

Lee Sharkey's
CALENDARS of FIRE

(Tupelo Press, 2013)

READER'S COMPANION

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Biographical Note

Lee Sharkey is the author of six chapbooks and three previous full-length collections of poems, most recently *A Darker, Sweeter String* (Off the Grid Press, 2008). She was the Maine Arts Commission's 2010 Fellow in Literary Arts and the recipient of the 1997 Rainmaker Award in Poetry, chosen by Carolyn Forché, and the Abraham Sutzkever Centennial Translation Prize. Since 2003, she has co-edited the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, one of the country's oldest literary magazines.

Reviews and Citations

"Lee Sharkey writes an exemplary poetry of conscience that exposes and refutes that 'the warden is also the historian.' Her 'slit-tongued questions' [and] 'throat song' are reminiscent of Lorca's Deep Song and Darwish's celebratory lyrics of life . . . Reading *Calendars of Fire*, you will know what it means to 'shiver from the we in tenderness.'"

— Fady Joudah

"In her stunning fourth book of poems, Lee Sharkey takes on the work, simultaneously elegiac and urgent, of reading 'what has happened back to happening.' From line to startling line, she evokes the sufferings of persons affected by war and other oppressions, sometimes in juxtaposition to personal grief. Sources—from the Spanish Inquisition to Palestine and Sarajevo—are identified in the notes; the poems themselves conflate without generalizing, placing us, through compelling images and breathtaking particulars, in scenes at once foreign and familiar. Profoundly disturbing but ultimately hopeful, *Calendars of Fire* rewards and challenges with each re-reading."

— Martha Collins

"When you finish reading *Calendars of Fire* the first time, you will want to go right back to the beginning and start reading it again, and again, and each time it will renew itself in its own flames, in its feel for the tormented and terrorized, the imprisoned and interrogated, the violated and voiceless. You will return to it also for the crystal through which Lee Starkey views not only the harm and violence we do to one another, but also the inexplicable human tenderness that sometimes survives. And you will want to read the book again for the sorrow in its honed, ceremonial diction and the strength in its varied, strophic lines. 'The whole harm entered me,' writes the poet in the title poem, and 'love branded my throat with tongues.' As with the poet, so too her grateful readers."

— Fred Marchant

On Urgency and Form

My work is chronically inflected by issues of war and peace, of late in particular by two aspects of my Jewish identity: my acute discomfort over the treatment of the Palestinians by the state of Israel, and the persistent shadow of the Nazi Holocaust — by the human capacity to make holocausts. I don't mean these necessarily determine the subject matter of my poems; rather, they color my consciousness, torque my sentences, shape my broodings about life and human nature.

Given humanity's proclivity to violence and our headlong if inadvertent rush to make the biosphere unfit for life, what instruments can poets summon for the transformation Langston Hughes invokes when he calls out, "I'm gonna split this rock. / And split it wide! / When I split this rock, / Stand by my side," or that Celan summons, as if in prayer from purgatory: "One more word like this, and the hammers will be swinging free"?

Received genres are no use to me if they polish but don't rearrange the furniture, offer pleasure but leave the means of perception intact. Seamless narratives suffocate me with their fictions. The personal lyric most often seems incapable of engaging the world's derangements. This has driven me in my work to parataxis and the juxtaposition of disparate elements.

Among the poems that constitute my previous book, *A Darker, Sweeter String*, the first I wrote was "Unscripted." In retrospect, I see that this poem sets out on a personal level the journey the rest of the volume undertakes on the stage of the world — from shattering to tentative alignment, from speech struck dumb to the first words of a new syntax. That poem was written during the course of my son's hospitalization and slow recovery from a cerebral hemorrhage. He spent weeks on the verge of death, during which it was all I could do to inhale and exhale. When I wasn't spending time with him in the hospital, I would walk each day to the marsh near my house, which provides images for many of my poems, and let the birds and the water instruct me. If spring returned, if I were to retrieve a language that made any sort of sense, it would be one

that more fully included death in life: “lilies are steeping / sky is incised / with speaking // dredged / from the unspeakable.”

