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Choosing a Poet's Life: Despite daunting obstacles, Colby poets pursue their solitary, creative craft

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choosing a poet's life

By Gerry Boyle '78

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Jody Zorgdrager '89 leads a double life.

Zorgdrager works for a medical products company in Seattle, sitting at a computer and crunching numbers. After work she pursues her true calling: writing poetry. "It's data specialist by day and poet by night," Zorgdrager said, adding that, with a book of poems coming out soon, her cover was blown. "A whole bunch of jokes about how I'd be giving poetry readings at staff meetings," she said.

Two decades after she began writing poems in creative writing classes at Colby, Zorgdrager has found success. A master's of fine arts from Warren Wilson was followed by slow but steady publication in increasingly prestigious journals and magazines. The former third-grade teacher, substance-abuse counselor, and adjunct college instructor will see her first book of poems, *Of Consequence*, published later this year or early next by a small press in Nebraska.

Zorgdrager credits faculty at Colby, especially Peter Harris and Ira Sadoff (English), for sending her down this artist's track. "I just can't say enough as far as their influence on me with poetry," she said. And then she chuckled. "I don't know if I owe them gratitude or blame."

But for Zorgdrager and others like her, writing poetry is no laughing matter. To pursue it as an undergraduate, a student may have to weather criticism from parents who were hoping for a more marketable college degree. To continue to pursue the craft after college takes determination, commitment, and a willingness to sacrifice.

"It's mostly a singular art, so it gets lonely," Zorgdrager said. "It's difficult, too, because I've found that I've always, on some level, had to justify to the professional world what I was doing as a writer. ... But I wouldn't have it any other way."

She is by no means alone.

At Colby there now are more students who want to write poetry than there are classes to accommodate them, says poet Adrian Blevins, an assistant professor of English. With the limited space in *The Pequod*, the College literary magazine, filled, students this spring founded a new poetry-only publication, *The Collective*. A group of five seniors and juniors, dubbed the Varsity Poets, includes one student bound for the MFA program at the University of Pittsburgh and another attending a prestigious summer writing workshop.

"We steal them from other majors," Blevins said. "They start writing and they have the talent. And then the question becomes, 'What do I do with my talent?'"

It can be a daunting gift to acknowledge. "They're afraid they're going to be poor," Blevins said, "and that might be true."

Sadoff, a widely renowned poet and the Arthur Jeremiah Roberts Professor of Literature, says it has become tougher in recent years for students to follow their muse, at least professionally. The increased cost of college today sends them out into the world with more financial pressure. Poetry is more marginalized as an art form than it was 20 or 30 years ago. And students at colleges like Colby, he says, tend to come from a social class for which becoming a young artist “represents a loss of class privilege.”

“I think it takes more courage to become an artist now,” Sadoff said.

Despite that, for some there is no choice.

Rachel Simon '99 was taught by Sadoff and Peter Harris, poet and Zacamy Professor of English, and recalls an odd moment of encouragement in Sadoff's advanced poetry class. “He said, ‘You know, the people in this workshop who are the best writers right now are not necessarily going to be the people who pursue this professionally.’ And

matter what her day job, noting that she has colleagues from graduate school in marketing and corporate jobs. “Even if I had done something like that, I would still have time to write,” she said. “For me, I feel like it's something I have to do for my own sanity and stability.”

She carries a notebook and sporadically jots down ideas. While Simon says her writing process is not very regimented, it has resulted in publication of her work in a variety

of journals (including the *North American Review* and *Poetry*), a poetry prize, and the recent publication of her first book, *theory of orange*.

The book, which draws on “any interesting and moving thing that I have access to,” Simon said, has been favorably received, including a blurb from the poet and writer Joan Larkin, who praised Simon's “clear-eyed gaze at life's odd, irresolvable circumstances.” Characteristically, and perhaps in keeping with the tone of her work, Simon's recollection of her book's actual arrival was both specific and reflective: “There was a big snowstorm and the mail carrier showed up with two thirty-pound boxes,” she said. “He was unhappy. He said, ‘What *are* these?’ I said, ‘My book.’ And then he shared some of my excitement.”

Coming in the summer 2007 *Colby*, a review of a new book of poetry by Ronald Moran '58. *The Blurring of Time*, published by Clemson University Digital Press, is Moran's ninth book or chapbook.

