

Octogenarian on Fire

New Poems

2013–2017

Vilma Ginzberg Olsvary



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Murmurs & Outcries, Small Poetry Press, 2007

Snake Pit, Round Barn Press, 2010

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MEMOIR

When the Iris Blooms, 2012

Mostly Roses, 2015

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Introduction and Thanks

This volume of poems derives from a larger manuscript, titled **Octogenarian on Fire**, a collection of poetry, memoir and essays written during and about that decade of my life. But it was unwieldy, so I have extracted those poems written in my late eighties, omitted any previously published, and present them on their own here. I plan to produce the balance of that manuscript as part of my memoir series, privately printed for my family.

Writing is one of the main avenues through which I continued to express whatever fire I still possessed, and which was my main preoccupation in those years between 80 and 90: not just writing, but being involved in poet-activist ventures such as the **100Thousand Poets for Change** global peace and justice movement, birthed here in Sonoma County by [Michael Rothenberg](#) and [Terri Carrion](#); the **Hurt to Hope** project of the YWCA in which poet [Michelle Wing](#) organized writers against domestic violence; and [David Madgalene's](#) **World of Change** anthologies of poetry calling for positive social and spiritual change.

Four of my five books of poetry were published after turning 80 [my first was at age 77], as well as two volumes of memoir [family stories written over the years for my granddaughter]. I also served on the board of the Healdsburg Literary Guild for over ten years, hosted its monthly Third Sunday Salon for nine years, produced its annual Poetry Valentine event with chapbook for eight years, and served as its Literary Laureate in 2008/2009. A busy literary ten years indeed!

Simultaneously during that decade I traveled a health odyssey perhaps not so unusual for people of my generation. In addition to a long-held superstition about dying at 83, I experienced a number of health challenges which at times seemed to support that expectation. However, I was surprised by the down-and then up-ward thrust in my overall health; at eighty-eight I was in far better health than I had been five years earlier, and later was able to heal and bounce back remarkably well from a subsequent auto accident injury at age 88. Less than a year later, at 89, after a mentally, emotionally and physically exhausting planned move from my beloved Healdsburg home into the Friends House retirement community in Santa Rosa, I suffered an unexpected episode of congestive heart failure from which I again recovered remarkably well, according to my physicians. As one of the lucky people in this decade of life who experience such recoveries, I include poems that arose from that surprising journey. And for their practical roles in my health challenges, I must thank Dr. Michael Carlston; Dr. John Hunter; Deborah Myers; Greg Brusco, my trainer of over five years; physical therapist extraordinaire David Townsend; and of course Dr. Eki Shola Abrams.

I could not have imagined how this avocation of writing could pull me into a large community of writers and especially poets, many of whom became

close friends, most of whom became treasured colleagues. Little did I know until circumstances necessitated it, how generous and supportive so many of this community was. I cannot thank enough, for their friendship, their love, their kindness and generosity, and often their hands-on practical help during my down-times, David Beckman, Waights Taylor, Jerahmy Parsons, Armando Garcia-Davila, Ed Coletti, Katherine Hastings, Jodi Hottel, Toni Wilkes and Greg Randall, David Madgalene, Michelle Wing, Michael Rothenberg and Terri Carrion, Susan Lamont, Liz Martin, Sharon Beckman, and so many others whose caring energies I felt in the hard times and whose common interest in the art and the dissemination of poetry gave me so much joy, always.

And for my non-blood family: music-nighters Geri Cross and Bill Zaner, who saw me through so many ER visits and recoveries; my brother-in-writing Chester Aaron for being constant inspiration; my "chosen daughter" Annelisa MacBean who knows when and how to apply our STAR-knowledge; my dear friends Helen Kincheloe and Mariam Stephens, who hear me; my new sisters-in-writing Clare Morris and Sashana Kane Proctor; to all of them my gratitude for being in my life in such loving, selfless, and soulful ways.

And for my blood family: daughter R-P, granddaughter Rachel, and sister E-A, I feel so lucky to have you in my life, and to feel your loving support and patience for this crazy writing obsession I have.

