

A Sense of One's Self: Poetry in the Therapeutic Context

October 30, 2007

7:00 p.m.

The Philoctetes Center

Levy: Francis Levy
Nersessian: Edward Nersessian
Braziller: Michael Braziller
Chase: Karen Chase
McKeithen: Madge McKeithen
Ostriker: Alicia Ostriker
A: Audience Member

Levy: Good evening and welcome to *A Sense of One's Self: Poetry in the Therapeutic Context*, which inaugurates "Our Life in Poetry." Those of you who are acutely aware of the names that we give to the series will note that this is a change from the name we had last year, which was "Our Life in Six Lyrical Poems."

I am now pleased to introduce Michael Braziller. Michael Braziller is publisher of Persea Books, a literary press he co-founded in 1975. He is director of the Philoctetes Center Poetry Program. Michael will moderate this evening's roundtable and introduce the other panelists.

Braziller: It's nice to see you all. This year we will have a total of ten poetry events. There will be a combination of roundtables like tonight and classes like last year, at which a poet or critic joined me in a discussion of a handful of great poems. Some future events include Ed Hirsch on three contemporary Polish poets, Alice Quinn on Emily Dickinson. Amy Brennan will revisit Yeats's *The Tower* with me. In addition there will be a panel of young poets discussing the question of influence, and a panel on the relationship of poetry and music featuring both the reading of poetry and the playing of music. I'd like to thank Francis Levy, Ed Nersessian, Patricia Brody, Ellen Fertig, and Adam Ludwig for all their help and support with the program.

Tonight my three guests will all talk about experience with illness and then read from their eloquent books. A discussion will follow between us, which will eventually open itself up and include you. My guests bring three very different perspectives to the therapeutic value of poetry, or to put it another way, they bring three different perspectives to the ways in which we turn to poetry in order to deal with—and hopefully even transcend (if only momentarily)—intractable and devastating material. They will shed light on the endlessly intriguing relationship between poetry and our relentless request for growth and change. Serious illness both terrifies and isolates us. To some extent, each of my guests came to poetry, and poetry came to them, as a means of articulating a crisis that is both universal, yet distinct and unique to each individual. In each of their situations, the music and states of awareness in poetry has been a catalyst to find courage, acceptance, and even renewal.

Karen Chase's poems have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, and *The Southwest Review*. *Bear*, a collection of her poems, will be forthcoming in 2008. She was the poet-in-residence at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, teaching

poetry to severely disturbed psychiatric patients. She is the author of *Land of Stone: Breaking Silence Through Poetry*, which deals with her experience at Rosedale Hospital writing poetry with a schizophrenic young man who refused to speak.

Madge McKeithen teaches writing at The New School and in private workshops. Her first book, *Blue Peninsula: Essential Words for a Life of Loss and Change*, is about turning to poetry when she learned that her son had an unknown degenerative disease.

Alicia Ostriker is the author of eleven volumes of poetry, most recently *The Volcano Sequence* and *No Heaven*. Her most recent critical studies are *Dancing at the Devil's Party: Essays on Poetry, Politics and the Erotic* and *For the Love of God, the Bible as an Open Book*. She has received numerous awards and fellowships from the NEA, the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations, the Poetry Society of America, and the San Francisco State Poetry Center, and has twice been a finalist for a National Book Award. Ostriker is Professor Emerita of Rutgers University and teaches in the Low Residency MFA Program at New England College. She has written about her own experience with breast cancer in *The Mastectomy Poems*.

Karen, do you want to start it?

Chase: Sure, I guess I have to. In 1980, I went to work at New York Hospital-Cornell in White Plains, the old Bloomingdale's. I was there as the poet-in-residence. Some people called me "the hospital poet." I was there for over a decade, and during that time I worked both individually and in workshops with several hundred patients and read thousands of their poems. Midway when I was there in the mid-80's, there was a young man named Ben who didn't speak, and for two years we met every week, writing poems, passing a pad and pencil back and forth, alternating lines. He eventually began to speak, and *Land of Stone* is the story of the growing expressiveness of his language, first on the page and then uttered out loud. You say he was schizophrenic, but actually he was on a ward where most of the patients were schizophrenic. In fact, nobody ever felt they could diagnose him because he said so little that there just wasn't very much information. As a younger person in high school, he excelled at his schoolwork. He loved art, and he actually got kicked out of high school for talking too much. Something happened and he became silent. He was silent for six years before he was admitted to New York Hospital, and what precipitated that was one of several violent events where his mother came home from work in the city—I think they lived in Queens—and asked him if he wanted a cup of tea. He threw her to the ground and said, "Why do you keep baking cakes with poison in them?" His parents brought him to the hospital and didn't even mention that event, and said, "He's been silent for six years."

So I'm going to read a few pages from the first chapter of *Land of Stone*. These few pages are about my first meeting him, and the first poem we wrote together.

"It's the end of a hard summer, and I've just driven almost three hours south to get to work at Rosedale. My mother died a few months ago and the ride down gives me a stretch of time to maybe think about it. This summer I have been writing a lot of poems and have been generally withdrawn.

