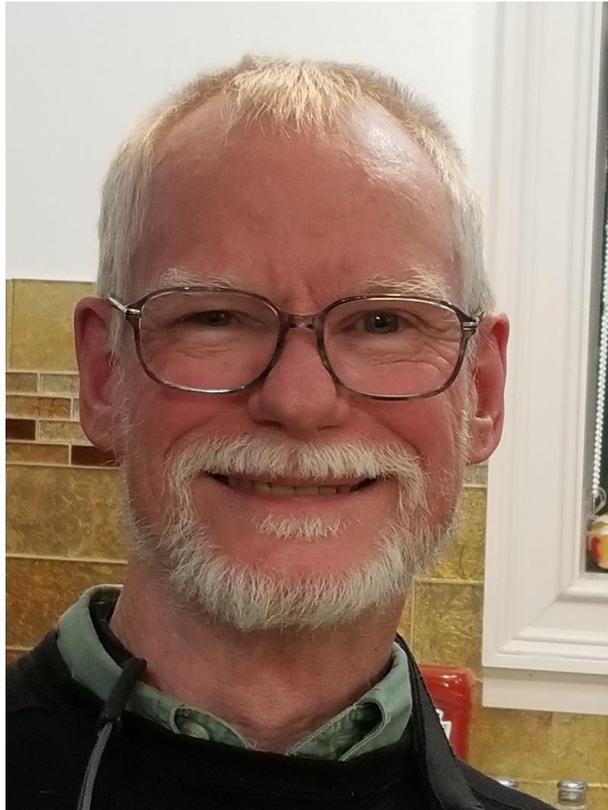




**Our Interview with Poet Bill Hayden,
Norwalk's Poet Laureate**



I think my first poem was written when I was a lifeguard between my sophomore and junior years in high school. I am a life long observer of nature and its beauty— and its mysteries— so I first began writing poems using descriptive writing about the natural world I saw around me.

Sally from the Norwalk Public Library: Thanks for joining us on the **Poetry Page**, Bill!

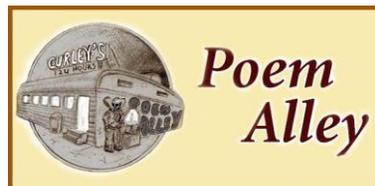
You are Norwalk's second **Poet Laureate**, now in your second year, I think? You were really the right choice for laureate, given your history in poetry, and all of the wonderful community work you have done, and continue to do, with the arts.

Please share with us your life-long community involvement in regards to poetry, beginning with your work on *The Little Apple* magazine in the seventies! Include Curley's, and the *Oysterville* project, and everything in between!

Bill: Thanks, Sally!

I happened to join the company of a number of poets back in the late 1970s in Norwalk who would organize readings and workshops in cafés, and artists loft spaces. One I recall, in particular, was at the old YMCA in downtown, Westport. I was the only one who showed up beside the organizer, now my long-time friend and writer, Agnes Moore. Through Agnes, I was introduced to local artists, and other poets and writers such as Henry Lyman, who single-handedly spearheaded the publication of four issues of *The Little Apple* magazine. He tirelessly promoted it, and secured just enough financial backing to keep the enterprise in the black, more or less! Henry chose me for his assistant editor, I think because he saw me as being a bit more level-headed. We had a lot of fun making that happen!

Some time ago, I came across the Curley's **Poem Alley** group of poets that meets at **Curley's Diner in downtown Stamford**. This group helped me delve deeper as a writer with encouraging commentaries, both from the other writers and from the moderator, Ralph Nazareth, who taught university-level poetry. Ralph is a repository of tremendous experience, and has a thorough familiarity with the literature of poetry as well as what makes a poem great. I hope to find time to rejoin this vital group of poets in the future.



