

# *The Folklore Muse*

Suggestions and Other Materials for Teaching

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*The Folklore Muse* is a collection of creative writing (poetry, fiction, memoirs, other literary nonfiction, and drama) written by folklorists and derived from their interests in folklore.

Although the editor and the contributors to the volume hope that it will appeal to many readers for the inherent qualities of its contents, they are aware that it may have particular interest to those who are interested in *culture* in the broadest sense (that is, in the sum total of human behavior, manners, and expressivity). They also believe the book may interest some instructors (folklorists, anthropologists, or teachers of creative writing looking for writing about encountering a range of cultural possibilities) as a text for classroom use. For folklorists and other ethnographers, the writing in the book offers new approaches to perception of the kinds of culture traditionally studied and written about in other ways, that is, through academic and scholarly exposition rather than the personal, more imaginative writing here. For those who are primarily writers of fiction, poetry, or literary nonfiction, such as memoir, the writing here offers examples of works that examine a variety of cultural realities and forms, written by those who have studied the cultures professionally. These examples demonstrate in interesting ways how one's work can provide subject matter for writing. Students in folklore classes may see the writing in the collection as examples of less formal ways to write about folklore. Students in creative writing classes may see it as demonstrations of how to use professional and intellectual interests in expressive writing.

## Contents of This Guide

For Your Reference: <i>The Folklore Muse</i> , Table of Contents. . . . .	3
Contents by Literary Genres. . . . .	6
Some Folklore Genres and Folklore Topics Included. . . . .	8
Points for Discussion. . . . .	10
Observations and Questions about Individual Selections. . . . .	13
Comments by Authors. . . . .	16
Bibliographic and Discographic Information. . . . .	49

## For Your Reference: *The Folklore Muse*, Table of Contents

The Folklorist's Endeavor: An Introduction. . . . .	1
Being or Becoming a Folklorist. . . . .	6
Steve Zeitlin, "Rock and Word" . . . . .	8
Daniel Peretti, "Shelfscapes" . . . . .	10
Libby Tucker, "Travels" . . . . .	15
Edward Hirsch, "Work Song" . . . . .	21
Jeannie Banks Thomas, "Instructions for Installing Blinds," "Woman, 41 (Motif GYN041)" . . . . .	23
Steve Zeitlin, "Barbara," "Julia," "Amanda in the Mornings" . . . . .	24
Joanne B. Mulcahy, "'Affectionados': What My Mother Taught Me about Language" . . . . .	26
Mary Magoulick, "Women and Water in Senegal" . . . . .	32
Elaine Lawless, "In Search of Our Mothers. . .and Our Selves" . . . . .	39
Fieldwork, Folk Communities, Informants. . . . .	54
Frank de Caro, "Oral History" . . . . .	56
Cynthia Levee, "White Bluffs and Miss Lena" . . . . .	58
Steve Zeitlin, "Margaret," "Cat" . . . . .	60
Jens Lund, "Karl and Janie" . . . . .	61
Ted Olson, "Historical Sign" . . . . .	66
Margaret Yocom, "Opening Camp," "Where the Living Keep Watch," "Echo, at Lakeside," "In Jewelweed" . . . . .	68
William Bernard McCarthy, "Second Growth" . . . . .	71
Jeff Todd Titon, "Percy" . . . . .	73

Teresa Bergen, from <i>Bigfoot Stole My Husband</i> . . . . .	84
Performance. . . . .	91
Matt Clark, “Legends, Rumors, Lore and Revelations (Some Incomplete) Involving Leaton Troutwine, a Local Eccentric/Celebrity/Hero (and Gordon’s Owner)” . . . . .	93
Steve Zeitlin, “The Storytelling Wake” . . . . .	111
Leslie Prosterman, “Rant,” “Ceci,” “Painting Louise Glück” . . . . .	112
John Burrison, from <i>Kamp: A Memory Novel</i> . . . . .	117
Jeannie Banks Thomas, “Shins around the Fireside (Jig)” . . . . .	122
William Bernard McCarthy, “Maybelle and Sara on the Porch” . . . . .	123
The Powers of Narrative . . . . .	124
Frank de Caro, “Ballad Girls” . . . . .	126
Kirin Narayan, “Stella Stories” . . . . .	128
Steve Zeitlin, “Once Upon a Time,” “Tickling the Corpse,” “Mirror” . . . . .	137
Legend and Myth . . . . .	139
Mary Magoulick, “A Cosmology of Women” . . . . .	141
Carrie Hertz, “Absent Gods” . . . . .	143
Paul Jordan-Smith, “Glaukos,” “Shadow” . . . . .	146
Danusha Goska, “The Ramayana. . . as if Sita Mattered” . . . . .	148
Material Traditions, Material Things. . . . .	171
Holly Everett, “One of My Mothers” . . . . .	173
Steve Zeitlin, “The Quilters” . . . . .	178

Laurel Horton, “Grandma Effie and the Heirloom” . . . . .	179
Jo Radner, “My Great-Great Half-Uncle Horace’s Bone-Handled Jackknife” . . . . .	181
Margaret Yocom, “The Cane” . . . . .	183
Children and Children’s Lore and Language . . . . .	184
Susan Stewart, “my mother’s garden,” “arrowhead,” “shadowplay,” “tag,” “red rover” . . . . .	185
Steve Zeitlin, “The Lulu Bird Nestles in the Daddy O Tree,” “Folksay,” “The Tenderness of Swine” . . . . .	189
Neil Grobman, from <i>Lost in Redskirt Forest</i> . . . . .	191
Ritual and Custom . . . . .	203
William Bernard McCarthy, “The Birthday Horse” . . . . .	205
Rosan Augusta Jordan, “In Praise of Bodies,” “Hands and Hearts in the Days of the Dead in Oaxaca, Mexico” . . . . .	207
Ted Olson, “Christmas Tree” . . . . .	210
Steve Zeitlin, “Madhulika” . . . . .	211
Margaret Yocom, “Eating Alone” . . . . .	212
Norma Cantú, from <i>Cabañuelas: A Love Story</i> . . . . .	213
Worldview and Belief . . . . .	219
Jeannie Banks Thomas, “Salem, Massachusetts, Playground at Gallows Hill” . . . . .	220
Teresa Bergen, “Haints” . . . . .	221
Notes . . . . .	239
Contributors . . . . .	240

## Contents by Literary Genres

### *Poetry:*

Frank de Caro, "Oral History" (pp. 56-57), "Ballad Girls" (pp. 126-127)

Carrie Hertz, "Absent Gods" (pp. 143-146)

Edward Hirsch, "Work Song" (pp. 21-22)

Laurel Horton, "Grandma Effie and the Heirloom" (pp. 179-180)

Rosan Augusta Jordan, "In Praise of Bodies" (pp. 207-208), "Hands and Hearts in the Days of the Dead in Oaxaca, Mexico" (p. 209)

Paul Jordan-Smith, "Shadow" (p. 146), "Glaukos" (p. 147)

Cynthia Levee, "White Bluffs and Miss Lena" (pp. 58-59)

Mary Magoulick, "A Cosmology of Women" (pp. 141-142)

William Bernard McCarthy, "Second Growth" (pp. 71-72), "Maybelle and Sara on the Porch" (p. 123), "The Birthday Horse" (pp. 205-206)

Ted Olson, "Historical Sign" (pp. 66-67), "Christmas Tree" (p. 210)

Leslie Prosterman, "Rant" (pp. 112-114), "Ceci" (pp. 114-115), "Painting Louise Glück" (pp. 115-116)

Jo Radner, "My Great-Great Half-Uncle Horace's Bone-Handled Jackknife" (pp. 181-182)

Susan Stewart, "my mother's garden" (p. 185), "arrowhead" (pp. 185-186), "shadowplay" (pp. 186-187), "tag" (p. 188), "red rover" (p. 188)

Jeannie Banks Thomas, "Instructions for Installing Blinds" (p. 23), "Woman, 41 (Motif GYN041)" (p. 23), "Shins around the Fireside (Jig)" (p. 122), "Salem, Massachusetts, Playground at Gallows Hill" (p. 220)

Margaret Yocom, "Opening Camp" (p. 68), "Echo, at Lakeside" (p. 68), "Where the Living Keep Watch" (p. 69), "In Jewelweed" (p. 70), "The Cane" (p. 183), "Eating Alone" (p. 212)

Steve Zeitlin, "Barbara" (p. 24), "Julia" (p. 24), "Amanda in the Mornings" (p. 25), "Margaret" (p. 60), "Cat" (p. 60), "The Storytelling Wake" (p. 111), "Once Upon a Time" (p. 137), "Tickling the Corpse" (p. 137), "Mirror" (p. 138), "The Quilters" (p. 178), "The Lulu Bird

Nestles in the Daddy O Tree” (p. 189), “Folksay” (p. 189), “The Tenderness of Swine” (p. 190), “Madhulika” (p. 211)

*Fiction (Short Stories):*

Teresa Bergen, “Haints” (pp. 221-238)

Matt Clark, “Legends, Rumors, Lore and Revelations (Some Incomplete) Involving Leaton Troutwine, a Local Eccentric/Celebrity/Hero (and Gordon’s Owner)” (pp. 93-110)

Jeff Todd Titon, “Percy” (pp. 73-83)

*Fiction (Excerpts from Novels):*

Teresa Bergen, from *Bigfoot Stole My Husband* (pp. 84-90)

John Burrison, from *Kamp: A Memory Novel* (pp. 117-121)

Norma Cantú, from *Cabañuelas: A Love Story* (pp. 213-218)

Neil Grobman, from *Lost in Redskirt Forest* (pp. 191-202)

*Memoirs and Other Literary Nonfiction:*

Holly Everett, “One of My Mothers” (pp. 173-177)

Elaine Lawless, “In Search of Our Mothers. . .and Our Selves” (pp. 39-53)

Jens Lund, “Karl and Janie” (pp. 61-65)

Mary Magoulick, “Women and Water in Senegal” (pp. 32-38)

