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# Carol Hamilton's *Breaking Bread, Breaking Silence*: A Review

by Robert Cooperman

Carol Hamilton, *Breaking Bread, Breaking Silence*  
(Chiron Review Press: 702, N. Prairie, St. John, KS 67576-1516, 2001)

Mark Twain once observed that the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. Nowhere is that axiom more true than in lyric poetry, in which every word is crucial to the overall effect of the whole and every word must carry the added weight of a compressed form. In Carol Hamilton's prize winning new chapbook, *Breaking Bread, Breaking Silence*, every word does yeoman service, heroic service to create a luminous, splendid collection.

As the title implies, this sequence deals with one of our most basic needs: food. But *Breaking Bread, Breaking Silence* is about more than that primal need, which in my barely civilized family evinced itself as a sort of boarding house free-for-all brawl to amass and eat the most food on the table. Hamilton makes us see that food is about much, much more, about human communion, communication, about love and its denial. The very act of preparing a meal is an act of supreme human love and memory, of the binding together of families and civilizations, as Hamilton makes clear in the collection's second poem, "Preparing the Feast," in which "Time swirls gently at the/kitchen sink, where again/the ham rind is sliced . . ./and clove/spikes pierce down . . ." The women gather in the kitchen to prepare a feast, Thanksgiving? Christmas? It's not important which, but what is important is that something communal is taking place that will feed a family, a clan, and this act of preparing the food is part of a long continuum of human history. The act of cooking makes civilization possible: "each of us pressed in, fitted/one to another, gathered at/an ancient table."

For Hamilton, the sharing of food is more than

a family ritual, a family delight; it's a spiritual, religious activity, a secular corollary to the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, as in "Salt Bread." Here, eating together is "a reminder/that sacrifice was carnal." The religious is rooted in the particular, the material world. But behind the secularizing of the sacred is Hamilton's knowledge that the primal religious experience is one of terror, of human sacrifice that has, thankfully, been subsumed into the ritual of taking food:

"We/eat and drink calmly,/leave terror to its/desperate struggle on/some forgotten altar."

By mingling the sacred into a secular experience, Hamilton creates a powerful, heady diction. Her borrowing from liturgical language and from biblical imagery exalts the chore of merely cooking, the act of shoveling in food that tastes good. The basics of life, for Hamilton, become a hieratic experience: "There have been oblations/substitutions, ransoms,/whetted blades stayed/before bloodletting. . . ." Notice the allusive language, but even more the attention Hamilton pays to and the care with which she mingles sounds as on the slant rhymes of "blades" and "stayed."

As much as Hamilton borrows from the language of religion and from sacred ritual, she's more than aware that food is about families, the love that's expressed in the creation of a family feast, and the accommodations family members make and the white lies they tell to grease along the machinery of getting along together. Feasts mark sacred and secular celebrations, but they also mark time passing, lives passing, and loved ones passing away. In "My Mother's Relish Tray" Hamilton recalls dishes and accompaniments both her mother and grandmother made and that no one in the family

