



Our Interview with Poet Katherine E. Schneider



**So many times in this past year
lines from poet Kim Bridgford’s poem “The Trail” came to mind
as a kind of encouragement during social isolation:**

**“Throw out your lonely tasting medicine /
And look around. Sometimes you’ll find a song,”**

Sally from the Norwalk Public Library: Thanks for joining us on the **Poetry Page**, Katherine! Along with poets Mark Lamoureux and Van Hartmann, you were scheduled for an **AuthorSpeak** at the library with your new book before the pandemic began. Unfortunately, that had to be postponed.

I kicked off the **Poetry Page** last year with you, Mark, and Van, but [that Page](#) had really just been an overview of your work. I am so excited to interview you in more depth!

So let's begin!

Please tell us about the role poetry plays in your daily life. In what way do you carry your poetry within you?



Katherine: Firstly, thank you for this beautiful opportunity to share my poetry and thoughts with you and the **Poetry Page** community!

In my daily life, poetry moves with me and comes to me in experiences and feelings that call different lines from poems to mind.

There were so many times this past year, for example, that lines from poet Kim Bridgford's poem "The Trail" came to mind as a kind of encouragement during social isolation: "Throw out your lonely tasting medicine / And look around. Sometimes you'll find a song, / And dusk, like heaven's multicolored thought, / Will fall."

In a different way, poetry is also in my daily life as I consciously and unconsciously gather images, memories, feelings, and ideas that I will capture or crystallize in a poem that I will write.

The last twenty-five percent of my current manuscript is poems that haven't been born yet, but are forming within me.

Sally: I remember in graduate school, I attended your graduate seminar *Poetry as Prayer*. It was marvelous. Please share with us ways in which poetry is prayer to you. Do you find that writing poetry is a manner of praying?

Katherine: It means so much to me that you remember this, Sally! I am truly honored that you enjoyed it so much. I put my heart and soul into it!

That seminar and the accompanying paper I wrote with it came from a foundational question I had about why humans do poetry and why it is necessary and important.

Now, of course, there are so many awesome ways to answer those questions; however, my answer was that poetry is one and the same with prayer.

I am thinking of prayer as the finding of words to express our feelings, thoughts, and experiences, and putting them out into the world. Prayer that is not limited or defined by any religion, but prayer in its most basic form: a speaking out of what lives within us. All with a belief in the worthiness of doing so. It is an act of faith and hope to resist silence, and also to believe in the worthiness of our expression being heard or read, even if it is only by the self.



Poetry, the same as prayer, puts words to what is within us with belief in the worthiness of doing so—it identifies or confesses our innermost feelings and sins, praises wonderful people and things, expresses gratitude, petitions for things we desire, and more. This is the main reason why, I believe, writing and reading poetry can affect us so powerfully in such a relatively small space of lines / pages.

Sally: Did you write / read poetry as a child? Did your parents foster your interest, and encourage you?

Katherine: This is a great question!

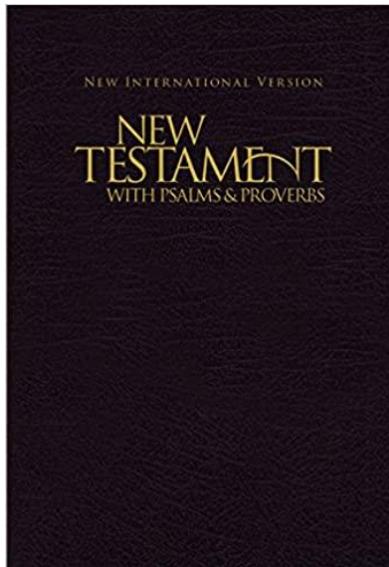
My parents have always been big readers, mostly of fiction. I didn't really find poetry until I got a guitar and was determined to write songs when I was about eleven or twelve. The lyrics I wrote never became songs, though; instead, they began to fill notebooks and sketchbooks as very personal poetry. Though I was very private about it, and never shared my poems until I was in my senior year of high school, my parents encouraged me heartily when I started to pursue writing poetry seriously in college. They encouraged me in everything that was important to me, and for that I am eternally and deeply grateful.

