

ConVivio Guest Post: Lauren de Vore



I've always loved the sound and rhythm of words, and some of my earliest memories are of being read to—fairy tales, classic children's stories, and poems, lots and lots of poems. Remember "Lines on the Antiquity of Microbes" (subtitled "Fleas" by [Strickland Gillilan](#)): "Adam/Had 'em.", reputedly the shortest poem ever published? Or how about the hypnotic verses of Robert Service: "There are strange things done in the midnight sun by the men who toil for gold..."?

Well, this is a completely new experience for me, a coming out of my poet's closet so to speak. After spending my working years as a science writer/technical editor, it's a real treat now to spend time writing what I want to write! To my surprise, I find myself writing poetry.

As I found pleasure in the writing of the following poems, I hope you find pleasure reading them.

Like Dan, I love Yosemite. As spectacular as spring and early summer can be, fall is actually my favorite time there; the days are still warm but the nights are crisp and, with the crowds gone, the valley is quietly settling down for the winter. Regardless of season, there is something spiritual about the place. I wrote the following poem last June after an early morning walk.

Morning Walk

Lauren de Vore (July 3, 2014)

I rose at dawn one summer morn
 Something was calling me
A gift to see the day new born
 Here in Yosemite

The forest duff held yestreen's heat
 Meadow grass bowed with dew
I watched the silent stars retreat
 Dark eased its sable hue

With reverence I inhaled deep
 All was hushed, nothing stirred
So perfect, pure that I could weep
 Silver song of first bird

Such sanctity in every rock
 Waterfall river pool
All mysteries reveal, unlock
 Here in God's vestibule

I walked till gray gave way to light
 Granite in bas-relief
A simple chapel met my sight
 Edifice for belief

Seems strange that midst this majesty
 Man constructs walls and roof
In searching for divinity
 Indoors he turns for proof

Perhaps too much to face full-blazed
 Unfiltered gaze of God
Within a structure man has raised
 There finds it safe to laud

A gentle breeze whispered my way
 Gratia domini
Whate'er the day it's Sabbath day
 Here in Yosemite



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I've long been a fan of Walt Whitman, even before I went to Whitman College. And no, the college was not named for the poet but for a missionary, Marcus Whitman, who in settling the Walla Walla valley managed to wipe out most of the native inhabitants with a measles epidemic; the understandably irate survivors then massacred Marcus and his settlers. History lesson aside, do you remember Apple's commercial for last year's Superbowl, "...the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse."? That's a line from the poem "O Me! O Life!"

(<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/182088>) in Whitman's "Leaves of Grass."

My verse is below. I think everyone, at some point or another, contemplates legacy. Very few of us have the opportunity, talent and/or fortitude to make a difference in the grand scheme of things. But on the smaller, more human scale...

My Verse

Lauren de Vore (Feb 27, 2014)

My verse, Mr. Whitman,
Is but a small verse, a simple verse,

One of quiet striving to find a place to fit in,
A way to leave the world better, if only a bit, than before.

I have asked the larger questions but only lightly,
For I am one more inclined to nurture dragons than slay them;

I have loved well but without grand passion,
For I am better suited to live on the plains, in the lea not the face of the storm;

I have shed tears over the struggle and injustice,
But cried also over the beauty and sheer joy of it all.

Many are the times I should have done, could have done,
But more are the times I did.

And so, mine is a simple verse—a son, a handful of friends,
A smattering of follies and kindnesses, of ordinary tragedies and triumphs.

I have not shaken the earth for good or ill,
But I have lived. I am here.

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Since we're recognizing National Poetry Month, here are several poems about words, poets and poetry. There's a lot of verbiage about poetry being transcendent, sublime, profound, etc. I'm always a bit put off by these superlatives. Some poetry is indeed extraordinary and inspiring, and I suspect many poets have ambitions toward that end. But such characterizations can make poetry seem intimidating and set it beyond the ken and interest of ordinary writers and readers. It's important to remember that poetry is also fun, and that less-than profound poems are every bit as valuable, and often more enjoyable, than the critically acclaimed "greats."

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This is my little rebuttal to literary critics who extol poetry in highfalutin terms and to poets who cultivate the abstruse in an attempt to be profound. As an aside, I'm very fond of sonnets. I like the challenge of working within the constraints of the sonnet's structure, meter and rhyme—specifically, 14 lines consisting of three quatrains and a concluding couplet in iambic pentameter with an ABAB or ABBA rhyming scheme. (If you've ever taken a music theory class, writing a sonnet is similar to being presented with the melody line and figured bass for a Bach chorale and working to fill in the other three parts. And then, of course, comes the lesson in humility when, after hours of struggle on your own composition, Bach's version is revealed! The same thing happens when I read Shakespeare's sonnets.)

