

How A Poem Becomes*

Snow was almost everywhere. We were living in a basement on Dubuque Street, and I was awake at about 2:00 a.m., listening to the wind outside blasting over the window wells. My assignment for Don Justice's poetry class was due, and I lay there with my wife Len sleeping warmly with child near me, thinking that I had absolutely nothing about which to write. The lilacs would probably not bloom again, and we would have difficulty attending classes, with all the snow and the slippery streets. There was a streak of light across the walls of the basement, across a few pieces of our modest furniture, the baby's crib waiting, which Len and I had saved every extra penny to buy, the oak dresser drawers which we had bought at an auction, and the mirror reflecting its dark and silvery images. The crib was a special one, with a bolt that could be released so the cradle could be swung back and forth to pacify our baby, so we could read to her and talk to her as she was cradled and sung to sleep. We had her little pink dresses already, all the little pink ribbons on her pillows, blankets, and bed. I lay there thinking of the crib, her little clothes, and how wonderful it was going to be to have a little girl join our little family. I lay there remembering the full moon over Tybee Island, the marsh and the empty beach cottages, the sand and the sandspurs, the quiet wind moving softly over and through the seaweed. I lay there thinking of the full moon Len and I had watched earlier during the most recent evening, the silhouetted branches of the pin oak near the lane, the cold and heavy rooftops of the neighboring houses, the occupants of which we had not really gotten to know, the cold gray sky which was obviously preparing itself for an all night of snow and angry winds. We were Southerners, and I lay there wishing we had never come north, wishing that I could just stroll down to the sea, walk along the beach, then out onto a jetty and feel that calm, eternally present peacefulness of being permanently within the Oneness of Nature. Len was breathing heavily, turning restlessly in her sleep, and I reached my hand gently over to feel those two hearts beating. Somehow, I knew the baby was going to be a little girl, she was so obedient and shy, and I comforted her, "It's okay, Stephe ...only the wind and snow acting up. Sleep well. Get some rest. Tomorrow we will take a walk in the snow...maybe even watch a movie in the Student Union. Now, go to sleep. Be a good little girl and go to sleep. We love you."

That was when the exasperating moans and groans began. They were coming from directly above us. The exhilarations, the sighs, the staccato chirps and soprano shrills were exasperating. They had to be in an iron bed, with very old springs, and the pounding and pounding of iron onto the wooden floors continued, over and over and over. I listened and waited, hoping that Len and the baby would not awake, listening and waiting for every next pounding of iron onto the overhead floor. I felt like an intruder, an uninvited guest, but there was not very much I could do about it. She was a young girl in her early twenties, blonde and shy. Len and I had only spoken to her a few times, only in passing, fairly formerly. I was hoping she would become thoroughly pleased and happy; but then, I heard the sound of heavy boots onto the upstairs floor. I continued listening, and about thirty minutes later I was at our small kitchen table scribbling the following:

Outside the moon, the springs
Upstairs are squeaking.
I have been listening

From down here below, while
The overhead affair reflects
Another kind of moon,

Windows, the reflections; how
Rapidly rhythmic go
Their springs. I have been

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Listening for some time. The bed
Must be made of iron; it
Pounds and pounds my over-

Head floor. The plaster drops;
Their springs stop; and
Almost immediately after,

Heavy feet, light feet
Move across the upstairs floor,
Toward the windows, unaware

At this point, of the moon,
Of my windows here below,
My windows listening

Upstairs. The faucets are
Running now; something
That sounds like soap, drops.

Someone gently blows her nose.
Then, there's the sound of boots;
A door opens all too soon.

The light feet are not the ones
Leaving; they are still near
The windows, barely shuffling

Their bewildered positions.
Perhaps she glances toward the moon.
But outside, below the windows,

An automobile hardly starts,
Cold; and even with the bright full
Moon, it's not my place to go:

Mine sleeps warmly beside me here.

