



AN INTERVIEW WITH
Walter Barga

AUTHOR OF
Trouble
 behind glass doors
 poems

by **Karen I. Johnson**

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Can you describe how you structured this book into three sections and how they connect to each other?

I like space/openness in poems/poetry, and having the poems grouped into sections gives the reader a chance to breathe, to relax, to reflect, to meditate, to gather strength, excitement, anticipation to continue forward through the book.

All of the poems in the first section were written during my two years as the first poet laureate of Missouri or somehow were a part of that experience in a significant way. I often field questions concerning that experience. The poem "Hall of Waters" first appeared in my second book, *The Vertical River*, of the trilogy, *The Body of Water*. The poem was used as a lyric for a choral composition by Amy Kirsten as part of the Verses & Voices program. Verses & Voices contracts with Missouri composers to write choral music using Missouri poet's work. All three of Missouri's poets laureate and now the current Kansas poet laureate have poems that are part of these new choral compositions. Hearing "Hall of Waters" performed in the State Capitol Rotunda was a transcendent experience.

The second section begins with the poem "The Whole Facts," which can never be whole, complete, unless we declare it so, much like what we discover about our lives: any whole is just a part of another whole that we may or may not be aware of. So the poems of this section are whole unto themselves but fragments that belong to greater wholes. How many (w) holes does it take to fill the Albert Hall: Just one and an infinite number, both societal and personal. And so here are many of the holes that are trying to become a whole.

The third section leans toward the catastrophic from an ant invasion to millennial delusions in the present and the past. The poems tend to be longer and more narrative. Here the poems

move from an ant apocalypse to the apocalyptic urge within us to drive off a cliff and embrace the driving.

I enjoyed the humor in the poems "Poet as Grand Marshall of the Fall Parade" and "Scantly Clad Poet." Are these from your experiences as poet laureate of Missouri? Looking back on that two-year period, how would you describe your experiences?

Yes, the two poems are directly from my poet laureate experience along with "Poet in Prison," as are all the poems in the first section of the book. For example: I did a short reading in a postage-stamp-sized park in a small town and the reading was followed by a magician whose act included the knot trick that is described in the poem "Knots." "In the Round" I wrote for an event held in the Rotunda of the State Capitol building. I was asked by the chancellor of the university to write a poem for the 100th year anniversary of the university membership in the Association of American Universities, which is the poem "University of Fields." And so it goes.

There's no short or easy way to describe my poet laureate experience except to say I was quite surprised at the high demand for the poet laureate. I probably average an event per week at many expected and odd venues across the state, e.g., as grand marshal of a small town fall parade. Yes, poetry is alive but not always in ways that can be predicted.

I think the most fulfilling moments for me as poet laureate were when someone, usually a man, would come up after a reading at a county library to say that his wife had dragged him to the event and that he fully expected to be bored and/or dislike the experience. This statement would be followed by just the opposite response: "It was just amazing. I never thought I could like poetry." Something similar happened at a nursing home, when an eighty year-old man told me how sad

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he was that no one had ever introduced him to poetry and how much he had missed because of that.

One of the memorable lines from “Moon Walk” follows a reference to the constellations: “The telling lives in us.” Do you feel you are driven to be a storyteller through poetry, or how do you see the relation between poetry and narrative today?

This poem was originally titled “Moon Walk Missouri.” For the book, I shortened the title to “Moon Walk.” In the poem I interweave three stories: a full-moon night walk in the woods, the first moon walk on July 20th 1969, and the idea that we are our stories some of which are inscribed in the constellations of stars. Story/narrative is essential to our identity. Stories permeate the fabric of our being and society. Advertising tries to manipulate our stories to sell us what we don’t need. Politics concocts stories in order to persuade us to vote against our own best interests. Everything we see and do is telling us a story. We are story-telling animals and our living depends on these stories.

