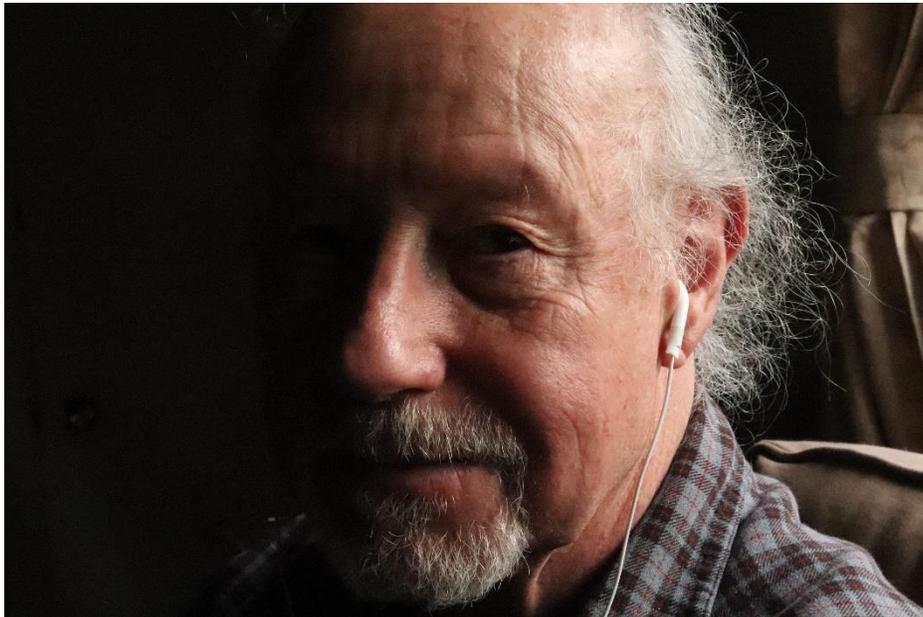




Our Interview with Poet Van Hartmann



...each of life's moments
are sacramental in their importance,
something to be valued, revered,
and held carefully...

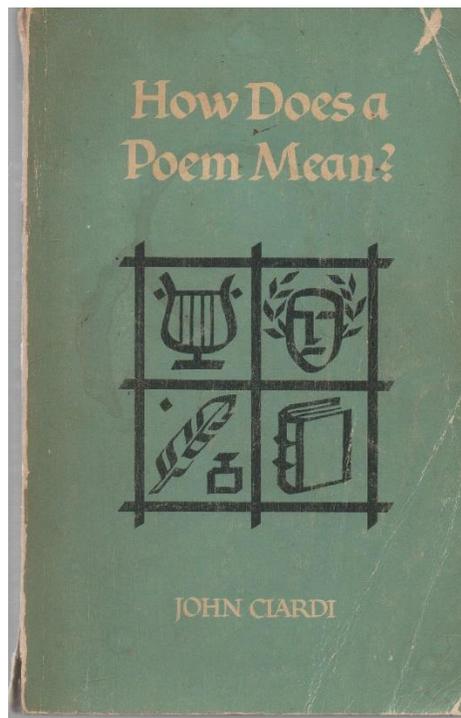
Sally: Thanks for joining us on the **Poetry Page**, Van! I featured you on our very first Poetry Page—along with Katherine E. Schneider and Mark Lamoureux— when the pandemic had just started. You, Katherine, and Mark were scheduled for an AuthorSpeak at the Norwalk Public Library with Cynde Lahey, Director of Library Information Services. Then, of course, we had to cancel.

That program will be rescheduled once we are free to gather freely again, but for now I am happy for this more in-depth interview with you on our Poetry Page! I know so little about you as poet.

Let's start with how poetry first came into your life! Was it when you were a child, or later? Please explain, and elaborate!

