

## A CONVERSATION WITH SEAN HILL

### What inspired you to write this collection of poems?

Unlike with my first book, *Blood Ties & Brown Liquor*, which I conceived of as a book project before writing the poems, I wrote many of the poems in *Dangerous Goods* without a clear project in mind. The earliest poem is from 1997 or so and one of the last ones, "Bemidji Blues," was written in 2011, a few months before Milkweed offered to publish the collection. It was my move to Bemidji that inspired many of the poems in the book, though I'd been exploring some of the themes—travel and home, alienation and desire—long before I ever heard of Bemidji, Minnesota. I was moved to write out of and away from the initial culture shock and alienation I experienced in moving from the Deep South to northern Minnesota.

The Liberia thread in *Dangerous Goods* came from a brief mention of central Georgians immigrating to Liberia in a history book I read as research for *Blood Ties & Brown Liquor*. That book led me to letters written to the Milledgeville newspaper by two African American men who'd immigrated with their families in the early 1870s. The men represent two reactions of African Americans trying to make a home in Africa. Sandy Gannoway returned home to

Milledgeville after two years whereas Allen Yancy was firm in his determination to stay in Liberia even though he had lost three of his children and his mother to disease there. It was this bit of Milledgeville history that piqued my curiosity, snagged my imagination, and stuck with me for years.

### Describe the historical research you undertook in writing the book.

I was thrilled to win one of the American Antiquarian Society's fellowships for creative writers, which allowed me to spend several weeks in their reading room conducting research, exploring and gathering material. It's an unbelievable resource for anyone interested in American history before 1876. I went to the AAS to research mostly the history of Liberia, but I also researched Minnesota history there. I wanted to explore history that seemed to resonate with my situation. Most of my days at the American Antiquarian Society were reading books about the American Colonization Society and Liberia in the 19th and 20th centuries; I read period newspapers and firsthand accounts and the American Colonization Society's newsletter, and I looked at 18th and 19th century maps of Africa, and I followed leads down rabbit holes.

### Where did the idea for postcard poems begin?

The postcard poems started in 2005 on a slow meandering late summer road trip from Bemidji to Vancouver, BC with the fiction writer Lauren Cobb. I'd never been a sender of postcards, but for some reason when I saw a couple of common nighthawks flying low over some railroad tracks in Hartline, WA one evening, I felt like that was some sort of gift, and I also felt the impulse to share it with the poet Nicky Beer. So that night at the hotel I wrote a poem and bought a postcard and mailed my first postcard poem the next morning.

I thought that this could be the beginning of a series. I'm a casual birder and am often seeing birds (even when not looking for them), so I decided that each poem in the series would have to take off while on a trip from a bird sighting that I felt moved to share with a friend. And, I'd have to write it and mail it before I returned home. The thing of it was trying to capture the place and the mood and the import of the moment and the relationship with the addressee—trying to figure out how to make an epistolary poem out of a postcard.

After three or so years, Lauren or I had the idea that I should write postcards to and from abstract concepts, states of being, and inanimate objects. Most of the postcard poems that ended up in the book were from this phase of the project. Ultimately, they were the ones I felt were most compelling as poems and would be most compelling for a reader.

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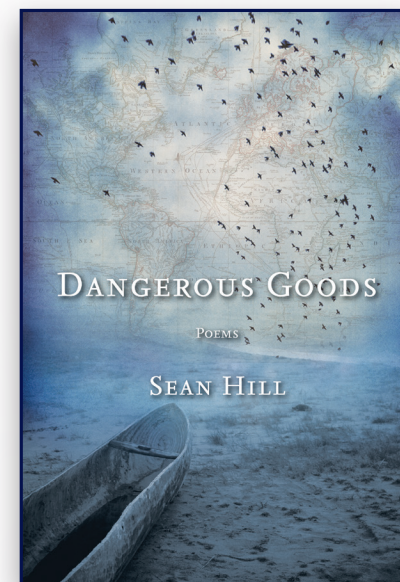
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## 27TH ANNUAL Minnesota Book Awards

### POETRY WINNER

Category sponsored by Wellington Management



*Dangerous Goods*

by Sean Hill

MILKWEED EDITIONS

A READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE PREPARED BY  
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## SUMMARY