Sally: And your faith, had that been instilled in you from a very young age? Do you have a story about how you found it?

Katherine: Actually, I did not grow up in church or with much knowledge of Christianity at all except that my family celebrated Christmas and Easter.

I found faith, interestingly enough, through reading!

In the Fall of my freshman year of high school, my mother decided on a whim to start reading the New Testament. She started to tell me about it, and I decided that I should read it too because it would give me an interesting perspective for my ninth grade global history class in which we were studying the ancient world.



My nerdy, perhaps overachieving, urges (haha) here introduced me to the Jesus of the gospels, and this introduction changed my life forever. Jesus' compassion, mercy, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, boldness, and care for the vulnerable and those rejected by society pulled me in and made me a believer. Then, for many years, I got involved with various churches as an expression and commitment to my faith.

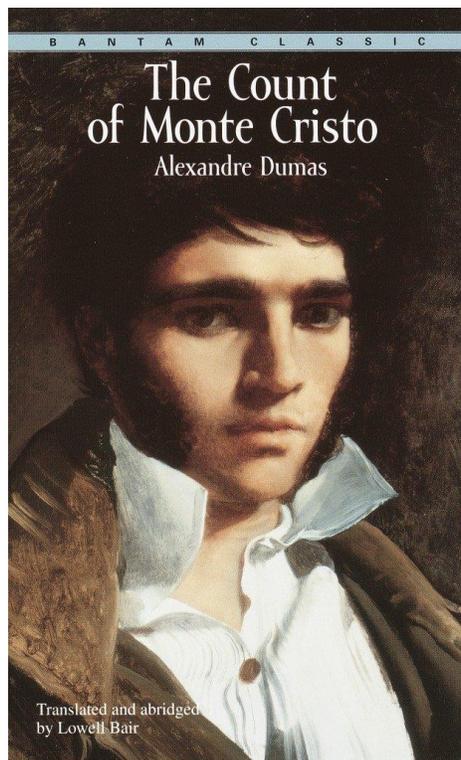
However, today I find myself at odds with many of the political ideas of those I used to go to church with. I don't currently attend any church, but I find myself more connected to that Jesus I met when I was thirteen than ever before.

Sally: That's so wonderful that you live with your feelings of discovery, still so new and fresh, from that single experience at age thirteen.

What other books did you read as a child?

Katherine: As a child, I enjoyed reading for pleasure on topics or ideas that excited me or made me laugh.

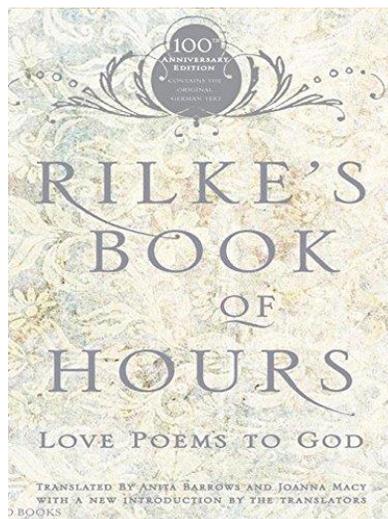
However, when I was an adolescent, I read an abridged version of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and I was never again the same!



The heartbreak, betrayal, and overall interpersonal drama of the story overwhelmed and engaged my young heart completely. I still swoon thinking of the story and how much it affected me.

Sally: Currently, do you have a favorite poet or poem?

Katherine: There are so many poets and poems I love, but the book I return to as a favorite that I identify with so much is Rilke's *Book of Hours*, as translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy.



Sally: Please tell us about the most influential teacher you have had in poetry.

