

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS



# Land of Stone

## Breaking Silence through Poetry

Karen Chase

### BOOK INFORMATION:

February 2007  
5 x 8, 196 Pages  
Paper: \$15.95  
ISBN-10 0-8143-3315-X  
ISBN-13 978-0-8143-3315-0

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"Karen Chase's *Land of Stone* is a poignantly eloquent narrative of the therapeutic relationship between an admirably humane, gifted poet and a schizophrenic young man. No miracle takes place, nor need ensue, but both are changed somewhat for the better. Chase is restrained and persuasive in telling her story."

—Harold Bloom, literary critic and Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University

"The teacher is a poet who understands the depths of helplessness from battles with childhood polio. Her student is a young man sealed in a cocoon of silence by a series of traumas. In a psychiatric ward, they wrote poetry together, poet and patient, alternating with each other, one line at a time. This simple story is told with such honesty and force, chances are you will not put the book down until the last poem. *Land of Stone* is also a story of the many intimate roles that language plays in our lives, in the sounds and images it evokes."

—William S-Y. Wang, research professor of language engineering at Chinese University of Hong Kong

"Karen Chase has invented a means of communication that is capable of stirring interest and communicative response even in a psychiatric patient who, for his own reasons, is determined not to be interested or responsive. The effectiveness of the quiet, elegant way, respectful of privacy, in which she invites interest and response makes the diagnostic interrogations and urgings to expression common in clinical work seem heavy-handed and primitive by comparison. In character, she does not presume to teach a lesson to clinicians, but there is one to be learned here nevertheless."

—David Shapiro, professor of psychology at the New School for Social Research, and author of *Neurotic Styles*

"*Land of Stone* is a gripping, unusual book. I will hand-sell it until the cows come home!"

—Matthew Tannenbaum, proprietor of The Bookstore (Lenox, Massachusetts)

For more than a decade, Karen Chase taught poetry writing to severely incapacitated patients at a large psychiatric hospital outside of New York City. During that time, she began working with Ben, a handsome, formerly popular and athletic young man who had given up speaking and had withdrawn from social interaction. Meeting on the locked ward every week for two years, Chase and Ben passed a pad of paper back and forth, taking turns writing one line of poetry each, ultimately producing one hundred and eighty poems that responded to, diverged from, and built on each other's words. *Land of Stone* is Chase's account of writing with Ben, an experience that was deeply transformative for both poet and patient.

**Karen Chase** is an accomplished poet. Her poems have appeared in numerous magazines, including *The New Yorker* and *The New Republic*, and have been anthologized in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, *The Norton Introduction to Poetry*, and *Billy Collins's Poetry 180*. She is also the author of *Kazimierz Square: Poems*.

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## About the Author



### Karen Chase Author

Karen Chase lives in the Berkshire Mountains of Western Massachusetts. She is the author of *Land of Stone*, published by Wayne State University Press, a non-fiction book about her work as Poet-in-Residence at a psychiatric hospital. Her poems, stories and essays have also appeared in many magazines, including *The Gettysburg Review*, *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic* and *Southwest Review*. Her book of poems, *Kazimierz Square*, was short-listed by *Foreword Magazine* as Best Indie Poetry Book of 2000.

For more information,  
visit [www.karenchase.com](http://www.karenchase.com).



Her work has been widely anthologized, including poems in *The Norton Introduction To Poetry*, *The Norton Introduction To Literature*, *Poetry 180: A Turning Back To Poetry* edited by Billy Collins, *Yellow Silk: Erotic Arts and Letters*, *The Second Set: The Jazz Poetry Anthology* edited by Yusef Komunyakaa and Sascha Feinstein, and *Thus Spake The Corpse: An Exquisite Corpse Reader, 1988-1998 Volume 1* edited by Andrei Codrescu. Her story "The Resurrections of Isaac Bashevis Singer" received a citation as one of the "100 Distinguished Stories of 1993" in Best American Short Stories. Her essay "Learning to Shoot" received a citation in Best American Essays 2006.

