

The Unraveling by Wyn Cooper

Interview by Doug Holder

Recently Doug Holder caught up with poet Wyn Cooper, a former Somerville resident, to talk about his new collection of poetry “The Unraveling.”

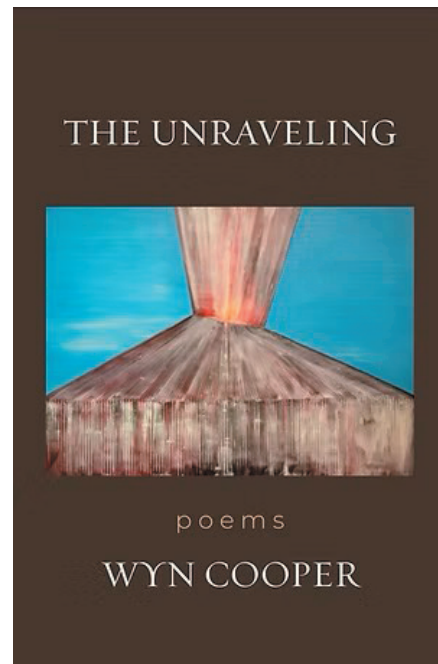
Wyn Cooper has published five books of poetry, including, most recently, *Mars Poetica*. His sixth book, *The Unraveling*, will appear in May 2026. His poems, stories, essays, and reviews have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, *AGNI*, *The Southern Review*, *Five Points*, *Slate*, and more than 100 other magazines. His poems are included in 25 anthologies of contemporary poetry, including *A Century of Poetry in The New Yorker*, *Poetry: An Introduction*, and *The Mercury Reader*. His first novel, *Way Out West*, was published by Concord Free Press in 2023.

In 1993, “Fun,” a poem from his first book, was turned into Sheryl Crow’s Grammy-winning song “All I Wanna Do.” He has also cowritten songs with David Broza, David Baerwald, Jody Redhage, and Bill Bottrell. In 2003, Gaff Music released *Forty Words for Fear*, a CD of songs based on poems and lyrics by Cooper, set to music and sung by the novelist Madison Smartt Bell. Their second CD, *Postcards Out of the Blue*, based in part on Cooper’s postcard poems, was released in 2008. Their songs have been featured on six television shows.

Cooper has taught at the University of Utah, Bennington College, Marlboro College, and at The Frost Place. He has given readings across the country, as well as in Europe and South America. He is a former editor of *Quarterly West*, and the recipient of a fellowship from the Ucross Foundation. For two years he worked at the Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute, a think tank run by the Poetry Foundation. He lives in Vermont and Massachusetts, and works as a freelance editor. His website is www.wyncooper.com.

“The Unraveling”--your new book of poetry is a perfect heading for the state we are in. As Yeats wrote: “Turning and turning in the widening gyre The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” Your take?

I wrote these poems over a a six-year period with no theme in mind, no narrative arc. Even after it was accepted two years ago I couldn’t see how the poems were related, except that some were reactions to the pandemic, and some were indirectly about the end of a long marriage. Even the title was different. In my attempt to replace that title with one I liked, I came up with over a hundred of them, and created a small focus group of Cambridge poets who were kind enough to read the ms and react to



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the titles I came up with. None of them were compelling, or sufficiently able to summarize the collection. I finally realized that the majority of the poems described different kinds of unraveling—of human relationships, of the effects of the pandemic, and of the state of both our country and the world. The center simply wasn't holding.

I am glad that you have a poem about Somerville Ave. — my neck of the woods. I have written about the Ave before, noting its twists and turns with the Boston skyline in the distance. It is a very urban sprawl of an avenue. But in spite of the grittiness of the street, you put angelic, yellow monarchs at the end. Does hope spring eternal?

I lived on the Somerville side of Porter Square for a decade, and would often walk down the avenue toward Boston. I always found it to be a more meditative journey than my walks in other directions. I like to think that the poems in this book, like the poem you refer to, describe a world that's unraveling, but a world that can also provide hope because of the people in it who don't give up. There's beauty peeking out from the chaos, and simply walking down the avenue provides an example of that.

How do you come up with ideas for your your poems? What is the process?

I think most of my poems come out of my unconscious, because I never ever sit down to write a poem "about" something. I just play with language until thoughts and eventually lines and sentences form, and trust that my unconscious is doing the work. It's like our dreams: where on earth do they come from?

In my poem "Chronic" --I used a quote from Freud to focus me --he wrote that his experience of cancer was like "an island of pain in a sea of indifference."

Could you have written this book when you were young?

My first book, *The Country of Here Below*, came out when I was 30, and it was fairly dark, but it reflected a world much different than the world we live in now. My mindset, however, was not all that different. Maybe I need to grow up!

Why should we read this book?

Despite the subject matter, and the fact that the book's title wouldn't lead a reader to expect hope, I think readers will find that there is hope here. In a larger sense, I think the fact that there are so many poets who continue to spend countless hours on poems that attempt to understand our hearts and minds is a miracle, and I think miracles are always hopeful by definition.

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Somerville Avenue

Entering the atmosphere
the beat of wings grows louder,
the wings not wings but wonders
as speakers hung from streetlights carol
Hark! the herald angels sing.

Jets lift off from Logan, their contrails
parallel in late Atlantic light,
hark the angels serving cocktails
who herald flight so brightly.

This checkerboard street
steers cars southeast, toward
Brahmin vistas that harken back
to cows on the Common.

Underpasses pass by sign-holding men
who seek alms with palms turned weary
from weather; the cars pass quickly.

Flags flap half-mast in wind that smells
of Portuguese barbeque
no longer on the menu,
the lounge closed for repairs.

But hark! the yellow monarchs,
their wings a spotted map
that waves to angels brightly —
their presence heralds spring
and neverending rain.