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Poetic License: the Past in Creative Writing

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Poetic License: The Past in Creative Writing

Imaginative work . . . is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners.

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Four writers examine the transmutation of personal experience and historical material into poetry and fiction.

Poetic License

Mara Faulkner, OSB

I like the title, “Poetic License,” because it got me to thinking about all the activities we need a license for. It seems that most of them pose a danger to ourselves and the people around us — a sixteen-year-old behind the wheel of the family Toyota, a pilot flying a 747 with a few hundred people aboard, a surgeon up to his elbows in your abdominal cavity, a hunter in blaze orange with a high-powered deer rifle. A license gives us some small assurance that these people are trained and will act responsibly.

You don't need a license to write poetry. I guess that's because it sometimes seems like the tamest of pursuits. For me, that's not the case. Poetry gives me the courage to look steadfastly at people, events, and parts of myself that I'd shy away from otherwise and the license to write about them. In all of my writing I'm obsessed with seeing

— its dangers, its blessings — and for me poetry is one way of seeing, though I rarely see at the end the thing I saw at the beginning. Every poem I consider worth keeping shows me something I didn't know existed until it took shape in the poem, like the leaping deer that materializes in front of your car on a foggy night.

My most trusted mystic is Dame Julian of Norwich, who lived in fourteenth-century England. In *Showings*, she recounts that when she was thirty years old and deathly sick, Jesus appeared to her in a series of visions. She recovered and spent the next twenty years in her anchorhold pondering what she had seen with her “ghostly sight.” But her visions weren't all she pondered. Past the window of her hermitage rumbled carts heaped high with the bodies of men, women, and children felled by the Black Death, which struck Norwich three times during Julian's lifetime, wiping out half the population. If the wind was right, it might have carried to her nose the smell of burning flesh from Norwich's “Lollard Pit,” where church officials burned Lollard preachers for heresy, the worst one being translating the Bible into English and putting it into the hands of literate lay people. Julian might have been tempted to overleap the tenacious, resistant physical world, a world that bruises, sickens, dies, kills, in order to arrive at her unshakable conviction that “alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thynges shalle be wele.” But she didn't do that. Instead, she looked intently at the messy world, seeing it as evidence of God's love and brilliance. In a passage that some priggish translators edited out of her *Showings*, she writes:

A man walks upright, and the food in his body is shut in as in a well-made purse. When the time of his necessity comes, the purse is opened and then shut again, in most seemly fashion. And it is God who does this, as it is shown when he says that he comes down to us in our humblest needs.¹

Like Julian's visions, my poems never give me a license to leave behind the frayed, imperfect, wounded world, though I understand the temptation to retreat into imagination. I agree with the French-Jewish philosopher and activist Simone Weil, who wrote during World War II: “Let us love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love.”² I hope that my poems have both love and resistance in them.

“Common Courtesy” made me see something I didn't want to look at with anything even close to love — a caterpillar, not the silent, green kind that spins itself a gold-stitched cocoon and turns into a monarch, but the big, noisy yellow kind that gouges huge holes in the landscape. This one was digging a storm sewer across our yard. To my surprise, this poem, which began in resistance, ended in metamorphosis and a kind of love.

Common Courtesy

The yellow iron caterpillar
bright against the spring's newness
stretches its sinuous neck
like a descendant of dinosaurs.
Its jagged teeth scoop up a mouthful of lilac bushes,
dirt and all, and set them alongside the trench it's digging.
Then its delicate nose nudges the concrete drain tile,
as gray and hollow as an old bone,
into the trench
and buries it.

A tiny man looks out through its square eye
and guides its great teeth, daintily sparing
the budding maple and the little ash tree we've coddled
through dry summers.

It's the most powerful thing in the land
but robins and mourning doves that fly away squawking
when I come near ignore the great beast
or accept it as one of them.
When its cheerful growl falls silent
a bluebird perches on its sleeping head, and in the morning
the cardinals whistle it awake.

I thought it was an enemy
on a rampage
but now I'm not so sure.

It's not planting a bomb, just a storm sewer
to carry rainwater to the Millstream.
Maybe it's as natural, its iron body mined from underground,
as the trees and I. It seems to be in its element
creeping up hills of dirt on circular rubber paws.

Its sidekick, the chubby bobcat, hurries back and forth
smoothing the ground to replant the lilacs
while the trees, unconcerned,
scatter pollen and flowers
on the raw earth.

Poetry doesn't give me a license to change either the present or the past. I've written quite a bit about my parents, both in my poems and in the memoir I recently finished. Because I love them so much, I've sometimes been tempted to pretty them up, to trim off the frayed edges and turn them into dream parents and the past into a dream past. Again, I try to resist. The next poem is about my mother, the gardener, and her tough, unsentimental relationship with animals.