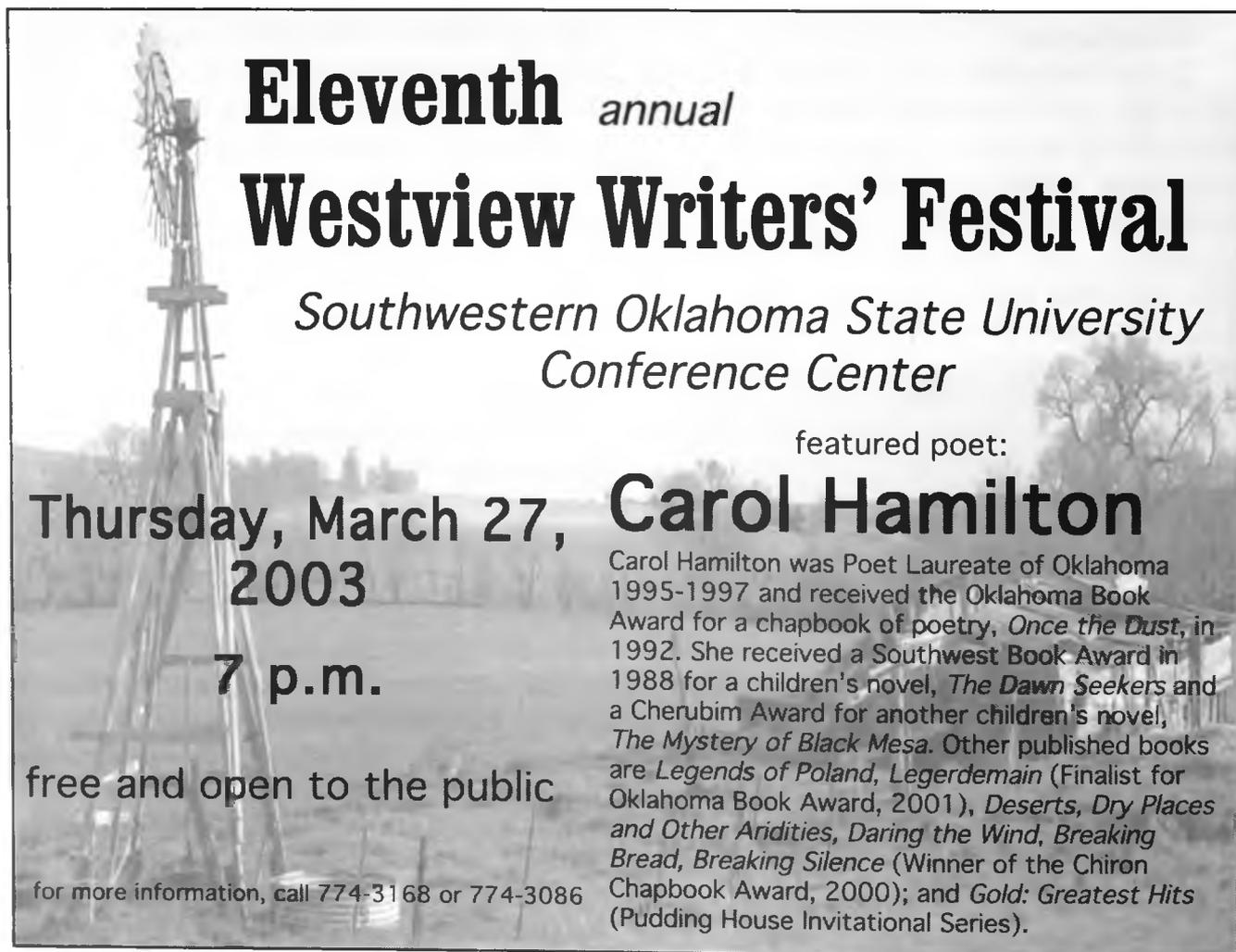


was so impolite, until now, to say how much they disliked the jello mold, but that these dishes “fill hungers we cannot/even name.” And so they appear on the feasting table year after year, not so much to be eaten, but for the sake of memory and human continuity. It’s the hunger for human contact, for communion, even more than the physical hunger for food that sustains families.

At the heart of this luminous collection is the knowledge that all sustenance means the death of something, a sacrifice for which we must make thanks. Something, be it animal or plant, has died so that we may survive. This is the truth of all life:

“But sacrifice/Has placed this dish before us... Martyrdom has given us this feast... We must whirl and/Dance like dervishes, thankful/That we are at the table.” (“How Are You? Have You Eaten?”) And for this wonderful chapbook we should give thanks too and devour its pages and poems in the spirit in which they were created, for the emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual sustenance *Breaking Bread*, *Breaking Silence* has given us, for the martyrdom to craft and vision that the poet has made on our behalf.

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Carol Hamilton was Poet Laureate of Oklahoma 1995-1997 and received the Oklahoma Book Award for a chapbook of poetry, *Once the Dust*, in 1992. She received a Southwest Book Award in 1988 for a children's novel, *The Dawn Seekers* and a Cherubim Award for another children's novel, *The Mystery of Black Mesa*. Other published books are *Legends of Poland*, *Legerdemain* (Finalist for Oklahoma Book Award, 2001), *Deserts, Dry Places and Other Aridities*, *Daring the Wind*, *Breaking Bread*, *Breaking Silence* (Winner of the Chiron Chapbook Award, 2000); and *Gold: Greatest Hits* (Pudding House Invitational Series).

