

Scribbler

JANUARY 2016

ISSUE 86

Editor's Note

Since this issue's theme is parenting, the next *Scribbler* will be all about sex. How could we become parents without sex? The usual conditions prevail: poems no longer than 50 lines, prose no longer than 850 words. The deadline for the spring issue is Feb. 28, 2016. Please send work to Karnit@LMI.net or to me at 420-45th Street, Oakland, CA 94609.
— Kayla Sussell

"What is a Wife & what is a Harlot? What is a Church
& What
Is a Theatre? are they Two & not One? can they Exist
Separate?
Are not Religion & Politics the Same Thing? Brother-
hood is Religion,
O Demonstrations of Reason Dividing Families in
Cruelty & Pride!"

— William Blake from *Jerusalem*

This Be the Verse*

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were sappy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

— Philip Larkin

*Reprinted with permission. From *Collected Poems*
by Philip Larkin. Farrar, Straus and Giroux (2003).

Answer Me This

"Just answer me one question."
My father's voice sounds almost vulnerable
on the long-distance line.
Surely this can't be him.
"Do you believe our family was dysfunctional?"
"Well, yes," I say slowly.
"But was it worse than other families?"
"How would I know that?" I temporize.
"I didn't grow up in any other family."

The truth is, I do know a little about that.
When I became a pediatrician,
I realized that if a child had shown me
the bruises encircling her wrists
that I showed my father when I was six,
I would have had to file a report
with Child Protective Services.
My father was a doctor, too,
so why couldn't he protect us from my mother?
Why did he believe her instead of me?
Why did my brother stop eating at twelve?
Why did he slash his wrists at thirty-six?
Why did he refuse for three years
to talk to anyone in our family?

I try to offer my father what comfort I can.
"It was worse than some," I say,
"Better than others."
"I just can't see it," he replies,
and that, of course, was always the problem.

— Jan Steckel

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Meryl Natchez Weldon Kees Hildegard of Bingen
Judith Offer Kayla Sussell

PREVIOUS-ISSUE FINANCIAL REPORT

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Participants in Clive Matson's creative writing workshops receive copies of the Scribbler for two years, and for as long thereafter as the recipient shows interest. If you are interested in receiving copies of the Scribbler, send an email with your name and mailing address to: clive@matsonpoet.com

Submissions and Editorial Policies:

Basic Acceptance Policy: If the current editor likes a piece, it gets published; if not, it is passed on to the next editor who will either use it, or return it to the author. All rights are reserved. Send submissions to: scribbler@matsonpoet.com (BUT any emailing instructions at top of page 1 rule!).

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SCHEDULE AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

POETRY SALOON (drunk on poetry!)

Meets at 472 44th Street, Oakland, the second Friday of the month. Potluck at 6pm, reading at 7:30pm. Bring poems or prose by you and others to share, or come just to enjoy. Hosted by Kayla Sussell.

January 8, February 12, March 11, April 8

CRAZY CHILD WRITING WORKSHOPS (fee: \$80)

Saturdays, 10am - 5pm, once a month.

January 9 in Briones

February 13 in Oakland

March 12 in San Anselmo

April 9 in Montclair

10-WEEK WORKSHOP poetry, prose, plays, nonfiction (fee: \$400), Wednesdays, 7pm - 10pm, Temescal District, Oakland. Current sessions end December 30; next sessions start January 13.

NOVEL AND CREATIVE NONFICTION WORKSHOPS (fee: \$400 for ten sessions)

One ongoing, intensive workshop meets for three hours every other Monday in Marin. Writers bring ten pages to each session. Limited to five writers.

STRUCTURE OF LARGE WORK

(fee: \$400 for ten sessions)

For writers with a draft of a full-length play, script, or novel, or who want to start a large work. Our topics are standard repertory, starting with "Whose story is it?" Current sessions end January 15; next sessions start January 22.

THE NOVEL'S ARC (fee: \$500 for five sessions)

In this workshop four novelists commit to reading each other's novels and examining how each works as a whole. We'll devote a two-hour session to each novel. Next sessions will be arranged in March.