Joanne B. Mulcahy, “‘Affectionados’: What My Mother Taught Me about Language” (pp. 26-31)

Kirin Narayan, “Stella Stories” (pp. 128-136)

Daniel Peretti, “Shelfscapes” (pp. 10-14)

Libby Tucker, “Travels” (pp. 15-20)

Steve Zeitlin, “Rock and Word” (pp. 8-9)

*Drama:*

Danusha Goska, “The Ramayana. . .as if Sita Mattered” (pp.148-170)

## Some Folklore Genres and Folklore Topics Included

### *Children's Folklore:*

Grobman; Stewart; Tucker (teenagers' games)

### *Family Folklore:*

Everett; Lawless; Mulcahy; Narayan; Tucker; Yocom, "The Cane," "Eating Alone"; Zeitlin, "The Lulu Bird Nestles in the Daddy O Tree," "Folksay," "The Tenderness of Swine"

### *Folk Art-Craft:*

Everett; Horton (quilting); Lund; Titon; Zeitlin, "The Quilters," "Rock and Word"

### *Folk Belief:*

Bergen, "Haints"; Lawless; Thomas, "Salem, Massachusetts, Playground at Gallows Hill"

### *Folk Drama:*

Goska (folk puppets)

### *Folk Expressions:*

Grobman (palindromes and anagrams in performance context throughout the novel)

### *Folk Narrative:*

Clark; Goska; Hertz; Grobman (elements of Märchen); Lawless; Levee; Mulcahy; Narayan; Thomas, "Woman, 41 (Motif GYN041)"; Tucker; Zeitlin, "Once Upon a Time," "Tickling the Corpse," "Mirror"

### *Foodways:*

Clark; Jordan; Prosterman, "Rant"; Yocom, "Eating Alone"

### *Games:*

Stewart; Tucker

*Hero Figures:*

Clark; Goska; Jordan-Smith

*Legend:*

Bergen, "Haints"; Bergen, from *Bigfoot Stole My Husband*; Clark; Thomas, "Salem, Massachusetts, Playground at Gallows Hill"

*Material Culture:*

Everett; Horton; Lund; Magoulick, "Women and Water in Senegal"; McCarthy, "Second Growth"; Olson, "Historical Sign"; Radner; Titon; Zeitlin

*Myth:*

Clark; Goska; Hertz; Jordan-Smith; Magoulick, "A Cosmology of Women"

*Music, Song, Folk Rhyming:*

Burrison (toast); Cantú; de Caro, "Ballad Girls"; Hirsch (work songs); Lund; McCarthy, "Sara and Maybelle on the Porch" (Carter Family singers); Thomas, "Shins around the Fireside (Jig)" (instrumental music); Tucker

*Oral History:*

de Caro, "Oral History"; Levee; Lund; Narayan; Zeitlin

*Oratory:*

Mulcahy

*Ritual:*

Cantú; Everett; Jordan; McCarthy, "The Birthday Horse"; Olson, "Christmas Tree"; Prosterman; Yocom, "Eating Alone"; Zeitlin, "Madhulika"

## Points for Discussion

Those who become folklorists (an interesting profession followed by a rather small number of people) seem drawn to the field by a variety of influences. Consider some of the factors that made the writers included in this book become folklorists and also how they have looked at other people in their field of endeavor. Joanne Mulcahy writes of drifting through various things, finally being attracted to women's stories in particular, then devoting great energy to listening to them in various contexts. Mary Magoulick writes of her experiences in Senegal, which seem to have less directly influenced her toward anthropology and folklore interests. Elaine Lawless links her interest in women's stories to her own life history; though she may have fully realized this connection only in retrospect, the reader can certainly see how her experience drew her toward a folklorist's appreciation for the value of understanding stories. Norma Cantú's protagonist is a folklorist, and by looking at her earlier life as revealed in flashbacks, we can see the personal influences also leading her to become one. In several poems Steve Zeitlin speaks of other folklorists and the sort of work they do. What are the many factors that lead a person to a profession of lifelong interest, whether folklore or something else? How does the choice intersect with experience or family and personal concerns? Why write about this? In general, can one's profession provide a fruitful topic for creative writing, whether memoir or fiction or poetry? Are some professions better subjects than others, or would that depend on the writer?

Several contributions in the book focus on women's stories, including the authors' personal narratives, but they may look at quite different aspects. Elaine Lawless, in her books about women as preachers and in religious contexts as well as in her work about the stories told in family shelters, writes of the difficulties women have had in being recognized and surviving difficult lives; in her memoir in *The Folklore Muse* she connects her own stories to that larger narrative context. Joanne Mulcahy writes of how she lived her life going to various parts of the country, where she would "find a waitress job" and then spend her time and effort getting women to tell her their stories; an editor tells her she has a "passion for chronicling women's lives." Kirin Narayan's stories about Stella fix upon a particular woman, though they emphasize her free spirit and eccentric life, not the

difficult lives some other women encounter. Carrie Hertz's narrators tell stories of their lives that connect to classical mythic figures. In particular by providing a (fictional) motif number, Jeannie Banks Thomas suggests in her poem "Woman, 41 (Motif GYN041)" that a story common to many women is being told. In her play, Danusha Goska re-invents a story and makes a female character central, so that her narrative, well known in other forms, comes in effect from a woman's perspective. Why this particular interest in women's stories? Do, as Mulcahy writes, "women use stories to hint at what we can't say, to seek power when we have little, to find ways to be heard"? Do stories of many kinds, from narrators of all genders, say things which are not otherwise expressed?

Folklorists often see themselves as concerned with groups and communities, even when they may concentrate their attentions on a particular folk performer, craftsperson, or "informant." Folklore is seen as something communal and thus of great relevance to how groups function and see themselves. Teresa Bergen's chapter from "Bigfoot Stole My Husband" immediately gets us into a subculture of self-proclaimed enthusiasts who center around the existence of a legendary creature. Jeff Todd Titon's short story "Percy" has at its center a group of artists and craftspeople. John Burrison writes about a group of summer campers or, rather, in particular about the staff of a summer camp. Sometimes a folklorist may present a group through the eyes of only one or a few informants. For example, we see an Alabama Jewish community in Cindy Levee's "White Bluffs and Miss Lena" through the eyes and memories of a single informant. Much of what we know of the community in Matt Clark's story comes from his narrator. Family groups provide the history and folklore at the center of Laurel Horton's poem "Grandma Effie and the Heirloom," Jo Radner's poem "My Great-Great Half-Uncle Horace's Bone-Handled Jackknife," and Kirin Narayan's memoir "Stella Stories." Other groups figure in other ways, direct and less direct, in other pieces. How do the authors depict the centrality of "groupness" to folklore? How about the relationships between particular individuals and folk groups? How does the folklore communicated by an individual (say, his or her craft) relate to the larger group?

In different ways a number of the pieces in this book suggest that training as a folklorist and having a folklorist's outlook on culture and the world shape how folklorists observe and comment on what they encounter, even if it is not folklore as such. Leslie Prosterman is very attuned to the

nature of performances, something which folklorists study, even when the performances in question are poetry readings, not performances by, say, country blues singers or traditional storytellers. Edward Hirsch sees workmen in a contemporary context but thinks of a traditional work song. Jeannie Banks Thomas in “Woman, 41 (Motif GYN041)” assigns a motif number (which folklorists use to classify elements of traditional narratives) to a common life situation. Libby Tucker undergoes treatment for cancer in a famous medical complex in twenty-first century New York but thinks of her experience in reference to various kinds of folklore ranging from fairytales to teenagers’ games. In “Rock and Word” Steve Zeitlin writes of undertaking a task, building a rock wall, that ties in with his perspective on traditional craftsmanship (as well as poetry). Daniel Peretti notes that his very way of reading has been shaped by his growing development as a folklorist and his encountering folkloristic perspectives. Are those in other professions similarly shaped by their professional training and perspectives even in matters less related to those professions? Is being a folklorist useful or detrimental to how these writers conceive of society and the world?

Quite a few of the contributions to this book involve the families of the authors. Joanne B. Mulcahy connects her progress as a folklorist to her perceptions of her mother (as well as her father and siblings). Elaine J. Lawless writes extensively about her family background and her mother’s history in particular. Steve Zeitlin writes, in both prose and poetry, of his wife and children and his interactions with them. Jo Radner’s poem is concerned with the rediscovery of family history; Laurel Horton’s with the process of passing on family heirlooms. The cane in Margaret Yocom’s poem of that name belongs to her grandmother. Norma E. Cantú’s protagonist is constantly concerned about her family’s reactions to her own actions. Kirin Narayan’s essay may focus on a family friend but is very much about her own growing up and the family context. Holly Everett considers the ways in which her fieldwork has been inspired and shaped by members of her family. Of course most of us are concerned about our interactions with our families. Do folklorists have particular perspectives that other writers might not? How important is family folklore to the writers in question? (Family folklore is a subject of interest to folklorists and about which Steve Zeitlin, for example, has co-authored a notable book; family folklore might include oral family history and other stories as well as rituals and celebrations found in the context of a family.)

## Observations and Questions about Individual Selections

*Teresa Bergen, "Haints":*

Though different ideas about folk beliefs are central to the story, the characters also have different ideas about things such as what does it mean to take care of someone and what is manliness? What are these attitudes, their advantages and drawbacks? Does this relate to the divide in the characters' larger worldviews, especially relating to beliefs about haints?

*Danusha Goska, "The Ramayana . . . as if Sita Mattered":*

Danusha Goska has said that some might criticize her as a Westerner appropriating an Asian story. Is such a use of materials from a culture not one's own legitimate? Is her reworking of the root story to criticize the attitudes toward gender and gender roles found there a fair thing to do or should we accept such attitudes as those of another culture even if they are not ours?

*Jeannie Banks Thomas, "Shins Around the Fireside (Jig)" and "Salem, Massachusetts, Playground at Gallows Hill":*

In both of these poems Thomas juxtaposes cultural elements that might seem at odds: traditional music with a golf course and "company housing," a TV actress who played a witch and a "boom box" with a setting associated with historical witchcraft accusations. What effect does this have? How might it elucidate the relationships between popular culture, folklore, and cultural change?