I have described *A Darker, Sweeter String* as an attempt to map the post-9/11 political and psychic landscape, though the state of mind from which those poems emerged has long been with us. The book's title comes from Imre Kertész's novel *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* (Vintage, 2004): “I am whistled up every day to drive the spade deeper, to play death on a darker, sweeter string.”

Calendars of Fire takes its title from the culminating phrase in the first stanza of the second section of Muriel Rukeyser's “Letter to the Front”:

Even during war, moments of delicate peace
Arrive; ceaseless the water ripples, love
Speaks through the river in its human voices.
Through every power to affirm and heal
The unknown world suggests the air and golden
Familiar flowers, and the brief glitter of waves,
And dreams, and leads me always to the real.
Even among these calendars of fire.¹

Writing the book began with a question about pronouns: What would be needed to make of “I” and “you” — the other from whom I am separated by history, ideology, religion, nationality, or gender — a “we”?

I envisioned a song, equal parts words and silence, that would “swarm like white dragonflies / across the checkpoint,” and began to explore spare formal structures that allowed me to rove across the disparate but mutually insightful realms of contemporary geo-politics, intimate relationships, classical mythology, and the rural landscape.

Not long after I immersed myself in this project, three people with whom I had deep, long-term ties died in close succession: a former lover, a mentor, and a friend. Death entered as the ultimate checkpoint, and the poems took on an elegiac cast. A lyric voice insisted on reentry.

¹To read the whole sequence of Rukeyser's “Letter to the Front,” see: <http://MurielRukeyser.EMUenglish.org/writing/letter-to-the-front/>

On “Sequestered”

The poem “Sequestered” in *Calendars of Fire* had its genesis in a passage I read in 1984 in Werner Keller's book *Diaspora: The Post-Biblical History of the Jews* (Harcourt, 1969). In recounting an auto-da-fé (“act of faith”) held in Madrid in 1680 to celebrate the marriage of King Carlos II to Marie Louise of Orléans, niece of Louis XIV, Keller describes an incident in which a seventeen-year-old Marrano condemned to death by the Inquisition for “secret Judaizing” called out as she and other prisoners were being paraded before the royal box, “Have mercy, Madame Queen! How am I to renounce the faith I took in with my mother's milk?”

The question lodged itself in me. The Jews of Spain had been compelled to leave the country or convert to Christianity in 1492; those who converted were subject to the vigilance of the Inquisition. How could a forbidden faith survive for two centuries without the external trappings of observance, remaining so fundamental that this girl barely out of childhood would risk death for it?

Perhaps because I, her co-religionist, find belief so hard to come by, I set out to learn more about Francesca Nogueira and the historical circumstances that led to her appearance at the so-called act of faith. I read histories of the Spanish Inquisition and gossipy accounts of the Spanish court by the French ambassador and his wife. I dusted off my rudimentary Spanish to struggle through the official account of the auto-da-fé by the governor of the Inquisition's prison, who was also the architect of the grandstands erected in Madrid's Plaza Mayor for the event. The story that unfolded was a caricature of fanaticism and decadence — an empire reduced to impotence, a princess married off to the inbred, imbecilic last spawn of the Hapsburg dynasty in the vain hope of cementing a political alliance, a country suffering from food shortages and hyperinflation distracting itself with a spectacle of ritual repentance and death by fire.

I found records of the criminal charges against Francesca, along with similar records for her extended family, but no further mention of her calling out at the auto-da-fé. I decided to go to Spain, where the Archivo Histórico Nacional houses extensive and detailed records of Inquisitional proceedings — like the Third Reich, the Inquisition

obsessively documented itself. I finagled a recommendation that got me a pass for the archives and stitched myself a pink linen suit so I would look the part of *la profesora*.

