

Beauty, Humor, and Hope: an On-Line Poetry Craft Workshop
Sunday, December 4th, 2-4 pm
sponsored by the Orange County Public Library
in Hillsborough, NC

Dear Writers,

I'm thrilled to be hosting you this Sunday, December 4th, from 2-4 pm for a craft workshop on writing poems of beauty, humor, and hope. This packet contains the poems we'll be studying on Sunday (followed by the poems we looked at in the first Beauty, Humor, and Hope workshop held on November 13th). You're welcome to read them in advance, or you may choose to wait and see them for the first time during the workshop, whichever you think will better serve you. During our time together, I'll discuss the techniques the poets used in crafting their work and offer ways to use the poems as jumping-off points for our own writing. As always, any prompts I offer when we begin writing will be optional.

Many thanks to library staff member Kafi Allah, Adult and Teen Services Coordinator, for her work in making this class available. We're very lucky to have her at the library.

See you all on Sunday!
Pam Baggett

Blueberries for Cal

Watching little Henry, six, scoop up blueberries
and shovel them into his mouth, possessed.

I'm so glad I brought blueberries—wish my kids
could/would eat them. Cal can't; Simone won't.

Henry's sisters Lucy & Jane took turns feeding each
other goldfish crackers and sips of juice.

Arms around each other's neck and back. Tiny things.
I wish my daughter had a sister like that

and my son a nervous system that let him walk
and munch berries. Sometimes I can't bear

all the things Cal doesn't get to do. I want to curse
everything I can't give him.

Admire/compare/despair—that's not the most real
feeling I'm feeling, is it? I feel joy in Henry's joy.

Blueberries for the child who wants them.
There's all this energetic sweetness, enough to go around,

to give and taste and trust. More than enough.
For Cal, too. I want to remember this.

My children seem to subsist on music and frosting.
Where there's frosting, there's cake.

Where there's music, someone chose to make a song
over all other things on this earth.

In Gratitude

For *h*, tiny fire
in the hollow of the throat,
opener of every *hey*,

hi, *how are you?*,
hello; chums with *c*,
with *t*, shy lover of *s*;

there and not
there—never seen,
hardly heard, yet

real as air
fluttering the oak,
holding up the hawk;

the sound
of a yawn, of sleep, of heat,
a match, its quivering

orange flame
turning wood into light,
light into breath;

the sound
of stars if stars
could be heard, perhaps

the sound
of space; life speaking life:
warm air endowed

to hard clay—
a heart, hurt,
a desire to be healed—

the work
of bees stuck in the nubs
of hollyhocks

(stanza break)

and columbine, time
to the extent that time
is light, is bright

as the match,
the flame of the sun,
real as the muffled hush

of sleep,
the fluttering oak,
a moth, the silent *oh*

in the throat
when a hand is laid
upon the shoulder;

hunger—
the body's empty cry
for filling, for loving,

for knowing
the intimacy of breath,
of half-breathed words

fragile as the stars:
hollow, hush,
holy.

Possible

now my dress smells like rain & all day long: I've been
eager to get back to my book. a novel about a young
couple making pasta & falling into one another's
skin. an Irish novel, with names of cities that clunk
around in my mouth — cities I'd never heard of
but now ride my skull like pleasant, individually-
wrapped candies, words with strange cactus-like
shapes, words I star: Sligo. Carricklea. I turn
the page. my mind goes: stick, stick, stick,
my brain goes hungry for more. today I run
through the rain in my wooden clogs & pleasure
at the sound: thump, thump, thump, the entire
green world of a street flashing down an open
sewer drain. So alive! I think, then
remember what else makes me possible: public
libraries. cartilage. a good hardcover. a prayer
I overhear my cab driver mumble while
passing by a full school bus. goose bumps I get
from reading my old journal, one sentence,
another: My heart is a skull zone (did I really
write that?) — & oh, I am possible again. I am
a fragrant, silly self. today, I thank
the worms who eat the dirt who
break down the soil who make
the lilacs possible and young, forever
purpling, forever cradled in my palms as I cross
Blakemore Avenue and it rains, rains, rains, and I
think about eating up the alphabet, which has
made a city into a word into a sound: Sligo,
which slides, slinky-like, into my brain,
the dear alphabet which has made me
into a woman who will cross the street
and love the lilacs and treasure the strange
turn of the day, the strange turn of
a word, a sentence, a curve and a stroke
of black ink that — thank you — brought me here.

