

Regrets, Rewards, and *What Ifs* . . .

Musing on Hypotheticals

Not long ago I was asked to join a panel at the Associated Writing Programs (AWP) convention to examine the ways in which we women “Of a Certain Age” (i.e., over sixty) think that both the literary life and our own careers have changed over time, and, more specifically, in the words of the novelist Janet Burroway, who organized the event, “how ambition persists, how we have handled disappointment, how we’d do it differently.” The questions were intriguing. After all, at a Certain Age, those of us on and off that panel have journeyed through enough of life’s territory to look back—sometimes blinkered, sometimes with binoculars—at the landscape of the past. At a Certain Age, or so journalists have lately been telling baby boomers, we discover that our constant companions on the voyage out have become those alliterative twins Regret and Remorse, the one perhaps self-pitying, the other often self-flagellating. At a Certain Age, we see that the choices shaping our stories are now all too evident; here they are in high relief: the roads taken or not taken, the trails blazed or left overgrown.

But wait, here’s the voice of my mother—dead at ninety-seven in 2001: “Regret? Remorse? What about rewards, what about pleasure, what about joy?” “You had a happy childhood, dear,” she would sometimes say, after attending one of my readings. “Why must your poems be so morbid?”

Yes, at a certain age we savor rewards, not just worldly ones but memories that are rewards. Yet what most often wakes us at the hour of the wolf—the scary before-dawn moment that comes to so many—what really wakes us with a start is the question, *What*

if. . . This is the question that I'd identify with what lawyers like to call "the hypotheticals."

"Let's say the doctor didn't operate that day, what would he have done, what if he'd been sober the night before, what if the resident had been on the job instead of in the linen closet with the nurse?" Or the lawyer within, my superego speaking to my *moi*, as the French call the ego: "What if you hadn't gone on that roadtrip across Europe when you were twenty years old and six months pregnant? Would the baby have come to term—and lived?"

I'm focusing here on the deeply personal hypotheticals that haunt me most, the ones about loss and how it might have been averted: the wrongful death of my husband of thirty-five years after routine surgery in February 1991, the death of my three-day-old premature baby in September 1958. About my husband's death, I've written quite a few poems, including one called "The Hypothetical Life," in which I imagine us living "the life that escaped the surgeon's scalpel, / the blood that rained / from tubes they planted in you," even while I recognize that on the "real white real-life / wall where [his] likeness / hangs in an artist's pencilled effigy" his image has begun to fade, as if "the sky and its surly / mists had started / leaking through," leaving only a "hypothetical person." About the death of my firstborn, I've never written a poem that I felt I could publish—perhaps a measure of the intensity of that early shock.

But our mission as panelists was to talk about our literary lives, and that is my mission in this book as well, so I'll focus here on a few professional hypotheticals that haunt me. And broodings on the hypothetical, rather than musings on reward or regret or remorse, are what these are. Of course there are countless *what ifs* on which I could meditate right now, but I'll confine myself to only two.

Here's the first. The time, June 1957. The place, a fancy New York hotel dining room, and I mean fancy as only fifties fancy could be: black-jacketed waiters, white tablecloths of the sort always described as "snowy," heavy plates, heavier silver, etcetera. The characters: Cyrilly Abels, Managing Editor of *Mademoiselle* magazine; a famously important editor at Knopf who shall be nameless because I've forgotten his name; and me, an awkward,

self-conscious twenty-year-old who is this year's Guest Managing Editor at *Mademoiselle*, working with the very Cyrilly who was soon to turn into the much-maligned Jay Cee of *The Bell Jar*.

Cyrilly (turning to me while nibbling chef's salad): No Name (the Knopf editor) is very interested in seeing your manuscript. He'd like to consider publishing it!

No Name (I recall him as a large, hearty man): Yes, young lady, I'd love to look at it. One of your teachers at Cornell recommended it highly to me!

(I know this may sound like an Alzheimer's fantasy, but it isn't. . . .)

Me (blushing and nibbling chef's salad): Oh I don't know. No. I don't think I'm really ready to show that manuscript to anyone. I don't think it's really good enough.

Yes, dear readers! I said it, I meant it—and did it ruin my life? Who can know? Maybe I was right and the book (for book it was) was awful. Maybe I was crazy because, after all, this was the nineteen-fifties and I was about to get married, turn down a fellowship to graduate school, and follow my husband (a doctoral candidate who'd been drafted into the army) to Germany, where he would be a Private First-Class in an ignominious encampment just outside Nurnberg, and I'd get pregnant and have a baby who'd be born prematurely and live only three days. And I'd stop writing poetry for five years.

Was I right? Was I wrong? I didn't publish a book of poems—and certainly none of those poems in the manuscript that interested No Name Editor—for more than twenty years. Instead, I went to graduate school at Columbia, refused to join any writing workshops (though I could have taken some at Columbia's even then rather prestigious School of General Studies) and mostly stalked apart from the literary scene in what Byron, describing his brooding Childe Harold, called "joyless revery."

But who am I to decide, as the hour of the wolf strikes and the clock dings four-thirty A.M., then five A.M., whether I should have said yes or no to No Name Editor, so hearty and welcoming, with salad dressing dribbling down his chin? And if I had said yes, who can say that he'd then, himself, have said yet another yes to the manuscript?

