

Margaret By Night

By Betsy Warland

Reading *The Stone Angel* in the night, my parents overhead. Their muffled conversations. Their tensions. Glints of sixty some years of loving. Knowing. Hagar's rage illicit in this air conditioned world. Passion a sunset away. I have waited over a decade to read this book. For the right time. Why now, I don't know. But I am. And it makes me nervous. Elated. My father's hair. Attentiveness gone. Dandruff on his storm-blue shoulder, suit askew. Too big. Yet again. At the airport he sits. Cries. Has ever since his stroke. Half his body numb. Wooden. Relearning life from his left side. The feminine now allowable. Often overwhelming him. Leaving, I kiss him. His body shakes with soundless crying. Each time it's this way. I leave. We wonder. All three. Is *this* the

last time? So many rehearsals. Tears replacing former silence. Words still too. My hand waves through the small window. This gesture an erasure? Stroking? The back and forth of I don't know? His last image of me. Crop-harvesting patterns comforting from above. We disappear into our separate elements. Hagar dies by the time I'm home. Three months later my father lies down on Christmas Eve and does the same. "He looked so happy." My mother stunned. Abandoned at the end of his bed. And you Margaret, a month later. I wrote you before you died. To thank you. A small letter. A hand in the window. I didn't tell you I wondered about Hagar's last words. It seemed perhaps a facile way to end a book. Unlike what came before. Every word needing to

be there. Now I think differently of it. Whispered storied in the dark. Children tell one another (when we're supposed to be asleep). Stories out of the nights of our minds. Hagar fierce to the end. "Oh, for mercy's sake let me hold it myself!" Glass of water. Straight back chair. My grandmother insisting we help her up from her death bed into it. No convincing her of anything but. Once seated she knew, "put me back in bed" and died. The story ends somewhere. Or goes beyond what we imagine *gno, narrate*. Relentless pursuit of narrative. And when we stop, what then? Our minds the true texts that books only gesture at. Hagar's last words a narrator's sustaining breath: "And then —" Two word bridge to a different dark. My father's smile.

An Evening of Poetry

A Story by Marvyne Jenoff

If someone doesn't fight me I'll have to wear this armor
All of my life.
— Jack Spicer, *The Holy Grail*

Dear Dad,

I have no idea where in the world you are. Even if you are dead I have no idea which direction you would have taken. But I'm writing this anyway because I'm confused and I have no one else to talk to.

I feel that it's finally all right to approach you, now that you can be proud of me. I remember the time I came to you with a problem. You laughed in my face and said, "Daughter, I'm three times your age with half your education and I have the same problem." Dad, that was all the lesson I ever needed. I advised you on the spot, with alternatives, and let me tell you

that's the last time anyone ever laughed at me. And, Dad, I'm warning you right now that this letter concerns poetry. As I'd say to anyone who cast aspersions on the seriousness of such a pursuit, the fact that I do it gives it credibility.

I should begin with news from home. Unemployment is down and Mom is dead. You'll enjoy hearing about my career. I don't suppose you know that when I was seventeen Mom asked me whether I wanted to be a nurse or a teacher. I decided I'd rather deal with people who could stand up and account for themselves. At eighteen I was teaching in my own classroom. At the same time I studied literature: after all, literature was life, and surely it behooved a teacher to know everything she could. After my fifth academic degree I began to realize that in

order to teach you had to be able to do, as well. That's how I became a poet. And I think you'll be proud of what I'm going to tell you.

Most people don't understand what a lot of work poetry is, but I've done what I had to do and I've been rather successful. I've published a little, and not long ago a librarian in a town I'd never heard of phoned to invite me to give a poetry reading. I guess it won't be long before my name — our name — is a household word! She had invited another poet to read with me, and he had agreed to pick me up at 5:15 in the afternoon. But the letter of confirmation from the library stated that he would pick me up at 5:00. Now, my time is valuable. I phoned the other poet himself to set the matter straight.

He seemed surprised at my call, but

quite willing to compromise. We agreed on 5:07. I asked how I would recognize his vehicle, and he said, "You can't mistake it." No more. Dad, I'm sure you will agree that that is condescension of the worst kind. No woman should have to put up with that. It's a good thing I was on my guard, for, puttering down the street at 5:06 exactly was a shiny multicoloured motorbike with a cluster of balloons attached to the back of the seat. And a young man on the seat. I guess he'd been expecting some girl he could impress, not an old-style teacher who'd survived the Sixties and Seventies unscathed. However, I was ready for anything.

"The balloons are for you," he said. "They're a back rest." I didn't appreciate that slight against my age, but he smiled so nicely that I couldn't help but smile back. I shook hands with him and jumped on without another thought. And the balloons were very comfortable. Even the colours were harmonious and in good taste. B minus.