Decadence

*If the ancients deny heaven treasures wine, and say
moon has never understood wine—I know it's nonsense.*
—Yang Wan-Li

A fawn, no older than four days, wobbles
to stand beneath her mother's belly, bumps
her still-forming head against the udder,
which starts the flow of milk. The delicious
sweetness of dame's rocket, pink and purpled,
fills the air and makes me think this is what the fat
in doe's milk tastes like as it seeps
from her nipples into the slurping mouth
of her young. The month of May possesses
a viscous fertility: the same fawn will run
in a matter of weeks, wine pouring from heaven
as sun and rain. In the riffles, brown trout
stuff themselves on sulphur and coffin flies.
While we fish we watch the water's surface—
jaws parting, bodies porpoising, a thousand dimples
and swirls that mimic the expanding galaxy.
In the sandy banks above the river, fox and mink
dig for turtle eggs, yellow yolk dripping from chins,
their mates lapping the evidence to sate desire.
My love and I sleep naked in the returned warmth,
hands draped over the round flesh of a long marriage,
over the pleasure we take in each other's aging bodies.
Two nights ago a bear destroyed a friend's beehives,
broke the boxes and left the drawers strewn
like half-read books. In the face of this wreckage
he laughed, told me to think of the rapture
in a pink tongue swathed in honey, of the black-armed
stickiness, the splendid apiary confusion: bees flying
everywhere, stinging the bear's immense head
as he reared up and grinned, licking and grinding
the waxy comb between his teeth and gums.

Museum of Sex

with all the women I love.
Rajeeyah & Lisa pose luminous
in front of neon lights. Glow
& strike. Lean. Renée & I light
up with laughter & we cackle
high & low. Nanya-Akuki
searches for the best dosas
spiced potatoes & chutney.
We study want & desire.
Decide on dinner while
searching the punk scene
& the start of stag films.
Tokumbo meets us after
& we trail toward Pongal.
Talk race & class & Beyoncé
& Toni Morrison & chakra
cards we read one by one
by one by one by one by one.
This sisterhood. Call us
all our names. Say love. See
us. Say trust & hope & laugh
& joy & much & miracle.
Yes. Say miracle. & see this.
These women. Surrounding
a table full of nourishment.
All of it. Such abundance yes.
Such luck to love this much.

Man Listening To Disc

This is not bad --
ambling along 44th Street
with Sonny Rollins for company,
his music flowing through the soft calipers
of these earphones,
as if he were right beside me
on this clear day in March,
the pavement sparkling with sunlight,
pigeons fluttering off the curb,
nodding over a profusion of bread crumbs.
In fact, I would say
my delight at being suffused
with phrases from his saxophone --
some like honey, some like vinegar --
is surpassed only by my gratitude
to Tommy Potter for taking the time
to join us on this breezy afternoon
with his most unwieldy bass
and to the esteemed Arthur Taylor
who is somehow managing to navigate
this crowd with his cumbersome drums.
And I bow deeply to Thelonious Monk
for figuring out a way
to motorize -- or whatever -- his huge piano
so he could be with us today.
This music is loud yet so confidential.
I cannot help feeling even more
like the center of the universe
than usual as I walk along to a rapid
little version of "The Way You Look Tonight,"
and all I can say to my fellow pedestrians,
to the woman in the white sweater,
the man in the tan raincoat and the heavy glasses,
who mistake themselves for the center of the universe --
all I can say is watch your step,
because the five of us, instruments and all,
are about to angle over
to the south side of the street
and then, in our own tightly knit way,

(no stanza break)

turn the corner at Sixth Avenue.
And if any of you are curious
about where this aggregation,
this whole battery-powered crew,
is headed, let us just say
that the real center of the universe,
the only true point of view,
is full of hope that he,
the hub of the cosmos
with his hair blown sideways,
will eventually make it all the way downtown.

I'd rather be influenced

to send more postcards.
To kiss with more tongue
and let cantaloupe juice
run all the way down
to my elbows. I'd rather
be influenced to cook
more quiche and make cold brew
at home. To wake up early and stay
in bed. To be better at remembering
my friends' birthdays.
To vote early. I want an algorithm
that worships heirloom tomatoes.
The sound of that one summer
cricket outside my window.
Peach sorbet with tiny spoons.
The way the mountains go copper at dusk.
The chatter of your dog laughing
in a dream across the room.

Immigrant Picnic

It's the Fourth of July, the flags
are painting the town,
the plastic forks and knives
are laid out like a parade.

And I'm grilling, I've got my apron,
I've got potato salad, macaroni, relish,
I've got a hat shaped
like the state of Pennsylvania.

I ask my father what's his pleasure
and he says, "Hot dog, medium rare,"
and then, "Hamburger, sure,
what's the big difference,"
as if he's really asking.

