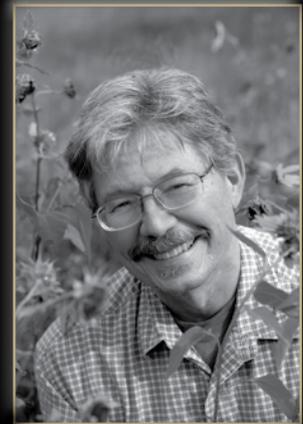


AN INTERVIEW WITH WALTER BARGEN

AUTHOR OF
**DAYS LIKE THIS
ARE NECESSARY**
NEW & SELECTED POEMS

by **Karen I. Johnson**



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One of your signature techniques is on display in the book's title poem, "Days Like This Are Necessary," where you juxtapose a helicopter shot down carrying 15 soldiers on a day in November with your own outdoor activities in Missouri where "leaves are falling casualties." Tell us about this technique and how and why you employ it in your poems.

Robert Hass has said that all good poems contain their opposite. Perhaps "Days Like This Are Necessary" uses a variation of that strategy. Having opposites in any piece of writing opens up many levels of interpretations and adds contrast and conflict that helps to sustain the poetic moment longer than the writer might otherwise be able to. To call it a strategy suggests that I controlled the process of writing the poem. That's generally not the case. In the poem "Days Like This Are Necessary," I was deeply disturbed by the tragedy of the war in Iraq. The helicopter crash focused my anguish, especially with the irony of the soldiers leaving the battlefield for R & R (vacation) and dying in the process, and then comparing it to my own circumstance/environment. I leave it to the reader to grapple with the issue of necessity.

The poem "Civilized Sacrifice," where I describe my feelings of transcendence that comes from my experience hiking in the mountains and then the poem makes a "Hassian" turn with the discovery of the mummified body of a young girl sacrificed by the Incas is similarly structured. These disparate experiences can be reconciled by the fact that the Incas believed the mountains were inhabited by gods, and by walking on the mountain, I "walked on the backs of gods."

The poems collected under the heading "At Play in the Ruins" are about war and civil unrest, with a very broad range of time (ancient to modern), place (Spain to Los Angeles), and point of view (onlookers to victims). What can we take from the collection as a whole?

I've rewritten this manuscript many times and given it many different titles. Rather than getting shorter, it has only become longer; a sad comment on the human situation. "At play in the ruins" is the last line of the poem "Lost Ordnance," which is autobiographical and describes living in Europe a few years after World War II. Unfortunately, being surrounded by such all-pervasive destruction as a very young child captured my imagination and has not let it go.

Conflict and war consumed the twentieth century, and hasn't abated in the twenty-first either. If I remain fascinated with our destructive side, it's because the extremities of behavior reveal so much about us. Of course, it is worrisome for other reasons than survival, as Josip Novakovich wrote in a recent essay, "I don't need a writing program. I need a war."

At Play in the Ruins doesn't come close to referencing all the conflicts in the twentieth century, but it does touch on many: WWI, Spanish Civil War, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, the Balkans, and both Iraq wars. Many of these poems approach their subjects at a slant: "Flagging," "End of the Rope," "Snake Act: the Movie," "Home Front," and others. When a nation goes to war, all its citizens become part of the walking wounded, and it's true in our current case no matter how hard we try to distract ourselves with conveniences we are victims of war. When the war is over, society spends generations attempting to recover from the experience. With each of the Iraq wars, Vietnam veterans tumbled back down the hole of PTSD. I think that is part of what I would take away from these poems: No one in a war-driven society escapes unscathed.

These war poems come from many voices including some unusual voices such as zoo animals affected by different wars in "Zoonotic." What was the inspiration for developing these animal voices? Was it the belt?

I think it was Gary Snyder who wrote that the animal and plant kingdoms were not represented in the halls of power, in

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the governments; therefore, poets should become their voice. I've always had great empathy with animals. I feel their plight and tragic extinction as the tidal wave of humanity overruns this planet. Many poems that I've written deal specifically with the subject of extinction: "House of Turtle" and "To Keep Going" are two that appear in the new & selected work. For too long, we have acted like we can do anything and not be concerned with the suffering we cause, and when we do consider suffering, we usually focus on the human situation.

