

**Alice Friman**

## **Sweet Hell: A Conversation with Alice Friman**

*During a recent visit to Troy University, Ms. Friman addressed a creative writing class and afterward answered questions from students Nathalie Boyd, Caleb Humphreys, Samantha Loff, and Claire Mathis.*

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*How did you get started?*

When I was in college at sixteen, I would write terrible poems about being in love with the wrong person – nothing’s changed has it? When I was in my thirties I would get the urge to write a poem, and I would write it and hide it in a drawer. And that went on for fourteen years. The person in you who writes is the deepest part of you there is. So what was going on really? I was hiding myself in the drawer. But who knew that? I had three kids. I had a lot of floors to scrub. Anyway, that’s what it was. Maybe at the end of twelve, thirteen years I had fifteen poems hidden in the drawer. And what happened was I had a student named Randy, who was eighteen years old. I was forty-four. He said to me, ‘You write poetry don’t you? There’s a poetry reading downtown. Why don’t you go?’ And I, who wanted to travel the world, and later did by myself, said ‘No, I can’t do that. You take me.’ Eighteen years old, and he took me. So we go to this place. It was a bar, and there were eight people there. Four of them were dead drunk, blotto, out. And they got up and they read poetry, and I said, Well, it’s not so bad. So I took them out of my purse and got up on stage. And I am pretty good in front of an audience, I enjoy it. But my hands were shaking. And when I came down, they said to

me, You know, you're pretty good. You should come back. And that was the beginning of my second life. I would go there every Tuesday night. And I took the poems out of the drawer – in other words, I took myself out of the drawer. It just happened.

*Do you have any poems that were inspired by your childhood?*

Is that a joke? I would say at least half of them were. Or at least inspired by one's parents or one's family. When you're a child your parents are great people. Great, big, powerful people. To see them shrink and to see them die in your hands, and I mean actually in my hands, is very difficult. One of my books is called *The Book of the Rotten Daughter*, I'll show it to you. The working title was *Death, Death, and Some More of It*. My father called me "Rotten Daughter." And it wasn't a pet name. And I am not a rotten daughter. He was just a little wacky. And very harmful. Which is what makes a poet good. So, you can't get away from it. Even if you think you can, you can't. It's who you are.

*In your poem "At the Holocaust Museum," there seems to be a correlation between the need for visual understanding, and a desire to re-connect with other people, between your group's compulsion to witness and their mutual politeness while huddled together.*

I can see that you understood the poem perfectly. I wrote what I saw happening: in the face of such unbelievable horror, I was struck by how people who didn't know each other at all (there was no "group"), seemed to want to press together, and in so doing, be kind. It was as if we were all reduced to children again and needed the comfort.

*Do you have a favorite image that tends to recur?*

Yes, and I think that probably everyone does. I think they come from one's childhood. The image that recurs quite a bit often is the ocean. I spent my summers, from the time I was seven to twelve, on Long Beach. In those days, Long Beach was completely empty. It was a child's paradise, which meant they left you alone with great big empty fields and beaches. And the ocean itself, to a seven year old, is very large. I find images of the ocean coming back and coming back.

*Was it Yeats who said that everyone is naturally drawn to the ocean?*

I don't know if it was Yeats who said it, but it's true. Especially for women. You'll find women sitting on the beach alone, or with someone else, just sitting and staring at the ocean. And it's very comforting, you know, because those are the things that are going to be there after you're gone. Other things I write about a lot are trees. I won a fellowship at Bernheim Forest in Kentucky. You come for a month, and they give you a place to stay and write about trees. After I did that, I kept going back all the time. So I've got all these poems about trees. In the latest book, *Vinculum*, every section begins with a poem from Berheim Forest. It's a forest and arboretum. It's just wonderful to walk around and see.