"I unlock the door to the ward and walk down the long hall toward the nurses' station. A new patient is standing motionless next to the water fountain. He gazes at the wall and doesn't seem to notice me as I pass. No matter how distracted I am, there's no way I could miss him. His looks arrest me. More than six feet tall, with a lean build, he has close-cropped black hair and piercing dark eyes, a long aquiline nose and full lips. He's wearing an immaculately-tailored shirt tucked in to bleached blue jeans and white sneakers. As I walk by, I'm uncomfortably aware of how small I am compared with his large frame. A nurse on duty tells me Ben has just come on the ward and barely talks.

"The next day he's standing in the exact same place, staring at the same spot on the wall. I stop.

"Hi. My name is Karen Chase and I write poems with people here. I'm wondering if you'd like to try it."

"Yes," he says, without moving his eyes from the wall.

"Surprised that he answered me, and surprised that he agreed, I set up a time to meet with him the following week.

"Since my mother's death in the spring, I had pulled back from the hospital work. Each week when I arrived there, the staff, out of concern and compassion, asked how I felt, how I was doing. Really, I had nothing to say, but I responded, 'Things are going okay.' What had been okay in fact was writing. It was my sanctuary.

"Talking about her death was not what I wanted to do. In fact, talking about anything had little appeal, so when the staff told me that Ben said the words 'yes,' 'no,' 'everything is fine,' and rarely anything else, that sounded mighty good to me.

"The next week, I'm due to meet with Ben for the first time. I wake up early in my cottage on a lake in rural Massachusetts. In the coming light of morning, I make my way out to the cold, dark car, turn the heat way up, leave the radio off, and begin the long drive south. No thoughts of Ben—in fact, no thoughts at all. The ride passes in a flash. Where have I been all these hours? I have no idea. Fumbling around in my over-size canvas bag for my keys, as I meander through the lavish corridors, then up the stairs to the ward, I find my furry rabbit's foot on the keychain. I unlock the ward door. Ben is watching the weather report on TV at the end of the hall. His eyes land right on me and he gets up and walks in my direction. I motion toward the porch and say 'Hi.' He says nothing, and we both walk to the porch.

"The 'porch' is a long, narrow room with a bank of windows facing the enormous old maples outside. On the opposing wall, a large plate-glass window looks in to the nurses' station. More accurately, the window looks out. Whatever happens on the porch is visible to the staff, and they keep watch. The leaves look very huge and very green. I'm aware of the discrepancy between the outside lushness and the inside drabness.

"Ben sits down. Then I sit on a chair on the opposite side of a long, low oak table. Neither of us has uttered a sound so far, but it's strangely comfortable.

"As if it were one vague, long word. I mumble, 'Whatdoyouthinkofpoetry?'

“As I ask the question, Ben averts his eyes, then focuses right on me. His look turns into the definition of eye contact. He says nothing.

“‘You like it?’ I ask. Long pause; tense again; still oddly comfortable.

“‘No.’

“Now Ben glares at me, as if the sound of my voice has insulted him. He did agree to meet with me, I remind myself, a bit confused.

“‘Want to write?’ I say.

“‘Yes.’

“Here is a man who says little, but he seems to say what he means. I lean over and pull a small stone from my briefcase. Because he'd looked like a stone to me the week before, it occurred to me that we might use a stone as a takeoff for writing.

“I call the stone the “third thing.” When I first began to teach at Rosedale there were numerous objects—you could call them ritual objects—that I brought in to stimulate writing. Put an apple, a shoe, a shell on a table, and each writer can focus on it in his or her written line.

“When I put the stone on the table between us, Ben did not touch it, but looked at it for a long while. I wrote, ‘I am a stone’ on top of the page and handed him the pad and pencil. Neither of us said a word. Without a moment's hesitation, he wrote, ‘A stone is good’ and passed the pad back to me. I added another line, and so began the rhythmic back-and-forth of our work together, a reliable pattern that lasted for two years.”

Now I'm going to read the poem and I'll indicate which line is mine and which line is his.

“I am a stone (K)
A stone is good (B)
It sits on a field (K)
It never worries (B)
It never dreams (K)
It always comes through (B)
In any weather (K)
Everything is always fine with it (B)
Even in blizzards (K)
Everything is always okay with a stone (B)

“By relating to the third thing—the stone—rather than to each other or ourselves, I wanted to stress that our writing was going to be about the outside world, that we were not going to use words to directly express anything personal. As a psychiatric patient, he was continually urged to talk about his personal life. As a woman who had just lost her mother, I was often urged to talk about her death, with the assumption being that talking about my loss would help.

“Writing poems with Ben was going to be different. I wanted to show this stone-like character that external images can correspond to internal states. Writing about a stone was a way to be personally accurate, a way to tell a subjective truth. In other words, ‘I’m not really a stone, but I’m like a stone.’ When I wrote, ‘I am a stone,’ I was telling Ben, ‘You can make up things in a poem,’ and I was saying, “You’re not alone, fellow. I too could be stony.””

Braziller: Thank you.

Chase: So that’s just the very beginning, and then it unfolds. And then he really starts to be quite expressive.

Braziller: If you have questions now, feel free, but obviously there will be time at the end, too.

Ostriker: Did you use the same strategy with other patients?

Chase: A few. It was really different with each patient. But there were several patients where I alternated lines.

Ostriker: Brilliant strategy.

McKeithen: Karen, I was struck in reading your book by your own wish for silence at the same time that you were connecting with Ben, and I’m wondering if you in any way felt that that helped some of what transpired between the two of you—your wish for silence after your mother’s death.

