

From **HOWLING BIRD PRESS**,
a 'dazzling debut collection...a breathtaking new poet'

AT THE BORDER OF WILSHIRE & NOBODY



MARCI VOGEL Winner of the 2015 Howling Bird Press Poetry Prize

Fall 2015

Advance praise for *At the Border of Wilshire & Nobody*

Marci Vogel's poetry is wildly generous in its vision yet also exquisitely elegant in its precise, lyric grace. In her dazzling debut collection, *At the Border of Wilshire & Nobody*, the losses are profoundly intimate, but the vivid orchestrations of Marci Vogel's poetry are capacious and inclusive of us all. The emotional power of these poems reverberates beyond the intricately latticed webs of her lines, announcing the arrival of a truly original and breathtaking new poet.

—DAVID ST. JOHN



Like the divergent architectures of Southern California, the poems in Marci Vogel's *At the Border of Wilshire & Nobody* are thrillingly disparate in their construction, while still rooted in a latter 20th-century optimism—and decorated with the kind of astonishing landscape—that could only occur so magically in Hollywood. It is, however, ultimately the human connection that brings this outstanding collection together, a skillful poet who gives us a deeply affecting look into what it means to live as a human being, for as long as we get to be here: “What is it this life / wants us to / hold? Each other.”

—LYNN MELNICK



MARCI VOGEL, winner of the inaugural Howling Bird Press Poetry Prize, was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. Her poems, essays, and translations have appeared in *FIELD*, *Poet Lore*, *Plume*, *Jacket2*, and *Drunken Boat*, among others. A first-generation college student, she is currently a doctoral candidate in the Creative Writing and Literature Program at the University of Southern California. A long-time writer of prose who began writing poetry in her forties, Vogel's work has earned nominations for the Rona Jaffe Writers' Award, the *Best New Poets* anthology, the AWP Intro to Journals Project, and the Pushcart Prize. Her translation from French into English of Andrée Chedid's 1956 poetry sequence, “In the Noon of Contradictions,” was selected for the 2014 Willis Barnstone Translation Prize.

Cover & author photographs by PETER FIGEN

At the Border of Wilshire & Nobody

POEMS

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Winner of the 2015 Howling Bird Press Poetry Prize



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At the *Border of Wilshire & Nobody*, by Los Angeles poet Marci Vogel, is the first book produced by Howling Bird Press, the student-led publications arm of the publishing concentration of the MFA in Creative Writing Program at Augsburg College in Minneapolis. Vogel's manuscript was selected as the winner of a nationwide contest in the fall of 2014. Associate editors Amanda Symes, Ashley Cardona, and Kevin Matuseski helped judge, edit, design, and produce this volume as part of their graduate studies in the book trade. Funds raised from Friends of Howling Bird, through Augsburg's annual "Give to the Max" campaign, helped support its publication. Future book competitions will feature titles in fiction and creative nonfiction, as well as other poetry collections. Augsburg's publishing concentration complements MFA coursework in fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, playwriting, screenwriting, and cross-genre studies. Other concentrations include teaching and translation.

Review copies of *At the Border of Wilshire and Nobody* are available upon request.

A Conversation With Marci Vogel

Howling Bird Press associate editors Amanda Symes, Ash Cardona, and Kevin Matuseski recently spoke with 2015 Howling Bird Poetry Prize winner Marci Vogel about her new book and the writing life.

Howling Bird: Who are some of your favorite poets, and did any of them inspire you in your writing of *At the Border of Wilshire & Nobody*?