*Steve Zeitlin, "The Storytelling Wake," and "Once Upon a Time":*

Both poems reflect on the nature of storytelling. What different aspects of this art does each comment upon?

*Elaine J. Lawless, "In Search of Our Mothers . . . and Our Selves":*

Lawless is subtly drawing a connection between her own life and her work as a folklorist studying the personal narratives of abused women. What is the connection and is it obvious? At the end of her piece she notes that she once missed this connection herself. Why might that be the case?

*Matt Clark, "Legends, Rumors, Lore, and Revelation":*

Among other things, Clark is concerned with the process of narration itself. At one point he leads us to believe that his protagonist may find a fortune in gold (and, indeed, the search for treasure is an important theme in American legendry), but we soon learn that another character runs off with the gold. We never hear the story of how the treasure was found, nor do we get the details of how the other character steals it. Why does Clark leave this out? Is he suggesting something about storytelling? Does a teller inevitably leave out something?

*Frank de Caro, "Oral History":*

Recording what people remember is an important part of what folklorists do, yet this poem is about some of the pitfalls of trying to do so. What are those? How can folklorists cope with and compensate for such problems in recording what people tell them? In general, how can they deal with their informants to insure their cooperation? (This problem is also a focus of Jens Lund's memoir, in which informants spin out multiple versions of a family tragedy.)

*Steve Zeitlin, "The Storytelling Wake":*

This poem works from a ritual occasion used for storytelling: a wake (that is, the occasion when a dead body is visited by the living prior to burial). The tradition sometimes is to recount stories about the life of the deceased, as is the case here. What does this provide to the gathered group? What other occasions are particularly used for storytelling, either as written about in this volume or in actual social contexts? Why those?

*Kirin Narayan, "Stella Stories":*

Narayan says that "early on" she decided that "collecting stories was a good way to compensate for being born so late." What does she mean by that? What does it suggest about the functions stories have within families?

*Jeff Todd Titon, "Percy":*

In this story Titon contrasts differing attitudes toward craftsmanship. How does he develop this idea? What different groups of people are involved? Is social class of importance? Other factors? Besides

craftsmanship, the story also takes up the relationship between “natives” born into a rural community and “transplants” from away. In this case the transplants are artists from the 1970s counterculture. How do they perceive Percy and Leverett, and how is Percy different from who they think he is? Why do you think Percy decides not to do blacksmithing for the tourists and summer residents of the island?

## Comments by Authors

*These comments include notes, essays, observations and background information regarding the pieces which appear in this book.*

**Matt Clark** (*“Legends, Rumors, Lore and Revelations (Some Incomplete) Involving Leaton Troutwine, a Local Eccentric/Celebrity/Hero (and Gordon’s Owner)”*) comments on the narrative context that he saw as lying behind the folk narration in his short story—the stories told by the boatmen who take tourists on rafting trips along the Rio Grande River in the Big Bend country of west Texas:

### *“Boatmen Stories of the Big Bend”*

The Big Bend area of west Texas is awash in folklore, particularly folktales. The small communities and isolation of the desert-mountain environment provide a perfect breeding ground for stories. Most of the stories associated with the area are not dissimilar from other stories of the Southwest, a combination of tall tales and rumors drawing upon the Mexican, Indian and Anglo backgrounds of the people who populate the area. Perhaps the most active storytellers, though, are to be found along the river near Lajitas and Terlingua, just outside the gates of the Big Bend National Park. There, the largest occupational group among the community consists of boatmen. These men and women (even the women prefer to be called “boatmen”) make their living guiding rafts in and out of the canyons that the Rio Grande cuts its way through. Their occupation demands that they have a way not only with the river, but with each other and their customers.

Storytelling has a number of functions amongst the boatmen. They tell stories to entertain the tourists they work for, to entertain each other, even as a kind of informal competition amongst themselves.

### *The Boatmen Lifestyle: A Short Description*

A great many of the boatmen of the Rio Grande grew up around the Big Bend area. They spent their youths working as helpers around the boathouses in Lajitas. In their teenage years they were allowed to take more responsibilities as guides. The pay for guiding a raft through the

Santa Elena canyon is quite good. Most of the younger guides work to save money for college. Indeed, a few of them enroll in colleges close to other rivers in order to continue rafting during their education, partly out of economic need, partly out of addiction to riding the currents. Some boatmen of the Rio Grande return to the Big Bend area to work after college. Some find other jobs on other rivers, or get out of boating altogether. It is not surprising to find that the boatmen are all extremely literate.

A few of the boatmen own houses around Lajitas. Others live in the abandoned buildings of nearby quicksilver ghost town, Terlingua. Some of the younger boatmen prefer to sleep in tents on company property around the river. These men and women have access to the boathouse's kitchen and showers, etc. Many of the boatmen who live in tents prefer that type of lifestyle because it allows them to pick up and move whenever they feel like it. These transient boatmen may wander off to other rivers to find jobs for different seasons.

### *Two Boatmen*

(The following two men presented me with most of the information I used in my story.)

Bob "Bobski" Gray is a twenty-seven year old boatman for the Big Bend River Company. He is not from the Big Bend area. He began boating as a young man, drawn into rafting by his affiliation with the Boy Scouts of America. He put himself through college near the Black Canyon of the Gunnison in Colorado by guiding rafts down the Arkansas river. He majored in Philosophy and English, and considered a third degree in Guitar, as he is an accomplished player. He is a quiet, very intelligent man who litters his conversations with references and examples from a variety of literature. He is the most transient of boatmen, spending Spring on the Rio Grande, Summer in Alaska, Fall and Winter in Colorado. (During the Winter, Bobski "vacations" spending most of his days on the ski slopes.) His quiet nature lends special resonance to his storytelling style. Despite his youth, Bobski Gray can command an audience with ease.

Don Casper is in his late forties. He grew up in West Texas around the Rio Grande and doesn't leave Lajitas except to do studio guitar work in Austin. He owns a modest but comfortable house. His life-long familiarity with the Big Bend area allows him to serve as a kind of expert amongst

the other boatmen. He is revered as a storyteller and guide. He himself reveres nothing so much as the unspoiled nature of the Big Bend.

### *Where Stories Are Told*

ON THE RIO: A great many of the boatmen's stories are told on the lazy stretches of the Rio Grande. They tell stories to their customers—almost all of these stories seem to be identical between the boatmen and are fairly tame. They tell stories amongst themselves—these tales can become quite raunchy. (One marked semantic difference between the stories told to the customers and the stories told between the boatmen is the amount of rafting slang.) Despite the fact that these stories are often repeated, the boatmen never seem to tire of them. They invigorate themselves with their uses of creative adjectives, particularly hyphenated descriptive terms.

AT CAMP ON THE RIVER: This is another place where the stories can be divided between stories told to customers, and stories amongst themselves. Even when it is quite hot during the day, the camps along the Rio get chilly at night. The campfire serves as a central spot for cooking and storytelling.

HIKING: The boatmen, when not burdened with tourists, enjoy a pause in their own boating for hiking. This allows them to visit a number of caves, gravesites, grottos, abandoned presidios, etc. They tell stories as they hike, as well as when they get where they are going.

AT THE COMPANY BOATHOUSE: This is a members-only club. The stories here are reserved for the boatmen alone. Often, the stories told here may revolve around the exploits of some recent tourists.

AT LA KIVA: This underground bar in Terlingua offers a dark place to eat good barbecue, drink, and socialize with the rest of the community. The stories told here are open to interruption and enjoyment by all.

AT THE DESERT DELI AND DINER: This dining spot offers a rotating menu and nightly musical entertainment, usually by one of the boatmen. During and between songs, the boatmen and community members trade tales. Sometimes the songs themselves are stories.

### *What the Stories Are About*

RAFTING: Rafting stories involve customers' stupidity, the hazards of being a boatman, the joys of being a boatman, and a multitude of bragging.

**BOATMEN:** The boatmen gossip between and about themselves, tell stories about old boatmen's exploits, and elaborate on the tall-tale adventures of a mythic boatman named Ed.

**GHOSTS:** Ghost stories relate boatmen's personal experiences with and knowledge of ghosts who "live" along the river (La Llorona) or in the area (Murder).

**BIG BEND MYSTERIES/PEOPLE:** Stories in this category may talk about the different witches known to have lived around the park and river. Included here are inventories of cures offered by the revered curanderas, like Maggie Smith of the Hot Springs area.

**"TRUE" STORIES:** The best stories are often the ones which people swear are factual. These include experiences boatmen may have had with the ghosts, the murder that created Murder, the Marfa Lights and Muerte Springs.

**CONSTELLATIONS:** Because the boatmen spend a lot of nights outdoors, they are especially knowledgeable about the stars. A boatman with a talent for picking out constellations faster than anyone else is regarded as a great talent.

*[Matt Clark also provided some notes on specific aspects of his story, such as sources and cultural details:]*

- Gordon the walrus comes—albeit tangentially—from the boatmen's phrase, "Gone to live with the Eskimos." This phrase is used in two ways. In regard to boatmen who may have died and/or are highly respected and have gone on to other things or places, the boatmen say "\_\_\_ has gone to live with the Eskimos." Or, they may say, "\_\_\_ went north." The same idea is used when they talk about some boatman who has gone off to pursue some other "silly" career, or who was not a very good guide. The difference is in the tone. Sometimes, in reference to the less respected guides, the Eskimo phrase is followed by a quick and out of tune rendition of Elvis Presley's "North to Alaska." Gordon, then, is a tangible example of someone who went (and it turns out, has gone) north.
- The Poet from Sul Ross State University in Alpine is a character that expresses any doubt a reader may have about what the other characters are telling him. College students are generally looked down upon as "know-nothings" but not because the

boatmen distrust education. They merely believe that no education is complete without a healthy dose of experience.