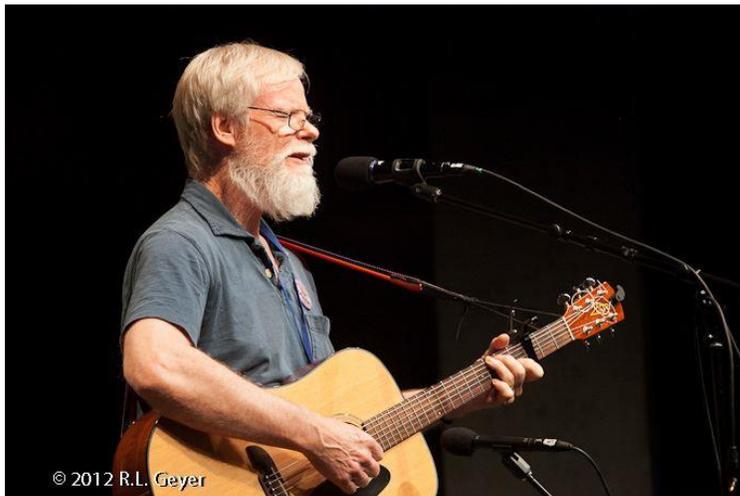
[Poem Alley](#)

[Oysterville](#) was published in November of 2018, and is an anthology of Norwalk poets. It was released as a printed booklet, and also as an MP3 recording with each poet reading their poem.

Our first Norwalk Poet Laureate, [Laurel Peterson](#), organized this project with the help of Norwalk's [FACTORY UNDERGROUND](#) recording studio, where the recording for this volume was produced. It was published by [WOODHALL PRESS](#) in Norwalk.



Sally: Please tell us about [THE GOOD FOLK COFFEEHOUSE](#) that you run with your wife, Brandi.



Bill with song and guitar

Bill: In the early 1990s, our pastor at [Rowayton United Methodist Church](#), Wayne Lavender, had seen us perform our folk songs at local area coffeehouses: Friday's Coffeehouse in Wilton, Rabbit Hill Coffeehouse in Westport, and one at the outdoor YMCA in Westport.

One day, Wayne asked the question: "Why don't we host one of these coffeehouses right here in Rowayton at our church!?"



So...we didn't need much pushing to get it started!

In June of 1990, we—**The Good Folk Coffee House**—opened our doors on what has become a monthly Dinner Theatre of area coffeehouses, featuring an open mic hour followed by a featured performer. We include a sidebar of quiches, casseroles, soups, brownies, desserts, teas, and coffees to keep the crowd from going hungry. We often have more musicians than we can squeeze into the hour before the feature, so we have them perform after the featured act. It often goes on until 11 or midnight!

We grew our audience by inviting performers we would meet at area festivals, and at annual **Folk Alliance** conventions, and proceeds always went half to the featured performer and half to the church. When a holiday came near to the 4th Saturday, Brandi and I would sometimes take the featured spot ourselves.

Sally: How are you managing the coffeehouse during the pandemic?

Bill: We've been considering eventually offering our fan-base some on-line concerts for which we would solicit voluntary donations. For now, though, it's been kind of a blessing for us to have this year "off," after thirty years of hosting it!

Sally: I understand you and your wife perform as a folk duo! Please tell us about that!

Bill: We started by learning duo arrangements of some Tim Hardin, Peter, Paul & Mary, and others' songs, but we owe our friend, Walt Graham, a deep debt of gratitude. It was Walt who taught us to play a terrific expanding repertoire of songs by Gordon Lightfoot, Jonathan Edwards, Cat Stevens, Steve Goodman, Joni Mitchell, Simon & Garfunkel, James Taylor, including some originals of Walt's and mine!

While playing together as a folk-singing trio called *Suede*, we performed on the main stage of the **Oyster Festival**. Walt's song "Norwalk, It's a Seaport City," and my song, "Hope for the Harbor," were pressed onto a souvenir 45 rpm record (remember those?!). It got a lot of airplay on **WNLK**, our local radio station.

