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## Featured Poet

Sandra M. Gilbert

### Sun in Fog

Bright white everywhere,  
on the deck and in the garden

and even bits and pieces  
on the floor—

shards of light afloat  
in pools of shadow,

and on their edges faces that blanked  
and vanished years ago,

jostling to be seen  
in a blur that haloes

the grass, the tattered yellows,  
the cloud across the sea.

Then suddenly it burns away,  
the blue leaks back,

sears ghosts to nowhere, leaving  
only the same plain

stranded day.

\* \* \*

## Grief: A History

When you spun away in the whirlwind  
my grief followed you  
a whimpering spaniel

you were gone your absence  
was absolute & my grief  
sat on my kitchen table  
a vase of bloody roses

my grief sprang from my breastbone  
a young birch swaying & scabrous

my grief was a dull pot  
at the back of the stove

my grief lashed the windows  
a hurricane with your face

my grief sulked & silenced itself  
a fog over the harbor

my grief in tatters  
my grief in gusts  
my grief skulking around the house  
ready to kill

and behind it alongside it  
ahead of it  
in their march of plenitude  
the five musicians came

one at the far left drumming  
on old stones with hands  
like heavy gloves

and one on the far right  
with a steely mandolin displaying  
ecstasies of syncopation

and one just left of center scraping  
a violin whose pure implorings  
shone above the road

& one  
just right of center  
pulsing lunatic heartbeats

& in the midst  
the dark the stout  
accordionist came staggering & falling

under the weight of his keyboard  
with its trills & trickles  
its hundred pipes

its massive lurching chords  
that led them on all five  
as they tramped the dust

as they flung ahead through  
the whirlwind where you hide

as they stomped on my glitter  
of grief my shards of  
rage

& scraps of children  
shrieking with joy  
followed swift as swirls of paper

& I too I followed  
until there we were  
where we hadn't been:

& it was moonrise down on the riverbank  
& the pipes at the center piped lower  
like shadow pipes

oh there by the muddy river  
where the waters unfold  
& flow in their helplessness

the last pipes piped  
their solitude of grief

\* \* \*

## The night mare

comes up from the field her  
nostrils twitching her  
hide jumping with fleas,

she's white against black grass—  
a spasm under the trees,  
her hooves hearts knocking, & oh,

old shape-shifting clop-clopper:  
she carries you from the lake  
to the pit where

you build the chapel  
of panic, & she's the mice  
chattering inside the organ, the angel

who lets drop the window  
of heaven that shatters  
next to the altar,

& under  
a quilt of shadows she's  
the thin one

who enters the pulpit & asks  
how can you praise god  
after the soldiers made the eyeless rabbi

dance naked in the marketplace.

\* \* \*

## Mother and Child

In the seal colony  
at the edge of infinite water  
(though finite fish)  
the mamas are barking orders  
at their blobby babies,

rearing, flap-flipper  
& now & then  
turning their teats toward  
air–sun–hunger  
(are they indifferent?).

The rubbery baby  
tubes of fishy flesh  
squiggle around  
like slick embellishments,  
like variations on the theme of mama.

A few flop away from the huddle  
toward the water where  
everything is easier but nothing  
is safe.

One hangs clueless

in a black pool by the rocks  
and the undertow slithers  
around him, hooks him, starts its long  
drag outward.

Does he

know what's happening?  
Does his mama know?

\* \* \*

## Flocks

—for Aaron David Gilbert-O’Neil

A huddle of fuzzy rocks cropping the field,  
these nuzzling mothers live to eat a salad  
of prickle, bristle & stalk; in warm or wild  
air, they moon & baa as in the ballad.  
Our two-year-old princeling points & bleats a mimic  
bleat, & shrieks. He can’t believe they’re real!  
They munch, they stare, they aren’t in a book!  
(They’re busy as grownups, serious, & careful—)  
& a hundred feet below, on the churning beach,  
other stories are spinning strangely to life.  
There’s a faraway glitter his flung-out arms can’t reach,  
& an endless sound like a giant huff & puff,  
& hurrying things leap up & rise & fall,  
bringing him heap after heap of shining wool!

Sandra M. Gilbert

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Poet and critic, memoirist and essayist, Berkeley resident Sandra M. Gilbert has published eight collections of poetry, including *Kissing the Bread: New and Selected Poems 1969-1999* (2000) and *Belongings* (2005). Her most recent prose works are the memoir *Wrongful Death* (1996), the cultural study *Death’s Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (2006), and, just out, an essay collection, *On Burning Ground: Thirty Years of Thinking About Poetry* (2009). With Susan Gubar, Gilbert has coauthored or coedited a number of works, among them *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979, 2000), the three-volume *No Man’s Land* (1987, 1988, 1994) and *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985, 1995, 2006). A professor emerita at the University of California, Davis, she has most recently held distinguished visitorships at Cornell University and at San Jose State University. She is currently at work on a new collection of poems tentatively titled *Aftermath*, and a study of literary eating titled *The Culinary Imagination*. She is the mother of three and the grandmother of four.

