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Heather H. Thomas reads her poem "Chrysanthemums" from her book of poetry "Vortex Streets" at Felix Dam Park in Muhlenberg Township.



FRIDAY APRIL 20, 2018 12:01 AM

Berks poet Heather H. Thomas reaches a turning point (VIDEO)

With the publication of her seventh collection of poems, the writer and teacher moves past her personal fear and confronts the world beyond.

Upcoming poetry readings by Heather Thomas

Wednesday: 7:30 p.m., Barnes & Noble, 1700 Fruitville Pike, Lancaster. Hosted by Lancaster Poetry Exchange.

April 27: 7 p.m., Culture Den, St. Peter's Village, 3451 St. Peter's Road, Elverson. Hosted by Culture Den.

June 7: 6 p.m., GoggleWorks Center for the Arts, 201 Washington St. Hosted by Berks Bards.

Aug. 12: 4 p.m., Parkside Lounge, 317 E. Houston St., New York City. Hosted by Great Weather for Media.

Heather Thomas bibliography

"Vortex Street": FutureCycle Press, 2018

“Blue Ruby”: FootHills Publishing, 2008

“Papeles de Resurreccion”: (Patricia Diaz Bialet, translator), Editorial Vinciguerra, 2004

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“Practicing Amnesia”: Singing Horse Press, 2000

“The Fray”: (collaboration with Barbara Schulman), Kutztown Publishing, 2000

“Circus Freex”: Pine Press and Standing Stone Press, 1995

“Voiceunders”: Texture Press, 1993

Website (<https://www.heatherhthomas.com/biography/>)

Where to buy ‘Vortex Street’

GoggleWorks Center for the Arts store, 201 Washington St.

Barnes & Noble, Broadcasting Square, Spring Township.

Print and Kindle editions are available at [Amazon.com/](https://www.amazon.com/).

Through the publisher, FutureCycle Press at www.futurecycle.org/.

Links for all of Heather Thomas' books in print can be found on her website at www.heatherhthomas.com

Postcard from Vortex Street

3/15

Start the day trying

not to hear myself think.

Breath on the page

blows into the street.

Have I gotten over myself

so I can reach you?

C. D. Wright quote

Poetry seems especially

like nothing else.

Poetry is not like,

it is the very lining

of the inner life.

(This quote defining poetry by the late poet and teacher C.D. Wright hangs above Heather Thomas' desk.)

WRITTEN BY [GEORGE HATZA \(/SECTION/STAFF&STAFFID=36\)](#)

When the poet Heather H. Thomas sits down to write at her desk on the second story of her Muhlenberg Township cottage, she need only lift her gaze from her laptop and look out the window to see the Schuylkill River rushing by.

The river plays a large part in her latest collection of poetry, her seventh, entitled "Vortex Street," published last month by FutureCycle Press.

Before Thomas, a Berks County native, places a finger on a key, she goes through a process that may involve all or some of the following: drinking her morning coffee, meditating, reading other poetry and writing in her journal.

"Then I go to my desk," Thomas said, "and start writing. I often begin a poem longhand in my journal. It's very associative. I have to write toward clarity. For me, writing is about revising. I usually have a convergence of urgencies. It feels like I have to write this poem, but I trust the process will lead me where I need to go.

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"Poetry has changed my life and allowed me to be more trusting of myself and others. There's always the dark valley in the poem before I can achieve the clarity every poem needs."

Thomas' earlier works focused more intently on the personal.

" 'Vortex Street,' " she explained, "is an embrace of the larger world beyond my own singularity. In other words, getting over myself so I can reach 'you,' defining that as a 'shifting individual other' in the world beyond myself."

Inspired by events

The poems in "Vortex Street" are inspired by events around the world: the Sandy Hook shooting ("Vapor"), the Boston Marathon bombing ("Marathon"), the war in Syria ("Aleppo"), the enigma of Turkey ("Bowl of Breath"), the 20th anniversary of the Sarajevo siege ("Slit Silence" and "Rim of Mountains, Rim of Stars"), the murder of reporter James Foley ("Face of Earth"), the bombing of children in Afghanistan ("Third Eye") and the war in Iraq ("The Same Moon").

In that sense, then, "Vortex Street" (which took seven years to write) is a kind of turning point for Thomas, who began composing poetry as a means toward understanding a life complicated by familial and personal relationships.

"My writing of poetry (began as) a response in some ways to the silence practiced in my family when in the face of emotional difficulty and loss," she said. "No one talked about anything important. Emotion was considered a sign of weakness."

That fits perfectly with her unique definition of poetry as "a break in the climax of silence."

She elaborated: "I need to find my way to the right words and the best order. Up to this point, poetry has allowed me to become myself. This book feels like I'm contending with what Virginia Woolf called the 'shocks of being.'

"It can be words someone says to you one day by chance that you remember 20 years later, an epiphany, a large moment of joy or loss, the finding or losing of love or family. Death. Life. Or witnessing the struggles of others and connecting with that. The shocks of being change you when you enter them it's physical. Something that goes through the body.

"A poem comes from the body, an action in language that contends with mind and spirit. It is also a spell of language, a kind of magic It is language distilled to its most essential."

Transitioning to poetry

Thomas, 66, worked as a reporter, feature writer and editor at Reading Eagle Company for 13 years before leaving in 1985. She earned a master's degree in creative writing from Temple University and was hired by Kutztown University to teach journalism, composition and introduction to literature. After earning her doctorate in English at Temple, she transitioned to teaching writing and poetry.

