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A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA

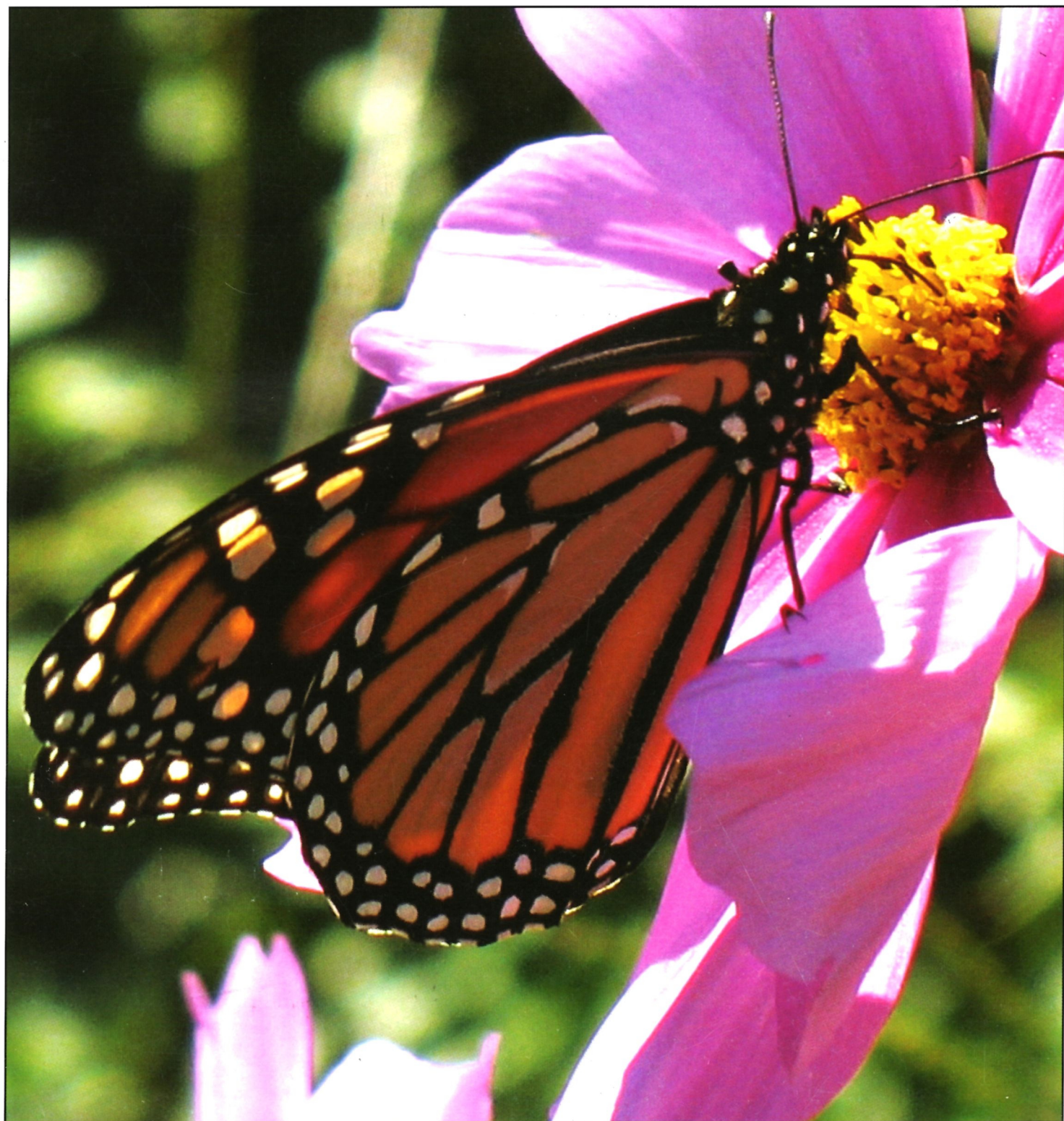
# WESTVIEW

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# W E S T V I E W

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## Contents

Daniel R. Schwarz	<i>The American Scholar</i>	page 4
Daniel R. Schwarz	<i>The Muse Returns</i>	page 5
Daniel R. Schwarz	<i>Mother in Hospice, April 2005</i>	page 6
Daniel R. Schwarz	<i>Snowbound</i>	page 8
Daniel R. Schwarz	<i>About Suffering: Response to W.H. Auden</i>	page 9
Daniel R. Schwarz	<i>Generations</i>	page 10
Helen Maxson	<i>Interview with Daniel R. Schwarz</i>	page 11
Helen Maxson	<i>Speculations on the Lyrical and the Narrative Modes in Poems by Dan Schwarz</i>	page 15
Judith Neuman	<i>Winter</i>	page 21
Judith Neuman	<i>Who Invented Kisses?</i>	page 22
Christine Chen	<i>Date with Alice</i>	page 23
Carol A. Hattrup	<i>At the Gas Station on the Corner</i>	page 25
Carol A. Hattrup	<i>Speaking with the Fish at Boston Aquarium — Before Scuba Lessons</i>	page 26
Bonnie Lyons	<i>At the McNay Museum</i>	page 27
Barry Ballard	<i>Life-Form Under the Overpass</i>	page 28
Cass McGovern	<i>I Met the Devil on the Train</i>	page 29
Nicole Hardy	<i>One of the Five Wise Virgins Gives a Toast at the Party for the Prodigal Son</i>	page 32
Nicole Hardy	<i>One of the Five Wise Virgins on a Date with the Prodigal Son</i>	page 33
Megan Jones	<i>Sepulchre</i>	page 34
Mark Wisniewski	<i>Mass</i>	page 36
Elaine Silverstein	<i>On the Good Ship Lollipop</i>	page 38





Susan Hazen-Hammond	<i>Still Life with Ant</i>	page 42
Karla Clark	<i>It Was So Sudden</i>	page 44
Darlene Giblet	<i>Rosie's Leaf</i>	page 45
Lokke Heiss	<i>Tea With Emily</i>	page 46
Stephen Germic	<i>A Death Like This</i>	page 50
Gerald Zipper	<i>Like Fog</i>	page 51
Lori Levy	<i>Stillborn</i>	page 52
Wesley D. Sims	<i>Multi-Tasking</i>	page 53
Kay Barnes	<i>Ladies of the Club Revisited</i>	page 54
Stephen Lefebure	<i>Cash Entry Silver Mine</i>	page 64
Linda Giacometti	<i>Hera's Laughter</i>	page 66
Gay Baines	<i>Never Chant</i>	page 67
Kenneth Baron	<i>Advice for an Unborn Son</i>	page 68
Sean C. Hayden	<i>The Way Station</i>	page 70
Robert Cooperman	<i>Sheriff Dennehy Makes His Intentions Plain to the Widow Burden</i>	page 75
Robert Cooperman	<i>Lavinia Burden Replies to Sheriff Dennehy's Proposal of Marriage</i>	page 76
Robert Cooperman	<i>The Widow Burden, After Rejecting Sheriff Dennehy's Suit</i>	page 77
Robert Cooperman	<i>Sheriff Dennehy, After His Rebuffed Proposal</i>	page 78
Robert Cooperman	<i>The Widow Burden, Caught in a Quandry</i>	page 79
Georgia Ressmeyer	<i>When March Arrived</i>	page 80
Ann Levison	<i>April, May, June</i>	page 81
Contributors		page 82



# The American Scholar

by Daniel R. Schwarz

*"The world is his who can see through its pretension."*

Emerson, "The American Scholar"

"Write a simple happy poem," she said,  
"Your pain bores me."  
"I can't write what I don't feel."  
"Had you any sense, you would  
not write your damned poems  
of gloom and doom.  
Write a romantic love poem,  
speak of the lovely moon,  
changing colors of October leaves,  
red sunset hovering on Cayuga lake."

"Ah, but when I feel the fine frenzy of a poem,  
my emotions overwhelm me  
like incoming tide surging over sand.  
I need to chew on bones of experience,  
Drink dregs of bitterness,  
taste ashes of regret."

"You need to take out our garbage and walk  
the dog."  
"Do I not know well that  
cynicism is mortality  
of attitude and sarcasm is  
mortality of speech?  
I need sing of unrequited love and early death,  
hear woozy bluesy sounds of saxophones,  
think of the Sorrow and the Pity of my people,  
and render my vast capacity to feel pain."  
"Are you having delusions that you are Shelley  
or Wiesel?"  
"We poets respond to agony  
driven by the lyric spirit."

"My advice to you," said my muse,  
leaning forward in her chair,  
"is work hard enough to pay the bills;  
write funny poems  
if poems you must;  
avoid burdening your readers  
with narcissistic accounts;  
above all, dear man,  
take small steps  
accompanied by modest words."



# The Muse Returns

by Daniel R. Schwarz

"I am in an elegiac mood,  
nostalgic for what should have been,  
anxious to mourn days gone by,  
to find paths not taken,  
words not said;  
I need to drink from dregs of regret and loss."

"Let us not live in the world of  
what if or might have been  
or I should have and could have,  
and almost or but....  
She's gone and it's time to build a tomorrow.

"I need to scold and blame myself and suffer  
romantic agony."

"Ah poor man,  
there you go again.  
Revel in the world's  
delicious cornucopia of pleasures;  
each day's a harvest, banquet, and bouquet."



# Mother in Hospice, April 2005

by Daniel R. Schwarz

“I am drowning,” she mumbled.  
“I am ready to die. I don’t want  
my family’s lives in suspension.”  
But her mind was lucid.  
Crowded into cubicle with  
Living remnants of her body, four of us—  
my taciturn brother who  
put life on hold to be caregiver;  
my second wife, Marcia,  
who knew what to do and say;  
my younger son, Jeff, who had never  
seen death’s color and texture;  
and myself, guilty for not doing more,  
frustrated that doctors knew so little—  
were, in halting whisper,  
counseled to love each other,  
avoid strife, anger.  
Her final words were who she was.  
To my wife: “Take care of Danny.”  
Eyes close, few minutes silence:  
“Marcia, you make wonderful *rugelah*.  
How is your ailing father doing?”  
To me: “You have found joy in  
sharing interests with your wife.” Pause.  
“We need to find someone for you, Jeff.”

With barely audible laughter,  
she recalled defending me  
to fifth grade teacher who  
thought I was inattentive, even ironic:  
“You were smarter than your teachers;  
children need to laugh and have fun.”





She taught us to die with grace and dignity.  
“A great lady!” I tearfully told my son  
as we watched her fight for breath.  
“She was quite a beauty into her sixties, but  
is she not even more beautiful  
radiating love for family?”

In intermittent moments of clarity,  
she lived in fabric of  
human feelings and memories.  
She always knew what I have come to learn.  
Savoring small pleasures—smiles, touches;  
sunrises, sunsets; cardinals feeding;  
herons, deer visiting pond;  
intimacies between tick and tock  
when life momentarily blazes—  
are not mere interstices  
between ambition and career success,  
but warp and woof of life itself.

Her favorite color was blue.



# Snowbound

by Daniel R. Schwarz

*"His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."*

James Joyce, "The Dead"

As far as eye can see,  
quiet as pure white,  
peaceful as country landscape,  
still as frozen pond, snow  
bends trees and ragged bushes,  
blankets earth, buries roads,  
homogenizes houses,  
nullifies difference.

Blizzard awakens my soul.  
It's as if I were enclosed in womb  
from which I emerge reborn,  
or crypt that magically reopens.  
Smoldering passion, creativity, curiosity  
melt snow, prepare  
ground for flowering, renewal.



# About Suffering: Response to W.H. Auden

by Daniel R. Schwarz

About suffering they could be wrong,  
The Old Masters: when and if they ignored  
effects of massacres,  
cry of mothers who  
have lost their kin and kind,  
when and if they could not imagine  
paranoid fantasies triggering  
psychotic explosive acts:  
fingers wedded to guns,  
perambulatory mindbombs.

For every Guernica,  
there has been sound of silence.  
Take Picasso's Vichy days:  
Did he notice when  
friend Max Jacobs disappeared?

Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia, Oklahoma City:  
The Massacre of Innocents  
is everywhere, takes many forms.  
While Icarus drops from sky,  
Others lose parents, child, hope.



# Generations

by Daniel R. Schwarz

## I.

We celebrated New Year's Day with  
generation older than ourselves.  
Time—ghostly uninvited  
guest—circulated like  
stale medicated air in hospice room.  
Conversational hum and buzz  
touched by mortality  
returned me to my past, even as  
I saw my future self:  
stooped bodies bent by time,  
hearing aids, flaccid skin, canes,  
wrinkled faces whose geographic  
lines mapped worthy histories.

## III.

Caught in warp of  
another time, greeting me warmly  
yet feigning full recognition,  
others insinuated intimacy that never was,  
as if I were bridge to  
younger world they once knew.  
Some never appeared, debilitated by illness,  
loss of faculties, though present in  
to and fro of regrets, memories, elegies.  
Yet I imagined them as they were,  
in full vigor, at similar parties years ago,  
and realized I soon will be them,  
my sons me, and the yet unborn  
would watch my sons age.

## II.

A warm touching occasion:  
Among them, men and women I once  
held in awe, who were my current age or  
younger when I first arrived in Ithaca  
bursting with words and promise.  
“She is in its worst stage, the time  
when one knows one is caught  
in its inexorable grip,” grieved a luminary  
of his still-elegant wife now  
ravaged by Alzheimer's.  
A few of the guests huddled  
In corner, sharing the pain  
Of adult children lost to heroin,  
alcohol, and mental collapse.





# Interview with Daniel R. Schwarz

by Helen Maxson

*Note: Poems referred to below that are not in this issue or prior issues of Westview have been published elsewhere, and most are accessible on Daniel R. Schwarz's web page: <http://www.people.cornell.edu/pages/drs6/>*

## Helen: Why do you write poetry?

Daniel: I think most writers—and I include myself—write primarily when we need to delve into our psyches and discover who we are and, secondarily but still importantly, when we need to share the results of that process with others. I use words to understand myself and the world I live in. I have kept a diary most of my life, briefly recording events and my responses daily. Poetry is a way I come to terms with my feelings in a disciplined form. My poems respond to events and experiences about which I need to say something to myself.

Life's serious events evoke in me a need to put my thoughts into form, and that form on occasion becomes poetry. May I quote a 2002 poem?

## WORDS

Are my mind's mirror,  
editing what I see of self and world;  
transforming brine in which ideas soak:  
Imagination's amanuensis and muse,  
giving shape to what might be.

Are nets in which I try to catch  
swimming ephemera of my life;  
while I have woven them tight,  
from filaments of experience,  
I do not always know how to set the nets  
to catch tortured thoughts, tender feelings.

Are closets and drawers where I put my things,  
ordering tentatively life's disorder;  
honing tools to shape inchoate thoughts;  
putty to fill insignificant gaps  
where tiny drafts penetrate;  
are whetstones to sharpen memory;  
intricate mosaics shaped by experience  
into elaborate patterns.

Are memory's archaeology  
by which I excavate my past;  
recall or create lost visions of childhood,  
capture evanescent dreams;  
nocturnal fictions of fulfillment,  
undoing day's fantasies;  
are soul's music, tongue's plaything,  
mind's geometry and poetry.

Or, as Stevens put it in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1949), "The poem is the cry of the occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it, / the poet speaks the poem as it is / Not as it was .... [The] words of the world are the life of the world."

My subjects often, but by no means always, are inspired by my personal life: the aging and recent death of my parents—my mother died in 2005 and my father in 2004—my sometimes difficult relations with my father, the evolution of my two sons' lives, my divorce and remarriage, family love and even some strife, romantic and marital love, and Jewish themes. My poems balance *carpe diem* with a deep sense of mortality that takes the form of awareness, fear, and reluctant acceptance of the inevitability of aging, illness, disability, death. Elegy echoes in many poems whether it be the premature death of friends' children, or the accidental death of a colleague. Sometimes elegy intersects with nostalgia. My poems often express my love of nature. As I contemplate nature's wonders, including seasonal changes, I often relate its movements to human rhythms. I am interested in cultural differences within America and the world. Finally, in the spirit of Stevens's "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never." My poems respect the power of the human mind.

The scope or corpus of my fifty or so published poems takes into account a good deal of my life and interests—art, travel, nature, food, literature, teaching, writing, and, of course, family. I address illness, aging, loss, loneliness and death,



as if one could exorcise these demons by writing about them. Writing does have therapeutic value, but, alas, those fears that we all share are part of living.

**What do you see as your recurring themes?**

I write as a humanist who believes that in our relatively brief time on earth we can make a difference to those we care about, including family, friends, and, yes, students. Playing on the theme that time is money, I counsel that time is time and really all we have.

Throughout my poems is a strong consciousness of mortality combined with a sense that life is to be lived and enjoyed fully. I have written a fair number of elegiac poems about times past and lives ended. But ended does not mean lost. For example, “Mother in Hospice, April 2005” is an encomium to a great lady whose life gained value from what she passed on. “Performance” reflects on my student Christopher Reeve’s tragic accident and who he really was apart from his role as Superman. Related to the elegiac mode is often nostalgia for what we imagine as simpler times, even while we know—as I indicate in the poems—that we reconstruct the past according to our dimly-acknowledged needs. In my poems, nostalgia goes hand in hand with a sense that we do learn from experience and that even in my 60s there is much life to be lived if luck holds out. And I have written love poems about the joys of falling in love and remarrying and poems about a relationship that didn’t quite make it. My passion for travel often informs my poems, whether directly or indirectly.

**What do you see as the salient features of your poetry?**

In terms of form, a salient feature is a small story—often derived from a simple observation—and narrative shifts back and forth from present to past and often back again. Thematically, a crucial feature in my poetry is the place of memory even while I understand that there is always a distinction between what as well as what we remember happened and a second distinction between what we remember and how we select and arrange that

memory into words. My poems often focus on the presence of the past; as George Eliot put it in *Middlemarch*: “A man’s past is not simply a dead history, an outworn preparation of the present....It is a still quivering part of himself.” Rhetorically, a major feature is a belief in language and a belief that if we can only find the right words, we can communicate. Thus, I respect the audience and I strive to be lucid. I think of the epigraph to E.M. Forster’s *Howard’s End*: “Only connect.” Like Forster, I believe in personal relationships as a cornerstone to the building of a life. I believe in the capacity of the human mind to understand and believe, despite all our failings, that we need others—family, friends, community.

My belief in language even carries over to my naively optimistic belief in communication through language as a way to solve larger misunderstandings between different political visions, although I do not often address in my poems explicitly political themes. If we can only talk about a problem, I believe we have a chance to solve it.

