

SOARING

Newsletter of Spalding University's MFA Alumni

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Homecoming 2009

“This Kentucky Derby, whatever it is—a race, an emotion, a turbulence, an explosion—is one of the most beautiful and violent and satisfying things I have ever experienced.”

—John Steinbeck

On this first weekend in May, I stopped what I was doing, turned on the television and watched the Kentucky Derby. By the time I joined in, most of the equine interest stories had already run, most of the handicapping and prognosticating had finished and the horses were being led through the paddock area. The University of Louisville marching band played “My Old Kentucky Home” and spectators with hats and suits sang the lyrics that scrolled along the bottom of the screen. Jockeys mounted, horses were led into the gates and, for a second, there was total silence, broken by ringing bells and gates clanging open, hooves thundering, launching the thoroughbreds into the “fastest two minutes in sports.” For three quarters of the race the favorites maneuvered over the muddy track, when Mine That Bird, a 50 to 1 long shot took to the inside rail then bolted past the field to win by over six lengths. The horse that was in last place at the first turn, stole first place in the end.

As homecoming approaches, I’ve tried to put those 50 to 1 odds in perspective. What were the odds that, five years ago, I would have decided to enroll, then actually be accepted in an MFA program? Probably greater than the Derby winner’s. And who could have guessed the odds that five years later I’d still look back with the confidence that it was one of the best things I’d ever done?

Suffice it to say that I treasure the friendships and relationships, experiences and education I gained during my two years in Louisville at the Spalding MFA in Writing program. I love the Steinbeck quote above and believe that it could just have easily been written about Spalding residency and workshop experiences. And now, every last weekend in May, I look forward to returning to my old Kentucky home and every year the journey home just gets better.

[Continued on page 7]



HOMECOMING SCHEDULE

Thursday, May 28 (for alumni who arrive early)

5:00 Celebration of Recently Published Books: Molly Peacock, Nancy Jensen, Kathleen Driskell, Tori Murden McClure (ELC)

Friday, May 29

11:30-12:30 Readings by PGRAs (First Unitarian Church)

1:30-2:30 **The Writing Life: A Panel Discussion by Alumni.** Erin Keane, Michele Ruby, Katy Yocom discuss topics like volunteering in the literary community, editing anthologies, and finding a writing residency (First Unitarian Church)

2:45-3:30 **Kaylene Johnson's Plenary Lecture: "Ten Weeks to a Bestseller and other Injustices of the Publishing World"** (First Unitarian Church)

3:45-4:45 **Care and Tending of Books/Scripts** A panel of faculty and alumni discuss what authors can do to promote a book/script once a book contract is signed or a play/screenplay is slated for production. Includes time for Q&A
Fiction: Kenny Cook, Linda Busby Parker (Fall 03), Julia Watts (Fall 05), Katrina Kittle (Fall 08)

Poetry: Greg Pape, Molly Peacock, Kathleen Thompson (Fall 03), Frank X Walker (Spring 03)

Creative Nonfiction: Roy Hoffman, Dianne Aprile, Tori Murden McClure (Spring 05)

Writing for Children and Young Adults: Ellie Bryant, Luke Wallin, Edie Hemingway (Spring 04)

Playwriting: Eric Schmiedl, Charlie Schulman, Kim Stinson-Hawn (Fall 07)

Screenwriting: Sam Zalutsky, Wayne Crawford (Fall 08)

5:15-6:30 **Celebration of Recently Published Books by Alumni (ELC)**

Al DeGenova, Teniece Delgado, Kaylene Johnson, Maryann Lesert, Julia Schuster, Kathleen Thompson, Frank X Walker



7:30 **Reunion Class Get-together for classes of 2003 and spring 2004** Students from other classes are welcome as well. Heavy hors d'oeuvres, and a cash bar. \$30 per person; \$50 for two (J. Graham Brown Suite, Brown Hotel)

Saturday, May 30

8:30-11am **Homecoming Brunch with MFA staff** Faculty and staff available until about 9:45 a.m. \$40 per person (J. Graham Brown Suite, Brown Hotel)

11am **Buffet lunch** in the cafeteria. Complimentary, but reservations required.

