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PAULANN PETERSEN: "Red is a thousand poems"

With a half-dozen titles in the last twenty years, Paulann Petersen has published a coherent body of work, which is still growing, the result of the poet's long practice and concentration on a few major themes.

In "The Character of the Poet" Louis Simpson states, "The art of poetry consists in discovering the themes that are proper to oneself" (Simpson 18). The link between finding one's personal themes and creating art is evident in each of Petersen's collections. She selects and sequences poems to reveal her preoccupations. Taken as a whole, her six collections show a circling back to central concerns, and the progress in her work is not one of moving on to new themes but of finding new ways of dealing with the themes she holds to.

Coming late to poetry writing and publication, Petersen has created books that are not especially significant for the moment they were written or published. Unlike Adrienne Rich's books, no dates bracket a creative period. Indeed, because Petersen republishes poems from chapbooks, the period of their composition is not always evident. If their chronology is uncertain, their thematic relation seldom is. Petersen's poems share in a contemporaneity of themes that interested her early and interest her still. Such themes, Simpson suggests, have a way of selecting the poet, and Petersen continues to explore her themes, "proper" ones as in "characteristically belonging to the being or thing in question."

That Petersen's work turns upon a few themes is illustrated by the poem that opens *A Bride of Narrow Escape* (2006), concerned with the reliability of the body's knowledge, the concurrence of past and present, and the essential act of naming:

A Vapor, It Rises at Waking

Here, you are no age,
none at all. The tense is ever
present, *is* is all there is, you are
simply, presently you.

Your face—if you could
see its calm, or knit of puzzlement,
knot of fear—is indeed your face,
the same moon of shadowed flesh
you lift into the air,
not the mirror's flat image
waiting to catch you off-guard
regardless of your pose.

The house you find
yourself wandering in
is the home of your life,
both new and familiar.
Each doorknob, each knicknack
uncanny yet true.
The child-fingers still alive
inside your hands
remember each shape.

You see your mother—
immutably dead—
stir and smile. Her lips
defy all law to form
a sound so longed for, so clear
it disappears. What rises
from your body at waking
is simply her voice speaking a word
she chose at your birth,
breathing out your name. (BNE 3)

To arrive "here" allows access to a self unchanged by accident. The face, the house, the mother, and, most important, the name the mother speaks assure that this self is authentic and enduring. Yet a final twist adds uncertainty to the previous corroborations: the "you" is just waking and what has been described has the ambiguity, the insubstantiality, of vapor.

Proper Themes

Once when asked to explain her poetics, Petersen hesitated, not being one to identify with any particular school. What she liked about her seven summers at Centrum was the opportunity "to hear all those voices. My impulse has always been to inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness. Isn't there room for many strong, resonant voices?" She knew she was not an academic poet, yet what other schools of poetry did she know? She remembered hearing about a school of disembodied poetics and reflected: I am not of that school: I am practicing *embodied* poetics.

Well before she found a way to describe her practice, she had placed the body at the center of her poetry. The earliest chapbook, *Under the Sign of a Neon Wolf* (1989), draws upon recollections of her grandfather's fur shop, where the girl tries on fur coats between racks of furs. "I was that child born / under the sign of a neon wolf" who "learned the indelible / weight of an animal's / skin on my skin" (NW 5, BNE 30). In the cold storage room, "Their fur pressed me from both sides" (NW 3, BNE 33). And in "Coat of Fur" when a woman slips into the coat, her nails quicken and she imagines having a feral stride (NW 6).

Reviewing *A Bride of Narrow Escape* in *Calyx* in 2007, Diane Holland noted Petersen's use of skin imagery. That's no surprise as two of the three poems just mentioned are reprinted there fifteen years later. "What connects all of life is touch and breath," Holland observed, and the poems show "the skin as exquisite borderland" (Holland 116).

Poems of the body appear throughout Petersen's work. There is nothing muted about this interest. Often the body's desire and its reflex from the world's touch are hardly exquisite. Petersen's outcry can recall that of Walt Whitman in Section 28 of "Song of Myself": "You villain touch! what are you doing? my breath is tight in its throat, / Unclench your floodgates,

you are too much for me." Often the body is that of a first-person speaker who might be Petersen herself; sometimes the body is that of the second-person "you" and might be read as our own. Either way, the body in these poems seems intimate, vulnerable, and familiar.

The furrier poems from 1989 establish what Holland found in the 2006 collection, a poetry "grounded in the sensual details of the body and the physical world" (Holland 115). With even sharper focus, the second and third chapbooks insist on the body's importance. *The Animal Bride* weds the body to its animal origins, and *Fabrication* ties the body to the tugs of the moon. Both earlier and later work show powerful natural influences incorporated by the body. According to Holland, "a world of myth and archetype always hovers nearby" (Holland 115).

"Feral" recounts, "I bleed in a dream" in which blood marks "a trail of scent / I leave for each / dream animal to follow" into the waking world. There is nothing to fear; indeed, the dream shows the color of blood as the "rush of // wild poppies. Two, three, / a whole rash field, / strew of wet silk" (AB 22, WA 30). Red in Petersen's poetry signifies the deep life of nature, whether it be the "red pool" of "Under the Sign of a Neon Wolf" that draws to it "soundless animals" or the red fruit in "When I Walk":

> . . . I carry
> three seeds of the red fruit
> dropped from the red pod
> three drops of blood
> moments spent in the other world
> . . .
> while in each seed
> a pinprick of life
> shines green steady (AB 29-30, WA 79)

The "red bleeding" of chestnut blossoms implies menstrual blood in "Onset" (BNE 35); the woman in "Convert" with "lips / painted poppy-red" attracts a

hummingbird “close enough to sip / honey from her tongue” (BNE 70); red poppies appear in poems about Turkey in *Blood Silk*.

