

## **SABBATICAL LEAVE REPORT**

for Winter 2017

Bob Post

November 2, 2017

### **Original Statement of Purpose**

In my Sabbatical Leave proposal of November 2015, I stated, “I am seeking a sabbatical leave for the purposes of professional growth and renewal through the writing of poetry. The focus of my sabbatical will be the craft of poetry, the steps that shape an initial idea through multiple revisions. The sabbatical will include editing drafts, creating new poems, researching aspects of the writing process, and adapting my findings to classroom activities.”

### **Activities Performed**

My proposal planned six specific activities to achieve its objectives.

#### **1. Write/revise daily, beginning with material already written in my notebooks.**

I did this. Activities 2 and 3 below tell how.

#### **2. Revisit typed drafts of my poems, looking for ways to tighten and sharpen the language and imagery.**

Sorting through folders of typed material, I gathered 43 drafts to revise. I have revised these and returned often to revise them.

#### **3. Brainstorm and free-write new poems.**

I filled 60 pages of a 70-page spiral notebook with ideas and brainstorming for new poems. This material and older notebooks yielded 20 typed pages of drafts for future work.

#### **4. Seek poetic theory in literary criticism and in interviews of poets.**

I read extensively about the theory of writing poetry, primarily seeking essays about revision and skimming interviews for questions and responses concerning how poets revise. Attached to this report is bibliography of the sources that focused on revision. This bibliography is the tip of the iceberg of my reading of poetic theory.

#### **5. Attend local readings by authors.**

I attended the following readings:

Diane Seuss, reading and craft talk, KVCC Commons Theatre, February 16, 2017.

Reading and multimedia presentation by Denise Miller & Friends, *Echolocation*, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, February 23, 2017.

KVCC Faculty Poetry and Fiction Reading: Michelle Bonczek, Jen Brown, and Denise Miller, Anna Whitten Hall, March 21.

Jim Daniels, two readings and two craft talks, KVCC Student Commons, March 29 & 30.

Ned Foskey Poetry Prize 6th Annual Reading, KVCC Center for New Media, April 7.

“Alchemy: The Monologue Readings,” Kalamazoo Institute of Art, April 20.

Alchemy & Friends of Poetry Reading, Kalamazoo Public Library, May 9.

Elizabeth Kerlikowske, Kathleen McGookey, and Cindy Hunter Morgan, Ransom District Library, Plainwell, May 18.

“Passages of the Suites: Hours, Home, and Alchemy,” Richmond Center for the Visual Arts, WMU, May 25.

### **6. Develop my findings into classroom activities for my students.**

I am the least satisfied with this area of my sabbatical. Articles that applied revision techniques to classroom activities were variations on a theme of cutting apart documents and recombining the cuttings. I haven't gone beyond these ideas yet to develop applications of my own. I do intend to do so. I gathered much raw material during this sabbatical, and I continue to reflect on what I read and will seek further applications in my classes.

As the sabbatical progressed, I added two more activities:

### **7. I re-visited my own creative process.**

I reflected on a dozen of my poems that I considered successful, i.e. they had been published or selected for a public thematic reading. I wrote these reflections in a notebook. All of these poems involved extensive revision and working. When I reflected on how I wrote them and how their drafts changed during the revision process, I realized that they differed in the approaches I used and in the amount of time I spent on them. A few were written and revised in one sitting, within an hour, with only minor changes later. Others were revised over several years. In one case, a single poem became four published poems through revising over nine years, involving major “surgery” and numerous drafts. This self-reflection was probably the most important part of sabbatical and one that I had not envisioned in the original proposal over a year ago. This self-reflection contributed as much to the list of editing questions attached to this report as did my search into the theory of crafting poems.

### **8. I voraciously read poems.**

In addition, to individual poems in *American Poetry Review*, *Field: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, *Poetry*, *Rattle*, and *Tin House*, I read sixteen books of poetry. Several of these books were recently published by local poets:

Philip Levine, *The Last Shift*, 2016.

Diane Seuss, *Four-Legged Girl*, 2015.

Conrad Hilberry, *Player Piano*, 1999.

Jim Daniels, *Birth Marks*, 2013.