- The actual Marfa Lights Historical Marker is word for word as given here.
- People from Marfa really do sit out by the lights to tell stories, drink beer and just generally revel in the mystery they “own.”
- The Tornado Incident comes from no real Big Bend Story. Instead, it comes from my own reading of Lord Raglan’s “The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama, Part II” and a desire to create a hero who fits in with at least a few of the characteristics Raglan outlined. The name Jesus is used in this tale to underscore the Raglan reading.
- The Marfa Lights Kidnapping comes—in a way—from the Raglan essay again. In and around the Big Bend area, there are dozens of tales about the Lights. People are careful to point out that the Lights remain a mystery because anyone who discovers what they really are disappears before they can tell the world. “I know what they are,” Doc Casper said in La Kiva, “but if I tell, they’ll have to kill me. It’s like a CIA thing.”
- The Poet’s comments in regard to Joseph Campbell come directly from my reading of *The Power of Myth*.
- Briscoe’s problem with his son goes back to Raglan again, as well as the Oedipal myth.
- The Murder episode is a direct transcription of the story Bob Gray told late one evening around the campfire. Off in the distance, we could hear a bull bellowing. The story is actually quite true and can be read about in a number of magazines and newspaper articles dating back to 1896.
- The Bandito incident is a semi-transcription of a tale Doc Casper told while hiking to Boot Canyon in the Chisos. We found the Springs in question and, after treating the water with iodine, drank some of it. Doc insisted that it would induce dreams in which the identity of your one true love was revealed. If it did, I do not remember this.
- The Leaton Troutwine/Ofalia Sotol love story is completely of my own invention. That Murder should take Leaton to Muerte Springs is my way of fusing two folktales into one. Sotol, incidentally, is a plant that grows in the vicinity from which a tequila-

like liquor is made. In addition, the stalks of the plant are used as very light but sturdy walking sticks.

- Peyote does grow in the park, although it is very difficult to find now. The rangers have no problem spotting it, but are not willing to share the secret with anyone else. The boatmen, when asked what it looks like, describe Indian tobacco, a weed that doesn't induce visions, but does give one a stomach ache. "All the college boys come down here, you know to raft and whatever," Bobski said in the boathouse. "And they all want to know where they can get some peyote. Except they don't have any idea what it looks like. So we show 'em the Indian 'bacco and say, "Careful with it." But it just makes 'em get headaches and stuff. Some boys this one time, though, saw us the next day at La Kiva and told us a wild-ass story about all these visions they had. I don't know where they came up with that."
- The water moccasin is common around Big Bend, as are rattlesnakes. The creatures aren't feared by the boatmen, but avoided out of respect. Most boatmen have stories about people they know who have had unfortunate run-ins with snakes and the various cures that have worked. The halved-chicken cure is associated with one woman in particular, Maggie Smith, who ran the Hot Springs General Store inside the park and was a sort of patroness and curandera for the area inhabitants. According to Doc Casper, she also recommended soaking the bite in kerosene.
- Marguerite Lechuza (lechuza meaning owl) is a composite of a number of witches described by a number of boatmen. La Mitre is the mountain that Satan landed on when cast out of Heaven. The boatmen's witch tales are usually told camping in Mexico.
- "La Llorona," Bobski Gray said, "haunts every river, you know. Every river I've worked on has a wailing woman wandering around waiting to suck somebody's blood in the parking lot of a bar or just scare the hell out of somebody. She either killed her kids by throwing 'em off a cliff, or drowning on the shore. Usually because her husband left her or something. My own theory has to do with Medea and all that mess. You know, a lot of these stories aren't new stuff at all. You can find the same characters in books written God

knows how long ago. But La Llorona, shit. Every boatman I've ever known has got a story about her. Me, I've never seen her. But I have heard what sounded like crying once, just past the Rock Slide. I'm not saying she exists or does not exist. I'm just saying there may be more than one of her."

- The Rock Slide is a Class IV rapids area. It doesn't look too bad until one is just in the middle of it, then the realization dawns that if you don't have somebody to get you out just the right way, you may not get out at all. The different rocks in the Slide all have pet names given by the boatmen. Don Casper says that they've been named what they're named for as long as he's been rafting, and he has no idea who or why they were named what they were, except for the ones that obviously look like their names.
- The gold Marguerite Lechuza mentions could be any one of a number of treasures that are lost in caves along the River. Some of the gold was left there by Pancho Villa's men. Some of it is just there. In most stories the boatmen tell, the people who find the gold cannot lift it, due to some curse upon it. When they go to get help, the cave either closes up upon itself, or is just impossible to find again. I have Leaton lose out on this find due to the idea that Americans work for their riches, while other cultures do not.
- "Que cruda estoy" is another boatmen phrase, heard as an excuse for any screw up. By blaming their mistake on a hangover, the boatmen feel they are justified in feeling no guilt, or shirking some duty. This is especially true if someone wiggles out of carrying the "groover" (portable toilet box) back to the raft.
- The ghost of the projectionist is based upon the story (told at the Desert Deli and Diner by a boatman named Beth) that a miner sick of watching *Love Finds Andy Hardy* shot the man running the theatre. The theatre, still there, has been turned into a bar.
- Bears, although not Polar Bears certainly, are still found in the Chisos Mountains. They are rare and not known to be aggressive, but boatmen who wander off the trail to use the bathroom are warned, "Bears'll getcha. . ." I suspect that this is said as a means of warding off danger, as if mentioning something bad will keep it from happening.

- The Poet's not knowing any poems comes from the boatmen's dislike of poetry, but vast knowledge of songs. The Poet in the story could probably construct a fine popular epic out of what he's come to learn, but instead, he prefers to tell stories. The narrator passing the Poet his lighter shows that he is also passing "the torch" to a new "designated storyteller."

**Carrie L. Hertz** *had this to say in relation to her poem "Absent Gods":*

I do not research mythology as a folklorist, but my love of mythology as a child led me to the study of folklore. Later as a folklore student, I was introduced to the works of scholars like Sabina Magliocco and Kathryn Rountree, who through ethnographic studies, examined (neo)pagan groups and their desire to infuse or rediscover magic and ancient stories in the modern Western world. Reading scholarly works like these led me to take a new look at some of my favorite mythological heroines. The multitude of goddess imagery, narratives, and analogies employed within the (neo)pagan movement encourages a playful attitude with divine archetypes, adapting them to modern sensibilities and experiences, or envisioning oneself and others as "goddess types." The intention of this poem was to capture a little of this liminal shifting between supernatural divinity and mundane humanity.

Modern paganism is attractive to a number of Western women who resent what they feel to be a lack of positive or powerful female depictions in more mainstream religions. Many modern pagan groups seek balance and equality between genders but venerate the feminine in an effort to redress the violence against or devaluation of women in Judeo-Christian religions. However, the narratives of goddesses so often revolve around their relationships and experiences with gods or mortal men. Therefore, this poem, "Absent Gods," describes a variety of male/female (power) relationships, positive and negative, while focusing on female perspectives.

**Margaret R. Yocom** *comments on her poems:*

*“Eating Alone”*

This poem gave me a chance to think about just where I am from. What does it mean to be “from” something, someplace, especially when it’s a culture—German—that has had a rough go of it from time to time here in the US: World War I and “Victory cabbage” instead of sauerkraut, for example. I asked my grandfather Elmer Christman Keck what it was like to be German in our hometown during World War I, and he said, “No problem.” This from a man whose father gave their slaughterhouse a French name (“The Abbatoir”) instead of the German. And what is it like when you marry into another culture—and all of us do in one way or another—and the person you live with cannot fathom why you do what you do?

It’s not easy coming to terms with where I’m from. And I sometimes wonder why I have never taught a course on Pennsylvania German folklore. Some of it, I know, is because I feel somewhat of a stranger to the culture—I didn’t grow up speaking German or Pennsylvania German because my grandfather wouldn’t teach my mother because of the problems that didn’t exist(!). My father was the first generation to move off of the farm. I chose, though, to write my dissertation and my first articles on family folklore set in the Pennsylvania German country because I did want to understand more about this family that gave me elocution lessons so I wouldn’t sound like a Pennsylvania “Dutchman.” I miss not having more of an accent, but I did keep my unusual last name. I’m sure that the loss of some of my culture is one of the reasons I feel so passionate about teaching people to learn about their own.

I’m sure there’s more poetry to come from my Pennsylvania Danish-Swiss-German roots.

*“The Cane”*

My paternal grandmother Bertha May Garber Davidheiser Yocom (1888-1988) of Douglassville, Pennsylvania, was one of the two main informants of my Pennsylvania fieldwork with my Pennsylvania German family. How does one write about a treasured family member, a grandmother, both as a fieldworker and a poet? Nothing seems quite good enough, quite sufficient.

As a folklorist who specializes in narrative and material culture, I find myself teaching about objects of memory and the stories people tell about them. So often, a resonant object enables us to walk with a much treasured person, even though physically they have passed out of our view.

My grandmother's cane does sit in the corner of my bedroom. About ten years after her death in 1988, I asked her daughter Gladys for one of her canes. I'd had a problem or two with my knee, and I wanted Bertha, "Nanna" I called her, with me when I needed to recuperate from another mysterious pain, or more. She had always had a very independent notion about doctors and medicine, as a lot of our family stories (that I collected) tell. An early "physical culturist," she often preferred her own treatments: once when her firstborn baby son was seriously ill, she dumped the doctor's medicine down the toilet because it wasn't working, and she healed him herself. When she broke her hip in a car accident and her doctor told her she'd never walk with a cane, her answer was to leave her canes lying about when she knew she didn't need them. It was her and her spirit that I wanted walking along with me.

All those thoughts came to me one day as I began a short-line poem for my poetry writing class. As I wrote, the poem even came to take the shape of Bertha's slender brown cane. Now I am doubly blessed: I have Bertha's cane, and I have this poem to read aloud to people. Each time I read it, though I don't name her, she is there right beside me. And maybe especially because I don't name her, the people my listeners treasure, might be standing right by them, as well.

### *The Other Poems*

They come out of my love for the natural world of my major fieldwork area, the western mountain and lake region of Maine. And also from some of the difficulties that come from doing fieldwork on logging and forest culture, as a woman, in an isolated, rural, hard-working, male-oriented area such as the Rangeley Lakes Region.

