

Biography

Mervyn Taylor is a Trinidad-born poet who also works in visual art. He has taught at The New School and in the New York City public school system, and is the author of six books of poetry, including *No Back Door* (2010), which received the Paterson Award for Sustained Literary Achievement, *The Waving Gallery* (2014), and his most recent, *Voices Carry* (2017). He can be heard on an audio collection, *Road Clear*, accompanied by bassist David Williams. His long poem, *The Center of the World*, appears in the newly published *Brooklyn Poets Anthology*.

The Center of the World

I.

From here I can see the world, all the people
walking down Flatbush Ave., going into stores,
waiting at the bus stop, all the latecomers rushing
into the subway cat-a-corner from my window,
across Ocean Ave. all the new immigrants in winter
wearing too much clothes, the police recruit from
Long Island under the awning of the Arab grocer.

Salaam, I can hear the crack addict, the last of
his kind disappearing between the floorboards,
arguing with the Arab chief, the one with the scar
on his left cheek next door to whom the Asians
scrape calluses from feet three times the size
of their own, giving them the designs they want:
star, crescent, half-moon, the flag of any country.

I see all four seasons pass through the park, in
winter, the lake shimmering between the trees,
in autumn the nervous leaves shaking and falling,
the sudden flood of green in spring. And summer,
oh summer, with the smoke of a hundred grills,
the smell of bar-b-q, the birthday balloon sailing
away from the crying boy, the slap of dominoes
on the picnic tables, the relentless hawk, a rat

dangling from its talons, dripping red onto the
cyclist's jersey, the yellow paddleboats on their
circular journey around the island that is the ducks'
breeding ground, dense, impenetrable, the raccoon
that scared us after the concert at the band shell
the night Rudder sang his calypso blues, where
a year ago Odetta made her last appearance half-
sitting under a falling moon. And the vet whose
shock of white hair stood out among the runners,
I don't hear his sidewise shout anymore.

In the zoo the enclosure where the bears ate a boy

has a higher fence, painted with pretty pictures.
On Sundays the drummers still form their circle,
and in the evenings horns announce the arrival of
the Haitians, their sound atonal, harsh, unrelieved.
They move in concentric circles, singing not words
but a series of o's, rising, falling, rising.

II.

Sometimes the midnight lines at the McDonald's are
seven registers across. Here a homeless man might sit,
nursing coffee, pretending to wait for the No. 12.
I know where it goes, out Linden, through dangerous
parts of East New York, I take it almost to the end of
the line, to a building boasting a thirteenth floor and
terraces with a great view of flights leaving Kennedy.

I watch the Puerto Ricans on their day, the coquis on
the hatband of the older men. Fridays the Jews
stream in numbers toward the end of the park where
the big synagogue is, the cops with backs to them
blocking traffic. I see all the time accidents at this
five-way intersection, the elderly couple never
making it to a wedding, their car spun round facing
the opposite way. I catch, on Labor Day,

steel pans going down the middle of the avenue,
a girl waving a mysterious flag, the sergeant longest
on the beat saying, ahh, don't worry 'bout it, too long
to explain what wining is. I've heard relationships die
at 3 am, among the pillars in the pavilion, or at the stoplight
while a car idled. I've heard the prettiest rendition of
a Scott Walker song come up the fire escape and through
my window, through a long and sleepless night...

III.

I've heard the shocking quarrels of people over
a parking space, over love, over nothing. I've
seen a boy gasp his last between the park benches
after the pop, pop turned out not to be fireworks,
the cap on his head turning red. There are times
I looked out to see not a soul, and times it seemed
a congregation had gathered under my window,
times when the heat would rise and then would not,
my guest and I sleeping in gloves.

I've lived through three supers, watched their sons
grow to manhood. I've let the woman next door
climb through my window when she'd forgotten
her keys. I've stepped over the nodding ghosts of

men acting like doormen in the lobby, their number
dwindling till there was one, who could hardly lift
my suitcase. I leave but always come back here,
where I review things from this vantage point,
the confluence of people and lives after deliveries
are dropped off early in the morning by trucks
rambling through this intersection of the world.

Mervyn Taylor

Tell us about the making of this poem.

This poem came to me at around 4am one morning, after a long writing drought. I awoke with the opening line almost physical, as a starting point- “From here I can see...”, meaning from my window, which looks out on a five-way intersection, and the poem unfolded as a description of the life taking place in condensed form. I wrote for about two hours, the sun coming up, on yellow post-its taken from my bedside table, afraid that any movement, such as from the bed to my desk, might cause me to lose the lines. And so I scribbled in a half-lying position, spending the rest of that day deciphering what I had written, assembling the little squares of paper in some kind of order. It came together as only a few poems in a poet’s life manage to flow.

What are you working on right now?

I’ve just published my sixth collection, *Voices Carry* (Shearsman Books), which includes some poems dealing with experiences encountered while working in New York City’s garment district. I’m thinking of working on some more in that connection.

What’s a good day for you?

A warm day, when thoughts and limbs move unimpeded.

What brought you to Brooklyn?

