

Mark Decarteret Residency 2008

We begin by mulling over, weighing in, on W.S. Merwin's solemn, emotionally-stunted (but epic-minded) lament "Words from a Totem Animal"-an environmental plea, entreaty, managed by an animal (with what appears great difficulty) both resigned to its plight and unnamed. We also try to see behind Merwin's pronouncement that "all magic is but metaphor"--this thinking that words possess an almost alchemical power when first summoned and/or uttered and also see to our taboo-boos--this condition that knowing a person or thing's actual title allows it to exercise its will over us or vice-versa. That whole idea behind euphemisms. How we do of anything the sacred, to go the around inviolate, subject. that the Try two not to collections look it in of the poetry eyes. devoted Maybe it's entirely because of this sense of the sacred, the inviolate that the two collections devoted entirely to bears and Bear Crossings, contain only three persona (anima?) poems (with one of them a Navaho song and the other a toy's view- though one or two pieces what-if with this half-wish/half-sniff of its subject). Or maybe it's this dread of being of two minds? Or this discomfort, even shame, judging by our attempts at anthropomorphism in the past (not to mention our disastrous track record with Nature in general)--those most hokey of invocations, not to mention, those sorriest of portrayals.

Ah well, far be it for me to scare the students off, prevent them from suiting up. So first things first, they dreamed up their creature. Or were charged, assigned. Some might even say saddled. And then with the brisk and slightly brash encouragement of Cynthia Gallaher's sketch "White on White" they play-acted, addressing their wilder sides. Student's work ranged from the prayerful, incantatory to the mysterious, shape-shifting. Some used omission and irony as if to call the animal's very identity into question. And then it was time for the homage or tribute. Which could take the form of an ode- a celebration of the animal with the proper, praise-giving "you" or a narrative - a plain old observance (in the far less faithful and worshipful third person), keeping respectful distance though and writing about it as it goes Ultimately, about its business these poems amidst the natural (or metaphysical in some students' cases) world. would exploit whatever worked best in their persona poems. Which could even mean abandoning the animal somewhat. Or altogether. Going wherever they're charged, directed (and oh yes, I should mention that they couldn't use the letters "e" and "n" in this piece-I'm sorry, but that is what the All Mighty Scattergories Die divined!). Looking further for guidance from Billy Collins' under-handed stance, spoof of Smokey the Bear, "Flames" or Adrienne Rich's dream rearing up into revelation piece, "Bears." And in some sense, summing or sending up, this little quest-of-sorts. Except that we shut down with a (semi) found poem--a la Maxine Kumin's "You Are in Bear Country," some government pamphlet instruction turned absurdist's protest poem via this slight addition of subversion and unrest, where students made claims on some pre-existing literature, taking an entry or article from a field guide, encyclopedia, or newspaper and then substituting their animal for the one written up.

Once again, I'd like to extend my gratitude to all those who were instrumental in establishing the Esther Buffer Poetry Residence, the Portsmouth Poet Laureate Program Board of Directors, Mimi White, Elizabeth Knies, and Poet Laureates past and present, as well as Portsmouth High School, Jean Keegan, and of course, her creative writing class