The incorporation of natural force by the speaker’s body is particularly stunning in “Moles.” The poem combines two meanings for moles: dark-seeking, underground animals, and beauty spots or blemishes on human skin. The poem appears in the folio of this essay. Here it is enough to point out that despite the surgeon’s best effort to remove moles, the adolescent girl sees her “scars / redden and spread” across “skin that would not close.” Yet at night, she pleads with these embodiments of her deep life to remain with her: *Go home— / dig back to my blood, / be beautiful*” (NW 7, BNE 36).

The body is a compass that reads and directs, as the subtitle of *The Wild Awake* makes explicit: *A Reading from the Erotic Compass of the World*. Contact with animals, in dreams or waking, points toward the wild, as if the body is attracted to and swings into alignment with it. The compass needle points true: The human body shares the life of animals.

This axiom of the poet’s created world is illustrated by two poems from *The Animal Bride*. In “Room” the speaker lies in bed alone, aroused by imagined lovemaking. Her erotic feelings link her to the animal wild:

> Somewhere in summer’s room
> a pine marten waits
>
> for a fisherman to toss aside
> the rosy entrails of a trout—
> while the one gold spot
>
> on the marten’s dark fur
> burns at her throat.
> Something swells in my throat,
>
> is gone, then swells again.
> Here is the chance for learning
> and unlearning. (AB 12-13, WA 48-49)

The speaker of "Desire Prepares an Event" locates herself, "Here: wildly awake" and "awake widely." Her feeling "drunk on moths and hummingbirds, / the live flame behind their eyes" leads naturally to the "thought / of my legs wrapped around / the trunk of heaven-only-knows / what man." Desire prepares for an erotic storm, again presented with animal imagery: "A whole / knotted sky inside filled / with wings" that leads to climax and calm afterwards, "The sky inside suddenly / smoothed of clutter. All clear, / and now the long, easy / outlet of breath" (AB 10).

The erotic poems focus on the speaker's or reader's body, depending on the use of "I" or "you." Often the body is without partner, allowing attendance upon itself, its own satisfaction and insight. The courtly love tradition once proclaimed unfulfilled love an exquisite disaster, occasion for many poems on the rejected lover's storms and sighs. As in Wyatt's "Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind," the sonneteers also conceived love as hunting and entrapment of the wild and elusive mistress. Petersen builds upon and subverts this tradition, as she redefines fulfillment, moving the single woman from "the ache of unmet desire" (F np, BNE 56) and "taut / desire weighing my limbs" (F np, WA 54) to an exquisite privacy of self-regard. "Advice to a Solitary Woman" portrays this self-sufficiency:

> To the secret language
> you share with yourself, listen.
> . . .
> Release your body into the care
> of your own hands tenderly.
> Do what the good wife would do,
> only do it
> for yourself. (F np)

The body wakes to its roots in animal nature, which is often obscured, either by the speaker's slumber or by the current of daily life that covers a deep life underground. Petersen shows her protagonist at the moment of becoming aware. In Zen, a quick blow to the side of the head might strike us

alive. Muriel Rukeyser calls it the "moment of proof" in a poem of that title: "that climax when the brain acknowledges the world, / all values extended into the blood awake" (Rukeyser 155).

With similar language, Petersen acknowledges such moments, describing the process of waking to them, and, as we shall see later, the process of writing poetry. The unaware subject is struck by a sensation that leads to insight. Expressed another way, her sleeping, upon some collision, becomes her waking.

As in courtly love poetry, such collisions can be dangerous. In "Room," the solitary, vulnerable speaker lies in a space that seems be boundless. Then down from the sky

> Every peril, sweet and heavy
> in the heat of falling,
> plummets toward me, inside. (AB 13, WA 49)

In "The Day Jesus Became a Woman," Jesus dreams of a tree with huge red leaves at its foot and then is struck by finding a dead hummingbird with a beak "like the finest, dark thorn / he'd ever hope to see" (AB 19, WA 34). Interestingly, the later version of this poem substitutes "I'' for "Jesus," changing the poem's perspective, while maintaining its jeopardy.

For the woman in "Cloth" stretched out and admiring the "jut and jump / of shoulder and hipbone," the impact is the imagined coupling of bodies:

> Soft cloth falls away
> from my skin in the way
> a grace streams from bodies together.
> *Tender*: that remarkable flow
> from two headlong bodies
> thrown askew in their rush to fit,
> to press themselves into each other. (AB 23, WA 15-16)

Like the women who lie alone, the women who drive are alone with their sensations. In two poems in *A Bride of Narrow Escape*, the drivers imagine having a car accident. That possibility strikes them fully awake. They feel the collision as if it had occurred and are spurred to consider their lives in a wider, wilder way.

In "Lane Change," the driver knows how an accident could happen while approaching a Portland bridge. She sees her car and body smashed, and this imagined disfiguration becomes, upon further thought, a transfiguration, for both herself, as she senses an afterlife of cruising open roads, and for her ill mother, whom she knows is presently motionless and voiceless, though she can now recollect her mother in her active days driving the same bridge home (BNE 17).

