



THE WRITING LIFE

by Kerri Webster
September 2004

Writers are observers before anything else.

galaxy, dying

We pay attention, which is to say we pay our attention like a tithe, like dollars crumpled in the collection plate.

J. pale with headache. Flimsy wet paper towels.

We notice, which is to say we then turn around and give notice, withdrawing into isolation so that we can write it all down.

PBS show/Eurasian steppes

The isolation is the expense, the psychic cost. Nuns know it. I don't want to say I'm nunnish, but how else to put it if I don't leave the house for days in service of something I often almost (*almost*) don't believe in?

Most poets I know carry notebooks, and for some the notebooks take on fetishistic status.

below the spiral—mud, gold earrings.

The notebook becomes a milagro, an amulet, a worry stone, a pill bottle..

crappy drinking fountain

I've seen writers lose their notebooks. It's not pretty.

iron arrowheads

I'm at the Albertson College observatory, teaching in the final week of the Log Cabin's Summer Writing Camp. We're just to the part where the professor's telling about the death of galaxies, when there's a tug on my sleeve and a middle-schooler in my group whispers, *Jennifer has a really bad headache*. She and I go sit in the hallway as, inside, the universe keeps up its machinations.

ELEGY FOR A GALAXY

Below the spiral, mud: gold earrings
buried with the girl on the Eurasian steppes. Also iron arrowheads. Also horse bones.

I'm dizzy all May. At the planetarium, Jennifer's head hurts. My mind hums
Hubble, neck sore from tilting back below Andromeda. Somewhere a train

through inner Mongolia, clang and rattle, here the hallway floor a fixed entity
like mud or tea or institutional paper towels

wet then pressed to pale Jennifer. Pale Jennifer, girls ride horses everywhere.
How the drinking fountain fails us: tepid. Metal flakes through pipes

yet don't you adore, some days, how iron gets here? Take Tunguska cratered
and singed. Drink. With what should I be buried: blank paper plus tea plus

something spiral—seashell. Corkscrew. Jennifer, there's nothing but travel,
light to the back of the eye. Rest.

Kerri Webster received her MFA from Indiana University. Her chapbook, *Rowing Through Fog*, was chosen by poet Carl Phillips and published by the Poetry Society of America in 2003. She received a 2004 Literature Fellowship from the Idaho Commission on the Arts and has worked for the Log Cabin as a Writer in the Schools for four years.