THE O:JA&L MASTERS SERIES

Poetry: All forms & styles

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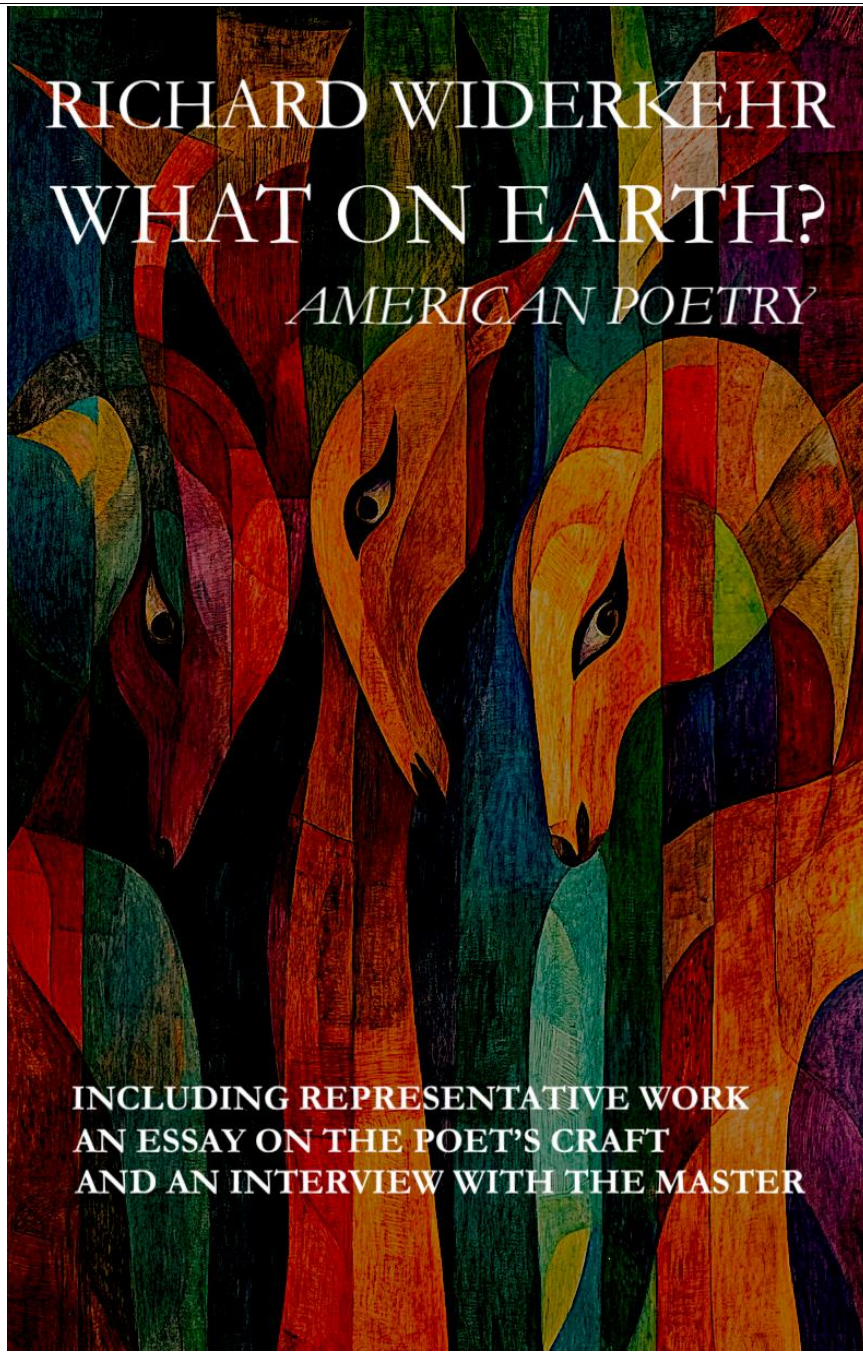

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THE 2026 O:JA&L MASTERS SERIES

RICHARD WIDERKEHR

Poetry: All forms & styles

INCLUDING REPRESENTATIVE WORK
AN ESSAY ON THE POET'S CRAFT
AND AN INTERVIEW WITH THE MASTER

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REPRESENTATIVE WORK

WEST TOWARD SQUALICUM MOUNTAIN IN AUGUST

AFTER YOUR RIFFS on that blue harmonica
at the String Band Jamboree, after the woman
with the gold-and-black arch-top guitar
said, *This is good,* we have headed
west in your flat-bed truck, the half-moon
in our rear-view mirror not a stopped
pocket watch, not your mother's pale face,
not the years all the way back to *Lamentations*,
the wars, this war now. Didn't she play
the hammer dulcimer? Now these fields
half-asleep in the heat, the hay trucks
heavy-laden, the closer and closer
we get to the gray mustard seed
of the sun.

* First published in *O:JA&L*.

IN THE HALL OF NORTH AMERICAN MAMMALS: MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

WRITING IN THE COOL OF THE MORNING near the diorama
of the saber-toothed tiger—
no need to tell you about my tar pit of an apartment
near the river in Manhattan or the nettles I fell in when I fled
to Day Creek.

You don't want a woman, said the hooker
in red hot pants in Times Square. In the summer of love,
nights in Adam & Eve's,
I nursed Stingers 'cause that's what Bogart drank.
And yet,
under my Vodka-and-burnt-toast breath,

I muttered, *God, please take my life.*

In the cool of the morning, the frozen saber tooth
beige-gold. Sometimes, yes, I soared
like a god with his female city
in air, in fog with its/her orange-pink halo
at night over the Empire State Building,
the spire King Kong fell from,
his fist uncurling, fingers letting go,
setting down Fay Wray slowly,
tenderly,
at dawn, on her ice-gray platform,
not calling *God God*

*First published in *O:JA&L* and reprinted in *Missing the Owl* (Shanti Arts Publications) by Richard Widerkehr.