When I first started my longterm project in 1985, I took poetry with me to read in the evening to recall to myself the other parts of me that could so easily feel like they were slipping away. I loved the stories I was collecting and everything I was learning about work in the woods and the

beautiful carvings that poured from jackknives and chain saws. But poetry helped me remember, too, the literary conversations I loved, the theater, my dedication to social justice and feminist ideals, my spiritual life as a Quaker. So, I carried with me the work of Adrienne Rich, certainly. And the writings of friends from graduate school: fiction by Robert Abel and Valerie Martin, poetry by Christopher Howell and Bill Tremblay. Since 1993 when my husband and I bought a small “camp,” a cabin, on Rangeley Lake, I’ve been able to stay in Rangeley all summer, and I’ve attended to the land around me, taking the time for hikes on Saddleback Mountain and for kayaking on Rangeley.

I have made a friend of the red-gold sunsets that I watch from my small dock that floats and falls with the waves, and I am particularly fond of the blue-gray storm clouds that blow down the lake. I can see rain approach, foot by foot, at times.

There’s a loneliness to fieldwork, a necessary loneliness, I think. I do live alone for most of my summers in Maine, but by loneliness I mean an aloneness that is right and fitting, one that comes from knowing that I will never be native to this area. It is my fieldwork area, and though I will spend most of my professional life working in it, dedicated to it, I will never be of it. It is, though, a place where I, as both a human being and a folklore fieldworker, keep watch.

I live alone for most of the summer in Maine—in 1993 my husband John and I bought a small “camp,” a cabin in the area. I come as soon as I can in early June and open the camp that’s been closed since September. John follows in August.

Each spring when I walk through the cabin for the first time, a cool, damp loneliness washes over me, as if the house were a living thing, sorrowful as Persephone at its months without breeze or birdsong. Why this loneliness, I ask myself. The aloneness of being a fieldworker is right and fitting, I know; it’s a feeling that comes from acknowledging over and over again that I will never be native to this area. I will spend most of my professional life working in it, dedicated to it, but I will never be of it, never from it. It is, though, a place where I, as both a poet and a folklorist, keep watch.

Nevertheless, loneliness is the greeter at my door, and “Opening Camp” speaks to that loneliness, to thoughts of distant friends, and to the grace, grief, and sensual delights that life constantly places before us.

While questions are vital to my poetry practice, absolute answers are not. Poetry allows me to explore questions, to dramatize one or more possibilities, and then to see how well these possibilities sit in this corner of the world. I can show, for example, a woman so desirous of space for herself that she hangs a wash on a biting cold day, a woman gathering together her daily tasks and the world around her to create art. As I follow my questions, I write toward open-ended conclusions, ones that are, as Stephen Dunn describes, “evocative of the mysteries that the poem has enacted.”

The practices of poetry and ethnography share, above all, one vital motion: the loving, scrupulous attention to detail. For poet Stephen Dunn, detail is a moral exercise: “All poems are moral to the extent that they are evidence in content and form of an attentiveness to the details and circumstances of our lives. They get right the things they pay attention to, which always implies a correction of some sort. The issue is not right versus wrong. It’s right versus off (the imprecise, the superficial, etc.).”

Jane Hirshfield writes of a necessary concentration, a “particular state of awareness: penetrating, unified, and focused, yet also permeable and open. . . . The experience of concentration,” she explains, “may be . . . a simple, unexpected sense of deep accord between yourself and everything. It may come as the harvest of long looking.” Great art, she notes, is “thought that has been. . . concentrated in just this way: honed and shaped by a silky attention brought to bear on the recalcitrant matter of earth and of life.” It is the task of the writer, then, to become “in the words of Henry James, a person on whom nothing is lost. What is put into the care of such a person will be well tended. Such a person can be trusted to tell the stories she is given to tell, and to tell them with the compassion that comes when the self’s deepest interest is not in the self, but in turning outward and into awareness.”

**Jeannie Banks Thomas** provides these notes and comments about her poems:

*“Salem, Massachusetts, Playground at Gallows Hill”*

This poem references:

- A storefront haunted house (Poe and Hawthorne Museum) that privileged Poe over native son Hawthorne because Poe’s work lent itself more easily to the generation of screams.
- A statue of Samantha Stevens (of the TV series *Bewitched*) that was recently donated to the town. The statue caused some controversy because some thought it was disrespectful to the memory of those who were accused of being witches.
- The street carnival (including food vendors, hence the fried dough, butting up against the historical cemetery and memorial to those accused and killed as witches) that goes up in Salem each October during Haunted Happenings.
- During one particular Haunted Happenings, the street performers at the downtown mall included a contortionist whose assistant really was a one-armed girl.
- Salem has a long history of immigrant communities, including today’s vibrant Dominican community. The Dominican bar (with the good but slow food) is right near a lot of witchy tourist events.

This poem attempts to quite literally capture my fieldwork through its images. It also points to the connection between death and the festive, carnival and darkness, and some of the fecundity (“rain”) and creativity and promise (“live music”) that can emerge from this unlikely pairing.

*“Shins around the Fireside (Jig)”*

“Shins” is the name of an actual tune, a jig. The poem describes several ethnographic moments:

- Stanza one describes a “pastoral airs” concert, a tradition in Cape Breton, which is held every year, that involves the performance of traditional Cape Breton fiddle and piano music and also bagpiping in the church. It also involves the singing of a capella Gaelic songs. The singers sometimes hold hands, and swing their hands as a way of helping remember the tune and the words. This is a way of literally “cranking out the tune.” Many of the Gaelic songs in the area were traditionally sung while working

(milling) fabric. Milling frolics are still done today, not because cloth needs working anymore, but because people still find important the tradition of community gatherings and live music. They are often tourist or festival events. A fairly well-known “world music” performer, Mary Jane Lamond, sings some of these Gaelic songs. She is of Cape Breton ancestry and has a modest home on the island. Students can also listen to Ashley MacIssac (who unites the traditional music with rock-and-roll), Natalie MacMaster, Buddy MacMaster, Kimberly Fraser, Jerry Holland, Andrea Beaton, Kinnon Beaton, Glenn Graham, and many others to get a taste of the music. A quick Google can lead students to their music; most of these musicians have Web sites. Some of these performers are close to the age of traditional college students, but the music is performed by all ages. It is a dance music, and the island still has a tradition of hosting dances that draws an audience of all ages. Folklorist Burt Feintuch, an expert on the music, describes it as a traditional fiddle and piano music that has rock and roll intensity. Well-respected Canadian writer Alistair MacLeod has written about the island and its culture in his fictions *Island* and *No Great Mischiefs*.

- The second stanza describes the town of Inverness, NS. Inverness used to be a coal mining town. Cape Breton is vibrant musically but is severely economically depressed, which is apparent in Inverness. The poem was written at a time when there was talk of building a golf course to help draw tourists to mitigate the town’s economic woes.
- Cape Breton has a wonderful range of cultures and communities that care about their heritage: Mi’kmaq (Native), Scottish or Gaelic, and French. The French and Mi’kmaq languages are still spoken in the French and Mi’kmaq parts of the island. A movement is afoot to bring back Gaelic as well, and music is a part of this movement.
- The last two stanzas describe a house party that focused on music (and included some world-class, but local, musicians such as Howie MacDonald) and included an expansive “midnight supper,” which was eaten at midnight, of course.

*“Instructions for Installing Blinds”*

I think it is the job of folklorists to document the small moments of everyday life. “Instructions” comes from this impulse. It documents a moment of home improvement that becomes a love poem. It also references the poem “Love Worker” by Charles Simic, the 15th poet laureate of the United States.

*“Woman, 41 (Motif GYN041)”*

Finally, “Woman 41” is about Rosa Parks, of course, but it is also about women “of a certain age” (like me) who finally become angry enough to stand up for themselves, which leads to positive transformations in their own lives and those of others. I think this “I’m-not-going-to-take-it-anymore” experience for women at this time in life is common enough to merit recognition with a motif number.

**Jo Radner** adds this information in connection with her poem:

*“My Great-Great Half-Uncle Horace’s Bone-Handled Jackknife”*

This poem is based on family facts: Horace Greeley Adams (1857-1939) was born in Denmark, Maine, to Gilson Adams and Gilson’s second wife, Abigail Quincy. Although Horace had died years before I was born, he lived on in fond family stories about ingenious, eccentric bachelor “Uncle Horace.” It wasn’t until I was middle-aged and all who had known Horace personally were gone that I discovered the dreadful tragedy of his childhood, his mother’s murder-suicide. I was cleaning out the attic of the house where he had last lived, and by chance I found the little newspaper clipping in a dresser drawer, tucked into a little cotton pouch with a few other childhood memorabilia and what must have been a lock of Horace’s mother’s hair.

I still have Uncle Horace’s jackknife, and I still occasionally whittle with it, but it fits into my hand differently since my discovery of its owner’s true story. As in the poem, it carries comfort and connection — and also *discomfort*. It’s an icon of meditation for me. As I hold it, I think about how we shape our lives, silently and privately, to accommodate the miseries that we cannot control. If we are successful, as I believe Horace was, we contain our past torment in layers of nacre, as an oyster patiently generates a pearl around a painful grain of sand. But the sand is still there.

**Neil Grobman** offers this background on Chapter 6 of his *Lost in Redskirt Forest*:

*Chapter Six: “The Awful Giant Grubsnig”*

Did you ever wonder if Disney was ever going to make his villains really evil? Well there is no doubt about this villain. He is really AWFUL. His name is Ginsburg spelled backwards because he is a HORRIBLE and BIG businessman, typical of Horigron (Mr. Ginsburg, a good, small businessman, being a character in an earlier chapter of the novel). Everything works BACKWARDS in this chapter, so the reader has to be on his toes. There are five magical items captured by the hero in this chapter, making it reminiscent of the folktales “Jack the Giant Killer” and “Jack and the Beanstalk.” The Giant is in the Child Pornography business, so that is about as awful as you can get. What he uses to have power over others is STRENGTH. Ironically, this is also what defeats him. Don must use one of the magic items—the magic dumbbell, of course, the symbol of that STRENGTH. The giant seems to be defeated by perishing in WATER by drowning.

