

INTRODUCING THE SRPR ILLINOIS POET:
LAURA VAN PROOYEN



Laura Van Prooyen grew up in a tight-knit Dutch community just outside of Chicago. She is author of two collections of poetry, *Our House Was on Fire* (Ashland Poetry Press, 2015), nominated by Philip Levine and winner of the McGovern Prize, and *Inkblot and Altar* (Pecan Grove Press, 2006). Her poems also have appeared in *APR*, *Boston Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among others. Van Prooyen teaches in the low-residency MFA Creative Writing program at Miami University, and she lives in San Antonio, Texas.

Flood

And what do I have now that the water has gone?
When the city was submerged, all was quiet,

except for bullfrogs spilled onto the roads,
their throaty chorus, a song of displacement,

now muted by acres of muddied trees and Olmos Basin
filled with trash. The water has gone, leaving me thirsty

in a South Texas afternoon at a stoplight, eating exhaust
as heat rises in waves. This spot, under 10-feet last week,

was murky as the algae-laced Wisconsin lake I fished as a child,
where every June, my family unfurled. My mother

fried bacon, my dad drank too much, and we kids
ran barefoot and got ticks. Two weeks of ping-pong, a slippery pier,

bloodsuckers, and late-night fires. I don't remember thirst.
I remember the bubble of the Buick's rear window, the small cabin

swallowed by trees as we drove away for the last time
when I was twelve. My whole childhood could fit on the tip

of a lit cigarette. Or be carved on a turtle's shell
to sink and emerge for the next forty years.

Jewel

Shopping at my hometown Jewel,
I'm white.

I don't know
what to do with my eyes. I tick

off my dad's list. Coffee filters,
strawberries, milk. I used to eat spaghetti

with my grandma
at The Windmill restaurant across the street.

I shopped this store
my whole white childhood, my whole
mashed potato childhood that had almost nothing

to do with race. Until it did. Until whites
started moving fast, fast, fast

and For Sale signs became illegal. But I wasn't paying
attention.

I was busy living my white life

and leaving.
Busy not thinking of the families
moving in, the families moving out, my parents

staying and staying
a lifetime on one street. Or was I unseeing

what I saw?

the ladies from church afraid to go to the mall?
the teacher who said my neighborhood was getting “dark”?
the girls mimicking big lips?
the neighbor telling my parents to sell and quick?
the cops circling and circling the White Castle parking lot?

I’ve been gone a long time.
There’s so few people here I know.

Except my parents. Who stayed
because of their stuff. Because

my mother could never give up
her brick ranch home.

It was here I first learned to whisper *black*.

When my parents spoke, if they spoke,
it was to note difference, to say

what a nice *black* cashier they had at the store,

at Jewel, where I grab a 2-liter of pop
under the aisles’ blinding florescence—

my big white silence stuck in my eye.

Visit to the Once-Beach, South Texas

For two and a half miles my girl sighs.
110 million years ago, the shoreline of the Gulf

would have been at our toes. We're here
where dinosaurs roamed through mud, their prints preserved
as stone. Yet,

we can't seem to get past the present,
beyond the rocky trail and small discomfort
of my daughter's shoe.

In the canyon,
roped-off sections guide us to the tracks,
the best ones obscured by algae from last month's rain.

My daughter asks me to take her picture.
She steps into the sun and holds her arms up
as if her day is glorious. She smiles. Asks to see the image,

she posts herself on Instagram
with the caption: *Lovin' this winter*
and in minutes has 48 "likes."

I don't know how to find our way back
to the wonder of dirt. My daughter reverses
the camera, extends her arm, calls me into the frame.

The focus zooms on our selves.
Our faces block the footprints behind us.

We're captured, grinning in the virtual global sphere.

As water rises. As seas grow warm.
Inches of coastline disappearing
faster than the speed of the newest phone.