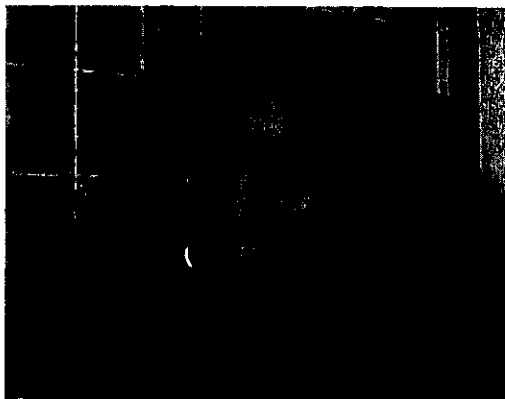


“all bound up with Saint Augustine, ambiguity, and bedrooms” – Interview with RHINO poet Katie Hartsock



Katie Hartsock

Poet and RHINO associate editor Carol H. Eding interviewed Katie Hartsock in June 2016. Hartsock's poem *Cuticles* was a finalist for the RHINO 2013 Founders' Prize and her poem *On the Heat of Upstate Travel* in the *Advancing Polar Air* was a finalist for the 2016 Founders' Prize. Originally from Youngstown, Ohio, she holds an MFA in poetry from the University of Michigan and a PhD in Comparative Literary Studies from Northwestern University. She is an assistant professor of English at Oakland University (MI).

Carol H. Eding: We are honored to have an interview with you on our Big Horn Blog, Katie, as well as to have your poem "On the Heat of Upstate Travel in the Advancing Polar Air" in our current issue. What was the genesis of this ambitious poem, and of its title?

Katie Hartsock: Thanks so much for having me! This piece is a poem of a day, lines written down from morning to evening on early winter visit to Illinois Beach State Park. It's about an hour north of Chicago, and you can walk through the woods along The Dead River, across from large marshy fields punctuated with power lines. The river flows into Lake Michigan, in a dunescape of grasses, sumac, oaks, and scrub. We like to go walking there in all seasons but maybe especially in fall or winter. Usually, when my husband and I drive there, we're seeking a kind of day trip reprieve from something. (I've always liked, btw, how Wordsworth chides himself for this: "more like a man / Flying from something that he dreads, than one / Who sought the thing he loved.") Anyhow the unsettledness and longing that made us want to get in the car that day is at the heart of the poem.

The title plays with classical titles of treatises (like Aristotle's *On the Generation of Animals* or Cicero's *On the Ends of Good and Evil*) - I wanted the poem to invite ideas of argument or expertise such phrasing might recall, to create a kind of springboard into more meandering thought - which begins in the elaboration of the title itself. [My colleague Alison Powell does something similar with the title of her gorgeous collection *On the Desire to Levitate* (Ohio University Press, 2014).]

CE: Congratulations on your first full-length book, *Bed of Impatiens*, coming out this fall from Able Muse Press. Tell us about your choice of the book's title.

KH: My title is all bound up with Saint Augustine, ambiguity, and bedrooms. *Impatiens* is a Latin word whose central meaning is "not suffering" or "not able to endure." This leads to a range of transferred meanings which include intolerant, insensible, unfeeling. And some nice poetic phrases: Ovid calls an old man "impatiens viae," so that *impatient of the road* = *incapable of travel*. One of Virgil's war-horses is "impatiens vulneris," so that *impatient of the wound* = *dying*.

Only in later Latin does it come to mean our current sense of impatient, which we could define as "not able to endure not having what you want." 18th century botanists gave the name *impatiens* to an East African plant, "impatient" because "its capsules readily burst open when touched." So they cannot suffer touch. But this makes me think of different kinds of touch, and different kinds of consequent bursting.

And of Augustine. The third section of the book alternates poems I wrote in the voice of Augustine (after his *Confessions*) with more personal, contemporary lyric poems. The title came to me while I was revising the scene in the garden where Augustine finally



Fra Angelico's Conversion of Saint Augustine

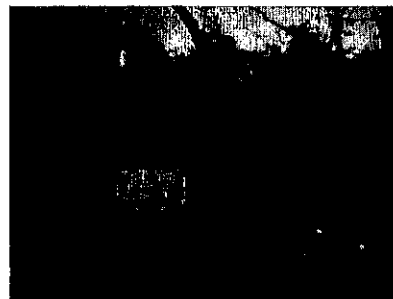
converts—he had been impatient to do this for a long long while, but he couldn't. At that time there was a Pauline hierarchy of Christians, the "best" ones being those who are celibate. Augustine wanted to be the best kind, all or nothing. (It's interesting, because his mother Monica—married and not celibate—was a model of faith for him.) But as Augustine says in Book 2, "I loved to love" (*amavi amare*), so he was waiting, with much anxiety and self-beratement, for the day when he finally felt ready to become celibate. (It is from this waiting that we get probably the most famous phrase from the *Confessions*: "Make me chaste, Lord, but not yet!") So as I was writing about him in the garden, in his voice, I thought of the beds of impatiens my mother and grandmother always kept, and suddenly I imagined him among these flowers which, twelve centuries later, would be named because they couldn't endure touch without bursting – and here's Augustine bursting to be able to endure *not* being touched.