It wasn't easy to make conversation on the motorbike, but I felt I had to be polite. I asked how he'd started writing poetry and he said he honestly couldn't remember, that it was just something he'd always done. When I told him how I'd come to be a poet he was sympathetic. He asked if I'd ever thought of quitting my job — my job! — and writing full time. Now, the last thing I wanted was sympathy. So I got back at him. I asked him how, if he were a writer, he could justify *not* teaching: didn't a writer have the responsibility of helping others understand what he was trying to say?

He changed the subject. He asked what poets I felt had influenced my work the most. Homer and Milton, I told him. When I asked who had influenced him, he rattled off several names I'd never heard of. I thought he was just trying to be smart.

"Friends of yours?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. Just like that.

Dad, I have to admit there are a few aspects of literature I'm not yet familiar with. I was saving the Twentieth Century for next year. Still, I wondered whether anyone so young could really be a poet. How could he tell he was a real poet? And how could anyone tell if a poet's work were really good if the poet were still alive? Or lived nearby?

"Have you given many readings?" he asked me.

"A few," I replied. "Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking maybe you'd like to read first. That way you'd be relaxed afterwards and could enjoy my work."

He smiled when he said that. I guess it

was his idea of humour. But I took exception.

"How many readings have you given?" I asked.

"Thousands."

Well. That explained everything. He was famous! Then I realized what he was getting at. He thought his poetry was better than mine and he wanted to read last just to make sure the audience was left with a good impression.

Dad, as you can imagine, I wasn't going to let him get away with that. I refused to read first and I refused to read last, and the only compromise we could come to with the librarian leading us to the platform and the audience crowding in was to read alternately a few minutes at a time.

He started out with love poems to his wife. I thought they were rather nice, though I wondered whether people really wanted to hear that sort of thing. I'd always thought the purpose of poetry was to communicate sound philosophical principles. When it was my turn, I read my epic about the simple math teacher who, at his own expense and with unstinting devotion during his summer vacations, drew attention to the fact that if you used simple objects like apples and oranges, two and two still equalled four, and won the Nobel Prize for bringing mathematics back to the layman before the Russians did. The other poet continued with poems about trees and flowers. I went on with my epic about the simple Phys. Ed. teacher who campaigned for a sport that would express the needs and aspirations of the modern era, and, with the banning of tobacco, introduced a floor-pacing competition into the Olympics and won the first Gold Medal.

The audience received me very well. That relaxed me and I really was able to listen to the other poet during his third set. At first I tried to guess what punctuation he used, just by the sound of his voice, but there didn't seem to be any. I couldn't even make out a proper sentence — I must have been extremely tired. I didn't want to hurt the poet's feelings so I kept my eyes open as long as I could. But it was when I half-listened and half-dozed that his work began to make sense. And you know, Dad, his work surprised me. I would have expected a young fellow like that to have lots of sexy poems, but all he read this time was one long poem about putting his arm around his wife. Somehow that was even more embarrassing. Can you imagine anyone keeping his arm around anyone else long enough to write a ten-minute poem about it? He said they'd been married for over a year. I wondered what he

did for a living.

I concluded the evening with excerpts from my work in progress about the liberating effects of orphanhood. Afterwards several people came up to me, not to him, to ask advice about poetry workshops. I was glad I had worn my new dress.

There were some beautiful women standing around the other poet. He didn't pay any attention to them, though. He just waited politely until I was finished. Then, as we were walking toward the exit, he said, "It will be good to get home."

Dad, I was very curious. I don't believe in personal questions, but finally I asked him, "What's your wife like?" That was a mistake. A dreamy expression came over his face. He seemed to gaze right through me. "She's beautiful," he said. Then there was silence. His expression got worse. Suddenly he began to recite poetry. I could tell by the way his body tensed and his voice pierced the air that he was making up new poetry. That wasn't appropriate behaviour in a parking lot. I wanted to throw my arms around him to make him stop but the moment passed. Then he did a little dance, leaped onto the motorbike, and waited for me with the same silly expression. I doubted he was in fit condition to drive. I stood there trying to figure out how I would manage to drive the bike myself when I noticed some of those beautiful women still in the parking lot, watching us. I didn't want them to laugh at me, so I just crawled in among the balloons and fell asleep.

