

VOICES OF INDEPENDENCE

Four regional poets worth celebrating and learning from

BY Lori Walsh PHOTOS BY Emily Spartz

It doesn't get much better than this: sliding Linda Hasselstrom's "Bitter Creek Junction" into the CD slot of the car and rolling down the window. Hasselstrom's voice washes clear and loud through the speakers. "Make a hand!" she shouts, and the poem rolls from her throat, and passers-by stop and stare as if it's unusual to drive through downtown sending the spoken word into the wake of the world.

It's best if you can hear them read their own works: Sarah McKinstry-Brown's sultry performance of "You Are Dangerous" dancing over background music on her CD. Christine Stewart-Nuñez cradling a captive audience at Augustana College. Lee Ann Roripaugh opening up her classic "Octopus in the Freezer" at the Festival of Books. Hasselstrom in the reading room at Zandbroz Variety.

They are our poets – women have not only contributed to the poetry of the Plains but have also helped reshape it.

SARAH MCKINSTRY-BROWN

AUTHOR: *"When You Are Born,"*
"Cradling Monsoons,"
"Transplant" (spoken word CD)

DON'T MISS: *"1001 Loads of Laundry,"* *"After the Revolution, Waltzing is Forbidden"*

VISIT: www.sarah.midverse.com

"The reason I'm still passionate about poetry is that I really do feel like it saved me on a number of levels," Sarah McKinstry-Brown says. "Writing is like church. When I sit down to write, I quiet down. Everything gets calm, and I begin this process of finding out what makes sense to me."

McKinstry-Brown, who lives in Omaha, was introduced to slam poetry in Albuquerque, when she wandered into a coffeehouse to discover poets shouting and whispering and moving around on the stage.

"If that's poetry, I do like poetry," she remembers thinking. "I do want to write it."

Yet the first time McKinstry-Brown read one of her poems in front of a live audience, she was so nervous she had to turn her back to the crowd. She would hold the heaviest book she could find to camouflage the shaking of her hands. Today, when she teaches workshops, she reminds students that she didn't just "roll out of bed this morning" with a perfect poetry performance at her finger-



Sophia's Got Some Questions
By Sarah McKinstry-Brown

The girl who began
as a single cell,
splitting and repeating,
a question my body
couldn't stop answering,
is now five and a half,
almost six,
and wants to know
if God made us with a hammer,
and if there are restaurants
up in heaven. Or toys.
Are there toys in heaven?
Is the dog going to die?
And if the dog does die,
will Jesus yell at the dog
for begging at the table?
Is there yelling
in heaven? It's bedtime,
and she needs the unabridged version
of everything.
I do my best
to fit the cosmos
inside a goodnight kiss,
which, I guess, is fitting,
since the marriage of lips
and skin pretty much explains
the origin of her, girl
who spends her days spinning
in place, arguing with gravity
till we all
fall down.

tips. There are years of practice and polish embedded in each reading.

McKinstry-Brown, like poet Billy Collins, recommends exploring poetry in reverse. Start with contemporary poets before dipping into the classics, she says. Find the voices who are writing poems that get you excited, that make you laugh, that you recognize in the details of your own life.

To write poetry, you must open new doorways into yourself. Though universal in appeal, McKinstry-Brown's work also is wrapped in the best kind of feminine viewpoint – smart and sensual, with warmth and wit and a willingness to speak from the densest forests to the most dazzling laundry rooms of womankind.

"Follow your instincts. There is a real sense of discovery in the process. You have to be willing to fail, to not make sense. You have to be willing to be playful."



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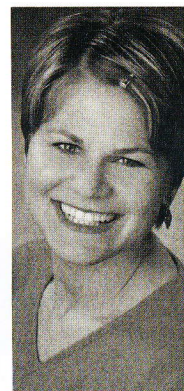
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CHRISTINE STEWART-NUÑEZ

AUTHOR: *"Keeping Them Alive,"*
"A Love of Unreal Things,"
"Unbound & Branded," "Postcards on Parchment"

DON'T MISS: *"Convergence," "Bad Girl"*

VISIT: <http://christinestewartnunez.wordpress.com>



One of the beautiful things about a poem is its distilled nature, Christine Stewart-Nuñez says.

