

An Interview

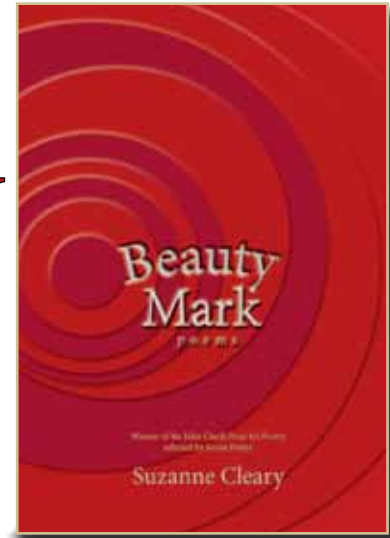
with

Suzanne Cleary

Author of

Beauty Mark

Winner of the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry
selected by Kevin Prufer



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Q: The book's title poem "Beauty Mark" considers beauty, in particular, what a beauty mark is philosophically. Yet, the poem's speaker considers the age-old debate about inner vs. outer beauty by asking in the fifth stanza, "But what is a beauty mark, beyond the physical?" A few stanzas later, Miss Peggy Lee is mentioned, and the reader can recall an earlier poem in the collection, "Swimming with Miss Peggy Lee," which claims that Peggy Lee's beauty mark is her platinum hair. Would you comment on any relationship between the two poems "Beauty Mark" and "Swimming with Miss Peggy Lee"? Were they carefully planned or written in close proximity to each other?

A: I usually write poem by poem, rather than by project or with a framework. I start fresh with each poem, and want to be surprised by where it takes me. But since my interests are pretty steady, themes and subjects do reappear. I wrote "Beauty Mark" about five years after I wrote "Swimming with Miss Peggy Lee," and I see no special connection between these two poems, beyond my engagement with the idea of beauty. Beauty is indefinable, politically suspect, and a primal need, so that topic probably will continue to keep me pretty busy.

Peggy Lee has shown up in several of my poems, and I hope she continues to do so! For me, she represents the quintessential artist, who follows her own vision, and tirelessly works to develop and explore her craft. And I really love her subtle, gutsy work. "Beauty Mark" gave me a chance to consider this one means [the beauty mark] by which women have created, manipulated, or otherwise commented upon, beauty. Cultural and historical facts often feed my poetry. Also, I was taught not to stare, and a poem lets me stare—and, then, to comment upon what I have seen.

I do not have a beauty mark. After I read the poem, people sometimes ask me that. You've got to love the playfulness a poem can unleash, right?

Q: The speaker in the first poem "Lines for the Actress who Performed Shakespeare-In-The-Park with a Stick in Her Mouth," takes notice that the actress, who plays Ariel, during a performance of The Tempest plucks a stick from the grass. When the actress places the stick in her mouth, she harkens back to Ariel's release from the enchanted tree. Does the ninth stanza, "Pressing the small stick into the role of the vast unspoken, the greater part of the most that can be said," suggest that the actress wants to be released from trouble with her lines so that she can perform well?

A: This poem began when I heard of a stage performance in which an actress spoke her lines while holding a stick in her mouth. It's hard to forget that image, which I carried with me for five or six years before I finally wrote the poem. Yes, I had thought that the poem would be about the actress' struggle to speak, but then I saw that her lunge for the stick could be a lunge for the elemental, the actual.

I saw the actress (who is playing a spirit, no less), as craving something that would make her performance real, even gritty. Suddenly, the stick-in-mouth seemed an eloquent metaphor for the inadequacy of words: a stick says as much as we can, and as well. As wondrous as language is, it cannot ever say all that we want it to say, all that there is to say, about being alive. OK, the weak link in my argument is only too apparent—the actress speaks Shakespeare's words, so they are marvelous words—but the desire for the perfect word is what keeps a poet writing.

Q: Many of Beauty Mark's poems are about food and contain wonderfully detailed imagery such as "Cheese-Of-The-Month-Club," and in another poem "Food Poems," food is conveyed as universally communal. With the different cheeses mentioned in "Cheese-Of-The-Month-Club," did you recall the experience of eating Extra-Aged Farmer's Cheese and Belgian Goat Cheese and, of course, the Blue Cheese, which is not mentioned but described so well as "...the creamy, the crumbly, the stinky, the blue..." in

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order to make the tangible work? In "Food Poems," the subject of what we digest internally takes on a universal aspect that is spiritual. How were you able to make the poem work so naturally, especially with the last stanza that sounds like an incantation or religious chant?

A: Like many of us, I struggle to be alive in the here and now, instead of living somewhere in the past or, perhaps worse, up ahead, in the non-existent future. I tend to live in my head. But when I enjoy a good meal or bite into a perfectly ripe fruit, I am one of those people who lives deeply in the moment. "Cheese-of-the-Month Club" owes its descriptive details to Internet research, not, alas, to a really good cheese plate. It was fun to write this poem because the dilemma (i.e. too much cheese) of the "you" strikes me as simultaneously silly and poignant. That's a good combination, prototypically human. I welcome into my poems all contradictory, messy combinations, because I think they can lead to a poem of complexity, almost by definition, perhaps. I usually don't want a pure, simple emotion. Ambivalence rocks! I stand with Yeats on this, although I believe he used different words to express this thought.