12:15-1:30 **Graduating Students' Readings** (Brown Hotel)

3-3:45 **Modern Classics: Ahab's Wife** Sena talks about the evolution of the novel from inception through its publication as a Modern Classic (ELC)

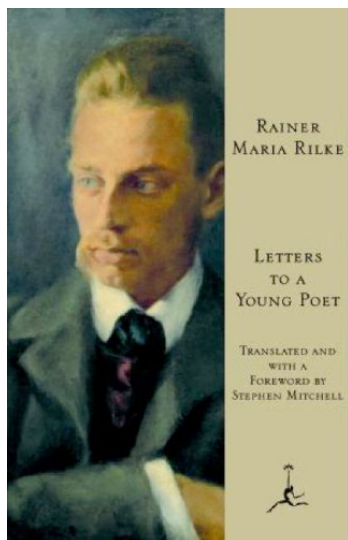
4-5:15 **Anthology Readings** Readings from three anthologies edited by alumni: *Women.Period.*, *Christmas is a Season*, and *Yellow as Turmeric; Fragrant as Cloves* (ELC)

6:00 **Graduation** followed by dinner (The Gallery, Brown Hotel, \$45 for dinner)

DEATH OR ICE CREAM?

By Maija Stromberg

In Rainer Maria Rilke's classic, *Letters to a Young Poet*, there are ten letters written to Franz Xaver Kappus over a period of six years, from 1902 to 1908.



It's a testament to Rilke's character that he was willing to write these beautiful and insightful letters to a young poet whom he'd never met.

In the first letter, Rilke breaks down the mainstay of any writing workshop. Kappus has evidently asked for a critique of his poems (his letters aren't provided), but Rilke responds as follows: "With nothing can one approach a work of art so little as with critical words: they all come down to more or less happy misunderstandings."

True, even the keenest reader never understands *all* of what you might be trying to say. And, happily, this is the way it should be. If your keen reader

understood your writing completely, then it would be hard to argue that your writing was unique. The difficulty of fully understanding a unique voice might be one of the reasons that there are still new things to say about Shakespeare.

It's with the imperfections of critique in mind that Rilke declares: "Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, **acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write.**"

While I understand that he's arguing for the independence of the artistic voice, I object to his final demand. The weight of his question – if you couldn't write, would you have to die – is an unfair burden on any artist prone to doubt.

Last night, while we were eating pizza, I looked at my husband, a mechanical engineer who studies diesel combustion and emissions, and I noted that he has never said, "If I am not able to graph the heat release rate of burning diesel fuel in a turbo charged engine, I will surely die."

He admitted as much. "In fact," I said, "In the situation I just mentioned, isn't it likely that you would say, 'Let's go get ice cream'?" He concurred.

Where else do people take themselves as seriously as writ-

ers do? At first, because I was thinking in terms of professions, I decided that this view – "I'll die if I don't become a writer/actor/pianist/sculptor," was mainly typical of artists. But then, taking a broader look at the world, grabbing just a few big cultural ideas out of the pile, it's easy to see that in sports, for example, the combination of physical prowess and competition suggests both beauty and war, and ends in winners and losers. Politics points dramatically to the people, saying, believe *us* and you'll benefit, believe *them* and you'll suffer. In Christianity, the link between faith and life is intrinsic. Do writers need to subscribe to the same broad reckoning? Write or lose? Write or suffer? Write or die?

I've seen my husband when he's figured out some gnarly combustion equation, and the plot line on his graph suddenly rises and falls the way it's supposed to. When that happens, he's happy.

I dislike an ultimatum, particularly one involving death. Flip the analysis of your writing life the other way. When you write a good sentence, does it make you happy? Does it make you want to write another? On any given day, I'd start there.



FRANK X WALKER RESURRECTS YORK

By Loreen Niewenhuis

If you've walked to the river during one of your busy residencies, you probably wandered onto Belvedere Plaza. Walking up the brick incline, you are funneled to the statue of George Rogers Clark (of Louis and Clark fame). He points toward the river as he looks back over his shoulder at you. It's only natural to walk past him to the railing and look down at the river to see what he's trying to show you.

A more recent statue added to the park is tucked back and off to one side of Clark. It is of York, Clark's slave, who was taken along on the expedition to explore the West. Ed Hamilton did this sculpture and it is a powerful work. York stands, feet astride, a gun in one hand, an ax in his belt and dead ducks in his other hand. While the Clark statue befuddled me, the York statue has always captivated me with its strength and power.

I expect York to turn his head and look down at me.