WRITING EXCURSIONS: SEE PAGE 8

For more information about any workshop, visit matsonpoet.com or phone 510-654-6495. To register, phone 510-654-6495 or email clive@matsonpoet.com (unless otherwise noted).



Who Raises You?

In 2016 my husband and I will celebrate our 55th wedding anniversary. I attribute our longevity to a variety of things, including the pragmatism that prevented us from expecting a constant brass band. But most of all, I attribute it to my husband's aunts: a messy, brilliant, miserable group of Russian refugees, torn apart by migration, politics, poverty, and an inability to slip smoothly into the skin of expectations. Collectively, they raised him and he learned to value smart women.

My husband doesn't talk about his childhood. I've known him since he was 13, but I was 17 when I met his aunts and he was 22 and living on his own. My version was put together with the crumbs that dropped from the family table and with what I learned from the sisters. I am sure I've embellished it. However, it is as true as I can make it.

His mother was the fourth of five sisters, all of whom came here with their mother, Baba Dvorah, from a village in the Ukraine called Trostenetz. Baba Dvorah brought her daughters, ranging in age from 2 to 18, because there were no men left to bring: husbands, fathers, sons and brothers were murdered by the Cossacks and no men were left alive. Whether some or any of them were raped has never been discussed. It seems likely.

Rose married young and she married her young uncle. Mark was born about two years after the wedding. When he was 2 ½, his father died of lung cancer. His mother worked in the clothing factories: she was smart, handsome, politically left wing, and struggling. She lived with men, married at least one other time, and mostly was not there for her son. Not many of the men in her life found it easy to love a brilliant, hyperactive, enraged little boy. In between the men in her life, when she was on her own, she lived with her older sister Jenny.

Jenny was brilliant: a flamboyant, red-headed union organizer, political junkie, self-educated in every way, and determinedly liberated. She had a daughter, divorced when her daughter was young, and moved into the Grand Street housing project with her two best friends, in the early 1950s. Her two best friends happened to be Black women: Pauli Murray, one of the first Black female attorneys, later on the Brandeis faculty and an open lesbian, and Maida Springer, a Panamanian labor organizer of tremendous charisma and intelligence (Pauli's autobiography, *Proud Shoes*, is a wonderful read and Maida's story has been recorded by the Radcliffe oral history project). Rose lived with Jenny, on and off, in-between men, and Mark was often in the orbit of Jenny and her friends.

Mark was only 10 when his mother got breast cancer. Rose couldn't work much: Jenny took Rose and Mark into her home and the older sisters helped any way they could. In the chaos of work, illness, broken relationships, and family feuds, these women raised a man—though not one of them had a son or kept a husband—and all of them lost their father and brothers to unspeakable violence. They took care of an ailing sister when every minute of their own lives was stretched thin. Rose died when Mark was 14. Mark grew up knowing women are fierce, they are smart, they work, they are formidable, and they don't sit home and wait on men.

I finished college after our wedding. I went to law school after we had three kids and a dog at home. I never heard the words: "but where's my supper?" I never heard even the silent thought "but what about me?" Who might the sisters have been with my education? How much did they sacrifice to survive in a world dominated by men and money, neither of which they acquired or kept? A novel's worth of speculation about each of them might just about do it. But I did manage to tell them, before they died, that I was eternally grateful to them for raising a man who unequivocally valued women.

—Tama Zorn

Writing About My Mother

...is not something that's comfortable to do. My relationship with my mother (now dead 12 years at age 84) was always uncomfortable. I yearned to be loved; she yearned to be loved, but neither of us yearned for the other. For her, men were the important ones. For me, my women friends gave me what I needed. My mother never understood the value of my friendships because she never had a woman friend. I never understood her narcissism and dislike of other women. Perhaps she didn't dislike them so much as consider them competition for the attention of men. That alone alienated me.