*You said that half of your poems are inspired by your childhood. What about the other half?*

I go out and take what I call "image walks," a lot, a lot. And I see something, and I scribble it down. I see something else, and I scribble it down. What you're really doing is gathering material that will, in turn, reflect how you feel in

the moment. Not how you think you feel, but how you really feel. I also very much am interested in love. I'm an old romantic. And you know, Tennyson said, The low sun makes the color. And I have been falling in love all my life. And usually with the wrong person. So I'm into misery a lot.

*Are you grateful in any way for such experiences?*

Oh, no. That's a great big question, because you're asking three questions at once. Yeah. I tell my students when they come to me and they say, Oh, I can't write because I just broke up with my boyfriend. I'm miserable. I say, Good. I've got a very dark view of the world. I mean, I'm funny, but I have a dark, dark view. I think life is a tragedy. Ask the question again. Am I grateful for my misery? I'm grateful I can do something with it. And I think because of that, poetry has kept me sane, really.

*In "Diapers for my Father," It's fantastic how Ophelia and the narrator, presumably you, relate to one another. How did you come about connecting such a personal moment to Shakespeare's play?*

I had just come back from the store after purchasing the diapers. Why the words "To be or not to be" popped into my head I don't know, but they did. And then I remember I laughed. Such a big question: to be or not to be when what I had just faced was so mundane: pads or pull-ons. So here then was the true face of death—the reality of dying—not as a grand soliloquy but in the rather comic and tragic purchasing of diapers. And then, the poem took over. That is, once I engaged Hamlet, I just pushed the inherent comparisons.

*Can you describe your writing process? Do you maintain a daily writing schedule? How long does it take you to complete a poem?*

I write every day. That is, I spend time every day working like a wasp over her cells. Rewriting, rewriting. Tinkering, tinkering. It takes me at least a month to complete a piece, or to come to the conclusion that it's done. I work on one thing at a time. Not that I recommend working that way to other people. It's just the way I do it.

*How do you make time to write?*

That's the wrong question. The question should be: how do you make time for everything else? Sorry, I'm being funny. Well, we don't have television. I don't belong to Facebook or any other social media. I live a very quiet life. Look, the truth is, that people do what they want to do. If you want to write stongly enough, you will.

*Do you always believe in your work, even in its infancy?*

I believe in nothing. Least of all my work. I write from the inside out (the inside of an image or thought or feeling) and try hard not to look at the particular piece I'm working on objectively, that is, as a judge. That's not my job. My job is to SEE the world and write what I see. If what you mean by belief is, do I have faith in my work—that is, do I think it's good—then the answer is no. Do I think if I work hard enough focusing and refocusing I can make it better, then the answer is yes.

*How do you decide what meter your poem deserves?*

I am reminded of what Derek Walcott said about rhythm. He said that when first beginning a piece what you have to do is discern the rhythm. Yes, before you even know what you are talking about, or where you're going as to language or even sense. It's the inherent rhythm of those first lines that will carry you, and not what you're saying. And I've found that to

be true in my own work. You will rewrite and rewrite to clarify and better focus the sense of what you're saying, but underneath it all is that music that is inherent in the opening lines. And that rhythm is nothing that you "decide." It's what's there already. I am, of course, speaking of free verse. But even so, it's the poem that "decides" what meter it wants to be in, not you.

*What would your advice be to a person just beginning the poetry-writing process?*

Read a lot of the poetry that you love, slowly and out loud, so that you get a feel for the deliciousness of the language. After all, you are entering a love affair that promises to last your whole life, and hopefully a long life if possible, so take your vitamins. Read, read, read, and go to as many poetry readings as you can. And whatever happens in your life, take it. That is to say, live it and feel it. Be brave. Suck the juice out of every experience you have. Even the bad ones.

*What do you think of the current MFA programs? Is an MFA necessary to succeed in today's market? Can an MFA really make somebody a better writer?*

I have very mixed feelings about this one. When I started writing seriously in my mid-forties, I had three kids and a kitchen floor to scrub. If there were MFA programs around, except for Iowa, I didn't know about them. I started to write because I needed to put into language what I was feeling. And the more one writes, the more one has to write. One learns how to write by writing. There's no magic bullet. The writing scene today seems to me to be get-a-job oriented, and of course the MFA system feeds into that. Will getting an MFA make you a better writer? Well, perhaps a more disciplined one, and perhaps it can develop one's natural penchant for stringing words together. But it can't create talent or

teach someone how to see, and an artist—any kind of artist—is someone who knows how to see.

