



Our Interview with Poet and Artist

Melissa Slattery



To have the patience to just notice—and kind of honor—
what each day brings through a creative response
in either a poem, story, drawing, painting—
or just making a thoughtful meal, or being kind to someone.

Sally: Thank you for joining us on The Poetry Page, Melissa! I became acquainted with your beautiful poetry during our December, 2019 Art & Text exhibit at the library, but I don't know how long you have been writing or what role poetry plays in your own life. Could you tell us a little about that?

Melissa: Thank you so much, Sally, for being such a strong supporter of the Norwalk poetry community. That December event was just wonderful. I was so honored to have been a part of it. I loved the mixed media artwork that artist Patricia Kurowski made in response to my poem. And such a great crowd came that day: three hundred people!

Poem without a Spine

I've been searching for a way to
build you a spine, so you can stand,

alone, and one thought is maybe
oil cans might work.

I think for a moment of the Tin Man's
plea, for a way to release bound words.

But, where to find those good old cans,
not plastic throwaways?

The kind my father left behind, placed on
thickly dusted shelves, caked a bit with oxidized

evidence that he had had a habit of caring
for his machines, as needed. Still opened.

Can I use that kind
of oil can, somehow string them together?

Build a hollow tower, stack up a kind of
struture to hold these bits together?

Can I find a seam to open and pour
from it, lozenges of ambered memories,

sieved from these wandering thoughts?

Melissa Slattery
Art & Text Exhibit, Norwalk Public Library, 2019



Patricia Kurowski
Poem without a Spine
Mixed media
15 x 8

I started writing poems early as something fun to do. My parents were big believers in reading stories to my siblings and me. We had wonderful children's storybooks; and we went to story time events at our nearest library, which was the Darien Library.

Everything about the library delighted me as a kid. From the bright yellow sit-upons we learned to make, to the expressively-read stories. Taking out books was a delight, watching the librarian stamp the due dates with a rubberstamp and ink pad was a thrill. Keeping track of the cards tucked into their little manila jackets pasted on the back page of each book was all part of the mystique of libraries. I was a library nerd from an early age, thanks to my mom.

Then, in high school I had an English teacher who really encouraged me to develop my poems. His name was Warren Allen Smith. He was flamboyantly, joyously, and openly gay at a time when being so was very courageous. And he encouraged his students to just be themselves. He loved theater, and lived part of the time in town (New Canaan), and part of the time in NYC. He played us the entire audio of *Hamlet*, lifting the needle off the record constantly to explain what the lines meant to us. He had so much enthusiasm for words. He also encouraged me to illustrate my poems.

So, I was lucky to get a lot of encouragement to write, and draw, and paint from several teachers; and also, my mother & father.

Finally, poetry plays a huge role in my life right now. It provides solace as I watch my mom age through dementia, certainly. I feel like I finally have things I can write about, having lived an interesting (to me) life for six plus decades. I also experience a conscious state of inspiration regularly, if unpredictably, and writing poetry is a way of capturing that state of being in the present moment, and offering gratitude for the beauty and depth of life that I see around me. I began a serious mindfulness meditation practice about three years ago, which I think has strengthened my connection to writing poems.

Sally: You recently revealed to me that you are also a visual artist! I am finding that people have so many hidden talents! What type of art do you create?

Melissa: Yes, I studied Fine Art as an undergraduate student in Philadelphia, and finished my BFA in California. I wanted to be an art teacher at the time. After graduation, I shifted to graphic design, and learned on the job when the Macintosh computer first emerged. I took lots of small classes and workshops to learn about typography, and the best practices in graphic design. I was learning as fast as I could—like a sponge— as graphic design became almost like the food channels with celebrity designers, and really great magazines like *Print*, *Communication Arts*, *Emigre*, *Wet Magazine* (edited by Leonard Koren, who went on to write the book on Japanese aesthetics, *Wabi-Sabi*), *Upper & Lowercase*,

and *Domus*. In San Francisco, there was a group of 5 graphic designers— all named Michael. They were called “The Michaels.” There were also several very strong women designers working at that time; among them, Lucille Tanazas, and April Greiman. I learned a lot about design just living in the Bay Area during the 1980s & 1990s.

Anyway, that’s where I developed an interdisciplinary sensibility. Image and text were always part of what I was working on. Later, when I was working as a graphic designer at Norwalk Community College, I had an opportunity to start teaching again, and I decided to go back to school for a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies at Wesleyan University. I wanted to begin teaching interdisciplinary studies.