Among her honors, she has been a Fellow at The MacDowell Colony, The Sanskriti Foundation, and at The Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center. She has been the recipient of numerous grants, including several from the Witter Bynner Foundation for Poetry and The Rockefeller Foundation. For over a decade, Chase was the Poet-in-Residence at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, teaching poetry writing to severely disturbed psychiatric patients and doing research. From 1991 until 2004, she ran the Camel River Writing Center and has served on the resident faculty of The Robert Frost Place in Franconia, New Hampshire. She now serves as a trustee of The Amy Clampitt Fund, whose mission is to benefit poetry and the literary arts.

Karen Chase is available for interviews and in-person appearances. Please contact Sarah Murphy at [murphysa@wayne.edu](mailto:murphysa@wayne.edu) for more information.

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# Prompt Questions

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## for an interview with Karen Chase

- ❖ Why did you write *Land of Stone*?
- ❖ As a poet, was it difficult to write a book of prose?
- ❖ What was the hardest part of the book to write?
- ❖ So much of the book focuses on silence and the lack of words. What about silence in your own life?
- ❖ Did you consider studying psychology?
- ❖ Did you consider your work with Ben “therapy?”
- ❖ You had polio as a girl. Did that affect your work with Ben?
- ❖ What drew you to do this work in the first place?
- ❖ What happened to Ben?

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# An Interview

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## with the Author

### **Why did you write *Land of Stone*?**

When I was working at the hospital, I knew it was privileged work. It was extraordinary to get to know the patients in the context of poetry. The only goal was to write poems. It was something relatively simple, considering what these people were up against. I kept detailed notes of all the meetings I had with them. The work was golden and it was thrilling to be able to revisit the notes, relive the story, and tell how Ben became part of the talking world again.

### **As a poet, was it difficult to write a book of prose?**

Yes. As a poet, in my heart, I believed that the poems Ben and I wrote told the whole story, that there was no need for anything else. But I realized that I had to add something more. In early drafts of the book, I concentrated heavily on the poems, completely leaving out the story of what happened between us. Eventually, I was moved to write the larger story, relying less on the poems, yet still giving them their due.

However, the experience of writing prose—sentences!—was thrilling. I found that having written poems for so long was excellent training when it came to fashioning sentences. Rhythm, sound, disjuncture—many of the things I take into account when working on poems—were crucial in prose writing. Now I find that going back to poems is affected by the prose writing. It's a wonderful process at this point—each ricocheting off the other.

### **What was the hardest part of the book to write?**

I found that including aspects of my own life in the book was very difficult. I resisted writing about my mother's death, my girlhood polio, and maybe most of all, what I felt about Ben and what I thought he might have felt about me. I believed that the book did not need me in it. In fact, after a number of drafts, I realized (and it was pointed out to me) that I was leaving out important elements of the story. The story was more important than my own wishes. So I threw privacy out the window.

### **So much of the book focuses on silence and the lack of words. What about silence in your own life?**

I like it. I don't like to talk a lot (although I can really get going sometimes!) I am sure this tendency drew me to Ben right when I met him.

I think I have always been drawn to poetry—reading it and writing it—because of a deep frustration with words. Language always seemed paltry when it came to expressing myself. Poetry has given me a chance to break the boundaries of normal communication to get my inside world view outside.

Because poetry gives me a kind of solace in my life, it came naturally to share this with patients who had trouble with words, those thorny things.

### **Did you consider studying psychology?**

No. I treasured my job at the hospital, in part because I was an outsider, something I always prefer to be, for some reason. Being an outsider with a fresh point of view was valued in the setting of the psychiatric hospital.

My husband is a psychologist, as is my sister and many of my friends are workers in the field, one way or another. But I can't imagine a life doing anything other than writing.

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## An Interview with the Author (cont.)

### **Did you consider your work with Ben “therapy?”**

It certainly wasn't therapy in the conventional sense.

I just came inside after shoveling a lot of snow off my deck. Shoveling made me feel great! Is this therapy? Or, I love to cook. It calms me down, it gives me a chance to make things and make things up. All that makes me feel good. It helps me. Is that therapy?

