

**“About the Poems and the Author” -  
An Introduction to *Pamela Harrison Greatest Hits 1981-2000*  
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I was born and raised on the wide dry plains of Oklahoma, a place where weather is a constant and vital concern—from the grinding ravages of drought to the immediate doom of tornado, lightning, and flash flood. There, the prairie runs far and flat to the western horizon, pressed by a vast and windy sky. People who live beneath that cataract of wind and light turn to leather and squint. My husband, a man of the north woods, feels desperate and exposed under that scouring sky. God’s eye, I call it, the eternal gaze of heaven. It shrinks one to a proper humility. Folks there talk plainly (if they talk at all), and their truths cut like flint.

A plains woman’s interest in outer weather soon coupled with my own childhood obsession: the secrets of my family’s inner weathers. I registered like a barometer minute changes of tone and heart in those I loved. By the sixth grade, I was fully determined to be a meteorologist, as serious and essential as the local celebrity on radio and TV whose word we awaited as though the very prophet spoke. Inaccurate forecasts, I learned, could cost a person’s life.

Years passed and my native interest in words and weather evolved into a love and need for poetry. Nothing else I knew could record the changes of season and light, mood and storm with comparable subtlety and satisfaction. I think Robert Frost said it right in his poem, “Tree at My Window”:

That day she put our heads together  
Fate had her imagination about her,  
Your head so much concerned with outer,  
Mine with inner, weather.

I am a watcher by nature. Observation and reflection are my instinctive responses to change. Naturally, I married a man of action, a general practitioner (like my father) committed to serving the poor and underprivileged at home and abroad. Especially abroad. Accompanying him to the Arctic, Africa, the Caribbean, and Central America, I was often forced to reckon with both the limited store of my own practical gifts and the proper uses of words.

“At Home in Our Ignorance As in a Canopy of Trees” is a poem that was long in the making—a record of events lived in the first year of our marriage. My husband was a medical student working a rotation at the Uganda Cancer Institute in Kampala, Uganda. The clinic was gathering early samples of Kaposi Sarcoma for the NIH in the years just before the AIDS epidemic began. Shortly after we arrived in that exotic equatorial city, Dennis contracted malaria, and the first anniversary of Idi Amin’s coup reeled into high gear. The poem took decades to write to my satisfaction, until I could admit in full my own white, post-colonial ignorance and privilege. Marion K. Stocking

at *The Beloit Poetry Journal* is interested in political history and gave the piece a home (Summer 1996).

Living daily in the shadow of a man who could deliver immediate and concrete help to those he served was a special challenge for me, the watcher-dreamer. I come from practical people for whom being useful and productive are more than personal virtues. In unforgiving landscapes, they are vital necessities. Slowly it came to me that I must use my recording eye and gift of words to tell the stories of those who couldn't speak for themselves; to bear witness, if nothing else, to the difficult realities they lived. I don't kid myself that poetry makes anything happen. But bearing their tales forward, saving their truths from complete erasure, answered some essential need of my own.

"The Cambodian Woman Comes to Learn English" grew out of volunteer work I did as an ESL instructor once we returned home. I wrote the poem while a student at the Vermont College MFA Program [subsequently renamed Vermont College of Fine Arts]. Richard Jackson, editor of *The Poetry Miscellany*, is on the faculty and intercepted me after the poem's first public reading to ask if I'd submit it for publication (Spring 1988). In the years since, it has been an enduring favorite at readings and has even inspired one minister to a church sermon. Despite a now rather old-fashioned indulgence in detailed description, the poem still moves me. I think if readers relax into the flow of exotic images, then the emotional jolt of the end arrives as it did for me, layered with shared experience and understanding.

"El Rosario" was born of a trip we subsequently made to Honduras with a volunteer outfit called ACTS (American Caring, Teaching, Sharing), founded by some NH/VT health workers and others who wanted to volunteer their skills directly at the point of need, on the order of Doctors without Borders. My husband was a board member of the group and made several trips to establish, build, and maintain a medical clinic and clean water supply for the small village of El Rosario. On one of those trips, it was humbling for me to speak like a three-year-old in my halting Spanish and to have only knitting to offer the village women in their enormous need. Having volunteered in similar endeavors, Margaret Gibson liked the poem and accepted it (under the title "Letter from Rosario") for publication in *New Virginia Review* when she was a guest editor there in 1995.

In 1985, Dennis and I signed on with Project HOPE to do a year of volunteer work on the tiny island of Carriacou in the southeastern Caribbean. Carriacou belongs to Grenada and has been used as a kind of holding tank for the country's political prisoners and schizophrenics. It was indescribably beautiful and poor. Dennis was one of two island doctors, serving a population of 8,000. Our little family made three of the eleven non-natives on the island. Our daughter, Kate, aged eight, was the only white child. Because the elementary school boasted 340 students under one roof (with four blackboards to divide the space, no books, no paper, no pencils, all learning by rote,) we chose to tutor Kate at home in the mornings. She then accompanied me to the Bishop's School where, a third grader, she sat in on 7th grade classes while I taught 7th and 11th grade English. That island year brought many poems and vivid experiences highlighting our own blessings as well as the vitality and endurance of those we served. Kate's resilience in the face of real loneliness and disorientation was heroic, and she is the star of an award-winning chapbook entitled NOAH'S DAUGHTER, published by

the Panhandler Press out of the University of West Florida in 1988. Expanded subsequently into a full-length collection, NOAH'S DAUGHTER has been a finalist in a dozen national contests (Walt Whitman, Brittingham, Illinois, etc) and is still looking for a publisher.

