

## Creative Creatures

*The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.*

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### **# 8 / Elizabeth Ayres, author, poet, creative writing teacher, California, Maryland**

I first met Elizabeth Ayres after she had decided to move away from New York City and came searching for a rental place in Abiquiu, New Mexico. It took only days to get her settled in; her new home sat all alone deep in the blazingly white Plaza Blanca sandstone formation; it literally balanced on the edge of a high, vertical cliff. Earlier, I had taken others there who were looking for a remote place to retreat from society and who, instantly overcome by vertigo as well as the fear of becoming forever lost, turned away, ran to their vehicle and drove way over the speed limit to get back to at least a little bit of civilization fast. Not so Elizabeth; she came to stay and she loved the unique location. I heard only one complaint: on full moon nights, the white cliffs surrounding her home reflected so much brilliance that she couldn't shut an eye.

Elizabeth taught at New York University and the College of New Rochelle. She has run her own writing school for over twenty-three years: Elizabeth Ayres Center for Creative Writing, at first in New York, then from Abiquiu and, after she had decided it was time to turn her back on the white cliffs, in California, Maryland, where the Potomac and Patuxent rivers meet Chesapeake Bay. Three grand

moves, and what a difference a place makes ... She has been called a charismatic teacher and workshop leader. She says: "People undergo personal metamorphosis as they write. Their work then contributes to the transformative process of others. Because writers play such a critical role in our culture as it struggles to evolve, I have created a refuge where creativity takes pride of place and aspiring writers are encouraged to grow to their full potential."

Her Creative Writing Center (see: [www.creativewritingcenter.com](http://www.creativewritingcenter.com)) is both training ground and launching pad, as many published writers who got started there can affirm. Nowadays, she also offers online writing classes and writing retreats that "help you to become the writer you dream you can be." I have seen it happen, I have heard it confirmed by many of the students she lured to Abiquiu to attend a seminar or a retreat. Elizabeth would teach in the mornings and evenings; in the afternoons I would take the group out on a desert hike; for quite a few it would be the first time "out in the wild" and the experience, says Elizabeth, "helped replenish and renew their creative wellsprings as much as my teachings did." After taking one of her courses, many students stopped being intimidated fledgling writers, for Elizabeth gave them a safe place where their creative spirits could flourish. Her instruction was "nurturing" and "immensely supportive," as I heard students say; and it still is, if I must believe the praise I hear from my friend Vanessa Muntinga in Switzerland who studies online—and I have no reason to doubt her words. "Elizabeth edged me forward," I heard said. "I returned from her workshop feeling full of words and sentences again."

She herself wrote three books. "Writing the Wave"—inspired rides for aspiring writers and delivering much more guidance than what a standard How To book offers. "Invitation to Wonder"—a journey through the seasons, which has the shores of Maryland as its main location but offers a universal exploration and appreciation of the earth; its sentences flow so smoothly you'll find yourself in a dream; and the words Elizabeth introduces hold often promises of fascinating stories deep inside them. "Know the Way"—a journey in poetry and prose, proves once again that her prose is very poetic. Her poetry is no lesser joy, and even more convincing when read by Elizabeth herself. The two of us organized and did poetry readings in Abiquiu, where we were sometimes backed up by local musicians. For me these became the first of my hesitant "performances" with my own poetry; later followed invitations such as the one from Salida, Colorado, a six-hour drive, where I read in Bronco Billy's Café and was paid with beer, a dinner, and a take from the tin tips can before I drove eight hours back (for the return trip I took a different route through the Rockies). By the way, it was Elizabeth who pushed me forward when I was writing poetry. I never took her class (shame on me, I haven't even listened to one of her many spoken-word audio tapes), nevertheless I learned a whole lot from her. I hope to be able to draw her away from the East Coast, where nowadays most of her retreats take place, and have her as artist in residence in Matfield Green, someday. She can teach us Kansans all about nature writing—and she herself, who so far never visited the Midwest, without a doubt will feel enormously enriched and inspired by the prairie. I cannot wait to read her reflections.

*Ton Haak, August 2012*