For centuries people have made paintings, written novels, composed music, etcetera and these activities have helped people in a deeper way than shoveling snow or cooking. Was writing poems therapy for Ben? It was an activity he wanted to do. It interested him. It stimulated him. I think it made him think.

The intensity of our work and our relationship shared some elements with psychotherapy. Poems acted as a mask for Ben to begin to tell his story, which, I think, helped him gain a degree of insight. And I believe that the relationship that he and I had while writing together was an important part of his beginning to speak again, but much of this is mysterious.

### **You had polio as a girl. Did that affect your work with Ben?**

During most of the time I was working with Ben, it didn't cross my mind. But later on, I thought about it and now believe that my polio did have an effect. I talk about this in the book. The first day I saw Ben standing in the hallway of the ward, he looked frozen. He looked like a statue. I was intrigued and drawn to this.

I was paralyzed after I had polio for awhile—I'm fine now—but it was traumatic. I couldn't move. Ben appeared so rigid—now I am talking about his mental state—and I think that I felt a particular kind of compassion for him, based on these parallel, but very different, experiences.

### **What drew you to do this work in the first place?**

I came to the work because of a hard time in my life. I had recently gotten divorced. I had two young sons and had to make money. I was desperate to keep writing, however. So I dreamed up the idea to write poems with psychiatric patients and wrote a grant proposal. No one thought it would ever come to pass. Luckily and happily, a few generous souls at a few foundations were intrigued with the ideas and funded the work. That's how it got started.

### **What happened to Ben?**

I called him about a year after he left the hospital and he was working in the garment district in New York City pushing dollies around. This was very good to hear. Then I called him a couple of years later and told him that I thought that I might write a book about the work we did together and he seemed glad. Then when I tried to reach him a couple of years ago, when I was working on the book, his phone had been disconnected. I made some attempts to find him with no luck. Nothing would make me happier than to know that *Land of Stone* found its way into his hands.

Karen Chase is available for interviews and in-person appearances. Please contact Sarah Murphy at [murphysa@wayne.edu](mailto:murphysa@wayne.edu) for more information.



## NEWS FROM WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

**\*For immediate release\***

### *Land of Stone* Now Available



For more than a decade, Karen Chase taught poetry writing to severely incapacitated patients at a large psychiatric hospital outside of New York City. During that time, she began working with Ben, a handsome, formerly popular and athletic young man who had given up speaking and had withdrawn from social interaction. Meeting on the locked ward every week for two years, Chase and Ben passed a pad of paper back and forth, taking turns writing one line of poetry each. *Land of Stone* is Chase's account of writing with Ben, an experience that was deeply transformative for both poet and patient.

**Literary critic Harold Bloom has called *Land of Stone* "a poignantly eloquent narrative."**

In Chase's engrossing story, readers will find inspiration in the power of writing to change and heal, as well as a compelling firsthand look at the relationship between poet and patient. As she tells of Ben's struggle to come out of silence, Chase also recounts the issues in her own life that she confronts by writing with Ben, including her mother's recent death and a childhood struggle with polio. Also, since poetry writing seems to reach Ben in a way that his clinical therapy cannot, Chase describes and analyzes Ben's writing in detail to investigate the changes that appeared to be taking place in him as their work progressed. A separate section presents twenty-two poems that Chase wrote with Ben, selected to show his linguistic development over time, and a final section offers Chase's thoughtful reflections on the creative process.

*Land of Stone* is a touching human-interest story that provides honest commentary and valuable insights of interest to psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, alternative therapists, and other mental health practitioners. The book also explores the connections between language and healing and will interest creative writers, teachers, and linguists.

**Karen Chase** is an accomplished poet. Her poems have appeared in numerous magazines, including *The New Yorker* and *The New Republic*, and have been anthologized in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, *The Norton Introduction to Poetry*, and *Billy Collins's Poetry 180*. She is also the author of *Kazimierz Square: Poems*.

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