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This magazine is made possible by funds provided by the Student Association of the State University of New York, College at Oswego.

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Art
Lorraine M. Goldych  My Favorite Place  INFRARED PHOTO  Front Cover
Dad's Trees INFRARED PHOTO  2
Tim Metallo  Bad Music DRAWING  20
Unaccounted Four DRAWING  21
Lorraine M. Goldych  Deserted Farm INFRARED PHOTO  19
Barbara E. Scott  Sulphur Springs Road LITHOGRAPH  30
Marie Koltchak  Keren PHOTO  32
Shelley Manley  Untitled PHOTO  39
Amber Chalone In Wonder of PHOTO  Inside back Cover
Marie Koltchak  The Shepherdess PHOTO  Back Cover

Fiction
Walter Plaisted  The Funeral  22
Elizabeth D. Gronosky  A Simple Procedure  33

Poetry
Nancy C. Anderson  Spring  3
Carol Shiffer  November Moon  3
Thomas Prestopnik  On Seeing a Man and His Wife At Daybreak  18
Timothy Schuman  Gravitation Day  27
Fumie Kamoshita  Hiroshima with Japanese translation  28
Tim Metallo  The Red Wheelbarrow  29
Walter Plaisted  from Bricks For the Living  31
Timothy Schuman  Dinah at Eighty  40

Drama
Maxine S. Petry  One Woman Show  4
"SPRING"

Why does the oak tree
Burst forth with buds at first warmth?
The cold lake lies motionless.

Why does the wind soften
Whispering rumors of Spring?
The strong-limbed oak is silent.

Nancy C. Anderson

November Moon

The hunter's moon climbs the evening sky
As restless, clamoring wild geese fly
Silhouetted against the cold light,
Their wings brushing hoarfrost onto night.

Carol Shiffer
One Woman Show

INTRODUCTION

Mary Edwards Walker was born on November 26, 1832 in Oswego Town, New York. She was the daughter of Vesta and Alvah Walker, had four sisters and one brother. Mary Walker graduated from Falley Seminary and taught for several years. In 1855 she earned her medical degree from Syracuse Medical College. She married Albert Miller, also a physician, but that lasted only a short time. Dr. Walker's practice was never very prosperous and she was more of a celebrity most of her life. She gave lectures in the U.S. and Europe, and donned the bloomer style. As years went on her clothes became more and more masculine. She served in the Civil War at first as a volunteer, but later as an assistant surgeon. She received the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1865. After the war she spent the majority of her time lecturing on women's rights and other issues. She had suffered an eye impairment in the war and practicing medicine was very difficult. Later in her life she had financial problems and spent time touring with sideshows as a freak. Then, in 1917 the Federal Board of Medal Awards declared that her Civil War citation was unwarranted and it was taken away from her. She died in 1919. Only in recent years has the honor been returned to her.

Author's Note

I hope in writing this play to bring out the personality, drives, emotions and intellect of this tiny, yet incredibly strong woman named Dr. Mary E. Walker. The events, people, and places referred to in the play are real or based on truth, but I have taken dramatic license in my depiction of these events. I pray I do her justice.

M.S.P.

ACT ONE

Scene One

The scene opens with the dressing room, downstage right, and the platform, stage right, lighted. The scene is a dime museum sideshow in Toledo. It is the Fall of 1893. The first night's performance has just ended. The platform is raised and extends from center to stage right. There is a chair on the platform, which faces to left stage and a curtain is behind the chair, right stage. The dressing room is at the right side, downstage, of the platform. A banner hangs upstage right on the platform, with poorly painted pictures of the ten attractions in the show (a juggler, fat lady, midget, Mary Walker, etc.) The rest of the stage is dark, with a few props representing other sideshow details.

DR. WALKER:

(Is in the dressing room as the curtain rises. She is dressed in men's black trousers, frock coat, and vest with a bow tie. Her medal is pinned to her coat. She is wearing white gloves and a silk top hat sits on the table. She is seated, slightly turned from the audience. She wears round spectacles. Her hair is gray streaked with white, and cut very short. Her whole manner is masculine. She looks up and turns to the audience. Slowly.)

I am Mary Walker and I am going to tell you the story of myself. I am sixty-one and have been traveling with dime museum sideshows like this one for several years now. I think ... this ... tour will be my last one .... Just three more days. You should have seen tonight's crowd, so many people—and all their eyes were on me.

(Laughs)

And I'm in the show with a sword swallower, a fat lady, a midget! They come to look at me—the way they look at THEM. They think I'm a man, but I didn't want them to think THAT. I didn't want them to see only THAT in me. I wanted them to learn something from what I said. People have always looked at me as odd, even when I was young, but I never really thought that I was—that I am a FREAK. I suppose I knew inside that they would think that. Maybe I didn't want to believe it. Maybe so. Yet I don't feel like a freak ... inside.

(She picks up her hat and umbrella, and enters the platform area.)

But the announcer comes on just before I go on,

(Laughing)

"WELCOME, WELCOME EVERYONE! Here we are in beautiful Toledo! And this is our first night! What a perfect night for a show! How about that first act we had!! What a tiny little fellow he was!! I was afraid I would step right on him by accident coming out here! HA HA HA! Now, for our second act tonight we have a little lady in pants! And I must add,
she is as well dressed as any man I've ever met, MAYBE BETTER!!"

(She imitates his laugh, which is sarcastic. Turns to audience, to her right.)

And all the people laughed . . .

(Continues at sideshow.)

"Come on! Step right up! There's plenty of room for this attraction. Come on!"

(Turns to audience.)

He waved his cane around and hailed to passersby, and the crowd started to grow—all of them with round, curious eyes.

(Continues as announcer.)

"She's a well known FEMALE physician from New York! She has earned her fame with her lectures in the U.S. and in Europe on dress reform, women's right, the EVILS of alcohol and tobacco, MEN BE ON YOUR GUARD, the Civil War, and the profession of medicine. She is the first woman to ever be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor! You tell me if she is really a lady or ACTUALLY A MAN!! You won't be disappointed, folks, so step forward and give her a warm welcome! Don't forget our next act—the sword swallowing wonder!!"