Mom and the Rabbit

"Humans and animals are not profoundly perpendicular."
— Andy Opitz

We can't learn
from the animals how
to be human.
The fox can teach us only to be more
like him loving
the smell of rabbit and mouse
the hot spurt of blood when teeth
puncture the jugular.
The rabbit can teach us the succulence of iris shoots
and terror so deep it wrings one scream
from a silent throat.

But I wonder about my mother
and the big black rabbit
and the way they harvested her pea crop
in her 81st summer
she in her row
he in his
the only sounds the wind
the muffled fall
of peas on peas in her bucket
and the little *tnk tnk tnk*
of her tongue
against the roof of her mouth—
her work song.

What did she learn from him
those cool companionable mornings?

Not patience silence hunger the scant
protection of invisibility. Life as girl and woman
handed her those texts and she'd
learned them years ago by heart.

Not sentiment softness. She never
looked away from death
nor called it by another name.

She could bait and empty a trap
rid her garden of gophers with a hose and a baseball bat
scald and pluck a ring-necked pheasant
kill an old hen with one shining downswing of the hatchet
then with powerful hands
pull out from under its ribs the red and purple guts
the thin-shelled eggs and yellow fat.

In a lean year if the fox
didn't get it first this rabbit
could be food.

She didn't name the rabbit *friend*
unless friendship means the two of them
hunger allayed by the lavish summer
she in her row
he in his
under wind sun sky
moseying along toward death.

On the other hand, my poetry has taken me back four thousand years and given me the license to reconstruct Scripture in the light of all I've learned about women living in patriarchal cultures, such as that of ancient Israel. I've always been horrified by the Genesis story of Sarah and Hagar and their sons Isaac and Ishmael, as well as by the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, his first-born, in obedience to God's command. Sarah laughs first in disbelief, then in joy and triumph when the angel announces the good news of her pregnancy. But I wondered what lurked under the laughter. So, I imagined my way back into her thoughts and feelings. I thought about the pressure on women in patriarchy to produce sons, a pressure that often turns them into enemies and persecutors of other women and children. Those ponderings produced this poem:

The Last Laugh

*Sarah then said, "God has given me cause to laugh—
and all who hear of it will laugh with me." Gen 21:6*

Sarah laughed once
they say
when the angel
told that joke
about her withered
womb sprouting
a son.

Turns out the angel
was right
as they always
were back then
and Sarah could silence
her rival's taunting
once and for all—
no need now
to divide love or property
with Hagar's bastard boy
needful only until God
and Abraham
did the impossible.

Abraham
who always seemed
to be doing something
awful
at somebody's
bidding
brought Hagar
the news.

Did Sarah's cackle
of triumph
follow Hagar
into the wilderness
with Ishmael on her back

or did her laughter
die as she caught a glimpse—
mother's intuition
you might call it—
of Abraham

dragging his old bones
up the mountain
with his burden of belief
in a strange god hungry for sons
and the boy trailing behind
asking plaintively
“Abba, father, where is the lamb?”

Finally, I’ve been thinking lately about Theodor Adorno’s often-quoted and often-misinterpreted statement, “After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric.”³ I know he meant something far more complex than these words, taken out of context, seem to say. In addition, he later admitted that he’d been wrong, and that the sufferings of the post-modern world *needed* the expression of poetry. But a statement like this one, repeated often enough, could lead to the conclusion that poetry is so trivial as to be barbaric in the face of extreme oppression and suffering, or, on the other hand, that poetry and the material world, with its racial, class, and species divisions, belong to separate realms. I disagree with both of these ideas about poetry. My current favorite poem is Marilyn Nelson’s sonnet sequence, “A Wreath for Emmett Till,” subtitled “R.I.P. Emmett Louis Till, 1941–1955.” These fifteen poems are Petrarchan sonnets intricately woven together, the last line of sonnet 1 becoming the first line of sonnet 2, and so on until sonnet 15, which weaves a wreath of the repeated lines. The poem is Italian in form but Shakespearean in imagery and allusions, with *Rosemary for remembrance*, rue, yew, Queen Anne’s lace tangled with the terrible imagery of the lynch mob and the dead boy.⁴

I hope I have courage like Nelson’s to follow where poetry is leading, and that war, the degradation of the environment, the whittling down of women and children, even Auschwitz will find their way onto the welcoming page. This poem takes a step in that direction.

Creation Story

For the girls and women of Afghanistan

In the beginning, before learning was squeezed small, prettily packaged and tagged, and forced to sated students, the spoon grating against clenched teeth, the children of Ireland were starving, having been forbidden the old stories and the magic of words that lilted like jigs and reels. They were, after all, barely human, potato eaters, white niggers whose barbaric brogue murdered the fine English tongue, receptacles too crude for poetry.

Hungry themselves, brave priests came in the night to the classrooms of hedgerow and ditch. In whispers, taught Chuchalain, taught Jesus Christ, taught Shakespeare.

Their mouths green with the succulence of words, they taught barefoot children to break the iron shackles of law. Amidst the gibbering of Empire, where prison bars grew like starveling trees, in the cold rain, in the dark,

there was paradise.

