



**Congratulations,
Katherine!**

**Meet the next
Poet Laureate
of Northwest
Florida,
Katherine
Nelson-Born**

Photo by Belinda Todd

by Nikki Fragala Barnes

An interview with Nikki Fragala Barnes

This past week, right in the middle of a warm October, I had a video call with Katherine Nelson-Born, newly appointed Poet Laureate of Northwest Florida.

She was in her office, with her stacks of books. She confessed to not quite being able to tackle all the organization she aspired to, though from my end, her space looked airy and bright and inviting, and I was glad to share the time together. So, let's bring you into our conversation — here's what we talked about, such a tender range of topics including social justice and hope, Florida mockingbirds, Moscow Mules, and the natural inspiration in mornings. Read on.

Nikki: It's so nice to meet you and thanks for talking with me this afternoon.

Katherine: Oh, thanks for talking with me — I was so happy to hear from Mark Terry inviting me.

Nikki: Yes, he's wonderful — he has such a heart not only for poetry, but also for poets.

Katherine: Well, that's good; we need lots more people like that. So how would you like to get started?

Nikki: Congratulations on your new title, Poet Laureate of Northwest Florida.

Katherine: Yes, I am excited, mostly excited.

Nikki: What was the process like for you to become Poet Laureate?

Katherine: Well, it was an interesting process because several years ago, for the current outgoing Poet Laureate, I was on the committee that did the interviewing. When I was invited, this was very much like applying for a job and turning in a resume, and answering several pages of questions, like what would your vision be. It was very much like applying for a job, which it is, it's true, it's a job.

Nikki: And, how did they announce your appointment? How did they tell you?

Katherine: Well, actually, I believe it was an email following a zoom meeting of finalists. There's since been press releases and announcements, all very exciting.

Nikki: So I notice that you use sound a great deal in your work, both the sounds of the words themselves and also the sounds that one would hear, kind of the imagery of sound. Can you talk about the importance of sound, and how you seem to so naturally write about what we hear?



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Katherine Nelson-Born grew up in New Orleans where she earned her undergraduate degree in English from the University of New Orleans before moving to Richmond, Virginia, to earn her MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University. Katherine then attended Georgia State University, where she earned her PhD in English.

Katherine's poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Alyss*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Emerald Coast Review*, *Excelsior ReView*, *GSU Review*, *Longleaf Pine*, *Maple Leaf Rag* and *Penumbra*. Katherine's poetry earned "Honorable Mention" at the 2015 Alabama Writers Conclave. Her poetry also previously won the University of New Orleans/Tennessee Williams Ellipsis award for poetry and placed twice among finalists in the Agnes Scott College Writer's Festival.

Katherine's premiere poetry chapbook, *When Mockingbirds Sing*, was published in 2016 by Finishing Line Press. Katherine's first full-length book of poems, *Bone Geometry*, is coming soon.

Currently, Katherine is completing a new novel and consulting for K & K Creative Editing.

Katherine currently lives and writes in Pensacola, Florida, with her husband of over 25 years, Tim Born, with whom she raised her daughter, Rowan Born, who currently attends the University of Southern California.

Katherine: Well, I'm glad you noticed about sound. Because for me, sound is important: to avoid the obvious rhyme scheme, but I like to have the complementary sounds, the slant rhyme, what helps the work flow. And I've just always found wordplay and sounds important. I grew up with radio, so music is my first love, and then putting words to music is my second love. So having words that sound musical in my ear, I find pleasing. I really love wordplay. There's a fine line so that it doesn't become "the sound and the fury," where the sound is all you hear, and you lose the message. Sound is always important to me.

Nikki: What do you want readers to know about your Act One, and what do you want us to know about what you're doing now?

Katherine: Well Act One is like the opening act, where you're getting introduced to your life, your story. Act Two, you get to the meat of it, and by the time you get to Act Three, you figure out how to pull it all together and really coalesce all of the ends into something beautiful, whether it's a work of art in words or music. You get to the final act, and the people that have gone with you and stayed with you all the way — it means you must have done something well.

Nikki: You have lived both in Louisiana and Florida — both the South, but so different.