I was always astonished at women who were friends with their mothers, wondering how they learned to do that. I could see the pleasure it gave them and was jealous of them, but I never really understood how it worked. Perhaps if I had a daughter, I would have learned how to be her friend. But I had sons, and that was easy because I did not identify with them. They were always separate and slightly foreign to me. That allowed me to give them the room to become who they were, rather than who I thought they should be. (*cont. on page 4*)

Hologram

In my dream, my daughter shimmered on stage as a hologram, giving a lecture on sexual dysfunction for her fellow marriage and family therapists. They nodded and laughed at all the right times.

I wanted to tell them she was such a terrific speaker, so witty and animated, because she'd studied dramatic art. I knew that she knew she had cancer but expected to live. Only I knew she was already dead. No way would I tell her and break her heart.

She was still my baby who'd bounced in time to the music of the Beatles, my mischievous toddler, my girl who sang on stage at Fairyland at five.

Waking to the sea's murmur at Casa Obelisco in San Pancho, Mexico, in my room with the cool tile floor and a fan turning slowly overhead, I understood: this was what had happened.

Through all the long months of chemo – R-CHOP, RICE, R-DHAP, GEMOX – PET scans and radiation treatments, both of us snubbed death – the hated stranger grinning smugly, waiting so near.

Even as the tissues around her lungs filled with fluid from the tumor and her breathing grew labored, I held her hand and told her, over and over, *Hang onto hope, Liana. You can still get better*, as though my love could scratch a diamond or dispel the night.

– Lucille Lang Day

(cont. from p. 3)

If I had been friends with my mother, I would have talked to her about my insecurities as a woman in a man's world. When I came of age in the '50s, women were undervalued and unwelcome in many professions. Much of that changed in the '60s but, by then, I was divorced and struggling to combine work and children. I knew I was lucky to be able to work. Both my mother and grandmother would have been happier if they had worked, but their times did not encourage that. White, middle-class women who worked in the '50s were regarded as unfortunate by my mother and her friends. They had not been able to find a man to take care of them. I grew up knowing I did not want to be taken care of in that way, but not certain I could take care of myself. I envied the women just coming of age in the '60s with the support of the women's movement.

For me, the women's movement was a life raft. I loved the consciousness-raising groups I belonged to. At one time, I was involved in three different groups that met weekly at my house. Sharing our deepest feelings in a safe and (cont. on page 7)

Some Sort of Sad Miracle in Reverse

You are not a loggerhead turtle covering with sand her luminous stash of eggs then heaving her body back down the beach to slip into vast waters and glide away never to behold her hatchlings struggling along that same path to the sea.

You are not Charlotte in her web using the last of her energy to spin a glowing sac never to encounter the spiderlings who will hatch out and be carried off on silk parachutes of their own making.

You are not a salmon leaving the ocean behind to thrash her way upstream clear a nest, spawn, and die – spent and ragged – never to feed alongside her fry in those same waters in which she once fed.

You are a mammal. You pushed him out bloody and screaming nourished him with milk that you made.

You are a human whose young need rearing seemingly forever. You lived together in a small space, breathed in the air that he breathed out, ate from the same plates. Yet all you know of this person he has become is the sound of his voice, the look on his face, the shape of his gait at a distance.

– Jo Podvin



Pegasus

Once more, the eighth time
mother calmly closes the car door,
staggers away from the crash
bottle of Jack
fat, amber lozenge
stashed in her shoulder bag
my little sister crying
alone in the wrecked car.

Soon an ambulance will arrive,
mom won't be there.
A social worker will be called,
she still won't be there.
My sister will be lifted
from the car by
the hands of strangers.
She will be placed into
a home of "good people"
who don't drink a fifth
of Jack at eight a.m.
then drive.

These people will be
married, happy, want a child.
My sister will be the daughter
they have prayed for every night
every Sunday morning at church—
her hair the same bright, light red
as the woman's dead sister's
who drowned at age ten
and just seeing that hair
rushing long down my sister's back
wild, waving
as if caught in deep pond water
makes the woman's eyes tear.
She breaks her heart.

