novel in verse

It is June 2003. In a month I will graduate from Vermont College with my MFA in Writing. I feel in equal parts relief, fear, and a sense of accomplishment. During my two years, I have written a draft of *Heck Superhero* and almost a complete draft of *Keturah and Lord Death*. Also, unbeknownst to my advisors, I have been working on the revisions of *Tom Finder*, which is just coming out.

I am worrying about my lecture and my reading for the grad residency, and I have been asked to do something extra for the graduation ceremony. You might say I'm feeling a little creatively tired.

Then comes the call for the workshop submission.

Heck has been workshopped twice. Keturah has been workshopped twice. They are beyond workshop help. I say to myself, self, you can do this, you can write something new for workshop, something perhaps you will work on post grad.

Self says, sorry, I got nothin.

I say, self, what kind of writer are you? Remember, we don't believe in writer's block? Think of all those writers who write thousands of words a day and never take a day off. Come on, it's just twenty pages.

Self says, sorry, I got nothin.

Not only do I have no creative energy left, I have no ideas.

Except one. It is an idea I have been trying to avoid. I am not ready for this idea. This is the idea.

While I was writing *Tom Finder*, I did a tremendous amount of research on homeless children. The things I read haunted me. Even as I finished *Tom Finder*, I knew it wasn't going to be enough. Random thoughts like, what would a homeless child do if he got a toothache? led to

another whole book, *Heck Superhero*. I also knew that I *would* one day, that I *must*, one day, write about a homeless girl. I knew that to write this book honestly, it was unlikely I could avoid the topic of prostitution.

I knew this idea would have to wait until I was a very happy very strong person who could live in such a dark world for the time it would take to write such a book. That was someday, but not now.

Still, when the call comes for workshop materials, one has a tendency at times to do something rash and ill-thought.

I had always wanted to write poetry. I would write poems for my workshop. I would write twenty poems. As I wrote, almost against my will, every one of those poems was about my homeless girl. She told me her name was Angel. When I was done I looked at my work.

What could the college do?

They couldn't flunk me now.

I sent it in.

Allison McGee was my workshop leader. It was a lively, opinionated and passionate workshop – and these, of course, are the best kind. But when it was my turn, the silence was deafening. People struggled to find something to say. They were… kind. Possibly nothing is more damning that a "kind" workshop response. Allison, in an effort to make me feel better, said something like this: "I don't really know what these poems are about, but you are firmly in the world of language, and so you must be getting somewhere."

I took my diploma and my twenty poems home. I framed the former and tucked the latter away in a dark place.

I got a full time job to pay for my student loans and got busy trying to publish my creative thesis. In a single draft I fixed the problems my editor found with *Heck Superhero.* It was ready for publication. Heck came out in 2004. In a few drafts I finished *Keturah and Lord Death*, sent it to my editor, and he sent me a short email asking for one major item of revision. I worked on it some more, sent it back, and he said done. Keturah came out in 2006.

I thought my life would always be this way.

And then.

And then I took a break. I deserved a break, didn't I? I needed a break.

A year later, I was still on my break. I said, self, isn't it time you started writing again?

Self said, sorry, I got nothin.

I decided I needed time. Time was all I needed. I knew if I could get some time I would come up with an idea, and it would definitely not involve a homeless girl or poems that make people behave kindly toward you. I applied for a grant and took a three-month sabbatical from work to write a novel. Three whole months. I had written a first draft in less time.

What would I write about? I thought again about those 20 poems. I didn't know where they were anymore. I didn't want to know. I wasn't strong or happy yet. Instead, I would write a fantasy, something fun and easy. I wrote that fantasy all summer. I wrote four hundred pages at least. I threw them all out. The story was clever but it had no heart. Once or twice, as my sabbatical crashed and burned, I thought of Angel. But I couldn't bear to go there.

After working for three months of working for many hours a day and finding that I hadn't kept a single word of my work, something occurred to me. Perhaps I was not going to write anything until I wrote Angel's story. Perhaps it was so big in my mind that it left no room for anything else. I looked everywhere, pulled out my files, dug through everything and found those twenty poems. I threw them out.