Katherine: Living in Florida is a real eye-opener. Course, even when I moved away from the South, I didn't get past Richmond [Virginia], the seat of the Confederacy. It was a wonderful experience because it let me know the South covers a great deal of territory. But Florida, I always had this exotic idea of it — and Louisiana is quite exotic — but more like South Florida: palm trees and beaches. It's kind of like the First Act and Second Act. When I first got here, it's another southern state, and has a nice beach, and then when you get to know the politics and some of the history — once I started doing some research there's a beautiful book, *Lay that Trumpet in Our Hands*, [a novel by Susan McCarthy] some of the history of racism, that Florida had its own history, like Louisiana or Mississippi. That was an eye-opener. So, it was educational.

Nikki: Would you please talk a little about the title poem from your chapbook, *When Mockingbirds Sing*?

Katherine: It was in response to (back in 2008), I applied for a Big Read grant from the NEA, and it was based on Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*. So that got me started and inspired. I am very much in tune to social justice and self-expression. It makes me think of the saying, 'the personal is political;' I do believe that. And, I also realized I had a book from back in the 1980s, and I didn't realize that I may have been influenced by — Charles Bukowski's *Mockingbird, Wish Me Luck*, a friend gave it to me back in 1988 — and on page seventy-one was "Mockingbird," and I was thinking, oh! I remember that! And, I just recently pulled it out — so something told me I had more influences mixing in. And also the whole point about mockingbirds: it's the state bird of Florida, so not only that, it's excellent at mimicking other birds. So all of those things came together for me: the state bird, living in Florida, social justice, wanting to be a writer. We all want to be original, even knowing, 'there's nothing original under the sun.' Even so, we know [Ezra] Pound says, 'make it new.' So, to make it new and make it mine — this is where it came from.

Nikki: And, what is it that you love about chapbooks? (I love chapbooks, too.)

Katherine: It's easier to carry a theme within a chapbook. In poetry, it's almost as if I had written a collection of short stories — this is a collection of poems. I think you can carry a theme or an idea more concisely in a chap. And, I am promoting a chapbook competition coming up. My first activity as Poet Laureate — and it's open to all — I'm hosting a poem-a-day in November. So I'll be posting on our Facebook page and on Twitter, a prompt. It's a poem-a-day for thirty days. And then, in the first two weeks of December, if you've written original poems, then you send them for a chapbook competition. It's an honor system — I'll put out the prompts. I hope they move people to write. The idea

is similar to NaNoWriMo. Folks can write anything in response to the prompts. People have thirty days, and then should have thirty poems, and out of that you should have 25-30 poems for a chap.

Nikki: I love this idea, and I love the way you speak of chaps, and how they work for writers, even emerging writers.

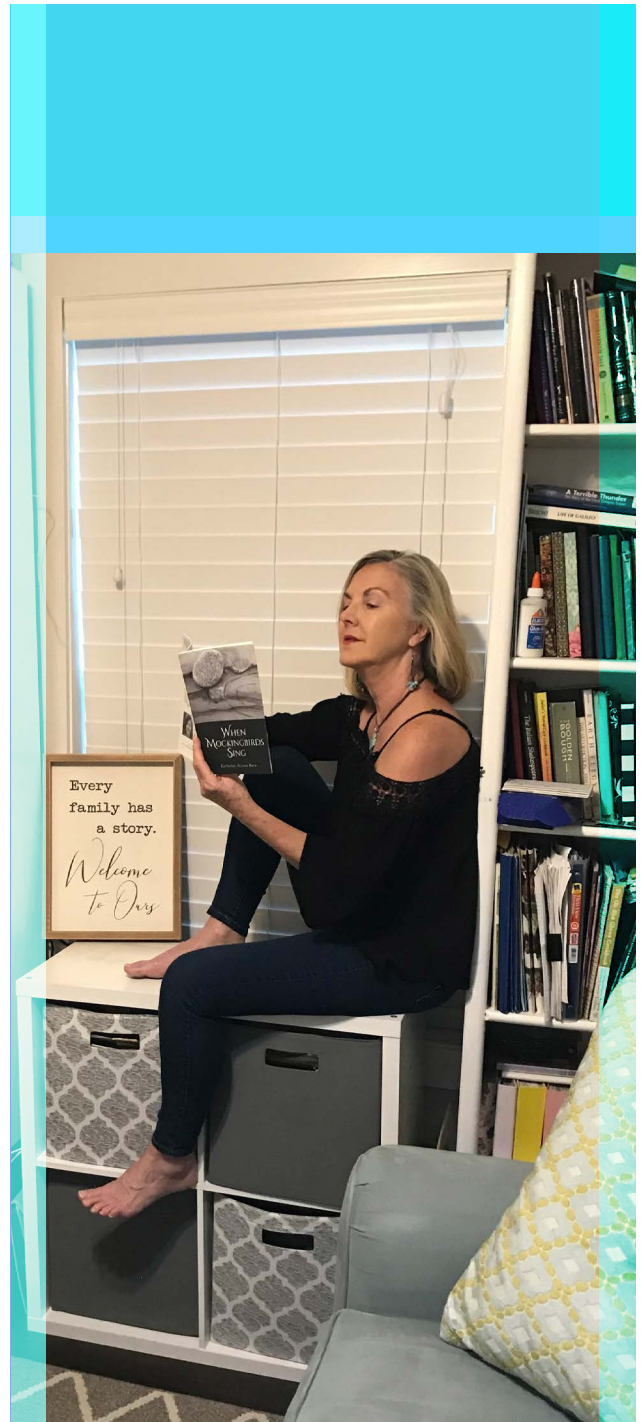
Katherine: Chapbooks are a way to find your way as an emerging writer — to come up with your first collection, and another collection, and along the way, you may be able to put together a longer work. It's certainly a good way to build your work.

