

An Interview with Terry Blackhawk, author of *Escape Artist*

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Conducted by Elizabeth Smith

Q. In Escape Artist you use works of photography and painting as a basis for your writing. What led you to do this and what were your intentions in doing so?

A. I began writing about art as a classroom teacher in 1989 when the Detroit Institute of Arts started its Student Writing Project, which I participated in for about 10 years. I was astonished at the diversity of genres and approaches my students took in their writing and pleased by the almost immediate access visual art gave them to imagery and imagination. As I wrote along with my students, I also discovered the range and freedom available when one uses art as a springboard. I am not alone in this--I would say that the majority of contemporary poets find subjects through visual art at one time or another.

Writing is a lot of hard work for me. It's also hard for me to interpret my own work, and I'd almost rather not comment on it, but let the reader make of it what s/he will. I was interested in the reviews of [my previous book] *Body & Field* to see that some reviewers had diametrically opposed interpretations to the collection, a fact that pleased me a great deal. That is, one found the poems comforting and at peace with the world; another saw them as ominous and fraught with potential danger.

Q. You mention the Student Writing Project, but you also taught English for many years, as well as being a high school poet in residence. What do you think is the importance of writing for young people, and how has teaching helped you as a writer?

A. It's very important for young people to develop their voices through writing. I think writing gives kids a heightened self-awareness and a sensitivity to language and its nuances, as well as a sense of trust in themselves, in their ability to express their experiences. This is something that develops over time, of course. The more writing, the more assurance.

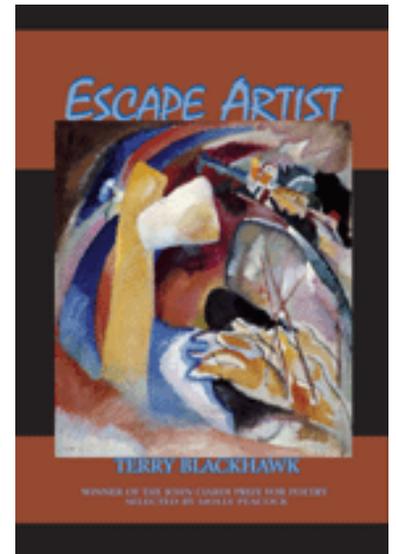
Kids are so open and flexible. Working with young people helps keep you new, on your toes. (In fact, it requires that.) And their honesty requires the same from their teachers.

Q. What do you hope students can take away from your own writing?

A. The same as any reader, I suppose. I don't often use my own work with students, but when I have, I've noticed that they respond to the most personal pieces, to vulnerability, which maybe frees them to explore their own tenderness.

Q. I think this is probably true of many readers. Your poems are often intensely personal, but you write about your experiences in a way that makes them relevant to everyone. Why do you think it is that very personal writing is often what other people can relate to the most?

A. If by personal you mean close to the inner life, I'd say that this happens because poetry distills and enhances experience and because it helps us get inside the soul of another person, whether that person is contemporary or lived, like Sappho, thousands of years ago. Nevertheless, I would hope that readers of poetry would respond to more than the information about an author's life contained in a poem. Whatever its triggering occasion, a poem exists as a "made" thing. The root (poema) comes from the Greek, meaning "to make." It's not simply a matter of personal



expression. In fact, I like to keep in mind Emily Dickinson's comment that the speaker in a poem is not oneself but a "supposed person." We've got to give the imagination some credit here. I do share some of my own "personal" poems with kids where I can speak about the experience that gave rise to the poem (especially if it's something that I think we might have in common, such as family matters) because it helps them to see that even the most common experiences can be translated into poetry, that poetry can come from the stuff of everyday life.

I often tell kids I like a poem to end with an "ahhh..." That is, the reader finds herself set down in a different place by the end of the poem. And the crafting and attention to rhythm, pacing, sound, the very words themselves--all of this creates a kind of force field...a distillation or enhancement or rendering of experience that is much more than the sum of its parts.

Q. You are able to encapsulate very particular images and feelings with precise language. How do you know what will make a good subject for a poem, and how difficult is it to filter your thoughts?

A. I don't know what will make a good subject for a poem until I get started. Once there's some kind of draft, rough set of notes on the page, then I'll see if it's going anywhere. It's not really a matter of filtering thoughts. I think of it as seeing where the language takes me and then shaping or finding the shape that the thing seems to want to take. Generally, I'll start from some rough notes, sketchy ideas, bits of language, a freewrite...it's so varied it's really hard to specify. The poems in this book span at least 10 years of writing which may be why it's a bit hard to pin down.

I like the visual arrangement of poems and I like variety in stanzas and line lengths and so on. I rarely start out with the intent to write in a particular form, but at a certain point, the way it's going to look starts to matter, the length of the line especially, and that becomes a guide to composing.

