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## Ernest Suarez

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### *An Interview with Kate Daniels*

*When I read the manuscript of Kate Daniels' forthcoming book, Reading a Biography of Thomas Jefferson in the Months of My Son's Recovery, I realized I had encountered something special. I had intended to flip through the manuscript and familiarize myself with it on the initial pass, but I started reading the first poem and didn't stop until I'd finished the entire book. The next day I read it through again, from the first page to the last without stopping. I'd long admired Daniels' verse—she's been a powerful and accomplished poet since the 1980s—but it was evident she'd taken her art to a new level. It was also clear that her achievement had been hard won: many of the poems were written in response to a family tragedy.*

*Daniels is the author of four previous books of verse: *The White Wave* (1984), *The Niobe Poems* (1988), *Four Testimonies* (1998), and *A Walk in Victoria's Secret* (2010). She is also the editor of *Out of Silence: Selected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (1992). In 2011, she was given the Hanes Award for Poetry by the Fellowship of Southern Writers for career achievement. She is the Director of Creative Writing at Vanderbilt University, and has also taught at the University of Virginia, the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Louisiana State University, Wake Forest University, and Bennington College. She has served as Poet in Residence at Duke University Medical Center and Vanderbilt University Medical Center, and is on the writing faculty of the Washington (D.C.) Center for Psychoanalysis. In 2016, she was inducted into the Fellowship of Southern Writers. She is the Vice President of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers*

*This interview was conducted on July 24, 2017 in Arlington, Virginia.*

**Suarez:** Your new book is divided into four sections. What's the relationship between the sections?

**Daniels:** Well, I've always had a yen for narratively organized poetry collections. I've certainly organized my own that way. This one, I think, is organized thematically, but not chronologically or linearly. My poetic obsession involves the psychodynamics of human behavior. And the older I get, the more it seems that is all I'm interested in. . . . I think that's true in this book, too, which concerns itself with addiction, or as it's often called in the paradigm of 12 step recovery, the family illness. From the beginning, my poems have been strongly autobiographical, and my books have reflected



where I was in my life, and what was going on when I wrote them. So it is probably not news to anyone who has read any of my books, that addiction did and does affect my family, going way back on both sides, through generations. That's not an unusual family descriptor, of course, but as a topic, it's not all that widely represented in American poetry. Or at least, it's not much represented through the creation of characters who are not addicts or alcoholics themselves, but who are profoundly affected by the problems of others—their loved ones. So—it was a difficult and painful book to write, and I found that I needed a lightning rod, or something like that, to give me some distance from the material so that I could hear what the poems were saying. Part of the lightning rod turned out to be how I finally organized it.

The center of the book was always poems about addiction, written from the perspective of a woman approaching old age, a mother, who is struggling with a grown child's addiction. For a long time, I thought that was going to be the whole book. The first section is titled *Her*; the second is *The Addict's Mother*; the third is *Him*, and the last is *Us*. The hard challenge I faced once I had written the poems was organizing them and trying to figure out the answer to the question you're asking right now: what is the relationship between the sections. I had all types of different versions of the manuscript. Ultimately, I realized that there was something I was trying to express about the systemic nature of the experience of addiction—which is what the family illness theory of alcoholism and addiction is all about. That's how the use of pronouns for the section titles occurred to me, I think. It seemed natural to organize the book around the characters who people the poems, but to keep them anonymous, too. Because that was a goal of the book: to enlarge its personal narrative beyond my autobiographical story, so that anyone coming to it during this terrible nationwide opioid epidemic might find something there to connect with. That reaching out to others was important to me. I guess this is an appropriate moment to put on the record that these poems, the book, the readings of the poems that I give, even this interview have all been undertaken with the knowledge and approval of my real life child—who I think of as my anonymous coauthor—who has been through the fire, and is now in recovery. The generosity, humility, and mercy of that gesture brings me to my knees. Every day.

**Suarez:** Can you talk about the title poem?

**Daniels:** I'm very fond of the title poem which comprises the entirety of the third section, *Him*. In the past few months, of course, my relationship

with it has changed as it has taken on connotations and implications that I hadn't anticipated when I was writing it. I was commissioned to write it by Lisa Russ Spaar for an anthology of poems that she was editing about Thomas Jefferson and Monticello, called *Monticello in Mind: Fifty Contemporary Poets on Jefferson* (University Press of Virginia, 2016).