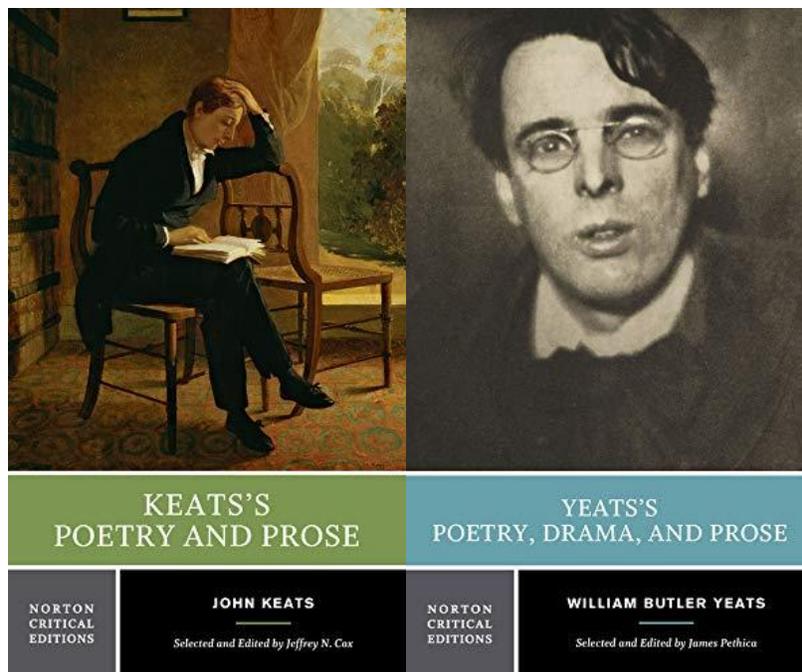
Van: I think we all have poetry in our heads from an early age. In ["The Prelude,"](#) Wordsworth even suggests that the mother's heartbeat we hear in the womb gives us our first experience of poetic rhythm. When I was an infant, my grandmother sang a lullaby to me that I still remember as a kind of poem. So that was the seed, I suppose.

But as a conscious interest, poetry came later. In high school, I had an Advanced Placement English course taught by Mr. Catalano that introduced me to poetry through John Ciardi's book, *How Does a Poem Mean?*



Sally: Was there a particular poem that struck you so deeply that you knew at that point that you were a poet? A particular poet that spoke to you? If so, when—at what age—was this?

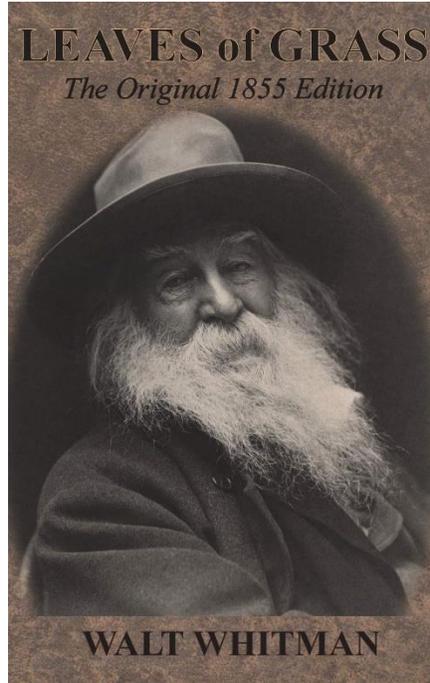
Van: The two poems that dug in and formed roots were Keats's "[When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be](#)" and Yeats's "[Lake Isle of Innisfree](#)," both of which I encountered in college. I had probably just turned twenty. I can't say that I knew I would be a poet, but I did know there was some beauty in language that opened a place in the heart, and that I wanted to have that in my life.



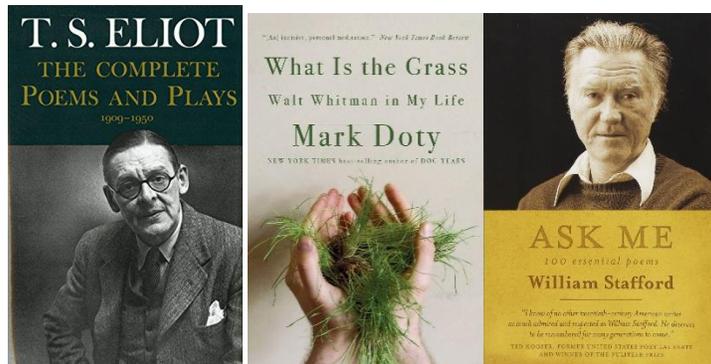
Sally: Who is your favorite poet? What is one of your favorite poems? Why?

Van: I'm not very good at those kinds of questions. I can never choose a "favorite" when it comes to the range of wonderful voices out there and the different moods we have when we read or hear poems. It's like with the Academy Awards. I don't believe that there is a "best picture" among the diversity of artistic creations available.