So I took a very roundabout route to becoming an art teacher. I really love knowing about lots of mediums and learning about the work of all kinds of artists, writers, performance artists, and so on. It’s like a feast of creativity.

I gravitated towards a genre called “the book arts”— also a very lively creative community at the time— out in the Bay Area. Libraries were very much engaged in collecting and celebrating small-edition, hand-crafted book arts works. The San Francisco Public Library held lots of lectures, exhibitions, and workshops that offered great support to book artists at that time.

For book art you need to develop content as well as form, and so writing— i.e. poetry— came back into my activities. Concrete poetry is well explored in the book arts through one of a kind sculptural works, as well as through small editions published by small craft printers. I learned a lot about applying the skills I learned in art school: etching, lithography, & letterpress printing with handset lead type. Poetry was very much a part of the book art creative process. Small, self-published editions by so many wonderful book artists, filled with original poetry and art, were very inspiring to me then, and continue to inspire me now. One group I joined at the time, the **Pacific Center for the Book Arts**, used to have gatherings at members’ homes: three artists would share their work; and there was a big potluck. It was so much fun! The **PCBA** went on to found the **San Francisco Center for the Book**, which offers classes, events, lectures and printing to this day. I was honored to have had the opportunity to teach several mixed media workshops there: <https://sfcbook.org/>



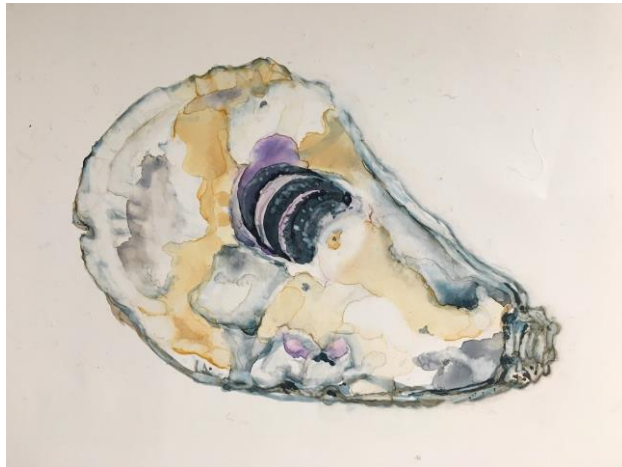
To finally answer your question, I paint from life. Currently, I'm trying to paint 100 oyster shells. This series started as a COVID-19 quarantine project. I was very rusty when I began in April. Now I'm on my 50th painting, and I've re-learned a lot about rendering realistic form in watercolors. Oyster shells are a good subject: they have a natural watery aspect to them; and they're readily

available, scattered all over at local beaches. And I like their links to Norwalk history through the still-quite-active local oystering industry.



Melissa Slattery, 2020, watercolor

Sally: Wow, Melissa that is so incredible. I never knew these things about you!! Your Oyster Shell art is so beautiful!



Melissa Slattery, 2020, watercolor



Melissa Slattery, 2020, watercolor

I know that you attend many gardening programs at the library. I find gardeners to generally be very creative, as the act of planting is certainly an act of creating. Do you feel a connection between poetry, art, and the garden?

Melissa: I do. I gravitate towards natural things: stones, shells, plants & flowers. I haven't established a new garden at the condo I just moved into in Norwalk, but I will soon be doing that. I did just plant some milkweed plants. I'm still learning how the light works on that particular ground. The landscapers mow my postage stamp sized lawn, so I need to build obvious boundaries to protect whatever I plant there eventually. The practice of cultivation seems to tie into the creative process. I do see clear relationships.

Sally: Do you find yourself—during these times of COVID-19, and the isolation it requires—creating more?

Melissa: Yes. Like everyone else, suddenly I had unexpected time on my hands and no place to go besides the grocery store. I began my current series of oyster shell paintings, and have spent more time writing and revising rough drafts or sketches into more finished texts, as poems and stories.

The many layered spectacle of the COVID-19 response in the United States has also influenced me to find ways to stay calm. Making poems and drawings and paintings is very calming and life-affirming. The meditative nature of painting and writing seems to act as an antidote to the fearfulness generated on social media and the evening news shows.

I truly believe that the arts offer a refuge, a solace, and also a laboratory for cultivating creative problem solving. Making creative work is a kind of practice in

problem solving that carries over into other areas of life, and has a very beneficial effect, I think.