When I heard about Frank X Walker's (spring 2003) newest collection of poems, *When Winter Come: The Ascension of York* (published by the University Press of

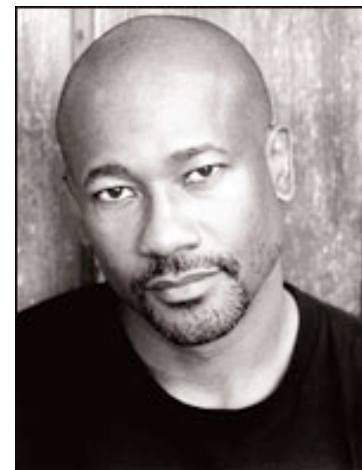
Kentucky), my first question was if he had been inspired by the sculpture. Walker answered, "I was fortunate enough to be researching the York poems while Ed Hamilton was working on the clay version of what would be become the bronze statue on the Belvedere. When I needed inspiration, I could go to the studio and watch Ed work and watch York

come alive and usually go home and have really good writing or editing sessions."

Walker mentioned that this collection is a sequel to his award-winning *Buffalo Dance* and that it features not only York's voice, but also the voices of the women in York's life and some of the objects closest to him.

These multiple voices do a more complete job telling York's story.

I then asked him why he chose to inhabit York in this work, and if he learned anything about himself by doing so. Walker replied, "I thought the narrative would be more powerful if he told his own story. I learned that I still really enjoyed American history and a good story and that the Lewis and Clark expedition was full of great stories."



[Author photo by Tracy A. Hawkins]

Walker often travels to give recitations of his work. There is even a section of his website (www.FrankXWalker.com) called "Frank Out Loud: readings, workshops, lectures, special events." He mentioned: "I think poems are meant to be read out loud. It is very important to me to be part of the oral tradition."

Walker's poetry generally takes the form of free verse, but he is currently working on a group of poems he's calling Affrilachian sonnets.

When Winter Come: The Ascension of York will be featured at the Celebration of Recently Published Books by Alumni at this month's Homecoming program. Alumni won't want to miss Walker resurrecting York during this event.



EXPLAIN IT TO ME LIKE I'M A 5-YEAR-OLD...

By Amy Watkins-Copeland

“Hi, I’m Amy and I’m a poet.” A simple enough declaration, but it’s hard for me to choke out those words. When I talk about writing in the “real world,” away from the understanding tribe of other writers, I expect to be misunderstood, thought pretentious. I’m reluctant to talk about poetry in mixed company.

Elizabeth Slade made me realize how lame that reluctance is. When I mentioned painting during a Spalding residency, she asked if I was an artist, and I gave my usual response: “Um...well, I’m not very... that is, I like to paint, but...um...”

“I’m going to ask you again,” she said in a firm tone I recognized from my mother, “and you’re going to *own* it.” She didn’t relent until I had shouted to the crowded Brown Hotel lobby, “YES! I am an ART-IST!”

When my daughter’s school recently held a day for parents and community members to visit classrooms and share knowledge, I decided to “own it,” as my firm-but-fair pal might say. I volunteered, barely faltering over the words “I’m a writer,” said over the phone to the vice principal like a confession. I armed myself with Nancy Willard’s picture book of poems, *A Visit to William Blake’s Inn*, one of my daughter’s favorite bedtime reads, scrunched myself into a green plastic chair meant for a five-year-old, and faced the wild horde of kindergartners on a Tuesday afternoon. Here, with a few asides, is what I told them about poetry, beginning with the hardest part: “Hi, I’m Amy, and I’m a poet...”

To be a good poet, you have to know a lot about words, because poems are made of words. If you’re a poet, you need a big vocabulary. Do you know what vocabulary means? *One kid suggests that it means “really big words.”* That’s sort of the idea. Your vocabulary is all the words you know, so we just added the word “vocabulary” to your vocabulary. *They find this very funny.* You want a big vocabulary so that you can use lots of different words in your poems — pretty words and funny words and exciting words. *One kid suggests “awesome words,” and I tell him those are a poet’s favorite kind.*

The best way that I know to learn about words and grow your vocabulary is to read, so poets read a lot. We also ask a lot of questions. If you hear a word you don’t know, ask what it means. *This may backfire on me later, but I’m sticking to it.*

You might not think so at first, but poets also need to learn math, because poetry uses patterns. *I show them the book I’ve brought, how there are patterns of lines and spaces, patterns of short and long lines and patterns of rhyming words. They immediately understand the rhyming, even the “a-b-a-b” stuff, because that’s how their teacher is teaching patterns.*

So, if you’re going to be a poet you have to learn a lot about words and a lot about patterns, but there’s one other thing you have to do to be a poet, the most important thing: you have to pay attention. You have to notice things. Poets use something else you’ve learned about in school: the five senses. Poets notice things with their senses and then use those things to tell what it’s like to be in a certain place or with a certain person or to feel a certain way. Do you know what I mean? *They don’t.*

I bet if you think about it you can tell me a sound that reminds you of school or a smell that reminds you of home. Whenever I smell popcorn, I think of my mom. She used to make popcorn, and the whole family would eat it and watch TV together. [Continued on next page]

EXPLAIN IT TO ME LIKE I'M A 5-YEAR-OLD...

