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Barbara Hamby

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PROFILES IN POETRY



Barbara reads to Patsy, Photo by Catherine Husum Taylor

Barbara Hamby

A recent interview with FSPA Past President Al Rocheleau

Rocheleau: Born in New Orleans and raised in Honolulu, your background features some of the most colorful locales and aspects of the American experience. How have those points of reference threaded your work over the years?

Hamby: I only remember New Orleans through my mother's stories. She loved the city so much, and talked about living there and the people she met when she was a newlywed and new mother. We moved when I was four, and my first memories are after that move. I was ten when we moved to Hawai'i, so those memories are strong and vivid. For the first year we lived in a little farming community on the leeward side of O'ahu called Wai'anae (WHY-ahn-aye), and I went to Wai'anae Elementary School. We had just left Virginia, and I had gone to a segregated school though I had no awareness of the fact. In Wai'anae I went to school with blacks, whites, Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese, Samoan, Filipino, Portuguese, and those are just the ones I remember. And it was a seamless transfer. I loved school, and I loved learning about all the new customs and foods. And Hawai'i was so beautiful. The mountains are this otherworldly green, and the Pacific is as blue as the sky, especially when compared to the gray-green Atlantic. I feel as if Hawaii is a paradise that I keep inside me always, a room in my memory palace that I can go to when I need the scent of the ocean or the flowers that are everywhere.

I have to say that Hawai'i doesn't really come up that often in my poetry. I really saved it for fiction. My book of stories, *Lester Higata's 20th Century*, is set in Honolulu, and is really a love letter to that city. The stories revolve around a Japanese-American man who fought with the Allies during WWII in much-decorated battalion that was instrumental in liberating Rome. I've been working for a long time on a novel that is set in Hawai'i during the 1960s. It was 600 pages at one time, and now it's 350. I don't know what's going to happen with it, but I've really loved working on it.

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Rocheleau: Tell us about the recent collection, *Holoholo*.

Hamby: “Holoholo” is the Hawaiian word for walking out with no destination in mind. I love this idea and the word. Other languages have similar words, for example “le flâneur” in French, which describes someone who walks a city’s streets (probably Paris) observing what is going on in the passing moment. It is a word that is really limited to men, but about five years ago, Lauren Elkin wrote a book, *Flâneuse*, about women who walk in cities. Often, the word “idle” is associated with the flâneur/flâneuse, which I suppose is part of the Hawaiian word, but the Hawaiian culture doesn’t have that built-in striving and ambition that might ridicule aimless wandering. There is also the English word “gallivant,” which is to go about from one place to another in pursuit of pleasure, and the Australian word, “walkabout,” which is a spiritual journey that young aboriginal men take into the wilderness. Again, only for men, though there were so many taboos in ancient Hawaiian culture that who knows if women were allowed to go holoholo.

Holoholo is made up of odes, and is a testament to my love of the ode, which is often is defined as a poem of praise on an exalted subject. It may have begun that way, but



Enheduanna, high priestess of Nanna (c. 23rd century BCE)

it has changed from the first poems found on cuneiform tablets which temple poets wrote in ancient Sumeria praising gods, goddesses, and kings. Even the Hebrew *Psalms* that so influenced Whitman and Ginsberg are involved in a complicated kind of praise. Jehovah is a beneficent deity, but he also has a lot of rules and a nasty temper when they are broken.

Nearly 2,000 years after the poems of praise by the Sumerian temple priestess Enheduanna Pindar was writing odes for the victors of the Greek games at Olympia, Nemea, Korinth, and Delphi. And 400 years after Pindar, in the work of Horace the ode became a more intimate examination of human consciousness in both its public and private masks. The English Romantic poets took the ode and made it a palimpsest of consciousness. Then in the 1950s the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda wrote his *Odas Elementales* and changed the ode forever with his short lines and praise of such ordinary subjects as the tomato and his socks.

Is the ode a form? While an ode can have a specific form, as in Pindar and Horace, it seems to me more of a poetic stance, a poetic investigation of what it means to be a human being at any moment in time. Odes seem to say—the world is beautiful, but it’s terrible, too. Living is glorious, but we die. Unlike the elegy that focuses on the end of lives, the ode celebrates and contemplates living, but, of course, that means keeping an eye on the final curtain as well.

My first odes appeared in my book, *The Alphabet of Desire*, but I think I was writing them before I began to call them odes. I came to the ode through Keats and Neruda. I have always adored Keats’s long musical lines, and I love Neruda’s exaltation of the ordinary. I like to think of my odes as a threesome between Keats, Neruda, and me.

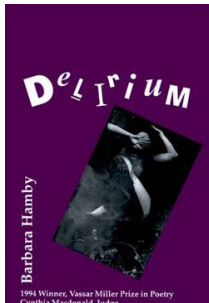
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After writing my first odes, I couldn't stop, and I wanted to know more. What is this human need to praise? What are its motives? The Romantics used the odes to question human mortality. Walt Whitman in his great ode "Song of Myself" gave voice to the eternal tension between mortality and immortality, and Allen Ginsberg took up the ode as he unlaced the social corset of 1950's America.

And the ode is still being written. There is Bernadette Mayer's "Ode to My Period" and Yusef Komunyakaa's sublime "Ode to the Maggot," as well as Kenneth Koch's autobiography in odes, *New Addresses* (2000). Sharon Olds published her *Odes* in 2014, both a beautiful book of praise for the female body and an investigation of aging. So the ode seems to be without end, a public exclamation of our most private thoughts. It praises, yes, but it asks hard questions, and embraces Lorca's duende. From the very beginning of consciousness and its expression in language and writing, the ode has been with us, forging a connection between the world inside us and the one outside, and I find it thrilling to be part of that four-thousand year conversation between my deepest self and that of human beings who have come before and those who will follow.

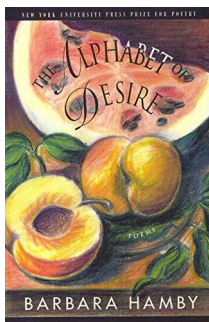
Rocheleau: Can you give us a rundown on some of the other books (many award-winning), that you've written or edited? It's a broad scope. What may have provoked their individual styles or substance?

Hamby: I started out as a free-verse poet very much influenced by Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, but also Sylvia Plath, T.S. Eliot, and Garcia Lorca. I struggled to find my poetic voice, but when it finally happened, editors of magazines let me know that I was doing something different. My dream publication was *The Paris Review*. Whenever, I wrote something that I thought was my best, I'd send it there first, and when I got my form rejection, I'd send the poems to other magazines. Then one time, I got the upper level form rejection—"In spite of its obvious merit, we are returning these poems to you. Please try us again." I was over the moon. When I sent the next manuscript, Richard Howard called me to accept the whole manuscript. These poems were in my first book, *Delirium*, which to my utter surprise won several first book awards and an NEA fellowship.