Brandi and I developed our own repertoire of songs due to Brandi's great harmonizing ability, so we were often featured at other coffeehouses in the area.

We also owe a debt of gratitude to the [Hudson Valley Folk Guild](#), which hosts a continuing series of coffeehouses over in Poughkeepsie, and some of the surrounding towns in nearby NY State. Their open mics would fill carloads with singers and guitar players, and fill our stage with delightfully various original and cover-tunes to the delight of our audience.



Sally: During the pandemic, have you been performing as a folk duo on a virtual platform?

Bill: Our own performing lately has consisted of sharing an acoustic anthem or guitar-backed arrangement of a hymn during our church's zoom worship services each Sunday morning.

Sally: That's so nice!

I hear from poets how much they love your **1st and 3rd Monday Night Poetry** workshops! You began this workshop as laureate. You held it at the Norwalk Public Library, and then, after the start of the pandemic, you began holding it on zoom. I hear you are really filling a void for poets by offering your workshop on zoom. You give them something—much needed—to look forward to! Please tell us about your workshop. Can anybody join?

Bill: I send out announcements twice a month inviting participants to come to our zoom workshops. Since I also share these announcements on a couple of poetry Facebook pages, we have attracted several folks from across the country. One gal stays up late in the U.K. to join us! Until—or unless—it starts to get unwieldy in terms of numbers of poets attending, it's worked out just about right with around a dozen up to fifteen or sixteen participants sometimes. When it gets larger, we just need to be mindful of the time so everyone can be given a turn to share.

Sally: In writing the **Poetry Page**, I have heard a lot about the workshop held at the **Somer's Library** in New York. Poets love that, too!

I heard from one poet that—at the time she attended it—they had a rule that the poem would not be “critiqued” unless the poet specifically requested it. Otherwise, the poem would simply be enjoyed, and I suppose people would give their natural responses to the poem, without being critical. She said this made it a safe place for poets.

I wonder how you run your workshop, and manage the process of critiquing, or not critiquing, a poet's poem? What are your thoughts on all this? It's such an interesting topic!

Bill: We don't have any specific rules for discussion following a poet's reading of their own work. Most of our regular participants have gotten used to this informality. Since a number of our regulars have experience as educators—though not necessarily in creative writing—we do tend to elicit a creative discussion/response that most of our writers appreciate. Most of us consider ourselves to be evolving, and learning, as poets and creative artists, so we appreciate the feedback.

I've gotten a lot of good feedback on my own poems, and oftentimes our group discussions hold as much wealth of insight and inspiration as the poetic works themselves.

While a discussion sometimes may contain elements of specific critiques of particular parts of a poem, most often these tend to show up as suggestions: rearranging the stanzas, omitting a section, or approaching the topic from a different point of view, for example.

Sally: What are your plans for some more community poetry projects once the pandemic is over?

Bill: Glad you asked about that! I'm thinking about my original plans to organize in-person readings featuring some area poets that have achieved some success in publishing their work. My predecessor, poet and professor Laurel Peterson, was able to bring the U.S. Poet Laureate, Tracy K. Smith, to Norwalk Community College (NCC) in May, 2018 for a reading/talk for our community.

Sally: Do you have any other virtual projects looming aside from your Monday workshop?

Bill: It's my idea in 2021 to organize some on-line readings, and possibly invitational “teach-in” on-line workshops. These might feature some of my fellow CT Poet Laureates, or other poets from around our area.

Sally: That sounds great!

As laureate, do you involve Norwalk schools, and create any specific projects with children and educators? I’m sure it must be a daunting task deciding which projects to take on as laureate. How did you decide on a direction? Do you work with the Norwalk Arts Commission, Norwalk Public Library, or independently?