A collection of verse on travel, distance, and history, *Dangerous Goods* features poems of reminiscence and coming of age, observations on modern life and times past. From the Bahamas, London, and Cairo, to Bemidji, Minnesota, and Milledgeville, Georgia, Hill explores the relationship between travel, migration, alienation, and home. Here, playful “postcard” poems addressed to “Nostalgia” and “My Third Crush Today” sit alongside powerful reflections on the immigration of African Americans to Liberia during and after the era of slavery. Part shadowbox, part migration map, part travelogue-in-verse, *Dangerous Goods* is poignant, elegant, and deeply moving.

Sean Hill accepts his award at the 27th Annual Minnesota Book Awards Gala on April 18, 2015.



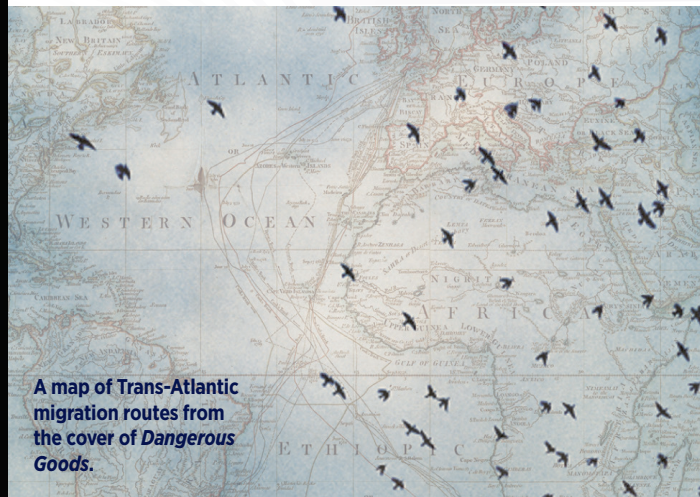
## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were your first impressions when you read the title of this collection? What did you think it meant? Has your sense of the title changed after reading the book?
2. What are the main themes of *Dangerous Goods*? Which poems explore and express those themes best for you? Why?
3. What patterns can you identify in Hill’s writing? Are there images or subjects you see him returning to throughout the collection? What specific images stand out for you?
4. Hill employs epigraphs at the beginning of each section. How do the epigraphs affect your reading of the poems?
5. There are a series of postcard poems in the book. In which sections do these appear? What is the effect of scattering the poems throughout the book? How do these epistolary poems relate to the other series in the book? (i.e., the Liberia poems, the Bemidji poems, and the history-based Minnesota poems)
6. Describe how the natural world—birds, the seasons, meteorological occurrences, etc.—operates in these poems.
7. Specific dates, people, and historical events are major forces in this collection. Which historical threads do you find most compelling? Why? How does the use of footnotes affect your reading of the work?
8. In “Still Life with Starling and Man,” Hill writes: “Nostalgia’s a small act/of thievery from the here and now.” What are the essential ingredients of nostalgia? Do you feel nostalgia for a time and place you’ve left behind?
9. Which poem or poems do you like best? Why? What is it about the narrative, the lyric quality, the language, the imagery, and/or the structure that appeal to you?
10. What did you learn about poetry, history, or life as a result of reading this book? What does this collection make you want to read next?

## ABOUT SEAN HILL



Sean Hill was born and raised in Milledgeville, Georgia, and received an MFA from the University of Houston. He has received fellowships and grants from Cave Canem, the Bush Foundation, The MacDowell Colony, the University of Wisconsin, the Jerome Foundation, and Stanford University where he was a Wallace Stegner Fellow in Poetry. His first book, *Blood Ties & Brown Liquor*, was published by the University of Georgia Press in 2008. In 2009, Hill became an editor at Broadside Press. He lives in Bemidji, Minnesota. Visit [www.seanhillpoetry.com](http://www.seanhillpoetry.com).



A map of Trans-Atlantic migration routes from the cover of *Dangerous Goods*.

# 27TH ANNUAL MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

The Minnesota Book Awards, presented by 3M Library Systems, is a statewide, year-round outreach program of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library in partnership with the Saint Paul Public Library and the City of Saint Paul.

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