(Turns)

I knew I would be one of these freaks, but I never expected to be laughed at . . . In other sideshows I never came onto the stage until after the announcer introduced me and I rarely heard his speech. Perhaps this time I should not have listened . . .

(She walks towards the downstage right corner. Sadly remembering.)

I stood behind the curtain—I was frozen. I felt like I was going to panic, run away or something. I clung to the curtain and every word he said rang in my ears! The noise of the crowd milling about the stage—there must have been hundreds of people—it frightened me! Were they going to judge me, ridicule me? I asked myself. But why now—why think of that after all these years? I wondered why I was even here. A sideshow!

(Laughs coldly)

I had to pull myself together, but I was so . . . afraid. I was going to run away, but then he announced me! It was like a shot in my heart! I knew I'd never get away in time. So, I went on. Luckily, I have given many lectures and I don't think the audience noticed my fear.

(She returns to the center of the platform, walking stiffly, and begins her lecture.)

I know why most of you are here—to see my "strange" attire and to see if I'm really a man instead of a woman. You have the right to believe whatever you want to. Besides all that, I sincerely hope that all of you will go away having learned something of value, and perhaps, THAT shall want to hear me speak again—and not the way I'm dressed. But since we're on the subject of my clothing . . .

(She steps back to model her outfit.)

Let me tell you why I choose to dress this way. As a member of the medical profession, and in every other facet of my life, I have found corsets, long skirts, and hoops impossible to manage. I also find THAT kind of Dress to be very dangerous to a woman's health and well-being—the corset literally constricts breathing! It is also a strain on the marriage relationship, because one cannot be happy unless one is healthy and the fashions women wear today will not allow freedom of movement or normal body functions, healthfulness, or happiness.

(Now a bit sarcastic.)

I have more than once seen, and I'm sure you have also,

(She will act out the speech, overly dramatizing it and trying to make the audience laugh.)

ladies in long skirts—some still in crinolines—covered in mud laboring to climb into trolleys and they rub up against men who become miserable and streaked with mud. And, Gentlemen, have you ever found it easy to ride on trolleys with women in hoops on them? I believe not! You have barely space to breath, like the women wearing the corsets! You would naturally think that men would want women to dress like them and such incidents might never occur!

(More seriously)

But they like to keep their ladies in frills and stays, and keep them dependent. I predict that one day men and women shall dress sensibly side-by-side!! . . . I pray that I don't shock you, do I? . . . But no more about Dress. I'll be speaking about the changes needed in women's fashions and lifestyles on Thursday night, and I don't want to give away ALL my secrets too soon. So, you'll just have to come and see on Thursday, now won't you?

(She smiles)

Now onto TONIGHT'S subjects:

(She stops and takes a breath, then takes off her spectacles to rub her eyes, then replaces them.)

I was born in Oswego Town, in 1832. Oswego Town, for all of you who are not familiar with the state of New York, is in northern New York—right on Lake Ontario. Oswego Town is near the port city of Oswego. Surely you have heard of prominent Oswego! We have very severe weather there. My family lived on a farm and we were quite isolated, with only a few other farms near us. I had four sisters and one brother. My parents
treated us all equally and since there were more girls in the family, we had to do "male" chores. But it was GOOD for us. Unlike most parents, mine believed that women should pursue careers just as men do. Corsets were never worn at home. My father, Alvah Walker, had seen slavery in the South, and witnessed how horrible and immoral it was.

(The platform begins to dim and DR. WALKER exits towards the dressing room.)

And my sisters, they went on to teach. They were such capable and hard working women, and they knew when and where they were needed. I'll always respect them for being such givers, giving to their families and to the children they taught.

(She is now in the dressing room.)

When I was very young I wanted to be a doctor—I dreamed of being one. Even then, people thought I was quite strange.

(She laughs. She begins to change. She will do so throughout the scene. A dressing screen may be used, but not to totally conceal her.)

I would walk around with my medical books and I'd recite all the different organs, muscles, bones, and so forth. And I'd tell people how to cure themselves of whatever they had, and they'd just laugh at me . . .

(Recalls.)

Once, I asked old Missus Cray how she was feeling. She was our closest neighbor, and she would walk past our farm just about every day. But this particular day she was SO pale.

(Seems to address someone in the shadows.)

Missus Cray, Ma'am, you're looking so pale today. What is your doctor doing for you?

(Pause as if listening.)

Bleeding you? . . . Why yes, they do say it will drain your body of all the fluids that are ailing you, but . . .

(A beat.)

I know he is a good doctor, yes, Ma'am . . . But bleeding isn't always good for you. It drains more than fluids. It takes away your life. . . . Yes, I am glad you have such faith in him, Ma'am. I mean no disrespect . . . just be careful . . .

(Back to audience.)

I watched her walk away. She had been such a powerful, robust woman before her illness. Then she became a . . . skeleton. Two days later she passed away. After that, I knew I HAD TO BE A DOCTOR. The kind that could be honest with my patients and not expect them to believe every word I said, or treatment I used, on pure blind faith . . .

(She has now changed to a very young MARY WALKER with her hair pinned up.)

My father and my sister, Aurora, were the only ones to see my dream. Only them. My father. . . . what an upstanding man he was! He commanded power over everyone, and my mother and all of us, we were under his spell! (Very happily remembering. She picks up a very worn book from the table.)

He was the one who gave me the medical books and books of poetry, and told me to be what I wanted to be. He told me to hold on. And I would, no matter what! I was spoiled at home—spoiled into believing that I could be anything I chose to be. But later I would find out how difficult it truly was in reality. Yet, I love my father for what he gave me, the perseverance, the strength to fight. I loved that man!

(Left stage lights. There is a large armchair set in the center of the area. Young MARY WALKER enters with a book in her hand. Calls.)

Father, I found the Book!

(Reading the cover.)

The poems of Shelley!

(She comes over to the armchair and sits at the foot of it. She looks up at someone who is sitting in the chair.)