And began again.

I had thought that the poems must have been simply a pre-writing strategy, an entrance into the story. Often my stories begin with words on little pieces of scrap paper that, if moved around, could sound like poetry. But as I began to write Angel's story, the pages refused to stop being poetry or at least something like unto it. I learned later that this has happened to other writers.

Virginia Ewer Wolff said of her first novel in verse, "It's the way I heard the voice that was telling it. The form just came to me. And so I kept it, hoping I wouldn't have to change it but being afraid I would. But Brenda Bowen said, No, this is fine, you don't have to change it into

paragraphs. I did try changing part of a draft into paragraphs, and I just got all blocked and stifled and couldn't do it."

Ron Koertge of *Brimstone Journals* said, "I never even considered writing it in margin-to-margin prose. There was always something punchy and immediate about the poems."

Robert Cormier said of his novel in verse, *Frenchtown Summer*, "As I began to write, it seemed to cry out for verse. I tried writing it in prose, but it didn't work, so I let it go its own way." End quote.

Still open to the idea that this was just a pre-writing strategy, I honored that artistic impulse and I wrote poems. I wrote and wrote until I broke my heart and I stopped. I had fifty pages. Fifty poems.

That was it. I stopped. I didn't want to write this book. I didn't want to live there. Not strong. Not happy. I had no control over these poems. They weren't becoming a story. I was attentive to the language, I played with form. But I couldn't make a story at the same time.

By now it is now 2007. I said, self, you haven't done anything to speak of with your writing for years now. If it isn't Angel, write something.

Self said, "I got nothin."

I wondered if that was it for me. VCFA had been my last hurrah, and perhaps I wouldn't write again. My brain had retired. Saying so was like admitting it was time for me to get a rocking chair and an afghan and swallow prescriptions. It was conceding to a kind of death. Trying to be a good sport, I thought: Death has its good points.

Then two things happened at roughly the same time to resurrect me. I have an adult daughter who loves to rifle through my private things. She likes to read my journals and my computer files and my emails. We have an unspoken agreement: I won't be offended if she won't confront me with anything she shouldn't know.

One day she came upstairs crying. She said, "I just finished reading your Angel story, and mom, you have to write that book." I said, "We have an agreement." I said, "I don't know how to write that book."

A very short time later, I got a phone call from Faculty Chair Sharon Darrow inviting me to apply to be on the faculty of Vermont College of Fine Arts. She said they would pay me about a third of what I was currently making. I said I would just love that.

I was hired a couple weeks before the January 2008 residency. I hastily prepared a lecture, and then suffered over what I would read. I remembered as a student that I preferred hearing the raw, rough unpublished work faculty were working on over work that had been professionally edited. So I summoned my courage and read the only thing I had: some of that fifty pages of Angel.

I would like to stop here and say that my colleagues are the most gifted and generous souls I have ever met. They teach me as well as their students. They are not only good writers, they are the best kind of people. They and the students were enormously encouraging, and told me that I should write this book.

I believe it was at that residency that Julie Larios introduced me to the whole debate about the novel in verse, of which I had known nothing. She said in a lecture, in essence, that she had doubts and deep reservations about the novel in verse, that it would be difficult if not impossible to write something that could be both poetry and novel.

I thought, oh, so that's why I'm having so much trouble!

Still, because self refused to give me anything but Angel, I went home and continued to work on it. At first I worked hard and turned out a few pages here and there, but as the semester went on, the pages came slower and slower until they stopped. I was living proof that Julie was right. If this wasn't impossible, it was a least far too difficult for me. When I returned to VCFA for the next residency, I hadn't written a word in a couple of months. Again, however, I had nothing else to read but Angel. Again, I was encouraged by my colleagues and the students to finish the book. Tim became impatient with me when I said I wasn't sure I could.

I led a workshop with Julie. In our workshop was a student who had submitted part of a novel in verse. On the day it was her turn she said, "This is going to be awesome. I can't wait to see Martine and Julie go at it over the novel in verse."