*What poets had a strong influence on you?*

I hope you mean have, for one doesn't stop reading and developing. But if you mean had, then all those wonderful women who split the poetry world apart a few decades ago: Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Denise Levertov, etc. But if you mean have a strong influence on me and continue to do so, then Keats, Yeats, Rilke, Hopkins, Albert Goldbarth, Louise Glück, Neruda, Carol Frost, E. A. Robinson, David Huddle, etc.

Glück's the best thing writing, I'm telling you. Read a book called the *Wild Iris*. Goldbarth's a rascal. His poetry is so different from Glück's. I don't know if influence is the word. There are poets I love, and poets that I read and say, Look at that! You can do that? You can read Louise Glück, and it's clear as crystal. She doesn't use any tricks, and yet, how does she get from here to there? So I don't know if that's an influence. When I first started reading Goldbarth, I thought, Oh my goodness, you can just stick anything in a poem! Anything! Pizza! He's got a book called *The Kitchen Sink*. And he knows everything. So that was sort of freeing. To know, well, I can just stick it in.

My favorite poet of all time is Gerard Manley Hopkins. He never fails to thrill me. And I'm not religious at all, so it's not that. It's the language, the idea of rapture, that kind of business. To be able to get that down on paper. I mean, I've done it, but it's so hard. O thou lord of life, send my roots rain. If only I had written that one!

*Would you describe your writing process?*

I have in my house, unless I go away to write, which I do sometimes, an area surrounded by glass. It looks out over the top of a forest. It's gorgeous. You can watch the hawks circling. I've got nothing in my head. If I'm lucky, I have an idea, but that's unusual. It's funny to watch yourself do what you do. I go to another room in the house, not on purpose, I just do. I'll play with a pen and paper, and it has to be a black pen, and it has to be a piece of paper, folded in half. Once I get the first lines, which might not end up being the first lines, and I get the rhythm, then I go upstairs and put it on the computer. I used to swear I would never, never write on the computer, but I do. I used to write on the typewriter with one finger. So I put it up there on the computer and say, What have we got here? It's pretty lousy. And then I tell myself, It doesn't make any difference. I'm just playing. (I lie. It's called creative lying.) And every day, I spend time with it. I see where I can go, what is there. And so it takes me sometimes a month, two, three, to write one poem. Each poem has a number and a date it was finished and a 3x5 card. So this way I can keep track of where it is, if I'm sending it out, the dates it goes out and comes back, where it goes next. I'm very organized.

*Do you write more than one poem at a time?*

No, but there's not a right way to do it. It's just how I do it. You know the poet Rita Dove? She once told me that she's got these envelopes, and they're arranged by color. And in each envelope, she's got these little snippets. So, when she sits down to write, she says, What envelope do we write in today? So I tried that. It was a disaster. You have to find your own way without looking for it. It will find you. So I usually only work on one. And I'm obsessive. When I'm really getting to the part I like, which is tweaking it at the end, when I sort of know where it's going, and it's not quite there, sometimes I'll stay up half the night, just tweaking.

Then you've got to begin again, which is terrible.

*Is that why you describe poetry as your "sweet hell"?*

Well isn't it? So engaging, so demanding, so frustrating, so delicious—the words, the wonderful words just slipping around all over the place. Sounds like sweet hell to me.

## Diapers for My Father

Pads or pull-ons—that  
is the question. Whether to buy  
pads dangled from straps  
fastened with buttons or Velcro—  
pads rising like a bully's cup  
stiff as pommel with stickum backs  
to stick in briefs. Or, dear God,  
the whole thing rubberized,  
size 38 in apple green, with  
or without elastic leg. Or the kind,  
I swear, with an inside pocket  
to tuck a penis in—little resume  
in a folder. Old mole, weeping  
his one eye out at the tunnel's end.

