

THE *SRPR* INTERVIEW:  
ARIELLE GREENBERG BYWATER

**Kirstin Hotelling Zona:** Welcome to *Spoon River*, Arielle. I'm so happy to have you as our featured poet. I also want to thank you for what you've done (and are doing) for the dynamic community of women poets and mother poets in this country (categories you are helping to redefine); this is vital work. It's not your only work, of course, but I think it deserves special recognition.

I'd like to start with your big move. We're interviewing in Maine—where I grew up and live in the summer, and where you've recently relocated after much hard thinking. Your decision may seem radical: you quit your tenured job at Columbia College in Chicago to move with your family to rural Maine. Your husband, Rob, has a secure job that allows him to be mobile, but you have no secure source of income yourself and few urban amenities. In your VIDA interview with Amy King, you explored your attraction to the idea of a public intellectual, which reminds me of Emerson, who described his decision to leave the ministry and the congregation where his father preached for decades as a need to leave the church so that he could be a better minister. Did you need to leave the university to become a better teacher, a better writer?

**Arielle Greenberg Bywater:** I'm thrilled that you invoked Emerson: following in Emerson's path is deeply appealing. I love teaching and think I was a good teacher: the hardest part of leaving my job was leaving my students. But I'd been thinking more and more about what it means to be a good teacher. When I was here [in Belfast, Maine] on sabbatical, I taught childbirth education classes, and it became clear to me that what these people needed more than *information* was a safe space to talk and ask questions, to find community with one another. My job was to hold that space. Another thing I did [on sabbatical] was study Nonviolent Communication, a technique of active listening and connecting with people. So much of what we call "listening" in our culture is really giving advice, correcting, criticizing, comparing—things I do a lot of, and which were at the core of my teaching

style, but which are not what most people really want. How to teach without trying to “fix” everything you see?

**KHZ:** How do you feel these streams of experience coming together in your present life?

**AGB:** I’m interested in creating and holding radical spaces. I hope to teach in backyard workshops and with different arts organizations here, and I want to be a teacher who is comfortable with less control, less *product*. On my own journey I want to be learning more and teaching less. And the same goes for my poetry; I considered, for instance, having every line that I write for the next year end with a question mark. I feel like my previous work is surer of itself than it should have been. Though I’ve always kept to an aesthetic path that resists what I call the tidy epiphany or resolution, I still wanted to make a crafted, attractive poem. Now I want to allow more mess in my work; some of the poems here are evidence of this. More questioning, more openness, less knowing. When I decided to leave the academy people would say, “Well, what are you gonna *do*?” And I would say, “You know, I think I’m gonna raise my kids and I think I’m gonna grow some food and I think I’m gonna write and maybe I’ll write different kinds of poems, maybe better poems, because I’ll be doing other things out in the world?” And when I said this to one of my colleagues, Lisa Fishman, who currently directs the Creative Writing–Poetry program at Columbia, she said, “*Of course* you’re going to write better poems.” I sense that many academic poets take this as a given—that if you’re not teaching you’re going to make more interesting work—even though we all act as if these jobs are the Holy Grail. But I don’t know what my next work is going to be like. And that’s a good thing.

**KHZ:** It takes a lot of discipline, in my experience, to endure uncertainty. I wonder how consciously—and conscientiously—stepping out of the academy has impacted this discipline. Do you fear losing that sense of immediate contact with the world of contemporary poetry that academic jobs can provide? Of being forced into conversation with what’s happening “right now”? In your VIDA interview you said that part of you just wants to be the good girl, wants to be liked. What do you fear on this new path?

**AGB:** Oh God, so much! I cling, unproductively, to my sense of myself as somebody who has accomplished a certain level of expertise and who reads and does all this other kind of work that is related to the writing of poems. But at the same time I ask myself *Why?* Why do I need that external validation? And then there's the scholar in me, which gets back to your question about the public intellectual. There are many people who call themselves poets, but most people do not call themselves critics. This is unfortunate, because we desperately need public intellectuals, scholars and critics outside of the academy. We need people to feel that they are thinkers and that they have pertinent ideas without the benefit of a PhD or a credential. Academic disciplines have become so specific: everyone's a specialist. I have really wide interests—across the arts and across cultural studies and sociology—and I couldn't possibly do degrees for everything I'm interested in or want to write about. I want the freedom—in the culture, and from my own ego—to think widely and openly in the world.

**KHZ:** I like your segues from poet to public intellectual to the role the academy plays in both facilitating and frustrating the relationship between them, and wonder in what ways you think of your present life as a continuation of your academic life and in what ways you see it as a rejection or departure from academe?

**AGB:** I came to realize that one of the things I'm most invested in is building community. In Chicago, I was part of a vital department and I loved my students. But in the academy everyone's racing to get home, racing to get to work, racing everywhere. This was especially true for me after having kids. I felt totally torn, and so the disparity between the expectation for community and the actualization of community among academic colleagues was disappointing. We rarely had time to talk to one another about our work even though we hired each other because we love each other's work! When I was [in Belfast] on sabbatical I felt exposed for the first time to a place where community building is a number one priority for many—

**KHZ:** It's essential in a place like this; a small, rural community with long, hard winters—

**AGB:** It's essential for survival and it's grassroots. There's not a ton of money here, and there's a back-to-the-land legacy. I ended up around