

Six poems by Kimberly L. Becker

Kimberly L. Becker is author of the poetry collections *Words Facing East*, *The Dividings* (WordTech), and *Flight* (forthcoming, MadHat Press). Her poems appear widely in journals and anthologies, including *IDK Magazine*, *Panoply*, and *Tending the Fire: Native Voices and Portraits*. She has held grants from MD, NC, and NJ and residencies at Hambidge, Weymouth, and Wildacres. Kimberly has read at venues such as The National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC and Wordfest and served as mentor for PEN America's Prison Writing and AWP's Writer to Writer programs. www.kimberlylbecker.com

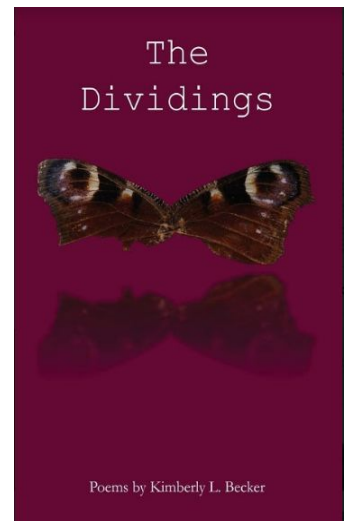
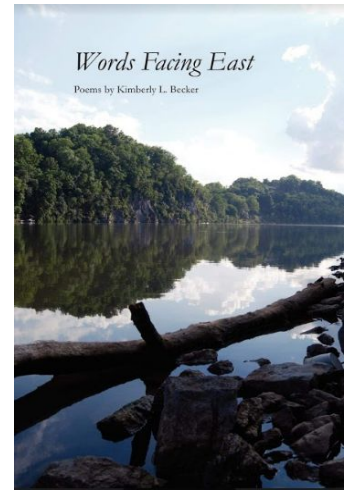
To introduce these six poems, Kimberley sent to *Siwar Mayu* this statement about her art, a powerful invitation for the younger generations:

“As a mixed race poet identifying Cherokee, I neither presume to speak for any sovereign nation nor identify with the dominant culture. I am undocumented and describe this experience in an essay for the upcoming anthology *Unpapered* co-edited by Diane Glancy and Linda Rodriguez.

My work is influenced by my attempts to honor my heritage through the study of language, culture, and history. I look to my literary elders and betters, such as the brilliant Allison Hedge Coke, who taught me to "hold the door open" for others and so I seek to give back where I can.

If, as Tillie Olsen wrote, "every woman who writes is a survivor" and if, as Audre Lorde wrote, "so we speak, knowing we were never meant to survive," then every writer of Native descent, documented or undocumented, is not only a survivor, but also a witness against the institutionalized racism still pervasive in this country. The Holocaust happened here, as well; Andrew Jackson's visage is on our currency and his portrait hangs in the Oval Office of our current corrupt president.

Thankfully we have Joy Harjo as Poet Laureate, the first Native American poet in that role, an important cultural corrective. Read the work of her and so many Native writers who are of the land and speak wisdom from ancestors who were here first. Raise up young writers. Hold the door open. Make your writing an offering. Pray. Praise what you can. Call out injustice when you see it. Call on the strength of generations of people who were never meant to survive, but have.”



“Language Classes,” “Morning Song,” “In the Purple and Blue of It,” “The Cherokee in Me”
© From *Words Facing East*. WordTech Editions, 2011.
“In Your Mind you Go to Water,” © *North Dakota Quarterly*.
“Copper” © From *Flight*. forthcoming MadHat Press.

LANGUAGE CLASS

written on Qualla Boundary; for C.M.

Little by little
we are reclaiming the words
Just as the land was once large,
so, too, our voice
Some words lost on the Trail
have been found
They lived hidden in baskets,
in pockets, in the very tassels of corn
(*Selu, Selu*)
Now the words live again
See? When I saw nogwo it is now,
both the now of then and the now
of not yet
The words work secret medicine
and strong, forming us
from the inside out
Language is our Magic Lake
we walk in limping with loss
and emerge wholly ourselves
When Cecilia speaks
she bears with her
the future of these sounds
Listen: her voice is soft, but sure

MORNING SONG

Birds wake and throw their songs against the world
I rise and add my morning song
nogwo sunale nigalsda
face East and pray into what sun there is
Battles are over
Defeat comes as a relief, suddenly
There is no more fight in me for you
who didn't fight for me
Birds settle on wires
unharmd by power within
They lift and fly formation in a sky that has no answer
except for clouds' iterations
Somewhere a bear is waking up
like the one whose prints I saw in snow
direct register
My dog put her nose into impressions resembling human handprints
My son carved a soapstone *yona* for me
that I placed by shards from Jerusalem and Manassah a friend gave me
from her dig
I don't feel like singing, my voice is choked with tears
gvyalielitse Yihowa
my heart has become like agate
cold and pointed planes
bones mineralize, why not the heart
defeat may be relief but it is grief all the same
All the things you feared, they have come true
still, song rises
still, red bud and dogwood
throw forth bloom
still, blackbird with red war paint
calls: *iyugwu*
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“Morning Song”: Facing East, a song of praise is offered in the morning. *Nogwo sunale nigalsda* (now morning has come). *Yona* (bear) *Gvyalielitse Yihowa* (I am thankful to you, God) *iyugwu* (Bring it)