Father, should I read your favorite?

(Pauses as she listens.)

Certainly, Father. Are you tired from the fields?

(Pause.)

The sun WAS terribly hot today. I'll read a little passage for you and you can just fall asleep here in the chair.

(Affectively she looks up at him. She opens the book and thumbs through it to a page.)

I know you'll like this one . . .

(Recites)

"I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,
From the seas and the streams;
I bear light shade for the leaves when laid
In their noonday dreams."

(She looks up at her father, then back to the book. She turns more pages, then stops. Reads quieter.)

To A Skylark:

"Like a poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not."
I'll read one more piece for you to make sure that you begin to dream.

"Like a rose embowered
In its own green leaves,
By winds deflowered,
Till the scent it gives
Makes faint with too much sweet these heavy-winged thieves."

(She looks up at him. Then, she closes the book. gets to her feet. and after looking back at him once more. tiptoes away into the dressing room. The scene fades.)

I was so sure of the future then. I felt that if the Lord wanted me to be a doctor then that was what I was going to be.

(Sadly)

I did not foresee any of the pain, harassment, any of it . . . .

If it had not been for Aurora and my father, all would have been lost long ago. But now what do I have? I want it to be like it was then—full of love and respect and promise. Now, all I have is loneliness and frustration . . . . at least, I still have Aurora. Why couldn’t she be here when I needed her? She has always been there when I needed someone. She’s watching the farm while I’m here. She didn’t even bat an eye when I told her that I was going on the sideshow circuit. Not an eye. She understands me so well. I can’t let her take care of me like she has been all this time. She even brings me my meals from her house. It’s because she doesn’t think I’m taking care of myself . . . . I do forget to eat sometimes . . . . I must make my own living even if it’s by being a freak in a sideshow. She feels my pain, I know she does. I can’t hide it. And I feel guilty for that—maybe that’s why I left, so I wouldn’t be a burden on her or be reminded of the pain and the guilt all the time. Here I can dwell on the good experiences of my life and tell others about them . . . .

(The dressing room dims.)

Scene Two

The scene is a small, spotlighted area of the stage, downstage right, beside the dressing room. There is a wheelbarrow in the left rear corner of the scene, partly in darkness. Center of the scene is a pail and a small cloth bag. Rear is a basket filled with greens. MISS WALKER appears from right. The year is 1850 and she is eighteen, with long, curly brown hair, which falls about her shoulders. She is dressed in a gray, simple, ground-length dress without a hoop. She crosses to the wheelbarrow and wheels it into the scene. Then, she pulls her skirt up a bit and gets down onto her knees. She is in a garden. She mimes picking up stones and placing them into the wheelbarrow.

MISS WALKER (addresses someone left stage.)

No, Aurora, I don’t need any help. You do enough work in your garden at home. Just talk with me. We don’t get to see each other very much. You live too many miles away.

(She looks up in the direction of Aurora. Laughs.)

Grown up? Hardly, Sister. I have a long way to go. What to do now that I am eighteen is a very good question. Any suggestions?

(Pause)

Do you think I will like the Seminary?

(Looks up.)

Then, I should go there. And I could teach like you did.

(Pause.)

You’re certainly right. I must make a living somehow. Have you ever planted flowers? I noticed that you didn’t have any in your yard.

(A beat.)

Well, let me show you how I plant my flowers and perhaps you will see how easy they are. I remember that you never liked to watch me plant. It’s nice to have a husband to do the planting for you.

(She smiles. Indicates stones.)

First, you have to extract all the stones from the ground where you’re going to plant. It’s the same as in a vegetable garden.

(Pause.)

Yes. And if I go to the Seminary and teach I won’t have to rely on Momma and Father anymore. They have done so much for all of us. What saints! I could save for medical school.

(Listens.)

Oh, no, I have not forgotten my dream of being a doctor. And I never will. Look at Elizabeth Blackwell—the first female physician. And those Bloomerites—they have the right idea about clothing! We live in progressive times, Aurora, and we better catch up!.

(Listens, then laughs.)

Am I? Forgive me for sounding so hell fire and brimstone—all righteous for the Cause. But I feel that times are changing, especially concerning women. We will have a choice in life. We can be whatever we want to be—a mother, wife, teacher, doctor, anything!

(After a few seconds she looks up angrily at Aurora. With surprise.)

Married?! What makes you think that I even want to get married?

(Listens.)

