

[https://www.berkshireeagle.com/arts\\_and\\_culture/books/lisken-van-pelt-dus-poetry-how-many-hands-to-home/article\\_155d07b2-df0d-11ef-8cd1-13b814a02a62.html](https://www.berkshireeagle.com/arts_and_culture/books/lisken-van-pelt-dus-poetry-how-many-hands-to-home/article_155d07b2-df0d-11ef-8cd1-13b814a02a62.html)

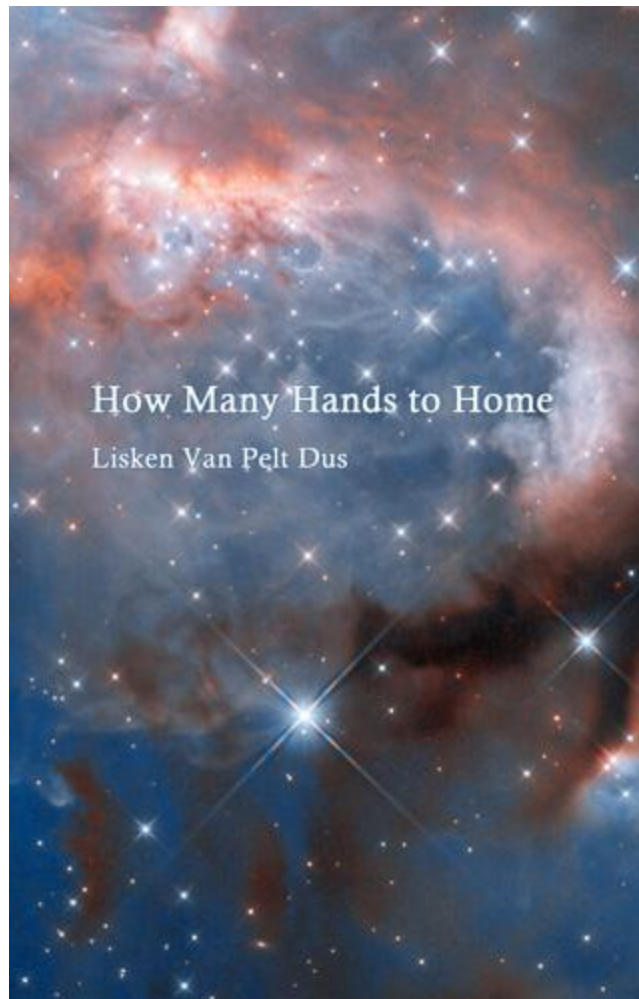
ARTIST Q&A

## Poet Lisken Van Pelt Dus explores identity and belonging in new collection 'How Many Hands to Home'

By Jennifer Huberdeau, The Berkshire Eagle

Jan 30, 2025

---



MAYAPPLE PRESS

## This story was made possible by contributions made to the Local Journalism Fund.

[Berkshireeagle.com/donate](https://berkshireeagle.com/donate)



In times of strife, look to the artists.

“This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no time for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal,” a friend told a despondent Toni Morrison in 2004. Morrison was depressed, feeling helpless following the 2004 presidential reelection of George W. Bush.

### Read It

"How Many Hands to Home" by Lisken Van Pelt Dus

Published by Mayapple Press

78 pages

\$20.95

At a time when the country again feels “bruised and bleeding,” poet Lisken Van Pelt Dus has already headed the call, has gone to work. Her new collection of poetry, “How Many Hands to Home,” does not shy away from the here and now. Filled with lyrical verses it tackles weighty contemporary issues — identity, immigration, displacement, belonging, a sense of home — head on.

“It’s not a lightweight collection. It’s definitely grappling with some major stuff,” Van Pelt Dus, of Pittsfield, concurred during an interview with The Eagle. “I was especially grateful to my publisher because she moved very quickly once she accepted it. And I’m really grateful for that because it is a timely book that needs to be out now – what we are dealing with and where we are right now.

“How Many Hands to Home,” released earlier this month by Mayapple Press, is Van Pelt Dus’ second full-length collection of poems. She has received four pushcart nominations, the most recent for her poem, “In the Beginning,” the first poem in this collection. She has also published two chapbooks of poetry.

A book launch party, 4:30 p.m. Feb. 1, at the Lichtenstein Center for the Arts, will feature a conversation between Van Pelt Dus and P.D. Pin, executive consultant to the Straw Dog Writers Guild.

Other upcoming events include a reading, 4 p.m. Feb. 23, at The Bookstore in Lenox and an online book launch, 3 p.m., March 9, hosted by Devotion to Writing, which will feature a conversation with Justen Ahren. For more information, visit [lypdpoetry.com](http://lypdpoetry.com).



Poet Liskin Van Pelt Dus has released her second full-length book of poetry, "How Many Hands to Home."

PHOTO BY REGINE JACKSON

Raised in England, Mexico and the U.S., Van Pelt Dus arrived in the Berkshires as a student at Williams College. She completed her graduate studies at UMass-Amherst. Teaching, she said, has been a throughline of her career, "the where and what have varied." She has taught in high schools, including 14 years spent at Monument Mountain Regional High School. She is an adjunct professor at Berkshire Community College. She also teaches Okinawan martial arts at Elm Street Martial Arts, which she owns with her husband Robert.