Chase: Well, I think one reason the work we did together was as fruitful as it was is that we did share certain things, like not really wanting to use very many words. That was certainly one of the things. Another thing, which I talk about at length in the book, is that I had polio as a little girl and was paralyzed. He was a very rigid person, and I think that rigidity stirred something up in me about my young paralysis.

Braziller: It’s such a perplexing story, really, that he was completely silent and then responded to these poems, and did come out of himself. The poetry led him back to life, but not very completely, right, as I understand?

Chase: Right. This is not a miracle story. It’s really not.

Braziller: Exactly.

Chase: But he did begin to speak, and he did begin to function well enough so that when he left the hospital he had a job.

A: Did he ever talk about the experience of writing poetry after he regained his speech?

Chase: Yes, it was really fascinating. In the last few months, he did bring up things about the poems, and at the end he said, “I always thought words were going to be the important part,” or something like that.

Braziller: I was so interested because a lot of the poems, as you write, or as you were saying before—only went so far. In other words, he wrote about the weather, he wrote about color and light and storms, and that seemed to give him some pleasure or some contact, but it went no further than that.

Chase: What do you mean when you say it went no further?

Braziller: He didn't become intimate. Nothing of his history came out, or he didn't really write deep, deep thoughts—or did he?

Chase: Well, the set-up between us was just writing poems, and was not talking. Every word that he said to me in two years is in this book. That's how few words he actually said. But as time went on, for example, the way he would write about storms became narrative. He had introduced the past tense; he had introduced the future tense. He was able to write things with a line, with a beginning, a middle and an end when he wrote about storms. So that felt very profound for me.

Braziller: It was.

Chase: Or thrilling anyway.

Braziller: It was. It was.

Levy: Karen, I can't help projecting onto this the character in Bergman's *Persona*—there's the actress who doesn't speak, and the whole movie is a disquisition on the reversal that occurs because eventually it's the actress who does speak and the nurse is kind of brought into silence. Did you find in your relationship, like in a therapeutic relationship, was his coming out of himself, at least in poetry, having any countervailing effect on you in any way? Is that something that was going on between the two of you guys?

Chase: Absolutely. I really had never talked much at all about my polio, and I ended up really thinking, why do I feel so connected to this guy? I began to think, "Oh! I have a story, too." So it had a huge effect in that that material bubbled to the surface.

McKeithen: I was just wondering how you used the "third thing," but then also in your book there's the third—with Dennis. So there's Ben, and then I'm wondering if that allowed a sort of collaboration that mirrored what you were doing with the writing.

Chase: The character of Dennis in the book was my supervisor. I'm not sure I understand exactly what you're asking, but maybe I do, so I'm going to try to answer. I don't think I could have done the work I did with Ben without having the supervision I had, because I had never studied psychology—had no plan to—and it was safe for me to be completely focused on this very intriguing and mysterious character. I couldn't have done that without someone overseeing the work and knowing the details of what went on and questioning me about it.

A: Did he ever go on to write poems himself without you feeding any of the lines? Do you know if he writes today or ever wrote afterwards?

Chase: Once I knew he was going to be discharged, I started feeling like, “Okay, now I’m going to really try to get him to write on his own,” because I had been absolutely religious in not ever introducing anything new. Any change came from him. But he was about to leave the hospital, so I thought, “Okay, I’m just going to try.” So one day I said to him, “Why don’t I write the first line today and then you write the whole rest of the poem.” And he did that. When he was leaving the room, he picked up the pad—a regular white-lined pad, the same as every pad we had used for two years—and he looked at it, and he said, “Is this different paper?” It was kind of heartbreaking and he never did it again. He was not interested in doing it again.

Braziller: Let me interrupt. We’ll come back to this; we’ll have time for questions afterwards, but I think we should move along. Madge, you’re next—a very different experience.

McKeithen: Yes, 1997. My then fourteen-year-old son began to show signs of stiffening in his walk, in his gait. I remember it was Tuesday, November 13th, when a neurologist actually said, “We’re dealing with things that aren’t normal.” His name is Isaac; Ike is his nickname. He’s now almost twenty-five, and we’ve been to all the major medical institutions and we still don’t have a name. His illness is progressive; for the first four years it was only in his walk, as far as we knew, and then all of a sudden it became apparent that it was also involving cognitive loss. I have another son, two years younger than Ike. I just sort of found poetry, turned to it almost out of desperation. Doctors couldn’t give answers. I had begun to start writing on my own and pursuing an M.F.A. and making a job change, because I needed something that could be interrupted as much as it appeared that things were going to be with Ike’s illness.

I guess it was the winter of 2004 when I began to look at all these poems that I had just accumulated and stuck into places. It’s really a delight to talk about the poetry part of the book for me, because it really was like falling in love. I can remember being at Mayo Clinic, and we’d been through days and days of tests, and Ike was asleep in the room, and I dashed to the bookstore that was connected through these sort of rabbit-warrens that allow you to move around in Rochester, Minnesota without going outside. I went to the medical section of the bookstore and spent a couple of hours in there second-guessing everything the doctors had been looking for—you know maybe they’d missed something—and then on my way out the door I stopped in the poetry section and pulled the blue and brown spine off the shelf and sat for a couple of hours with Emily Dickinson. I put it back on the shelf, didn’t buy it, but I remember leaving, going back to the room, thinking I had something I hadn’t even known to ask for. I hope that’s not too simplistic, but I then began to put together these poems I had just ripped out of things, and thought, “I’ll just put together an anthology, and maybe it’ll help somebody.” I showed it to a couple of people and they said, “It’s not apparent what these are, so you need to write to tell us what they mean to you.”