**How have your writing and teaching about literature affected your poetry?**

I am a humanist as teacher, critic, scholar, and poet, and that means I place a strong emphasis on how humans live. Even in the high tide of theory, I have—without sacrificing attention to the formal aspects of literature as well as the need to understand historical contexts—focused on literature as artistic works by humans, about humans, and for humans. Humanistic criticism believes that the doing—technique, structure, and style—is important because it reveals or discusses the meaning inherent in the subject. Our goal should be an empathetic reading of a text to discover the conscious and unconscious patterns of language that the author built into a text; those patterns usually convey a vision of how humans live. We should read literature as an imagined representation of historical events and human behavior. Human behavior is central to most works and should be the major concern of analysis. Thus, our interest as readers is in how fictional people behave—what they fear, desire, doubt, need—and fictional includes poetry and drama as well as novels and stories. Although



modes of characterization differ, the psychology and morality of characters need to be understood as if they were real people; for understanding others like ourselves helps us to understand ourselves.

When I write a poem I descend into myself, but the words are for not only myself but others whom I hope will respond to them. As the 2006 Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk puts it, “[O]nce we have shut ourselves away we soon discover that we are not as alone as we thought. We are in the company of the words of those who came before us, of other people’s stories, other people’s books—the thing we call tradition. I believe literature to be the most valuable tool that humanity has found in its quest to understand itself.”

Among other things, I am in part what I have read. We are what we experience, and for me reading and visiting museums are central to my experience since I have spent much of my life engaged in these activities. As your fine essay shows, I have studied the modernist literary tradition, which I teach and write about, especially the English and Irish tradition—Joyce, Hopkins, Stevens, Auden—as well as such painters as Picasso and Cezanne. My poetry has been influenced by my study of the relationship between modern art and modern literature, entitled *Reconfiguring Modernism: Explorations in the Relationship between Modern Art and Modern Literature* (1997). Examples of the influence of art can be found in many of the poems.

To return to literary influences, I have been influenced by Hopkins in terms of my use of phonics and in dramatizing confrontations with nature; the phrase, “I caught at dawn,” from my “Charleston Lake, Ontario, August 1996,” echoes the opening of Hopkins’s great sonnet “The Windhover.” “Reading Texts, Reading Lives” and “Ocean Pleasures” show my familiarity with Stevens. It is hardly surprising, since I am a Joyce scholar, that “Snowbound” begins with an epigraph from Joyce’s “The Dead” and that I have written a poem entitled “Reading Joyce’s *Ulysses*.” I have also been influenced by the American tradition as my epigraphs from Hawthorne and Emerson show—and with Emerson I have even borrowed the title of one his best-known essays.

### **Does your narrative focus derive from your interest in teaching narrative?**

I think the uses of multiple time frames and the desire to tell a small story come from my interest in narrative, but also from my sense that stories—even anecdotes—enact values. Narrative is both the representation of external events and the telling of those events. My interest in narrative derives from my belief that we make sense of our lives by ordering them and giving them shape. The stories we tell provide continuity among the concatenation of diverse episodes in our lives. Each of us is continually writing and rewriting in our minds the texts of our lives, revising our memories and hopes, proposing plans, filtering disappointments through our defenses and rationalizations, making adjustments in the way we present ourselves.

Furthermore, the emphases on dramatizing a distinct voice within my poems comes from my interest in lyric and in strong fictional characters—including reliable and unreliable narrators—who reveal their psyches and values, their personalities, with their quirks and idiosyncrasies, in their speaking voices. Of course, the dramatized speaking voice changes with the subject, and sometimes the voice is a dramatized version of my response to a particular moment. Other times, it is more of a persona as in “The American Scholar” or “The Muse Returns.”

My strength is the efficiently-told tale rather than the striking image, although I occasionally hit the mark with the latter, as in “Remarriage.” I think I am at my best as an observer; opportunities to travel have afforded me opportunities for observation of nature and people, whether it be a refugee from the Holocaust or a lobsterman in Maine. I would say lucidity, succinctness, the ability to control multiple time frames within a brief poem to represent a small but illustrative story are my strengths, and maybe the failure to find the most original way of saying is a weakness. I don’t do much with rhyme, although I do often write in regular lines.



**Is the persona yourself, as often seems evident when you write about family issues, or is it a dramatized person?**

Certainly, in “The American Scholar” and “The Muse Returns,” the voice is that of a comic persona who is trying to find his voice. But even when the voice originates within myself, it forms another “speaking self” within the ontology of the poem. Writing poetry exposes the deeply-buried self—the fixations and obsessions, the dark memories, the pain we barely recognize—what Palmuk calls the “secret wounds” and creates a persona different from the everyday social self. The speaking voice in my poetry is not the everyday self who gets up, brushes his teeth, has breakfast, and drives off to work, but an intensified and particularized self whose words are carefully chosen and refined with an imagined audience in mind. The voice exists within the imagined ontology of the formal poem.

**How do you compose? Can you take us through the creative process?**

I begin a poem when I feel strongly about something I have felt or seen. I write something down in my computer, or in a notebook or a slip of paper if the computer isn’t there. At a later time—hours, days, weeks, and months—I might sketch a draft of a poem, revise it, and play with words. I might let it rest for days or weeks, returning every so often to fine tune it, tighten it, and omit unnecessary words, especially articles. The need to communicate to the imagined audience enters more prominently into the creative process at the time of revision. Sometimes, I fine-tune for months and years, and then suddenly I think, “Yes, it is ready.” Even after submitting a poem, I may notice a place where fine-tuning is necessary, or an editor may make a valuable suggestion for revision. When I begin to like it, I show it to my wife, Marcia, a retired professor, and perhaps to another reader I respect. I find computers help me immeasurably; I think now with frustration of the experience of having to retype of my earlier scholarly writing.

**Has your feel for nature been affected by living in rural upstate New York?**

I grew up in what we thought was the country, in suburban Long Island, and I remember even then having a favorite birch tree in a yard, enjoying the still beauty of a snowy day, and my family nurturing baby rabbits abandoned by their mother. Living near the ocean helped me appreciate the seasonal effects on the sea and marine life, and a handful of my published poems reflect that. But certainly, living in Ithaca for 39 years and, as I do now, in the country with a home overlooking a pond—albeit within a mile of Cornell—has deepened my appreciation of seasonal rhythms. I enjoy bird watching and snorkeling. I revel in the process of nature—freezing and thawing, snow and sunshine, sunrises and sunsets—and the variety of birds and the observable differences in plants virtually every day. That appreciation carries over to my response to nature wherever I am. Writing poetry helps me see and hear the natural world—as in “Spring Sounds”—but seeing and hearing the natural world also help me write poetry.

**Does your Jewish background play a role in your poetry?**

I am a secular Jew with respect for Jewish traditions and history but without a certainty of God’s presence: I have problems when I ask myself, “Where was God during the Holocaust or the killing fields in Cambodia or during black enslavement here and elsewhere, and why is there is so much individual and collective suffering in the world?” Yet, I was Bar-Mitzvahed, and so were my children. I have been married twice by a rabbi in Jewish wedding ceremonies and have belonged to a temple for decades. So clearly, the Jewish tradition is important to me. I have published several poems on Jewish history, the Holocaust, Jewish rituals, Jewish holidays, and the Old Testament. Certainly, writing my book, *Imagining the Holocaust* (1999), brought some of these themes to the forefront of my thinking.





# Speculations on the Lyrical and the Narrative

## Modes in Poems by Dan Schwarz

by Helen Maxson

In his poem "Spring Sounds," Dan Schwarz describes the sounds of a creek as a musical composition of separate voices sometimes singing in unison and sometimes carrying distinct parts. The structural pattern ascribed to the creek takes various forms throughout Schwarz's poetry, helping to define it as a whole.

### Spring Sounds

Spring sounds: low-pitched baritone  
of roaring creek, insistently,  
slowly cutting shapes as it  
gathers its strength,  
rolls, tumbles, roaring  
strongly in bass,  
then, yes, tenor surge  
over ancient rocks  
in three discrete small cataracts,  
before coalescing at next plateau  
returning to orderly pattern,  
softer, gentler gurgling  
of soprano trickles and alto drips,  
pleasurable cacophonous trilling.

There is much about this brook as an image that can speak to several themes and, thereby, to several of Schwarz's poems, revealing among them a common dynamic that unifies them as the brook unifies its trickles and drips. The brook participates in both order and cacophony. It flows over ancient rocks. Its flow is both urgent and casual. It carries impact, cutting "shapes"—of self-expression and of impressions made on the surrounding landscape—that mirror the workings of other poems. There is a universality to this brook that, engaging Schwarz's other poems, reflects what it means to him to be human, to be alive, and to describe—as music and language and paint describe—those

experiences.

Schwarz's poem, "Mother in Hospice, April 2005," enacts the creek's dynamics in various ways. A dying mother, surrounded by her family, honors individual members by tenderly commenting on their personal needs, struggles, and strengths. At the same time, she counsels them to become, as the brook does, a unified whole, "to love each other, / avoid strife, anger." In the final stanza of the poem, the concept of coalescing as a family becomes a mode of being or living in which individual elements of experience comprise the strands of life's fabric, rather than moments between them.

There is a mystery in "Mother in Hospice, April 2005": just as individual trickles and drips combine to form a larger stream, as well as "discrete small cataracts," the individual moments of life form a fabric that celebrates each one separately and gives them precedence over any totalizing agenda that we might be tempted to impose on our lives and in which these moments would be lost. The mother's moments of clarity as she dies come to her naturally rather than as a function of her will. Coming and going on their own terms, they produce a fabric of individual feelings and memories that are "warp and woof of life itself." Embracing this aspect of her dying as a way of living, the poem's speaker affirms the workings of the brook as a mechanism that can detach us from what is artificial, connecting us with what is genuine and can help us to live well.

The poem "Generations" describes a similar mystery involving human experiences that coalesce yet remain distinct. The speaker of the poem remembers a New Year's Day celebrated with his elders, whose poor health and approaching deaths have much to do with the atmosphere at the party: "Time—ghostly uninvited / guest—circulated like /



*Daniel R. Schwarz*

stale medicated air in hospice room." Yet, even as the irrevocable marker of life's end is much in evidence, the generational boundaries defining the party guests blur for the speaker: "Conversational hum and buzz / touched by mortality / returned me to my past, even as / I saw my future self." The speaker imagines those at the party as they were when they were younger, "in full vigor, at similar parties years ago, / and realized I soon will be them, / my sons me, and the yet unborn / would watch my sons age." The speaker finds himself in both his elders and in his sons, in a perception that softens the influence of time, as well as the ravages of life itself represented by "Alzheimer's,....adult children lost to heroin, / alcohol, and mental collapse." There is a power here coming from identification with others—a form of coalescence with them—that defeats time and rises above distinctions that we take for granted in our day-to-day lives.

In fact, there is a component of transcendence

in the mysterious coalescences of all these poems. It is helpful to remember here that Dan Schwarz has spent much of his scholarly career studying the workings of modern British fiction, a body of stories that behaves in various ways like the poetry of British high romanticism. We think of the language with which D. H. Lawrence describes human passion, language that sometimes leaves behind the linear, syntactical logic of prose for the more associative logic of poetry. We think of the moments of discovery and epiphany that inform the stories of Conrad, Joyce, and Woolf. These novelists reinforce the impulses toward transcendence that their readers have found in romantic poetry, and Schwarz's poems frequently enact those same impulses.

At the same time, Schwarz's poems make use of many literary elements generally associated with fiction. The lyric moments of feeling and perception he describes emerge from narrative contexts of setting, situation, and character. To be sure, the lyrics of high romanticism happen within narrative contexts too: Coleridge studies the secret ministry of the frost in a midnight lull in life's activities as the parent of a baby in the English countryside, and the poem tells a story about that parent even as it explores his inner musings and discoveries. But the narrative dimension of Schwarz's poems is not often upstaged, or upstaged for long, by the sort of lyricism or epiphanic experiences for which the romantic poets are known. Perhaps we might see Schwarz's poems as poetic versions of the modern fiction he has studied as a scholar. Perhaps we might liken the interplay between the narrative and the lyrical in these poems to the dynamics of his brook in "Spring Sounds," as it passes among its separate cataracts and the plateaux on which their coalescing transcends them.

One of the features of Schwarz's poems that emphasizes their narrativity is their use of quotation and dialogue. Schwarz's poems often advance an underlying theme by remembering words and verbal exchanges of the past. In fiction, even as it develops a



story's underlying themes, dialogue helps to develop character and scene. In lyric poems, those goals are usually secondary to more ephemeral or transcendent explorations. In Schwarz's poems, however, we find a balance between the narrative and the lyrical in which dialogue participates in an overall—ultimately transcendent—fabric of voices that together constitute the poem. It is a balance akin to that between the individual and the blended that we have already traced in Schwarz's brook and in the lesson represented by the dying mother for her son. The characters' voices in Schwarz's poems stand out as individual expressions that help to conjure a narrative, even as they are absorbed by some lyric exploration that is carried out by the speaker's voice.

Schwarz's poem "Snowbound" expresses well the balance between the concrete subjects that usually inform narrative and the abstracted or transcendent experiences that tend to comprise the subjects of lyric poems. Schwarz introduces the poem by citing the lyrical ending of Joyce's story "The Dead," in which snow is falling all over Ireland so as to bury the differences between individual things and diminish the differences between, "all the living and the dead." In Schwarz's poem, the snow, "buries roads, / homogenizes houses, / nullifies difference." For both Joyce and Schwarz, the snow clearly suggests some state that transcends the distinctions among concrete things, but there is at least one important difference between their views. Critics of Joyce have long disagreed on whether to find hope or despair in the final image of "The Dead" (and, for that matter, in many images throughout Joyce's work in which he seems deliberately to resist interpretation). Schwarz participates in that ambiguity in the first of his poem's two stanzas: the snow is peaceful, but it nullifies. But in the second stanza, he casts the state of being snowbound as a process of gestation and hope:

Blizzard awakens my soul.  
It's as if I were enclosed in womb  
from which I emerge reborn,

or crypt that magically reopens.

Smoldering passion, creativity, curiosity  
melt snow, prepare  
ground for flowering, renewal.

In Schwarz's re-envisioning of Joyce, snow nullifies the individual only to prepare for individual birth. Distinct cataracts that coalesce in a brook, threads that intertwine in a fabric, delineated scenes and characters of narrative that transcend worldly distinctions in some form of lyrical experience—perhaps we can say that in the cosmos of Schwarz's poems, all these things gestate for a time in a loss of self that will, in the end, enhance each cataract, thread, and character. If so, perhaps we can also say that in Schwarz's poems, the relationship between the individual voices of dialogue and the speaker's voice that, in the end, absorbs them mirrors that between cataract and brook or between threads and fabric and, so, enhances the dialoguing voices. Certainly the voices of the speakers in Schwarz's poems rise often to the level of the abstract. The nouns his speakers use are frequently offered without the articles that, in common speech, would attend them.

In "Snowbound," the speaker describes being "enclosed in womb ... or crypt"; in the poem's first verse, the extensive whiteness is "still as frozen pond." The family in "Mother in Hospice, April 2005" is "Crowded into cubicle." Throughout Schwarz's poems, his speakers' nouns rise—leaving behind articles—from the specific to the general, from the concrete to the abstract. As a result, the characters' voices are defined against them, to a corresponding degree, as reflections of specific individuals. Perhaps we might say that the abstracted language of his speakers offers, among other things, a fertile snow against which his individual characters are defined—a womb of thoughtfulness and transcendent realization in which the specificity of narrative is subdued in order to be later enhanced. To be sure, Schwarz's speakers tell their own stories with specific details. But they provide, too, something akin (though not



identical) to the “conversational hum and buzz” attending the New Year’s Day celebration in the poem “Generations,” in which individual voices are muted, and against which the quoted voice of the “luminary” grieving his “elegant wife now / ravaged by Alzheimer’s” gains clarity.

The themes of speech, voice, and artistic expression are explicit throughout Schwarz’s poems and reinforce our sense that the voices of his poems work in much the same ways as the sounds of his brook. The creek is “baritone,” “tenor,” “soprano.” In “Mother in Hospice, April 2005,” the mother’s “final words were who she was,” and the figure of Marcia “knew what to do and say.” The speaker remembers his arrival in Ithaca “bursting with words and promise.” In the companion poems “The American Scholar” and “The Muse Returns,” the speaker’s muse instructs him on the writing of poetry. In treating the theme of expression, Schwarz’s voices play out the opposition and, at the same time, the mysterious partnership between the narrative and the lyrical, the concrete and the transcendent that we have seen in his poems. In her advice to the character of the poet that he avoid burdening his readers with his narcissism, Schwarz’s muse likens the poet to Joyce’s Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, who cannot find his own poetic voice because, in his self-conscious attempt to write as he thinks a poet should write, he cannot silence Shelley’s voice in his own work. Schwarz’s muse warns the poem’s speaker against the same mistake: “Are you having delusions that you are Shelley or Wiesel?” Counseling against rhapsodic self-inflation that is out of touch with one’s own reality and that of others, her advice is reminiscent of the wisdom of the dying mother who counsels her family to avoid conflict; both women urge a form of coalescence rather than self-assertion. Yet, the muse exemplifies perfectly the premise that Schwarz’s dramatized voices gain clarity against the voice of the speaker. The

speaker rhapsodizes that when “I feel fine frenzy of a poem, / my emotions overwhelm me like incoming tide surging over sand. / I need to chew on bones of experience. / Drink dregs of bitterness, / taste ashes of regret.” The muse responds, “You need to take out our garbage and walk the dog.” It is a comic triumph of the concrete over the abstract, of characterization over lyric rumination. While her message transcends the self-absorbed individual on behalf of service to others, her voice celebrates the genuine individuality that eludes both Stephen Daedalus and Schwarz’s speaker. It is a healthy balance between lyric and narrative.

The allusions of Schwarz’s poems to earlier works of literature repeat these dynamics, offering characters and situations defined, in part, by their familiarity to the reader as well as by the artistic strategies of the earlier writers. Against these specifics, Schwarz’s speakers come to their own conclusions about them, generalizing in sometimes lyric terms. In response to Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts,” Schwarz’s poem speaks of “cry of mothers who / have lost their kin and kind....” In response to Joyce’s Leopold Bloom, Schwarz writes

His scars are psychic scars,  
like ones we all bear,  
and his, like our Hades, is within:  
fears, obsessions,  
and dimly acknowledged needs.  
He, too, is teacher;  
his subject is humanity.  
He is Stephen’s Nestor  
but also his Virgil,  
accompanying him—and yes, us—  
through divinely human comedy.

The phrases “He, too, is teacher” and “through divinely human comedy” underscore the abstraction of their nouns by omitting articles and speak with the graceful cadences of lyric. Furthermore,





both poems treat broadly-inclusive subjects: the suffering of Icarus is extended to all mothers who have lost children to violence; the Hades of Bloom lies within us all and, like Dante's *Inferno*, is part of the cosmos of all people. Schwarz's citations of transcendent truths add to the lyricism of these poems.

And yet, in these poems, the images of Brueghels's painting about which Auden is writing, the details of Picasso's painting that Schwarz mentions, the historical detail of Max Jacob's seizure by the Nazis, the plot details from *Ulysses* listed in Schwarz's response to that novel: these concrete specifics are the stuff of narrative. Perhaps this mingling of literary modes evokes Schwarz's brook on the subject of literary allusion, finding in it an author's personal experience with a prior work, through which the work transcends the specifics of its original creation and contents. As such, allusion becomes a gesture of both narrative and lyric impulse.