I'm very grateful I was able to stay connected to the **Monday night Poetry Workshop** that Bill Hayden, **Norwalk's Poet Laureate**, has been running on Zoom (contact Bill Hayden, for details: poet_laureate@norwalkpl.org). The **Lit Crawl** event that the Norwalk Public Library organized and presented virtually in April was another wonderful community event. It was so well done, and so inspiring. It was such a relief to share the joy of poetry with the Norwalk poetry community after being in quarantine for weeks.

Sally: I'm so glad you enjoyed our LitCrawl!!

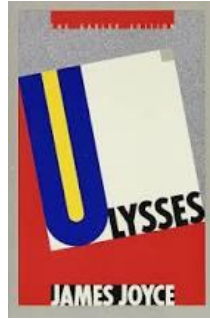
Which poets and artists have influenced your own work? Why?

Melissa: Sally, so many, that I could write pages and pages, and I would still be leaving out a legion of them!

Artists whose work I love and appreciate include Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Cornell, Agnes Martin, Georgia O'Keefe, Louise Bourgeois, Ann Hamilton, Annette Messenger, Christian Boltanski, Suzanne Valedon, Matisse/Picasso, David Simmons, Eva Hesse, Meret Oppenheim, Martin Puryear, Squeak Cornwath—the list goes on, and on.

In writing, there are so many it's hard to mention just a few. So here's the shortest list I can give: I really love Richard Brautigan's writing, as well as Emily Dickinson, Joy Harjo, Tracy K. Smith, Billy Collins, Dorianne Laux, James Wright, Kwame Dawes, and, of course, Mary Oliver.

While at Wesleyan, I did a thesis project on James Joyce's *Ulysses*. I spent years poring over the text of *Ulysses*, which showed me just how many ways text can be manipulated, like a material, with almost sculptural qualities. Joyce's work is so densely woven that at any point you might locate a thread to pull, and then find you can just keep going and going, finding more and more meaning intertwined in his stories. It is incredible to me that he produced such intertwined writings without any use of technology other than pen and paper. He did devise a color code to keep some kind of track of all the themes he was weaving together. And he notoriously edited his galley proofs to an appalling degree (much to the consternation of his French typesetters who had to make constant revisions to his already typeset text). But his breadth of knowledge of languages, literature and history are astounding. And scholars are still unwinding the densities of texts he generated. It's like a living thing, almost.



So, Joyce is probably my biggest inspiration, though I am not sure if I am influenced by him! If I am, I'm happy for it!

I've included here a collage with my favorite Joyce quote: "Chance furnishes me what I need. I am like a man who stumbles along; my foot strikes something. I bend over and it is exactly what I want."



Melissa Slattery, collage

To me this quote speaks of an openness in his creative process that I've aspired to in my own writing. A willingness to work with what is presented each day, and a valuing of cultivating mindfulness. To have the patience to just notice and—kind of honor— what each day brings through a creative response in either a poem, story, drawing, painting— or just making a thoughtful meal, or being kind to someone.

My thesis project at Wesleyan examined how artists have extended Joyce's text, along with his ideas on writing & style in various ways. I made a series of drawings, book art works, and small sculptures around this giant, endless text, which has acted as an underpinning for my subsequent work. His example of being open to what the world offers (I give thanks to Mary Oliver for this, too) is what I find inspires me the most.

Sally: Do you have goals as a poet/artist? Or is it simply enough to accept the work as it "arrives," and allow it to enrich your life? Please tell us how your work does enrich your life, and how you wish to grow into it.

Melissa: I love the idea of discussing the "arrival" of a poem, because most of my poems have that quality; meaning, they mostly come when they come. When they arrive, sometimes they are whole, and sometimes they need some rearranging— or some further thought and editing— to reach completion. But the arrival is unpredictable, and I love that. It makes the gift that much more lovely.

And it definitely feels like an enrichment, or an experience that is complete within itself. And then there is the further enjoyment of sharing such a gift/ message, with others who also have their own messages/poems to share. I can't express how wonderful it is to sit with other poets, and share work. That has been a great enrichment. The Norwalk Public Library really excels in its support for poetry. I feel so lucky to have the great asset of the Norwalk Public Library in our community.

I hope to show my visual work, and to make poems to share, for as long as I can keep doing it. The last few years I've been pre-occupied with family health concerns that will eventually resolve, and allow me more time for my work. Although, I do realize that these family matters also feed my work in that they provide me with human intimacy, and the full human experience. Life and death provide invaluable experiences from which one can create serious art. I'm grateful to be having these difficult, but beautiful felt experiences to draw from.