## IN THE PURPLE AND BLUE OF IT

Walking the property  
In the late afternoon  
In the purple and blue of it  
The stand of pines  
Fairytale deepness  
Past the reservoir  
Crunching hulls of black walnuts  
Thinking:  
This is sacred ground  
My eyes devour the view  
That I like to claim as mine  
But know it's not, despite the deed  
When I return to the anxiety  
Of the city  
I will long for this land  
As a lover for the body of the beloved  
I will recall its voice  
The trickle of creek  
    call of hawks  
    rain as it comes up the valley  
I have seen mesas  
Great red tables  
Altars for sacrifice  
But it is these mountains  
I hold against the bruise of my heart  
The purple and blue  
Of their mothering forms  
  
Purple     and     blue

## THE CHEROKEE IN ME

Cleaning up the mess  
you left last night:  
the shot glass sticky with reproach,  
assorted plates and pots.

They scrub clean.  
Not so the words  
I can't expunge  
with sponge.

I put the things  
I can't right.  
Wipe down counters,  
table, stove,

all the while remembering I'd read  
that a Cherokee woman  
could set her man's belongings outside  
if she wanted him to leave.

I keep this up my sleeve.

## IN YOUR MIND YOU GO TO WATER

*There are still people who live on the land and do not objectify the Earth.  
The pain of the earth is their pain. —Eduardo Duran*

You were born with death within you  
Passed on in blood,  
trauma from prior generations, including the land  
You try explaining this to the doctor:  
the difference between pathology and blood memory  
He takes furtive notes,  
threatens dire consequences for noncompliance  
His kind have been trained to try to train our brains  
to eschew extremes of joy and pain,  
have tried to stable unbroken horses of our dreams  
while from the storehouse of memory  
comes knowledge of sacrifice, Selu and Tsali,  
and even now those willing to risk life  
by raising one if manyed voice in defense of sacred land  
But the white doctor writes on his white pad  
prescriptions for Lethan lethargy  
knowing docile people forget blood heritage,  
docile people won't rise up  
but rather acquiesce to colonizing "experts"  
In the office of the oppressor  
there is no room for voices and visions of elders  
Rain dances outside window frame  
In your mind you go to water, go to prayer  
in solidarity with other suffering survivors  
like your brave friend who said she'd take on the pain  
of the People if only she could protect them  
Goodbye, physician, who does harm first and last  
We'll swallow no more pills, no more lies  
Only pain prompts witness; anesthetization, apathy  
You were born with strength within you

## COPPER

My AIDS patient tells me that my hair, in the light, is the same color as his partner's, who is dead, but whose hair my patient cut and gave to his partner's mother after he had died, per his request, even though the mother hated and blamed her son's lover. My patient's partner wore a ponytail as I often do, but today my hair is loose and something about the glint of it has caused my patient's eyes to light up and he pronounces, *copper*, before explaining what he meant. I sit in silence in deference to his memory. *Not brown, but copper*, he reiterates with satisfaction and suddenly I feel anointed with something like a blessing by sharing even slimly in the love they knew. His face goes private for a moment, he closes his eyes and reaches to touch his graying, curling hair he has told his home health aide he wants to let grow long even though it makes bathing him take longer. I tell him he looks handsome with hair longer and he smiles. We sit in thought for our respective long-haired lovers, past and present. We talk about religion, all the shit that's in the Bible, who slept with whom or even murdered someone, and remember the old story about Samson and his hair, his strength, and somehow it's a comfort, not contrived or foisted on us, and we laugh and I hold his hand and he says he's glad I came. I'll cry later in the car but I also will remember *copper* and then recall how at a back-to-school-night my son's chemistry teacher showed us how copper burned with green



surprising flame and gave the reason for it,  
something I think to do with oxidation,  
but don't ask me for details, all I know  
is I was mesmerized by the seeming  
transformation and now, having heard  
my patient say *copper* for what I thought  
was basic brown, I am reminded that  
in the light and chemistry of love  
we see the brightest in each other  
and even a penny, next to worthless,  
can exhibit a patina the color  
of lichen on stone and turns out lichen  
is not a single organism but  
a partnership or symbiosis  
and through my patient's one word copper,  
he has generated worlds of memory,  
connection and truth and even though his body  
is failing in its strength against a stronger lion,  
his spirit is arrayed and shines with light.

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR



Paul M Worley is Associate Professor of Global Literature at Western Carolina University. He is the author of *Telling and Being Told: Storytelling and Cultural Control in Contemporary Yucatec Maya Literatures* (2013; oral performances recorded as part of this book project are available at [tsikbalichmaya.org](http://tsikbalichmaya.org)), and with Rita M Palacios is co-author of the forthcoming *Unwriting Maya Literature: Ts'ïib as Recorded Knowledge* (2019). He is a Fulbright Scholar, and 2018 winner of the Sturgis Leavitt Award from the Southeastern Council on Latin American Studies. In addition to his academic work, he

has translated selected works by Indigenous authors such as Hubert Malina, Adriana López, and Ruperta Bautista, serves as editor-at-large for México for the journal of world literature in English translation, *Asymptote*, and as poetry editor for the *North Dakota Quarterly*.