"It's like a tiny piece of glass that you look through and see something new," she says. "Sometimes things in daily life can be transformative because we take those things for granted."

Stewart-Nuñez cracks open subjects from the domestic to the divine. Her most recent collection braids poems about the birth of her son with poems about the death of her sister. She believes there is a difference between writing the personal and writing the private, and many readers relate to her latest work precisely because they have been plunged into the oceans of loss or joy in their own lives.

"At some point, when I started sending (poems) out there, I just let go of something," she says. "I have to be OK with people knowing some things about me."

Stewart-Nuñez, who teaches at South Dakota State University, reminds readers to be patient with a poem because often "you can't get all the layers on the first reading."

On the other hand, she warns poets not to be too opaque.

"A reader should be able to enjoy at least one layer on the first read. There has to be a reason to go to the page."

LEE ANN RORIPAUGH

AUTHOR: *"On the Cusp
of a Dangerous Year,"*
*"Year of the Snake," "Be-
yond Heart Mountain"*

DON'T MISS: *"Octopus in
the Freezer,"*
"Bioluminescence"

VISIT: <http://runningbrush.wordpress.com>

"There's a stereotypical notion of what characterizes the poem with a capital P," Lee Ann Roripaugh says. "But as a poet, you get to define what a poem is each and every time you engage in the process of writing a poem."

Roripaugh recommends visiting websites to find something that speaks to you.

"The poetry community is really sort of efficiently and marvelously networked," Roripaugh says. "Everything is kind of at your fingertips. Read against the grain. Challenge yourself."

In Praise of a Pregnant Body
By Christine Stewart-Nunez

Some women count calories, step on the altar
of weight each week, mourn the loss of waist
jeans too tight to button, I prefer to blossom.
I surrender to coconut salmon in banana leaves,
miso soup with prawns, paella, lasagna, seafood
risotto, mangu and tostones, salads of blueberries,
blood oranges, and papaya, the bloom of belly,
breasts spilling over seams, petals of areolas darkening.

I've abandoned the lunch-break park with its tire swing
and picnic of stale chips for the circus, lion tamers,
dogs with purple tutus, magicians pulling doves
from top hats, trapeze artists somersaulting
through the air. I want the Big Top's pillows
of cotton candy dissolving in my mouth, mounds
of popcorn shiny with butter, globs of caramel
apples, hot dogs drenched in mustard.

Blood thickening and milk springing from nipples
remind me: be open. Enough of this suburb
with its square meals served in look-alike
houses. Give me Paris with its artists scattered
on sidewalks, painted confetti, dancers
in discotheques stretching onto streets at dawn.
With more body to envelop, I'll browse boutiques
at the Rue du St.-Honor, lounge sipping caf-au-lait,
nibbling a croissant's flakey layers. Order coq-au-vin
or pot-au-feu, decorate the board with baguette,
brie. Will mousse aux fraises complete me?

If I'd been born with different genes
petite, straight-hipped, willowy-tall
would I enjoy fat bowls of kalamata olives, sliced avocado,
desserts of mangoes in cream, pumpkin pie?

I surrender to possibility, to joy, to feasts
of seven-grain breads, lamb stews, chocolate
souffls. I thank this baby whose growing bones
demand wheels of provolone, sticks of mozzarella,
cubes of sharp cheddar, cups of vanilla yogurt
at two a.m., whose kicks remind me to taste
roast beef, venison steak, the cream of deviled eggs.

Roripaugh teaches at the University of South Dakota and says often her students are looking for permission to approach their writing seriously. Roripaugh is constantly stretching, challenging herself.

"I don't want to be the kind of poet who writes the same volume over and over."

There is something about writing poetry that evokes nobility, Roripaugh adds – purity in process that translates into more than the resulting ink on page.

