

THE POETRY OF AUDREY WURDEMANN

By Peter Donahue



RETROSPECTIVE REVIEWS

In 1935, with her book *Bright Ambush*, Seattle native Audrey Wurdemann became the youngest person ever to win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. She was 24 years old and, according to family records, a descendent of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Brought up in Seattle's affluent Highlands neighborhood, Wurdemann (1911–1960) began writing poetry at age seven. She attended St. Nicholas School for Girls on Capitol Hill, which later merged with Lakeside School, and graduated from the University of Washington at age 20. When she was only 15 she traveled with her parents to San Francisco to meet George Sterling, lauded at the time as California's greatest poet.

In *Tales of San Francisco*, Samuel Dickson recounts the meeting between the two: "Sterling did not have much patience with adolescent geniuses. But this child had something.... He looked at Audrey and said, 'Now, what do you want to do?' 'I want to learn



to write great poetry,' she said. 'Someday I want to be able to describe all nature in my poems—the sky, the earth, the sunrise, and the sunset—everything!'"

Sterling was so impressed by this "adolescent genius" that one year later he wrote the foreword for Wurdemann's first book of poems, *The House of Silk* (1926), remarking, "Such a greatly promising poet is, indeed, a *rara avis*. I am grateful to the alleged Fates for such talent as this. Here is poetry, alluring and individual." Unfortunately, Sterling died before *House of Silk* appeared, but not before Wurdemann was able to insert a short elegy to Sterling that, in

part, fulfills her earlier stated desire to "describe all nature":

*Why is the sea bird calling
Out on the billowed crest?
Why is the wind-chant falling
To a dirge for a soul at rest?*

*Oh you, whose smile was sorrow,
For you there's no more pain.
Let the glad sun shine tomorrow.
Tho it shine through rain.*

Following publication of *House of Silk*, Wurdemann was admitted to the National League of American Pen Women and

invited to attend the organization's convention in New York. At the convention she met Robert Frost, who had won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1924 (and would win it again in 1931). Frost's influence—his acuity of poetic form, thematic emphasis on nature, and metaphysical undercurrents—seems apparent throughout Wurdemann's poetry, including her poem "The Loneliness of Autumn":

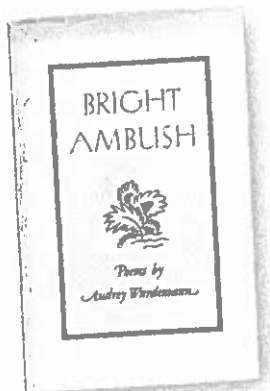
*I exorcise myself of this September,
Of frost and falling leaves and harvest
done;
I will not keep their annals, not
remember
The loneliness of autumn in the sun."*

Yet, where Frost is decidedly Modernist in his understanding of poetic form as "a momentary stay against confusion," for Wurdemann form is a means of honoring tradition, achieving transcendent beauty, and expressing one's deepest feelings—an orientation that places her more in the


lineage of pre-Raphaelite poet Christina Rossetti than Robert Frost.

In fact, most of Northwest poetry in the early 20th century was, to quote Matthew Arnold, "wandering between two worlds, one dead, / the other powerless to be born." As critics Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain note, late Victorian prosody, which "neither belongs to the Romantic modes nor meets the premises of modernism," remained particularly strong among early 20th-century women poets such as Audrey Wurdemann. Northwest women's poetry in this period was permeated by what Armstrong and Blain call "a politics of affect," which enabled women to be assertive through the ethereal yet powerful expression of feeling. One reviewer, commenting on Wurdemann's work, remarked on her "urge to walk eternally among rose gardens...[with] thoughts that soar on splendid wings." For Northwest women poets, this affect, with its emphasis on natural splendor, also enabled them to establish for themselves a necessary sense of regional purpose and identity. Indeed, with their exquisite attention to such iconic Northwest elements as rain, fir trees, and moss, Wurdemann's first two volumes of poetry, both of which were written in Seattle, have a clear Northwest inflection.