On occasion, though, having a form can lead to discoveries and help to handle the material. I find it fun to fool around with rhyme sometimes...not often, but the Danish Museum and Professor Jones are examples of that kind of formal play. I decided to put "The Seal Wife" into a sestina after I picked it up, having put it down for a while, when I discovered that one of my 6 end words, skull, had variants that absolutely fit the story: scull (a fisherman's boat, which I knew) and sculp (not exactly a variant, but close...it refers to a skin or a pelt, which I did not know and which was so uncanny I knew I had to make the sestina work.)

Q. The title poem of this collection is about crows, and Nature appears frequently in your work both as specific animals or birds and as a general sense of contrast with the human world.

A. There are actually fewer "nature" poems in *Escape Artist* than in *Body & Field*, whose entire last section, "Clearing the Bird," is comprised of poems that are launched by birds. As a child, I found much solace and exhilaration in nature, with the woods around our house as a kind of personal kingdom. In my late 30s I took up bird watching and later found myself unable, as one birder-poet-friend said, to keep the birds OUT of my poems. There's a kind of underlying similarity (probably a romantic tendency) between viewing art and watching birds: a desire to exceed (or suppress) the self--whatever that is...

Q. Another image which recurs in your writing is glass. Why do you think this may be?

A. I don't think of this as an especially prominent image. The poems that do contain glass imagery (that I'm aware of anyway) were written at least 10 years apart. But I'm pleased that the second, third and then the penultimate poems in the book contain the molten glass imagery. It's intriguing that something so hard (yet breakable) could come from such fierce, molten origins. Another image that helped in the arrangement of the poems is the bulb: the useless bulb in "Moment of Breaking" which becomes generative and procreative by the time we get to "Amaryllis" at the end. It seems very sexual and female to me. There's also the bulb in the Emily Dickinson poem, "Amherst: Her Grave in Autumn."

Which brings me back to Emily Dickinson. I spent a year's sabbatical thanks to an NEH fellowship in 1992-93 studying her life and work. During this time I visited Amherst twice and attended a conference of the Emily Dickinson International Society in Washington, DC, where a scholar from Sweden, speaking about translating one of my favorite

Dickinson poems (“Split the Lark, and you’ll find the Music”), “gave” me this wonderful news: the translation of “bulb” (the second line of Split the Lark is “Bulb after bulb in silver rolled”) into Swedish is “blomlurk” or bloom lurk, which led to my being able to say “the bloom lurks/ within the bulb, the bulb within/the earth...” etc. Very few readers will get the Swedish pun, but it pleased me enormously to find and use it.

Q. Several of your poems incorporate your experiences in other countries. Have you done a lot of traveling?

A. I spent almost two years overseas, in Italy, Sweden, and then Israel, when I was 19 and 20. I learned Italian and Swedish fairly well at the time. I attended L’Universita per Stranieri in Perugia, spent a year at a “folk high school” in Sweden and then met up there with my Antioch roommate for a 6-week hitchhiking sojourn that ended with our working on a kibbutz in Israel. Aside from a (relatively) recent trip to Ecuador with a group of birders and another to London and Copenhagen for my son’s wedding in 2001, the poems about travel come from that extended time abroad. Because so many years have passed, the memories of that time take on the aspect of dream, something that one almost recreates in the telling/writing of it.

Q. The first poem in Escape Artist says something similar to that—“The dream is a tale, a story I tell, drawing us in to a new space, encircling us in a common light.” Has storytelling been important to you?

A. Story was an essential motif in *Escape Artist*—hence the invocation, which draws from the limited repertoire of stories that I know well enough to tell: an Icelandic “silky” tale, “The Thieving Dove” from Italy, “The Cowtail Switch” from W. Africa and a story from the Brothers Grimm. I also used the silky tale in the sestina “The Seal Wife” in sec. iii. I didn’t do a word search through the manuscript for the word “story” but I’m sure it’s frequent.

I was fortunate to work with and become friends with some wonderful storytellers during my years as a teacher and have been very grateful for “the gifts of story”—both from personal stories and from folklore and mythology. I have come under the spell of the Greek myths more than once in my poems. The characters and images from mythology (heroes and monsters, dark and light) are a rich area to explore for personal as well as imaginative meaning. In 1993, I spent a wonderful week immersed in the Orpheus myth at a workshop led by master teller Laura Simms.

Tellers often say that they don’t choose the story, the story chooses them. That is, for whatever reason, from this world-wide treasury of tales, one chooses the characters and symbols that relate most directly to one’s inner life. Thus, Story is a powerful teaching tool. In teaching I may ask students to put on the mask of a figure from myth or story, to write from an adopted persona, often with surprising and pleasing results.

I am fond of sharing a Jewish proverb: “God invented Man because He liked to listen to stories,” and also of the ideas of philosopher/educator Harold Rosen, who suggests that rather than describing our species as homo sapiens, we should consider ourselves homo narrans. My father was a wonderful storyteller, too, as was my mother-in-law. I’m sure every family has its teller(s). Story is a way of knowing and learning about our lives. And what better form of entertainment!

Q. Finally, your collection is called “Escape Artist.” Do you see art as an escape?

A. No. I do not see art as an escape, rather perhaps as an answer, a means of understanding.