

The Sacramento Poetry Center's Monthly Newsletter Journal for poetry

*"Relax / I tell them / you're inside / poetry now"* - Julia Connor

***The Snake Salutes the Tiger!***

***Join us Wednesday, February 10 for  
a Tiger's Eye Press release:***

***Emily and the High Cost of Living  
a chapbook by  
Kathy Kieth***

***Plus readings by Tiger's Eye Co-Editors  
Colette Jonopulos and JoAn Osborne***

***The Book Collector, 1008 24<sup>th</sup> St., Sacramento  
Dec. 9, 7:30 PM. Free!***

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Norma Kohout read and signed books at a 2009 Rattlesnake Press reading.

**Jeff Whitney** was born in Texas but spent most of his youth in northern California. He graduated from California State University, Chico, with degrees in both International Relations and Spanish. He is currently in Spain, teaching English in a bilingual elementary school outside of Madrid. His poem "Ant Hole" won first place in the 2009 SPC contest. His poems "Stirring Leaf" and "Tabula Rosa" won honorable mentions.

## ANT HOLE

By Jeff Whitney

Imagine the nucleus  
under its microscope: some storm  
of electron, proton, and neutron  
all stirring about  
in a tight, ineffable orbit  
like the cars of an electric racetrack.  
Or, better, imagine the universe  
and how it began. A sphere  
of matter all balled up.  
Imagine the silence before  
and the cacophony after, the surprise  
of each molecule willed  
suddenly into being.  
Imagine a young Saturn  
drafting behind a young Jupiter,  
each etching a ring  
to the wide halo  
around the crown of the sun.

Now see the one ant meander  
away from the core  
from where the other ones spill.  
See how clear his trajectory is  
and how little the other wandering ones,  
like him, on their own now, without  
a scent to trail, return.  
Note how alike this one ant's trek is  
to that of the radiant material -  
planet, star, moon rock -  
that began to drift from  
a dark hole at the center  
of the universe  
all those millennia ago  
and continues to drift  
through the black  
of space, filling it  
for a century or thousands,  
already on its way  
to some other patch  
of the great unknown.

Now, turn your head toward the skyline  
and see a burst of sparrows leave the tree  
tops like dandelion seeds.  
Note the ease with which they soar.

Remember them, these heralds  
of entropy. They won't  
remember you, or the ones before you  
who looked up at the birds  
before these birds, then the clouds,  
then the stars, and put together  
the jigsaw of this universe.

Like the ghosts of something  
we might have been, and still might be,  
watch them dissolve  
into that wing. What they love most  
is to impress the Gods of disorder.  
And the Gods are impressed.  
But what exactly pulls the sparrow up, toward  
the early moon, toward that one cloud  
that fills the blue of today?

It may be a fool's errand to follow,  
even with our own cautious eyes, even  
for the breath of a moment:  
too little gravity where they go,  
the emptiness they troll  
the host to too much light,  
with too many ways to get lost  
and never drift home.

## TABULA RASA

By Jeff Whitney

The first day of a young year.  
Yet the curtain of the world pulls back the same  
as every other unremarkable day¾  
a newspaper asleep on the wrong porch,  
the regular pulse of a bee hive, a bear  
in hibernation, dreaming of honey¾and there  
must be something to all that,  
something that explains why the constellations  
look less like Perseus among a thousand  
other ancient dramas played out nightly  
across the open stage of sky, and more like  
a happy coincidence of stars, simply that;  
something that explains why we live  
our lives retelling the same stories  
about the diligence of God, the splendor  
of nature, as if they might change  
or die out if we did not  
note them to a friend or an empty page.  
A reason why the cat is waiting, patient as winter,  
for the arrogant morning bird to swagger by.  
Often I think the question  
might be the explanation, the search  
the destination. Or, perhaps  
more darkly, this world  
was going to happen even if I weren't here  
to confirm everything, to check  
the fine math of God  
every now and again.  
So this year let the warm comforts be  
the mail in its box  
promptly at lunch, the dog  
pulling an old friend along a road  
near a field, the field  
itself ¾ where a collection of  
dandelions came undone  
in the breath of the young  
or the great breath of the world  
last year and every year prior ¾  
alive again this spring  
with hundreds of white heads spearing up  
like the creator's infinite fingers.  
And let there be something  
to all that as well, something  
to justify our own haphazard lives  
tumbling with direction or without  
across the great plain of years;  
something spelled out in English or  
whatever language we like  
in the sheer accident of stars  
on any given night that says  
everything we need it to say.  
And says it well.

## STIRRING LEAF

By Jeff Whitney

These long autumn nights  
make the hardest of souls sick for home.  
Already the mother bee losing her hive  
to the biting cold of the coming season;  
the scorpion crouching darkly in the desert  
as coyotes trot by, sniffing  
deep the earth, a cold moon  
too far and blue to be anything  
but a faint idea of constancy...