Bill: I mentioned to our **Norwalk Arts Commission** chairperson. Marc Alan, who has been very supportive of the poet laureate position, that I was hoping to connect with our Norwalk middle schools, and high schools. I want to offer something along the lines of a series of workshops for students who are interested in creative writing, or who may be part of a writing club. My idea was to introduce the students to some of the various poetic forms I’ve worked with, teach a class on ekphrastic poetry writing, and introduce them to some poets that might widen their perspective on what kind of poems are being written and published in our time.

Sally: That sounds wonderful. I hope this can happen!

Please share with us your responsibilities as laureate.

Bill: My responsibilities as Poet Laureate are to increase awareness of poetry in our city and the surrounding community through organizing events, and encourage people to read, write, and study poetry. I happen to have a particular interest in combining the art forms of music and poetry, dance and poetry, visual arts and poetry, as well as exploring improvisational poetry/spoken word.

I’d hoped to organize live, in-person events in which these various art forms could be shown to work together. We held a couple of in-person ekphrastic— the writing of poems in response to particular works of art— poetry writing workshops at two different Norwalk art galleries before the virus. Perhaps it could be revived in an on-line format, which I will be exploring.

As the pandemic subsides, one project that the Norwalk Arts Commission is supporting is to hold open area readings/performances at the SONO Collection mall. This might be a venue for some of the combination of art forms that I mentioned above.

Sally: So nice! And, of course, please remember that the **Norwalk Public Library** and the **Norwalk Arts Commission** partnered in the creation of the Norwalk Poet Laureate position.

We are always here to support and help our local poets.

Now, about yourself **as poet!**

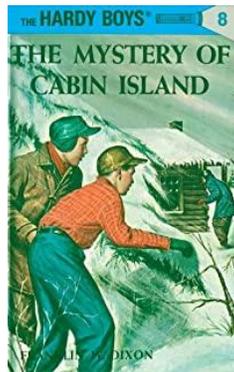


How long have you been writing poetry, and at what age did you come to it, or it to you?

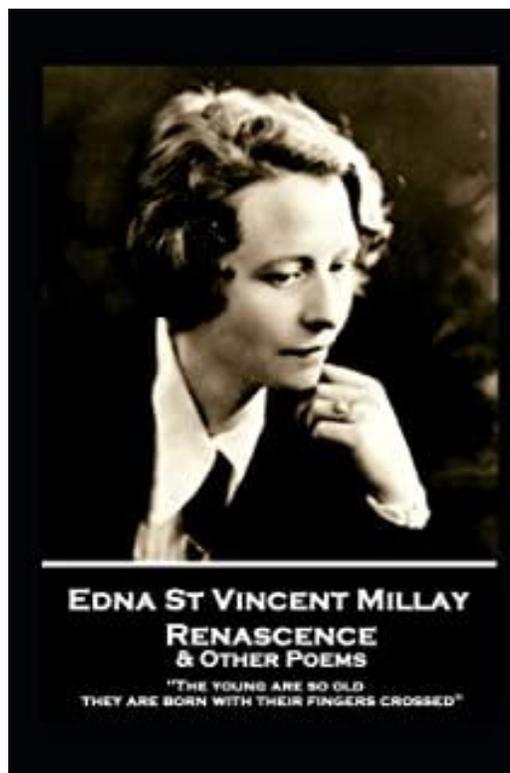
Bill: I think my first poem was written when I was a lifeguard between my sophomore and junior years in high school. I am a life long observer of nature and its beauty— and its mysteries— so I first began writing poems using descriptive writing about the natural world I saw around me.

Sally: The natural world has influenced many a poet, hasn't it? There is definitely a link there. Did you read poetry in your earlier childhood?

Bill: In my earlier childhood, I was more of a *Hardy Boys* mystery book reader than a poetry reader.



Though one interesting note about my family is that my mother used to occasionally recite from memory the poem, "Renaissance," by **Edna St. Vincent Millay**, which we celebrated around many a dinner table at the holiday times.