NIGHT FIELDS

SHE WAS RIDING the rope swing
under the fir tree, and somewhere a branch
was creaking. She gazed at the tree
with its gray bark, up where the branches
started, thirty feet high. A rushing
went through them. They'd been quiet
at her window, but now they were
too loud, too close, like the sea.
The goats, staked out, munched on
their weeds; and she leaned into the dark,
closing her eyes as if she knew
trees can grow tired of being trees,
knew they can toss and heave
and take her through the dark fields.

*First published in *Writers' Forum,* reprinted in the chapbook *Disappearances* (Radiolarian Press) and then in *The Way Home (Plain View Press)* by Richard Widerkehr.

ON POTTER'S VALLEY ROAD

Greetings and salivations, says our cat, asking for her Bluebird Tuna, not parsnips.
Our calico cat, whose beige-yellow sleek resembles a top-down '48 Packard

pastel convertible, her belly's rascal satin too white to be more than a slight variation
of the truth. Her name is Science, and we believe in her as if she were God,

whom, if there were a god, we would believe in, just as we believe in subtle shadings—
elusive ecru—not Salvation Army reds. Above all, we believe in gray Packards

whose existence can be proven by glancing at old Sunday Times
magazines sections in microfiche. Yes, we believe in wind, rain,

in words that open like umbrellas, knowing their place,
which is to shelter us. After all, our cat knows we provide

the bluefin tuna. So when our Saab Sonnet equipped with roll bars
veers on the hair-pin curve on Mt. Abora, almost wrenching

head from torso, our soul or something like it rises from the crash scene,
says *Don't die*, and somehow our larynx gets re-attached to trachea,

our head not on straight, but we can still crawl home on all fours
to Potter's Valley Road. Under low stars

that drift through conifers, we say, *This is good.* Our cat wraps herself
around our ankles. *Oh, Science*, we call out. This is our place.

*First published in *O:JA&L*.

AS WE STAND BY A MOSS-COVERED STUMP IN FIELD 49

--I was a vessel of attention…
- Patricia Hooper

SMOKE FROM THE WILDFIRES, haze over Skagit Valley.

Last night in our driveway, frogs and stars,
and later in my dream someone would say,
My neck has been mended in three places.
I woke, sipped coffee.

Here at the start of March in this stubble field,
you say, *Look*—an eagle in black alder branches;
white tail feathers. In the distance, dark foothills.
Mist sifts down and licks at them a little.

Sometimes, we are boats made of smoke.

*First published in *I-70 Review*.

WILDFIRES: ST. PAUL RIOTS

THAT AUGUST when fireweed turned white,
and the sun hung like a poppy in smoke—
Beauty takes a beating in the streets,
I wrote, *and truth tries to do too much.*

That night the orange half-moon,
a smudge pot in funerary shadows—
now my sister says, *There's no virus,*
it's a plot by the government—

this host's an army, a throng.
Fumes and rumors fuse no sinews, bro.
George Floyd is dead, I tell her.

And the sun has the gall to come up.

*First published in *The Main Street Rag* and reprinted in *Missing the Owl* (Shanti Arts Publications) by Richard Widerkehr.

HER COFFEE TABLE

-- in Hebrew *ruach* means *breath, wind, spirit*

LAST NIGHT'S DREAM—no, let's start with this teak
table in the sun. My sister who has heard voices
gave it to me. After our parents' deaths,
I asked, What about your silver? Don't you
want that? *You keep if for me,* said Chloe.
Her call on a borrowed cell phone. In my dream,
we are children playing this game—if we cut
ourselves on a scrap of tin foil, we die.

Don't crumple them, she says. *I have nothing,*
bro. To which I do not say, You gave away
the Birkenstocks we sent you…. It must be
someone's job to tuck wind into syllables,
keep from touching jagged edges,
take in this breath, the next.

* First published in *O:JA&L.*

SYMPATHY FOR THE SCARECROW

WHAT'S WRONG—why can't he free his arms,
call on beasts of mercy? As if he must appease
the gods of flame and so forth, he amps up
his adrenaline and dread, flails his spindly

limbs in the wind. The crows on topsoil
by the new starts know this isn't just work.
No one texts him, sends a video, reminds him
of the last time he walked on fire.

Shall we discuss his mute, charred eyes,
or leave that to the guardians of straw?
He gazes at the center of the blue spruce,

as if the trunk might see his ashen wrists,
fluent as wings once more as promised,
burning, of course, like dead bees.

*First published in *O:JA&L* and reprinted in *Missing the Owl* (Shanti Arts Publications) by Richard Widerkehr.

WHEN YOU ASK ABOUT THE ELEPHANTS IN THAT DREAM

I RECALL THE SWOOSH of their limbs in the dense vegetation,
and yes, their heavy breathing. Our dead father,
our mother not there by the shallow pool
where no fish leapt upstream, loyal to water.

Like our mother by her window near the end,
eyes upturned, you lifted your face to one side,
as if to hear a waterfall in the sun being filled
and emptied, emptied and filled, as dusk crept in.

*First published in *O:JA&L*.

YOU

THE ONE THING I do not forget
is you. Your silence. Along with
your red bishop, also a rabbi,
riding diagonals of rain.

