

Susan Meyers



Susan Meyers, photo by Gene Furchgott

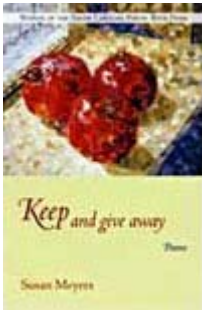
Keep and Give Away, from which all of the poems that follow are drawn, is the title of North Carolina native Susan Meyers's new book from the University of South Carolina Press. It may also serve as a metaphor for her life, for it is her giving spirit that characterizes everything she does. It was Susan's generosity that eased my return to my home state over ten years ago when I wasn't sure I wanted to be here. We met at Weymouth in Southern Pines during a North Carolina Poetry Society meeting, and her warm welcome put me quickly at ease. Shortly afterwards, she was elected program chair and then president. It was during her presidency that the society sponsored Sally Buckner's remarkable and important anthology *Word and Witness: 100 Years of North Carolina Poetry*. In the years since we met, our friendship has flourished, and she's welcomed me into her home, her life, her husband Blue's kitchen, and her world of poetry. Though our approaches to our work are different -- she a lyricist and I a storyteller -- our admiration and appreciation for the other's craft and our sharing of both our work in progress and our lives has solidified our friendship.

Her world of poetry is also shaped by a giving spirit. As a lyric poet, she investigates the possibilities of words, sounds, rhythms, and forms, and weaves them into lines that continue to astonish me in poem after poem about nature, fishing, her long relationship with Blue, and her devotion to family, past and present. Her words are at the same time playful and serious, as in the surprisingly complex poem, "Neither the Season, Nor the Place." On the apparent smooth surface of the poem, she rides the lake with Blue and comes upon a gathering of "quivering loons," who in their dipping and rising are "reaching out into the air / like questions that reorder the day." Like the years of a long marriage, the bodies of the loons "glide in a slate cloak / of understatement," knowing instinctively what is right for the moment, and what is not, in the same way she does, as she tells us in her opening lines: "Some mornings I mutter down the hallway / of our marriage and open the only available door." It is neither the season nor the place for anything else. Who but a skillful poet would see in the antics of wintering loons such clarity?

Susan works tirelessly for poetry. She struggles for precision in her own work. She freely offers support and expertise to both fellow poets and aspiring ones. And without hesitation, she devotes hours and hours to promoting a vision of poetry throughout both

Carolinas. She may now claim South Carolina as her home, but we'd be wise -- and poetry would be better off -- to never let her leave her Old North State. -- Barbara Presnell

Barbara Presnell's collection of poems, Piece Work, won the 2006 Cleveland State University First Book Prize and will be published by Cleveland State in spring, 2007. In addition, she has published three chapbooks, and her collection of textile mill voices, Sherry's Prayer, won the North Carolina Humanities Council's 2004 Linda Flowers Prize. She lives in Lexington and teaches at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her poems were featured [on this web site in September, 2005.](#)



Guitar

On any given night it picks its way
down the canyon, one step
almost in front of the other -- agile enough
to slip by whatever spells trouble.
Forget fear. It slides down rocks, if it has to,
to reach bottom. By day, a red bandana
or straw hat, and why not?
No map, just crosshatch and parallel.
It inhales the heat, and the pinched cold
creeping off the mountain.
It lives alone, turns its back to the wolves.

Say it's a tin cup with bent handle.
Peyote in full bloom. A train
pulling rich cargo across the horizon.
Tequila. A thumbnail piercing the skin
of a lime, the ripe shower that follows.

Keep and Give Away

*What do I know of man's destiny?
I could tell you more about radishes.*
-- Samuel Beckett

With a bushel basket in hand
he's the tally of my ripest desires,

more than the sum of his summer
crops, perfect and plentiful as they are --

even counting Early Contenders
and Silver Queen. Burpless

cucumbers, Kentucky Wonders too.
Throw in the fruit to sweeten

the numbers: blackberries and figs
piled in pyramids or weighed

in pecks. And don't forget
the peppers (red yellow green),

divided into keep and give away.
Dinner plates -- heaped with leafiness,

tubers and pods -- heavy
with the haul and roots of his labor.

Now he's shelling peas in his lap
and I sit across the room, listening

to the ping, ping. He's more
than the sum, I cannot count the ways,

and despite a constant reckoning
of work and luck, numbers fail me

in this long, hot growing season.

Neither the Season, Nor the Place

Lake Santee, SC

Some mornings I mutter down the hallway
of our marriage and open the only available door.
But once in a while, say on a warm January morning,
I ride out with him on the smooth lake of it,
our small boat in the midst of quivering loons,
the soprano of their notes -- not calls, really,
but soft barkings -- reaching out into the air

like questions that reorder the day.
In these high-pitched tones of small dogs, the loons
sound wounded, but they're not:
they drift on the honey-sweet water, unfettered
and safe in their wintering. We watch one bob
and dive, and just when we're distracted, it resurfaces
a few feet from us, a white-breasted surprise.

