Peirce joins Guggenheim ranks

by Ann Friou

Poet Kathleen Peirce, professor in Texas State’s M.F.A. Program in Creative Writing, is one of only nine poets in the U.S. and Canada to win the coveted Guggenheim Fellowship in 2007. She joins scores of Nobel, Pulitzer and other prize winners who have appeared on the roll of Guggenheim Fellows, including Ansel Adams, W. H. Auden, Aaron Copland, Martha Graham, Langston Hughes, Henry Kissinger, Vladimir Nabokov, Isamu Noguchi, Linus Pauling, Philip Roth, Paul Samuelson, Wendy Wasserstein, Derek Walcott, James Watson and Eudora Welty. Additionally, Peirce is one of only two Guggenheim Fellows at Texas State: Novelist Dagoberto Gilb, also a member of the creative writing faculty, was named a fellow in 1995. (continued on page 46)
The Guggenheim Fellowship — a one-year $39,000 award — will enable Peirce to take time off from teaching to travel and write. She plans to explore cultural and personal loss and transformation in writing a book-length poem, tentatively titled The Green Vault. American poets have produced a number of book-length poems in the past decade, Peirce said, explaining that writing one is “the greatest challenge I can imagine for myself. To go forward as an artist, I have to do the things I don’t know how to do. I write in the direction of what I don’t have. It’s a relationship with the unknown, at least for me, and I think for many poets.”

Peirce is interested in what it means to be intensely sentient in an ordinary, daily way. Her award-winning collections of poetry (she’s published four volumes since 1991) explore the transformative qualities of mundane events — the touch of a beggar’s hand at a border crossing, the quality of light on a fall afternoon, the longing to share joy with other people. Her poems also reveal her deepening questions about loss — the loss of innocence, of love, of her parents, of youth, of sadness. Loss and transformation have always been her subjects, Peirce says, even before she began to write poetry. Her focus on the sentient life has opened her to encounters that make loss and transformation “recognizable, durable and endurable” — encounters that often translate into poetry. “You would be right to think that Eros is at home here,” she said. “So are death and hope and surprise.”

In 2004, Peirce won a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, during which she spent time in Europe. “What I felt walking in the streets and museums and churches and cemeteries of Berlin, Prague, Budapest and Dresden — especially in the sense of the political histories of those places — made for an operatic leap in the intensity of encounters which came, as they must to a traveler, quickly and briefly and with a relentless pace,” she said.

A profound encounter during a visit to The Green Vault in Dresden, Germany, set her on the path to creating her major poetic work about loss and transformation. The Green Vault, located in the Dresden Royal Palace, is one of Europe’s most famous treasure chambers, containing artworks of
Peirce’s poetry collections and teaching have received numerous honors. On the cover of her 2004 collection, *The Ardors* (Ausable Press), poet Norman Dubie wrote, “The arguments in the more formal of these poems are nearly Miltonic.” *The Oval Hour* (University of Iowa Press 1999) won the Iowa Poetry Prize from the University of Iowa Press and the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America, and was a finalist for the Lenore Marshall Prize as well as the Los Angeles Times Book Award. *Divided Touch, Divided Color* (Windhover Press 1995) is a handmade, fine arts press book that brings high prices from collectors. Peirce’s first collection, *Mercy* (University of Pittsburgh Press 1991), was published three years after her graduation from the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop and was awarded the Associated Writing Programs Award for Poetry. In addition to winning the NEA Fellowship in 2004, Peirce was inducted that year as a member of the Texas Institute of Letters. She is especially proud of her Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching presented by College of Liberal Arts Dean Ann Marie Ellis in 1999. In 2007, she was named Texas State’s Honors Professor of the Year.

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**BLACK PEARL**

The arm is lowered, the wrist is flexed as to present the palm more or less parallel to the ground – not unlike a natural gesture of suppressing. This way we showed we loved, not the dead, but ourselves remembering what those once living thought about, those now dissolved by what-nots making up the dirt, blurred and engulfed maybe the same as any object approached in increments by light, and we were changed softly as when we thought about the stars when the sky was blue. There were lilies named star-gazer; their buds were fits of color pushing into light, but their scent, it seemed, was another way to think of radiance, like thoughts we thought the dead once had, the dead the earth and heaven had made far from us.

**DREAM OF FLIGHT**

When joy returned to us in sleep sometimes it took the shape of flying, as though by having taken curves in, in wakefulness, with our eyes or mouths, our dreams were seeded with such arcs as wings can make, or the arc of feeling pleasure that was mirrored in the shape of wings as well as what wings do. Sometimes our flights were heavy like a waltz or the outline of a pear, and we glided in a way corvids understand over the bodies of their food, but sometimes we would lift high, as though we were not being lifted, but had loved the world enough that we could know it further any way we liked, and it was those dreams we loved to speak about, by whose forms we were moved differently and were made multiple where we had thought to disappear.

From *The Ardors*, Ausable Press, 2004