In the response to Auden, Schwarz's speaker urges an empathy for those who suffer, and a willingness to "imagine / paranoid fantasies triggering / psychotic explosive acts" that reminds us, in its extension beyond our own experience, of the speaker's willingness in "Generations" to imagine the elderly guests as they were when they were younger, realizing that "I soon will be them." In his response to Joyce, Schwarz's speaker celebrates the same impulse while meditating on the character of Leopold Bloom, his pain and courage in the face of insult as a Jew, his tolerant and forgiving nature reflected in a citation from *Ulysses* with which Schwarz begins his poem: "Force, hatred, history, all that. That's not the life for men and women, insult and hatred." It is the same tolerance and forgiveness that we, as readers of *Ulysses*, see when a hurt Bloom gives his persecutor the benefit of the doubt: "Perhaps not to hurt he meant" (Joyce 311). In their quest for understanding rather than self-centeredness, both poems celebrate the plateau on which the separate cataracts of Schwarz's

creek coalesce. Ironically, in both poems, it is in exploring and honoring the experiences of specific individuals, and thereby lowering the boundaries between them, that both poems abstract to an overall practice of tolerance that would embrace all individuals. From this perspective, tolerance seems like an abstraction fostered by specifics. Perhaps there is a suggestion in Schwarz's poems that allusion is a lyrical process that starts with the detailed familiarity of narrative.

Schwarz's poetry is highly allusive, referring to classic works of literature from Dante to Auden, to works of visual art, and to figures of mythology and religion (like the Christ implied by the punning phrase "divinely human comedy"). In a letter to a Mr. Kean, John Keats referred to the creative process of alluding to one's artistic forebears as an "immortal freemasonry" (quoted in Bate 201); in its allusiveness, Schwarz's poetry engages in just such a process, building an artistic edifice that combines the bricks of prior works with his own creations. It is a coalescing activity, and it enacts in the arena of art the same work of empathy for which Schwarz, echoing Bloom, calls. In his 1939 elegy "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," Auden wrote, "For poetry makes nothing happen," appearing to disagree with Yeats's view that art could respond in constructive, efficacious ways to the events of history. However, Auden's skepticism is belied by his poem's celebration of Yeats's potential impact on the hatred of the Hitler era:

Follow, poet, follow right  
To the bottom of the night,  
With your unconstraining voice  
Still persuade us to rejoice;  
In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.

For Dan Schwarz, there is no doubt that poetry can make things happen. In its images, in the dia-



logue of its characters, in its allusions, Schwarz's poetry claims for art the work of his creek, making music that is a sound of spring and renewal, embracing the cacophony of disparate voices in "orderly pattern" that transcends them and suggests some improvement or desirable condition toward which we might work.

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# Winter

by Judith Neuman

Winter moved in and set up housekeeping.  
An old friend, she settled down and made herself at home,  
filling up the corners with coats and boots and hats and gloves,  
the smell of wool and wet wood snapping on the hearth.  
On dark days she whines and howls,  
Blowing drifts and cold between the cracks.  
But in the sun she changes tune.  
Her icicles play drip-phonies upon the windowpane.  
Her snow cascades off shingles with a roar,  
burying dry flowers under downy coverlets.  
Tracks of rabbit, 'coon, and deer embroider her frozen quilt.

In the kitchen, winter cooks.  
A pot of soup exhales its steamy breath,  
distilling sweetness from last summer's roots.  
Bones release their marrow for her bread  
and cellars give up their apples for her smile.  
We draw 'round the table, celebrating her return.



*Photo by Kevin Collins*



# Who Invented Kisses?

by Judith Neuman

Was it someone from our distant past?  
Perhaps a newborn's mother  
so excited by his glow  
that she drew him to her lips  
and before she knew what happened,  
had puckered up and kissed?

Or was it a father home from the hunt  
whose young son ran to him with joy?  
He grabbed the child and swung him in the air,  
then, on the sweaty forehead,  
firmly placed his lips upon the boy.

Perhaps it was young lovers who  
in searching for each other  
reached with their hands to hold  
their heads in close confine,  
lips accidentally meeting  
hardly breathing,  
tongues reaching and receding.

Or was it a maiden who bade farewell  
to her knight on his way to battle?  
With a hug so tight,  
a grasp so sweet that  
two pair of lips could not help but meet?

Perhaps it was old gray heads,  
holding each other's hands,  
drawing close to one another,  
counting their remaining days,  
their lips uniting before  
the final parting of the ways.

Maybe kisses were not *invented*,  
but built into the human gene,  
like smiles or frowns or laughter or love—  
a needed balance to complete a human being.



# Date With Alice

by Christine Chen

Joe had just turned his computer off for the day when Perry walked into his cubicle and asked “You heading out?”

“Yeah.”

Perry gestured over one shoulder with his thumb. “Wanna grab a beer before you head home?”

Joe shook his head and started gathering paperwork to place in his briefcase. “No thanks. I’ve got a date.”

His friend’s eyebrows rose about half an inch. “With Alice?”

“Yup.” Joe closed the briefcase lid. Both latches snapped into place with a palpable *click*.

Perry leaned against the wall of the cubicle. “So when do I get to meet her?”

Joe looked up, surprised. “Uh—I don’t know. I think it’s too early for that.”

“Oh, come on. How long you been seeing her now? Six months?”

Joe counted backward in his head. He’d started seeing Alice in June, and it was now November. “Five.” *Wow*, he thought in amazement. The time had really flown by.

Perry nodded as if to prove his point. “Yeah. And I haven’t heard you mention anyone else that whole time. Sounds like you two are getting pretty serious.”

Joe shrugged, scratched his head, and hoped Perry would drop the subject.

He didn’t. “Good for you, man. I have to admit, there was a time when I was really worried about you. All work and no play. And it wasn’t just me. Lots of folks thought you were a little...” Perry paused.

“Antisocial?” Joe said.

“You said it, not me. But no more, eh? You finally got a life...and a woman. Good for you, man.”

“Gee, thanks, Perry. Listen, I gotta go; I’m running late.” Joe stood up, hoping Perry would take the hint.

He didn’t. “So. Maybe I’ll see her at the office party this Christmas?”

“Nah,” Joe said quickly. “I don’t think so. I’m not sure that would be appropriate.”

Perry guffawed. “Listen to you, Mr. Manners. ‘Wouldn’t be appropriate.’ Next thing I know, you’ll be telling me you haven’t even slept with her yet.”

To his horror, Joe’s face burst into flames.

“You mean—you haven’t even slept with her yet?” Perry burst out, a bit too loudly.

Joe mumbled, “I have to go,” and he fumbled for his briefcase. He pushed past his co-worker. Perry, still in shock, let him go.

All the way home, Joe flushed and blushed at the memory of his conversation with Perry. It was a fair question, he supposed (though it was, in classic Perry fashion, far too personal).



After all, he was almost 35 years old, and at that age, most men wouldn't have waited five months to consummate a relationship with a woman. Hell, he knew some men who wouldn't have waited five *minutes*. But Alice was classier than that, and he wanted to set a higher standard. She deserved it.

Just thinking about her made him feel warm all over. He could see her in his mind's eye, as clearly as though she were sitting in the passenger seat with him. A bob of honey-blond hair, a five-foot-six frame, long slender legs. He wondered what she'd be wearing tonight. Maybe the beige turtleneck and brown suede skirt. Or the sky-blue dress that stopped just above her knees. That would be nice. Whatever she wore, she was sure to look fabulous.

He pulled into the driveway of the house at precisely six o'clock—just enough time to hit the shower and change before Alice showed up. He loosened his tie as he went through the front door, grabbed a beer from the fridge in the kitchen, and headed upstairs to the master bath. Twenty minutes later, he emerged in a cloud of steam, his black hair damp and wavy and his skin wet and wrinkled.

He changed into a fresh pair of khakis and a white button-down shirt, then opened his sock drawer. He withdrew two items: a pair of brown argyles and a soft leather case. Crossing over to the front window, he twirled the clear plastic rod that swivelled the blinds. From here, he had a good view of the street, and he'd know precisely when Alice pulled into the driveway.

Joe spent a few minutes glancing up and down the street, nursing his beer. It was a nice neighborhood, he thought. The residents were mostly young professionals, some married with young families. The people here really cared about their homes; on any given Saturday, the street buzzed with the sound of lawnmowers and weed-whackers. The lawn across the street was particularly well-groomed, but Joe noticed again that the curtains were much too sheer. He could see everything through them. He'd have to caution the family about that one of these days.

He turned the TV on with the remote and sat down on the bed, nursing his beer and waiting for Alice to arrive. He didn't have to wait long before he heard the car turn into the driveway. He set his

beer down on the nightstand, went to the window, and looked. Alice had arrived, all right. She stepped out, wearing the brown suede skirt and holding a shopping bag in her left hand. In her right hand, she held a cell phone to her ear, and she was laughing—presumably at something the other person had just said. As she approached the front door of the house across the street, she juggled the phone between her shoulder and her ear while she searched for her keys. Then she disappeared through the

door. A few minutes later, she resurfaced in the upstairs bedroom where she began to change out of her clothes behind the too-sheer curtains.

With a practiced motion, Joe opened the leather case, withdrew a pair of binoculars, and began his date with Alice.



*Photo by Rita Ji*

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# At the Gas Station on the Corner

by Jane A. Banks

I wait in the truck and watch  
my young husband  
fill our grill's propane tank  
and wonder:  
how do men learn the tasks of modern manhood?  
I do not know  
how to fill a propane tank.  
If I wanted  
to be a man  
to get out of the truck  
to fill a propane tank  
to grill our meat  
where would I go to learn?  
His father must have taught him  
and his father before  
father before father  
all the way back until  
before propane tanks  
when men lit the eating fires by hand.



# Speaking with the Fish at Boston Aquarium — Before Scuba Lessons

by Jane A. Banks

Why do I stand outside  
your aquarium  
tank walls  
when I could be  
breathing underwater  
like a living miracle  
among 3,000 strong,  
circling in your dark  
rising cylinder,  
searching for that elusive out—  
out there, you know, it will still be nighttime.

Can the turtle read the graffiti  
on his own shell?  
Does that ugly fish know he is?  
He wouldn't mind  
if I climbed in  
that sandy bed, curled up as  
still  
as the rock  
turns-into-fish as it moves; the audience  
cries out collectively:  
It was a creature after all.

Last call  
for contemplating penguins  
was hours ago. I'm ready  
to dive in, float  
in a fetus-like ball,  
warm and lovely as a fluid cell,  
white in your ink-black world.

I will be pulled in your wake  
as you swim for sea,  
adapt to salt  
water waving us toward those wide  
steaming cracks in the crust,  
and as we pass together through the ocean floor  
I will think: silent, the fish understand me.



*Photo courtesy New England Aquarium*





# At the McNay Museum

by Bonnie Lyons

I blinked and squinted  
past a gray silk suit into the face  
of the museum director whom a kindly guard  
had asked to check on me—  
the woman lying motionless on the ground  
might have overdosed, might be dead—  
sprawled out on the sweet spring grass  
following the play of wind and sun  
on a mobile sculpture  
until the dappling light  
carried me off to sleep.

A cool, cloudless afternoon,  
but women of a certain age don't lie  
down on the grass. With a blanket  
beneath me I'd have been less objectionable.  
Cowboys have bedrolls, nomads have tents.  
Something, however flimsy, must separate us  
from ground and sky, mark  
and make our human place. I was a mare  
or cow who simply folds her legs  
and lies down in any pasture.  
Momentarily at home on planet earth.



# Life-Form Under the Overpass

by Barry Ballard

One brings little to the steady muzzled  
hum of the environment. Even distant  
visitors who have fallen through the prism  
of our sky barely engage us. Their bodies  
singed, clothing shredded, language exhaled  
like gibberish from disoriented  
minds. They hold out their hands like a curled limb  
of planets from an unknown galaxy:

A life-form trapped in the dense nebula  
of our pauses and turns, hiding from our  
Sun in the shadows of gravity and dying  
from their inability to acclimate.  
And the debris of their journey scattered like lost  
art, each shard of broken glass—glowing like stars.



# I Met the Devil on the Train

by Cass McGovern

When I was 22, I met Satan on the Illinois Central's 7:35 a.m. commuter train on Chicago's South Side. Spying the locomotive's headlight at 75th Street meant I had less than two minutes to spring into the station and buy my weekly ticket. Commuters were pouring toward the station as if they were lemmings invited for a spring swim, slowing down only to flip a nickel onto the metal plate at the ramshackle newsstand while the mustachioed fellow called out the headlines. As the approaching train's whistle wailed, I ducked under the black-and-white one-armed gate, hearing the slap of its full extension behind me and the "ding, ding, ding" of notification that in moments the heavy locomotive would pull in for the waiting crowd at 72nd Street. Taking two at a time, I ran up the wide and deep black asphalt stairs, flying past the familiar ticket agent and those waiting in line to pay the week's tariff, saying that I would purchase my weekly ticket on the train, that I needed to make a connection. I could hear him grumble, perhaps saying, "The conductor won't like that."

I was careful to almost tiptoe once outside the station's warming house so my new two-inch-high red heels would not embed in the platform boards' ridges. My unbelted trench coat, billowing like a bumbershoot, scared the gunmetal-gray pigeons so they maniacally strutted away with heads doing their forward bobble, red feet splaying in all directions. With a moment to go, I leapt into a railroad car, happy I wouldn't miss my nine-thirty class in a western suburb after catching the El and another bus. Though I wasn't in the smoking car, the air smelled a bit like cigarettes mixed with a mothball scent from winter coats.

I plunked down in the last vacant seat near the back, next to a woman who wasn't one of the regular riders. Being a shy woman, I didn't talk easily to anyone, particularly to strangers. My bench-mate seemed to draw me out with her smile. She had

no reading material — no *Daily News* folded in the usual rectangle that considerate riders took the time to make, no paperback, no study materials like I had from my graduate program. I didn't have my required ticket, and she seemed to know it. Most everyone pulled out a weekly pass and sat down.

The charmer was a woman about my mother's age — mid-forties — though my intuition told me she wasn't like my mother at all. Her brown-blond shortish hair was brushed away from her face. Her smile was broad and mesmeric. She a cobra, perhaps; I, her prey.

The weekly ticket was about \$5.50, as I recall. I had only a \$20 bill and felt embarrassed that I had been late, dashing onto the train without paying first. I reached into my purse, gold chain slung over my left shoulder as if I were trying to fish out the elusive bit of red cardboard. And I sighed. The cobra picked up that I didn't have a ticket and said, "Why don't you just put your thumb over the date? Just hand it to the conductor with your thumb over the dates for last week. He'll never know."

"Yes, but I would."

"He'll never know," she repeated, leaning in toward me. "Just your thumb."

"Oh, I couldn't do that." My Libra horoscope said I was a fair person, and I lived up to that code. My honesty was a virtue I valued. And yet, my co-conspirator was charming — like the proverbial snake — a woman I never saw before or after that Monday. Why did I listen to her? What power did she have over me? She looked a tad like the Virgin Mary, my favorite Catholic character. I loved to sing in grade school, "Bring flowers to the fairest, bring flowers to the rarest" about the Queen of the May, and here she was, in the flesh.

"I'll give him the twenty dollars. That's fine."

"He won't have change. Just put your thumb over the date." I learned that repetition is part of



her mantra. I learned later in graduate school that to change a behavior, repetition is one method.

My resolve was wearing thin, and the angst began. I didn't really want to ask him for change. He would get mad. I could save that money. I needed it. What could one ticket hurt in the cosmos of many? Who would know? The conductor was coming closer.

"Tick-ETS. Tick-ets, please."

His paper punch was clicking even between ticket punches, mimicking the click-clack of the train over the rail joints. I became light-headed. My hand went back and forth over the surface of the ticket, like a magician preparing to stupefy an audience with a sleight-of-hand trick. Should I or

shouldn't I? I practiced putting my thumb on just the March dates for Monday to Friday, then off, then on again. The woman nudged my elbow while showing me how to present the little red card, her thumb confidently clenching the side of her ticket to blank out the dates.

"Tick-ETS! Tick-ets, please."

He came closer, his round, dark blue cap with its duck-billed visor popping up between the commuters at the front of the car, swaying among the heads and folded newspapers in front of me. I could hear his punch on every ticket, as if a metronome were measuring my doom. Finally, he was at our faded yellow faux-straw bench. I held my hand out, thumb over the date as instructed. Then the struggle



*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall*

began, he pulling gently at first, me pulling back a little harder.

Caucasian Chalk Circle. Who would let go?

"Ticket, please," he commanded, eyes jumping now from the ticket to my soulful hazel eyes. It was as if one of the Ten Commandments was being broken and I knew I shalt never remove my thumb. I did let go after his third tug.

"This is last week's ticket."

"Oh?"

"Do you have this week's ticket?"

"Uh, I'm sorry, I don't seem to have it."

"You have to pay."

"All I have is a twenty."

"I'll get you change."

He continued down the aisle to the back, still chanting his slogan. I felt my face burn. My soul felt as if a tapered talon had scraped a black mark on my religious chalkboard. A lie. An image of purgatory's burning red flames for X number of days for expiation blazed in my head. Could I pray this monstrous lie out of my conscience? How about twenty Hail Mary's to match the twenty dollars? I felt that everyone around me knew I was no good. I hoped no one would report to my parents. My mother usually caught the 8:12 a.m. train; what if one of her friends took the earlier train and witnessed what I did!?

"You wouldn't think he would have pulled so hard," said my compatriot, the instigator-in-crime. No apology, no sympathy. Does the ringleader ever fess up? I didn't have much to say after that. My face was red, my heart howling.

The Virgin/Devil and I rode in silence until Van Buren Street, the next-to-the-last stop, where she stood up, excused herself, and struggled to step in front of me. I swung my knees into the aisle so she could exit. I wanted to say something, yet I was mute.

We pulled into the Randolph Street station, the last stop in our twenty-minute ride. I was running to catch the El to continue on to Oak Park. I looke for the conductor, more to avoid him than

to collect my change. Although \$20 was big bucks in the mid-1960s, perhaps the \$14.50 was worth skipping to save face.

A snarl caught my attention.

"Miss! Miss, over here."

He had been waiting. I noticed that he was kind to stand away from the crowd, letting everyone go by before he began his talk. Though I had sat toward the back, near the exit, I was nearly the last commuter to disembark. I knew that I didn't want to face him or public scrutiny.

His uniform was as commanding as a policeman's, nearly a decade before Watergate helped chisel away our confidence in, our trust in, and our respect of men in blue.

"I'm surprised that you tried to pass off last week's ticket."

His voice was clipped, not the sing-song drawl of "Tickets, please." He had his cap set straight on his graying hair. The grandfather I never knew, only in a disappointed grandfather voice chastising me. His eyes were like slits, his mouth straight across, one hand on his hip and the other in a critical-parent stance with his forefinger shaking up and down in front of me. Please, get the crucifix now; I'm ready to die.