By Amy Watkins-Copeland

[Continued from previous page]

They find the popcorn thing oddly hilarious and tell me some of the sounds that remind them of school — bells and buses and markers squeaking — then I read them a handful of Nancy Willard's poems, including the poem spoken by Blake's tiger because they all love him instantly.

What did you notice in this poem? Did you notice anything you could see or smell or taste or hear or touch? *snow, tiger fur, burning loaves of bread* Did you hear any words you didn't know? *emerald, abundant*

I read them the last poem in the book, a sweet and slightly melancholy little good-bye poem that ends, "rest a little for my sake / and give my love to William Blake." One goofy little boy, maybe the one who said snow was a smell, said, "I didn't like that one. The end made me feel embarrassed." *I think embarrassed is the word you use when you're little and you feel something you can't describe, a mix of emotions that isn't sad or happy or angry, something you haven't learned the word for yet. And I think that if a poem makes you feel that emotion you can't describe, maybe you're something like a poet.*

I didn't tell him that. I told him that there are all kinds of poems — ones that make you feel happy or sad or even embarrassed — and that's okay. The teacher asked me a few questions. I told the kids to pay attention to things, to try writing down or drawing what they see, hear, taste, touch, smell and feel. I told them to use their imaginations. I told myself these things.

As I extricated my adult-sized bottom none too gracefully from the kindergartner-sized chair, I realized that I often make writing too complicated. I'm always trying to mean something, forgetting Richard Hugo's advice in *The Triggering Town* to "have increased faith in sound and the accidents of imagination." Writing really isn't so complex; all it requires is word, pattern, curiosity, imagination and attention. I left the Crayola box smell of the classroom feeling happy, feeling more than I had in a long time like a poet.



UPCOMING WRITER EVENTS

(CLICK ON NAME TO GO TO WEBSITE):

[INDIANA UNIVERSITY WRITERS' CONFERENCE](#)
JUNE 14-19

[KENTUCKY WOMEN WRITERS CONFERENCE](#)
SEPTEMBER 10-12

[SOUTHERN FESTIVAL OF BOOKS](#)
OCTOBER 9-11

To contribute an event to this list, please send an e-mail to:

SOARING@SpaldingMFAAlum.com

Fun Link!

Check out Literature-map.com

It is a strange, graphic display that relates authors to one another. You click on an author's name and a cloud of other authors appear who have some relationship (based on their writing) to them. You may buy that Dostoevsky relates to Gogol, but what about Wendell Berry to Dave Eggers?

SOARING

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This year, the program put together by our committee of Bonnie Johnson, Sue Carls McNally, and John Schuler with the amazing help of the MFA staff, is the best yet. The first reunion of the initial graduating MFA classes of Spring and Fall 2003 and Spring of 2004 only adds to the anticipation. We're excited about our second Celebration of Recently Published Books by Alumni on Friday night with featured alumni authors – Albert DeGenova, Teneice Delgado, Kaylene Johnson, Maryann Lesert, Julia Schuster, Kathleen Thompson and Frank X Walker. We're keeping the weekend agenda updated on the alumni website www.spaldingmfaalum.com plus we're keeping a running list of those who've told us they're planning to be at homecoming. Check the site regularly for additional updates and attendees. And if you're returning, send your name, genre and graduation time and we'll add you to the site.

Here's to seeing you in Louisville.

Best always,

Terry

Terry Price, Spring of 2006



COMING ATTRACTIONS

* More interviews with published alums!

* Reports from Homecoming 2009

* Maybe YOU'D like to write something??

Shoot your idea to:
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Hot Link!

There was a session at AWP called 'Shameless Promotion: Getting the Book to the Readers.' The four presenters (all published writers) also have a blog called SQUAD 365.

It is at: SQUAD365.BLOGSPOT.COM

They (and others in the audience who had great input) vowed to blog about the session to get all the ideas out to writers. And it's not just about promoting your own work, but about promoting literature in general.

The Spalding MFA Alumni Association is an independent organization established by graduates of the Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program of Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky and exists to facilitate communication among alumni and between alumni and the MFA in Writing Program. The Association does not represent the University or the MFA program, and all activities, publications, views and statements are those of the individual writers who are affiliated with the Spalding MFA Alumni Association, and are not those of Spalding University, the MFA in Writing Program of Spalding, its staff, faculty, employees and agents.