

# The Power of Words: An Interview With Poet Holly Lyn Walrath

By David E. Cowen, Bram Stoker Nominated Author of *Bleeding Saffron* (Weasel Press 2018)

Holly Lyn Walrath, a fellow Houstonian, is a poet, editor, educator, publisher, essayist, blogger and so much more. Holly Lyn Walrath holds a Bachelor's degree in English from the University of Texas and a Master's in Creative Writing from Denver University. Holly had been a juried poet for the prestigious Houston Poetry Fest. Holly's chapbook *Glimmerglass*



*Girl* (Finishing Line Press, 2018) was awarded the SFPA's Elgin Award for best speculative poetry chapbook. Her first full volume of poetry, *The Smallest of Bones*, will be published this year by the Stoker-awarded CLASH Books. She teaches with Writespace, a Houston-based literary nonprofit, and is the Managing Editor of Interstellar Flight Press, a science fiction and fantasy small press. At Rice University, she is the coordinator for the Religious Studies Review, a quarterly review of publications across the entire field of religion and related disciplines. One key facet of

Holly's writing is her use of words and the emotional power she places with them.

**Q: The diversity of your work and projects is so deep. You stand in the position of being an author, editor and publisher. How do you think these roles have changed or matured the way you write, especially poetry?**

A: I'm supremely lucky to lead a life immersed in books. I started Interstellar Flight Press (IFP) after my father passed away in 2017. I had wanted to start a publishing adventure for years but something held me back. My father had Parkinson's disease and became nonverbal for the last few years of his life. It made me realize how important words and communication are to me. That spurred me to finally take the dive and become a publisher, which was a logical choice after freelance editing. I love juggling multiple roles because I'm never bored. Collaborating with other authors inspires my own writing and deepens my writing practice because I learn while I edit.

**Q: As a publisher what types and forms of poetry most interest you? Are there certain topics or themes that you have found yourself drawn to?**

A: At IFP, we love anything speculative but particularly works that intersect with topics of cultural criticism. Our

goal is to publish marginalized voices and genres. We're one of very few SFF publishers of chapbooks (poetry collections under 40 pages). I'm interested in experimental forms and work that defies genre. An example is our new chapbook, *Field Guide to Invasive Species of Minnesota* by Amelia Gorman. It's part field guide, part poetry. For that book, I created illustrations to pair with each poem from old public domain nature guides. I like works that acknowledge the book not only as text but also as object.

**Q: In 2018 you were awarded the Elgin Award for Best Speculative Chapbook by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association for *Glimmerglass Girl*. That win had to certainly be rewarding. The focus of the chapbook, as you described in your introduction, “is a fantastical account of womanhood.” There is such bitter sweetness in your verse in that volume. In the poem *Behind the Glass* there is a story of the truth of relationships that tears away schoolgirl fantasy. In that piece you declare “We live in a world/of unfulfilled fairytales.” In the poem *She Learns How to Disappear* you give us a woman who longs for escape from what may either be a horrible relationship or even just a bad life. The woman “memorizes little spaces she could hide in” to find refuge from her agony” seeking**

**the empyrean sky with its open space  
where she could be a splinter in the expanse**

**fold up like an origami swan  
tuck her face under her wing, blasphemed.  
This one thing is clear—she knows  
one more day is purgatory.**

**These are powerful and heart wrenching images. What was the genesis of this volume. Your introduction also suggests that there was a lot of you in this work. Can you share any of that with us?**

A: All my poems are devastatingly personal in some way. In *Glimmerglass Girl*, I explored womanhood and femininity as a foundation for the speculative. The title poem is about the glass winged butterfly, which looks extremely delicate, but is poisonous to predators. Women are often taught to be delicate, but inside we hold real fierceness. What makes a woman a monster and what makes a woman a woman? I see that book as a jumping off point for my latest book, which deals with gender on a bone-deep level. I feel like my work is always interrogating systems and standards.

**Q: You have been very active with a Houston non-profit called Writespace. What types of courses have you enjoyed teaching the most? Are there courses such as those you taught at Writespace you believe aspiring speculative poets would find of benefit?**

A: I started volunteering with Writespace in 2014 because I was looking for other writers for advice. Houston happens to have one of the best SFF communities in Texas. I've taught a variety of classes at Writespace including a class on speculative poetry where we discuss what speculative poetry is and read works by Neil Gaiman and Mary Soon Lee as an example. We have some fall classes that will be available very soon! Other than Writespace. I also teach with Poetry Barn and this October I'll be teaching an online class all about speculative poetry.

