



Bryan Penberthy was raised near Leavenworth, Kansas, and currently lives in Charleston, South Carolina. In 2000, while an undergraduate at Kansas State University, he was selected as an Associated Writing Programs (AWP) Intro Award winner in poetry. He also received the Lamb Memorial Scholarship from KSU, given every two years to the outstanding student in the creative writing department.

In 2003 Penberthy completed an MFA at Purdue University, where he received the Leonard Neufeldt Award for his work. During his time at Purdue, he served as Poetry Editor for Sycamore Review.

Penberthy's first book, *Lucktown*, won the National Poetry Review book prize and will be published in 2007. His poetry has appeared in many journals, including *Crazyhorse*, *ACM*, *West Branch*, *Bat City Review*, and *River Styx*, and has appeared online in *Blackbird* and *Verse Daily*.

Sleeptown

Places like this aren't invented.
The cold, industrial polish of this city
skews light, and what it reflects

it returns badly. Splitting the landscape,
an obsidian river carves
silhouettes of brush and rocks, banks strewn with mica

and quartz shards, pale smoke frozen
in crystal. A storm-split oak arcs into
bridge-lit water, a coral

reef suspended in dandelion wine. The trees
and half-illuminated
buildings seem submerged.

I know so little
about things that matter. How
to be a good man. Why rivers are constantly

moving, apparently toward
ends that mean completion. Whether, drinking
their waters, I would forget

these twilights—the smell of wet brick and broken pines,
indigo and sapphire-troubled
skies—or drown. My distracted heart beats codes

I'm unable to translate.
The only ritual I know how to perform
is rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

Big Sky Dust Jamboree

The frying pan girls are dancing
on the splintered steps of the bandstand,
thin fingers gesturing at rain.
They are overflowing
with wet smiles.

Some kids stroke the smooth back
of a drowned rat with branches,
pushing it against the swamped
gutter drain, to which it
sticks like a promise.

Out past the paper mill,
the river is still receding,
clogged with the white mass
of clotting pulp which worms
southward, away from
the drowned place.

We have never felt
so quiet.



Bryan Penberthy

Distinguished Kansas Poet

• [E-mail](#)

How We Breathe

Cloud-scrimmed Kansas,
dogwood near my window—shadows in the branches move and fall
in unpredictable sweeps,

slipping the weight of rain. Yesterday's storm flooded our streets,
gutterwash cresting sidewalks
and pouring through the muddy access roads I drove looking

for you. A shroud
of willow branches sway and fade against the sky's elliptic blue
dusk. All cloud is still.

Fireflies catch in the leaves, their phosphorescent messages
shorting out, breathing
in their way. Watching, I can almost remember how we kept our lungs filling,

giving in to instinct,
to the thousand cages that memory and its cracked bottles
full of hand-built galleons, offer.

All poetry on this page
Copyright © by Bryan Penberthy, 2007