

LABOR *of* LOVE

WSU associate professor and poet earning accolades for first book

BY RICHARD DUCKETT

With her first book of poetry, a chapbook titled “Parturition” published earlier this year, and a growing list of poetry prizes, Worcester State College associate professor of English Heather Treseler is continuing to make a name for herself in literary circles and beyond.

“It has been years since I have read a new poet of such rhetorical sophistication and mastery. Wow. One thinks of the young Robert Lowell. Rhetorical mastery fueled by fury and necessity. Agony shaped and released by intelligence, by art. A breathtaking debut,” wrote Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Frank Bidart.

Treseler, a poet and essayist, has a particular affinity with a name that has Worcester roots, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Worcester-born poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911-79). She has written several essays about Bishop as well as her doctoral thesis at the University of Notre Dame, and had a residency last summer at Bishop’s grandparents’ house in Great Village, Nova Scotia.

“Bishop’s work has always been a magnet for me,” Treseler said.

Treseler has also made her own mark with her students at Worcester State University, where she has taught literature and creative writing since 2011. In 2017 she received the George I. Alden Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Her own early roots as a poet-writer go back to an engaged childhood in the Boston area with parents who loved words and storytelling.

“I don’t know if you could call it poetry, but I was writing poet-like things by the time I was six,” she said. “I started getting serious about it in high school.”

And being serious has involved putting in plenty of time working at her poetry. “A lot of my poems take a long time to write,” she said. “Honestly, I think it’s 15 to 20 years to write good poems. I don’t

necessarily tell that to my students, but it’s been a long process.”

“Parturition” won the Munster Literature Centre’s international chapbook prize and was published in March. The prize also included a \$1,000 award and an invitation to launch the book at the Cork International Poetry Festival in late March (the reading was canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic). Of the 12 poems in the book, four have received individual poetry prizes. Two were nationally competitive prizes from Frontier Poetry (\$2,000) and the Missouri Review (\$5,000); and two regional prizes, the Frank O’Hara Poetry Prize from the Worcester County Poetry Association and a second-place prize from Crosswinds Poetry Journal in Rhode Island.

“Parturition” will be part of a longer book she is planning. “The hope is this summer I finish the manuscript,” she said. Her poems have appeared in over 30 journals in the U.S. and U.K.

Treseler told Frontier Poetry in an

interview that “Parturition is the clinical term for the process of childbirth. Less literally, it is the act of bringing forth, of making. This is my first book, and it grapples with what makes art a necessity: hunger and loss, but also that need to assuage our condition with language, to assert agency in a world in which choice can feel hedged in and delimited.”

Treseler’s poetry can begin with an observation or thought that expands into a wider panorama of deep thinking and feeling. “Shorelines” moves from the sound of the waves at Ogunquit, Maine, to a deeply personal experience and reflection of the narrator’s visit there.

Which is not to confuse the narrator with the author.

“I tell my students the person of the poem is different from the personae of the poem. Poetry is not autobiography. It can draw on and create a lived experience, but is not necessarily historical,” Treseler said.

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Heather Treseler has taught literature and creative writing at Worcester State University since 2011. [PHOTO/MATT WRIGHT]

Heather Treseler’s book of poetry, “Parturition,” was published earlier this year. She has also written several essays and her doctoral thesis about Worcester-born poet Elizabeth Bishop. [PHOTO/CHRISTINE PETERSON]





“Worcester State students are fantastic,” says Heather Treseler, pictured working with a student in the school library. “Many are working part time or full time to put themselves through school. That translates, I think, to a deep investment in their learning. ...” [PHOTO/MATT WRIGHT]

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She cited Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “The Map,” which makes a “metaphoric distinction between historians and map makers” including the concluding line “ ‘More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors.’ She’s claiming a license to her poetry that’s not allowed to strict factual accounts,” Treseler said.

“Writing poetry involves a sense of risk, it’s always a chance to play with language and words, which for me as a writer is how I grapple with lived experience and reality. So in some parts I write poems that can be history and imaginary and get to a truth that cannot be verified by strict facts or history.”

While Treseler was growing up, she said, “My parents jitterbugged around the suburbs of Boston,” buying homes, restoring and selling them, and then buying a new one. They finally settled in Newton. Treseler lives in Newton Centre.

Her father was a high school English teacher, and “my first memory is tagging along one day.” He read James Joyce’s “The Dead” “to a group of fairly rapt 18-year-olds” at Dedham High School, Treseler recalled.

“I started looking at books and actually reading them before I actually went to school.”

Her father was also a track coach. “I saw father’s use of language to push athletes beyond their aerobic thresholds.”

Along with that, “My mother is a natural story teller, who spent hours reading to me and also we spent hours making stories for each other. So I sort of had a father tongue and a mother tongue in language, and with three other siblings around, writing was a way to finish my sentences.”