My early vision of a poem was as a series of images, a rhythm of images, and in this constellation of images there was a story but not necessarily a linear narrative. My first and second books, *Fields of Thenar* (1980) and *Mysteries in the Public (1990) Domain*, came out of that sense of the poem. It seems to me the 1980’s was a fairly combative time for poetry with the “New Formalists” claiming themselves as the one and only true poetic form. They were rediscovering the narrative not that it had been misplaced or wholly forgotten. I just kept writing and found myself writing in a more narrative style. My “water trilogy,” published in the 1990’s and collected under one cover, *The Body of Water* (2003), clearly exhibits this shift toward narrative. I found it to be quite a liberating experience, opening up so many more opportunities to write. Still the image is the dynamo, the electricity in a poem. I think I found the prose poem to be the ideal place for an effusive wedding of narrative and image.

One of my personal favorites is your revival of Don Quixote, not in his own time, but in today’s world. Two of your approaches are on display here: placing some person or event from history in modern times and using a play on words, notably in being “errant” as in an “errant knight” and in the title “Errancy.” Tell me a little about your use of these tactics.

Everything has been said before according to Terrence who lived around 190 B.C. and yet we keep saying it again and again from as many different angles as we can discover. Pound’s advice weighs heavy on all writers—make it new. Terrence’s comment reminds me of the declarations made by physicists

periodically that there is nothing left to discover and now we have the CERN Haldron collider exploding atoms into finer particles until we may have our first glimpse of anti-matter, or declarations of the end of history as we continue to write history each day. This is all to say that to take historical events or persons and introduce them into foreign/contemporary settings/situations gives the poet the opportunity to make unexpected discoveries. Plus it streamlines the poem since almost every reader will have a sense of who Don Quixote is so there is a lot of basic information that does not need to be dragged into the poem. The reader brings that to the poem. In my two books of prose poems, *The Feast* and *Theban Traffic*, the incorporation of a historical person, Jonah in the former, and a historical setting haunted by ancient Greece and Egypt, in the latter title, are variations on the “Errancy” approach.

I love to invent words but even when I think I’ve invented one or a new variation on a word, I often find that someone else has already made use of it. I have a prose poem manuscript titled Tintinnabula. Hey, a new variation on tintinnabulation. Wrong! It may not be in the collegiate dictionary and spell check hates it, but it can be found in the OED. Plus it is the name of an abandoned city that harbors a sound weapon that can destroy the world and there are three 1980’s cartoon episodes where the good guys and the villain race to find it. Or take the adjective, hypnopompic, I needed it as a noun, maybe hypnopompicity. I have no idea if it has an official home. It probably does and Terrence will have been correct again and I will be on an errancy of foolishness again.

The title poem, “Trouble Behind Glass Doors” has a great line that is now stuck in my head, “We never leave the places we’ve lived.” I know you have lived in Europe and probably a great many places because your father was in the military. How much of that experience has influenced your work?

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—Walter Bargen

It’s nearly impossible for me to grasp the full and penetrating effect of having lived in other countries, though not that many, and in other states, though not that many, and I would add to the mix having a mother who is from Germany. Every place that I have lived haunts me. I always feel like I was never attentive enough and that I missed something, when in reality it’s so much more, I missed volumes. I always seem to be in search of the missing, for something that was not quite achieved, some key to understanding that I need. Why was I there? Why did I leave? Who was I supposed to meet and didn’t? Was it to be found in the store next to the one I walked into, the place that held what I was really looking for and didn’t even know I was looking? We can haunt ourselves in so many ways both fertile and destructive. Imagination is a double-edged sword. You get cut both ways—bleed happily, bleed nostalgically.

In writing about war and conflict, you have described your approach as writing “at a slant.” Can you explain what you mean by that? Are you using “slant” as Emily Dickinson might have used it?

Give a young boy a pile of rubble and he can play with it all day--each day a lifetime of heroic fantasies. I didn't create the rubble, I just played in it, and now I feel a certain responsibility for it as part of a society that is quick to enter into conflicts. So I write about such things at a slant rather than as direct experience.