The book came together around that—these poems that had been sort of lifelines or things that I needed to turn to. You don’t want to tell your friends all, you don’t want to be the dullard at every party, so you read to be sort of alone and with yourself. So it’s really a delight to be here to talk and focus on the poetry. I want to read just a small section that probably is from one of the toughest times: when we crossed from believing we were dealing with an illness that was just movement-oriented, and then began to see that it was affecting cognition. When I began to fear that I was going to lose the ability to talk to Ike and have him speak to me, it felt like that was a whole new domain. We were living in New York. Ike lives in a wonderful place in Pennsylvania,

and I had gone and taken him to his doctor in Philadelphia and returned home with this new piece of news as to what was going on with him.

Each of the little sections in the book starts with a poem, and then sometimes elaborates on the poem and sometimes just uses it as a springboard to tell Ike's story. This starts with a poem that's called "Text," by Alan Michael Parker.

*It has taken me forty years to admit
emotions have no words.
I express and repress, scrawl
vowels on a placemat,*

*test my artistry
against a poor drawing of the Acropolis
Find me wanting.
Which is not to say that as a man*

*I am inarticulate by nature, or that the sunshine
moves through the sugar shaker
and then through me without stopping.
Or that even as someone who learns*

*in metaphor, I am much different from
the sparrow outside the Greek diner,
atop the crusted snow,
brainless with hunger.*

*On my walk back from town this morning,
I met a woman in her driveway,
one hand on a snow-blower. Weeping.
The enormous trumpet of the red machine*

*blew the powder into the air,
noise going nowhere as she wept.
They seemed to me as one,
she and her machine, and what could I do—*

*the placemat folded in my pocket
sang itself a pretty lie
What could I say? Sorry.
Then she realized I had stopped:*

*she smiled badly, wiped her nose,
and went back to tidying.
And I went back to trudging through
words, head down, humming out of tune.*

McKeithen: So that's his poem.

"I am desperately sad. The news from the doctor hits hard. Subcortical dementia. For two days, the research into those words keeps me busy. Now I have a notion, at least, of Ike's likely cognitive decline. Day three, an avalanche of sadness stuns me.

"I am alone in the apartment, trying to work, and a single word comes, unsought and insistent, over and over—*shard*. I speak it out loud and listen to it. I wonder where it comes from, whether it is meant to bring relief and how it might. The sorrow feels impenetrable, even corrosive. I cannot get around it. It seems unfair to call a friend, to use another for my own comfort. Friends could offer an illusion or a feeling, but I am *atop the crusted snow, / brainless with hunger* for things to be other than they are. None of us can change things with Ike. No friend. No husband. No parent. No sibling. Nothing I can say or do. No bargaining position. The pain of it is unspeakable.

"It has taken me forty years to admit emotions have no words."

"Utter pain.

*"...a snow-blower. Weeping.
The enormous trumpet of the red machine
blew the powder into the air.
noise going nowhere as she wept."*

"The machine of my sadness is deafening and inescapable; it is all of me.

"*Shard*. I go to the living room and turn the whisper-thin pages of the unabridged dictionary and consider the word's meanings. *Shard* shares an Anglo-Saxon root with *shear*. *Shard* suggests beauty in a way that *piece* and *fragment* do not. 'The precious dish broke into shards of beauty on the board,' *Webster's* offers.

"I think of breaking open sun-bleached sand dollars to find doves. I remember art history class and a Grecian urn extrapolated from a few shards. Shards of pottery, of shells, suggest the whole. With this illness on this particular day, I do not glimpse a whole."

And then I turn to the poet's words again.

*"Find me wanting.
Which is not to say that as a man*

*I am inarticulate by nature, or that the sunshine
moves through the sugar shaker
and then through me without stopping.*

"I am mouth-open, mute. My son's illness is refractory, bending and breaking apart things passed through it.

"I look for, I need, words, lines, even ones falling short, maybe lying, incomplete, imperfect.

"*Shard* and its form, *sherd*, I read, have two other meanings—first, a boundary, and second, a gap in a fence or a wall. The word that means brokenness and beauty brings more—dividing lines and breaks in them, permeability and the seemingly impenetrable.

"Words slip in. First a shard, then more sought... *what could I do-- / ...What could I say?*" The woman with the snowblower and the one with *the placemat folded in my pocket* continue, *tidying. / And...trudging through / words, head down, humming out of tune.* There is a text this morning."

So I guess I know that sounds almost too somber and remote, but it was extremely powerful to me at a time when I just walked around the room going, "How can this be? How can this be?" That a poem that was questioning could there be words in fact gave me words.

Braziller: That was beautiful. Maybe we can go ahead with Alicia, and if there's time permitting, I'd love you to read your title poem, the Emily Dickinson poem and talk a little bit about how you came to that final stanza. It's very interesting.