The documents of the Inquisition are collected in large bundles tied in string — imagine oversized versions of Emily Dickinson's fascicles. After a week of staring at parchment sheets, straining to decipher archaic handwriting and looking for a familiar name, I came upon a list of goods sequestered when a member of the Nogueira family was arrested. And then a transcript of a hearing in which Francesca's sister refused to confess or name accomplices. And then another transcript, with the sister's sentencing or "relaxation to the state" for execution. Finally, I found Francesca's name, in a summary of her case and sentencing — not to death, after all, because she had, under duress, confessed and repented. But there was no transcript of her hearings — I found her name, but not her words. I had breathed her in, but could come no closer to her. On the anniversary of the auto-da-fé, I traced the path the prisoners had taken to the Plaza Mayor, walked past the site of the royal box, and sat for hours in the scorching square. And still I did not know if the incident that had sent me on the quest was actual or apocryphal.

Home again, I wrote a play tracing the lives of Marie Louise and Francesca to their point of convergence at the auto-da-fé — two young women of the same age, both pawns of historical forces. But it, and I, were overwhelmed by the mass of historical detail, much of it too rich for the imagination to better. To cite just one example, the queen's duenna strangled the queen's parakeets because they spoke French. I stuffed the play into my filing cabinet. Five years later I returned to the subject, wrote paired poems focused on the two young women, and once more let the matter drop.

And so things rested until 2010, when I read Martha Collins's *Blue Front*, an account from multiple perspectives of a lynching her father watched as a boy. I glimpsed in the way the book incorporates documentary material a possible approach to writing more comprehensively about Francesca Nogueira.

The obsession was upon me again. I reread my notebooks from the trip to Spain, the stillborn play, and more histories of the Inquisition. The first draft of the poem that

emerged was sixteen pages long and included material about the Spanish court. But I found my thoughts dwelling on prisoners — of the Inquisition and of the modern state. Accounts by former detainees in Iran's Evin prison had been in the media, and their voices inserted themselves. There were many parallels, including waterboarding and the relentless insistence on confession. A figure of the prisoner began to emerge on the page — sequestered, time-bound, timeless, and in some way I couldn't name fundamental to our individual and collective self-understanding. This figure was set off by the figure of the inquisitor. The poem became a form of ceremony in which the two — free and determined — enacted their parts.

The rest of the composition process was largely a matter of subtraction, making room for silences that ambiguities and unnamed weights could be suspended in, lives we cannot know. Nearly three decades after my first, chance encounter with Francesca Nogueira, I am still compelled by the question of keeping faith, though I can no longer see the distance between the prisoner — or the inquisitor — and myself.

This is a revised version of an essay that appeared on *Ancora Imparo*.
See: <http://ancoraimparo.org/?p=2115>

On "Possession"

"Possession" is one of several poems in *Calendars of Fire* that was impelled by the urge to re-constellate words we use to name fundamental human impulses.

Figures that recur in the background of the poem, though stripped of their particularizing context, include Gilad Shalit, the young Israeli soldier held hostage for almost four years by Hamas; Palestinian women detained in Israeli prisons; the printers' strike that helped precipitate the Bolshevik Revolution; and dolls left in a street when the Gestapo rounded up its Jewish residents. These interweave with reconstructed family memories: my mother, succumbing to Parkinson's disease, waking to the sound of her breakfast crashing to the floor with a lifetime's accumulation of her china; and my mother's namesake in Poland keeping up the rituals of family life as she tried, repeatedly and unsuccessfully, to get visas for herself, her mother, and her brothers to leave for the United States.

But these sources are incidental, and the severance from their context deliberate. If the poem is successful, the de-contextualized images and the silences between them will constitute a new space for the reader that both possesses and dispossesses, that cannot be possessed.