So what if Elizabeth and Patsy, and half the other girls my age are getting
HITCHED!! I’m happy for them, but it’s not for me!
(Get to her feet.)
I don’t want to marry Jack!! What ever gave you that idea? . . . He\nADORES me?
(She laughs.)
I don’t want to live on a farm for the rest of my life and that’s what would\nhappen if I married him. You know that. . . . I never felt more than\nfriendship for him, I’m afraid.
(Pause.)
Oh, I’ll tell him, don’t worry. I’ll set him straight. Marriage is slavery!
(Her sister must have gotten angry, because MISS WALKER’S expression\nsoften, almost apologetic.)
Well, . . . slavery of sorts then.
(MISS WALKER begins to move the wheelbarrow. It is very heavy, but she\nmaneuvers it with great strength. She wheels it to a corner of the scene. She\nreturns and kneels down on the right side of the scene.)
I will be no slave to any man. Look at MISSUS WOOLSON. She waits on\ner husband HAND-AND-FOOT and he’s not an invalid!
(She picks up the cloth bag. Recalls.)
Remember the day we went for that long hike, with baskets for berry\npicking, and we walked by their house? Missus Woolson was out there in\nthe front yard fixing the fence, because it was rotting away. And remember\nwhat Mister Woolson was doing?
(Waits.)
Right! Like a king he sat there on the porch. Then, he has the nerve to call\nto her, just as we were passing.
(Imitates him, with an ugly expression on her face and a deep, scratchy voice.)\n“Martha, hurry up there! I want my lunch!”
(Pause.)
I know, She looked at us, smiled and waved, dropped the hammer and\nstarted back to the house like there was a fire or something. It made me sick\n. . . .
(Listens.)
They might be an extreme example, but remember that it happens to many\nwomen. You know that. When a woman marries a man, she gives up\neverything.
(Aurora protests. MISS WALKER softens.)
Teaching. YES. You gave up teaching.
(Listens.Laughs.)
Of course it was all right if you wanted children. And you have wonderful
children.
(Pause.)
You’re right. You are. YOU would never be a slave. You’re too smart for\nthat . . . .
(She begins to take something out of the bag.)
I need these long sticks for the Morning Glories . . . . He IS a sweet and\ngood man. He’s so good with the children. I want a husband like you have,\nif I have one at all.
(She mimics tying the flowers up onto the sticks.)
You take each flower and gently pull it up and tie it, in two places, to the\nstick. You must be careful with them, because they are delicate . . . . It will\ntake a long time to find my special someone. My husband would have to be\nEXTRA special. He’ll have to understand that I want a career of my own.\nHe might even have to be a doctor. Then, he’d surely understand.
(Points to the ground where she is working.)
See these Morning Glories! They sprang up like nothing! Look at them\ndrooping. The sticks should make them stand up better. I wonder if they\nwill win any prizes at the Fair this year.
(Pauses.)
My roses? Yes. I hope they’ll be ready for the Fair. But I love the Morning\nGlories best . . . . Why? Well, because they bloom the earliest and they need\nthe most care.
(She pats the earth down around a flower firmly. Then she looks up at her\nsister.)
Of course I want children! But I want a career too. I don’t have to have\nthem right away.
(Smiles.)
I need a husband first. But I will have the career, husband or no husband.
(Regards the flowers.)
There—that’ll hold them. You should check the sticks every once in a\nwhile to see that they are still secure. Rain can do terrible things to them,\nand then the flowers will fall.
(She moves over and begins to mime making long rows in the earth with her\nhands.)
Now, I’m going to plant various flowers together to give the garden some\ncolor.
(Thinks.)
You’ll have to visit again when more flowers are up. Then I can give you\nsome to take home with you. I know you like my roses. The bushes are so\nhealthy this year, did you notice them?
(Listens.)
I know. Do you recall that poem Father used to read to us, or have we read to him?
(Pause.)
Yes, that was it. "To A Skylark." There's a beautiful verse in it, it goes:
Like a rose embowered
In its own green leaves,
By winds deflowered,
Till the scent it gives
Make faint with too much sweet these heavy-winged thieves.
A pretty verse, wasn't it? I hope MY roses won't be deflowered. They have to win this year. And MY Morning Glories too.
(She smiles, teasing.)
Big Sister worrying about me again, are you? You're almost like Momma—do you know that?
(She takes the pail and nimbly pours water on the planted area. She puts the pail down and gets up.)
You have to give them a lot of water, and every day they need more. Well, unless it rains. It's just like a vegetable garden, except prettier.
(She smiles on the front of her skirt.)
We should be getting back to the house. I'll get the greens. Momma wants them for a stew. She wanted to start it by four, and I think it's almost four now.
(She puts the cloth bag into the pail and puts them aside, and examines the ground where she has been working. To her sister with a short laugh.)
Friends? Of course, Silly. We'll always be BEST FRIENDS. I know that I'm a little hot-headed at times, but I truly value your advice and friendship.
(She moves to the rear of the scene and picks up the basket of greens.)
Don't worry. You're part of me. It's wonderful that you came to visit. How does my garden look? Not much there now, except for the droopy Morning Glories, but just wait—we will have the best flowers in the county. Don't I always? This little plot of land has put up with so many of my dreams and frustrations.
(She puts the pail into the wheelbarrow and places the basket on top of it.)
I tell the flowers the injustices of the world, because they are patient with me. They simply listen and don't pass judgment. So, this is my secret hideaway where I lecture to flowers. One day I will lecture to halls filled with people. Most everyone else thinks I'm crazy and just talking nonsense. But we'll show them,
(Addresses the ground.) Won't we?
(She laughs softly. Then, to Aurora.)
You walk ahead. I've got it. I've been reading about the heart. Did I tell you already? . . . Uh, huh. It's the most interesting organ. Oh, yes, I know every part. Let me recite them to you . . .
(She picks up the wheelbarrow and follows in the direction of her sister, reciting.)
The muscular interventricular septum separates the two sides of the heart. Then, there is the left and right ventricles and atriums, and the pulmonary veins lead . . .
(The garden scene fades. Lights come up on the dressing room. MISS WALKER enters from left. She will change throughout the scene.)
I earned my medical degree in 1855 and went to practice medicine in Columbus, Ohio. But I had to return to New York—to Rome.
(Reminiscing.)
Albert Miller was his name. We met at Syracuse Medical College. What a scholar and speaker he was! He was tall, athletic, with brown eyes and sandy-brown hair—so handsome!! When I first saw him, I immediately admired him. I felt like a little schoolgirl with stars in my eyes. He noticed me too. He respected me and understood me from the start. On graduation day, Albert gave the Commencement speech. It was called "The True Thinker." I'll never forget that title . . . . He stood behind the podium . . .
(Goes to the end of the stage, and imitates him.)
"President, Board of Trustees, honorable faculty members, and my fellow students, we have accomplished a great deal together through this journey of education! We have put forth all our energy, intellect, responsibility, and common sense to get where we are at this proud moment! We have found the greatness in ourselves!!"
(She steps back into the dressing room.)
He wore a black suit, so elegant, and his voice echoed in every corner of the auditorium, and in all our minds. It was so moving. He spoke of the theories we had learned and how he hoped we would carry them with us into the practice of medicine, with openmindedness, and concern for the individual. He felt that all the theories were as important as the practical experience we had gone through. That day, when he gave his speech, was the day I knew that I loved him. I didn't tell him right away though,
because we were going to practice medicine in two separate places, and we could not be together . . . Then, I found out that he loved me also . . . .

(She steps away from the dressing room area near the end of the stage.)