Katherine: My absolutely most influential teacher in poetry was Dr. Kim Bridgford, who passed away at the very end of June last year.

While it hurts so much to think that I won't be able to meet up with her or ever have a phone call with her again, I remember the things that never die—the books she wrote, the communities she created, the manuscripts of her students that she coaxed to life, and the eternal ripple effect of her words, actions, and presence.



[Poet Kim Bridgford, 1959-2020](#)

[Mezzo Cammin: An Online Journal of Formalist Poetry by Women](#)

[Poetry by the Sea Conference](#)

[An Article on Kim's Poetry by the Sea Conference](#)

Sally: In what way did she help your poetry?

Katherine: In every possible way!

She was my undergraduate professor and advisor, my graduate mentor, my friend, and poet-mother.

In each consecutive meeting, class, workshop, private e-mail, and impromptu conversation, I heard from her that I was, indeed, a poet, that my poetry was worthy, that my faith-based poetry was powerful, and that I had wisdom and insight in me that I could weave into a poem.

She gave me full confidence that I could and should seek to publish my poems.

She was an excellent professor for all that she taught regarding the craft of poetry, workshopping, editing, reading, and engaging with the poetry community.

But I also knew that she loved me, and genuinely cared for me as a person. I would not have taken one step toward the MFA or the path I've been on with my poetry had it not been for her mentorship, encouragement, and love.

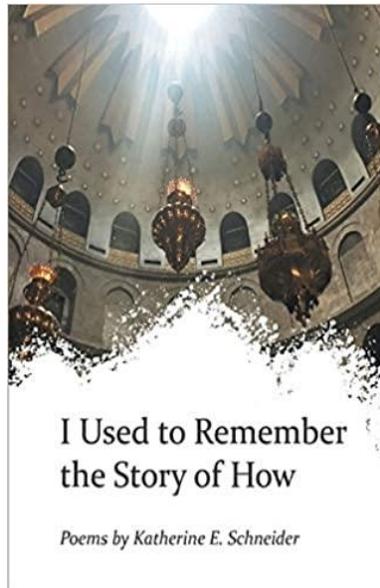
Sally: Thank you for sharing your thoughts about Kim—so beautifully expressed.

Your first book—*I Used to Remember the Story of How*—was published by [Finishing Line Press](#) in 2019.

It's a beautiful book that seems, to me, to interweave the personal and the religious, each illuminating and deepening the other. Am I correct? Was this intended as you built the book?

Katherine: Yes! This was exactly my intention.

Sally: Please tell us about your publishing experience with *I Used to Remember the Story of How*.



Katherine: I had a wonderful publishing experience with *I Used to Remember the Story of How*.

I loved that [Finishing Line Press](#) offered such a clear schedule and explanation of the process of presales and ultimate publication. I particularly loved having control over the cover image and design. I imagine that might be intimidating to some, but I absolutely loved doing the design work myself because it is exactly what I wanted it to be!

The cover image is a photo I took from one of the most incredible moments of my life—looking up at a beam of sun coming through the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the exact spot where tradition says Jesus was resurrected.

Sally: Have you published in journals, too? Which journals?

Katherine: Yes. I have been published in [Ruminate](#), [Blue Line](#), [The Poetry Porch Sonnet Scroll](#), and [The Paddock Review](#).

Sally: Please tell us a bit about your process of sending poems out for consideration to journals. How do you select the journals, and are you disciplined in always having poems out for consideration to various places? Is this a process you enjoy?

Katherine: I should be more disciplined about sending out poems as a regular and very careful practice. Kim Bridgford definitely taught me all about how to do this, and I do send poems out utilizing the database on [Poets & Writers](#) to help me find great journals.

However, I have not been nearly as meticulous or consistent about it as Kim taught me to be, mostly due to competing life necessities and distractions. It is a goal of mine to work towards Kim-ness in this regard.

Sally: How important is publishing to you?