Writing poems is more difficult now than when I was young. I look at the poet I was then as a little sister — opinionated, with lots of verbal energy — who threw herself headlong into whatever she was writing. A first line would speak itself, and away she went. Some of the poems she wrote still interest me; others seem not fully realized, or to come at issues too forcefully. Now, I write slowly. I'm nosing down a buried trail that leads from question to question, so there's more continuity between one poem and the next. Typically, in my journal over the course of days or weeks I accumulate dreams, quotations scavenged from reading, observations from a woods walk, phrases that announce themselves with tonal clarity.

My journal notes from 10/31/09 record a dream in which:

I brought out my mother's beautiful cream-colored ivory china plates with the raised pattern

When I realized they were gone they disappeared

With no one else to remember them

they survive only because I believe in them

The hand that flocks the ceiling

(is the hand that) grabs my throat

Oh, and that other violence,

the china cabinet falling in the dead of night

brings my mother to

My mother on her knees by the sherd heap

Now lay the table with

the large cream colored plates

with the raised border

We'll sup on them

so long as I believe in them

When I stop believing they will disappear

hand withdraws them

fall to black.

The notes from 11/5/09-11/8/09 read:

This thing that was not to be kept to myself

Possession

"Nothing is absolutely dead

Every meaning will have its homecoming festival"

An instance

An occurrence

Printers demanding to be paid piece rate for punctuation marks as well as letters — also
the bakers and the corps de ballet

One instance:

Woods walking this morning, the textures of the change of season under my feet: a lace
of ice in the pine plantation snow and spongy pine needles in alternating patches
through the copse. On the slope down to the water more mystery mounds of scuffing
topped with fibrous scat, one squib gunpowder black with flecks like mica (how clean
scat is). Last night the water stiffened along planes that raised (cast) ridges and scorings
where they met.

Triangles. Jackstraws strewn over ice.

Thoughts of you I would no more direct than breeze that comes and goes of its own
volition. My cargo pants made little bird (chirring) sounds when cloth rubbed against
cloth with my steps.

You can see among these scratchings elements I would incorporate into the poem. I
reread the journal entries dozens of times before I heard the long line that set the music
the poem would follow. It was triggered by listening to Israeli journalist Amira Hass's
acceptance speech for the International Women's Media Foundation Lifetime
Achievement Award, which begins:

Allow me to start with a correction. My life is a failure. Nothing more than a failure. As I
have painfully discovered, the right to know does not entail a duty to know.

I worked at "Possession" steadily for a month; after that, it was mostly fussing. Other
poems have taken much longer to settle; over the years, I've built up stamina for this
process. Often I picture myself as a pit bull that can't unlock its jaw once it has clamped
its teeth down on something.

On Mentors

I have had three mentors in poetry. In all cases, they were women who put their devotion to poetry, the community of poets, and the values poetry embodies above personal ambitions. In this, I have been blessed.

The first was Constance Hunting, whose first book, *After the Stravinsky Concert*, was published by Scribner's in 1969. Connie might have been expected to build a poetry career on the national stage, but when she moved with her husband and young children to Orono, Maine, she chose instead to start a small press largely devoted to the work of Maine writers. Puckerbrush Press gave many young poets their first opportunity for publication. Connie bypassed the politics of publication by publishing her own books under the imprint as well.

I first came to call on Connie in 1977. At that point, I was a sandaled back-to-the-lander growing my own food and printing chapbooks and broadsides on a hundred-year-old platen press that had been mothballed by a local print shop. Connie, cool and sophisticated, invited me into her kitchen, where we sat at the trestle table and began a conversation about poems and poetry that would last for a quarter century. I was twenty years her junior, yet she treated me as a peer. She invited me to co-edit two anthologies of contemporary Maine writing and published four collections of my poetry. I cut my teeth on reviews and literary essays in *Puckerbrush Review*, a journal she started in order to give serious critical attention to what was being published in the state. Each issue featured an interview by Connie with a major literary figure with a Maine connection, such as May Sarton, Mary McCarthy, Philip Booth, and Elizabeth Hardwick.