The clerk is nothing but patience  
practiced with sympathy.  
Her eyes soak up everything.  
In ten minutes she's my cotton batting,  
my triple panel, triple shield—my Depends  
against the hour of the mop: skeleton  
with a sponge mouth dry as a grinning brick  
waiting in the closet.

She carries my choices to the register,  
sighing the floor with each step.  
I follow, absorbed away to nothing.

How could Hamlet know what flesh is heir to?  
Ask Claudius, panicky in his theft,  
hiding in the garden where it all began  
or behind the arras, stuffing furbelows  
from Gertrude's old court dress into his codpiece.  
Or better, ask Ophelia, daughter too  
of a foolish, mean-mouthed father,  
who launched herself like a boat of blotters  
only to be pulled babbling under the runaway stream.

*(first published in The Ohio Review)*

## **At the Holocaust Museum**

Like Dante, we too are led  
down. The elevator that swooped us up  
and spewed us out, leaves us—  
clusters of strangers—to the inexorable power  
of no way to go but with each other  
and the relentless spiral of design.

We shuffle, slow as sludge  
in a drain, winding to the bottom.  
We gawk, not in disbelief but believing  
this has little to do with us—our comfort  
in the face of explanations that explain  
nothing, the old jackboot footage  
of rantings, book burnings, and the car  
that waits for us, rattling with ghosts  
on its siding, and the glass case  
big as Germany, knee-deep in human hair.

We grow quiet. We have crawled  
into our eyes. There is nothing  
but what we see. And at base bottom,  
what's to see but the dredged-up bottom  
of ourselves that belongs only to ourselves  
and the moving tide of each other.  
We crowd in to look. The eye is hungry—  
a dog dragging its belly through streets,  
sniffing out its own vomit, not getting enough:  
the experiments, the ovens, and all their

tattooed histories fidgeting in smoke  
that rose like bubbles in a fish tank  
to dissipate in air. Fingers pluck  
at our sleeves. Gold teeth hiss  
in their case. What do they want of us,  
we who can give nothing, reduced to nothing  
but dumb pupils staring at evidence—  
the starved and naked dead, the bulldozers,  
the British soldier throwing up in his hand?  
We press to the TV monitors, mob in,

fit our bodies together like multiple births  
in the womb, wanting the heat of each other,  
the terrible softness beneath clothes.  
Excuse me, Pardon, and the knot of us  
slips a little, loosens to make room.  
In the smallest of voices, Sorry we say  
as if, battered back to three again,  
all we have is what Mother said was good.  
Pinkie in a dike. Bandaid on a gusher.  
But what else do we know to do

at the end of another century that retrospect  
will narrow to a slit, if this Holocaust—  
this boulder big as Everest—isn't big enough  
to change the tide that ran through it?

*(first published in The North American Review)*

## Primary Colors

Red is love,  
rubies and valor. Venery

and the blast of trumpets. Mars  
swirling in a dust of iron oxide—the last

victory-stained chariot rumbling the sky.  
Red is ketchup. The mangled dead. Stop lights

and the heart's juice.

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Blue is both heaven  
and the naked abyss, the vein

under the tongue, Stilton cheese  
and the hottest stars. Blue is turquoise

and trickery: the sky's bruised emptiness:  
by night—black water, black hole.

Blue is saxophones. The Virgin's wrap.  
Melancholy. Mondays. Picasso's period.

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Yellow is radiance  
not tainted by the smack of death. The sun's

democracy. New straw. Number 2 pencils.

Buddha's parasol. Yellow is gingko  
in autumn. Vincent's draft horse of a color  
to charm the gods. Wolves' eyes. Tigers  
between their stripes. What remains  
when you split green and leave the blues  
behind. That July morning.  
The dress I wore.