Already the last leaf on the tree,  
stirring from long summer sleep  
a day or a week before its fall  
while the field mouse, limp as seaweed  
in the falcon's talons, grasps  
once more for the budding dandelions  
looking up from their field...

Yet already, in the midst of all this passing  
from life to non-life, from known world  
to unknown world, in  
a low-cut valley on another continent,  
a young gazelle licking water  
from a pool of new-fall rain, head bent  
heedlessly, as if it is natural  
for the universe to progress like this¾  
loss followed by gain. Or maybe  
loss with gain: damselflies quietly  
mating within a thicket of reeds,  
green geese flickering south.  
And later, some time after  
all this, field poppies and feral irises  
beneath the hard pan of winter, stems  
coiled, petals taut: just two  
of the twenty-thousand things  
not even God can keep secret  
long into spring.



**The Sacramento Poetry Center welcomes submissions for the next *Tule Review* — now 40-50 pages and perfect bound — with an anticipated publication date in June 2010. Please refer to SPC's website for submission guidelines.**

**Naomi Benaron's** short story collection, *Love Letters from a Fat Man*, won the 2006 G.S. Sharat Chandra Prize in Fiction. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in numerous in print and online journals, and she has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She teaches writing at Pima Community College in Tucson AZ. Her poem "At a Roadblock" won an honorable mention in the 2009 SPC contest.

## AT A ROADBLOCK

*Everyone who is found  
will be thrust through*  
Isaiah 13:15

By Naomi Benaron

Life or death comes down to this:  
the hue or color of your skin,  
your height, the length of your fingers,

the curl of your hair, the currency  
you carry, the god you call,  
the language of your plea.

It does not matter  
if we lived as neighbors.  
It does not matter

if we sat together on the floor  
and dipped our fingers  
into a common bowl of food.

It does not matter that your child  
bleeds on the seat beside you  
and you must pass to save her

or that the same red blood spills  
from your arteries and ours.

If you do not stop in time we will kill you.  
If you do not understand us we will kill you.

If your features do not please us  
or you ask for medicine or food,  
drop a name like a coin into our palms

we will kill you.

See how those who have gone before you  
lie in their spilled lives by the side of the road?

This we will do to you  
and do and do again.

We divide the road into *here* and *there*  
with a metal gate, a stack of tires—  
maybe burning—

a tree limb and some fifty-gallon drums,  
a scatter of boards and rocks.

Your passage to the Promised Land depends  
on men in restive moods who stand with nervous  
fingers around a club, a machete's handle, a trigger.

We have been here for a thousand years.  
We will be here for a thousand years yet.

Like an altar the roadblock rises  
from the dust of Everywar.  
Worship us. Lay your offerings at our feet.

We are the aleph and the tav,  
the alpha and omega:  
the beginning and the end.

You cannot kill us.  
We are already  
the walking dead.

**Cynthia Helen Beecher** lives in Sonoma County close to a river. She is the author of *The Rainmaker's* and has essays, short stories, poetry and photographs in print. She will write until all the stories are told. Her poem "Measured by Love" won an honorable mention in the 2009 SPC contest.

## MEASURED BY LOVE

By Cynthia Helen Beecher

i.

Rooster the cat rubs my leg  
gazes upward waits  
food rewards his patient love

for weeks after I rub on pink lotion  
wrap gauze bandages  
pray to the poison oak gods: let my ankle go

ii.

In African rain a man crosses the Lokenge River  
sure footed on forest logs  
laid across the swirling red

he carries courting a pure white  
rooster patient  
under his muscled ebony arm

both endure the journey  
he wants to be her man  
her students at recess holler in delight

iii.

Baby doll Rosemary  
splendid in green velvet coat  
yellow rose dress red curls

tissue paper in shreds brittle  
cannot hide puckered lips  
minced by tiny teeth

stuffing creeps from thin rubber toes  
blinking eyes obedient asleep  
Rosemary waits out the years

missing a little girl's tender fingers  
patting her back whispering *I love you*

**Kathleen McClung** lives in San Francisco and teaches at Skyline College and the Writing Salon [www.writingsalons.com](http://www.writingsalons.com). Her award-winning poems, stories, and essays appear in *Poetry Northwest*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Spirituality & Health*, *The Rambler*, and elsewhere. She first learned to write in Sacramento public schools, libraries, and trees. Her poem "Caving, 1953" won second place in the 2009 SPC contest. Her poem "Reprieve" won an honorable mention.