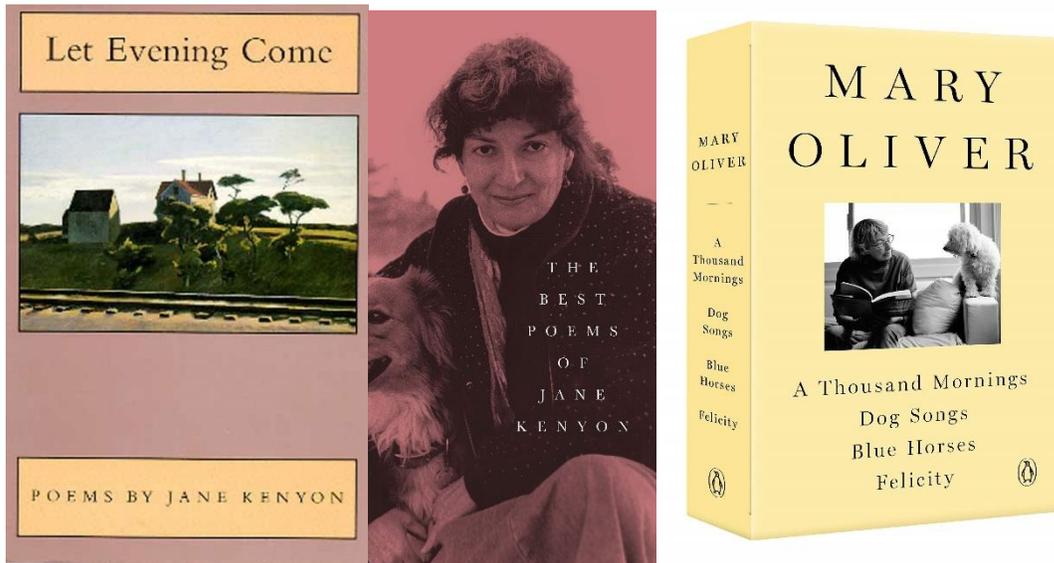
But I do have favorites that I return to for inspiration. Keats and Yeats, of course. [Walt Whitman](#) for his sheer exuberance in breaking free of forms in search of something natural and organic.



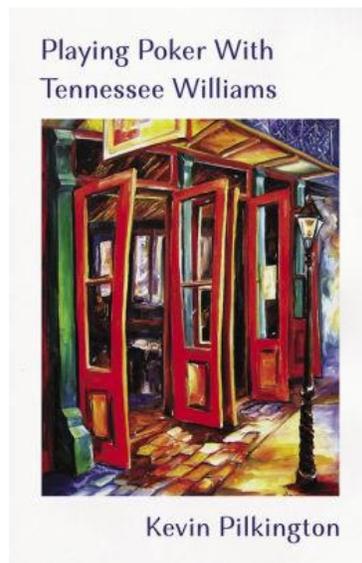
[T.S. Eliot](#), [Mark Doty](#), [William Stafford](#), the pacifist, for his ability to speak gently and beautifully in a simple voice that is natural and devoid of self-conscious artifice.



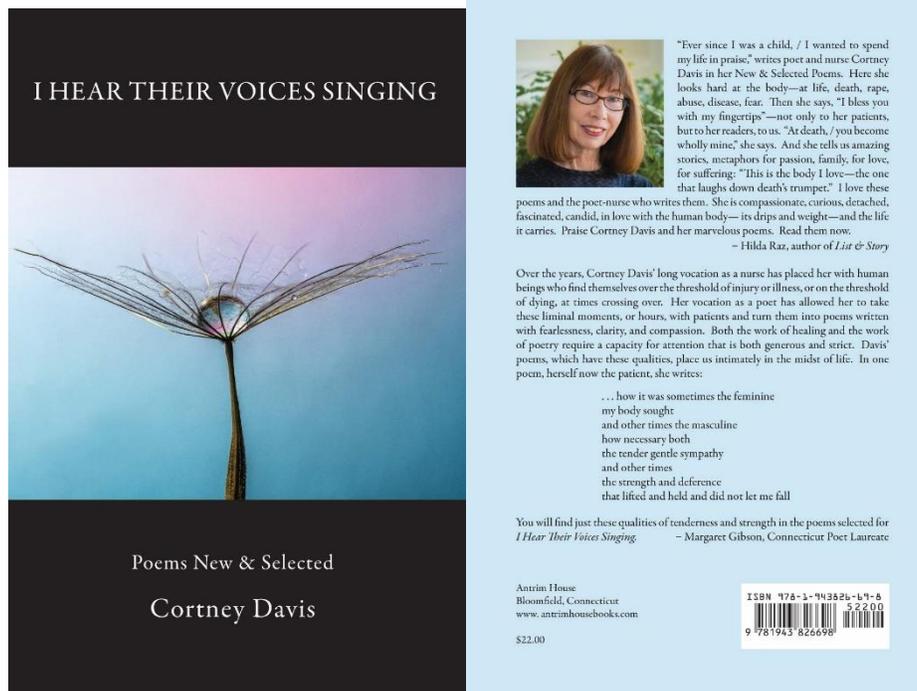
[Mary Oliver](#) and [Jane Kenyon](#) for similar reasons. I find that it is so hard to keep from straining to sound like a “poet.” One of my favorite poems is Kenyon’s ["Let Evening Come,"](#) which prayerfully intones its acceptance of the movement of time and the shifting angles of the light.