"Collision," a poem in the folio, places the near-accident in the speaker's "dreaming eye" during her Sunday nap. Vivid enough to wake her, it "slams" her back to Sunday's concerns, including needing to see her ill mother, who is in "one great unshaken sleep," and expecting a call "from the man I'm sure // isn't right for me" (BNE 25). Add the hotcakes she ate for breakfast, too many, too fast, "a dull clump / caught in my chest." Waking, feeling uncomfortably confined, the speaker, nonetheless, feels the impact of the premonitory dream:

> I'm stuck
> with stubborn lodgers
> in my body, struck with the thud
> of what awaits,
>
> but spared, yes saved and now
> wildly awake—
> a bride of narrow escape. (BNE 26)

The bride is not wedded to death. Like the animal bride, she marries a renewed sense of being alive. Balanced against the eros welcomed by the

animal bride is the death sensed by the bride of narrow escape. No animal/human body exists without both. The young body may not feel "what awaits." Yet the old body, as in Wyatt's "me lusteth no longer rotten boughs to climb," knows death and its contrast and partnership with eros. Petersen's own sense of what awaits seems heightened by passing years, by her own physical changes, and by the illnesses and deaths of her parents, which she addresses in the elegiac first section of *A Bride of Narrow Escape*. Diane Holland noted that this grouping "reveals for the first time an intimate personal narrative" (Holland 115).

The five-part narrative of "Magnolia" would make a fine short film about the inextricability of eros and death. First, its narrator pins in her hair a "cream magnolia veined with purple / that seeps a sweetmilk perfume" (F np, BNE 55). She attracts the attention of a younger man, who stops "the warbler green / of a song he's singing," to catch her attention and ask her name. Buoyed by the tune, she walks to the park where a Sunday crowd scatters "like cotton from some great tree." She begins to follow two women, perhaps a mother and daughter, and notices the older one's "walk of a mummy trailing / the long echo of bandages." As the daughter matches her mother's steps, the protagonist follows "in their gentle wake."

The magic of magnolia does not relent, for the three oddly-matched women breathe in the "huge eddies of pollen" common to the season. The protagonist breathes the scent of magnolia, while the air around her—and even her encounter with aging women—abets a feeling of "tenderness / the ache of unmet desire. . . . My body / meets the air in just this exact way: / soundless, easy" (F np, BNE 56).

The last of the sequence is imagined vividly. It combines recognition and acceptance:

> The grave must be a shallow thing—
> no more than a bit of uneven ground
> strewn thick with the glint of pollen.

This day I know that someday
I'll lie down, unbidden,
in the long and deepening
bed of broken flowers. (F np, BNE 57)

Prior to the "filming" of "Magnolia," we suppose the speaker has broken a magnolia blossom from its stem. Pinning it in her hair, she calls it the "most ancient of flowers." Does she suspect that the buoyancy of the day arises from its dying? The last stanza suggests a camera shot held on that blossom.

Rukeyser's moment of proof occurs in many Petersen narratives, a climactic moment, either in a sexual or life-ending sense, yet additionally with a realization that "when the brain acknowledges the world" all values extend "into the blood awake." Petersen's protagonists are able to avoid the limitations of solitude and self-gratification by extending their sensuality to a widely sensuous appreciation, not appropriation, of the world.

This broadening is illustrated in the first poem of Petersen's first full collection, *The Wild Awake*. Reprinted in the folio, "A Reading from the Erotic Compass of the World" addresses "Pleasure's arrow" as the guide to "the one heaven," described in jazzy, sexually-charged imagery: "You are a brassy bud, / honey's one sharp drop" (WA 11). That is how "the erotic compass" indicates direction of travel. While *The Wild Awake* is replete with love poems, in its last section, "Words Rise from Nowhere Else," a shift occurs to an eroticism including more than the protagonist and her lover. One poem in this section, taken from *The Animal Bride* to a new context, is the compendious "When I Walk" (AB 29, WA 78). Stanza upon stanza echo the title by starting with reference to "walk" or "walking." The objects the protagonist carries in her walk are various, each reflecting her interests and involvements, each described with tactile details: muslin pouch, scrap of dark fur, silky caul. The enigmatic, totemic objects indicate where she has come from and where she might be going, though the poem is more about journeying than arriving. The traveler has no single aim, no one bearing to

guide her; her travel seems multi-directional and inclusive, showing in conclusion a truly Whitman-like approach to the world:

> where and where I walk
> and whenever I walk
> I carry with me
> these open hands (AB 31, WA 80)

Originally the final poem of *The Animal Bride*, "When I Walk" precedes the last one of *The Wild Awake*, "Appetite," a tightly-focused description of eating honeycomb. Pleasure's arrow at the book's start included "honey's one sharp drop," an image hinting at ejaculation. Here the honeycomb, sensuous in the eating, signals both time's passing and the need to satisfy "your own yellow hunger." This hunger, however imperative, is large and diffuse. It seeks union with the world, as the book's triumphant conclusion asserts:

> Never say you can't take
> this world into your mouth. (WA 81)

If, as in "Magnolia," people "scatter themselves to picnic and play / like cotton from some great tree," the poet must allow room for many others in her poems and recognize what they have in common, exactly what her next full collection accomplishes.

Not knowing its contents, I assumed from the title *Blood Silk* that this book would consist of Petersen's signature body-compass lyrics. However, I was struck to find that this was a group of travel poems, and, with its different modes of writing to capture her experiences of Turkey, was, indeed, something else. Here are poems about history and politics, about customs and landscape, showing an acute awareness of other people and places.

The collection's use of documentary, of narratives and quick snapshots on location, marks a shift to accommodate these subjects. Petersen is a fine tourist because she employs her senses, her powers of observation and sympathy, demonstrated in her lyric mode. Yet, when considering *Blood Silk*'s themes, it is gratifying to see Petersen's reiteration in yet another context of what has been important to her all along: meeting life with open hands, believing the world is good to taste.

