


  
*the*  
**LITERARY HILL**  
*A Compendium of Readers, Writers, Books, & Events*

BY KAREN LYON

## DC in Verse:

### Our Poetic Capital

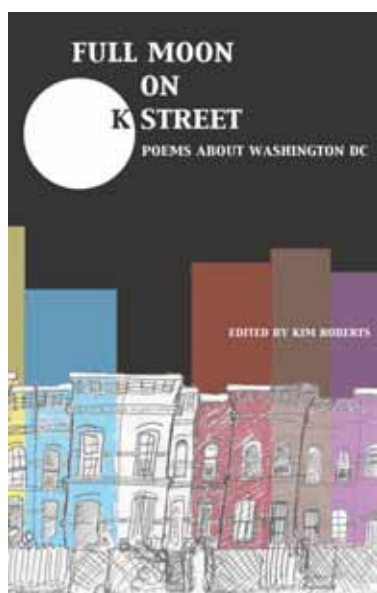
“When power corrupts,” wrote John F. Kennedy, “poetry cleanses.” What better place for a poetry journal, then, than the nation’s capital? “Beltway Poetry Quarterly” has been cleansing readers since January 2000, when it began publishing poetry by authors who live and work in the DC area. With support from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities and the Humanities Council of Washington, DC, the free online publication “strives to showcase the richness and diversity of Washington area authors in every issue, with poets from different backgrounds, races, ethnicities, ages and sexual orientations.”

In celebration of its 10th anniversary in 2010, “Beltway Poetry Quarterly” is publishing a special anniversary issue as well as a print anthology of poems by current and former residents of DC. “Full Moon on K Street: Poems About Washington DC” is edited by Kim Roberts, founder and driving force behind the “Quarterly.” “The anniversary issue has some real treats,” she promises. “There are 15 poets total, all of whom have served as guest editors for ‘Beltway Poetry’ in the past 10 years.”

In essays accompanying their poems, the guest editors describe the effect that “Beltway Quarterly” has had on them and on the local poetry community. “What ‘Beltway’ has done over these 10 years,” writes Merrill Leffler, “is to ingather poets from the Washington area and give their heterogeneous voices a home.”

Naomi Ayala writes that “the ‘Beltway’ has made the soil of our literary community more rich and fertile.”

And Teri Ellen Cross recalls how the experience of editing an issue called “The Evolving City” has stayed with her: “Whether walking to work on Capitol Hill or watching the neighborhoods change while driving from the city to the suburbs, I have often wondered what story I was missing. ... The poets in this issue explored the nooks and crannies



A new anthology celebrates the 10th anniversary of “Beltway Poetry Quarterly.”

that were dear to them. And in doing so, they allowed me as a poet to indulge my curiosity for the stories that I grasp at, the ones I know exist, but have no entry to them as they dance on the edge of my periphery.”

A release party for the print edition of “Full Moon on K Street” will take place at the Folger Shakespeare Library (201 East Capitol St. SE, 202-544-4600), following a poetry reading and discussion on Jan. 11 at 7:30 p.m. The year-long anniversary celebration will also feature monthly readings around town, including “The Superbowl of Poetry: An Alternative to Football” on Feb. 7 at The Writer’s Center in Bethesda (4508 Walsh St.,

301-654-8664). For information on readings, or to purchase the anthology or sign up for a free subscription to the online “Quarterly,” go to [www.beltwaypoetry.com](http://www.beltwaypoetry.com).

### The Spy Who Came in from the Kitchen

To most chefs, there’s only one CIA: the Culinary Institute of America. But author Kay Shaw Nelson earned her cooking chops courtesy of the “other” CIA. Fresh out of college, she came to Washington and, eager for “an opportunity to travel,” joined the Central Intelligence Agency. She spent a lifetime living in exotic locations, sampling foreign fare, learning to cook regional specialties, and eventually becoming a food writer.

In “The Cloak and Dagger Cook: A CIA Memoir,” Nelson shares her experiences – or at least those she can talk about. “A spy will ferret out the finest

foods, dining lore, expensive wines, and information concerning how to prepare and savor exotic delicacies,” she writes. “Although the facts about many of these discoveries and incidents ... will remain hidden, the story of the gastronomic intelligence officer deserves to be told.”

