

PATHOS · HUMOR · HISTORY · CREATIVE NON-FICTION

CALLAHAN COUNTY

## STAR SPOTLIGHT

WRITERS SHOWCASE

(All submitters retain ownership)

## American Life In Poetry

Column 231

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

This column originates on the campus of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and at the beginning of each semester, we see parents helping their children move into their dorm rooms and apartments and looking a little shaken by the process. This wonderful poem by Sue Ellen Thompson of Maryland captures not only a moment like that, but a mother's feelings as well.

## Helping My Daughter Move into Her First Apartment

This is all I am to her now:

a pair of legs in running shoes,  
two arms strung with braided wire.  
She heaves a carton sagging with CDs  
at me and I accept it gladly, lifting  
with my legs, not bending over,

raising each foot high enough  
to clear the step. Fortunate to be  
of any use to her at all,  
I wrestle, stooped and single-handed,  
with her mattress in the stairwell,  
saying nothing as it pins me,  
sweating, to the wall. Vacuum cleaner,  
spiny cactus, five-pound sacks  
of rice and lentils slumped  
against my heart: up one flight  
of stairs and then another,  
down again with nothing in my arms

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## Wanted: Writers &amp; Poets



The pen is mightier than the sword

## Writers And Poets!

The Eastland/Callahan County Newspapers announce that the Baird Star will be publishing submitted poetry and short stories. We will also be publishing a literary journal in the near future.

1. We ask for first-time publishing rights. All other rights will remain with the author.
2. There will be no payment, but you will get your works before the general public. We will be sending sample copies to other organizations, the literary world and libraries for their archives and your notoriety.
3. Short stories should be brief. Poetry should be no longer than 24 lines.
4. Each submission should be typewritten, single spaced, with author's name and contact information in the top right hand corner. You must include a SASE for the return of the submission.
5. Please address all submissions to:

Literary Editor  
Eastland/Callahan County  
Newspapers  
P. O. Box 29  
Eastland, TX 76448  
email: [thebairdspotlight@att.net](mailto:thebairdspotlight@att.net)

Submissions sought to:

Star

P.O. Box 29  
Eastland, TX 76448email: [thebairdspotlight@att.net](mailto:thebairdspotlight@att.net)

S.A.S.E. for returns

--WANTED--

20 lines,

double spaced or less

Poetry

Fiction or Non

Each entry with brief biography notes. All must be family oriented; no smut, slander or liable material.

## Rhyming Words To Know

Block

Tick-tock

Loch

Woodcock

Ad Hoc

Poppycock

Crock

Fetlock

Mock

## Words To Use Wisely:

Mesencephalon: This is a name for the mid brain. No word was found for half brain.

Naupathia: When you get sick from being at sea, you can say you suffer from this.

Neomenia: This is when the new moon arrives. There was once a song "New Moon," sung by Nelson Eddy and Jeanette McDonald.

Ochlesis: When there is overcrowding, it can make for an unhealthy condition. This is a generic word for that.

## At Summer's Close

Despite the bitter  
northwind  
You stuck tight 'til bitter  
end  
But I suppose, at summers  
close  
There's other things to  
attend.

Looking upward to the  
sky  
And there you are flying  
high  
I can't believe, a little leaf  
Could reach such heights  
when it dies.

Jostled by each windy  
breeze  
You shimmered, you shook,  
you teased  
You wouldn't loose, your  
favorite roost  
Not even if they say please.

Then at once, without a  
word  
You were flying with the  
birds  
You danced and danced,  
the sky romanced  
And no sound was ever  
heard.

Then up and away you  
go  
As sparks from a fire...  
although  
You go higher, than any  
fire  
And come down ever so  
slow.

And now you're a part of  
this  
Your freedom is fortune  
kissed  
No anchor holds, this leaf  
of gold  
Even though you've been  
dismissed.

You hustle and run  
around  
In the richest part of town  
You scuttle about, the town  
without  
Your anchor that held you  
down.

How about a brighter day  
You can help in your own  
way  
Spread it around, your gold  
and brown  
You can do it while you  
play.

-Weldon L. Smith  
Eastland, Texas

## A NAMELESS VOCATION

In her memoir *The Winter Sun*, poet Fanny Howe explores the possibilities and impossibilities of a writer's calling.

By Ange Mlinko

Poetry Media Service

The *Winter Sun*, by Fanny Howe. Graywolf Press, \$15.00.

At the outset of *The Winter Sun*, an apologia for the writing life, Fanny Howe confesses, "Since early adolescence I have wanted to live the life of a poet. What this meant to me was a life outside the law; it would include disobedience and uprootedness. I would be at liberty to observe, drift, read, travel, take notes, converse with friends, and struggle with form." The outlaw poet has a long lineage, from the Beats and Rimbaud back to the troubadours, and it doesn't accommodate the vulnerabilities of womankind. What it would mean for Howe, born in the United States in 1940, to pursue a life of poetry and self-definition—without sacrificing eros and motherhood—unfolds in a series of essays that might take as its motto "lower limit: memoir, upper limit: lyric." The *Winter Sun* is an indispensable companion to Howe's last book of nonfiction prose, *The Wedding Dress* (2003). Both collections circle around the theme of word and life, the *via negativa*, in an increasingly positivistic and cynical world. She subtitles *The Winter Sun* "Notes on a Vocation" but states at the outset that hers is "a vocation that has no name," collapsing the mystical and the literary, Simone Weil and Samuel Beckett.