This student, amusingly, did not know that I was a Julie Larios disciple and that I had confirmed all of her doubts and reservations and then some. Julie, for her part, was far too humble before the god of art to ever say never. The participants looked at us expectantly. Julie and I looked at

each other. The hoped-for battle never ensued and we had a great workshop experience together.

Over the course of a couple of years I worked away at Angel in the same pattern. I would come home from residency energized and hopeful, and by mid-semester I had lost heart and stopped writing. At home I looked at my pile of papers sidelong and with dread. I wrestled with my angel, and more than once my hip was put out of joint. Nevertheless, this character had seized me by the left and right ventricles. I knew her. She was mine. I loved her like my child. I was committed to telling her story.

After many drafts I felt like I had something that was almost readable. Before I would send it to an agent, I wanted it to pass the true litmus test. I sent it to Julie. I waited, sick as a novice, sure that she would despise it, and absolutely willing to believe her if she did. Finally she responded. What she said will remain between her and me, a sacred exchange. But after that I began getting it ready for an editor.

My agent, Brenda Bowen, who had been an editor for twenty years, had suggestions for revision. I rewrote and sent it back to her. She had more suggestions. I rewrote and sent it back to her.

She felt it was ready for the unveiling. Margaret Ferguson at FSG bought it. Shelley Tanaka at Groundwood Books bought the Canadian rights. I had two of the most brilliant editors on the planet, and they were working together. Little did they know that it would take both their good brains to tackle this project.

Margaret sent me the first editorial letter. It was four pages long. Single spaced. The first sentence says, “Thank you for letting me publish your book.” That was it for praise. The rest was all about what needed still to be done. Kind of like a packet letter on steroids.

I worked hard, harder than I ever had. The poetry pulled me out of the story. The story sucked the poetry out of the pages. Every page had to have a beginning, middle and end. Every page had to have a pay-off. And yet it had to work as a whole. It was gruelling and humbling, but finally, after several months, I sent it back to Margaret one hundred poems shorter than the original.

She sent me a three-page letter. The first sentence said, “You have done a good job of cutting this down.” The rest was all about what needed still to be done. She said the originally proposed publication date of spring 2012 would have to be pushed back to fall 2012.

I worked hard. Some days I despaired. When I saw her at the residency, Shelley touched my hand and said, “Poor Martine.”

She never said, “Poor Martine, never mind about all that work.” She never said that last part. She felt sorry for me, but not that sorry. Finally after some time, I sent back a revised manuscript.

This time I graduated to a two-page letter. But, Margaret said, there was one issue that was significant enough that it was possible the publication date would have to be again pushed back to spring 2013.

This would have been bad for me for many reasons. I worked, I cut, I thought until my brain bled, and then, one day I realized that … I liked it. I – I liked my book. I sat up straight. I said, “I’m happy. This book makes me happy.” I might have heard angels singing. I sent it to Margaret and Shelley. Finally, finally, I got the long-hoped-for email saying, “Yes. We’re done here.”

I hope this long tale serves as a window into one writer’s process and that some one of you might find it useful in some way, whether you write a novel in verse or not. It also serves as a cautionary tale with the full intention of discouraging you from attempting to write a novel in verse because you think it might be easier in some way. Some of you, of course, despite my bad example, will feel driven to write in the form. For you I will offer some of my insights, but first I think it’s important to share my thoughts about the debate over the form.

In an article entitled "Things That Tick Me Off!" critic Peter D. Sieruta famously said:

> Arranging words
> prettily
> on a page
> does not necessarily
> turn prose
> into
> poetry

Well, let me just say, frankly, that, yes it does. And please give me a moment to explain.

This is poem is in Russian.

Бабочка газа

Скажите, что сталось со мной?
Что сердце так жарко забилось?
Какое безумье волной
Сквозь камень привычки пробилось?

В нем сила иль мука моя,
В волненьи не чувствую сразу:
С мерцающих строк бытия
Ловлю я забытую фразу...