For years, Connie and I carried on a correspondence, inventing playful forms of address for each other: *Dear Rosa*, she would write, and sign off *Love, Floribunda*. But she was uncompromising about poetry, the best critic a young poet could have for her work. Her ear was pitch perfect (she had trained as a concert pianist), and I learned its tuning as we read aloud. Her pen was sharp and swift. A check mark meant high approbation; a "not quite settled?" meant something less than right, which would not do for her because in poetry everything was at stake.

In 1989, Eleanor Wilner became my faculty supervisor in my third semester of the Warren Wilson College MFA program. In the preliminary conversation we had about the semester's work, she described me as “a thin woman with a fat woman trying to get out” — one image of the feminist cultural transformation she writes about so eloquently in her essay “The Medusa Connection” and enacts in her visionary poems. In those pre-mail years, the student would send a packet of poems and prose annotations by postal mail to the supervisor every three weeks; some time later, the packet would return with hand-written comments on the poems and an accompanying letter. The nature of the comments and the length of the letter varied from supervisor-to-supervisor. Heather McHugh crossed out whole sections of poems, leaving the pith, and scribbled a few incisive phrases on a paper placemat from the Eastport diner. Eleanor wrote ten- and fifteen-page single-spaced letters, giving away her own writing time. “Time is hard to own,” she penned at the top of one of those letters.

With Eleanor's encouragement, I began to place my work within a cultural tradition of Jewish writers and to seek out texts and writers that would deepen my understanding of that tradition — Yehuda Amichai, Dahlia Ravikovitch, Hassidic tales, the Old Testament, Muriel Rukeyser, Adrienne Rich, Nelly Sachs, Paul Celan. She placed my poems in this context, celebrated what they might become as well as what was on the page. The most generous of teachers, she provoked generous response. “Would that you were a multitude,” she wrote me. “And you are.” How could I not work my heart out for her? Her teaching became a model to emulate in my own teaching of women's studies, poetry, and composition at the University of Maine at Farmington.

Closer to home, there was Marion Kingston Stocking, an editor of the *Beloit Poetry Journal* for fifty-four years, who died in May, 2009. Marion invited me to attend a *BPJ* editorial board weekend a few years after the journal moved from Beloit College in Wisconsin to Maine in 1983. At the time, I was working as a high school English teacher and single parenting; I leapt at the opportunity to re-enter the world of poetry.

Editorial board sessions were held at Marion's house, an old cape looking out toward Frenchman's Bay and Bar Harbor. When I first arrived, members of the board were reading manuscripts in every corner. Marion greeted me warmly, stuck a sheaf of

manuscripts paper-clipped with cover slips into my hands, led me to the library, where books filled the walls floor to ceiling and spread out in piles over the floor, and instructed, “When you write your comments, be opinionated. Wishy-washy responses aren’t helpful.”

That was the beginning of my apprenticeship — though never explicitly such — with Marion. I was welcomed into a literary family, with Marion the matriarch dispensing homemade soups and anecdotes from a life defined by scholarship, curiosity about every aspect of existence, egalitarian impulses, and spontaneous bouts of enthusiasm — a life given over to poetry. From her, I learned the practice of editing and producing a literary journal: the day-to-day devotion of screening manuscripts, the protocol of rejection and acceptance, the complex and rewarding relationship between editor and poet, and the exigencies of getting an issue to press. I learned the rewards of attention and the cost of inattention at any step in the process. Most importantly, I learned how editing can — must — be practiced with the same respect and generosity that the poet brings to writing.

When Marion stepped down from the senior editorship of the journal in 2003, long-term board member John Rosenwald and I were as prepared as could be to step into her shoes. Still, it seemed impossible that two of us could do what Marion had done for decades on her own. To assume the editorship of a journal whose history could be said to define the last half-century in American poetry — the first or very early publisher of Galway Kinnell, Anne Sexton, A. R. Ammons, Maxine Kumin, Albert Goldbarth, Susan Stewart, Susan Tichy, Sherman Alexie, and many more — was daunting.