"Yes, I'm sorry."

I knew it wouldn't matter if I told him about the woman. Being sorry was familiar to me in my twenties, as in, "I'm really sorry." *Mea culpa*. Bless me father, it has been ten years since my last confession.

He continued to lecture me, holding me there for maybe five minutes. When he knew I was thoroughly embarrassed and knew that I would never do it again on his watch, he gave me the change.

"Don't let it happen again. I hope you learned your lesson."

Yes, never take the 7:35 again. And, for sure, don't listen to a strange woman who may be Diablo in disguise.

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# One of the Five Wise Virgins Gives a Toast at the Party for the Prodigal Son

by Nicole Hardy

Sure, I'm glad you're back  
but how hard is it to come home

when the money's gone?  
I'll raise my glass to your brother

instead, to knowing what it's like  
playing every rule, waiting

days tasting shades of vanilla  
for the promised Christmas bonus

always good always home instead  
of upstairs with whoever's asking

fence-sitting on a fall somewhere  
in the gray between always good

always home, the words say themselves  
in the same night-prayer for who

knows how long how many years  
just in case He's still listening:

*Dear God, please. Please.*



# One of the Five Wise Virgins on a Date with the Prodigal Son

by Nicole Hardy

At dinner, you picture me a woman:  
V-neck on the verge of revelation,  
heels too high for church.  
If I can make myself a mystery,  
pretty inside these lines, why do I  
crave your vacation days, picture  
a flight to man-made paradise,  
cutting courses in consequence,  
modesty, foresight, and virtue?  
I'd atone like you did, arrive home  
in time for the party.

But we can both predict  
my predictability. I'd show you  
a daring tan line, every entry  
stamp in my passport, and I'd still be  
wearing this snow-white V,  
reverse doppelganger  
to Hester P., both of us foolish,  
and first one home is a virgin still.  
Was there ever a time you craved  
a week of my nights? What would you give  
for seven days of simple, sweet,  
sorrowful only as every joy  
is sample-sized, individually wrapped,  
not meant for retail sale.



# Sepulchre

by Megan Jones

*"How simple, when a thing is over, to refashion it."*

Sheila E. Murphy

As lives split and stiffen in  
to the parameters inventing  
a people, who decides  
which will be epics and which will be  
footnotes embedded in  
the underskin?

Indifferent to muscle and  
bone you are  
unaware of existing  
on approximations, our cradle of  
shared memory peopled  
with your absinthe fictions

Behind our premise of unity  
what do we know  
of women but the men  
before? What do we know  
of guilt-edged red  
nightmares, of shades not  
white, the underpinnings of shame?

Dig into history, the forgotten  
ribs and shin  
bones of nations—unearth  
the palimpsest, the collected  
calibrations of a culture's gods and  
discover that retrospect lies  
in ashes darker than pulsing shadows





Lose yourself in the fine dust of  
chewed-up *fact*  
and exhume those bones  
stewing in the graveyard, for  
the neat symmetrical wounds of textbooks  
have yet to be cauterized and

With nothing dead  
but the moment itself,  
you may snap the taut white thread  
holding that one tiny instant  
where myth might change  
and decide for yourself  
the correct moment to gather the corners  
together in one quiet seam  
and sew them  
shut



*Photo by Andy Newman*



# Mass

by Mark Wisniewski

my grandmother kept violet  
plants on

every window sill  
tables the sun hit &  
the floor along a north wall

she also had a parakeet she  
outlived

& then

as she announced

it would be just  
her

& her violets

she drank bottled grape  
juice allowed to ferment  
slightly  
& attended the racetrack  
once a year:

she had the whole moderation thing  
down

except for  
walking to 6 a.m.  
mass

even in her eighties she  
was a fiend about mass: thunderstorms  
couldn't stop  
her from accepting her  
host

one morning  
a neighbor appeared &  
told my mother he'd just



seen someone lying face-down  
in a snowbank

stopped his car  
lifted up the person &

the person was  
my grandmother

with 2 black eyes she blamed on  
her glasses  
& she was very sore

about missing Father

Lijewski's sermon

she lived to nearly  
100 in a time  
when that was all

but a miracle

my father found her

body one morning  
on the landing  
of her basement stairs

& then we were all

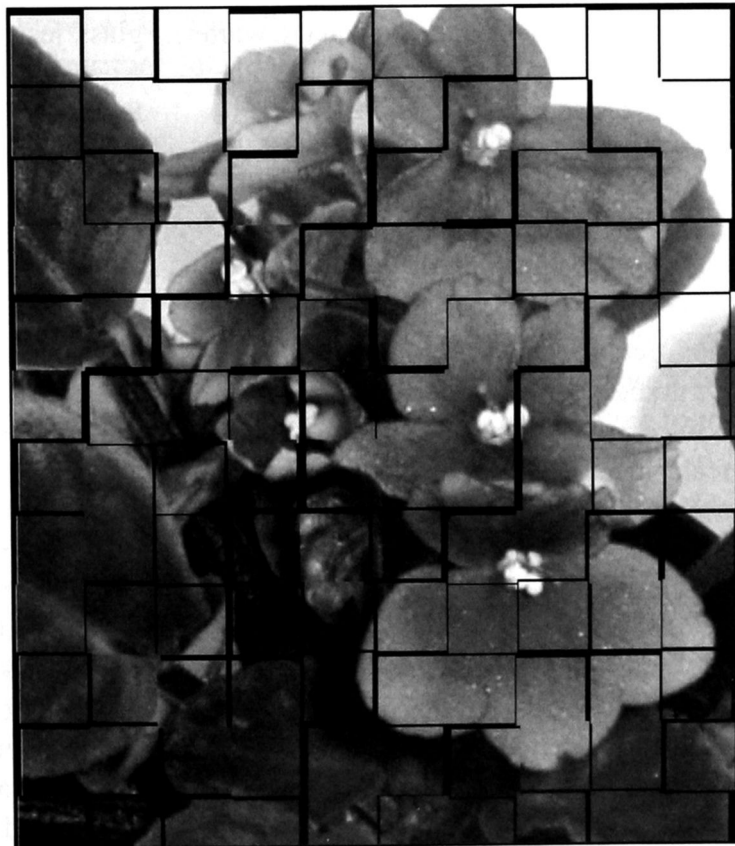
sure she'd woken  
at night believing

the basement door led  
outside to another

dark & quiet morning walk  
from which she'd return

with her swallowed host

to her juice & all  
those violets



*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall*



# On the Good Ship Lollipop

by Elaine Silverstein

"And for these two cuties...Shirley Temples." The smiling Chinese waiter placed tall Tom Collins glasses decorated with frilly pink paper umbrellas before the two little girls. Charles and I had bribed our granddaughters to forego their preferred pasta with the promise of forbidden nectar at the Chinese restaurant. Their glasses were filled with ginger ale tinted a pale pink by the coveted, red maraschino cherries dropped into the bottom. A plastic straw, bent at an angle, poked out of each glass. Sophie and Hannah beamed up at the waiter, even remembering to say thank you, before attacking the treat.

"Tell me," I asked the girls, "do you know who Shirley Temple is?"

My granddaughters stared at me blankly.

"She was a very famous movie star," I explained.

"Is she a real person?" Sophie, who was six, asked. "Or is she a cartoon character?" My granddaughters lived in a world where cartoon characters seemed real and real people behaved like cartoons. It got confusing because the likenesses of both were interchangeably available on lunch boxes and backpacks.

"She was a very real person," I assured her. "When she was just your age, she was super-famous. Every mother wanted her daughter to be a Shirley Temple look-alike."

"Like Britney Spears?" Hannah, who had recently turned four and was a great fan of Britney Spears (especially admiring of, and eager to emulate, her wardrobe), asked.

"Oh, she was much more famous than Britney Spears," I told them. "She had big dimples." I used my index finger to drill a hole in my cheek, demonstrating a dimple. "And, she had curly, curly hair. Shirley's mother used to brag that she had exactly 54 curls. Can you imagine?"

"How many curls do I have?" asked Hannah,

whose dark hair was a tangle of long almost unmanageable curls.

"Maybe you should count them," her grandfather suggested without considering the consequences.

Sophie took a handful of Hannah's hair and began to count curls. Hannah wiggled away from her sister, knocking into her glass.

"Maybe this isn't a good time to be doing that," I said, reaching across the table to catch the glass just in time to prevent a meltdown. "Anyway," I continued, "her hair was blond, more like Sophie's."

The girls nodded and went back to their drinks. Clearly, my bit of movie history was only moderately interesting.

"I'll try to find one of her movies for you," I said. "You'll see for yourself." I spoke with the profound confidence of the uninformed. Despite the authority with which I had introduced the subject to my granddaughters, I had very little expertise in the films of Shirley Temple. I was more of a Margaret O'Brien person. Shirley had already reached puberty and tapped off, stage left, before I was old enough to go to the movies.

Several weeks later, Charles and I found ourselves walking past a small video store on Lexington Avenue, near Hunter College.

"I'll bet we can find Shirley Temple movies in there." Charles cupped his hands around his eyes and peered into the grimy window filled with old Humphrey Bogart posters curling at the edges. It looked like the kind of store that would stock old movies. In fact, it looked like the kind of store that had only old movies. We pressed a buzzer to be admitted.

"Sorry," the gray-haired man behind the counter apologized. "I have to keep it locked. Better safe than sorry."

Charles nodded sympathetically. "The world



just isn't like it used to be."

"You can say that again," the man, apparently the proprietor, agreed. "Even little old ladies try to rip me off."

I prowled around the shop while Charles and the proprietor clucked over the state of the world. "Do you have any Shirley Temple movies?" I finally interrupted, unable to find what I was looking for on the disorganized shelves. If there were a logic to the display, I couldn't figure it out.

"Sure." The man shuffled out from behind the counter and headed for a row of dusty shelves in a corner. "I got 'em. But, you might prefer these...." He showed me a set of three films packaged together in a yellowed cellophane wrapper: *Heidi* starring Shirley Temple, *National Velvet* with Elizabeth Taylor, and *The Wizard of Oz* starring Judy Garland.

"No. It's only Shirley Temple I'm after. Thanks."

"Well, here then." He pulled out a handful of videos in their slipcases, brushing them on the side of his pants to rub off the dust. "Just what you want: *Bright Eyes*, *Little Miss Marker*, *Heidi*, *Stand Up and Cheer*." I studied the blurbs on the back to help me make a decision. I finally selected *Bright Eyes* because the sleeve said that it was the movie in which Shirley Temple first sang "Good Ship Lollipop," and I also took *Little Miss Marker* because it was an adaptation of a Damon Runyon story.

I could hardly wait for an opportunity to share these treasures with the girls, something new and wonderful. After all, Shirley Temple was legendary. She transcended time. A drink was named after her.

"I've got a treat," I said to Sophie and Hannah the next time I was on babysitting duty.

"Remember I told you about Shirley Temple? Well, I have one of her movies." I pulled the video out of the bag to show them. We three admired the picture of the captivating, curly-haired child.

"She's so cute," Hannah said.

"Everyone in America thought so," I agreed.

The girls hurried through dinner and baths,

anxious to watch the movie. I plugged *Bright Eyes* into the player. The three of us snuggled up together under an old quilt to watch the movie.

The music swelled. The title rolled, and there she was, right in the first frame. A colorized, six-year-old Shirley Temple walking all alone alongside a highway, dressed in jaunty leather aviator's jacket and cap, her thumb stuck in the air.

"What's she doing?" Hannah asked.

"She's hitchhiking," I explained.

"What's hitchhiking?" Sophie wanted to know. We do not permit these girls to ride their bicycles around the block, nor do they cross streets without an adult holding their hand.

"Well," I said, "it's sort of asking a stranger for a ride. Something that was all right to do in the olden days, but not anymore."

"Oh," Hannah said. "We're not allowed to talk to strangers."

"Right," I agreed.

A truck stopped alongside the child. "Hello Shirley," the driver of the truck said. "Going to the airfield? Climb in. I'll give you a ride."

"Anyway," I said, "see, she knows the driver, so he isn't a stranger." This was not a comfortable conversation. "Would you like me to make some popcorn?" I asked, changing the focus. Maybe I should have previewed this movie.

We learned that Shirley had come to the airfield to visit her godfather, a pilot who hung out there with the rest of the flyboys. He was her dead father's (gone to heaven after a big crack-up) best friend. Shirley was crazy about flying and loved to hang out at the airfield too. She knew all the fellas. And they knew her.

By and by, we met Shirley's mother. She worked as a maid for a very mean couple. They had an exceptionally bratty daughter who heartlessly savaged her dolls. We watched as that mean little girl beat her doll, tore off its head, and threw it away.

Shirley discovered the discarded dolly. She kindly rescued it from the trash bin. She tenderly cradled it in her arms promising to make it well. The doll episode was witnessed by the rich, wheel-



chair-bound uncle of the mean couple. He approved of the smiley Shirley whom he called, you guessed it, "Bright Eyes." He clearly abhorred his noisy, nasty, young niece.

Meanwhile, it was Christmas. As a special treat, the godfather had arranged for Shirley to have a party at the airstrip in an airplane that would just taxi around the field. Shirley's mom would be along later. Even on Christmas day, she had dusting to do.

At the airstrip, Shirley dressed in a very short, ruffled dress with lots of chubby thighs showing, sang "On The Good Ship Lollipop" to the delight of the singing flyboy fellas who passed her from hand to hand like a sack of flour while she sparkled and sang.

Back at home, Mom, out of her maid's uniform, carrying a special cake with an airplane on top that had an inscription reading "Happy Landings, Shirley," got ready to leave the house to join the party.

"Is it her birthday?" Hannah asked.

"I'm not sure," I answered. "I think it is a special party, but not her birthday."

"Oh, then why does she have a cake with her name on it?"

"I don't know." Details were not the strong suit of the movie.

But soon we would all know why there was a cake. As Mom rushed out, she forgot to look both ways and was mowed down by a passing car. Splat. There she was, sprawled out in the street. We were permitted to see her legs stretched out. Next, there was a close-up of the ruined cake. Poor Mom!

Back at the airfield, the sad news of the mother's demise was passed on to the godfather.

It was up to him to tell the child that her mother was dead. He arranged to take Shirley up in the airplane. After all, it was her heart's desire. What a great way to soften the blow. The airplane would practically be in heaven where Mom and Dad now reside. While the two of them were flying around, he took her on his knee. Flying the big plane with a single hand on the steering wheel, he put his other

arm around Shirley, hoisting her to his lap. Then he spoke seriously to the little girl. "Shirley," he said, "your mother missed your father a lot and wanted to join him in heaven."

"Did she have a bad crack-up, too?" Shirley asked with a charming pout.

"Maybe we want to watch something else?" I asked my granddaughters.

"No, we like this," they protested.

I was flummoxed. What's with the Hayes office? What kind of movie was this? I thought this was a movie made in a simpler, kinder time. Surely, no one ever thought this was a movie suitable for children (or rational adults, for that matter). The father died in a crack-up. The mother was hit by a car and died instantly. The little girl was clutched and handled by a bunch of grown men. Then there was the rather disturbing fact that she spent an inordinate amount of time on her godfather's lap.

In the last reel, all was finally made right. Shirley got a nice new home with her godfather

and his reclaimed girlfriend (whom he will, of course, marry). They would all live happily ever after. The rich old man in the wheelchair would also live with them, as he preferred spending his money on this nice, newly created family than on his own undeserving flesh and blood.

Let us hope that the new family, with all their money, will provide little Shirley with a chauffeur so she doesn't hitchhike anymore.

When the credits went up, we headed for bed and *Goodnight Moon* or some other sweet, safe storybook.

"Will you bring us another movie next week?" Hannah begged.

"Please," her sister added.

"Okay," I reluctantly agreed, unsure whether the girls' parents would approve.

Maybe instead of *Little Miss Marker*, I should just show up with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.



# Still Life with Ant

by Susan Hazen-Hammond

The ant on the table walks across the paper  
I wrote the fifth doctor's opinion on.  
It weaves through the petals of the rose,  
climbs the crabapple, circles peach and pine cone.

The rose has no scent, the peach no fuzz.  
They are beasts in angel costume,  
roaring through my years  
with me on a leash behind them.

Could crabapples be chokecherries in drag?  
Did the wind twist these cones off the pine  
my great grandmother planted in 1904  
and fling them 30 states, 100 years, to me?

Once upon a time,  
people lived happily ever after.  
Once upon a time, I thought I would live  
happily, if not ever after.

If I had known how, I would have dreamed  
of fresh roses in a vase each morning,  
and planting my own pine.  
I would have dreamed of more  
than straining crabapple jelly  
and stirring chokecherry jam,  
but my world was as small as the paper  
that gives edges to this still life.

Why did I work as blindly as the ant  
that is struggling to tear my still life apart?  
When did roses lose their fragrance?  
When did peaches drop their fuzz?

Still life, life still.  
How long still do I have  
with this life?





I have grown as unselfed  
as the peach and the rose.  
There is pitch on my hands.  
There is pitch on my heart.

The ant falls off the edge of its world  
and finds death in the sole of a giant.



*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall*

# It Was So Sudden

by Karla Clark

And her twin brother was dead.  
A full moon lit up the morning —  
the sky hardly noticed the light.

Rain left slick on cracked  
pavement, on the roughened  
bark of the trees. And he was

dead. Downtown, in the café,  
talk was of weekends and money,  
voices hummed over tea.

In the market, mandarins  
flamed, winter greens  
breathed in their bins. Somewhere,

whales breached in their roads.  
In her meadow, the new colt stood up.  
And he was dead. An old woman

crossed in the crosswalk.  
The newspaper slapped to the porch.  
A child brought home his skinned knee.

Blood moved in her pulse points.  
And *never* turned into *always*, and a black  
bird brought twigs to a nest.



# Rosie's Leaf

by Darlene Giblett

My granddaughter picked up a crumpled autumn leaf,  
Its edges surrounded with the brown decay,  
Bronze dotted with rust,  
And in the middle, vivid scarlet  
Woven and intertwined with green.

“Look Grandma,” she said.  
“The leaf is beautiful like your hair  
With all its different colors—  
Here, you can have it—it’s a present.”  
Smiling, we proudly put the leaf in a crystal vase upon the mantle.  
I went to the salon and dyed my hair a vibrant red.



# Tea With Emily

by Lokke Heiss

It was a wet April afternoon in Elm City, and Barbara was already an hour behind schedule. Pulling into a driveway, she turned off the engine and took out her list of names and addresses. The rain came back—a few drops at first, and then with a clap of thunder, it started to sheet down. Rivulets of water jetted across the windows. The rain sounded like a thousand impatient fingers drumming against the roof of the car. Barbara was so nervous her hands were shaking, and she had to hold her paper against the steering wheel to read it. The address was correct; this was the right house. After this stop, there were still three people left to see tonight. She had to get in and out quickly. Every minute she delayed would make it that much harder to get back to Tucson in time.