Imagining the Past: *Sophie Collins*

Cynthia N. Malone

In 1860, a Victorian woman with the astonishing name of Emily Faithfull hired fifteen girls to work as typesetters for the newly established Victoria Press. Queen Victoria bestowed a royal warrant on the press, congratulating Emily Faithfull for providing jobs for women, but others responded less enthusiastically. Pranksters covered the typesetters' stools with ink and mixed up the letters in the typesecases, and unions blacklisted the men who ran the presses.

Sophie Collins is the fictional account of a fifteen-year-old girl's experiences working at the Victoria Press. Sophie and her younger sister, Liza, come to live at the Refuge

for Destitute and Homeless Boys and Girls in Broad Street, London, when their father dies and their mother takes a position as a governess. Since that time, Sophie has expected that she and Liza will eventually go into service in London households. Now Emily Faithfull has hired Sophie, along with another girl from Broad Street, Jane, as an apprentice typesetter (also called compositor) for the Victoria Press.

The premise of the novel is that Emily Faithfull has asked Sophie to keep notes on the work of the compositors so that she will have a record of the history of this scheme for women's employment. Sophie has a supply of paper, pens, and ink, and she sits down often to write — but she has trouble focusing on this task. She spends her Sunday afternoons racking her brain to reconstruct the week's work. She turns in those Sunday-afternoon notes to Miss Faithfull; the notes she keeps for herself form the novel.

This premise makes it possible for Sophie to reflect on her experience at the Press and in her life more generally. My research has informed the way I imagine what such a life might have been like. The novel includes excerpts from a number of historical documents, so that Sophie often comments on newspaper articles, magazine articles, and books that she encounters at the Press. She also reacts to the other apprentices, who include middle-class girls and orphans.

Two bits of material history are important in this section. First, the crinoline of 1860 was quite large. Crinolines had become widely affordable — many servants wore them — but old dresses could barely stretch over those huge cages, so the ridges showed. Second, the compositors worked from cases of lead type. Each letter, number, mark of punctuation, and space had a designated compartment in the type case.

The historical figures in this excerpt are Emily Faithfull and another reformer, Bessie Parkes.

Sophie Collins

March–April 1860

Their dresses flamed up in a blaze of powder, Miss Faithfull said; the very air took fire. Another matchgirl seized a bucket and doused them, and both survived. Mind the story, she counseled, and keep yourselves in modest crinolines. If those wide skirts should brush the hearth, they will blaze out like great torches.

I wish I had a moss-green velvet dress, with skirts as wide as a church bell. But if Miss Faithfull is right, then Jane and I have got the safest clothing in all of Britain. Our starveling skirts stretch over the ribs of our crinolines like worn silk on an old umbrella. God forgive me! I mind it very much.

Julia whispers to Charlotte about our clothes, pulling back the fullness of her skirts in mockery of ours. I heard her whisper, as she hung her own neat little bonnet on the peg, that ours could serve as coal scuttles. Charlotte dared not offend her, but she had at least the good grace to look uncomfortable.

I cannot see how Julia can credit herself with any virtue on the grounds of her prosperity, though she so clearly does. Her father owns a thriving millinery shop; her mother supports the Committee schemes for the employment of women. On our first day of training, Julia told us with some pride that she had feigned enthusiasm for Miss Faithfull's Press because the Committee means to pay us union wages after our apprenticeship. As she lives with her family in Russell Square and does not need the money for living expenses, she intends to set aside most of her wages to build up a stock of capital. Miss Faithfull smiles on Julia with special favor, as Julia has hinted that she will set up another women's press when she has completed her training here. Julia regards herself as quite clever because she has hoodwinked Miss Faithfull; every day her smug and haughty smile settles more deeply.

God knows that smug face parades itself in dozens of shops every day, all over London. The shopkeepers of the city must loathe the very sight of it, the face of undeserved comfortable circumstances, though of course they are obliged to bow and scrape. I am heartily sick of the airs and the proud, self-satisfied display. Any street child, any girl from the Broad Street Refuge knows how slender the separation between those women and our mothers. It seems to me that fine women take great pains to avoid noticing. Perhaps after all Julia is wise to set aside her stock of money. Still, I cannot think it right to use this place to work out her own financial salvation.

Jane says that I should mind less, that I gain nothing from splenetic condemnation. That was her phrase, "splenetic condemnation." The mighty phrase set me back, as Jane does not often speak severely. If Julia must give account to anyone, Jane said, it must be to her parents, or to Miss Faithfull, or to God Himself. I feel the truth of her point, though I own I feel as strongly the truth of mine. I grant that I am young, but it appears to me that Justice rolls down unspeakably slowly. In a fair few cases, Justice never rolls down at all. Jane says that such a view must be counted as pride, perhaps even heresy. But she admits that often, often, it appears to fit the facts of the case.