Simon also writes, and she would no



Colby poets discuss their work at a class held at Riverside Farm Market in April. Clockwise, from left, are Assistant Professor of English Adrian Blevins, Julia Germaine '07, Sasha Swarup-Deuser '07, Lucy Hitz '07, Jessica Bernhard '07, and Liz Stovall '07. On facing page, a draft of one of Bernhard's poems shows notes from the workshop comments.

If occasional publication stirs the coals of the poet's fires, a book is gasoline on the flames. As Zorgdrager put it, “To have an audience and know that you're going to have a reading audience out there—that's an honor and a privilege.”

A fiction writer at Colby with Sadoff and Susan Kenney, the Dana Professor of Creative Writing, David Roderick '92 didn't write his first poem until he was in his mid-20s, enrolling in a poetry class during summer break from his job teaching English at a Massachusetts

prep school. The poetry took hold, and he left his teaching job for an MFA program at the University of Massachusetts. For the past decade he has taught creative writing at colleges, most recently as a visiting writer at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (and next year at UNC-Greensboro).

Along the way he had a two-year writing fellowship at Stanford and began publishing in small magazines in 2000. He was runner-up for the Yale Younger Poets Prize. His writing

“I think it takes a lot of courage. It takes courage to admit things to yourself.
The next step is to admit things to an audience.”

Liz Stovall '07

that gave me hope because I knew who the two best writers in the room were. Neither of those two were me.”

The two best writers went on to become a doctor and an actor and musician, Simon said. She moved from Mayflower Hill to Chicago, worked for two years in higher-education accreditation, and continued to write, meeting in a weekly poets' group. Simon entered an MFA poetry program at Sarah Lawrence College and left with a degree and a determination to continue writing poetry. She did, while teaching at the State University of New York at Purchase. That led to the eclectic set of poetry-teaching gigs that support Simon today: at Sarah Lawrence, SUNY-Purchase, the Bedford Hills Maximum Security Women's Prison, and Poets House in Manhattan. “And I'm starting in two weeks with a short class for high school students,” she said.

stalled after 9/11, but he found his way. “I had this nice long run where I was around a lot of people who were struggling in the same way and also were beginning to publish books, too. So I could see there was light at the end of the proverbial tunnel,” he said.

“I'm also a pretty stubborn guy, so that helped me along the way. And I have a thick skin. I can deal with a lot of rejection. The book is a good example.”

The book is *Blue Colonial*, versions of which were rejected by more than 70 publishers before being published last year. It won the coveted *American Poetry Review*/Honickman First Book Prize, and it includes an introduction by the renowned poet Robert Pinsky. The book, which explores the American past and ties it to our present, has propelled Roderick into the spotlight: a feature in the *Boston Globe*, an interview on National Public Radio.

In February Roderick learned he

had won the Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship, having been chosen from a pool of 222 applicants. The prize is a cash award of more than \$40,000; the only stipulation is that the winner spend time traveling outside of North America. Upon his return (his tentative plan was to visit Italy, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and Greece with his fiancée) Roderick will be required to submit three poems to the scholarship committee.

"I'm very fortunate, because a year and two months ago, no one had even heard of me," he said. "I was just floundering around like everybody else."

In the world of poetry, Roderick has won the lottery. And yet he already was feeling the constraints of the attention paid to his book. "What I'm finding is that it's preventing me from moving on and doing other things," he said. "I'm trying to pull away and write something different."

If Roderick found 9/11 temporarily paralyzing, it was the tragedy that moved Molly Otis Lynn Watt '60 to begin to write. Watt left her job in higher education after 9/11 and has written a poem a week ever since. Watt is part of a vibrant poetry scene in Boston, including a writer's group called the Bagel Bards, which meets at Au Bon Pain in Cambridge. She edits poetry chapbooks, and she recently saw her work collected in a book, *Shadow People*.

"I now say I'm a poet," Watt said.

Her work ranges from the autobiographical to historical. She has found inspiration in subjects as varied as Cambridge Common and

glaciers, and she hopes to draw on her firsthand experience with the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s for future work. "I don't have time to write even half the poems I want to write," she said. "It's central to my life."

The same has come to be true for the Varsity Poets, who met recently with Blevins at the Riverside Café in Oakland. Sitting on the deck overlooking Messalonskee Stream, the students read poems and listened to critiques. Julia Germaine '07 read a poem and the discussion led to talk of the risk of love poems straying into cliché (Germaine avoided that trap, Blevins said), the use of repetition, and "disjunctive moments."

