

BORDERLINE FORTUNE by **Teresa K. Miller**
Penguin Publishes National Poetry Series–Winning Collection
on Personal and Environmental Trauma



Borderline Fortune is a meditation on intangible family inheritance—of unresolved intergenerational conflicts and traumas in particular—set against the backdrop of our planetary inheritance as humans. As glaciers melt and species go extinct, Teresa K. Miller asks what we owe one another and how we echo our ancestors’ grief and fear. Drawing on her family history, from her great-grandfather’s experience as a schoolteacher on an island in the Bering Strait to her father’s untimely death, as well as her pursuit of regenerative horticulture, Miller seeks through these beautifully crafted poems to awaken from the intergenerational trance. She bears witness to our current moment with clarity and attention, “refusing the mind’s limits” (Carol Muske-Dukes).

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A graduate of Barnard College and the Mills College MFA program, Teresa K. Miller is the author of *sped* (Sidebrow) and *Forever No Lo* (Tarpaulin Sky) as well as co-editor of *Food First: Selected Writings from 40 Years of Movement Building* (Food First Books). Her poems and essays have appeared in *ZYZZYVA*, *AlterNet*, *Entropy*, *DIAGRAM*, and elsewhere. Originally from Seattle, she is a former union organizer and special education teacher as well as a lifetime member of the Girl Scouts. She is invested in practical ways to promote food justice and fight climate change, including as steward to a mini orchard in Clackamas County, Oregon, site of three historic weather emergencies over the past year.



Praise for *Borderline Fortune* (Penguin, Oct. 5, 2021)

“Full of meditative and sharp lyric moments, these poems are alive with complexity and critique. Acoustically, they enact the swell and crash of water: ‘the wish/ you’d unwhisper,’ ‘friction/ on the flint.’ Thematically, they prod the undercurrents of society and the expectations of American life....These are valuable, urgent poems of witness.” —**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**

“Miller’s **greatest success in the field to date**....For most readers of poetry, Miller will be a **new and invigorating voice**, fully conversant with the ambiguities of our present day.”

—**LIBRARY JOURNAL**

“*Borderline Fortune* is a poetry book with a voice in a dying world.” —**NPR’s Bookworm**

“Though short, these poems haunt at length.” —**THE OREGONIAN**

“**I’m so impressed with this new book**, with the condensation of syntax, the music, the interior rhyme and off-rhyme, echoey sequences, and **the ethical and aesthetic insistence on a lack of resolution**. I’m fascinated by the way the ‘you’ to whom so many of the poems are directed begins to take on aspects of a landscape. In fact, all through the book, the nonhuman and the human seem to be merging. W. S. Merwin implied that elegy is always written for someone who can’t read it, but **Miller’s poems suggest that elegy is a modality that can conjure presence again and that the poem resurrects the dead** in some sense.” —**FORREST GANDER, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, on *Borderline Fortune* at the Montana Book Festival**

“Teresa K. Miller explores startling territories in *Borderline Fortune*. She addresses the lines we’ve drawn and erased for centuries on the earth, which conform to the borders we cross and uncross in the mind. Yet: ‘I’m asking you to believe in what you’ve never seen or heard,’ she writes, refusing the mind’s limits. Here is the dark power of climate change where she finds ‘the future all danger, heat, & scarcity.’ **Blake, Dickinson, and Hopkins’ Terrible Sonnets hover** (‘birds build—but not I build’), above trees cut down and hope with feathers. The damage done to the earth echoes the damages to the protean mind of the poet—but **Miller remains radiantly elusive, an escape artist in these marvelous poems of altered terra firma and revelation**.” —**CAROL MUSKE-DUKES, former California poet laureate**

“In *Borderline Fortune*, Teresa K. Miller claws her way to and through her subject—loss in the form of ‘shrapnel and good intention.’ Awareness: It’s a hard journey. The human voice calls in ragged gasps, how did we get here? But unlike Rumi who blithely says, ‘Whoever brought me here will have to take me home,’ Miller’s voice has been dragged to this shore and pressed under. To write is to imagine, and Miller discovers in the going, in the moment when we remember that ‘every river had a first day to flow.’ **Through Miller’s poems, we are given that first day, no matter what comes after**.” —**DAVID ROMTVEDT, National Poetry Series-winning author of *A Flower Whose Name I Do Not Know* and *Dilemmas of the Angels***

