

This is an introduction of Paulann Petersen by Cindy Williams Gutiérrez at an event sponsored by the Oregon Cultural Trust and VoiceCatcher at Portland State University on December 15, 2010.

I have the honor this evening of introducing Paulann Petersen and the very easy task of speaking of her as inspiration. To see how Paulann inspires, how she breathes life into the world, we must return to her makings on the page. I turn to her poem “Manifesto” which appears in her first chapbook, *The Animal Bride*:

There is a thing or two
I know: to speak the story
as it unfolds,
to sleep with the **animal**
dark and breathing
against my face,
to remember my heart
can do only this: **give**
and take **and give**
what is never
its own.

From this seminal poem, we see how Paulann inspires through “the animal dark and breathing” and through a constant return to giving—by giving, and then taking, and then giving again.

To know Paulann is to know generosity and gratitude. Paulann inspires us to give and to give thanks. It is not surprising that the first class I took with Paulann was on poetry of praise—the ecstatic poems by the gods of praise who have inspired her: Rumi, Walt Whitman.

The electric charge between Rumi and Paulann cannot be denied. This became evident to me in the inaugural event of an international poetry and music series called “Readings from Around the World” that Angie Chuang and I used to co-produce. That event featured Paulann and Angie reading Rumi’s poetry and their own poems inspired by Rumi. They were accompanied by three extraordinary musicians playing a variety of Persian and Turkish violins, ouds and percussion. Seeing and hearing Paulann channel Rumi and respond to him with her own ecstatic poems is a song of praise I will never forget.

And then there’s Walt Whitman, to whom Paulann has dedicated a generous portion of voluptuous poems in her newest collection, *The Voluptuary*. There are many things Whitman and Paulann share, including a surname (in her case, her maiden name). She has been quoted as saying: “The generosity of his [Whitman’s] embrace is absolutely stunning.” I would say the same about Paulann.

When I think of giving praise to creation, I think of the Aztec notion of the God Above All as the Mirror That Makes All Things Shine. This is godliness we can aspire to. What an incredible way to go through the world—making all things shine. And then I think: “This is what Paulann does—in her art and in her life.”

I have seen her sparkle with delight when she hears about another writer’s success. I have seen her graciously open up her home to celebrate the publication of writers spanning the I-5 corridor from southern Washington to the California border. I have seen her shine with equal parts praise and humility in honoring William Stafford during the [Stafford] Birthday Reading Series she founded and has continued to organize for 12 years. And I have been the recipient of her quiet, private gifts—letters of recommendation, introductions to other writers, moments of mentoring—to help me (and countless others) shine. It is no wonder that she received the Oregon Literary Arts’ Holbrook Award in 2006 for her generous contributions to the literary life of our community.

In “...red is a thousand poems,” Erik Muller’s analysis of Paulann’s oeuvre, he writes this about her vision of the world: “Mirroring reality... is not her aim... Imagery is her way of assuring us there need be no split between what our discourse tends to keep separate: perceiver and perceived, word and thing, self and other, human and animal.” Perhaps this is the gift that inspires us the most. Paulann says it best in the title of one of her poems in *The Voluptuary*. Paulann—as seer, as giver, as appreciator, as mirror that makes *all* things shine as one—calls her poem “The Light Connecting Each to All.”

Paulann also inspires us to sleep and wake with the animal. As Erik Muller notes in his thoughtful treatise on her body of work, Paulann is a writer of *embodied* poetics. He quotes her as saying: “I believe in body poems, poems that rise from the body.” He goes on to write: “The word ‘rise’ indicates that poems...are given by the body without the body’s summoning or choosing. Listen to the end of Paulann’s poem “Where the Animal Goes When I Am Awake” (from *The Wild Awake*):

After the day lies picked apart
by sunlight, after the night lies
staring ahead, mute as a god, he
turns to me, turns into me. I return.

The animal is breathed into Paulann and she breathes the animal into us. She inspires us with the feral, the sensual, the erotic.

I remember workshopping one of my poems called “The Rituals of Weavers” in one of Paulann’s classes. It was a poem I had written under the guidance of Jeff Davis, a yogi and writer from back East. He had led us through a series of yoga poses that grounded us in the bottom half of our bodies—to get us out of our heads. Then he guided us through a visualization exercise and we wrote what “we saw” in our mind’s eye. My poem imagined an ancient civilization of women who were weavers. It ended with a frenzied dance, but Paulann pointed out it was unclear whether the scene was sexual. I knew it was sexually charged in my vision, but I was reluctant to take that risk on the page. Paulann calmly paused after pointing out the vagueness of the poem’s ending, then said: “It would be powerful if it *were* erotic.” Those words helped breathe the unbridled life into my poem that I had both yearned for and feared.

If we turn again to Paulann’s first full collection *The Wild Awake*, we will find her poem “Feral”—a poem that yearns fearlessly toward waking, toward unbridled life, toward our animal self.

I let blood in a dream.
No loss, no loss—
it’s merely a step toward
waking, a trail of scent
I leave for each
dream animal to follow.

And so, is it any wonder that we are inspired by Paulann’s attachment to giving and giving thanks, to sleeping and waking with the animal? Is it any wonder that we train our noses to pick up the scent of her trail toward waking—this waking to the marvelous beauty and mystery of the world?

May we each transform into a dream animal, and follow. May we follow Paulann wherever she leads us. With this, I give you Oregon's beloved Poet Laureate, Paulann Petersen.