

Written by Mike Schulz

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"I didn't really get interested in poetry until I got here," explains author and Augustana College alumna Farah Marklevits, during a recent interview on the school campus. "I went on a Latin American term, and we read Pablo Neruda in Chile at, like, his *house*, which is on the coast. And it just

captured

me. We're in Chile, and there's the ocean, and the professors had a copy of his poems, and they were reading them, and it was just like ...

wow

."

Less than a decade after Marklevits' 1999 graduation, it's now her readers who are saying "wow."

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On September 18, Marklevits will be the first guest in the 2008-9 season of the literary series "River Readings at Augustana" (formerly titled "Lit Wits"). Currently teaching a freshman-level composition class at the Rock Island college, and serving as assistant director for the school's Reading/Writing Center, the author has already seen her poetry published in such print journals as *Poet Lore* and *Cimarron Review* and such online magazines as

Born
and

Octopus

, plus a 2006 book with her name in the title -

Three New Poets: Sarah C. Harwell, Farah Marklevits, Courtney Queeney

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Marklevits also has her share of notable fans. In her introductory remarks to Marklevits' *Octopus* pieces, poet Heidi Lynn Staples wrote that the author's works

"are diverse in approach, style, and tone" and "exhibit consistent aesthetic choices which create across the poems a compelling voice." And Bruce Smith, Marklevits' graduate-school professor at Syracuse University, is quoted as saying, "The poems take such care with imaginative language, without seeming fastidious, that they accumulate a gravity of feeling and make their own metaphysics."

Heady praise for someone who originally came to Augustana planning to major in pre-med, but who, she says with a laugh, "fell off *that* wagon. Right away. Like, with the first chemistry class."

After her stay in Chile and the publication of several pieces in Augustana's literary magazine, *Saga*

, the Minnesota native went on to earn her bachelor's degree in English and philosophy, and her master's in creative writing. But even now, she says, "I'm not the kind of person who's bound at, like, 2 o'clock every day and writes for three hours. It doesn't fit my life, but it doesn't fit my personality, either. It's always sort of been these ebbs and flows."

When the work is flowing, though, Marklevits says it's when she chooses to dedicate a number of poems to a specific, shared theme. "I don't know if it's obsessive," she says, "I don't know *what* the word is to describe it, but I tend to want to investigate

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something from multiple angles, or explore different takes on something. So I tend to write in series.



"I was really interested in clichés," she continues. "so I would take a cliché and see what I could do with it by repeating parts of it, or changing the combination, or taking it literally, or something. Playing around with the language. Like, 'When the cat's away, the mice will play.' I took that one literally - what *would* they be doing when the cat's away? And so I just had fun describing these little mice activities and this little mouse world.

"And one that I thought worked really well was 'throw the baby out with the bathwater.' That one turned out to be a little more serious and less playful. I started thinking about our relationship to babies, and women's relationship to wanting to *have* a baby, and it became this serious thing. It was still playful, but playing in a serious kind of way."

Another series concept that Marklevits found herself fascinated by was marriage, especially after marrying Augustana physics professor James van Howe in 2003. The author has written more than 20 poems on the subject, several of which were published in the online periodical *Octopus*

(and can be read at OctopusMagazine.com).

"I became interested in, like, what *is* this relationship called marriage?" she says. "I mean, there's my own, individual, personal relationship with my husband, but then

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there's also 'What does this relationship mean to somebody who meets me?' Because that's a word that *describes* me now - 'married.' So what does this mean to another person who might not know a whole lot about me? And how does this idea work in a culture where there's a lot of divorce? I just got really interested in the subject, and it just developed its own momentum."

Over the past several months, the author has found herself equally taken with a new subject, as Marklevits and van Howe are the parents of seven-month-old Elouise.

"I'm interested, personally, in what women artists and writers *do*," she says, "especially ones who are mothers. I mean, there's this physical relationship to your child that you can't get away from, and then there are also these cultural ideas about what it means to be a mother that are a little hard to escape, too. So what do you do? How do you fit the art in? That's what I'm struggling with a little bit lately."

When she was pregnant, says Marklevits, "I had a hard time doing *anything*. I don't know if it was, like, all of my creativity was invested in making this person, and so I couldn't find it in the *other* part of me, or what. But it was very difficult.



"So what I've been trying to do - and I haven't been so successful now that school has started - is give myself five-minute blocks [of writing]. If I have just five minutes, that's what I'm going to - the *least* that I do today is write for five minutes and see what happens.

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"So I have these little *tiny* things now," says Marklevits of her recent writings, "and I'm not really sure what to *do* with them. And then I don't know if I should then take my five minutes tomorrow and *revise* something, or if it's okay the way it is. My relationship with revision, I think, is changing, because I'm just trying to lower my expectations a little bit.

"I mean, I don't want my daughter to grow up to be an *ax murderer* or something, you know?" she continues with a laugh. "I don't want her living in squalor because I'm, like, off *doing* some thing."

Marklevits adds that having a book of her own published is a definite long-term goal, even though "with poets, I think, a book is a little more difficult in some ways - a little harder than when you have a novel that you're writing, and there's this defined beginning and end. It's a collection, but sometimes the poems hang together in a way that makes a sort of thematic whole, or sometimes there's a kind of narrative arc, or different voices And other times it's just, like, a bunch of poems. So it's hard to figure out."

In the meantime, Marklevits will continue to seek - and likely find - her inspiration in five-minute bursts.

"I don't know what it is," she says, "but sometimes when you open yourself to playing around with language, *ideas* emerge - things you're thinking about, or that are in the cultural air. And you end up getting surprised. Or going in a different direction from where you expected."

Marklevits' September 18 reading takes place at 7 p.m. in Augustana College's Wallenberg Hall, and more information on the "River Readings at Augustana" literary series is available by calling (309) 794-7823.

Fitting the Art In: Farah Marklevits Opens the “River Readings at Augustana” Series, September 18

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