



## *Author Asks*

from *Kiki Petrosino*,  
author of **Fort Red Border**

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- 1 The entire first section of *Fort Red Border* tells of a love affair the speaker is having with a character named Robert Redford. Though all of the events narrated in the poems are imaginary, the name of the speaker's beloved belongs to a figure in popular culture. How does the use of this name affect your reading of the poems in this sequence? How would your experience change had I replaced "Redford" with an anonymous "he" or "him?"
- 2 When I composed the poems that comprise the "Fort Red Border" sequence, I wanted to construct a fantasy world that would feel somewhat real to the reader—but only somewhat. What details in the poems help convince the reader that the world of the speaker and "Redford" could be real? Are there any places where "unreality" breaks through? If so, what is the effect of those "breaks?"
- 3 In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante imagines a special relationship between his eponymous hero and the classical Roman poet Virgil. The relationship is purely a figment of Dante's imagination since the two could never have met in real life. When I was writing the "Redford" poems, this relationship was present for me. In what ways does the figure of Redford parallel that of Dante's Virgil? In what ways do the poems re-imagine the relationship between poet-hero and poet-guide?
- 4 During the revision period for this collection, I was working part-time at the University of Iowa Hospitals & Clinics, processing manuscript submissions for a medical journal called *The Annals of Otolaryngology, Rhinology, and Laryngology*. (Otolaryngology is also known as "ear-nose-and-throat medicine.") Several poems in *Fort Red Border* were inspired by this work and by the titles of papers submitted to the journal. In fact, I ended up using the word "otolaryngology" to name the collection's second section. How do the poems in this section accord with that title? In what ways do they revise it? How does the process of writing poetry involve the ears, nose, and throat?
- 5 The poem "Afro" resulted from a writing exercise that I had assigned myself, which was to use the language of the Magna Carta to describe something important in my life. How do legalistic phrases like "whereas for this" and "desirous to prevent mishap" affect my treatment of this subject matter? Do they cast the subject in a new light or present a different sort of argument? Finally, what elements make this piece a poem rather than a piece of law-like prose?
- 6 As a young writer, my teachers frequently told me that exclamation points should be used sparingly, if at all! The poem "Secret Ninja" is my act of rebellion against that rule! As you can see, the piece makes abundant use of exclamation points! How do these punctuation marks function in the poem? How would the effect be different had I used more conventional punctuation?

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- 7 Readers have told me that the poems “Afro,” “Or,” “Dread,” and “White” are oblique, rather than direct, treatments of race in America. Do you agree with that characterization? If so, what effects of language contribute to the sense that I’m treating this subject obliquely? Are there other places in *Fort Red Border* where I address issues of ethnic or cultural identity in a different way? If so, how do those poems differ in their approach from the four mentioned above?
- 8 I have titled all of the poems in the third section of this book “Valentine.” In what ways do these poems accord with, or deviate from, your expectations of what a valentine should be?
- 9 In “Valentine [Today I met],” the speaker describes several different kinds of romantic love: “Chrysler Building Love,” “Foghorn Love,” etc. What variety of feelings or moods are evoked by these adjectives when applied to love? Do you agree that there could be such a thing as “Dinner Roll Love?” If so, then what would that love be like?
- 10 The final line of this collection is “I’ll tell you what I wish.” What role does wishing, or desire, play in this work? Do the objects of that desire change or remain the same throughout?

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## *Writing Exercises*

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### Exercise A

Many of the poems in *Fort Red Border* are addressed to a listener who is either silent or whose answers are unsatisfying to the speaker in some way. There are a lot of difficult conversations. What voices do we use to speak to one another? For this exercise, find tomorrow's weather report for your home town. This should be a simple report, journalistic in tone (for example, "Tomorrow will be sunny, with highs in the low 20s, and a windchill of 3 below.") Next, relate this weather report in a series of short (10-15 line) poems. The same weather report, told in separate poems to the following listeners:

1. Your boss
2. Your current spouse or partner
3. The moon
4. An ex-best friend
5. A five-year old child (not your own child)

Think about how writing to different listeners alters your diction, tone, syntax, and imagery. Which register of voice do you think you write in most frequently?

### Exercise B

In *Fort Red Border*, a remembered scene or snatch of conversation gives rise to reflection. But one of the challenges to writing about memory is finding fresh ways to describe how the past affects us. Write a 15-20 line poem in which the phrase "I remember" appears five times. The phrase may appear anywhere at any time and you may alter the tense. None of the memories have to be real. The poem should also:

1. Enjamb at least two lines
2. Have exactly one proper name
3. Contain a quote of some kind (use quotation marks or italics)

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Next, revise your poem by taking out the verb “remember” and replacing it with another verb that has nothing to do with remembering. This may force you to change the poem drastically. Good. Allow the poem to go in a direction that you hadn’t previously imagined.

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## Suggested Reading

Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy* (Sinclair, Trans.)  
Beachy-Quick, Dan. *Spell*.  
Berryman, John. *The Dream Songs (1-77)*.  
Dove, Rita. *Thomas and Beulah*.  
Fisher, M.F.K. *The Art of Eating*.  
Forché, Carolyn. *The Country Between Us*.  
Reddy, Srikanth. *Facts for Visitors*.  
Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Stephen Booth, ed).  
Smith, Andrew (ed). *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink*.  
Tate, James. *Selected Poems*.  
Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence*.  
Williams, William Carlos. *In the American Grain*.

### Films

*La Traviata* (1982). Franco Zeffirelli, dir.  
*Out of Africa* (1985). Sidney Pollack, dir.  
*Stop Making Sense* (1984). Jonathan Demme, dir.  
*Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars: The Motion Picture* (1973). D.A. Pennebaker, dir.

### Places

Gettysburg National Military Park (Gettysburg, PA)  
La Casa-Museo di Petrosino (Padula, Italy)  
La Dew Topiary Gardens (Monkton, MD)  
Ristorante Pane e Olio (Florence, Italy)  
The Baltimore Museum of Industry (Baltimore, MD)  
Union Station (Washington, D.C.)  
Utz Quality Foods Tour Gallery (Hanover, PA)  
White Marsh Mall (Nottingham, MD)

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