

Facts about the Poet

An interview with poet and
UO professor Dorianne Laux

Dorianne Laux is the author of three collections of poetry from BOA Editions, *Awake* (1990), introduced by Philip Levine, *What We Carry* (1994), finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, *Smoke* (2000), and *Facts about the Moon* (W.W. Norton, 2006). She is also co-author, with Kim Addonizio, of *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry* (W.W. Norton, 1997). Her work has been published in magazines such as *Best American Poetry*, *Best of the American Poetry Review*, *Ms. Magazine*, and *Diverse Publications: The International Journal of Erotica*. Her poems have been translated into French, Italian, Korean, Romanian, and Brazilian Portuguese. She was invited to read at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. in 2001 by Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz. Among her awards are a Pushcart Prize for poetry, two Best American Poetry Prizes, two fellowships from The National Endowment for the Arts, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. In Febru-



Dorianne Laux

ary, Dorianne read from *Facts about the Moon* at the University of Oregon and gave a lecture to the Creative Writing Program's Kidd students.

Paul Martone: How does *Facts about the Moon*, your fourth book of poems, differ from your previous work in terms of both the process and the content?

Dorianne Laux: The content of this newer work was surprising for me. Having grown up in the barren suburbs of San Diego, and raised my daughter in L.A. and Berkeley, I never imagined I would write poems about trees, birds, elk, or the moon. Living in Oregon certainly changed that. I am not what you'd call a nature poet. I don't think you can find even a weed in my first three books. Well, maybe a weed. I lived near Spencer's Butte when I first moved here, in a second story condo with floor to ceiling windows. It was like living in an aquar-

ium, surrounded by swaying trees. Very surreal, impossibly beautiful. Before Oregon my idea of wildlife was a fly caught in the screen door, mosquitoes in the scum of the aquaduct, a horny toad in a shoebox. Beautiful as well, but small, stunted beauty, not like living in the vicinity of eagles and elk. I found this new landscape interesting, and sometimes unnerving. I resisted writing about nature but it kept insinuating and muscling itself into the poems and I saw no way to kick it out, the big bully. As for the process it's pretty much the same as always: arduous. Few poems come to me full cloth. The revision work is endless. I never write poems toward any preconceived overarching theme or idea so either they begin to constellate or they don't. If they don't, I put them aside and keep writing until they do. When they do, I put them in a folder and pretend it's

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M.F.A. Graduate News

Stacey Lynn Brown ('96) read with her husband, the poet Adrian Matejka, at the Windfall Reading Series in Eugene on February 21st. Recent poems from her manuscript have been published in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Natural Bridge*, and *Mot Juste* and are archived online at fishhouse-poems.org. Stacey teaches Language and Literature at Lane Community College and recently welcomed a baby girl.

Miriam Gershow's ('02) short story "A Step Ahead," will appear in the next issue of *Black Warrior Review*.

Eugene Gloria's ('92) second collection of poems, *Hoodlum Birds* (Penguin, 2006) will be released at the end of March. The Academy of American Poets and Penguin Books will be co-sponsoring a reading on April 2, 2006 at Verlaine Cafe in the Lower East Side in New York.

Kate Lynn Hibbard ('99) won the 2004 Gerald Cable Book Award for *Sleeping Upside Down* (Silverfish Review Press). She is an instructor of writing and literature at Minneapolis Community and Technical College. Her work has been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *New Letters*, *Seattle Review*, and *Crab Orchard Review*.

Jeffrey Klausman ('86) was recently awarded Exemplary Faculty Status by the Washington Community and Technical College Humanities Association for outstanding contribution to the humanities.

Jude Nutter's ('97) second collection *The Curator of Silence*, which won the 2006 Ernest Sandeen Prize, is coming out this October (University Of Notre Dame Press). Last year, she spent two months in Antarctica with the National Science

Foundation's Artists and Writers Program working on a collection of poems and pastels/paintings. She is currently working on a third collection of poems dealing with war and conflict: a selection of poems from this manuscript won the 2005 International War Poetry Contest.

