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The Scholar & The Bohemian

by Sutton Welsh

You're a designer. Everybody knows your label of sapphire eyes and little white lies. I suppose I'm a fan of informal inhumanity. You scatter thunderstorms and collect pieces of murky hearts. Like the phantom, you lurk in the shadows and crash chandeliers. You're waiting for another drive on a dirt road with no red lights. You're wishing for another sunset with snowflakes and scarlet lips. We are each other's nightmares. Yet, I still want to inject your heroin. Yet, you still want my mascara tears to stain your ivory T-shirts at midnight. I pack my leather suitcase. You grasp the keys for the sports car. You wear a kelly green necktie. I wear silver bangles; their jingle drowns out your condescending sermon. The Scholar went right. The Bohemian went left. Maybe they'll meet again when the lilacs bloom.

Past'ale' Fem'ale'. Pastel crayon. Jessie Pohl.

Tod Marshall on Bear Spray, *Walden*, and Why Poetry Matters

Interview by Allie Shook-Shoup

On March 16th, 2015, the Bethel College Literary Studies Department hosted Tod Marshall, a Wichita native, University of Kansas Ph.D., and nationally published poet with three books to his name, including his most recent work, Bugle *(Canarium Books 2014). Marshall is a professor of English at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, where he directs the writing concentration and coordinates a visiting writers series. During his visit to the Bethel campus, he gave a lecture for the Convocation series, shared lunch with faculty and students, workshopped student poems, and spoke in professor Siobhán Scarry's class, LIT 251 Studies in Poetry: Archivists and Agitators. In the midst of his busy day, Marshall found a few minutes to sit down and answer a few questions over a cup of Mojo's coffee with YAWP! editorial staff member Allie Shook-Shoup.*

Allie Shook-Shoup: If you were just starting out as a new poet, what would you suggest reading to spark the imagination?

Tod Marshall: There are a lot of great intro to poetry writing books, and there is probably none better than *The Triggering Town* by Richard Hugo. Richard Hugo was a poet who taught for a number of years at the University of Montana, and he collected his lectures in this book *Triggering Town*. I think that they emphasize a lot of the important messages that young writers need to hear in creating poetry. Some of those messages include: trusting your intuition; not worrying too much about getting the facts right; trusting the music of the poem to take you in a compelling direction; and [dealing with] the loneliness and difficulty of writing in general, whether that's poetry or some other genre. You're always alone at the desk, you have to put in that time at the desk, and you don't know whether or not that time will come to anything, but you won't know if you don't try. Also, *The Triggering Town* emphasizes, because it's focusing on poetry, the importance of relishing the music of language, and reveling in it. It's got a lot of great one-liners in it. One of them is, and this is close but not exact, it's a rough paraphrase: you owe reality nothing and your imagination everything; poetry is not about communication … if you want to communicate, pick up the phone. So, *Triggering Town* comes to mind.

I think that William Stafford is another poet that maybe doesn't get quite as much attention, who's really great on the art of writing. One of my favorite Stafford anecdotes is from an interview with Bill Moyers, and in that interview Stafford was talking about his writing process, and his writing process consisted of waking up every morning about 4:30 and going out to the couch — and he wrote on a legal pad — and lounging back on the couch, and writing. And that worked for Stafford. For me, I'd fall back asleep. But Moyers asks him, "well, what if nothing good comes to you?" and Stafford responded, "then I lower my standards." And that bridged a little bit to something we were talking about at lunch, that dynamic of not letting the world critique you too much, and getting something down on the page, first and foremost. Then you can work it toward whatever goal or whatever final shape the poem might achieve. So those are two that come to mind.

AS: I've heard a lot of people say that poetry isn't really relevant anymore, that it's an art of the past that people spent time on when they didn't have TV or the Internet. What would you say is poetry's most important function in our communities and our culture, today, right now, as you have experienced it?

TM: That's a really hard question and a really layered question. Poets have been writing defenses of poetry going back for centuries. So it seems that there's an ongoing question about how integral the poetic art is to culture at large. Now, what's fascinating about that dynamic is, poetry is one of those art forms, along with dance and music, that seems to have existed in some form in just about every culture that we've ever known. So why do we continually question the relevance of something that it seems humanity in general seems to have valued over the course of history? I think the answer to that is: in 2015 we try to measure impact in as many quantitative ways as possible. And we think about audience, and number of books sold, and those easily measurable ways of recognizing what roles something plays in culture. So by that equation, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is the most important thing to our culture these days? I would find that pretty disturbing. You know, I think that poetry is as vibrant and alive right now as it ever has been. In my own town, there are more spoken word events, there are more readings, there are more open mics, than I know happened when I was in my teens, twenties, and thirties, in different places all over the country. And Spokane where I live is a relatively isolated city; it's not Seattle

or Chicago or New York, and I know that in those places it is even a more vibrant art culture. So one reaction I have to that — because I know that poetry has been around for so long, and seems to be still a vibrant part of what I see in culture around us— is: what's wrong with that line of questioning? Why, throughout history, does that questioning keep coming up? And I don't know the answer to that, but you know, I always think about, what if the question were framed: why isn't dance relevant as much as it was? Why isn't classical music as relevant? And you know, I think that's what people are looking for — and there's a whole host of essays on this subject, Dana Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter?" … and there's a lot of interrogation about what role poetry should play — and I think that the question wants some quantifiable rationale, or some real mystical vision about how poetry plays this role like Shelley argued for — that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, somehow changing things, and I think that that's just silly. But I think that the best answer is: it *is* alive and it *is* around us and it might not get 10 million Google hits like a weird cat and dog interaction on a video, but there are still plenty of people reading it, performing it, and sharing it with one another, and you know, what more do we want? Does that speak to what you're asking?