Nikki: And speaking of that, you've written both: novels and poems. It can be so different to write using stories and structures; I really see a lot of magic in it. Do you find that one informs the other? How does that relationship work?

Katherine: Some of the poetry that I have written, I think it would fall into narrative poetry; it's lyrical, condensed stories. Whether you're writing a short story, a memoir, a work of fiction, you want your words to leap off the page just as beautifully in a work of fiction as in a poem. There's gotta be a reason for every single word to exist on the page — just as in poetry. As you know, I like sound, so when I tell my stories — well, in another life, I'd be a professional storyteller or maybe a dramatic actress! I love telling stories; I love acting them out. I used to enjoy the story hour with my daughter when she was very young. Even when I taught workshops — I've taught workshops with kindergartners on up to college — again, it's wordplay. It's bringing the words to life and making them sing.

Nikki: I'd love for you to talk more about your laureateship. You're going to be supporting education and community, poetry in the community. How is that beginning to take shape for you?

Katherine: Well, I'm excited for the poem-a-day project, and as far as education goes, I will conduct workshops next year, probably over Zoom.com, for people who are interested. I am also going to apply for another Big Read grant — what those are so encouraging for, is to work outside of your comfort zones to engage with libraries and schools. The work I'm looking at centering is Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (although she has a brand-new book out). It deals with some of our social justice issues that we are facing, even though this came out



Photography by Tim Born

in 2014. So, if I'm able to receive that grant, then I'll be able to use it to work with the schools in addressing some of these social issues as well as the larger community. Near here we have the large naval base, and I'd be able to engage with them again. I worked with them last time, and we were able to bring the play for *To Kill A Mockingbird* into the schools as well. I just love this work, *Citizen*, because it promotes the idea of citizenship and the different viewpoints we have about what that means and privilege and many other interesting things. So that's one major project right now.

Another fun one, is that I'm working with a group of young local poets who have actually gone to regional Florida poetry slams. One group recently placed third. There are students involved, though it's community-wide. Trying to broaden our horizons and incorporate more of the spoken word and word art — the thing about poetry slams is there is a format, and that's one way of supporting our young poets. I've seen very promising work — and the format and the rules of poetry slams help push them forward with their work and their performance and move beyond rhetoric and get to art. And it's a good challenge for me, as a more traditional reader, and I've pushed myself more in recent years to perform my work, not just read it. It takes work, and I want to do more of that. And in our days of Zoom.com, I think spoken word works really well, works better.

Nikki: That is one of strange blessings of this pandemic landscape that some things that would be completely inaccessible — we are now able to participate over vast distances.

Katherine: Yes, that reminds me that Claudia Rankine is reading at UCLA (my daughter is at USC), and I have a ticket! And even the upcoming Palm Beach Poetry Festival is virtual. I want to see more about how people are making these events compelling because we can learn from them and build on some of their ideas. We usually have a regional writers' conference, but a lot of that has now had to become virtual. So I want to see how people are doing that better, and make it better to engage more people.

