

Quiet City

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ISBN 978-188615798-9 \$13.95, 76 pages, trade paper

BkMk Press, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 5101 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, MO 64110,
(816)235-2558, www.umkc.edu/bkmk

Interview by Kristin Pugh

Congratulations on your recent Nebraska Library Association Mari Sandoz Award. "The Mari Sandoz Award," according to the Nebraska Libraries website, "recognizes significant, enduring contribution to the Nebraska book world through writing, film production or related activity." You first were published very early in your career, having several poems published while you were still an undergraduate.

How did having success so early in your career affect your work? At what point in your life did you decide poetry would be your life's work?

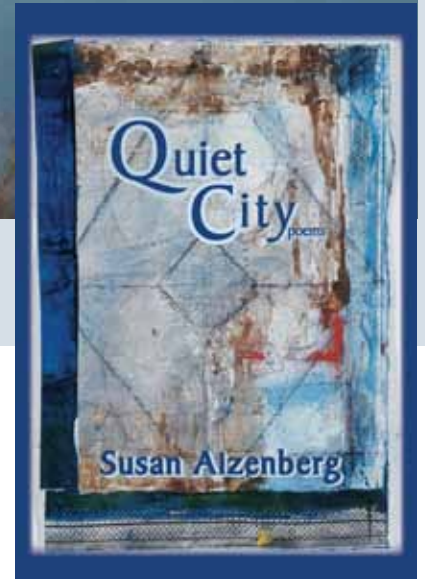
Thank you, Kristin. I was completely surprised by and honored to receive the Sandoz Award. It was especially meaningful to me as I have loved and depended on libraries since childhood.

I began writing while still in elementary school, and with the exception of a brief, high-school fantasy about becoming a dancer, the only thing I ever wanted to do was write. I wrote poetry, fiction, and plays from the time I was very young, but it was when I was in the undergraduate Writer's Workshop at the University of Nebraska Omaha that it became clear to me I wanted to be a poet. I was of course very encouraged by those early publications; that editors I respected thought my work good enough to publish gave me some courage to balance against the tremendous self-doubt most of us who write face. It's probably worth mentioning, too, that I was an older, "returning" student when I entered the Workshop,

and I had been seriously studying and writing poetry on my own for at least a decade before that, though I'd never sent any work out.

In Quiet City, a vivid contrast is evident between the beautiful, almost soothing, language and serious subjects. "To Vishniac," specifically, manages to intensify the already poignant effect produced by Roman Vishniac's photographs. What was it about Vishniac's collection, particularly the pre-WWII photographs of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, that inspired you to write this poem?

Thank you. It's difficult to fully explain the ways in which Roman Vishniac's *A Vanished World* inspired this poem. Working through my response to the book, which collects some of the more than 16,000 pictures he took of daily life in German and Eastern European Jewish communities in the late '30s and early '40s, is the reason I needed to write the poem, and in some ways the poem itself is my best answer. In most respects, I have little in common with the Orthodox Jews who populate Vishniac's remarkable photos, yet I nevertheless feel a deep connection to them. My grandparents had lived much as they did, though they were lucky enough to have emigrated from Poland and Ukraine in the early 1900s. My mother spoke Yiddish. I look at the men and women he's photographed with such compassion and clarity and see, simultaneously, people as strange to me



as they must have been to their neighbors and the faces of my own family. In part the poem grew out of my need to explore that, and the implications for all of us in the ways we see each other as “other” and “foreign,” and I wanted, too, in some small way to pay homage to Vishniac himself, a great artist who took these photographs at tremendous personal risk. Even this seems to me a partial answer, but I hope it’s a somewhat useful response to your good question.

“Chatham Bay” is another poem that responds to a photograph. How does the genesis of this poem compare for you with “To Vishniac”?

Actually, there is no photograph. Unlike “To Vishniac,” “Chatham Bay” is not in response to another work of art, or to history, or the life of an artist. It’s a poem of place, mostly, I think, and entirely fiction. The speaker, the photographer, and their relationship are products of my imagination. I’m glad it convinces!

What do you see as the connecting element among the poems collected in Quiet City?

That I’m the one who wrote them? Just kidding, but maybe not entirely. I write about what I think about, dream about, obsess about, imagine—sometimes I write in response to an image or to a phrase or line that comes to me with nothing more than that in mind. It’s difficult to sort out the connecting elements of the book, although of course one has to do at least some of that when assembling and organizing a collection. Perhaps I can best answer in terms of craft: one thing I can say with certainty in terms of what connects all my work is my love of language, and my pleasure in making poems—in working with diction and syntax, metaphor and image, the line, rhythm, etc. In terms of subject matter, I mostly only see those connections after the fact or when others point them out to me. I’m interested in art, in personal and public histories, in the ways in which our individual and family lives are, in my view, inextricably interwoven with the times and places in which we live and the

history that shaped them. I think in many ways the cliché is true; there are really only two subjects in literature: love and death.

What book of poetry have you read most recently? What did you like about it? Were you already familiar with the poet’s work?

I like this question much better than “who are your favorite poets?”—thanks! Though I do understand why that’s so often asked and have asked it myself, of course, I always have a hard time answering, because it’s so difficult to choose among all the poets whose work I love. Coincidentally enough, the last book of poetry I read is by Missouri’s Poet Laureate, William Trowbridge—*PUT THIS ON, PLEASE*. I’ve known and admired Bill’s work for years for its intelligence, humor, technical mastery, and heart.

Are you more drawn to poetry that is similar in style to yours or styles that are different? What initially draws you to a poem—style or subject?

I have pretty catholic tastes in poetry. I’m drawn to all sorts of poems. I don’t think one can separate style and subject in a poem—though we have to teach and talk about form and content separately, they really cannot be separated. That said, there are poems that seem first to announce themselves as “about” some particularly compelling subject, others that seem to foreground language in a more obvious way. If I had to choose one, I’d say I’m drawn to language first, though again, I think that’s a somewhat false distinction.

Do you have ideas for another book project anytime soon?

I don’t generally think in terms of book projects, per se, but rather work poem by poem. I do sometimes find I’m working on a series of poems, as happened with the Eleanor poems that appear in *Quiet City*, and I believe I’ve started work on a series of poems now, but it’s early days.

