Saint Paul's Literary Grand Dame

BY DARA SYRKIN

Just after she was named poet laureate in July 2006, the *Irish Gazette* called Carol Connolly "Saint Paul's literary grand dame." "I love being named poet laureate for so many reasons. It was totally unexpected. It gives me the chance to do meaningful projects, write poems on deadline which might last."

The poet laureate of St. Paul is an appointed, honorary position. A friend of Carol's told the new mayor that the city should have a poet laureate and that Carol Connolly should be the poet laureate. Mayor Chris Coleman made it happen. Carol joins Barton Sutter of Duluth on Minnesota's poet laureate roster. Carol's term will last as long as Mayor Coleman is in office—perhaps longer.

"St. Paul hosts a flood of talent," asserts Carol. "I'm so grateful to have been chosen."

A poet laureate is entrusted with raising the status of poetry in the everyday conscience of the people, the official lightning rod for the poetic impulse of the people. "I've had several assignments: the budget poem and reading with the mayor and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, more. I'll continue to support other poets and writers. I'm taking my job seriously without being too mesmerized by it. I'm not *it*; I'm representing *it*."

Carol strives to be the kind of poet she admires most. "Those are the people who are willing to inspire or are willing to expose themselves enough to help others. I have great admiration, too, for the people who can get up every morning and write a poem. How do they do that?"

Carol's poetry career germinated at the Loft. She had been ruminating about being a mother of eight amidst her crumbling marriage. After taking a journaling class, upon a friend's suggestion, Carol sought out a fiction class at the Loft. "That class was full, so I took a poetry class instead."

Poetry and journal writing render truth. "Being true to ourselves is a hard job. Accepting any kind of truth is a big, huge job. Then it's what you make of that truth, how you move on. Maybe what you know to be the truth isn't. But most people know when they're lying to themselves. You can't lie to yourself in a journal.

"When I started writing poetry, it spilled out of my journal and I was willing to tell my story. But I realized it was not just my story—I was speaking to and about many women. And I think women's stories will be different in the future. Or maybe not. Perhaps the human condition will be the same. Maybe we'll continue to talk about Nancy Pelosi's wardrobe."

After *Payments Due,* Carol's poetry collection, was published in 1985, she was sought after for other writing gigs. She worked as a columnist for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press, Mpls.St.Paul* magazine, and *Ladies' Home Journal,* and she has reviewed books for the *Star Tribune*. Carol continues to write for *Minnesota Law and Politics*.

Carol's political activism and career are well known: Minnesota Women's Political Caucus cochair, Saint Paul Human Rights Commission appointment, Minnesota Racing Commissioner, that commission's Affirmative Action Committee chair, and much more.

Political activism has also shaped Carol's poetry. "Not only did I have a lot of life experience by the time I started writing at age forty, being active politically allowed me to see the world in a different way. I was involved in the civil rights, women's rights, and peace movements, and I am still very active in politics."

***Connolly** continued on page 3*

and while Speaking with Carol . . .

Melissa Borgmann related the latest accomplishments of *Teens Rock the Mic*, a spoken word program for young people that Melissa originated and coordinates. Carol cheered for the amazing work Melissa is doing. Melissa gasped—twice—when she was introduced to "Carol Connolly, St. Paul's poet laureate." "That's the best response I've ever received," stated Carol.

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A woman displaced from her home in New Orleans post–Hurricane Katrina told us her story. She refused to leave her animals, was eventually rescued from her house, and then stayed on an overpass for three days. Her tale included commentary on FEMA, the mayor of New Orleans, the governor of Louisiana, the president of the United States, and a "Thank God for the Army Corps of Engineers." Carol took in all of this information and emotion and said to the woman, "You have to write about this. You *must*." When the woman left, Carol reflected, "There were ten poems in what she just told us, but all I could hear were the political ramifications."

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One year at Christmas, when Carol began to decorate the house, she bought fabric for tablecloths that had yellow circles on a black background. The tree, wreaths, balusters were all decorated with wide yellow ribbon. An aged aunt of Carol's came to the house and took in the sight. The annoyed aunt called one of Carol's relatives and asked, "What's wrong with red and green? Is yellow the feminist color?"