Yesterday on North Shore Drive,
a gray radiance on the lake—
whoa, no hole in the clouds.
Nothing asked why I had stood

on one leg, nor did it ask what
I was trying to prove and to whom.
It just said, *Pay attention*, and for
a few moments, that's all I did.

Gray with its face like a hospice
nurse who asks you to sing,
"You Are My Sunshine," which
by the way, is not a happy song.

MESSENGER IN EARLY NOVEMBER

- in memory of J.K.

DRIVING PAST AGATE BAY, I catch a glimpse
of this deer in a splotch of sun and shadow—
the brown-tail's flanks on the edge of the road
in yellow leaves, thin branches. Last May
after your death, a bear cub loped beside my car
like a lost Labrador, seemed to disappear
under my front bumper. Slamming on the brakes,
I felt no thud, heard nothing. Amazing, the cub
as if uninjured, clambered up the ditch-bank.
Only later, after your memorial, did I reread
your last poems, that black bear nosing
at your sleeping bag in the camp site
in Arizona; recalled marmots whistling
in pillow basalt near Mt. Baker; the grouse
thumping its tail near our driveway,
feasting on red hawthorn berries.
You noticed. I cannot believe you said No
to another go-round on the cancer wish machine,
you called it, completed your book, *First Stars.*
On your last hike, you raced downhill
in your wheelchair, shouting. You must
be in these sun spots, mottled shadows.
Too excellent a camouflage, my friend—
thin, flickering branches, a few gold leaves,
before all the color goes away.

*First published in *I-70 Review* and reprinted in *Missing the Owl* (Shanti Arts Publications) by Richard Widerkehr; also featured on griffinpoetry.com.

MIGRATION: YOU ASK ME WHAT I WANT

WHEN FLOCKS OF SNOW GEESE GATHER on the low, wet fields
near Conway in mid-February, the whir of black-tipped wings,

a fire of dying constellations in my throat—their cries
not in unison, no—scattered ice floes flying home.

*First published in *The Main Street Rag* and reprinted in *Missing The Owl* (Shanti Arts Publications) by Richard Widerkehr

TWO SOLITUDES

YOU SAW HER SHAME, wanting to give herself,
she said, to the first man on Division Street
she met. There was a black trestle, that tributary
of the Huron River. No locomotive's shackled wheels.
Fifty years later, she writes and asks if you ever
laughed about what happened. No, never.
She feels, she says, a slight melancholy.

You recall how she unfastened her jade heart
necklace, closed it in your hands. "This won't work,"
she said. Were there four, five other mornings?
Sometimes, you have this dream. Headstones,
that river. As you walk away, you both lug
on your backs this stone image of the other
one, still young, fingers almost touching.

But you are old, heads bowed, maybe glad
a little at not having given any winter stars
the small, mute satisfaction of seeing what burns
away in clear, bright air. Do not ask if you two
might come to see this world more filled
with mystery than you can understand. No,
do not start a poem that ends, There used
to be more streetlights in the square.

ESSAY

WHAT ON EARTH?

Short lyric poems can hold an entire world in a few lines: a moment caught in motion, a story compressed, or an insight earned at the edge of experience. In their best versions, everyday speech rubs against metaphor until language begins to sing, and the reader feels time slow, as if attention itself were a kind of gravity. This essay explores how poets achieve that intensity through image, sound, and craft. By looking closely at work by Patricia Hooper, Joseph Stroud, and Wisława Szymborska, Widerkehr traces how detail and diction turn observation into revelation.

I'D LIKE TO BEGIN this talk with a few examples of short lyric poems. Sometimes, these are captured moments, sometimes compressed short stories, maybe with the speaker's hard-won insight near the end. Often there is a tension between plain speech and metaphor that lifts the language toward song. Time can seem to slow down for the reader, as when light approaches a very large object, such as a black hole, physicists tell us.

Let's look at a poem by Patricia Hooper from her fifth book, *A Necessary Persistence*.

SIGHTINGS

The world leafs out again, the willow first
and then the river birches near the road
we're driving down, you in your car seat watching,
for hawks or smaller birds returning home.
Two years have passed since you could walk or stand
alone. The winter-damaged fields are sown,
and there, along the ridge, unraveling,
spirals of songbirds, drifts of dogwood trees,
restored to blossom, beauty that breaks the heart.
And you whose spinal cord could not be healed:
you're lowering the window, looking up
at miles of wings, your face alive with joy.

As we're drawn by details into this bird-watching trip in spring, the language is quiet, not calling attention to itself. Then those *winter-damaged fields* that are *sown* make their entrance. Good word, *sown*. The "you" is the speaker's

paralyzed grandson. Hooper has raised the stakes, and we feel her urgency, released from *spirals of songbirds, drifts of dogwood trees*… this injury that *could not be healed… heart-breaking beauty…miles of wings, your face alive with joy.* Clear images, strong feeling—a grandson's wonder, the speaker's joy and gratitude—this poem is a gift to the reader.

Now let's look at a less formal kind of poem by Joseph Stroud from his book of collected poems*, Of This World.*

THE PERFECTION OF CRAFT

The great blue heron stalks among reeds,
stops—alert—then stabs its beak, flings
into the air a roiling snake, and catches it,
tosses it again, the snake not knowing
what on earth, caught once more, head first,
still alive, slithering down the herons's throat.

We see the heron catch a snake, toss it in the air, catch and toss again, as if this were a game, so the serpent goes down "alive, slithering into the heron's throat." What an image! But the poem is about craft. Perhaps, the poet is like a heron, and the poem is the snake, not knowing *what on earth,* says our speaker, all at once in the point of view of the snake.

