

Life in the Valley

Catch Lex Runciman at Silverton Poetry Festival

Steve Slemenda
Special to Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Lex Runciman is one of six poets featured in "Durable Goods: Appreciations of Oregon Poets" (Mountains & Rivers Press, 2017) by fellow poet Erik Muller.

Last month, Runciman joined Muller and three of the other featured poets at the Salem Book Bin. Runciman, Paulann Petersen, Barbara Drake and Clem Starck shared and discussed their work in a rich exchange with the audience and each other.

The group has done several programs together, and Runciman will participate in another such conversation on Feb. 24 as part of the Silverton Poetry Festival.

During the Salem program, I asked them to comment on the value of their experience on the road. Runciman's one-word response: "Gratitude."

Gratitude strikes me as a central value in Runciman's life. It's certainly a strong presence in his volume of selected and new poems, "Salt Moon: Poems 1981-2016" (Salmon Poetry, 2017). This book has given me a wonderful introduction to his work spanning four dec-

ades.

In it are poems of great range, depth and beauty. They make a tapestry interwoven with memories, dreams, observations and meditations from an inquiring life. Each poem echoes the theme of intrinsic beauty and wonder in all things — the exquisite, the tragic and the mundane, the light and the dark. The scope is broad.

A young boy releases a mud-covered salamander back into a lake: "It fell back / and once in the water / how it fell — clear, / slow, in its own heaven."

Waking from a nightmare of his child's death, a father looks in on his sleeping daughters and finds them as they are — their regular hushed respirations. Overhead, rain falls like pebbles. Face and face, name and another name.

The poet contemplates beach agates: "They are the origin and dream of glass. / Whatever they say is impersonal: / Whatever it is is beautiful."

A bystander has dived into a lake and rescued a baby in a runaway stroller that had plunged from a wharf: "This is the purest thing / you can remember doing, and anyone / would have — this bright gift // a privilege you'd wish on no one."



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The poet, who was an adopted child, reflects on all he does not know of his biological father and mother: "you have not known his shoes or watches or ties / his gait or religion or lack of it / nor his sisters nor his brothers / and of your mother you lack all the same."

Often in life, the darkness seems impenetrable. Yet we trudge, as we must, toward some light of understanding. In a poem titled with a quotation from Psalm 30, "Joy Cometh in the Morning," Runciman expresses the difficulty of persisting toward light: "No touch endures. The doctor is unsure. / Memory says love is unreturned. / The words you have rehearsed / vanish from your mouth. Sleep teases. Gesture is not enough. / I don't know how we can go on."

"The artist's function," said the great modern American poet Wallace Stevens, "is to make his imagination . . . be-

If you go

What: Silverton Poetry Festival Presents "Talking Poets/Durable Goods: An Evening of Poetry and Conversation" with Erik Muller, Lex Runciman, Barbara Drake and Paulann Petersen.

When: 7 to 9 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 24

Where: White Steeple Gallery, 314 Jersey St., Silverton

Cost: Free

come the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives."

In the light of Runciman's poems, we are shown the way: through the open embrace of experience; in the conviction of joy in the morning; in the beauty and solace to be found in love, in nature, in each other. For that, Runciman has my gratitude.

This article by Steve Slemenda is one of a monthly series by members of the Mid-Valley Poetry Society on books by Oregon poets. Contact him at stsles@gmail.com.

Bill could help alleviate packed classrooms

Natalie Pate
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

A bill coming before the Oregon Legislature, which convenes Monday, could finally assuage teachers of crammed classrooms.

House Bill 4113 changes only five words to existing collective bargaining laws, but would make class size a mandatory subject.

This means districts would be required to discuss class size along with things like salaries and benefits when making budget decisions.

"(Class size) tends to exacerbate any other issue we have in the education system," said John Larson, president of the Oregon Education Association.

"The way things work right now, either side could say, 'No, we don't want to talk about that,'" he said. "The more times we don't have that conversation, the worst (the) problem becomes."

Oregon has some of the largest classes nationwide, with an average of 25 students per class.

In 2014-15, there were more than 450 math classes in the state with more than 36 students per class, plus more than 70 science classes with more than 46 students, according to Oregon Department of Education's 2016 Class Size Report. Additionally, more than 20 percent of kindergarten classes had more than 26 students.

Studies show large class sizes can negatively affect absenteeism, standardized test scores, graduation rates and teacher retention.

Large class sizes are particularly damaging in lower grades, where teachers are building students' understanding of core subjects, such as reading,

writing and math. This is in addition to developing social and emotional skills, including how to follow instructions, how to share and how to sit still.

"At some point, you are so overloaded you just hope everyone has a place to sit," Larson said, referring the challenges teachers face. "And students just don't learn when there are so many students in a room."

The bill was presented to lawmakers last session, but died after its public hearing in front of the House Education Committee.

Sponsors are trying it again in the short session, this time with the House Committee on Business and Labor.

"We get that there's a finite amount of dollars for every school," Larson said. "But we believe educators should have some say in how they use those dollars."

Rep. Brian Clem, D-Salem, a chief sponsor on the bill, told the Statesman Journal class size is his top priority this session. But he doesn't have a strong idea yet whether the bill will pass.