I grew up in Southside Richmond, Virginia, in a white, working class family. My father, along with most members of his family, never finished high school. My kinfolk were mostly people only one generation removed from farming. They worked in factories. They worked with their hands. They were frugal because they had to be. They didn't build up nest eggs or acquire property because they couldn't afford to. They certainly didn't go to college, or think about education as a step to anywhere else. I was the first person in my family to go to college, and I went to the University of Virginia on an academic scholarship in 1971—only the second year that women were admitted as undergraduates. It had taken a class action suit to force the state to admit women to the flagship public university paid for by the citizens of Virginia and founded by the author of the Declaration of Independence. I hope I had a sense of that irony when I entered, but I can't remember anymore if I did or not! It was also only six years past the passage of the Civil Rights Act, so both women and people of color were new on campus. We were all immigrants in a new world, really, surrounded by the "Virginia Gentlemen" of "Mr. Jefferson's University." More than a few were resentful of the presence of so many "Others" on campus. That has fundamentally changed now, but it was a fact back then.

Nevertheless, for me, everything about being there was extraordinary—it was like being at a twenty four hour smorgasbord buffet of ideas and art. I started changing right away, and I quickly became aware that the opportunity of being there was changing my prospects. Four decades later when I got the invitation to write the poem, I thought I'd write a poem about that—the socioeconomic opportunities offered to me by Thomas Jefferson. It would be about the American myth, rising out of the working class to be educated, learning that it was "a thing" (as young people say today) to be socially enfranchised in the larger world in which one lived. The world in which I had grown up was not like that: It was payday to payday poor, suspicious, xenophobic, and fundamentally apolitical. The idea that one not only could, but perhaps should, participate in society in a variety of ways, according to a vision of what one had decided for oneself was a desirable and worthwhile way to live and be was a notion that had never occurred to me. The University of Virginia implanted that

idea in me. And much of that implanting had to do with what I came to understand about Thomas Jefferson.

I got the request to write the poem right as my mother was dying in Virginia from lung cancer. Then after that, I discovered that my child away at college in another state had developed a drug addiction. My mind was a mess, and my limbic system was operating like a terrorist cell. Most days, I could barely breathe. I wanted to write the poem, but I couldn't get enough of a grip on my mind to even get started. I turned to the soothing rituals of research. I have always loved research—how it focuses the mind, and centers you, and sends you out from that centerpoint to make your methodical investigations.

So, I checked out several biographies of Jefferson, and piled them up on my reading table in the living room and beside my bed. I read in and through them, taking notes and just trying to snag details that might jog something that could tip me over into the poem. I write in a very hodge-podge, magpie fashion, and it took me about ten months to write the poem. I knew from the beginning that race would come into the poem. I've written a lot of poems about race, the South, white Southern working class identity, so I was able to trust that however the poem came into being, it would not evade or minimize the topic of race which is essential to the real life history and to the constructed myth of Thomas Jefferson. I had always had a conflicted relationship with Jefferson because of the conflict between the two: image and reality. It was hard to fit my mind around the inspiring language of the Declaration of Independence—which I have frequently taught in American literature courses—and the moral depravity (as he himself named it) in his personal life as a slave owner. How was it possible for the person who wrote our iconic founding documents—*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness*—to be the same person who purchased and sold slaves, who forced his fifteen year old slave—a girl, a child—to have sexual relations with him? How is it possible to contain those contradictions within the same psyche? What I was chasing in the poem was not the larger, external context—the social and historical realities that made Jefferson's deeply conflicted life possible. I was interested in the psychodynamics of this one personality—so good in one way, so evil in another. This is what led me to the theme of bipolarity, and that's what became the entryway to the title poem.

My child who has struggled with addiction also has severe bipolar dis-

order. (Please allow me to interject a public health notice: it is estimated that about 80% of Americans with bipolar disorder self-medicate with alcohol or drugs, and many end up with substance dependent or addicted. It's a problem.) My child was born in Louisiana. Jefferson, of course, was responsible for the Louisiana Purchase—a sort of audacious and grandiose gesture for the young republic to have made. All these things came together—thinking about Thomas Jefferson, his humanism and his democratic ideals, the fact that he was not only a slave owner but actually had an entire other family with his slave Sally Hemmings, the immorality of that part of him that coexisted—bipolar-like, it seemed to me—with his higher nature that created this amazing country. Once the character of my Louisiana-born child entered the poem—at the end of the first section—it sort of wrote itself. I've been thinking and writing about bipolar disease for several years now, so bipolarity became a kind of metaphor for the things I was ruminating on in the poem. I do have to say that I hope no one thinks I'm suggesting Jefferson had bipolar disorder. I'm not. And I'm not making excuses or justifications. I'm trying to understand something that seems incomprehensible to me. It was incomprehensible to me that my child could become addicted to drugs. I just couldn't understand how it had happened any more than I could understand how Thomas Jefferson actually was the person he was. Writing the poem, in a way, helped me to accept that I was not ever going to understand. And that what I had to do was to accept the starting point: In the past, this happened and can't be changed. This is where I am now. What are my choices now? That's what one day at a time is about: acceptance, and then managing time and evaluating choices.

**Suarez:** What about the poems in *Her* and *Us*, the ones that don't directly concern themselves with the theme of addiction?

