

*Never had I more
Excited, passionate, fantastical
Imagination, nor an ear and eye
That more expected the impossible –*
W.B. YEATS

Age and the passionate imagination –

This is the intersection that has sparked our interest at *Passager* for over 20 years. The body may be slowing down, even breaking down, but the spirit is waking up in ways no one could have predicted. *Passager* exists to give voice to this deepening spirit. Even the sound of the voice is beautiful, with all its cracks and resonances, sudden bursts of laughter, flashes of insight, and freedom to express.

Founded in 1990, *Passager* was the first, and until recently, the only national literary journal to focus on promoting the older writer. The idea for *Passager* grew out of a creative writing class for seniors that Kendra was teaching at Baltimore's Waxter Center. "It was an unbelievable group of men and women in their 80s and 90s," she recalls. "I don't think I'd ever been in a room with so many people of that age. I was overwhelmed by the passion, so invigorated by it, that my whole orientation about old age shifted. I left there thinking, 'Nobody knows about this. If it's going on at the Waxter Center, it's going on all over the country . . . the world!'"

At the time, Kendra was also teaching a publications class at the University of Baltimore and became excited by the possibility that a new literary journal could make this passion and creativity more visible . . .

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, light gray circular and oval shapes that form a complex, swirling pattern. The text is centered within this graphic.

*strawberry season:
childhood*



If Music Be the Food of Love

• *Leon Arden*

The most unforgettable character I ever met was the worst teacher I ever had. And in those days there was no lack of competition for this honor.

Mrs. Mctavish, who taught biology, believed in repetition as the key to learning and so the whole class often found itself chanting simple truths such as, “Egg plus sperm equals fertilized egg, egg plus sperm equals fertilized egg.” Mr. Lebeau, our French instructor, purposely made screeching sounds with a piece of blackboard chalk and, when we groaned, would hold up his hand, the middle finger bent out of sight, and say: “What are you complaining about? Look what happened to me.” Economics was taught by “Mr. What” due to the way he asked questions. “Bad money drives out what? The direction of a Bull Market is what? Inflation is what? Depression is what?” Soon all we heard was “what what what.” And Mr. Rickman advised the boys in Hygiene that if we met up with a “fairy” we were to straighten him out by beating him up.

We had almost no opinion of our school principal because his lofty manner seemed to place him far above the petty tasks of education. Rarely seen in the halls, he dwelt in a large bright room with a desktop as clean and polished as a ballroom floor. Within arm’s reach was a microphone into which he occasionally made solemn pronouncements that were broadcast throughout the school with biblical portentousness. “This is Mr. Tinworth. I would like to speak to you this morning on the proper way to salute your country’s flag.”

High school was mostly something to endure until the last bell set us free. Yet there was one class I couldn’t wait to attend. On the top floor, in room 305, Mr. Itzkowitz taught the structure of the string quartet and his lucky students, I was told, listened to Toscanini conducting Beethoven and Beecham interpreting Mozart. Itzkowitz also compared different renditions by various

pianists as they played Schubert, Chopin and Brahms.

To me, an only child, classical music was like an assortment of dear friends. Tchaikovsky, for example, was such an old friend I couldn't remember when we first met. Chopin quickly became an intimate while Dvorak never failed to cheer me up. Bach withheld his great secret until I went to college. But Beethoven was the very model of manhood while Brahms held forth on autumnal wisdom. The Amazing Mozart, who at first seemed slightly lightweight, a bit quaint, slowly won me over until we became absolutely inseparable.

So I walked into my first music class as into my first cathedral. I was ready. I had never been more ready. I walked in, sat down, and discovered that the legendary Mr. Itzkowitz was no longer with us (he had been snapped up by a private school and carried off to Boston) and in his place stood a Mr. E. Trundle whom none of us had ever seen before. His bald head had a semi-circular fringe of hair that stuck straight up like grass. He wore a Chaplin mustache, Heinrich Himmler glasses, displayed a toothgap in his half grimace, half smile, and had a face that evoked no fear in any living thing.