"It is unacceptable when there are more students than desks," he said. "I want (families and educators) in there complaining about class size."

"It should be the highest priority of the district. Everything else should come second," he said. "And then, if they say, great, now we don't have enough money, I'm happy to fight for more money."

Clem said this is one option the state can take, but it isn't the only one.

"It doesn't get them more money, but it does put them in the middle of the conversation," he said.

Opponents of the bill, including the Oregon School Boards Association, argue ramifications from the bill could cost districts millions of dollars they



Rep. Brian Clem, D-Salem, speaks at the Capitol in Salem in 2015. He said his top priority in the 2018 short session is a bill meant to reduce class sizes.

DANIELLE PETERSON/STATESMAN JOURNAL

would otherwise use to hire new staff, train existing employees and create and expand programs that benefit students.

"Is it important to talk about? Yes," said Jim Green, executive director of the school boards association. "At the bargaining table, though? No."

Green who also serves as a member of the Salem-Keizer School Board, is wary of any bill that makes something mandatory. "Class size is important, but forcing (it) could cause a strike," he said.

But Green doesn't deny Oregon has a class size problem. The more kids, the more expectations, the more issues, he said. "Classroom management is an issue."

Green presented an outcome in which a certain number would be set for the maximum number of students that could be in one class. Any additional students would require the district to pay the teacher additional money.

Districts, he said, would have to cut support staff, programs and the number of instructional days in an already short school year.

In addition to budget constraints,

Green said districts often don't have the facilities or bodies to accommodate the changes either, which is a much larger financial undertaking.

Green is worried the complex issue, which would impact Oregon's 197 districts, won't have the time it needs to be discussed in a short session.

"If it's required to bargain, (the district) is not able to offer programs we offer to all other schools," he said. "(There is) population growth in certain parts of the city — you need that flexibility."

This would lead, he suspects, to extensive mediation processes and strikes. "It doesn't actually do better for teachers," he said.

Larson countered, saying that's very extreme. "I don't think we have any locals who go into bargain thinking they want to go on strike."

"Strikes are really awful things," he said. "(They're) a last-ditch effort."

Larson said the bill allows each district to address class size as they see fit.

He emphasized smaller districts may not have an issue with class size, comparing the idea to Measure 98 funds for career technical education or dropout prevention efforts where individual districts can allocate money for their specific needs.

"The bill doesn't set a threshold," Larson said. "It lets each district have a meaningful conversation about what a good class size would be."

"We may not come to any solution," he said. "But at least we have the conversation and at least it's out there."

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Numbers

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Transportation.

Help on the way

Even with the small decline, Oregon's state parks have still continued to see rapid growth. That's not expected to change in coming years.

The good news, Havel said, is that the state park budget included money for 21 additional park rangers who will start in 2018.

Parks officials also got permission to offer discounted rates at some less-visited parks, while in the future slightly increasing rates at more crowded parks.

The goal is to entice more people to camp at such places as Humbug Mountain State Park (42,000 camper nights), as opposed to Fort Stevens (257,000 camper nights).

"Maybe somebody who's having problems getting a night at Fort Stevens would consider Humbug if they got a

night of camping for free," OPRD parks director Lisa Sumption said in an April interview with the Statesman Journal.

"We're trying to move some of our crowds across the system, and this is one way of doing that. We have a lot of parks with capacity that few people visit."

Oregon Coast state parks visitation Day use

2017: 29,562,745
2016: 28,603,243
2015: 27,528,098
2014: 24,969,651
2013: 24,035,716
2012: 23,314,225
2011: 21,426,973
2010: 22,428,747
2009: 23,497,013
2008: 21,684,258
2007: 23,474,768
2006: 22,953,890
2005: 21,925,604
2004: 23,248,905
2003: 21,090,250
2002: 20,927,888
Oregon state parks camping nights
2017: 2,788,358
2016: 2,741,578

2015: 2,590,942
2014: 2,491,805
2013: 2,411,954
2012: 2,319,078
2011: 2,307,741
2010: 2,410,817
2009: 2,515,652
2008: 2,327,464
2007: 2,362,409
2006: 2,305,651
2005: 2,318,074
2004: 2,381,379
2003: 2,383,534
2002: 2,380,911
Crater Lake National Park visits
2017: 711,749
2016: 756,344
2015: 614,712
2014: 535,508
2013: 523,027
2012: 447,251
2011: 423,551
2010: 448,319
2009: 446,516
Lewis and Clark National Historic Park visits
2017: 293,356
2016: 281,576
2015: 270,410

2014: 244,921
2013: 217,022
2012: 201,704
2011: 191,867
2010: 218,553
2009: 225,846
John Day Fossil Beds National Monument visits
2017: 214,557
2016: 210,110
2015: 196,277
2014: 183,420
2013: 156,285
2012: 148,152
2011: 148,002
2010: 135,151
2009: 130,925
Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve visits
2017: 72,212
2016: 80,613
2015: 72,709
2014: 69,405
2013: 72,717
2012: 78,164
2011: 76,194
2010: 86,335
2009: 88,496