Joshua Robbins ('03) is a teacher of English at Johnson Community College in Lawrence, Kansas. In the spring, he will teach a poetry workshop at the Lansing State Correctional Facility. Josh also writes a poetry column for the *Lawrence Journal World Newspaper*.

Attention M.F.A. graduates: We want to hear about new jobs you've taken, awards you've won, and work that has been published or is forthcoming. Send updates to: pmartone@uoregon.edu. ■

Brian Turner: A Voice in Wartime

Brian Turner ('96) lived abroad in South Korea for a year before serving for seven years in the US Army. He was an infantry team leader for a year in Iraq beginning November 2003, with the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division. Prior to that, he was deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1999-2000 with the 10th Mountain Division. His poetry has been



Brian Turner

published in *Poetry Daily*, *The Georgia Review* and other journals, and in the *Voices in Wartime Anthology* published in conjunction with the feature-length documentary film of the same name. His first collection of poems, *Here, Bullet*, has been described by The New York Times as "a harrowing, beautiful first-person account of the Iraq War by a soldier-poet." The col-

lection, based upon Turner's year-long tour in Iraq as an infantry team leader, is the winner of the 2005 Beatrice Hawley Award.

Here, Bullet

If a body is what you want,
then here is bone and gristle and flesh.
Here is the clavicle-snapped wish,
the aorta's opened valves, the leap
thought makes at the synaptic gap.
Here is the adrenaline rush you crave,
that inexorable flight, that insane
puncture
into heat and blood. And I dare you to
finish
what you've started. Because here,
Bullet,
here is where I complete the word you
bring
hissing through the air, here is where
I moan
the barrel's cold esophagus, triggering
my tongue's explosives for the rifling
I have
inside of me, each twist of the round
spun deeper, because here, Bullet,
here is where the world ends, every
time.

Literary Reference

Literary Reference, the newsletter of the Creative Writing Program, is published quarterly in conjunction with the University of Oregon Office of Publications.

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Kidd Reading at the Buzz



Meg Gibbons



Jordan Bailey



Ursula Evans-Heritage

2006 Kidd Prize Writing Competition Accepting Entries

The Creative Writing Program is now accepting entries for the 2006 Kidd Prize Writing Competition in poetry and fiction. Entries must be received by Monday, May 1, 2006, by 3:00 p.m., in the Creative Writing Program office, 144 Columbia Hall. Submission guidelines are available in the Creative Writing Program office and online at <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~crwrweb/kidd.htm>.

The competition, which is held each spring, awards up to \$800 in total prizes to poets and fiction writers enrolled as undergraduates at the University of Oregon. Ehud Havazelet will judge for fiction, and Edward Hirsch will judge for poetry. Past judges have included Frederick Busch, B. H. Fairchild, Mark Doty, Paul Lisicky, T. R. Hummer, Rosellen Brown, Yusef Komunyakaa, Barry Lopez, Sharon Olds, Deborah Digges, Susan Straight, and Charles Baxter.

For more information about the Kidd Prize Writing Competition, please email Kidd Fellow Paul Martone at pmartone@uoregon.edu. ■

Kidd Tutorial Now Accepting Applications

The Creative Writing Program is now accepting applications for the 2006-2007 Kidd Tutorial. The Kidd Tutorial is a year-long course in creative writing and humanities that approaches the study of creative writing through intellectual, cultural, and artistic inquiry.

Students in Kidd Tutorial are challenged to confront literature with a spirit of engagement, inspired questioning, and their own evolving creative responses.

The tutorials provide an opportunity for students to encounter ideas from many disciplines and to use those ideas as sources of inspiration for their own work.

In each tutorial section, a graduate tutor works closely with four to six undergraduate students in an intimate classroom setting. Students leave the Kidd Tutorial having completed the

equivalent of an undergraduate thesis, consisting of 15 to 20 poems, three to four short stories, a novella, or essays in literary nonfiction. But, most importantly, students leave the Kidd Tutorial with the tools to sustain their writing efforts into the future.

Students who are interested in applying for the Kidd Tutorial should first satisfactorily complete at least one introductory 200-level course in creative writing.