*(first published in The Gettysburg Review)*

## Swedes

New Zealand, a rented car,  
and me and my sweetie  
white-knuckling the hairpin turns,  
stopping at each overlook to stare  
into the generosity of beauty  
spilling out in the world,  
when suddenly, a sign—  
SWEDES FOR SALE.

Mile after lovely mile,  
then another sign and soon  
every fifty feet, homemade,  
propped on posts or pinned  
to burlap bags hanging from  
mailboxes and fences, heavy  
and lumpy with who knows what.

GET YOUR SWEDES NOW!

We look at each other.  
Greta Garbo? ABBA?  
King Gustav I who in 1523  
freed Sweden from the Danes?

PUT MONEY IN SACK—25¢ A SWEDE

Could be something to eat—  
potatoes or melons. If so, we  
are tempted! Honor system or no,  
a bargain's a bargain. Imagine,

two bits for an Ingmar Bergman  
burger. A little ketchup, one bite  
and a hairy spider crawls out,  
and you're off searching for God  
on a moth-eaten horse only  
to realize your mother doesn't  
love you and never did. And psst...  
there goes Sister in a white dress  
giggling behind a bush, and life—  
well, what does it mean anyway?

Then because my love is ever  
the sensible one, he calls time out,  
for we have been riding this joke  
long enough, and see—there really is  
a God—a picnic table not six feet  
from the ocean for no one but us  
and the wheeling black-backed  
gulls shrieking in melodrama.

We take no pictures, so picture us  
bundled up, huddled in the cold,  
wielding our plastic silver—  
peanut butter, the good bread,  
our splurge of fine plum jelly  
with brandy—while clouds  
scud in, graying the skies, and me  
reaching up to pull the hat down  
tight over his ears—the hat that  
plays havoc with his thinning hair.

Look, there we are under the one  
shaft of sun left—still cracking jokes  
and laughing over our Swedish mystery.  
Eating lunch by a darkening sea.

*(first published in The Southern Review)*

## At Okefenokee...

*.../trembling earth/*

Winter, and the alligator's heart  
slows to a two-times-a-minute beat  
while all reptilian seize and destroy—  
the tank plates, the terrible teeth—  
wallow in the sleep of black-stained water,  
the dark looking glass of the swamp.

Imprisoned in the wrists, his pulse  
paces in philosophic thought. Who dares  
question what elegant adage or principle  
quickness behind that perpetual grin?

Loops of Spanish moss canopy his head  
and a fearsome quiet hushes the black-  
satin water of his sheets. He concentrates  
therefore he is—all seventy-eight  
teeth and fifteen feet of him. I shiver  
in my fleece. But the great mouth  
is beyond hunger now, the catatonic  
jaws, locked. It is the ides of January.  
The Okefenoke trembles like a clogged sink  
but will not go down. The fabulous lives:  
the swamp's saviour: the stopper in the drain.

*(first published in The Hamilton Stone Review)*

## Re-reading Emerson

Even when he was seventeen  
he wrote in quotables,  
the long looping sentences  
arcing the cliff edge  
of pages: the transcendent  
pitch for a new America.

He was a train pulled by  
its own light. Even when  
writing of Goethe—  
ahead in thought but each  
thought running steel  
horizontal to his own. Or  
28 August 1833, Rydal Mt,  
arguing Carlyle to Wordsworth—  
the oak intact in the acorn.  
The rose in the bud.

Truth is, from the first slap  
to the final box, he flew  
by the seat of his rhetoric:  
a mantra of self-reliance  
propped up by an over-arching  
idea—electric and universal.  
*When we discern justice,  
when we discern truth,  
we do nothing of ourselves,  
but allow a passage to its beams.*

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Truth was, he quickened each  
of his days into history  
suffering those beams. Derision,  
disdain, a son's death, fire, and ever  
his lost Ellen, her song coming  
*out of the darkness*, deep-toned  
and calling as from a dream.

It takes genius to live like that,  
pulling a country behind you.

*(first published in Ekphrasis)*