Another is that my great-grandfather **Henry Cornelius Hayden**'s poems were published in a volume entitled simply, *Poems*. Just the sort of book you might have found in the later 1800s in people's parlors, where—being a time of pre-radio and TV—gathering to read poems aloud must have been a favorite pastime.

Sally: Wow. That is so interesting, Bill!

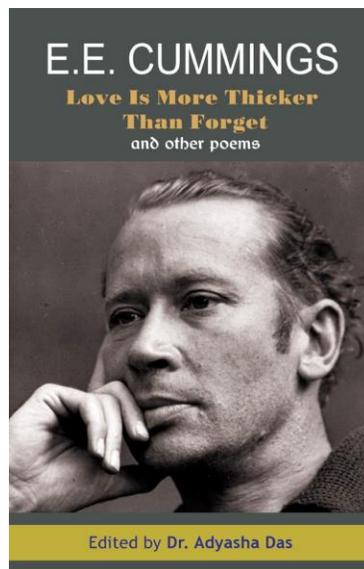
I am wondering whether you have a copy of your grandfather's book!

“Renaissance” is [Edna St. Vincent Millay's](#) poem that—as she was reciting it at an evening party in Maine when she was very young—got the attention of one particular listener, Caroline B. Dow, who encouraged her to apply for a scholarship to Vassar College. She also offered to pay some of her expenses. Amazing that your mother recited this poem!

No wonder you are a poet.

I know you preferred *The Hardy Boys* when you were very young, but do you recall any particular poem—or poet—striking you when you were a boy?

Bill: I think when I saw my first [E. E. Cummings](#) poem, I was immediately struck by his all-lower-case writing style, as well as by his hugely imaginative imagery. I fell in love with his poem, “o by the by,” loaded with power and passion. It really spoke to me.



Sally: I loved E. E. Cummings, too. I was introduced to him in high school by a teacher who read aloud his delightful poem, "[in Just-](#)," about the little lame balloon man.

Would you say that you had a particular teacher, or some other person (parent, friend) who encouraged you as poet?

Bill: Before he passed away a few years ago, Norwalk resident, Hal Eskesen, was an informal poetry mentor to me. Hal had a wonderful touch for writing insightful, playful, and meaningful poems that, sadly, rarely made it into book form. He preferred his own mimeographed "Scarecrow" pamphlets that he would self-publish from time to time.

He was a frequent reader at the open mic at our **Good Folk Coffeehouse**. He encouraged me to keep writing, and to always keep the creative juices flowing.

Sally: It's wonderful that you had someone like that in your life, Bill.

As an adult, who are your favorite poets, and what are a few of your favorite poems?

Bill: [Maya Angelou](#) — Her poem read at Bill Clinton's first inauguration, "On the Pulse of Morning," is a favorite. This powerhouse of a poem is capable of bringing our country together in a way that few other contemporary works can. Her voice is so authentic—her love for life shines so clearly— as she unabashedly speaks for a nation.

[Pablo Neruda](#)—His poetry is so full of life as well, with a boundless vocabulary of images from everyday life, and the world around him. He weaves poems of enchantment, wisdom, and love that captivate me every time I read his work. His poem, "What is Born With Me," has captured the theme of universality in his personalized way of inhabiting his poems. The way he merges with the subjects in his poems is magical to me.

[John Murillo](#) — A professor of creative writing at Wesleyan University, John's poems connect us with his contemporary urban black voice which does not flinch in the face of society's continuing racial divide. He gives voice to a perception of a reality most of society can only imagine. This is perhaps best exemplified in his poem, "[A Refusal to Mourn the Deaths, by Gunfire, of Three Men in Brooklyn](#)," from his 2020 book, *Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry*, published by [Four Way Books](#).



Sally: How would you define your style of writing? Do you write mostly free verse or do you also write formal verse?

Bill: I experiment with different forms, but often come back to the fourteen-line iambic pentameter sonnet form. Usually, though, I don't include a rhyming pattern in this style.