But I also love the wonderful wit of a poet like [Kevin Pilkington](#), who can take us suddenly with a single word into a completely different set of associations.



I've recently discovered the stark, honest look at reality mixed with deep compassion in the poetry of [Cortney Davis](#), coming out of her experience as a nurse practitioner. I'd better stop, because the more I think about it, the more the list of models to aspire to expands.



Sally: That's exactly why I like to ask that question, Van! It always opens up a whole wide world! Thank you for sharing!

You already answered my next question a little, but what other poets from history do you enjoy? Is there a favorite school, or era, of poetry you are drawn to: romantic, modern, confessional, beat, imagist? Why?

Van: I went off to graduate school convinced that I would study [Chaucer](#) and medieval literature. I love Chaucer's descriptive capsules of human beings and his ironic voice.

Then I discovered a completely unlikely new poetic voice in the satires of the eighteenth-century poet, [Alexander Pope](#). I did a Ph.D. dissertation on his long mock-epic, "The Dunciad," which, by the way, following the madness of the past four or five years, seems more and more prophetic of our own modern age. But what I also found in Pope was an

almost architectural sense of structure through his use of antithesis and rhyming couplets that appealed to some sense of aesthetics within me.

Then I began looking more closely at the English Romantics, especially [Wordsworth](#) and [Shelley](#), as counterpoints to Pope. Their attempts to find poetic rhythms and inspiration in nature opened up yet another source for me.

So here again, I am all over the place, finding different kinds of pleasure in different voices at different places in history.

Sally: That's wonderful, Van!

Do you ever write formal verse?

Van: I occasionally set myself a task of trying to write formal verse as an exercise in discipline, but I haven't written any poems for publication in formal verse.

Sally: Do you have a set schedule for writing? I know some writers get up early and write before leaving for work, etc.. Or do you just stay open to inspiration catching you by surprise?

Van: I am terribly undisciplined about my writing. I will go for periods of time without a fixed schedule, then I will find myself engaged in a project that compels me to fill whatever time I can working on it.

Sally: That doesn't sound at all undisciplined, Van.

Do you find a certain theme—or preoccupation—surfaces in your poems? Do you allow these to surface freely, or are there themes you set out explore?

Van: I've had several recurring preoccupations in my writing. One is loss. The disappearance of others from our lives. I suppose you could call it grief, but for me it is also the mystery of how someone so present one moment can suddenly become an absence, a nonexistence, and how poetry can summon them back again.

Another preoccupation, in my second book, *Riptide*, is violence. The violence the world does to us, the violence we do to each other, the violence we ourselves commit in unthinking ways.

Finally, I find in moments of encounter with the natural world the urge to open them up into some deeper connection, to find in them something sacramental, to try to see a mirror of my deeper self within them.

Sally: Would you say you learn about yourself with each new poem? Discover yourself anew, as it were?

Van: I hope that is true. To appropriate Adrienne Rich's phrase, "diving into the wreck," I hope that each poem involves some diving into the messy wreck of my own submerged self and that I bring back up from it some fuller knowledge of myself. Whether or not I succeed is another question, but it is certainly a goal.

Sally: When did you have your very first poem published? Do you remember the magazine?

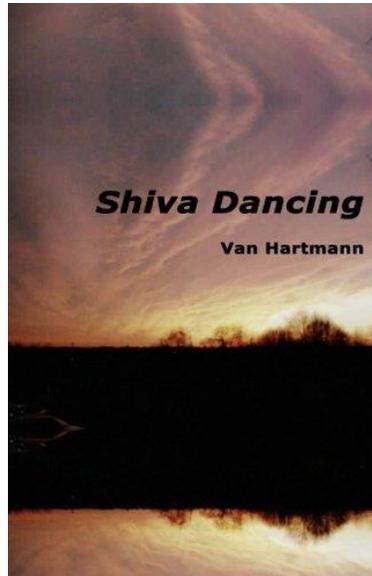
Van: My first poems weren't published until 2003, when I was already in my late 50s. My wife had passed away from cancer a couple of years earlier, and I turned more seriously to poetry as a means of processing that loss.

