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## Virginia sabbatical fellowship inspires new manuscript

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Joan Baranow seeks inspiration for her poetry every day. She does so while juggling her work as an English professor, an independent book publisher, a documentary filmmaker, and director of Dominican's graduate humanities program. However, finding the time to write can be a challenge.

Several years ago, Baranow and five other busy writers formed a "poetry ball" in order to share and critique each other's work. Every Thursday, they would dial into a conference line, quickly agree on a prompt, and then write for an hour before calling back to present their work.

The weekly exercise provided both valuable feedback and a supportive community. However, over time Baranow noticed a pattern.

"I came to realize that many of my poems were all about the same length and the same shape because I only had that one hour," says Baranow, who teaches in the [Department of Literature and Languages in Dominican's School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences](#). "I was so focused on that deadline that I felt an internal nervous tension – a kind of pressure – to finish my poem. Then, I realized that much of my work was tightly structured because my life was so structured."

This realization led Baranow to apply for a sabbatical so that she could slow down and focus on her art.

Opportunity presented itself when, during her sabbatical, Baranow was selected as a fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, one of the nation's largest artist residency programs. Sequestered in the rolling foothills of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, Baranow was able to work in solitude during the day and, each evening, enjoy the company of a creative community of artists, writers, and composers.

"At the residency I had no pressure and no distractions from everyday life. I could take several hours to consider where my poem was going. I had never had that before."

Baranow, who grew up on the East Coast, said the residency was a homecoming of sorts. She found inspiration from the nature around her, especially the many insects typically found in the East. She also had time to read poetry, explore new works, and gain inspiration.

"I have to read poetry that inspires me to write – that's true of many writers and artists," she says. "When I read poetry, I feel those rhythmic lines in my body, and I become inspired to explore different forms of writing. I compare it to going to a dance and hearing music that makes you want to dance because you feel the rhythms in your body."

Baranow explored the works of James Merrill, Dean Young, and Ruth Stone. From Dean Young's "wacky imagination," to James Merrill's "combination of a formal sense and conversational style," and Ruth Stone's "blend of directness and simplicity that takes you off guard," Baranow found inspiration that shaped her own work.

"I had the luxury of having hours ahead of me. I could start writing and ask myself 'where is this going to go?' That was something I had never had before," she says.

The result was 70 pages of poetry, which Baranow shaped into a new manuscript titled *Cold Pastoral*. The manuscript – the title refers to a line in the John Keats poem "Ode to a Grecian Urn" – recently was a finalist for the Marsh Hawk Press book award.

Now that she is back on campus, Baranow is again busy. She is working on Dominican's new MFA in Creative Writing program. Launching in summer 2017, the low-residency MFA will offer tracks in poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction. It also will offer an emphasis in Narrative Medicine—the only such MFA track in the country. Baranow and her husband, physician and poet David Watts, produced the PBS

documentary *Healing Words: Poetry & Medicine*. *Healing Words*, which features patients who incorporated poetry into their recovery process, beautifully shows how being cured of disease is not the same as being healed.

The hybrid program will enable students to attend classes on the Dominican campus for 12 days in summer and eight days in winter. Throughout the year, they will work online with a faculty mentor.

The program is a perfect example of what is possible in today's mobile, connected, and diverse society.

"We live in a golden age of poetry," Baranow says. "We live in a democracy, we enjoy freedom of speech, and we believe in education. We can reach out to provide education to people living anywhere in the world. With the Internet, we have platforms. This is an inspirational time for creativity."

*Joan Baranow's poetry has appeared in The Paris Review, The Antioch Review, JAMA, Feminist Studies, and other magazines. She is author of two poetry chapbooks and a full-length collection, Living Apart, published by Plain View Press. Baranow has won an Individual Artists Fellowship in Poetry from the Marin Arts Council, and has long been a member of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers. With her husband, physician and poet David Watts, Baranow runs Wolf Ridge Press. She received a PhD in English from Rutgers University, an MA in English with Certificate in Creative Writing, SUNY-Binghamton, and a BA, English, Cum Laude, Hollins College.*

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