

Writing *the* Wind

As a child, award-winning poet and short-story writer Marilyn Krysl, M.F.A. '68, imagined that words rose from the ground and the wind lifted them to our mouths. Now, she knows it's true.

BY TODD SCHWARTZ | ILLUSTRATION BY DAN PEGODA

Go to the center of America and you will find Kansas. Go to the center of Kansas, and planted amid the wheat and corn and sorghum fields you will find a small crop of streets and houses that is the town of Sylvan Grove. Now go to the center of the twentieth century, when the war years were about to become the jet age, and you will find a little girl playing away the long, sweet summer days on her grandparents' farm.

Mornings and evenings her grandparents read aloud from the Bible, and for the girl it is like hearing Adam and Eve speak. The words roll and blow and thunder. Then the little girl goes outside and talks to trees and sings to the birds and carries on dialogues with the rabbits and chickens. The idea comes to her that words rise up out of the ground, catch the wind, and are blown into the mouths of people, who can then speak. Soon, adults will teach her that this idea is crazy. But time will pass, and when the girl is herself an adult, she will know that she was right all along.

So this is how the story begins, with an idyllic childhood in Kansas. But the reader loves drama, so now comes this:

When Marilyn Krysl (the Czech name rhymes with "diesel") is ten years old, she gets a bad case of the mumps, and when she recovers she has lost the hearing in her left ear. No one can see her wound, but she believes she is crippled. This is before the days of therapy or counseling, and her family has no real comfort to offer her. The partial deafness changes her in another way as well.

"It made me very sensitive," Krysl remembers, "to other people who are wounded or in difficulty. I felt from that moment on that I could just look at people and tell who was really happy and who was carrying some painful thing. Since then I've always noticed the hurt people more than the well people."

And the reader also loves conflict, so there is this:

When Krysl is twelve, she is uprooted from her beloved Kansas by a tornado of hope on the part of her mother, who runs a beauty shop, and her father, who is a teacher. It is 1954, and they believe they must move to the magical, booming West, where all things are possible.

"My parents, mostly my mother, decided we were going to go west," Krysl says, "where money grew on eucalyptus trees and fell gently to the ground, and every town was Hollywood and everyone was a movie star. She looked for that place a long time, but never found it."

Instead, her father finds a job teaching music in Eugene, and her mother opens a new beauty shop, and Krysl isn't in Kansas anymore. She leaves behind the farm and the lovely life defined by the landscape and the words rising from the ground—not to mention her very first boyfriend—and it will be many long years before she forgives her parents.

Krysl has been a serious reader from very early on—she read *War and Peace* at nine—so most days she retreats to her rich interior life, lived on the page, where she always feels safe.

Now you might expect something unusual to happen in the story, a turning point, and it does:

One of her mother's friends leaves a religious magazine on the coffee table, and Krysl picks it up. An epiphany flutters in the air. Soon, Krysl has written a story about a man she invents who helps Christ carry his cross. She sends the story off to the magazine, and a few weeks later they send her a check for \$50! This, then, is the epiphany: She is a sometimes-lonely junior at South Eugene High—but now she is something more: a published author.

"I received several amazing gifts in a short period of time," recalls Krysl. "I published that first story, and I had a couple of really wonderful teachers who encouraged my poetry; and then, for that poetry, I was lucky enough to win a one-year scholarship to the University of Oregon. And that's where I met Ralph Salisbury, who invited me to join his 400-level writing course as a freshman. I was naive and untutored, and Ralph was kind and gentle. How lucky to have him as my first real writing teacher. He truly nurtured me, and I will always be grateful. I became a writer because I had that string of lucky breaks as a really young person."

So the story moves forward, establishing texture and rhythm:

Krysl reads, and she writes, and Salisbury reads, feeds, prunes, and nurtures what she writes. She publishes in national magazines, and soon enough it is 1968, she earns her M.F.A., and the days as a student are over. She quickly realizes that she doesn't know how to do anything *but* write, so she will have to get a job teaching writing. Before long, Krysl goes to work at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and she will teach there for the next three decades. As she does, she will channel Ralph Salisbury and be an intuitive reader and master the delicate science of being encouraging, which is what teaching writing is mostly about.

