

“Ohio 1968”

"You only die of the first man". Colette

Now that you've swept me up,
Keep me aloft above the soft, wet ground.
Let me stay in your arms
This November night
That much closer to Heaven,
Against your heart.

Claudia Beechman

“The Right Direction”

I pulled into the auto body shop--
Your mirror was being repaired.
I passed the bashed-in fenders,
Tangle of silver metal
Before proffering your billfold
In the office.

You doubt me now, you cannot go
One hour it seems without manifold
Suspicious of love poems written
In secret, hidden in some file
Where it seems the word delete
Does not exist.

You crashed the system, you who've
Stayed the course, been my asylum
For so many years, fueling ambition.
The words came tumbling out
As you had feared, you
Fear them still.

Our normal hum of conversation
Has resumed since your return.
You say the car will pass inspection.
Meanwhile, at the wheel
Of the computer, I seek
The right direction.

Claudia Beechman

I wrote this after I hurt the one I love most.

“Boris”

"Love is sacrifice". S. Beryl Lush (my grandfather)

At the train,
He said he'd remember
The little red veins
Threading the perimeter
Of her nose.

Not her eyes
Of red-flecked green,
Nor her heart-shaped face,
Nor the way she moved
Upon the stage.

He was going
West to try his hand
In Hollywood, after
Leaving the theatre
By the Shore.

He wanted her
To come with him.
The curly-haired,
Two year old, too
In the stroller.

But she could
Not go with him.
Though she got lost
In his green eyes;
Had known ecstasy.

She was bound
By her own law
Of 'thou shalt not',
Could not tear out
The hearts of so many.

Years later,
He came back to
The resort, successful,
Disdainful of her
Menagerie in a backwater.

He sat there
In the tiny cottage,
His freckled hands
Folded on the table
Using the word “provincial”.

She speaks of it
Matter-of-factly,
Though telling me
At last, that yes,
She had loved Boris.

Claudia Beechman
Previously published in Bucks County Writer Magazine.

“Stringing My Guitar”

It had been a long time
since I had strung my guitar;
When did Martin start
twisting two strings into one sleeve?

One wedged-in peg
Flew across the room as I stretched
the string too fast across the frets.
The old ones had long lost their
strength and lustre;
I unwound them with no trouble.

I saw where the warm wood had worn
since the work done at the factory in Nazareth.
I admired the new bridge,
Traced the outline of the nearly invisible
repair done in the Rue de Rome some
thirty years ago.

I shook my head to think how I had fled,
leaving it behind
Like some abandoned lover
In a corner of a room in the rue Boulard;
A friend protected it,
And brought it to Connecticut.

One year later, the oud player
from the band gave me a scolding
For leaning it against the wall exposed

for two whole days--
"It's your instrument!" he cried,
"It's your instrument!"

I found the black peg on today's paper,
Hidden in Eminem's hat.
Now, I'll relearn the fingering , and sing,
Then rest it in its battered case
Against the velvet lining,
The sticker that read "fragile" barely visible.

Claudia Beechman

*I think of this poem as an odyssey. As I unwrapped the strings,
unwound them and wove them through the grooves, all kinds of memories
came flooding back. The guitar became a metaphor for me.*

"L'Armoire"

L'armoire sent bon comme tu sentais,
Sachet suspendu de la clef,
Doux souvenir de toi, toujours soignée,
Ton beau sourire que l'amour embellissait.

L'ancienne armoire autrichienne,
Qui était à toi, qui est la mienne,
Fait que ton image me revienne,
Fait que ton courage m'appartienne.

L'armoire me parle de ta beauté,
De la fierté des belles choses que tu as créées,
De la broderie en petit point faite en coulisse
Ou tu attendais pour chanter.

L'armoire bleue ou tu gardais
Tes tricots de la meilleure qualité,
J'y passe ma main comme tu la passais,
Je respire comme toi le parfum des rosiers.

"The Armoire" (translation)

The armoire smells of your perfume,
Sachet suspended from the key,
Sweet souvenir of you, now in my room
Brings your smile back to me.

The antique Austrian armoire
That once was yours, and now is mine
Sends me your image like a star,
Sends me your courage from afar.

The armoire tells of your beauty,
Of the art you made on an embroidery ring,
French knots done in your dressing room
While you waited to sing.

The armoire on my plain pine floor
The armoire that still smells of flowers
Your scent floats out when I open the door
The old armoire that will always be ours.

Claudia Beechman

Every time I opened the beautiful armoire that I inherited from my sister, the smell of flowers would come wafting out. Somehow, the words came to me in French first. It was so satisfying when I finally figured out a decent translation. I made my first collaborative effort when a neighbor set it to music. We recorded it and sent it to WXPN (UPenn's radio station). They played it on Bastille Day, then again in March just in time for the Philadelphia Flower Show when the program's theme was "blossoms". Many thanks to Sleepy Hollow deejay Chuck Elliot.