Levy: One thing that came to my mind right away is that the situation that you talked about is a little different from a therapeutic situation. Underlying the character of Philoctetes is trauma, and here you talked about taking something very painful and it actually becoming an occasion for pleasure of some sort. That's the way it sounds. It's extraordinary, actually.

Braziller: Trying to give this class a title, we stumbled on that—A Sense of One's Self—and now I'm wondering why I came up with that title, because I think that in chapter after chapter, there's this feeling that when you could just absolutely lose yourself in the chaos, the poetry unites you with another, and also with a heroic sense of what your mission is in relationship to your son, that you have to continue.

McKeithen: I think in reading the books of the others who are here tonight as well, I kept seeing overlaps and connections, and what you just said about the last poem, "The Blue Peninsula—"

When I sent this manuscript out, it had a very different title, and I didn't see the redemption.

Levy: What was your title?

McKeithen: *Affirming Loss*. Yeah, so it's amazing he even read it, right? When I went in he said, "But the title is..." and he pointed me to the Emily Dickinson poem at the end, and he said, "What do you think?" I said, "Sounds absolutely right and it scares the hell out of me."

Braziller: But we have to come back to that.

Ostriker: Before we do, what you read reminded me of another Emily Dickinson poem, the one that begins, "After great pain a formal feeling comes." What you were saying reminded me of that because that poem is talking about stiffening, about becoming like stone after great pain. But the formal feeling that you are describing has to do with the formality of poetry—that it's words, shards of words, set beautifully together that somehow respond to the pain.

A: I thought you were asking a question, and with your last line you answered it.

McKeithen: That there is a text.

A: There is a text. You sort of resolve, to a certain degree, what it was that was such tremendous pain. It was beautiful. And it's a great poem.

Braziller: The more I think about it, ending the whole evening on that Emily Dickinson stanza from "The Blue Peninsula" will be—if we have time.

McKeithen: Okay, thank you.

Braziller: Alicia?

Ostriker: My first experience of writing as an attempt at self-therapy was in my thirties when I decided to write a set of autobiographical poems about my childhood, which would enable me to figure out where it all went wrong and exorcise everything and then I would be free and clear. That was my plan. It didn't happen. I did write a set of autobiographical poems. They were completely different from what I thought they would be. They didn't release me from anything, but they were more loving and less angry than I thought they were going to be.

What I'd like to do now is read one poem which was very important for me in my life. This comes from my late thirties, and a period when my marriage was in big trouble. I've been married for almost fifty years to the same person. I was just talking about this to my taxi driver, who thought it was weird.

This poem is called "The Exchange," and I wrote it after an experience which the poem describes, a kind of waking-dream.

I am watching a woman swim below the surface
Of the canal, her powerful body shimmering,
Opalescent, her black hair wavering
Like weeds. She does not need to breathe. She faces

Upward, keeping abreast of our rented canoe.
Sweet, thick, white, the blossoms of the locust trees
Cast their fragrance. A redwing blackbird flies
Across the sluggish water. My children paddle.

If I dive down, if she climbs into the boat,
Wet, wordless, she will strangle my children
And throw their limp bodies into the stream.
Skin dripping, she will take my car, drive home.

When my husband answers the doorbell and sees
This magnificent naked woman, bits of sunlight
Glittering on her pubic fur, her muscular
Arm will surround his neck, once for each insult

Endured. He will see the blackbird in her eye,
Her drying mouth incapable of speech,
And I, having exchanged with her, will swim
Away, in the cool water, out of reach.

The experience of imagining all this was shocking to me, and haunted me until I wrote the poem, and afterward. I didn't see the poem as therapeutic. I saw it as diagnostic, which is, I think, an important distinction. The poem was telling me something about myself that I didn't want to know, because of course in all family disputes I was the innocent victim. I was good, I was kind, I was gentle, I was nonviolent. That was centrally who I was—the good victim. The poem told me that I was submerging a murderous, violent, female goddess type, and I had to admit I had this alter-ego, and what that told me was that there was a self I had been submerging. She didn't *like* being submerged, and that's why she was violent and murderous. It was perfectly clear that what I would have to do was try to drop the “good girl” definition of myself and integrate power into my life—integrate this woman into my normal, everyday life, which is of course a life-long task. I wanted to read that poem as one kind of revelation of a self to a self. It distresses me when people see this poem as a triumphant fantasy. I didn't see it that way at all.

Then I want to read a few of this sequence of poems, *The Mastectomy Poems*, of which there were originally twelve. There are ten excerpted in this book of selected poems. I'll start with the first one. They began being written six months after my surgery, which was in December, 1990. The June after that, I gave myself a present of a week's solitude in a cabin we have in the Berkshires, where I had nothing but food, wine, a lot of books, and a radio. No phone, no electricity. It's a wonderful place to retreat. I began many of the poems that ended up in a book called *The Crack in Everything*, including these.

The bridge is the George Washington Bridge from New Jersey, where I live, to New York, but since it's a poem, of course it's symbolic.

The Bridge

You never think it will happen to you,
What happens every day to other women.
Then as you sit paging a magazine,
Its beauties lying idly in your lap,
Waiting to be routinely waved goodbye
Until next year, the mammogram technician
Says, Sorry, we need to do this again,

And you have already become a statistic,
Citizen of a country where the air,
Water, your estrogen, have just saluted
Their target cells, planted their Judas kiss
Inside the Jerusalem of the breast.
Here on the film, what looks like specks of dust
Is calcium deposits.