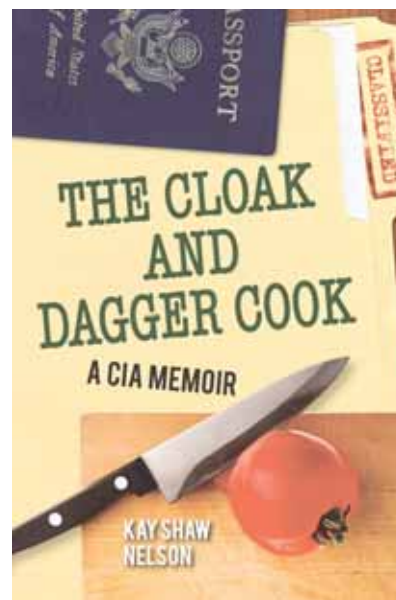
Hired as a researcher in 1948, Nelson soon found herself in the Kafkaesque world of espionage, where “it became second nature to live in two worlds and repeat falsehoods to cover up what I was really doing.” The duplicity took its toll, especially in her social life. “People at parties want to discuss what they do at work,” she recalls. “I had nothing to say.”

Happily, romance arose among the ranks when she met another agent, Wayne Nelson, whom she married in 1950. The following year, she accompanied him on assignment to Turkey.

In those days, many CIA wives were kept in the dark about the clandestine nature of their husband’s work and discouraged from socializing in case they might find out (or expose) secrets. Isolated in their Istanbul apartment, Nelson chafed at the restrictions. As solace, she immersed herself in the local cuisine, entreating her Turkish maid to give her cooking lessons. She soon began venturing out to markets, vegetable stalls and butcher shops, where carcasses were displayed “each with its tail still in-

tact.” In short order, she was skewering kebabs with a native flourish. “I was hooked,” she writes.

With each new deployment, Nelson expanded her culinary repertoire. In Greece, she mastered the savory soups and stews of the taverna; in Korea, she took on the challenge of the pickled vegetable staple called kimchi; and in Germany, she tackled hearty sausages and delicate pastries with equal aplomb. Nor were her gastronomic adventures limited to cooking. Never one to pass up the opportunity to try something new, she gamely sampled “the highly sea-



A former CIA agent shares recipes and culinary adventures in a new memoir.

soned innards of young lambs wrapped in intestines” in Athens, and downed a “slithery, rubbery, gray sea slug” on a beach in Korea (“followed quickly by a draught of beer passed to me by Wayne”).

Nelson wrote her first food article in 1963, for which she received all of \$15. Bigger and better assignments soon followed. She was offered the post of Washington correspondent for “Woman’s Day” magazine and, over the years, published a string of 20 popular cookbooks. Some of her favorite international recipes are included in “The Cloak and Dagger Cook.” In 1996, the Company once again recruited her, this time to compile and assemble recipes and essays for a CIA cookbook, “Spies, Black Ties, and Mango Pies.” A sequel, “More Spies, Black Ties, and Mango Pies,” was published in 2009.

In “The Cloak and Dagger Cook,” Nelson not only shares the story of an indefatigable traveler and cook, but she also provides a unique glimpse – albeit a shadowy one – into historic events of her time, including the Cold War and the Bay of Pigs. While she is by necessity circumspect about some aspects of her life, she is more than forthcoming about her exhaustive travels and the meals cooked and consumed along the way. The pace of her well-documented life can be dizzying at times (and sometimes as repetitive as her use of the word “delectable”), but Kay Shaw Nelson makes an ideal travel companion – curious, cheerful and always ready for whatever the next stop will bring. ★



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**Anniversary Event**

**Wednesday, January 27 at 7 p.m.**  
**Multi-genre Reading of Great Writers**

*A Space Inside is just that—a place where developing writers, lesser known voices, and the work writers create between books can be heard. It alternates monthly between poetry and prose.*

*For more information email Monica F. Jacobs at [monicafjacobe@usa.net](mailto:monicafjacobe@usa.net)*



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