Elizabeth Kerlikowske, *Last Hula*, 2014.  
Jennifer Clark, *Necessary Clearings*, 2014.  
Bruce Lack, *Service*, 2015.  
Nancy Hoy Nott, *Poems in Two States*, 2017.  
Steve Leggett, *Entropy in the New World*, 2017.  
Joseph Gross, *Everything at Rest Is Waiting*, 2017.  
Daneen Waldrop, *Life as It*, 2016.  
Michelle Bonczek, *The Art of the Nipple*, 2013.  
Kathleen McGookey, *Stay*, 2015.  
Mary Hatch & Elizabeth Kerlikowske, *Flying Lessons: Paintings & Poems*, 2017.  
Kenneth Rexroth, *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese*, 1971.  
Dave Marlatt, *A Hog Slaughtering Woman*, 1996.

### **Objectives Accomplished**

1. To re-read, revise, and re-work my writing collected in notebooks.
2. To enhance my writing skills during this semester through constant practice.
3. To research how other poets and writers approach the craft of writing.
4. To bring back to my students the skills and knowledge that I acquired during this sabbatical.

### **Conclusions Drawn**

From this sabbatical, I learned that revising poetry is an individual process determined partly by the poet and partly by the individual poem. The statements made by writers during interviews and in essays reflected how the writers have worked out their own philosophies of revision. In *The Poet's Companion*, the chapter "The Energy of Revision" Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux offer ten guidelines and 35 questions. Traci Brimhall, on a handout she uses for workshops, offers 11 Revision Tips under three broad approaches to writing ("The Chisel," "Forensic Reconstruction," and "The Frankenstein). These were useful and concrete suggestions to direct a writer in the revising process. And then there is former U.S. Poet Laureate Mark Strand, "I do not have a secret method of writing, nor do I have a set of do's and don'ts. Each poem demands that I treat it differently from the rest, come to terms with it, seek out its own best beginning and ending." Strand does admit in his essay that his approach to writing and revising poems was heavily influenced by George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and its list of six rules, the final one being "Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous." While I have been familiar with this essay by Orwell and have used in it prose writing classes since I taught technical writing at Western Michigan University, I never thought of its applications to revising poetry until I read Strand's essay.

With a project of this sort, one is building on knowledge and creating new expertise. I see this sabbatical as a foundation for future growth as a writer and as a teacher.

Already I have published a poem that I worked on during this sabbatical. I dusted off a poem, "I Don't Want to Know," that I drafted in 2010. After much reworking, I submitted it to *Encore* magazine. The poem has already appeared in the October 2017 issue. Another poem was chosen for a thematic reading at the Kalamazoo Institute of the Arts in February. I began this poem after visiting an exhibit of art work by jazz trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith at the Kalamazoo Institute of the Arts. "Six Hipster Clarinets" was a response to Smith's

“New Black and Color Forms” 2013. My poem went through three drafts before I typed it and then another seven drafts before I submitted it. It is a very different type of poem than I usually write, and I am proud that it was selected and read at *Echolocation*, at the KIA, February 23, 2017.

I also would add that I believe my efforts at writing and revising help me to better empathize with my students when they struggle with writing. The act of writing is a struggle for me. I make choices, involving details, word choice, and order of sentences. The goal for me with every piece of writing is to produce clear sentences. Poetry adds the effects of sound and imagery. Ideally, the finished project looks like it was effortless. I am continually second guessing myself as I write. For me, a lot of effort goes into that final product.

### **A Summary of the Manner in which the Criteria for Sabbatical Leave Proposals Were Fulfilled**

KVCC’s Mission Statement states that we will: “Support a balance between a comprehensive curricular base and innovations in education, personal development and technology by strategically utilizing resources.” This sabbatical developed professional writing skills important to my teaching courses in the curricular base.

KVCC’s English Department’s first general education outcome is “Effective written and oral communication.” This sabbatical allowed me to redirect my energies from grading papers to reading theory about revision and to applying the theory to my own writing. Sharpening my writing skills can only enhance my ability to teach writing. Already this semester, I feel that my students in ENG 110 College Writing I and ENG 160 College Writing and Research have benefitted from the theory that I encountered in my reading. Breaking writing tasks into smaller steps, asking questions during the stages of writing, and exploring possibilities during drafting and revising are aspects of writing poetry that have direct applications to writing informational prose. I will continue to apply what I learned during the next semester when I teach two sections of ENG 111 College Writing II and one section of ENG 222 Advanced Creative Writing.