Nikki: I know, too, from your profiles online,

about how much Anne Sexton's work means to you, and I like to speak about how we claim our literary heritage, almost in terms of ancestors. So who are some of those writers for you?

Katherine: Sharon Olds really turned me on to the power — her work let me see that one can use one's art to negotiate difficult material — she had all those poems about her relationship with her father. With some of the difficulties I had as a child, her work showed me it can be artistic. She was one of my heroes. The more recent one is *I love Cornelius Eady*. I got to meet him at APA before things closed down. His opening poem, "The Couch," is so powerful. Of course, Natasha Trethewey because of her southern roots and the ways she is able to negotiate that well and so wonderfully. Jesmyn Ward is a fiction writer, and her work is awesome. Anne Sexton, Maxine Kumin, of course [Sylvia] Plath. Those are mine.

Nikki: Let's talk about your next novel. It's YA with LGBTQ characters.

Katherine: Yes, novel number two — it's actually a trilogy. The (working) title is *The Fire Upstairs* — I'm sure that will change. The premise of the trilogy — well, novel number one was based on historic events from the 1970s, a tragic sniper event in New Orleans in 1973, a tale of racism. And then six months later, there was the [UpStairs] Lounge fire that was deliberately set — it was a gay bar — a place my dad used to go a lot — and many people died tragically. It was around the time of the movement and protests in San Francisco. Those events both had enough mystery and unsolved events around them that it gave a writer a way in, some space.

Nikki: And how are you advocating for the voices from those communities in terms of social justice?

Katherine: I'm still wrestling with being sensitive, especially supporting the hashtag own voices (#ownvoices) and their experiences — I'm very concerned about not writing from a place of appropriation. I'm not a person of color. I'm not gay, but my father is. And I think as someone who grew up in The Quarter,

in the gay community, I have some validity to my experience and sharing those voices. I think it's still difficult, and when my father hadn't come out, and was trying to hide within a marriage, I saw, even then and even now, the prejudices that are either flagrant or thinly disguised. They are still very present. The story is basically a story of human love, but it tackles some of the issues, and how they can tear apart lives and/or make them stronger.

Nikki: Thank you. So we gotta talk a bit about COVID-19. How has this brought challenges and opportunities?

Katherine: Well, it made me a hermit for a while. I did get some writing done for a good bit of it, and that was good. The challenge that I have, is my theme is hope. I do think hope is important. Without hope, what have we? So, the challenge is that sometimes things are hard and full of negativity. Hope is such an important theme in my poetry, in my thoughts, in my life. Because I think you have to have some kind of hope, or it's hard to go on. So with COVID, it's been a challenge for me. I think one of the poems I wrote during this time is about how COVID and climate change are not two separate issues. My daughter (who's all of 21) I think she's going to grow older in a world much different than the one I grew up in. I don't think this is all going to be over next year. And so the challenge I face is that part of me thinks about what's next, and the other part of me thinks, whatever is next, we have to face it, overcome it, adapt to it, do whatever it is you need to do to find what moments of beauty can be found. Which is kind of what my fiction addresses as well.

Nikki: Thank you so much. Ok, so the holidays — what are you doing for the holidays? What does that look like? Are you reimagining things? Are you keeping things the same?

Katherine: I'm not sure about the holidays. I've always had this love/hate relationship with the holidays because when I was younger it was not something that was part of our normal lives. And then for many years, I tried to overcompensate, and then I was over the overcompensation, and now . . . I have mixed emotions about the holidays, and my birthday is right in the middle of them! Right between Christmas and New Year's, I turn the big six-oh — so I'm really ambivalent — how did I get



Photo by
Belinda Todd

WHEN
MOCKINGBIRDS
SING

Katherine Nelson-Born

[Link to book](#)

LINKS OF INTEREST:

<https://katherinenelsonborn.ink/index.html>

Official announcement: <https://wilf.org/PoetLaureate>

On GoodReads

https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/15888764.Katherine_Nelson_Born

Poem: Midsummer Musings

<https://silverbirchpress.wordpress.com/2016/07/28/a-midsummer-nights-musings-poem-by-katherine-nelson-born-beach-and-pool-memories-poetry-prose-series/>

Poem: in memory of my mother, born on halloween

<https://www.facebook.com/knb.ink/photos/2320122978098643>

to be that age? I'm about twelve at heart! So I'm like, what's going to be next? I am ready to get over 2020. Part of me wants to just skip the holidays and go to the new year after January. So, I'm ambivalent about the holidays. The holidays are supposed to bring hope!