**Daniels:** Well, the first section has what I think of as “messy poems.” Particularly the opening poem, “Her Barbaric Yawp.” The first summer of this family crisis, I was up on Cape Cod by myself. Out of the blue, John Hopenhotaler wrote and asked me to send a poem for *A Poetry Congeries*. I told him I had this really long, weird poem, and that I'd send it as long as he let me down gently if he didn't like it. I was just too fragile at that point to risk much of anything. Luckily, he liked it! And that helped me, I think, begin to get a sense of how the book might come together. “Yawp” was so weird I thought no one would ever like it but me. So, having it published helped me have faith in the persona—an older woman, on the cusp of old age, who

has a definite take on things. She's feisty and outspoken, and although she has suffered a lot in gender-based ways, she can still be felled by the marvel and the beauty of human life. After that, it was easy to see that "She Poets Cento" should come next: a long quilt poem in which I appropriate lines from other women poets as a way to express my gratitude to my poetic fore-mothers. After that, I felt I had made a nest for "Homage to Frank O'Hara: Fire Island Tea Dance, Summer '78," which is the most intense poem about gender I've ever written.

**Suarez:** To what extent is writing about gender—whether a person is male, female, transgender, or however that person chooses to define themselves—inevitable?

**Daniels:** I do think it's inevitable, but I think it might have been more difficult for women poets of previous generations to take that position. Not writing about gender directly might have been an advantage to them. Even in the poetry world, throughout much of the twentieth century, there were risks to being too outspoken as a woman poet, too challenging to the male order of poetry and publishing, bringing too much female gender-specific (read: unpoetic) material into one's poems. Take Elizabeth Bishop, a poet whom I love. Even she, with her enormous, almost universally admired talent, shrank from identifying with her gender. She seemed to want to write above or beyond her gender almost as if it were a garment she could remove, which seems ridiculous to me. My personal belief is that writers inevitably reflect their gender in some way—though by gender, I mean a spectrum, not a bilateral scale of male/female. Phil Levine writes out of his gender, but not about it. A poet doesn't have to write about it, but cannot help writing out of it, from it. However, I *do* write about it, about my gender, my female gender. I also write explicitly about Gender with a capital G. Essentially, I'm an old unreconstructed baby boomer feminist.

**Suarez:** As you mentioned, addiction is another major thread in the book.

**Daniels:** Yes, those poems are the center of the book. As I said, they emanate from a compelling autobiographical experience that I had. A number of them are also about narrative. So, in my mind, there is a meta-dimension to the book: it's a collection of mostly narrative poems on a particular subject that are also commenting on narrative. That comes from attending 12 step meetings.

Within a month of discovering that my child was a drug addict, I was taken in shock to an Al-Anon meeting. For the first few months, all I did was sit there and cry. People held my hand and gave me tissues. It was a place where you could go for one hour a week where you didn't have to feel ashamed and stigmatized about what was happening in your family because everyone there was having those problems. A 12 step meeting is a fascinating site if you're interested in narrative—an intense, but highly controlled space. There are rituals of language that start a meeting, like in church, and rituals of language that end it. In the middle is the part where narrative takes over completely. Pretty much, people testify, but it's completely non-coercive. You can attend for as long as you'd like and not have to say anything. Ever. But once you start talking, you only have a certain amount of time. By the grace of God, I became a part of an Al Anon group that's been around since 1978; it's all women and it has a three-minute limit for talking. At first, all I did was cry, but at the same time I've been an English professor for almost forty years, so my mind started turning what I was hearing into texts even though I wasn't immediately aware of it. I began attending at the start of January, and by the spring, I started to feel similarities between what it feels like to write poems and how I felt sitting through the meetings. You had three minutes to talk—even if your husband had just burned the house down or your child had OD'd and died. You could talk about pretty much anything at all. So there was a lot of freedom around content, but severe constraints on the form of the talking. Somehow this experience with language—either creating it or receiving it—came into the poems, which helped me gain some control over my mind.

**Suarez:** Can you be specific about receiving and creating language in a particular poem?

**Daniels:** “The Power of Narrative” is a poem whose narrative setting is a meeting of a support group for addicted people. I would say it's about the power of language, and the ways in which language and thought are interdependent. I wrote it in tercets, which I thought suggested something about the strictness of the form of these meetings which are severely constrained by a set of guidelines. There are times at beginning and end for group recitations. There are printed out readings which are read exactly as they appear—no ad libbing! There is a person, a sort of emcee, who conducts the meeting by reading a script. Everything is timed, and adhering to the time limit is really important. In the middle is open sharing when the floor is open to

anyone who wants to talk. Nevertheless, during sharing, talking is defined and constrained: three minutes (usually) and strictly timed by a timekeeper; no references to religion or politics, or treatment centers. No references to any reading material or media that is not published by the support group itself. No cross talk, which means that you can't respond directly to anything that anyone else has said. You describe your husband kicking the dog to death in a drunken rage, and then it's "ding," onto a person who is angry at her teenage daughter for denting the car after she'd drunk a beer, "ding," and so on. There's a lot of silence in meetings, just as there is in poems. The relationship between not being able to respond to what others say is very much like writing a poem, and not knowing who might read it, or care for it. My favorite poem in the entire book is about this; it's the most unpoetic of all of them but at the end . . . can I read a little of it?