Фонарь свой не водит ли тать
По скопищу литер унылых?
Мне фразы нельзя не читать.
Но к ней я вернуться не в силах...

Не вспыхнуть ей было невмочь,
Но мрак она только тревожит:
Так бабочка газа всю ночь
Дрожит, а сорваться не может...

It could be a TV listing for all I know, but whatever it says, by arranging itself in lines this way, it has declared itself to be a poem.

This is a poem in Basque:
1.
lelo. yl lelo
lelo. yl lelo;
leloa çarat
il leloa.

2.
Romaco armac
aleguin eta
Vizcayac daroa

Zanzoa.

3.
Octabiano
munduco jauna
le coby di
Vizcayocoa.

4.
Ichasotati
eta leorres
y mini deusco
molsoa.

5.
leor celayac
bereac dira
menditan tayac
leusoac.

6.
lecu yronyan
gagozanyan
nocbera sendo
daugogoa.

I have no idea what it says. It might be a very bad poem, bereft of imagery, precision, thought, metaphor or beauty. But just as the raised palm is a universal symbol for *stop*, words arranged prettily on a page is indeed the universal symbol for poem. Poet James Longengbach says "Line is what distinguishes our experience of poetry."

A writer I knew was unhappy because a critic negatively reviewed her novel as a novel in verse, calling her on its lack of poetic elements. The writer said to me, that's not fair, I was very clear that I did not mean for this to be poetry.

But here's the thing: as soon as you arrange your words prettily on the page, you set up expectations. You announce that poetry is about to happen here. If you do not meet those expectations, people become disappointed and cross. Mr. Sieruta becomes ticked off.

Poets are our modern society's prophets – ignored but revered, allowed to starve, but honoured deeply once we have finally starved them to death. It is not a small thing to write a book that fools the eye into thinking you aspire to poetry. Trust that if you write your novel in verse form, arranging the words prettily on the page, all your protests will not stop people from judging it as they would poetry.

On the other hand! I know exactly what this writer meant when she said, "I didn't mean for my book to be poetry." Because it isn't… quite.

I'm convinced that some of the debate about the verse novel could be soothed if we could find a proper name for it. A traditional children's poem is not required to meet stringent requirements of sophisticated poetry because it is called a nursery rhyme. Take a poem for very young people, add pictures, and you have a picture book. No one compares it to the work of Rilke. Make a story funny and use a specific kind of art, and you have a comic book. Make the comic book longer and the story more complex, and you might have a graphic novel. It is judged in context. No one compares it to *Madame Bovary*. Add a true story to an antique, and you get provenance. Put story to operatic music, and you have not quite lyrics, although music is made, not quite poetry, although some are decidedly poetic. You have libretto.

Sadly, so far, the best we've been able to do is "the novel in verse." It offends verse-makers and novel-makes both. The only people who don't seem to care what we call it are young readers.

I say it isn't quite poetry, because poetic devices are bent and flattened a little by the imposition of structure and story in the novel in verse. Story is hollowed out a little by close attention to language and metaphor. Form stretches content. Virginia Ewer Wolff was careful to disclaim her work as poetry. She called her work "lineated prose." One critic I read said she thought it was, quote, *becoming of Ewer Wolff to be so humble about this.*

Please.

In the end, the debate is moot. If you are sure that your book needs to be a novel in verse, or any form for that matter, even one not yet invented, the last thing you should concern yourself with is what people are going to say. What you write may not be popular. You must take your licks like a man, and your poor royalty cheque to the bank. You have done your job if you tell your truth in the medium best for the telling. In the end an artist does whatever she pleases and that's simply the end of it.

What is poetry anyway?
Part of the problem stems from the refusal of the poem to be pinned down to a definition, and the refusal of the poet to allow anyone to define it.

English poet A E Housman said he could "no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat, but we recognize the object by the symptoms which it provokes in us." Samuel Taylor Colleridge said, "Prose is words in their best order; poetry is the best words in their best order." Moliere declared that "Everything that is not prose is verse, and everything that is not verse is prose."

