

## IN OREGON'S NAME

Paulann Petersen

for Cottonwood Canyon State Park

September 25, 2013



Paulann Petersen, Oregon Poet Laureate Emerita, has six full-length books of poetry, most recently *Understory*, from Lost Horse Press in 2013. Her poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *Poetry*, *The New Republic*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Willow Springs*, *Calyx*, and the Internet's *Poetry Daily*. She was a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, and the recipient of the 2006 Holbrook Award from Oregon Literary Arts.

Tenino people came first  
to this river's banks,  
alert for a rosy-sided flash  
of steelhead or chinook.  
Then ranchers and farmers  
brought their livestock, their crops  
within easy reach of its flow.

Now any Oregonian  
can wander the John Day's edge  
for days and never leave  
what is ours. Sixteen miles of river—  
and land on both sides—  
now belong to our common good.

In our name, cottonwood  
is planted to grow once more  
in its namesake place.  
For us, those age-old shrubs  
absent too long—chokecherry,  
sumac, snakeweed—  
are rooted again in native soil.

In this park, a bald eagle  
makes her wide sweep  
above the canyon's basalt.  
Once more the late spring breeze  
carries a fragrant, heady message  
from clusters of wild bloom.  
What hadn't sweetened this canyon air  
for more than a hundred years  
grows close by once more.  
Replanted near these banks,  
the mockorange thrives—  
we all thrive—  
here, at the river's side.

## An Interview with Paulann

*Understory* (Lost Horse Press, 2013) is the name of Oregon poet Paulann Petersen's latest collection of poems. In resource management, "understory" is defined as a layer of vegetation beneath the canopy of a forest. As metaphor, it reaches toward the contemplation of the vast and ever-composting material, historical and mythical, that lies beneath our everyday, work-a-day narratives. The poet herself brings a strong, generous presence to an interview, as well as a wealth of understory. Petersen retired from a four-year tenure as Oregon Poet Laureate this past year. She taught public high school English for 20 years, has led writing workshops at libraries, colleges and conferences and continues to promote poetry through work and engagements. The poet recently shared some thoughts with Irene Cooper regarding abundance, inspiration, schools of poetics and canvassing Oregon on a poetry mission.

IC: Your poems are multi-sensory experiences. The image of the beak in "Use," from *The Voluptuary*, "...constant growth and constant use//...Worn to perfection" and "That heart—what's at// the flower's very core—// blazes last" from *Understory's* "Why the Aging Poet Continues to Write": this imagery is almost tactile, of the body as much as of the greater natural world. What would you say of your body's relationship to the earth it inhabits?

PP: My body is one miniscule part of the earth it inhabits. And my poems are poems of the body. When my first full-length book was published, one of the questions my publisher asked me was: "To which school of poetics do you belong?" I was stumped. I'd never considered myself as a member of any school of poetics. I began to list—in my mind—the schools with which I was familiar. The famous School of Disembodied Poetics (Naropa) popped into my mind. And suddenly I realized I was indeed part of a school. I'm a practicing member of the School of Embodied Poetics.

IC: You are one of two out of seven former and current Oregon Poet Laureates who hail from Oregon. What do you think truly tethers the artist to the geography, to the landscape?

PP: I can speak only about what tethers me to the landscape. The effect of landscape, homescape, on me is both deep and oblique. Oregon is mountains, ocean, high desert, rain forest. It's the hot springs in Hart Mountain Antelope Refuge, the Church of Elvis in downtown Portland, pelicans on Klamath Lake, herons in Oaks Bottom in the Willamette. Oregon is abundance, variety vast and gorgeous. It teaches me inclusiveness and gratitude. Oregon encourages a wide embrace.

IC: Poetry is frequently talked about in terms of music, and certainly you have expressed the necessity of speaking and hearing verse. What are the consequences of silence?

PP: Silence is part of that music! When the text of a poem appears on the page, the white spaces indicate pauses, hesitations. Those "spaces" are essential to the poem's music.

IC: What or whom do you look to for inspiration?

PP: I look to language itself for inspiration. I listen for its moods, its music, its inexhaustible richness.

IC: What influences or engages you outside of poetry?

PP: Teaching. Family. Friends. I try to remember William Stafford's aim: to meet each person as separate, luminous being.

IC: How has your art-making changed, if it has?

PP: My art-making changes each moment of its ongoing existence. That's part of its very nature. But perhaps you're talking about work habits. Over the years, I've become more and more dependent on long stretches of time (hours) to work. I love to be able to immerse myself in writing.

IC: William Stafford is quoted as saying, "I would exchange all that I have written for the next thing," about the notion of legacy?

PP: Do you mean William Stafford's legacy? He has left a marvelous legacy for other writers, the encouragement to lower our standards and keep writing.

IC: During your official tenure as poet laureate, you canvassed thousands of miles and devoted much time in your role as poetry advocate and diplomat. How will you live now?

PP: Less out of a suitcase.

I am still fairly busy with events, but I am doing very little travelling now. My years as OPL were wonderful. When I finished my second term as OPL, I had given readings and workshops and presentations in all of Oregon's 36 counties—27,599 miles in all. Being an ambassador for poetry in Oregon was an honor, a privilege. But it is nice to be home.

To listen to Paulann Petersen read "My Father's Voice" from *Understory*--part of radio interview on Radiozine with Leigh Anne Kranz from a broadcast on KBOO FM-- [go here](#).

Oregon's sixth Poet Laureate, Paulann Petersen has six full-length books of poetry, most recently *Understory* from Lost Horse Press. She was a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, and received the 2006 Holbrook Award from Oregon Literary Arts. She serves on the board of Friends of William Stafford, organizing the January Stafford Birthday Events.