At the time, I did not think the "poem" was very good, and I now see that it was terribly jagged and broken. To my no small surprise, however, Don Justice placed the poem on the following week's poetry writing worksheet. The responses were not at all exciting. Justice mentioned something about a few contemporary poets being eavesdroppers; Catherine Davis, Jephtha Evans, and Joseph DeRoche said absolutely nothing; but Michael Van Walleghen said the "poem" had "potential," which I now realize was merely a nice way of saying the poem had failed. Later, while visiting my mother and father in Savannah the following summer, I subsequently stuffed the poem into an old trunk in the attic, and forgot about it. While visiting with my parents, Len and I drove to Tybee Island almost every weekend and tried to plan our lives, especially whether or not we should return to Iowa City the forthcoming September. We always stayed at The DeSoto Beach Club, where I had worked most summers as a bartender during my undergraduate years at Miami; and we were often on the beach, watching the seagulls drifting over and around the seawalls, watching the waves bursting forth, trying to figure out what we did not understand about life and the pursuit of happiness.

My "would-be poem," then, had been buried in an old trunk in the attic in Savannah, and it would remain there for over twenty years, until I was removing some of my father's things and came across it.

As I removed the "poem" from the old trunk, I had a strange and empty feeling in my stomach, an eternal void that can only be described as feelings of isolation, aloneness, quiet desperation, and in general that feeling of not really wanting to continue, wishing nevertheless there could be some REASON to go on. I could not come to grips with why I felt so depressed having found the poem. For as long as I can remember, I have been obsessed with the past, experiences that happen to me which seem to demand my understanding them, or at least my coming to terms with their significances as they pertain to my survival or daily conduct. I knew at that time there were numerous unresolved feelings associated with the poem. I did not know what they were. I knew the girl in the poem was very important to me, but I did not know why. I sat there in the attic, hot as it was, for an inordinate period of time, trying to come to grips with whatever it was about the "poem" that seemed to be demanding that I revise it, that I in effect determine the real significance or meaning of the event. I am certain I was thinking that if I were to revise the poem I would resolve the enigma surrounding my feelings about the poem. I know NOW that there is life beyond poetry when there is life through poetry, that we find meanings, purposes, or catharses not simply during and after the process of creating poems, but when we move on, as we metamorphosize our losses, disappointments and frustrated aspirations, into something else.

Sometime during the Fall of 1987, I began revising the would-be poem that hung awkwardly down the page like a jagged and ugly vine. The line "from down here below, while" seemed sluggish primarily, I supposed, because of the shift from the voiced or vocal cord vibrations of "from down" to the unvoiced sounds of "here" and "below" in which the vocal cords are not caused to vibrate. The "m" and "n" are nasal with the lips closing and causing the sounds or the breath stream to issue through the nose, while "here below" hurries along with a decent amphimacer. The enjambments were supposed to suggest the suspensions upstairs or the senses as perceived in my head of the suspensions in the affair upstairs, as the three-line stanza was supposed to suggest the three of us; but rather, the enjambments and the three-line stanza only exposed the awkwardnesses of the poem. And how on earth had I ever written "Heavy feet, light feet" moving across an upstairs floor UNAWARE, unaware of "My windows listening/ Upstairs"? "My window-listening" would have been better; but even with the hyphenation, I was not window-listening but rather floor listening. In either case, the lines were terrible. I liked "...something/ That sounds like soap, drops," especially the comma pause after "soap," and I also liked the no doubt distasteful "...gently blows her nose" with the disruptive sense of the entire situation; but I did not like "A door opens all too soon," primarily because of "too soon," in that I had become too judgmental bordering on sentimentality. And I became so pleased with "Mine sleeps warmly beside me here" that I had been more than willing to quit the poem entirely. As I reviewed the poem twenty plus years after, I saw quite clearly that the "hardly" was archaic, and the "barely shuffling", "...it's not my part to go", "The plaster drops", and "At this point" were superfluous if not too explicit and would have to be revised from the poem.

Not only were there phonetic, rhythmic, and diction errors, but there did not seem to be any real strategy within the poem; or, if there was a strategy, then it was a conflicting one, in that one moment I seemed to be sympathetic toward the girl and the next moment I seemed to be callous. There was an overwhelming attitude of indifference toward the girl upstairs toward the end of the poem. But if I revised the last stanza it would mean that I would have to omit my favorite line, "Mine sleeps warmly beside me here." I tinkered with the poem and sent a version of it to Patrick Ellingham of The Cathartic and received a note in return that he liked the poem except that I seemed too harsh on the part of the girl, and I knew immediately that I would have to revise my favorite line from the poem, the way it moved so smoothly across the page, the liquids and nasals, the fricatives in "sleeps" and "beside", the assonance and consonance, the vowel mosaic aspect of the line, the interlacing of the "e" vowel. All of it would have to go, but in it rested the indifferences of the poem, at least this was what I was thinking. My last line involved a cathartic focusing and then turning away from suffering, turning away from the girl's situation in which I recognized was the heart of the poem.