Being the only woman in my class was difficult at first. Most of the men were afraid of me. Normally women didn't pursue medicine, or any career for that matter. So, they weren't very comfortable around me, and some never were. But soon they realized that I possessed the same intellect and drive as they did, and I made plenty of friends. It was nice being treated as an equal. They were so bright and eager. I remember the picnics we would all go on. After they were done devouring all the food they could, they would get silly and tease me by yelling:

(LOUDLY)
"SPEECH, SPEECH, MARY!!" They knew I spoke my mind whenever I felt like it, often giving speeches in public or in the classroom. One time, when they teased me, I stood up to amuse them, and to get them to stop yelling . . . .

(DR. WALKER comes to the end of the stage and then comes down from the stage and walks down the left aisle, a spot following her. She stops.)

I decided to try out several passages from the beginnings of what would turn out to be my book, "Hit."

(She acts out this speech as if she is at the picnic with her classmates, and will refer to members of the audience as fellow students from time to time.)

All right, Gentlemen! I'll indulge you in a speech! And I want certain men to pay close attention to what I am about to say. 

(Smiling, she raises her right hand.)

Especially you, Mister Rollingham, because it concerns women's issues and YOU are my favorite rival on that subject! And I will not forget to address Mister Samuels or Mister Jerret! I remember everything and everyone!

(She laughs.)

Let me share some passages I am currently preparing for the book I hope to complete some time in the future.

(Very seriously.)

CHAPTER I: LOVE AND MARRIAGE. There is nothing of greater interest to all classes of people, in all times of life, than Love and Marriage questions—because all people are affected, directly or indirectly, either by their own—that doesn't affect any of us yet, I'll add—by those with whom we are associated in every day relations, or by the ties of consanguinity.
On Seeing a Man and His Wife
At Daybreak

They stand above town near Dise Road
When gray dawn is burned off into
An August morning. They wade
In a field, pressing the wet
Grass with slippered feet, she
In her red bandanna while he holds
The quart container. Their age withers
Like the dawn as both waist high in thorns
And morning glories,
Search out those blackberries like
School children. They shun the car
Or two that rattle by, knowing
Only the scratch of goldenrod
At their sleeves, the drone
Of a wasp content with a sprig
Of ivy, and wanting nothing more.

Thomas Prestopnik
Bad Music
drawing
Tim Metallo

Unaccounted Four
drawing
Tim Metallo
The Funeral

He'd been a model of control
Hadn't he been a model of control?
Isn't that what all the neighbors and relatives had said when they'd seen him at the funeral home?
Lying in his bed in the room in the house he'd grown up in he could hear his mother crying.
"What's she gonna do without him?" he'd heard them ask each other.
"How's she gonna survive?" they'd whispered.
Never mind him, he's in control
But damn it! How was he gonna survive?
"You'd better come home," Hugh had said over the phone
"Your ma needs you. You dad, he's...uh...gone."
He'd driven straight home that night.
Hugh met him at the door, "Your ma won't stop."
He'd driven two hundred miles; she'd baked eight pies and eleven loaves of bread.
"Hi honey," she'd stepped quick to the china cabinet, "I'll get you something to eat."

She'd talked and talked: "Your Uncle Rob and Aunt Betty'll probably fly in from Texas. They'll need some place to stay. People'll be stoppin' in after the funeral....Maybe more bread."
"Ma!" he'd said, grabbing her by the shoulders, then drawing her to him when she began crying.
Later, after she'd finally fallen asleep, he'd sat at the kitchen table with Hugh.
"He was drivin' home with a load of stuff from Bath, you know how slippery that Bath-Haspin road can be in winter."
After Hugh had gone to bed he'd walked into his own room.
He'd been afraid to turn out the light, as if darkness, somehow would make it less dream-like; more real.

It was a cold though clear morning. Dale was packing his car for the trip back to school. His mother had hovered around him all morning, making sure that all his clothes were washed and that he had a sufficient supply of snacks to take back.
At noon his father came home from the store and the three of them ate lunch together. Afterwards his father walked out to the car with him. He stood beside the car while Dale warmed it up.
"Dale," he said, hands shoved in his pockets, "I'm sorry I bitched about the F. Three A's and one B ain't nothin' ta be ashamed of. He paused, as if uncertain, "I just want you to know that your mother and I are very proud of you."

Backing the car out of the driveway, Dale noticed for the first time how vulnerable his father looked standing with one hand in his pocket waving goodbye.

He'd chosen a nice casket.
Hadn't he chosen a nice casket?
It'd been oak, his father's favorite wood, with nice brass handles.
Inside was white satin. Not that bright white stuff that hurts your eyes, but a nice soft off-white satin.
Everybody had said it was a nice casket.
His mother had picked out his gray pin stripe; that was his favorite suit.
He'd made sure the undertaker had put his pants on.
Dad had always said to be sure he was buried with his pants on.
He'd looked real fine.
Hadn't he looked fine?
Maybe his face had been a little too glossy and his lips a little too red, but that
was to be expected.
So why had everybody ruined it?
Didn't the undertaker know that his father'd hated Psalms?
And the flowers.
Didn't everybody know his father'd hated flowers?
No, he hadn't hated flowers. Just the thought of givin' 'em to dead people.
"Take your flowers home!" he'd wanted to shout, "Dad doesn't need 'em.
"Dad doesn't want 'em
"Give 'em to someone who's still alive!"
But he hadn't.
He wished he had.
He'd not bothered with flowers.
He'd brought a baseball instead.
It was the baseball he'd used when he pitched the no-hitter that won Woodhall Central the county championship.
His father had taught him how to throw a baseball.
That was when they lived in Buffalo.

Dale stormed into the small apartment, face red with shame or anger, tears streaming down his face. He slammed his new glove onto the floor and screamed, "I hate baseball!"
"Shh," his mother said. "You'll wake your father. C'mon in the kitchen and tell me what's the matter."
"I hate baseball!"
"Shh..."
"Dale," his father called, "Come in here."
Dale, fearing the worst, dragged slowly into his parents' bedroom. "What," he mumbled.
"What's wrong?" Dale had been pestering his parents for a glove all spring and they had just gotten it for him the day before.
"Jimmy Shatner told me I throw like a girl," he sniffed. "He got the rest of the class to make fun of me—even the girls," he sniffed again and wiped the tears away with his hand.
His father reached out and caught Dale's arm, pulled him onto the bed and tickled him until he giggled. "Go get my glove," he told Dale.