With regard to Julia, my spleen has had less to feed on these last two days, as I have been setting an article about the emigration of women to Australia for work as servants and governesses. Miss Bessie Parkes argues that her emigration scheme will ease the problem of the surplus female population; emigrant women, she contends, will find opportunities to make useful and happy lives in Australia. I am half-persuaded, as good positions are few enough here. Still, I wonder whether she has not gilded the prospects. The most adventurous woman's heart must suffer great trial in the long sea passage and in the slow adaptation to that distant country.

Miss Parkes' is a rational scheme, I suppose, put in the light of other possibilities available to most women. So many men have left this country already, great shiploads of soldiers and clerks and the hopeful lost, like Jane's brother, Robert. I suppose that women seeking marriage may do well to sail after them, to Australia or Canada. Then, too, England has trained enough governesses for every family in the colonies. In that sense the nation can surely profit from exporting governesses as surplus goods. Nevertheless I object to the notion of a "surplus female population." Unless we are all to line up two by two and file through this life as if entering Noah's ark, I cannot see why a greater number of women constitutes a surplus.

Surely it is not the women themselves who are redundant, but what England has made of them. I have granted already that we produce a surplus of governesses. But governesses do not breed themselves, rabbit-like. English society turns out so many governesses precisely because it allows women to turn our hands to so few and such impoverished species of work in this world. Many who write for the *Englishwoman's Journal* protest against the dreadful waste that passes for education of wealthy girls — piano-playing, drawing, fine needlework. My own poor education progressed little after Liza and I went into the Refuge, but even the littlest children at Broad Street turn their hands to useful work: standing on a chair to stir the porridge, bleaching and washing the linen, scrubbing the floors and shining the brass. Better that by far than spend our afternoons reclining on satin-covered divans, practicing French knots and crewel work. Stitch together the fancy needlework of England's leisured women and stretch it across the country as the banner of women's contributions to the nation: surplus indeed.

Perhaps Jane would say, in her quiet, kind voice, that I should strive to be less self-righteous. Very probably she would be right. Surely the judgment of the prosperous is the sin that doth most easily beset me.

If I sound again and again the note of splenetic condemnation — mild Jane's sharp phrase lodged deeply, I find — I do not forget the powerful change this position has wrought in my life. This apprenticeship alters our future prospects so completely that I am sometimes quite overcome. If I succeed, if the Press succeeds, I will earn enough to take lodgings and support Liza and Mama. But if my work proves unsatisfactory — if the Press cannot turn a profit — I tell myself that our lot will then be no worse than it would have been without this chance. Liza and I will go into service; Mama will enter a home. Some nights I dream that I must make my way across a rope stretched high above Kingsway. I must cross it alone, then cross it again, bearing my fever-stricken sister, then yet again, this time with my frail and shrunken mother. I startle awake, certain that I will miss my step and kill us all.

I am deeply grateful to have this place, though I have found much in this work that I had not considered. I did expect the patient labor over each line, the careful placement of every letter and space, though I now see that the shoddiest handbill hawked in the streets has cost considerable time and skill. I supposed that the setting of articles for the *Journal* might resemble a slow, deliberate reading. Foolish as it sounds, I had never considered the time we would spend taking every letter, every mark of punctuation, every space from the forms and returning each piece of type to its proper place in the cases. Miss Faithfull has read reports of ingenious typesetting machines, but no one has yet invented a mechanical device that could replace the human labor of distributing the lines of type back into the cases.

Setting lines brings me a deep pleasure, fringed though it is with anxiety about my speed and accuracy. Returning the type to the case brings only the brief and compromised pleasure I used to feel when I admired the well-scrubbed hall at Broad Street, moments before the children burst through the front door from their walk. In this way the compositor's work seems to me of a piece with all the work that falls to women: preparing meals that vanish in an instant; washing the plates and pots so that we might begin cooking and serving again; washing the clothes that grow soiled before day's end. Each task bears its nugget of pleasure, I think, its own tiny moment of proud achievement — achievement that dissolves into dirt and mess to be conquered again, world without end. How different must be the pleasure of the author, whose labors end, whose book rests in the hand. What delight it must be to make a thing that endures.

Speaking (of) Poetry

Karen L. Erickson

When people ask me, “What do you do?” I sometimes say, “I teach French,” or “I am a professor,” or “I’m a church musician,” or even “I’m a mother of two.” I never say, “I am a writer,” even though all of my work involves writing in some way.

“I am a writer” seems brazen. “I am a writer” makes me think of tweed jackets, fragrant pipes, torment, wild hair, deadlines, agents, doing lunch. It would be even harder to say “I am a poet.” Poets are dreamy, faraway, impractical, burdened with cadences only they can hear. Like dogs howling at a whistle beyond human hearing, poets suffer for their art.