And I dreamed: there were two children sitting under the flowers in Grandpa's garden with their arms around each other. Grandpa was shouting and trying to chase them away. The whole garden was inside a balloon, the round kind with colours swirled around it. The children couldn't hear him and I was glad. The children began to get smaller and less distinct. I realized that was because the balloon was expanding and getting thinner and I was holding on to it with my arms around it to keep it from bursting. The first line of a poem came into my head: "Men who marry young and love their wives." Perfect pentameter. And a title: "Wonders of the World." I realized it would look better without capital letters — after all, the poet was a modest person — but I didn't know how to change it. Suddenly the balloon was inside my stomach and I thought, ah, it's safe, but it rose up to my throat and stayed there afraid to say anything. Suddenly the dream disappeared. There I was on the pavement, flat on my back with the poet bending over me taking my pulse. I opened my eyes and he sure backed off in

a hurry.

"Sorry," he said. "We hit a bump. Are you all right?"

I guess I was stunned. I couldn't think quickly enough to say anything.

"Would you like some water? I've brought a flask."

"I don't drink," I replied.

We'd gone a few kilometers in silence when I felt the blood trickling out of my ear. It was just a few drops and I was able to catch it on my finger and swallow it, so that the poet wouldn't see such a personal thing. I certainly wasn't hurt, and I didn't feel any different. But the accident must have loosened something in me, for the strangest thing happened. I started to talk.

And that nice, helpful poet turned off the motor to hear me better and I hadn't even asked him to. As the bike carried us, half-coasting and half-floating, I talked non-stop. And Dad, I must have been talking about you and Mom, because the poet kept saying things like, "That's awful!" and, "Did that really happen?"

As we approached my apartment building I was prepared to jump off and wave goodbye: It had been a full evening and I had to teach in a few hours. But the poet acted as if he had plenty of time. He brought the bike down to earth and balanced it firmly with both feet. Then he looked straight at me and asked me softly, "When did you say she died?"

"Last week," I replied. He kept looking at me. I wondered what was wrong. Finally he asked, just above a whisper, "Aren't you sad?"

I really didn't have time to chat, so I said, "Of course not. These things happen to everyone." He had really been very nice to me, and I wanted to reassure him.

But you know, Dad, the next day I was sad. I was sad for days after that. And I'm confused. I'd always thought that in order to be sad you had to be happy first, or at least love someone, and I don't know why I'm telling you this, Dad. I don't know why I'm telling you this at all. Maybe I just wanted to let you know that unemployment is down and Mom's dead.

Grief

By Anne Szumigalski

The tears I shed, *she tells me*, more than filled my bathtub; they splashed over the edges and soaked into the rugs and the curtains. They seeped into the walls and dripped through the floor. When I rolled back the carpet there was a damp white deposit thick enough to be scratched with a thumbnail coating the pine planks. Then, just as I feared, some officious person flung open the windows and let in all the sharp air of autumn. I was left staring at a stained floor and a salt-encrusted tub. Later I noticed that a few dribbles had escaped the airing by hiding behind the joists. These dropped, an unnatural dew, upon the room below. There was not enough though to cause more than a few spots on the furniture and a persistent, though not unpleasant, briny smell. *And she stares down at her crooked feet grimed black from working the garden all*

summer. She sighs and is silent for a while.

At last she raises her candid eyes to mine. How I long for the winter, *she admits*, when I can stay in the house all day treading wool shag that sprouts between my toes like grass. I shall pad about the sunroom trying this chair and that until I find one to my comfort and settle my bum into the cushions and hoist my feet up on the padded footstool. There I shall sit and watch them grow whiter by the day, sometimes even by the hour, at my side a pile of the largest and longest books I can find in the library. God grant that some of these will yield tales both pathetic and heroic, for only in such stories can I find that optimistic sadness which holds my attention and brings pride to my heart and new tears to my eyes.

I shall rise only to make coffee and sandwiches or to visit the bathroom. Even

these small journeys I shall make reluctantly. By March I shall hardly be able to move from my chair to my bed, from my bed to my chair. Then one day spring will appear again with its flurry of digging and seeding, and I shall forget that I ever said this or did it.

Thus will my life wear on from season to season, from equinox to equinox, until one spring I shall find myself unable to get up from my chair, my book, my melancholy. I shall be left gazing through the window at my daughter, herself by this time grown into a stout grandmother, or at least a great-aunt, walking barefoot between the rows of the garden, a measure of carrot seed held lightly in her palm. From time to time she will rest from her continual bending and flinging and stare up at the lead blue of the sky which threatens, or perhaps promises, rain.

DOROTHY LIVESAY "The Jest of God" (Story by Margaret Laurence)

i

We move from dark
to light
and back again
pressing the button
turning the knob

Those who believe
know that the light will come
but refuse to accept the dark —
dress up death
in a jester's motley
of wings

ii

My father said:
*Those who believe
will return in some guise
will live on.*

But he remained sceptical
up to his last
breath