The imagery of blood silk recurs through this collection, as it does through *The Wild Awake*, though not exclusively to signal female sexuality. "In the Narrow Margins," the Turkish poppy, common beside grain fields, is presented sensuously as "little flounces of wet-silk, / flaunts of tissue-sheen." Like "each / bearded head on each bent stalk" of wheat, the "poppy's heart" feeds on the earth. Poppy and wheat stalk may stand for female and male, yet the emphasis is upon earth's supporting what "feeds these eyes / feasting on the poppy's blood" (BS 13). Like grain, the poppy supplies generous nourishment.

The breaking forth of blood insists on the moment, its emergency and vigor. In Turkey, the poet/traveler finds a poppy that summons up the past, for in such an old land are ruins, each with its buried story unknown to the visitor, forgotten by the natives. The flowers carried into the fine hotel that once served as a prison for political undesirables, including the poet Nazim Hikmet, must include, the observer in "Bouquet" insists

> blood-silk poppies
> cut from between the stones
> toppled across village graves . . . (BS 21)

and it must become a bouquet honoring Hikmet. The poppy that grows from "Turkey's volcanic soil" is the flower of political struggle and aspiration, as

well of a constant urge to life. The moon of Ur, in "Moonrise, Adiyaman," is timeless, reassuring that the life of the senses will never end:

> . . . when risen from behind
> an obscured horizon,
> the full moon is a colossus.
> Almond honey, powdered blood,
> a poppy's silk all pressed
> in one numinous globe. (BS 40)

Nazim Hikmet is one poet honored by the poppy. Sappho is another, for on Lesbos as on the mainland "in such mineral soil, / the most red of poppies grow" (BS 70). In "Memento," a poem in the folio, the speaker wants to bring such blossoms home to a friend:

> That red of startle, breath intaken,
> sharp. The color of living-is-seeing—
> and I looked at their shadow-heart blooms,
> looked out at the poet's island in April,
> and thought of you. (BS 70)

That red marks Sappho's "thousand / poems torn into fragments / and scattered to grow / where she walked." Poppies, in fact, are too fragile to carry far from their rocky soil, though the speaker tries by picking and pressing them, only to find that they become "purplish brown / ghosts." Yet the speaker can transport poppies in a poem, as she acknowledges "their color gone / in all but this telling" (BS 71). The triumph of "Memento" is the poem itself.

The poet faces challenges representing such ecstatic moments. Can she find adequate expression? In "Rendering," trying to write about and then sketch the poppy, she rejects words that hover and encroach, "fumbling like an over-achiever bee, // predictable as my B minus drawing" (BS 30). The words—"sheerest Ottoman silk . . . a red only a heartbeat / from blood"—almost parody Petersen's other earnest and more successful efforts, and "my set of 12 crayola pencils" makes the drawing effort sadly amateur. Vitality is

missing. By chance, the cedar shavings from her sharpened pencils, resembling poppies' fallen petals, provide that life, curled and aromatic.

The visitor to Turkey can be a tongue-tied stranger, puzzled by its customs and language, as well as dazzled by its generosity and abundance. Interactions with Turks and Kurds are adventures in understanding another's words or gestures, and, at another level, demonstrations of the uncertainties in the reader / writer relationship (Petersen supplies readers of *Blood Silk* with a glossary of Turkish words). In "Turkish for *Hello*" (BS 14), barriers of language and gesture are overcome, and in most situations the linguistic contretemps are either resolved or provide a humorous stand-off. The poet's traveling companion knows enough Turkish to communicate with peddlers and proselytizers (BS 67 & 69), even if the poet remains frustrated:

> Where human voices ratchet,
> sough and shuffle in sounds
> I cannot understand, I must cobble
> a name for late afternoon's
> leafy unease . . . (BS 37)

She must cobble names for many new sensations, just like the Turks who are learning English or who observe this American woman's unconventional ways of dressing and sitting with the males of a Kurdish family. They, too, face obstacles, marvels, a condition "without name or its mouthing" (BS 38).

The poet is ever-puzzled by what one poem calls "The World, Rushing" (BS 50), a world buzzing with sensations. Trails are steep, views are cluttered with strange sights, and "every marveled / obstacle of this world" (BS 80) is much harder to comprehend on foot or from a rushing vehicle than from the high vantage of a hot-air balloon.

In Turkey, appearance may conceal more than it reveals. Like other nations, Turkey has its understory, perhaps concurrent with the popularly told narrative, perhaps buried and forgotten. Like the underground life of Petersen's lyrics, the understory has to strike through to be revealed and

discovered. It might be Nazim Hikmet's story obscured by the transforming of his prison into a luxury hotel, a story of poetry and protest, imprisonment and exile, and a delayed and debated homecoming for reburial (BS20, 22, 86). Or it may be about the Armenians in Turkey, whose slaughter is hardly acknowledged to this day (BS 76).

To add to Sappho and Hikmet, the poet celebrates everyday Turks in whom she sees a dedication that helps confirm her own work as poet. There is the man in the waterpipe garden who keeps the hookah's aromatic herbs burning: "I would choose to become / the carrier of live coals. // . . . I would be this keeper, / this giver of fire . . . " (BS 15). The juice vendor, who bears a spouted urn, offers a cupful to passersby, unperturbed whether this nectar accepted or rejected (BS 17). And there is the keeper of the watergate, who controls irrigation of farms below his mountain perch (BS 42). To the poet, these commoners are uncommon; for her they are encouragers and exemplars, like the native bee that "gathers to its body / mote by yellow mote / this dust of life" (BS 56). Petersen is hardly the first poet to develop the theme of being a poet.

Most unambiguous and touching is the body's language. Since it is completely adequate, there is no need to speak. It precedes and survives efforts at speech. In attempting to understand Islam, the poet considers the body's ways of praying, palm to palm for Christians, but "To pray Muslim I would first need / to pry my hands apart" and "my hands would be open / as if waiting to receive / a gift, or willing to give / as good as they got" (BS 27-28). Her understanding learns from her choreography, her hands in prayer resembling the open hands of "When I Walk."