“The poems in Teresa K. Miller’s *Borderline Fortune* emphasize the greater context of our existence as individuals, as family members, and as cultures. Miller mines family as a construct, whether naturally related or collected. She interrogates relationships with the lens of a geologist,

exploring the physical, chemical, and biological properties of the gravitational fields that pull us together and the elements that erode us. **The poems in *Borderline Fortune* are so sharply crafted, they serve as the pick and axe that dig deep into the granite of the past and shape a world created from the knowledge and the mythology Miller has extracted.**

—ELMAZ ABINADER, author of *This House, My Bones* and cofounder of VONA

“*Borderline Fortune* feels like a book that was written to save oneself, to enact through poetry a means of salvation. Teresa K. Miller weaves together transcendent astonishments, precise images of the natural world, histories of horrors still present in the land, & personal revelations as intimate as bruises, weaving them into a single, entangled whole. ***Borderline Fortune* is not a book that solves a problem, but a book that creates a net, a thing made of both solidity & gaps, open enough to be pulled through the dangers, strong enough to haul a body up to the air.** This salvation happens in the reading, how the reader creates the net along with the poem, hand-in-hand, each one pulling the other to the surface, ceaselessly, with every memory of beauty & of grief. The book is a reminder that salvation is an ongoing work, for, as Miller writes, ‘In the end, there was no end.’” —MATHIAS SVALINA, creator of the Dream Delivery Service and author of *The Wine-Dark Sea*

“In the sweeping expanses of *Borderline Fortune*, Teresa K. Miller grapples with the complexity of inheritance, the complicated legacies of family, history, and place. What created us, and what do we in turn create? How closely twined are belonging and betrayal? Here, history, identity, and the natural world meet and merge: ‘a riven nausea in the cambium, / some needle-leaved private anguish.’ Geography itself is sentient and responsive: ‘lies twine into granite, brine / into mineral creatures made of lace.’ **In the end, the poems form a landscape we must immerse ourselves in, their movement as dark and unpredictable as the ocean or tectonic plates, and their story one we don’t navigate as much as survive:** ‘Haul / yourself out, / one frozen leg at a time.’” —LAURA WALKER, author of *swarm lure* and *psalmbook*

Praise for *sped* (Sidebrow, 2013)

“Weaving these individual threads into a single plait, Miller’s form highlights her expansive entanglements, as well as her singular focused journey through mourning. ... **What a gripping debut** Sidebrow Books in San Francisco has recently released.”

—KATRINA ROBERTS, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

“In *sped*’s last units, when many of the themes of the book begin to be drawn together, **you learn that you have absorbed the fragments and made them whole inside you** without fully knowing it.”

—DENNIS JAMES SWEENEY, *Tarpaulin Sky*



Praise for *Forever No Lo* (Tarpaulin Sky, 2008)

“Miller’s elderly woman on a bus, salutation to a love one, and Iraq War carnage described above all fit together so eerily well—so well that Miller’s implicit suggestion is that these consciousnesses and events not only can belong together, they can be and really are fused. More so than through simple webs of causality, Miller’s chosen events are so compacted they become *interior to* each other, already dependent in this new arrangement. ... **Miller’s *Forever No Lo* is a sleeper success—wide reaching and bold.**”

—HAINES EASON, *American Book Review*

Shelter in Place, Season 2, Episode 12: *Borderline Fortune*

Interview with Laura Joyce Davis, December 10, 2020

Teresa K. Miller has known success and rejection, highs and lows, both in writing and in life. In an articulate and honest conversation, she talks about what poetry can teach us, and why success and awards aren’t the main thing.



Featured episode: ShelterInPlacePodcast.info/episodes

Excerpt (Teresa K. Miller speaking):

When my father was killed, the kid who killed him was 17, and the DA wanted to try him as an adult. And my mom and I persuaded them not to. So he was tried as a juvenile instead, and he had a very small sentence as a result. We knew from experience with a family member who was wrongfully incarcerated for almost seven years that there’s no restoration that comes from imprisonment, particularly for a 17-year-old. What is left to him but misconduct? If his adult life begins in prison, what is left to him? We never really let people serve their time. For the rest of his life, he would have trouble getting housing, getting jobs, but we somehow expect him to learn a lesson and become a productive member of society.

What will we do with what we know about how we've behaved or how our ancestors behaved? How can we make amends in a way that isn't about domination or revenge? I think so much of what's happening right now politically is coming from just such a limited toolkit. It's about one side dominating the other side. And even the idea that there are only two sides is so artificial, right? At some point we're just going to have to be willing to model alternative ways of interacting in the world, some way of finding common interests rather than defending positions. **I'm talking about something that transcends the debate that we're having right now, where we could think more expansively and more creatively about how to move forward.** Because the old way is not working.