The ideas and shifting point of view are complex, the images stark. Notice Stroud's active verbs—stabs, flings, catches, tosses. "Stalks" is more accurate than "walks." Also, more vivid. A "roiling snake in the air," suggests turmoil; it's a better word than "writhing" here. Maybe the word "coils" is in the back of our minds. And look at Stroud's switch from the fancy word "roiling" to plain speech, "what on earth." Yes, what on earth?

I should tell you I am a musician and a singer. Sometimes, when a certain word in my poem doesn't sound right, I search, not for a synonym, but a word that rhymes or is a half-rhyme. For me, sound is part of the energy that drives the poem, almost as if our lines were a force field. Sometimes, this can lead me to a surprising word or image. Another way of getting back into a poem that isn't finished is to re-type the poem, changing line endings and/or stanza breaks, or changing the speaker from "I" to "you" or "he."

Sometimes, I write in the voice of a persona who is not myself, as in my poem, "Sympathy for the Scarecrow." Sometimes, paradoxically, the invented speaker can free us to take more risks, go into subject matter that may be hard to touch, as in, Szymborska's poem, "Lot's Wife, " which opens like this:

> "They say I looked back out of curiosity. But I could have had other reasons. I looked back mourning my silver bowl. Carelessly, while tying my sandal strap. So, I wouldn't have to keep staring at the righteous nape of my husband Lot's neck."

I've left out the line breaks on purpose. See how prosy this is, how plain the language, how believable Lot's wife is, how we get clear images and then a sarcastic attitude toward her husband. It is what I call a conversation poem, mixing images and plain speech.

Nearing the end of this talk, I recall when I was nineteen years old, standing with my girlfriend on the pedestrian walkway of the Ambassador Bridge that goes from Detroit to Windsor, Canada. "A geometer's dead forest," I would call the bridge's towers and cables in my poem. As semi-trucks shifted gears and climbed toward us, the bridge began to shake. I don't recall thinking, What on earth? But yes, what on earth!

Though I grew up in big cities—New York, Detroit—for almost forty years I have lived in the "county," in a small red house on a chip-seal road in northwest Washington. A "necessary persistence" keeps us going.

INTERVIEW

Associate Editor Jeff Streeby

INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD WIDERKEHR

Across decades of writing, teaching, and attentive living, RICHARD WIDERKEHR *has developed a body of work marked by lyric precision, moral seriousness, and a deep fidelity to place, family, and the inner life. His poems—often rooted in the landscapes of the Pacific Northwest—move fluidly between memory and imagination, the personal and the archetypal, the seen world and what lies just beyond it. In this wide-ranging interview, Widerkehr reflects on the formative influences that shaped his poetic voice, from early literary mentors and formal study to the quieter educations of work, illness, and care. He speaks candidly about writing practices, revision, form, and failure; about the ethical challenges of turning lived experience into art; and about sustaining a creative life outside the glare of literary celebrity. What emerges is a portrait of a poet committed less to spectacle than to attention—one who understands poetry as both a craft honed over time and a way of remaining permeable to the world's griefs, gifts, and ongoing surprises.*

Streeby for O:JA&L: How have your formal education and any significant mentors or informal experiences shaped your poetic voice and approach?

Richard Widerkehr: When I was an undergraduate, I read a lot of English and American literature, some Greek drama and Russian novels. In grad school at Columbia, we read the English Romantic poets, and I wrote my Master's thesis on Coleridge's later poems. In my twenties as I taught and tutored mostly part-time and had what I would later call a part-time life, I read Hardy, Lawrence, James, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald. Poets that meant a lot to me were Shakespeare, Keats, Yeats, Coleridge, Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, Eliot, Reothke, Sylvia Plath, Ginsberg, and James Wright.

One of my mentors at the University of Michigan was Robert Haugh, who focused on what he called place images in fiction. We read stories built not on plot and rising action, but ones whose climax is a moment of emotion and/or insight. For example, maybe you know Jame's Joyce's short story, "Araby," where a young boy goes to a bazaar he has built his hopes on, but he is disillusioned.

After I moved to Bellingham, I took more writing classes at Western Washington University. A short story I wrote in a class taught by Lynda Schor turned into what would become my novel, *Sedimental Journey*. Other teachers at WWU who encouraged me were Kelly Cherry, William Wiser, Jim Rogers, and Mary Elsie Robertson. They even gave me blurbs years later when the book was published by Tarragon Books in Bellingham, for it took nine years to write, fifteen more to get published.

After I won a prize in a short story contest judged by an editor in New York, *Sedimental* came close with him. He and an agent I met both said I needed to cut the book somewhat and find a better ending. After sulking a while, I rewrote the book. Again, close but no cigar. I tried other presses, was a finalist in a contest, but no. In 2005, my wife and I went to a psychic fair where a friend of hers was selling her jewelry. I met a former classmate who had a small press. She asked me what happened to the novel. I gave it to her, and she published it.

By then it was 2005. I had gone back to writing poems, my first love. In 2012, after some health problems, I decided to submit poems simultaneously to many places. Got quite a few published. That led to books of poems. During this time, I continued to take courses for a week in the summer at Centrum, worked with poets such as Joseph Stroud, Erin Belieu, Peggy Shumaker, Agha Shahid Ali, Jane Hirschfield, Mark Doty, Gary Copeland Lilley, and a fiction writer, Craig Lesley. Over the years, I had been corresponding with Patricia Hooper, who read my poems and commented with specific suggestions and encouragement. She has been my unofficial mentor.

Streeby for O:JA&L: In what ways have your roles outside poetry (such as teaching or case management) influenced your subject matter and style?

