in refugee camps for two years before starting their own gardening and nail-salon businesses in the Bay Area. After Harvard, Susan worked on a government-run sustainable cocoa development project in Vietnam while staying with family in the Mekong Delta. She returned to San Francisco for her Coro Fellowship (the nonprofit program trains fellows for “effective, ethical leadership in public affairs”)—and with her aunt’s recipe for a Vietnamese dessert, which led to their popular tamarind black sesame truffle.

Susan will soon take over managing Sócôla’s operations, sales, and marketing full time. She plans to systemize and streamline their production process, and find out if the business is expandable and sustainable enough to support one if not both sisters.

“Sometimes I think, ‘Why am I trying to make chocolate?’” Susan says, pondering what her parents went through for her and her siblings. Upon reflection, she remains committed. “What am I so afraid of? Maybe the world will fall in love with our chocolate,” she says. “It’s fun and delicious. It gets you out of the grind and into the body. If people can give them as gifts, share them around a table, enjoy, be grounded in the moment, and maybe take that feeling somewhere else—I think that’s success.”

—ELIZA WILMERDING

Noir Romantic
Poet April Bernard samples the air of Keats, Shelley, and James M. Cain.

“O
h, I’m a romantic, but a heartbroken romantic—and noir, deeply noir,” says poet April Bernard ’78, with a full-throated laugh. Then she explains: “Noir is romanticism embittered. The life of feeling that has been betrayed leads to the attitude and genre of noir. No one who loves noir is a cynic—cynics never believed in anything in the first place. People who love noir are disillusioned romantics. You couldn’t have Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Dashiell Hammett unless you had the Romantics: the belief that feeling is primary and expressing feeling will lead you to spiritual enlightenment. When you find out that it doesn’t, you end up in a place of noir.”

Consider her poem “To the Knife,” in which she mentions Alfred Hitchcock’s 1946 film

“...Notorious, where I discovered myself a long time ago, before I learned the finish of the dance could never be a box-office-pleasing slow dissolve to kissing. No, my dance like theirs properly never ends, it is a danse apache to the death, so much violence to reason in lovers kissing and sighing, because they love because it’s impossible, and pretending a happy ending is just an excuse for more kissing.

This poem, with others in her most recent book, Romanticism (2009), embraces the irrationality of both romanticism and noir: “They are both emotional reactions to the world. Neither is very smart,” she says. Yet, in this collection, her fourth, “The impulse behind the poems is to experience extremities,” she observes. “Shelley wrote, ‘I fall upon the thorns of life; I bleed!’ And I said to myself, ‘Why can’t I say that?’ How do I do that? So I decided to write poems interrogating language, exploring

“I like people to stand on tiptoe when they read my work,” says Bernard. “Not that it’s difficult to understand—but I’m trying to articulate complex ideas and feelings.”
For nearly 30 years, Tony Jenkins has distinguished himself as a lawyer, mentor, author and champion for diversity. Now, he has been chosen by his peers to be President of the State Bar of Michigan. This selection recognizes Tony’s passion for the law, his integrity, his professionalism, and a willingness to dedicate his leadership skills and energy toward the enhancement of our profession. We congratulate Tony as the sixth Dickinson Wright attorney to serve as President of the State Bar of Michigan.

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“THERE IS TERRIBLE PAIN IN THESE POEMS AND I DIDN’T KNOW HOW TO EXPRESS IT ANY BETTER.”

Take the ending of “Romance”:

...Most of what I imagine, what I want, is small: Hands with mine in the sink, washing dishes, the smell of wool, feet tangling mine in bed. I know the gods punish the proud, but I do not yet know why they punish the humble. Although after all it is not humble to ask, every minute or so, for happiness.

Bernard is now in her second year as director of creative writing at Skidmore, where she also teaches literature. (Her own mentors at Harvard included Robert Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Bishop.) Previously, she taught for a decade at Bennington. (She still lives in Bennington, Vermont.) Her first book, Blackbird Bye Bye, won the Walt Whitman Award from the Academy of American Poets; current U.S. poet laureate W. S. Merwin declared it the work of “a poet of obvious gifts and power and ambition, unsparing and brilliant.”

She’ll admit to the “intellectual ambition” of her work: “It is not just about ‘me.’ I’m interested in writing in a way that reaches beyond the subjective and personal to something greater. That’s what all serious art is for: reaching beyond the self.” While writing Romanticism, she reached for a lot of Henry James (a “late Romantic,” she says, who appears more than once in the poems), listened to lieder, and heard plenty of opera.

Yet the sorrow and disillusion in the book are “tempered with aesthetic and intellectual playfulness,” Bernard says. “I’m playing a game with readers and at the same time engaging their emotions and wits.” In one case, she brings together the unlikely duo of Roy Orbison and John Milton in a poem that mixes tongue-in-cheek celebration (“Someone will return a phone call today!”) with the feeling of waking from a dream to realize, crestfallen, that a lost love is not present after all. Language, she finds, can help melt desolation: “Truth telling, saying it as exactly as I can, provides a form of refreshment.”

~DAVID SCRIBNER

modes of romanticism. There is tremendous pain in these poems and I didn’t know how to express it any better.”