What about the animals caught up in our conflicts? What about the animals that we keep in zoos that we are responsible for because we put them there? What happens to them? They die along with us often in the worst imaginable ways. Think of the elephants from "Zoonotic" in the Tokyo Zoo during WWII who starved to death because they wouldn't eat the poisoned potatoes. The poem then turns as many of my poems do and the focus is on my father who fought in both WWII and Korea. It was the belt that tied the experience of my father to the suffering of the zoo animals but it was not the inspiration for the poem, it is what brought the poem to its conclusion.

Theban Traffic is one of your more recent books. The poems selected from that book are populated by Jake and Stella who live in Thebes. Who are Jake and Stella and what should we know about their town?

Theban Traffic was inspired by my book *The Feast*. The couple, Jonah and Jessie, appear in six of the eight sequences in *The Feast*. They came to me as an afterthought during the reading of the third set of proofs. The characters Jonah and Jessie have Biblical origins.

After *The Feast* was published, I thought why don't I begin with two characters and see where I can go with it. The result is *Theban Traffic*. Stella & Jake appear in nearly every poem and are contemporaries who live in an almost mythical Midwestern city, which is similar to what I did in the book *Harmonic Balance* with the town of Harmony, another imagined Midwestern town, where all the poems take place in the town of Harmony. I think this makes these two books distant cousins of Edgar Lee Masters' book, *The Spoon River Anthology*, but the people in my books are mostly alive. Thebes is not that of Illinois or Arkansas or Greece or Egypt, but all of these blended together. Stella & Jake's Thebes goes back thousands of years, but it sits very much in the present moment.

When I write with a historical perspective there are all kinds of surprising relationships to discover that wouldn't be there otherwise. I think too often we suffer from a myopic historical perspective in this country and that prevents us from making wise decisions. I'd say that Stella & Jake have the typical concerns of people of our time, though it is expressed often through the lens of surrealism. I hope this creates a certain

amount of unfamiliarity and makes the characters, situations, and settings new to the reader. It did for the writer.

A fellow writer has said about Theban Traffic that it is testimony to your place as America's best sociopolitical poet. What was your reaction to that statement?

I think there are at least two ways to read this comment: one is from the broader context of all my writing and the other is by looking specifically at the poems in *Theban Traffic*. Politics is certainly one of my concerns but the subject usually enters one of my poems somewhat obliquely even when it's really the center of the poem although that's not always true. In *Fields of Thenar*, the poem "Beirut" is a cry of shock and pain, hearing the radio reports covering the 1975 civil war in Lebanon. In *Mysteries in the Public Domain*, the poem "Interruption" is about how our personal lives are overwhelmed by the tragic events happening around us. I can't separate the personal from the political. Almost all the poems in the opening of the new book, *Days Like This Are Necessary*, strongly commingle the two.

Many of the poems in *Theban Traffic* do the same thing, perhaps sometimes with a more subtle touch. The love poem, "In the Trenches," with its sensuous imagery is confounded and conflated with the Spanish Civil War. In "Theban Planet" Jake is left sleepless by the crises that envelope the world, both currently and historically, and his restless worry causes Stella to roll over in bed and ignore him. "Results & Prospects in Thebes" is inspired by a quote from the revolutionary Trotsky and becomes a meditation on aging. "Hanging Gardens of Thebes" touches on war veterans. "Trouble with the Egyptian Travel Agent" looks at torture and "Terrorist in Thebes" suggests

that perhaps our own psyche is our worst terrorist. Does this make me a sociopolitical poet? I don't know. As far as being the best or even one of the foremost sociopolitical poets in this country, I would never say that about myself or even quietly claim it.

...perhaps our own psyche
is our worst terrorist.
—Walter Bargaen

It's been said that, as a poet, you are impossible to label because you are constantly trying new forms. The poems from The Feast are prose poems. Theban Traffic is a mix of verse and prose poems and other collections include prose poetry. How do you determine the form of a poem, such as whether a poem will appear as prose or as verse? Is that a planned process or a spontaneous one?