Finally, this sabbatical has allowed me to immerse myself in my field, to reflect on the reading, and then apply what I have learned. I feel energized. I am thankful for the opportunity afforded.

### **Applications (How You Plan to Use the Outcome of your Sabbatical Leave to Benefit the College, Students, and Colleagues)**

This sabbatical produced a bibliography of books and articles that deal with the revising and crafting poems, notes of authors’ statements concerning revision (a sample is attached), and a checklist of questions/editing tips to speed the revision process. I will use these three items not only in my own writing/revising but also in preparing activities for the classroom to benefit my students. I will also offer these materials to my colleagues in the English Department. I hope that they will build on my efforts.

## Advice from Writers on Revision

Interviewer: How long did it take you to finish “The Moose”?

“I started that [poem] *years* ago--twenty years ago, at least--I had a stack of notes, the first two or three stanzas and then the last.”

**Elizabeth Bishop, interviewed in *Poets at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, 1989.**

“Of the two best methods of revision, the more practical is simply to cut out the bad parts. The whole secret then becomes how to recognize the bad parts, and it is true that many writers are too much blinded by a love for their own creations to see what may prove perfectly obvious to their readers.... The other method is to abandon the early draft and think it through again. Completely reconstruct the thing! The experience of having tried once before and failed might turn out to be an advantage the next time around.”

**Donald Justice. “On Revision.” *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*, 1992.**

“Rewriting [does] not mean fiddling with a word or two here and there, but redrafting the poem from scratch, that is, actually *find* the poem that was buried under that first ineffectual version. It is an act of discovery in which we find the language and the meaning at the same time....”

**Steve Kowit. *In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet’s Portable Workshop*, 1995.**

“When I do re-write--a week later, a month, or maybe a year later--it’s not very much. I might have to add a little bit or turn two lines around or cut a little bit, change a word, or replace a line. I almost always fiddle around some more with the lineation--sometimes I have to hold on to something for years before I have an ending.”

**Kay Ryan, interviewed in the *Paris Review*,**

“I do not have a secret method of writing, nor do I have a set of do’s and don’ts. Each poem demands that I treat it differently from the rest, come to terms with it, seek out its own best beginning and ending.”

**Mark Strand, “Notes on the Craft of Poetry.” *Weather of Words: Poetic Invention*, 2001.**

“A good poem, even in potential form, has a shape, a life, that floats above the words: ‘the light around the body’ as Robert Bly put it....Apprehend the poem’s field of energy, then think, while revising, of coming at that field from a completely different direction than you have tried so far. Your poem is a city; instead of getting off the freeway and driving into town straight down Main Street, imagine you’re out at the junkyard next to the lake, trying to get hubcaps for your ‘78 Ford Country Squire. Leave your car there underneath the big maples and walk into town through the railroad freight yard, past the greenhouses, up past the soccer field.”

**Richard Tillinghast. “Household Economy, Ruthlessness, Romance, and the Art of Hospitality: Notes on Revision.” *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*, 1992.**

## QUESTIONS FOR REVISING A POEM

March 2017

### **Create interest through the beginning and ending.**

Does the first line grab the reader's interest?

Does the first line create an image?

Does the last line "end" the poem or leave the reader perplexed?

Does the poem end with an image or an abstraction?

Can the abstraction be replaced with an image?

Is a better ending possible?

Is the last word, a concrete or an "important" word?

Is the ending the place where the poem should begin? [Try beginning with the last line and start from scratch.]

### **Consider the content.**

Does the poem appeal to the senses?

Are the images clear?

Are there ambiguities in the poem?

Are there abstractions in the poem?

Are these abstractions needed or earned by the rest of the poem?

Are the correct words used? [Check a dictionary for definitions, especially if using words that not commonly used.]

Can a long word be replaced with a short word?

Is there humor in the poem?

Does the poem work beyond the humor, so it is not just a joke?

Is the correct voice used? [Try switching from first person to third person and vice versa.]

### **Read the poem aloud.**

Does the poem read smoothly? Are there spots where you stumble over the words?

Does the poem have "music"? [Music consists of repeated sounds as in rhyme, alliteration, assonance.]

Can the music be improved?

### **Note the Line breaks.**

Do the line breaks suggest how the poem should be read?

Are the lines in the correct order? [Try moving the lines (or the sentences).]

Would the poem work better in prose?

## **The Art of Revision: A Bibliography**

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