Richard Widerkehr: My background in teaching helped when I wrote my novel, *Sedimental Journey,* which is about a funny-sad geology prof who sees himself as a man of facts but falls in love with a fictional character. In a class I took from Annie Dillard, one assignment had been to write in the voice of someone else. I wrote from the POV of a hippie woman named Cheryl. When I wrote my novel, I was learning how to write on the edge of fantasy and reality, for the fictional character, Eloise, shows up in the real world. My teacher, Lynda Schor, told me the story didn't have to be funny to be good. It would take me nine years to finish as I worked minimum-wage jobs for the most part. Bellingham was a very cheap place to live back then. My work as a case manager has led to some poems, but I have had to change names, gender, identifying details, and make composite characters. Sometimes, I've gone toward magical realism, since I'm not allowed to tell the stories.

Streeby for O:JA&L: Was there a pivotal moment or experience that led you to pursue publication? What inspired that decision?

Richard Widerkehr: I started writing poems at age sixteen, which was a pivotal moment. In my freshman year at the University of Michigan, I submitted poems to the Hopwood Contest, for I had read and admired Patricia Hooper's work in the college literary magazine, *Generation,* and also read her prize-winning manuscripts. I would not win until my junior year. By then I was in a class with one of the editors of *Generation*. After class, he asked me to submit a poem, and I wrote down from memory a poem about playing chess with my father, but I made a mistake, used the word "brilliant" twice in one line. Years later as I put together old poems and new ones in my fifth book, *Missing the Owl,* I deleted the repetition but used "brilliant" in the last line, making an ending that satisfied me more.

Streeby for O:JA&L: How do recognitions, awards, and your reputation within the literary community affect your sense of responsibility and belonging as a poet?

Richard Widerkehr: Awards have often motivated me to write more, but they have this risk. Sometimes, reaching for the brass ring at the center of the merry-go-round has made me forget how writing well can make us feel more alive, more attentive to the world around us. My writing community for many years has been a group I met at Centrum, a writers' conference in the summer in Port Townsend, Washington. In the winter we would rent a barracks at Fort Worden for a week, cook and clean together, do free writes and writing exercises. We had fun and became good friends, called ourselves the Madronas, after the name of our barracks.

Streeby for O:JA&L: Many of your O:JA&L poems—such as "Deer in Fog at Twilight Near Squalicum Lake Road," "Potter's Valley Road," and "West: Toward Squalicum Mountain"—evoke vivid landscapes and a strong sense of place. How does the Pacific Northwest, or specific locations, shape your poetic imagination and themes?

Richard Widerkehr: In the years I taught in New York and Honolulu, I wrote in pocket notebooks but did not complete that many poems. The Pacific Northwest, which I had visited several times, may have been calling to me. I moved to Skagit Valley where I had a few friends, and then to Bellingham to take classes with Annie Dillard. In my poem, "Potter's Valley Road," some details came from a friend's story about himself, and the nature details were what I had come to know here. About "West Toward Squalicum Mountain," I had met a woman at the Subdued String Band Jamboree in Deming, WA, who plays a dulcimer. The gray sun like a mustard seed at the end of this poem was a gift I got from writing my first draft quickly and then reworking it many times, my usual practice.

Streeby for O:JA&L: In "When We Send My Sister Birkenstocks, She Gives Them Away" and "At O'Hare Airport: Her Foxgloves," you touch on family,

illness, and generational memory. How do personal and family histories inform your poetry, especially in the works published by O:JA&L?

Richard Widerkehr: Family history is at the heart of what I write, and so are the nature poems. When I was young, I did not think family was that important, and I moved from Detroit, Michigan, to go to grad school in New York City. My sister's mental illness changed everything. Later on, I would become a case manager at a mental health clinic, where I had been teaching a writing and educational skills class to out-patients. Later, I came to work on the mental health unit of a hospital where the charge nurse had me sing songs with the patients, which I liked doing.

My mother and father's deaths had a big effect on me. I started going to synagogue to say the Mourners Kaddish for my father in 2005, and I kept on going, studied for my Adult Bar Mitzvah, and was called to the Torah in 2012. My mother, who was not Jewish but had converted to keep peace in the family, told me, "Remember you're half-Christian." Well, no, I thought, and later put this in a poem. She and my father had moved across the country to try and help my sister. I have written so many poems to/for/from/about her, as my teacher Peggy Shumaker suggested, that she (my sister) is almost one of my muses.

Writing about illness, and about mental illness, is tricky. I had started saying prayers when I first went to work as a case manager. How some people can keep a certain core essence intact, who they are, when besieged by such an illness amazed me. Once I watched a training video where a woman who hears accusing voices rides a bus. In the video, I saw what she saw, heard through earphones what she heard, got an inkling of what it must be like to experience such an ordeal.

About memory and imagination, I recall Annie Dillard saying that when you write a memoir, your memories get replaced by what you write. In his *Letters To A Young Poet*, Rilke advised his young friend not to do it unless he felt he had to. I can't really say how memory and imagination come together for me and cohere organically in a poem. A good friend calls some of my sister poems benedictions. Maybe, "When We Send My Sister Birkenstocks…" can be read that way.

Streeby for O:JA&L: Your O:JA&L portfolio includes lyric, narrative, and list poems (such as "Biloxi"). What draws you to experiment with different poetic forms. How do you decide which form best suits a particular subject or emotional tone?