Your Inner Child Is Calling

BY BOB WILLIAMS, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

FROM THE EDITOR

Many of us, perhaps most of us, have a little voice inside promising "someday" to find the time to write a children's book. Whether it's fantasy, memoir, high adventure, or life lessons, there are tales to tell . . . tall tales and small tales . . . tales that only you can bring alive. So, what to do?

Well, you're in luck! Just so happens that the Loft's sixth annual **Festival of Children's Literature** is coming up Friday and Saturday, April 20 and 21. Children's authors, editors, and illustrators, as well as librarians and marketing/publishing professionals, will be on hand to fire your imagination, show you the ropes, answer your questions, and lead you into an amazing land of possibilities. There will be full-group presentations, small-group workshops, a book fair, author appearances, book signings . . . and the Loft provides the lunch. Register for one or both days. See what you think, this might be the time. Check out the article on page 1, then visit www.loft.org or call 612-379-8999 for a free brochure.

So many of us who love children's literature, who read to our children every night, who bring home library bags filled with books for them to read, who populate this alternate reality with our own dreams and life stories, are forever looking to encourage our kids to write their own words and stories too. But how to jump-start their special visions? Well, summer is a terrific time to step outside the traditional scholastic approach to creative writing and give the kids a unique opportunity to find their own voices. The Loft's very popular **Summer Youth Courses** offer everything from classes to workshops for children and teens, ages 4 to 17. It's all new and it's all fun at www.loft.org or call 612-215-2575 for a free brochure.

And finally, of course, April is National Poetry Month. Inaugurated by the Academy of American Poets in 1996, National Poetry Month brings together publishers, booksellers, literary organizations, libraries, schools, and poets around the country to celebrate poetry and its vital place in American culture. You can visit www.poets.org to find out more. The *View* joins in the celebration this issue with featured poems by **Margaret Hasse** (page 12), **Patricia Kirkpatrick** (page 12), and **Jim Moore** (page 3), along with an article by **Francine Marie Tolf** exploring the relative merits of complexity and simplicity in poetic style.

Bob Williams— bwilliams@loft.org

a view from the loft

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A View from the Loft is the membership publication of The Loft Literary Center. The mission of the *View* is to support and inspire the diverse Loft community by providing information on Loft programs and members, a forum for literary issues, and listings of opportunities in the literary arts.

Articles represent the opinions of the contributors, not necessarily those of the Loft. The *View* accepts letters and unsolicited articles about writing and literature from Loft members, but does not accept unsolicited poetry or fiction. Please enclose an SASE. Contact Sarah Caflisch, editor: scaflisch@loft.org, 612-215-2590.

The mission of the Loft is to foster a writing community, the artistic development of individual writers, and an audience for literature.

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THE LOFT LITERARY CENTER
Suite 200, Open Book
1011 Washington Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55415
Phone / 612-215-2575, Fax / 612-215-2576
www.loft.org
Loft office hours: 9–5, Tuesday–Friday

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Feminism was ingrained in Carol at an early age. "At the Catholic boarding school I attended we were immersed in a feminist model: compete with yourself and help your sisters. I've lived by that. Those Dominican nuns knew what they were doing! But from a social justice standpoint, many women in my age group could not abide the lack of control over our reproductive rights dictated by the Church. We were also shocked to learn that Catholics could not be given conscientious objector status because the *Church* had been so warlike throughout history.

"As artists, if we do have influence, we need to use it for the common good. For instance, spoken word artists have done poetry and poets a great favor. They have gotten poetry into places it wouldn't be. They have made art accessible. (Not all accessible work is art. Quality and accessibility can go hand in hand. And think about it: through the ages, work that has lasted is work that is accessible.) They have taught us how to live as poets—how to line up gigs in the United States and Europe, about fund-raising, how to promote poetry and ourselves—because they are fearless."

Fear and ridicule do not lurk in Carol's hallway. "No, they never have. I am always amazed by and interested in the criticism I receive. Years ago, I was doing a reading of *Payments Due* at a gallery in New York City. A man approached me at the end of the reading and said, 'I hate your work. I want to buy five copies of your book.' My poems opened something in him that he didn't want to look at. When my book first came out, people were enraged. Now that the second edition is in its third printing, more people see the humor and the ridiculousness in it.