Though most of the revising, then, involved the ending of the poem, using the anaphora to focus on the girl's predicament, there were various other versions that were changed hopefully so the reading of the poem would be smoother and the focus in the poem more distinctive than was the earlier Iowa version. The lines,

Their springs go so rapidly
and the bed
must be made of iron.
It pounds and pounds
my overhead floor,
and her gentle moanings
embarrass my silences...

seemed to hang too prosaically on the conjunctions, and there needed to be more pounding, hopefully creating a lingering effect with the "ing." The lines,

Finally, their springs stop
and soon afterwards
heavy feet and light feet...

suffered with the "soon" and became "immediately afterwards," though I liked "immediately after" better, except that the "after" tended to enjamb into "heavy feet," which would have made "heavy feet and light feet" parts of an adverbial phrase beginning with "after" which I did not want as "heavy feet and light feet" were to be subjects of the verb "move." The lines,

A door is opening, the light feet
are not the ones leaving.
They are still near,
as they will be forever,
barely changing, caught
in their bewildered positions...

needed a period stop after "opening." The "near" needed "waiting" after it for a prolongation effect, and "caught" needed to follow "forever" to suggest that permanent situation. The lines,

Perhaps she knows, standing there
in infinite aloneness...

needed to be "that infinite aloneness" to move the "aloneness" into a higher level as well as bridging the gap from "there." The word "aloneness" was chosen over "loneliness" because the latter associates so conveniently into sentimentality, notwithstanding Roethke's use of the term. The lines,

I know the color of her hair,
the way it turns and rolls...

seemed so much a cliché that it had to be changed. I liked the gesture and did not want to lose the images, so in desperation I merely switched "color" and "way," hoping to give the lines some originality at least. The lines,

But outside in the snow,
his motor hardly starts.
She remains near the windows
as his motor sputters
through the distances of snow...

and the rest of the ending of the earlier version provided absolutely nothing for the new version, if, indeed, I was going to make the girl the central image/metaphor of the poem. The lines suggested a lot about the girl's lover, but they provided associations through which the reader would be disliking the lover

more than sympathizing with the girl alone at the window. I believed the lines "...the warm/ markings across the glass, her eyes/ watching a desolate moon" would finish my focusing through the girl. I deliberated for the longest whether the last line should read "a desolate moon" or "the desolate moon," as the article adjective made a moon of difference.

Having finished revising the poem, I sent the poem back to Patrick Ellingham, and he accepted it, to be published in the Spring of 1988. I read the poem again a number of times and decided to call it a scenaric, making a list of eighteen aspects of the scenaric and how I would write more in the future.

1. At least one basic metaphor or symbol,
2. Two lyrically internal sounds per line, or two very similar sounds in juxtaposed lines,
3. Three or four accents per line,
4. Little or no endline rhymes,
5. Less than 60 lines, aiming for 20 lines,
6. No line longer than eight syllables,
7. No line shorter than four syllables,
8. Title prepositional, leading into first line,
9. Use at least five rhetorical devices:
 - a) anaphora, b) serials, c) simile,
 - d) epizeuxis, e) ellipticals, f) periodics,
 - g) key-word repetitions, h) rhetorical question, i) asides, j) symmetricals,
 - k) positive-negatives or negative-positives,
 - l) antimetabole, m) antithesis, n) asyndeton,
 - o) polysyndeton, p) epistrophe, q) symproce,
 - r) anadiplosis, s) epanalepsis,
10. Scenes of one or more persons,
11. Dramatic,
12. No sentimentalizing,
13. Avoid the use of "I" except when focus moves outside of speaker or poet,
14. Use observations and philosophical speculations,
15. Use irony, rhyme imagery, pararhyme, if possible,
16. Concentrate on phrase rhythms, i.e. Paz,
17. Think narrative lyric, and
18. Have at least one ambiguous reference.