For now, I'm really enjoying the **Monday Night Poetry Workshop** with Bill Hayden, **Norwalk's Poet Laureate**, and other Poetry offerings, and am seeking out more poetry activities and events. I feel like there is still so much to learn, and observe, and appreciate in the world of contemporary poetry.

One event worth mentioning is Poet **Billy Collins's daily Facebook Live Poetry Talks**. In response to this COVID-19 quarantine time, he started offering a 25 minute or so daily poetry reading and discussion that is really very good. I love his manner of sharing his breadth of knowledge and humility as a poet. He's very droll, and funny, so I appreciate tuning in to see what he will be discussing during the week. He takes Sat/Sun off. He plays good music, too.

I am hoping to publish a book of poems at some point. Right now, I'm busy building a catalog of work to base it on. I feel like I am a year or two away from having enough completed and worthy material. I am seeing certain themes emerging, like art history and memory, and a sense of the surreal or the absurd. And that has been a lovely thing to notice.

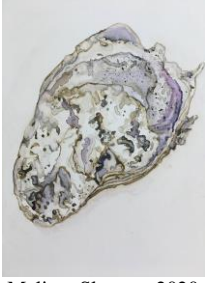
Thanks for chatting with me, Sally! And thanks for all the great work you and your colleagues at the Norwalk Public Library provide to our Norwalk Community.

Sally: Thank you, Melissa! One of the reasons I enjoy writing these Poetry Pages is that I learn so much about a poet that I never knew! You have provided me with so much inspiration.



Melissa Slattery

Now, here are three more of Melissa's poems!.....



Melissa Slattery, 2020
watercolor

Oyster Shell

written on Monday, June 22, 2020

Gaston claims a mystical space
exists within a shell.

Amidst the layers of its history, I do catch
glimmers of the magic it can tell.

Of tides, the pull and push of
lunar magnetism - Physics -

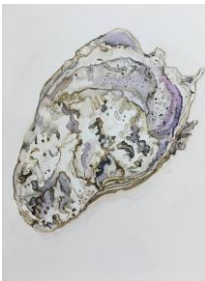
sensed, in the body (missing) now,
of powers it must align,

and in perpetuity can show,
in cascades of calcified remains,

how it went, on and on, and still
retains the beauty of the worldly

ebb and flow, on display,
for all who wish to know.

-Melissa Slattery



Melissa Slattery, 2020
watercolor

The following poem was written as Melissa spent the last few days emptying out a house she lived in, and loved, for nineteen years. It was cathartic...



A List for Letting Go

You'll need:

A friend, who hugs well

A program, that's reliable

Sage grown in that garden

Aflame in a grey dish.

Smoke, watch it.

Time, allow it.

Attention, keep it.

A methodology, learn it.

Love, always.

Belief, inevitable.

In exchange for:

a frozen turkey

three flowerpots

a sage bundle

three maple seedlings

a French designer jacket

a big old iron bracket; rusty, &

a worn hoe.

Remember to bury the best cat

in the backyard before you go.

-Melissa Slattery



The following poem contains a line borrowed from
Gator Butchering For Beginners, by **Kristen Arnett**

It's easy enough to slip the skin. Wedge your knife below the bumpy ridge of spine to separate cartilage from fat; loosen tendon from pink, sticky meat. Flay everything open. Pry free the heart. It takes some nerve. What I mean is, it'll hurt, but you can get at what you crave if you want it badly enough.

Start with the head....

Family Research

To get a better idea
of how to write micro-fiction,

I almost read a story about cutting hearts
out of alligators, actually eviscerating them, but

then, I just couldn't make myself read it.
What must that be like, I wondered?

The writer explains it's a metaphor for having the
guts to dig deeply into the essence of a matter.

Any matter, I guess.

But, her words could not isolate me enough,
from the visceral feeling of opening up a big, toothy reptile,

with a sharp blade sliced through its thick skin,
a dead weight, a piece of lumpy luggage.

Then sorting out and separating its organs
from the cartilage and tendons,

the diaphragm, the spongy lungs,
to find and pry the heart free.

No, no. No way, no how.
I was in no mood for blood.

So I read, instead, a story
about a mother, who

drove a daughter crazy, in her old age,
by insisting the daughter was her sister.

"Remember how we used to shell peas before dinner,
sitting on the back steps at Franklin Square,

and Daddy would get home from work and
give one of us his hat to put away," she'd ask.

"No, the daughter would say, I don't.
I'm not Mary."

--Melissa Slattery