The Feast happened in such a rush, roughly one poem a day for three months, I didn't ask questions, or have doubts, I just wrote. I found the prose poem form to be liberating. I could just pour a lot of wild associations onto the page and not have to worry about line breaks. Write it down—sort it out later. Russell Edson has said that prose and poetry are two sides of the same coin. I think the coin has worn very thin

and prose and poetry now pass through each other. It's a very permeable membrane. And that passing back and forth has resulted in some confusion among some readers who need clear demarcations between the two genres. On the other hand, this "confusion" is fertile ground for creativity.

I would call *Theban Traffic* a book of prose poems. There are very few poems that are lined/versed in the book. Because *The Feast* was prose poems, I made the decision to stay with that form for *Theban Traffic*. When a poem I'm writing tends toward being expansive and effusive, it's easier not to compose by line but by sentence. I think that's the chief advantage of the prose poem. It's possible to include so much more in a sentence than you can in a line. Lines are generally much more finite. A few of the prose poems in *Theban Traffic* started out as versed poems, such as, "How Tables Learn to Talk." I've moved in the other direction too. Sometimes a prose poem just isn't working out so I rewrite it as a versed poem. I usually discover something about the words and the poem that I didn't know before and, often, find new angles from which to consider what I've already written. Charles Baudelaire is sometimes referred to as the father of the prose poem. In the mid-nineteenth century, he wrote, that he wanted a prose that did everything that poetry did except have end rhymes and line breaks—hence, the prose poem. I just hope that I write with energy and imagination in all forms.

A few questions about you: As a child you traveled extensively, living during the early 1950s while your father was in the service, in a Germany that was still marred by bombed-out buildings. What influence did those early years of travel and living outside the United States have on your poetry?

Those early years probably have influenced my imagination more than I can describe or would like to admit. My revelation of their influence is similar to what J.G. Ballard describes in his autobiographical book *The Comfort of Women* which is a sequel to *Empire of the Sun*, which is called fiction but I believe he's admitted that it is thinly concealed autobiography. As a young boy, Ballard spent a half-dozen years in a Japanese POW camp after Shanghai was captured at the beginning of WWII.

My postwar experiences were nothing as overwhelming or direct as what Ballard went through but they did mark me deeply. One day I saw my Uncle Max's arm, the one that is always bent at the elbow in a right angle. The underneath part of his forearm looked like it had been plowed with muscles torn and removed. Then another uncle reaching for a stein of beer revealed his similarly scarred forearms. Both were veterans of WWII. Each time my mother, who grew up in Germany, visited, she would bring rolls of tin foil, coffee filters, and toilet paper, until my closets were filled. The war never ends for them and for us. It seems like it can be found

in every corner of my life. I guess I would say, once you've had your radio tuned to a certain frequency, you begin to hear it all the time.

You are now in your second and final year as Missouri's first Poet Laureate. You have visited schools and had videoconferences with guest poets for high schools across the state to raise awareness of poetry. How would you describe the reaction of the students? What advice have you given those students about reading and composing poetry? And, finally, did you find any budding poets?

I would say the reaction of students has been tremendously positive. Younger students, especially, love the opportunity to exercise their creativity. In fact, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that they crave it. In schools, with the emphasis on measurable skills, students don't often have the chance to relax and walk along the hallways of their imaginations. Plus students don't recognize and value the stories that come from their daily living. Sometimes I'm able to help them discover some of those stories, or, at least help them to become more sensitive to the possibilities that their own lives are fertile ground for stories. I tell students that if they want to be poets, short story writers, novelists, essayists, that they need to read, read, read. You can't be a poet/writer without reading. And the goal of reading for a writer is at a minimum one

book a week in the genre that he or she wants to write in. I'll go further. It's an absolute necessity. And if beginning writers want to be on the cutting edge of writing, they need to read the literary magazines where the most current writing is being published. And I go one step further, saying it's an absolute necessity to read poetry everyday, no matter the genre that a student wants to write.

Generally, I'm not with students long enough to identify anyone as a budding poet. I'm sure there are many "budding poets" in the groups I've spoken to. Language and imagination are the basic building blocks of poetry, along with observation, listening, playfulness, etc., and everyone who speaks, and has any imagination, is potentially a poet.

How has being Missouri's poet laureate changed you and what experiences will you take away from being Missouri's first Poet Laureate? I believe one of your duties as the poet laureate is to compose a poem honoring Missouri. Have you completed it?