ΦBK Author Wins 2020 National Poetry Series

Bilal Siddiq, *The Key Reporter*, November 12, 2020

Teresa K. Miller, born and raised in Seattle, Washington, is making a lasting mark in the world of poetry and literature. Selected as a winner of the 2020 National Poetry Series by former California Poet Laureate Carol Muske-Dukes for her book *Borderline Fortune* (Penguin, 2021), Miller now finds herself among the company of true giants of the field. **Past winners include former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins and fellow ΦBK member Joshua Bennett.**

Writing has always been Miller's career at heart. Recalling her youth, Miller remarked "I've wanted to write for as long as I could remember. ... Saying I wanted to be a writer seemed as natural as a teacher or a firefighter." Miller's interest in writing evolved from a myriad of sources. Growing up, she was exposed to a cousin who had authored multiple novels with major publishers. Her research methods she credits to her late father, a genealogist with a keen eye for meticulous detail. While attending Centrum's writing program for students, which she completed no less than seven times, Miller would also frequent Copper Canyon Press and was able to take week-long workshops taught by accomplished authors such as National Poetry Series winner David Romtvedt and Guggenheim Fellowship recipient Matthew Stadler. Even her elementary school, by focusing heavily on creative writing and having a half day dedicated to the task each week, played an important role in nurturing her fledgling interest in writing.

With such a strong foundation, her latest accolade as a winner of the 2020 National Poetry Series is, while astounding, not wholly unexpected. **Before this selection, Miller's work had already been garnering quite a bit of attention. Two of her previous submissions, *sped* (2013) and a collection titled *California Building*, had both made it to the finalist stage.** Miller has also written for multiple journals and received the Mills Alumnae Scholarship toward her MFA.

At Barnard College, where she became a member of Phi Beta Kappa, Miller majored in history and minored in environmental science. She remarked that the decision not to major in English and even minor in the sciences has enabled her to "enjoy crossing between the worlds and, in particular, finding where they offer fruitful conversations." Her background gives her work a unique flavor as she writes not only poetry, but also analyzes current issues through the eyes of a historian and the words of a poet. A recent example of this delicate and elegant interplay

includes her piece “laid bare,” which briefly covers her thoughts on the turmoil in America brought to a head by George Floyd’s death.

Delving into her literary journey, Miller commented that there is an “inherent tension in academia between scholarship and creative work,” but credited her liberal arts education with providing her the realization that this tension, while existent, need not be antagonistic. **Miller believes that “the deepest understanding of our human experience comes through the intersections of seemingly disparate approaches.”** The interdisciplinary nature of her studies has allowed Miller to collaborate on books covering a variety of topics because she is able to oscillate between macroscopic views of the issue at hand and the underlying evidence. Much of her work depends upon her data analysis skills, rooted in her science background, intermixing with her emotional connection to and love of nature and the earth.

Winning the National Poetry Series is a great accomplishment and one that Miller will surely take great pride in; however, it does not seem that she intends on slowing down any time soon. **Her unique blend of literature with science and research with emotion provides a breath of fresh air in the world of poetry** as prose steadily seeks to steal center stage in the literary world. An emerging star with a much-needed new take on poetry, Miller is breaking down barriers and bringing poetry to the foreground once more.

Six Years after Father’s Tragic Death, West Seattle Native to Publish Poetry Book in His Honor

Ty Swenson, *The West Seattle Herald*, April 12, 2013 (excerpted)



When the West Seattle Herald first reported on Teresa K. Miller it was 1997. She was a 14-year-old who Herald reporter Don Nokes described as “a gal with a lot of gumption,” and with good cause. Teresa, with the help of two good friends in Erin Evetts and Kristen Tjerandsen, had collected over 550 pounds of food and \$160 for the Junction Community Food Bank.

At one point, as Nokes wrote, Teresa got a bit nervous after soliciting donations in front of the Admiral Safeway because people just started handing her cash instead of food. As the green bills piled up and Teresa became increasingly unsure of what to do, “our heroine got on the horn to dad, who rode to the rescue.” Teresa’s dad was Marvin Gene Miller, a West Seattle native, Boeing engineer and avid cyclist.



Nine years later, in 2006, Teresa was only two weeks away from graduating with an MFA in Poetry when tragic news arrived.