I also find the haiku format helpful in organizing my thoughts, and have written a number of haiku series poems: simply a number of haiku, written one after the other in a series of eight or ten of them, enough to allow a theme to develop.

Another form I like playing around with is the “found” poem, using words or phrases “found” in the world at large. For example, one poem I wrote was made up out of the list of top 2016 music album titles that were chosen by WPKN-FM programmers, and published on their website. There was a pool of about 150-200 titles, each of which sounded kind of poetic. So I selected a number of them, grouped them together in triplets, and wound up with a poem I had “constructed,” or you might say, “curated,” rather than written. This is kind of what I think of as the “found” poem style.

Sally: Do you find you have a particular recurring theme—or preoccupation—as poet?

Bill: I like writing about contemporary issues, personal transformation, spiritual journeys, as well as nature.

Sally: Do you have a collection, or collections, of poems, or desire to?

Bill: Not presently, but I may consider it sometime in the future. There is a small collection of poems I assembled from an old notebook from 1967, when I took a trip to the west coast. It is titled, *Down, Down, Utah Mountain*. This might be considered a sort of chapbook, but I've no plans to publish it at this time.

Sally: I do love that title, Bill.

Do you publish in literary journals?

Bill: Not actively at this time.

Sally: Please share with us your thoughts on publishing. Publishing is not important to everyone; and indeed, the poem is the most important thing.

Bill: I am currently happy sharing my writing with colleagues, and others. It's most satisfying when I can experience the listener's reactions in person, or in a zoom meeting.

Sally: What advice would you, or do you, give to other poets in regards to publishing?

Bill: There are all kinds of access points to getting published both online, and in print. One just needs to do a search. Our neighboring town of Fairfield, CT has a monthly poetry workshop called [The Poets' Salon](#), and they feature access to a variety of publishing opportunities for poets.

Sally: Has the public role of Laureate interfered with your private world as poet? Or does the public world come naturally, and the act of balancing both the public and private worlds come easy? How do you manage this?

Bill: I love having the regular twice-monthly workshops to inspire me to keep writing new poems. The workshops keep my creative eyes and ears tuned to new ways that my fellow poets have of seeing, sensing, and knowing the world around us.

I think, as the pandemic fades from our society, and events I'd like to organize increase, this might result in a balancing act for me. But I look forward to more activities as Norwalk's Poet Laureate in 2021, whether these are generated online or in-person.

Sally: We look forward to this, too, Bill! Thanks.

What do you enjoy outside of poetry? Nature? Gardening? Reading? Cooking? Family?

Bill: I enjoy creating artwork out of "found" and recycled materials, as well as traditional drawing and painting