**Suarez:** By all means. Read the whole poem.

**Daniels:** *Support Group*

For a long time, each day was a bad day.  
Truthfully? For years, each day was a bad day.

The nights were worse, but she could slide  
The deadbolt on the bedroom door, and swallow  
An Ambien, or two, to summon sleep.

Thank god she never dreamed about it.

The meetings helped, but it was hard to go  
Because the first thing you did was admit  
You were fucked, and had no power.

It was worse to stay home, sitting on the fear  
Like a solitary hen hatching poisoned eggs.

There were a lot of rules and tissues in the room.  
The rules were followed. The tissues were  
Dispensed to those who wept.

Many wept.

In the rooms, there was infinite suffering.  
It had 3 minutes each to describe itself.

A little timer went off, or someone waved  
A cardboard clock face in the air. One Suffering  
Stopped talking. Then the next Suffering started up.

A lot of suffering in the world, is the first clear thought  
Most people have when they come here.

That sums up what it was like for me. These groups represent a place, a site, where wounded people gather. Many people go there—to Al Anon, especially, I think—thinking they are going to find out how to change what's going on with the addict who is destroying not only his or her own life, but the lives of the people who love them. Then the first thing you learn when you go there is you can't change anyone else. You have no power over them or their addiction. That's the starting point, what's called Step 1: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol/drugs/ other people." As the poem says, if you came there thinking you'd get advice on how to change someone else's behavior, then "You're fucked!" All you can do is try to change yourself, and how you respond to something. If I hadn't spent half a century struggling to write poems before I ever went to Al Anon, I don't know that the process would have worked with me as well as it ultimately did. And does. Once my head began to clear, I could see constant correspondences between the linguistic constraints enforced by the structure of a 12 step meeting, and aspects of writing poems. And that was helpful. It was therapeutic, actually.

**Suarez:** Tell me more about how that translates into poetry.

**Daniels:** Well, I think people often come to 12 step meetings feeling out of control, hoping to find something that will control or solve a problem. But what they find out right away is that they have to control themselves because they can't control anything or anyone else. Likewise, I think I "come to the page" to write a poem because I have some kind of problem, if you will, something that's bothering me, an itch, maybe, if that makes sense. But once I get to the page, the first thing I realize is that I have no power over anything other than my individual choices of language. This word instead of that. This line ending. This stanzaic form, etc. Language has its own rules.

Readers have their own desires. Poetry is not going to give you a break on any of this. So I can't force anyone to like my poems, any more than I can force my loved one to stop drinking or drugging. I can only choose the best words for my poem, to the best of my ability, and commit myself to my vision of the poem. Likewise, I go to meetings and practice the 12 steps to commit myself to my own mental health and serenity—though while I'm there I might pray for health and serenity for someone else!

That's what poetry writing feels like to me, I guess: this quite amazing balance of control and abandonment. In Al-Anon, you get started by accepting you can't control or change anyone but yourself. The abandonment part of it is that you give yourself up to the terrible feelings you are almost certainly going to have to experience when you let go of your fantasy that there is something you can do to make your loved one stop drinking or drugging. . . . Isn't that sort of like writing a poem? It is for me. You sit down to write a poem, possibly a little pumped up with what you're going to do, with your love of language, with all your craft knowledge. You're surfing a swell of affect that language is starting to adhere to. But the page humbles you right away. Right away, you understand your "control" is limited. You have an idea, or a character, or a line, and you line up words with a thought about syllables and an array of sounds. You choose this form, you choose this voice. You consider your line breaks. All those things you have control over, but you don't have control over how someone is going to receive your poem. Writing a poem is about having control over your ideas concerning language and things involving others that you have no control over whatsoever. That's what these groups were like for me. It was extraordinary. You go in thinking that nobody could feel as much pain as you're feeling, but then you're overwhelmed by other people's stories, and somehow that affects your story. It enlarges your reality base. The forms of the group and the constraints around language use can help you clarify the choices you actually have. And you have to sit with and accept all the choices you don't have. And you only have three minutes to talk about it! One of them, for me (and I suspect for many writers), is that I don't know what affect is going to be unleashed in the poem. Which is to say, I never know where I'm going in a poem until I'm just about there. I'm a poet who has a sense of where to start from, and then I'm just gone—writing—until I'm there.