## REPRIEVE

By Kathleen McClung

Outside Tom's Bait and Tackle Store, we found a chunk of metal in the gutter near a pole—an ugly thing, all twisted wires. "You touch that and you die," the friend beside me said, another first grade kid, whose name and face and gender fail me now, but not that certainty of tone, that air of "Yes. Pure radioactivity right here." I paused. Then, skeptic, hunkered down and stroked one finger on a wire: some grease, but, worse, the voice: "You're really gonna die!" And something like a Geiger counter clicked in me, confirming, "Yes. It's true." I wailed and fled in the direction of my house. I knew by running that I might arrive in time. In time for what? To pass some clue to people that I loved? To hide my head beneath a pillow, dulling out the roar? I ran and ran—a blur of neighborhood—and when she rushed onto the porch and scooped me up, she gathered what she could, and then my mother—did we hurry? did we stroll?—returned with me along those blocks, returned to sidewalk edge and telephone pole, and looked down on that junked mystery, a hush between us: slow, exacting scrutiny at work. How long we stood examining I don't know now, but something changed within that hush, assurances were made: I was not to die, no, not then. Our looking made it so. And when we found a clerk inside, his naming of the harmless auto part, his whisking it away were two almost unnecessary acts. The soothing had been done, the awful granting of reprieve.

## CAVING, 1953 *for John*

By Kathleen McClung

He keeps the legend deep within his head, safeguarding a past from Fruity-boy, Fish, or Veeder who would surely shrink it, end it now at the mouth of this cave.

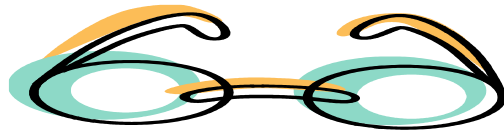
A man a hundred years back found an underground lake, hurried to town, stole a rowboat, then carried it alone miles into the cave, set sail, and never came back.

Inside, he studies the ceiling of sleeping bats they used to stab with sticks for fun, when reaching was itself an art. They have jobs now, cash for smokes and burgers all their own, future plans that twitch, flutter like wings of bats, poked by boys.

The others in their galoshes move forward, farther into winding halls of water dripping onto stone, farther from Fish's car parked off the road beside a grove of birches. He slows, on purpose, lets their voices lose their echoes, and stands a minute without moving, not sure why. He sets in the sand his Army Surplus canteen and listens. Nothing surprises him: he's heard his heartbeat plenty of times, squeaks from cave mice, drips, wind. He jingles the change in his pockets, flicks a nickel somewhere—for luck, maybe. Or maybe for someone years away, to find, as he once unearthed a Win With Wilkie button in a beam from his first flashlight. It was a treasure, almost the rowboat, the lost man himself.



Keith Ratzlaff



### Lori Ostlund on *The Bigness of the World*

Since the 2009 release of Flannery O'Connor Award winner Lori Ostlund's short story collection, *The Bigness of the World*, reviewers have consistently noted Ostlund's Minnesotan origins, which shape the globetrotting midwesterners who populate her pages. When I copyedited the book for the University of Georgia Press last year, I too was struck by the role of place in *The Bigness of the World*, enjoying priceless gems such as the moment in "Talking Fowl with My Father" that charts what makes a joke in Fargo, North Dakota, vs. in San Francisco, California. Now, though, I find that it's the voices of Ostlund's characters that have stuck with me most, bits of dry-wit exposition floating through my consciousness the way lines from a poem sometimes will. Ostlund is a 2009 Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer's Award winner who has published stories in the *Georgia Review*, the *New England Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and the *Kenyon Review*, among other fine publications. Residing with her partner, novelist Anne Raeff, in San Francisco, Ostlund teaches transitional (developmental) English and story writing at the Art Institute of California-San Francisco.

Jennette: How was it being on the West Coast Live radio show?

Ostlund: It was so much fun . . . I did Litquake, and one of the women I read with recommended me for the show . . . [The host] said, "Does your home town of 400 people have a copy of this book in their library?" So I said, "I hope not." I mean if they still even have a library—and they may not, because I was the only one as far as I know that ever went to it—you know it was just like books inside of grocery bags, and you'd just kind of go through the bags and see if there was anything—

Jennette: Really?

Ostlund: Yeah, that's what it was like when I was a kid, and it was open only in the winters, because in the summer you were supposed to be farming and things like that. But it would just be Saturdays for an hour or two that you could go, and I never saw anyone else there besides me . . . I mean we had a school library, but this was the public library . . .

Jennette: [I want to ask you about] . . . the way that you put humor and pathos together . . . so that they seem to be mutually interdependent . . . One example that stands out for me is Ilsa, the babysitter in the title story. She's very loopy in a way that is hysterically funny. You also get the idea that her loopiness makes her life rather sad . . . And you have this child protagonist who's understanding adult humor by witnessing her parents mocking this person whom she feels very affectionate towards . . . That's very sad, but at the same time, we're laughing at Ilsa in the same way the parents are, because she *is* funny . . . I want to ask you how you learned to do that.

Ostlund: . . . I think we are laughing at Ilsa, but the narrator, even though she's an adult, has a slightly different perspective, so her fondness is something we get to piggyback on. And so we are also looking at the parents in a certain way, and thinking and seeing certain things about them, and so we're straddling these two worlds. Whereas I think the parents are just laughing and patting themselves on the back, saying "We've got someone who's a little bit eccentric, what a great catch." They're critical. However, the narrator does say at one point, "Laughter is rarely a straightforward matter." She understands that, and she, oddly enough, feels an allegiance just as much to Ilsa, in a way, as she does to her parents.