When had she last seen Emily? Barbara couldn't remember. She looked at her watch. No time to wait for the rain to let up. Sticking her brochures into her purse, she took a deep breath, opened the car door, and ran to the house.

Barbara reached the shelter of the porch and pressed the doorbell. She tried to remember to be confident and not look anxious. A thin, white-haired woman answered the door. The old woman smiled and raised her arms. "Barbara! I haven't seen you in so long."

"How are you?" Barbara asked, folding into the hug. Emily was frail and felt as though she might break into pieces if Barbara squeezed too hard.

Emily pulled away and shook her arms. "My goodness, child, you're soaked."

"I'm just a little wet."

"Where's your umbrella?"

"I didn't think it was going to rain so hard."

"How'd you grow up in this town and not learn about spring thunderstorms? Come inside and I'll get you a towel."

Barbara followed her down a front hall to a parlor. It had been twenty years since she'd been

in this room. The antique organ was still sitting in the same place in the far corner. She'd been too small to reach the pedals, and Emily had pushed them for her while she'd played "Chopsticks" on the keys. An oak hutch was next to the organ. On the other side of the room, two chairs and a small table were in front of a small brick fireplace. There were family photos and other bric-a-brac on the mantle.

Emily returned with a towel. She paused at the doorway, staring at Barbara, and then came into the room. "I'm sorry, but you look so much like your mother," Emily said, giving her the towel.

Barbara patted down her face. "People say that."

"Are you sure you can't stay for dinner?"

"I'm so sorry. I really can't."

"But you'll have some cookies?"

"Of course."

"Tea or coffee?"

"Tea. Thanks."

While Barbara dried her hair, Emily made a trip to the kitchen and returned with a tray of cookies and a steaming teapot. She put them on the table in front of the fireplace and showed Barbara a small bowl of assorted tea bags. "Why don't you pick what kind of tea you want."

"It doesn't matter. Anything."

"I bought these from a specialty store. You choose."

The last thing Barbara wanted to think about was what kind of tea she was going to drink.

She pointed to the tea bag closest to her.

Emily picked up the tea bag. "Rosemary. I don't think anyone's picked that tea before. What does it taste like?"

Barbara had no idea what it tasted like. "It's hard to describe," she said.

"These special teas have quotations," Emily said. Taking a pair of reading glasses from a pocket,



she slipped them on. With some difficulty, she read, "*There's rosemary, that's for remembrance, pray you love, remember.*" She squinted. "This print is so small. Where's that from?"

"It doesn't matter. Why don't you try some?"

"I usually drink Earl Grey, but you're right, we should always try new things." Emily tore open the sealed envelope and put the bag in the pot. "I read that the only way to really enjoy tea is to use loose leaves. But when Phil and I were in England, everyone used tea bags. And we figured if it was good enough for them, it was good enough for us." After waiting a moment for the tea to steep, she poured out a cup for Barbara and put a tea cozy over the pot. "Phil bought that for me when we were in the Lake District. What a wonderful trip that was."

"It's nice. You must miss him a lot."

"Sometimes I just pretend he's in the next room puttering about," Emily said, sitting down. "It's nice to use the tea set. Don't get many guests anymore." There was a distant rumble of thunder from outside. Emily took a bite of a cookie and looked at Barbara, who hadn't touched any of her food. "Would you like some cake instead?"

Barbara picked up a cookie from the dish. "No, this is fine."

"Are you sure? I have some cake in the kitchen, if you want it. That reminds me of the Lafayette carnival. The year I was running the cakewalk? You must have been in about fifth grade."

"That's right."

"I was in charge of the cakewalk, and somehow you kept winning all the cakes. And I remember thinking, *that's odd—winning all those cakes in a row*. Then you tried to carry them all away at once, and you dropped them. Wasn't that a mess?"

"It was a long time ago."

"Wait until you get to be my age," Emily said, blowing on her tea. "I can see you trying to hold all those cakes like it just happened. But I can't remember what I did yesterday."

Barbara was too nervous to be hungry. She took a sip of her tea and pretended to nibble on a cookie. "Your memory sure seems good to me."

Emily tested the tea with her lips. "You know how much everyone in town misses your folks."

"I know."

Emily took a bigger sip, rolled her tongue. "Tastes minty to me." She settled back in her chair and stared at the pictures on the mantle. "Your dad wasn't just a judge. I mean, he was more than a judge."

"More?"

"I don't ever remember anybody being mad at him. You knew he was going to treat you fair, even if you lost."

Barbara was silent. She held her cup, thinking back to days when she sat at the back of the courthouse, kicking her heels under the polished wood bench, waiting for a session to be over.

"And your mom, she taught French at IC for how many years?" Emily asked.

"Ten."

"Wasn't she acting dean for awhile?"

"That's right. She helped out for a year."

"Phil and I were in England when the accident happened. That was a terrible thing."

The last thing Barbara needed was to think about that day. She took a breath, sipped her tea, and focused on giving the simplest answers possible.

"You know, afterward, they put up a big four-way stop there, where Highway 54 crosses 36."

"I didn't know that."

"I guess you wouldn't have had any reason to drive on that road."

"Not since I left town."

"Anyway, I think about your folks a lot. They did so much for everyone here."

"Thanks."

Emily put her cup back on the saucer. "But what about you? You told me on the phone about great things happening in Arizona."

That was lucky. Since Emily had brought it up, Barbara wouldn't have to be so obvious.

"It's really exciting. In fact, that's why I can't stay. I have to get back to the project." Barbara handed Emily a brochure she had brought in from the car. "Here's a step-by-step explanation of what



we're doing."

"It looks impressive."

"The key is how the medicine affects the tissue. See these photos? This is before the injury, and this is just two weeks after."

Emily nodded. "You wouldn't know it's the same person."

"And we were just at the most critical stage when we ran out of money. A thousand dollars more, and we can finish the project."

Emily put down the brochure. "Why can't you get any money from the drug companies? If this works as well as you say it does, I'm sure they'd be happy to help you."

This was it. Sink or swim. "That's just the problem," Barbara explained. "The idea is so simple that the moment a drug company hears about it, they'll just pull the rug out from under us. No, we have to do it on our own."

Emily nodded, then got up and went to the hutch. Opening a small drawer, she took out a checkbook. "I'm writing this for one thousand dollars. Who do I make it out to?"

Barbara had rehearsed this many times. She paused, took another sip of tea. "Our company isn't incorporated, so it's best you make it out to me. That way we won't have any delays."

Emily wrote the check with a shaky but persistent hand. "Watch me do this. I want to make sure I have the zeros right."

Barbara stood up and peered over her shoulder. "That's right. Three zeros."

Emily finished writing the check, but instead of giving it to Barbara, she walked back to the table. She took off the cozy and poured herself another cup.

"Barbara, you're not telling me the truth."

Barbara froze. "What did you say?"

Emily twirled a spoonful of sugar into the tea. "I said, 'you're not telling me the truth.'"

Barbara could grab the check and run. The door was behind her. Ten steps and she would be out of the house. But then what? One phone call



*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall*

would stop the check, and Emily might call the police. It wasn't going to work. Barbara sat down, defeated.

Emily put the cozy back on the teapot.

Barbara stared at the floor. "How did you know?"

Emily smiled. "I just know. When someone says they need a thousand, they always really need more."

Barbara's heart started to beat again. She didn't trust herself to look at Emily, so she stared down at the bowl of tea bags on the table. "You're right. We need more money."

"If you're trying to do something as big as this," Emily said, turning to face Barbara, "a thousand dollars is a drop in the bucket. I know how expensive medical supplies can be."

"We're all putting everything we have into this. But I just didn't feel right asking you for more."

Emily went back to the hutch and lifted up a



ceramic letter holder. "I've got some emergency cash."

Barbara was so surprised she could hardly talk. "Cash?"

Emily pulled out a roll of bills from under the letter holder. "Sure sounds like an emergency to me." She brought the check and cash over to Barbara.

"Just now, you looked like you did a long time ago, when you were a Brownie. You were right here in this room, and so cute in your uniform. It was something to do about a raffle...trying to get me to buy some kind of ticket. It was for something really unusual, especially for you being so young. What was it again?"

"It was...it was just one of my harebrained schemes."

"You were sure cute. That's all I can remember." Emily handed Barbara the check and the cash. "Here you go. That's all I have for now."

Barbara wrote out a receipt. "When the project takes off, we'll convert your donation into preferred stock."

Emily gave a quick little laugh. "I never did understand that stuff. Don't worry about it."

She walked Barbara to the door.

"This means a lot to me," Barbara said.

"You just look so much like your mother. Oh, I'm sorry, I already told you that."

Barbara nodded and said the last thing she had to say, "It's really important not to talk to anyone about this. For at least four weeks. This is the crucial moment."

Emily put her finger to her lips. "Mum's the word."

They walked out to the porch. It had stopped raining. "I can give you an extra umbrella."

"I'll be okay, really."

They hugged one last time.

"I hope it all works out for you," Emily said, letting go of Barbara.

Barbara got into her car, waved, and drove off.

After two blocks, she pulled over. Taking the cash from her purse, she counted the bills carefully—five hundred dollars—and a check for a thousand. If she could get back to Tucson by Sunday night, she could pull a favor from a check-cashing service and get all the checks converted into hundred-dollar bills. If the money wasn't back at work by Monday, somebody would notice, and if they did an audit, it would all be over.

Barbara felt a wave of nausea coming. Rolling down the window, she closed her eyes and took slow, deep breaths. Emily had called her out, not on the project itself, but on how much it cost.

*Had she known it was all lies, and had she decided to give me the money anyway?*

The thunderstorm had pounded all the dust into the earth. The air was absolutely clear.

Cradling her head with her arms against the car window, Barbara opened her eyes and realized she was on Webster Avenue. Just across the street was Annie Kilmer's house, or at least it used to be her house. In grade school, Barbara had been friends with Annie and had played in her bedroom.

Annie had a set of beautiful silver brushes that had belonged to her grandmother; she kept them on a table by her bed. A couple of times they'd brushed each other's hair. Barbara remembered the comforting pull of the brush as she swept the curls down and away from Annie's head.

What had happened to Annie? Where was she now? Were the brushes still by her bed? With her bad credit, and with nothing left to pawn or sell, this had all looked so easy from far away. When you were far away, they weren't people, really—just names. And this town wasn't home—it was just a place where she was from.

Barbara didn't start the car. Instead, she watched the last of the sunlight play off against a row of small, neat, wood-framed houses. The shadows crept out and took over the street as the outline of houses slowly faded into the dusk.

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# A Death Like This

by Stephen Geric

I remember thinking that a  
death like this was the best  
for which such a creature could  
hope. I remember thinking just  
that as the sun sent a pattern  
across an acre of new snow, and  
then it took every bit of will to  
ignore a pull to translate, or to  
interpret, or to somehow discover  
presence amid such absence.

I remember thinking that crows are,  
at any rate, weak creatures, prone to  
noisy congress and swift retreat.  
But when a rare afternoon sun in late  
December glances its light off a few  
black feathers that rest on glowing  
snow, it can be difficult to find your  
breath, to even claim the content of  
your lungs as your own. Breath  
that hovers for a moment and then  
goes the way of dead crows. Symbolic?  
Yes. I remember thinking that, anyway,  
symbols also appear, hover, and then go.





# Like Fog

by Gerald Zipper

Sometimes the mind ruptures  
fracturing when least expected  
divorce cropping up like a rock in the road  
a head-on car crash  
she recalls the wild journey from sweetheart days  
when breathless lovers tasted soft ripe fruit  
would she ever laugh again?  
ever feel the excitement of a shared glance?  
ever warm to the touch of caressing fingers?  
the most feared predator lurked under the skin  
playing sad tunes she began to recognize  
she practiced eating alone  
sleeping alone  
slapping on smiles for friends who could not know  
concocting grins for suitors with unsure faces  
enduring loneliness thick as fog  
searching for a pathway  
expecting miracles outside the door  
ignoring the desperation of a life slipping by.



*Photo by Michael Claveau*



# Stillborn

by Lori Levy

I gave birth last week to my latest  
poem. Squeezed out what had swelled in me and  
there it was  
naked on the page. I bent close  
as if to count its toes: twenty-five lines,  
skeleton intact,  
shape normal.  
But it didn't kick  
or suck or blink or even  
yawn. A perfect frame, yet nothing breathed.  
I turned it upside down to make it  
scream. Twisted, poked, tugged its limbs. Re-  
arranged it on its bed. Pounded on  
its chest, but could not pump a pulse  
into my poem.

I buried it and prayed  
another one would come. Soon.  
That it would belch a lusty cry,  
demand my breast, my arms.  
That it would bawl out all it knows  
of hunger, pain, desire.



# Multi-Tasking

by Wesley D. Sims

With quartz-time order the cosmos spins,  
the planets ensconced in their cycles true,  
the worlds of photons pulsing straight  
along their paths. Then wander into the men's  
room, discover chaos, your life taken  
in your hands. Is light playing tricks on you,  
or the force field warped after  
prestidigitation by multi-tasking hands?  
Does Guinness record a demise  
from asphyxiation induced by laughter?

I should have regarded the omen  
last week, the rare alignment of five  
planets all visible together, a string of white  
pearls laced across the twinkling sky.  
An amateur astronomer aimed my sight  
with talented hands—*See them rise,*  
*there and there.* I observed the jewels.

His mumbled response to the *Hi* I said  
perturbed at once the fragile cup  
of calm. A glance revealed the sudsed-up  
pearls of bicuspid. Images whizzed by.  
I saw again as a child an elder tease me  
with the challenge to rub my head  
and pat my belly simultaneously.

No cosmic arc here, a paler shade.  
Standard hygiene, with his free  
hand he brushed his teeth, while we  
aligned leg to leg, no wall made  
to separate the sparkling porcelain  
fixtures turning our trajectories.



# Ladies of the Club Revisited

by Kay Barnes

Around five o'clock on a Monday afternoon in the early spring of 2003, I'm entering the city limits of El Reno, Oklahoma on Route 66. I've passed the flat-roofed VFW Post 382, its World War II B-24 bomber perpetually on display by the roadside, an electric sign announcing karaoke on Friday evenings, and the pebbled entrance to El Reno Estates, a mobile home community.

From the crest of the viaduct that arches over a tangle of railroad tracks, I see the El Reno Cemetery off to my right and the old grain elevators straight ahead, filling the first three blocks of town on the west side of the highway.

My mother was buried in that cemetery twenty-two years ago, my father two years after her. They lie in the Catholic section, adjacent to the potter's field. On the other side of the potter's field is an area for blacks.

If you stand on the far side of the cemetery, where my parents' graves are, and look toward downtown, the grain elevators appear to be one giant, white pitch pipe. Because the Oklahoma plains are almost always windy, in a surreal moment you might expect to hear music. But there's really nothing to hear, other than the wind's hissing.

I wouldn't move back to my hometown (population 16,400) for either late-in-life love or a great deal of farmland money. Some of the latter is still around, despite the fact that El Reno is well past its salad days. Although many of the children I grew up with have settled here, some after going off to college, I have not returned to look them up. We could only reminisce about shared but trivial childhood experiences—hemming handkerchiefs together in Girl Scouts, private piano instruction with Sister Redempta in the basement of Sacred Heart Church, square dancing lessons at the Elks Club.

Loads of us took those lessons when we were in seventh and eighth grades. Boys in plaid shirts

and bolo ties, girls in angora sweaters and sequin-strewn felt skirts. (Held aloft by starched net petticoats, those skirts flared out like untethered teepees.) One of the Mrs. Jensens in town was our toe-tapping, hand-clapping teacher. She stood in the band shell at the north end of the Elks ballroom, flipped the 78-rpm records on her portable player, and called the steps. "Allemande left with your left hand, right hand to partner, and right and left grand." Her red cowboy hat looked smart over her curly black hair, and the rhinestones on the rims of her glasses sparkled under the stage lights.

The Texas Star was our favorite dance, and every class ended with it. "Dance your ladies off the floor, that's all there is, there ain't no more." We knew "ain't" wasn't proper English; hearing it from a teacher was part of the fun. Yes, square dancing lessons were really fun. I could reminisce with Jim Bass about them. I know where to find him; he's in law practice now with his father in downtown El Reno. But I'd rather look up his mother, Harralyn, one of the club ladies. The mothers of some of my childhood friends are who interest me now.

At the bottom of the bridge, at the blinking red light, the usual choice awaits me. I could make a right turn to visit my parents' graves, a left to drive by my childhood home on South Hadden Street, or I could go straight ahead on Rock Island Avenue, past the grain elevators into downtown, on the lookout for Wade Street. Nelson's Home Stay, where I've made reservations once again, will be one block to my right on Wade.

I remember them, the club ladies, as bookish women, and if there's anything I too have become in the course of sixty years, it's bookish. I've spent more years in colleges and universities—acquiring degrees in English and American literature, French, and creative writing—than I've spent using those degrees as a classroom teacher. A psychologist



might guess that I've never found my true self, but the fact is I have. And I know there is nothing that my true self would rather do than take a course in something my mother called "worthwhile," something traditional, difficult, and nearly impossible to commodify. The last course I took was in Dante, at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, when my husband and I were there to enjoy a New England fall in the early years of his retirement.

My mother, of course, is the one to blame for the penchant I cannot resist. But I didn't know this, not really, not until I looked as far as I could into her past, long after she was around to answer my questions and long after anyone in the family could answer for her. Indeed, by the time I knew what my main questions about her were, I could turn only to El Reno's recorded history and to a couple of elderly clubwomen for answers.

On the way to Nelson's bed and breakfast, the names of intersecting streets distract me: Mill, Oak, Ash, Cavanaugh. Cavanaugh, my maiden name. As a child, I assumed this street was named in honor of my father. After all, he was Exalted Ruler of the local Elks Lodge, men slapped him on the back, calling him "Doc" or "Shanty," when they met him in town, and—I was sure no one could fail to notice this—he looked like Clark Gable, only half a foot shorter.

But the street bears no connection to my family. (It was named after a military officer stationed at Fort Reno late in the nineteenth century, when the federal government was trying to keep land-hungry white men—the "Boomers"—out of the Unassigned Lands of Indian Territory.) All these streets lead to the east end of El Reno, the part of town where the leading citizens used to live, the area of big houses. One of them, Grandfather Fogg's home, has fleurs-de-lis carved into the foyer's staircase, a Juliet balcony on the second floor behind massive fluted columns, and a ballroom on the third floor. For years the Fogg property has been inhabited by only one renter who occupies a small apartment at the back. The great white-frame Southern Greek Revival house has outlived its usefulness along

with, perhaps, the means of those who own it.

At Carson I make a right turn. I know Carson will take me past the side entrance of the DeLana house. I don't remember the street name of the front entrance, but there it is—Macomb. I turn the corner and put my car in neutral in front of 800 S. Macomb, home of the former Damrosch Music Club president, Mrs. John C. DeLana.