*Grobman* also notes that the place name HORIGRON (where the action of Chapter 6 takes place) is derived from HORRIBLE GROWNups. He also notes that the “enemies” or “life traps” that his protagonists defeat in various chapters of this novel relate to certain basic concepts such as “negative creativity” or “time itself”; as noted above, in Chapter 6, the protagonists use their antagonist’s STRENGTH against him, something which fits into larger themes in the novel. Readers may also appreciate more information from **Neil Grobman** on the novel as a whole:

In the novel, *Lost in Redskirt Forest*, there are four critical characters from the Wolfe family that are described in chapters prior to Chapter 6 (The Awful Giant Grubsnig). The family members are **Nancy** Wolfe, the main character’s (Don’s) sister, **Trixie** (the Wolfe family dog), **Ellen** (Don’s mother), **Levi** (Don’s storytelling father), and **Peter** (Don’s younger brother). **Mr. Ginsburg** is a GOOD LITTLE businessman in the neighborhood who employed Don at his five and dime store (Chapter 4). Mr. Ginsburg is a Vietnam vet who has come back from the war with a limp and sports a fancy cane (sort of an affectation for his affliction)—why is it important? Because wherever he walks, people can hear his CLOMP, CLOMP, CLOMPING

with the fancy cane (repeated in the giant chapter as the huge footsteps of GRUBSNIG to make the obvious connection).

When Don gets to HORIZON (a cleverly sound-alike reference to OREGON where I first taught folklore classes—no offense meant—I needed a setting, and this worked great), he meets characters who are the anti-characters of people from his family and hometown:

*Chapter 6:*

GRUBSNIG (Mr. Ginsburg's name spelled backwards) the corrupt big businessman.

*Chapter 7:*

NELLE is the witch (the witch/bitch Goddess and opposite of Don's nurturing mother Ellen)—yes name spelled backwards again.

*Chapter 8:*

The Wolf in this chapter is named Nevil the wolf (whereas Levi Wolfe is Don's father's name). Think of that as an anagram of Levi (evil) but beginning with an N.

And by the way, these anti-characters are presented in the REVERSE order that they were presented in the earlier chapters—Levi was first, Ellen was second, and Mr. Ginsburg was third, thus the “backwards theme” and the use of PALINDROMES is well justified. Here are some *trivia notes*: I once met poet Allen Ginsburg, shook his hand, and spoke with him briefly back in the sixties. He has nothing to do with this Mr. Ginsburg, just as Barre Toelken has nothing to do with trolls (Barrie the Toll King). Plus, I never actually had a dog named Trixie. My childhood dog was a wire-haired Fox Terrier named Sporty, but he was a trickster (and I am capable of spelling it correctly). This is all poetic license.

The following anti-characters are not as super evil as the first group, but they are basically misled, misdirected, and out of control with their special powers:

*Chapter 10:*

The anti-character is PAN—playing off of the pun on Peter Wolfe's name suggesting PETER PAN, and the character is a little of both mythic Pan and literary Peter Pan.

*Chapter 11:*

COYOTE (the TRIKSTER) is a canine, and I am playing off the similarity in name to Don's dog TRIXIE, a schnauzer (as well as the cleverly planned REDSKIRT spelled backwards)

*Chapter 12:*

ANANSI the Spider (who is both male and female) is a pun off Don's sister's name NANCY, the tattletale.

**Danusha Goska** makes a number of observations about her contribution to the book in an introduction to her version of the *Ramayana*:

*“The Ramayana. . . as if Sita Mattered” : An Introduction*

Folk art has long held a hypnotic sway over me that elite and popular art have never been able to match. I was planted amidst folk art’s power and mystery. Slovak folk music pounded out of stereos. Embroidered aprons and pillowcases slept in hope chests. Spooky wooden carvings stood sentry behind china plates in the dark and dusty corners of the hutch. I could not apply articulate meaning to my mother’s folk art; she grew up in one culture, peasant, village Slovakia; I, in another, suburban New Jersey. For me, all folk art—Hopi pottery, African carvings, Eskimo scrimshaw—exercises this same mute, raw power. Beautiful and powerful things whose beauty and power we cannot articulate can mesmerize us for life.

As an English major in college, I was forced to read the *Dead White Males*. Before political correctness would make a dent in my world, my undergrad professors never addressed the irony of our working-class ethnics being made “educated” by reading canonical literature so assertively divorced from us. Of course today, in 2006, at this same institution, working class ethnics are made “educated” by reading other canonical literature—by African Americans and Hispanic Americans—which they, in the main, are not. Ironies abound; they are just slightly different ironies.

I realize today that the *Dead White Males* have much to say, and that they often say it surpassingly well; it’s the way that they were taught that was classist. In any case, when I tried to understand what the canon was doing wrong, I hit upon the easy target. I was a woman; much of the art I was rejecting was created by and for men. Aha! So *men* were the enemy!

As part of this misguided effort to clean my aesthetic house, I exempted myself from otherwise social evenings because men’s voices had won out when it came to deciding which film to see. I rejected action films, often starring Bruce Willis, and featuring scantily clad women. (I didn’t see my first action film —Arnold Schwarzenegger’s *True Lies*—till I was in my thirties. I found it funny, outrageous, and thrilling.) Even art museums lost their sanctity. The Elgin marbles, the

Uffizi, the Louvre; I sniffed at the many Madonnas flashing their breasts at long dead noblemen who couldn't commission more honest porn, and marble men flailing violently at each other.

The righteous sacrifice of art, high and low, left a large and painful hole in my life, as does the loss of faith or of a loved one. Entertainment became a fond memory. I craved the mind-numbing good time I used to get from trash. I embarked on a quest, a quest I know I shared with many other women, minority group members, and others who felt badly served by art, and yet unable to deny its power.

Conventional power structures are reflected in art to such an extent that even imagining satisfying art that does not reflect these power structures was, for me, at first, nearly impossible. From readily available art, it would be easy to conclude that male sadism and female masochism are indispensable to erotica, that demonization of the other is essential to conflict, that winner-take-all competition is the element that keeps a plot moving forward, that physical beauty, no matter how chastely described, is the *sine qua non* of a heroine. Could concern for all life and the heroic nature of plain people serve as entertaining plot elements? Could a heroine in sensible shoes and with attainable body proportions win a hero's heart?

I wanted to find an artistic Robin Hood. This Robin Hood would steal away from great elite art, and would hijack from addictive popular art, all the qualities that give them their power, and apply it to art that served what I perceived as noble ends. This artistic Robin Hood would kidnap those moments of it's-as-if-they-were-people-I-knew involvement, the wish-it-would-never-end entertainment, the physical-response-inducing eroticism, the Walt Disney magic, the walking-out-of-the-theater-humming-the-tunes catchiness, these vivid everyone-knows-what-Scarlett-wore-to-the-Twelve-Oaks-barbecue prettiness, the spine-strengthening righteousness, the audience-bonding *communitas*, the I-don't-know-what-it-was-but-I-saw-something-of-God-and-now-I-can-go-on-living kapow of art, great elite art, powerful, addictive, popular art. Rip it all out of the hands of those who must be on top and cause others pain getting there, and place it into the hands of artists who can create art that will encourage life, joy, and understanding, for me and people like me.

I sought out and imbibed art created by working class ethnic women like myself. A middle class, Ivy-League-educated, male acquaintance said that the new books I was reading could not

be taken seriously because, “When my friends read James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, they all thought it was about them, and none of them think that about *The Bread Givers*.” *The Bread Givers* is, of course, the story of a working class, Polish-Jewish woman; *Ulysses* is about a privileged young man very much like my acquaintance and others in his milieu.

A second prong in my effort was to pursue a PhD in folklore. I was as starry-eyed when beginning my studies at UC Berkeley under the late, great folklorist, Alan Dundes, as I was when gazing into my mother’s hutch peopled by mysterious, wooden figurines. Dundes rapidly disenchanted me. An unreconstructed Freudian, he insisted that every folkloric item, from a stately saga to a herky-jerky children’s toy, was working out basic Freudian drives for power and sex, mostly for sex.

I studied *wayang kulit*, or shadow play, with Amin Sweeney, a former *dalang*, or puppeteer. Shadow puppets seduced me the very first time I saw them. When was that? I’m not exactly sure. It wasn’t in the excellent Peter Weir 1982 film, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, in which they appear as mythic doppelgangers to the main, human characters. I welcomed their appearance in that film as that of old friends. How did I, a Jersey girl, develop a familiarity with Southeast Asian shadow puppets?

My memory places my first encounter in an unlikely venue: Jama Michalika, a café, in Krakow, Poland. A century old, “Michalik’s Cave” has long offered an alternative universe to surrounding harsh reality. When I was a teen international student in Krakow, overwhelming smog and Soviet water cannons were the order of the day. You slipped into Jama Michalika and you were recruited into the dashing, yeasty, unconquered Poland conjured by poets’ rhythms and heroes’ dreams. Folk art cluttered the walls. Were shadow puppets really among them? I don’t know if they were in reality, but in my memory, that is where I first saw them. And they fit, exactly.

Shadow puppets are flat, and between approximately one and three feet high. They are carved from buffalo hide. Both silhouettes and internal details are carved. The puppets are held on sticks by puppeteers who sit in back of white screens. There is a source of light, traditionally a flickering oil lamp, behind the puppeteer. The puppets’ shadows fall on the screen; it is these quivering shadows that the audience watches.

I wish I could convey with precision what is so entrancingly right about the puppets, the Javanese in particular. There is something about the placement of the eye in relation to the slope of the nose—but the part of my soul that responds to them is not a protractor. They are very different from anything I've seen before; they are very different from anything that anyone in my world defines as “art” or as “beautiful.” They are an acquired taste that has uncompromisingly imposed their own aesthetic on me. These puppets' peculiar, stylized form, their painstakingly carved filigrees, their silence, intimated of the wisdom and mystery of another, heightened, world. I felt if I could be initiated into their world, I could learn something powerful, significant and new.