Sometimes the tourist meets eyes of others with full understanding, as she does with the woman across a courtyard (BS 14) or the youngster with whom she plays hide and seek (BS 60). Or, in "Regular Issue," she glimpses another in an unguarded moment:

> In a mosque's cool, unlit haven,
> his boots and socks stripped off,
> a soldier sinks to pray. Swarthy dress,
> hardened hands, black-whiskered face
> all pressed to the muted carpet.
> Exposed below his trouser hems,
> his calves, ankles and feet are honed,
> achingly pale, the small hollow
> behind each ankle bone
> shadowed with softest blue,
> the plump pad of each toe bent
> back against its sole—
> bared in such dim, such dark,
> a childhood of tender skin. (BS 48)

Her senses reveal the sense of this moment—that she need not fear this soldier at prayer. Throughout the travel poems, the poet registers data upon her senses—eyesight, smell, touch—and, while the impingements of this new world are hardly ever collisions in the way we have already discussed, the physical world does startle in the poet a quickening, for she has come to Turkey already awake and becomes increasingly adept in its culture. So moments of proof are not crises or climaxes, since the mature observer, well-versed in how the body instructs consciousness, in how desire prepares the event, readily integrates an unaccustomed experience, adapts to or accepts foreign customs.

In *The Animal Bride*, the speaker of "Promise" declares what she wants from a man:

> I want this man to slip his hand
> under my hair, then take
> the nape of my neck in his hold—
> boldly, without hesitation—so the hair
> is a dark curtain surrounding
> this place where our bodies touch. (AB 11)

No personal ad could be clearer or more exact. In many poems this man never shows up. However, "Customary" marks how the love poems evolve

from 1994 to 2003. Written for her husband, this poem reflects on the difference between Turkish and American expectations for the company of men and women. The poet recognizes she is the only woman eating with men, sometimes inciting curiosity, sometimes disdain. Nevertheless,

> Still, you touch me.
> Your hand around mine,
> arm along my waist, your skin
> against my bared skin—
> our accustomed affection
> a custom which the village leader
> labels with a shake of his head . . . (BS 44)

Tender and calm, this poem depicts a fulfillment the speaker desires and, indeed, finds. Being awake can result from accumulating, considering, and drawing conclusions from experience along a path of steady growth, not only from chance collisions.

Long Practice

To call herself a practitioner of the embodied school of poetics is apt, for, as we have seen, the body is Paulann Petersen's residence and studio. Also, in the chance sharing of a family name with Walt Whitman, she seems comfortable receiving his influence, first, in being eager for experience, and, second, in readying the senses for whatever the world has to offer. About a working manuscript whose central section is addressed to Whitman, what will later appear in *The Voluptuary* (2010), Petersen says, "the generosity of his embrace is absolutely stunning." For both poets, the senses are the frontline, the skin their outer border.

There must be sensation for a poem to occur: sensation prepares the poem. Petersen avers, "I believe in body poems, poems that rise from the body." The word "rise" indicates that poems are not only connected to the body; they are given by the body without the poet's summoning or choosing.

For Petersen, heartbeat and breath provide the rhythm for both living and writing.

"Words Rise from Nowhere Else" links heartbeat with language, the speaker's life with her poem:

> Despite the whisper of death,
> each day my heart pumps out
> its strange and lovely litany,
> marks out a notation of lurching blood
> whether I take note of its rhythm
> or not. . . . (WA 59)

It would be fatal if the speaker had to will the heart to do its work: "Surely this poem that is / my life would stop" (WA 59). "When I Walk" also identifies the source of language in the body, as the speaker carries "a scrap of dark fur" that evokes "the animal's lost voice / that glossy tongueless body." Carrying her father's ashes, she senses the "word at the root of my tongue" (AB 30, WA 79-80).

While the word "rise" implies waking and becoming conscious, some protagonists are speechless, dumb. The character Snow Red has slept through much of her life only to awake with a baby at her breast. She represents the inarticulate person not yet attuned to the body's language, though she is on the brink of sensing it:

> Waking at last she feels her skin
> prickle with what it recalls,
> ready to spill the story. . . .
>
> she can taste
> some piece of another world
> still caught in her throat. (AB 16, WA 44)

And the mother's voice speaks that language in "A Vapor, It Rises at Waking"

What rises
from your body at waking
is simply her voice speaking a word
she chose at your birth,
breathing out your name. (BNE 3)

The long-silent speaker of "Legacy" is about to burst with the urge to speak: "How much longer can I go on / with my mouth full of this fire?" She regrets not expressing herself:

A thousand thousand times
I could have spoken out,
opened my mouth to tell of the fire
that lay behind every word I said,
given it to another,
just as I took it from someone before. (AB 14)

She would be a thwarted writer unable to communicate if she wrote without "fire" words.

Explicitly about writing poetry, "Manifesto" is placed first in both *The Animal Bride* and *A Bride of Narrow Escape*. The concise statement of program stands unchanged from 1994 to 2006:

There is a thing or two
I know: to speak the story
as it unfolds,
to sleep with the animal
dark and breathing
against my face,
to remember my heart
can do only this: give
and take and give
what is never
its own. (AB 9, BNE 1)

The poet acknowledges the demands of telling and remembering, and of sleeping, too, aware that these activities follow upon the poet's

acknowledging the unknown and the unowned: who knows what events will occur? who ever owns the animal body? Yet the body in sleep and with each heartbeat informs the poet of that other world that is the starting place for her poetry.