And more currently, Terry Eagleton said, "A poem is a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end. This dreary-sounding definition, unpoetic to a fault, may well turn out to be the best we can do."

I would like to read you a poem by Nikki Giovanni, an acclaimed poet with nineteen honorary doctorates. The poem is called "A Poem for Carol":

when I was very little,
though it's still true today,
there were no sidewalks in Lincoln heights
and the home we had on Jackson street
was right next to a bus stop and a sewer
which didn't really ever become offensive -
but one day from the sewer a little kitten
with one eye gone
came crawling out…

It goes on from there, just as prosey as it began. This is obviously a narrative, but no one has ever questioned whether this is poetry, including me.

This is from a poem by Michael Ondaatje called "Elizabeth":

Catch, my Uncle Jack said
and oh I caught this huge apple
red as Mrs. Kelly's bum.
It's red as Mrs. Kelly's bum, I said

and Daddy roared
and swung me on his stomach with a heave.
Then I hid the apple in my room…

And so on. The poem does not explain how the boy knew Mrs. Kelly's bum was red, but it goes on in this same prosey voice.

Now listen to this one:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again.

This is not a poem, but a passage from Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*.

I invite these comparisons to emphasize that poetry and prose do not observe borders well.

Steve Kowit is a poet and critic for the San Diego Union-Tribune. In his article titled "A Poet's Anti-Rule Book," he examines some tried and true rules and offers his sceptical observations about each one. He explains that T. S. Eliot insisted that "modern poetry must be difficult" and that for years his word was gospel. I'll quote Kowit here: "The main thrust of the modernist impulse in the 20th century was to write a complex, opaque, highly textured poem. Eliot famously denigrated meaning altogether by telling his readers in a charming and provocative metaphor that a poem's meaning was the meat one threw to the guard dog while robbing the house…"

Not surprisingly, it was around this time that poetry became the business of an intellectual elite, if you will, banished to the world of academia. Poets writing for poets. Poetry is the business now, according to poet Bart Baxter, of a subsidized subculture. The world cannot do without poetry, and so, out of mother necessity has come the arresting and accessible poetry of rap music, cowboy poetry, poetry slams and performance poetry, and*, perhaps, the novel in verse.*

Nowadays, Kowit notes, the narrative poem has resurged. Our age is filled with superb poetry of great simplicity, clarity and grace. He mentions Billy Collins, Ron Koertge, and Mary Oliver among others. I would add Julie Larios. Kowit concludes, "Eliot in short was profoundly

mistaken: contemporary poets may decide for themselves how simple or difficult they wish to be."

Guggenheim Fellowship Poet Charles Harper Webb said "The world of poetry is as fashion-conscious as the world of haute couture. Reputations wax and wane; poetic strategies do, too." He says, "what contemporary poet didn't wish to make vatic pronouncements that would be interpreted and re-interpreted by sophisticated professionals – to be a genius with thoughts and perceptions too fine, nuanced, complex or profound to be conveyed by direct statement or simple narrative."

Apparently, according to Webb, the narrative poem, the kind that tells a story, may still score low on the poetic hipness scale. Possibly this fashionable resistance to narrative in the world of poetry is part of what critics find disagreeable about the novel in verse. Webb says, however, that bad writing, and not the narrative form, is the real problem. He encourages poets to put narrative back in their poet's toolbox.

My point, which I have been long in making, is that if it is difficult if not impossible to define what makes a successful poem, and by the time you do, it is out of style. You can see how difficult if not impossible it is to define what would make a successful verse novel, other than the symptoms it provokes in us. Amanda Jenkins said, "I don't like the idea of dissing the looser, laxer aspects of the novel in verse. It's like looking some fourteen-year-old girl in the eye and saying, 'You know that book that had you weeping into your pillow, the book you connected with so much it kept you from taking that bottle of pills? Yeah, that book – well, it's trite and meaningless, and by the way, here's your bottle of pills back.'