. . .

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Jennette: Another story in the collection that I think is very funny and also very sad is “Dr. Deneau’s Punishment.” The scene where Dr. Deneau sits down with his principal and they’re going to talk about his names for the slow learners’ group in his class . . . It has me in hysterics every time . . . And yet I understand that all of the sarcasm that makes [Dr. Deneau] so funny in part comes out of this very sad gap in his life . . . That seems like a really voice-driven story. I like his voice, in any case.

Ostlund: I like his voice also. I think that some people get so caught up—some people just see him as cranky or downright mean. I remember when I first wrote that story, it was in a much different form. I gave it to a friend to read, and she responded to it purely—she’s not a teacher, she never has been—she responded to it purely as, “He’s a teacher, why is he not encouraging these kids?” And even if you’ve never been a teacher, this seems an odd comment to make. I mean, you do understand that the world is filled with people who are teachers, and some of them are not capable of, on a daily basis, being anything remotely close to what students need. I mean this is just the way it is. And I was already feeling strange about that story, because I felt that story could either really succeed or really fail. I wasn’t sure yet which. It started out, my brother and his wife were visiting, so it’s four of us, all teachers. So of course, we’re just talking about teaching stuff. My brother is a junior high math teacher, so he and I started to talk, first about what it was like when we were going to school, and that there were these reading groups . . . The slowest group was called the donkeys—

Jennette: Oh my God, this comes from life?!

Ostlund: So we’re laughing about it, but we’re saying, maybe the donkeys didn’t think it was so funny. But it was a totally different perspective then. I mean, thirty-some years ago, that was not considered a problem: “They can’t read well, we’ll call them the donkeys. Let them pick it up a little bit . . .” When I started to write [that story], Anne was having stuff at work that I would hear about, and I was just sick about the way that education was going. There are people who are very upset by Dr. Deneau. I’m not necessarily one of them. Do I think he’s what kids need? No. Do I think he’s really funny? Yes, I do. Do I share a lot of his disgruntlement? Yes. But there’s a point in that story where everything kind of shifts, and it just becomes a really devastating story. But I’m kind of with you, I hope that at the same time, people are reading it and laughing . . . It’s funny, you said you were trying to figure out the balance between humor and when to let the humor go . . . I can do it in writing, but I don’t always do it well in life . . . In real life, I always, if I’m in an uncomfortable discussion—why do I always have to get one more sarcastic comment in, when it’s so apparent that that is not helping? Do you have that problem?

Jennette: I have that in a big way. Maybe that’s why I’m so drawn to that story, too.

Ostlund: Because he is, right up until the very end, who he is. It’s just that we’re seeing a whole other story unfold that changes the way we feel toward him.

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For more information about Ostlund’s work and upcoming events, please visit her Web site, [www.loriostlund.com](http://www.loriostlund.com).

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Dorine Jennette ~ [www.dorinejennette.com](http://www.dorinejennette.com)

**Thursday Next**, with Dr. Jennette – classes at Matrix Arts, 1/28, 2/25, 3/18, 4/22; and two Saturday intensives in March/April



## Workshops: Who needs them and where are they?

by Lisa Jones

Most writers will tell you that you need to seek out other writers if you are to persist as a growing poet, but what kind of poetry community is right for you? Perhaps you've wondered if poetry retreats are worth the expense. Below I describe three retreats of this kind and review some pros and cons.

### Writing Retreats

Short term retreats can be great for revitalizing one's enthusiasm for writing, exploring new or risky types of poems, finding writing friendships and networking. I have been to Napa Valley Writer's Conference and Squaw Valley Writer's Community retreats (each lasts about a week) and loved them both. Napa has the benefit of staying with the same teacher and poets throughout the week. Squaw Valley Writer's Community allows you a chance to work with all five teachers and encourages bonding with fellow students through free-time, as most poets share housing. Both take place in unique environments and have other special traditions/perks you can learn about on their websites. I have friends who have also enjoyed the Tomales Bay Writer's Workshop. For more information, find them on-line or call UC Davis Extension for a brochure. Each retreat features nationally recognized poets as workshop facilitators and/or lecturers. I found most of the teachers, at the retreats I attended, incredibly inspiring and very sharp at recognizing what an author is attempting while offering constructive criticism.

Sometimes the pressure of writing a poem a day or the schedule can be over-stimulating and sleep is often compromised, but I've yet to meet someone who said they wouldn't do it again. Since these workshops focus on generating new work, and don't necessarily allow bringing in revisions, they tend to be very encouraging to keep you going and charge you up to write with a fury when you return home. I left each worrying about whether my ego had been inflated a little too much. Hard and thorough criticism is important to me, but I realized that I'll keep going to such retreats, because the workshops push me to try new and harder challenges and there's just something about writing in that kind of intense time period, surrounded by folks that share your passion.