In *Delirium* I wrote an abecedarian poem, which I loved writing. I don't know if it was such a great poem, but I loved not knowing what was going to happen. An abecedarian is a kind of acrostic poem that goes back at least to the ancient Hebrew poets.

"Psalm119" is an abecedarian poem though much of its form is lost in translation. I didn't know that at the time, but I read about the form, wrote the alphabet down the left margin of a piece of paper, and the poem almost wrote itself. The form was made for me—I felt as if I were turbo-charged into a magic zone in which language and I were dancing our own special tango.



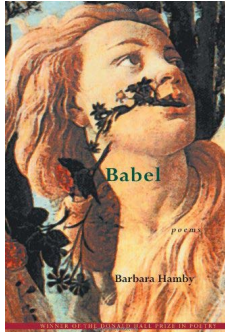
In my next book, *The Alphabet of Desire*, I wrote a sequence of twenty-six abecedarian poems, one for each letter of the alphabet. I did write about Hawai'i in this group of poems because Hawaiian is a k-rich language, and I needed the k's. I'm a list maker, and you can imagine the lists of words that I had for this project. I was in heaven. It was so difficult, but so much fun. You

[Link to books](#)

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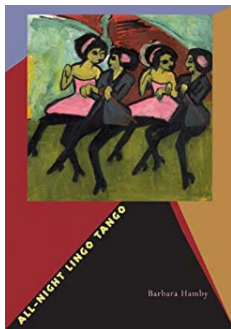
often read that we use only ten percent of our brain's capacity. Writing that sequence, I felt as if I were pushing my usage up to 27%.

In *Alphabet* I also wrote my first group of odes, or at least the first ones I called odes. I think that the poems that Richard Howard took for *The Paris Review* were odes,



especially the title poem, “Delirium” and another one “Nose.” This also when I got interested in the history of the ode and started reading Pindar and Horace.

All of these obsessions came together in my next book, *Babel*, which won the first AWP Donald Hall Prize for poetry. The title poem is a double abecedarian, in which the first line begins with an A and the second one with a Z, weaving the alphabet until the last two lines which begin with Z and A again. The book begins with a sequence of poems in which the mockingbird is a central metaphor, and ends with a sequence of odes called “American Odes,” which are about quintessentially American subjects like hardware stores, bubblegum, barbecue, rock ‘n’ roll, cars. I was also working my way into a more formal way of writing—counting syllables and end rhymes. I often couldn’t make it work, so I’d pull the poems apart and make them free-verse poems, but at the end of *Babel* I was able to make the leap into a more formally rigorous kind of writing.



A lot formal writing is pretty constipated, but then a lot of free verse is boring. My guiding light in writing more formal verse was the Italian word “sprezzatura,” which means doing something incredibly difficult but making it look easy. I wanted my formal poems to have the freedom of free-verse but within my chosen constraints. My next book, *All-Night Lingo Tango*, was a result of this obsession. Almost every line in the book has 13 syllables and end-rhymes.

I had such fun with that book. One of the elements of sprezzatura was allowing myself to follow my wacky interests, travel, love of English vocabulary, words in other languages, love of Shakespeare, years of watching mindless TV, and following them places that I didn’t expect them to take me. One of my favorite poems in the book is “Mambo Cadillac” which reads like a wild misbegotten romance between a woman and a man. It was only years later that I realized that it was the wild part of myself talking to the tame part.

This was the book that I sent in with my application for a Guggenheim fellowship, which was for my next book. I had no idea that I’d be successful, so I’d already finished my project which was for my *New and Selected Poems* when I received the fellowship. What should I do with the year off and the money? I love train travel, and I love Russian literature, so I decided to take the Trans-Siberian railroad from St. Petersburg to Beijing. It took about a month, and the poems were tackling me in the streets. This was the summer of 2011. The next summer I wanted to take a Jack-Kerouac-On-the-Road trip across the US, but David had just gotten a grant to follow the Blues Highway from Memphis to New Orleans, so I jumped on his train. Again, the poems were jumping out of the landscape in front of our car.

One of the things I loved was how the Russian trip kept infiltrating the Blues Highway trip. When we went to visit Graceland, I couldn’t help noticing how many similarities there were between Elvis and Tolstoy. Both had hundreds of people visiting their houses—Graceland and YasnayaPolyana. Both had favorite daughters and a bunch of yes-men hanging around driving their wives crazy, not to mention their sexual hangups. And, of course, New Orleans was a kind of homecoming.

I had two parts of a book, so what next? I love *The Odyssey*, so I applied for a summer grant from FSU to follow *The Odyssey* from Troy to Ithaka. Writing the application really made me investigate my process. Since scientists as well as humanists were going to be reviewing my application, I didn't want it to seem like I was trying to get money for a fancy vacation. I used Tim Severin's book *The Ulysses Voyage* to chart my course. We started in Istanbul and ended up back in Athens after going to Ithaka. I worked in visits to all the sites of the ancient games—Korinth, Nemea, Olympia, and Delphi—because of my love for Pindar's odes to the victors in those games. It was scary driving in Greece. There are no guard rails, and I'm terrified of heights, but the country and the people were beautiful. I even tried rewriting *The Odyssey* from the women's point of view. These three trips came together in *Bird Odyssey*, and then *Holoholo*.

Rocheleau: You have written many poems with food as a focal point. So let's add the art of cooking to that of poetry, among your various vocations. I enjoy your posts on social media featuring beautiful overhead photos of really succulent dishes and desserts that you have mastered; you seem to marry the visual sense to evoke other senses, like that of taste. Am I overextending to see that mix of the senses in your poetry, and that object to object, sense to sense, poetry goes everywhere for you?



Fig Tart



, Nectarine Tart



, Cherry Tart

Hamby: David says, "The poetry store is always open," and I think he's absolutely right. There should be no division between your life and your art. I often talk to students in conferences, and they tell me fascinating stories. I say, "That's a poem." Up to that point they haven't considered their stories as subjects for poems. Poems are everywhere. I'm working on a poem about conversation, and I read about "adda" the Bengali word for a free-floating conversation that can include politics, family problems, literature, the dog walking by the coffee shop, anything. Or I was watching the miniseries on Chernobyl, and the men were fashioning metal guards to cover their crotches, and I started riffing on the word "junk." Picasso said, "Inspiration exists, but it must find us working." Discipline for me is writing down everything that might be a poem and letting those little pieces tell me where they want to go. And yes, sense images drive a poem. Eliot said that you can't tell a reader how you felt. You have to recreate the world in which you felt something, so the reader can enter that world and feel it, too. It will never be your exact feeling, but it will resonate. It's all about connection. As E. M. Forster said, "Only connect."