Having an outraged, scared, empathetic imagination helps to engage subjects of conflict or any subject. The poem “Lost Ordnance” that is in the first section of the book, *Days Like This are Necessary*, describes something of my experience of playing in the ruins of WWII, less than a decade after it ended. It has haunted my writing for a lifetime. The poem ends: *in other's gardens and backyards/where other children play/at the dead center of day.*

In the late 1970's, after *New Letters* published the poem “Beirut,” which was included in my first book, *Fields of Thenar*, I was working on a construction crew led by a Vietnam veteran, who after reading the poem, wanted to know if I was veteran. The poem was that real to him. Growing up in a military family perhaps cultivates a certain kind of imagination that makes it easier to engage in the subject of war. Also, being stationed in Europe and the United States forced me into living in my imagination; it became too painful leaving friends again and again as we moved from place to place. The imagination is always there to converse with and do battle.

Many of these war poems tell of conflicts that are not well enough known in this country—the gassing of the Kurds, San Salvador, Bosnia—perhaps because most Americans did not feel directly involved. How did you come to write about such conflicts?

I'm surprised at the question. I can't imagine that these events are not known, and should be well known, tattooed on our conscience. Except for the fact that events like you mention, are so frequent, almost daily it seems, think of car bombs in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we are so insulated from these events, experiencing them through the media, that, yes, they become just another thing to ignore. In this country, land of the 24-hour news channels, it's easy to “suffer” from news exhaustion, but for me there's something in me that cries out when I hear about the suffering of others in these ultimately meaningless conflicts. How can I declare them meaningless when people are dying? What I mean is that these conflicts

settle little and most often are simply laying the foundation for the next conflict, the next assault on our humanity. Anymore, I pass in and out of phases of being a news junkie. Poetry keeps reminding us of both our humanity and inhumanity.

This collection includes a few poems that might be described as visual poems (some call it concrete poetry). The best example is “Hagiography of Faults.” Its visual form adds even more meaning to the poem. Could you explain this form and is this something new in poetry and in your experience?

It's certainly not very complicated on my part. “Hagiography of Faults” is describing one incident in a troubled relationship. Since each person has their own faults, it was easy to make the leap to earthquakes, shifting crustal plates, and so the poem is divided in half suggesting the actual physical event, but also the divide between the two people involved in the phone conversation. I did not think of the poem in terms of concrete poetry, and no, I don't think this is new in poetry. There's probably a book of poems sitting on a shelf somewhere that employs this type of divided line.

In my 2007 book, *West of West*, I employ a not so regularly divided line in the section with the same title. In this case, I used the divided line for a different set of reasons. The poems were based on/inspired by a series of photographs taken by Alan Berner that depict the modern West. The West is synonymous with spaciousness, vast empty landscapes that are only erased by the horizon. The high plains of Eastern Oregon are called The Big Empty. I wanted to convey something of this openness by opening up the line and including extra space between images. I like space and broken lines in poems. It gets me to read the poem differently from a block of text.

Do you have a list of words waiting to find sentences other than those you listed in “Paperwork?”

Kind of. Though I do keep lists of words that catch my attention for a variety of reasons, they rarely make it into poems, not infrequently because I lose the lists. In this case, I was transferring the contents of a small breast-pocket notebook into a larger notebook and found most of the details of the poem “Paperwork” just waiting for me.

You have written one poem about doomsday prophets and mentioned them in at least one other. What is it about such prophets that captured your imagination?

Actually, I recently wrote yet another poem on the subject,

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“Apocalyptic Exhaustion Across Nine Time Zones.” I find the subject fascinating. It amazes me that we, and I use we very loosely, keep coming up with wonderful fantasies on how our world will end. Through history there has been a constant stream of these types of revelations. Through access to the internet, these predictions have turned into a flood. And they build on each other and become more complicated in their predictions. What does this say about us? That we are tired of our existence on this planet? That we find it somehow thrilling that we face the end? That we are livened by facing our imminent doom? That we are bored and need something to do? So the poem, “Give or Take a Day or Two,” is a brief and very incomplete inventory is just another of the phenomena.

Literature is a conversation between writers, where readers are not only welcome eavesdroppers but become part of that conversation.

—Walter Bargaen

