



The Cottonwood People

Melissa Kwasny

Faint. Uncombed. Awash in rain.
They share the kind of beauty shared by older women.

Rhapsody in wind. Buds,
not leaves: the small greens crowding up behind them.

Music, if one could see it, its wicker, its cursive strain.
Spruce, which has the heavier sails, flapping.

You are everything you feel beside the river. (Seamus Heaney)
Through the silver-paned bark, the diamond pores of

sloughed off skin. If I saw my soul, she would be this tree,
and I would love her.

Placing stops between the strings, a composer
warps the score though making noise is never the intention.

One can draw anything on paper and ask a musician to play it.
For instance, a violinist known for her sheer nerves.

It is good to be cold, to remember cold. Hushed by rain,
to be ordained in a dry place. Suppleness of the word posture.

By the time my friend received the diagnosis, she was no
longer
prepared to accept it—

an afterimage shot with stores of pollen.



Melissa Kwasny is the author of five books of poetry: *Pictograph* (forthcoming from Milkweed Editions, 2015), *The Nine Senses*, *Reading Novalis in Montana*, *Thistle*, and *The Archival Birds*. A collection of literary essays, *Earth Recitals: Essays on Image and Vision*, was published by Lynx House Press in 2013. She is also the editor of *Toward the Open Field: Poets on Poetry 1800-1950* (Wesleyan UP) and co-editor with M.L. Smoker of an anthology of poetry in defense of human rights, *I Go to the Ruined Place* (Lost Horse Press 2009).

An Interview With Melissa Kwasny

HDJ: How did you discover that writing would be a significant part of your life?

MK: When I met Richard Hugo at the University of Montana in 1974. Until then, I had never met anyone who was a poet. I mean, I hadn't conceived that one could spend one's time reading, writing, contemplating, as I did, and that there was a name—a vocation—for that!

HDJ: In an interview with Brett Ortler and Maya Zeller, you reference being fascinated with Native American songs and that you read Frances Densmore's translations. What other kind of work did you read as child, a young teenager, or high school student?

MK: Mine was not a literary family. We had few books in the house. People worked hard and most of the time. Who knows why one child falls in love with the library? As a child, I read classic young adult novels like *Little Women*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Jane Eyre* because my grandmother paid for me to join a book club. I loved when those monthly boxes arrived, the book or books wrapped in newsprint. And as a high school student, I discovered poetry through the influence of a teacher who recited Chaucer and guided us in writing our first free verse. I still have the illustrated *Leaves of Grass* my sister gave me then. I was in my early twenties, just out of college, when I read Densmore's haunting translations of Chippewa, Papago, and Seminole songs.

HDJ: In her review of your book *Reading Novalis in Montana*, Melinda Wilson writes, "Kwasny consistently relies on the marriage of man and nature to inform her understanding of existence." What role does writing have in that process of

understanding? A role of discovery, a role of report?

MK: Writing plays a processual role. In other words, it is a recurring step in the continual process of communion, of understanding. Most of my poems begin as acute attention paid to something through my five senses, “chief inlets of Soul in this age,” as Blake wrote in his own marriage, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. I like to think that Blake meant his title as a description of earth, just as I do in one of my poems in *The Nine Senses*, entitled “The School of the Dead, the School of Roots, and the School of Dreams.” (I stole the category names from Helene Cixous, though she was talking about steps to writing, not the tutelary value of the earth.) So, I begin with the senses, and a process develops, a back and forth flickering between attention to what is in front of me in the natural world to what is emerging in my consciousness and dreams, a dialogue between the internal and external. Writing furthers this process.

HDJ: One of my favorite lines of “The Cottonwood People” is “If I saw my soul, she would be this tree, and I would love her.” How would you describe your own commitment to nature, and how does that connection influence your work and your life?

MK: I am committed to nature, as all of us are, aware or not. We cannot divorce ourselves from it. It is what we breathe, eat, dress in, walk on, share a consciousness with. But to veer closer to what I think you mean, the lines you mention came out of nowhere for me, which is one reason I love to read and write poems. That strangeness, that transport when something else begins to speak. Lines like this come intuitively—a word that literally means a teaching from within—as a consequence, it seems to me, of attention to the outer world. When I began this “people” series of poems, I was thinking of the words of the great scholar of Iranian Sufism Henry Corbin. He writes that if we want to see the world as it really is, it is more important to ask who than what, for instance who are the deer, the mountains, the cottonwood, not what. What does it mean to make this shift from what to who? What does it mean to be a person, to regard other non-human forms of life as people? To regard the “personhood” of plants and animals? On another note, Emerson, in his famous essay of 1836, entitled “Nature,” writes, “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me and I to them.” When Emerson says “occult” I think he means hidden, under the surface. He does not mean supernatural. That relation is, for me, an unending source of guidance both in my work and life. Because it is occult, the possibility of revelation is always near at hand.

HDJ: What was the first word, line, or idea that inspired “The Cottonwood People,” and how did that initial seed sprout into the body of the completed poem?

MK: I was gifted a month at the Ucross Foundation, an artists residency program in northeastern Wyoming. One night, we were all sitting in a composer’s studio listening to him give a talk on his current work and influences. My mind starting drifting out the window—it was a lovely evening after a sudden rain—and I found myself gazing at this beautiful cottonwood tree. It was May and so the leaves had not yet unfurled. The naked boughs of trees have always been among the most lyrical, musical things to me: patterned, entangled, intricate, ghostly. The cottonwood’s limbs were turning white in the darkening, and yet almost disappearing. I thought of my hair, of all things, its own whiteness, as well as a growing sense of my own transparency. On that same day, I had been given word that a close friend was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. There is something about Alzheimer’s that seemed to resonate with this tree, bare-limbed at night, how it was picking up a glow from somewhere else. As if my short term memory of the tree was going, but something else was taking its place. Like a photograph fading, as we all are. All this moved in and out of my gazing and later, my poem. And it came to me that, if we could see the soul, we might see it as a reflection of the various animals and plants of a particular place. Especially after the rain, especially at sundown.

HDJ: Your poem is written in non-rhyming couplets except for the last line, which is moved away from the left hand margin. How did the form (and your break from it) influence the process of this piece?

MK: I came to Ucross after studying and writing prose poems for five or six years. My last two books are composed entirely of them. Like most writers, I arrived with boxes of books. Among them were books of poems by people who are elegant practitioners of the line—Sarah Gridley’s *Loom*, the selected poems of Gennady Aygi, and a number of contemporary Chinese translations by Fiona Sze Lorrain. Something about the quiet the line instills with its rhythmic stitching, with the silent rooms of its stanza breaks, was attractive to me. A lot could get dropped into those silences, be absorbed into them. The kind of prose poems I have sought to emulate—René Char’s, for instance—move wildly from image to statement to further image. They are associative rather than narrative, covering a lot of psychic ground or gathering many images into one matrix of consciousness. I was in a spare, quieter space in Wyoming. I wanted to investigate single images again: the cottonwood, the deer, the antelope, the bobolink. There had to be room between the stanzas and lines for the object of my attention to respond. Writing in lines restricts; in these, I almost felt as if I were learning to whisper and to hear again.