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Rocheleau: Married poets, especially those who have accomplished so much in their art separately and together, is a natural subject for interviewers to pursue. In his work, David often reminds me of a fleet-fingered sax player, winding out wildly profound (and often uniquely funny) solos. To me, your own work approach is more often like that of a cellist, dancing along the constraints of a composition, obeying the rules of form while just slightly breaking them in your personal tempos and that stretching called rubato. What are the conscious and complementary differences in approach you may have both found remarkable?

Hamby: Sometimes people will say, “Isn’t hard living with another poet?” To me it’s the best thing in the world. I never have to explain why I need to run off and work on something. He went on all those long trips with me and used them for his own poetic purposes. We love and value what the other person does. I had a friend in graduate school who was very good poet, but she married a tax attorney, who despised poetry because it had no monetary value. That to me would be like living in hell. Living with a poet allows you to talk about it all the time. That is paradise.

Rocheleau: Your work is brocaded with exceptional word and phrasal flourishes that remind me of Donne. For instance, you have no fear of interspersing classical roots with the directness of everyday things and description. An example in “Thus Spake the Mockingbird” with its “the duodecimo of desperate love”, while a few lines down... “... where midnight slinks. I am the careless minx in the skirts of women.” You also carry an almost pianistic knack for complementing tones with your internal assonance and consonance. Many poets eschew such effects, but not you.

Hamby: When I was working on my first book, I wrote a sequence about Keats’s journey to Italy. As part of my research, I read Jackson Bate’s beautiful biography of Keats. In one chapter he described Keats’ love of Shakespeare his use of assonance or repeated vowel sounds to create music in his lines. I thought, “That’s something I’d like to try.” At first it was stilted, but after a while my brain understood what it was that I wanted to do, and it became more fluid. I think sometimes poets shy away from difficulty because the results are so horrible at first. I find that if you just stick with it, you can find your way.

Rocheleau: In your travels and sojourns abroad, what has that catalogue of time and event brought to your work and your life experience? Can you share an anecdote or two?

Hamby: We both love to travel. I like to plan the trips, but David has the most incredible facility with languages. He says his French is intermediate, but it has opened so many doors for us. The same is true of his Italian and Spanish. Even when we went to Russia, he learned phrases that made our way more delightful. He loves to eat, so a lot of his energy goes into finding restaurants and joking with waiters. He’s so good natured. I love opera, and he has cultivated an interest, too. We’ve been to a lot of the great opera houses. He also loves football, and I have never cultivated an interest in that, but he doesn’t care. What is a first down? I’ll never get it.

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Barbara at Stonehenge, Photo by David Kirby

Rocheleau: I know of your fondness for learning various languages and the distinctive play inherent in each. Are you currently studying anything new in this vein for yourself or a future project?

Hamby: I'm on day 790 of a Duolingo streak in French and Italian, and I'm taking an Alliance Francaise class on Tuesday nights. I'm hoping to go to Florence in May, and I have a fiction project I'm thinking of that's set in Paris. Other than that, I have no idea where I'm going. One of my passions is for words in other languages that we don't have in English. For example, in Swedish, there is the word "mangata" for the trail moonlight makes on water. And in Russian, "razbliuto" is the feeling you have for someone you once loved but love no more. The Bantu phrase "em-bukiem-vuki" is to tear off your clothes to dance. This became our "boogie-woogie." Isn't that wonderful?

Rocheleau: During the stay at Florida State, first as a student aspiring to an M.A., then as a longtime teacher, what are some of highlights and discoveries of each role you might pass along to current and future poets?

Hamby: I've been asked at parties how I can possibly teach someone to be a poet. My interlocutor is usually a scientist. I suppose for them, poetry is a mystical endeavor, and it is mysterious on a certain level, but every semester I see my students' writing improve dramatically, especially my undergraduates. One of the joys of teaching is seeing that happen.



What you can't teach is something I call "fire in the belly." I've seen really gifted poets give up, and less gifted writers stick with it and become really good. Recently I had a student who was just brilliant, and she worked hard at it. When I encouraged her to pursue an MFA, she said that her father wouldn't approve. A year after she graduated, she called me and said she was dying at her new job. She still wanted to be a poet, but there was her father. I suggested that she apply to various programs, just to see what would happen. I had fellow professors calling me asking me what they could do to get her to come to their programs. Finally, she got an offer from a top school that offered her a huge stipend. When she showed the letter to her father, he started crying. He said that he had no idea that something like this existed. And he was an educated man, a lawyer. Oops, that's the second benighted lawyer that has shown up in this interview. Is there a course in law school called, "Stomping the Poetry Out of Our Students?"

Rocheleau: Everyone reads into an artist's favorite things. So okay, how about favorites of yours, among artists and their works. If we take poets first (including those who may have influenced you the most here or there), who comes to mind?

Hamby: I talked earlier about Whitman, Ginsberg, and O'Hara. Also, Bob Dylan was a huge influence. I was one of those people who was thrilled when he won the Nobel Prize. He introduced me to Rimbaud. His "Subterranean Homesick Blues" is a masterpiece of rhyme. In the past ten or fifteen years I've immersed myself in ancient poetry and literature. I love the Russians. A couple of years ago, I was trying to learn how to post my classes on FSU's online program. My tutor was a Russian major, and pretty soon we were talking about Dostoevsky and my favorite of his novels, *The Idiot*. It was as if we were in love with the same guy. Her colleagues were looking at us as if we were out of our minds.

I'm teaching a class on the letters of poets starting with Ovid and ending with Ginsberg and Kerouac. I love Emily Dickinson's letters. My poetry is not much like hers, but I love it. I just



Emily Dickinson

finished reading Sylvia Plath's letters, all 2,200 pages. I love her bee poems. They influenced my sequence of bee poems in my first book. I love Anne Sexton's fairy tales. Pindar's odes taught me how form and freedom could work in a poem. Horace's odes are so calm on the surface, but are deeply passionate. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are brilliant, and I love *The Odyssey*.

Shakespeare and Keats—who isn't influenced by those two? *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a perfect piece of poetry as are Keats's odes. I've memorized "Ode to a Nightingale," and it teaches me so much about music, as do the soliloquies in *Hamlet*.

Rocheleau: As with David, music seems front and center, so what favorites here (besides poetry itself as music)?

Hamby: I love a lot of different kinds of music. When I was a teenager in Honolulu, I went to a lot of concerts. I saw Hendrix twice, the Stones, the Animals, and lots of other groups, but I also loved classical music, too, because I took piano lessons. Beethoven is a favorite. I love his piano sonatas. I have a box set of them on vinyl that I listened to for years. I also love Mozart, especially his operas. *Le Nozze di Figaro* is one of those perfect creations. The music is glorious, and the libretto poetic, but it is also subversive—overturning the class system but also making the women in the opera more powerful than the men. I love Puccini's *La Boheme* and *Tosca*.