Go put your clothes on in a shabby booth
Whose curtain reaches halfway to the floor.
Try saying fear. Now feel
Your tongue as it cleaves to the roof of your
mouth.

Technicalities over, medical articles read,
Decisions made, the Buick's wheels
Nose across Jersey toward the hospital
As if on monorail. Elizabeth
Exhales her poisons, Newark airport spreads
Her wings—the planes take off over the marsh—
A husband's hand plays with a ring.

Some snowflakes whip across the lanes of cars
Slowed for the tollbooth, and two smoky gulls
Veer by the steel parabolas.
Given a choice of tunnel or bridge
Into Manhattan, the granite crust
On its black platter of rivers, we prefer
Elevation to depth, vista to crawling.

So that's the opening, and the sequence goes through a long process. This one is called
"Mastectomy," dedicated to my surgeon, Alison Esterbrook.

I shook your hand before I went.
Your nod was brief, your manner confident,
A ship's captain, and there I lay, a chart
Of the bay, no reefs, no shoals.
While I admired your boyish freckles,
Your soft green cotton gown with the oval neck,
The drug sent me away, like the unemployed.
I swam and supped with the fish, while you
Cut carefully in, I mean
I assume you were careful.
They say it took an hour or so.

I liked your freckled face, your honesty
That first visit, when I said
What's my odds on this biopsy
And you didn't mince words,
One out of four it's cancer.
The degree on your wall shrugged slightly.
Your cold window onto Amsterdam
Had seen everything, bums and operas.
A breast surgeon minces something other
Than language.

That's why I picked you to cut me.

Was I succulent? Was I juicy?
Flesh is grass, yet I dreamed you displayed me
In pleated paper like a candied fruit,
I thought you sliced me like green honeydew
Or like a pomegranate full of seeds
Tart as Persephone's, those electric dots
That kept that girl in hell,
Those jelly pips that made her queen of Death
Doctor, you knifed, chopped and divided it
Like a watermelon's ruby flesh
Flushed a little, serious about your line of work
Scooped up the risk in the ducts
Scooped up the ducts
Dug out the blubber,
Spoonfed it off and away, nipple and all.
Eliminated the odds, nipped out
Those almost insignificant cells that might
Or might not have lain dormant forever.

Okay, jumping ahead, I'll just read two more. This one's called "Wintering," with an epigraph from the poet Lucille Clifton that says, "I had expected more than this. I had not expected to be an ordinary woman."

It snows and stops, now it is January,
The house plants need feeding,
The guests have gone. Today I'm half a boy,
Flat as something innocent, a clean
Plate just lacking a story.
A woman should be able to say
I've become an Amazon
Warrior woman minus a breast,
The better to shoot arrow
After fierce arrow,
Or else I am that dancing Shiva
Carved in the living rock at Elephanta,
Androgynous deity, but I don't feel
Holy enough or mythic enough.
Taking courage, I told a man I've resolved
To be as sexy with one breast
As other people are with two
And he looked away.

Spare me your pity,
Your terror, your condolence.
I'm not your wasting heroine,

Your dying swan. Friend, tragedy
Is a sort of surrender.
Tell me again I'm a model
Of toughness. I eat that up.
I grade papers, I listen to wind.
My husband helps me come, it thaws
A week before semester starts

Now Schubert plays, and the tenor wheels
Through Heine's Lieder. A fifteen-year survivor
Phones: You know what? You're the same
Person
After a mastectomy as before. An idea
That had never occurred to me.
You have a job you like? You have poems to
write?
You marriage is okay? It will stay that way."
The wrinkles are worse. I hate looking in the
mirror
But a missing breast, well, you get used to it.

Braziller: Are you going to read "Normal" by any chance?

Ostriker: "Normal." Okay, yes. I'll read "Normal." This one has an epigraph from Emily
Dickinson, so this will be the last one I'll read. "Assent, and you are sane."

First classes, the sun is out, the darlings
Troop in, my colleagues
Tell me I look normal. I am normal.
The falsie on my left makes me
In a certain sense more perfectly normal.
An American who lives beyond my means,
A snake-oil foot in the door,
A politician with a strong
Handshake in an election year.
Crafted of latex, it repairs the real.
Like one of those trees with a major limb lopped,
I'm a shade more sublime today than yesterday.
Stormed at with shot and shell,
A symbol of rich experience,
A scheme to outlive you all.

Meanwhile a short piece of cosmic string
Uncoiled from the tenth dimension
Has fastened itself to my chest.
Ominous asp, it burns and stings,
Grimaces to show it has no idea

How it arrived here.
Would prefer to creep off.
Yet it is pink and smooth as gelatin.
It will not bite and can perhaps be tamed.
Want to pet it? It cannot hurt you.
Care to fingertip my silky scar?

Now I am better, charming. I am well.
Yes, I am quite all right. I never say
The thing that is forbidden to say,
Piece of meat, piece of shit.
Cooled, cropped, I'm simple and pure.
Never invite my colleagues
To view it pickled in a Mason jar.

Braziller: Alicia, I interrupted you. Could you read the last little one, because I know you were headed there.

Ostriker: I was headed there. Okay. The last one is called "Epilogue: Nevertheless."