She was the third poet laureate of Berks County, from 2008-2010.

Thomas worked for 25 years at KU before retiring in 2013. She now teaches part time at Cedar Crest College in Allentown and leads community and private poetry workshops.

For many, reading a poem is not unlike encountering another language. Its heightened diction and complex formatting at its most sophisticated can prove intimidating to the casual reader. So teaching poetry demands a certain kind of disciplined approach, a means of allowing those unfamiliar with it to be drawn in.

Thomas described the process.

"A poem is an experience," she began. "That's where I start. Wallace Stevens said, 'One should read poetry with one's nerves.' I try to get a student to make a personal connection with the poem. Never tell them what it means. It's not about that.

"Then we back into history, tradition, gender, class: the context."

Another aspect

Creating the stanzas is yet another aspect of writing poetry.

"The word verse means to turn," Thomas said. "The turn of a line (in a poem) is a powerful place where you can either continue the thought or leap to a new idea. Sometimes it's not about the context but the sound and rhythm."

Every writer has his or her own influences, and Thomas is no exception.

"I couldn't devote my life to poets who ended their own," she said, citing Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and John Berryman as examples. "I turned back to the modernist poets. Granted, they were difficult. However, that's what I chose as my field, my growing place.

"Poets such as T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Marianne Moore. They're my literary family. They had their human failings, but their work stands and remains inspiring and relevant. They forged the path for all of 20th century poetry."

Stunning irony

It's a stunning irony that Thomas resided for a time as a young girl in the Wallace Stevens house in the 300 block of North Fifth Street. She used to play games with her maternal grandfather, who would challenge her to spell words correctly for quarters. Words always have been part of Thomas' life. That's how writers, and in her case poets, are born.

Why has Thomas chosen to title this transformative compilation of verse "Vortex Street"?

According to the "Notes" section at the back of the book, Thomas defines a vortex street as "a repeating pattern of swirling vortices formed in clouds or water in the wake of an obstacle (a so-called 'bluff body'). A phenomenon of fluid dynamics."

The compelling thing about a vortex street is that it is shaped like the human genetic code, a double helix. To Thomas, that serves as a metaphor for the theme of the book in that it suggests "that this is the place where we live." For most of her life, she has imagined herself standing in the midst of turmoil, a human bluff body, battered by life's relentless surge of heartaches and tragedy.

Through her poetry, she has used language as a means of engagement without fear. With "Vortex Street," she now has reached beyond the self.

Raised in silence, Thomas undeniably understands the meaning of apprehension.

"Silence equals fear: fear equals silence," she said. "I was afraid of my past. Now, I'm not afraid anymore. I find the words for it. When we name whatever it is in our

lives that we fear, we can be free of it. Our lives can exist in freedom. I am trying to free myself through language.

"In 'Vortex Street,' I am dealing with the chaos around and within me. I am also trying to transform fear, or pain, or loss into acceptance and love."

Contact George Hatza: life@readingeagle.com.

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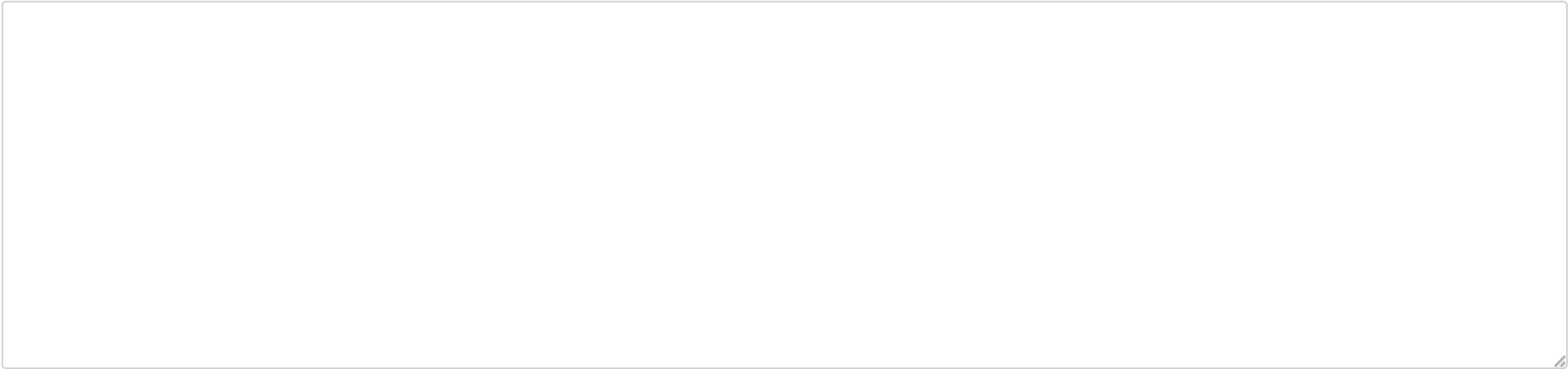
George Meiser IX

04.20.18 / 3:51 pm

I'm pleased to learn that Heather is recognized as an impressive poet and that she had taught journalism at KU. On a personal level, I was genuinely sorry to see her leave the Reading Eagle as all her articles were of exceptional quality. She surely is one of the best writers ever employed by the Eagle.

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Daniel Bernile, DMD

The advertisement features a blue background. On the left, there is a circular inset image of a woman's face. The main text is in white and red. The logo for American Dental Solutions PC is on the right, with the name 'Daniel Bernile, DMD' below it.