

[Western PA Air and Water Ballet](#) [1]

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Poems by Terry Dawson



Western PA Air and Water Ballet, Circa 1970

(1) cold steel

coke fumes settle in the seams of red brick
homes stacked thick on countless hillsides

the wide Ohio swallows hard beneath shelves of gray
ice and dozens of bridges, pale blue and canary

slate sky leaning in: it is

the way of this burg(h), choking for decades

come nightfall blast furnaces gorging on soft
bitumen ignite the confluence of rivers

snow hardening to stalactites, longer and blacker as
chill reduces pollution to *pirouettes* of fog—

the city rounds its shoulders like everyone else,
making a *bourrée* beeline to places inside

words to each other as we pass rise steaming —
what's to say that's not been said? the men,

crowding downtown bars in a.m. half-light,
down amber boilermakers and utter next to

nothing as they cross rivers to forge
pig iron into ingots of steel the dead

of winter itself has yet to speak, as towering
flues raise fists of industry from castles

of soot defiance holding its silence,
resignation its mischief Pennsylvania

its choreography and the cold,
its riveted self-assurance

(2) wet ritual

the Kumbh Mela never comes to Pittsburgh:
no one mistakes the Allegheny for the Ganges

or Monongahela for Yamuna and wades in fully dressed
till garments rise as sodden tutus

no one expects a dip in the Ohio
to cleanse them like Triveni Sangam

even with its Mississippi-bound *adagio*, feeding the Gulf,
where brown women wash clothes against its shores

still we await a *grand jeté* into
the invisible Sarasvati from rivers—

the dead floating in all, and all
in time entering death cleansing them

of all desire to flow over those routinely
filling them with their sins—in time

all folding neck, arms and legs to
align with the very bottom of water



Island Living

the island of America, floating free
from and sunk into everything
with its footprint in the shape of greatness—
heavy edges calving ice,
remains for now in the singular sea
of our planetary mind

most free to reside here, having arrived here,
carried by those determined to procreate
nowhere else, they assume the mantle of
abandonment of thought regarding
anything save island living: “we are
here” remains enough

our warming weather, our receding
demarcations, our short-breathy occasions
and rare heavy-metal libations
deter not an ounce of resolve to insist
without evidence we the best,
keeping science more silent and the
press less evident

first residents here conceived us a turtle,

its carapace spread with dirt retrieved
from beneath the fingernails of a gopher
diving six years deep
to the floor of the abyss
before the creature breathed its last

when we citizens do the same,
consider what will remain
of the island of America floating free
from and sunk into everything

Art Information

- [“Pittsburgh - Three Rivers from Duquesne Heights \(1968\) \[5\]”](#) and [“Washington - Southeast from Washington Monument \(1988\) \[6\]”](#) © Roger W; Creative Commons license.



Terry Dawson is an ordained Presbyterian minister living in Austin, Texas. He produces and performs with the multicultural poetry, jazz, and live painting collaborative Five Voizz Brush. His poetry, essays, and creative nonfiction have appeared in *Red Fox Review*, *Horizons*, *di-verse-city anthology*, *Pigeonholes*, *Courtship of the Winds*, *Dash*, the 2019 Texas Poetry Calendar of Kallisto Gaia Press, and the *Ocotillo Review*. He was a finalist in the Chase Going Woodhouse Poetry Competition and was twice long-listed for Ireland's Fish Anthology Poetry Prize.

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