the winter, when the furnace is
sometimes the rumble as they pass
ranked wide we can hear the trains
and whine and then there is a
groan. This goes on all night
the first couple of days we don’t
ast, get hooked together, un-
der the surface. But on those
times penetrate everything we do.
when we’re making love, until the
we slide back to earth again the
view

Hmm. Mostly I have a PhD just because I didn’t want to leave school. I don’t
know if it has influenced my writing in any specific way. I mean, it must have,
as I spend much of my day steeping in it. It’s just that I don’t have anything
to compare it with. I started college after I turned 21, and I spent the three
years between High School and college bouncing from job to job (Super-mart
dairy manager, fast food night manager), and I was writing then, but
I wasn’t writing very well ... so I don’t know what the influence has been.
Whatever it is, I’m glad to be around books all day. And having the summers
off is pretty wonderful, even if I don’t have the money to travel.

In your poetry it seems like existence is very self-perpetuating. Philosophy is self-perpetu-
ing. For example, the poem “The Sky Is Blue & Birds Fly Through It” seems to present a
philosophy that puts itself into motion. The birds are startled by the sound of their pass-
ing and so they pass to a clearer spot, which seems to be more idle, which in a way, started
the bark of philosophy in the first place. In the same way, your poetry seems very self-per-
petuating. Its momentum slows and speeds with your repetition of words. And your use
of parentheses also seems to create this repetition and self-perpetuating movement. How
conscious of this are you while writing. How much effort or intent shapes your rhythm
and syntax? Also, you employ parentheses in a novel way, so I ask you, what are you hop-
ing to accomplish through the use of parentheses?

I like your phrasing here, your conception of “self-perpetuating.” I never
would have say it that way. “Cyclically-stationary,” I might phrase it, if I were
forced, or perhaps, “particle AND wave.” While I’m writing, I’m aware, often,
that whenever I say one thing I’m not saying something else. I hate that. I

Interview with John Gallaher
by Vince Bauters

John Gallaher is the author of the poetry collections Gentlemen in Turbans,
Ladies in Cauls, and The Little Book of Guesses, which won the Levis poetry
prize and is now available from Four Way Books. His poetry has recently
been published in jubilat, Field, Denver Quarterly, Pleiades, and Crazyhorse,
among others. He lives in rural Missouri where he teaches and co-edits The
Laurel Review.
want it to be day and night. I want the field and the street. 
I have this fantasy—desire—that if I keep myself open, if I can just find a way to attend properly, align my frequency, I might just be able to catch a whisper of the real plenitude of being in time. This is always—necessarily, I suppose—a failure. But what kind of failure? A failure of possibility or of attention? Perhaps if I were standing a bit to the left, I might have caught more of it? Whatever it is. So sometimes I feel it more as anxiety than as desire. Is it something I’m searching for, or is it something I’m terrified of losing?

In the first book, I tried catching more of this it by using parentheses. The idea—thinking about it then, and more later—was to slow the forward narrative momentum (that sentences necessarily enact) down so that more of the meditative, stationary quality of thought could enter. The way one thinks to oneself as opposed to the way one formulates an argument to others.

After the book came out, I wanted to do something else. My first thought was to speed everything up. If slowing things down is one way to investigate being, then speeding it up might be revelatory in some other, perhaps complimentary, way. So I wrote something like 120 poems all with the world “guidebook” in the title. “A Guidebook to the Afterlife” is one example. I finished that project exhausted. Right now it’s on a shelf.

So now I’m currently doing whatever it is I’m doing throughout most of The Little Book of Guesses. What that is, I’m not sure. I think perhaps I’m worried less about writing, about composing elements in a line narratively (or any other way), than I am about creating an atmosphere around a story or group of images. Words like “anecdote” and “house” and “field” appeal to me lately. And the word “fetish,” with all that might entail.

Gentlemen in Turbans, Ladies in Cauls really takes a lot of effort to construct a beginning. The first poems each seem to approach a new start in a mechanical, almost circular, process. There is the need to get “from point A to point B” in the poem “From Where One Is to Where Everything’s Just the Same,” and the two people in the poem “Only What Happens Disappears” are trying to “begin at the door, beginning, as we say, in the midst.” All this effort to construct a new start, or a departure, is increased and made very poignant as a result of all these poems being placed next to each other. This excellent ordering of these poems in the book makes me ask, how do you choose the order of your poems in the books?

For me, that’s the question of all questions . . . in the same way that lines follow lines to form a poem, poems follow poems to make a book. The truth of the matter is that I often get help from others on ordering poems. Some of the ordering is thought out, or written, and some is just going on the feel. I wanted to start Gentlemen by placing the reader on an even footing with the thinking of the book, so I wanted to start by starting.

