

# The RIVERDALE PRESS

July 3, 2014

## Poet sings of sensual scenes from Riverdale to Reykjavik

by Shant Shahrigan

In Matthew Thorburn's first poetry project, he and other high school students in his native Michigan collaborated via e-mail with counterparts in Japan. At the end of the undertaking in 1991, schools in the U.S. and Japan published entries by students on both sides of the globe — an intimation of things to come for Mr. Thorburn.

Since then, scenes from Iceland, China and Japan, along with his home of Riverdale, have filled his four published books of poems. His latest effort, *This Time Tomorrow*, earned him a Bronx Recognizes Its Own (BRIO) award for artistic excellence from the Bronx Council on the Arts.

In 21 poems, Mr. Thorburn exports scenes from Hiroshima, Reykjavik, Shanghai and other far-flung places.

"It was this really interesting experience at places I really wanted to come back to, which I did through writing because I wouldn't actually be able to go back to Iceland," he said.

"In Reykjavik" evokes the mixed sense of wonder and being lost that travelling abroad can bring:

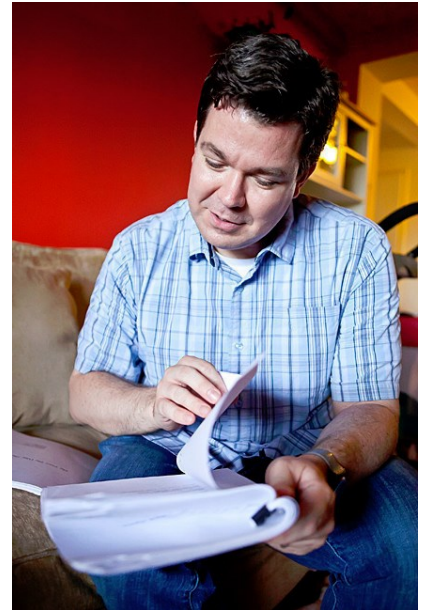
*...Nothing feels familiar  
enough. Nothing nods back. In a misty  
drizzle we look for Ásmundur Sveinsson's  
studio-turned-museum and drive by  
Einar Jónsson's instead. "Did this happen  
when they were alive, too?"*

Mr. Thorburn, who works in communications for an international law firm in Manhattan, said he uses lunch breaks in midtown and spare moments in his Riverdale apartment to craft his freeform verse.

His book-length poem *The Trees The Way The Light* describes a year in Riverdale, with a few excursions to New Jersey and his in-laws' native China. Mr. Thorburn, 40, is currently seeking a publisher for the work.

In the tradition of poets from Chaucer to T.S. Eliot, he starts his work off with a unique invocation of the spring. It and the rest of the poem are haunted by Mr. Thorburn's feelings over his and his wife's unborn daughter:

*Winter's so long I forget  
what spring is like  
until a weird crackle makes me  
duck and look up...*



Matthew Thorburn, a Bronx Council on the Arts BRIO winner for poetry, at his home on June 20.

Photo: Marisol Diaz/Riverdale Press

The book is filled with images of “the coffee-dark Hudson,” Ewen Park’s trees and children playing in the snow. The poet said he wrote the poem as though describing contemporary life to the child he never got to see:

*I wanted to show you  
these days and what life was like.  
It scares me I can  
no longer picture  
your face, which was only  
ever my memory  
of my imagining  
of what your face  
might look like someday...*

Later on, Mr. Thorburn and his wife had their first child, a boy.

*The Trees The Way The Light* also displays a fascination with words that seems to run through all of Mr. Thorburn’s poems. In the unpublished book, he repeatedly questions their power while clearly reveling in them. In a scene where he works on a first draft while birds flutter near his window, he strikingly calls words “first feelers I put out/to see what feels back.”

This year’s BRIO marks the third time Mr. Thorburn has won the award. His first book received a write-up in *The New York Times Book Review*. Before that, he won a prestigious Hopwood Award from the University of Michigan, a prize known for setting a number of famous writers off on their careers.

“Something like the BRIOs is awesome because it gives you that recognition from your borough,” he said. “But most of the time, it’s you at your desk. You have to be doing it really for yourself.”

Mr. Thorburn said he will make his first collaborative undertaking later this year. The Center for Book Arts in Manhattan has paired him with a poet from Coney Island. They are charged with writing a work that will be published next spring.

Mr. Thorburn said he looks forward to the challenge.

“Another thing for writing or photography or any art is not to get stuck in any rut,” he said. “Keep trying new things and experimenting.”