Marci Vogel: Goodness, even some of my favorite poets would be a long and eclectic list, but it seems only natural that whatever we're reading at any one time seeps into consciousness and onto the page. During the time in which I was writing many of the poems that comprise *At the Border of Wilshire & Nobody*, I was completing an MFA and so

had a great opportunity to read widely, from Sylvia Plath to W. S. Merwin (who was Poet Laureate at the time) to Ken Chen, 2009 winner of the Yale Younger Poets competition. And I was very fortunate, also, to work directly with poets whose work I adore: Angie Estes, Carmen Giménez Smith, Mark Irwin, David St. John, among many, many others. ¶ Collections that struck me particularly (and still do) include those by Anne Carson, Mary Ruefle, and Lucille Clifton. Jane Hirshfield's poems, essays, and translations (with Mariko Aratani) of Onono Komachi and Izumi Shikibu were also on my bedside table, as were her translations (with Robert Bly) of Mirabai. And Bly's translations of [Tomas] Tranströmer, along with the classic, *Leaping Poetry*, which includes translations of Lorca, Neruda, and Vallejo. The thought of so many people writing poems in different languages in different parts of the world and through different centuries is probably the main inspiration. You're just another poet, part of a lineage, doing her work.

HB: You seem to have themes of flight and travel with your vivid images of nature and the road. Where did you write the majority of your poems? How did your location affect the content of the poems?

MV: Peter Campion, who is a terrific poet and was one of my teachers, was the first to point out that my poems seem to "perambulate," and many in this collection were, in fact, composed on walks or in cars—which is way easier (and safer) when you're a passenger rather than a driver. Certainly a few were born at the airport, which is a great place to write, by the way—you're at the mercy of flight schedules, and there's so much baggage to explore! I'm a big homebody, but when I travel, it seems to be far. ¶ One of the clichés about Los Angeles is that



MARCI VOGEL

folks don't walk much, but ever since I was little, I've loved to walk around my neighborhood, and, well, I've always lived in Los Angeles, so there you go. One of the benefits of living here is that nobody looks at you strangely if you stop in the middle of the sidewalk to write in your notebook. Nobody cares. Except maybe my dog; he gets impatient if we stop for too long. ¶ In both content and form, then, I'd say that the poems are very much connected to location, some of them quite specific, such as the Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook steps pictured on the cover of the book. If you're ever stuck in traffic on the Marilyn Jorgenson Reece interchange from the 10 West to the 405 N, and you look to the right, you will see the angel in the mountain from "Panorama Highway." I hadn't yet known about Jean Valentine's *Door in the Mountain*, but I love that collection so much, I figured nobody would mind if they thought I were paying homage to Valentine rather than simply reporting the view from a particular vantage point.

HB: You play with form and white space in interesting ways. Can you talk a little bit about your goals in doing so?

MV: Something I find utterly thrilling (and freeing!) about poetry is how it depends upon language and resists it at the same time. Or maybe it's more accurate to say that there are aspects to a poem that extend beyond language, but that are also tied its use: the sounds created by the placement of certain letters next to each other, say, or—as you note—the proximity of letters to white space. This is true even in prose; in English, for instance, words are designated by spaces around their beginning and ending letters, signaling to the reader how to interpret the marks on the page—kind of like Mark Twain's difference between lightning and a lightning bug. In this case, a better example might be fire and fly, where two words signify very different meanings but become a lightning bug when the white space between them is taken away. ¶ Twain was getting at the difference between the right word and the wrong word, of course, and then there's also Coleridge's idea of poems relying on “the best words in the best order.” Stephen Dobyns, whose work I really admire, has a great book of essays with that title, and he articulates this push-pull of language really well: “The artist has a star in his or her brain, and language is the doodle that attempts to bring that star to life. Language is an approximation, but by using discursive and nondiscursive language, the poet tries to create or recreate an event and to make the reader experience this event.” ¶ Of course, poems don't always relay “events” per se (or mine certainly don't), but certainly what I'm after is to create an experience—an emotion or a sensation, maybe—for the reader. In this regard, form and white space function kind of like body language: they provide cues and signals that aren't verbally articulated but without which we would have a hard time knowing how to respond. Those unspoken aspects also do a lot to help the words come forward; I often have a sense of a poem's form before I set down any letters at all. “A Retrospective of Birds” is a case where borrowing “the body

language” of museum placards helped me to articulate the spoken (or, in this case, written) language. ¶ The aim for melding content and form, then, is to create an experience for the reader similar to the one that originally propelled the composition of the poem. Whether any particular doodle does indeed bring its star to life is for the reader to say, but I think it's important to try. As Dobyns says: “I believe that a poem is a window that hangs between two or more human beings who otherwise live in darkened rooms.” In this way, the poem is also a light. Or maybe a lightning bug!