All three require you to submit sample poems as part of your application and they are competitive (SVCW sometimes takes less than 10% of their new applicants). Applying early is advisable, as Napa, for example, has a rolling application process, wherein they try to balance new and more experienced writers. Check their websites or call for a brochure. Their prices range in price from approximately \$750 to \$1550. That does not include housing, but often includes many wonderful meals, free admission to staff poetry readings, and lectures. All three workshops have reduced price fellowships and less expensive rental options.

See *Poets and Writers Magazine* or *AWP Magazine* (or on-line versions of each) for advertisements of other retreats nationwide. If you have the money or can get a suitable scholarship, a poetry retreat is not to be missed, but there are other ways to revive your writing and find community. What you do day to day/year round will of course make the biggest difference. It would be best to find them on the web, but you can call Squaw Valley Community of Writers at 530-470-8440 and Napa Valley Writer's Conference at 707-967-2900 x1611.



## Workshops: Who needs them and where are they? (Part II)

People can be hell after all. Then again they can be great mentors and terrific fun. If you read a few books on the making of a poem, and a few interviews with successful poets, it becomes clear that most have relied on others to help them improve their writing. Writers and artists agree that the creator is not a good judge of the work.

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This goes both ways. We don't necessarily recognize our greatness. We may trash our best lines or waste hours (or years) cleaning up an inconsequential point in a poem while ignoring the biggest weakness that spans across all ten of our favorite pieces.



## Finding the Right Workshop

For some writers, a good instructor or the kinship of a couple of like-minded readers is all the intrusion into their creative process they need, while others thrive on meeting with a group of peers. It is important to consider how a workshop's format and its members fit with your particular needs and writing style.

If you are a budding Dorianne Laux, writing clear, one page poems you may benefit from a broader array of workshops or courses, than someone who is a unique twist of John Ashbery and Brenda Hillman. Even if you are shooting for a very large audience, if your work deals with complexity or stretches conventions of form, you may only want to share your pieces in an environment with a strong and savvy leader or well read crowd, employing a format that allows time for participants to muddle through your mud to sense the pearl within. Large workshops, where the work is read on the spot, risk missing the point of a poem and steering it toward mediocrity, banal clarity, or premature death.

At the same time, in a large workshop you can learn a ton about revision and which of your poems reach a broader audience. Of course, one has to remember with any workshop that only you can kill the poem. It is your job to discern which poems should be abandoned, a workshop audience just lets you know whether *they* see a live poem (yet) or not.

If you don't want criticism, there are workshops that de-emphasize critique. Know which kind you are in and don't expect folks to adjust the format for

you. Watching other folks critique each others' work teaches you much about writing and will help you discern whose advice matters to you.

If you just need a couple of good readers to exchange work with or want to start your own workshop, taking a course is one of the best ways to find the readers you are looking for. A special teacher may be a profound influence, but instructors seem to agree that the real keys to good writing are reading poetry and writing and rewriting. A good long term workshop or class should be pushing you to do all three.

## What price for poetry?

It is amazing how much money one can spend on a career that doesn't pay (money that is). Here are some thrifty options.

Every year, on the third weekend in April, the **Sacramento Poetry Center Conference** offers readings, workshops and panels that draw stellar poets from near and far. This year's conference will feature: Kaelan Smith, Troy Jollimore, Peter Grandbois, Toni Mirosevich, Joseph Lease, and Donna de la Perriere. HQ for the Arts at 1719 25th St (at R St).

**Sacramento's Tuesday Night Workshop** is very welcoming to both new and experienced poets. Five to 20 poets may show up on a given day. If you want to participate right away, bring 15 copies of one, one page poem. Time to read and discuss the poem may be limited, but the group meets weekly and locally published and prizewinning poets participate regularly, including Danyan Powell, the facilitator. Do not come unless you seek criticism, but know that most of the poets critique with kindness--7:30 p.m. at the Hart Senior Center.

Tiffany Denman, a published and prize winning graduate of UC Davis' creative writing program, recommends Sacramento City as a low cost alternative to writing retreats. "One group I found helpful was **Jan Haag's writing class at Sac City, 'Writing as a Healing Art,'** and **Sutterwriters.**"

These groups didn't deal with the mechanical/theoretical aspects of writing so much, but they offered a safe place for expression. They helped her generate personal narratives and produce much more work than the brief, highly scheduled time she spent at a writing retreat.