Though he wanted ever so much to make good, it was clear he was one of those who thought that to teach you had only to talk. You could sometimes get away with that in a required subject. When teaching an elective (Music, Sewing, Carpentry) with all of us knowing it didn't matter a damn if we passed or failed, there was no question about it: you must dominate as if you were Rommel.

The students filed in quietly, trying to get the measure of the man. It didn't take them long.

One of the last to enter was Francene Swick, who brightened my life whenever she appeared. She exuded such good will that she was forever offering it to others in generous smiles. I knew her soundless laugh, that head-toss of hair, her blight of braces over which her beauty easily triumphed. I also knew of the complete absorption she brought to every subject she took and how totally unaware she was that I stared at her.

Mr. Trundle stood up, adjusted his glasses, introduced himself, and said: "Welcome. I hope in time we will really get to know each other. But now we must move right along because we have a lot of ground to cover. Today we will study music by a man some consider the greatest composer who ever lived. The three Razumovsky Quartets, or Rasoumoffsky, as it is sometimes spelled" (he wrote this out on the blackboard) "or 'ovsky' or even 'owsky'" he wrote this out, too. Before he turned to face us, a paper glider, thrown at Francene Swick, third row, fourth seat, dove into the open desk of "Fat" Biggs, seated next to her, . . .



Smoking

• *Luna Tarlo*

One winter in Montreal when I was ten, I would often find myself so wide-awake about an hour or so before daybreak that I could not bear to spend another moment in bed, and I would go and wake up Babette so that we could have a smoke together.

Babette never seemed to mind being roused so early. She was a French Canadian Catholic girl from Acadia in Nova Scotia. During the Depression a lot of girls left their homes to come to Montreal to find work. My mother had hired her as a live-in maid six months before. She slept on a sofa in the kitchen, which was next door to my bedroom.

Babette was the most fastidious person I had ever met, even compared to my mother, who was neatness itself. Every night after washing the dinner dishes, Babette would be at the ironing board steam-pressing her things by placing a soft damp cloth under the iron – a lace dickey or a detachable organdy collar, her white cotton crocheted gloves or her small white linen handkerchiefs with the initials BL entwined in one corner. Babette Leduc.

One night we were sitting, Babette and I, on a piano bench in front of my bedroom window. A sharp, peppery odor emanated from Babette's feet. It was an odor I'd gotten used to during these sessions but it never ceased to surprise me that, for someone as fussy about her appearance as Babette was, she didn't seem to be aware of her smelly feet. Holding my father's Sweet Caporal cigarette gingerly between my thumb and forefinger as I'd seen my father do, I leaned towards the lit match in Babette's hand. My mother loved to smoke but because of her migraine headaches had been told by her doctor not to. She sneaked one occasionally but after school I invariably found her in the living room lying on the sofa with a damp napkin across her forehead, her eyes closed, her feet in neatly laced shoes resting on a towel.

I inhaled some smoke instead of holding it in my mouth for a second or two as Babette had recommended, and began to choke.

“Shhh!” warned Babette, shaking my arm roughly. “You will wake them!”

I watched through teary eyes as the last of the smoke issued from my lips; in the shadowy room it appeared like a veil of grey chiffon drifting away in a breeze.

“There were very many cigarettes in the package?” Babette asked.

“No,” I answered.

“You must be careful or your father will notice. Then where will we be?”

“He doesn’t notice things,” I said. “He’s absent-minded.”

My tone was an exact replica of my mother’s.

Babette, I surmised, was too poor to buy her own cigarettes. I never saw her smoke except with me. She struck another match and lit her cigarette and her delicate profile materialized in the light from the flame. Everyone agreed that Babette was an extraordinarily pretty girl, and husbands of people who came to visit my mother often hung around the kitchen and engaged Babette in conversation.

“Where did you find them, the cigarettes?” she asked, smoke streaming from her nostrils.

Babette smoked like a professional.

“In his jacket pocket. He always keeps them in his right hand pocket.” I shivered in my cotton chenille bathrobe.