Another and then another loon rises in place,
stretches its thick neck, flapping its wings,
and shakes off a shiver of water. They appear
and disappear. Around us their quiet yelping, the rising
and diving -- our boat rocking, occasionally, in another
boat's wake. Their bodies glide in a slate cloak
of understatement, not the black-and-white
plumage they're known for, their bright-checked
beauty -- this being neither the season, nor the place.

Villanelle for Gertrude Stein

Buttons, tender, and delicate as rain,
require both hands, reciprocal, with trust.
Patiently, we undo and do again.

What closing argument lies free of blame?
I give you two: old clasps without rust --
buttons, tender, and delicate as rain.

We close a gap, expect an inch of gain.
We've fastened nothing, wishes more or less.
Patiently, we undo and do again.

Unanswered questions, the day's refrain,
we turn over and over, like a child's first
buttons, tender, and delicate as rain.

A double-threaded shank can break, the same
as someone's word. What's loved is lost.
Patiently, we undo and do again.

Love when anchored, can still grow, retain
its mysteries of give and take -- lustrous
buttons, tender, and delicate as rain.
Patiently, we undo and do again.

Someone Near Is Dying

To sit for hours by your bed
is to gaze at the day's periphery,

the chickadee at the feeder fidgeting
like a four-o'clock insomniac.

My desire is to leap into the midst
of forgetfulness, its dreamy scatter.

What does your every move show
if not, *I am still alive?*

If this moment, bare as twigs,
is the only one, let it be

the limb, in its loose skin
of lichen, tilting at clouds --

not the branch stunted
from lack of promise or light.

The beauty of Spanish moss is the curl
of its beard lifted by wind; of brown

grass, its inclination toward green;
of the chickadee, its brave opinion

of strangers. Listen, Mother --
thunder, out of season: an old woman

at the end of her day, humming.

Hat of Many Goldfinches

Say you could wear twenty goldfinches on your head,
ten females in their soft, modest plumage
and ten bright males.

What jubilation,
all that twittering and hopping about.
Little feet massaging your scalp, little beaks
perchicoreeing to everyone you pass.
No need for ribbons
or veils on your black and yellow nest
of excitement, your curious crown of animation.

But how to seduce the finches to stay. A sprinkle
of thistle in your hair might hold them
long enough for you to kneel
at the altar of morning.

Gives you goose bumps
to feel the beaks tapping against your skin.
Walking down noon's aisle, you nod
and they shift a little.
More shuffling,
and the hat is rearranged. Take your photo,
or look in the mirror, and the hat you see there
is another, not the same hat you wear now.

Never depend on a hat of goldfinches
to bore you.
And forget the hatbox. These hats rest in sweet gums
and maples, on a narrow shelving of limbs.

I once knew a woman who wore her robin hat
when the finches wouldn't come. But the hat was heavy
and the brown depressed her.
She stayed home that morning,
her hair crawling with worms. The day she wore her
bluebird hat the bugs bothered her breathing,
the smallest attracted to the wind of her nostrils.

Now she knows to wait
for the finches. As long as there are finches,
there's a dream of a hat of finches --
the hat
we all want to wear on the day we die.
Imagine your own last dimming, its perfect
orchestration: final breath, pause,
a sudden fluttering
and lifting of forty somber wings.

A past president of the North Carolina Poetry Society and the current president of the Poetry Society of South Carolina, Susan Meyers is frequently tempted to say that she is from "Carolina," leaving off the "North" or "South." A North Carolina native, she grew up in Albemarle and Greenville; she and her husband now live in South Carolina, near Summerville. Even her book publication history shows an allegiance to both states. Keep and Give Away ([University of South Carolina Press, 2006](#)), her first full-length book, was chosen by Terrance Hayes for the inaugural South Carolina Poetry Book Prize, sponsored by the South Carolina Poetry Initiative. Her chapbook, Lessons in Leaving, won the 1998 Persephone Press Book Award (now the Mary Belle Campbell Poetry Book Publication Award, managed by the North Carolina Writers' Network), judged by Brendan Galvin. Her poetry has also appeared in Crazyhorse, The Southern Review, Tar

River Poetry, North Carolina Literary Review, and other journals, as well as on Verse Daily and Poetry Daily web sites. Her book reviews have been published regularly in The South Carolina Review and Review Revue. A long-time writing instructor, she has served as the poet-in-residence at the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, S.C., and as a mentor for creative writing students at the Charleston County School of the Arts. She holds an MFA degree in Creative Writing from Queens University, in Charlotte.