All the same, I am a writer, and I’ve written poems most of my life. Poetry stretches language for me, and widens space in my mind for thought, the way my babies widened my ribcage to have room to mature before birth. Poetry is a foreign language, with all the gifts of foreignness — we see assumptions and misunderstandings more easily when we speak “foreign.” We see what we can’t say, or can’t yet say. This is part of why I learned and teach French: to learn to see the foreignness not just of French, but of my own native language, the limits of plain old talk. So, perhaps, as I easily say, “I speak French,” I could say, “I speak poetry.”

Poetry allows me to recall past experiences in a concise and vivid way, as a snapshot or a smell or a song might do. Some of the poems below are mementoes of my experience as a mother. Others capture a glimpse of life changes or moments of particular awareness. I write poems too when I’m grappling with something that I can’t get at discursively or rationally. Poetry is an economical, indirect way to gain access to a different, productive mode of reflection. Wrestling with a poem is one way to tangle with deep thoughts, complicated problems, like mortality or grief; these poems shelter emotions that otherwise might go underground or flood my perception.

Finally, I write poems for the sheer enjoyment of playing with words as they pop into my head. The sounds and internal rhymes, echoes and images bring pleasure as well as challenge. Sometimes writing a poem is like eating my favorite dessert, with the buzz of pleasure deep in the back of the throat. Sometimes it’s like a ride at the fair, exhilarating and unsettling and a little bit dangerous.

The home stretch

I think twice now about tight places
steering wheels loom large
school desks and restroom stalls present new corners
my clothes shrink from week to week
breathing bumps against a hard round dome
and my socks are far, far away

My office now is cut in half
Next to my desk a cradle waits
Scarred bookshelves peer at new white furniture
computer disks nestle in stacks of tiny shirts
I make room week by week

Last night I dreamed of running
light on my feet on an open road
I woke to feel a kick and my whole belly moved
Did you dream, too, and run in your warm bed?
Tight within and tight without
we squeeze and swell toward
contraction and mysterious flights

When you knock in the tightest place
of all I'll dream of a wide expanse
and a house with many rooms

Pure ambition

He reaches out a hand
eyes concentrated lips pursed
fist then palm push upon the wood
and the door swings slowly open
There it is again

He breathes a throaty greeting
rocking gently on his knees
the porcelain gleams
cool and beaded with condensation
He stalks the gaping reservoir
Its open-lidded eye widens at his
sudden thunderous approach
thumpa thumpa thump
and his triumphant vowel-rich cry
Panting hand over hand
he pulls himself to stand
fingers poised to grasp
the slender silver key
and reach into the gurgling abyss

Then I race in to scoop him up
once again the sibylline throne eludes his grasp
I close the lid and croon a breathless paean
Thwarted furious saved from watery death
he rages in my arms as I hug him close
with mock cheerful patter I open the tap
He heeds the beckon of this lesser voice
his wail subsides

distracted if unbowed
he reaches out a fist then fingers
closes his hand around the thin stream
I glance in the mirror and see my relief
a tinge of guilt as I guide his potent reach
toward tamer foes
sorrow to be ever and always the cautious hand
and the ghost of triumph
as I keep my baby safe

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.

I see myself walking out

I've come again to pick up my son I sit for a minute
in the daycare lot, open the window and listen
as the engine comes to rest Cicadas birds
wind moving slowly through corn
through the broad leaves of a stand of old oaks
a truck moves serenely in the distance

I need to go in now and get my child
the experts say consistency is all
the child knows by an inner clock
the schedule we keep and it is time
The needs of his fragile ego wrestle with the lure
of quiet in a car hot with August sun
I shrink from my role as mother and judge

I picture myself moving briskly into the room calling his name
I pack up his things, remembering the lamb and his special cup,
signing my name on the stern slip guarding the door
I move in sleek maternal silence
as I greet my day-long absent son

How does the wind blow today?
Will he go on playing happily with the toys?
Will he say he doesn't want to go, crying
bitter tears at my power to say when?
Will he feel the jolt of moving from here to home?
I jingle the keys to the car now steaming
in the heat and dust and the rustle of early corn
I listen to the sigh of the wind

I see myself walking out into the field of corn
losing my way in the tall rows far above my head
as I once did when I was very young
hidden for a moment even from myself
Would I feel that thrill of almost being lost?
the deep contentment of being found again?
Would I come out changed forever
calm at every turn of my toddler's mind?
Would I come out at all?

I close my eyes, drawing back a sense
of reunion after momentary loss
This is what I want my child to know
I leave the car, the summer sun strong on my back
Maybe today he'll trot easily at my side
coming smoothly through the childhood
we have chosen for him to live
day after day in a group of taller children
and brushed by strange arms
Maybe I'll look down at his golden head
lift him high and tell him
I have been there all along

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 so I feel her round my heart.

Sitting Fast

The pace of life quickens, startling the birds strutting in the garden;
They are searching for the perfect stalk to line their nest
They pluck first this pale frond and then that bit of fluff

They are preparing to be still, watchful, a warming presence – a halt quickening
in a life of flight. I am drawn by the extremes of speed, the drawing rush
to achieve in time and the agony of motion in a soul just learning to be still.