During that same period, the events of 9/11 and the war in Iraq compelled me to try to give voice to my political views about the war.

Two of the poems about the war were published online by [Winning Writers](#) in that year. One about the loss of my wife was published by [Phi Kappa Phi Forum](#), and another by [The Texas Review](#).

Sally: I believe you have two full-length collections, and one chapbook. Could you please tell us about each of these?

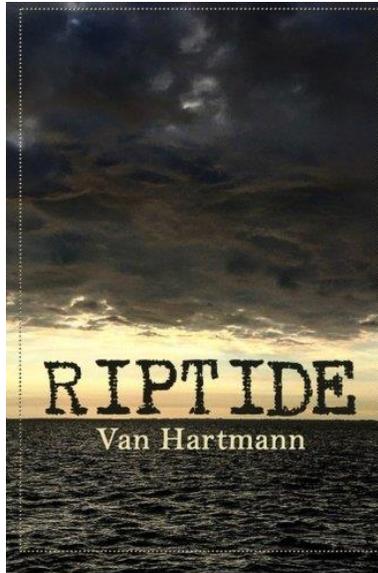
Van: *Shiva Dancing* (2007) is composed largely of poems about my first wife's (Roslyn Hartmann) illness and death in 2000, and my father's last years and death in 2006. The title is my attempt to combine the Jewish act of sitting shiva with the Hindu god of destruction and creation. Since I am neither Jewish nor Hindu, I suppose I could be guilty of some cultural appropriation. But Roz was Jewish, so the idea of sitting shiva made sense.



And, at the time, I was trying to use poetry to find some sense of renewal and regeneration in the midst of loss. Also, my personal losses, and the related grieving, took place against the backdrop of the national loss of 9/11 and the war that followed, which I try to make sense of in the title poem, “Shiva Dancing.”

The chapbook *Between What Is and What Is Not* (2010) continued the exploration of loss, but with some sense that comes from my reading of [Coleridge](#), that the space that opens up between being and nonbeing, between existence and loss, between what is and what is not, is a space that we sometimes fill through acts of imagination, acts that connect the physical world of existence with the void of nonexistence. That poems and other works of art can be born in that space, our own miraculous little creations ex nihilo.

Riptide (2016) is largely a meditation on the violence done to us and the violence we do to each other. The title and organizing poem, which makes up the introductions to the six parts of the book, is based on the experience an older friend, Bob Milton, had while bodysurfing in Hawaii.



Bob was of my parents' generation. He remained hardy and physically active late into his life. When he was already in his late seventies, maybe eighty, while bodysurfing in Hawaii, Bob was caught in a riptide that carried him out to sea, where he floated for some hours before a passing boat spotted him and pulled him aboard. The experience changed him profoundly, stealing from him his sense of strength and agency.

In the poem, I try to put myself in what I imagine to be his position, gradually losing one's sense of self in the face of the indifferent deterministic forces of a natural environment one had always thought one could control.

Another poem that is central to the collection, "Tubers" is about a childhood memory of my own participation in an act of bullying against another kid, something that has nagged at me over the years and made me acutely aware of the potential for violence within ourselves. Other forms of violence – war, hunting, domestic abuse, illness – also work their way through the book toward, I hope, some sense of redemption at the end.

Sally: Myself, I don't like to differentiate between full-length collections and chapbooks. You had referred to them as such in your bio somewhere; that's why I referred to them as such in my question. But I feel a book is the size it wants to be. Do you feel similarly?

Van: I tend to agree with you, although I think I used my chapbook in part as a stepping-stone or trial run for some of the poems and ideas I wanted to develop more fully in *Riptide*.

Sally: How do you know when you have a book? Do you feel intuitively certain when a finished group of poems belong together as a book? Or do you set out to compose poems for a collection that you have in mind?

Van: I struggle with that. I think that at different points in my life my writing has taken on different focuses. To some extent, that focus becomes the organizing principle of the grouping of poems I want to pull together into a collection.

For example, a trip that Laurel and I took to Greece two summers ago set in motion a set of poems about time, place, and transitions, how we connect place to place, past to present, personality to personality. My working title for those poems has been *Swimming the Aegean and other Seas*. But then I found myself responding more recently to the presence or absence of birds and the incredible resurgence of birdsong during the early period of Covid, when human traffic had diminished, which led me to thinking about their migration patterns and the fragility of their lives.