The bookbag on my back. I'm out the door.
Winter turns to spring
The way it does, and I buy dresses.
A year later, it gets to where
When they say *How are you feeling*,
With that anxious look on their faces,
And I start to tell them the latest
About my love life or my kids' love lives,
Or my vacation or my writer's block—
It actually takes me a while
To realize what they have in mind.
I'm fine, I say, *I'm great*, *I'm clean*.
The bookbag on my back, I have to run.

Braziller: That's great.

Chase and McKeithen: Excellent. Yeah, that's wonderful.

Ostriker: Okay, now we chat.

Braziller: Any questions?

Chase: Thank you so much for reading those. I don't know if there's any way you can answer this, but since you were dealing with such autobiographical material, was it fighting with your imagination? Or how did they intersect?

Ostriker: This stayed pretty close to actuality. The way the imagination worked in the poem was through metaphors. So, for example, when I imagine that what the surgeon is cutting into is all kinds of fruit, that's where the imagination comes in. Or another poem where I make metaphor after metaphor about what the breast meant to me. So the autobiographical facts are there as fact, and then a lot of the elaboration is metaphoric and that's where imagination comes in.

Braziller: This was written a year after?

Ostriker: The poems got started a half year after the surgery and then I worked on them for another year or so. And I have to say, they were fun to work on. I worked on them really hard—a lot of revisions, a lot of versions, trying to get them right.

Braziller: When during the experience did you start to think of the metaphors? Were they coming to you as you were going through this?

Ostriker: Oh no, not at all. It didn't begin transforming itself into poetry until I gave it permission to do that in six months. I was teaching, which is a completely different activity from writing, and I had the surgery in December and wanted to have it as fast as I could after my diagnosis, so that I could teach the following semester, because that's therapy. But the writing the poems was hard work, but the best kind of hard work, because I felt they would be useful to other people and not just to myself if I wrote them well.

Chase: Is that what was fun? Or what was fun? I mean, was writing them more fun than writing other things?

Ostriker: Writing is fun. But writing these was harder work than writing some things and also more fun, because mostly when you're writing poetry you don't know that it has a use in the world, and these I knew would.

A: Did they have a use for you in a transformative sense, and when you finished them were you finished with this experience?

Ostriker: I didn't think it was particularly transformative except, you know, I'm a poet. When I thought the sequence was finished, which took more than a year, that was good. When Hilda Raz, who edits *Prairie Schooner*, asked me if I would write an essay for a book of essays she was editing by women poets on breast cancer, I said, "No. I wrote the poems; I'm finished." And she said, "No, you're not. You have an essay to write." And it turned out I did.

A: More than just being useful, wasn't it getting to the unconscious, the creativity, the depths that you couldn't get to any other way, except through poetry?

Ostriker: Well, that's what poetry is for—

A: Yes!

Ostriker: So everything I do does that.

A: Yes, whereas the by-product is that it's useful to others.

Ostriker: Yeah.

Braziller: Wasn't that what you were asking, Karen, in a sense, that this is very, very difficult material and maybe fights the imagination.

Ostriker: Not really. It was like good red meat. Both of you must know, the trick is to go deep enough so that you get it right. I mean that's the job. It's not a trick. It's a job, it's a task.

A: Ms. Chase, did you ever read poems to this fellow that you wrote with?

Chase: I offered to, and he did not want to hear anyone else's poems. However, every week I would return. The beginning of our meetings started with my reading aloud the poem we had written the week before. He loved to hear the poems we wrote. I'll read one of the last ones.

In fact there's a voice
it relays and echoes
all around
in the background, bell-sound
The two together
produce sound everywhere
The landscape is blanketed with their sound
There is a lot of relay
and boomerang
The Sounds go far away
they then resume

Ostriker: Now we don't know who wrote which.

Chase: You might. You have to look in the book.

Ostriker: It's beautiful.

Chase: You know, he could write and he could talk.

A: Did he read your book?

Chase: No, as far as I know. I would be extremely surprised. I don't know where he is. I've tried to find him.

Ostriker: Is Ben his real name?

Chase: No. It's my grandfather's name.

Braziller: I'd love it if Madge would read that closing one. As I remember, it's a very joyful, intensely delightful ending that somehow signaled your own coming out of, or beginning to grow yourself, in spite of what was going on. It's also a great poem.

McKeithen: Should I talk about it and then read the poem?

Braziller: Whatever you think is best. We can conclude on this unless there'll be other questions afterward.

So how do you write it? You cite the poem first and then you write about it?

McKeithen: Right.

Braziller: It might be more interesting if you could read some of your own writing. However you want to do it.

McKeithen: Both. Okay. It is a four-stanza poem that for the longest time I carried around, folded, and just couldn't get to the last stanza. Maybe I should just read the Emily Dickinson poem first. It's called "It Might Be Lonelier." Well, that's her first line.

It might be lonelier
Without the Loneliness —
I'm so accustomed to my Fate —
Perhaps the Other — Peace —

Would interrupt the Dark —
And crowd the little Room —
Too scant — by Cubits — to contain
The Sacrament — of Him —

I am not used to Hope —
It might intrude upon —
Its sweet parade — blaspheme the place —
Ordained to Suffering —

It might be easier
To fail — with Land in Sight —
Than gain — My Blue Peninsula —
To perish — of Delight —

"An endurance poem for anyone with eyes adjusted to seeing in the dark, *not used to Hope--/ ... Ordained to Suffering*, for one who can trace the shape of a sorrow from the inside like a second skin. In words measured and hewn, the poet, in her essential task of making, creates and articulates and exposes my loneliness for the company that it is.