There are bound to be many other opportunities out there. The best workshop for you might be an informal private one and you won't get invited unless you tell people what kind of workshop you are looking for (it also helps if there's room in the workshop!). Sometimes you have to start your own, *Poets and Writers* offers suggestions: [http://www.pw.org/content/writers\\_conferences\\_colonies\\_and\\_workshops](http://www.pw.org/content/writers_conferences_colonies_and_workshops))

### On-line Options

I have workshopped many a poem with friends met through a class or writing retreat, but have never taken a class on-line so I asked Valerie Fioravanti, (a Fulbright winner, who writes fiction and prose poems and teaches both local and on-line prose workshops, to comment:

they are a great way for busy people to fit a writing workshop into their schedules, on their own time (there are specific deadlines to meet, but you can choose to meet them at your convenience). For poets who have a hard time speaking in public or listening to feedback in

the "hotseat" of a traditional classroom, reading and processing feedback on poems can be both self-paced and private.

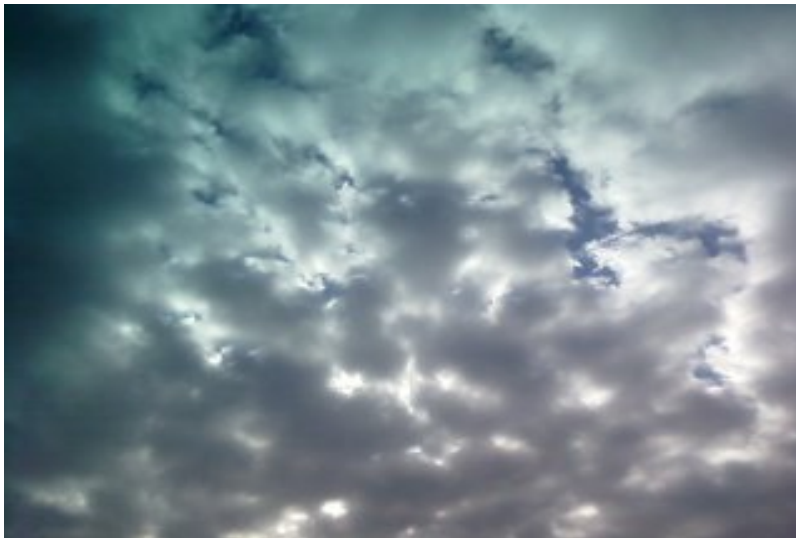
There is a tendency in the traditional workshop for the discussion to get bogged down in the minutiae of a minor point in the text. With written responses as the primary source of feedback, there's a much more balanced sense of how the work has been received. This is one possible reason to believe that the online format is superior to the traditional model.

<http://valeriefioravanti.com/SacramentoWritingWorkshops.aspx>)

For poetry workshops and courses on-line, see the Poets & Writers site below or google "poetry workshops on-line" for the most current groups. These should include both free and for fee groups/classes. Some on-line courses are available through colleges and extension programs. Others are taught privately (For example, Kim Addonizio advertises on-line courses as well as courses in her home).

If I hear of more options I'll post them on SPC's blog. E-mail suggestions to: [lisajonespoet@gmail.com](mailto:lisajonespoet@gmail.com).

L. A. Jones is the interview editor for *Poetry Now*.



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## Swan Scythe Press Chapbook Contest

Accepting submissions:

January 15 - June 1, 2010

For full details see:

[www.swanscythe.com](http://www.swanscythe.com)

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## Emmanuel Sigauke Interviews NSAA, Spoken Word Artist...

*NSAA is a regular in the Sacramento Poetry scene, particularly at the Sacramento Poetry Center, Luna's Cafe, and the Mahogany poetry series, where he is a host.*

**Sigauke: Thank you for agreeing to do this interview. First, can you tell us a bit about yourself?**

NSAA: My stage name is NSAA pronounced (en-sah-ah). It's an African adinkra symbol that basically means quality, as I understand it. It's like saying "The real McCoy". What I like about the word/symbol is that it is based on the quality of cloth, for example; this cloth is hand made nsaa.

I'm a bit of an odd duck I'm afraid to say, my stage name is a case in point, how odd I will keep on the low-low, very political too. I love NPR, BBC and Democracy ....I see a terrible shift in American society, a shift of putting more and more burden and responsibility on individuals and less on corporations. There is only so much an individual can do before they hit information overload, in the house bill (health insurance) we will all be required to buy insurance or it will be a federal offense, does every answer to every problem require putting more on citizens whose plate is already full? If America was a club I would turn in my membership and ask for my money back because this club has no perks, opportunities yes, if you have money, but perks? No. Unfortunately, this is not a club this is my home; I digress, sorry about that. But this is a great example of what I write about.

I consider myself a free verse conscious poet. In my opinion poetry is the soul of the people and is as important as architects, politicians, and religious leaders. Poets throughout history pushed society and civil-thought forward, questioned the status quo and allowed us to look at issues from the human-condition perspective. It is the responsibility of the poet not to stand silent in times of crisis; we are the "sacred order of voice", kind of like verbal super heroes, without the capes of course.

**Sigauke: I have hosted an event at the SPC in which you were one of the features. You also have frequently participated in open mic sessions during most of my readings. How does participation in poetry readings help you in your art?**

NSAA: Open mic is one of the unique things about the poetry scene, very democratic. The open mic for me is more about catharsis rather than being about perfecting craft, cheaper than a shrink I tell you. It allows me to share artistically how I feel about issues, life and complex emotions like ambiguity. But, I must say this, poetry readings do give me incentive to write just like gallery showings incentivize art creation for a painter.