Thus far, after all these years, I have not written another scenaric, though I still have my list of rhetorical devices, dramatics, phrase rhythms, and so on. In fact, during the years since "Outside The Moon," I have been writing various sequences, from love poems to childhood poems to AA poems to Auschwitz poems, some sequences as long as 126 logions and/or iconemissive mosaics, spontaneously right off the top of my head, which I swore I would never do, etc., totally departing from my plans for the scenaric, even to the point of giving up completely in attempting to define and/or describe what poets do. Be that as it may, the final and "fat" version of the poem follows:

Upstairs springs are squeaking.
I have been listening
for some time here below,
while the overhead affair
reflects another kind
of windows, moon and snow.
Their springs go so rapidly,
the bed must be made of iron,
pounding, pounding and pounding

my overhead floor,
her gentle moanings
embarrassing my silence.
Finally, their springs stop,
and immediately afterwards,
heavy feet and light feet
move across the upstairs floor,
toward the moonlit windows,
these windows here below,
my unavoidable listening,
two moons quietly confused.
Faucets are running now.
Something drops like soap.
She gently blows her nose.
There's the sound of boots.
A door is opening. The light feet
are not the ones leaving.
They are still near, waiting
as they will be forever,
caught, barely changing
their bewildered positions.
Perhaps she glances toward the moon.
Perhaps she knows, standing there,
about infinite aloneness,
about loss and final goodbyes.
Perhaps she will someday soon
descend those winding stairs
and ask some gentle question,
about this awful weather,
when will spring be coming
or will the lilacs bloom this year?
I know the way of her hair,
the color it turns and rolls
over her shoulders, the warm
markings across the glass, her eyes
watching a desolate moon.

There were parts of the poem I liked, and there were parts that I wished I could have written more effectively. The composition of the poem violated many of the principles I had previously expressed about writing ("Art As Discovery," *Discourse*, Autumn 1970 and "The Third Stanza," *The Journal of Teaching Writing*, Fall 1984), primarily in that I had never resuscitated a poem after so many years; and I had never experienced such a deliberate control, aesthetic distance, in revising a poem. I had never experienced the charm one line could have in demanding a revisiting and the revising of a poem. Even now, well over 35 years after its publication, I can still hear the line "Mine sleeps warmly beside me here" and feel so much regret in not being able to use the line in the final version of the poem. In that line, in fact, I discovered there was the key to my persistent mixed feelings of despair and pleasure associated with this poem. I had thought about it previously, but only recently had I faced the totality of the experience, certain aspects associated in my mind with the poem that were not actually in the poem.

A few weeks after I had finished the original version of the poem, after another furious day of snow, Len had seen our physician for her regular checkup and had returned from her part time job at the Zimanskys. The basement was dark, except for a small light at the top of the stairs, and a fairly bright light in our small kitchen where I was sitting at the small kitchen table reading Poe. Len closed the door at the top of the stairs and just stood there. I greeted her as always, "Hello, dear," and continued reading which was also as usual. When I realized she was not descending the stairs, I turned from Poe's "The

Falling House Of Usher." She was just standing there in the shadows at the top of the stairs, crying quietly, as I asked what was wrong. "Our baby's dead!" she exclaimed, as her legs suddenly just gave way, and she started falling down the stairs. I rushed to her as fast as I could, but she had fallen almost all the way down the stairs before I could reach her. We were sprawled out, all tangled up, at the bottom of the stairs. I managed to rise to my knees, holding Len in my arms. She was conscious and was repeating over and over that Dr. Moore had not been able to find Stephe's heartbeat and had said she was dead. I called an ambulance and rushed Len to Mercy Hospital which was only a few blocks from our basement apartment. Dr. Moore induced labor, and Stephe was delivered as "still life." We were devastated to say the least, losing Stephe during the last weeks of the final trimester, and without anyone being able to tell us WHY.

When we arrived at Mercy Hospital, we were greeted by a very kind nun who did not know, of course, that Stephe was dead. The kind little nun was trying to comfort Len, telling her that she would be taken care of, and that soon she would be greeting a new member of our little family. Len turned so tragically to the nun and said, "Sister, my baby's dead." The little nun tried not to display her shock, but the pain was in her eyes. "We'll take care of you, dear. Everything will be all right. God has his reasons, though we just can't always understand them. God works in mysterious ways. Now, let me help you upstairs, dear." The little nun and Len went toward the elevator, while I remained to fill out the papers at the Emergency Desk. Somehow, in my mind, the line "Mine sleeps warmly beside me here" had and still has everything to do with Len, me and Stephe. That's the real reason I've had so much difficulty relinquishing the line, and our lives since Stephe have never been the same.