So now I have a grouping of poems that span two different but potentially connected topics. How do I shape them into a coherent whole? I wish I knew.

Sally: It sounds to me, Van, like these topics will organically connect—or are already connected—once you see them together.

Do you submit often to magazines? Are you disciplined about doing that? Do you enjoy the process, or is it drudgery?

Van: I am very poorly disciplined about that and feel that I should be doing it more systematically.

Sally: How important is publishing to you?

Van: My primary focus is on just trying to write a decent poem, one that I feel has some authenticity of voice and exhibits some level of craft. So, my primary audience is my own inner critic.

But I do believe it's important to engage in the public conversation of poetry, and that means putting poems out there into the public domain. It imposes another level of

discipline, and it makes possible the larger conversation that keeps poetry alive in our world.

So, yes, as delinquent as I am in actually doing it, I do think it's important to send poems out for publication.

Sally: Please tell us about your education and degrees, the schools you attended.

Van: I received a bachelor's degree from Stanford, with a major in history. I spent a year in France after college working for Stanford's study abroad campus there, where I developed an interest in medieval art and literature. I then received my master's degree and doctorate in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Sally: Was there one particular teacher or professor at any stage of your life who influenced you beyond all others? Encouraged and guided you?

Van: My AP English teacher, Mr. Catalano, sowed seeds for the love of literature while I was in high school.

In college, Professor Larry Friedlander watered the seeds with a course on Shakespeare.

After college, while I was in France, Professor Del Kolve made me fall in love with Chaucer and medieval art.

Then in graduate school, Professor Thomas Stumpf showed me that the study of literature and teaching could be at the center of a fulfilling life.

Finally, Dan Masterson, who taught poetry and screenwriting at Manhattanville, was a crucial mentor as I tried to become more focused and serious about my writing in the early 2000s. He would take a poem I was trying to write, highlight whatever was strong in it, then advise me to cut out the rest of the needless verbiage.

Sally: Were your parents supportive of your writing?

Van: Neither of my parents went to college, so they weren't quite sure what this idea of a Ph.D. in English was all about. But they were incredibly supportive of my choices and my creative efforts. They were quite proud to see the poems that I had written, but through the eyes of parents rather than critics.

Sally: You are a professor at Manhattanville College. I think you told me once how much you enjoy teaching. Please explain.

Van: I am a firm believer that my students and I are engaged in a mutual quest to make sense of our lives and that the study of literature is central to that quest. I gain intellectual as well as social sustenance from the classroom interaction. I take joy in seeing students grow into empathetic, critically minded adults through the study of literature, and I am thrilled when a student finds his or her own voice through poetry. At the same time, I feel grateful for ways in which my students help me to continue to grow.

Sally: Does the teaching ever get in the way of the writing, or does it lend inspiration?

Van: For me, it continues to open up new insights into life and the variety of human personalities.

Sally: What advice do you give your writing students?

Van: Above all, keep writing. Then edit. It is work. Along the way, give yourself the quiet space to look into yourself to access the memories, images, and associations that lie deep within.

Also, get outside of yourself to take a walk, physical or metaphorical, to look at the world in new ways and build additional memories, images, and associations to draw from.

Finally, replace abstract ideas with concrete sensory images and details wherever possible.

Sally: Do you enjoy being in the public as poet; giving readings, and such?

Van: I'm not all that comfortable with the label. I think it's important to give readings in order to look into the mirror, so to speak, that comes from an audience's response. I even find that I will sometimes hear myself stumbling over a phrasing and realize it needs to be changed.

But there's also a feeling of inauthenticity that comes over me when I present myself too self-consciously as a "poet" in a public space. That said, I also acknowledge the little ego within that responds to the public stage.

Sally: Well put!

Do you have a particular goal as poet? Perhaps a particular poem you would like to write someday, a particular collection you'd like to put together, a certain prize you'd love to be awarded?

Van: I want the impossible. That at some point I will write *the* poem, or collection of poems, that makes it all make sense.

Sally: Your wife, Laurel Peterson, was Norwalk's first poet laureate. Is that a position you might like to hold someday?

Van: Laurel set a very high standard to live up to. I think she was fabulous as poet laureate. I saw the incredible work she put into it and the wonderful community impact she had. I'm not sure that at this point, as I move into the second half of my seventies, I would have the energy to follow that act. So, I don't think so, unless there were some compelling sense that my doing it would be of a particular benefit to the Norwalk community.