**Q:When I get the opportunity, I love to plug the Houston writing community. Many folks in the HWA seem shocked that Houston has such a large and vibrant community. I think this comes partly from “cow town” and “oil town” stereotypes. But there are so many people and groups in this community. Of course, the University of Houston’s Creative Writing Degree program is one of the best in the US. What thoughts can you share with the HWA community about the Houston writing and arts scene? Has, in your opinion, being in Houston furthered your career both in what you have accomplished and inspiration for your work?**

A: Along with the places you mentioned, Houston is also home to the award-winning Inprint Margaret Root Brown reading series, Write About Now? open mic for slam poets,

and many other writing groups. There is a thriving SFF scene with new writers cropping up every year. What's particularly unique to Houston is the existence of art/writing crossovers in collaboration with Houston's world-renowned visual art world, such as Words & Art, an ekphrastic writing group. If I'd never moved to Houston, I would have never met my critique group, which has been going on for several years (and several years before I arrived!)

**Q: Your small press, Interstellar Flight Press, has certainly established itself quickly. Interstellar Flight Magazine, a publication of your press, published an essay by Bram Stoker winning poet Christina Sng which was nominated for the 2020 Bram Stoker for Short Nonfiction. Such a great accomplishment. What poetry volumes are in the works from that press? Do you have any non-fiction publications related to speculative poetry in the works?**

A: We have several forthcoming poetry titles in 2021. I'm particularly excited about Amelia Gorman's *Field Guide to Invasive Species of Minnesota*, an illustrated chapbook of eco-apocalypse poems that's formatted like an actual field guide. It's a poetic journey into the strange and wonderful world known previously only to the wild.

Also, forthcoming this year is Brandon O'Brien's hip hop meets Lovecraft chapbook, *Can You Sign My Tentacle?* which flips the eldritch genre upside down. Lovecraftian-inspired nightmares are reversed as O'Brien asks readers to see Blackness as radically significant. It's a conversation piece and a book that questions the horror canon.

We're also working on our Best of Interstellar Flight Magazine Year 2 anthology, which will feature all of our 2020 Alternate Endings flash fictions by writers of color.

As for nonfiction about speculative poetry, I would love to see that in our inbox! We're accepting nonfiction book proposals for all speculative genres.

**Q: Clearly your poetry falls under the “speculative poetry” umbrella with elements of science fiction, fantasy and horror. I saw in one interview that you at some point associated yourself with the “Weird” a genre that H.P. Lovecraft, Robert Howard and Clark Ashton Smith are often credited with originating? Are there any “Weird” poets that you consider influential to your work? Do you still consider the “Weird” to be a strong influence?**

A: I'm redefining the weird genre because that terminology no longer stands with contemporary

speculative poetry, in my opinion. To me, writing weird means writing outside of or on the margins of genre and inhabiting a liminal space—whether that means you’re a person who doesn’t feel at home on one side of the so-called boundaries or the other, or you’re a writer who is asking the speculative world to reconsider whether those boundaries are necessary as all. The New Weird breaks down borders.

**Q: Your work on the Religious Studies Review intrigues. How did this assignment come to be? Was it hard to cross over from speculative poetry and fiction to academic religious studies? Have your personal works influenced or heightened your work for that journal?**

A: I was a freelance editor for many years but became interested in the academic world of journals as a way of expanding my experience. My role at Rice is a coordinator of the journal—so I get to work with over 30 editors from across the globe who review over 1,000 books in religious studies a year. It was a natural transition to move from working with authors to working with editors and I think the work the journal is doing is necessary and important, because reviews are the lifeblood of the literary world.

**Q: I try to ask this of every poet I have interviewed. Poets I have met often fall into two camps. Some claim**

**only to write when inspired. When the moment or the “Muse” takes them. Others, tell me they are methodical, writing every single day for some set time, perhaps even working on a goal of writing so many poems per day or week. How do you approach your writing, both in determining what to write about and the form of expression you will choose for your piece?**

**A:** I used to be far more disciplined, ha. I used to write a poem most every day or so, sitting down to write in the morning and not getting up until I had some words on the page. These days, I’m so busy that I rarely have time for that. Instead, I try to grab whatever time I have in the week. I’m in a stage in my editing career where that takes precedence, and I get to work with so many talented writers that I’m constantly inspired. Reading the work of other writers has always been my jumping off point. I feel like if you’re ever at a loss for words, all you have to do is pick up a new book and you’ll be transported. The thing with writing is there are going to be ebb and flow periods in your life—and that’s okay.