But extremes are no more real than the center, than the depth of speed.
Anchored existence is real, too, a bit of fluff to warm the nest:
Birth and death are no more real than life, and life no more than birth or death.

The eggs lie still, vulnerable and powerful in their smooth calm;
the mother sits, awaiting crackling birth that comes with pecking
and emergent sound; or she awaits the slow awareness

that the speed of flight is not to come from this egg, or even from this nest;
she pecks the eggs to carry them far away and drop them down.
Stillbirth, still birth; in both the egg breaks, someone sits and broods,

and flies away. I hanker for the old clucking of motion where I know
just where I am, as I rush about cloaked in importance...
What I need, and this is to the death, is to eye a piece of grass

To slip into the drama of the choice: a dried husk? a downy bliss?
a fragment of twine? to strut eyeing the ground for the perfect softness
to shelter a warmth whose only purpose is to incubate flight.

Our bargain with shoes

At first, they tell us what to do
 how far we can walk
 how long we get to stand
We take our cue from them
They are most definitely in charge
 but they share their newness nobly

In a brand new pair of shoes
 we look taller, stand straighter
 on level soles, in rigid forms
We swivel like a mannequin
We resemble our shoes
 just as we mold to new love
 new job, new promises to improve
We walk with more cheek
 until the leather wins over flesh
 and we come whimpering to our knees

And then in time they mold to us
 they stretch to fit our corns
 the wayward bunion
 the spur of bone on bone
They sag on the side
 we roll our foot out
 We stop holding our stomach in
 and take a long weekend just for play
We wear them down
We break them in

They end by looking like us
 sloppy and soft
 powerful in comfort

We know each other's
 going out and coming in
They shelter us from
 the serpent's sting
and in the end
 we both to dust returneth
 and that is the perfect fit

Novel Intrigue

Scott Richardson

A few years ago I made a fitful start at a spy novel set in medieval Iceland. After struggling over several chapters of *The King of Iceland*, I turned my attention to other interests, including, forgive me, a return to Homeric scholarship, which is much safer territory, and it's only recently that I've returned to this project with some resurgence of confidence. In pondering the roadblocks to my progress during the intervening years, I can think of two principal causes of my reluctance to press forward, apart from the sheer audacity of creating a fictional world, which I suspect is inherently hubristic.

The first I blame on my previous attempt at writing a long work of fiction a few years before. I had a decent premise but little idea where it was leading. But each time I sat down to work on a chapter, my fingers would take me places I had only vaguely thought out and often in directions I hadn't suspected. I felt like the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, who claimed that it was the characters who were guiding him along the narrative, not he himself telling them what to do. It wasn't a Delphic inspiration, really — I wasn't possessed by a Muse or anything. But I did learn to trust that the next episode would emerge as though naturally from what I'd written the day before. With this one, however, though starting with a good notion of the overall plot and characters, I just couldn't feel that same mojo. Surely there was a right road to take but I couldn't read the signs. When I made the decision to dredge it back up several months ago, I realized that I was working in a different genre and that it wasn't enough to have a solid starting point but only a vague sense of where it was all leading to. For this one I needed to have a vivid map in front of me before I could proceed at all. So I wrote and rewrote a detailed outline of the plot and then a description of the events in each chapter, subsequently arranging and rearranging the chapters to get the effect of suspense and progress that matches what passes for my vision. Now I can take each chapter one by one and concentrate on making this chapter do what I decided a while back it needed to do. That's made a world of difference, and I feel silly that it took me this long to figure out that a method for one novel won't necessarily work for the next one. Still, if anyone had told me as much, I would have scoffed silently and ignored the advice. Stubbornness tends to yield a slow learner.

The second problem I realize I encountered has to do with its medieval setting. In all my other creative writing, I've worked with my own world and could rely on my own idiom. Allusions to high or low culture, geography, historical and literary references, jokes, human behavior, American speech patterns, imitations — I could tap into my

experience in life as well as my education to arrive at plot elements, prose style, dialogue, characterization, and a sense of place. Medieval Iceland, I found, restricted me in most of these respects. Not only was I daunted by the task of creating this alien setting for an audience largely unfamiliar with the Viking world; more unnerving was my realization that I could no longer make full use of my habits and experience as a writer. I don't want to imitate the style of the Icelandic sagas — I want the prose to sound more like an English-language novel, but there are freedoms I'm used to that would not suit this context. I still haven't gotten over this hurdle, but I've come to accept the restrictions as I work toward figuring out how much of my regular voice can come through and how much I have to pretend to be a Scott Richardson who knows only what 10th-century Scandinavians knew. One thing I have done to enhance my ability to adopt this persona is spending time in Iceland. I've been there twice now for a total of six weeks and have visited a number of my settings two or three times, and I intend to go back once or twice soon. There's no substitute for feeling the place and seeing the people, who look pretty much the same now as then. I've also spent time learning to converse in the modern version of the Vikings' language. So even if I can't get inside the head of my characters as well as I'm accustomed, I'm better at faking it than I used to be.