Hugh gave the eulogy at the funeral.
"A nice eulogy—wasn't it a nice eulogy?" his mother had asked.
Hugh'd mentioned fishing trips with his father.
He'd also spoken of the antique furniture his Dad had fixed so well.
The minister spoke of common men and their tie to the earth.
He'd not thought of his father as a common man, but rather an uncommon man (isn't that what Thoreau said?). But he knew what the minister meant.
It'd turned out okay, though the part about going to Hell was a little scary.
Maybe he'd go to church a little more often. Funerals made you think about going to Hell a little more often.
After the funeral everybody stopped over to the house.
He'd wished everybody would just leave.
He'd gotten tired of the same stupid questions.
"How's school?"
"What're ya takin'?"

Tired of the same stupid comments.
"My you've grown sooo tall, I remember when you were just this tall," the speaker invariably held his or her hand about three feet from the floor, palm down, knees slightly bent.
Tired of being complimented on how well he'd handled things.
"Why couldn't they just leave" he'd wondered.
He'd watched Johnny leave his mother's side and cross the room to him, "I'm sorry Dale," he'd said, "Your dad was a great guy."
Johnny, his best friend.
Johnny, his fishing buddy.

It was a warm drizzly spring day, a perfect day for fishing along the Kiter.
Johnny and Dale were to meet their friends at the Holly Farm grocery store in the middle of town before hiking to the river.
It was Dale's first fishing trip without his father, something he'd been begging his parents about for the past week. His mother had been somewhat hesitant, but his father had convinced her that it would be all right. His father had even agreed to let Dale take his fishing pole.
The rod was a metallic gray-silver fiberglass with ceramic guides. It was six feet long with a handle of fine cork and a spinner reel. His mother had given the pole to his father when they were married fifteen years before. His father
had always taken good care of the rod, wiping it dry with a soft cloth before putting it into its leather case after every fishing trip.

What a great day they'd had! They didn't catch any fish, but then again they'd only fished for about half an hour. The rest of the day had been taken up with a huge wrestling match.

During the wrestling, the pole, which was leaning against a tree by the bank of the river, was knocked into the water. Dale saw it fall into the quickly moving river and scrambled to the edge. He couldn't see it in the muddied fast flowing water.

The Kiter isn't a very wide river, as rivers go, but during late March and early April it is six to ten feet deep and the water flows quite fast. The boys dragged the bottom of the river with long sticks, reaching out as far as they could (which wasn't very far). Then they walked the edge for two miles hoping to find some sign of the rod.

Eventually all the boys, with the exception of Johnny and Dale, left for home. Still the two searched on. It was near dark when they started for home.

He'd tried to think up ways to explain the pole's loss as he and Johnny trudged home. "Maybe you could tell your dad that I fell in and you dropped the pole to save me," Johnny had suggested.

Yet when he stood inside the kitchen door, wet and dirty, he'd told his father the truth. "I lost your pole, Dad. We were foolin' around and I lost it." His father had stood there and looked at him for a moment, then he stepped forward and placed his hand on Dale's shoulder, "Go change your clothes," he said, walking into the living room.

His mother'd replaced that rod with a graphite one on his father's birthday that July.

He'd always meant to buy one for him but every time he had enough money there was something he wanted for himself.

Now he'd never be able to replace it.

If only it were April and he could go fishing!

Everybody was gone now.

Johnny had gone home, he had to work in the morning.

He'd driven Hugh home earlier.

The relatives were gone.

The neighbors were gone.

Now the lights were off.

He could break down now couldn't he?

Lying in his bed in his room in the house he'd grown up in he could hear his mother crying.

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Gravitation Day

Yesterday was gravitation day. There was a huge bang as the ozone and earth fell from our feet in a rushing gush of Hoover noise. We flew into the sun, hair higher than the leaves of the tallest tree.

Then the rooted things were sucked—roots ripping, crumbling dirt, which was sucked along with columns of leaves, and twigs, and loosened rocks. Then the cars went gleaming into the swirling blue sky. Finally the buildings broke from their foundations and crumpled into meteors of aluminum, wood and glass. Then the world stood alone in a black vacuum of sucking nothing.

Gravitation day was over yesterday was fall,

the branches fell from the leaves and the leaves spun in drifting circles making way to the ground.

The trees stand alone, high above with limbs stretched to the sun and roots held firmly in place, in the soil which is protection, and the wind comes harmless to the trees, but not to the leaves which are sent flying into flips, and turns and somersaults turning the world upside down and sideways and all ways. Millions upon millions of leaves are lifted up, shuffled along, and dropped again; victims of a force holding them to the earth even after gravitation day is over.

Timothy Schuman
Hiroshima

I wonder if the people who are here
were looking at the mushroom cloud
which burst out from there, beyond the ocean,
on a summer day, thirty-nine years ago.

I am here at this peaceful time;
throwing a bunch of wild flowers into a vase,
burning incense in a silence by myself.
Although the incense reached to the heaven,
the time that flowed away among them
would never have flown away completely.
Beside the flowers and the incense,
I am in search of where to devote them.

The Red Wheelbarrow

how much depended
upon
that red wheel
barrow
shrouded with grey
fallout
beside the dead
chickens

Tim Metallo

Fumie Kamoshita
from

Bricks For The Living

i

Beside the quiet
Blue-green waters of the stream
A man fries a trout.
He eats beneath hemlocks leaning
Through mist rising from the creek.

Beneath the surface
An old trout snaps the back of
A silver minnow.
Nylon filliment extends
From hooks anchored in his jaw.

ii

A man and a boy
Wander through spring fields. "Why do
We need this rain, Dad?"

A red tail hawk folds his wings
And crushes a sparrow's life.

iii

Are people like stars?