Applications will be accepted until Monday, May 1, by 3:00 p.m. Each application requires a personal statement, a letter of recommendation, transcripts, and a writing sample. Applications are available at <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~crwrweb/kidd.htm>.

For more information email Kidd Fellow Paul Martone at pmartone@uoregon.edu. ■

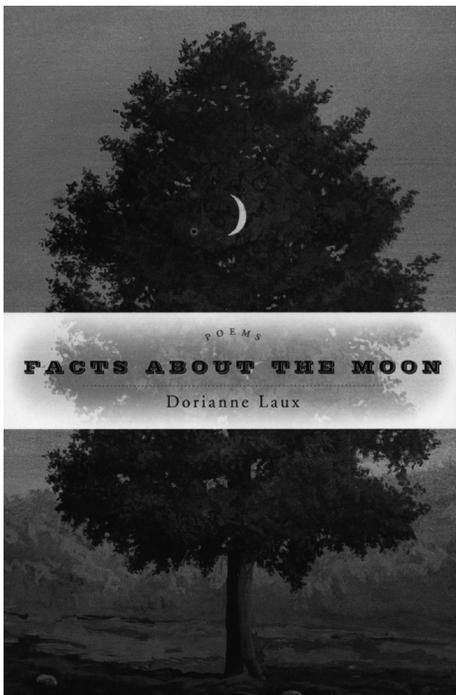
Dorianne Laux

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a book by giving it a title, usually a terrible title. Then I lug it around to poetry readings and the audience lets me know if the poems are working or not. Poems fall out and are replaced by new ones. A day comes when the binder is too heavy to carry around much longer and that's my cue to go ahead and begin the process of turning it into a book.

Martone: The poems in *Facts about the Moon* share a distinct prose quality. How does form function in your work?

Dorianne: I'm not what you'd call a formal poet, though the line itself is a for-



mal concern. I grew up reading novels, and so the fluidity and flexibility of the prose line is in my blood, as well as an affinity for story, character and dialogue. But a story is set to music, the rhythms of language and human speech being the musical vehicle, the driving force. Aside from that, most of what I work toward is compression and coherence, clarity of thought and image. I'm less interested in form than I am in substance. I admire form but I need substance. That said, I worked in form exclusively when I first began writing, from the age of twelve to around the age of 24, and I learned much

from the practice. I also write a sonnet on occasion, or a rhymed poem, or I practice in syllabics, just to shake myself up, but it's not what I came to poetry to do. I came to speak freely of the mystery of existence and for me that's difficult to do in iambic pentameter. I have a dedication to clarity, to passion, to the necessary utterance, the senses playing a large role in creating vision and mystery, parables of joy and despair.

Martone: You have often been classified as a "working class" poet. Is this label one you embrace? How do such labels limit or expand a poet's process?

Laux: I don't pay much attention to labels, though if it brings more readers to the table, that's fine with me. If I have to be designated as something, working class poet is as good as anything. It was certainly fine for John Lennon.

(unrhymed couplets) seems particularly effective in poems like "The Crossing" and "What's Broken." How did you arrive at this form? What does it add to the content of these poems?

Laux: I don't compose in lines. I wait to see what I've written and then begin to experiment, giving the poem a number of possible shapes until one feels right. Hunt and peck, peck and hunt. "The Crossing" is about lovers and so it made sense to try couplets. "What's Broken" is more difficult for me to imagine having found the form for as quickly. I probably tried a number of possible arrangements before settling into couplets, but again, the regular and shapely form seemed a good contrast to the subject at hand. It also slows things down a bit and so helps to create tone. It's part of what I like about the process, finding the poem's shape. It's very intuitive for me,

"There are those who disdain emotion, think it is the height of maturity to be without emotion, but I believe that without our emotions we are dry husks, nothing more than thinking machines. It takes passion to write, to dedicate oneself to a deep exploration of the world within, a world no one else can know unless we allow it to flush up through our skin, weaken our knees, leak out from the corners of our eyes."

--Dorianne Laux

Martone: Some might argue *Facts about the Moon* addresses political issues more openly than your previous books. Do you agree? If so, do the more recent poems reflect a change in your concerns?