"The Summers Past"

My sister in her summer garden,
A silk square covering her head
A star sapphire gracing her finger
Her chair perched by the annual bed,

Dreaming about her early summers,
Her singing father, skeeball, The Green Mill
Her pixie mother in capris,
"Happy Hour" at the Admiral Hotel.

She saw her sisters in their sunsuits,
Drinking milk from hobnail glass,
Coasting bikes on the macadam,
Carrying towels and weathered rafts.

The beach boys raking sand each morning,
The faded orange canvas tent,
The big red Coca-Cola cooler,

Pastel umbrellas, chairs for rent.

Her grandmother with her straw basket
Filled with ripe plums and marzipan.
Her grandfather's keen eyes upon her,
A Churchill in his elegant hand.

She thought of running with her mother
Who body-surfed straight to the shore,
Whose eyes reflected the sea's color,
Whose laughter rose above the ocean's roar.

They'd take the good ones in together,
Then run right back into the tide,
Their heads turned sharply toward a wave,
Again they'd catch the crest and ride.

Content in their communal silence,
They'd walk together in the bracing air,
The salt smell hovering around them,
Sea water glistening in their hair.

They passed the white-washed Spanish villa,
The cottage modest by compare,
Wild honeysuckle overran the eaves,
And all was small but love and laughter there.
She made some watercolors of the cottage,
The spinet, lantern, and the flowered chair,
They hang together in her mother's kitchen;
An evocation of the time spent there.

Claudia Beechman

*I imagined my late sister reminiscing about our beloved Cape May, long
before it began catering to tourists.*

*"Boca Lobo" (on the occasion of a performance at The Philadelphia Museum of Art,
Nov., 1995)*

My voice teacher
From Argentina once told me
"We tell the singer, 'Boca lobo!'"
(May the wolf spring from your mouth).
From the foot of the Grand Staircase
I looked up at Diana the Huntress
And the beast leapt from my throat.

Six months before
My soul went into hiding
Twenty pounds lighter
My body was admired
Nothing fit, but what did it matter
In Morris where patients lay
In their stained sweatshirts
In the refuge of the “dark wood” dweller.

The doctors, finely attired,
The tips of their Montblanc pens
Peeking out of their pockets,
Their monogrammed shirtcuffs a reproach:
I, so shabby and unkempt wanted to shout
“I, too am elegant!”

When the drugs failed
They tried electricity,
And finally, some current must have jolted
The right synapse as I lay bolted to the table;
Holly gathered my hair gently
Ron said my t-shirt was pretty.

(Though they say you remember nothing,
I remember these things.)

In the day hospital,
Still ashamed and appalled
By what had befallen us,
We had “group”
Sometimes silent, sometimes crying
We listened to Chris, who gave good counsel
And talked of normal things like cooking.

My voice teacher
From Argentina once told me
We tell the singer, ‘Boca lobo!’”
(May the wolf spring from your mouth)
From the foot of The Grand Staircase
I looked up at Diana the Huntress
And the beast leapt from my throat.

Claudia Beechman

Previously published in UPenn's Speakeasy Anthology

*My voice teacher told me about "boca lobo" long before I became ill,
but I never forgot it. This is a poem about hope and triumph. I'm
still fighting the beast.*

"Petit Point"

For her last holiday
The aunt stitched a masterpiece
Her needle dancing through the scrim;
A legacy for her niece.

She was embroidering a story
"The Princess and the Pea"
For a little round-faced girl,
A gift of Love and Beauty.

Her sewing box was arrayed
With ribbons, silk and lace,
There were pearls and rhinestones
For the crown above the face.

She sewed twenty patterns,
And none was the same,
A flowing gown of purple spilled
Over the billowing counterpane.

Awake, welcoming an hour,
She'd fashion another layer,
Adding beads and sequins
French knots for the curly hair.

The princess, lovely, but weary
Had not slept the night
The pea of glinting, jet black beads
Defied the mattress' height.

The pea, in its malignancy,
Had robbed the princess of rest
Thus proving her royalty,
She painfully passed the test.

The aunt lay still and peaceful
Asleep in her queen-sized bed,
Her hand held the scissors
That cut the final thread.

Claudia Beechman

The magnificent needlepoint that Laurie made hangs in my niece's bedroom. I could never quite get over the fact that Laurie was as talented with her hands as she was onstage.

CLAUDIA BEECHMAN: MUSICAL BIOGRAPHY

I come from a theatrical family; my mother Dolly is an actor, director, and playwright and my father, Gene regaled patrons in "Gino's", his Philadelphia restaurant, with his beautiful baritone voice. My sister Laurie became a Broadway star. She appeared in *Annie*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *Cats*, *Les Miserables* and was nominated for a Tony award for her performance as the Narrator in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. In 1998, she died of ovarian cancer.