Thoughts Profound

Lauren de Vore (Apr. 10, 2014)

The poet's task can be formidable
For if one's aim is poetry profound,
One must, as precedent, think thoughts profound
(Though not completely inexplicable).

But if a thought seems deep or sage to me,
I wonder is it so? Perhaps it's just
My ignorance, something that's been discussed
And shelved long since by those more scholarly.

But then I think, ne'er mind those dusty tomes,
Th'idea's new to me. And so I pense
The thoughts and images as they make sense
To me, and in the process pen my poems.

I think it matters not what's deemed profound,
But that one thinks and ventures to expound.

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Standing in the shower, hot water streaming over my shoulders, is often a creative time for me. Possibilities for new poems emerge, solutions to difficulties with in-progress poems arise. But then, dripping wet, I have to quickly find something to scribble on before the ideas evaporate with the steam!

Musing

Lauren de Vore (Feb. 19, 2014)

Why is it that when inspiration strikes,
I'm always in the shower or in bed
Near sleep with naught to write upon to catch
Those fleeting sparks of wit, those crystal drops
Of insight evanescent in the light
Of day? Perhaps there is some muse who likes
To tease, to pendulate a slender thread
Of perfect prose or rhyme sublime, then snatch
It back while laughing from the mountaintops.
Yet if these tricks amuse the muse, no spite
I'll hold, for any hint poetic psyches
Me up and sets thoughts spinning in my head.
Come morn, with pen in hand I'll chicken-scratch
Till phrases coalesce in starts and stops,
Like smoke rings that shine brightly then take flight.
And though I might prefer some clearer spikes
Of inspiration, mileage posts instead
Of traces drawn by bits of straw and thatch,
I welcome any literary sops
That come my way. For I know when the right
Words finally align in proper queues,
The poem belongs to me and not the muse.

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Words are like people. Some are practical and purposeful. Some are demanding and ambitious or exuberant and frivolous. Others are somber and melancholy or perhaps persnickety and precise. And playing with them is just plain fun.

Old Friends

Lauren de Vore (June 14, 2014)

One of the nicest things now I have time to write
Is chance to reacquaint myself with long-lost friends.
In searching for the perfect phrase or rhyme just right
As thought in prose or poem sinuously wends
Its way from brain to page, I've happened on a host
Of lovely words I met, oh, years ago, but long
Forgot midst press of workday life. So here's a toast
To all the vocables that make a language song,
An art, a mental exercise, a game of tones.
Some are celebrities, imposing cynosures
That daunt for fear their inept use engender groans.
Others inveigle as they dangle sapid lures
To those who strive to find t'exact mot juste
As anodyne for verbal hebetude. The twee
And chary, risible and coy've returned to roost
Within my newly 'larged vocabulology,
And in their company I've wambled far and wide
Through literary dingle, kloof and weald. Although
At times I balter in their syllables, beside
Their usual kith and kin they're far more apropos
And much more fun to know. And so I set myself
The goal each day to use at least one quirky word
That else would molder on some dusty reference shelf.
Eyebrows may rise and people think me most absurd,
But words unused are eas'ly lost, and in their loss
Is language dimmed, for words are more than letters in
A row but filled with meme and meaning stretched across
The years. When words are lost, the concepts held within
Are also lost and soon or late th'ability
To think those thoughts recedes beyond recall. And so
My game of tones is more than vain legerity
But quest to save the tools we need to think and know
And understand. And after all, these words are friends,
And friendship true perdures despite mere fads and trends.

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I was always the nerdy kid, the one with glasses and braces who actually liked school and read poetry even when it wasn't assigned. In fact, one of my favorite poems was (and still is) Robert Browning's "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173002>). On a recent rereading, it struck me how much one's enjoyment of such poems depends on knowledge of the "cultural literacy" of the era in which the poem was written. The verse below attempts to reflect on this realization.

A Poet's Admonition

Lauren de Vore (Dec. 6, 2013)

A passing survey of lauded poets of yore
Reveals what may be a vexing predicament
For would-be bards of today, for tis evident
That the sonnets and odes English teachers adore
Are brimming with analogies from history,
Legend and myth. These allusionary subjects,
While once in common grasp, now baffle and perplex
All but the super-erudite and scholarly.
For who today knows 'nough of Ozymandias
Or Cuchulain or Lochinvar to apprehend
The poet's nuance? Be they villain or godsend,
Their deeds are lost to time, their names are powerless.