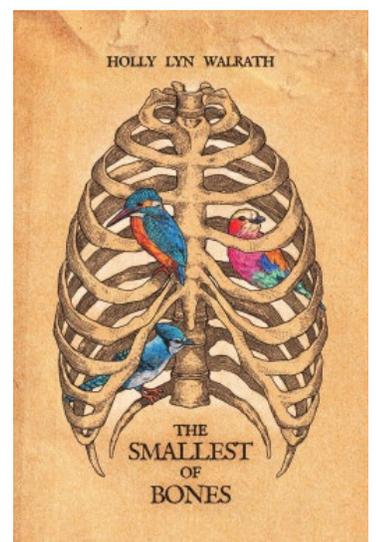
**Q:** As a follow up to the previous question, and one I often repeat, deals with the avoidance of cliché in speculative poetry. I do not see your work falling into that trap. There is a crisp freshness to your use of words and images. What advice can you give the fledging poet on how to use archetypes without resorting to cliché?

## **How do you write dark poetry without imitating the poets that inspired you to write dark poetry?**

A: One practice is to try building a word bank of interesting words to draw from. This can be a list or spreadsheet or a word map, where you start with one interesting word and free-associate other words that are related to it.

There is always going to be imitation because the very art of writing a poem is imitation of all the people who've come before you and decided what a poem IS and what it means. The key is to get beyond imitation into putting your own unique stamp on a trope or archetype. This is what I call finding your own voice. Mary Oliver refers to it as "writing memorably" and it's perhaps the hardest part of writing. The thing is, imitation can get you a long way, and it can be a valuable exercise. I'm all for it.

**Q: You certainly have to be excited over your upcoming full collection of poems, *The Smallest of Bones*, to be published by Clash Books later this year. I have been very impressed with the loving support that the folks, especially Leza Cantoral, its Editor in Chief, give to poetry. Tell us about how this book came about and your experience working with the folks at Clash Books.**



A: I started writing *The Smallest of Bones* as a series of tiny poems as a challenge—to write small, concentrated pieces. It evolved into an exploration of body acceptance and gender unacceptance. I started submitting it without any real idea of who might want it or where it might end up. I was absolutely blown away when CLASH accepted it, because Leza’s editorial eye is fantastic. Leza is doing a lot of similar work of breaking down genres. All their books are worth supporting.

**Q: *The Smallest of Bones* features sections of poems divided by various bones in the body: cranium, mandible, sternum, sacrum, spine, calcaneus and temporal. Within each section is a set of poems that are connected with that theme. Each section begins with a description of the named bone and how the bone is often involved in physical abuse of women. The opening section on the cranium notes that anthropologists once argued that because male cranium bones were thicker it meant that females were inferior. Sometimes, of course, science isn’t science. You end that discussion with “The skull and its bones may form our facial expressions, but they cannot form who we are.” Under the section entitled “Mandible” you describe “Fractures of this bone are the most common in cases of domestic violence. The fist is a favorite tool for assaults.” That introduction jars the reader. In your**

introduction to the “Spine” after discussing spinal injuries from abuse, you ask “Maybe we should stop looking for men as partners.” The poems in these sections are short, almost haiku in nature. Your words mix brutality with sensuality; the binary nature of life and relationships. Then on occasion there is a softness, as if perhaps love is not all exploitation or abuse:

*no one else will remember  
the soft way you sleep  
when you are gone*

*so I will tell your ghost*

*who stands on my side of the bed  
and kisses my hair as I sleep*

In another set of poems, you describe a macabre Cinderella being groomed by the ghosts of dead birds

*the skeleton birds came in the morning  
waking, they all out to me  
land on my arms like feeble longing  
groom my hair, whisper in my ear*

The Disneyesque fantasy of the story rings differently in this light doesn't it? How did the concept for this volume develop? Were all the poems written for the

**bone themes or where they collected? How did you decide to interpret each section with the poems?**

A: What a close reading, thank you! I wrote the tiny poems first and then knitted them together into sections. A discerning reader might notice that the table of contents actually forms its own poem. I needed poems to divide the parts, so I settled on the bone poems that form the spine of the book through using found text from old anatomy books and Wikipedia entries on bones. After I'd rewritten those poems several times, they no longer resembled the found text. The idea for the bone poems came from the concept of neurosexism—the idea that researchers and scientists apply gender to the study of the brain (How are women and men's brains different?). I noticed the same is true for bones.