"The wonderful thing about writing comes from your own willingness to engage with the process," she says. "Read, write and revise, as widely and as deeply as possible. Poetry is an art form that you can never master. It is not a means to an end."

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THE VIOLIN THIEF . . . By Lee Ann Roripaugh

slips away into the bird-stunned blaze of morning, sticky fingers steeped in pine, sun an ambered cake of rosin sliding up the sky by unseen hydraulics.

Perhaps the violin shouldn't let itself be played in the hands of a thief, but the violin thief understands the laws of harmonics that invisibly subdivide the glistening neck, the unmapped and inscrutable intonation of silky ebony fingerboard yielding to callused fingertips, how to balance the unwieldy contrariness of the bow with only the lightest of grips. So in the end, the stolen music exists solely for the violin thief, making the violin thief an owner of sorts of the once-silent violin that now sings willingly in larceny.

Music everywhere: Do you hear the confidential pizzicato of rain pinging the windowpane? The train whistle fiddling double-stops? Whisper of horsehair against rosin a song of brushed hair, the spicatto of the coffee maker's sputter, woodpeckers trilling a delicate col legno?

The violin thief isn't boy or girl, man or woman, ghost or hallucination.

The violin thief is the parched thirst of night's velvety-inked blackness. The stained mouthings of dipsomaniacal iris drinking night's bruised wine until drought-ridden stars drop from the emptied goblet of sky. The relentless bee that greedily searches for stars in the purple mouths of the iris, stealing away with a bright crust of pollen on its legs like golden crumbs of rosin dust.



- **LINDA HASSELSTROM**
- **AUTHOR:** *"Dirt Songs," "Dakota Bones,"*
- *"Bitter Creek Junction" (and many others)*
- **DON'T MISS:** *"Mulch," "Make A Hand"*
- **VISIT:** www.windbreakhouse.com

"Mulch" is the poem most requested when Linda Hasselstrom does readings, she says. Women tend to "whoop, holler and request it by yelling from the back row, and then ask for a copy."

Her poems are infused with the sacredness of everyday. She neither shies from the jagged corners of life nor from the dirt-under-your-fingernails details of turning the earth to churn language and imagery. Yet her poetry, like her prose, is smooth and inevitable – a polished river stone.

"After all those college classes, I thought poetry had to be profound, and that kept me from writing for a long time. ... 'Mulch' changed my viewpoint, and since then I've worked at finding the

Mulch
By Linda M. Hasselstrom

A mulch is a layer of organic matter
used to control weeds,
preserve moisture,
and improve the fertility of the soil.
You will not find naked soil
in the wilderness.

I started cautiously: newspapers,
hay, a few magazines;
Robert Redford stared up
between the rhubarb and the lettuce.

Then one day, cleaning shelves,
I found some old love letters.
I've always burned them, for the symbolism.
But the ashes, gray and dusty as old passions,
would blow about the yard for days
stinging my eyes,
bitter on my tongue.

So I mulched them:
gave undying love to the tomatoes,
the memory of your gentle hands to the squash.
It seemed to do them good,
and it taught me a whole new style
of gardening.

Now my garden is the best in the wilderness,
and I mulch everything:
bills; check stubs;
dead kittens and baby chicks.
I seldom answer letters; I mulch them
with the plans I made for children of my own,
photographs of places I've been
and a husband I had once;
as well as old bouquets
and an occasional unsatisfactory lover.

Nothing is wasted.

Strange plants push up among the corn,
leaves heavy with dark water,
but there are
no weeds.

poetic in the daily, writing poems about a ranch auction, calving, a letter to a friend, digging potatoes, driving, drying onions, a dead cow, driving in a blizzard ... a friend who wasn't home, lighting kerosene lamps, roadkill, scrubbing parsnips, walking the dog."

Hasselstrom is the quintessential Dakota poet. Writers journey to her ranch near Hermosa for retreats.

"Every single retreat is different, and I'm often surprised at what the writers achieve in a few days," she says. "Many of them realize, I think, that I'm a pretty ordinary woman, and if I can write decent prose and poetry, so can they." **S**

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