Martha Modena Vertreace-Doody

In this Glad Hour

Morning. The sun sweeps above Lake Michigan, glazing the high-rises with a newborn look, as fresh as if to prove the words of the psalmist: "At night there are tears; but joy comes with dawn." These poems tell part of the story of a remarkable woman, Mrs. Joseph Duncan, née Elizabeth Caldwell Smith, or rather, of my attempt—perhaps obsession—to find her.

The adventure begins with a writer's restlessness to be writing, although I did not have a focus that would summon thoughts and feelings to words, and words to paper. Enter the "triggering town," Springfield, Illinois where I went to present a workshop on teaching poetry. I told the audience that a poem need not—or perhaps must not—emerge solely from the poet; that ideas often present themselves precisely because they exist in a realm separate from the poet's concerns. Predictably, in writing from these alien ideas, the poet may experience the common ground where both the poet and the idea stand face to face. The idea becomes the "dark glass," the clouded mirror which reflects the poet's face.

Certainly I never expected Springfield to be a source of poems for me.

Several months ago, as poet-in-residence at Kennedy-King College, I conducted a workshop on poetry for the Illinois Association for Teachers of English. While spending the afternoon downtown at Prairie Bookstore after my presentation, I discovered a journal, written by a little-known woman. I decided that I wanted to write a series of poems as a vehicle for my experiencing her life and times.

The promise as challenge I set before me: to search for a journal of a woman from another age, whose life was unknown to me, someone about whom I had not heard a lot of stories. I wanted to find someone who was not racist, sexist, or any other more tiresome "-ist." After all, my writing poems about her world

would involve our living together. Her words would be with me on the bus going to school, at my kitchen table eating my husband Tim's home-baked bread, in bed with me waiting for him to complete his evening ablutions.

When I uncovered the *Diary of Mrs. Joseph Duncan* (Elizabeth Caldwell Smith) on a bottom shelf under a pile of high school yearbooks in the Illinois room, I was absolutely uninterested in reading about the woman who became First Lady of Illinois, wife of Joseph Duncan. However, I challenged myself to work with the first journal I found—and hers was it. After hiding the journal under more yearbooks, I left the store, then I returned later that day to make sure it was still there. It was. The night before I left Springfield, I bought the journal for fifteen dollars. Committed. Little by little, I found myself mesmerized by this tiny woman who left a genteel life in Washington, D.C., where she met her future husband, a Congressman from Illinois, at a White House dinner. They lived in rural Jacksonville, Illinois, until his death. A mother who outlived seven of her ten children, who was widowed twice as long as she was married, she was not a feminist in the modern sense. Yet, she marched far ahead of her contemporaries in her understanding of her sense of place and the power that she possessed, not because of her husband's position, but because of her own.

The bare boned facts of Elizabeth's life—and yes, across the centuries, we are on a first-name basis—are deceptively unremarkable. Born in 1808, in New York, she was the daughter of James R. Smith, a merchant, and his wife, Hannah Ray Caldwell. Her maternal grandparents, killed during the Revolution, bequeathed as her legacy, a zeal for religion and patriotism. Her diary, which begins with her teenaged years in Newark, New Jersey, and ends in 1848, records the daily life which women endured. Born to privilege, she lived in relative ease by virtue of the wealth of her parents and her social standing.

Who is this society lady who becomes a pioneer woman? As remarkable as she was, who did she marry? Where would she find a man who would encourage her sense of duty to provide for the less fortunate, this woman for whom religion was paramount in her life, who writes in a letter, "I always enjoy the society of ministers." Elizabeth lived in turbulent times, having moved to Illinois in the shadow of the Civil War. What about the "S" word—"slavery"?

Armed with questions in my head and her journal in my hand, I returned to Springfield, and from there went to Jacksonville, the home that the couple called "Elm Grove." Pictures in the journal reveal a mansion surrounded by land and elms; today, large houses surround 4 Duncan Place.

Rain off and on all day. Clouds parted for a few minutes, only to join and produce more rain. When Tim and I got there, we discovered that the house was closed to visitors on Wednesdays. We spent our time taking tourist pictures of ourselves on the grounds and on her steps. Then we drove back to Springfield via Cozy Dog for the traditional corn dog feast. I realized that, wherever I was to encounter Elizabeth, it would not be at her house, at least not yet.

As Elizabeth and I begin our journey together, she trusts me to open myself

to the wind stirring her words around me; I trust her to keep talking. I read her journal everywhere—trains, buses, doctors' offices—once, twice, thrice—before I start to wonder about Joseph Duncan, the man she married. Her journal speaks of her domestic duties that she fulfilled, as if her very life were defined by darning stockings, preserving raspberries, going to church. I made another promise—this one, to her—not to see her with post-modern (did not exist) eyes; not to bring feminist (barely begun) presuppositions to her life. In short, I wanted to find the richness inherent in her life, not add richness to her life as if it were weighed in the balance and found wanting, from a twenty-first-century perspective.