Thus must the twenty-first-century poet ask,
What is the current coin of history and myth,
The people and places that will register with
Readers today and in years to come? Quite a task
To choose amongst Lincoln, Mandela, or Gandhi,
'Twixt Birkenau and Abu Ghraib. And which of these,
If any, will have meaning in the centuries
Ahead when poet too is part of history?

No matter how important now, most everyone
And every deed will likely be forgot in time
As memory must pick and choose which are sublime
And worth remembering, the rest to jettison.
Perhaps this is the poet's task, to search the dross
And find the diamonds bright, and by the craft transform
Mere mortals into myth.

Bard choose well, for you form
The future's view of history, a heavy cross
Indeed to bear. But every age has need of lore,
And hist'ry books though filled with facts are dreary works.
But stories tell with rhythm and with rhyming verse,
And oft the parables evolve to something more.
So poet hone your tales and wisely wield your pen,
For they may well have powers far beyond your ken.

These next two poems started out simply as observations of scenes but evolved into something a bit more.

Big Sur Coast

Lauren de Vore (Feb. 24, 2015)

On high I watch the breakers pound the shore.
With foaming wrath they protest journey's end,
As if through sound and fury they could rend
The cliffs and force the land to yield before
Their watery might. No restful overlook
This bluff of mine, with naught for company
But screaming gulls and one lone cypress tree.
Though meager shelter 'gainst the wind, in crook
Of twisted trunk I stand, eyes squinting in
The glare. With every thundering crash I feel
The temper in each surge of liquid steel,
Frustration that the race is run and win
Or lose 'tis done. Thus so I reckon feels
The river as it empties in the sea,
As well th'explorer trekking westerly
Till dry land ends and squatting on his heels
Curses the ocean now his westering days
Are done. And yet the rivers ever run,
And though the strand is strewn with those who shun
The sea's untamed expanse, the restless gaze
Beyond the known and venture ever on.
Around the globe, by tempests tossed, by ice
And fire burned, be't hell or paradise
They tarry not as onwards they are drawn.
And when at last the last frontier's been breached,
When all the empty lands are overrun,
What of the ones who chase the setting sun,
Now that the questing's done, the limit's reached?
I watch the breakers crash upon the shore
Refusing to accept that journeys end.
As daylight fades, down from my bluff I wend
And know the waves will pound forevermore.



I'm convinced that all cats, just before they are born, are sworn to secrecy about all things feline!

Cat

Lauren de Vore (April 15, 2015)

So sleek and elegant, tuxedo-clad, my cat
Sits crouched upon the hearth and stares unblinking at
The dancing flames and glowing coals. What see you there,
Oh cat who deigns to share my bed and meager fare,
Deep in the fire's heart? Across the eons do
You gaze, when deepest darkest Africa was new,
When mighty beasts, not man, did rule the plains and you
Perhaps the leader of some simban pride? Or do
You see the ancient pyramids when cats were viewed
As gods, were worshipped, idolized, their favors wooed?
Can you tap mem'ries from the days beyond recall?
You've prowled the fetid alleys and the king's great hall
As Black Death carried off both rich and poor. You've sailed
Around the world, in countless armies' van you've trailed,
You've watched as tempests swirled and battles raged and seen
The course of hist'ry changed. Oh cat of midnight sheen,
The flick'ring flames reflect within your slitted eyes,
Their ever-changing scintillations hypnotize.
Can you not give me just a hint of what you see,
Of all that's feline, foreign and thus hid from me?
Still as a statue, full of secrets, staring at
The swirling fire, so sits my sleek and silent cat.



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Every writer is, I suspect, an avid reader—a good thing too, since where would writers be without readers?

Selfish

Lauren de Vore (Jan. 6, 2014)

My reading time is precious time, my selfish time.
So if you see me with a book, don't talk to me,
Don't ask me what I'm doing—reading, duh—or if
It's good—it is, I wouldn't read it otherwise.
And if you do, don't be surprised or captious when
I scowl as I reluctantly reply. And should
You then decide to choose a book or magazine
Yourself to read, please be forewarned that reading's not
A group activity. Repress, nay kill the urge
To interrupt to ask to read me "just one thing."
Though I may acquiesce with barely stifled sigh,
The answer's really "no." For I am far away
Within the pages of my book—another time,
Another place—and hauling back to here and now
Is maddening beyond belief. Tis selfish, true,
Such solitude to seek and churlish to resent
Its breach. But since I have no secret place in which
To hide away and read, domestic bliss would be
Enhanced by silence till I've closed my book and joined
Again the present day and ever-patient spouse.

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And finally a little something haiku-ish...

Birdsong in a minor key
Shatters the fragile shell of dawn.
Daybreak.



Many thanks to my husband, Paul Jackson,
for the photos. (You should have an exhibit
some day!)

-- Lauren de Vore