In Professor Sweeney's class, to my increasing horror, I learned how the elements of the puppets that I took as mute messengers from a superior world are used to establish the social status, and, therefore, the worth of each character. Rich, royal, good looking males are superior; females and commoners are inferior, as are the physically ugly. There are very few female roles. There is a tiny, beautiful, loyal, passive wife and a purely evil, very powerful old woman. Servants are all content with their lot and more obedient to their servitude than their masters are.

These paradigms are not “just” about art; scholars report that shadow play typology “has exercised a powerful influence on the daily attitudes of the Javanese.” In other words, the sexism, looksism and classism in the shadow plays are used, according to scholars, to “understand” real life outside of the plays. Claire Holt finds shadow plays important enough to title her chapter about them, “The *Wayang* World.” She talks about how the plays are used to teach the young and build national identity. Benedict Anderson refers to “an almost universally accepted religious mythology which commands deep emotional and intellectual adherence.. .the wayang tradition.” Clifford Geertz quotes various informants who describe shadow plays as a way to work out daily life and morality, and the characters as spanning the possibilities of that effort. In other words, if you don't see a character, concept, or solution to life's problems in shadow play, you can't conceive of them in real life. Amin Sweeney's book *The Ramayana and the Malay Shadow Play* reports, “The wayang heroes are noble princes and demigods who exist on a higher plane.” Ward Keeler thought enough of the influence and importance of shadow plays that he titled his book, *Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves*.

The classism, sexism, and looksism of shadow play went unobjected to by the Western scholars I read. Rather, they seem to like these features. James R. Brandon says, for example, in *Theater in Southeast Asia*, “More men than women usually see woyang kulit. . .it may be that the high philosophic tone of the wayang and the many scenes of heroic combat appeal to masculine tastes.” In other words, the exaltation of the rich and powerful, the insistence that physical beauty and moral virtue always coexist, and that ugliness and moral turpitude do, as well, qualify, in this scholar’s estimation, the plays as displaying a “high philosophic tone.” Secondly, it has, apparently, not occurred to him how dismissively and negatively females are portrayed, or that that portrayal might not appeal to women and might result in their not choosing to attend shadow play. One wonders if this scholar’s comment is acceptable because of the distance of shadow plays from the author and his assumed readers. I don’t think that Harvard would publish a comparable comment about why more whites than blacks liked minstrel shows. Benedict Anderson steps away from academic objectivity when he tells readers how we “should” react to the shadow play’s caste loyalty. He tells us we should not interpret it as the selfish vanity and empty posturing of a privileged group. He goes on to make a touching case for the abject obedience of servants. Again, how might Anderson write about “happy slaves” in American fiction? Anderson writes, “Having now considered the deep Javanese recognition of the logical and social necessity of a moral pluralism along caste lines...” The caste system is, save misogyny, perhaps the world’s most longstanding system of human oppression; here it is identified as “logical” and “necessary.” Mary Zurbuchen, a woman, never even mentioned the lack of female characters in shadow play. One wonders if the sheer virtuosity of shadow play suggested to these scholars proof of the soundness of the systems it depicts. Similarly, observers once concluded that American slavery must not be such a bad thing, because slaves produced such fine spirituals and other folk art forms.

The inequalities of shadow play reflect unnecessary suffering for women; it is possible that they reflect unnecessary suffering for men, as well. Indulgence of misogyny does neither sex any good. One of the most poignant sentences I read on shadow play was, “Javanese males . . . often appear happiest of all when playing with infants who cannot yet speak.”

Someone might argue, “You’re a Westerner. It’s different over there . . . There, women and servants are content.” “It’s different over there” is the logic of men who order foreign wives from catalogues. I am working class. As such, I was depressed, indeed, I was aghast, my first semester of grad school at a premier university, famous for its radicalism, to read scholars’ flowery praise of sexism and feudalism, as long as those oppressions were aesthetically presented and far away. I was a servant when I studied shadow play at Berkeley; I financed my degree by working as a live-in domestic. Before grad school, I had lived in the Third World—not as a disinterested scholar, but as a passionately involved teacher. I was the daughter of a woman who grew up in a near feudal Eastern European village. I was not unfamiliar with the lives of women, or servants, or villagers.

Employers who insist that servants, and Westerners who insist that Third World women, are “content”—and that their pretty folk art and rich folk traditions proves this so—often misread situations disastrously. Twenty years ago I taught in Nepal. I published articles about the particular roadblocks Nepal’s feudal Hinduism placed in my female students’ paths. Some readers, often Western ex-pats who basked in the “contentedness” of Nepal’s “picturesque” poor, condemned me for this, describing Nepal as a paradise, apart from Western obsessions with things like equality and dignity. Today Nepal erupts in a Maoist insurgency, and its daughters are prime cargo in the sex slave industry. In fact, Southeast Asia has been rocked by several revolutionary movements in the past century, and today human populations in that region are no more settled than are its notoriously hyperactive tectonic plates.

Other readers may dismiss my concerns with shadow play as imperialistic. Aren’t Western products every bit as shallow? Don’t our films and other pop culture products equate poverty with evil, and goodness with beauty? I would argue that they often do, but that they do not do so as emphatically as shadow play. I would also argue that there are fewer exceptions to the rules in shadow play. In any case, the tendency to glorify power and to shame powerlessness, and the tendency to associate virtue with beauty exist in Western art as well, as touched on above, and my urge to tinker with shadow play is by no means without reference to Western art, rather, it is part of a lifelong struggle with art’s ability to empower, and, conversely, its power over, people like me.

As my semester project in Professor Sweeney’s class, I rewrote *The Ramayana*, the myth most frequently performed in Malay shadow play, “as if Sita mattered.” Here is a brief summary

of one version of the main points of the plot of *The Ramayana* as relayed by Prof. Sweeney. As with all folk epics, there are other versions. A king wishes his daughter, Sita, to marry. To select an appropriate groom for her, he announces an archery contest. The first contestant to shoot an arrow through forty palm trees will win her. The number forty appears repeatedly in this story as Sweeney tells it; this evidences the distant Arab-Muslim roots of some aspects of Malay culture, even in this telling of a Hindu tale. Forty, as folklorist Alan Dundes has pointed out, is a Middle Eastern pattern number signifying “a lot,” as in the forty days and nights of Noah’s flood, and Ali Baba and the forty thieves. At key points in Sweeney’s story, a given task must be carried out, and forty jars of mosquito hearts is required to complete that task.

Ram wins the archery contest. He marries Sita. Ram, Sita, and Ram’s brother Lakshmana are sent to live in a forest. The ogress Surpanakha seduces, or attempts to seduce, Ram. To punish Surpanakha for being a female who takes sexual initiative, Ram orders Lakshmana to cut off her nose, ears, and breasts. Surpanakha complains to her brother, Ravana, the ten-headed demon. Ravana kidnaps Sita, and takes her to his island kingdom, Lanka. Ram spends a great deal of time searching for Sita. Eventually Hanuman, the monkey god, aids Ram by building a causeway to Lanka. Sita is rescued. Ram questions whether or not Sita was able to successfully guard her virtue against Ravana. Ram requires Sita to walk through fire in order to prove her purity. Sita does so; the fire refuses to burn her. In any case, Ram abandons her. Sita goes to the house of the sage Valmiki, who takes down her story.

As far as I know, Semar never appears in the *Ramayana*. Rather, he is a character from the *Mahabharata*, another Hindu text used as the basis of shadow play, where he is a servant. Semar is exceptional in the world of shadow play, in that he is physically unattractive and crude, and yet he is a positive character. Semar is superficially grotesque, spending much time joking and farting. His appearance is deceiving; he is really a god in disguise, and wise counselor to the lead character. I have inserted him into my *Ramayana*.

The significant female antagonist of the *Ramayana* is Surpanakha, but I chose Durga as the prototype for my man-eating demoness, Dorcas. Durga, Hindu goddess with a necklace of human skulls, is such an irresistible model of the feminine “dark side.”

At this point I wonder if Politically Correct readers are not ready to put me up against a wall and shoot me. How dare I, an alleged Westerner, re-write a non-Western epic, and according to my own view of how power relations should work? In fact, I have no right to do what I've done here.

Now that we've cleared that up, I will mention that, as Alan Dundes never tired of saying, folklore, to qualify as folklore, must have multiple existence and variation. In fact, the *Ramayana*, like a couple of other folk epics—*The Prose Edda*, *The Iliad*—has a named author, Valmiki. But there are, as the title of an excellent scholarly work points out, many Ramayanas. The articles in editor Paula Richman's collection, *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* present many industrious authors working away like hyperactive beavers to fashion their own Ramayana, one that reflects their understanding of how the world should work.

In fashioning one of many Ramayanas, I wanted to explore whether or not it would be possible to use the same techniques and material I find attractive: the screen, lamps, puppetry, and the very same puppets, even similar plot elements, to create a play that would be exciting, moving, funny, profound, and not offensive to me. I also wanted to use the same folklore plot-generating scheme Sweeney encouraged us to apply to the Ramayana, that is, the one outlined in Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*. Thus, as per Propp's criteria, there is an opening during which the state of the kingdom is discussed, a complication that requires action, a contest which will display the hero's prowess, an arranged marriage, an absented guardian, kidnapping by a monster, a servant upbraided and banished, a need for the return of the servant, a return, sudden discoveries of true relationships, the monster's island burning, the help of an unusual army, a causeway of sorts to the island, and Sita offering to throw herself into a fire.

I wanted to use the very same puppets because the puppets' mysterious message and otherworldly beauty were the first things to attract me to shadow play. I also wanted to use these puppets to educate the viewer, or at least turn upside down his expectations and preconceived conclusions. For example, the refined hero's bearing, beauty, and noble lineage are supposed to trigger in the viewer a conclusion that this character is a good person. In my experience, though, being beautiful and privileged does not, necessarily, equal heroic stature. Most of the well-born, beautiful people I know have done what the accumulated rewards of their ancestors' rapaciousness made it easy for

them to do. I want the viewer to see the puppet whom we have been trained to see as a repository of virtue for what he just might possibly be: selfish, shallow and conventional.

