

In Conversation with Poetry Contributor, Joanne Corey

MJ: Can you tell us a little bit about your process of writing, “State Line”? What did that look like? What would you like for your audience to take away after reading your poem?

JC: I wrote “State Line” during a private writing retreat in North Adams, MA in May, 2021. I had gone back to the area for a few days on my own to write and make decisions on which poems to include in my collection *Small Constellation*, which centers around the North Adams area, its evolving history, and my family’s relationship with it. I wrote “State Line” because I wanted to include a few more poems about the small towns that surround North Adams and what it was like to live there.

My childhood home in Monroe, MA was about a half mile from the state line and I passed the state line sign that is the subject of this poem thousands of times, on foot, by bike, by car, by school bus when I was in high school in North Adams. In some ways, it felt superfluous, as the small towns were each other’s neighbors, regardless of state. For example, most of the people in Monroe, MA belonged to churches in Readsboro, VT because Monroe was too small to have any churches of its own. My father worked for New England Power Company, which had dams and power stations along the Deerfield River in both Massachusetts and Vermont.

As with many other rural areas in New England, the closure of mills along the rivers caused population decline and a certain amount of decay, represented by the rusted state line sign. The people on the ground, however, can still see themselves as members of connected communities regardless of a line on a map. They can still enjoy the unifying force of the river and hills, aside from the geographic names they have been given.

MJ: Who are you reading right now?

JC: I’ve most recently finished Tara Betts’s collection, *Refuse to Disappear* (The Word Works) and am about to dive into Jessica Dubey’s most recent chapbook, *All Those Years Underwater* (Kelsay Books).

MJ: When you submitted your poem, you talked about how it was a part of your unpublished collection, Small Constellation, which you say centers

around the North Adams, MA area. Would you mind elaborating a little on how that area (and even region) has influenced your writing?

JC: Growing up in Monroe, then a town of about 200, I went to North Adams frequently to visit our grandparents, to shop, and to attend high school, so it feels like my second hometown. As I was entering adulthood, North Adams and the surrounding towns entered a period of economic decline that halved the population and led to most of the young people leaving the area. After I graduated from Smith College in 1982, I moved to Broome County, NY to join my spouse who was a native of Stamford, VT, which is also close to North Adams.

We continued to visit frequently, as we still had relatives and friends there. When I returned to my childhood love of writing poetry in my fifties, it was natural to me to write about my family and our New England roots. I also felt drawn to explore the sweeping changes that have occurred in the North Adams area over time. I have a unique perspective as both an insider and an outsider that I thought might be elucidating and that I explore in *Small Constellation*.

The collection contains poems dealing with the Hoosic and Deerfield Rivers and their place in the lives and livelihoods of people living in the region; the Hoosac Tunnel and railroads; personal stories of my family's immigrant roots; and the astonishing transformation of the mill complex that started as Arnold Print Works, became Sprague Electric, and is now the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

There are also a number of ekphrastic poems based on artworks from MASS MoCA, some of which also tie to the landscape or North Adams' history.

MJ: You mention in your biography that you have been an (almost) annual resident at the Boiler House Poets Collective at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams. Can you talk a little bit about that fellowship and how the work you've done there has impacted you?

JC: In November, 2015, I attended one of the first workshops-in-residence weeks at The Studios at MASS MoCA, a collaboration between The Studios and Jeffrey Levine, founder, publisher, and artistic director of Tupelo Press.

As someone who had just recently begun to publish my poems, I only had the courage to apply because it was taking place on my “home turf.”

Although I was in over my head as a beginner among much more accomplished poets, we poet-attendees bonded so strongly that we wanted to continue our relationship. As the Boiler House Poets Collective, we have met for a week-long reunion residency at MASS MoCA every fall, other than the pandemic closure of 2020.

The Boiler House poets have been foundational in the development of *Small Constellation*, including workshopping individual poems and an earlier version of the manuscript. I learned a great deal about ekphrastic poetry from their example and from group projects we have undertaken during residency weeks.

I’ve also enjoyed the opportunity to read with them in North Adams several times.

MJ: Is there a specific poem about New England that has really inspired you and your work?

I have memories of “learning by heart” Longfellow’s “Paul Revere’s Ride” as a young student in grammar school in Monroe, MA. I think I internalized that sense of place, because, when I started to write poems myself as I got a bit older, I naturally gravitated to writing about my own New England surroundings.

When I returned to writing poetry in my fifties, I again felt drawn to poetry of place, and particularly to my place of origin, the MA/VT border area.

MJ: Outside of Small Constellation, are you working on any projects or publications right now?

I am working on final manuscript preparation for my chapbook, *Hearts*, which will be published by Kelsay Books in late summer, 2023. *Hearts* deals with my relationship with my parents, concentrating on my mother’s final years, as she battled heart disease.

I’m also working on a new chapbook manuscript of ekphrastic poems based on artworks of MASS MoCA.

MJ: Where else, in terms of magazines and publications, can readers view some more of your work?

JC: Wilderness House Literary Review, Volume 17, Number 1:
<https://www.whlreview.com/no-17.1/poetry/JoanneCorey.pdf>

Rat's Ass Review, Fall/Winter 2022:
http://ratsassreview.net/?page_id=4093

The online anthologies of The Binghamton Poetry Project:
<https://thebinghamtonpoetryproject.wordpress.com/anthology/>

While my blog Top of JC's Mind is an eclectic mix of writing, I always link to new publications as they become available. You can also find links to older publications, as well as a few self-published pieces:
<https://topofjcsmind.wordpress.com/>

Joanne Corey is a native of the Massachusetts/Vermont border area and a graduate of Smith College; she currently lives in Vestal, New York, where she participates with the Binghamton Poetry Project, Broome County Arts Council, Tioga Arts Council, and Grapevine Poets. She returns to New England often to visit family and friends. With the Boiler House Poets Collective, she has completed an (almost) annual residency week at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams since 2015. Her first chapbook, *Hearts*, is forthcoming from Kelsay Books in 2023. She invites you to visit her eclectic blog: topofjcsmind.wordpress.com.