After graduating, Howard U. in Washington DC, New York seemed the right place for a writer. Brooklyn is where most of friends and family from back home in Trinidad had settled—fellow students and I used to drive up many a weekend for my Aunt Bertha’s wonderful dishes, her crab and callaloo. Brooklyn...a home away from home, also close enough to Gotham, so...

Tell us about your neighborhood. How long have you lived there? What do you like about it? How is it changing? How does it compare to other neighborhoods or places you’ve lived?

I live on Parkside Ave, overlooking Prospect Park. I’ve lived here some thirty-something years. I used to live in Vanderveer Estates, in the Newkirk Ave. area, but moved after experiencing several break-ins. Parkside was a largely Hispanic neighborhood then, the salsa blaring at all hours. Then came the 80’s and 90’s, with the attendant crack epidemic. I attempted to move many times during that period, but somehow weathered it. This poem, *The Center of the World* describes some aspects of those days. It was rough. Now things have calmed down, and it’s great having a subway stop literally at your door, and a park that affords poems by the dozens, the cyclists, the ducks, the lake...

Share with us a defining Brooklyn experience, good, bad, or in between.

In December 2015, the weather remaining unseasonably warm, a beautiful bird appeared in Prospect Park, becoming a sensation for its colorful, tropical appearance. Photographers and curious folk flooded the area. I paid little attention until a fellow poet, Susana Case, came by, describing the phenomenon. Eventually I went to see for myself, crouching to look under brambles where the bird had shied away from the crowds. It became the subject of a poem I worked to assemble,

called *Ode to the Painted Bunting*. It holds pride of place in *Voices Carry*. I came to see the bird as a kind of metaphor for my immigrant self, as one having stayed too long.

What does a poetry community mean to you? Have you found that here? Why or why not?

There is a poetry community here, but not one that's readily discernible. Brooklyn is a big city. One has to look, to explore. Certain centers became popular, like the Brooklyn Moon Café, in the spoken word tradition. I've helped to produce reading series, such as Soirees, in Fort Greene at the Corner Post Café, and Flash and Thunder, with Dawad Philip, at the Skylight Gallery in Restoration Plaza in Bed-Sty. Lately, Lynn McGee has produced the ongoing Lunar Walk series, with Gerry LaFemina.

Tell us about some Brooklyn poets who have been important to you.

More poems, than poets. Doughtry Long, father of the actress Nia Long, wrote a poem with the incredible closing line, "...and the wind sings EEEEEthiopiaaaaa". Elouise Loftin, wrote in her book *Jumbish*, about Weeksville women- "and they fan, fan, fan...they got so much to be hot about." She also penned the killer image- "She cut her hair off in the back in a V for victory, and when there was none, she said, for Victoria." Presently, I like the poet Dennis Nurkse. His poems about Brooklyn are quite the testament to this place.

Who were your poetry mentors and how did they influence you?

Mentors? Mainly Derek Walcott and Amiri Baraka. Baraka for his amazing attunement to music, and ability to make the image dance in a few words- "Lately, I've become accustomed to the broad-edged, silly music the wind makes when I run for a bus..." or, "Poetry is nothing unless it is lemons piled on a step". Derek for his devotion to the art, for making it the bridge between islands. Keorapetse Kgositsile, the South African poet whose direct language and everyday speak showed me the possibilities of ordinary speech. I go back to his lines as teachable metaphors all the time- "...And you appear, naked like a Kimberly diamond / full like Limpopo after rain..." from his poem *To Melba*. I also admire the late Jamaican poet Tony McNeill, for his directness, as he describes a mentally troubled aunt, her treatment- "The needle shies down her body, and sticks." And I love Sharon Olds, for never averting her gaze. And Susana Case, for speaking of love, in all its complicated ways.

Tell us about the last book(s) and/or poem(s) that stood out to you and why.

Derek's last book, *White Egrets*, the poems that deal with the subject of aging- the lines that describe a woman he admired for her beauty in his youth, whom he now meets, when they are both in wheelchairs, in an airport lounge. It does what this poet usually does...drills to the heart of the matter.

What are some books or poems you've been meaning to read for years and still haven't gotten to?

Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, that I never quite finished. Walcott's *Omeros*, the same. I've only gotten halfway through Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Paradise*.

Describe your reading process. Do you read one book at a time, cover to cover, or dip in and out of multiple books? Do you plan out your reading in advance or discover your next read at random? Do you prefer physical books or digital texts? Are you a note-taker?

One book at a time, savoring. I like a good story, without a lot of philosophical intrusion. I like the feel of paper, but I've been reading a lot on kindle lately, for my book club. It's easier, although I miss being able to share.