In 1932 Wurdemann married Lieutenant Lee Woods Parks, of Seattle, but less than a year later they divorced. Then, at age 22, she married Joseph Auslander, a poet from New York City whom she had met five years earlier. Auslander was already a well-established poet, and



in 1937 he was appointed to the "chair of poetry" by the Library of Congress and served for the next four years as America's poet laureate. Though residing in New York City, Wurdemann and Auslander returned to Seattle every summer for extended visits with her parents. *The Seattle Times* society page kept close tabs on these visits, at one point describing Wurdemann as "the talented young poetess of the deep-blue eyes, blue-black hair and luminous white skin," and Auslander as "every bit the typical New Yorker in trim gray suit and orchid shirt." Auslander, who was struck by Seattle's "beauty, isolation, and originality," shared Wurdemann's disinclination toward Modernist literary trends. In the late 1930s, when the two coauthored a novel titled *My Uncle Jan*, about a Czech sculptor, Auslander said their intention was to buck "the current literary trend of neurotics and Freudian fantasies."

While Audrey Wurdemann is not a Northwest poet who would be intimately identified with the region in the way that, for instance, Richard Hugo is, her early work—for which she received the most acclaim—is the distinct product of a period of cultural transition from the Victorian to the Modernist in the Northwest. In the three volumes that followed *The House of Silk* and *Bright Ambush*, the Northwest influence in Wurdemann's poetry faded, which is understandable given that she had left Seattle when she married Auslander, moved to New York and then Florida, and never resided in the Northwest again. By mid century, her descent into literary obscurity had begun, and it was not until her death in 1960, at age 49, that local newspapers once more remembered her as one of Seattle's favorite daughters—the ingénue poet who in the 1930s brought national literary acclaim to her hometown in the hinterlands. 

Peter Donahue's new novel, Clara and Merritt (Wordcraft of Oregon, LLC, 2010), is about longshoremen and Teamsters in Seattle in the 1930s and 1940s.



Additional Reading

Interested in learning more about the topics covered in this issue? The sources listed here will get you started.

Unlikely Poster Child

Why Sacagawea Deserves the Day Off and Other Lessons from the Lewis and Clark Trail, by Stephenie Ambrose Tubbs. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.

Native American Women: A Contextual Bibliography, by Rayna Green. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.

Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women, by Paula Gunn Allen. New York: Ballantine Books, 1990.

"The Sacagawea Mystique: Her Age, Name, Role, and Final Destiny," by Irving W. Anderson. *COLUMBIA: The Magazine of Northwest History* 13 (Spring 1999).

The Seattle Steelheads

Shades of Glory: The Negro Leagues and the Story of African-American Baseball, by Lawrence D. Hogan. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2007.

The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960, by Leslie Heaphy. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2002.

Negro League Baseball, by Ernest Withers. New York: Harry Abrams, 2005.

"Beisboleros: Latin Americans and Baseball in the Northwest, 1914-1937," by Gilberto Garcia. *COLUMBIA: The Magazine of Northwest History* 16 (Fall 2002).

A Toe in the Water

Bretz's Flood: The Remarkable Story of a Rebel Geologist and the World's Greatest Flood, by John Robert Soennichsen. Seattle: Sasquatch Press, 2009.

The Panda's Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History, by Stephen Jay Gould. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992.

Glacial Lake Missoula and Its Humongous Floods, by David Alt. Missoula: Mountain Press, 2001.

"The Great Columbia Flood: An Epic Geologic Event that Shaped Landforms and Ideas," by Tom Mullen. *COLUMBIA: The Magazine of Northwest History* 19 (Spring 2005).

House of Myth

The Laurels Are Cut Down, by Archie Binns. New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1937.

A History of Bellingham, by Edith Carhart. Bellingham: The Argonaut Press, 1926.

General George E. Pickett in Life and Legend, by Lesley Gordon. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

"Northwest Underpinnings of a Historical Novel," by Les Eldridge. *COLUMBIA: The Magazine of Northwest History* 20 (Summer 2006).

"A Century on Prospect Street," by Michael Vouri. *COLUMBIA: The Magazine of Northwest History* 6 (Fall 1992).