And of course Krysl will write. Her work will appear in *The Atlantic* and *The Nation* and *Best American Short Stories* and the *Pushcart Prize* anthology. No less an icon than the late John Updike will say of her, "Krysl is funny, fierce, and feminist in the best possible way, and a technician of variety and resourcefulness. I read her short stories with considerable pleasure, surprise, and admiration."

Krysl joins the community of poets, short story writers, and academia-housed literary authors who are as invisible to most Americans as sea cucumbers. They have neither six-figure advances nor movie deals, but there is a small inland ocean of brilliant, landmark writing that happens far from the open-water and rare tidal waves of the best-selling authors. Krysl swims here comfortably.

"It was always clear to me," she says, "that I was going to be a literary writer and not a popular writer—and I've always been happy with that. My work has always been sort of weirdly esoteric in one way or another. When I first began as a writer it didn't even occur to me that I should move to New York City or get an agent and a New York publisher. As the marketplace took over our cultural life in the '70s and '80s, and everything just got bigger and bigger with globalization, I've watched books become a product that giant corporations can profit from, which has reshaped the literary world. Of course, now that the economy is in such a mess, tons of small presses are reappearing, as authors and publishers tire of the rat race of trying to come up with mil-

lion-selling books. It will be interesting to see how that plays out."

But this is not that story. This is still the story of the girl with the mumps, and the woman with the left ear that will admit no sound, but that has put her in tune with the weak and the wounded in our world. So the story now calls for adventure, some risk, some danger.

"When I began teaching, it was obvious that the academy is a very safe, cloistered place," Krysl says, "and that if I was going to grow as a writer I was going to have to leave and go out into swirling life—experience things that are difficult and frightening and moving. I'm grateful that I have been able to spend my life in the academy, but just as grateful that I could get away from it and challenge myself."

As a volunteer nurse at Mother Teresa's Kalighat home for the destitute and dying in Calcutta.

As an unarmed bodyguard helping to protect civil rights activists in Sri Lanka. Doing research for a novella in that continuing caldron of war, inhumanity, and famine, Sudan.

"It's important to me to be able to say, 'I came, I heard, I saw, and I did not turn away. I am still here and I will tell others,'" Krysl says. "But I'm mostly a coward. So I look for situations that force me to be brave. Being in a country torn by civil war and doing accompaniment work was another wild and good wind blowing through me. I honor the idea of 'think globally, act locally,' but I also need to experience political solidarity with people in other parts of the world. I need to be near them, to be there in the flesh.

"I seldom go with the specific idea that I will write about it— but inevitably you do write about whatever happens to you."

The poems and short stories in Krysl's books, including *Warscape with Lovers* (Cleveland State University Press, 1997), *How to Accommodate Men* (Coffee House Press, 1998), and the recent winner of the Richard Sullivan Prize in Short Fiction, *Dinner with Osama* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), are often set in war-torn locales, seen from a committed but not strident feminist perspective, spun through with originality, layered with surprising and beautiful language, and dealing with human relationships: families, women and children, men and women. One reviewer has suggested the coining of a new literary category, the "political lyric," to describe her work.

And always Krysl's writing is sensitive to the wounded, the weak, the exploited—her own long-ago wound still draws her to that place. But will the reader accept a slight plot twist? A



lot of Krysl's stuff is funny as hell. The extraordinary short story collection *Dinner with Osama* is full, as another reviewer has written, of "the details of the ordinary, the absurd, and the apocalyptic [told in] outrageous and deeply affecting ways."

The title story, in which well-meaning, upper-class yet painfully politically correct Sheila decides all will be forgiven if she just invites Bin Laden for a nice dinner party, begins,

I'm on the Boulder mall half an hour before my herbal wrap appointment, shopping for an eyeliner not tested on rabbits, when I get the idea: Why not ask Bin Laden over for a glass of Chardonnay and something light but upscale? Me, Sheila, your average liberal neocolonial with a whiff of Cherokee thrown in way back when. I've been known to cook up a delicate Pesto Primavera or some boisterous Buffalo Enchiladas, take your pick. Better yet, something showy to appeal to his self-image as a major player—my Alaskan salmon à la Tetsuya marinated in fresh basil, coriander, thyme, and grape seed oil.

