

An Interview with Pia Taavila-Borsheim, Author of [*Above the Birch Line: Poems*](#)

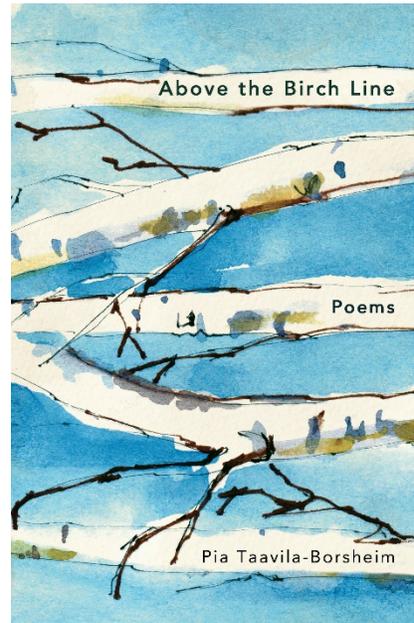


Gallaudet University Press: *Above the Birch Line* traces your life trajectory, sharing moments from your childhood all the way through to contemplations of aging and death. How did this collection come together? Did you intend for it to represent a life's journey?

Pia Taavila-Borsheim: Intention... I didn't necessarily intend that the poems in this collection follow any specific trajectory, at least not initially. What happened, however, was this: I often pin many poems I've recently written to a large, cork bulletin board I have that stretches around three walls of my writing room. Once I pinned them up, I looked at 96 poems, and recognized fairly quickly that there were, yes, poems from childhood, poems about motherhood, poems about my travels, poems for former loves, poems for my husband, and poems about the aging process. So then I picked the strongest of these, made headers for each section, and then compiled the poems in this thematic sequence. Also, within each individual section, I arranged the poems in an order based upon how they seemed to communicate with one another. For example, a line or an idea from one poem seemed to flow logically into the next poem. Voila!

GU Press: Your poetry includes references to growing up as a Coda. How do you think your identity influences your writing?

Taavila-Borsheim: My being a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults) has a huge impact on my writing. I try to take an abstract idea or emotion and then create images that demonstrate that idea or emotion. For example, the word "loneliness" is rather abstract, right? But if I were to write a poem, I'd write about a spider weaving a web below a deck chair, left out in the rain. I'd then have the persona of the poem looking down at that spider, possibly from an upstairs bedroom window, where she is seated, writing a letter to someone who no longer loves her. I would hope that the images in the poem convey the abstraction in ways that are concrete, visible, tactile.



For CODAs, so much information about the world comes into the brain through the eyes, the skin, through a raised eyebrow, a small inflection of meaning. We tend to operate in very visual ways, and I like my poems to be, as one critic called them, “small paintings.”

GU Press: Do you have a favorite poem in this collection? What makes it special?

Taavila-Borsheim: That’s hard to choose. Of course, the love poems to my husband stand out in this sweet season of time, with a late-life marriage... I also love the poem “Haiku Sequence: Night Watch,” for several reasons. First, it is a sequence of haiku stanzas, arranged in a chevron pattern. And then, it is a long sequence, arranged chronologically, whose pattern echoes the design of the entire collection. Last, the images within it still are so clearly visual to me... and the way that poem came to me was and is still somewhat mysterious and magical.

GU Press: Leslie Harrison described *Above the Birch Line* as a book of “ferocious maturity.” As you reflect on your writing over the years, has your poetry, or your approach to writing, changed?

Taavila-Borsheim: My poetry has changed only in that I am less tentative about writing things I may not completely understand. I go with the images that arrive through the “back channels” of my mind. I don’t worry so much, in first drafts, about spelling and punctuation as I once did. There’s always time to edit. Now, I am much braver about just grabbing the ideas fast enough to do so before they disappear completely.

GU Press: What do you hope readers take away from this collection?

Taavila-Borsheim: Although the collection is shamelessly autobiographical, I hope that these poems contain universal appeal. We’ve been in love, we’ve had our hearts broken, some of us have raised children only to see them move away or become estranged... many of us have traveled only to find ourselves learning something deeper about our shared human nature... I hope that the readers of these poems will see themselves in my work, or at least appreciate and acknowledge our shared humanity. I hope the poems lead to laughter, to a shared shed tear, to a nod of recognition. To love is a risky business, but to embrace our lives, such as they are, is a marvelous, wondrous enterprise, indeed.