I put on hamburgers and hot dogs,
slice up the sour pickles and Bermudas,
uncap the condiments. The paper napkins
are fluttering away like lost messages.

"You're running around," my mother says,
"like a chicken with its head loose."

"Ma," I say, "you mean cut off,
loose and cut off being as far apart
as, say, son and daughter."

She gives me a quizzical look as though
I've been caught in some impropriety.
"I love you and your sister just the same," she says,
"Sure," my grandmother pipes in,
"you're both our children, so why worry?"

That's not the point I begin telling them,
and I'm comparing words to fish now,
like the ones in the sea at Port Said,
or like birds among the date palms by the Nile,
unrepentantly elusive, wild.

(stanza break)

"Sonia," my father says to my mother,
"what the hell is he talking about?"
"He's on a ball," my mother says.

"That's roll!" I say, throwing up my hands,
"as in hot dog, hamburger, dinner roll...."

"And what about roll out the barrels?" my mother asks,
and my father claps his hands, "Why sure," he says,
"let's have some fun," and launches
into a polka, twirling my mother
around and around like the happiest top,

and my uncle is shaking his head, saying
"You could grow nuts listening to us,"

and I'm thinking of pistachios in the Sinai
burgeoning without end,
pecans in the South, the jumbled
flavor of them suddenly in my mouth,
wordless, confusing,
crowding out everything else.

The following poems are the ones I presented at the first Beauty, Humor, and Hope workshop on November 13th. Enjoy!

Patience

Call it sloth; call it sleaze;
call it bummary if you please;
I'll call it patience;
I'll call it joy, this,
my supine congress
with the newly yawning grass
and beetles chittering
in their offices
beneath me, as I
nearly drifting to dream
admire this so-called weed which,
if I guarded with teeth bared
my garden of all alien breeds,
if I was all knife and axe
and made a life of hacking
would not have burst gorgeous forth and beckoning
these sort of phallic spires
ringleted by these sort of vaginal blooms
which the new bees, being bees, heed;
and yes, it is spring, if you can't tell
from the words my mind makes
of the world, and everything
makes me mildly or more
hungry—the worm turning
in the leaf mold; the pear blooms
howling forth their pungence
like a choir of wet-dreamed boys
hiking up their skirts; even
the neighbor cat's shimmy
through the grin in the fence,
and the way this bee
before me after whispering
in my ear dips her head
into those dainty lips
not exactly like one entering a chapel
and friends
as if that wasn't enough
blooms forth with her forehead dusted gold
like she has been licked
and so blessed
by the kind of God
to whom this poem is prayer.

The Same City

For James L. Hayes

The rain falling on a night
in mid-December,
I pull to my father's engine
wondering how long I'll remember
this. His car is dead. He connects
jumper cables to his battery,
then to mine without looking in
at me and the child. Water beads
on the windshields, the road sign,
his thin blue coat. I'd get out now,
prove I can stand with him
in the cold, but he told me to stay
with the infant. I wrap her
in the blanket, staring
for what seems like a long time
into her open, toothless mouth,
and wish she was mine. I feed her
an orange softened first in my mouth,
chewed gently until the juice runs
down my fingers as I squeeze it
into hers. What could any of this matter
to another man passing on his way
to his family, his radio deafening
the sound of water and breathing
along all the roads bound to his?
But to rescue a soul is as close
as anyone comes to God.
Think of Noah lifting a small black bird
from its nest. Think of Joseph,
raising a son that wasn't his.

Let me begin again.
I want to be holy. In rain
I pull to my father's car
with my girlfriend's infant.
She was eight weeks pregnant when we met.
But we'd make love. We'd make
love below stars and shingles

(no stanza break)

while her baby kicked between us.
Perhaps a man whose young child
bears his face, whose wife waits
as he drives home through rain
& darkness, perhaps that man
would call me a fool. So what.

There is one thing I will remember
all my life. It is as small
& holy as the mouth
of an infant. It is speechless.

When his car would not stir,
my father climbed in beside us,
took the orange from my hand,
took the baby in his arms.