Sally: Do you find it a positive thing being married to a poet? I assume you must help each other out immensely as listeners and readers of one another's work?

Van: Laurel is my best and most important critic. She was the person who convinced me that I could be a poet, that I in fact was a poet. We share and learn from each other constantly.

Sally: If there was just one thing a person could feel about your poetry, or derive from it, what would you wish that to be?

Van: I would hope that they would take away a sense that each of life's moments are sacramental in their importance, something to be valued, revered, and held carefully, and from that would come an empathy for others, human and nonhuman alike.

Sally: How vital is your poetry to you in your day to day life?

Van: As undisciplined as I am in my practice of daily writing, I try to carry poetry as a way of experiencing the world within me in my day-to-day life. In that sense, as a way of shaping my seeing of the world, it is quite vital.

I've taught early American literature at various points in my career, and while I don't share many elements of their faith, I do respond to the Puritans' idea that the natural world and the world of human affairs are filled with moments to be opened up for their deeper meaning, their potential to contain within them something of the sacred, as different as my understanding of that might be from theirs.

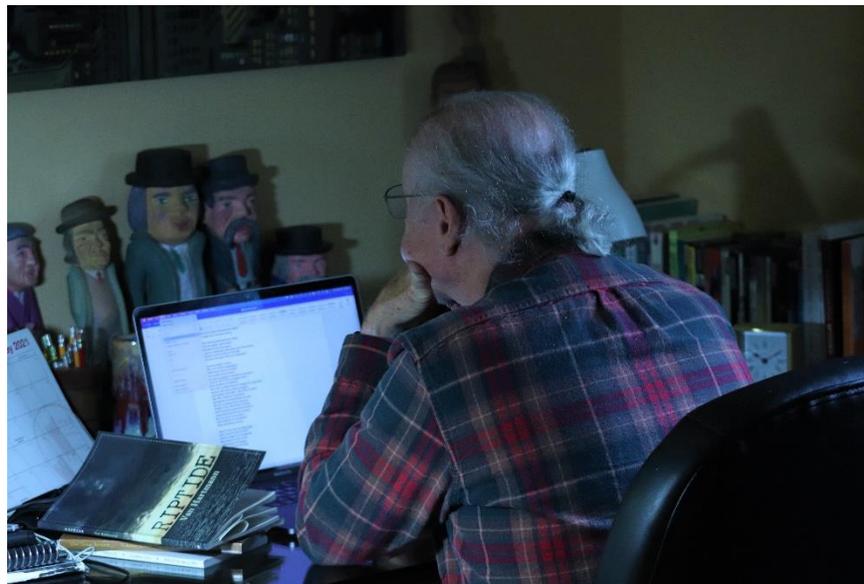
Maybe [Thoreau](#) comes closer to my sense of what it means to have poetry as a way of seeing in your day-to-day life when he says that he wished to live deliberately, to live deeply and suck all the marrow out of life. That is the challenge, to be awake to the world around and within us in the ways poetry makes possible.

Sally: Do you feel a constant state of wonder is important for a poet?

Van: I think that is a good way of saying it. It is far too easy to move numbly through the daily tasks of living, somnambulant as it were. To stay awake to the miracle of our existence, and the existence of others, is the challenge.

Sally: Please share with us anything that you feel I have left out! We are so happy to have you on the Poetry Page!

Van: I just want to thank you for doing this for the community of poets who might not otherwise be seen and heard.



Now, three of Van's poems...

SHIVA DANCING

Our plane slid down the Hudson,
at the mouth, banked east,
its shadow traversing Manhattan,
shrinking, expanding, breaking into fragments
on roofs and sides of buildings,
then settled on a crevice
where it seemed a tooth had been extracted
from the city's jaw.

A year before, the wreckage still exhaled
an acrid breath; smoke and ash and swirling cells
spun a savage dance;
air was thick with supplication
for one more gasp, touch,
chance to ask forgiveness;
mingled whispers, muted howls
rose in dark plumes from the hollow throat.
Now, from half a mile above I gawked
dumbly at the remnants of their passion.

At LaGuardia, baggage, bustle, embraces
brushed away the shadow that briefly touched their dust.
You weren't there to greet me,
having passed through your own catastrophe
a full year earlier than theirs.
I knew that time was slipping forward,
the present pressing on the past,
relentless, indifferent, like Merrill's torn up block,
the massive volume of the world
closing shut again, even on our grief.