"The voice in this poem knows that enormous *Dark* allows no room for *Peace*. Heaven forbid that the infidel *Hope* try to force its bully way in, disrespecting the sacred hall of *Suffering*. For three verses, there is no pushing or scolding or prompting or suggesting a self-help book on grief management. It is pain drawn sacred, deserving of a space measured in cubits, ordained, a sacrament, tended to, shielded from blasphemy. *Suffering* and *Loneliness* are respected, exalted.

“From the poems that I have kept and read and reread over the last eight years, I have received or extracted in increments when the whole poem was too weighty or turned to the next thing too quickly, when what I needed was strength to stay and be. For years I did not read the last stanza in this poem. Poems especially lend themselves to fragmentary reading and rereading. I partook of the rare and profound food in the first verses and chose not to taste the delight at the poem's end. At the same time, I could not excise it. I knew it was there.

“For several years, I kept the fourth stanza folded under. The lining of the pocket in my bag where I tucked the poem turned the crease in the paper red. In the final stanza, the poem turns on its heel and accuses me of enshrouding myself cowardly in the loneliness, the dark fate, the suffering and lying down to die. It indicted me for languishing in misery.

“In the last year, the poem for me has become all about the fourth stanza, all about the harder task of reaching for the *Blue Peninsula*, risking delight again in my life, given Ike's illness. What might be on *My Blue Peninsula*? What might I be afraid to gain? What might I be conveniently, timidly avoiding by staying encased in painful, familiar, safe victimhood?

“Familiar with the wound, I had become a wound. And from there I could render suspect all love, joy, friendship, companionship. I could avoid self-exposure, defer knowing myself or having others venture in. It could be all about my son's illness, how noble. Might happiness or fulfillment or purpose be waiting? Could the desire to reach it bring with it the guts to risk it? As Ike is not his disease, could it be that I am not my sorrow?

“I would not have heard the fourth verse had I not steeped long in the first three. Now that I have read the fourth many times, the *Room Ordained* in the beginning does not read the same. The room is still sacred and set apart, but the door is open. It is not an ultimate destination. Read through, the poem has re-created itself. The *Dark* house a dare, a goading: *It might be easier / To fail*. From its windows billow challenges to me. Do I have it in me to reach for *Peace, Hope, even Delight*? Is there an *Other* to interrupt *my Fate*? Can I answer? Carl Sandberg writes,

*“Let joy kill you.
Keep away from the little deaths.*

“Imagine that.”

Braziller: That's great. “Imagine that.” That's terrific.

McKeithen: So thank you, Emily Dickinson.

Ostriker: I've been wondering two things. What was poetry to you before this all happened? And the other question is, do you write poems?

McKeithen: I think I've always been open to reading poetry at different levels of intensity, and I express myself in verse sometimes, but I very much respect poetry too much to say, “I've got to write poems.” I love to read poems.

Braziller: Were you church-going?

McKeithen: Yes, I was raised in the Presbyterian Church, so certainly hymns and verse and scripture—

Braziller: So that's sort of where it began, and it's in some ways a similar—

McKeithen: There's some Old Testament in here, too. There's some verse.

Ostriker: You write about your response so beautifully that *it's* poetry.

McKeithen: Thank you.

Ostriker: It feels so deeply said and so beautifully said and so profoundly said. I think that the distinction between prose and poetry is iffy. That Dickinson poem reminds me of once when I was teaching Dickinson to a class of sophomores. They were irritated, and it was clear they didn't like it that she wrote about death and depression and madness so much. You know—how unhealthy of her. I tried to explain that Dickinson was someone who was afraid of nothing that could occur in her mind, that she was completely fearless. Most of us are so careful about what we allow ourselves to feel, and she was open to feeling everything, and wanted to feel everything as intensely as possible, whereas most of us are cowards emotionally. One kid in the class got it. He muttered, "Cool."

Braziller: Did she have an influence on you in that way? You just say all kinds of things about what goes through your mind with alterations.

Ostriker: Yeah, it's very important that she could allow any emotion, including ecstasy, which most people are also afraid of, as well as fear and pain. It seemed to me like a good model.

A: Doesn't poetry allow any of us to try it—if it's real or good poetry or not—allow us to get to areas that we wouldn't get to otherwise?

Ostriker: I hope so.

A: Because of the rhythm and the beauty of it, and the words. We love words, so therefore we'll get to things that otherwise we wouldn't. You don't have to be Emily Dickinson.

A: It was very interesting, that statement that Carl Sandberg made—

Braziller: It was a poem.

A: I think it's very true. I think that when you have a bad experience in life—I'm interpreting it that way, and I may be wrong—to keep focusing on the negatives makes it worse. The idea is to transcend beyond the negative and go into the positive, to misdirect your mind to positive things. A coward dies a million deaths. Most people die one death. You can't control your destiny, but you can control and misdirect your mind so you get a victory out of the darkness.

Braziller: Okay, thank you all very much.