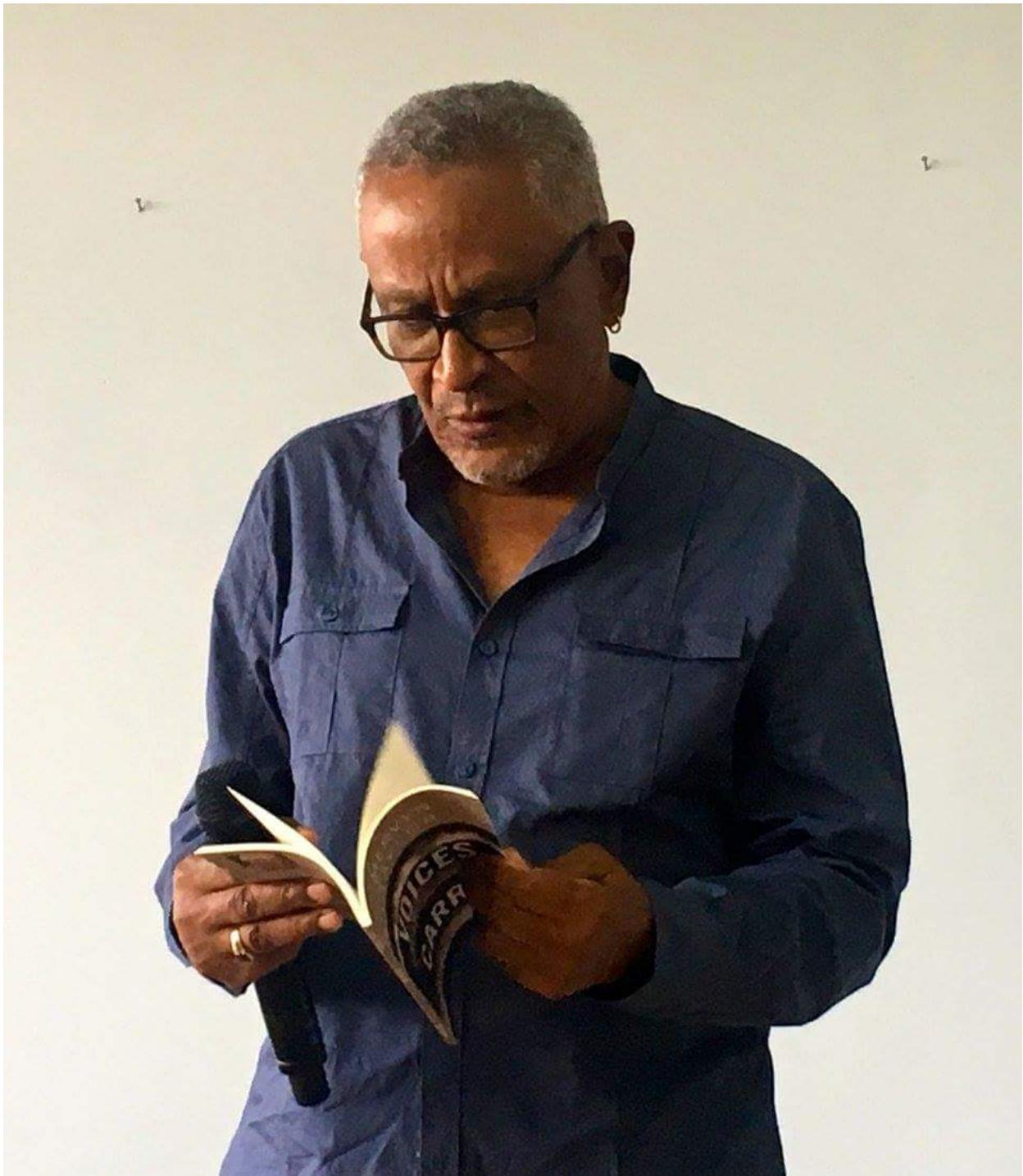
What's one thing you'd like to try in a poem or sequence of poems that you haven't tried before?

I'd like to do a series of longer poems, like this one, which I don't do very often. These I find have to come on their own, when they're ready. Or perhaps it's when I'm ready!?

Where are some places you like to read and write (besides home, assuming you like to be there)? At my other home, in Trinidad, or anywhere the Muse sees fit to follow.

What are some Brooklyn spaces you love? Why?

Prospect Park, for obvious reasons. Brooklyn Heights, for its serenity, and considerate layout. Flatbush, for the never-ceasing mix of people, to watch the Korean greengrocer come to understand the Trinidadian grandmother, to know exactly what her complaint is, what she's asking for.



Fill in the blanks in these lines by Whitman with words of your own choosing:

I celebrate _poetry_____,
And what I _offer_____ you I drink myself _____,
For every ___sip of wine does_____ me as good _as it does_____ you.

If you have time, write a nine-line poem using these end-words (in whatever order) from Jay Z's "Brooklyn Go Hard": **father, Dodger, jack, rob, sin, pen, love, Brooklyn, Biggie.**

Father, I have ended up in this place that was once
home to the Dodgers, a team in a game of which you
know nothing. This is Brooklyn, where Americans

love to shorten your name to one syllable, like Jack,
or Rob. You would have scratched 'Julian', in large letters
so they'd know it was a sin to call you otherwise. But

I think you would've liked Biggie- he reminds me of
Telemaque, sweating out his khakis, the one who came
to visit when you were sick, your one, your only- friend.

Why Brooklyn?

Because this is where the party is. Because this is where you meet people you would not have had the chance to meet elsewhere, at least, not all at once. Because it offers possibilities. The Haitian danced a bachata with a Dominican. Where else?