

THE LOST POEMS OF SCOTT HARNEY

He had dreamed of one day publishing a book of his poetry. A year after his death, he finally is.

BY CORDELIA MILLER



Scott Harney in the early 1980s. Facing page: Megan Marshall outside the Belmont home they shared.

Robert Lowell was the draw in 1975 for budding poets Scott Harney and Megan Marshall, when the two took the Pulitzer Prize winner's poetry workshop at Harvard University. Marshall still remembers the respect she developed for Harney in that class, "his devotion, how much he read and knew," she says. "He knew much better what he was up to than I did—about both his poems and mine."

Harney was 19, Marshall 20, both public school kids, he from Charlestown, she from California, neither feeling like they fit in with the affluent prep-school culture at Harvard. They fell in love, but she broke it off, and both went on to marry other people. It would be 30 years before they found each other again.

PHOTOGRAPHS: HARNEY BY FRANKLIN GERECHTER; MARSHALL BY ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



SELECTIONS
FROM SCOTT
HARNEY'S
POETRY.

***From Somerville
and Farther North***

We drive a mile
past the homes of
men and engines,
beneath a low-
slung evening sky
to Union Square,
slide to third,
and Somerville
suddenly

opens like a night-
blooming flower.

Streets are black
petals that draw
the humming
traffic in like bees
to a center

of streetlamp
stamens exhaust
will pollinate.

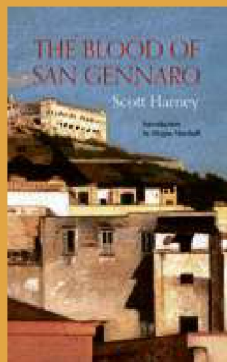
Incongruent
dreams on a
barren landscape,
yet how else defy
the sadness of a
sooty moon?

From *Climbing Mount Vesuvius*

Just stay steady
for the walk
ahead, to a shack
on the narrowest
edge, where they
sell limoncello
for a euro a shot,
and you sway
between the crater
and the rest of the
world, deciding
where to fall.

From *Revere Beach*

I watched the
cotton candy blow
and spin together,
the pink cloud
forming itself like
the first whim
of creation. The
second whim is to
become unspun,
return to sugar,
water, elements
that matter ...



Neither had become well known for their poetry, their dream in college. Marshall is a professor of writing at Emerson College, and a writer of well-regarded biographies, one of which won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize. Harney worked at the Somerville Youth Commission, as an aide at McLean Hospital in Belmont, and as a paralegal.

Harney published three poems in the *Somerville Community News* and a couple of movie and music reviews in *The Boston Phoenix* in the early 1980s. When Marshall was an editorial assistant at the *New Boston Review*, she asked him to write an essay on his upbringing in racially charged Charlestown. After it was ultimately rejected, for being more memoir than journalism, Harney seemed to have stopped trying to get his work published. But he never stopped writing poems.

After Harney and Marshall reconnected and moved in together, he had a desk in a corner of their bedroom where he worked. But he rarely showed her any of his writing. Then, in December 2018, Harney's doctors told him he had six months to live. He had been fighting mantle cell lymphoma for years, and the chemotherapy had gradually brought on congestive heart failure.

Harney did hope to see his work in print, and had organized two dozen poems into a chapbook—a small collection poets can inexpensively produce, hoping to build momentum for a full-length book—only to have it rejected by a small publisher. His plan was to submit it to competitions, but then his failing health forced him to stop working.

Marshall's younger daughter, Josephine Sedgwick, a culture editor at *The New York Times*, had grown close to Harney over the years. She had some of the poems that were in the chapbook. Unbeknownst to Marshall, Sedgwick created a book of them with a beautiful salmon-colored cover. When she gave the book to Harney, he cried.

Harney died in May 2019, at age 63. Marshall wrote an obituary that was published in *The Boston Globe* and reached out to family and friends to tell them of Harney's passing. Two of his former girlfriends sent her gifts he had given them: poems. Marshall had never seen them—she thought his only surviving poems were those in the chapbook—and she started wondering what else he had left behind.

She dug through files at his desk, on his computer, and stacked in boxes in the basement. She even found two slim sets of typed pages on a bookshelf in her office. "They were right here and I never knew," she says. "But it was comforting, too, that they were right here and he trusted me with his work. Maybe he was giving them to me. Maybe he wanted me to find them."

As Marshall read through his files, some going back to the Harvard class where they met, she realized Harney hadn't just been writing; he'd been taking what she calls "seed

pearls" and crafting them into deeply moving poems, sometimes gestating them for years. These were striking, lyrical works, mostly set in Boston and Naples, Italy, where Harney had traveled every year during the previous decade to write. "Each time I was stunned," she says. "I'd read the poem and think about all that I didn't know about Scott."

Marshall wishes she could ask Harney why he stopped sending work out—his talent was obvious—and after his death, she found a collection of rejection letters for poems he had submitted to various literary journals in the early years after he graduated from Harvard, some with encouraging notes from editors urging him to try again. One manuscript "was among the top 10 finalists of 271 entries," read a 1982 note from the prestigious Grolier Poetry Prize. If he had won, he would have had a book published.

As she was beginning to go through Harney's files, Marshall heard from an acquaintance, Askold Melnyczuk, a writer who runs a small publishing house of poetry and journals. He had seen Harney's death notice in the *Globe*. He remembered attending a reading by Harney—the only public reading he ever gave of his work, organized at the urging of a friend after Harney's impromptu reading at a holiday party—and being taken by the poems. Melnyczuk said he wanted to publish Harney's chapbook.

As more and more poems came to light, the project expanded into a full-length book, *The Blood of San Gennaro*. Its name comes from one of Harney's poems, about an annual festival in honor of the patron saint of Naples, which involves priests turning the saint's dried blood to liquid. The ritual is both improbable and miraculous, something like Harney's poetry collection itself.

"I see this as a lost treasure of Scott's beautifully crafted poetry," says Jane Shore, one of Harney's teachers at Harvard, and herself a noted poet. "I'm not sure he knew what a good poet he was, but he was amazing."

On May 17, two days shy of the one-year anniversary of his death, Scott Harney's book will finally be published. "Poetry has its own time," Melnyczuk says. Sometimes, writers' works only coalesce after they are gone, and they "wind up startling and shocking the whole literature community into awareness. Scott's poems have the power to do that."

Collecting her late partner's poetry has been profoundly moving for Marshall. "Working on the book has kept him alive to me," she says. "All of this is really quite miraculous. Here we have this beautiful book full of really profound poems that might have stayed in the file cabinet." She's eagerly looking ahead to a public reading when gatherings are allowed again. "[They're] his poems, and I feel very happy that more people will know them." ■

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Harney and Marshall on vacation in Truro.

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