"Wildcraft" also has a history in Petersen's canon, appearing in 1989 and again in 2006. It, too, states her ars poetica, by way of describing for Denise Levertov a walk to pick huckleberries: "I walk / on a beaver dam, / tightroping its narrow rim, / and think of you a continent away" (NW 18, BNE 75). The beaver dam's "mesh of branches and twigs," the grouse's "ventriloquial call," and the fruit's "dark tartness / that shadows our lips and hands" are physical sensations that prompt the speaker to discover analogies with the invention and agility she savors in Levertov. When she addresses her senior, the monologue within a landscape becomes a dialogue about poetry:

> I tell you this balancing act—
> one hand holding a pail half full of berries
> the other flung out
> while I place one foot, then the other
> on this spongy contraption's
> one walkable line—
> is like writing a poem. You say
> better yet
> look at the beaver dam itself:
> an animal's making.
> You love
> how its weave of branches, roots and silt
> holds us—
> both holds and lets the water go. (NW 19, BNE 76)

The dam is the poetic line, a stay against confusion, a construction to help reserve water but allow for its flow. Its maker is an animal, a beaver with instincts similar to the poet's to build, store, and release.

Poetry practice is rooted in the poet's physical being. Blood of heart and breath of lungs assure this grounding. Petersen describes how the poem

manifests itself as sound. "A poem, if it has a chance to work, has sound form. I can hear it, sense it, it's a physical thing." Illustrating how "Collision" was written, Petersen recalls "a series of triggerings when sounds suggested sounds. Sounds were pulling me through these experiences, were pulling me through the telling of this story." For her, sound is "material I can feel," as she cites Li Young-Lee's insistence upon the poem's physicality: You can put your hand on the page and feel a hum, a vibration rising from the depths. She uses sound to shape and draw in content: "I try to look at a stanza or a group of lines that might suggest a sound form. I try to call the rest of the material into that sound form."

In the 1980s when she lived in Klamath Falls, Petersen hiked a great deal on the east side of the Cascades. The title "Wildcraft" sounds like "woodcraft," that ability to make from available materials what is needed to survive. On its surface, this early poem set in the Cascades appears to be an amble to pick berries with its climax the precarious crossing of a beaver dam. Petersen remembers early spring in those mountains as an inspiration for her poetry, not in the sense of becoming a poet of Oregon landscape, but in seeing there an analogy for her own calling: "Early spring, with the snowmelt, the creeks jump their banks . . . the brilliant green of that grass under that flowing water—that's what I want a poem to be—so clear, yet transmogrified."

What must at once strike a reader of Petersen's work is its imagery. It is arresting and fresh. She chooses *grass under water* from the welter of spring impressions. Like creek water, her imagery is invariably clear. And like the alterations water makes to the grass below, her imagery changes our understanding of sense data: "so clear, yet transmogrified."

A reader could make a long list of striking images. I have already noted some: the praying soldier's foot, the fur of the pine marten's throat, poppies, poppies, poppies! What piques my interest is how the images move

between literal and figurative realms, their transforming power. These images, especially those that seem to be metaphors, reveal underlying relationships between two seemingly unlike things and, by expansion, reveal unity among many things.

Petersen's imagery seldom serves literal reportage, realism that reproduces. With the exception of autobiographical poems in *A Bride of Narrow Escape*, Petersen usually dispenses with specifics about her family or herself. With the exception of the poems about Turkey in *Blood Silk*, Petersen usually dispenses with specific locations for her poems. The people of the poetry—I, you, she—are also usually unspecified, and they are often located in rooms. This lack of documentary detail allows the poems to have a generality that makes the moments of her character's lives stand for what is typical and common, reminding me of imagery in the paintings of Edward Hopper.

Petersen is occupied by the functioning of imagery. Mirroring reality—the quotidian—is not her aim. She uses imagery to explore the fit between inner and outer, between imagination and reality. What knowledge results from her practice is not a copy of something that existed before. Imagery is her way of assuring us there need be no split between what our discourse tends to keep separate: perceiver and perceived, word and thing, self and other, human and animal. Metaphors carry us beyond such divisions. Just as water running over grass transforms our seeing, so metaphors give us things we have never joined before or understood quite this way.

This image work starts with Petersen's sense that what we might call "the literal" often feels charged with much, much more. Indeed, there is both an expectation of and a yearning for that something more. Here's how Issa expressed it in a haiku from 1819:

> The world of dew
> is the world of dew.
> And yet, and yet— (Hass 228)

"Oriental Lilies," a poem in the folio, shows how imagery—both literal and figurative—can draw diverse realms together, reaching for the unknown of "and yet, and yet." The imagery is sensuous, though it opposes what the lilies actually smell like with what they do not smell like. After the speaker examines the lilies, her attention moves to morels and then to fruit at the market. All three engage her attention because to her they smell like sex. Drawn back to "Lilies. / A room and a half away, / I smell them," the speaker examines them closely:

> petals
> marked with thick, burgundy drops,
> each anther a dangling worm
> of red powder, anthem of pollen. (AB 24, WA 20)

As she moves closer, the speaker finds language to bring the lilies to resemble morels and tropical fruit. Her advance toward the lilies, actually "to look into a blossom, pale cave / of perfume," gets her so close that pollen brushes off on her and she becomes implicated in the sexuality of these fruiting / flowering bodies, "now smeared / with red, with saffron— / swift, disarming stain" (AB 24, WA 21).

The description of the three plants animates them as sexual beings. The speaker's movement from the lilies and then back for a more intimate exploration forms a sketchy, yet telling, plot, for the speaker despite her precision gets smeared, even along her throat, suggesting a blush, and then she recognizes her own erotic nature and its link with these blossoms, after first dismissing the bond. She is marked not with ashes of penance but the blessings of pollen, whose erotic energy carries the speaker excitedly from the dangling anther to her anthem.