It's hard to know fully how being poet laureate has changed me. I have been writing poems for four decades. The great pleasure and reward is in the writing itself; everything else is the job part of writing: getting work published, arranging readings, etc. The job part has become a little bit easier but there is more of it now, so I've been far busier than I ever expected that I would be. For example, last April I visited three colleges,

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one university, three libraries, one high school, had one dinner reading, and judged one elementary school writing contest. Before being poet laureate, I might have had two or three events at most in the month of April, or maybe none at all. So it's quite a contrast between pre-poet laureate and now. The downside is that I have much less time to write.

Also, the level of interest in poetry is very much underestimated in this country. Rarely, has an audience for any event that I've attended been less than forty and it's often been much larger. I do present biweekly in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, a poem written by a Missouri poet. I'm surprised at how many people read the column and my comments about the poem all across the state. I think I can say that the role of the poet laureate, to bring poetry to the people of the state of Missouri, has been a success. That doesn't mean that there isn't more to do.

Have I written the Missouri State poem? That requirement was unofficially removed. I think there was concern about pressure and potential writer's block. I gave it a try anyway and wrote "Moonwalk Missouri" and decided that this was my Missouri State poem. One reporter didn't think that it was about Missouri even though it's about a walk at night in a Missouri woods. It is not an epic, abstract poem. I feel that contemporary poetry is often at its best when it is very grounded, very specific. The concern of the poem is about the necessity of story telling: "Constellations tattooed to their stories./Such epics the accumulated wisdom/To our ends."

Either you or one of your guests during a video conference hook-up with high school student explained that a poet must read and read a lot. Your poetry covers a broad spectrum of topics and I know you draw inspiration from mythology, religious works, and history, to name just a few topics. For that matter, poetry has been described as having conversations with those who have gone before us. Who are some of your favorite people—writers, artists, historical figures—who you either have engaged in a conversation or would like to engage in a conversation? What poets have had the most influence on your writing? How would you describe your reading appetite overall?

As a young writer reading to learn how to write, some of my favorite poets were, and still are, Charles Simic ("Dismantling the Silence"), Mark Strand, Pablo Neruda ("The Heights of Machu Picchu"), Vasko Popa, Italo Calvino ("Invisible Cities"), Octavio Paz, Diane Wakowski ("Inside the Blood Factory"), Gary Snyder ("Rip Rap"), Allen Ginsberg ("Howl"), Robert Bly ("Silence in the Snowy Fields"), Elizabeth Bishop, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, W. S. Merwin...there are so many more, I can't possibly list them all, and I haven't listed any younger writers, such as Kevin Prufer, Wayne Miller, Denise Low. Everyone I read influences and shapes the way I experience and write a poem. Also, there are many ancient and modern philosophers, who influenced my writing, including Heidegger, Hegel, Nietzsche, Buber, the pre-Socratics.

My reading appetite? I'm starved. I can't get enough. There's so much to read and write about and so little time. I often have three to five books that I'm jumping back and forth between. Let's see, at the moment, I'm reading *The Worst Hard Times*, the latest issues of *Big Muddy*, *New Letters*, and *Pleiades*, *Nude With Anything*, *The Tales of Marco Polo*, and I'm rereading *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest* in tandem with the first title I listed, since their geographical focus is somewhat the same.

Though it is an overstatement, when it comes to writing, nothing is wholly new. Every writer inherits a language that is both private and public. Every writer is indebted to the writers who preceded him or her. Every writer borrows and steals though it may not be a wholly conscious act. Literature is a conversation between writers where readers are not only welcome eavesdroppers but become part of that conversation.

After the publication of this new book, which contains by my count 121 poems and after completion of your term of office, what will be your next project?

Carlos Fuentes said that when he was young he survived to write and now that he is older he writes to survive. I understand his feelings all too well. I guess my project is to continue to write, continue to engage the world, continue to explore the vast unknown and try to bring a little of it into my poems. I currently have two manuscripts that I'm working on when I can find the time: *Dying of Strangers* and *Sky Yet To Weigh*. I will be surprised if I complete either one by the end of this year, but I'll try. Also, I would like to pull together the prose I've written over the decades and see if anyone might be interested in publishing it as a book. When I say prose, I mean a few essays and some short stories. It will be a short book.

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