Okay – it's poetry, but is it a story?

For me, as I read dozens of novels in verse in preparation for this lecture, the question that came often to me was not, is this really poetry, but rather, is this really a story? For me, the iteration of the many inner agonies of teens do not automatically add up to story.

Joy Alexander, a lecturer at Queen's University, Belfast, says: "The verse-novel presents the writer with particular challenges, which may prove traps for the unwary. The plot may be ineffectively realized through the medium. The verse novel foregrounds the fact that the narration is voiced, creating the problem of how to make things happen and to move the plot forward. The form lends itself to the confessional and to the expression of feelings, which raises the spectre of banality or melodrama."

I'm not sure what she means when she says the narration is voiced – surely one hopes all narrations are voiced – but she brings up a good point about structuring a novel in verse. For me this was an enormous challenge. The pretty poems I wrote but which had nothing to do with anything. Bits of story I wrote that seemed important to include but had not a drop of poetry in them.

John Gardner suggests the difficulty may be more than just the requirements of two different forms – he suggests it may come down to the personality of the writer:

Quote: "A poet, to practice his art with success, must have an ear for language so finely tuned and persnickety as to seem to the ordinary novelist almost diseased… In a novelist, a hypersensitive ear may occasionally prove a handicap... One sign of a writer's potential is his especially sharp ear and eye for language… On the other hand, if as readers we begin to suspect that the writer cares about nothing *but* language, we begin to worry that he may be in trouble. Normal people, people who haven't been misled by a faulty college education, do not read novels for words alone. They open a novel with the expectation of finding a story…. If the [fictive] dream is to be continuous, we must not be roughly jerked from the dream back to the words on the page by language that's distracting."

Some of my best poems were too proud of themselves. They stopped the eye, and the heart. I would write a sestina or a sonnet, and in re-reading, it would make me stop and say, oh, isn't that so very clever. It drew the reader out of the story, out of the fictive dream. Sometimes the poems were beautiful, but too obscure. It made the reader stop and say, "What does that mean. Wait, I'll read it again…"

I didn't want the reader to stop and count the lines and say, hey, that's a sonnet. So I wrote the sonnet, allowed the form to inspire, and then I would mess it up, break the rhythm and destroy the rhyme. I wrote pantoums, villanelles, and then I would mess them all up so they were unrecognizable. Because for me, the story was the most important thing, the fictive dream. I wanted to step quietly. I didn't want to wake anyone up.

This is just how I did it. Other writers have honoured the poetry over the story. Marilyn Nelson's book *A Wreath for Emmett Till* wrote the entire book as a heroic crown of sonnets. It was stunning poetry, but if I had not already known the story of Emmett Till, it would have been difficult for me to have accessed his story based on her book.

David Levithan's *The Realm of Possibility* is brilliant – he uses iambic pentameter, haiku, ballads, and shapes the whole novel in the circular form of the rondo. I found the story hard to track

because I was so much into the beauty of the poetry. This was the artist's choice, and I honor that choice. Normally when I read poetry, I just dip. I'll read a page or three. I open a book of poetry randomly and ask the universe to speak to me. But in these books, Nelson's and Levithan's, I was able to read much more, to read on a more sustained level, because even the faintest of narratives pulled me along.

Why turn to the novel in verse?

Patty Campbell in an article published in the *Horn Book*, listed some common features of the novel in verse. According to her, they are

- almost always written in the present tense (mine is not)
- the text is shaped in a succession of one- or two-page poems, usually titled (mine are not titled)
- they are often told in two, three or multiple voices (mine has one voice)
- the action often centres on an emotional event and the novel deals with the characters' feelings before and after (mine isn't like that)
- in the verse novel there's a whole lot of lovin' going on – not so much sex as the yearning, aching quality of first love that poetry so gracefully captures (mine has sex and no love)

You can see that I wrote my novel before I knew the rules.

Many good novels in verse don't share these features. Perhaps it would be more useful, for the writer at least, to talk about how form and content inform each other, rather than dwell on similarities that don't hold when feet are put to the fire anyway.