An 1881 citation from Benjamin Peirce, the idealist philosopher and father of pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce, helps summarize Petersen's use

of imagery and takes us a step farther: “In every form of material manifestation there is a corresponding form of human thought, so that the human mind is as wide in its range of thought as the physical universe which it thinks. The two are wonderfully matched” (Menand 156). In a Darwinian age, Peirce secularized the medieval Christian doctrine of signatures, which propounded that every manifestation of God’s creation reflected an aspect of His Nature. Thus, humans were given five senses to perceive that creation and given reason to find His signatures everywhere.

One difference, though, is striking, and it is suggested by some of Petersen’s images: Maybe the physical universe and the human mind are more than a perfect match. Perhaps they are an identity.

In Petersen’s work, brides, twins, sisters, and shadows point to identity or near identity. Her work tends toward such matching. Her version of Psalm 24 starts, “The world is my lover, / I shall not want” (WA 26). Her body is given away, carried over the threshold, “lifted / by a lover’s embrace / into the house of this world” (WA 27). In “Second Skin,” the *you* who needs solace is advised to “choose the moon,” for the two are “blood sisters” (F np), though the speaker of “A One-Sided Conversation With Moon” complains that the moon’s changes do not erase a life of regret (BNE 44). The moon appears in each of the speaker’s fingernails in “Making Do” and is “tight in the / bowl of my eye” (WA 70).

The assertion of identity could not be clearer than in “The New Cosmology,” whose delighted speaker exclaims:

> So it’s true: the poplar and I
> *are* sisters, daughters of an ancient star,
> every last thing
>
> so much the same
> (harp, toothpick, linnet, sleet)
> that whatever I touch
>
> is touching me, *whatever*

is a cousin
unremote. Even the metaphors—

ruby as blood, blood
as river, river as dream: all are true.
Just as the poets promised. (WA 71)

Petersen enjoys placing the elegant list of line five in the same poem as the slovenly, dismissive "whatever" and the old-chestnuts about ruby/blood, blood/river, and river/dream. Even with stock metaphors, poets have assured us of identity with whatever we touch or touches us.

Another aspect of Petersen's exploration of oneness is her interest in concurrent worlds, often described as waking and sleeping, surface and underground, human and animal. Our bleeding at night allows dream animals to follow us, ice fishermen plumb another world below their reach, the grand hotel in Istanbul was originally a prison. These pairs of worlds have a contrastive dependency upon one another; in a sense, they are one.

In "Two Places I've Seen Mullein Grow," what is the significance of the poet seeing this plant in Eastern Oregon, decades ago, and in present-day Anatolia? There, here, young, old: the poem suggests a match between these separated items (BS 39). Beyond suggesting, some of Petersen's credal poems stand up and claim such unity. In "Yes, Walt Whitman" the poet accepts Whitman's unity of being, for, like grass and trees, our bodies, "knuckle and shank, / twists of muscle and hair— / have come from another / bodied forth huge and fine" (AB 27, BNE 66). "One and everything" are united in "The Same Worlds Within You As Without" (WA 76-77). For "all bodies are the same" and we can hardly separate the person from the chair she sits on, the leaf from the tree, or the river from the sky above it. A rush of images becomes one more revelation of the identity of apparently separate existences.

If, as Edward Sapir speculated, our language is the house of our consciousness, then our language clearly reveals us. When I read the work of Paulann Petersen, I am confident that she wishes to be revealed, as both person and poet. I can find in her poems and her comments about poetry all I need to know about her themes and practice. In looking at the rich vein of imagery running through her work, I can see various ways language represents and transforms its subjects. Petersen is meticulous about the images that are drawn into the sound form and the sense form of each poem. She has a ready and boundless supply of sense data that interests her, and she can find numerous ways to present it, from literal, to figurative, to transcendental, a term used here for those images that indicate so much likeness that they proclaim identity.

Using imagery in this stepwise manner, Petersen faces increasing levels of difficulty. It is easier to describe than to compare, it is easier to compare like things than to make metaphors from unlike things, it is easier to find surprising likeness than to discover unity among things. Petersen's image making, at this uppermost step, is a matter of belief. It is also a matter of stirring belief in others. What is the highest rung of the ladder one might stand on?

William James, in an 1878 article titled "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," described an active, exploratory effort much like Petersen's image making:

> I, for my part, cannot escape the consideration . . . that the knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that [she] comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth. . . . Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, so far as they are bases for human action—action which to a great extent transforms the world—help to *make* the truth which they declare. (Menand 356-357)

As her career proceeds, Petersen has occasions to write poems such as “Sacrament.” She is confident enough to enlist the reader as an actor, a co-efficient of the truth:

> Become that high priest,
> the bee. Drone your way
> from one fragrant
> temple to another, nosing
> into each altar. Drink
> what’s divine—
> and while you’re there,
> let some of the sacred
> cling to your limbs.
> Wherever you go
> leave a small trail
> of its golden crumbs. (BNE 71)

The bee, literally, makes its food, just as Petersen makes “A Sacrament,” a poem that declares: “Rooms in your house / fill with that sweetness / your body both / makes and eats” (BNE 71). While the bee serves as analogue for the hard-working poet (which Petersen is), its honey serves as analogue for the poet’s nourishing work.

And the trail? Petersen wishes to mark the way to the kind of living her several proper themes reiterate: walk with open hands, carry the amulets that memorialize where you have been and point to where you need to go, trust the sense of the senses coded in the blood, o wise animal!

Poetry Folio

MOLES

One fumbled into sunlight
so the neighbor thrust his shovel at me
saying *Kill it don’t be a fool*
bash its head you know

how they ruin a lawn

while I stood and stared
at its beautiful hands
digging back into earth.