HB: Gregory Orr outlined the four temperaments of poetry to be music, structure, story, and imagination. Which of these (or which combination) best reflect your approach to writing poetry?

MV: Greg Orr's *How Beautiful the Beloved* was another collection I read

while composing the poems in *At the Border of Wilshire & Nobody*, but I'm not familiar with his ideas about poetic temperaments. I'm thinking that being criminally digressive probably rules out story, right? It's definitely dashed any hope of writing well-plotted mysteries, though I have big crushes on Inspector Lynley and Detective Foyle, both of whom are imagined characters, so that might be telling. Certainly, the structure a poem takes in its composition is key, as noted in the discussion about form and white space. Music also plays an integral role there, since structural components such as white space, punctuation, line, and enjambment help to control the breath—and thus, musicality—of a poem's utterances, even when not read aloud. David St. John (who was a rock star in a former life) has this great reminder that prose persuades by argument while poems persuade by their music. That's always been true for me, as both a reader and a maker of poems, though making music with real instruments is a whole other story. ¶ [Digression Alert: Heaven knows why, but when I was about 12, my parents bought me a second-hand guitar while we were visiting family in Seattle. My step-dad had to strap it to the top of our Firebird to get it back to Los Angeles. My mom

told me that if she ever caught me playing it in the park, she'd kill me. That's probably not the reason I never got any good—kill me was '70s mom-speak for get really mad—but the only instrument I lay claim to today is tambourine. And I'm a dedicated kitchen dancer.] ♡ Process of elimination, then, I'm going to go with Door No. 4: Imagination. What happens after turning the knob is anyone's guess.

HB: What life events affected the subjects of your poems when you were writing the collection?

MV: Well, all of them, probably. And more. "The Situation Room Is Gutted Down to Brick & Bare Floor," for example, responds to events that affected the lives of millions of people around the world during the early part of 2011, including the civil demonstrations and unrest across the Middle East and North Africa known as the Arab Spring; the earthquake and subsequent tsunami off the coast of Japan in which three reactors in the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant failed; and the U.S. strike on the northern Pakistan compound of Osama bin Laden. Closer to home, the two women in "Stop, As in Two-Way," are lifted directly out of very brief instances of life that happened to intersect with my own as I walked by. Lifting one's child onto a toy horse outside a grocery store might not be a large-scale life event, but it certainly moved me a great deal. My step-father always read *The Los Angeles Times*, and it's probably not the best use of natural resources, but I still love reading the paper version every morning. I'm really grateful for the incredible work journalists do, especially because I'm terrible at writing on quick deadlines. A question that always fascinates me as a poet is how the events of life become translated—or even transmuted—through imagination, through language.

HB: In "She Slips a Totem Under Her Pillow," you've

captured the narrator's innocence but, at the same time, revealed her curiosity and courage. How much does teaching young kids influence your poetry?

