



# **FLOWERS & SKY**

*Two Talks*

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## PREFACE

The figures of powers governing the imagination write themselves in skies and flowers.

Or so it seems. These essays were written and delivered as talks on two separate occasions in the Spring and Fall of 2016. Though the events were distinct, my methods were similar: for each piece a governing image channeled me back into my own work in a kind of recursive voyage of discovery. *Flowers and Sky*: I seem to have been commanded by these figures across a lifetime of writing, and so I took the opportunity to try to unravel their arrivals — to mark my developing interest and abilities, but also pay homage to their power as a constant resource, their inexhaustible resonance on the axis of my own reverberations. By the end I'd explored as if performing an autobiography in parts, in attendance to the powers I harnessed that made a life in me. I vetted my writing in the service of a deep romance

of images, to lose myself again in a discipline of flowers under a paradise of skies...

To enter the flower or parse the sky required a certain general focus for sure, but the very form and structure of a talk suggested personal presence. I wrote in the first person to *be* the person, and raised citations from my own work to illustrate the image-adventure charging my work. The actual occasion of the talks, of course, included a live audience: I hope you can listen to the recording we made and hear the *live* in it, so that the silences of time and distance might dissolve in the timbre of my voice. The main piece is the complete “Sometime of the Night,” a set of meditations circling around the famous “flower soliloquy” from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, from which sonorities abound. The spell is in the petal, so to speak, so lean back... and let the wild vowels bloom!

April and October, Alabama and Washington state: There were great globs of magnolias working the high branches, and shifting streaks of gray and white pelting the big pine ridge. The first talk was given as part of “The Poet’s Shakespeare,” for the University of Alabama / Tuscaloosa’s Strode Shakespeare symposium. The second was delivered on a panel called “What is poetics?” as part of the University of Washington / Bothell’s Fall Convergence in Poetry.

Much gratitude to the conference organizers and fellow travelers alike, who privileged questions over answers to make an art of listening... and whose generous attention helped amplify these talks into conversations.

*“a breeze of words teasing out the substance of the sky..”*

ONE

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SOMETIME OF THE NIGHT

*“The Poet’s Shakespeare”*

THE HUDSON STRODE PROGRAM IN RENAISSANCE STUDIES

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA, TUSCALOOSA

April 2016



## SOMETIME OF THE NIGHT

I keep circling back, as if trying to unwind a spell... as if I could un-pop the rhymes, unthread the music, and release the measure... But no, not to unmake them: to come again to their making, to feel anew the sway of the spell and the bell of the rhyme and the swell of the measure — four hundred years strong in themselves, and fifty years alive in my own body. So I return again and again to my dream, my *Midsummer Night's Dream*, as — what now? — Puck with a gray beard? A goat-boy with a cane? — and to the lines that seem to have been my birthright: Oberon's flower soliloquy, spoken to Puck as a prelude to delivering to or on Titania the magic flower-juice that will awaken her to her fate, to the intoxication of love, to falling instantly and transformingly in love — just as the spoken lines awakened me to my own fate — of falling in love with language through the transforming power of poetry.

“I know a bank...” Shakespeare’s *King of Fairies* tells Puck, Act II, Scene i, in the enchanted woods near Athens,

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,  
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,  
Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine,  
With sweet musk roses and with eglantine:  
There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,  
Lulled in these flowers with dances and delight;  
And there the snake throws her enamelled skin,  
Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in...

Yes — as I have often told the tale — at the age of seventeen I thought to play Oberon in our high school production of *Dream*, and buried my face full force in those flowers, inhaled them, absorbed them, and declaimed the lines in rooms, on city streets, in my bed and in my sleep I suppose — and *still* declaim them — though it was the role of Puck that was given to me, it was Puck who claimed me, and Puck who I became. And yet, myself transformed by what I’d memorized, a Puck who owned the ritual and the rite to command *himself* to service — to spell himself, I’ll say, to awaken himself into love and to figure the love in language in the shape of poems... “I know a bank,” I say, and around me the flowers bloom, the flower-words in their spectral aura and rich sensory evocation — incantatory zeal!

## STILL WALKING

Look at the sky: it reeks of projection. Look at my eyes: they're tools of the sky. Look at my feet: still walking. "Which way are you walking?" Ask the birds. "What are you singing?" A walk-along song. "How does it go?" *Bird, dome, pink, breeze.../ mind-light in the alphabet trees...* And more like that... Look at my smile: it goes up to the right. Is that my sly inflection, a mark of selection, the pitch of glory, the angle of erection? "All that, but rhymier." I watched a man who bought a bouquet; pleasure made him wiggle as he walked away. He swished unawares; the peonies winked and smiled to the right. "What was he singing?" A wiggling song. "How did it go?" Back and forth. "Ah, the world's a stage." Look at the page.

*Flowers & Sky: Two Talks* brings together two lectures and a suite of unpublished poems by one of our finest lyric poets. These intimate talks use Shurin's own work to illustrate the power and practice of image-making at the deepest level. The result is a continual act of discovery, part poetics, part literary autobiography, and part three-dimensional bibliography. An accompanying digital recording, in the poet's voice, brings the work alive into full sonority.

With the talks, poems, and recording together, the book offers a short course in poetic practice and a glimpse into a unique life making, and made by, art.



Aaron Shurin is the author of twelve books of poetry and prose. His writing has appeared in over forty anthologies, and has been recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, and the San Francisco Arts Commission, among others. He is the former Director of the MFA Writing Program at the University of San Francisco, where he is now Professor Emeritus.



An audio download is included with this book.

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