In the courtroom mother wins,
takes my sister home.
Each amber sip mother swallows
fuzzes, blurs—
a shot glass breaks
sharp shards on the kitchen floor,
drops of blood on tile,

my sister tip toes out
from her room, peers—
mother passed out
on the small living room couch.

My sister closes her door
sits at her desk
paper, pencils, paint,
overhead light—
she draws, defines
large muscled horses,
winged like the ones
I once drew,
horses large, strong enough
to carry her everywhere
flying, flying away.

— A.M. Stanley

To My Son at Seventeen

We stand at the foot of the stairs, your gaze
angling down to mine. We're in conversation

about the cello lesson, the essay due, the ride
you need home from your basketball game

when I am struck by how complete
and how separate you have become, and how,

despite a certain shared history beginning
with my body and a seed, we have diverged.

You roam and strike for independence,
I threaten and demand obedience.

We negotiate spending money,
household chores, driving privileges,

you, with your eye on the future when
you will be free,

I, with my eye on the future,
when you will leave me. I am the harbor,

watchful and staid, fearful of storms,
destinations beyond the edge.

You are the ship, new made and splendid,
sailing out to sea.

— Adele Mendelsohn

Theodicy

Sleep-deprived, confused, your nipples so sore
you can hardly bear the baby's ruthless gums,
and if they cry, you pick them up again,
and wander the few rooms your life has narrowed to,
the soft floss of their hair, the bluish pattern that blooms
under transparent skin, the tiny nails so fragile
they bend when you try to cut them. Soon
they begin to know who you are, they reach their chubby arms
towards you, they smile, they nuzzle the soft bones
of their fontanel into your neck,
and there has never been anything more delightful,
not sex, not the best meal, not driving fast
in a convertible on a winding road by an azure sea,
and you would do anything for them, and you do,
you give up nightlife, adult conversation, hour-and-a-half
massages, spicy food, uninterrupted thought,
and they learn how to walk,
to swim, to read, and you've paid for the orthodontist
and endured the teenage years, and paid for college and
helped out with grad school and they're launched,
with their own lives, their own ways of salting meat
and slicing it, their own partners and opinions,
here they are, flawed human beings with adult problems
for which it turns out you are the cause.

— Meryl Natchez

For My Daughter

Looking into my daughter's eyes I read
Beneath the innocence of morning flesh
Concealed, hintings of death she does not heed.
Coldest of winds have blown this hair, and mesh
Of seaweed snarled these miniatures of hands,
The night's slow poison, tolerant and bland,
Has moved her blood. Parched years that I have seen
That may be hers appear: foul, lingering
Death in certain war, the slim legs green.
Or, fed on hate, she relishes the sting
Of others' agony; perhaps the cruel
Bride of a syphilitic or a fool.
These speculations sour in the sun.
I have no daughter. I desire none.

— Weldon Kees

From *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees* (rev. ed.).
Edited by Donald Justice. University of Nebraska Press.

Holy Spirit,
giving life to all life,
moving all creatures,
root of all things,
washing them clean,
wiping out their mistakes,
healing their wounds,
you are our true life,
luminous, wonderful,
awakening the heart
from its ancient sleep.

— Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

From *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*, edited by Stephen Mitchell. New York: Harper & Row (1989).

(cont. from p. 4)

nurturing group was a profound awakening for each of us. We gained courage from each other, and developed respect for the many ways that women found to express themselves and achieve what they wanted. It gave us confidence and even a kind of peace. My sons recalled hearing the conversations from our living room while they tried to sleep, resenting the intrusion of all these women. I thought it was a good experience for them to know that women valued each other and the time they spent examining their lives together. I miss those times and those groups.

If I had been friends with my mother, I would have shared what was important to me: learning how the world worked, what I could do, what I couldn't do, what I wanted, and what I was afraid of. I kept all that hidden from her, and I never knew how she felt about her place in the world – what she had expected, how she dealt with disappointment and loss of love, and how she felt about a daughter who rejected her and everything she valued. I saw my mother as a shallow, selfish person and vowed to make a life as different as possible from hers. I accomplished that, but not with as much satisfaction as I expected. I felt the restriction on women's hopes and dreams that existed in the '50s and welcomed the changes that the '60s brought.