Writing "Food Poems" was a very different experience. The first three sections accumulated in my notebook, separately, over several years. They are true, brief stories. I considered these fragments, and I hoped to turn each into a longer poem. There are great poems about food, but it seems to me that many food poems are celebratory by default. They are predictably celebrations of plenty and, as such, they are poems of privilege. Thumbing through my notebook one day, my three fragments suddenly appeared to be one poem. Why? I don't know. I wish I knew, believe me. A poet should understand, even study, her process, which helps her to write future poems. Anyway, I saw that I could write a food poem about the uncertainty that most people on our planet feel regarding their next meal. Each fragment would be a section, suspended in space. This was to be a lean, spare poem. Then I felt that there needed to be a fourth section, a prayer. It turned out to be a prayer for people who feed those who cannot feed themselves.

Q: When reading the poems "Magnificent," and "Temporary Tattoo," I imagined that you were the observant poet who discovered a grab-bag of goodies to inspire you to write detailed imagery such as the "maroon station wagon with leopard seats," in "Magnificent." Were these poems based on actual shopping experiences, such as your favorite bookstore for "Temporary Tattoo"? Do you find that stores in colorful, disheveled areas provide the most interesting ideas or images?

A: Yes, all of the above! The world will give us poems if we will keep our eyes open. Genuine interest in the world is invaluable to the poet, not least because it takes focus off of the self, the ego. To my poetry students--and to myself—I say, Get out of your own way. Get out into the world: stroll, trawl, be enthralled. Accept all gifts.

Q: Looking at Cleve Gray's work "Threnody," I can imagine how it inspired you to create "Lament," because the images appear like spirits drifting away from our earthly plane—a somber image. Do you find one particular aesthetic in visual art inspires you to create poetry?

A: Rembrandt. Frankenthaler. Bearden. Rothko. Diebenkorn. Avery. No, there is no one aesthetic in visual art that most speaks to me. Although the story behind "Threnody" is extremely powerful, extremely moving—he created it as a protest against the war in Viet Nam—the installation itself exerts a physical force on the viewer and that, ultimately, is what I think a certain type of good art does: it stands on its own. I've said "a certain type" because art is a massively various category. I can be excited by the work of many contemporary artists, as by much artwork I have not yet seen.

Q: The title for the poem "Hate Your Job? It Could Be Worse," immediately made me consider a poet's job in today's market. What would you consider to be the hardest part of being a poet today? Is it giving up on a particular poem that doesn't seem to work or the poetry market itself?

A: This is a great time in which to be a poet. The sheer number of poetry readers, poets, readings, festivals, and conferences, is mind-boggling; likewise, the number of publishers, writing programs, and prizes. The Internet has multiplied astronomically our chances to engage with poetry, whether through reading on-line journals or electronically "attending" poetry readings. When I first fell in love with poetry, over 30 years ago, such proliferation of the art was unimaginable. The main downside of this wealth of activity is a frenzy to rush poems out into the world before they are ready. A good poem takes time: incubation, crafting, drafting. Parts of this process may happen quickly, but a good poem takes time. I love what Theodore Roethke said about the artist's responsibility to resist the pull of the market. He said, "Art is the means we have of undoing the damage of haste. Art is what everything else isn't."

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Q: Many of your poems in “Beauty Mark” are lengthy, but some are short like “The Glass Half Full” and “Strong Bikini,” so how do you decide when a poem is or isn’t done? Also, with so many poems in tercets, couplets, and the concrete poem “The Arms of The Venus De Milo,” in a ‘V’ shape, how do you decide a poem’s form?

A: Form is very important to me because my poems usually begin as large, long-lined blocks of text. Even I can’t stand to read them, they hurt the eyes. So I aerate with white space. I love the tercet because three is so aesthetically pleasing. Three is simultaneously balanced and off-balance. Everyone knows that you should put an odd number of flowers in the vase, for a dynamic arrangement, so I use the three-line stanza to add energy to my page. Couplets are also fun. They can make a poem gallop, I think, and quatrains create a more stately pacing. But in terms of my writing process, I do not make formal decisions until I feel that most of my poem is written. I can’t think of too many things at one time. I find it best to work on clarity and logic and, if appropriate, narrative flow, and to physically shape the poem at a later stage.

Somewhere, Billy Collins says that a poet’s first question is “How do I get into my poem?” and the poet’s second question is “How do I get out of my poem?” Once I get into my poem, I resist the temptation to get out, even if I happen to discover a perfectly good ending. I want to stay inside of my poem as long as possible, so as to discover all of the poem’s possibilities. I can cut lines later. I tell my MFA students at Converse College that it can be fruitful to write beyond what you think is the end of your poem. “Ruin your lovely poem,” I say, and will say again. I am convinced that it is better to be interesting than to be well-polished, although I am sure that brilliant minds disagree with me. I am a great believer in writing beyond the end of the poem. Give yourself time. Trust that the poem will tell you what to do. Whatever you do, follow the poem, don’t lead. It knows more than you know.

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