Ellen Bryant Voigt (born 1943) is an American poet. She has published six collections of poetry and a collection of craft essays. Her poetry collection Shadow of Heaven (2002) was a finalist for the National Book Award and Kyrie (1995) was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her poetry has been published in several national publications. She served as the Poet Laureate of Vermont for four years and in 2003 was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

Voigt grew up in Virginia, graduated from Converse College, and received an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. She has taught at M.I.T. and Goddard College where in 1976 she developed and directed the nation's first low-residency M.F.A. in Creative Writing program. Since 1981 she has taught in the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers.

She resides in Cabot, Vermont.
A Marriage Poem

1.

Morning: the caged baby
sustains his fragile sleep.
The house is a husk against weather.
Nothing stirs—inside, outside.
With the leaves fallen,
the tree makes a web on the window
and through it the world
lacks color or texture,
like stones in the pasture
seen from this distance.

This is what is done with pain:
ice on the wound,
the isolating tourniquet—
as though to check an open vein
where the self pumps out of the self
would stop the second movement of the heart,
diastolic, inclusive:
to love is to siphon loss into that chamber.

2.

What does it mean when a woman says,
&quot;my husband,&quot;
if she sits all day in the tub;
if she worries her life like a dog a rat;
if her husband seems familiar but abstract,
a bandaged hand she's forgotten how to use.

They've reached the middle years.
Spared grief, they are given dread
as they tend the frail on either side of them.
Even their marriage is another child,
grown rude and querulous
since death practiced on them and withdrew.
He asks of her only a little lie,
a pale copy drawn from the inked stone
where they loll beside the unicorn,
great lovers then, two strangers
joined by appetite:
    it frightens her,
to live by memory's poor diminished light.
She wants something crisp and permanent,
like coral—a crown, a trellis,
an iron shawl across the bed
where they are laced together,
the moon bleaching the house,
their bodies abandoned—

3.

In last week's mail,
still spread on the kitchen table,
the list of endangered species.
How plain the animals are,
quaint, domestic,
but the names lift from the page:
Woundfin. Whooping Crane. Squawfish.
Black-footed Ferret. California Least Tern.

Dearest, the beast of Loch Ness, that shy,
broad-backed, two-headed creature,
may be a pair of whales or manatee,

male and female,
driven from their deep mud nest,
who cling to each other,
circling the surface of the lake.

Ellen Bryant Voigt
This is how it was:
they had their own churches, their own schools,
schoolbuses, football teams, bands and majorettes,
separate restaurants, in all the public places
their own bathrooms, at the doctor's
their own waiting room, in the Tribune
a column for their news, in the village
a neighborhood called Sugar Hill,
uneven rows of unresponsive houses
that took the maids back in each afternoon—
in our homes used the designated door,
on Trailways sat in the back, and at the movie
paid at a separate entrance, stayed upstairs.
Saturdays, a double feature drew the local kids
as the town bulged, families surfacing
for groceries, medicine and wine,
the black barber, white clerks in the stores—crowds
lined the sidewalks, swirled through the courthouse yard,
around the stone soldier and the flag,

and still I never saw them on the street.
It seemed a chivalric code
laced the milk: you'd try not to look
and they would try to be invisible.
Once, on my way to the creek,
I went without permission to the tenants'
log cabin near the barns, and when Aunt Susie
opened the door, a cave yawned, and beyond her square,
leonine, freckled face, in the hushed interior,
Joe White lumbered up from the table, six unfolding
feet of him, dark as a gun-barrel, his head bent
to clear the chinked rafters, and I caught
the terrifying smell of sweat and grease,
smell of the woodstove, nightjar, straw mattress—
This was rural Piedmont, upper south;
we lived on a farm but not in poverty.
When finally we got our own TV, the evening news
with its hooded figures of the Ku Klux Klan
seemed like another movie—King Solomon's Mines,
the serial of Atlantis in the sea.
By then I was thirteen,
and no longer went to movies to see movies.
The downstairs forged its attentions forward,
toward the lit horizon, but leaning a little
to one side or the other, arranging the pairs
that would own the county, stores and farms, everything
but easy passage out of there—
and through my wing-tipped glasses the balcony
took on a sullen glamor: whenever the film
sputtered on the reel, when the music died
and the lights came on, I swiveled my face
up to where they whooped and swore,
to the smoky blue haze and that tribe
of black and brown, licorice, coffee,
taffy, red oak, sweet tea—