I mentioned before that I loved Dylan. When I was a teenager I memorized all the lyrics on *Highway 61 Revisited*. I'd have to brush up, but I could probably recite "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" in a pinch. I also love Leonard Cohen and Joni Mitchell. They were the soundtrack of my twenties. When I cook, I love to listen to the Stones and Van Morrison. One of the top concerts of my life was seeing Morrison at the Olympia in Paris. Another one was Leonard Cohen at the O2 in London. We were walking down the street, and David said, "Would you like to see Leonard Cohen?" I thought it was a rhetorical question, but that night we were in the arena listening to him sing, "Famous Blue Raincoat" and "Hallelujah."

Rocheleau: Finally, visual artists, including the films you've bonded with over the years?

Hamby: Oh, that's a big one. When I was in college, I took a lot of art history classes. How's that for a career plan—poetry and art history? Those art history classes have enriched my life in ways I never imagined. I had the most wonderful professor—Patricia Rose—and I took every class she taught—High Renaissance, Baroque and Mannerism, the Northern European Renaissance and the History of Graphics. She really taught me how to look at art. When David and I went to Italy on our honeymoon, I took my class notes with me. Because of Florida State's study abroad program in Florence, we've been able to see the masterpieces of the Renaissance over and over. One of my ongoing projects has been drawing Donatello's David. When we're in Florence, I'll go to the Bargello and sketch for an hour or so. My drawings aren't good, but I love to really look at that statue. David has driven me to so many out-of-the-way places to see frescoes and paintings. I love Piero della Francesca. His fresco cycle in Arezzo is breathtaking. Caravaggio is another favorite. Many of his paintings are still in their original settings in Rome.

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Donatello's
David,
pen and ink by
Barbara Hamby

We both love film though David is more omnivorous than I am. We just finished Jane Campion's new film *The Power of the Dog*, which was great. I loved her *Bright Star*, of course, because it was about Keats. There used to be a movie theater in Tallahassee, The Miracle, that brought in all the art films. It was a sad day for us when it closed. We used to go to an early show and then discuss it over dinner. I'm working on a piece of fiction now with a character who is sitting in on a French New Wave cinema class, so I've been rewatching some of those. *400 Blows* and *Breathless* are two of my favorites and Jacques Rivette's *Celine and Julie Go Boating*. I'm looking forward to *Drive My Car*, a new Japanese film.

Rocheleau: Your and David's bond, as people and as master poets, must have grown, as great relationships do, into something very special. In fact, this appears already celebrated within your community and within our greater art. It seems to have been the lucky find of an internal and external oneness that radiates of its own observation and introspection. Can you share some guiding principle? And since we'll continue to be interested, what might your future yet hold, since we enjoy the shine we see?



Barbara and David, Photo by Catherine Husum Taylor

Hamby: I think we've been really lucky. In the beginning we had a lot of chemistry and a love of poetry. We still have that but we've developed other interests, especially travel, that have made our life together so rich. We get along really well at home, but when we travel, it's magic. I am great with a list and an itinerary, but David makes it fun. His high spirits elevate everything we do. He's always game, and he loves to buy tickets. When I want to go to a concert, he's already online buying the tickets. Love is such a mystery. Who knows why it works? I'm just grateful that it does.

BOOKS BY BARBARA HAMBY:

Holoholo (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021, ISBN 9780822966586)

Bird Odyssey (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018, ISBN 0-8229-6525-9)

On the Street of Divine Love: New and Selected Poems (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014, ISBN 0-8229-6288-8)

Lester Higata's 20th Century: stories (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010, ISBN 1-58729-918-6)

Seriously Funny: poetry anthology edited with David Kirby (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010, ISBN 0-8203-3569-X)

All-Night Lingo Tango: poems (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009, ISBN 0-8229-6017-6)

Babel: poems (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004, ISBN 0-8229-5859-7)

The Alphabet of Desire (New York: New York University Press, 1999, ISBN 0-8147-3597-5, paperback ISBN 0-8147-3598-3)

Delirium: poems (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 1995, ISBN 1-57441-002-4, paperback ISBN 1-57441-003-2)

Delirium

Just before I fainted in the restaurant that evening,
I was telling you a story about a madman
I saw earlier in the day
as I walked home from my ballet class
just off the Piazza Santa Maria del Carmine.
After crossing the bridge of Santa Trinita,
looking in at Ghirlandaio's frescoes
for the Sassetti family,
then wondering how many women there were
who were young and rich enough
to wear the see-through lace cowboy shirts
in the Gianni Versace windows
on the Via Tornabuoni,
at the intersection of the Via de Calzaioli
and the Via del Corso,
I walked into a hullabaloo being drummed up
by a bearded man who was stalking back and forth,
screaming something in Italian, of course,
and waving his arms in the air.
But when he turned he would reach down with one hand,
clamp his crotch,
and then pull his body around
as though his hips were a bad dog
and his genitals a leash he was yanking.
After each turn he'd continue stalking and flailing,
until time to turn again.
So I am trying to explain this and our pizza comes,
and I saw off a bite, but it is too hot,
so what do I do but swallow it, and it's too hot,
and I think, it's too hot,
and my voice decelerates as if it is a recording
on a slowly melting tape and the scene
in the restaurant begins to recede:
in the far distance I see the bearded man ranting
on the street,
then nearer but retreating quickly you
and the long corridor of the restaurant,

(Continued on the next page)

BARBARA HAMBY

POEMS BY

then it's as if I am falling into a cavity behind me,
 one that is always there, though I've learned to ignore it,
but I'm falling now, first through a riot of red rooms,
 then gold, green, blue and darker
until I finally drift into the black room
 where my mind can rest.

I wake up in the kitchen, lying on a wooden bench,
 with you and the waiter staring at me.

"I'm fine," I say, though it's as if I am pulling
 my mind up from a deep well.

The waiter brings me a bowl of soup,
 which I don't want, but it doesn't matter because
the lights go out and a man at the next table says,
 "Primo quella signora ed ora la luce,"

which means, first that woman and now the light,
 and it's so dark that I can't see myself or you,
and I feel as if I'm turning, a mad voice
 rising from my stomach

crying where are we anyway, and who, and what, and why?

~ From *Delirium* (1995)

Trigger Tries to Explain

Aw, Dale, he didn't mean it when he said I was the
best thing that ever happened to him. If he even said it,

chalk it up to the RKO publicity machine. I'm a horse, a
dead one at that, mounted in the museum with glass

eyes and looking a little ratty as the tubby former fans
file by with their bewildered bored kids, who are thinking,

Golden palomino, my ass, I can't believe he brought us
here instead of Disneyland, the boys looking like overgrown

insects and the girls like prostitutes in their halter tops,
jean short-shorts and platform sandals. It would have

killed Roy to see them, being such a goody-goody, always
Leonard Slye just beneath the skin with his Oklahoma homilies,

making everyone feel safe and sound. Oh, sure the big bad
Nazis were gone, but there were plenty of villains:

on the left the Commies, on the right the McCarthyites.
Poor Dale, you had a horse, too, what was her name? You were

Queen of the West until you gained a hundred pounds on fried
rashers, doughnuts, Wonder bread, and bakery cakes. Okay,

so it couldn't last forever. Get over it, Trigger, I tell myself,
television is fickle. Now it's hospital shows, blood and angst

undercut with tawdry sex. I blame the French, frigging cinema
verité. Where's the story, the hero, the beautiful girl?