The house is not as imposing as my fifty-year-old memory of it. It does have thick red brick pillars and dormer windows on the third floor, but the second floor has a brown-shingle façade, and the porch has a friendly prairie appeal. Even though it has nineteen rooms, it is not the style of home in which one expects to find what is noticed first upon entering it—a central staircase wide enough for bridal entrances and an enormous pipe organ in the living room.

I was in this home several times as a child, accompanying my mother to the Damrosch Music Club meetings. The ladies wore hats and gloves to these bi-monthly affairs, which were not at all like parties, and the club's choral group, to which my mother belonged, was required to sing at every meeting. Members were addressed as "Mesdames," and meetings were conducted by parliamentary procedure. In the foyer there was a crystal bowl on a curio table into which members were supposed to drop a nickel for every minute they were late.

A young family lives here now. The mother is out on the side lawn, rolling a ball to her toddler. She keeps glancing at my car, wondering, probably, who I am and why I'm scrutinizing her house.

This is my third trip back to El Reno in the last five years. Other times I've come to do research in the archives of the Carnegie Library on a few El Reno women's clubs, the Damrosch Music Club among them. I've examined their constitutions, by-laws, and membership rolls from their beginnings to 1956, the year we moved to Oklahoma City where I, my parents said, would "have a better chance." A better chance at what? A better chance than who? Those were the questions I felt but couldn't articulate in the eighth grade, when



my parents put their beloved custom-built house on the market and began spending Sunday afternoons looking for a new house in "the city."

Fifty years later, I've spent days reading minutes in hardcover books that look like accounting journals and more days squinting at crumbling brown newspaper articles on anniversary programs and club history. My time in the archives has been informative, amusing, edifying, and sometimes touching—like the moment I stumbled upon a photo of my young mother in her Red Cross uniform, white collar and cuffs, white cap like a nurse's, serving coffee and donuts to WWII soldiers in the town depot's canteen.

That photo, reproduced in the *El Reno Tribune* and in a leather-bound book on El Reno history financed by Mrs. DeLana's son, gave me a flush of pride in my mother's El Reno days—but it subsided when I discovered that the Red Cross volunteers in the picture had never been identified. Not on the reverse of the photo, not in the newspaper, not in the book. Angered by the omission of "idents," I wrote the names of the women I recognized on the photo's back, behind their figures: "Happy Farrell" and "Myrtle Cavanaugh." There.

Hours in the library, as intriguing as they've been, have failed to answer the questions that have drawn me back to El Reno half a century after my family left it, questions that have become, in the course of my research, increasingly urgent, probably because of the difficulty in answering them. I have long suspected that my mother's willingness to leave this town, her home for twenty-five years, was related to her position—or lack of position—within it. Now I want to find out why she belonged to only one of the two El Reno culture clubs she fervently admired.

Perhaps the interview I have scheduled for tomorrow will finally dislodge an explanation as simple and painless as an equation in elementary algebra. Solve for  $x$  when  $y$  is suddenly known. Perhaps.

After a night's rest at Nelson's Home Stay and an early morning walk through El Reno's four square-block downtown, I'm sitting on a navy blue velvet loveseat in the formal living room of the doyenne of the Athenaeum Club of El Reno, a literary study club formed in 1897, only eight years after the Unassigned Lands of Indian Territory were opened to non-Indian settlement. My mother would be ninety-seven this year, one year older than the state of Oklahoma. Mrs. LeVan—I address her as Mrs. LeVan, not Mary—is ninety. Neither of these two native lowans could be called pioneers, but they both moved to the young state of Oklahoma in the thirties, when they were young brides.

Mrs. Le Van's long hair is pulled back into a bun, the way it was when I was a child. It's gray now, of course, and her thick wire-rimmed glasses reveal how nearsighted she has become. (In fact, I'm sure she doesn't know how dusty her living room tabletops are.) She is dressed in a white turtleneck, a long straight burgundy skirt, and shiny, lightweight flats with Gaugin-print vamps, a visual hint that she is still conscious of style.

Athenaeum's unofficial historian lives alone in this two-story Federal-style red brick house on the east side of town. She tells me she serves on the board of the public library, which was established by the Athenaeum in 1897, in one room of the Peach Building downtown, and staffed by club members until 1903 when the town took it over, forming a board composed entirely of men. In 1904 the Carnegie Foundation provided a grant for the construction of a real library, the cream-colored two-story brick one I've been working in.

"Your mother belonged to Damrosch, and your father sang in the barbershop quartet," she recalls suddenly. "I remember them well. And you are the age of my youngest daughter."

"Yes, Ruthie and I were in Girl Scouts together," I respond, noticing a dictionary stand by the window at the south end of her living room and a big American Heritage lying open to the light.



In 1940, two years before I was born, El Reno had 10,000 residents and eleven women's clubs, only three of which were auxiliaries to men's clubs. Five of the women's clubs were devoted more to personal enrichment more than to community service, and two of those became my mother's obsessions—the Damrosch Music Club, of which she was a member, and the Athenaeum Club, of which she was not.

“Athenaeum is one of the very oldest study clubs in Oklahoma,” Mrs. LeVan says proudly, after I tell her I’ve come back to El Reno to learn about the literary club she belongs to. “But I would have to call it a listening club, rather than a study club, today. The younger women, many of them working full-time, come to the now-monthly meetings to listen to a report on a book they haven’t finished. Sometimes there’s no reading assignment at all; instead, someone from outside the club, maybe a local minister, speaks to us about a topic of general interest. In your mother’s day, on the other hand, it was a real study club.”

I know what she means. The annual courses, planned a year in advance and presented to the members in professionally printed and bound violet booklets that look like my senior prom dance card, were always extensive. In 1937, the year Mrs. LeVan was notified by the club’s corresponding secretary that she had been voted into the membership, Athenaeum read and discussed *Henry IV Part 1*, *Henry IV Part 2*, *A Comedy of Errors*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *King Lear*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, *A Winter’s Tale*, and *The Tempest*. In the spring of this Shakespeare study, the members voted unanimously to study eighteenth-century British literature the following year. In 1940-41 the program was devoted to Greek theater, and in 1941-42, a comparative study of *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, and *The Divine Comedy*.

I have read the programs, which outline the hefty courses of study and sometimes include a

bibliography for supplementary reading, with a growing sense of admiration. These women fashioned for themselves something like a college curriculum in the humanities, while their husbands, if they joined any organization at all, took part in the activities of the Chamber of Commerce, the Kiwanis Club, the American Legion Post No. 34, The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, or the El Reno Rod and Gun Club. In the twenties, some of them might have belonged to the Ku Klux Klan, for the KKK included so-called good citizens, like school superintendents and people who attended church on Sunday.

My father and his buddies, none of whom, as far as he knew, were members of the KKK, went on fishing trips together twice a year, taking pictures of each other with minnow buckets slung over their heads, and played poker and pool in the basement of the Elks Club building. With a few exceptions, they were physicians, lawyers, judges, and small businessmen. Two of them, the Fogg brothers, were Athenaeum husbands. The men I remember—the ones who sat on our front porch with my dad on summer evenings telling stories and laughing—were easy-going guys, not ambitious in any obvious way or interested in intellectual matters. So what had gotten into their wives?

“We wanted to learn, and we had long afternoons for study,” Mrs. LeVan explains. “We did our housework in the mornings, had the benefit of a maid once or twice a week, and didn’t have to chauffeur our children to organized activities in the afternoons.”

“Did you talk to your husband about Athenaeum studies?”

“If you mean was I able to teach him anything, the answer is ‘No.’ He wouldn’t have been interested,” she says, whisking the lap of her skirt with her right hand.

George LeVan, like John DeLana, was in the farm loan business. My father, a lifelong Democrat who had a hard time apprehending the good accomplished by men with capital, had nothing favorable



to say about El Reno's farm loan men, while my mother absolutely revered their wives.

I want to ask Mrs. LeVan if she remembers my mother ever being considered for membership, but she is so gracious, she is enjoying this conversation, and I've read the by-laws. I know that "all transactions of the club are strictly private." I'll have to proceed by indirection.

Even today, with twenty-five members meeting only once a month, Athenaeum seems to be a tightly-knit group, rife with blood ties, church connections, and sorority links. In the past, when meetings were held every Monday afternoon, there were years in which only eight women belonged, even though the membership rules would have allowed seven more. Today, as in the past, a woman proposed for inclusion and approved by the executive board can be blackballed in the general vote, and the names of the women who are considered but not accepted are recorded only in the memories of the members.

I've wondered if a college education was an unofficial requirement for Athenaeum membership in my mother's day. And this is a question I have no qualms about asking.

"It has never been required," Mrs. LeVan answers, frowning slightly, as if to indicate it should have been, "but many of us had some college background. There were degrees in library science, education, and home economics. I was the exception—my major was French."

In more than one way, Mary LeVan was an exception. She was the first woman in town to have her own car—a yellow roadster with a rumble seat. And she was the only member of Athenaeum to "go public" with her literary skills; for years she wrote book reviews for the *Daily Oklahoman*, an Oklahoma City newspaper with statewide distribution.

Now she revels in her good memory. "Your folks lived on the other side of town, not far from my friend Canny Funk, directly across the street from Marge and Rupert Fogg." I turn to a blank

page in my yellow legal pad. Time to home in.

"Did you know my mother at all, Mrs. LeVan?" I dislike the supplicating tone of my voice, but I can't control it.

"Not intimately. I saw your parents at the country club, at Elks Club dinner-dances, that sort of thing. But I wasn't a member of the Catholic Church."

Her assumption that only members of Sacred Heart Parish would have known my mother well surprises me. She's wrong about this, and I can prove it.

"My mother always said her closest El Reno friend was Marge Fogg. And she belonged to the First Christian Church, didn't she?"

Mrs. LeVan looks at me sharply.

"Marge was one of my dearest friends too."

For just a few moments, our eyes lock and neither of us smiles. Is she questioning my mother's assertion? Or is she just remembering Marge and missing her? I wait for her to add something commensurate with her social skills—a complimentary remark made by Marge about my mother's painting or piano playing, the dramatic anecdote about Marge grabbing a ball of twine and a pair of scissors, tools for an emergency childbirth, before rushing my mother to the hospital when premature labor pains interrupted their mahjong game. Anything that would tell me she already knew Marge and my mother were close, that it wasn't a fact Marge concealed, or that "best friendship" wasn't my mother's misreading of a merely Christian or neighborly relationship.

She looks somewhere into the middle distance, apparently waiting for me to introduce another topic.

When my parents settled in El Reno in 1933, during the Great Depression, my father was a recent dental school graduate, lucky to be employed by the U.S. Public Health Service. He was transferred from a brief stint at a leprosarium in Carville, Louisiana, to the new federal reformatory two





miles west of El Reno, where he was to establish and direct a dental clinic. Almost immediately, my parents liked the town. They found it a friendly place in which there were plenty of organizations open to new members. Within a few years, my father resigned from the Public Health Service and opened his own dental practice downtown, intending to spend the rest of his life here.

Although my mother, unable to drive, didn't get around as easily as women with cars, she eventually joined the Elks Club Auxiliary, the American Red Cross, a bridge club, the Damrosch Music Club, and the St. Ann's unit of the Sacred Heart Parish Altar Society. But it was the annual program of the Athenaeum—the little program booklets shown to her and discussed with her by Marge Fogg—that brought a spark to her eyes.

And no wonder. She had a better than average secondary school education—with courses in Latin, French, European history, ancient history, drama, and oral expression—from one of the best public schools in the country, Omaha's Central High School (attended as well by Tillie Olsen—author of "Tell Me a Riddle" and "Silences"—by Henry Fonda, by Dorothy McGuire, and by the man who invented the TV dinner for Swanson and Sons).

My mother belonged to Quill and Scroll and the Junior Classical League and was the Parliamentarian of the Student Council. She planned to go to college on an inheritance from her maternal grandmother, but, at the age of seventeen, she married the Creighton University senior who would be my father, gave birth to a son, and used her college money to pay her husband's dental school tuition.

Ten years after her highschool graduation, she was the wife of a successful professional, who was a joiner and a leader, a popular fellow. They lived in a Dutch colonial house with a living room large enough and formal enough for the women's clubs' hat-and-glove meetings. Mom had the requisite piano, interesting antiques, Limoges china, and King Edward sterling silver. On the material level,

she seemed set up for culture club membership, and her best friend belonged to Athenaeum. But the invitation never came.

"Years of reflection will not quite reveal what the requirements of membership are," wrote Southern novelist Frances Newman of a social club in Atlanta to which she belonged. "Lineage will do something, and money—not so fearfully much money—will do more, but even the two together will not do everything." A year ago, when I asked Elizabeth Cox-Wright, another elderly Athenaeum member, how she would account for her 1947 invitation to join the club, she embarked on an anecdote that, on the surface, revealed nothing.

"There was this beautiful teapot in the Red Aves pattern, English china, at Kerr's in Oklahoma City when I was a newlywed, and I coveted it," she began. "When I got the teapot, I said to myself, 'Now I'd better have someone over for tea.' I decided to invite Mother DeLana. I just loved her—she was regal, but without airs, and she loved the past. Shortly after that tea day, I received an invitation to join."

"Might this have happened before you married Morris Wright?" I asked.

"Absolutely not," she replied.

Morris Wright's aunt was a member of Athenaeum. His uncle was an El Reno banker, and Morris went into the furniture business with his cousin. The newlyweds bought a house in Mrs. DeLana's neighborhood. The young bride had only to snag the influential matriarch's attention.

Elizabeth Cox-Wright would understand Frances Newman's next sentence perfectly: "Take it all in all, a talent for being fashionable in just the right way will do more."

"Was there anything in particular that would keep a suitable woman out of Athenaeum?" I ask Mrs. LeVan.

"Why, yes," she says emphatically. "Belonging to the wrong kind of church."



Neither of the other two Athenaeum members I've talked to mentioned the importance of religious affiliation.

"Can you give me an example?"

"A Jehovah's Witness, a Nazarene, or a member of the Church of God didn't stand a chance."

"Really!" I say vaguely, doubting that she actually recalls a member of one of those churches being considered, wondering if I've been tossed a red herring.

"I think it's ridiculous, but that's the way it was and still is, to some extent. You know how, in this part of the country, people are always asking what church you belong to. Even though I'm a Presbyterian, 'Protestant' is all I'll admit."

Mrs. LeVan is shifting her weight around in her chair and shaking her head back and forth.

"In fact, what difference should it make to a study club if a potential member doesn't go to church at all?" she adds.

"If a tributary of Protestantism was a problem, what was the situation for Jews and Catholics?" I ask.

She stills herself. When our eye contact is re-established, it is intense.

"There was only one Jewish family in El Reno, the Youngheims."

"Was Mrs. Youngheim considered for membership in Athenaeum?"

"No. She wouldn't have been."

"There was a good-sized Catholic community here—enough to support a parish, an elementary school, and a small high school. Did you ever know a Catholic member?"

"One," she says, lowering the volume of her voice and holding up a finger. "Rose. She became a member the same year I did. And I felt sorry for her. She had to walk the gauntlet. They didn't really want to invite her, but they felt they had to. She was old Dr. Riley's second wife, from Milwaukee. He had been here forever, and his first wife had been a member."

"So Rose Riley had an Athenaeum legacy which was reluctantly honored," I summarized.

"Exactly."

All the way back to the library, I think about the Riley wives, their big house in the same block with the old Fogg place; I want to take a closer look at the Athenaeum program booklets from 1900 to 1930.

"Anyone desiring membership in this Club shall make formal application through the Secretary, who will duly present the name to the Association." This is Article IV, section 3 of Athenaeum's constitution in 1900. Reading the constitution closely in each of the annual programs, I discover that membership was obtained by application until 1914, when it became "only by invitation."

When I review the names of the early members, I'm struck by one—Josie Tannebaum—who belonged to Athenaeum from 1900 to 1921. I confirm my suspicion that Mrs. Sam Tannebaum was Jewish by locating her obituary in the *El Reno Tribune* microfilm. There is no place for Jews in the El Reno Cemetery, and probably in most other small-town cemeteries in central Oklahoma; they have to be buried in the Hebrew section of Fairlawn Cemetery in Oklahoma City.

The Tannebaums were pioneer residents of El Reno. Mr. Tannebaum owned a men's clothing store, a business he sold to Mr. Herman Youngheim in the early twenties. But Mrs. Tannebaum's Athenaeum membership was not passed on to Mrs. Youngheim.

I see that the first Mrs. Riley, Frances Burroughs, became a member in 1910, the year Josie Tannebaum served as club president, and was a leading member until her death in 1933. Whirling again through newspaper microfilm, I discover that burial rites for Frances Burroughs Riley were held in Sacred Heart Catholic Church. So, religious affiliation did not preclude Athenaeum membership



in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It became an issue for the first time in the early twenties.

Did the Ku Klux Klan, at the apex of its power in Oklahoma in the twenties, stir up anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic feelings that had not been problematic in the pioneer town? I remember reading in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, the journal of the Oklahoma Historical Society, a former Klansman's testimony that he was severely reprimanded for spending fifteen cents with a Greek and for associating with a Catholic friend by whose side he fought in the trenches of World War I. Men were not the only ones influenced by the Klan. A significant number of Oklahoma women joined the WKKK in the twenties to fight for law and order and a nation of "white, Protestant, 100 percent Americans." Historians maintain that the Oklahoma KKK, the most successful Klan organization in the Southwest, left a bitter legacy in the state. "People around here used to be afraid of Catholics," an elderly Damrosch Music Club member said to me in an earlier visit. "Religion never mattered in the music club, but it might have mattered in other clubs."

My mother must have been somewhat troubled by Rose Riley's acceptance into Athenaeum. "If we lived on the east side of town, things might be different," she would hypothesize dreamily, studying her face in the mirror of her dressing table. "If your father made more money, if we had a bigger house...." From the dormer in her bedroom, she watched Marge Fogg's Athenaeum friends come and go. "Get all the education you can," she would say to me as she watched.

I once asked my razor-sharp Aunt Marie, my father's sister, how she remembered my mother. "A sweet woman with good taste, musical talent, a big vocabulary, and a remarkable lack of self-confidence," she answered. Her last observation made me recall the times my mother asked me to

edit or write a thank-you note for her when I was in college. "You're an English major; you can do it much better than I can," she would say. She was neither lazy nor unskillful with written language; she simply didn't believe in her own ability to compose a graceful, error-free note.

Perhaps, as my aunt's comment and some of my memories might indicate, my mother didn't consider herself worthy of Athenaeum. If that was the case, she might have asked Marge not to present her name. Or Marge might have known that a Catholic had such a slim chance of being admitted that she never broached the subject. Or maybe Marge did submit her name, only to have it rejected by the executive board or blackballed in the at-large vote because my father was still considered a newcomer or a *parvenu*.

I'll probably never know exactly how it happened that my mother did not become an Athenaeum member. But I do know that, for her, the Athenaeum Club was the local embodiment of feminine refinement and the life of the mind, and she wanted me to take notice. "Marge is always studying something. Lois loves reading poetry. Mary LeVan reviews books for the *Times*." Members of Athenaeum were to be my models—not the mothers with seven children in our parish, the Sisters of Divine Providence who staffed my school, or the saints whose lives we were told to emulate in religion class.