**Suarez:** Let's take a step back. What about literary influences?

**Daniels:** Phil Levine has been the number one influence for me and probably will always be, even though his imprint was more spiritual than stylistic. Certainly, these poems don't bear much obvious relation to his. But his work gave me the courage to write out of the humble details of my own life and my own circumstance. My point of origin in life was as a woman, a working class Southerner from an uneducated background. I felt humiliated and diminished by that. In the early 1970s, I found a part of myself in poetry by Adrienne Rich, Muriel Rukeyser, Anne Sexton. But I couldn't find my people in poetry until I read Levine. Luckily, I discovered Phil's poetry very early and I met him very early—so Phil always and forever.

**Suarez:** In the first poem, there's certainly Whitman.

**Daniels:** Oh yes, there's always Whitman! Although Stanley Kunitz with whom I studied in the MFA program at Columbia, crushed me in workshop one day when he observed, "You're not Whitman, you know, Kate." But I've always wanted to be Whitman! A writer of verses that are ragged, garrulous, seemingly hodgepodge, and magpie-like with a generous clutter. My love of long forms comes from Robert Penn Warren, I think. I'm pretty sure *Audubon: A Vision* was the first longer poem of his I read, and it blew me out of the water, especially the form of the poem which was simultaneously focused and wandering. In "Yawp," I was trying to do something similar, maybe, stay on the path and wander off it, too, in ways that Warren did so brilliantly.

So, I love to write like that: expansively, at length, garrulously. But I had to change gears in the second section. They are stripped down; the lines are shorter. They don't use much decoration. Plain facts and narrative. I wanted the poems to be brittle and terse, and sort of barely enunciated from between gritted teeth. Tense jaw. Jack Gilbert's *Monolithos* was in my head when I was writing those shorter poems. I first read it in the early 1980s when it came out, and I still return to it. I remain amazed by and covetous of the almost clinical lucidity with which he was able to write about intensely emotional situations.

**Suarez:** In that second section, the topics are so overwhelming, so emotional, that I sense it had to be contained.

**Daniels:** Yes. I wrote most of the shorter addiction poems up on Cape Cod

in a tiny, cove-front cottage looking out at a tidal salt marsh. It was primal, solitary, private. There was an enormous amount of crying and howling, even, and having to get up and pace, or even run, the feelings out of my body. . . . It was very painful writing these poems. I had no control over the pain. The only way to not feel it was to not write the poems. But my choice was to write the poems, so I had to risk the affect. I'm glad I wrote them, but I won't ever revisit this topic again.

**Suarez:** Any other influences you were aware of?

**Daniels:** Sharon Olds was very important to me, especially in the 1980s. She wrote so straightforwardly about her experiences as a heterosexual woman and a mother. I think part of the grittiness of certain depictions of female experience in my poems comes from my reading of her. I discovered Adrienne Rich when I read *Diving into the Wreck* as a junior in college and was off to the races with her. Of course, I loved her take-no-prisoners feminism, but I loved equally the way she used big, free forms to address larger issues. I'm always interested in poets like Rich, Warren, and Rukeyser—bold, free verse poets who often stick to a narrative line, but feel free to transgress and interrupt themselves. And who load their poems with information. I also found Langston Hughes helpful to me, and have always been amazed at the early awareness he had of his desire to write for “his people,” if I can put it that way. I've had a similar sense of trying to write for my people, Southern, working class people who are not fancy, artsy people. People who love stories. That's something I learned from Hughes and from Levine both—how to speak not only about the disenfranchised people who are close to your heart, but how to speak to them—even though they might not be initially inclined to read poetry.

**Suarez:** What were your other strategies formally and thematically?

**Daniels:** I'm a narrative poet. The be all and end all with me is narrative. So most of my poems begin with a character, a sense of a character. Maybe the character is saying something in the first person, or maybe I see the character in the midst of a dramatic scene or vignette. I never know how a poem is ultimately going to play out—only how it starts. After that, it's a journey. As E. M. Forester wrote, “How do I know what I think, until I see what I wrote?”

I know exactly how, for instance, “Her Barbaric Yawp” started. When

I was in college in my fourth year at the University of Virginia, I was looking for a place to live with some girlfriends. We went to check out a sprawling apartment on the top floor of an old house on Jefferson Park Avenue in Charlottesville. There were some other girls living there at the time. The room that I was going to get was currently inhabited by another UVA student, a girl named Gretchen who was wearing cowboy boots. The room was incredibly messy, but it was a great room with big windows, a tall ceiling, and solid wood doors. I remember looking around and thinking about where my furniture would go. Then this happened. On the bare floor, in a corner of the room, I saw a diaphragm. It appeared as if it had just been removed. I was twenty, and I knew what a diaphragm was, of course. I remember thinking, “What kind of woman would throw her diaphragm on the floor?” Here’s how I used a diaphragm: discreetly, then afterwards, I washed it, and dried it, and powered it, and put it back in its little plastic clam and hid it in the bedside drawer. That seemed like total sexual liberation to me. But when I saw Gretchen’s diaphragm flung on the floor, I had an epiphany: I’m not really all that liberated! I thought I was writing about this character—this more liberated-than-me-Gretchen—but then it turned into a poem about aging, and experiencing one’s erotic self over time, about being female in this particular culture where you can feel so scrutinized and judged. Gretchen never appeared in the poem at all!