From that original chapbook, "Bug Sonnet" caught the edgy, unsettling experience during a jungle rainy season of taking up residence in a house with no screens. Nothing makes a North American feel so far from home as living intimately with bugs. "Fish Story" came much later in the year, when we thought we were inured to almost everything—the strain of poverty and loneliness, the chronic lack of protein, the mildew of the rainy season giving way to the dust and filth of absolute drought. The visitation it recounts somehow brought a return of our sense of hopefulness. David Slater was kind enough to take it for the *Laurel Review* in 1990. The wonderful Elinor Benedict at *Passages North* accepted "Evensong" for publication in the winter of 1988. One reader was so taken with the poem, he hand-carved the text onto a wooden board and gave it to me, a memento I cherish to this day.

"Stereopticon" is part of a full-length collection presently entitled UNWRITTEN WORLD [published in 2004 as *Stereopticon*] which, in its various incarnations, has been a finalist in national contests ten or so times and is now, also, in search of a publisher. Autobiographical in nature, the manuscript explores ways in which my relationship to language and poetry came into being in defiance of strict injunctions to be silent. (See "Revision" for one such injunction). "Stereopticon" was originally entitled "How the Words Work" and was taken by Orval Lund in 1993 for *Great River Review*. Orval has been a great supporter over the years and in April of 1993 made me a featured poet in *Great River Review*, printing a personal essay and a selection of poems from another full-length manuscript entitled OKIE CHRONICLES, a long poetic sequence narrating the prairie misadventures of an extended farming family in the nineteen-fifties. OKIE CHRONICLES has been a runner-up for publication at Helicon Nine, and finalist at Brittingham, Ohio State, BkMk PRes, Cleveland State, Owl Creek, High Plains Press, and Snake Nation Press.

"Romance" was written at the Vermont Studio Center while I was on a fellowship during that part of the spring when Vermont seems like a slab of meat thawing on the counter. Those pigeons, visible from my room beside the river, danced their tango and redefined a gloomy day. Neil Shepard, poetry editor at *Green Mountains Review* and closely associated with VSC, took it for his pages in 1995 under the title "Came the Rain."

"The First Law of Thermodynamics" was written long ago, when I first began to take my poetry seriously, working as a student with Jack Myers at Vermont College's MFA Program. In those days, and when it was first published in the Spring of 1992 by Jean Burden at *Yankee Magazine*, it was titled "If Wishes Were Horses." Now it is part of a new collection called METAPHYSIC (a kind of bestiary of my imagination) which will begin making the rounds for publication in the fall of 2001. As I remember, Jack seemed to like the formal characteristics of the poem, the economy of its rhetorical assertion and balance. (I was reading Robert Penn Warren at the time). I think it also gives a glimpse of my delight in the uses of metaphor and my enduring Okie's eye view of our species' spiritual prospects.

Finally, there are three poems which are central to my poetic sensibility. "Revision" recounts an event in the life of a nine-year-old which turned her from an occasionally extroverted tomboy into a silent, introverted watcher, one for whom, in time, true words became a saving grace. The poem was taken by the editors at *Iris: A Journal about Women* in 1993 and thought well enough of to be printed on the inside cover of the number. It's fashionable these days to discount poems written by the many former children who were abused by their elders. "Therapy-speak" their efforts are called dismissively. But I consider them works of heroic witness, often by those just coming to voice. Such a use of words constitutes a taboo-breaking act that is a first and necessary step in refusing to be a victim. Speaking one's truth against forces of local oppression was a foundation of our nationhood. In this country beset by privilege and squalor, I think we discount such efforts to transform tragedy into art at our peril.

Periodically I am moved to describe certain states of soul as though they were a furnished room or landscape. Living as I do in Vermont, winter has been a rich source of imagery. "Field in Snow" was written in one day, a pure distillation fallen into words from the roof of my mind. Joseph Parisi liked it, too. Enough to take it for *Poetry's* pages in Winter 1992. At a low point some years later, I opened a letter from a stranger at the post office and found that "Field in Snow" spoke to and for another. She said she keeps it among the piles of papers on her desk so that it periodically surfaces to be read and appreciated all over again. How kind of her to write Mr. Parisi for my address.

Mr. Parisi also liked and took for the pages of *Poetry* (March 1991) my own personal favorite of all the work printed here. "So, Caravaggio" also fell out in one sitting, at a time in my life when acceptance seemed my only recourse. The title refers to the {Renaissance} painter who was so masterful at rendering ordinary faces arrayed around a hidden source of light. I consider it a kind of prayer, a fitting start or end to any offering of poems I could make.

—*Pamela Harrison*