Beneath a smoke stack spewing
Smog the warriors
Gather, gripping mugs like swords
At a local tavern

*Walter Plaisted*
The clock in the hallway ticks with mechanical steadiness, chopping time into manageable segments: neat little half or quarter hours that never change, never miss a beat. The clock echoes through the house, churning out its constant rhythm. The cat lies on the windowsill watching sparrows, waiting for the clock to chime five o'clock: dinner time. She knows. In a dark corner next to the cold fireplace, I sit and let the tick regulate the speed of my rocking. Slow, mechanical, thoughtless. I want to take a sledge to the clock, smash it.

Thoughts like that frighten me. I know it is only a grandfather clock. But tick, tick, tick it goes, no chance to hold still, to slow down, to stop. Even the doctors couldn’t stop it. Tick, tick, tick — I’m boxed into the way I’m supposed to act. Clean the house, volunteer at the day-care center, play the hostess, smile, laugh, clean the house again. Each chime of the clock marks another hour I have been the loving housewife, another hour I sit in my spotless house, waiting. The urge to smash grows stronger.

I kept the doctor’s appointment today, although I wanted nothing
more than to stay huddled in the darkness of my house, away from the
stares and gossip that seem to follow me everywhere. Even the taxi
driver watched me in the rear-view mirror, his gray eyes holding
sympathy I didn't want to see. When I gave him the fare he squeezed my
hand quickly and smiled—as if I needed reassurance. Then the women
in the waiting room peered at me over out-dated issues of *Family Circle*
and *McCall's*, sniggering and judging with their polyester mentality. I
clutched my purse to my chest and walked quickly to the reception
window, announced my name, then turned to face the women.

They wouldn't meet my eyes, these women with bulging abdomens
and heavy buttocks. No one moved to make room for me on the nubby
green couch, no one removed their coats from the one remaining chair.
I had to hold each one up until it was claimed, then I settled back and hid
behind July's issue of the *New Yorker*. In the far corner next to a potted
palm a young girl—she couldn't have been more than seventeen—grasped
her hands to her elbows and rocked slowly back and forth. For a
moment she looked up and I could see the wetness of her eyes, and I
knew why she was there. That's what they thought I was waiting for.

Then a nurse in blinding white walked briskly along us, smiled
tightly, called my name. I stood slowly and followed her down the
panelled hall to Examination Room 3. The blank white walls were
stained with tiny drops of dark blood that the gloss couldn't hide. My
hand skimmed the surface and the drops disappeared, but my fingers
were clean. The nurse gave me a stiff paper gown that opened in the
front, then left. Half an hour ticked away while I held the gown closed
and stared at my cold feet. After a quick rap on the door, the doctor
entered with his perfunctory "And how are we feeling today?"

"Fine," I replied, although my habitual response would have been
"lousy." I was conditioned into conventionality by my wait among the
fat women with graying hair. I couldn't break routine. I got on the table
and placed my feet gently in the stirrups.

"Slide down, please," the doctor said, snapping a rubber glove into
place. I inched along the table until I felt I would fall off.

"O.K. You're going to feel a little pressure here."

I closed my eyes and tried to focus on a shopping list—milk, eggs,
disposable washcloths—no, I wouldn't need those. When I opened my
eyes, I could see the doctor reaching for a surgical mask. Then he picked
up a syringe and moved back, framed between my feet.

"Is everything all right?" My voice shook. I knew it was a stupid
question.

"Just need to do a little housecleaning. This might hurt a bit. Try to
relax."

"What do you mean, housecleaning?"

The doctor sat back on his stool, pushed away from the table. I had a
feeling he was testing his bedside manner. His eyes crinkled and his jaw
moved from side to side. He pulled the gown down and tried to smile
reassuringly; it was more of a grimace.

"It's nothing serious, Katie. Just a simple procedure to help you heal
faster."

"I feel fine," I told him.

"That doesn't mean anything... You miscarried three weeks ago,
right?" I nodded. "Well, sometimes tissue lodges in the uterus and has
to be removed. I'll just use this suction tube—" he held up a white
plastic instrument—"and clean house." He smiled, impressed with the
simplicity of his explanation.

"But why now? Why didn't they take care of that in the hospital?" My
eyes ached then cooled, and I closed them on the wetness.

"Well, Katie." He used my name to soften his words. "You were in no
condition in the hospital for the procedure. That's why we scheduled
this appointment. Or should I say the one two weeks ago." He squinted
his eyes again, and the lines on his forehead furrowed. I knew I should
be ashamed, that he blamed me.

But Matthew scheduled the appointment, not me. He didn't even ask
if I had plans, just made it. *He* didn't have to lie there with his feet in the
air while the doctor scraped his insides. He was safely at work with his
drawings and figures, surrounded by friends who sent me daisies in the
hospital. I only kept the appointment to make things easier for him, to
take the hurt out of his eyes. But I was the one on the table. I had to deal
with the cold shock of the doctor's instruments. Matthew could block it
all out, forget the plans we had for our child, because he had to. We always knew I was the strong one. Now I was alone with Illy feet in the air — no Matthew, no baby, nothing.

"Can't you do it some other time? I had such a day planned—" The lie was obvious: I hadn't worn makeup in days. I only sat in the house listening to the clock eat away at time. Tick, tick, tick—until the sound builds to a pulsing crescendo that shakes the pictures on the walls.

"I think we should do it now. You could only have complications if we delay." He got off the stool, took Illy feet out of the stirrups, and handed me a paper sheet to cover Illyself. "Since you're upset, I'll send the nurse in with a shot. You'll be feeling chipper in no time." He mumbled to himself, walked to the instrument tray and ran his hand over the implements, then turned and left, closing the door on his way out.

A few minutes later a nurse entered with a small, portable vacuum marked "DANGER: Do not use in the presence of anesthetics." The nurse was tiny, dressed in a white jumper with a pale pink sweater, smiling at Illy with healthy enthusiasm. Fumbling with the instrument tray, she produced a syringe filled with clear liquid. I held out Illy arm, trying not to think.