Katherine: It is the end-goal! I feel like the process of writing poetry for me isn't "finished" until the poem is "out there."

Sally: So interesting! I don't think I've ever heard it put that way, but that makes perfect sense.

Do you wish to have a second book, or is one in the works? How do you, personally, put a book together?

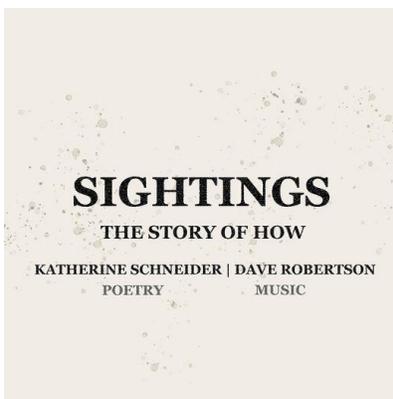
Katherine: I have a full-length manuscript in the works that I am very, very excited about.

My first book was a chapbook that, in some ways, was a glimpse of this longer work and a reflection of my spirit across many years beginning with my college days and early 20s.

While the spirit in this new manuscript is the same, of course, I feel it more fully explores the personal and divine with more maturity and edge. It excites me.

In terms of putting a book together, this new manuscript is thematically organized. Most of the poems are written and in various stages of editing, but some are in me waiting to be written. I know exactly what these poems will address even though I haven't written them yet. I believe I will have that inner-knowing when I've fully satisfied my poetic exploration of the theme.

Sally: Please tell us about your recording venture with **musician/composer Dave Robertson**. I listened to one of the recordings—**SIGHTINGS**—and found it so moving and beautiful. How did this idea come about, and where are you with the project?



Katherine: When I was working on the publishing process of *I Used to Remember the Story of How* with Finishing Line Press, I started to be really fearless and public on social media in sharing my poetry, details about my book, and interesting images and photos that I associated with poems in the book. It was a way to publicize during presales, but also a way to lean into sharing my poetry openly and widely which I had never really done before except in poetry circles.

In this spirit, I thought it would be fascinating and exciting to create songs with my poems in order to make them even more feel-able, portable, and accessible.

My incredible friend, **Dave Robertson**, was the perfect collaborator for this. In my many years of knowing him, we've shared a similar sensitivity to poetry, a similar religious journey, and an interest in emotionally powerful and expressive music.

He was really into my idea of creating poem-songs, and agreed to embark on the project with me! We have released two poem-songs, "Say Go," and "Sightings."



Katherine E. Schneider and Dave Robertson

Two more are in the works, and there are plans for more. This pandemic-year has caused delays, but hopefully we will be releasing poem-songs this spring and summer!

Sally: Please share with our readers where they can listen to some of the recordings.

Katherine: Absolutely! You can click on this link to [Listen and Watch on Facebook!](#) Or simply search for *The_Story_of_How* on [SOUNDCLOUD](#), [Twitter](#), Instagram, YouTube, and Bandcamp. Please like and follow us!

Sally: Please tell us about your Pushcart Prize nomination. That must have been thrilling!

Katherine: [The Paddock Review](#), associated with my publisher [Finishing Line Press](#), nominated my poem "[Breath](#)" for a Pushcart Prize last year. It was absolutely thrilling! After a lifetime of seeing this amazing honor in other poets' bios, I was now able to add this to my own!

Sally: You have become quite the celebrity during the pandemic in co-creating— and co-hosting— the remarkable [FUMFA Poets & Writers Live](#) program on Facebook (for those readers who don't know, FUMFA stands for Fairfield University MFA.) It's become quite famous, and is always well attended! Please share with us how you and co-creator [Chris Belden](#) came up with this idea! Did you ever expect it to take off as it did? How many episodes have there been to date?



Katherine: Thank you so much, Sally!