Richard Widerkehr: I had not seen that "Biloxi" is a list poem, so thanks for pointing that out. I do like poems with lots of quirky details. Although most of what I write is in free verse, I have written in traditional forms, too. Often, I don't see what happens in my poem as a decision, but more like something that comes to me, and then it becomes something else, as I work on it. If I get a first

line in blank verse, the poem might be a a villanelle or a pantoum, if I really like the line. When I write from a prompt (a word or a phrase), I am probably aware of a certain tone I have to maintain, but sometimes the key of the poem might change from major to minor, as it does in a lot of Beatles songs, and change back again, as in some Jewish songs, which can be dramatic. Sometimes, as I work on a poem, I may try on a different point of view. If two different voices seem to conflict, this may become two poems. It hardly feels like a decision to me, more like I have jumped into deep water, and I try to swim across the river. Maybe I make decisions I am not aware of making, if that makes any sense.

Streeby for O:JA&L: "In the Hall of North American Mammals: Museum of Natural History" and "Sympathy for the Scarecrow" both engage with art, dioramas, and the natural world. How do visual art and museum spaces inspire your writing process?

Richard Widerkehr: I don't know where inspiration comes from. I try things out and sometimes get lucky. To digress for a minute, Plato did not want to let poets into his ideal republic ruled by his philosopher king. He thought we deal in shadows, not the truth, and we can't even say how we do it.

About "In the Hall of North American Mammals," I probably wanted to evoke a certain childhood memory, to contrast it with the real city I lived in. I don't think I intended to put King Kong in the poem, but I like it when surprises like that happen. I recall that my first draft did not satisfy me. A poet friend named Gayle Kaune suggested I put God back in the poem at the end, and I am grateful for her suggestion. She has been my closest poet friend for many years now.

As a boy, I liked going to the Museum of Natural History. I was terrified by dinosaurs, yet fascinated. The advantage of looking at artifacts in a museum is that they stay still, as works of art tend to do. I've heard that cartoonists had to put a cape on Superman in the comic strip to show motion, which is hard to do, apparently. Maybe, some of my poems are almost like a still-life that has inherent motion. Most nights before I go to bed, I listen to classical music, which my mother loved, and I look at works of art on a cable station. Sometimes, the painting becomes a place I'll want to write from, tell its story, often what came before or what comes after the image we see. I recall a TV drama I saw as a child. Two lovers magically go in and out of the world of a painting. Sometimes, I like to let my mind slide sideways into a work of art, as if it were a place in nature. For me inspiration can come from paying attention to some place where we are not "distracted from distraction by distraction," as T.S. Eliot said. I wrote "Sympathy for the Scarecrow" a few days after I gave a reading that went well but was hard to give. In the poem I needed a fictional character for some distance, which may have led me to invent things. I was probably thinking of Dorothy's straw man in "The Wizard of Oz."

Streeby for O:JA&L: Could you describe your typical writing schedule or process? How do you balance inspiration with discipline? What techniques or rituals help you invent and revise your poems?

Richard Widerkehr: I don't have a schedule. Often, I work in bursts. I'm at my laptop about four mornings a week. When I worked on rewriting my novel, sometimes I would work for 8 hours at a time. I can't do that anymore. In the past, when I got stuck on my poems, I could switch to fiction. For the last 35 years, I've worked mostly on poems, which usually don't require nine years to finish. But a book of poems can take years. I worked on *Missing the Owl* for about eight years. The structure, arrangement of poems, and meaning of the book changed over time. And some new poems needed to be written to get to an ending.

About balancing inspiration and discipline, I don't know that I do. I am lazy but need to keep busy. Often, I do free writes after going for walks or slow jogs early in the morning. Sometimes I work on them. My teacher, Joe Stroud, said that about 95% of the time he fails. I have about 40 notebooks in my basement from the last 40 years: 200 pages times 40 years = 8,000 pages to get somewhere between 500 and 800 poems. A very inefficient process, which reminds me of Dr. Johnson's comment about his body, "a poor thing, but my own."

About techniques for revising: in my craft essay, I mentioned changing the line breaks and stanza patterns; also changing pronouns, the point of view, which I've done to try and get back into a poem that does not seem done. For me, the best part of revising is when you can go back and forth between adding things and cutting things, a back-and-forth flow, and something else takes over. Almost fifty years ago, Annie Dillard said that when she finishes a piece, she asks, "What did I leave out?" This is different from critique groups, which often want you to cut things out. On the other hand, Erin Belieu said words to this effect: Sometimes you've gotten the poem right at the seventh revision, not the twenty-seventh. Some of my first drafts are like telegraph messages, and I have to add details, so the reader feels grounded in a place.

First lines and last lines of poems are important to me. Some endings can be like slamming a door shut, as in Emily Dickinson's poem about the snake, "A narrow fellow in the grass," which ends with the phrase, "zero at the bone." Other endings open outward, leaving us with an image that spreads and resonates like ripples in a pool. In my poem, "West Toward Squalicum Mountain," the yellow-gray sun like a mustard seed opens out for the reader, or so I hope.

One of my teachers, Gary Copeland Lilley, used to ask our class, "What are the hottest lines?" These, he said, may need to be the first and last lines. Sometimes, on reading my first draft, a line jumps out that should be the last line, I think, and I'll switch it from the middle to the end. Gary also would ask us, "What

kind of poem is this?" That helped us not critique one kind of poem by the standards for a different kind of poem. He recommended an essay by Gregory Orr called "Four Temperaments and the Forms of Poetry," which explained many things, such as why poets like William Carlos Williams, who had an abstract imagination, did not care for the more concrete Whitman with his catalogues of things he saw and heard.

Streeby for O:JA&L: How would you describe your ideal reader? What do you hope your audience takes away from your work?