Laux: You're right; this last book is a bit different. I do seem to be confronting many of my ideas about a number of crises: the concept of democracy, the dwindling wilderness, cultural attitudes toward homosexuality and women, homelessness. I think those concerns have always been with me but I'm older now and maybe I feel more confident in directing my poetic attention more often and more fully toward them.

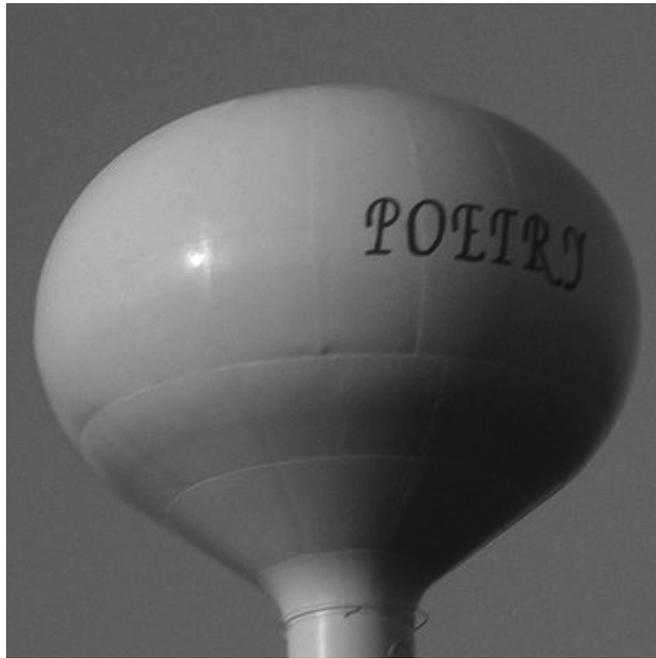
Martone: Your use of the two-line stanza

like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. Or, maybe making the cuts with the jigsaw. How can I make the trees fit into the sky?

Martone: Many of the poems in *Facts about the Moon* are written in first-person and are presumably autobiographical. To what degree do you allow yourself to embellish life experience?

Laux: My poems are autobiographical and I make no bones about it. I don't think there's any way to escape it. Even as a fiction writer I assume you're grappling with some question that's important to you, in your own personal life, and encouraging your characters to help you explore that question. As soon as we begin stringing words together, we're on

the road to revealing ourselves: our loves, our fears, our insecurities, our doubts. It's a highly personal endeavor. I don't believe that art should obscure or conceal, but bring up into the light that which is hidden, reveal. It astounds me that the autobiographical nature of writing, poetry or prose, isn't just a given. Why else would we write if not to try to shape and explain and celebrate our own experience. That said, I'm not interested much in the facts when I'm writing, I just go where the poem takes me.



Poetry, Texas

Martone: One of the most striking qualities of your poems is what Jane Hirshfield defined as their “emotional honesty.” How do you know when you're writing something that will not only resonate with many readers, but also deeply move them?

Laux: I don't. I write what I am moved to write, what I'm compelled to write, from the deepest part of myself I can get to. There's no guarantee that this work will produce a piece others find moving, but it's a good place to start. I'm afraid of many things but I'm not afraid of my emotions. How could Whitman have written *Leaves of Grass* without shedding tears? I think of him, combing the cities to find every voice, every body, every soul and include it in his poems. What a project! Poetry is what we seek when we want news of the self. Poetry contains the emotional history of the world. Our thoughts and actions are important to document, but without a sense of how we were feeling it is an incomplete picture. There are those who disdain emotion, think it is the height of maturity to be without emotion, but I believe that without our emotions we are dry husks, nothing more than thinking machines. It takes passion to write, to dedicate oneself to a deep exploration of the world within, a world no one else can know unless we allow it to flush up through our skin, weaken our knees, leak out from the corners of our eyes.

Martone: Have you found that each success makes the next easier to attain?