wanting to look, not knowing how to see,
I thought it was a special privilege
to enter the side door, climb the stairs
and scan the even rows below—trained bears
in a pit, herded by the stringent rule,
while they were free, lounging above us,
their laughter pelting down on us like trash.

Ellen Bryant Voigt
Blue Ridge

Up there on the mountain road, the fireworks blistered and subsided, for once at eye level:
spatter of light like water flicked from the fingers;
the brief emergent pattern; and after the afterimage bled from the night sky, a delayed and muffled thud
that must have seemed enormous down below,
the sound concomitant with the arranged threat of fire above the bleachers.
I stood as tall and straight as possible,
trying to compensate, trying not to lean in my friend's direction. Beside me, correcting height, he slouched his shoulders, knees locked, one leg stuck out to form a defensive angle with the other.
Thus we were most approximate and most removed.

In the long pauses between explosions, he'd signal conversation by nodding vaguely toward the ragged pines.
I said my children would have loved the show.
He said we were watching youth at a great distance, and I thought how the young are truly boring, unvaried as they are by the deep scar of doubt, the constant afterimage of regret—no major tension in their bodies, no tender hesitation, they don't yet know that this is so much work, scraping from the self its multiple desires; don't yet know fatigue with self, the hunger for obliteration that wakes us in the night at the dead hour and fuels good sex.

Of course I didn't say it.
I realized he watched the fireworks with the cool attention he had turned on women dancing in the bar, a blunt uninvested gaze calibrating every moving part, thighs, breasts, the muscles of abandon.
I had wanted that gaze on me.
And as the evening dwindled to its nub,
its puddle of tallow, appetite without object,
as the men peeled off to seek
the least encumbered consolation
and the women grew expansive with regard—
how have I managed so long to stand among the paired
bodies, the raw pulsing music driving
loneliness into the air like scent,
and not be seized by longing,
not give anything to be summoned
into the larger soul two souls can make?
Watching the fireworks with my friend,
so little ease between us,
I see that I have armed myself;
fire changes everything it touches.

Perhaps he has foreseen this impediment.
Perhaps when he holds himself within himself,
a sheathed angular figure at my shoulder,
he means to be protective less of him
than me, keeping his complicating rage
inside his body. And what would it solve
if he took one hand from his pocket,
risking touch, risking invitation—
if he took my hand it would not alter
this explicit sadness.

The evening stalls,
the fireworks grow boring at this remove.
The traffic prowling the highway at our backs,
the couples, the families scuffling on the bank
must think us strangers to each other. Or,
more likely, with the celebrated fireworks thrusting
their brilliant repeating designs above the ridge,
we simply blur into the foreground,
like the fireflies dragging among the trees
their separate, discontinuous lanterns.

Ellen Bryant Voigt
Landscape, Dense with Trees

When you move away, you see how much depends on the pace of the days—how much depended on the haze we waded through each summer, visible heat, wavy and discursive as the lazy track of the snake in the dusty road; and on the habit in town of porches thatched in vines, and in the country long dense promenades, the way we sacrificed the yards to shade. It was partly the heat that made my father plant so many trees—two maples marking the site for the house, two elms on either side when it was done; mimosa by the fence, and as it failed, fast-growing chestnuts, loblolly pines; and dogwood, redbud, ornamental crab. On the farm, everything else he grew something could eat, but this would be a permanent mark of his industry, a glade established in the open field. Or so it seemed. Looking back at the empty house from across the hill, I see how well the house is camouflaged, see how that porous fence of saplings, their later scrim of foliage, thickened around it, and still he chinked and mortared, planting more. Last summer, although he’d lost all tolerance for heat, he backed the truck in at the family grave and stood in the truckbed all afternoon, pruning the landmark oak, repairing recent damage by a wind; then he came home and hung a swing in one of the horse-chestnuts for my visit. The heat was a hand at his throat, a fist to his weak heart. But it made a triumph of the cooler air inside, in the bedroom, in the maple bedstead where he slept, in the brick house nearly swamped by leaves.