The bald truth is my mother was not a really good Catholic. She went to mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, but she never got into the spirit of pre-Vatican II Catholicism. She wasn't afraid of being "worldly," and, because she had been a Protestant, she wasn't afraid of Protestants. Her conversion from Methodism was an act of mercy, not faith, intended to relieve my brother—who was baptized in the Catholic Church and enrolled in Sacred Heart School—of his worries about her salvation. She simply took "instructions," received the sacrament of Confirmation, put a statue of the Blessed Mother in an alcove at the top of our stair-



case, and joined St. Ann's unit of the parish Altar Society. When she died, St. Ann's corresponding secretary sent a sympathy card with a strange, telling note penned at the bottom: "We think she enjoyed being a member." I'd say she was a closet Presbyterian, unhappily defined and limited by her formal affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church. Only once, however, did she express her dissatisfaction to me. "I miss the Methodist hymns," she said, "and the social gatherings, the punch and cookies."

I'm left brooding: My mother's marginal membership in a church that didn't suit her might have excluded her from an organization she needed. In her time, women her age did not go to college, unless they were teachers taking supplementary education courses in summer sessions. All across the country, study clubs filled a need in women's education that was not met in any other way. If my mother had joined Athenaeum in the thirties, the self-confidence she lacked might have been acquired through the literary practices that were expected of each member—reading difficult texts, forming opinions on serious subjects and expressing them, writing papers, giving oral reports, engaging in debates and panel discussions. The programs of study in the canon of Western literature would have compensated, to some extent, for the college education she forfeited when she married. Through it all she might have found the place she was meant to occupy in the little world of El Reno or—something much better—freedom from desiring it.

The Athenaeum Club, admirable as it was in the first thirty years of its existence, became something of an irony in itself. According to its constitution, the first object of the club was "to widen the outlook" of its members, yet the members chose over and over again to admit only those women who were just like themselves. There were

years in which it seems no effort at all was made to fill vacancies created by death. As Marge Fogg's daughter, a third-generation member, once said to me, "Intimacy was at least as important as study." Athenaeum was like a family so comfortable with itself that outsiders weren't welcome. The fact that it dropped out of the Oklahoma Federation of Women's Clubs in 1918, when headquarters was urging its chapters to get involved in civic reform issues, summons up the last of Frances Newman's observations on the requisites for membership in the elite Atlanta club she satirized: "A talent for bounding one's horizon on all four sides by the club's flourishing cedars will do most."

All of the Athenaeum members were ladies of leisure, yet, according to Mary LeVan, after World War II they became "lazy," unwilling to read demanding books and prepare papers that required substantial research. "We went through a period of tacky reports," she said, "before finally deciding to hire professors from the University of Oklahoma to lecture to us." After that, it wasn't long before the Athenaeum didn't amount to much as a study club anymore. "I guess some people just like to put on a hat and gloves, and a girdle, and go to someone's house," Mrs. LeVan said. "Since I wanted the intellectual, rather than the social, I was disappointed." My mother, I imagine, would have shared Mary LeVan's disappointment in the turn Athenaeum eventually took.

One has to wonder, of course, about a connection between the decline in willingness to read Dante and the advent of television. But World War II also, and first, might have squelched the clubwomen's interest in studying the humanities. From their beginnings in the mid-19th century, women's clubs in America chose mottoes that alluded to the ennobling effects of literature. Perhaps, as a result of yet another world war, clubwomen lost faith in the salvific power of literature. After the Athenaeum Club of El Reno turned—desperately, I imagine—to those professors at the University of



Oklahoma for lectures on contemporary international problems, they never returned to a systematic study of serious literature.

The only culture club in El Reno whose original character seems to have survived the twentieth century is the Damrosch Music Club, my mother's first love. In fact, it was the rediscovery of one of their programs in my piano bench five years ago that triggered my search for the truth about my mother's position in El Reno. The little blue suedecloth booklet that fell out of an old piece of sheet music was the music club's program for 1940-41. My mother was scheduled to sing Rudolph Friml's "L'Amour, Toujours, L'Amour" with Dorothy Leidy (a Catholic and the wife of a guard at the reformatory) and Mary Ellen Mallonee (a Protestant and the co-owner of the music store where my mother bought her upright grand). Mrs. Stanley Youngheim was on the membership list, too, along with three Athenaeum members and four women who belonged to the El Reno Study Club, an organization much larger than Athenaeum whose studies were not academic and whose members did not, for the most part, live in big houses on the east side of town. Damrosch, the only performing arts club for El Reno women, was the kind of inclusive organization encouraged by the General Federation of Women's Clubs—encouraged but perhaps seldom realized. And the choral group's selections were serious. They might have chosen pieces like "Home on the Range" and "Stars Fell on Alabama," but their charter was "to create through study and execution a greater appreciation of the works of the master composers and musicians."

Although membership in Damrosch has dwindled from sixty-five to twenty, the club continues to meet once a week, and the leader of its chorus for many years has been a black woman, Helen Miner, a teacher at El Reno High School. A poet friend of mine whose daughter works in theater, whose son is a jazz musician, points out to me: "It's always the performing arts that unite people."

The Athenaeum is still considered exclusive. Who belongs? "The same families," one of the town librarians divulged cheerfully. "You might not recognize them through their married names, but for the most part, it's chapter three and four of the same story." Some of the members, like Elizabeth Cox-Wright, are a bit ashamed of its exclusivity. "It's the status thing," she admitted to me. "Because I'm a strong Christian, exclusivity makes me uncomfortable. But I've been a member for more than half a century."

Two years after my meeting with Mary LeVan, when I return to El Reno to visit my parents' graves, I find out that she has passed on. "Mrs. LeVan was a member of the library board for forty years," the head librarian says. "We miss her a lot."

I, too, am conscious of a surprising sense of personal loss that leads me to ask myself for the first time what our conversation really meant to me. It was more than a successful interview, dozens of which I have had as a feature writer for weekly newspapers, all of them marked by a sense of mission accomplished, all the necessary information gleaned.

We faced a difficult issue together and threaded our way through it, diplomatically and truthfully. Not a woman who smiled easily, she was smiling warmly when I left her, inviting me to come back anytime or call her if I had additional questions. I felt that we parted as possible friends.

Yes, I made a connection that my mother couldn't have. But it wasn't a sense of doing better than my mother that I found so fulfilling. Did I make that connection as her ambassador? No, there was not that much distance between us.

My mother and I made that visit together; there were three of us in the room. In that strange encounter, both in and outside of time, the most significant introduction that occurred was between two clubwomen.

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# Cash Entry Silver Mine

by Stephen Lefebure

Cerrillos manages to disavow  
The present, as does any good retreat.  
In the little hills north of this town  
(Considered for the capitol, but now  
Used in films like *Young Guns* for the street  
Where heroes strafe the opposition down)  
I found the ruins of this mine, somehow  
Collapsed and yet improbably complete.  
Its colors faded to a khaki brown  
But nonetheless a stage which might allow  
The past to rise and silently repeat  
The labors which had given it renown.

Examine any object from the late  
Nineteenth century—perhaps a pen  
Or rocking horse. However made, it will  
Seem inseparable from its date,  
Impossible for any time but then.  
Yet here, as if that age were with us still.  
Will the things that we use also wait  
A century until the hour when  
They too become significant, until  
Someone like me appears and must debate  
Leaving them intact, or, as may happen,  
Abstracting them away from some gray hill?

Those who toil with things, and know them better,  
Those who keep the seasons of the year  
Like a set of friends whom they could never  
Lose, and take the dry years with the wetter,  
Those who had these objects to hold near  
At end of day, at morning, or whenever—  
Perhaps one miner here who was a debtor,  
And drank, perchance, at times to calm his fear,  
Gave this rocking horse, to have forever,  
To his child, while mother knit a sweater—  
People like the folks who labored here  
Are wiser than we are, who are more clever.



In the things we cherished and neglected,  
In all those tools and toys which we thought fit  
To love and then discard, transfer or hide,  
Was there not some truth that we respected,  
In each pick and shovel, in the knit  
Sweater, in the toy we used to ride,  
Was there not some reason we collected  
More than need would probably admit—  
Was there not some secret held inside?  
In everything we handled, we detected  
Worlds inside of worlds, an infinite  
Series where our lives were multiplied.



*Photo by Kevin Bauman*

I came here twenty years ago and found  
These structures and a large retaining wall.  
Today the homes have vanished, and the shaft  
Is covered, an abyss locked in the ground.  
A pebble tossed inside of it would fall  
Forever, I remember, and I laughed  
Nervously when it produced a sound.  
It felt impertinent for me to call  
Down, and when I did a sudden waft  
Of ancient air arose from those profound  
Depths, as if they knew to answer all  
Questions with an aromatic draft.



# Hera's Laughter

by Linda Giacometti

When Zeus hurled bolts from heaven,  
I tried to catch them with the cyclop lens  
On my 5 megapixel digital Canon.  
Acheron cried barrels of tears  
While Hera grumbled with laughter  
At my futile attempts  
To trap time in a freeze-frame.

Never one to give in easily,  
I persevered,  
Snapping shot after worthless shot.  
As blue spears splayed  
Across the murky sky once more,  
Time paused on my L.C.D.

Who's laughing now, Hera?



*Photo by Linda Giacometti*



# Never Chant

by Gay Baines

Never chant in the forest.  
They will call you mad,  
whistle to each other  
of your strangeness.

They know feather songs,  
the plunge of rain,  
the cries of fawns  
trapped in spring flood.

They know the stench of humankind,  
the roar & bite of the screw.  
Left on their own, trees outlive us,  
know us as leaners, sitters,

swingers, carvers.  
They expect harmony  
from geese, or they keep  
memory on their leaves,

store data in the hollow  
grub-rich coffins of their fallen.  
If you chant among them,  
they will know you've

capitulated,  
and will rustle  
closer to each other  
to draw you in.



# Advice for an Unborn Son

by Kenneth Baron

I've seen many swans in my life  
but I've never seen one dive.  
Does it really throw its wings out,  
chest puffed to proud, give a little  
hey-watch-this cry to its cousin  
and best girl, before plunging—  
a perfect 10—to a splashless splash?

I've noted this about trees:  
It can take 10 years to grow one  
but a slick 10 seconds to cut one down.

I've wondered about choices not made  
and imagined that, somewhere, there's  
a version of me and your mother  
living another life, if only we didn't zig  
when we should have cut and run.

Why swans, son? Why the sappy patter  
of a tree hugger? And why oh why the belly-  
gazing moan of what might have been?

Because swans, trees and mistakes  
matter. Because knowledge negates  
failure. Because everything can be changed.

Where there is hope, there is an audience.  
That's a fancy way to say, son, that no man  
is an island. Though some—the best perhaps—  
are peninsulas. Independent, far-reaching, yet  
still part of a whole. They are a place  
where roads go.



People used to believe the world was flat.  
It may as well be, so few journey toward its edge.  
I have spent too many days ashore, too many nights  
possumed in my hole. I have crumbed my trail.  
But I appraise what's done with a jeweler's eye.  
I can undo.

Don't think it's too late. Don't fail  
to notice the talent of trees. And don't ever  
be afraid to splash. Just dip your right wing  
into the wind, put your nose down;  
dive, my son.



*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall*



# The Way Station

by Sean C. Hayden

*Lub dub, lub dub, lub dub, lub dub.* That's my heartbeat, he thought. That's the sound of the blood in my arteries, echoing in my eardrums. Goose bumps prickled the back of his neck as the sweat he'd accumulated while climbing over the fence evaporated in the cold night air. I feel alive, Chris thought, I feel so frickin' alive. The sad truth was that he felt more alive in that moment, clinging to the outside of the suicide-prevention fence at the apex of the George Washington Bridge, ready to hurl himself backwards into the endless night, than he had at any time over the past ten years. That was the Catch-22.

It's not an uncommon phenomenon. The family and friends of the chronically suicidal will often report a complete turnaround in mood and demeanor during the days before an actual suicide. So much so that those who witnessed it would believe the person to be on the mend and no longer at risk. There is something about the feeling of control that comes with having finally made a decision that invigorates the suicidal and lightens their normally bleak outlook. That paradox of emotion, that life-affirming feeling of self-determination, has caused many would-be suicides to pause in the crucial moment and rethink their course.

Christopher Manning, now fraught with that same internal conflict, hung in the frigid wind, clinging with numb fingers to the outside of a fence 220 feet above the Hudson River's black icy water. He'd hung there long enough for a passing motorist to see him and call 911. Long enough for the fire and police departments to arrive. Long enough for the bridge to be closed down. In truth, he was beginning to feel like an ass. How much money, he wondered, is the City of New York spending on me right now? Two paramedics were standing on the bridge on the opposite side of the fence, trying to reach through and fasten a safety line to his belt.

"Don't touch me, or I'll jump," Christopher

told the young paramedics. "I mean it, guys: back off."

Chris was surprised at how young they were. Neither one of them looked as though he'd been shaving for more than a few years. They seemed like nice kids, with kind honest faces, and Chris felt bad about bothering them. These poor saps have better things to do than hang around on this bridge in the freezing cold, he thought. What if there's a fire somewhere and these guys are tied up here with me? That giddy feeling of self-determination was beginning to wane, and Chris suddenly remembered all the reasons he'd wanted to die in the first place. Enough is enough, he said to himself, I'm going. But just as he bent his knees and prepared to leap backward into the rushing wind, another thought occurred to him. What if these guys feel like it's their fault? What if they blame themselves and can't work anymore due to the emotional trauma?

"This isn't your fault," Chris yelled to the young paramedics and hurled himself into the night. The first thing Chris noticed was how overwhelming the roar of the wind became. All other sounds were instantly drowned in the totality of its voice. The second thing he noticed was that minute details now jumped out with amazing clarity. He saw a single bead of sweat standing out, defying the cold, on the brow of the younger paramedic, saw the flashing red lights from the fire truck, captured and refracted in that tiny, salty jewel. He saw himself reflected in the paramedic's eye, saw his body growing smaller and receding into the dark pupil, even as the paramedic's face grew smaller and receded from his vision.

It's true what they say, he had time to think; in the moment before death, you have time to think about your entire life. Falling, spinning through space, he watched his life spread out before him in a panoramic vista. The preeminent themes were



failure, selfish behavior, and weakness of character. It was difficult to put his finger on where it had all gone wrong. There he was as a little boy, happy and confident, and there he was as a junkie who had in some way betrayed everyone he'd ever been close to. He could see no tipping point, no rapid downward spiral, just a long series of bad choices.

When Christopher Manning's body broke the surface of the Hudson River, he actually felt himself bounce, felt his body rising up a full twelve inches above the water before falling again and disappearing beneath the choppy waves. In that moment, between water and air, life and death, New York and New Jersey, Chris remembered a certain fish he'd seen 23 years before.

When Chris was just a boy, before his life had begun its slow decay, he'd been fishing with his father. They were in a rowboat on a lake somewhere in New Hampshire. His father had reeled in a smallish bass and removed the barbed steel hook. They would scale and gut the fish right in the boat and pack them in a big red cooler under crushed ice. That was how you got the freshest filets. Before gutting a fish, his father would hold it by the tail and whack it once, quick and strong, against

the side of the boat. As Christopher's father tried to slap the life from this particular fish, however, he lost hold, and the fish flipped into the air after striking the boat's side. Chris saw the fish rising, saw it silhouetted against the blue morning sky, saw it catch the morning sunshine on its silvery scales as it fell back to the lake from which it had been hauled. It did not flap the way a live fish will flap upon the floor of a boat. It was more of a stunned, stiff vibration, the way a diving board snaps and quivers when a diver has leapt from its end. Chris watched the fish shudder and twitch as it sank head first, spiraling downward, stunned and dying, struggling to right itself, and disappeared in the murky lake.

Chris saw that fish now, as he sank head first through the cold black water. "There's no such thing as a free lunch," the fish said, still twitching and vibrating, holding Christopher with its round unblinking eye. "I guess I should have thought of that when I went for that fat worm of yours."

The darkness eventually gave way to a gray, dreary light, and Chris found himself standing on his feet. He was standing in some sort of room, dimly lit and crammed tight with people. Warm



*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall*



bodies pushed against his own from every direction. Caught in the slow, jostling, forward momentum of the crowd, Chris shuffled along, still unable to see his surroundings clearly. It was humid, the air stagnant, and people were sweating. His first coherent thought after hitting the Hudson was: This place smells worse than a packed subway car in August. The crowd continued trudging slowly forward. As his eyes grew accustomed to the light, Chris reasoned that he was walking in some sort of queue. Looking up, he saw a sign that said, "Customs and Immigration Terminal."

Christopher grew nervous. Where the hell am I? he wondered, the word *Hell* suddenly ringing in his ears. Looking about himself he scrutinized, curiously, the faces surrounding him. There were people wearing strange-colored robes, some in business suits, and still others completely naked. To his left, a tiny man in a grass skirt, who looked as though he'd just stepped out of a Bolivian rainforest, whittled a stick with a bone knife. To his right, a man in an Arabian headdress distractedly stroked his bushy black beard with one hand. There was a fat woman in front of him in some sort of African dress, who smelled as though she hadn't bathed in weeks. Everyone shuffled along in silence. They all seemed to be used to waiting in long, crowded, slow-moving lines. Chris, however, was not. He was beginning to feel claustrophobic. He was about to ask the Arab if he knew where they were headed when he suddenly found himself at the end of the line.

In front of him now loomed a large wooden desk, behind which sat a man dressed exactly like the Customs and Immigration officers at JFK Airport. There was an empty chair in front of the desk, and the officer was motioning for Chris to sit down. Not sure what else to do, he took a seat.

"Religion?" the officer said without introduction.

"I'm sorry?" Chris asked, taken aback by his abruptness.

"Your religion, please."

"Oh, right. Well, I guess I don't really have one."

"Ah," the immigration officer said with a heavy sigh, "one of those." He riffled under his desk for a moment, muttering beneath his breath, withdrew a pink form and placed it on the table between them. Chris stared at the pink paper, baffled, not actually reading the words, just looking at the document and trying to make some sense of the situation, when the officer handed him a pen, saying, "You'll have to pick one."

The document contained a list of words arranged alphabetically. Chris scanned the list: Animism, Baalism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism....

"Just check the box to the right of your chosen religion and sign the bottom, please," the officer said, looking more and more annoyed as the minutes passed. "As you can see, there's quite a few folks behind you. We really haven't got all day."

"But I don't know much about them. I don't think I'm ready to choose right now. Couldn't I have more time to consider?"

"You've had thirty-four years to consider, Mr. Manning. Now check a box and sign the bottom."

"Well," Chris said, "I guess I've always thought Buddhism sounded nice...peaceful or something. Do you think that's a good one?" The officer answered the question with a cold hard stare, slowly grinding his teeth.

Holding his breath, Chris looked down at the pink form, paused for a moment, then checked off the box to the right of the word "Buddhism," and signed his name at the bottom.