Shoppers bustle past with gleaming, logoed bags. Though Osama's hosts, the Taliban, are anti-woman, I'm no threat. Think a latter-day Julia Child stuffing a Thanksgiving turkey. I've got a Ph.D. in minding the human 7-11, serving all comers and keeping an eye on the clumsy bruiser who's about to knock the bottle of olive oil off the shelf. I'm an expert at chatting people up, and this is Boulder, where we aspire to getting it right. A passing tee reads "meat: that's what's rotting in your colon." There's an ordinance against marketing fur within the county, and our Eddie Bauer carries the de rigueur parka with the built-in air pollution level monitor. Our city's joined the suit against global warming, and some of us have deeded our upgraded designer homes through trusts to the descendants of the original Arapahos. Shops specialize in North Korean ginseng, South Korean ginseng, Nicaraguan ginseng, and a fabulous new strain grown in Connecticut. You can order arias sung for the spleen tailored to your personal astro printout and, if the acupuncturist recommends it, get a liver massage.

In Krysl's story, of course, Osama accepts and shows up at Sheila's house, dialysis machine and all. Things do *not* go as planned.

"This is an age," Krysl explains, "when things are so bad that you can't even believe they are happening. This is an age that calls for satire, and it's blossoming. In our progressively, sadly, and frighteningly dumbed-down nation, these are great times for those whose minds are still intact enough that they can recognize satire!"

Krysl is at the Boulder mall when the idea for the story comes to her.

"When war was declared in Iraq," she says, "the Quakers in town—yes, there are Quakers in trendy Boulder—began holding silent vigils on the mall. I couldn't handle not doing something about the war, even if only symbolic, so I stood with them. And

there were all these expensive, upscale stores around us, people were walking past with their shopping bags full of \$300 T-shirts and \$500 shoes. I became hyperaware of the privileged, oblivious money culture around me, and suddenly I was thinking about the war and 9/11. I had the ridiculous notion that if enemies could just have dinner together, by the end of the meal you could declare world peace. Right away I knew the story would *have* to be satire."

In the novella that concludes the *Osama* collection, "Welcome to the Torture Center, Love," Krysl, who volunteers to help the Lost Boys of Sudan and cofounded the nonprofit Community of Sudanese and American Woman, examines the peculiar shape love takes when it is cooking in the inferno of that war-torn, famine-fired nation, where the absurdities of evil are all too real. Krysl, as narrator, writes: "News has become mere anecdote: one person crowned Miss America, another beheaded. It's mostly image now, and here I am with the *Times* in one hand, a latte in the other . . . Yes! I told you we don't have much time—and have you noticed how your right hand doesn't know what its twin is doing? Tear yourself away from your nightly bowl of Netflix, and observe your right and left hands."

Here, perhaps, the reader is beginning to see that indeed we don't have much time, and senses that the end of the story is near. But it will not be a denouement—everything will *not* be made clear, and questions and surprises *will* remain. Because words will continue to rise from the ground, drift on the wind, and the sixty-seven-year-old Krysl will continue to write them down.

"I feel that as writers we trick ourselves into imagining that we are actually doing this thing called writing," Krysl says. "Such egos! I am very sure that I'm not doing anything other than occupying this place where some interesting language seeps through.

"Buddhist texts describe reality as the 'dependent co-arising' of all events . . . Events are impermanent, and those events that change very slowly may seem permanent, but eventually these too morph, change, disappear.

"Language appears as another form of dependent co-arising and, like everything else, language eventually passes away. I am now very much aware of this flux, this passing away, and of my own impermanence. I feel very precarious, and this is sometimes thrilling. At other times it's simply a fact. I am more and more aware of life as a 'gift event.' To be a body, and a body that utters speech—imagine! And the breath that makes the sounds of speech possible, that breath is also an event, given to me by what surrounds me, by what arises as I arise.

"I think of myself, the 'writer,' as being a conduit through which patterns of language appear in the world."

The story ends, and begins again. 

Todd Schwartz '75 is a Portland writer who also thanks Ralph Salisbury for the exceptional benefit of his unerring ear and unwavering generosity of spirit.