



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

In Memoriam: Winifred Rawlins

Winifred Rawlins, my favorite Quaker poet, died last month at the age of ninety.

I met Wini in the early 1980s, when I was a very new Friend. She used to come to Friends Center on Wednesdays to mend clothes for the AFSC, and often stopped in at the Yearly Meeting library, where I was cataloger. One Wednesday I was cataloging a book about grieving, and saw that the author had included one of Wini's poems. I hotfooted it down to the basement to show Wini my discovery. The poem was called "The Fire in the Snow." Wini told me it came out of an experience at Pendle Hill when she was Head Resident there:

I came by night where snow lay deep;
All was transfixed in frozen sleep;
I felt a sudden small wind blow
And saw a fire burn in the snow,
With tongues of crimson throb and leap.
Who gave it life I could not know;
Some hand had kindled its brave show;
I felt its primal laughter steep
My mind in happiness and keep
Me gazing, with no will to go.
Now as I sit and watch you weep,
When knowledge fails and words are cheap,
I'll make a little smoldering glow
of tenderness, and bid it grow;
When it begins to laugh and leap
I'll light a fire in your snow.

I couldn't get this poem out of my mind. How could such straitness of form (only two rhyme sounds--aabba bbaab aabbab; a variety of rondel, perhaps?) contain such intensity of feeling? At that time I was always on the lookout for Quaker texts for art songs (Ned Rorem says there aren't any). So the next Wednesday I asked Wini if she'd mind if I tried setting it to music. Wini (taken aback): "Oh, my dear, of course not."

A few weeks later I performed the result for Wini and the library staff. For the record, the piano accompaniment consisted of two contrapuntal sets of parallel fourths. I don't think it was one of my more successful efforts. Wini was gracious, if bemused, and we had lunch together.

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From that day on I was her devoted reader. She found poems everywhere; theology, nature, people, the news, the minutiae of daily life are all part of the Lord's dealings with Winifred Rawlins. Whatever her subject, it is transfigured.

Her first volume, *Winter Solstice*, was published when she was in her forties. Her last, *New Forest of Hope*, consists of poems written during the last two years of her life. Though her mobility was severely impaired, her ability to find poems in daily experience was not:

The vacuum cleaner's growling greets the day.
Like prairie wolves on some cold wind-raked plain
It howls its message to our common Sun.
Its voice to us is noise, made by this curious toy
Fashioned by human hands to serve our need
Out of its atoms, with their little inner suns
And circling cosmic dance.
 Far into space
Its voice ascends: "I call from Planet Earth.
Praise be to all that is!"
Now it is silenced as the plug is pulled.
Once more the rug is free of lint and dust.

The composer in me delights in her ability to enter into dialogue with poetic forms without being bound by them. Note how she captures the pulling of the plug by omitting the last two feet after "Praise be to all that is!" Her meters and rhyme schemes strike me as organic, growing out of her listening to what the poem wanted to be.

Altogether her poetry feels—and perhaps this is why she was so modest about it—like a byproduct of being attuned to the whisperings of the Inward Teacher at every moment. But attunement was inseparable from embodiment; *not to give those whispers poetic incarnation would have been unfaithful*. Her life speaks in her poetry.

It seems right to let Wini have the last word:

Sin is denying the quick murmurings of love,
Faring on bleakly with habitual living, and forgetting
The compassionate lifting of the curtain,
The dear intrusion which for a fleeting moment
Broke through the door to the dull understanding
Like sunlight falling suddenly upon a hillside
And gently withdrawing.
Sin is to put aside as irrelevant
The pure stirring of the mind which comes
Pregnant with thoughts like beautiful strange flowers
Alien to the wintry landscape in which they unclose;

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Alien these thoughts to the prevailing frost
Of the mind's uncaring.
Alien and yet familiar and precious forever,
Speaking of all that the heart cries for its sanctuary,
Confirming the twilit nostalgia of dreams.
Love's pure intentions are flashing beacons of light,
Fading and intermittent if rejected,
But growing ever more constant to the obedient watcher,
Guiding him to his home.

SOURCES: "The Fire in the Snow" from *Dreaming Is Now*, Golden Quill Press, 1963; "The Vacuum Cleaner's Growling" from *New Forest of Hope*, Pittenbruach Press, 1996; "Sin is Denying" from *Winter Solstice*, Island Press Cooperative, 1952. Used by permission of her executor.

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