I think the process of coming to terms with my own gender, relationships, and relationship with love shaped a lot of these poems. We all grow up learning to love ourselves and to love others. Sometimes both of those relationships are violent. When we're lucky, we find a way to love ourself and to love someone else without pain.

As for the Disney references, well, I'm a 90s child. If I can get a Disney reference in there, I'm happy, because I think we're all hyper-aware of Disney's double-edged sword of

fantasy—one that asks women to be both princesses and victims.

**Q: The title of the volume, *The Smallest of Bones*, is interesting. The particular bones mentioned in the book are not necessarily small when compared to others but I sense something much deeper than dimensional difference in the description. What meaning did you place with the title and how does it set the themes of the volume?**

A: The title comes from this poem in the book:

*you say*

*the smallest of bones  
is a part of the hammer in your ear*

*love is a heartbreak you can hear*

But I also was amused by the title because the poems are in themselves “small bones” metaphorically—a small skeleton for a book of poems.

**Q: What is next for you? Are you working on any new volumes or even scholarly works relating to speculative poetry we should be looking for?**

A: I am currently working on a series of 90s queer speculative poems (in one poem I meet Princess Di in drag and she tells me all about her adventures with Freddy Mercury). I would love to write a book on speculative poetry. Maybe one day? Ha.

My next workshop will be all about speculative poetry. It starts in October at the Poetry Barn ([poetrybarn.co](http://poetrybarn.co)).

**Please share with us a few of your favorite pieces:**

**Dear Future,**

It's important that you read this slowly. You'll need words where you are, strong ones that defy argument—you'll be tired of arguing. We were. After the hills crumbled and oceans dried up, we crawled down to the depths we had never plumbed, the deepest secret places of the earth, and we learned there are no secrets after all. The moon came close to us—when it fell it was merely a thin slice of white, as we had suspected all along. It got stuck on a skyscraper for just a moment before flattening the city.

You arrived before we could get eight hours of sleep a night or finish our to-do lists. We craved you like Vicodin. Your budding pink starlight apocalypses. There are so many beautiful moments we let go wrong. We were so certain. Did you know, while you waited wherever you came from,

how silent we could be as we lay down before you? Did you know yourself even then? At least we have this to leave you.

Look, we don't have any good advice, just to say that we're sorry. It's important to apologize to the people you've harmed. Say yes a lot but say no when you need to. Eat organic. Give more than you take. We realize these are platitudes, but there's always a little kernel of truth in the words of the past, isn't there?

We hope you've found an answer to the questions we never knew to ask. These were crimes committed for you, in your name. Don't keep our monuments; we don't want them anymore.

Love, Your past

(First appeared in Star\*Line Issue 43.3, Summer 2020)

## **Acacia**

*Use to anoint torches and consecrate hope chests. Endows protection as well as psychic and mystical powers. If planted inside a fairy ring, it will bring prosperity to the closest home. If burned, it creates a hypnotic state that is often perilous.*

I am crafting my worry like it is love,  
but when you leave me I feel only hollow.  
We just need to get through this paycheck  
and make it to the next, then we can buy  
you some medicine and stop stealing it  
off of trucks parked by the pharmacy.  
I send you off to work knowing the tumor  
is growing in your mind like a bad thought  
and I wonder if it will squeeze away all  
your memories of me and the time we've had  
together. Will you forget all the hope  
we stored in open jars to let rot?  
Will you forget the song you used to sing to me  
before bed with my knees curled up on your belly  
and your head touching mine like a lullaby?  
I don't know. But I send you to work anyway.  
Knowing you might come back empty.  
If there was a spell to keep you safe,  
I'd cast it.