"No, dear," she said cheerily. "You have to roll over."

I turned on Illy side, the paper rustling as she moved it away. She rubbed alcohol on Illy hip.

"What are you giving Illy?"

The nurse smiled. "Just a little Demerol...as a local." She hummed a few tuneless notes. "Can you believe this weather? It feels like Indian summer to me."

I closed my eyes and nodded. The needle jabbed through muscles, making me jump. My eyes felt hot and dry.

"What happens next?" I asked.

"Do you mean when the doctor comes back?" I nodded. "Well, it's just a routine D & E. That's dilation and evacuation."

"What does that mean?"

"It's a simple abortion."

The words hung in the air, forming a barrier between us. I wanted to reach out, to throttle her dainty neck. What right did she have? Abortion? Not me. Never.

"You don't understand," I finally said. She had turned her back to leave. "I miscarried. I'm not having an abortion." Suddenly my throat closed and I began to shake, my arms tight against my chest. My ears echoed with a high-pitched ringing. The nurse moved quickly, grabbing my hand and holding tight.

"It's just the same procedure. I didn't mean...not that you..." She was at a loss and I felt sorry for her. She patted my hand, trying to soothe me.

"I'll stay right here, Mrs. Miller. You won't be alone, and it will be over before you know it."

Time passed. Colors swam and mixed together, the nurse became a fuzzy paper cut-out, and the white walls moved from left to right with the rhythm of waves. Slowly my hand relaxed to the point where the nurse placed it gently on the table. My heart-beat clock echoed in my ears like the clock in the hall, loud and steady. Then the doctor was beside me, telling me to move down the table again.

"Just relax, Katie," his voice buzzed, "it'll be over soon."

I felt the needle pierce me, then forced my mind to center on a crack in the ceiling. I estimated its length and width in millimeters, tried to guess its origin, compared it to a snaky river. Then it became my cat, with a thin hairless tail slashing back and forth. The hum of the vacuum tube reverberated in my ears, but I told myself it was only Matthew cleaning house so I wouldn't have to. He is so good to me. My heart-beat ticked on.

"Almost done," the doctor said from far away. I heard a scraping sound like the cat at the door, waiting to be let in. Then the room became quiet as the hum of the vacuum died away. The doctor removed my feet from the stirrups and pulled the paper sheet down to cover me.

"It's over," the nurse said softly, giving my hand a pat. "Just rest here a little while, then we'll move you to Recovery." I nodded and fell back.

When I left Examination Room 3, the nurse asked if I wanted her to call my husband. I shook my head vaguely, said I would take a taxi home. Matthew was too busy at work. She led me to a quiet room of pastel blue, with calico drapes at the window and pictures of smiling clowns on the walls. I slept there for a while, then, suddenly, I woke up to emptiness and nothing had changed. I needed Matthew—he would run his fingers across my forehead, his dark eyes seeing only me. The corners of his eyes would wrinkle when he smiled, his breath would be warm against my neck. The soulless eyes of the clown twinkled and the painted smile mocked me. The nurse came, helped me get dressed, then led me back to the waiting room.
There were different women now—happy women with protruding stomachs and wedding bands, talking quietly about things like the advantages of breast feeding and tactile stimulation—things I didn’t need to know. Their eyes flitted around the room, careful not to seem interested. I ignored them and slowly drew a brush through my hair. Long blonde strands stuck to the bristles, and I absently pulled at them and formed an airy ball. In the window my reflection stared back at me, a pinched white face with cold blue eyes. I looked away. The cab driver honked, and I left the doctor’s office, shaking, with an aching gap inside. Matthew wouldn’t be able to make me go back.

The clock ticks slowly, gaining strength and volume in my mind until it blocks out everything else—the hum of the refrigerator, the purr of the cat, all little noises a house makes. Instead of resting, I sit in my rocker and sway to the tick, tick, tick. We bought the chair when we were waiting for the baby; doctors recommend the steady rhythm to soothe infants to sleep. I had Matthew move it from the nursery when I got home from the hospital. Now I sit and rock, and there is nothing soothing in the motion. Nothing at all. I watch the cat stretch her claws against the windowsill, long milk-white circles clothed in soft fur.

I am scraped raw.

I hear the car in the driveway, spitting gravel as Matthew spins the wheels. The door slams and he calls to me, tells me he’s going to check on the garden. Again the house is silent, possessed by the ticking clock. I stand, unsteadily at first, and shuffle to the hallway. The polished oak casing houses the mechanism that marks time with tiny, noisy chunks. Tick, tick, tick—minutes pass and I remain the same. The wood feels smooth and cool under my fingertips; I caress it gently, testing its strength. It would be such a simple procedure to put my weight behind it, to push until the clock shatters against the hard wood floor. Maybe I could change things.

Matthew laughs as he walks up the sidewalk, carrying a pumpkin, maybe, or a squash from the garden. Pain cramps my stomach and I lean against the sturdy clock, then slide to the floor. I’m bleeding again, as always. It never stops. The door opens and Matthew enters. His sandy hair is wind-blown and his thin cheeks hold a hint of color, but his eyes are laughing. Then he sees me and his arms are around me, holding me close. I let him carry me to the bedroom. The clock downstairs breaks into chimes—it’s five o’clock. The need to smash grows stronger.

Elizabeth D. Gronovsky
Dinah at Eighty

Four women
in the room talking
about men.

One with a butt
stalking the ashes
in the ashtray
not saying much.

Another, salting
her coffee—
(She's foreign)
bitter words
are heard here:
"I got me mind
he's being too nice."

The other
with false teeth
mashing cake,
spittles occasions of
hate on fine
china: "Four
times married."

Dinah—with ivory
skin shining
in morning
sits by the window
slashing her cake
into twos and fours
and sixes and eights.

The fourth lights
a smoke—her third
since ten,
laughs a little
and then breaks
the meeting:
"Well, I meet Jim
at three...

The others leave,
At the sink
Dinah washes
tea-cups and
cake plates
and ash-trays...
And she wishes
that she too had
someone to hate.

Timothy Schuman