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Literary GOF Recipient 2002 for Poetry

LITERARY PROJECT

The proposal is a plan that considers both my immediate project aims and my long-term career goals. I will be writing *Dark Logic* from start to finish during the grant period.

As linked as the writing of *Dark Logic* is to my personal progress as a writer, it is equally relevant to my professional development. Most Creative Writing teaching positions require that the applicant have at least one book, preferably more than one. In a field where publications and not degrees are measures of qualification, writing and publishing are crucial to professional success. My primary long-term career goal is to find a tenure-track teaching job, one that would allow me to write part-time and teach part-time.

Dark Logic is an important work for me personally and professionally. I wrote my first collection *The Man with My Face* primarily as an unschooled poet. I attribute much of the book's success (so far, about half the poems have been published in reputable journals and the manuscript as a whole was just a finalist for the Kathryn Morton Prize Poetry) to a mysterious combination of luck and intuition. Regardless of what my luck in the future will be, what I bring to the upcoming collection, along with my intuition, is a much deeper understanding of poetic tradition and forms.

Over the last few years, I have read and written voraciously. I have been fortunate enough to work with such renowned poets as Olga Broumas, Adam Zagajewski, Fanny Howe, Michael Burkard, Allan Dugan and Ed Hirsch, each of whom has given me tools with which to implement my vision. What these poets have taught me is how to write more deliberately. It is my hope that *Dark Logic* will be shaped both by the intuition that has always sustained me and by my more recently acquired formal sense of all that is possible in a poem.

Writing a poem is like meeting with a stranger, the stanza the room in which we meet and whisper, eavesdrop and watch. Although any stranger is welcome to enter, my audience will likely include immigrants and/or anyone who has contact with immigrants, anyone who has been affected by immigration, bilingualism, travel, etc. My readers are interested in city life—urban pleasures and problems, metaphysics—questions of love, death, beauty, ethics, evil and the existence of God. My readers need not be formally trained in poetry, though it's likely they will have an ear for music and an appreciation of the limits and potential of language.

ARTISTIC RESPONSE

"Poetry ought to have a mother as well as a father."

POETRY HAS A MOTHER—AN ORPHAN'S TALE

Of rain the day the child was born,
those in attendance, the mother's health—
there is no record. the father in turn
was responsible for a visible two-fifths
of the child's compendium of knowledge.
He taught her: Use pale green graph paper

when mapping out delicate problems, trim the hedge
in the yard with shears, mash the almond powder
to paste before adding milk, mow the lawn
at dusk, pull the shades down in the morning,
open the windows and avoid the electric fan.
Another one-fifth came from One unseen.
And two-fifths more? The mystery of the mother.
That missing math or music does complete her.

WHAT DOES YOUR ART MEAN TO YOU?

ON POETRY AND OTHER FORMS

George Herbert called prayer "the soul in paraphrase." I would say the same of poetry; I might also call it prayer. Yes even love poems are prayers if they are good ones. The best love poems are also love poems to God.

Yet the reader need not name my poem a prayer for the poem to do its prayer-like work of witness, confession, consolation, correction, celebration. Consider the many songs and lullabies based on prayers and psalms, sung to children as they sleep or drift to sleep. The sleeping or fretful child need not possess language much less the word "prayer" for the song to soften the edges of a long night, for the song with its meter, rhyme and music to carry her to the world of sleep and dreams.

To write a poem is to create a world. I do so in order to engineer a logic of my own making, an arena in which records are set straight, confusions clarified, lost things found and strange doors opened. In this world lives discipline in the form of truth and in the form of music. In this world lives pathos, history, memory, future and dream. I like a poem to occupy that mysterious space between what is and what can be, between present day world confinement and timeless world possibility.