**Sigauke: You host performances at the Ethiopian Restaurant on Broadway. Tell us a lot about that.**

NSAA: Mahogany is a local institution. Mahogany Urban Poetry Series is held at Queen Sheba Restaurant on 17 and Broadway and it goes down every Wednesday at 9 pm all thanks to Khiry Malik, local poet. It's a mature free speech after-hour HBO style poetry venue. I host Mahogany every 3rd Wednesday. Khiry, one of my favorite poets, has been the curator of Mahogany for years now; he allows me to torture his audience once a month.

(continued) NSAA: Every 3rd Wednesday DJ Supe puts down the music, dim lights sets the mood, the audience sip honey wine while listening to great poetry, and every time I host I think this is a great scene. Instead of going out dancing or to the movies people come to Mahogany to think and empathize. It is my pleasure and honor to be one of the hosts of one of the oldest poetry venues in Sacramento. I feel if there were more places like Mahogany we would have a better, well-informed Sacramento.



**Sigauke: You are also a graphic artist. Would you like to say something about that?**

NSAA: Yep, I am a starving artist and business owner. I design business cards, chap books, cd covers and tray cards, simple websites, flyers and logos. Give me a "holla" at [MyTbx](http://MyTbx) if you need some work done.

**Sigauke: Who are your favorite poets?**

NSAA: Oh that's easy. Hands down, it's "Straight Out Scribes", a local mother-daughter poetry team. These poets are activists, smart and purposeful, known for their tireless campaign to free American political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal. You can't help

but dig these two sistahs, watching them is what made me feel like I could share my words. I always wrote, but until I saw them I didn't know you could write and share such politically-charged poetry. They are no longer together though. Staajabu (the mother), went back east to be with family. Every once in a while Staajabu comes back and they do a local tour. Best believe I'm in the front seat, ears wide open. Also, I hear there might be a new CD in the works. Keep that under your hat, and keep your fingers crossed.

**Sigauke: How has the internet helped your art?**

NSAA: It make research easier, that's for sure. I think I owe the library money, yikes. Also the internet has made it easier to share work and advertise poetry events. I have a Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/mywordout>, just started blog last month: <http://thedeskofnsaa.blogspot.com>, and an event page: <http://mywordout.com>. Sometimes you have to stop setting up pages because you can waste your whole morning checking emails, friend request and hits. And facebook is digital crack. I get on there and hours go by without me noticing.

**Sigauke: What is the place of politics in your poetry?**

NSAA: Central. Politics is very important in my work, politics can make our lives easier or harder, fairer or punitive, if we are not involved, not sounding a hue and cry we will lose slowly our free speech and everything we've fought so hard to obtain. We must protect what we have won and push forward to higher ground.

**Sigauke: (Awhile back) On Friday [November 13] we shared the stage at the Sacramento Guild Theatre. How did you like that event?**

NSAA: It was great. Most of my favorite local poets were there and some new poets I've never heard before. I think I found some new favorites too. The poetry festival is an outstanding idea, two thumbs up for Terry Moore and Bob Stanley for pulling it off. I hope it it's an annual event.

*—Editors Note: another Guild Theater WORD event is coming soon!--*

**Sigauke: What words of encouragement would you give to aspiring poets, especially the spoken word ones?**

NSAA: Don't stop pushing the status quo. Challenge yourself not only to write about pretty things, or about relationships and love, but see your role in society. You are the soul; better yet, the conscience of your community. We must use our gifts to make this world a better one: more tolerance, greener, merciful, peaceful and artful. Long live free speech. Poet or die.



**Susan Wolbarst** has always been a compulsive writer. She finished her first book manuscript in fourth grade: a murder mystery featuring a parrot as an eye witness. It remains unpublished, despite some very wonderful illustrations by her favorite classmate. In recent years, she has concentrated on writing poetry, short stories and essays in Davis where she lives. Her poem "In the Ladies Room" won an honorable mention in the 2009 SPC contest.

## IN THE LADIES ROOM

By Susan Wolbarst

Faucet water splashing  
almost drowns her sounds  
of sobs poured down the sink.

Others do their best to ignore her,  
rushing through their urgencies  
inside an O'Hare Airport Ladies Room.  
They veer to dodge her,  
then secretly appraise her  
as they soap and rinse,  
crumple paper towels,  
primp, embellish, and  
wheel their bags out the door  
moving briskly from, or maybe to,  
distant places visited  
for important reasons.

She's the only one going nowhere,  
ignoring intercom voices  
droning flights, gates, times.  
I'm pulled into her grief,  
as familiar to me as a threadbare quilt.  
I have also tried to wash pain  
down drains of Ladies Rooms  
away from public view  
when there was nowhere else  
and nothing else was possible.