Poetry has become the daily substance of my life. Like my mentors, I practice it as a gift economy: the more you give away, the more you’re given. My own writing has always been the source that I return to, but editing has provided me a way to serve literature in the broader sense. In the process this has made me, I think, a fuller person and writer. Some days the requirements of editing, which I’m wont to compare to tending a herd of dairy cows, push aside the poem I’m desperate to work on. But by and large the writing and editing balance each other, the one pulling me inward, the other drawing me to the world.

Tiresias at last

Why do we war on each other? This is an unanswerable question we should never stop asking.

A few years ago, frustrated by the failure of contemporary political thinkers to offer anything beyond superficial insights, I returned to Greek drama: the passions of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra; the blinding pride of Oedipus; the implacability of the Furies, spawn of the blood of Uranus, avengers of the blood one family member spills of another. I turned to the chorus for its collective wisdom: The men's chorus in *Agamemnon* lamenting the fate of the young who flock to "War, War, the great gold-broker of corpses" and return as "ashes and urns . . . back / to every hearth." The Trojan slave women in *The Libation Bearers*, "cheeks glistening, / flushed where the nails have raked new furrows running blood," bewailing "the voice of Terror / deep in the house, bursting down / on the . . . darkened chambers." "What can redeem the blood that wets the soil?" they ask. "Oh for the hearthfire banked with grief."

I looked to the blind seer Tiresias, like all prophets condemned to speaking to the wind, who in the impulsiveness of early manhood struck out with his walking stick at snakes in the act of mating. Whom Hera punished for that blasphemy by turning him into a woman, then turning him back again. Whom Zeus and Hera called upon to resolve their argument about which, man or woman, had more pleasure in the sexual act, and whom Hera blinded when he answered, "Of ten parts a man enjoys one only." Whom Zeus, as reparation, gave the lifespan of seven men and the power of foresight. Every punishment a blessing, every gift a curse.

All poets are at least in part Tiresias, senses attuned, listening from the sidelines; coveting vision, powerless to make that vision come to pass or prevent its coming — "Neither a death averted nor a hair of a harm averted / By any scrawny farrago of letters," as C. D. Wright reminds us. In the first Tiresias poem I attempted, I inserted myself in the person of an "obscene old woman" soliloquizing in the bathtub, "coveting what the old man knows":

The depletion of the warrior
The diminishment of the eagerness of the penis
The relinquishing of the fist
The withstanding of the assault of fury
The passing of the knife
The spill of pearl blue intestines
The weight of gravity supplanting speech

Eventually, my obsession with the figure of Tiresias distilled into the sequence that appears in *Calendars of Fire*, six short poems inhabiting signal points in the trajectory of his life: the transformation from male to female, the knowledge of desire, the act of prophesy, the vision, the weight of what comes to pass, the aftermath.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Tiresias defies Oedipus's anger to tell him that the murderer of Laius, "Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich, / . . . will grope his way toward a foreign soil, / a stick tapping before him step by step." I have placed the stick (once more) in the hands of a Tiresias — who *blinds himself* in response the horrors he has witnessed and, by virtue of his prophecies, been complicit in. Even so, the curse pursues him; in death, he retains his powers. Travelers to the mist-enshrouded land of the Cimmerians make blood sacrifices to hear his prophecies.

Links

Lee Sharkey's website, with poems, interviews, more links:
www.leesharkey.net/

Author's web page for *Calendars of Fire*:
www.leesharkey.net/Calendars.html

Publisher's web page for *Calendars of Fire*:
www.tupelopress.org/books/calendars_of_fire

Beloit Poetry Journal, the literary journal that Lee Sharkey co-edits:
www.bpj.org/

"Women in Black": website for the Farmington, Maine chapter of an international network of feminist women calling for peace, justice and non-violent resolutions to conflict:
www.wibfarmington.org/