Now more years have crumbled.
I strain to see your face
through the ash and dust that you've become.

It was springtime,
that morning you lay dying.
A college festival outside our window

brought a brightly colored balloon filled with heat
that rose and fell in a nearby field;
shadows danced across the grass
from laughing students a hundred feet above the ground.
You had had a dying night,
shredded lungs and ragged breath
subsiding to a silent fever;
you wanted water desperately
but had no voice to ask.
The morning clouded up and rained,
which stilled the balloon but did you little good.
I wet a cloth, laid it on your forehead,
squeezed moisture from a dropper
to clear your clouding eyes,
soaked a sponge-tipped stick,
swabbed your mouth, and talked
to keep you tethered to the earth.

It was the sponge that held you.
On that you wrapped your tongue
and clamped your teeth so tight
I had to use some strength to extract it.
You clung to water at the end.
I left the room for one brief chore;
you drifted free.
When I returned your face was bent
to where I'd sat.
Red laced saliva slid onto the pillow.
A single tear wet your cheek.

Your fleeing molecules left a hole
that lay agape, dark matter
whispered into my nights.
I took to sleeping in the space you left behind,
trying to use my bulk to hold ajar
the door through which you departed.

But inexorably it closes.
Who can build a monument
sufficient to what we want:
the breath of their desire,
the grip of teeth on moistened sponges?
Instead, we're left to imagine them
from shadows left behind.
We'd like to think they've mingled in a graceful
minuet with those whose anguish

came before and after. We'd like to think
they fill a universe of particles
that gyrate in counterpoint to ours.
We try to picture Shiva dancing
madly in love with them, tossing
their fragments about the heavens,
preparing them for our reunion.
But we move on to others
who embrace us at airports,
help rebuild our homes.

What is this tale I'm telling you
who have no ears to hear?
A slim wedge I've set against
the volume of the world,
a little dance of images,
a fragile house of words.

Van Hartmann
(from *Shiva Dancing*, Texture Press, 2007)

SHE MIGHT HAVE FLOWN

Through the frosted window I watched
a little girl step out from beneath
my mother's years, hooded in a parka
and grinning, her unsteady foot
probing the black tire that hung
on a brittle rope from a white birch
in the middle of the meadow
coated with an early snow.
Why I watched instead of calling out
a warning, I don't know.
I think I hoped that makeshift swing
might lift her to whatever she had seen
that made her eyes go wide with wonder.

Perhaps it was some childhood memory
hung from an aged oak rising from Montana
wheat where all the sisters she has lost
pushed one another to the sky.

Perhaps it was my father,
whom she couldn't lift
from the earth to which he fell,
for which she blamed herself,
as those left behind will do,
and thought, *if only I'd had this,*
or maybe if I can master it
I'll lift him now.

Perhaps I read it wrong,
looking from my window
on that cold Vermont afternoon,
my elderly widowed mother
wanting *to go for a walk by myself,*
to probe the snow-wrapped meadow
and its secrets unencumbered.

Perhaps, as she slipped her foot
into the ring of that old black tire
suspended on a dubious tether of
frayed hemp she whispered
to her long-dead daddy,
to my new-dead father,
to me and all the men whose
angry logic had kept her grounded,
Watch me fly now
on my own wings
beyond the grip of gravity,
beyond the rule of logic,
beyond those laws that I at eighty-six
have every right to break.

When she fell I felt a grief so full
it made me furious at the world
of fact and at myself for not
attending better to things like
ropes and time and memories.

Van Hartmann
(from *Riptide*, Texture Press, 2016)

LOOKING FOR DAISY

Lost in Louisville, looking for Daisy's
bourbon lips and golden voice, stalking
the Seelbach, hoping to eavesdrop on Scott

and Zelda before the catastrophe,
I spy a man more like Tom in a mirror
sipping a martini with Myrtle, her

laugh a clatter of quarters tumbling down
the big oak bar. I'm tempted to gather
them up, but it's Daisy I want,

her voice, her touch, perhaps one long
strand of golden hair left behind
to drape across my naked skin.

I walk to the river, watch coal barges
labor the Ohio, scow after scow
piled black with impending fire, the innards

of mountains further east strung like onyx,
cutting currents into currents, trailing
mud brown eddies layered with swirling silt.

I skip a quarter across the river's surface
then ask where it began, the coal, the thick
dark water, the soil it carries, the memory torn

from Eden that weighs on my heart like gold.

Van Hartmann

(from *Riptide*, Texture Press, 2016)

