The Open Light
Poets from Notre Dame, 1991–2008

Edited by
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Twenty years after the publication in 1991 of Professor James Walton’s *The Space Between: Poets from Notre Dame, 1950–1990*, this follow-up anthology aims to celebrate again poetry’s vital presence at the University of Notre Dame. It uses the same criteria for inclusion: that the poet was associated with the university during the years indicated, and has published at least one full-length collection (not necessarily during those years). In the case of several poets, there were multiple books to consider, containing poems written over decades-long careers, which meant that I had to winnow my choices to a handful or so and thereby exclude some worthy poems. I finally settled on those poems that in my judgment adroitly exemplify the poet’s specific aesthetic, while at the same time appealing to a general audience curious about Notre Dame’s poetic culture. The craft of writing, in particular that of verse, has long held a position of esteem at Notre Dame, all the way back to the 1860s, when student poems, most often imitating classical models and the prevailing poetics of the Victorian era, would appear regularly in the weekly *Scholastic* magazine. There were also bound volumes of prize-winning poems every year from 1917 to 1923, culminating in 1927 with *The Notre Dame Anthology*, edited by Professor Charles Phillips.

Looking at the table of contents in Walton’s *The Space Between*, one notices such luminaries as John Frederick Nims, John Logan, Anthony Kerrigan, and Michael Ryan, among others, as well as the much admired and beloved Professor Ernest Sandeen, who sadly passed away in 1997, and the now retired John Matthias and Sonia Gernes. During their tenure at Notre Dame, Matthias and Gernes made pivotal contributions to culture, both on campus and beyond it. One need only
read these poets’ statements in the back of this anthology to realize how many students they influenced and supported. Those who come readily to mind, and who are represented in the current anthology, include Robert Archambeau and Joe Doerr, who not only received their Master of Fine Arts degrees at Notre Dame but also wrote Ph.D. dissertations directed by Matthias. As poets, in fact, their fondness for the modernist sequence is an obvious sign of Matthias’s tutelage. Others included here, such as Mary Hawley, praise Gernes, whose influence can be seen in the narrative lyric and in what might be called a poetics of empathy, which she has long championed. Sandeen also had a notable impact on the writing careers of Anthony Walton and John Phillip Santos while they were still undergraduates.

Of course, much has changed since the publication of Walton’s anthology in 1991. Creative writing has undoubtedly grown more essential to the intellectual identity and artistic ambitions of Notre Dame, as evidenced by the founding in 1991 of our flourishing Creative Writing Program, which has garnered considerable praise from the literary establishment. This is in large part because of the accomplishments of our M.F.A. graduates, who have published novels and poetry collections with both commercial publishers and independent presses. Other achievements include several AWP Intro Awards and even the prestigious APR/Honickman First Book Prize, won by Kevin Ducey in 2004 for his collection *Rhinoceros* (judged by Yusef Komunyakaa). Ducey is indeed a poet of irresistible panache and wit, so I am delighted that I was able to include five of his poems. As a program, we are also proud of the establishment of *The Notre Dame Review*, whose poems and short stories have subsequently appeared in the *Best American Series*, and the Ernest Sandeen Poetry Prize (eight collections strong as of 2011). Thanks to generous grants from Notre Dame’s Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts, we have sponsored such exciting conferences as “The Long Reach of African-American Poetics” in 2006, “& Now: A Festival of Writing as a Contemporary Art” in 2004, and the “Latino Poets Conference” in 2002. Our reading series has brought to campus numerous authors, both from the United States and abroad, including the Nobel Prize nominee Bei Dao, who also taught at Notre Dame as a visiting professor between 2005 and 2007. Four of his poems grace these pages.
Our Creative Writing faculty has changed considerably over the years. I joined the program in 2000 as an assistant professor, while still in my first year of teaching at the University of Dayton. Later on, Cornelius Eady and Joyelle McSweeney would replace John Matthias and Sonia Gernes. Steve Tomasula also joined William O'Rourke and Valerie Sayers as the third fiction writer in the program.

