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home
contests
regimen
online archive
current print issue



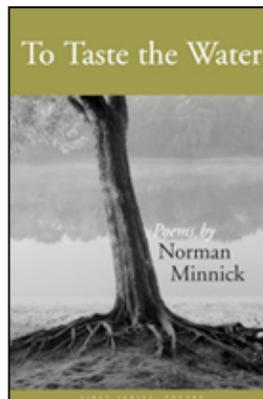
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A Conversation with Norman Minnick

by Jason Vega

Norman Minnick is securing his place in contemporary American poetry. His collection, *To Taste the Water*, blends elements of nature, family, and Asian poetry, and was awarded the First Series Award for Poetry by Mid-List Press. *The Southeast Review* tracked down Norman for the following interview.



Norman Minnick was born and grew up in Louisville, Kentucky. He received his B.A. in art from Marian College in Indianapolis and was accepted to the creative writing program at Florida International University in Miami. He earned his M.F.A. in 2001 and was awarded an Academy of American Poets Prize that same year. Minnick returned to Indianapolis, where he lives with his wife and two young children. He teaches at Butler University and the Writers' Center of Indiana.

You received your undergrad degree from Marion College, and are currently working in Indianapolis. Also being from Kentucky, I imagine the change of scenery was wonderful for you. Did you experience a bit of culture shock when you went to study at Florida International?

I had spent time in Miami before, so I wouldn't say it was culture shock. Culture *surprise*, maybe. Yes, the influence of the Caribbean people is enchanting. I was certainly under its spell.

Your poem "Sandpiper" has a wonderful structure, and reminds me of a time last year when I spent god knows how much time watching the sandpipers dodge the waves on Palm Beach. Did you find lots of inspiration in South Florida with its whirr of vehicles mixed with its fragile location between the everglades and the Atlantic, or do you find yourself more prolific in the interstitial zone of the Midwest which hugs the north end of the south?

There are many poems in the book that were inspired by South Florida, especially "Unfathomable Depth", the second section of "Things that Fly" and "initiation." Then there are the poems like "Bainbridge, Indiana," "Three Small Poems about My Father," "The Current" and "While You Work" that are certainly set in the

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Midwest. So as I answer your question I see that I am very much inspired by place. I am not prolific by any stretch of the imagination; I am its opposite. I think prolificacy comes more from an inner state of being. I don't know what that is exactly, I only know that it comes in spurts regardless of where I happen to be physically, whether it is on the coast of Maine, the Appalachian mountains of eastern Tennessee or in the Rocky mountains of Colorado. But you're right, I was born and raised in Louisville which is located on the Ohio River and claims to be the "gateway to the South," and have leanings both to the Midwest and to the South, so it is interesting that you say interstitial zone.

I'm glad that you mentioned "Unfathomable Depth," since it reminded me of a zen parable. Along with your repeated theme of nature and poems like "Poem Between Basho and Levertov" and "Chinese Art," I wonder what sort of impact, if any, Asian literature had on your work.

Oh, a huge impact. One of the first books of poetry that I read over and over was Gary Snyder's *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*. Then there were Rexroth's translations and Hass's book of Haiku. While epic poetry has always been a joy to read and the sprawling visionary line of Whitman and Ginsburg were, and still are, breathtaking and revolutionary, I find myself drawn more to the single moment of awe. I know Dante is considered to be one of the greatest poets in history, but I'd much prefer to read his near-contemporary, Rumi (they overlapped by about ten years). It is, and I am going to quote Lewis MacAdams from the back of Snyder's book because it captures precisely what it is I love about this poetry, "an ability to write a simple phrase that seems to have been echoing through human consciousness for three or four thousand years."

That's great. I consider Snyder among my favorite poets and I was wanting to ask you if "How Poetry Comes To Me" was dedicated to him, but now I know. It makes me happy that poetry like yours is getting published today. I love the shorter stanzas and rhythmic verses, which is something I feel contemporary poetry is veering away from. Where do you think American poetry is headed in the near future?

Very interesting question. And interesting timing too. I am teaching a course on fairy tales and today is our final meeting. There is a quote from Bruno Bettelheim that we've been considering that I

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think speaks to this directly: "In order not to be at the mercy of the vagaries of life, one must develop one's inner resources, so that one's emotions, imagination, and intellect mutually support and enrich one another. Our positive feelings give us the strength to develop our rationality; only hope for the future can sustain us in the adversities we unavoidably encounter." So, I am positive about the future of poetry in this country. Although there is still a great deal of irony and cynicism in contemporary poetry, I think there is an increasing desire for honesty and clarity. And real depth. There are poets who write mainly for other poets and then there are poets who write from some deeper place for a higher purpose. Lately I have been consumed with Blake's Four Zoas: Urizen, Luvah, Tharmas, and Urthona later picked up by Jung as his four basic psychological functions by which we apprehend and evaluate our experiences: rationality (Urizen), emotion (Luvah), sensation (Tharmas), and intuition/imagination (Urthona). I think too many poets write from the first two, but rarely the third and fourth. I believe, however, that many young poets are starting to recognize the imbalance and are beginning to pay attention to sensation and intuition.

Now time for the quick answer questions:

Name a writer whose work is currently making you jealous.

Okay: Maurice Manning.

What kind of child were you?

I was extremely apathetic when it came to school. I liked only to paint and draw and to explore the woods and neighborhoods around me.

What's your relationship with rejection like?

I suffer rejection.

Did you suffer in the process of writing this book? How?

And I suffered the book. I suffer the whole process. None of this comes easy to me. The most difficult experience with the book was finding an order to the poems so they could each vibrate and experience some kind of electrical charge as they rubbed against

each another. I especially suffered the waiting. I try to impose a habit, a structure, for writing and nothing comes. And I stress over it. I would like to be able to give in to the impulses that come at their own will... perhaps they would come more often.

Do you have a writerly habit you'd like to break?

Let me follow the thought above, "I try to impose a habit, a structure, for writing and nothing comes. And I stress over it. I would like to be able to give in to the impulses that come at their own will... perhaps they would come more often." I would like to break the habit of expecting something from imposing a habit.

What was the greatest surprise for you in your most recent writing?

The greatest surprise... I'd say it is how my poems are shifting to a more narrative style. And they are longer than any poems I've written before, so I feel like I am just starting out. This is both refreshing and frustrating at the same time.

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