“I wish they’d hurry up and turn on the heat,” I said. “It is almost six o’clock. Soon they will turn it on.”

She turned to me.

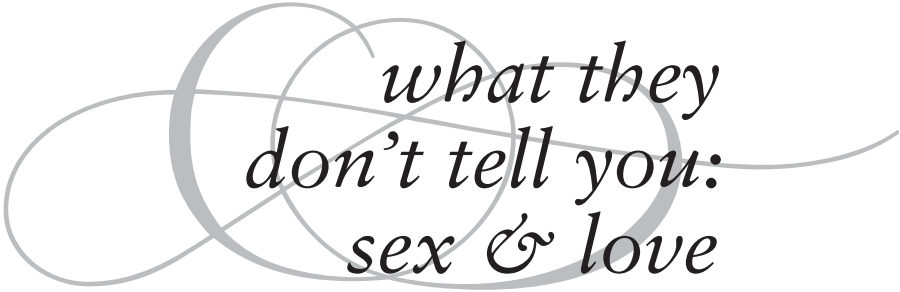
“Why you don’t get your quilt?” she asked. She herself was snugly wrapped in a blanket. I stood up and got my quilt and sat down again.

We puffed in companionable silence for an interval and stared out the window into the winter night. A few large flakes of snow began to fall, spiraling slowly from above. Beyond our apartment building the snow-filled field, smooth, untouched, glimmered whitely in the dark. On the other side, parallel to it, ran Van Horn Avenue. It was deserted now, flickering in the uneven street lights. The somber darkness, the soft-falling snow, the emptiness of the street across the way filled me with an awe as if I were in on some secret of the night.

“Do you believe in God?” I asked Babette.

“But of course.”

“What’s he like, God?” . . .



*what they
don't tell you:
sex & love*

The Road to Amphigouri

for RC at 65

When did you arrive,
he asked, by which he meant,
can you remember
what you wore?

Not a stitch, she said
between the lines, *and seven*
hundred eighty months
ago – more or less,

knowing, even as she
spoke, he might go to valiant
lengths to make the number
more precise –

ferret out Hokkaido's
average winter rainfall, say, or count
the notes in all the mad-
cow music

in the world, but all
he did, it seems, was ask her if
she'd like to dance,
forgetting that

they were already
dancing, so busy was he counting
all the clouds in sight
that summer day.

• *Julian Crowell*

They Don't Tell You How Sex Changes

Sex impinges less as I grow older
but is more precious, that some
one, the one and only now,
still desires, that the furnace
can yet be lit and finally roar.

Intimacy opens slowly as a rose –
an old garden rose, a centifolia
with its crowded labyrinth of petals
dark pink as labia, ruddy with
amorous perfume thick as honey.

No more quick ones in the bushes.
We like a bed and time that does
not press in constricting us.
We like to loll in moments before
the pulse rushes in toppling waves.

We take much pleasure in kissing
that once we passed through, gateway
to what we really sought. We linger
in sensuality keen as orgasm pro-
longed like an endless chord.

- *Marge Piercy*

What the Dead Do Best

Though seldom said, it's true: the dead
release us when they die. We do not know it
for a while, we think we hear their voices,
we think they linger in the shadows of cats.
We think we become them, the way
they sneezed, the way they pruned
their roses. And yes they may be with us,
but now so far in love with the world
they watch us raise our glasses to them
and think *Ah, a perfect earlobe,*
Oh, the rippling sound of laughter,
the profligate perfection of fingerprints!
Then they do what the dead do best: watch a bud
grow to a leaf that lasts a green season,
then free itself in a brief, lit symphony
of flight and recreate itself as loam.
They love to watch a wave
course a thousand miles, pulse
over a whale, lift plankton near Greenland,
then build and break across
the patient sand. They breathe
in centuries. They follow dawn's
quickenings birdsong around the globe
for decades. When they feel the need, they drift
into our sleep and light our dreams.
They love it that, through the years,
we realize we, too, are free.

- *Will Walker*