Laux: Success has its momentary rewards. But it can be as difficult as failure because it can stop you in your path, keep you from writing the next poem that needs to be written. You have to push it all aside and practice, practice. I heard Jon Stewart talking about failure and rejection the other night. He said he didn't mind it so much because he has confidence in himself and his work. He also said the sting of failure and rejection reminds him that he's alive. Ouch, that hurts, means you're in the game. Success gives you a certain confidence and that's good for the work. Not hubris, but a good solid confidence. All artists have a healthy dose of doubt, a self questioning: Could this be sharper, deeper, larger? The answer is always yes.

Martone: The title poem from your latest book reveals both your love for the moon and your obsession with it. What obsessions are driving your poems these days? What's next for you?

Laux: I have no idea yet as I'm in the middle of writing them. I'll know more when I've had time to lift my head and look at them as a group. The poems will tell me what I've been thinking about. For now I'm reveling in the mystery, writing in the dark. ■

Faculty News

Karen Ford is on a fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies, working on a book about race and form in American poetry. Her book, *Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Poetics of Modernity*, was favorably received by *The Arkansas Review*, which called it “complex, smart, and engaging.”

Dorianne Laux recently received a second Best American Poetry Prize for her poem, “Demographic.” New poems are forthcoming in *Nightsun*, *Parthenon*, *Fight These Bastards*, *CutThroat*, *Bat City Review*, *Blue Fifth Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Her poem, “Antilamentation” was read on *The Writer's Almanac* by Garrison Keillor on February 13th. In March she will give a reading and workshop at the University of Tennessee.

Cai Emmons's short story, “The Stylist,” will appear in the forthcoming issue of *Narrative Magazine*. The story is an excerpt from her second novel, which will be published later this year by William Morrow.

Robert Hill Long's “The Book of Joel,” an elegy for Joel Rossi (son of UO faculty/staffers Bill and Lynn Rossi) was published in the *Marlboro Review* in Vermont. Joel Rossi died just before his 19th birthday; “The Book of Joel” consists of 19 sonnets. *Del Sol Review* (Washington DC) has published the poem “Barry Carolina.” *Cream City Review* will be using one of RHL's sonnets from a 35-sonnet sequence titled “The Wire Garden” as the general epigraph for a forthcoming special issue on memoir; another sonnet from the same sequence will appear within the same issue. Robert will be reading at AWP/Austin to help celebrate Cleveland State University Poetry Center's 35th anniversary of publishing. ■

Upcoming Reading Series Events

Tobias Wolff

Thursday, April 27, 2006 at 8:00 p.m.

Browsing Room of the Knight Library

Tobias Wolff chronicled his early life in two memoirs. *This Boy's Life* (1989) concerns the author's early adolescence through high school, while *In Pharaoh's Army* (1994) records his tour of duty in Vietnam. Wolff's 1984 novel-la *The Barracks Thief* won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction for 1985. Whether writing fiction or non-, Wolff's writing is united

by an exploration of existential terrain. As Wyatt Mason wrote in the London Review of Books, "Typically, his protagonists face an acute moral dilemma, unable to reconcile what they know to be true with what they feel to be true. Duplicity is their great failing, and Wolff's main theme." Wolff's work has found a wider audience though its adaptation into film. *This Boy's Life* was adapted into a film starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Robert DeNiro, and Ellen Barkin.



Edward Hirsch

Thursday, May 25, 2006 at 7:30 p.m.

182 Lillis

Edward Hirsch is the author of six books of poems: *Lay Back the Darkness* (Alfred A. Knopf 2003); *On Love* (1998); *Earthly Measures* (1994); *The Night Parade* (1989); *Wild Gratitude* (1986), which received the National Book Critics Circle Award; and *For the Sleepwalkers* (1981), which received the Lavan Younger Poets Award from The Academy of American Poets and the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Award from New York University. He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim and MacArthur foundations, an Ingram Merrill Foundation Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome, and a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award. He has been a professor of English at Wayne State University and the University of Houston. Hirsch is currently the president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.



2006 Creative Writing Program Commencement Schedule

Friday, June 9: Second year M.F.A. candidate reading (part one) at Tsunami Books at 5:00 p.m.

Saturday, June 10: Second year M.F.A. candidate reading (part two) at 2 p.m. followed by Commencement Ceremony (location TBA).



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