Using the sleeping metaphor is paradoxical because the best poems, though they may carry us in the way of lullabies into a sleep-like trance, are themselves never sleeping. The best poems, even those that console or celebrate, are never asleep to that which is flawed in the world. This is the secret to their beauty, the reason why they comfort us. They are awake with us in the middle of the night. They clasp the hands of the insomniacs and accompany them as the flawed night (every night) unfolds.

I write, in addition to poetry, essays, stories and memoir. There are perils and pleasure that come with this predicament. For it can be a predicament. There is the phenomena of not quite being taken seriously in any genre. Teachers warn against the dilution of one's talent, the diffusion of one's focus, mediocrity across the board. People have a fear of generalized mediocrity and hope instead for highly specialized geniuses. Being someone who lives in the world as it is, I sometimes find myself inadvertently adhering to such expectations. When someone gives me money to write a story, I write a story. The same is true of an essay or a memoir piece. But who offers money to someone to write a poem? The trick is to be vigilant about making time for the not-for-profit genre, my love, poetry.

There are pleasures too, that come with writing in more than one genre. Each form has its own currency, each is another language with which to communicate. The essay is a teacher, the novel a storyteller, the poem an enchanter. And at their best, each of these borrows from the rest. The oral pleasures, cerebral pleasures, and pleasures of the imagination that reside in each, begin to fuel and complicate one another. There is pleasure too in being in the company of other multi-

genre writers. Both those of today: Michael Ondaatje, Sandra Cisneros, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, Adrienne Rich and those of yesterday: Shakespeare, Hardy, the Bronte sisters, Blake, Brodsky, Pasternak, Rilke, Jarrell and Rukeyser.

I am truly grateful for all the support I have received in every genre of writing. But the truth is that I do not want to lose sight of poetry. I see the ways in which, given the world of commerce, it is easy to do so. Not only do I want to keep poetry on my mind, I'd like to help keep poetry on the minds of others. As a teacher, I love passing the endless pleasures of poetry on to students, as my teachers have done for me in the past. I agree with Ruth Forman, that "poetry should ride the bus"! I love seeing poems on the ceilings of public busses, on the walls of subway cars, on television. For though there is a secret quality to the music of a poem, I think it is a secret that everyone should share. Who among us does not need prayers and consolation, criticism and uplift, celebration and rest? Who among us does not need what a good poem can give?

HOW WILL YOUR LITERARY PROJECT BENEFIT THE COMMUNITY? [EXCERPT]

As I've mentioned in other parts of the application, and as I assume you're already aware, poetry does not usually arrive with dollar signs in its eyes. Even if my book is to do uncommonly well in the market place, the profits will likely be modest. It is for this reason that I feel compelled to highlight a few less quantifiable benefits as well.

Some such benefits begin to affect the community in advance of the project's completion. For example, there is a subversive message that is sent to women poets everywhere when a foundation such as **AROHO** funds a project, not in the name of its profit potential, but in honor of its literary and spiritual merits. The message: *Poetry matters*. Even though it does not typically generate capital, poetry *still* matters.

Similarly, there's an affirmative, transformative power that infects women of color when they see that respectable foundations will support writers like themselves. Notably, white writers benefit from such role modeling too. When Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize in Literature, doors opened everywhere, not just for women of color writers who had there to for never imagined such a thing was possible, but for white readers (and writers) as well who were suddenly awakened to new possibilities in those different than themselves.

When the project is finished and the book has been published, it will take on a life force of its own. This force, like the foundation that made it possible, has transformative power. Women writers see, *Ah, someone like me is not only funded, but succeeds. She accepts the support offered her and with that support, accomplishes something. Here's what's possible. Perhaps I can do the same.* Again, male readers and writers benefit from this as well. So, women are being taken seriously as writers. *They are taking themselves seriously as writers. What's my relationship to that? Where do I fit in?* In this way, cultural production impacts all sectors of the community. Cultural work at its best asks necessary questions and makes restorative assertions. *Why just him? Why not her? Women matter. Poetry matters. Work matters. Our communities matter.*