Here is a short excerpt from what will be about the middle of the novel. The Icelandic brothers Grim and Ljot are spearheading a plot along with the Norwegian king Olaf under the code name Fimblewinter to let Norway take over the Free Republic of Iceland and put Grim in as titular monarch. Grim and his friend Fenn often treat the young Ljot with disdain, and the good spies are making the sibling rivalry work for them. One of these good spies, known here by his false identity as a peddler named Hedin, has wheedled his way into Ljot's good graces and has excited this bad spy's curiosity about his mysterious past. Now Hedin baits the hook with a fictitious tale of his experiences at the Norwegian court. I've chosen to use the Icelandic term "goði" and its plural "goðar" rather than a translation such as "chieftain." Hedin has just been telling Ljot the story of his life as a retainer of King Olaf in Norway.

Excerpt from The King of Iceland

The episodes covered the usual themes: Baltic raids, duels, mutiny, jewels and coins acquired and lost, sly betrayal by village elders, merciless revenge, animal threats in the wild, even some possible enchantment, though Hedin scoffed at those who fell for it.

The content of his tale was routine, the sort of story Ljot had heard all his life, but the narrative stance was odd, as though these were events that had happened to some-

one else though told in the first person. The curious distance between narrator and main character grabbed the listener and paradoxically made him trust in every word, even when he accused his guest of sensationalist embellishments.

Hedin was following the arc of Ljot's attention span and felt it was time for the dénouement. "During my last absence from court, my enemies, whom I'd naively regarded as trustworthy friends, were merrily setting the stage for my downfall. Even before I sailed to Denmark five months previously, they were working, I can see in retrospect, toward my exclusion from their club. Something was going on that I wasn't allowed full access to, and even Olaf would look at me askance sometimes as though to push me away and apologize for it at the same time. I sensed that it had to do with the Iceland plot."

Ljot's alertness had in fact been flagging, the ale at last catching up with him, but at these words his ears twitched and his face turned directly toward Hedin's with an alarmed glance, which he vainly tried to convert to simple, disinterested curiosity. Fortunately, the narrator's gaze was fixed to the floor, so he clearly noticed no change in his listener's demeanor. "The Iceland plot?"

Hedin now raised his face as though startled and looked at the trusting, innocent eyes of his new best friend. He paused with pursed lips, making up his mind whether to open them again on the same theme. Ljot looked into his mug, took a swill, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Sorry, go on."

"I guess it won't hurt to mention it now. Nothing's happened yet so I imagine the whole thing was called off. I was under the impression that it would all be settled by the time I came back out to Iceland, but I've been here two months. Perhaps the king's had a change of heart."

Ljot was careful not to voice any encouragement but merely nodded with understanding. "Norwegians are like that, I hear. Fickle."

"Not the king, not in my experience anyway. He's not the reason I'm here in an impoverished state. In fact, if he knew I was alive and fending off starvation by peddling, he'd bring me back in a trice. I'll find a way to get word to him some day, but right now my enemies have built a fence around him."

"So your false friends screwed you over and the king is left in the dark."

"That about sums it up." The details he gave of his downfall were mercifully few, and the brevity of the last segment suited Ljot, who had no patience for whining over misfortune, and he still had a glimmer of self-interested excitement when his friend came to a quiet close. His train of thought was taking him to the next stage of Hedin's

life, the one at which, out of embitterment toward the countrymen who betrayed him and loyalty to the Norwegian monarch who had championed the talented westerner, he would put his martial and strategic abilities toward the Fimblewinter cause. That would certainly get Grim's goat, to bring in a ringer just when Fenn and the other arrogant goðar were telling Grim what a useless piece of deadweight his brother was. Ljot's promised place of honor was starting to look less certain. This stranger could win him the respect he deserves.

He was fumbling for a way to broach the topic when Hedin, who had been looking glumly and pensively toward his knees, glanced up and asked if Ljot had ever heard the term Fimblewinter. Ljot gave an astonished shake of the head and stared at his guest as though he couldn't have heard him right. Hedin must have misinterpreted the look and continued, "I mean, we've all heard of Fimblewinter, haven't we, it's in our ancestral lore and poetry. The last days, yes, the fall of the Aesir and Vanir, the harsh winter leading up to Ragnarok. But that's not what I mean." He laid his head down with his feet still planted on the floor, as though about to take a short nap.

"Fimblewinter? What do you mean, Fimblewinter?"

"I think it's a code name." Ljot stopped breathing, moving. "For something I heard a fair amount about, secondhand largely, and I'm not even sure if any of it is true. Couldn't be, really, it's absurd. But the Norwegians seem to be taking it seriously."

"Go on. Sounds intriguing."

"The story goes something like this. Olaf is in cahoots with a major Icelandic goði, who's rallied a number of other goðar and influential farmers and convinced them that their welfare lies in the protection of Norway. The mother country is going to take over sooner or later, so they might as well be on the winning side."