And then—to finish this not truly tall tale of hypotheticals—

there I was, fifteen years later, having just been fired from what was in any case a rather crummy job at a California State College, which, like the Editor, shall be nameless (although in this case I could, but won't, disclose the name). Fired, or rather, as I wrote in a poem that I long regarded as an originatory myth of my life as a writer and academic, "not retained"! But I had just had a book accepted—my doctoral dissertation, in fact—by a prestigious academic press, with many plaudits from a Critic who was in his way even more famous than No Name Editor. Still, the powers that "were" on that campus decided to boot me out. What was I to do? Everyone (including me) thought I was strangely, amazingly worthy; how extraordinary and, well, wrongful this situation was. It was the early seventies. Some of us had marched to protest the fate of a colleague fired the year before I met my nemesis. I myself had in fact led the march. Was this a vendetta for my late sixties/early seventies rebelliousness? Or what?

A couple of guys from the teachers' union came to see me and my husband; they sat in our living room drinking tea—or was it wine—or something, and said how extremely qualified I was, and how worthy I was, and how, as we all knew, I didn't deserve to be fired, or terminated, or "not retained," whatever. They wanted to take my case. They wanted to fight for me so that everybody in California, all over the state system, would know that you don't fool around with the Union. And as for me, I had grown up singing Union Songs: "Oh you can't scare me, I'm fightin' for the Union," and "There once was a union maid / She never was afraid," and so forth.

They looked earnestly at me and my husband, and we—long-time New York City union supporters—looked earnestly back at them. Shouldn't they, couldn't they, take My Case?

In the event, I said No, as I'd said No to No Name Editor under such different circumstances. I didn't want the "negative publicity," I told myself. Was I just a "careerist"? This union maid *was* "afraid"! I wanted another "real" job, a "serious" job. But then I was plunged into several years of theatrical anxiety, at one point splitting up my tight-knit family—my husband, me, our three kids, then twelve, ten, and eight—so I could go, after a desperate period of joblessness, to the heart of the heart of the

country, Bloomington, Indiana, where I took on (temporarily) a life of singular autonomy, i.e., singleness, away from my beloved and our children.

As I always tell interviewers (and Susan Gubar does too), it was there that Susan and I met and—since it was 1973 and the Second Wave of feminism was beginning to crest—we taught a course in literature by women that we called “The Madwoman in the Attic,” then turned it into a book and became feminist critics, working together on a range of projects for the next thirty-five years. But what if I’d virtuously said Yes to the union guys? Or what if my life hadn’t ever even reached that particular crossroads because, okay, what if I’d said Yes to No Name Editor? What “brilliant career” would or wouldn’t have been mine?

Are these the regrets, the checks, the hesitations that must inevitably plague us as consciousness slams us toward the past in that oh-so-inevitable hour of the wolf? Trivial, perhaps. Think how much I’ve left out. Think of what T. S. Eliot speculated in “Burnt Norton”: “What might have been is an abstraction / Remaining a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation.” Thus the writings I offer in this book are traces of what really *was*. After I lost my first baby, I had three more children and went to graduate school, started writing poetry again, wrote a dissertation on D. H. Lawrence, got a range of academic jobs, became a feminist critic, and, while working on longer scholarly projects, reviewed many collections of and about verse for various journals. When my husband died following routine surgery, I wrote a memoir examining the circumstances of his shocking and untimely death, then turned to cultural studies of grief and mourning. But throughout all these years I kept on writing poetry, reading poetry, and thinking about it. The essays collected here—some previously published, some so far unpublished—are among the results of that ongoing process of meditation on verse. (Others, not included in this volume, are available online or in various periodicals.)

As the title “Confessional Poetics” indicates, part 1 of this book is the most personal. I wrote a number of the pieces as talks for AWP meetings or other events, and most reflect on my own hopes and practices as a poet. In part 2, “Figures in a Landscape,” I focus on individual poets who have meant a great deal

to me both as a writer and as a critic; all these essays have already appeared in print but all have been lightly revised for (re)publication. Finally, in part 3—"On Burning Ground"—I offer a sampling of (again, lightly revised) review-essays that I've written for *Poetry* magazine over a period of thirty years. I chose these particular texts because they represent my thoughts about a significant range of poets, but I could easily have selected essays about other poets to whose work I also responded strongly: because I am myself both a poet and a critic, I feel keenly the responsibilities of cultural analysis and aesthetic evaluation. As D. H. Lawrence declared, a poem is "an act of attention"—but so is a critical writing, for poetry both demands and (at its best) *exacts* meticulous attention.

Indeed, if the alternative life-plots—the hypotheticals—on which I've mused in this preface are merely abstractions, the perpetual possibility of poetry is always real: it is the ground on which I walk. Sometimes that terrain is perilous. As Matthew Arnold declared, in a passage that yielded the title of this book and that I have used as an epigraph for the collection, "we enter on burning ground as we approach the poetry of times . . . near to us [of which] the estimates are so often not only personal, but personal with passion." Perhaps some of the positions I've taken over the years have been problematic; Arnold's point is that the passage of centuries, or even decades, is both sobering and clarifying. Yet in all the texts I've included here I've traversed the burning ground of the present as warily and watchfully as possible. And after all, the lava that scorches the earth is as fertile as it is dangerous: volcanic ground nurtures as it glows—or so I hope.

—2008