Where's the horse? The other dead horses say, Whoa, don't get
excited, Trigger. Nothing's the way it was. That's the truth. Ah,

youth, I try not to be bitter, but sometimes I dream about
Zorro, now there was a guy who could make a horse look good.

~ From *The Alphabet of Desire* (1999)

Thus Spake the Mockingbird

The mockingbird says, hallelujah, coreopsis, I make the day
bright, I wake the night-blooming jasmine. I am
the duodecimo of desperate love, the hocus-pocus passion
flower of delirious retribution. You never saw such a bird,
such a triage of blood and feathers, tongue and bone. O the world
is a sad address, bitterness melting the tongues of babies,
breasts full of accidental milk, but I can teach the flowers to grow,
take their tight buds, unfurl them like flags in the morning heat,
fat banners of scent, flat platters of riot on the emerald scene.

I am the green god of pine trees, conducting the music
of rustling needles through a harp of wind. I am the heart of men,
the wild bird that drives their sex, forges their engines,
jimmies their shattered locks in the dark flare where midnight slinks.

I am the careless minx in the skirts of women, the bright moon
caressing their hair, the sharp words pouring from their beautiful mouths
in board rooms, on bar stools, in big city laundrettes. I am
Lester Young's sidewinding sax, sending that Pony Express
message out west in the Marconi tube hidden in every torso
tied tight in the corset of do and don't, high and low, yes and no. I am
the radio, first god of the twentieth century, broadcasting
the news, the blues, the death counts, the mothers wailing
when everyone's gone home. I am sweeping
through the Eustachian tubes of the great plains, transmitting
through every ear of corn, shimmying down the spine
of every Bible-thumping banker and bureaucrat, relaying the anointed
word of the shimmering world. Every dirty foot that walks
the broken streets moves on my wings. I speak from the golden
screens. Hear the roar of my discord murdering the trees,
screaming its furious rag, the fuselage of my revival-tent brag. Open
your windows, slip on your castanets. I am the flamenco
in the heel of desire. I am the dancer. I am the choir. Hear my wild
throat crowd the exploding sky. O I can make a noise.

~ From *Babel* (2004)

Ode to American English

I was missing English one day, American, really,
 with its pill-popping Hungarian goulash of everything
 from Anglo-Saxon to Zulu, because British English
 is not the same, if the paperback dictionary
 I bought at Brentano's on the Avenue de l'Opéra
 is any indication, too cultured by half. Oh, the English
 know their delphiniums, but what about doowop, donuts,
 Dick Tracy, Tricky Dick? With their elegant Oxfordian
 accents, how could they understand my yearning for the hotrod,
 hotdog, hot flash vocabulary of the U. S of A.,
 the fragmented fandango of Dagwood's everyday flattening
 of Mr. Beasley on the sidewalk, fetuses floating
 on billboards, drive-by monster hip-hop stereos shaking
 the windows of my dining room like a 7.5 earthquake,
 Ebonics, Spanglish, "you know" used as comma and period,
 the inability of 90% of the population to get the present perfect:
 I have went, I have saw, I have tooken Jesus into my heart,
 the battlecry of the Bible Belt, but no one uses
 the King James anymore, only plain-speak versions,
 in which Jesus, raising Lazarus from the dead, says,
 "Dude, wake up," and the L-man bolts up like a B-movie
 mummy. "Whoa, I was toasted." Yes, ma'am,
 I miss the mongrel plenitude of American English, its fall-guy,
 rat-terrier, dog-pound neologisms, the bomb of it all,
 the rushing River Jordan backwoods mutability of it, the low-rider,
 boom-box cruise of it, from New Joisey to Ha-wah-ya
 with its sly dog, malasada-scarfing beach blanket lingo
 to the ubiquitous Valley Girl's like-like stuttering,
 shopaholic rant. I miss its quotidian beauty, its querulous
 back-biting righteous indignation, its preening rotgut
 flag-waving cowardice. Suffering Succotash, sputters
 Sylvester the Cat; sine die, say the pork-bellied legislators
 of the swamps and plains. I miss all those guys,
 their Tweety-bird resilience, their Doris Day optimism,
 the candid unguent of utter unhappiness on every channel,
 the midnight televangelist euphoric stew, the junk mail-voice mail
 vernacular. On every boulevard and ruel miss
 the Tarzan cry of Johnny Weismueller, Johnny Cash, Johnny B.
 Goode, and all the smart-talking, gum-snapping
 hard-girl dialogue, finger-popping x-rated street talk, sports
 babble, Cheetos, Cheerios, chili dog diatribes. Yeah,
 I miss them all, sitting here on my sidewalk throne sipping
 champagne verses lined up like hearses, metaphors juking,
 nouns zipping in my head like Corvettes on Dexedrine, French verbs
 slitting my throat, yearning for James Dean to jump my curb.

~ From *Babel* (2004)

Ode to Barbecue

We are lost again in the middle of redneck nowhere,
 which is a hundred times scarier
 than any other nowhere because everyone has guns.
 Let me emphasize that plural—rifles,
 double-barreled shotguns, .22 semi-automatics,
 12-gauge pumps, .357 magnums. And for what?
 Barbecue. A friend of a friend's student's cousin's
 aunt's husband was a cook in the army
 for 30 years, and he has retired to rural Georgia
 with the sole aim in his artistic soul of creating
 the best barbecued ribs in the universe and, according
 to rumor, he has succeeded, which is not surprising
 because this is a part of the world where the artistic soul
 rises up like a phoenix from the pit of rattlesnake
 churches and born-again retribution, where Charlie Lucas
 the Tin Man creates dinosaurs, colossi of rusted
 steel bands and garbage can mamas with radiator torsos,
 electric-coil hearts, fingers of screws. Here W.C. Rice's
 Cross Garden grows out of the southern red clay with rusted
 Buicks shouting, "The Devil Will Put Your Soul
 in Hell Burn it Forever" and "No Water in Hell," and I think
 of Chet Baker singing "Let's Get Lost," and I know
 what he means, because more and more I know
 where I am, and I don't like the feeling,
 and Chet knew about Hell and maybe about being saved,
 something much talked about in the deep South,
 being saved and being lost because we are all sinners,
 amen, we bear Adam's stain, and the only way
 to heaven is to be washed in the blood of the Lamb,
 which is kind of what happens when out of the South
 Georgia woods we see a little shack with smoke
 pouring from the chimney though it's August
 and steamier than a mild day in Hell; we sit at a picnic table
 and a broad bellied man sets down plates of ribs,
 a small mountain of red meat, so different from Paris
 where for my birthday my husband took me
 to an elegant place where we ate tiny ribs washed down
 with a sublime St.-Joseph. Oh, don't get me wrong,
 they were good, but the whole time I was out of sorts,
 squirming on my perfect chair, disgruntled,
 because I wanted to be at Tiny Register's, Kojack's,
 J.B.'s, I wanted ribs all right but big juicy ribs dripping
 with sauce, the secret recipe handed down from grandmother
 to father to son, sauce that could take the paint off a Buick,
 a hot, sin-lacerating concoction of tomatoes, jalapeños
 and sugar, washed down with iced tea, Coca-Cola, beer,
 because there's no water in Hell, and Hell is hot, oh yeah.