The phenomenon of our **FUMFA Poets & Writers Live** weekly livestream was born when author [Chris Belden](#) (a fellow FUMFA graduate) and I reconnected after a long time, and wanted to do an in-person reading together last March.

However, that's exactly when everything shut down. At that moment in time, everyone was trying to shore up their strength, encourage each other, and move events online.

We decided to start an online reading series to share our own work and get through the pandemic through writerly warmth, community, and celebration of each other's books.

And then we decided we should keep it going indefinitely! We knew we had a core community of very connected FUMFA students, alumni, and faculty active on social media, and we hoped they would attend. We've been honored and delighted that they've continued to attend and also participate! For everyone who praises our livestream for the entertainment and connection it's brought to their COVID-lives, we say it means just as much to us to have done so.

We have had forty-five episodes to date!

Sally: Please share for our readers where they can find the program, and also how they can find recordings of the readings.

Katherine: All live and archived shows can be viewed on Facebook and also on YouTube by searching [FUMFA Poets & Writers Live](#).

Sally: Are you open to readers outside of the MFA community?

Katherine: Yes! We have already had several awesome readers from outside of the MFA community such as [Anna Evans](#), [Julie Kane](#), [Charles Rafferty](#), and several more.

While the FUMFA community of current and former students is at its core, we want to invite and hear from special guests from outside our community as well! [Philip J. Curtis](#), for example—a performance poet who reached out after seeing an open mic night stream—has become a beloved friend of the stream, and a regular reader and attendee!

Sally: Do you ever feel that your public persona and private life as poet conflict? I always seem to ask this question because of my own feelings of privacy, and how conflicted I sometimes feel when in the public too much.

Katherine: I think the biggest conflict has to do with how the demands of work and other life necessities and issues distract from the greater amount of time and energy I'd love to spend on developing my poems, the poem-music project, and other creative outlets. I want more time and physical/emotional energy to share all of these things publicly through publication, social media, readings, and events. I was always excited by this, but never had the boldness, or in some ways, the experience to get out there and go for it! I feel restless to have more public-time in this sense because I sometimes feel I am making up for lost time. I need and enjoy my private time, but I'm really motivated to continue to engage even more in that public life!

Sally: On top of everything else, you are an ESL teacher. Please share with us your joy in this work of teaching. I imagine any student who has you for a teacher feels incredibly fortunate because of your intelligence, generosity, patience, dedication, and kindness.