Entering Brown University as an undergraduate, “I started as a history and classics double major. Eventually my calling was something a little different. Classics gives you a portal into the English language and history an account of what happened, and I kind of thought of poetry as a connector with those two things,” Treseler said.

Turning in papers for a class taught by a Renaissance historian, Treseler, although she said she’s now slightly embarrassed to admit it, would attach some of her own poems.

The professor’s response was, “ ‘Some of these are quite good, why aren’t you majoring in English or a comparative literature program?’ ”

She earned a B.A. in Comparative Literature at Brown University in 2002, with an emphasis on literatures in English and Latin.

One of her poetry teachers and mentors at Brown was the poet and professor (and Rhode Island poet laureate) Michael S. Harper, who was quite a formidable figure on campus. He told Treseler, “ ‘You really need to get lost in the library.’ ”

It was at Brown that Treseler received the suggestion to read Elizabeth Bishop with the poet Robert Lowell. The two were friends and corresponded with each other, and reading their letters, Treseler found that they “framed some of the aesthetic questions and artistic questions of late 20th-century poetry. It was really a primer of a half-century of poetic issues. It was kind of a keystone for me, a backdrop to their artistic creation.”

Working on a doctorate on Elizabeth Bishop and epistolary techniques at the University of Notre Dame “got me more involved in a poetry that incorporated that century’s social media to give the lyric poems more intimacy and worldliness.”

Among the many fellowships and grants she has received as a scholar, Worcester State University Foundation awarded a summer research grant to Treseler and two undergraduate students in 2015 to work on Elizabeth Bishop’s archival materials. “That work informed three published articles and their design of an award-winning teaching module, for high school students, using archival material to teach ‘writing as process.’ Both of those students, now alumnae, have teaching jobs at high schools in Massachusetts, where they are putting their education to work, educating the next generation. WSU’s support of undergraduate research is unparalleled among its peers.”

Treseler has said that “Learning how to think — and write — about poetry as a

critic let me approach my own work from another perspective, to be my own reader and contrarian.”

At Worcester State University, Treseler has been able to combine teaching literature and research along with creative writing courses, something that’s been an ideal vehicle, so to speak, for her.

When applying to WSU to teach, “One of my interviewers said ‘We’re looking for a hybrid vehicle — teach literature courses and creative writing.’ I felt like saying, ‘Hello, I’m your Prius,’ ” she said.

When Treseler was an undergraduate at Brown University, she also worked several jobs to help see her through. “I don’t think I missed a class because I was keenly aware of how much each meant,” she said.

She sees that work ethic in her students at WSU. “I think a lot of my students have a sense of that, which is something really refreshing to work with,” she said.

“Worcester State students are fantastic. I’ve been so lucky to work with them. It’s been great working with students who have a lot of intrinsic desire to learn. Many are working part time or full time to put themselves through school. That translates, I

think, to a deep investment in their learning. An interest and curiosity that’s kind of a drive of its own and that’s something that’s great to work with in the classroom.”

Meanwhile, “Worcester has an incredibly lively literary scene that really rivals Boston and Cambridge for the number of events each week,” she said.

Treseler has been active with the Worcester County Poetry Association, brought nationally known poets to WSU, and participated in poetry readings here.

The Frank O’Hara Poetry Prize from the Worcester County Poetry Association in 2015 was for the association’s annual poetry contest.

In her journey as a poet, Treseler said, “Awards no doubt help. You know it’s a strong vote of confidence when someone gives you money. I’ve been really lucky to win a few in the last few years.”

However, she added that “both in grad school and after, I’ve made very many friends in poetry. These friendships have been very vital.”

When revising a poem, a process that can be tricky for any poet, “it’s quite possible to eviscerate a poem. I think that’s why having

a friend at the desk, a really truthful friend or friends, can tell when you’re stuck in a loop or the poem was complete seven drafts ago.”

Reading a poem aloud to a live audience can also be very helpful, she said. “I continually read poems aloud when I’m writing, but you hear a poem land differently when you read it for an audience.”

The pandemic has changed a lot of things. When Treseler was being interviewed she was finishing up teaching her semester courses at WSU online. “It’s been sort of the strangest of sensations,” she said. She recently took part in a live stream Zoom poetry reading hosted by the Worcester County Poetry Association and Bedlam Book Cafe to launch “Parturition” with fellow poet and friend Virginia Konchan, who read from her collection, “Any God Will Do,” her second book from Carnegie Mellon.

“I do think the pandemic has returned a lot of people to the pleasures of reading and perhaps turned us inward in a way that they might not have been before,” Treseler said.

“I think it’s got a lot of us kind of looking at the coordinates of our lives and what can sustain us. I’ve got a lot of books at home but I’ve never been so grateful for all of them.”

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