From Nine Sonnets from the Psalms

Hear my prayer, O Lord, though all I do all day is watch
 old black-and-white movies on TV. Speak to me
 through William Powell or Myrna Loy, solve the mystery
 of my sloth. Show me the way to take a walk or catch
 a cold, anything but read another exposé
 of the Kennedys. Teach me to sing or at least play
 the piano. For ten years I took lessons, and all
 I learned was to hate Bach. Shake me up or down. Call
 me names. Break my ears with AC/DC—I deserve far
 worse. Rebuke me in front of my ersatz friends. Who cares?
 They don't like me much anyway. Make me fat in lieu
 of thin. Give me a break or don't. I'm a hundred million
 molecules in search of an author. If that's you, thank you
 for my skin. Without it I'd be in worse shape than I'm in.

~ from *All Night Lingo Tango* (2009)

I beseech thee, O Yellow Pages, help me find a number
 for Barbara Stanwyck, because I need a tough broad
 in my corner right now. She'll pour me a tumbler
 of scotch or gin and tell me to buck up, show me the rod
 she has hidden in her lingerie drawer. She has a temper,
 yeah, but her laugh could take the wax off a cherry red
 Chevy. "Shoot him," she'll say merrily, then scamper
 off to screw an insurance company out of another wad
 of dough. I'll be left holding the phone or worse, patsy
 in another scheme, arrested by Edward G. Robinson
 and sent to Sing-Sing, while Barb lives like Gatsby
 in Thailand or Tahiti, gambling the night away until the sun
 rises in the east, because there are some things a girl can be sure
 of, like morning coming after night's inconsolable lure.

~ from *All Night Lingo Tango* (2009)

BARBARA HAMBY

POEMS BY

Some days I feel like Janet Leigh in *Touch of Evil*—
I wake up, sunny and blond, but by the time midnight
rolls around I've been hijacked by Akim Tamiroff's
greasy thugs, shot up with heroin, framed for murder,
and I'm out cold in a border town jail. I didn't kill
Akim, of course, it was Hank Quinlan—drunk, overweight
Orson Welles—who for thirty-odd years as sheriff
has been framing creeps for crimes they maybe did. Enter
Mike Vargas, tall handsome Mexican cop—Charleton

Heston with a weird little mustache and a dark tan
from a can. "You don't talk like a Mexican," Welles
says, which speaks to me, because I can see that talking
like a Mexican could solve any number of roadside hells
I am currently running away from—well, walking.

~ from *All Night Lingo Tango* (2009)

The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. I am
that Trinculo, wandering this blue-green island, drunk
in the company of clowns, waiting for a telegram
that will boost me out of my present jam. Oh, yes ma'am,
I'm in quicksand and thinking about *The Mummy* sunk
under a 4,000-year curse or is it Caliban,
skulking in the underbrush of my mind? What's this funk
that's grabbed me like a gorilla in love? If I can
shake-and-bake it into the next century, slam dunk
it into a Fed-Ex box, send it to Kalamazoo,
then maybe I'll be able to breathe, but that low-down skunk,
my heart, won't quit beating for Prospero and his stew
of thunder and magic, so I stay up nights and scour
the sky for Zeus, his bolts shaking the midnight hour.

~ from *All Night Lingo Tango* (2009)

Mambo Cadillac

Drive me to the edge in your Mambo Cadillac,
 turn left at the graveyard and gas that baby, the black
 night ringing with its holy roller scream. I'll clock
 you on the highway at three a.m., brother, amen, smack
 the road as hard as we can, because I'm gonna crack
 the world in two, make a hoodoo soup with chicken necks,
 a gumbo with a plutonium roux, a little snack
 before the dirt and jalapeño stew that will shuck
 the skin right off your slinky hips, Mr. I'm-not-stuck
 in-a-middle-class-prison-with-someone-I-hate sack
 of blues. Put on your highwire shoes, Mr. Right, and stick
 with me. I'm going nowhere fast, the burlesque
 queen of this dim scene, I want to feel the wind, the Glock
 in my mouth, going south, down-by-the-riverside shock
 of the view. Take me to Shingles Fried Chicken Shack
 in your Mambo Cadillac. I was gone, but I'm back
 for good this time. I've taken a shine to daylight. Crank
 up that radio, baby, put on some dance music
 and shake your moneymaker, honey, rev it up to mach
 two. I'm talking to you, Mr. Magoo. Sit up, check
 out that blonde with the leopard print tattoo. O she'll lick
 the sugar right off your doughnut and bill you, too, speak
 French while she dothe do. Parlez-vousfrançais? Okay, pick
 me up tonight at ten in your Mambo Cadillac
 cause we got a date with the devil, so fill the tank
 with high-octane rhythm and blues, sugar cane, and shark
 bait, too. We got some miles to cover, me and you, think
 Chile, Argentina, Peru. Take some time off work;
 we're gonna be gone a lot longer than a week
 or two. Is this D-day or Waterloo? White or black—
 it's up to you. We'll be in Mexico tonight. Pack
 a razor, pack some glue. Things fall apart off the track,
 and that's where we'll be, baby, in your Mambo Cadillac,
 cause you're looking for love, but I'm looking for a wreck.

~ from *All Night Lingo Tango* (2009)

Ode to Forgetting the Year

Forget the year, the parties where you drank too much,
said what you thought without thinking, danced so hard
you dislocated your hip, fainted in the kitchen,
while Gumbo, your hosts' Jack Russell terrier,

looked you straight in the eye, bloomed into a bodhisattva,
lectured you on the Six Perfections while drunk people
with melting faces gathered around your shimmering corpse.