Richard Widerkehr: Some of my work is in the form of letters to family and friends, and these poems have several audiences—the person I address, the general reader, and then sometimes other poets, too. Shakespeare did this. He wrote for the people in the penny seats, as well as for the aristocrats. After he has committed murder, Macbeth says not even Neptune's ocean can wash his hands clean. "No, this hand will rather/ the multitudinous seas incarnadine,/ making the green one red." This both defines "incarnadine" and gives us a nice surprise by bringing the concrete word "blood" together with "incarnadine." This has been called mixed diction, which I talked about in the part of my essay on Stroud's "The Perfection of Craft." George Orwell said he preferred short, Anglo-Saxon words. John Crowe Ransom liked to mix the two kinds of words. He wrote about this in an essay on Shakespeare.

About impact, it is very hard to know what effect a poem might have. As a teacher, you often don't know what impact you have on your class. My former student, JP Falcon Grady, a Native-American singer and musician from Montana, told me he appreciated what I did over 35 years ago. Now he is my teacher and mentor. Things seems to have come fully circle, and I am grateful.

About my ideal reader, I would say that he/she/they like to read poems or at least have an open mind and don't demand "Just the facts ma'am," as Sergeant Friday used to say. Sometimes, they can say why they like something, sometimes not. They're open to suspending disbelief, at least for a while, in the images/feelings/ideas/music that make up the virtual reality of a poem.

I would hope my readers might find some pleasure and surprise in having familiar things seen in a new way. And sometimes new things evoked in a way that is believable. Aristotle talked about "plausible surprises" in drama. I would hope some readers might want to go back and read my poems again.

Streeby for O:JA&L: Which of your books or poems do you consider most significant, well-known, or personally meaningful, and why? Is there a particular collection or poem that best represents your artistic vision or current direction?

Richard Widerkehr: The most meaningful ones have come from a deep place, and even though I may have worked hard, they seem like gifts. In my book *Night Journey,* there are two poems the length of short stories. One is "Her Story of Fire," and it was first published in a chapbook of the same name. It's a story about a brother and his mentally ill sister. The poem began when I heard about this writing exercise at Centrum: after you write one poem, write the opposite of it. The brother-and-sister conversation goes on for seventeen sections. Erin Belieu called it "concise, carved, contemporary, and incantatory." I had found an ideal reader.

Streeby for O:JA&L: What has your experience been like publishing with platforms such as O:JA&L and Buttonhook Press? Has this influenced your approach to audience or collaboration?

Richard Widerkehr: It's been very good, and I especially appreciate how O:JA&L links poems to paintings, many paintings I had never seen before, had never even heard of some of the artists. About collaboration, I don't know. Most presses have wanted work that is camera ready. My next book in progress is something of a collaboration, for my editor has chosen some of these new and selected poems. The working title is "In This Porous Light," and it could come out this year, if all goes well and the creek don't rise, as the saying goes. We had an atmospheric river in December.

Streeby for O:JA&L: How do you see the role of the contemporary poet in today's cultural landscape? What responsibilities or opportunities do poets have in shaping public discourse? What is your perspective on the current state of mainstream poetry and the arts?

Richard Widerkehr: Mostly we seem to be be invisible, or visible only to each other, the farthest thing possible from Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators." If our poems last beyond our time, maybe the effect on some people can be immense. From what I have read of the playwright William Gibson's book on writing drama, Shakespeare may have cared very little about any so-called literary immortality. Dickinson, who only had five poems published in her lifetime (and those against her will) did stitch together those "fascicles" (chapbooks), stash them in a footlocker that her sister and her mentor would find and publish after her death. In a letter she had written, she said if she had been meant to have fame, she was meant to. Nothing she could do about it.

About the state of the arts these days, our cultural community seems divided into different tribes and clans. I'm not sure what "mainstream" means anymore. Mostly, I've tried to go my own way. I've been lucky to have had many good poetry friends.

Streeby for O:JA&L: In what ways do you think poets and artists can challenge

or enrich the mainstream arts scene?

Richard Widerkehr: What I find promising is there are all these venues, magazines, poetry readings, and readers of poetry. Many African-American poets, such as Patricia Smith and Gary Copeland Lilley, are finding readers. At the same time, I feel that Jewish poets are being silenced. Some readings have been cancelled due to the high cost of providing security. A magazine in England that accepted a few of my poems said they would get death threats if they accepted a poem in support of Israel.

I think poets can enrich the mainstream by being themselves, which is often not that easy. LeBron James said his mother taught him early on that not everybody was going to like him. This can be not such a simple thing for me to accept, but I think if writers are true to their own experience, which includes imagination, our voices can create something new.

Streeby for O:JA&L: Do you have any upcoming readings, releases, or projects you'd like to share? Where can readers find more information about your work?

Richard Widerkehr: Often I read at open mic's here—one is the Chuckanut Sandstone Theater, hosted by Carla Shafer. I also sing my songs at open mic's, give occasional shows, and sometimes read a poem or two there. Last year I gave four readings for my latest book, *Missing the Owl.*

Since I have gotten older, short works are probably in the offing. I had to write nine nature poems to complete a draft of this *New and Selected Poems* for my editor. I did not really want to do this and wrote many extraneous pages. Some of my poems may be meant to heal losses in a place, this place outside Bellingham. Maybe, they're part of a learning process, too. Bob Dylan said, "How do I get out of going though all these things tw-iiiiii-ce?" Maybe the good part of having been slow to learn from my mistakes, is I need to keep writing poems. Maybe, my poem "Deer at Twilight in Fog On Squalicum Lake Road" is part of this process. One thing I've learned as a singer is that most people can only hack about so much dark matter right now. I wonder if I will have the strength to go back and raid some of those old notebooks in my basement. It seems to be a someday that has eluded me.