Then came the devastating Santa Rosa fires of October 2017, nine months after my 90th birthday, giving unexpected poignancy to my title. Another story, that, found in my small impulsive collection, ***90 is the new.***

Sonoma County, California, 2018

1. Writing



Photo by Ann Carranza

Healdsburg Literary Guild

the writer's life

what is the life of the seed
but sitting alone
in some cell of dark

impelled by fire
of unknown origin
to push
to push
somehow
in improvised ways
against boundaries
not of its own making
to leaf
to stretch
to blossom

until
on some air-filled day
 [if graced by good fortune]
all the miracle that had transpired
is plucked
by an innocent
or inquisitive hand

and the seed
finally discovers
its sacred destination

2. Watching the world
from here

about necessary evil

what a strange phrase, that:
 necessary evil

my mind stretches, pretzels around
 to grasp it

what evil could we possibly embrace
 because we deem it
 necessary

how about weaponry

to teach a man to shoot a gun
 is a terrible thing

some said it was a necessary evil
 to get food

to send that man to war to kill another man
 is a more terrible thing

they said it too was a necessary evil
 though I wonder what we got
 for that

how about plastic

how about privilege

we insist on remembering why they are necessary
 but easily forget why they are evil

that
 is the most terrible thing



Photo by Joe Archangelini

World of Change

[Written for the anthology **World of Change**, David Madgalene, editor, 2014]

robots

when robots clean our rooms
drive our cars
grade our work
trade our stocks
kill our enemies

what is there left
for us to teach our children?

watch "reality" tv fantasies
while downing genetically-modified corn chips
and sodapop
comment on celebs' cleavage
between transformer games
and car chase shows
gripe about potholes
and taxes
show off the latest
and fastest
and clearest
and fullest
and smallest
device full of apps
with which we cannot
pay our keep

and they will
graze as sheep
shop as sheep
vote as sheep
text as sheep
follow and be followed as sheep
each of which believes itself unique
by hashtag

sheep sans wool
sans heart sans soul

robotsheep



Photo by Ann Carranza

100 Thousand Poets for Change

on canaries and coal mines

those pesky wisconsinites are at it again
singing on their lunch hour
in their official public office space
the state capitol rotunda
while their reps are out to lunch
and no legal business being done anyway

they are being arrested
for interrupting the legislative process
of taking away their rights to sing together
peaceably

many white-haired
others young with bodies bent by student loan burden
they are being charged and arrested
handcuffed and booked
for peacefully disrupting
the moneyed invasion by
 the new american fascism
for the lawful assemblage of civilized outrage
 now deemed a danger that must be quelled
for packing no other weapon than
 their alto voices serenading
 we shall overcome

what pesky foolish extremists they are
they need to be put in their place

if they want to sing
they can do it on sundays
in a good christian church
where they can learn to mend their ways
become true god-fearing
real americans
like their governor
that chosen righteous walker

Introduction to **how we got Trumped**

The ascent of Trump during 2016 left much of the country with jaws agape, and his winning the Electoral College majority threw the entire country for a loop [except for Michael Moore who had predicted his win]. Like many, I was stunned, disappointed, frightened. So I turned to my old faithful companion, writing.

In the following piece, written when he was only a candidate, I try to understand how Trump got as far as he did; intuitively I began with the embracing of television into our daily lives. I also knew that somehow I had to express the dumbed-down mentality that was inherent in its dynamic, in the evolution of our culture, and in the form his rhetoric took.

As a writer I also knew instinctively that I wanted to explore and exploit the similarities between the sparse language of poetry and the simplistic language of mass media, demonstrating by word usage the simplicity of thought that I believe was complicit in the results.

And so I began with our culture's beloved Sesame Street, and wrote this piece in sound-bytes and Madison Avenue-type slogans, attempting to mimic the mind-set I believe contributed to the election of 2016.

It should be read aloud in a fast staccato way so that the listener is carried away without too much chance to think.

how we got Trumped:

[or, how we Americans chose an obscene 1-percenter for POTUS]

let's start here: the next generations and the tube

Sesame Street as baby-sitter: teach by entertaining

cookie monster and big bird

slogans and bytes

short attention span

least common denominator

paragraphs are too hard

don't go now, there's MORE!

We interrupt this news broadcast to bring you...

...to go where you've never gone before...

PBS CNN ABC NBC CBS Fox

TV in every room, every bar, every car, on your phone, on your wrist

TV: first we love it

then we depend on it

then we believe it

keep `em watching

Mr. Rogers and soap operas and sitcoms

shock and awe and shock-jocks Howard and Geraldo

make it quick

true or false yes or no black or white win or lose

keep me entertained

baseball football basketball

right here in my living room

and it's free

Kennedy Nixon debate

Kennedy assassination Nixon disgrace

history in my living room

just before the crime shows

the only good news is scary news

from interviews of statesmen to politicians on late night

bad attention is better than none

we love our movie stars Reagan Schwarzenegger

rich and famous is better than smart

I wanna be like them

everybody loves a winner

college is for prepping sports stars for wealth

sports sports sports

Magic Johnson and Joe Montana and OJ

see it now live!

winning and earning and selling and earning

famous for being famous

outrageous makes it better

Charlie Sheen Maury Povich the Kardashians

sex sells

how do I look?