Then there was February when you should have been decapitated
for stupidity. Forget those days and the ones
when you faked a smile so stale it crumbled like a cookie
down the side of your face. Forget the crumbs and the mask
you wore and the tangle of Scotch tape you used to keep it in place,

but then you'd have to forget spring with its clouds of jasmine,
wild indigo, and the amaryllis with their pink and red faces,
your garden with its twelve tomato plants, squash, zucchini,
nine kinds of peppers, okra, and that disappointing row of corn.
Forget the corn, its stunted ears and brown oozing tips. Forgive
the worms that sucked their flesh like zombies
and forgive the bee that stung your arm, then stung your face, too.

While we're at it, let's forget 1974. You should have died that year,
or maybe you did. Resurrection's a trick
you learned early. And 2003. You could have called in sick
those twelve months—sick and silly, illiterate and numb,

and summer, remember the day at the beach when the sun
began to explain Heidegger to you while thunderclouds
rumbled up from the horizon like Nazi submarines? The fried oysters
you ate later at Angelo's were a consolation and the margaritas
with salt and ice. Remember how you begged the sullen teenaged waitress
to bring you a double, and double that, pleasepleaseplease.

And forget all the crime shows you watched,
the DNA samples, hair picked up with tweezers
and put in plastic bags, the grifters, conmen, and the husbands
who murdered their wives for money or just plain fun.
Forget them and the third grade and your second boyfriend,
who loved Blonde on Blonde as much as you did

(Continued on the next page)

but wanted something you wouldn't be able to give anyone for years.

Forget movies, too, the Hollywood trash in which nothing happened
though they were loud and fast, and when they were over
time had passed, which was a blessing in itself. O blessed
is Wong Kar Wai and his cities of blue and rain.
Blessed is David Lynch, his Polish prostitutes juking
to "Loco-Motion" in a kitschy fifties bungalow. Blessed
is Leonard Cohen, his "Hallelujah" played a thousand times
as you drove through Houston, its vacant lots
exploding with wild flowers and capsized shopping carts.

So forget the pizzas you ate, the ones you made from scratch
and the Dominoes ordered in darkest December,
the plonk you washed it down with and your Christmas tree
with the angel you found in Naples and the handmade Santas

your sons brought home from school, the ones with curling eyelashes
and vampire fangs. Forget their heartbreaks
and your sleepless nights like gift certificates
from the Twilight Zone, because January's here,
and the stars are singing a song you heard on a street corner once,
so wild the pavement rippled, and it called you
like the night calls you with his monsters and his marble arms.

~ From *One the Street of Divine Love: New and Selected Poems* (2004)

Elvis and Tolstoy Save the World

I am standing in line waiting for the bus to take me
 across the street to Graceland when Tolstoy shows up
with his white beard and peasant's garb, and I smell him
 before I see him, because let's face it, Mennen's speed stick
was not big at YasnayaPolanya, but I recognize him right away,
 those big ears and the beard like one of the guys in ZZ Top,
and I say, "Lev Nikolayevich, what are you doing here?"
 And he gives me this mix of a stink eye
and What are you doing later? and says, "I need to talk to Elvis,"
 and I'm thinking, Tolstoy looked at my boobs?
and What's Tolstoy want to say to Elvis? at the same moment,
 and if one more supernatural thing happens, my brain
might explode, but we just get on the bus, sit down,
 and put on our headphones, but I can't stop thinking
about how much Elvis and Tolstoy have in common,
 as in hundreds of people standing in line to tour their houses,
and Tolstoy had a favorite daughter, Alexandra, and Chernov
 and all his celibate followers, and Elvis had Lisa Marie
and the Memphis Mafia, and there were Priscilla and Sonya,
 both driven mad by the great ones' sexual inhibitions,
so when we arrive at Graceland, which, contrary to my expectations,
 is not cheesy, but a middle class family home,
and the guides tell us to go through the house at our own pace
 but not to go upstairs, though that doesn't stop Tolstoy,
who heads right up and since no one says anything to him,
 I follow along in his wake, and he goes to Elvis's bedroom
without knocking or anything, and there's Elvis lying on the bed,
 but the young Elvis with his sad eyes, and Tolstoy says,
"Elvis, quit moping around. We have work to do." And I'm standing
 over by the closet trying to visualize an Elvis/Tolstoy project,
but Elvis tells Tolstoy that he can't help him. "I'm sad," he says.
 "My mama's dead, and she's the only one who really loved me."

(Continued on the next page)

“My mother just died, too,” I say, and Elvis’s head jerks up.
 “Who’s she?” he asks Tolstoy, who shakes his head,
 “I don’t know, some groupie. Forget her, we have to save the world.”
 “What’s wrong with it?” Elvis says. “What’s wrong with it?”
 Tolstoy’s head explodes and then comes right back together again
 like some Krazy Kat cartoon, which gets Elvis’s attention.
 “How long since you’ve been outside?” says Tolstoy. “I’ve been dead,”
 says Elvis, but Tolstoy pulls him off the bed. “That’s no excuse.”
 And I think, Groupie? Black Sabbath has groupies, but Tolstoy?
 And if I were going to be a groupie, I’d be following Chekhov
 around, because he’s my idea of a guy I’d like to spend time with,
 but here I am with Tolstoy and Elvis, and both are as crazy
 as rats in a coffee can, but for dead guys they’re moving fast,
 and I make a note to amp up my morning walk
 because I’m huffing as Tolstoy shoves Elvis into the pink Cadillac
 and I barely make it into the back seat because Lev Nikolayevich
 is gunning the engine, heading south on Highway 61 to Natchez
 and New Orleans because as everyone knows that’s
 where the world almost ended on August 29, 2005, when Katrina hit
 the Gulf Coast like an apocalyptic medieval shit storm,
 and when I look at my watch, the hands are moving backwards fast,
 the Cadillac’s speedometer is moving past eighty,
 a hundred, and we take off into the clouds, which are grey
 as a Confederate uniform, then black, and Tolstoy
 says, “We have to blast Katrina with our combined mojo, Elvis,
 or New Orleans will be sucked into the center of the earth,”
 and Elvis, says, “Jesus Christ,” and Tolstoy says, “No, man,
 it’s just you and me,” and Elvis jerks his head backwards,
 and says, “Who’s she again?” and Tolstoy shakes his head and looks
 into the rearview mirror. “She’s going to write the poem.”

~ From *Bird Odyssey* (2014)

The Odyssey in Six Sonnets

I. Nausicaa

I was the girl who found him washed up on the beach
like Burt Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity*
only worse for wear. I thought he was a tree, a birch
log covered with weeds, but then he moved—an arm, a knee.

I knew he was a man. Yoo-hoo—I called my ladies,
and one ran back for help. Oh, my god, the stories he told,
it was better than television or the movies,
though they were thousands of years in the future. A bold

man he was, one I could see myself having a snog
with and much more, but he was married, or so he said,
and my father fitted him out with a boat and grog
and gold, and that was that as the setting sun turned red
on Poseidon's kingdom. I wish I'd left him to rot
on the sand, algae around his throat, a lover's knot.