The Little Book of Guesses is perhaps less theoretical, and more hypothetical, in that way. It starts with a quote, attributed to Ronald Reagan, from 1983: “What would life be like if the second world war had really taken place?” Now, obviously we can all answer that with surely by looking out our windows. But can we say we are right? But we still write poetry. So we are anyway.

Whatever it is we can say we are is an elegy. Perhaps it is. But then again . . .

The book manuscript I’m working on is a project: “In the Little Book of Guesses, the thinking of desire, and desire throughout our lives (or maybe it’s over from desire, to hover . . . and the failure to conceptualize its order. Hopefully How does one order a book that is called Orderlife, I’d be in better shape.

The jagged lines of your poems and use of white space is fascinating. Yet, the visual aspects would be helpful. Therefore, do you try to capture some of it if so, how? Also, would you prefer your poems to be read aloud. With my first book, the poems were read by others who were sprinkled among the two people in the poem (or perhaps duet) circumstances. I enjoyed it.

You use language in a very interesting way. With very lofty vocabulary. At the same time are you hoping to accomplish through language? How much do you trust language? I trust language as far as I can through trying to enact a bit of time that does not make sense? I have a difficult time with it.

The endless shaving off of possibilities is endless accruing layers of possibilities. The only thing more difficult to prove is the one said. I have a hard time with it.

So I try to balance my reductive tendencies by bringing them into speech, with
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Whatever it is we can say we are is investigating that idea. In that way, the project: “In the Little Book of Guesses, an elegy. Perhaps it is. But then again, it’s not."

The book manuscript I’m working on is thinking of desire, and desire that vampire in our lives (or maybe it’s our lives from desire, to hover ... and the fact to conceptualize its order. Hopefully."

How does one order a book that talks about the world called Orderlife, I’d be in better shape.

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I’ve gotten less theatrical recently, compositions. When I read my poems, I hear more theatrical than that I try to read them asstraight. I can’t really sound the way they look (or perhaps feel) circumstances. I do.

You use language in a very interesting way, very lofty vocabulary. At the same time, are you hoping to accomplish through language/ phrases) How much do you trust language?

I trust language as far as I can throw it. I’m trying to enact a bit of time that does not thing. Does that make sense? I have a difficulty. The endless shaving off of possibility, endless accruing layers of possibility ...

The only thing more difficult to prove, one said. I have a hard time with time... So I try to balance my reductive tendency by bringing them into speech, with
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right? But we still write poetry. So we are—what—guessing? Living after the end of his-

story?

Whatever it is we can say we are is fraught with guesswork, so I wanted to

vestigate that idea. In that way, the poem that opens the book enacts its project: “In the Little Book of Guesses.” Someone asked me recently if it is

an elegy. Perhaps it is. But then again, perhaps they all are?

The book manuscript I’m working on now is titled LooseLife. And in it I’m

thinking of desire, and desire thwarted. I’m thinking of the tone we often aspi-

te to in our lives (or maybe it’s only me) to be unencumbered, to be released

from desire, to hover ... and the fantasy of that. But I haven’t yet found a way

to conceptualize its order. Hopefully I will soon. I’m a little anxious about it. How does one order a book that takes LooseLife as a title? Perhaps if it were

called OrderLife, I’d be in better shape.

The jagged lines of your poems and use of white space makes your poems visually capti-

vating. Yet, the visual aspects would be hard to notice if the poems were only read aloud.

Therefore, do you try to capture some of the visual breaks of your line when you read, and

if so, how? Also, would you prefer your poetry read or heard?

I like to think of poetry as “instructions for performance,” so I like them best

read aloud. With my first book, the parentheses and brackets, etc., were to be

read by others who were sprinkled throughout the audience. I only read it

that way once, and I enjoyed it. As the poems unfolded, they spread out. Or

that was my conception of it.

I’ve gotten less theatrical recently, or at least more manageable, in my inten-

sions. When I read my poems, I hesitate a bit at the ends of lines, but other

than that I try to read them as straight sentences. It’s true though, that poems

can’t really sound the way they look. In that way poems always exist in dual

(or perhaps duel) circumstances. I’m ok with that. I’ll soldier on, as they say.

You use language in a very interesting way. You mix an almost colloquial narrative style

with very lofty vocabulary. At the same time, you often repeat phrases or words. What

are you hoping to accomplish through language? (academic vocabulary and repetition of

phrases) How much do you trust language?

I trust language as far as I can throw it! I suppose though, in general, I’m just

trying to enact a bit of time that does as little damage to possibility as possible.

Does that make sense? I have a difficult time with the way the world works.

The endless shaving off of possibility as time unfolds into a now, and then the

endless accruing layers of possibility as time expands behind one.