And of course there's something provocative in that dictionary definition—to "readily burst open when touched." It might seem a little at odds with his conversion scene, but actually the language with which Augustine addresses God is often corporeal to the point of erotic. He continues to be passionate, to get physical, deep within his celibacy. In all its transformations, "impatiens" distilled the conversations and contradictions between desire and its limits which I wanted to be present in the collection's title.

And, the Augustine poems share ideas of longing, faith, and faithlessness with the book's second section, a sequence called "Hotels, Motels, and Extended Stays," which is full of impatient beds. Beds impatient for other beds, and beds impatient of themselves. The book's first section broadly works through a kind of mythopoetic restlessness—an idea that any story is not able to endure a single stable version of itself. So, *Bed of Impatiens* it was.

CE: And tell us about Able Muse Press.

KH: The excellent Alexander Pepple heads up Able Muse Press, founded in 2010, after Able Muse Journal had been going since 1999. I am thrilled to be "label-mates" with such great poets as Wendy Videlock, John Drury, Carrie Shippers, and Aaron Poochigan. And for all poets reading this: from now until July 15, Able Muse is in the midst of its open reading period! The press promotes a full range of poetic styles, from free to formal verse. I write in both, so I'm thrilled that *Bed of Impatiens* found its home here.



At Illinois Beach State Park, early winter, 2010.

The press's newest release is John Ridland's translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, rendered in modern meters that retain the Middle English poem's alliterative quality. A critic for the Seattle Times wrote, "Ridland gives the poem a long, loose line that sings in the lyrical passages, creeps in the spooky ones, and cavorts in the comic ones." (If you want to know more about the comic elements, read this [parodic distillation](#) of the poem by the delightful Mallory Ortberg at The Toast: spoiler alerts.)

CE: From reading your two poems published in *RHINO* (including "Cuticles" 2013), I'd say one of your major preoccupying themes, explored existentially in these two poems, is winter. Is that right? I am curious about your "mind of winter."

KH: I'm of the tribe of northeast Ohioans whose blood requires winter (the other tribe heads to Florida). I don't think I'd be happy living anywhere without real cold and snow. I like to put my boots on.

I have often thought about that Stevens poem you quote as I walked in winter mornings to get the 147 express bus (my favorite Chicago bus) to my job downtown. It was nearly a mile walking towards the lake, which was just on the other side of the high-rises behind the stop, so the winds would just get more and more intense, almost pugilistic. So I tried to become nothing myself, and behold nothing that was not there, and the nothing that was. And I was happy doing that, it felt real. And then it was so nice to board the bus after waiting, warming up with strangers. It reminds me of one of my and my husband's favorite scenes in all film: in Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire*, when Peter Falk talks, to the angel who wants to become human, of the pleasures of touch, coffee and cigarettes, drawing with pencil, and rubbing your hands warm [when it's cold outside](#).

Your question makes me think of an anthropology professor I had as an undergraduate at Cincinnati, and her description of an Inuit habit—one of the ways they preserved fish in the winter was to freeze them into the runners of their sleds, so that not only did the fish give shape to the runners of ice, but when the temperatures starting rising, voila, there was a preserved supply of food. Then she said something like, "People always think of winter as the season of starving, but actually it's early spring, when the food you stocked for winter has run out and things haven't started growing yet to replenish your supply." That really stayed with me, this new identification of spring as the season not as the renewal of growth, of stirred up desire, "a little life of dried tubers" and "smale fowles maken melodye" and all that, but a dangerous time, when you are pushing the outermost bounds of how long you can last. Which makes winter a time of stillness, of blankets and coverings. A time when something in you goes dormant that couldn't live unless it was allowed to sleep that deeply.

I also like the word "polar," how it orients us to the ends of the earth. Several years ago we started hearing the phrase "polar vortex," and it was funny how everybody started saying it constantly, as if this new name lifted a veil, revealed something crucial—about winter? about our lives?—we'd all been secretly suspecting for a long time. (And I like how "crucial" comes from the Latin *crux*, for cross.) I thought it made the cold seem even colder, but also meteorologically sharpened how we thought about our location on earth. Like the story my father-in-law tells of feeling his first deep-winter wind in (rather flat) Ann Arbor as a freshman from (hilly) Pittsburgh, and thinking, "There is nothing between me and the tundra."