AS: That completely speaks to the question I'm asking. Ok, So how do you deal with writer's block? Or do you encounter it at all?

TM: [Sighs.] I give myself exercises. And actually, when I finished my first book, *Dare Say*, I didn't. It's not so much "block" that I experienced. My mind seems to want to reach for some sort of shapeliness that it can create within. And what I mean by that is, I don't do well just doing freewrites that don't seem headed in some sort of direction. I need a fenced-in playground, I suppose, in which to explore and check things out. So, after I finished *Dare Say*, I gave myself this template of trying to write poems that used some sort of metaphoric energy for their creation. And they all had titles [that] describe something to something else. So, there's "Describe Icarus to Kentucky Fried Chicken," "Describe Turner to Martin Luther King," "Describe Wildflowers to Ethics." So there'd be a very concrete thing and a very conceptual thing, a very famous person or literary work and something quite distant from it, and I then would try to yoke them together somehow in the poem. Many of them were just disasters, but they made my mind work in a real different way than just freewriting would make me work.

Fertility. Pottery. Caitlyn Grant.

Pinched Tray Form. Pottery. Caitlyn Grant.

So then, when I finished that book, I was afloat again and I didn't know quite what to do, and it seems as though I settled upon the sonnet as a shape. *Bugle*, I think, ended up with about twelve to fifteen sonnets, and some of them are quite mutant in their "sonnetness," but that gave me some boundaries to work within, and that really helps get me going. Now I'm trying to find some new exercises. Like Will [a Bethel Literary Studies major and poet], I think I'm exploring a very long-lined poem right now, and I've found some good energy in that. I give myself little templates, like exercises to work in. I think that keeps writer's block from happening. I think in some ways writer's block is an illusion, it's ourselves giving too much attention to the world's criticism and not enough attention to what our imaginations want to do. And we're back to Stafford again. Stafford was asked, "why do you write poetry?" and he said that "the better question is, why doesn't everybody write poetry?"

AS: Easier question: what do you take with you when you're hiking?

TM: Back-packing trip? Or just day hiking?

AS: Well, I don't know. You spoke about just going out in the coniferous forests and wandering about. What's in your backpack when you're out there?

TM: Well, it depends where I'm going. If I'm in bear country, then I have bear spray because that would be silly otherwise. But I enjoy backpacking a great deal. I try to go out as much as possible in the summer. I'm not a winter sports person; I don't do snow camping. It never really appealed to me. But in a literary vein, and this is kind of silly, clichéd, and I'm sorry for it, but I carry *Walden*. I have a little bitty mini pocket *Walden* that is the only book I've ever carried, because books are heavy! And when you're backpacking you have to make choices. So I've got a little pocket-sized *Walden*, and actually, this is kind of blasphemous: I've ripped out many pages from the sections that I don't quite care for as much when I've needed fire starter. And so it's an abridged *Walden* now, although it didn't start out that way. If it's a place where I can fish, I usually bring my fly-fishing stuff. Those are the things that come first to mind.

AS: Is there anything else that you want to share with the Bethel community that maybe I haven't asked already?

TM: I guess I would reiterate the mantra that I ended on in the convo today: it's really easy to take the time that we get — to encounter literature, philosophy, theological works — it's really easy to take four years of study completely for granted. I think that's one of the ruts that we fall back into … one of your early questions about poetry mattering. It's almost as if we start to take those wonderful parts of our culture — poetry, music, and dance — for granted, and don't celebrate them like we should. But, don't do that. Realize what an amazing gift it is to have professors, to have a library, to be able to talk about ideas and challenge each other, and get the most out of this time. Because life shouldn't be a rut and life shouldn't be anything but a constant encounter with things that terrify us, with things that make us smile and cry, and live more fully.

Space Prison. Water Color and Acrylic. Jessie Pohl.

Composition

by Will Shoup

Like Borg, you suck up streams of love through wires—
along your seashell ears—and eyes (on screen):

create! Collect your home-row toes and lie
to self. First breath of life. You gather beams

and bricks of many houses' thoughts. This blot
of town: tornado'd trucks, like DNA;

unraveled blanket noise; a scream; a shot:
a kill. Now Sparky with the blood; his legs

were Dunlop'd off by skidding hubcap swords.
Good scalpel craft. Your implant eye. These signs:

Vesuvius, enraged, erupts; and hoards
of proles: they gather with their brews and grind

their teeth at scoreboard hopes; and you? The drone?
Do not resist. Weave nests of cord and bone.