**Suarez:** Like this book, your second book, *The Niobe Poems*, was written out of a painful personal circumstance, the accidental drowning of your young nephew. To what extent were those poems in your mind as you wrote *Reading a Biography of Thomas Jefferson in the Months of My Son’s Recovery*?

**Daniels:** That’s a natural question, but the only way those poems were in my mind while I was writing and editing this book was that I would occasionally think, “I remember feeling this way.” Otherwise, I didn’t think about the relationship between the two books. To me they’re very different. Death has a finality to it that the situation in this new book doesn’t. There was much more ambiguity. My nephew died. But the situation of my addicted child was that of a living death. He was alive, but dead in so many ways. Will he live? Will he die? Will the family survive? Is the money going to be used up? Will there be anything left by the time this narrative reaches its termination?

Generally, when I write poems I have the sense of everything happening at the same time: like a flock of birds either coming in for a landing or rising up to fly off at the same time. There's this great quote by Yeats where he describes "the moment of creation" as a psychic space on the border between sleep and wakefulness where poets are drawn into a state of "trance, in which the mind, liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols." When I write in more expansive forms, everything seems to be happening at once. It feels almost orgasmic, just as it's supposed to happen. That's when I feel the presence of Whitman and Rukeyser and Warren. But when I am writing short, emotionally intense poems—and many of *The Niobe Poems* are even shorter than some in the new book—there is this feeling of slicing and cutting and nipping things off. It's a very different feeling psychologically.

**Suarez:** In *The Niobe Poems* and in this new book, many of the poems are written in the third person.

**Daniels:** My impulse always is to write in the first person—and there's plenty of that in *Her*, *Him*, and *Us*. I like to write in second person, too. My MFA students hate second person narration, and I haven't been able to convince them yet of its merits for emotional distancing. But you're right, I use third a lot in this book —particularly in that second section where the addiction poems cluster, called "The Addict's Mother." I guess it makes sense that that is the one title section that is not a pronoun, but a third person, omniscient noun phrase.

I wouldn't be surprised if every single one of the addiction poems started out in first person. I remember times when I started with the "I," but had to draw back. I can't even describe the feeling of it. I needed to put a shield or a guard rail or something. If not, I was going to burn up.

**Suarez:** It's also a device to filter and control the material. Perhaps the switching between first, second, and third person was part of that.

**Daniels:** The autobiographical experiences that came to me during the writing of these poems came to me as I was turning sixty. One of the things in all the poems that I was feeling was my own mortality—my mother died, I had severe back problems which culminated in surgery, a good friend died suddenly, and my beloved child became addicted. I think there's a sense of aging in the book, and one of the things parents want as they age is to see

their offspring successfully launched, to see them able to support themselves, and have good relationships. So my sense that my grown child was going backwards was quite terrifying. I think that has to do with the switching.

One of the things that was so illuminating was that I was going through a narrative experience. I sometimes felt grateful that I had been arrested in my freefall by the 12 step program. I also felt embarrassed. I'm a poet and an English professor. Like all of us, I work with sophisticated texts every day—sometimes I'm trying to write them, other times I'm analyzing and teaching them. I've got some pride around my linguistic abilities! And I very much enjoy being a person who lives in that world. So I sometimes felt embarrassed by the simplicity and the simplemindedness of the approach to language that 12 step recovery tends to use. For instance, there are slogans that appear to be helpful. They can be seen as clichés. One of the things that fascinated me was how the experience redeemed those very simple words and phrases and turned them on their head. Nothing about the situation of being in loving relation to an addict is simple, but the way to save yourself—which again is the only thing you can do—might be to become really simple. I'll give you an example.

At the height of this situation, I went to a little store that sells materials published by my support group. There was a book on the shelf titled something like *Letters to God from Parents of Alcoholics and Addicts*. On the one hand, this is the type of thing that makes me cringe; on the other hand, I was desperate for relief from my psychic pain, and for some kind of guidance on how to help myself. Going to meetings had made it clear to me that I needed to be as non-elitist as possible because I didn't have anything to be elitist about. I felt like a complete and total failure as a parent. And I felt like a complete basket case as a person. So, I picked up the book and started reading it. The first thing I read was this: "Dear God, My daughter is a drug addict. I am so terribly afraid she will die," signed, "A Concerned Mother." Instantly relatable! Like every other parent of an addict, I was utterly consumed by fear that my child would overdose and die. I was willing to consider any advice, even that of an imaginary God. Here's what Imaginary God said: "Dear Concerned Mother, Thank you for your letter. Your child might die. Love, God." I stood there in that little concrete block storefront and felt like I was being vaporized. There I was right at the center of the 12 steps. If you don't accept what your reality is, you don't have a chance. Step 1: I admitted I was powerless.