from Poet's Bookshelf: Contemporary Poets On Books That Shaped  
Their Art

*poet Sandra M. Gilbert*

Edna St. Vincent Millay, mostly her sonnets  
Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*  
Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*  
W. H. Auden, *The English Auden*  
Rainer Maria Rilke, *Neue Gedichte*  
D. H. Lawrence, *Birds, Beasts and Flowers, and Last Poems*  
Pablo Neruda, *Odas Elementales*  
Sylvia Plath, *Ariel and Crossing the Water*  
Robert Bly, *The Teeth Mother Naked at Last*  
Robert Lowell, *Life Studies*  
Emily Dickinson, everything  
Ruth Stone, *Second-Hand Coat, In the Next Galaxy*

I couldn't keep this list to ten and am barely able to hold it down to twelve. Actually, if you count individual volumes, my list adds up to more than twelve books, so I know I'm fudging and fidgeting (wanting to add more). And yes, like some of the lists in the first installment of the *Poet's Bookshelf*, this one is a chronological account of influences, at least those of which I'm conscious.

In high school, I passionately loved Edna St. Vincent Millay, wrote sonnets in the back of geometry class (thus nearly failing geometry), and hung around in the Village, wearing a very fifties-ish existentialist black turtle neck with big gold loop earrings—but wished I really had been there in the twenties, when “Vincent” burned her candle every which way. Yet I should add here that I still admire Millay's often devastating skill with a sonnet and wish more people understood how good she was and is. I love her not sonnets, too, and having had a chance to read some unpublished ones, I'm sorry to say that her talent may have been at least in part underestimated because her estate has withheld some wonderful material from publication.

I actually began reading and loving Stevens in high school too, especially the sometimes sonorously funny Stevens of “The Worms at Heaven's Gate” and “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” (“In that November off Tehuantepec/The slopping of the sea grew still one night”). But I want to add that in those years I also loved lots of poets whose work I encountered in anthologies by Louis Untermeyer and Oscar Williams—among them, Conrad Aiken (“Morning Song from Senlin”), Archibald MacLeish (“Epistle to be Left in the Earth”), and even T.S.Eliot: “The

Hollow Men,” for instance, resonated nicely with a black turtleneck, big gold loop earrings, and morose poetic wanderings through the Village.

I’ll skip over my undergraduate reading because it was intensely focused not just on more Stevens but on close encounters with the major Romantic poets, whom I lovingly studied under the magisterial tutelage of M. H. Abrams but would never have hoped to imitate. How did I read Wordsworth and Coleridge, Keats and Shelley—and look, I’ve left out my beloved Yeats!? Probably I regarded them all from the perspective of a potential scholar/critic rather than a self-teaching poet. In graduate school, however, both as poet and as critic I began devouring Whitman, Auden, Rilke, and Lawrence (on whose poetry I eventually wrote a dissertation), and all their cadences, in various ways, filtered into my nerves, blood, bones, though I was often awe-struck. Imagine really writing “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” or “Sir, No Man’s Enemy” or the “Archaic Torso of Apollo” or “Bavarian Gentians.”

I came later to Neruda, at first through Robert Bly’s wonderful edition of Neruda and Vallejo, and I specifically list Neruda’s *Elemental Odes* because their celebrations of the quotidian—from salt to watermelons to socks—was a useful corrective for the mystical lyricism that so enthralled me in, say, Rilke and Lawrence. And then, of course, needless to say, I became obsessed by crucial contemporaries. Like so many young women of my generation, I was fascinated by Plath, both by what seemed the monitory story of her life/career and (especially in the long run) by her extraordinary poetic art. But, too, as so-called confessional poetry took hold among my peers (and me) I was drawn to the special genius of Lowell’s *Life Studies*, a book I battled for a while but to whose sardonic memoiristic lures I eventually succumbed. And in that Vietnam era—a time when everyone tried to write political poetry but few really could—I was just knocked out by Bly’s *The Teeth Mother Naked At Last*, a volume I still consider one of the best examples of powerful anti-war poetry that the last third of the twentieth century gave us.

Emily Dickinson and Ruth Stone, two great poets of bleak comedy, of New England, of doubt and desire, of dread and grief, appear at the end of my list because I came to know and appreciate both in the seventies, when the Second Wave of the women’s movement flung me onto the shores of feminism. To be sure, I’d read Dickinson in high school even as I was savoring Millay, but the Dickinson my teachers taught me was kind of cutesie—too much “I like to see it lap the miles” and too little “This Chasm, Sweet, Upon my Life”—so as a girl I failed to grasp her genius and ferocity. For the last third of a century, though, her brilliant darkness has been important to me as a woman, as a poet, as a scholar/critic. And in these same years the too long under-sung genius of Ruth Stone has also been a stay against aesthetic confusion. Now in her nineties, Ruth is writing with the same driven inspiration that’s long given her work its wit, its sorrow, its steely edge. Just the other day she told me on the phone that because of various eye problems she sees “as if through a fog.” But what she truly sees is, trust me, utterly radiant. When I think of the gift I’d love the muses to give me, I think of her fiery candor and the ceaseless vision that has always guided her through light and shadow.

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