Fanny Howe has written young adult novels and experimental fiction, but she is best known as a lyric poet of fragmentary serial works that call to mind Hölderlin and Dickinson. She is a reluctant memoirist, circling and digressing around a subject she finds difficult: herself. As a child, she remarks, "I was often mute in the background, sucking my thumb and daydreaming." Howe's background would turn any *littérateur* green: her father was Mark DeWolfe Howe, a law professor at Harvard descended from the illustrious Quincy family; her mother was Mary Manning, an Irish-born actress, writer, and general impresario of the arts in Cambridge. Life in that household was lively, sociable, and privileged, but it comes filtered through Howe's introversion. Her prose is condensed and cadenced to imply silence and shadow. Nameless fears persist around the edges; her earliest memories were marked by her father's absence while he served in World War II, then by the revelation of the concentration camps. "While we learned languages, poetry, science, and athletics, the prevailing social attitude was nihilist. Not officially so, not with reference to Nietzsche, but in the stirring cavities of decision making and imagination. Mass murder, global destruction, and genocide were idle topics."

The child sensitive to these intimations of cynicism and apocalypse would grow into a rebellious adult. The *Wedding Dress* opens with a powerful testimony of her youthful marriage and separation from her husband, Carl Senna. They were activists in Boston during the busing crisis (Jonathan Kozol introduced them). After four years of increasingly tense relations, mirrored too perfectly by the tensions outside their door, they were divorced and she, a white single mother, had three interracial children to support in a climate of fear and unrest. "There were many women like me—born into white privilege but with no financial security, given a good education but no training for survival." This crisis, and the example of her much-loved mother-in-law, a black woman from the South, precipitated Howe's conversion to Roman Catholicism.

Howe is well aware of how highly her "invisible-faithful" Catholic values are esteemed by "materialist-skeptical" intellectuals. Bitingly she acknowledges that people like herself "annoy well-adjusted people because weakness is not meant to survive." In pitting herself against the evo-devo celebration of competition that permeates our culture, Howe's unorthodox Catholicism (she quotes liberation theologians) is just as countercultural today as her civil rights activism was in the 1960s.

Howe is fully comfortable neither with entertaining nor with instructing. Instead, her memoirs and meditations are driven by the revelation that "the future is only the past turned around to look at itself." Like her daydreaming child self, she is bewildered by the demands of time, and finally doesn't really acquiesce to them. She repeats the trope over and over again: "The future is only the past recognizing itself at another location." "We move forward into a past that will be censored." Her digressive, meditative form mirrors this conviction: meditations subvert the demands of linear narrative, modeling a life outside ordinary time.

So what are we, if we are indeed enlightened and well adjusted, supposed to make of a woman who holds incompetence as an exemplary value; who distrusts words but uses them specifically, in the age of Richard Dawkins, to trace experience back to God; who would rather "hide out" caring for children than "get to work!" à la Linda Hirshman?

I find that Howe's essays clarify two contemporary issues. One: "The atheist is no less an inquirer than a believer," she writes. "In living at all, she is no less a believer than an unbeliever" (emphasis mine). Hence Camus's opening sentence in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, from 1942, is as pertinent as ever: "There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." We must determine for ourselves a *raison d'être*; in this, as in everything else about Darwinian capitalism, we are on our own. (Howe reminds us that the sign over the gate to Buchenwald reads *Jedem das Seine*—"to each his own," or, as she clarifies, everyone gets what he deserves.) In rejecting suicide, we are all creatures of faith.

Determining for ourselves a *raison d'être* is also, of course, the chief prerogative of those who choose the writing life, and the second issue, which Howe's "Notes on a Vocation" clarifies, is the role of the poet in an age of widespread scientism that peremptorily decides what questions are worth asking and how best to answer them. Quoting Johann Metz, Howe advocates "rebellion against being partially described—be it by a science or by another person." A poet—just by persisting in that weak, useless, embarrassing role—contests authoritarian definitions of the self. Until the suave proponents of Darwinian fitness and success can solve the problem of "living at all"; until such time as they can make us—mothers, fathers, children, poets—happy to be partially described, governed by those descriptions, we cannot do without Fanny Howe and this nameless, wide-open vocation.

Ange Mlinko is the recipient of the 2009 Randall Jarrell Award in Poetry Criticism. Her latest book of poems is *Starred Wire*. This article first appeared in *The Nation*. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Fanny Howe, and her poetry, at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).

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