Another thing I may do: get more paintings into my poems, and I've considered writing in the POV of Hebrew patriarchs, matriarchs, and other figures. I count myself lucky to have brought out four books of poems in the last eight years, especially *Missing the Owl.*

Readers interested in my work can order books from Village Books in Bellingham, also from Amazon, and they are available from the presses that published them: Shanti Arts Publications, MoonPath Press, and Plain View Press.

About my chapbooks: Radiolarian Press published "Disappearances"; Puddinghouse Press brought out "Mountain;" and Egress Studio Press published "Her Story of Fire." Books that are out of print *(Sedimental Journey, At the Grace Cafe,* and "Her Story of Fire"*)* can be found on used-books sites such as Biblio.com. O:JA&L has generously posted many of my poems online over the last seven years, along with my two chapbooks from Buttonhook Press, "West Toward Squalicum Mountain" and "Sympathy For The Scarecrow," in addition to this new chapbook now, *What On Earth?* Readers can click on the "Q" icon at the O:JA&L website, type in my name to find my poems. It's nice that O:JA&L keeps this portfolio in its archive.

ABOUT THE WRITER:

Richard Widerkehr's fifth book of poems, *Missing The Owl,* is available from Shanti Arts Publications, as is his previous book, *Night Journey*. He has also published three chapbooks and one novel, *Sedimental Journey* (Tarragon Books). He received his M.A. from Columbia's University, which he attended on a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship. His work has appeared in *O:JA&L, Writer's Almanac, Verse Daily, Atlanta Review,* and many others. He won two Hopwood first prizes for poetry at the University of Michigan, three Sue C. Boynton awards, three prizes at *The Bridge*, and first prize for a short story at the Pacific Northwest Writers Conference. He has worked as a teacher in the Upward Bound Program at Western Washington University and, later, as a case manager with the mentally ill.

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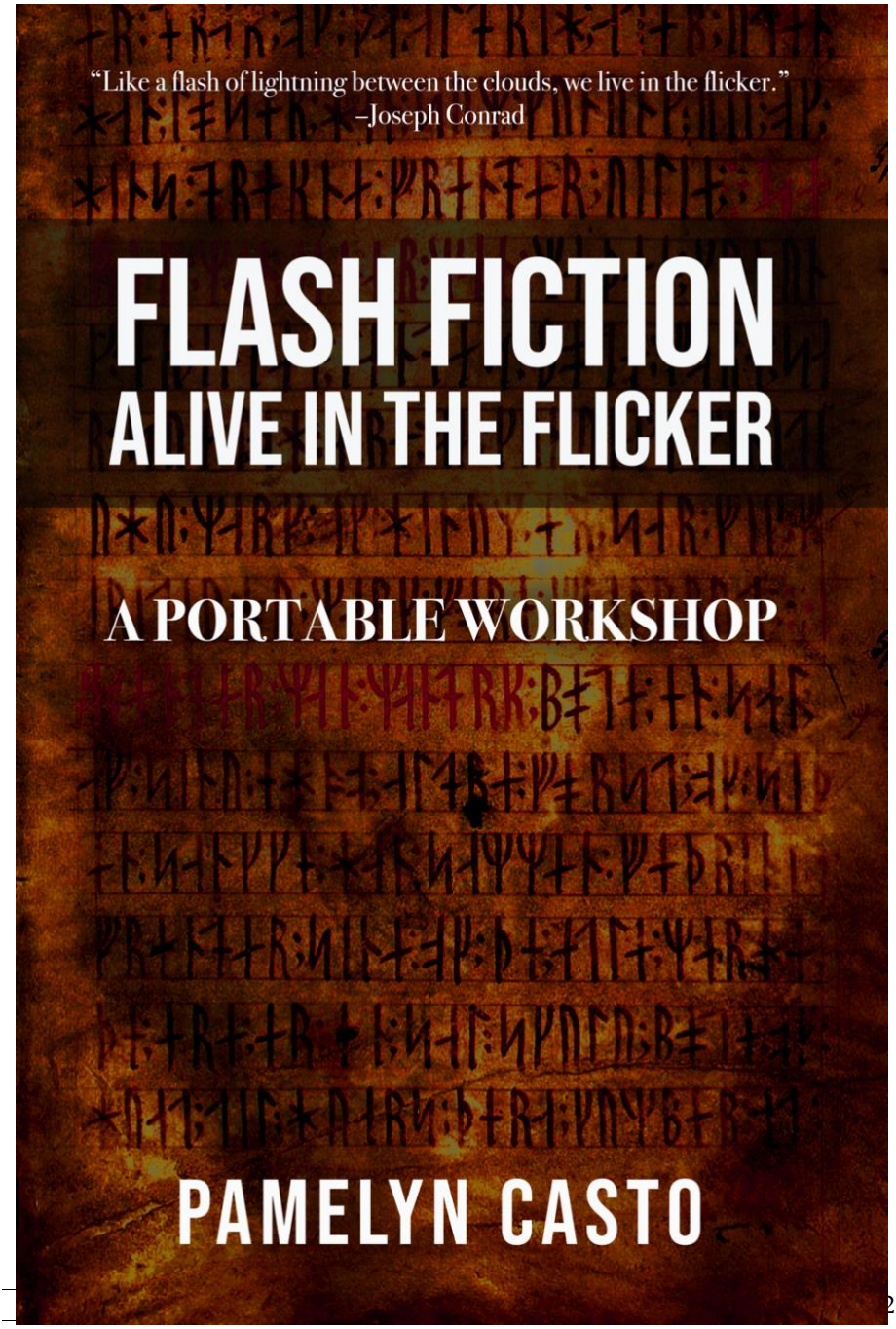

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