I began my musical career at the age of fourteen as a folksinger, accompanying myself on guitar and singing in coffeehouses in South Jersey and Philadelphia. My earliest musical inspirations were Joan Baez and Judy Collins. On Saturdays, I took the bus (there was no Speed Line yet) from Collingswood, NJ to Philadelphia to study opera with my father's teacher. When I got home, I put away the arias, lieder and Italian art songs and practiced the guitar, but I still use the vocalises (voice exercises) that my teacher so elegantly handwrote in the little spiral music book forty years ago. They are worth their weight in gold!

I went on to receive a B.A. in French from Rutgers University. I also obtained a teaching certificate in my senior year and discovered that I loved teaching. I attended McGill U.'s French summer program in Montreal between my sophomore and junior years, where I took a course in Moliere and "le francais vivant par l'action dramatique"--living French through acting. This was a milestone; I loved saying my lines in French. I decided to move to Paris after graduation where I studied acting at the Theatre Ecole Tania Balachova. She was a well-known stage and film actress in France. While I was home for a visit, my father gave me the Edith Piaf Deluxe Set record album; one listen was enough—I knew I had to sing French songs.

I learned the guitar accompaniment to Edith Piaf songs and began singing them in Philadelphia clubs and cafes. I made several television appearances. One night, I was singing in a restaurant where I met an actor from Canada who asked me to do the lead female role in *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris* the following summer. I agreed. In rehearsal, I found that I had a lot to learn. Singing the songs came naturally to me, but I was used to hiding behind my guitar. I had to learn how to move on stage.

When I finished my stint in Toronto, I again returned to Philadelphia. I continued to perform regularly and expanded my repertoire of French songs with a piano accompanist. I again began appearing around Philadelphia, performing at the Commissary Piano Bar, Barclay Hotel, and other cabaret venues, as well as doing several benefit concerts.

I also sang with a Middle Eastern band at a fantastic club on South Street called Cafe Yaas. ..There was an accordionist, a guitarist, an oud player and a bazuki player. The musicians taught me to sing in Greek, Turkish, and Hebrew.

My husband, Barry, who has always been tremendously supportive of my work and I put together a recital format that combines elements of show business and academe, with songs that run the gamut from Piaf to Poulenc, including personal, historical, and sometimes humorous commentary on the place of each song in the history of French popular music. I've presented this concert repertoire (in many settings), including the Cosmopolitan Club (for the Alliance Française), Chestnut Hill College, the Meadowbrook School, the University of Pennsylvania, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia Community College and Montgomery County Community College. I also participated in a benefit concert at Lincoln Center and the Marriott Marquis Hotel in New York. During this time, I gave birth to two sons, Beryl and Reid, who are now twenty-four and twenty-one.

I continue to refine my cabaret repertoire. Both my 1994 recording, *Parlez-moi d'amour*, and my 1999 CD, *Souvenirs de Paris*, include songs of Edith Piaf, Charles Trenet, Jacques Brel, and other French composers. In 1996, I joined my sister, for a duet of Brel's "If We Only Have Love" on Laurie's last album, *No One is Alone*. In January, 2003, I released my latest CD, *The Grand Legrand*, a compilation of songs by the prolific French composer Michel Legrand. I had the pleasure of presenting a copy to the great man himself, when he appeared at The Regency Hotel in New York a few months after the CD was released. I've appeared as a cabaret singer at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Act II Playhouse, Odette's Cabaret and Triad in New York.

In June 2001 I went to Eastbourne, a seaside resort town on the English Channel, to attend my uncle's memorial service. One morning, I walked down to the beach and watched the sun rise. I had an epiphany. (Something was telling me to leave my day job as a French teacher, which I had done for twenty-five years.) Something or someone was telling me to try my hand at writing. I took an early retirement, signed up for a poetry course and started to keep a journal with the help of Julia Cameron's Morning Pages. I submitted three poems and one of them was published by *Bucks County Writer Magazine*. My essays have appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Charlotte Observer*. In the summer of 2004, I met a composer and jazz pianist at a block party. He set "The Armoire" a poem I wrote in French and English to music. We recorded it and I'm happy to say that WXPN, the University of Pennsylvania's radio station has given it and the *Legrand* CD a decent amount of airplay.

Recently, I've performed with a group called The Hot Club of Philadelphia. They play the music of the gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt and French jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli. We've done two gigs at the Sellersville Theatre in Bucks County, PA.

What's next? I'd like to write a one-woman show based on my life.

Visit my Web site at www.theatrefest.com/claudiabeechman.
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