I loved the question Patty Campbell asks in the last paragraph of her article: "Why are so many writers turning to verse novels – are they easier to write?" She answers herself, surely not. She then says, "Whatever the reason, the verse novel is here to stay, and with its condensed language and suggestive power it can make a story soar beyond the possibilities of prose in a way that changes even this reader's initial reluctance to eventual enthusiasm."

I want to say as an aside here that this and other critics seem to speak of the form as if it were new. It is an ancient form, in fact. *Gilgamesh*, Homer's *The Odyssey*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Chaucer's *The Romance of the Rose*, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin (ohNAYgin)*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* were all longer narratives written in poetry. What is new, perhaps, is the persistent appearance of the form in literature for the young.

Nevertheless, the next part of my lecture will be an attempt to answer Patty's question, "Why this form? Why turn to the verse novel over prose?"

the country of young adult

Recently I was reading my son's *National Geographic* magazine. In one article the writer is surprised by a man's professed vocation. The man says, "Of course I'm a poet. What else can you do but write poetry in a country like this?" This poet was speaking of the country of Iran, but the country of the adolescent or young adult may be no less treacherous and bewildering and demanding of a poetic consciousness of its own. We were all young adults at one time or another, but one cannot time travel. Once it is gone, it is forever gone. Each new generation invents itself, and no one over 21 can really access it, cannot truly speak the language. Poetry offers a more universal language. Verse could possibly be a kind of translation machine – its spareness and use of metaphor and symbol, could be, if not time travel, a kind of Rosetta stone. A wonderful example of this is *The Geography of Girlhood* by Kirsten Smith. She took me to the country of girlhood, the one I had forgotten, the one I could no longer tell about, but it was also uniquely her character's country, with its own unique geography.

(your work may benefit from the) fractured narrative

Line breaks make you read differently. The line breaks, and the poems existing whole on their own, one to a page in silos, may reflect, for example, the fractured psyche of your characters. I felt as I read novels in verse in preparation for this lecture that many of the protagonists seemed just a little bit mad. My Angel did not think in a straight line, logical and linear. She was erratic and mercurial and in withdrawal. I wanted the punctuation to be visibly and noticeably absent, and the line breaks to serve as big punctuation when I needed it. I wanted the lack of quote marks to indicate airlessness, the lack of italicized titles to mean a rejection of convention, the lack of capitals to reflect a questioning of what is proper in a proper noun. None of this would have worked as well in prose.

(your work my work well with the) elevated form (of poetry)

On the other hand, poetry could have the exact opposite effect. To the same degree the poetry could bring out the beauty of soul in a protagonist in a way that would be difficult to achieve in prose. I think of Karen Hesse's *Aleutian Sparrow*. The character's flower-child way of seeing the world is captured perfectly by the poetic form. In Angel, I needed the elevated form of poetry to reflect the beauty of soul of these girls I was writing about.

(verse can provide) narrative distance

The poetic element provided some distance between my young reader and a disturbing topic, without requiring me to hedge on the difficulty of the topic. It allowed me to speak the truth perhaps more powerfully than in prose. John Gardner said, in the poetic style, nothing, or practically nothing, is explained, everything is evoked." If you are writing subject matter that requires evocation rather than denotation, this might be your form.

language as a shield

A young reader in an online teens-only book club reviewed Lisa Schroeder's *Chasing Brooklyn* in this way: "The book is somewhat creepy, but very good. I think it would've been downright SCARY if it hadn't been written in verse – and that makes me extra thankful! I'm not big on scary books, movies, or anything. This was enough to give me the chills in a few spots. But, without too many details, it wasn't something that kept me from falling asleep."

This works for the writer as well. Marilyn Nelson, author of *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, said of her heroic sonnet, "The strict form became a kind of insulation, a way of protecting myself from the intense pain of the subject matter." If you are thinking of plunging into a world you or your reader cannot bear, you may find a little refuge in the novel in verse.