CE: Though the two poems in *RHINO* have a natural free verse rhythm, they have formal elements: "Cuticles" is a sonnet; the often iambic lines of "On the Heat of Upstate Travel" contain classical allusions (as well as to Schubert's song cycle "Winterreise"). In the incantatory "Driver take the Amstutz / to the shores of the Dead River" and later in the poem, /"past the factory on the lake"—are these references to the Styx (In addition to the "highway to nowhere" in Illinois)?

Could you say more about the formal, allusive, and classical aspects of your work?

KH: When I'm really absorbed in writing a poem, I think my imagination elides the difference between old and new—everything that's in there becomes very immediate. So yes, the Dead River is a real river in Illinois, but it's also the river that borders the underworld. The Amstutz expressway is a road that gets you there, but it's in Waukegan: a stretch of highway, only about 3 miles long, right next to Lake Michigan. It was intended to connect to other roads, but the project was postponed and postponed and abandoned. You're driving north along the lake and all of a sudden you have this really short highway that's hardly there: you can go really fast for about two minutes. Now it's not been worked on for decades and some locals call it "The Road to Nowhere." So its own strange history and almost apparition-like existence enhances a very real but also mythic Midwestern post-industrial hauntedness.



Sandys' Medea

My great-grandmother was a Latin teacher, and I studied Latin in high school because of her, and then learned Greek in college. Since then my poems are always just making connections between classical worlds and this one. We were driving through Red River Gorge in Kentucky a few years ago and I saw this house in the middle of the hilly woods, its porch literally seething with cats, and I thought, with great certainty, "Medea lives there." A Medea after all the murders who has forgotten all the murders, come to live in half-shock, half-innocence, in Daniel Boone National Forest. So that became a poem.

When I started teaching prosody at Northwestern, I started writing my own formal poems, and it was completely pivotal to my work. I didn't how know much I needed the economy and music of iambs, the restraint of feet. I love to teach students to write in form—they complain and complain about how they can't say everything they want to say, but, by the time they're allowed to write a free verse poem, they can see for themselves how much they benefited from constraints. A very talented student of mine recently said at a reading that she thinks it's harder for her to write in free verse than for other young poets, and I felt really thrilled and proud and rewarded when she said this. There's tremendous freedom in writing in form, which I sometimes find even more generative than free verse.

CE: Are there certain poets, contemporary and from past eras and ages, who most importantly inspire your work? Other sources of inspiration besides poetry?

KH: Reading both Constantine Cavafy and Anne Carson in my early twenties remains transformational for me. I love to spend time with Homer, I always find something new whenever I go back to the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. As if the text is actually shifting and rewriting itself inside my editions while I sleep. I love everything C.D. Wright wrote, and keep learning from her even now that she's gone. Fanny Howe's memoirs *The Winter Sun* and *The Wedding Dress* were also really important.

Walking is a great source of inspiration, or of getting closer to the heart of a poem. On long walks particularly, lines often come to me or get worked out. I like listening to classic rock on vinyl: Janis Joplin, Allman Brothers, Bob Seger, The Guess Who, and even (with apologies to The Dude) some Eagles. I grew up listening to the oldies station with my mother, and I think those songs can still put me in a very simple mood, reflective but unreflecting at the same time, that's good for letting poems emerge. I love Bob Dylan's recent albums—"Mississippi" is one of the best songs he ever wrote. "You can always come back, but you can't come back all the way..." I enjoy reading literary criticism and classical scholarship, although sometimes I'm not the best reader, because I often think of lines or ideas for poems when I'm in the midst of argumentative, expository prose. It's as if one mode of thought stimulates the other in my brain—or, they're really just different strands of a unified way of thinking.

CE: Are there any themes or preoccupations that you keep returning to in your work?

KH: Right now I'm drawn to ideas of making, and of the possible impossibilities of making. I keep circling around the theme of mistakes, of mistakenness. I return again and again to the body, its beauties and its betrayals.

CE: Do you have a writing regimen?

KH: On my non-teaching days I like to get up early with coffee and write for hours in my pajamas. Very regimental!

CE: Have you memorized any poems? Please share with us which ones, if so.

KH: Yes, but I wish I had more. Robert Pinsky recommends putting all the poems you want to memorize in a folder and carrying that with you wherever you can, going over them as often as you can. I've been meaning to do that for years.

Until then: Yeats' "The Song of Wandering Aengus." "Love" by Milosz. "I started early, took my dog, / and visited the sea ..." by Dickinson. (I love how flirty this poem is, and that she goes on a walk with a dog.) "Short Talk on Van Gogh" by Anne Carson. And lots of scraps, including these lines from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

CE: Are there questions that I haven't asked that you'd like to answer?

KH: I'm a Leo.

Thank You, Katie Hartsock!

You can find out more about Katie Hartsock on her website. <https://katiehartsock.com/>.

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