

Mary Adams

Mary Adams
self portrait



Mary Adams defies classification as a poet. Yes, she is a formalist, one of the best writing in America today, but she is also a poet of surprising and sometimes disconcerting wit and erudition that give her poetry a memorable texture. I have known Mary ever since she came to teach in Western Carolina University's English department. She is one of the most verbally gifted writers I've ever met, and I am always dazzled by the way she makes language come alive. When Dana Gioia telephoned her with the good news that she had just been awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Poetry, we all celebrated. Mary is a poet who deserves a much wider audience.

Mary's passion for poetry is matched by her love of animals. She has worked for many years with the Humane Society of Jackson County, rescuing numerous animals from the local shelter and giving them a home until they can be placed with permanent owners. She's a great saleswoman, too. I now have four dogs that Mary told me we couldn't live without! She was right about that, but I have drawn the line at four. She keeps trying to change my mind, but so far she hasn't been successful. Maybe if she wrote a poem about why I should add another dog to my life, well—maybe I would reconsider. —Kathryn Stripling Byer

Tame

It's when your house erupts
with animals, dogs on the roof, dogs
hassling joggers, dogs helping themselves
from the icebox, that you know
the man will leave. Why, exactly's
harder. A man undaunted by a cat's
flaunted asshole surely knows
love works the wrong end
sometimes. Nor should squalor
scare a man who eats mayonnaise
every morning. Maybe it's
a kind of fear of ghosts, you think—
the testes of the Other that are gone.
In a movie once, you saw the hero
tame a wolf and then an Indian.
You'd hoped for such a man,
gentle hands, gold

hair like prairie grass.
Even the wolf trusted him, blithely
standing on his groin
or wagging hopefully for days.
Nothing's worth that kind of wait.
Not you who cannot give the wolf back
to the dog, not he
whose kindness kills the wolf
and Indian before he rides away
at movie's end.
Love makes the wrong promises.
Above you, dogs are crooning from the roof
as from the wild.

Another Story

He dreamed he wanted all her wilderness.
She dreamed of him.
He dreamed about the souls of animals.
Her animals were tired of being wild.
Her house blew up. It oozed when he entered there.
He cherished her, but he was made of walls.
Her longing sang him in a foreign language.
He could not dress or slake her loneliness.
He wished she saw how everything he'd had
swallowed everything he'd thought he wanted.
She wished he cared enough to swallow her.
He dreamed about the house he dreamed before.
She dreamed her body in which no one dreamed.
She tasted him recede, a ghost of salt.
She dreamed but it did no good.
His children throbbled in walls that compassed once
his world as perfect as the gusts of birds
he used to dream she winnowed in like song.
She gathered him as if he were not gone.

Cerberus at the SPCA

*Per me si va ne la cittàà dolente,
per me si va ne l'eterno dolore,
per me si va tra la perduta gente*
- Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 3

Just treat me like an ordinary dog
and don't be frightened. Even though my bark
is trifurcated, strident triologue

of me-myself-and-I, it's made for stark
cacophony, designed for starker places
than this clearing house for orphans - dark

caves like this, without the saving traces
of earth-familiar memories and the smell
of beings bodied on the air, of faces

animate with interest and doubt. A shelter -
we also call it shelter, and in part
it was a refuge for the ones who welter

tortuously in sentient life. The heart
at first delights in hell, for there the toll
of living is erased, the practiced art

of feeding is redundant, and the call
of other bodies silenced. I digress,
as one dog with three voices often will.

In hell, I needed three throats to oppress
those souls, who came at last to crave
real appetite to kill the emptiness.

And now they crave forever. Now they prove
the daily power of matter over soul.
I grew to pity them. I could not stave

their hunger off forever, or patrol
their ranks with rage enough. Their weeping eyes
once wept real tears which, when the hordes were whole
could sear their faces. How should I despise
the shades' abject and desperate confidence
that I could save them? For I recognize

that terror and that trust. It made no sense
to them, like pets that cannot find their way,
that this was somehow justice, recompense

for drinking the abundance of their day -
Well, anyway, I left. Strange how the power

I always took as natural died away

like thunder does when I forsook familiar
haunts, no longer hero of my home,
and knew the slavery of a passing hour.

I was a mortal dog. Stand closer, come -
don't look away. Although these throats once sang
together — one of body's carnal dream

of pain, one of love and of the wrong
things that we loved, one of the single pure
wish we always die of — that was long

ago. The reddest animals of fear,
the saddest winds of hell and all its big
fires are nothing to the fires here.

Mary Adams received degrees in creative writing from the U. of Iowa Writers' Workshop and the University of Houston. Her honors include grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Cultural Arts Council of Houston. This poem is drawn from Epistles from the Planet Photosynthesis (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999) and is reproduced with permission of the author, who holds the copyright. Epistles, Ms. Adams's first book of poems, was published at the end of the last millennium, and she fully expects a second book in this one. She lives in the mountains with a few dozen pets.

Q&A:

Kathryn Byer: What are you working on right now? You're a formalist poet. What can you tell us about the forms you've been using over the past couple of years, as models from the past?

Mary Adams: For the past couple of years I've been trying to use other peoples' forms and syntax, especially if they're poets I really admire. For instance, I've been using the some forms created by one of the great formal innovators, George Herbert. I've tried taking sentences from poets like Alice Fulton and Sandra MacPherson and using the syntax while changing the words. I keep thinking it will give me an insight into their magical brains. Actually, a lot of those poems have been complete failures. But they're like musical exercises. I haven't been happy with the exercises themselves, but I hope a poem down the road - assuming there is one - will be better because of them.

Kathryn Byer: Why do you find traditional form so congenial, gratifying and maybe terrifying?

Mary Adams: It's actually much harder for me to write without form. How else can I feel confident that what I'm writing is even a poem? At least a sonnet looks like a poem. So I guess one thing I like about form is it's a kind of external standard. What would we think of a musician who couldn't count? I have a musical background, so I also like the many musical aspects of form. And I'm attracted to rules. I like knowing the rules of the game, just the way I admire good manners. I love reading Miss Manners because she's funny, but also because she knows manners are a manifestation of respect. I guess I'd say form is ultimately an expression of my respect for poetry, including poetic tradition. I owe my reader more than my sensibilities. I don't think that traditional poetry has been exhausted; I think the best modern poetry enriches that tradition and is enriched by it. By the same token, I don't think the newer formalists like my work very much. At least they haven't wanted to publish it. Amazing, but true!

Kathryn Byer: What is the connection between your animals and your poetry? How did you get into your vocation with animals? Any stories?

Mary Adams: I've had animals most of my life, but I guess I got most passionate about animal rescue when I realized I wouldn't be getting around to having children. I love animals very much, so part of this work is selfish, and I've had some important connections to some outstanding dogs. I also like to think I work with them out of a need to atone, in some measure, for the human race - for the original sin of domestication that deprived animals of choice and the natural world of self-determination. It's a sin we never stop paying for, once we're sensible of it. From that moment on, "wilderness" became a fiction we had to work harder and harder to believe in. So there are two sides of the animal thing - emotional and moral - and I think both sides find their way into my poetry all the time.

Of course, what I like best about the animals is that they keep me from writing. Poetry is much harder than caring for 30 animals. Dogs may be messy, but at least you can tell the poop from the dogs.