And now, as an Elder, I wonder how my mother felt about aging and what accommodations she made to it. She was feisty and became a little outrageous as she aged. She had a young companion/caretaker, and I saw that she loved this woman as she had not been able to love either her daughter or her friends. What softened her, I wondered.

I believe it was aging and her accommodation to it that made her a more thoughtful and slightly more loving person. Because our relationship was strained, I didn't see my mother often as she became old. She didn't complain but she didn't explain either. Now, of course, I wish I had asked her everything: what's it like to be old? what pleasures are you finding? how are you handling your fears about illness and aging? Give me some signposts, some advice to help me through my aging. That's what parents are for. Be my parent, take care of me, be there for me, love me. Yes, we can still yearn for that long after our mothers are dead.

— Nancy Kreinberg

Mother

Sarah was her muse, not Mary,
though she said Mary's prayers, and didn't mind
if the Pope knew nothing of runny noses.

It took her seven years to carry us.
Dad complained: she sprouted ruffles, spouted
dentist bills, cried, and was always tired.

Diapers draped our winter radiators
(Left outside, they would turn to surfboards,
and come in dripping spume on icy knuckles.)

Her cool grey eyes drowned slowly
in the clattering, scraping mornings.
We roared out like bowling balls, socks matching,

While her sponge made its morning obeisances:
table, dishes, and whatever pablum baby.
She didn't question it. Then.

Later, of course, she wondered what she'd done.
By then, anyone could tell her: all her children
wore mortarboards and didn't sneak

over walls or sell their bodies.
With so much to credit, you'd wonder why
her mind would seem to search behind her eyes

for some idea – unconceived, aborted, or
whose mother died at birth – which
she might have nurtured and called her own.

— Judith Offer

From *The First Apples* (1977).

Family Dynamics

"Isn't that your mom in the backseat of that Chevy?"
my boyfriend asked as we crossed a wide avenue
on foot, on our way to an air-conditioned movie,
more to get away from the muggy heat than to see the show.

I looked into the window of the parked car he pointed at.
The thick crown of her braided red hair was unmistakable.
Most damning was her absent blouse exposing
pink satin bra straps and creamy freckled shoulders.

I couldn't see the man's face – only his beefy neck
and bald head bending low over my mother's breasts.
I never said a word to anyone of what we'd seen.
But gained a greater understanding of my father's rages.

Years later, I had a friendly drink with that old boyfriend.
He told me that seeing my mother half-undressed in the backseat
had emboldened him to make an intense but clumsy pass at her,
for which his face had been fiercely slapped; she'd also hissed at
him.

— Kayla Sussell

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WRITING EXCURSIONS

LAKE COUNTY WORKSHOP

"LET THE CRAZY CHILD WRITE!"

Saturday, April 23, 4 to 6 pm, and

Sunday, April 24, 10 am to 5 pm

Lake County Arts Council Gallery

235 Main Street, Lakeport, CA 95453

Fee \$55. Phone 707-263-6658 to register,

510-654-6495 for details on the workshop.

WRITING COSTA RICA

January 30 - February 6, 2016

Nosara Retreat Center, Guanacaste, Costa Rica

Fee \$1400

Host: Deborah Tommassini

debratom@aol.com, 212-381-1823

www.NosaraRetreat.com

For a full description and itinerary, AND TO REGISTER, check out Clive's "Excursions" webpage under the Instruction tab at: <http://matsonpoet.com>.

SCRIBBLER Annual Warning and FINANCIAL REPORT

If you haven't attended a workshop or submitted to the *Scribbler* or donated to the *Scribbler* in the last two years, this will be your **last issue**.

Total expenses: \$460.33 Total income from donors: \$200
If you enjoy reading *The Crazy Child Scribbler*, please donate.

THE SCRIBBLER

Clive Matson

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