



meet a member

War Experiences Define Gordon Alanko's Poetry— and Shape His Career

Lynne Robinson

Gordon Alanko received his Ph.D. from Boise State University in May 2014 with his daughter, Corinne, and wife, Bethany, cheering him on at graduation.



The car bomb exploded outside a mosque in Habbaniyah, close enough for Gordon Alanko's team to see, but time and distance made it impossible for them to render assistance. It was only the beginning of a very long day for Alanko, then deployed in Iraq as a combat engineer who specialized in finding and clearing

The Ferryman

The tunnel sharp descends to light-
Charon's gloomy calm abates
Bring the boat, boys! There's work tonight!
A load or two from a firefight!
War-slain, ho! Your ship awaits!
Just a copper, if you please-
For passage 'cross these dire straits
To bear you to the final gates
Charon's laughter turns to pleas-
It's not so bad in Hell, you know;
I'd gladly trade and take my ease
And leave others ply these seas.

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improvised explosive devices (IEDs). By evening, Alanko had started to pen "The Ferryman," a poem expressing the weight and weariness of these experiences through the voice of Charon, the escort to the underworld in ancient Greek mythology.

"So much poetry grapples with the translation of a moment's emotion into tangible form for another time and place," said Alanko. "Most of my poetry has been inspired by my wartime experiences in Iraq, often tending into fable—ghosts, gods, angels, beasts. What do all these think of our struggles?"

Alanko noted that he had been interested in writing for as long as he can remember, even considering a career as a science writer at one point. He focused primarily on writing prose through early college until a friend observed that his style "read quite a lot like poetry." This encouraged Alanko to explore poetry as an outlet "to ponder meaningful experiences," although he initially found it difficult "to embrace the creative, artistic element of poetry in a way that I felt I could share with other people." He began to feel more at ease with the form once he started letting others read his poems, helping him evolve his approach to poetry "as a communicative medium instead of as a journal that happened to rhyme."

It was Alanko's tour of duty in Iraq in 2006–2007 that gave rise to his most productive output of poetry writing. "When I recall my time in the desert, I don't often think of guns and bombs and explosions," he said. "I reminisce on the desert's stark magnificence and the spirit of its people." His poem, "History," for instance, is a meditation on "all that has happened across centuries" in the region and "how we all created and carried portions of that history." He has also used his poetry to

reflect on the challenges of returning home from war. His “Your Soldier’s Heart” shares the story of a platoon-mate who was the sole survivor of an IED blast and then narrowly escaped the consequences of a violent episode as a veteran, brought on by traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Alanko was majoring in engineering physics at Northwest Nazarene University when he decided to enlist. (“I more or less got bored and dropped out of school to join the Army.”) Little did he know that his experiences in the military would help shape his decision to pursue a materials engineering career once he came home. That journey began the first time his truck was hit by a bomb.

“I was at the machine gun, but riding in the cab below the gun turret. Something rolled out into the road,” he recalled. “It was a small bomb, by the standards that I would later develop. The dust settled quickly, and I found myself looking at a crater in the road through a hole punched halfway through a pane of armor glass. That was my first glimpse of the power of materials. The next day, replacing the window gave me my first understanding of how far materials have left to go.”

Alanko’s battalion went on to neutralize more than 1,000 IEDs by the end of its tour, earning a Valorous Unit Award, among other commendations. Alanko returned to school to complete his degree in physics at Boise State University and then elected to pursue his Ph.D. in materials science and engineering. “I came to realize that the solutions to so many of the problems that had frustrated me in the Army were fundamentally questions of materials,” he said. While his dissertation work focused on advanced powder processing of nuclear materials, he was grateful to his Ph.D. advisor, Darryl Butt at Boise State, for supporting him in his personal research interest of developing transparent armor materials. “I’d seen how well armor glass worked, but I’d also seen how prone it was to chipping when struck by rocks or bullets, delaminating in the sun, and other problems,” he said. “I did quite a bit of work on $MgAl_2O_4$ spinel, which along with sapphire and $AlON$ spinel, is a promising material to replace the ‘strike face’ of armor glass laminates.”

Alanko, a TMS member since 2012, received his Ph.D. in May 2014 and is now working at ATI Specialty Alloys and Components in Albany, Oregon, as a senior process development engineer. “I’m responsible for bringing a fresh set of eyes to production issues and new product development,” he explained. The pressures of completing his dissertation and starting a family with his wife, Bethany, limited his time for poetry writing, but he is now looking forward to “taking the time to learn and polish my writing.”