*The following interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.*

**1 How long have you been writing poetry?**

I think most writers have a similar answer, in one way or another: forever. But I really entered into it seriously around 2002, when I made a very conscious decision to dedicate myself to it. I had been step-by-step getting into it before that, but in 2002, I went to Mexico, to the San Miguel Poetry Week for the first time. That was a very transformative week for me, made me understand poetry was truly important to me and something I wanted to dedicate real work to. So I'd say, really defining myself as a poet and deciding to really dedicate a part of my life to it dates from that.

**2 “How Many Hands to Home,” explores many different themes, identity, belonging, displacement and the concept of home. What inspired you to write these poems?**

The poems themselves, some date back quite a while, so the inspirations have been various over the years. I have a couple in this collection that date back 20 years. About a quarter of them had their initial drafts a decade ago. So, the inspirations have been very different, in different stages of my life – different things I was dealing with; different things I was experiencing and confronting and thinking about.

But, I would say about half were written in the last four to six years. So, I think some of the thematic elements that come through you can trace to current events over [that time]. Certainly, there are themes of displacement, migration, war and violence, that I think are very clearly engaging with broader societal issues and conditions that we are dealing with both as a country and a globe. I think there are more poems in this collection that deal with the outside world than have been typically in my earlier collections, which have been more internal responses to those kinds of things. There are those kinds of inspirations, of just trying to make sense of where we are and thinking a little bit about how to get through it and the competing impulses of humanity, both beautiful and destructive and grappling with what that means and how it manifests in my own experience and in the experiences of others.

**3 How did you decide to pull them all together in this collection?**

Some of the migration poems I had really written quite a while ago, so I had in the back of my mind that there might be a collection that would form around that theme of movement through the world. Some of other themes of displacement and of home have been on the horizon for me for some years.

I had made some attempts here and there to pull collections together around that, but it never quite coalesced. So, this time, I decided to open up the lens a little bit and think about the broader implications of what those poems might be grappling with. I think that was how the collection started to take shape and wasn't quite so narrow but more about the capacity of the beautiful and destructive aspects of humanity's interactions with each other and with the planet and the universe. So once I did that, the collection started to come together and I started to think about what poems might wrap into that. I put together several different versions and ultimately, I worked with a terrific poetry editor, Lisa Goett. She's brilliant and extremely insightful. She helped with the organizing of the manuscript. It's not fundamentally different in conception but she suggested some ordering and sections and how the arc of the book as a whole might work. I also worked with other local poets and writers to talk through what I was trying to do and to have as sounding boards.

#### **4 People who are not writers might not understand the value of a writing community. Can you speak to that?**

It's a really helpful part of the process and evolution of the book.

In our conversation, two have come up so far. I've mentioned the San Miguel Poetry Week, which is now defunct but ran for many, many years and spawned an extremely important poetry community to me. I still gather with poets I met at that conference, in person twice a year and online, monthly. That's a community whose importance can't be overstated by me. Then I also have a local poetry group which was birthed, must be 20 years ago, that was spawned by an anthology Barry Sternlieb put out. He's an extremely fine poet in his own right and a very valuable mentor to many. He put out a 2002 collection called "Crossing Paths" and he sponsored a reading at the Berkshire Atheneum and at

the conclusion of that, a few of us connected and found we had no writing group and that was something we would value and would like. We've been meeting ever since.

In the last few years, I have been meeting with Pin and Alison Smith to work on manuscript scale work. It's extremely important to have a community.

Obviously, the poems themselves come from you, but to have someone else's gaze on them, to have a sense of writing in community, is critical because the poem isn't completed until it is received. Other poets, other writers can lend so much expertise and perspectives and show you where your poems could be doing more or what they want to do and point you in really interesting directions.

### **5 Are there any particular moments or experiences that you drew from that you hope will resonate with your readers?**

One thing that is signaled by the title that I hope the collection sparks people to just think and feel about is the notion of home, in a broader and more inclusive way than we might typically think of home. There's a poem that ends the first section, "Towards the Starting Points," that is probably the most fully autobiographical of the poems in the book and gives some idea of my own childhood, which was quite international and quite peripatetic.

One of the things my mother used to say is that home is center, not circumference. The idea of home being something very internal and very connected to place. So there's this kind of push me, pull me of being on the planet and trying make place for ourselves on a planet in the universe — I want that sense of scale to come through, that everything entirely from the interior and minute and private to our place in the universe as a whole comes together to be what we experience as home. There's a lot of push me, pull me in that; a lot of discomforts as well as comforts and threats to that and ways from which our sense of where we are can be destroyed by everything from fire to war to violence, some of those more violent things that come up in the collection.

And yet, there is something we carry that is discreet from that, which is our

individual homing. The importance of that and the right of each person to have that be sacrosanct, no matter the displacement, no matter what other forces would be working on them.

The other thing, I would hope [would resonate is] where the book lands in its final section as it moves toward the notion of solidarity and love, whether it's the kind of love you get in a partnership or as a kind of faith. The book kind of travels through, the loss of a traditional sort of faith but it feels like it lands in a faith in the universe; faith in the visible; faith in what we can hold and what we can participate in. So much of the book is this is where we are and the last section is how we can move through that.

## READ IT

"How Many Hands to Home" by Lisken Van Pelt Dus

Published by Mayapple Press

78 pages

\$20.95

---

Jennifer Huberdeau is the features editor at The Berkshire Eagle. She can be reached at [jhuberdeau@berkshireeagle.com](mailto:jhuberdeau@berkshireeagle.com) or 413-496-6229.

Tags [LISKEN VAN PELT DUS](#) [THE BOOKSTORE IN LENOX](#) [LICHTENSTEIN CENTER FOR THE ARTS](#)

---

Jennifer Huberdeau

Features Editor