II. Circe

Holy moly, what a man! I had him for a year,
and I got the good out of him, I can tell you that.
I knew the gods, as soon as their hangovers had cleared,
would put their oars in, nosing around when they saw what

was going on. They have some weird ideas about men
and gods canoodling. I hate that bitch Athena
with her helmet and double-D cup. I know she sent
Hermes to warn Odysseus. I should have seen a

trick coming my way, but he was such a divine hunk
of man. The poet says, *Some women are strange feeders.*
My sister bore the Minotaur, but I was in a funk,
had my fill of lions and bulls. I wanted a breeder

so when he left, I'd have someone of my own. Well,
so I will. I said goodbye and sent him straight to hell.

(Continued on the next page)

III. Mother in the Underworld

Didn't I teach you anything, you dumb cluck?
 Never get mixed up with the gods: divine blood will suck
 the plasma right out of your veins. You were a sitting duck,
 my boy, Athena loves a man with a big sword tucked

into his belt. She is Zeus's daughter, for God's sake.
 And killing Poseidon's son. Well, you have a real knack
 for taking a wrong turn. Why didn't you simply whack
 him on the head, rather than put out his eye and mock

him as you sailed away? I was standing on the dock
 the day you left for Troy. It was as if the sun had locked
 its light away. Then we heard that others had come back
 and still no sign of you, my darling boy. The ticking clock

had run its course for me. Remember, I'd felt you kick
 inside me. I couldn't live without you. That's a fact.

IV. Sirens' Song

O men in your ships, your ships of carnage, our lips burn
 for your bodies, your hips, anything you want we'll turn
 our bodies to, whatever you want. The waters churn
 with the sea god's salt-soaked blood. Swim to us now, spurn

the ways of men, and we will carry you to the fern
 grottos of our island, deep caves of softest moss worn
 softer still by our skin. O ships of men, do you yearn
 for whips and chains? Yes, we have them, as well, we can clean

the flesh right off your bones, or if your body's ruin
 lies in another room, we will help you find your doom,
 peel back layers of love until you're left with the germ
 of your beginning—your mother's egg, your father's sperm.

O men in your ships upon the sea, our bodies burn
 for you, anything you want we'll turn into, we'll turn.

(Continued on the next page)

V. Calypso

I was sick of him if you must know—nine long years
of the missionary position and ram, ram, ram.
I showed him what I wanted, and he said only queers
did those kinds of things. I should be so lucky. Oh, damn

the man, the island, and the great gods. He'd been drifting
for nine days in the sick churning sea and looked like death
on a stick. Why did I pick him out of the shifting
waters? Who knows? I did. I'll let you do the math.

His tales were thrilling for maybe six or seven months,
then another Have-I told-you-this-one? introduced
a tedium that made this semi-divine sea nymph
want to scream. When he whined to be set free, I produced

a raft tout de suite. Not his story, I know. I could kick
myself, Penelope. Forgive me for sending him back.

VI. Penelope's Lament

No sex for twenty years except with my handmaidens
and myself, so when you turned up like a beggar man,
O I recognized you but needed time to trade in
my poor-widow persona for something more Charlie Chan,

you know, a razor hiding behind a cream puff mask,
irritated by my number-one-and-only son,
ranting about food and money, hiding sheep and casks
of wine in caves, so the suitors would be forced to run

away. As if they would. A more ratty shiftless bunch
of creatures would be hard to rustle up. My bad luck,
they wanted to be king. I'd thought of giving them a lunch
of strychnine. Then you showed up, a geriatric Huck

Finn. So be my guest, finish them off, then I mean
to poison you. O Ithaka is mine. I am queen.



ABOUT BARBARA HAMBY

Barbara Hamby is the author of seven books of poems, most recently *Holoholo* (2021), *Bird Odyssey* (2018) and *On the Street of Divine Love: New and Selected Poems* (2014), published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, which also published *Babel* (2004) and *All-Night Lingo Tango* (2009). Her first book, *Delirium*, won the Vassar Miller Prize, The Kate Tufts Award, and the Poetry Society of America's Norma Farber First Book Award. Her second book, *The Alphabet of Desire*, won the New York University Press Prize for Poetry and was published in 1999 by New York University Press. She was a 2010 Guggenheim fellow in Poetry and her book of short stories, *Lester Higata's 20th Century*, won the 2010 Iowa Short Fiction Award. Her poems have appeared in many magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Yale Review*, and *The New York Times*. She has also edited an anthology of poems, *Seriously Funny* (Georgia, 2009), with her husband David Kirby. She teaches at Florida State University where she is Distinguished University Scholar.



ABOUT AL ROCHELEAU

Al Rocheleau is the author of *On Writing Poetry, 2010* (in bookauthority.org's list of "the top 75 poetry writing books of all time"); *Falling River: Collected Poems, 1976-2016*; over 200 poems and translations published in more than a hundred journals in six countries. He is also founder and director, Twelve Chairs Advanced Poetry Course (180 Hours) and the Twelve Chairs Short Course, both accredited by the Florida State Poets Association; lecturer, University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, Emerson College, University of Florida, Oak Hammock Institute for Learning in Retirement, Florida State Poets Association, and Florida Writers Association; recipient, Thomas Burnett Swann Award, 2004; nominee, Forward Poetry Prize, U.K., 2018; participant in joint music-and-poetry compositions and public performances with Florida composers Keith Lay (2014), Benoit Glazer (2018), and Stan Cording (2021); immediate past president, Florida State Poets Association.



ABOUT PATSY

Patsy began her life living two houses down from us. Her birth name was Mallory Burton, and she lived with her sister Merlin and her brother Percy. The first time we saw her, we were returning from a trip to Chile. We saw Patsy and Merlin lounging on our deck. They jumped up, and Patsy looked at us as if to say, "Who are you? And why are you harshing our mellow?"

They ran away, but in the coming weeks Patsy started nosing around, and close behind was Percy, who is a big orange tom and quite the bully. However, even though Patsy is very dainty, she is a scrapper. She wouldn't let Percy intimidate her. Pretty soon I was letting her into the house so she could get away from Bully Boy. She started taking long naps on the couch. It went on like this for about a year, and then she just gradually moved in.

David is allergic to cats, but Patsy doesn't really bother him. We started calling her Patsy before we knew her real name. Her original mother, Patricia Burton, told us that Percy was the runt of the litter, so Patsy was in charge until Percy grew into his full tom-ness.

In our house Patsy is queen. We call her The Prettiest of the Pretty Girls, Miss Pretty Paws, Miss Spats, Cookie Wallenda for her amazing climbing skills, and many other silly names. David had a dream recently in which Patsy told him that she wanted to be called Pomposity Kindlewick, so sometimes we call her Miss Poms or Pompy for short.