The only thing more difficult to predict than the future is the past, as some-

one said. I have a hard time with that. I much prefer for things to stay still.

So I try to balance my reductive tendencies, our tendencies to reduce things

by bringing them into speech, with the fanning contingencies of what is
around us. The endless fabric of what is around us at all the given times.

The Little Book of Guesses employs more of a traditional narrative. But it is still seeing the same transcendence from the ordinary and asking the same epistemological questions as Gentlemen in Turbans, Ladies in Cauls. What would you say was the biggest change in the form or style of your poetry between books? Was this a conscious change? Why? What caused you to write, in what might be called a traditional style as opposed to sliced up, jagged lines of your first book?

I think you’re right about the narrative, though I hadn’t thought of it myself. Yes. Our strategies have to change, but our basic questions, our three themes, remain the same. As Neil Young says, “It’s all one song.”

The overall technique among my books (including the unpublished, middle, one) has remained constant. I compose using little 3 by 5 mead notebooks within which I jot notes. At some point, I get to a computer and begin transcribing what I’ve written. In this way, I sometimes feel less like a writer than a conductor. I think what’s changed is what I’m listening for when I first put things into the notebook. Different circumstances, and different obsessions, cause different words to cross my path. Some of the things that go in the notebook are things I’m thinking, but others are things I overhear. Those things often get collaged into a poem relatively unchanged.

I think of it like a snowball. I push a thought through my notebook, a little line, and then start rolling. Sometimes it’s a mess.

I really enjoyed each of your titles. They were sometimes little haikus or bits of philosophical truth all on their own. How do you choose titles for your poems?

Titles are my favorite parts of poems. It’s a bumper sticker, or billboard. I choose them in the same way I write the poems. I find something, or I think of something, and if it feels like an entry point, but not necessarily tied to further language, so I say, “You shall be a title!” And I’ll often write TITLE next to it in my little book. So when I’m going back to write a poem, I find a title line, and then start rolling.

There’s a randomness to this that I like very much. It makes me feel in touch with the way things seem to happen in my life. But there’s also a mediated quality to this, as everything in my notebook has already once been filtered through my writing, my voice.

Your poetry has a very loose feel to it, very fresh, as if it was written at all at once. That feeling of spontaneity makes me ask, what is your revision process like? How do you retain your original ideas or words, but concentrate them further through revision?
I'm very happy you said that. Spontaneity is important to me. John Coltrane spontaneity, or Neil Young, for a different kind of spontaneity, or Jackson Pollock. As far as revision goes, it's the same as a guitar solo, I delete some bit that doesn't feel right, and then write something new (which often doesn't feel right either . . .), until it's something I can live with.

First thoughts are not always best thoughts, so I don't feel tied to my original ideas or words. I feel sympathetic to people who talk about revision as trying to listen to, or listen for, where the poem wants to go, not where the writer wants to take it. "Language did this to me." I like that.

How did you like studying in Athens, at Ohio University?

I liked it quite a bit. It's a great place, and a little off the beaten track. I studied with Wayne Dodd mostly, and had the opportunity to work on The Ohio Review near the end of my time there. It's a small program. Only graduating one PhD poet a year. Very small. There is also an MA program that's a little larger. Before that, I studied with Kathleen Peirce at Texas State University. That was also quite wonderful. I hear it's gotten a lot larger since I left, over ten years ago now.

Off the record, David Dodd Lee said you worked with Mark Halliday at OU. David said Halliday was tough on your poetry (he's tough on a lot of poets' work he said) . . . How did that affect your writing? How do you filter criticism or whatever, so that you get information that will help you improve, but don't become too despondent?

"Hello? Hello? Is this microphone on?" It's fine with me if this is on the record. I liked working with Mark Halliday. I still do. I'll, every once in a while, when I'm feeling complacent, send him something, and he'll say something like "Here comes the old Halliday curmudgeon again . . ." and sock it to me. I value that. I think it's important to have someone out there who signs on to what you're doing. For me that would be Wayne Dodd, or David Dodd Lee (Apparently I like to stick with poets who have similar names), and a few others. But almost as important is to have someone who really doesn't get it, or who gets it but doesn't like what he or she is getting, and who will take the time to talk with you about it.

I had more difficulty back than I do now. I admit to a bit of defensiveness. But once I realized it wasn't personal, I thought, well, what can this reaction tell me about poetry? How can this be of service in the composing of future poetry?

Not that he likes what I come up with, but his reactions help me come up with things. For example, once I gave him a poem where people are talking in a hotel lobby. "But people spend so little time in the lobby," was his reply to the poem. His meaning was that I was making too much of a small thing, the transient space of the lobby, for me represented something about being that he thought non-representative. So, in my revision, I added the line: "But people spend so little time in the lobby, Mark said."