Nikki: Well, I think most people contain the hope where the holidays fit in the calendar, and it sounds like your work and perspective open that up to the whole year, so I think you're probably doing fine. (Both laugh.)

Okay, so some of your favorite things right now. What is your favorite drink?

Katherine: I recently discovered the pleasures of ginger beer. It goes in what's called a Moscow Mule. As a matter of fact, on my Christmas list are those little copper mugs you're supposed to make the Moscow Mule in. I like the combination. I like ginger in all kinds of ways. There's gotta be a poem in there somewhere.

Nikki: What is your favorite time of the day?

Katherine: I'm gonna say I'm basically a morning person. I like the time before the day gets started, the quiet that can be there. It's the dawning of the new day, morning. First, if you wake up, well, that's a good sign! You have a chance to choose — which I try to, each day at that time, whatever it brings, to make the best of it.

And then evening happy hour...!

Nikki: Do you have a favorite constellation?

Katherine: Well, I'm a capricorn, so that one.

Nikki: Would you like to leave us with some parting words — what else would you like to say? This is your chance.

Katherine: I do want to leave you with hope. Hope is the healing in poetry — it's for everyone. I do believe that in our hearts most of us are poets, waiting to be discovered. And I would invite others to discover in themselves the magic of words — the spoken word, the written word — don't be afraid of words. If you own them, and you are willing to share them, people will feel that from you. I do want to encourage others to own the magic that is a part of every one of us.

Nikki: I forgot to ask you about teaching — what poems did you love to teach?

Katherine: I was blown away by Morgan Parker's "13 Ways of Looking at a Black Girl," which of course reimagines "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Wallace Stevens. I think those inspire important conversations. And, the classics, when I was in a traditional classroom, Langston Hughes, "I, Too, Sing America," alongside Walt Whitman's, "I Sing the Body Electric," because that again approaches those issues of social justice that are near and dear to my heart. And, of course, Sexton and "Her Kind." And, it's older, for fiction, Toni Morrison is my hero. Everything she wrote is so beautiful and so heart-rending. It could be beautiful and awful at the same time — that's what made her work so good.

Nikki: This was wonderful — thank you so much for your time today!

Katherine: Thank you — I just loved it. I have even more ideas now. People ask me what I get out of the Poet Laureate experience, and it's synergy. What I do with others makes me better. Even when I'm scared to death, if I overcome that fear, and I can accomplish something, even if it's helping someone else do something they might not have done, or finished something they were working on and didn't think they'd finish. It's the synergy. It's fabulous. Working with and promoting things that we love. And, I love poetry; I love the written word; I love poets. So, there you have it.

Nikki: I feel like we covered a lot of fun ground. Thank you for sharing so much with all of us. I'm already looking forward to your November poetry prompts and can't wait to play with those.

Katherine: That hour went by so fast! Thank you so much!

Nikki Fragala Barnes, member of FSPA and the Orlando Area Poets, is an experimental poet and participatory installation artist. An arts activist, Barnes centers material works on accessibility, land-based public histories, and the poetics of place, including monuments and multilingual/translated works. Barnes has exhibited/performed works at the Orlando Museum of Art (Orlando, FL), the Atlantic Center for the Arts (New Smyrna Beach, FL) and The Liminal (Valencia, Spain). Her work is also held in private collections internationally. She is earning a Ph.D. in Texts and Technology while teaching poetry writing at the University of Central Florida. [bynikkibarnes.com, @bynikkibarnes]

Return to Palmyra

(Inspired by Adam Zagajewski's "To Go to Lvov")

To get to Palmyra, take the Superdome Exit.
U-turn at the blue shotgun two houses from the corner.
Or head northeast of Damascus where
the golden colonnaded avenue beckons, where
caravan camels spit into the thicket,
christening a salamander the color of sand
beneath palms holding up the moon, where
a withered olive tree bears witness.

Careen across the serpentine river
into the Big Easy where pedicabs hover,
gleam of wax in the wet black morning,
wisp of smoke wafting from levees.
(It was never that easy.)