MV: Yes, it's true that I taught at a small elementary school for 22 years before entering the University of Southern California as a Provost's Fellow in 2012. In fact, I just attended alumni day to see what is now the Class of 2015, all ready to head out into the world, go to college, or work, or travel. At one point, a posse of very tall young adults ended up behind me in the hallway, as if we were headed to the library or art or something. Only I didn't have to remind

anyone to set a good example for the Pre-K—it was great! ♡ The speaker in "She Slips a Totem Under Her Pillow" does indeed admire the little girl she observes facing off with a full-sized stuffed California black bear (which nonetheless looks quite scary at almost eight-foot tall!). Something I was always grateful for as a teacher

of young kids was the privilege of being a guest in their world. More often than was probably reasonable, I wished I could have let the class just play, or nap, or talk, or whatever. The poem, "This Is Not a Test," is a kind of apology for standardized testing, melded with my own experience of elementary school life. The last couple of years, I've been teaching at USC, and my rule of thumb has been not to assign any book I wouldn't want to read myself. If I'm able to teach my students even a quarter of the amount they've taught me over the years, it'll be the least I can do.

HB: How long did it take you to write all the poems in *At the Border of Wilshire & Nobody*?

MV: This is a trick math test question, right? Let's see. I can say for sure when the manuscript that won the Howling Bird Poetry Prize was completed because I photographed myself on the floor of my house amid all the poems as I re-ordered

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them from another version. Selfies are terrific documenting tools. Plus, it was the first October ever where I could sequester myself for as long as I wanted without anyone calling the cops. The dishes definitely piled up. A few poems that are included in the final book were written in the year or so following that furious reworking, but the majority of them were complete by that fall of 2012. As for when they began, probably 30 or 40 years ago, but in terms of actual writing, I'd say about three years.

HB: What is your biggest challenge in writing? How do you approach it/overcome it?

MV: Like all challenges maybe, the ones having to do with writing have changed over time. The biggest used to be a challenge that many share, and that's simply having time. ¶ No elementary school teacher I know

is finished at 3 p.m., and I was always pretty brain-dead by the time I'd get home, usually around early evening. By the time I'd run around the block a few times and eat dinner, it would be time for bed. At one point, I tried waking up at 5 a.m. to write before school, but I just got too tired to keep it up. Mostly, I wrote during weekends and summers, and one summer when I was at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, a poet I admired, Cynthia Huntington, advised me not to worry about writing during the school year. As it turns out, some of the writers I respect most have told me they don't write (at least not extensively) during the times when they are also teaching most intensively. Everyone's different, of course, but just being reminded that everyone's doing the best she can eased my anxiety about not being able to be at my desk as much as I wanted. ¶ Now that my professional life has shifted (I'm currently a doctoral candidate in the Creative Writing and Literature Program at USC), the greatest challenge might be taking time away from my desk! Truly, I need to set my timer to take stretch breaks because otherwise I get so wrapped up in whatever I'm working on, my muscles start aching. I also find that transitioning from the imaginary to the real can be jarring.

I'm lucky my friends and family are understanding of my long stretches of work solitude, and also that they're gentle with me upon re-entry into the real world.

HB: What inspired the title *At the Border of Wilshire & Nobody*? Why "nobody"?

MV: The title comes from the first of three poems that begin "Lines Composed at..." Each poem ends a section of the book as a sort of locating device. And each was, in fact, drafted at a place indicated by its title. ¶ Lots of people love to write in public places—cafés, coffee houses, and the like.

For me, writing has always felt very intimate, and so writing in public just feels too exposed. In this case, I drafted the poem while waiting to pick up a friend from a doctor's appointment. The medical center was located near an old Border's bookstore

on Wilshire Boulevard, and it would have been too far to go home, so I just found as private a spot as possible. That's probably part of the nobody—a respect for anonymity—along with desire for the unexpected. Emily Dickinson was a big fan of nobody, too. Her "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (poem 260) is a favorite.

HB: What is your favorite poem in the collection, and why?

MV: In trying to decide whether or not a poem was included, I tried to apply Gertrude Stein's idea of exciting: "By exciting I mean it really does something to you really inside you." Some of the poems that made the cut were certainly more fun to write than others, and some I enjoy re-reading more than others, but just as all of our experiences make us who we are, for me, each poem really does something as part of a whole. The hope is that's true for the reader as well.





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