"Excellent," the officer said, smiling. "Through the doors, please." He cocked his thumb at a pair of black double doors behind him. Chris stood on legs that felt like they were made of Jell-o, and walked slowly around the big wooden desk. He glanced back several times at the long line of people, among whom he'd so recently waited in anticipation. No one seemed interested in him. They stood with



bored, tired expressions on their faces, shifting their weight from foot to foot, yawning, staring up at the ceiling with its flickering fluorescent lights, or down at their shoes, if they were wearing shoes; many were barefoot. As he reached the rear of the desk and stood behind the officer's back and before the ominous black doors with their gleaming stainless steel push bars, he heard the officer say, "Next" in his brash monotone.

Christopher Manning pushed through the double door of fate, and into the blinding light.

Squinting through the white glare, Chris saw only shapes and streaks of color. When he was at last able to open his eyes fully and without pain, he found himself standing in the middle of a lush green meadow, with a cloudless rolling blue sky above him. Wildflowers grew in thick tangles around his feet, and dotted the field with splashes of yellow and red. Several small trees, bursting with snow-white blossoms, broke the horizon. The air was scented and sweet and Chris felt all of his fear and apprehension evaporate. There was no sign of the black doors or the humid and overcrowded Customs and Immigration Terminal through which he had passed.

Not far ahead of him, seeming alien in the present surroundings, he saw another desk, behind which sat two elderly Asian men dressed in the traditional red and yellow robes of the Buddhist monk. The monks smiled calmly, apparently waiting for him to approach, but unlike the immigration officer, they did not appear impatient. Chris walked through the soft, knee-high grass. He stopped a few feet from the desk. This time there was no chair.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Manning," the monks said simultaneously. Their faces were tanned and wrinkled, but despite their advanced age, the two men seemed to radiate a kind of youthful vitality. Chris was suddenly sure that he'd made the right choice when he'd filled out the pink form for the immigration officer. He quickly decided that he wanted to be just like these men, to have the same inner peace they seemed to possess, to be imbued

with the same serenity. Chris smiled broadly and asked, "Is this heaven?" hopeful the answer would be yes. Spending eternity lazing in the sweet air of this meadow, Chris thought, under the benevolent gaze of these tranquil monks, would be no bad thing.

"No," the monks answered in perfect unison. "This is nowhere. This is a way station only. This is in between."

"Are you going to take me to heaven?" Chris asked, still hopeful. If this is just the way station, he thought, heaven must really be something.

"You are a long way from completion, Christopher Manning, a long way indeed. You must continue the process of birth, death, and rebirth. But don't be afraid: when you are ready, you will shed the cycle of rebirth permanently, just as surely as you temporarily shed your mortal coil when you struck the icy water beneath the George Washington Bridge." Chris wasn't exactly sure what they meant, but his hopes began to flag. The way they said the exact same thing at the exact same time was kind of creepy. He couldn't decide which one he should be looking at when they spoke to him, or which one to address when he spoke to them.

"I'm not sure that I'm following you," Chris said, directing half of his comment to one of them and half to the other.

"We're talking about reincarnation, Christopher. You're going to be born again."

"Born again?"

"Yes, born again."

Chris hadn't considered this. Perhaps he had chosen the wrong religion after all. Would they send him back as a rat or something? Then again, maybe this could work out okay, maybe in his next life he'd be a movie star or the president. It all seemed like a big risk. He'd really been enjoying the idea of lounging around in the meadow.

"Do I have to? Couldn't I just stay here?"

"Christopher," the monks said slowly, patiently, serenely, and in eerie unison. "You have so much to learn. You couldn't possibly cross over now.



You're going to be reborn as a girl who loses her pet cat to cancer. The pain of that loss will inspire you to become a veterinarian, where you must learn important lessons in compassion which have thus far eluded you."

"But this isn't fair," Chris said. "That guy in the Immigration Office didn't tell me anything about this."

"Karma and Dharma exist outside the realm of fair and unfair. It is the order of the universe. It's like physics. Would you say it's unfair for water to boil, under standard conditions, at two hundred twelve degrees Fahrenheit, and freeze at thirty-two, rather than vice-versa? Would you say it's unfair that the rate of acceleration for objects falling from the George Washington Bridge is thirty-two feet per second-per second? This is not a question of fairness, Mr. Manning."

"Can I change religions then? I'd really rather live forever in paradise. The Moslems have something like that, don't they? With virgins and everything."

"I'm afraid it's too late, Mr. Manning, but you are free to choose a different religion during your next life."

The monks began to chant. They sang in deep throaty tones, their syllables bouncing, rising and falling in soft playful rhythms. A deep sleepiness stole over Christopher. He watched the monks, just

barely aware of what they had been talking about only moments before. Their lips moved in perfect syncopation, but their songs were completely different, yet somehow interdependent.

Fat bumblebees tumbled and rose about his head, their thick lazy buzz mingling with the far-off chirping of birds. Sunshine warmed his skin and the grass seemed to be growing softer beneath his feet. Christopher felt himself sinking to his knees, his eyes growing heavier and heavier. The monk's lilting chant carried him down.

The rhythmic chant gave way to a new sound. Something deep and primal and comforting. He felt at once both wrapped tight, as though swaddled, and infinite, flowing and weightless. The sound was like a temple drum, like a marching column, like a beating heart. Yes, a heartbeat. I'm in the womb, he thought, I'm going to be born again. But even as understanding came, he felt it slipping away. Memory and language began to evaporate like dew drops in the morning sun. For a moment, he struggled against it, fought the fleeting sensation of un-becoming, his sense of self flickering, and then...and then there was only the sound. Constant, warm, protecting, and total. The sound was everything, the sound was the universe. *Lub dub, lub dub, lub dub, lub dub.*

\*\*\*\*





# Sheriff Dennehy Makes His Intentions Plain to the Widow Burden

by Robert Cooperman

I'm a plain-spoken man, Lavinia,  
and a widow out here alone,  
has but three choices:  
move back to her kin, agree  
to the unthinkable, or remarry.  
Your family's passed on,  
and Miss Jezebel's establishment  
ain't for a minister's widow.

Reverend didn't leave you  
Comfortable, though I'll not soil  
his memory, some accusing  
he had a wandering eye,  
and then some.

I could kneel and spout poetry,  
like that murderer Sprockett,  
who, I'll bet knows more  
about Reverend's death  
than even I could get out of him.  
But poetry's not my honest  
way of courting.

Like I said, I'm not given  
to Shakespeare-speeches,  
just to saying  
what's in my heart,  
and my heart's calling to you.



# Lavinia Burden Replies to Sheriff Dennehy's Proposal of Marriage

by Robert Cooperman

Dear Sheriff,  
you flatter me greatly,  
but my husband's passing  
is still too recent and raw  
for me to entertain  
a second marriage.

I can't say  
what my plans are,  
that Reverend Burden  
leaving me not  
quite so secure  
as I'd been led  
to believe:  
which you were kind  
enough to point out.  
And my family  
does reap the rewards  
of their righteous lives,  
as we all hope to.

Life's so precarious—  
witness my late husband's  
fall—that I believe  
I shall lose my mind  
to be deprived again;  
and worry for my safety  
might distract you  
in a situation calling  
for your panther reflexes.

Dear Sheriff Dennehy,  
were I to enter  
the blessed state again,  
I'll consider your suit  
with all seriousness.  
but for now,  
I can only offer thanks  
for this great honor:  
you, Gold Creek's  
one indispensable citizen.



# The Widow Burden, After Rejecting Sheriff Dennehy's Suit

by Robert Cooperman

My refusal tiptoed through  
a nest of rattlesnakes.  
he's Sheriff, after all,  
and he can make my sojourn here  
a hell of trumped-up charges.

I fought my gorge when he trod  
my plank floor like a buccaneer,  
and spat an albatross of tobacco,  
before launching his soliloquy.

And when he mentioned  
John Sprockett, I feared  
he'd discovered that good man  
of violence had killed my husband  
and given me the pouch  
I buried under one floorboard  
that creaked my guilt  
whenever Sheriff's boot  
struck it like a flint.

Oh, to be with William  
in the wilderness  
and damn the consequences  
of forsaking my civilized life,  
but at least clear  
of this great filthy teat of gold  
that prospectors suck at  
with the greed of piglets.



# Sheriff Dennehy, After His Rebuffed Proposal

by Robert Cooperman

She didn't say "No" outright,  
though I'll be damned  
if I know what she did say  
through all her flattery,  
like words was fine whiskey.  
She'll come around,  
her tiny inheritance'll  
run out fast, 'specially  
if me and Banker van Gelder  
come to an understanding.

I've done it with whores,  
with Ute squaws I had to punch  
before they'd squirm  
feisty as ferrets,  
and with that China doll  
that cries before,  
during, and after;  
but something about Lavinia—  
hair like an aspen  
filled with autumn—  
drives me to beg  
for a church wedding.

Preacher was a fool  
to take up with a hussy;  
lucky for me he took  
a careless step or got help;  
don't matter, 'cept folks  
is restless for an exaltation.

When Lavinia says "Yes,"  
I'll know the difference  
between grizzly-rough  
and dove-gentle.



# The Widow Burden, Caught in a Quandry

by Robert Cooperman

I pray for a path  
through this labyrinth:  
whether to tell William  
that my heart sings  
whenever I close my eyes  
and see his face,  
speak his name;  
or to board the Denver stage,  
take the eastbound,  
and live on the pouch of gold  
Mr. Sprockett gave me:  
resigned to my heart  
drying up like leaves  
in an autumn wind.

The former soars my veins  
with terror and delight;  
the latter, dull reason:  
what life can I expect  
with a half-wild man  
who haunts the forests,  
hates his white side  
even more than he does  
the Indian, suffering  
abuse from both camps.

Last night, while I cried  
over Thomas' cruelty  
in life and death,  
William appeared,  
lay beside me, whispered,  
"Live wild with me."

"I must think," I moaned,  
not sure if he were man  
or phantom,  
my cold arms not caring.

## To be continued in future issues

These poems are part of a collection entitled *The Widow's Burden*.

Purchase information may be obtained from Western Reflections Publishing Co., P.O. Box 1647, Montrose, CO 81402-1647.



# When March Arrived

by Georgia Ressmeyer

She did not roar or bleat or otherwise  
announce herself. She came in wisps of fog  
and then, as if embarrassed by her dress—  
flimsy, spectral, too loose—haunted the woods  
behind my house, would not approach the door.  
No match for trees, she broke in two at each  
collision with a beech or maple trunk,  
then paused to rearrange her limbs and smooth  
her tangled skirt, shake out her cloud-like hair.  
She seemed confused, unable to recall  
just why she'd come and if she had agreed  
to do some urgent task or play a role.  
Fearing to scare her off, I did not move  
but stood behind my windows and observed.

February, already having lagged  
an extra day to give poor muddled March  
a chance to clear her thoughts, hid in the shed,  
would not depart until March gathered all  
her wisps, tucked in her blouse and swept across  
the yard with such resolve we could not doubt  
that she would stay a month. By afternoon  
she'd nerved herself to act and sidled close,  
squeezing the moisture from her skirt onto  
the withered grass. Once she got started, tears  
she had contained eleven months sluiced out,  
dissolving snow and soddening the earth.  
March could not sense, through all that soggianness,  
how pleased we were she'd come to water us.



# April, May, June

by Ann Levison

Some years shy Spring comes tiptoe down the hill,  
shielding a sputtering ember in her hand—  
here she drops a crocus, here a daffodil,  
tiny beacons lighting a world still bland  
as rain. Other years, a bolder sprite,  
she bounds across the frozen fields with hair  
all full of light, sparks of gold forsythia  
like Roman candles exploding in midair—  
or maybe never comes at all, but dozes  
in gray forgetfulness till June bursts out  
in full array, iris, lilies, roses  
born all at once while she sleeps the days away—  
then wakes, alarmed, all flushed with summer's heat,  
and vines and branches curling round her feet.



## Contributors

**Gay Baines** lives in East Aurora, New York. She is a member of the Roycroft Wordsmiths. Her poems, essays, and short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in a number of journals, such as *Confluence*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Whiskey Island*, *Eclipse*, *Lumina*, *Xanadu*, and others.

After returning from Vietnam, **Barry Ballard** took up formal study at Texas Christian University in the fields of Religion and Philosophy for the essential reason of reclaiming his humanity. His poetry has most recently appeared in *The Connecticut Review*, *The Apalachee Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, and *Phoebe*.

**Kay Barnes**, author of *Mortal Means*, a book of poetry short-listed for the PEN Southwest Book Award in 2005, was raised in El Reno and Oklahoma City. She now lives in Dallas where she teaches poetry in the Highland Park Independent School District.

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**Karla Clark** lives and works in northern California. She is a practicing psychotherapist who writes articles on professional concerns. Her poetry has appeared in various journals, including *Carquinez Review*, *Epicenter*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Runes*, and *The South Carolina Review*. She has also produced a chapbook, *What Made Moon*.

**Christine Chen** is a family physician who lives and works in New Jersey. Her poems and stories have appeared in *My Legacy and Perspectives: The Journal of the New Jersey Academy of Family Physicians*.

**Robert Cooperman's** third collection, *The Widow's Burden*, is available from Western Reflections Publishing Co., P.O. Box 1647, Montrose, CO 81402-1647. His work has appeared in *The Centennial Review*, *Cimarron Review*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*. His first book, *In the Household of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, was published by the University Press of Florida.

As a non-traditional student of English, **Linda Giacometti** presides over the English Club / Sigma Tau Delta Chapter at SWOSU. Her work has appeared in *Heartbeat* (Frederick, Oklahoma), and several of her pieces have

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**Stephen Germic** is the author of *American Green* (Lexington Books) and *The Uses of Nature*. He has written on a wide variety of American cultural and literary topics and has taught at several universities, including Michigan State, Wayne State, and James Madison. Having recently escaped the academy, he lives with his wife and daughter in Virginia and Michigan.

**Darlene Gible** has written poetry since early childhood. She carries her enthusiasm for poetry to taking care of her children and ten grandchildren, ranging in age from two to fifteen. She is presently writing a children's book.

**Nicole Hardy** is a graduate of the Bennington College Writing Seminars. Her poetry has most recently appeared in *Margie*, *SAM*, *Switched on Gutenberg*, *The DMQ Review*, and *Spillway*.

**Carol Hattrup's** work has appeared in *The Journal of the Society for Philosophy in the Contemporary World* and *The Journal of Ethics and Information Technology*. She holds degrees in geography and education, and she is working full time as a mom raising an active one-year-old boy.

**Sean C. Hayden** works as a registered nurse at the Boston Medical Center. He has been writing most of his life, believing it to be a creative outlet. His work is forthcoming in *The Griffin*.

**Susan Hazen-Hammond** is the author of nine books, including *Thunder Bear and Ko* and *Spider Woman's Web*, both published by Penguin Putnam. She writes poetry in Spanish for *La Herencia del Norte*, and in English her poetry has appeared in a variety of journals: *Confrontation*, *Porcupine*, *Kalliope*, *RiverSedge*, *Slant*, and others.

**Lokke Heiss** is a family practice physician currently working for the University of Missouri in the Student Health Clinic. He is a Dracula scholar who has been quoted in the *New York Times* regarding research into vampire legends. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Epicenter*, *Heartlands Today*, *The University of Illinois Medical Journal*, and *Cinefantastique* magazine.





**Megan Jones** of Oregon looks forward to becoming a high school math teacher. She has also taken an interest in writing poetry and short fiction. Her poetry has appeared in *Free Focus*, *Epicenter*, *Diner*, *In Other Words*, and *Poetry Motel*.

**Stephen Lefebure** writes poetry and lives in Evergreen, Colorado.

**Ann Levison** was the editor of the *Harvard Post*, an independent weekly, for twenty-five years, where she wrote news articles, feature articles, humor columns, profiles, reviews, and opinions. Not until retiring did she undertake the craft of poetry—a change that has proved to be as gratifying to her as it was unexpected.

**Lori Levy** was born in New Jersey, grew up in Vermont, and lived in Israel for sixteen years. She lives now in Los Angeles. She is married and has three adult children. Her poems have appeared in *Lullwater Review*, *Portland Review*, *Rattle*, *MacGuffin*, *International Poetry Review*, *The Comstock Review*, and other journals.

**Bonnie Lyons** has published a full-length book of poetry (*In Other Words*, Pecan Grove 2004) and two chapbooks (*Hineni 2003* and *Meanwhile 2005*, Finishing Line Press). Individual poems have appeared in more than two dozen poetry journals, and she has published articles, essays, and interviews in various journals, including *The Paris Review* and *Contemporary Literature*. She is an English Professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

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**Cass McGovern** holds an M.A. and Ph.D. in counseling, her dissertation centering on assertiveness training with an emphasis on bibliotherapy. In 1991 she won a grant to study illuminations at Oxford with other librarians from America and England. While on sabbatical in 2000, she was able to peruse illuminated manuscripts in five European countries and in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

**Judith Neuman** was born in Chicago on the cusp of the Depression. Following her artistic bent she attended the University of Colorado, graduating with honors in interior design and general studies. She enjoys travel,

grandparenting, and gardening. Her poetry has appeared in *Seeding the Snow*, a journal of women's writing.

Born and raised on Long Island, **Georgia Ressmeyer** has spent most of her adult life in Wisconsin, working as an attorney for individuals with mental disabilities. The beaches, dunes, woods, and prairies of her adopted state inspire the nature imagery of her poetry. Her work has appeared in *Five Petal Blossom* and *The Lyric*. Her short novel, *Bernice: A Comedy of Letters*, was published by Metis Press in 1984.

**Daniel R. Schwarz** is the Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellow at Cornell University. His major field is the British novel with a strong focus on works from the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He has published numerous scholarly articles and several books. Recent books include *Reading the Modern British and Irish Novel 1890-1930* (Blackwell 2005), *Broadway Boogie Woogie: Damon Runyon and the Making of New York City Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan 2003), and *Reading Conrad* (University of Missouri Press 2001). His poems have appeared in *Ithaca Times*, *Westview*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Rattle*, *The Hawaii Pacific Review*, and others.

**Elaine Silverstein** is the co-founder and co-chairman of Beber-Silverstein Group, one of the largest woman-owned, privately held advertising agencies in America, whose clients include the National Organization for Women. Her work is forthcoming in *Jewish Women's Literary Journal* and *Palo Alto Review*.

**Wesley Sims**'s work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Carquinez Poetry Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *Crucible*, *Eclipse*, *The Griffin*, *G.W. Review*, and *Migrants and Stowaways: an Anthology of Journeys*. He lives in Oak Ridge, Tennessee with his wife and two sons. His hobbies include genealogy, camping, and photography.

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**Gerald Zipper**'s poetry appears in over 200 publications in the U.S. and Canada. A collection of his poetry, *Wounded Hopes*, was published by Rivercross Publishing. His play, *A Little Madness*, was produced at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York. He served as Admin. Sgt./Major in an infantry division during the Korean War. He is married and lives in Manhattan.



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