(First appeared in *Liminality: A Magazine of Speculative Poetry*, Issue #24 - Summer 2020)

## **Daughters Saving Mothers**

I keep her in the hope chest  
and when I come home she presses  
her lips to the keyhole and asks

are you holy? are you harmless?  
her body is a ring, her mouth  
clamped around her ankles  
acid teeth slowly devouring skin  
and bone from sinew  
and I promised I would save her  
so I go out into the ashfall  
and inquire of gold sellers  
snake charmers, dumpling carts  
do you know a way to save my mother?  
I'm asking all the wrong questions.  
am I like her  
the men wipe their hands on towels  
and listen with kind blue eyes  
shaking their heads sadly  
and I shrug farther into my coat  
where the red ash forms a line on my skin  
will I be like her  
I don't feel any urge to suck my toes  
my teeth are ground flat, I chew  
on my lips until they bleed  
in alleyways I give men a quick kiss  
for the next piece to the puzzle  
I knew a woman with the disease,  
once  
they say before they hold me  
I come home empty-handed  
I pull her, slippery and heavy onto my lap

I want to lock her away like a secret  
and throw away the key  
but I can't, I won't  
I love her like I love myself  
In the shower, red swirls of ash  
Our World isn't long for itself  
I curl up in the porcelain tub  
and sleep under the water  
wasteful, wasteful, she would chide  
there comes a day when I crave flesh  
no, need it, want it, don't care how  
am I her or is she me  
I don't let her see the man I bring home  
I twitch the blanket over the hope chest  
kick it into the closet  
and make the choice she wasn't  
able to make, for she was braver than I  
and I keep looking for ways to save her  
even when her mouth is at her waist  
and so little of her remains  
soon I will be the only reminder  
of the devourer we've become

(First appeared in *Liminality: A Magazine of Speculative Poetry*, Issue #23 – Spring 2020)

From *The Smallest of Bones*:

## **Cranium**

The cranium, or skull, supports bony structures of the face, creating a cavity for the brain and shielding it from injury. The bones of the skull are linked together by sutures, small joints formed by bony ossification. At birth, the skull is made of 44 separate bones which fuse together as the body develops. Anthropologists used to argue that the brain of the female sex was similar to that of an animal. Women were emotional. Less rational than men. Women's brains were analogous to infants. Inferior. The male of the species has skulls that are, by contrast, heavier. The bone is thicker. By analyzing the key features of the skull of a dead person, a conclusion can be drawn regarding sex, but not gender. The skull and its bones may form our facial expressions, but they cannot form who we are.

if you strip me down to my bones  
am I yours?

there are few places left  
that man has not touched

we square cities, parks  
but long for wildness

let us not assign  
too much power  
to the virgins

buildings have ghosts  
but so do trees

where the demon's tongue  
is rough like a cat's  
how I strain against it

I told the demon I loved you  
she stood over the water  
and whispered a word—  
brought down the mountain

what is a demon anyway  
but a flushed girl  
with ocean eyes

poured heat over my skin

like bleach  
there were graces I wanted to say over  
your body  
but there was nothing left for me  
to pray

you say

the smallest of bones  
is a part of the hammer in your ear

love is a heartbreak you can hear

god doesn't interest me  
only other worlds than this

if I am trapped in hell  
I will miss you most

we are the tree burning  
afterwards, there is nothing  
left of us but black ash

sea fog haunts me  
like memory  
stealing over the bay

what is the price of water?

I sink myself in the river at dawn  
your words are the stones  
in my pockets

sunlight is a eulogy  
for the way we once were  
all tangled up together at night

I was the moon peeking  
through your window  
watching you sleep  
memorizing your stripped body

I wanted to eat your dreams  
when I die, you say  
donate my body to science  
so kids can pull on my nerves

take my ashes up like paste  
warmed by your skin  
rub me across your hands

the clouds are wild in the sky  
I want to hold you between my teeth  
what would you say to some foreplay  
loud and vibrating like the cicadas  
slick around your golden boy hips

at the top of the mountain  
we collapse, lungs grasping,  
into the graves of moths

ask me, where is your wild woman?

I shot her in the face

She's wandering the valley

of my ribs  
skull turned inside out

we made love in the snow  
layers of puffy material between us  
looking up at the dark mirror of the sky

the thing I miss most about our world is the stars

## **Holly Walrath**

Holly Lyn Walrath's poetry and short fiction has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Fireside Fiction*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, *Liminality*, and elsewhere. She is the author of the chapbooks *Glimmerglass Girl* (Finishing Line Press, 2018), *Numinose Lapidari* (in Italian, Kipple Press, 2020), and *The Smallest of Bones* (Clash Books, 2021). She holds a B.A. in English from The University of Texas and a Master's in Creative Writing from the University of Denver. She is a freelance editor and host of *The Weird Circular*, an e-newsletter for writers containing submission calls and writing prompts.