(effects of) frugality and compression

Another young reader said in her review about a novel in verse; "While poetry isn't generally my thing, I LOVE it as a novel… It really is like reading a full novel, but without a lot of the fluff that often slows other stories down. You get all of the important stuff, and I never felt anything was missing." I smiled a little at this – by fluff, did she mean beautiful descriptions of setting? back story? thematic passages? Perhaps this form appeals to a generation that appreciates texting over letters.

Karen Hesse said of her novel in verse *Out of the Dust*, "The frugality of life, the hypnotically hard work of farming, the grimness of the conditions during the dust bowl, demanded an economy of words." End quote. I felt that same need for compression, setting my novel in the Vancouver Eastside neighbourhood, the poorest postal code in Canada and having the highest rate of HIV transmission in the world. If you feel frugality and compression may serve your piece, you may wish to consider this form.

musicality of voice

I felt that my main character's voice had a cadence to it, a musicality that seemed to me poetic. This is true of Jean Felipe Herrera's *Downtown Boy* and Walter Dean Meyer's novel in verse, *Street Love.* It doesn't have to be a dialect, however.

Here's a poem from Steven Herrick's book, *Kissing Annabel: Love, Ghosts and Facial Hair:*

Love is like a gobstopper
It's true
You spend all your childhood
Wanting that perfect round life-giving
Never-ending ball of sweetness
You look through the shop window
Your mouth waters
Legs shake
Eyes go in and out of focus
Until that desired gobstopper is yours.
You hold it
Cherish it
Kiss it
Dream about it
Sleep with it under your pillow
Wake up sticky
And hope you'll never be alone
But like all lovers
You want more
So one tempting night
You close your eyes
Push it all the way into your mouth
And taste its wonder
Then you swallow it
Choke
And die!
Love is like a gobstopper.

The poetry comes out of this character's unique voice.

thematic or structural relevance You may choose the novel in verse for some thematic or structural reason. The novel in verse form seemed particularly fitting for *Becoming Billy Holiday* by Carole Boston Weatherford, given that Billy Holiday was a jazz singer. I think my favorite novel in verse was a biography titled *Your Own Sylvia* by Stephanie Hemphill. Each poem was written in the style of one of Plath's poems. On each page was an autobiographical note about Sylvia Plath. The form could not have been more perfectly fitting for the content.

My Angel had a regular customer who paid her to read *Paradise Lost* out loud to him. Some of the book's theme emerges as Angel has an inner dialogue with that text, which, of course, is a novel in verse. It's an interesting side note that although *Paradise Lost* has a precise poetry that has survived the ages, at the time some people protested that Milton forgot the rhymes. Could it really be poetry without the rhymes? But Milton hated rhyme – he said it sounded too jingly.

Choose your form, or allow it to choose you, with some thought to how it will resonate with the content.

As I conclude, I'd like to say one more thing. Do not write poetry if you do not read poetry. If you aspire to writing any form of poetry, you must read it. To the extent that you do not read poetry, you must not write poetry. One who writes poetry, reads poetry. I hope I have expressed this in an understandable way.

In conclusion…

Asking the question, why write a novel in verse is akin to asking, why write at all? Why do we do this thing, and in the way we do it? What compels us to write a story we cannot write? A character seizes us – she is nothing, no one, not even a ghost, and yet for her we will run into the burning building of our imagination. And why is the journey to a finished book so impossible to map? Those who have done so cannot say exactly how we got there. We come back, try to lead others, and we get lost all over again. We leave our protégés and tell them they'll have to make this leg of the journey alone. Our tips and tricks may be nothing more than attempts to reassure ourselves that we can replicate the journey for ourselves another day. This thing we do, the reason we do it, the way we find to tell our stories, is to me one of the mysteries (right up there with who is self and why does she talk to you in that cheeky way). To ask why we write, how we choose or are chosen by our stories, and how we tell it, is to attempt to peel back one of the corners of the universe to see what is underneath. What you find there is yours alone to know. What you find there further compels you to write, and to write what you must and what you will, and to find your own, your very own secret way to do it.