

A METAPHORIC VISION OF THE WORLD

By Eleanor Berry

As Oregon Poet Laureate, Paulann Petersen has been a most active ambassador for poetry all over the state. She has given scores of workshops designed to help aspiring writers at all levels to generate drafts of poems. As a member of the board of the Friends of William Stafford, she has, for many years, coordinated the birthday celebrations of Stafford's poetry and teaching held each January, and she has spearheaded this year's widespread celebrations of his centennial.

As a champion of fellow poets, Petersen has written dozens of blurbs for others' books and chapbooks, and has hosted book launches that have sent one poetry collection after another sailing into the hands of readers. For her extraordinary contributions to Oregon's literary life, she was given the 2006 Stewart H. Holbrook Award from Literary Arts.

All this time, she has been writing prolifically herself, with two new books of poems (her fifth and sixth) published in the past four years, both in beautiful editions from Lost Horse Press. *The Voluptuary* appeared in 2010; *Understory* followed in 2013. The first is a focused collection, centered on Petersen's relation to Walt Whitman as both a literal and a poetic ancestor. It rewards being read as a whole. The second, more than twice as large, is a series of nine small groups of poems. It invites dipping and sampling.

Some of Petersen's recent writing has been incident to her role as Poet Laureate, in which she has been called upon to write poems marking particular public occasions. One such poem, "Capital," has been incorporated into the Salem Peace Mosaic, installed on the Salem YMCA building. There, it forms a long, wavy ribbon of text, helping to bind the separate areas and images of the mosaic together. The poem also appears, with the dedication "for Salem, Oregon," in *Understory*, where it is arranged in two quatrains. The second stanza addresses the city:

Salem, we're speaking *Peace* each time
we say your name.
Salaam, shalom. At your site, our mapmakers place
a star's steady shine.

The poem's imagery derives from the fact that "Salem," related to the Arabic "salaam" and the Hebrew "shalom," means "peace," and from the city's status as the state capital, marked on maps by a star.

For many poets, occasional poems requested for events or projects would likely be hackwork—competent verse without animating passion. That has not been the case for Petersen, perhaps because many of her poems are, in a sense, occasional. For her responsive imagination, the everyday world is replete with occasions for verbal celebration. The act of eating a fig, the memory of a horse galloping around a neighbor's field—such simple, sensuous experiences are the inspiration for many of her poems.

Whatever catches this poet's attention she sees as resembling something else. In her metaphorical vision, each thing calls up others somehow like it. Thus, a poem describing how the tiny florets in the disk of a coneflower bloom is titled "Why the Aging Poet Continues to Write." The ring of bloom, the poem tells us, moves from the outside inward to the center of the disk. "That heart—what's at / the flower's very core— / blazes last." So the poem ends, clearly implying a correspondence between the flower's blooming and the poet's writing.

Not only are things connected by resemblance—in Petersen's world, they are fluid and porous, shifting and merging. In a poem titled "Doxology" (a term for a hymn of praise), "Green glass / seethes with light, drinks it / into an emerald throat." Petersen welcomes and praises the possibility of taking the world into oneself. "Be a leaf," she enjoins in a poem called "Synesthesia," "learn / to eat the world with your skin." A principal exemplar of this way of

being is the bee, which, in a number of poems, is represented as feasting on the world, then—not unlike the poet—making from what it has gathered a new sweetness.