Several of Alanko’s new poems draw from his family as inspiration, and he recently won a student writing contest sponsored by The American Ceramic Society for “The Autoclave”, a poem “about the sense of pressure in graduate school.” It is the war poets, however, such as Siegfried Sassoon, Keith Douglas, and Brian Turner, that he tends to read and model: “Probably, unsurprisingly, I identify with them.”

History

I am the land
-the land of ten thousand years
-the land between the rivers

I become a part of you
-and you of me
-you eat me
-you drink me in

I will cling to some of you
-eat them
-drink them in
-exhale them clean again
Across my rivers

I am theirs as they are mine
I am after they are gone
I am the land

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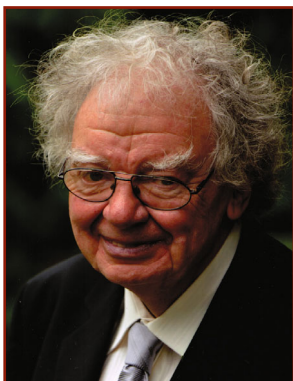
Your Soldier’s Heart

have another beer, fumble with the tab
you were there on the couch (minding your own business)
all of a sudden you’re racing down desert streets
out past Karma (funny name for a town)
bomb seen too late disappears in a puff of dust
and the moviegoers of the brain go silent
you look up trying to listen and the rocks start
start coming down can’t hear them pinging off metal
like locusts in summer battering car windows
the roaring grows the crowd inside your head
raining boos get up hero someone’s got to clear
that house so you do the way you learned weapon first
window kaleidoscoping reds and blues
cinderbrick will stop 9 millimeter
and that’s all the police have shot so far
How did you get, how did we let you get this far?

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member news

TMS2015 Acta Materialia Symposium Honors TMS Members



J. David Embury



Tresa M. Pollock

Two TMS members receiving 2015 Acta Materialia awards will be honored at a special symposium at the TMS 2015 Annual Meeting & Exhibition (TMS2015) on Wednesday, March 18, in Walt Disney World, Florida.

J. David Embury, the 2015 Acta Materialia Gold Medal Award recipient, is a professor of materials science and engineering at McMaster University and an adjunct professor at the University of British Columbia, both in Canada. He is also an adjunct professor at Shanghai Jiaotong University, China. Among his many awards and honors, he is a 1992 TMS Fellow. His presentation for the TMS2015 Acta Materialia symposium is titled, "Exploring Controlled Heterogeneity as a Strengthening Mechanism." The Acta Materialia Gold Medal is awarded to a proven leader in materials science and engineering

whose research has significantly impacted the development of the discipline.

Tresa M. Pollock, Alcoa Professor of Materials, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2005 TMS President, and 2009 TMS Fellow, has been named the 2015 Acta Materialia Hollomon Materials & Society Award recipient. This recognition honors an individual who promotes understanding of the relationship and interactions between materials technology and societal interest or needs. Pollock will deliver the presentation, "Design of New Co-base Alloy Single Crystals: The Impact of an MGI Approach," at the symposium.

Both honorees will formally accept their awards at the 2015 TMS-AIME (American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical, and Petroleum Engineers) Awards Ceremony on Tuesday, March 17.



Julius J. Harwood

In Memoriam: Julius J. Harwood

TMS offers its condolences to the family, friends, and colleagues of Julius J. Harwood, 1973 TMS President, who passed away on September 4, 2014, in West Bloomfield, Michigan, at the age of 95. Harwood earned his undergraduate degree at the College of the City of New York and his master's from the University of Maryland. From 1946 to 1960, he headed the Metallurgy Branch of the Office of Naval Research. He then moved to Ford Motor Company, where he advanced through a number of roles, retiring in 1983 as director of the Materials Sciences Laboratory. From there, he served as vice president of Energy Conversion Devices, Inc., and as president of Ovonic Synthetic Materials Company until his retirement in 2006. Harwood was also a 1971 TMS Fellow, past chair of the TMS Institute of Metals Division, and 1976 president of the American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical, and Petroleum Engineers.



Charles H. Ward

Charles Ward Named Co-Chair of MGI Subcommittee

Charles H. Ward, Editor-in-Chief of the TMS journal, *Integrated Materials and Manufacturing Innovation*, became co-chair of the Subcommittee on the Materials Genome Initiative (MGI) in January 2015. The subcommittee was established in 2012 to make recommendations to the White House National Science and Technology Council and Office of Science and Technology Policy on implementing the overall goals of MGI.

TMS Members Receive Cahn Prize

Julia R. Greer, professor, and Lucas R. Meza, graduate student, both of the California Institute of Technology, were presented with the 2014 Robert W. Cahn Best Paper Prize at the 2014 Materials Research Society Fall Meeting. They were honored for their paper "Mechanical Characterization of Hollow Ceramic Nanolattices."