It was clearly a tight group, the students and Blevins bound by commitment to their craft and the shared intimacy of their writing. The conversation was marked by the juxtaposition of the lighthearted and nearly poetic. Said Liz Stovall '07, commenting on a poem read by fellow poet Jessica Bernhard '07: "It's [about] the inevitability of impermanence."

With graduation weeks away for some, the Varsity Poets would soon have to consider what place poetry would have in their post-Colby lives.

The choice was particularly difficult for Germaine, a biology major/creative writing minor whose love for poetry is matched by a passion for science. Germaine was so torn by her parallel interests that she applied to two graduate programs: the MFA program at the University of Pittsburgh and a doctoral program in evolution and ecology at Ohio State University. The professor with whom Ger-

maine would have worked is studying gene flow in transgenic food crops.

Germaine waited for answers on both applications, and when they came, they didn't make her decision any easier. Germaine was accepted to both programs, and both universities wooed her with substantial fellowships.

Ultimately visits to both universities tipped the scale toward Pittsburgh and poetry—as Germaine concluded she didn't want to spend six years studying genetically modified corn. But she still has reservations, worrying that that most people don't read poetry, that poetry is "a pretty closed world."

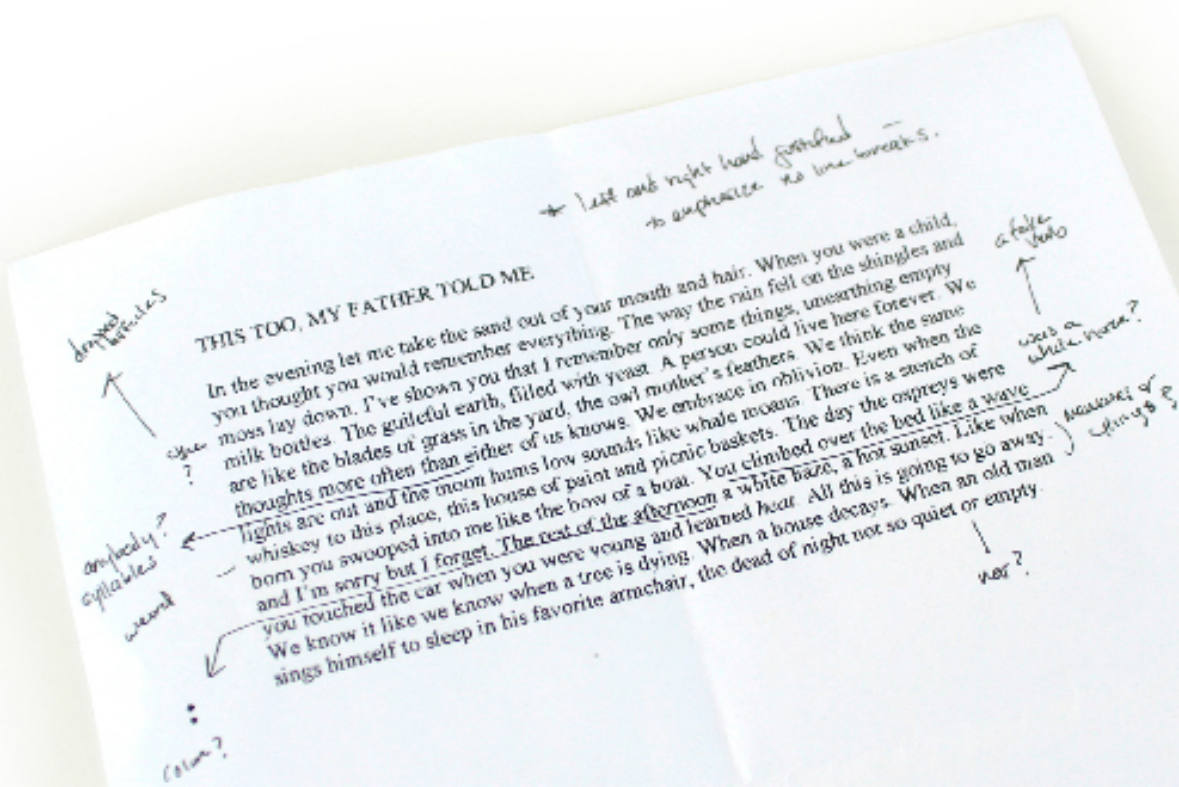
"I don't know if I want to be an artist," she said. "I don't know if I have the temperament for it."

Another of the Varsity Poets, Sasha Swarup-Deuser '07, said he's going to a poetry summer workshop, that he couldn't imagine parting with poetry as he leaves Colby. "I'd feel like I was leaving behind a dog," he said.

