



AN INTERVIEW WITH
Paula Bonnell
AUTHOR OF
poems
**AIRS &
VOICES**

BY HEATHER CLARK



ISBN 978-1-886157-62-0, \$13.95, 74 pages, trade paper

BkMk Press, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 5101 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, MO 64110, (816)235-2558, www.umkc.edu/bkmk

*First of all, congratulations on your selection for the Ciardi Prize. What does the book collection's title, *Airs & Voices*, mean to you and how did you come to it for the title?*

When I assembled the manuscript of this book—which includes voices human, animal, and musical—the title *Voices* just welled up from it. Speakers of its poems hear “starlings’ gibberish,” a dialogue of whale watchers, Asian-American students, a Peace Corps bride, and downstairs neighbors. Fernande Olivier, Pepys, Ben Johnson, and Martin Luther King, Jr. make brief appearances. This interconnected world is then torn by the singularity, the particular voices, heard in the wake of 9/11.

So many books use “voices” in their titles that BkMk wisely suggested I consider a change. The Japanese bird on the cover led me to *Airs & Voices*, recalling short musical pieces called “Airs & Dances.” In a subterranean way, the title draws on the wellspring of the “noises,” “airs,” “twangling” instruments, and voices of which Caliban says, “Be not afeard,” and Thomas Browne’s voicing long ago of another vision of one world: “All places, all airs make unto me one country; I am in England, everywhere and under any meridian.”

How did you begin writing, and how old were you at the time?

When I was fifteen, I discovered in a corner of our living room bookshelves a small blue book of my father’s, *The College Book of Verse*. Up until that time my experience with poetry had been a botched attempt of my own in second grade (two quatrains), and carrying out a freshman assignment to write a paean to my hometown, Johnstown, on the model of Carl Sandburg’s “Chicago.”

A private world opened for me in these pages, a world secret

and apart from other books and from real people, yet alive with concerns vivid to me. I was smitten with language so fluent that its harmonies embodied a recognizable authenticity rather than blotting it out. At about the same time I was encountering the poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Richard Wilbur, and Elizabeth Bishop in my high school texts. In the years between fifteen and twenty, my interest was in trying to say unsayable things.

You often use complex, multi-syllabic words (for instance, in “In the Middle of the Air” you say, “they announce progress / and effort, determination, encouragement”). How do you find ways to fit them in? Is this intentional or accidental? Is it done to slow down the rhythm?

When lines start coming, I’m concentrating on trying to catch them, not aware of syllables, conscious only of trying not to let them fly away. Some escape or evaporate; others land on the page and move around. As I transcribe the first words, waiting for what might come next, I want the sound and the sense to move together, to dance or drag as the occasion requires. In later drafts I play with the words, their rhythm and pacing, to see if I can get something more compelling.

I particularly enjoyed “An Alphabet (for Rosario)” – where you discuss the “secret language” and the difference in pronunciation/ dialect of languages. You write, “In this way, / moods could be annotated along with meanings.” Could you expound that thought?

Love poems classically wish for a private world. George Eliot wanted to learn Hebrew so she could converse in public with her man without others understanding them. In speech, tones

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of voice can express moods, and good actors bring lines to life by their expression. I've often noticed when listening to my voice-mail how much I get from the sounds of the sender's voice. The imaginary alphabet seems to provide for this by a cursive freedom and the infusion of color into its calligraphy. Perhaps with an ink that changes color like a mood ring?

My favorite of your poems was "History & a House." This 71-line poem quickly maneuvers through the time passed of washing feet. Both the feet and the house have been thankless for so long, and these words give them humble praise. Your line, "I wonder who lived here before / who loved someone enough / to make them feel better / like this, by touching / the humble foot / with the important hand?" Is this your home you speak of and was it a real event or an imagined one?

Thanks for your response to "An Alphabet" and "History & a House". It's good to know when something hits home in the invisible, distant receptors of a reader. Working on a blank page, the writer is in the dark about the reader. With good fortune, the writer may arrive at a result worth sending out into the unknown. For a long time, little may come back from that outer darkness. This poem is itself related to the mysterious distant communication between readers and writers. In it the speaker, as reader of a memoir, has become a fly on the wall in someone else's experience, and as writer uses that vicarious experience to voice aspects of the scene that modesty and humility would prevent a participant in the scene from claiming. It's fiction inspired by memoir, and by a diary which may have had no intended readers beyond its author.

Why put "Reconstituting Paris" with "Proving the Existence of Barcelona" in your section two?

Two prose poems, both about European cities. On the left, the past, memory rehydrated to activity—like those Japanese paper flowers that expand in water. On the right, the future, images leading to a dream of travel, though dryly phrased in legalese. (The judge may feel "somewhere I have never traveled, gladly beyond any experience" but makes pronouncements in a different kind of language.) Putting them on facing pages is, in a way, a statement of the paradox of living in time. We live in the present—or do we? How much space does "the present" occupy between "then" and "when"?

Both "The Voices" and "Vocabulary" are about the September 11th attacks. How personal are these to you?

I, anonymous—is everyone. *Airs & Voices* is mostly from anonymous perspectives: people whose names aren't mentioned, animals, a Blue Watering Can. Nobody, the one we want to read about. "Names" can be a burden, history an affliction that interferes with everyday life, what Walt Whitman called "the main thing." With the brutal interruption of 9/11, we suddenly understand that we have been living in peacetime. That is the story in *Airs & Voices*.

All of the poems following "The Voices" respond in some way to 9/11, though only "Vocabulary" alludes directly to it. The path of the poems is—It's one world, organically connected in peacetime with all sorts of curious threads and cross-weaves. And it's one world, jarred, severed, recoiling—as each of us and all of us begin putting out connective tissue to mend, in and after wartime. All of it personal, inescapably so. What happens to each of us and what we each see, imagine, and understand to be happening to others. Today, the global is the personal.

Your final poem is "Housework" and you leave us with a person who is busy caring for everyone in this house. Who will take care of the person who cares so much for this house?



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In this homage to the artistry and love in housework, activities are described, and familiar objects give comfort. A combined effect you rightly call "care." In the suspended moment of this poem, where no particular person doing housework is identified, the past infuses the present. I see adults drawing on memories exuded by things from their childhood homes, suggesting care given by their parents and their parents' parents. Like pairs of almost-facing

mirrored doors which reflect a series of people back and back and back. In times of disturbance, we heed or become sensitive to emanations from family things. This poem honors the character and importance of housework, of which women have done the lion's share.

What is your favorite word, be it for use in a poem or otherwise?

The word that I'm about to find for the place in the poem I'm trying to write where I'm still reaching toward something that I have yet to grasp.