"Deep into the third age of life, one can either fear everything, or nothing. I choose to fear nothing. This doesn't mean, however, that I am free from experiencing, now and then, a bit of momentary trepidation. Doesn't stop me from thinking at the top of the stairs, 'Oh, please, don't let me fall.' I also harbor fears about the world and, as Garrison Keillor says, 'the current occupant.' I'm quite sure, too, that almost all women think we need to prepare to be bag ladies. Security is mostly a superstition."

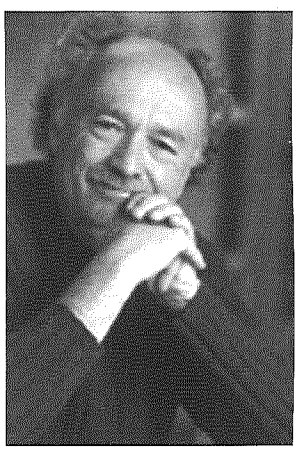
In a poem for her daughter upon her eighteenth birthday, Carol wrote these lines: "Begin to cultivate / a defiant attitude. / Question everyone." "It's good advice still," states Carol. "You don't have to be rude in the process. It's a matter of embracing personal freedom: the freedom of thought and speech; the freedom to be true to yourself. But be ready to be misunderstood. You have to get over the idea that there is a way to please everyone. And realize that as you honor the truth in your own spirit, other aspects of your life may have to fall away. That can be seen as defiant, too."

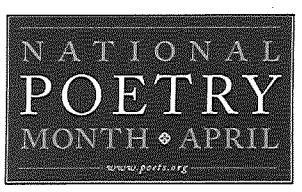
Carol may be defiant without being disobedient. She asserts that disobedience "is a virtue of youth. In one's third age, all the rules that hindered one have long since been starved to death. One hits the brakes for a red light, but not much else."

Dara Syrkin— dsyrkin@loft.org

Jim Moore with Heather Goodman & Nena Johansen

Loft Mentor Series Reading: Friday, March 30, 7 pm—Free (page 10)





When I Was a Boy I Was

by Jim Moore

three gulls before the storm, far out
in the ocean. Their easiness, even though
something difficult is coming.
Surrounded by the vastness
Of a life yet to be lived,
I floated in the large wind
of my childhood,
read my books on magic
and threw my ball again and again
into my mother's bed of lilies,
waiting patiently, the good boy I was,
for all that easiness to end.

Poetry *continued from page 1*

A more accessible poem can deal just as deftly with complicated ideas and emotions. I've long admired Jane Kenyon's work for its compassion and clarity. Here is "Biscuit":

The dog has cleaned his bowl
and his reward is a biscuit,
which I put in his mouth
like a priest offering the host.

I can't bear that trusting face!
He asks for bread, expects
bread, and I in my power
might have given him a stone.

A woman gives her dog a treat and reflects on it: can so modest a poem really embrace the complex? I think so. The playfulness of Kenyon's first stanza charms the reader into expecting nothing more than an anecdote, but that expectation is turned on its head in the second stanza. Far from delighting in her pet's trust, the speaker finds it unbearable, for trust renders the animal totally vulnerable—and there are those who would take advantage of this. Kenyon suggests the potential for evil is inside her, too: "I in my power / might have given him a stone." This echoes a passage from the Gospel of Matthew and gives new meaning to the first stanza's religious imagery. In a seemingly simple poem, Kenyon, focusing on one ordinary act, offers us a meditation on good and evil, power and trust.

Another poet exploring these themes might use fragment or esoteric allusion; her poem could be just as effective. Whatever your taste in poetry, it's a mistake to assume one style is superior to another. Poetry's a spacious house; it contains many rooms. On my crowded bookshelf at the edge of Minneapolis, Emily, Jane, and a host of other poets get along just fine.

Francine Marie Tolf has published poetry in many journals including *Nimrod*, *New Letters*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. She is a current Loft Mentor series winner, has received a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. A chapbook, *Blue-flowered Sundress*, is forthcoming from Pudding House Press.