Stovall said she was looking to work for a magazine after Colby, but poetry would continue to be part of her life. After all, she and the others have made great strides since they'd begun to write. "I think it takes a lot of courage," Stovall said. "It takes courage to admit things to yourself. The next step is to admit things to an audience."

In the end, Harris said, it may come down to a question attributed to the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "Can you *not* be a poet?"

"To some people," Harris said, "poetry is a fundamental way of making whole their experience."



Bread from Many Ovens

My grandmother had hands
but no handwriting.
These are stock images in the closet
of the imaginary. In the drawers
that used to be card catalogs
with just enough numerals
to locate a book's incomplete index,
now you find a lifetime of clipped
fingernails or the pattern of dust
spiraling in the light between the blinds
In the bedroom your mother recovered
from childbirth, or a fever, or her own upbringing.
In the parent drawer the atmosphere is quick to anger.
At least you'd think so judging from the neon
parenting signs. I implore you—
make me invisible, or at least not subject to
the square dance rules of transition, not here,
not in the way the weather changes
every few minutes in non-California.
I always find an umbrella in the lost & found,
but it's the locket of hair that I'm seeking.
In her early old lady years my grandmother
dyed her hair the color of cheez. Orange lines
to the grade-skipping cousins. It was beautiful,
the way we didn't talk about death
until we learned to talk about it like rain.

—Rachel Simon '99

Dad and The Waterstriders

But a four-foot-nothing boy,
my father and I build a tank.

A bulky vat with gallons of rain.
Water up to the brim.

After work and after school we go to the creek
behind the weeping-willow around the back

of a grey-blue house in Indiana, now grey
as ashes. It was much larger then

when my shoes were velcro, crackling
like a leaf fire with every certain step

a prepubescent makes. I didn't wear those shoes
in the creek, though; that honor went to a pair

of ragged white ones with not one whole lace.
They were my father's, knotted in the fifties and

never undone. Skimming the creek surface
for waterstriders and hatchling larva

dad says how happy our minnows are. They grow
so quickly and then they die and then the mourners

eat the dead. With all his ranting about aquatic villas,
I thought he was crazy like a hermit

obsessing over a shoe collection
or maybe just drunk off cheap Madeira.

He watches the tank like a hawk
counting its meal of minnows.

They are friends dad says. They turn
with each other. Detect each others' ethos.

Dad is more alive than ever, never heavier.
He is glowing like a boy playing God.

Look, he says, they're schooling.

—Sasha Swarup-Deuser '07

Hell Yeah

I'm sorry, but I taste relapse when we kiss because I taste
the smoke of his voice, the brass he used to weight that Hell Yeah
careening out of his shot gun body like rock salt. God,

he used to blow me open. He would cover my fingers
and dirty my fingers with the wet soil from his yard
and we popped jasmine seeds into the earth. We blindfolded

ourselves and bound our hands together with white scarves,
downing Speed with Robitussin and fiending to be awake. I remember
holding each other steady in the steady growling sweep of trains.

We trembled like the shutters on his house from the noises inside
each other. Hell Yeah I wanted and wanted him to hold me up
because I was made of shale, but we were shoddy pieces of carpentry,

burned and strewn over the bolted wood and steel of the tracks.
And I was only waiting for someone to sand me down,
so I wouldn't feel milled by you. I mean by him.

—Liz Stovall '07

Lunacy

The ocean all day turning its pages, as if the swelling would come,
finally, to an end; as if the ending this time
would be a different story.

It's that the gulls cried or laughed when I passed them.
And the gritty itch of sand in every corner, every crevice, every fold.
The air so moist with wild rose scent and krill gone bad
you could tongue brine from the breeze
if there were a breeze.

You think none of this is of consequence?
Even now, as the moon writhes from the grassy dune?
Even as it falls through the dark, like an egg?

—Jody Zоргdrager '89

The Diamond Sutra as a Commencement Address:

Instead of the rich, study the maple in May
setting free the world, one winged rooter
at a time.

Then try telling those seeds to stop
sprouting, to flick-flick their propellers
back onto the tree.

Note the gaze of the pebble as it refuses
the temptation to laugh or in any way try
to improve on silence.

To the pebble, dirt is not a mink coat.
Dirt is not not a mink coat.
Therefore, Get dirty! Sprout!

Then forget "dirt" and "sprout." Would you
climb a ladder into the light
if there were no light, no ladder,
no climber?

Therefore, Climb!