In 1974, this man met my mother
for the first time as I cried or slept
in the same city that holds us
tonight. If you ever tell my story,
say that's the year I was born.

why i feed the birds

once
i saw my grandmother hold out
her hand cupping a small offering
of seed to one of the wild sparrows
that frequented the bird bath she
filled with fresh water every day

she stood still
maybe stopped breathing
while the sparrow looked
at her, then the seed
then back as if he was
judging her character

he jumped into her hand
began to eat
she smiled

a woman holding
a small god

Trophic Cascade

After the reintroduction of gray wolves
to Yellowstone and, as anticipated, their culling
of deer, trees grew beyond the deer stunt
of the mid century. In their up reach
songbirds nested, who scattered
seed for underbrush, and in that cover
warrened snowshoe hare. Weasel and water shrew
returned, also vole, and came soon hawk
and falcon, bald eagle, kestrel, and with them
hawk shadow, falcon shadow. Eagle shade
and kestrel shade haunted newly-berried
runnels where mule deer no longer rummaged, cautious
as they were, now, of being surprised by wolves. Berries
brought bear, while undergrowth and willows, growing
now right down to the river, brought beavers,
who dam. Muskrats came to the dams, and tadpoles.
Came, too, the night song of the fathers
of tadpoles. With water striders, the dark
gray American dipper bobbed in fresh pools
of the river, and fish stayed, and the bear, who
fished, also culled deer fawns and to their kill scraps
came vulture and coyote, long gone in the region
until now, and their scat scattered seed, and more
trees, brush, and berries grew up along the river
that had run straight and so flooded but thus dammed,
compelled to meander, is less prone to overrun. Don't
you tell me this is not the same as my story. All this
life born from one hungry animal, this whole,
new landscape, the course of the river changed,
I know this. I reintroduced myself to myself, this time
a mother. After which, nothing was ever the same.

Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem

So here's what I've got, the reasons why our marriage might work: Because you wear pink but write poems about bullets and gravestones. Because you yell at your keys when you lose them, and laugh, loudly, at your own jokes. Because you can hold a pistol, gut a pig. Because you memorize songs, even commercials from thirty years back and sing them when vacuuming. You have soft hands. Because when we moved, the contents of what you packed were written inside the boxes. Because you think swans are overrated and kind of stupid. Because you drove me to the train station. You drove me to Minneapolis. You drove me to Providence. Because you underline everything you read, and circle the things you think are important, and put stars next to the things you think I should think are important, and write notes in the margins about all the people you're mad at and my name almost never appears there. Because you made that pork recipe you found in the Frida Kahlo Cookbook. Because when you read that essay about Rilke, you underlined the whole thing except the part where Rilke says love means to deny the self and to be consumed in flames. Because when the lights are off, the curtains drawn, and an additional sheet is nailed over the windows, you still believe someone outside can see you. And one day five summers ago, when you couldn't put gas in your car, when your fridge was so empty—not even leftovers or condiments—there was a single twenty-ounce bottle of Mountain Dew, which you paid for with your last damn dime because you once overheard me say that I liked it.

Love Song of the Bat with Vertigo

Oh your hair! How I long to stroke your hair with the tip of my wing like the giant in that book about mice and men, so I escape your attic, a mouse with wings, soaring above the mousetraps smeared with peanut butter in your kitchen. You shriek at me and hand the giant standing next to you a bat, not a bat like me, but a bat for hitting baseballs, now a bat to hit bats, so I sail high and away, four times around the room, a fastball slipping from the hand of the sweaty pitcher who puts the tying run on first in the ninth inning. You toss the giant a bucket to catch me, and suddenly I am incarcerated up against the wall, so I beat my wings inside the bucket the way a drummer improvises a solo, a song for you that silences the chatter in the nightclub. The bucket dumps me into the night air, a bat with vertigo, and I flap away upside down, searching the darkness for the light glimmering from your hair, like the waterfall in that cave where all good bats go to die.

Romantic Moment

After seeing the nature documentary we walk down Canyon Road,
onto the plaza of art galleries and high end clothing stores

where the orange trees are fragrant in the summer night
and the smooth adobe walls glow fleshlike in the dark.

It is just our second date, and we sit down on a bench,
holding hands, not looking at each other,

and if I were a bull penguin right now I would lean over
and vomit softly into the mouth of my beloved

and if I were a peacock I'd flex my gluteal muscles to
erect and spread the quills of my Cinemax tail.

If she were a female walkingstick bug she might
insert her hypodermic probiscus directly into my neck

and inject me with a rich hormonal sedative
before attaching her egg sac to my thoracic undercarriage,

and if I were a young chimpanzee I would break off a nearby tree limb
and smash all the windows in the plaza jewelry stores.

And if she was a Brazilian leopard frog she would wrap her impressive
tongue three times around my right thigh and

pummel me softly against the surface of our pond
and I would know her feelings were sincere.

Instead we sit awhile in silence, until
she remarks that in the relative context of tortoises and iguanas,

human males seem to be actually rather expressive.
And I say that female crocodiles really don't receive

enough credit for their gentleness,
Then she suggests that it is time for us to go

do something personal, hidden, and human.