**Suarez:** Let's finish up by talking about the poems in the final section. Can you describe what you were trying to accomplish there?

**Daniels:** It's the section that gave me the most trouble. A lot of the poems are about marriage, and about loss and acceptance, I think. I've been married thirty-one years. I remember after being married for about five years, waking up one day, and thinking that marriage was like buying an open-passage ticket for an ocean voyage. You know where you got on, but you have no frigging idea where you'll disembark! At some point you realize you're going to be on this trip forever—with this person you made a commitment to decades ago! It's kind of harrowing, isn't it? Beautiful, but harrowing. At some point, you find out what your ideas about commitment really are. But commitment involves compromise, and compromise means loss. So maybe these poems have to do with that.

“End of the Marriage” has to do with a family crisis from my childhood: a woman who has a horribly damaging adulterous affair, but for some reason the husband stays with her. The poem called “Breast Cancer” also focuses on a marriage and a crisis that comes to it. Some years ago, I did some work with a breast cancer support group at Vanderbilt. One woman in the group told an anecdote that comes in at the very end of the poem. It was a very sentimental, but deeply moving story. I still can't even paraphrase it without crying. For years, I tried to imagine the backstory of the husband who committed this very out of character action as he was bringing his wife home from the hospital after her mastectomy. “Longing at Sixty” is about a woman who is angrily protesting the erotic diminishment of her post-menopausal life. She is really pissed off.

The final poem is called “Detachment.” In that poem, I mention “the grinding.” Maybe that's what the final section is about: the grinding that just being a human being over time, alive and breathing, requires. Of course, some people think they can check out of the grinding by deranging their senses with alcohol or drugs or gambling or pornography—the various addictions our culture provides.

**Suarez:** To me, the final section seemed like a larger reckoning after the sections having to do with addiction. After having gone through that experience, it seems natural that one would pause and take stock of life as a whole.

**Daniels:** That seems right to me. Taking stock of life as a whole—to use your words—for me means being connected with my spiritual beliefs and practices. I am a person of faith, and my belief is that no matter what happens—even if the worst happens that a child dies, the child’s parents will go on living. Which means that life—whatever it is—will go on. The dead will bury the dead. Life is for the living. All those clichés. No matter what, I go on believing that there’s something larger than we are that is implicated in our very existence, and that loves us. I know that sounds absurd to many people. I’m a pessimist in so many ways, but somehow my faith makes me experience life as filled with blessings and joy as it is scourged by pain. Life is not preschool, and it’s not rainbow soccer. It’s not fair. We’re not in control, and we don’t get to choose. In poetry and in life, all we can do is come to the page, approach the moment with as much consciousness as we can bear, and with the ongoing awareness that the only control we have in this world is of ourselves—the words we commit to the paper, the choices we make in life.

# Kate Daniels

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## *Support Group*

For a long time, each day was a bad day.  
Truthfully? For years, each day was a bad day.

The nights were worse, but she could slide  
The deadbolt on the bedroom door, and swallow  
An Ambien, or two, to summon sleep.

Thank god she never dreamed about it.

The meetings helped, but it was hard to go  
Because the first thing you did was admit  
You were fucked, and had no power.

It was worse to stay home, sitting on the fear  
Like a solitary hen hatching poisoned eggs.

There were a lot of rules and tissues in the room.  
The rules were followed. The tissues were  
Passed around to those who wept.

Many wept.

In the rooms, there was infinite suffering.  
It had 3 minutes each to describe itself.

A little timer went off, or someone waved  
A cardboard clock face in the air. One Suffering  
Stopped talking. Then the next Suffering started up.

A lot of suffering in the world, is the first clear thought  
Most people have when they come here.

## *The Addict's Mother: Birth Story*

She wasn't watching when they cut him  
Out. C-section, you know. Green drape  
Obscuring the mound of ripened belly  
They extracted him from. He spilled  
Out squalling, already starving. Still  
Stitching her up, they fastened him  
To her breast so he could feed. There  
He rooted for the milk, so lustful  
In his sucking that weeping roses  
Grew from the edges of her nipples.  
For weeks, they festered there,  
Blooming bloody trails anew each  
And every time he made a meal of her.  
I know what you're thinking.  
But he was her child.  
She had to let him  
Do that to her.

## *Driving*

That was the year that summer lingered  
and fall came on late. I was still wearing  
sleeveless clothes when the temperatures fell,  
and the wind rose suddenly, and tore the leaves  
from their branches in a matter of days.