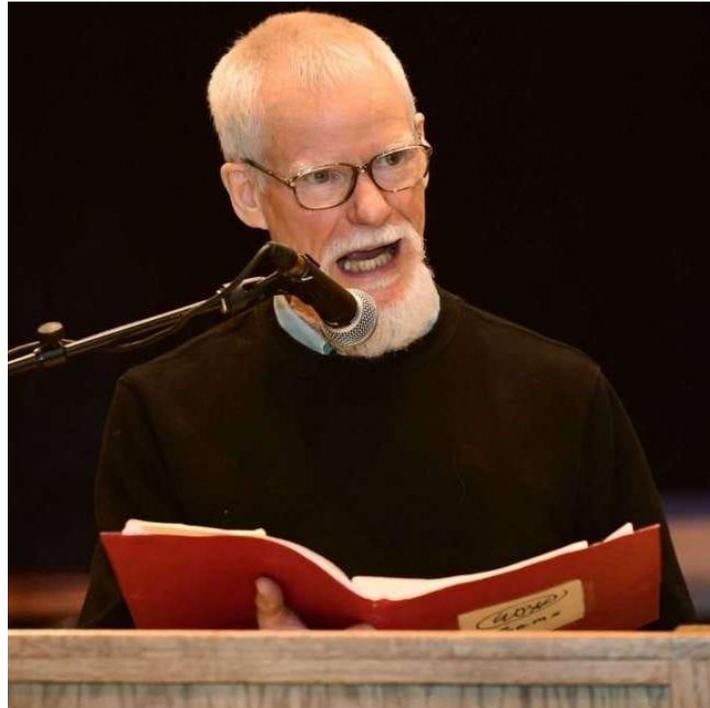


Art by Bill Hayden

Still a beginner at jazz guitar accompaniment, I'd love to be able to master those beautiful progressions and chords, so I keep trying to learn new songs whenever I have some time.

I enjoy a good movie, mostly those produced by independent filmmakers, or those made in Europe or Latin America. They seem to feature more drama, better character development, and a lot less car chases and explosions than the typical Hollywood movie.

I enjoy Qi Gong movement practices, and occasionally take a yoga class, along with two or three power walks a week. These practices help keep me healthy.



Now, three of Bill's poems...

Awaken, Warriors

(Anyone who has worked through emotional problems and come out the other side, usually with help from other people/therapists, might relate to this poem, which champions awakening from old habits and accepting one's new self.)

a core awakens, in spite of stuck drills
learned on flat lots where old addicts shoot dreams
like crumpled beer cans off stone walls clatter
with each ricochet new nightmares unfurl:
torture, running, vertigo, fire, tight gut
mesmerized in frozen shock-waves of grief
hurtling face first down tunnels of wet fear
forced to feel despair's razor blade cut, bleed...
awakened, form treasures out of shadows
side with those who win, take hope home this day
greet dreams grinning, not trembling. in your skin
comfortable. this life's worth living now!
warriors! equipped with peace and love, go
forth, engage in lively, sacred blessings!

w. p. hayden

Haiku for El Paso for Our Nation

(I believe poets are called to agitate, disturb and give pause to reflect on our society's wrongs, thus an increasing number of poems of mine address current affairs)

Hooked on redemption
"another man done gone" blown
Through a tenor sax
A phone call away
From the bad news: innocent
Bystanders shot down
"El Paso is NOT that
Kind of a community"
"He wasn't from here!"
Some people's tombstones
Are being carved way too soon
Holes blown in folks' lives
Blown like that black man's
Saxophone wail screeching blues
Notes to chill one's soul
Ammunition's dealt
A man man's mission. Can we
Legislate NOW, please?
Honor innocents
Sacrificed by violence
Gun control: somehow?
Say a prayer...bells toll
For us all. Let loose loving
Peacemakers...in throngs!

w. p. hayden

Inner Spaciousness on Earth

(This one attempts to wrestle with our planet's ecosystem crisis along with promoting an inner spiritual awakening among earth's citizens.)

Darkened by our west coast smoking
Stars and planets festoon the rhymeless sky
Who's in charge? Where leads this cloud?
The darkening debt owed father sky
Earth mother carries a switch
And their children: wind, fire and rain
Come hard, come darker, come often
Plot to smash, break this century's record
Renunciation of extractive modes of commerce,
Universal training in win-win world-building kinship,
Could turn the page of history, rewrite planetary evolution
Even give the green-light to the verdant pristine real
Global gaia-sphere bio-diverse emergent natural healing
If enough humans focus intently on their inner consciousness
And by this practice dissolve the grip of their egoic minds
Water, air, soul-soil, wheatbelts of nations become
Revered like our native brethren honored all realms all beings
Experience a merging with all that is, a universe:
Well of peace, creativity, beauty, truth and love
The dolphin, midge, elephant, mouse, eagle and viper
Unmask with grass, sequoia, rose, coral reef and sponge
The great design for teeming throngs of thriving life-forms
That coincides with felt oneness with all creation that's inside everyone
And available to all who adopt this refrain: to evolve human spirit,
Guided by the light-filled spaciousness of being within us all.

w. p. hayden