Ellen Bryant Voigt
Lesson

Whenever my mother, who taught small children forty years, asked a question, she already knew the answer. "Would you like to" meant you would. "Shall we" was another, and "Don't you think." As in "Don't you think it's time you cut your hair."

So when, in the bare room, in the strict bed, she said, "You want to see?" her hands were busy at her neckline, untying the robe, not looking down at it, stitches bristling where the breast had been, but straight at me.

I did what I always did: not weep --she never wept-- and made my face a kindly whitewashed wall, so she could write, again, whatever she wanted there.

Anonymous submission.

Ellen Bryant Voigt
To weep unbidden, to wake at night in order to weep,
to wait for the whisker on the face
of the clock to twitch again,
moving the dumb day forward—
is this merely practice?
Some believe in heaven, some in rest.
We'll float, you said. Afterward we'll float
between two worlds— five bronze beetles
stacked like spoons in one peony blossom,
drugged by lust: if I came back as a bird
I'd remember that— until everyone
we love is safe is what you said.

Ellen Bryant Voigt
Put this in your notebooks:
All verse is occasional verse.
In March, trying to get home, distracted
and impatient at Gate 5 in the Greyhound station,
I saw a drunk man bothering a woman.
A poem depends on its detail
but the woman had her back to me,
and the man was just another drunk,
black in this case, familiar, dirty.
I moved past them both, got on the bus.

There is no further action to report.
The man is not a symbol. If what he said to her
touches us, we are touched by a narrative
we supply. What he said was, "I'm sorry,"
"I'm sorry," over and over, "I'm sorry,"
but you must understand he frightened the woman,
he meant to rob her of those few quiet
solidary moments sitting down,
waiting for the bus, before she headed home
and probably got supper for her family,
perhaps in a room in Framingham,
perhaps her child was sick.

My bus pulled out, made its usual turns
And parted the formal gardens from the Common,
both of them camouflaged by snow.
And as it threaded its way to open road,
leaving the city, leaving our sullen classroom,
I postponed my satchel of your poems
and wondered who I am to teach the young,
having come so far from honest love of the world;
I tried to recall how it felt
to live without grief; and then I wrote down
a few tentative lines about the drunk,
because of an old compulsion to record,
or sudden resolve not to be self-absorbed
and full of dread-
I wanted to salvage
something from my life, to fix
some truth beyond all change, the way
photographers of war, miles from the front,
lift print after print into the light,
each one further cropped and amplified,
pruning whatever baffles or obscures,
until the small figures are restored
as young men sleeping.

Ellen Bryant Voigt
Year's End

The fingers lie in the lap,
separate, lonely, as in the field
the separate blades of grass
shrivel or grow tall.

We sat together in the little room,
the walls blotched with steam,
holding the baby as if the two of us
could breathe for him and were not helpless.
Upstairs, his sister turned in her sleep
as the phone rang—

to have wakened to a child's cry,
gagged and desperate,
and then repeat that terror when the call
split the quiet house and centered
its dire message:

a child was dead
and his mother so wrung by grief
she stared and stared
at the moon on its black stalk,
the road glistening like wire.
Rubbing the window clear of steam
as a child rubs sleep from its eyes,
and looking past the fence to where
he had plunged the sled up and down the hill,
we could still see the holes his feet made,
a staggered row of graves
extracting darkness from the snow.
When morning brought the new year in,
the fever broke, and fresh snow
bandaged the tracks on the hill.
For a long time we stayed in the room,
listening to him breathe,
like refugees who listen to the sea,
unable to fully rejoice, or fully grieve.

Ellen Bryant Voigt