"That actually sounds sensible."

"Well, it would work for one guy, anyway. I never caught his name, and I'm not sure who among my associates knew his actual identity. They just called him Loki." Ljot smiled at that one. "And Loki, it appears, is going to be one lucky son of a bitch."

"He and his fellow conspirators, no doubt."

"Well, not the way I heard it. Loki's deal with Olaf amounts to — I hesitate to say the words but this is how I've heard it — to be designated King of Iceland. As though the Icelanders would stand for that."

"That doesn't sound very Icelandic, you're right, but if, as you say, the Norwegian king will be taking over anyway, some Icelanders might as well profit. Perhaps they will serve as buffers."

“There’s no ‘they,’ just a he. Loki. He’ll be king, answering directly to Olaf, and his court will consist entirely of Norwegians.”

Ljot was lost and couldn’t really take in what he was hearing. “But surely the other conspirators in, what was it you called it, Fimblewinter, will hold offices and rise in ascendancy. They must be rewarded for their part in the plan.” Ljot stopped short, worried that he was sounding less disinterested than he meant to. Fortunately, Hedin didn’t notice and simply answered his objection as though it were a natural one.

“I’m just telling you how I heard it. Again, I don’t know how much my old pals know about it, and since nothing’s happened yet, maybe the whole thing was scrapped. But they did talk a lot about it. And this Loki character was definitely the only Icelander who would wind up with an actual gain. He’ll drop his supporters as soon as they’ve served their purpose.”

Ljot couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He put a lot of stock in Hedin’s distance along the chain of communication. Nothing firsthand, a whole lot of details muddled or lost. “Sounds as though this Loki will be disappointed when his allies are dismissed with no reward.”

“Oh, no, that’s what they’re all impressed by, to the extent that a Norwegian is ever impressed by an Icelander. That he’s leading his own people on — that’s the sort of betrayal those bastards relish.”

Ljot could barely conceal his outrage. If Hedin had not turned his face toward the doorway while talking, looking perhaps for eavesdroppers, he could hardly have missed the reddening of his host’s face and tightening of the jaw. Ljot couldn’t talk right now without giving the game away prematurely, before figuring out just how this new knowledge will affect his next move. He excused himself from the house and walked swiftly to the brook, as though to converse with the swans, who all glided toward the bank when they saw the master approach in the late twilight that would turn to dawn without any noticeable darkness. He had no crusts for them this time, which they couldn’t quite believe, so they flocked around him for a considerable length of time as he paced and fumed. Hedin stayed inside, thank goodness, probably stretched out for the night.

Let him sleep, ignorant of the enormity of his revelation. Seeing nothing as he strode manically among the swans, Ljot reconsidered the last few months, the last few years, his next step. How can he turn this knowledge to his benefit? How can he now even look Grim in the eye without flinching, without betraying his disgust? Everything depends on assumed ignorance. Let him consider me the fool he has played me for all along.

Conclusion

We asked at the beginning if writing is so dangerous that we need a license to practice it. In some countries, writing about our personal and collective past is an act of transgression, criminal even, punishable by exile or death. Cindy Malone writes:

Because I've just been looking over the cases featured in this year's Amnesty International Write-a-thon, I'm acutely aware of the stark contrast between those cases and my situation. Amnesty International appears regularly in my mailbox to remind me that writers in many places choose between censorship or prison, punishment, even execution. I'm free to write and speak without facing those dangers — without anticipating any fate worse than the possibility that *Sophie Collins* might be banned in public schools because of its portrayal of love between women. I'm mindful of the enormous debt I owe to other people for preserving that freedom, especially to courageous teachers and librarians (“radical, militant librarians,” according to e-mails from FBI agents) who get up every morning and defend our First-Amendment rights.

We four live and write in a place of enormous privilege and potential. And yet, even the so-called free press and liberty of expression are misnomers, to a certain extent. Censorship occurs in informal ways, and publishers have an eye on what will sell. Readers abandon books in favor of video and audio formats.

It is easy to lose the courage to say, “I am a writer” and “I am a poet.” There are risks, even if not to life and limb or political liberty. Writing takes us into ourselves, and therefore away from other duties or possibilities. Identifying ourselves as writers and poets requires a re-evaluation of our professorial identity for our families and colleagues, and, more important, for ourselves. Writing about the past presents a particular challenge of balance: We seek the equilibrium between invention and faithfulness, between personal vision and collective memory. Writing about the past risks evoking emotions, awareness of conflicts, and literary quandaries with which we then need to contend. It is our painful pleasure to create imaginative work that stays “attached to life at all four corners.”

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Notes

1. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and James Walsh, SJ, *Julian of Norwich: Showings*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 186.
2. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 113.
3. Frank Northern Magill, *Cyclopedia of World Authors*. (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 1997), 372.
4. Marilyn Nelson, *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005).

Editor's Note

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