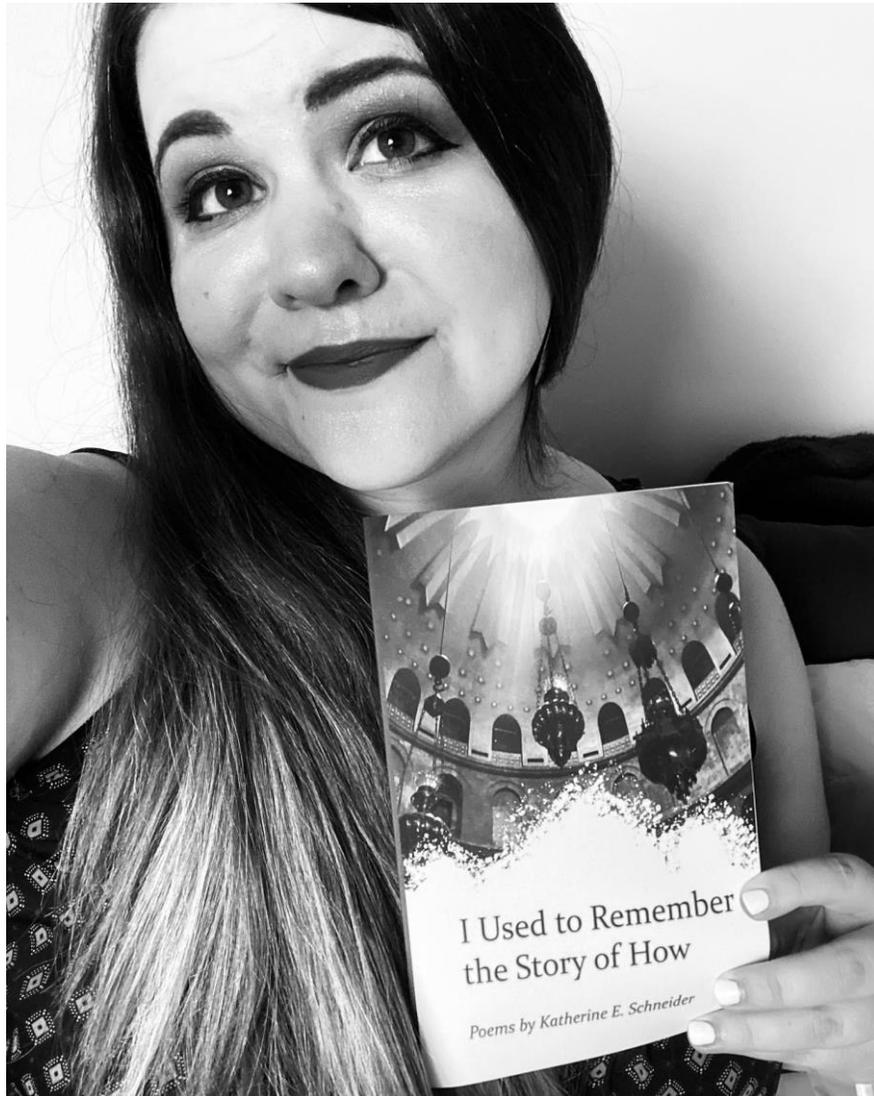
Katherine: When I first graduated from college, I was very lucky to get a job as a Managing Editorial Assistant at Random House in their audiobook department. Yet, over the four years I worked there— commuting to Manhattan on the train every day, and doing fairly silent work in a cubicle— I knew I needed to transition to people-oriented work.

In a way, ESL was always in me: I've always loved meeting people from other countries and cultures, and making them feel welcomed. I was also deeply disturbed by currents of xenophobia, prejudice, and racism, and wanted to have an active role and a job related to empowering and advocating for foreigners in the U.S.. My passion for language met with my passion for equity for adult immigrants and international students in the pursuit of becoming an adult ESL teacher.

Adjunct professor-type work is stressful and almost always uncertain, but fulfilling my dream of working as an adult ESL teacher has changed my life, and it has always been worth it.

Sally: Thank you so much, Katherine! Finally, can you imagine a life without poetry?

Katherine: A life without poetry? Such a thing does not exist!



Now, three of Katherine's poems...

GOD'S WORK IN TIME

My heart breaks open
cupped in my palms,
transfigures into cherry blossom flowers
blowing away in a shaft of sun.

Katherine E. Schneider

PRAYER AT 32

Save me from the sin of what
I thought I knew before
Save me from the sin of what
I thought was true before
Save me from the sin of what
I believed was right before
Forgive me for the pain of those
I hurt in ignorance before

Save me from the demagogue
Save me from the god of war
Save me from con artists
who swindled me before
Save me from the pharisees,
the tyrants, and the priests
Save me from the influence
of every sheep-clothed beast

Raise me with the little ones
Raise me with the weak
Raise me with the gentle ones,
the injured, and the meek
Tell those snakes we rise above
their violence and control
Tell their mob the torch and pitchfork
cannot pierce our souls

Katherine E. Schneider

TODAY

You looked up from your sulking
and felt a change.

You said,
today isn't about pain.

Look—death is defeated again—
you've opened up your eyes,

and the earth turns to the sun
which is waking the blue trail of night.

Things begin again—
The buses snort to life.

Each red-lit exit sign grows fainter
as lights flick on in restaurants,

and the sun glints off the breakfast silverware.

Katherine E. Schneider