During the first few days of Len's physical recovery, a young man from one of the funeral homes contacted me and offered to cover the expenses for Stephe's burial. I was grateful and agreed to meet him at the cemetery the following day, which turned out to be even worse than the days of snow. It began raining the same day on which the young man from the funeral home called, and it rained profusely during Stephe's burial and for days afterwards. At first there were only three of us, besides Stephe, at the burial site...the gravedigger, the young man from the funeral home, and myself. Stephe was in a small styrofoam box. The young man from the funeral home and I had umbrellas, but the gravedigger and Stephe did not. We stood there in absolute quiet, except for the rain pounding down onto the old snow, the ground and the grass getting all mixed up in the slush and mud. The gravedigger was wearing a very loose black raincoat, and he was using a very short shovel digging Stephe's small grave. We just stood there in the rain, watching. There were no tears. I felt a hurt far beyond tears and just continued watching the shovel and the dirt, the gravedigger piling the shovels of mud and rain to the side of a very small grave. To the side I noticed a small marker reading 'Baby Stephe' laying near a small wreath of artificial flowers, reds and whites, but I did not know or care about their names.

As I stood there in the pouring rain, I found myself trying to contain the sorrow, as I was glancing around over the trees and the wall of the cemetery, and toward the raining sky. When I turned slightly to my right, I saw there was someone else in the cemetery besides us. There was someone, a woman, standing about fifteen yards away beneath a huge black umbrella. She too was in black, and she slowly started walking toward me. I could not determine who she was, and for a split second I saw the lady from Forsyth Park, *The Ice cream Lady*, coming toward me as she had so often done when I was a small boy playing in Forsyth Park. There was her ice cream cart, there was her ringing bell, there were the magnolias and azaleas, the squirrels, the oaks and the swings and the monkey bars and the swans on the pond. There they all were, and then they were just as suddenly gone. When the woman came to about four feet away, I recognized that she was our neighbor, living just next door to us on Dubuque Street. Her name was Judy, and she was coming up close to me, reaching out from under her umbrella. She was crying quietly, tears falling down her cheeks. As she reached up to me, placing her free arm around my shoulders, she whispered, "I just didn't want you to be alone." I just stood there, letting her hug me, and nodding my head, trying to gesture that it would be all right. We stood there until Stephe was gone, into her cold grave of mud and rain, and then we left her there. There wasn't anything else we could do.

Whether or not Petrarch was correct "...quaedam dolendi voluptas...", that we enjoy suffering and explaining that suffering, or as Frankl would have it, that we should be "worthy" of our sufferings, has been a concern of mine for years. There is indeed a therapeutic aspect to writing; and we probably write to change and save our lives. But, we do not ever seem to get well, and the lives we save may not be our own. There is life beyond poetry when there is life through poetry. I try to be honest after all these

years. Has my life improved having written the poem? Has my life improved having written this essay? Has Len's life been saved, though we have been fortunate in having two children after Stephie, Karyn a physician, a neurologist, and Brett an attorney. The truth is that there is definitely solace in facing our disappointments or misfortunes, especially in the process of seeing those misfortunes transformed into some form of art; but whether or not there is catharsis in the sense of purgation that brings about spiritual renewal is highly questionable. There is still something about the poem...within the poem...that is supposed to happen..., but simply never does. The girl upstairs never came down those stairs to ask about the weather; in fact, she moved from the apartment shortly after the incident which I have attempted to describe; and over 35 years later I am still trying to bury that child...that winter no springs will heal (Edward Lowbury). For there is something about art and the spirit in art that never finds expression. There is something dreadful about art that festers, something dreadful within the artist's temperament and/or within the creative process that infects one's spirit at the same time it presumably is eliminating a complexity of emotions by bringing the complexity to consciousness and affording it expression. I do indeed feel better, now that I have plunged back into the dungeon. But, as I have plunged back into that basement, the dungeon, has the dungeon plunged back into me?