Green medians laced with purple beads
invite tourists from western New York State.
Empire Exit 43 finds the "Queen of Canal Towns"
whistling Dixie beneath the Temple of Baal
over carved cypress tables scented with pine boughs.
Click. Pythia smiles through the bones,
laughter like champagne bubbles rising to the rafters.
Rooftops tip into Katrina's waters.
Atoll palm fronds whisper benediction
over washed-out coral. If you feel lost,
the fossils point the way.

~ Katherine Nelson-Born

Falling Up

A wind gust flips up rusty leaf skirts.
Flaming heavenward, breezy ballerinas
twirl across a blue stage backlit
by dispelled ragweed sundrenched in jeweled skies
alive with crackling grass blades chasing grackles.
It's a dance gone wild with spiraling gyres.
Ospreys eyeball the merriment from above.

Across the universe
otherwise known as my backyard
march yellow Marigolds bursting from their borders,
gunning for the sun. Another blast of cold air
rips off the heads of bright red
bat-faced flowers. Grinning, they spin off
over roof tops, break free of gravity,
falling up.

Perhaps eternity looks this way – a funhouse mirror
dwarfing infinity into a bowl curved into itself,
a clown grin stretched across a multitude of infinities,
able to gobble up several Milky Ways in a single gulp.

And me? Well, you see –
I'm the Blue Fairy chasing Monarch butterflies
late for flight to Mexico. You'll find me,
hips gyrating into chorus-girl kicks
at heaps of leaves begging to be re-purposed,
sent sailing back up into the sky from whence they fell.
In this alien world, I am Glinda and Elphaba,
and I clash with everything. Like the leaves
set free from earth's orbit, meteors ablaze,
I am just another case of cosmic debris
firing across the universe.

~ Katherine Nelson-Born

When Mockingbirds Sing

The crickets cheer the sun's descent into the lake.
The sky yawns and swallows the sun's cherry-red
globe sliced with orange, like candy in a child's mouth –
absorbing the shrinking orb until the last
sliver slides into throaty darkness.
All that is left is the sweet afterglow.

A few stray chirps, then silence grows
until – in the blue-black velvet a call comes.
Some call it a Catbird. Some think it's a sin
to shoot one. They make music and bother
no one, except cats, perhaps, who have it coming
anyway. I think they mock me. I sit here
working to make words sing when they sing
without effort. So perfectly do Mockingbirds mimic
other birdsong, the human ear cannot tell the difference.
So sweet, their mocking seems the real thing,
like a knock-off Gucci bag at an Italian market,
so beautiful a mimicry, who cares?
Like soft Italian leather, the burra burra of
the Bluebird, the blush of the setting sun,
the Mockingbird's music mesmerizes.

Tired of tripping over my own words,
I open my ears, hear the music of the spheres,
and sing like the Mockingbird of a time
older than the ruins of Pompeii,
newer than the morning of a day not yet born.

~ Katherine Nelson-Born

On Learning the Origin of Haint Blue

Thunder trundles across the sky.
I sit under the Haint Blue porch roof,
bruised clouds scudding by.
Across the cosmos, two nebulae
slowly collide, create new suns.

The bright expanse I am resounds
louder than the clash of ancestors in my head.
Singing in tongues, I celebrate those who came
before me, coloring the auburn of my hair,
orange freckles on my nose, the fore-shortened
knuckles of my hands meant for labor,
for digging in the soil, for washing sheets.

My soul sings in blue ink
shaping words, shoving ghosts
through Indigo windows. They resist,
rooted to this earth, yearning to be
more than shadows tinting the porch ceiling.
Spirits crowd the veranda like old shoes
too weathered to be let in,
too solid to banish. Worth one more dance.
Veneers of what they once were, their voices thrum,
upending the bowl of my universe.
Together, we uncover the next and the next,
purple hue of space melting like grapes
on my tongue. Taurus, Scorpius, Gemini
I wear on Orion's Belt slung across my hips.

And still I expand, a celestial wind
defying physics, gravity,
the apple falling up, forgiveness
rain falling from my eye,
terrestrial home a cats-eye marble
rolling from my opened palm,
falling into a new constellation
of my making.

The poem starts here.

~ Katherine Nelson-Born