becomes a metaphor for transitions in feelings, thoughts, or insights.

## September 21

As I prepare this posting, our world is facing violence, war, distrust, and tensions that erupt in the worst behavior that human beings carry within them. The poem I share this week does not address or solve any of those urgent problems; it is a poem about making time to write, even in the midst of so much need. There are wonderful models of poets whose writing grapples with the most challenging issues of our time, whose advocacy comes through their poetry. Their work seems unquestionably worthwhile to me, and I doubt that anyone would question the time they devote to their writing. When a poem comes from a more personal landscape, as this one does, or captures a moment of joy, or expresses something unrelated to politics or social justice or human drama, it can seem optional, unnecessary, and making time to write can be hard to justify. But writing poetry can nourish and enlighten us in the personal sphere, helping us prepare to meet the needs of the world more courageously and fully. Writing can help especially when it brings to the surface expectations or assumptions that operate subconsciously. Writing this poem helped me see an ideal of motherhood I had internalized, without being aware of it, a constant measure of my inevitable failure. Devoting time to the poem made the sense of failure worse in a way (I was even further from the ideal described here because I took time to write), but working through the poem helped me realize that *not writing the poem* would not bring me much closer to the ideal. Being a perfect *whatever* is always out of reach. Releasing myself from this expectation was a necessary step in my maturity as a parent, and learning to make time for what sustained me amidst the flurry of tasks was extremely important.



### The Good Mother's Reward

In the time it takes to write this poem  
 I could have opened the new packs of diapers,  
 stacked them neatly, strategically.  
 I could have folded all that laundry, too --  
 shirts, socks, training pants, onesies, tights, booties, hats.  
 I could have made it all ready for the frenzied morning grab.

I could have prepared a dinner of  
 freshly cooked vegetables packed with vitamins

bits of cheese cut in the shape of their names  
 fruit arranged in a smiley face and  
 sandwiches cut into triangles (not squares)  
 and even a cookie as a special treat.

I could have baked the cookies --  
 the house after daycare would have smelled  
 the way my grandmother's did,  
 dessert still warm on a gently perspiring plate  
 glass of milk confident, proud beside it,  
 two percent or *maybe even whole*.

I could have pressed my apron for the baking --  
 I know I could have found it crumpled in a drawer  
 and washed and ironed it, starched and crisp.  
 I could have added a ruffle, too, assuming I could find  
 my sewing machine, still in a box in the basement.  
 I could have made room among the cartons and the chaos.

I could have followed the seductive trail of motherhood  
 back to its subterranean storage where the perfect mother waits.  
 I see her sigh at me now, fold her plump arms over her ample waist  
 and then, just before the word from the sponsor,  
 she smiles that beatific all-forgiving smile  
 and rumples my hair with a slightly floury hand.

My own hand signals the ultimate laborsaving device to print  
 as I race to the freezer to see what's for dinner.  
 Pizza and guilt, and a poem as my just desserts.

-- *Karen Lynn Erickson*

***Invitation for your writing:***

Think about your own strategies for making time to write, knowing that what works for others may not work for you. If you wish that you wrote more, experiment with different writing schedules, locations, goals and strategies to share work and receive support from other writers. If the quandary of the ideal expressed in this poem resonated with you, consider whether an ideal may be helping and/or hindering your work. Draft a poem or lyrical prose passage where you explore the ideals against which you measure success - as the perfect writer, friend, student, athlete, daughter, brother, employee, partner, citizen.... What aspects of the ideal draw you forward, giving you strength and inspiring further effort? Is there any part of the image that needs to be updated, refined or retired?



## NOTES