Feeling the need to comfort,  
I step behind her,  
touch her shoulder,  
can't keep from asking  
if there's something I can do.  
She unfolds upward,  
face red in the mirror,  
reflected mouth saying  
soundlessly  
my boy is dead.  
and her pain.  
My reflection tells hers  
I'm so sorry  
regretting the smallness  
of my whispered words.  
I watch her mirrored lips ask me  
to tell her husband she's OK  
then she bends again  
toward the water  
and the washing  
and her pain.

I hurry out  
to deliver her message,  
relieved to have a purpose.  
He waits outside the Ladies Room  
quiet as a snowman,  
a dry, pale version of his wife.  
I recognize him right away  
by the pieces that are missing.

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**Submit** poems and a 30-50 word bio to [clinville@csus.edu](mailto:clinville@csus.edu). (Electronic submissions preferred.) Submissions may also be mailed along with a SASE to SPC 1719 - 25<sup>th</sup> Street, Sacramento, CA 95816.

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**Catherine Fraga** teaches composition at Sacramento State University. She has had her poems published in numerous literary journals, including *Ploughshares* and *Alehouse Press*. Her collection of poems, *Running Away with Gary the Mattress Salesman*, was published in 2005 by Poet's Corner Press. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize in Poetry. She lives in Sacramento with her husband and two sons. Her poem "From a Rowboat on the Mekong River" won an honorable mention in the 2009 SPC contest.

## FROM A ROWBOAT ON THE MEKONG RIVER

--*Late summer, 2008*

By Catherine Fraga

Preecha, the tour guide, hears their  
disenchanted sighs, tourists nearly  
mourning, their bodies straining  
toward shore, so many sights to see  
in the ebony landscape of evening  
but nothing they desire  
only the fluorescent lights of hotels,  
restaurants, highway overpasses.

He wants what they want:  
the mesmerizing dance of fireflies  
a magical gathering of blinking lights  
thousands decorating banana trees  
lining the shore.

Preecha is reasonable. He knows  
the disappearance of fireflies does not  
match the tragedy of polar bears  
and Siberian tigers.  
Yet he keeps rowing, sweat  
pooling beneath his eyes, the ache in his shoulders  
dull and determined  
until two miles farther he  
glimpses a shock of lightning bugs  
undulating, the rhythm of his childhood,  
of memory, and the passengers  
hushed in thanksgiving  
a temporary victory over progress.





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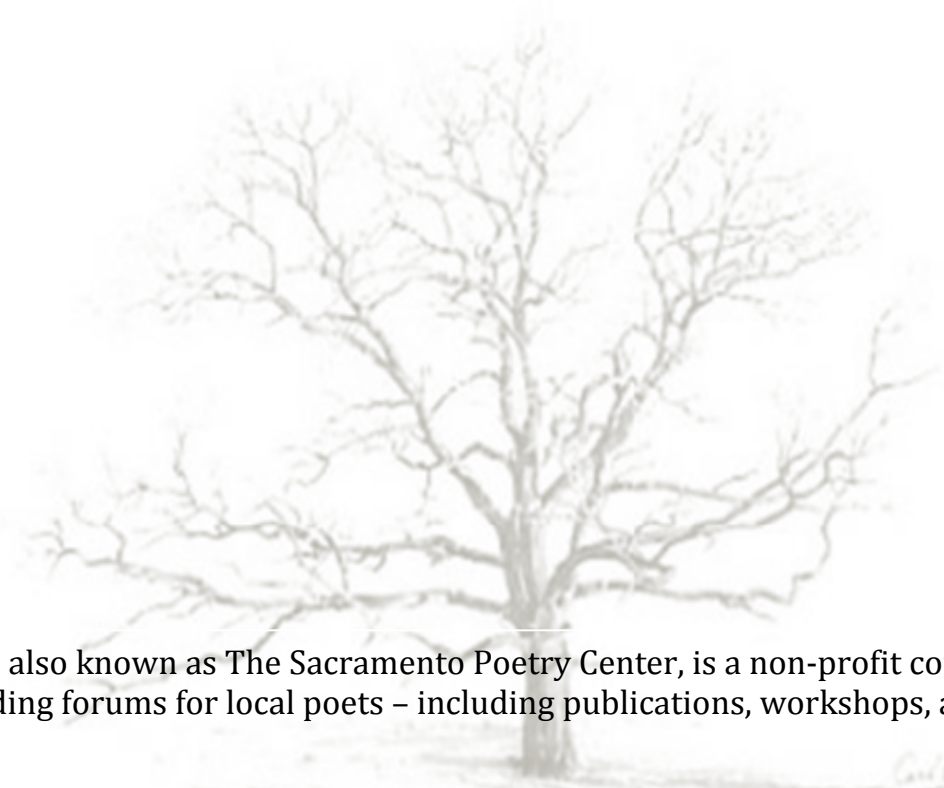


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*Carl Plante*