By then, there was a long line of addicts  
on the corner every morning – red-nosed  
and shivering, sores all over, reminding me  
of the roaming packs of starving dogs you see  
in third world countries. I shooed them away  
when they begged for money... All that autumn,

I was searching for my son. Why I never looked  
among the junkies on the corner who, after all,  
were other people's sons, or why—*god help me*—  
I drove right through their tattered clots,  
and kept my coins to myself, and controlled  
my thoughts – I have no clue. I just kept driving  
though I had no sense of where I was going,  
or what I'd do, or what I might find if I got there.

*At the Meetings They Say, “Detach with Love”*

When the alcoholic fell before reaching  
The bed, and pissed his pants before  
Passing out, and shat himself, and puked  
Up what was left of lunch, and just lay there  
Unconscious, soaking the carpet, his program  
Practicing wife turned him on his side,  
And left him there to sleep it off.

Whatever lesson she meant to share  
When she told this story at a meeting  
Eluded me. I could not make it fit  
The rage-filled narrative I lived inside  
That starred a heroin-addicted son who  
Jacked his mother’s car and traded it for dope.  
I settled for detachment minus hatred. . .

Regardless, love’s cellmate—hate—germinated  
And grew until the bilious pit in my stomach  
When his name blinked into view on the iphone  
Screen had eaten me in two. For longer than you  
Might imagine, I lived like that, the two halves  
Of me detached, one from the other: heart  
From mind. My body from his body.

## *Metaphor-less*

The dryness dead center  
Of deep pain. The bone on  
Bone grinding that goes on  
For months preceding  
The surgery—that's the way  
The parent whose child is using  
Heroin again feels in the middle  
Of the night unable to sleep, standing  
At the bedroom window, looking out  
Just barely conscious of what the moon  
Looks like—drained, gray. The moon  
Is a popular literary image—solipsistic  
Misery, misplaced love. Whatever.  
Tonight, it's nothing but a source  
Of milky light, swinging high up in the sky  
Shining weakly on the bleakness inside  
And the bleakness outside that has  
No other meaning but the cold  
Un-crackable rock of itself.

## *The Daughter-in-Law*

She called him the night before  
to let him know she'd be there  
early in the morning. Of course,  
he called her an *interfering whore*,  
and hung up on her, and got high.

She was there anyway by 8:15  
and when he wouldn't open up,  
the Swiss army knife she always  
carries on her belt sliced right  
through the window screen. I keep

Seeing her crawling in to wake  
him up, and how she would have  
entered feet first, and the colorful  
tats on her calves and ankles  
I'd always hated until then.

Turns out she also took a gun—  
though no one ever told me  
if she un-holstered it to make  
her point, or exactly what she said,  
or what it took to extract him

From the filthy blankets on his bed,  
or how she forced him in the car,  
and child-locked him in, and drove  
to the airport, and walked beside him  
to the gate, and stayed until the plane

Had lifted off. She doesn't talk about  
her feelings very much. So who knows  
how much it cost her? What I know is  
this: because of her, he made the flight  
I'd booked. It landed in another state  
Where his father picked him up  
and drove him straight to treatment.

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## RESOURCES

The worldwide fellowship of Al Anon and Alcoholics Anonymous provides support for people whose lives have been affected by other people's addiction and/or alcoholism. Al Anon is not affiliated with any church or religious denomination, political organization or party, and is completely independent of and uninvolved with treatment programs, hospitals, recovery facilities, etc. Al Anon's homepage is located at [www.al-anon.org](http://www.al-anon.org) and offers information on the organization, and other ways to get help. Al Anon also maintains an active twitter account: @AlAnonWSO

Al Anon groups are free, open to anyone who is bothered or affected by someone else's substance use or abuse, and anonymous. Lists of meetings are available online, as well as in local telephone directories. In most locations, meetings are typically available seven days a week, and are also available electronically and by telephone for those who live in far flung areas.

Al Anon groups do not recommend, review, discuss in meetings, or in any way endorse treatment centers, hospitals, halfway houses, etc. Al Anon's sole concern is with those who are affected by others' alcohol and drug problems. The contacts made with people in similar situations, however, may prove helpful or informative outside the formal structure of the group meetings.

Many states have created websites for those seeking help. For instance, Georgia's Department of Public Health maintains a very informative page at

<https://georgia.gov/blog/2017-12-12/georgia%E2%80%99s-opioid-epidemic-and-ways-get-help>

For issues relating to dual diagnosis – co-occurring addiction and mental health issues – consult your physician and/or mental health experts. NAMI – the National Alliance on Mental Illness – sponsors NAMI Family Support Groups that operate similarly to Al Anon groups: community-based, free of charge, and confidential. Their homepage is located at

<https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/NAMI-Programs/NAMI-Family-Support-Group>

## THE TWELVE STEPS

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.