But these are a different kind.
Nana said, *They're beauty marks* (no break)
be glad you have so many.
Ollie said, *You wait, someday*
a man will kiss them one by one.

Some were too suspicious.
Those a surgeon kissed
with his scalpel,
leaving my face and neck
speckled with black stitches
fine as a wren's tracks.
The sutures plucked out,
he watched my scars
redden and spread.
Then returned to get
each hard, scarlet weal,
sewing with wire
the skin that would not close.

At night I pleaded *Go home—*
dig back to my blood,
be beautiful. (BNS 36)

A READING FROM THE EROTIC COMPASS OF THE WORLD

Pleasure's arrow, you've swung
in the direction of the one heaven.
Pleasure's dart, you align
with marrow of the world.

Little tongue of wild greed,
you waggle toward the stars,
the swollen moon. You shiver to seek
their hunger-sprung light.

Let yourself wobble and ache.
Dip, kowtow your tip,
point at that deep, deepest well,
its rim: thick rime of salt.

You are a brassy bud,
honey's one sharp drop—
jitter of pollen getting a fix on (no break)
your own homemade sun. (WA 11)

COLLISION

In the corner of my dreaming eye
I spot a car—
speeding streak of red

intent on me—in time
to hit the brakes, breaking the sweet
escape of a Sunday's

stolen nap. Thunderclap
of hairline luck
slams me back. Alive and it's

still Sunday,
the day I should see
my mother who's been stalled between

dying and death
for two motionless, unspeaking
unspeakable years,

her closed-eye
then open-eyed hours
alike: one great unshaken sleep

whose dreams or dreamlessness
lie beyond detection,
beyond my most fervent call.

The phone call I more than half hoped
would interrupt my nap—
one from the man I'm sure

isn't right for me—
still hasn't come. I have no more notion
of love and me and men

than I did at seventeen, divining lyrics
of some dreamy song,
mining its words for a clue. (break)

That whole batch
of hotcakes I ate too fast,
a breakaway breakfast because I seldom

fix for just myself, is still
a dull clump
caught in my chest. I'm stuck

with stubborn lodgers
in my body, struck with the thud
of what awaits,

but spared, yes saved and now
wildly awake—
a bride of narrow escape. (BNE 25)

MEMENTO
—for Kate Gray

On this Turkish coastline's steep
rock-sharp hills. At the necropolis,
spurting inside shattered burial jars.
Pin-pricking pavement stones
at the temple of Athena, the agora below.
Dotting the fierce slopes
of Sappho's island so close by,
even the Agean mist
can't obscure it from sight.
On island, mainland, in such mineral soil,
the most red of poppies grow.

That red of startle, breath intaken,
sharp. The color of living-is-seeing—

and I looked at their shadow-heart blooms,
looked out at the poet's island in April,
and thought of you.

Seven I pinched, stem and all,
from their leafy bases. Seven I laid—
little gouts not touching—
between sheets of thirsty paper. (no break)
Five I let lie
like bright bells inverted,
their centers closed from view.
Two I pressed open,
spreading their red-silk lips
to reveal the powdery, dark
stamen and pistil, the black
stain at each petal's base.
Then buried them deep
under weight. Then waited.

Yours. What I would save
from Sappho's world
to bring you. What, days later,
unwrapped, had sunk
to murky dinge. Purplish brown
ghosts. Their color gone
in all but this telling. That red,
I tell you, that red is a thousand
poems torn into fragments
and scattered to grow
where she walked.
Lesbos, *Lesvos*, rock-clad,
looming. I tried to bring you
some of its blood. (BS 70)

ORIENTAL LILIES

Theirs is not the smell
of sex. No.
Theirs is more a
sweetness, liquid and heady.
Morels smell of sex—
that first sharp scratch of salt
then the dank earth opening up.
A certain fruit in the market

smells like sex. The one with an
unpronounceable name.
A small sign says *cut me in half,*
eat my pulp with a spoon.
Lifting its brown globe
to my face and breathing
in, I'm shocked—
as when in a dream I find (no break)
I'm naked. The air a cool
insistence on my skin. Lilies.
A room and a half away,
I smell them—petals
marked with thick, burgundy drops,
each anther a dangling worm
of red powder, anthem of pollen.
I move to where they rest
on a low table, twisting my head
to look into a blossom, pale cave
of perfume.
Too close.
Nose, fingertip, cheek,
fingers, palm, sleeve of my blouse,
collar, throat now smeared
with red, with saffron—
swift, disarming stain. (AB 24, WA 20)

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When a poem appears in two collections, both citations are given, and the later version is used when any revisions have occurred.

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Biography

An Oregon native, Paulann Petersen was born in Portland in 1942 and returned to live there in 1991. Her college education began at Pomona College, and she earned highest honors at Southern Oregon College with her B.A. and M.A. She taught high school in Klamath Falls and West Linn. In 1986-1987, she studied with Denise Levertov as a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University.

Her poetry has appeared in a dozen books and chapbooks and in numerous journals, including *Poetry Northwest*, *Poetry*, *Seattle Review*, *Hubbub*, *Willow Springs*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Beloit Poetry Journal* and *Calapooya Collage*, from which she has won two Carolyn Kizer Awards. She has led workshops for Oregon Poetry Association, Mountain Writers Series, Fishtrap, and Oregon Writers Workshop. As a board member of Friends of William Stafford, she has organized annual Stafford birthday readings. Currently, she teaches at The Attic Institute.

Paulann Petersen received Oregon Literary Arts' Stewart Holbrook Award in 2006 for her contributions to Oregon's literary community, to which she greatly added during 2010-2014 as Oregon's Sixth Poet Laureate.