According to a Seattle Post-Intelligencer report from the time, Marvin and a friend were riding their bikes along Highland Park Way S.W. when a 17-year-old Seattle teen driving a red Ford Thunderbird came careening around the corner at an estimated 80 miles per hour. The teen lost control of his vehicle and jumped a curb, striking Marvin who was 58 years old. He died later that night at Harborview Medical Center.

Teresa would later say Marvin’s death “stunned and paralyzed my mother and me.”

Six years later, Teresa, 30, is married and living in Oakland where she teaches children with autism while making plans to move back to Seattle. She is also on the verge of publishing her first full-length poetry book entitled “sped,” built of three poetic sequences that deal with “the death of a parent by vehicular homicide, the difficulty of meeting the needs of children with severe autism, (and) the dissolution of identity and relationship in an era of unending genocide and terror by war,” according to Sidebrow Publishing, who will release the book on May 1.

Publication History

Full-length poetry collections:

- *Borderline Fortune* (Penguin, Oct. 5, 2021), selected by Carol Muske-Dukes as a winner of the 2020 National Poetry Series
- *sped* (Sidebrow, 2013)

Co-editor:

Food First: Selected Writings From 40 Years of Movement Building (anthology, Food First Books, October 2015) with Tanya Kerssen

Chapbook:

Forever No Lo (Tarpaulin Sky Press, 2008)

Anthologies:

- “Zombie Viruses and Parasite Eggs; or, Horror Emerges from the Thawing Arctic,” with Gregory Giles in *Berfrois: The Book* (Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2019), reviewed in *The London Magazine*
- “Fine Persuasion,” *Conversations at the Wartime Café: A Decade of War, 2001–2011*, edited by Sean Labrador y Manzano



Journals:

ZYZZYVA, *Word For/Word*, *Tarpaulin Sky*, *sparkle + blink*, *Sous Les Pavés*, *slouch*, *SHAMPOO*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, *Phenome*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Parentheses*, *Moria*, *MiPOesias*, *kadar koli*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Flag + Void*, *E•ratio*, *Empty Mirror*, *DIAGRAM*, *Crux*, *Cricket Online Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Coconut*, *can we have our ball back?*, *Bone & Ink*, *Berfrois*, *8 Poems*, *580 Split*, *27 rue de fleurs*

Collaborative film essay series (2015–2020) co-created with musician Gregory Giles for U.K. journal *Berfrois*:

- “The Light Moves and Changes Everything; or, the Quantum Mechanics of Memory in the Afterlife”
- “Straightjacketed into Spectatorship; or, the Image of Seeing a Cave IRL”
- “Come on, People Now, Apologize for Your Brother; or, Everyday Evasions to Accommodate Tortured Genius”
- “The Millennium Falcon in My Stomach; or, A Plastic Token of Disease and Indifference”
- “Anatomy of a Protest; or, We Are Communication-Managed Bodies in Thin Air, and Life Is Good”
- “Improbably Sentimental Robots; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying About Babies and Embrace the Apocalypse”
- “Elephants Wouldn't Lie Awake Wondering; or, Cognitive Dissonance and the Carnivore”
- “Here's a Rainbow After My Act of Annihilation; or, Hydroelectric Romance and Terror”
- “Our Cosmetically Imperfect Yields; or, Agnès Varda's Loose Grip on Gleaning”
- “Luc Moullet's Double Fake-Out; or, Tracking Food Sovereignty in the '70s”

Other nonfiction:

- “On Being No One's Mother,” *LitHub*
- “Embodying Climate Grief,” with Dr. Sarah Myhre, *Common Dreams*
- “NCAP Gives Thanks for Farmers,” Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides
- “Protecting My Pesticide-Free Garden,” Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides
- “Not the Greatest Love Story Ever Told,” *Entropy*
- “Big Ag's Fight for Twitter Credibility,” *FoodFirst.org*, *Common Dreams*, and *AlterNet* — recommended by Civil Eats, Berkeley's Ecology Center, Resilience.org, GM Watch, *GMO Journal*, and others
- “As UNFCCC Convenes in Peru, Free Trade and Extractivism Undermine Climate Justice,” *FoodFirst.org*
- “Farmworkers at Forefront of the Struggle for Food Sovereignty,” with Tiffani Patton, *FoodFirst.org*
- “Land as the Basis of Sovereignty: Palestinian Farmers Awarded Food Sovereignty Prize,” with Tanya M. Kerksen, *FoodFirst.org*
- “Climate Change and Food Sovereignty: The People's Climate March,” with Eric Holt-Giménez, jointly published on *FoodFirst.org* and *HuffPost Impact*