*The Open Light*, a title I took from Professor Eady's poem “Why Was I Born? A Duet between John Coltrane and Kenny Burrell,” is a fortuitous metaphor for the explosion of diversity that has taken place since the publication of Walton's *The Space Between*. Women constitute more than one-third of the poets in this second volume; regrettably, the proportions are still not close to parity. Walton himself lamented the dearth of women’s voices, especially in light of Notre Dame's long exclusion of women as undergraduates, which did not formally end until 1972, when the first female undergraduates were enrolled. The situation of women poets has dramatically changed since then. For example, Jacque Vaught Brogan, among the first three women tenured in our English Department, and a prolific scholar of modern American literature, has had her first poetry collection, entitled *Damage*, published by the University of Notre Dame Press. Graduates such as Jenny Boully (M.F.A. 2002) and Kimberly Blaeser (Ph.D. 1990) have forged successful careers as both writers and as academics. Boully’s poems and lyric essays have appeared in many journals and in collections published by Sarabande and The Essay Press. Blaeser is an English professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, teaching creative writing and Native American Literature. She is the author of a critical study of Gerald Vizenor as well as three poetry collections. Beth Ann Fennelly is a celebrated young poet, whose work has appeared in the *Best American Poetry* series, and who currently teaches in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Mississippi. As her own statement explains, it was during her undergraduate years at Notre Dame that she came to realize her poetic vocation. These women’s accomplishments are a strong predictor that many more will go on to find professional success, whether in the publication of their work, in academia, or in the editorial field.

Another significant element of *The Open Light* is the number of ethnic groups represented—African Americans, Latinos, Asian
Americans, Native Americans—at times sharing a common Catholic heritage, but not always. Our strength, perhaps, lies in the encompassing definition of the word “catholic” as a synonym for the universal, and thus we find a sizeable contingent of international poets. I wish to emphasize, however, that this plethora of voices proves even more enticing if we consider the poems themselves, and how they differ and yet somehow converge, whether in thematic concerns, in style, or in form. It is a treat to read the snazzy, blues-infused poetry of Cornelius Eady, the co-founder of Cave Canem (a non-profit organization fostering contemporary African American poetry) and the author of numerous poetry collections, alongside the work of Anthony Walton, author of the well-received memoir *Mississippi: An American Journey* and co-editor with Michael Harper of *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry*. This anthology also displays convergences among ethnicities and geographies. Francisco Aragón (M.F.A. 2003), born in San Francisco to Nicaraguan parents and a resident of Spain for nearly a decade, shares with Tom O’Grady (Ph.D. 1984), a native of Canada’s eastern coast, a preoccupation with displacement and uprootedness in this time of globalization. The author of one poetry collection, O’Grady is Professor of English, Director of Irish Studies, and a member of the Creative Writing faculty at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Aragón worked as an English teacher in Madrid and Barcelona, while at the same time honing the craft of translation, which explains the bilingual format of *Puerta del Sol*, his first full-length collection. Since receiving his M.F.A., Aragón has worked at Notre Dame’s Institute for Latino Studies, where he now directs the unit Letras Latinas, which he himself created and which houses, among other things, the bi-annual Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize, our nation’s sole prize dedicated to publishing a Latino/a poet’s first book. John Phillip Santos, a Mexican American and author of the acclaimed memoir *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation*, has written poems rich in the cross-cultural imagination and immersed in particular confluences of history and culture. Santos’s intellectually restless voice and passion for experimentation are qualities that he shares with the Canadian-born Archambeau, the English John Wilkinson, and the Americans Joe Doerr, Stacy Cartledge, Michael Smith, and Michael Coffey. Thomas O’Grady’s formalist poetics (see his brilliant sestina
“Lament for My Family, Lost at Sea”) also finds an affinity with the sonnets and couplets of the Canadian-born Henry Weinfield, a professor in Notre Dame’s Program for Liberal Studies. Poets whose roots lie (at least partially) in Asia include Jenny Boully and Karni Pal Bhati. Boully was born in Thailand to a Thai mother and an American father and raised in Texas, and much of her poetry is concerned with this dual heritage. Bhati, who earned both an M.F.A. and a Ph.D. from Notre Dame, writes about his Indian birthplace and upbringing in vivid detail. Kimberly Blaeser, a Native American, is one more vital voice in this rich panoply of American ethnic identity, one that speaks to the often overlooked (and very current) estrangement between the more assimilated Native Americans and their tribal communities.

I hope that you will agree that the poems in *The Open Light* demonstrate a remarkable range of talent and accomplishment and portend an even more exciting future for poetry at Notre Dame.