I want Semar, whom we have been taught to believe is a happy servant, to talk about what it really feels like to be a servant. For Semar's/Sam's soliloquy, I put into his mouth the very feelings I had while working as a domestic. I want Durga, the vilified and demonized, to be revealed for what she really is—an old woman, maybe your grandmother, or your wife, whom you've run to, in times of need, and loved, and appreciated exactly for her age and her femaleness. I want Sita, the passive, silent object, to talk and reveal that it isn't fun having other people tell you whom and when to marry, as Nepali women in arranged marriages told me. I want to convey what money and power are, and that if money and power spoke in our accents they'd lose the romance that being foreign provides, so we'd best approach them for what they are.

Since I grew up on Golden Age Hollywood movies, I often file new art forms into old movie boxes. I pictured Sita's father as Edward Arnold, the portly, balding, intimidating patriarch who served as Preston Sturges' Wall Street tycoon in *Easy Living* and Frank Capra's fascist in *Meet John Doe*. Semar is Dooley Wilson, the "Colored"—that was the word back then—pianist Sam in "Casablanca." Sita is a young Judy Garland. Even in trying to imitate shadow play language—at turns solemn, ridiculous, and crude—I could only hear it in my head in a Frank Capra script. As in a Frank Capra movie, there are scenes where energized characters get things done by barking orders into several telephones at once.

The puppets speak in stage dialect. They speak in dialect to provide pleasure by varying the texture of the aural experience. The puppets speak in dialect also for practical reasons. One *dalang* voices every character. Exaggerated speech ensures that the audience knows who is speaking when. They also speak in stage dialect to imitate the shadow play's use of character types. Semar is a servant, so, he would speak in the closest thing old movies have to a servant dialect: Steppin'-Fetchit English. My Semar, Sam, does not make fart jokes, as does the *wayang* Semar. He does, though, speak in a dialect that has roused humor, albeit an uncomfortable humor, in American culture. In conjuring up half forgotten voices of Amos and Andy types, Sam plays with humor and discomfort, as fart jokes do in the *wayang* original.

Traditional narrative has encouraged so much blindness to women that in creation of women-centered narratives, there is a temptation merely to slip a female skin over a male character's challenges, motivations and actions. This hero-with-breasts must be menaced by the same enemies that menace heroes; she must solve those problems by wielding the same weapons that men yield. This type of heroine is typified by action movies with female leads, from Angelina Jolie's "Laura Croft" movies to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which features female martial artists. Similarly, in shadow play, there is Sri Kandi. Sri Kandi has the body of a female, but this character is really just a male in drag. She is menaced on the battlefield by foreign enemies, at whom she shoots arrows.

The hero-with-breasts type is narratologically unnecessary. Women's struggles are compelling enough that we don't need to be like men in order to fuel a plot, or to inhabit compelling characters.

Narrative conventions encourage the taboo against voicing who most women are, who our real antagonists are, and what weapons we wield to achieve the goals that we, as women, envision. Female protagonists, unlike male, are often not menaced by face-offs with alien combatants whom we must utterly vanquish. Rather, women "sleep with the enemy." Women are more likely to be entangled with more intimate antagonists: lovers, fathers, husbands, sons, bosses, or, indeed, the other women with whom we compete for men's attention. Women often don't desire dominance over, or the obliteration of, an antagonist; rather, we are more likely to desire improved relations with the others with whom we share our world, and with whom we will continue to share our world after the final curtain. We are less likely to wield a bow and arrow, and more likely to wield subtler weapons like speech and love.

A reflection of this effort to create a *modus vivendi*, rather than a weapon of perfect destruction, is reflected in the very structure of "The Ramayana. . .as if Sita Mattered" itself. I love art, from action movies to Slovak folk songs, from the Dead White Males to shadow play. Though I've studied with Alan Dundes, who could deconstruct anything and reduce it to a struggle for sex, I am still mesmerized by art's mystery. The speeches at the end of this play are meant, of course, to reconcile a disillusioned Sita with real life—one in which no one's love or lesson is perfect, and with shadow play itself, which, though imperfect, continues to lure with its mysterious power.

*In a piece which originally appeared in Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore (vol. 32, Fall-Winter 2006) Steve Zeitlin comments on teaching writing, the writing of folklorists, and the family expressions that also appear in "Folksay":*

*Of Clothespins and Cottonballs*

Hovie Burgess, a renowned juggler, once told me that when he teaches his New York University classes in circus arts, he has the students say their names and then balance a pole on their index fingers. From the way it teeters and tips on their hands, he can remember their names. For my class called Writing New York Stories in Cooper Union's continuing education program, I've developed my own approach: a "list poem" in which each student writes lines beginning, "I am from . . . ." The poem that spawned this wonderful assignment is by Kentucky-born poet and children's book writer George Ella Lyon. It begins, "I am from clothespins, / from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride. / I am from dirt under the back porch. . . / I'm from fudge and eyeglasses, / from Imogene and Alafair. / I'm from the know-it-alls and the pass-it-ons, from perk up and pipe down / I'm from He restoreth my soul with a cottonball lamb." Exquisitely selected details and phrases reveal worlds about her rural family, their language, and their homespun religiosity.

In the assignment, my students, too, reveal their distinctiveness. Alicia Vasquez, from Brooklyn: "I am from ducking bullets by the bedroom window with Mom in 1974 . . . / I am from controlling the flow of fire hydrant water through a can of Chef Boyardee . . . / I am from waiting for Mr. Softee's beautiful symphony / I am from getting beat up in the girl's bathroom at Public School 221 when I was the only Spanish girl there." From the suburbs, Caitlin Van Dusen: "I am early winter mornings waiting for the bus at the end of the long driveway in the dark, gusts from the heater vent and the rising, silvered world outside, the hiss and puff of my father's pipe, curls of sweet smoke mixing with heated air, watching for the reliable yellow lights to round the bend." The Jewish experience of Ellia Bisker: "I am from a Bar Bat Mitzvah every weekend and that awful naked feeling of chilly pantyhose at thirteen, inexpert makeup, braces for years and years before I was pretty." And a rural experience from a teacher we worked with in Louisiana: "I am from the death scent of wild rabbit, dove, and quail in my father's hunting vest."

From Trinidad and Tobago, Tracylyn John-Howell: “I am di Bake and Saltfish, Crab and Dumplin, Calaloo and Pong Plantin / Coconut Jelly, Mango Chutney, and Tamarind balls all sold when the island have Boat Racin’.” Or from Daniel Firestone at Yeshivah of Flatbush High School: “I am from technology / the microprocessor as a gateway to life.” From Stacy Morrison’s fragile spirit: “I am from porcelain figurines . . . too close to the edge of the table.” The I Am Froms encapsulate family dramas. Richard Storm: “I am from my mother’s chatter and my father’s silence.” And Barbara Rothman ends hers, “I am from longing. I am from loving. I am from leaving.”

The I Am From poems encourage students to reveal elements of their cultural backgrounds and worldviews, inviting them not just to report on their traditions, but to evoke them in resonant details. But as my students write these pieces, I often think about the reluctance of folklore and folklorists to draw within our fold so many forms of creative expression. These poems, they might argue, are not ballads, folk songs, or proverbs, and they are not “artistic communication in small groups,” Dan Ben Amos’s 1960s definition of folklore. That’s why I prefer Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s broad definition of the field, which looks at folklore as the “aesthetics of everyday life.” Too often folklorists have imposed definitions that have led them to shun outsider art or prison art or visionary art as illegitimate folkloric expressions. Even cowboy poetry was slow to gain acceptance as a folk art.

These poems speak to the need for folklorists to recognize that personal expression is part of every individual even before communities and traditions, that beauty needs to be perceived and expressed before it can be shared, and that personal expression is as valid a subject of folklore study as traditional expression. These poems suggest how worldviews are captured in the details of our dailyness. The new interest in personal expression by folklorists such as Margaret Yocom, who recently founded a creative writing section of the American Folklore Society, acknowledges this and helps build bridges among folklorists, poets, and journalists. In much of our work folklorists are writers, and our work rises or falls on our ability to make the traditions we study come to life on the page or the screen—just as writers become folklorists as they seek to convey the cultural milieu in which their stories unfold.

I don't usually do the in-class writing assignments along with my students, but one occasion, I found myself jotting down a few lines along with them. Not surprisingly, perhaps, given my role as a folklorist, mine was a particularly folkloric iteration of the poem, drawing together family expressions in my own and my wife Amanda's families, a number of expressions I had collected in my folklore research, and a few lines that have become traditional in my own family from the films *Willow* and *The Princess Bride*: "I am from 'Yo Sire' / And 'jumping off the fifteenth-story window for a breeze on a hot day' / From 'Tell Ma the boat floats' / To 'Too tired to tuck' / From a long story tucked into a family expression / Where to sing the hundredth psalm means to fetch a glass of water / From the movies we internalized / The timing that puts us in sync / 'You were expecting something a little more grand?' / 'Get used to disappointment' / Conversations that move from prose towards poetry / From alliteration, rhythm, hyperbole / 'Thank God for the guts and the gristle' / 'Putting on down to Gourda' / 'Gone, Garfield, gone'."

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**Holly Everett**'s academic research on roadside memorials, mentioned in "One of My Mothers," is discussed in her book, *Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2002), and her article "'Passing Through Nature to Eternity': Roadside Crosses in 'America's Hometown'" in the anthology *Roadside Memorials: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, edited by Jennifer Clark (Armidale, Australia: EMU Press, 2007). Other folkloristic work on roadside memorials includes articles by Maida Owens and Hege Westgaard in

*Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, edited by Jack Santino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). In this volume as well as in other books and journals, folklorists have also examined spontaneous shrines in forms other than roadside memorials.