American Idol

vote for your favorite doesn't matter why

Wall Street : greed is good

mad men ad men

repeat a lie and they'll believe it

QVC get 'em to buy it

image becomes truth

commercials for information

game shows for quick riches

who doesn't want to be a millionaire?

Oprah Winfrey Bill Gates Steve Jobs Mark Zuckerberg

tragedy sells

drama disaster explosions excitement

nothing is what it seems

is that his real hair/her real boobs/wiener's package?

that's old what's new?

toilet humor titters

science schmience

my opinion's as good as your facts

Sesame Streeters grown up: entertainment as teacher

no need to read just watch

OJ a real star the real trial WOW

history on my screen infotainment

Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reillyyeah!

tell it like it is

they're famous, they must know

Inside information! breaking news

send us your cell phone videos

we get it that's our language

twitters and tweets as news

notoriety as authority

state of the union addressesbooooooring.....

SNL and Jon Stewart and Bill Maher for the real scoop

the worst thing is boredom

outrageous works every time

Duck Dynasty and white trash

tell it like it is

"reality" shows for excitement

we love the brink of disaster

fear ends within the hour

enter media genius The Donald

anything for attention

ego rules and beauty is required

sex sells and size matters

Miss America how does she look?

she's only an 8 and too fat

celebrity apprentice

the rich guy that's got it all

he'll show us how

Trump University and the art of the deal

he's the boss

he fires the rich and famous

tweets as facts

forget their minds, grab `em in the crotch

if you're a star they let you.... Yeah!

celebrity authority all the same

the rich are entitled

everybody's gross anyway

whatever

come home dirty and tired

got my beer and football and free TV

I'm tired I'm mad I love my guns

I got nothing I can't lose

How's about a little excitement?

he tells it like it is

yeah we're all equal?

nahhh we ain't

he's just like me with money

I know what he means

8 years a nigger in the White House

now no way a cunt

couldn't be worse than it is now

he knows what I want

I'll follow him he'll get it done

American Idol Survivor

Celebrity Apprentice "You're fired!"

U.S. President "you're hired!"

all the same he's got my vote

it'll be fixed in an hour

I'll turn it off and go to sleep now

to my brother who thinks not as I

for Dick

decades ago
in our younger freer times
when I lost my own true-blooded brother
and you your sister
I adopted you and you I
we were workmates then
teammates

we locked arms back then
to lift the heavy
clothe the naked
comfort the grieving

we celebrated our victories
with love for each other
mutual respect
and laughter
and harmless teasing for our differences
in sunday morning ritual
and at the voting booth
differences that seemed
trivial then
of small moment
to the caring tasks we shared

these many decades
have parted us
by the many miles
and the tortured bypaths of habit
and shrunk our greetings
into annual report cards
filled with stories of grandchildren grown up
retirement recreations
and loving agreement
to agree to disagree
to omit from our virtual hugs
mention of those inconvenient differences
become chasms

what happened
how could you have slipped
or been slowly swept
to such unfathomable place
how could you
my brother whom I love still
have chosen to stand
on such fetid ground
set your shoulder
to create a suffering world
we once mutually and together
worked to heal

now I mourn not only
for the state of our beloved country
but I pain also
the cost of your understanding
my beloved brother

and I am awash
in the unassailable anguish
the unspeakable sorrow
of the terrible double loss

my dear brother
look again
look down to see
that upon which you stand
should I now fear
the heel of your boot

snapshot in Andy Lopez country*

three Latinos
working at the carwash
polish the newly-soaped-and-rinsed
shiny black and white
police car
its flashers asleep
its motor idle
its stature undeniable

dull shammies
the color of their skin
clear away
all leftover traces
of dutiful vigilance
dust of pursuit
make it new again
ready again
to carry out its mission

protect and serve
it says in the handbook
lying deep in the dark
recesses of the
glove box

* Andy Lopez was a 13-year-old Latino carrying a toy gun, who was shot and killed by a Sonoma County [CA] Deputy. This killing became the focus of a years-long struggle between outraged community members and the supporters of police departments. Repeatedly, 100ThousandPoets held poetry events along with marches and protests over the years. It is still a raw wound locally. This poem was written three years later, when I got a glimpse of a scene at a carwash, where the irony was not lost on me.