—Peter Harris

Margie (1916-1999)

It is always spring where she sits in her chair
under Monet's blue sky and fields of tulips
Her fragile body bends over the nail clippers
moving them toward her empty hand shaking
both hands shaking she misses and starts over
intent on making her right hand meet her left
Again she misses looks up at the still windmill in oil
her face relaxing into a faraway smile
I went to see the tulips she says to no one in particular
Every day I cut a dozen for the table

She remembers me
sitting with her for another afternoon
the dream fades from her face
she stands and leaves without comment
Long ago she trimmed my husband's fingernails
when he was too young to work the clippers
burying the parings among her tulip bulbs
I want to gather her hands in mine
clip her yellowed finger nails grown hard
fly her to Holland lay her in a petal bed

—Molly Lynn Watt '60

America

Without cable, it's just me and America drinking
from greasy bottles without a whole lot to talk about.
If she'd stop raining, I could get a swim in edgewise
before the algae blooms and abruptly we're left,

bereft of clean water as the weather gets hotter,
as America's skin peels back from her face.
Now me and my nation flip through radio stations,
hunting a haunting among all the idols.

But the noise is just noise, and she's wanting a voice
or a vision or some sort of solace. America moans,
old women become shallow the better the weather
or view. For America, my land, your land,

things aren't so Woody Guthrie anymore. And what
of the estuaries? What of the sinking cities? The species
going extinct each day numbers hundreds. Still turning
the dial, we learn nobody believes it's America's job

to bring democracy to those who need it. What do you want
from me, America stands and screams in the radio waves and
the bottle slips and smashes. I never did anything in your name,
America, and I'm pleading; take me with you when you go.

—Julia Germaine '07

Little Sonnet

If the universe sends me a grip I'll drop my Ajax and say something else,
but right now's about how my full-to-bursting motherliness—my pasty yield
to the sweaty troops of me and the dad in the bed and me and me all-milky
with the rainy children in the bed—was not stupidity and was not psychosis
no matter what the braincases thought back then since like everyone else
they've got to die and hover in the milieu, making now more actually
about how the saints are going to exonerate even the braincases
since like everyone else they're fragments of salt and the dust of fish:
ghoul spit on the thigh with a real life to lose but no human honeycomb in a crib
to float around at midnight and not-lick but near-lick since the divine stillness of a child
is the very death-defiance right now is all about since it's impossible but not really
but *maybe* given how now is in point of fact the waning time of me going
in the opposite direction of full-to-bursting since I'm too old to grow a baby
and moreover too wary to scatter myself to infinitesimal pieces like I had all the time
in the world. And the money and the grit. The novice wherewithal. That tenderness.

—Adrian Blevins

Bait & Switch

I recognize a bird by its shadow over the grass.
Perhaps a swatch of color lures it into the yard,
or actual prey, an insect caught bright on a leaf.

Everything I see is camouflaged: moth a torchlit
maze, pool a glove the sun slides into, one finger
at a time. The Mongols thought a fern seed

made its bearer invisible, and Genghis Khan kept
such a seed in his ring, but it failed to cloak him
from his lovers or foes. Instead, the seed helped

him interpret the language of birds. Once a finch
told him to conquer the land of Xi Xia, so he did.
That was the old world but still a world with its

own exterior logic; birdsongs, incessant pests,
maneuvers in the garden. All these hours I pick
tomatoes, bury kelp and fish-heads in the ground.

Maybe language will always be vestigial, a trail
of light in water. And rainfall an idiom. And birds
sermonic. I will be invisible here if I want to be,

among greenery and soil, where the compost burns.
I walk through my life like a king with a fern seed
under my tongue, beneath wings that shadow my body.

—David Roderick '92

Quixotic

Sometimes he's breezy with you, nudging
a sleepy kind of come here and kiss my forehead,
so the trammeling is spotty, like foreign policy.

Your malleable brightness is alluring:
if you're shiny he's blinded by the pants of you.
But we don't like to see him like this, in the daily

decimated world so full of metaphor it makes you hunger
for a flat piece of road going nowhere,
where you can hum the Dies Irae from anybody's requiem,

and not mean anything by it. Maybe
you don't buy it. But what a well the self must be
if you could find it. I mean how our minds fill like buckets.

Or perhaps I mean it's easy to empty,
to say someone else is empty,
hypocrite powermonger heartless shit for brains.

Where you are them is a mystery. Running into a spiderweb
on your way to bed. Or everyone has a version
of you, but it's not your version.

—Ira Sadoff

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