Several motifs arose which Elizabeth's life encompassed: childbirth, rearing, death—from a woman who survived seven of her ten children. Education: Elizabeth was educated, something which she valued all her life, donating money to organizations which provided monies to educate women. Slavery: her husband Joseph Duncan freed slaves he inherited, yet felt that slaves were savages, unable to care from themselves if suddenly freed. Consequently he favored a gradual, lawful release of the slaves. Elizabeth, however, financially backed abolitionist groups, even when she was near bankruptcy.

Did Elizabeth foresee this writer dusting off her tattered journal, pulling poems from it? Imagine my surprise when I read:

> Wednesday 22nd getting a few bad Marks gave up all hopes of wearing the meddle in the vacation and was under the painful necessity of relinquishing my claims to the superior ones of Miss M V D who I doubted not would get it. [her spelling]

Of course Miss MVD is not Martha Vertreace-Doody, but like most writers, I crave validation.

Elizabeth has taken me for quite a ride. I have dined at the White House dinner party, given by John Quincy Adams, where she first met Joseph Duncan. I have stood vigil with her when her husband died, as did seven children, one by one. I have heard her make provision for the poor when her own property was swept away.

I have tried to write these poems in her voice, with her attitudes. At times, I can feel the success; at other times, their failure accuses me.

There are times, sitting in my back room facing the garden, that I half-expect Elizabeth to cross the yard, wondering at the jade-green monk parakeets feeding upside-down at the suet baskets. People surmise that a mated pair came to the midwest as stowaways on a freighter during the early seventies. Given the subzero cold and snow, the biting winds off the lake which make Chicago winters the stuff of legends, these Brazilian natives face enormous challenges.

Some thirty years later, hundreds of these birds nest on the south side of Chicago lakefront. They could not have achieved the near miracle of their survival were it not for two factors. First, they live in huge communal nests that

give the birds the opportunity to share body heat. Secondly, Hyde Parkers are bird lovers, especially because we are not orchard farmers. Consequently, we delight in feeding these birds to help them winter over. Certainly the early life in Illinois, the life which Elizabeth chose, must have been very similar.

Imagine—no Hiltons, Holiday Inns, or Best Westerns. Travelers had few places where they could spend the night, except under the stars. The Duncan home became, not only the official State House and residence, but also a way station, an open-door policy of hospitality. One servant suggests that the house should be called a hotel, not a state house.

I have wondered who I am in relation to the journal, as I realized that I was searching, not for a cause, but for a literary friend. Elizabeth's entries are full of household "stuff," but say very little about the whirlwind that grew in magnitude. They faced personal challenges—the whole money issue—as well as the various events leading to the Civil War. Part of finding Elizabeth involves discovering her culture, a period of time often romanticized in the movies. Yet the reality of her life belied the "Go west, young man" scenes. Her husband, John, died when he was 44 after a brief illness. From the description in her journal, something as simple as pneumonia may have been the cause. In an era of few antibiotics and partial understanding of hygiene, his illness was probably treatable—and curable—in our time.

So many of the issues with which Elizabeth and John struggled in the early days of Illinois still haunt us. The legacy of slavery remains, the scars still visible in politics, folklore, music. The great waterways, our roads, our railroads that her husband fought for struggle for tax dollars. The Duncans did all they could to obtain free public education for all students, male and female. As an African-American professor in a community college maintained through federal funds, I feel that we can trace our existence directly back to Duncan's foresighted plans, whose fruits he did not live to see.

How does one *mother* in a situation in which you stand a better than even chance of outliving some of your offspring? What do you cling to? What anchors you? Elizabeth was a woman of great faith, as were many of her contemporaries. The possibility of death was ever present—whether through illness or violence. Her journal entries speak of her struggle against the devil who thwarted her efforts at every turn. She speaks of church attendance, prayer, and meditation on the Scriptures as providing her with strength.

Yet her life was not spiritualized beyond its concrete reality. Ill or pregnant for most of her adult life, Elizabeth depended on the kindness of neighbors—male and female. The villages and towns of the midwest survived because the people who were drawn to them often brought with them a body of practical knowledge. When John Deere came to Grand Detour, Illinois, from Middlebury, Vermont, he was a blacksmith. Using his skills, he developed the self-scouring plow, thereby helping the pioneers till the midwestern soil that had been remarkably resistant to the cast-iron plows they brought from the east.

As a well-bred, educated woman whose mother had taught her the entire

range of housekeeping skills, Elizabeth was a perfect First Lady. The residence on what came to be called 4 Duncan Place was their home as well as the official state house—

My essay ends here, for now, my collection of poems still unfinished. Perhaps I do not want the end to come. I have experienced a world which social circumstances would have not denied me had I lived in that era. So many open doors—that is at once the beauty and the challenge of a writer's vocation.

for Walter Charles Vertreace and Modena Kendrick Vertreace
for Bryan Charles Vertreace
spirit guides

for Timothy Doody, mine

In celebration of Jim Morrissey and Bess Morrissey,
John and Sue Morrissey, my Irish family

All that we know, now and forever, all scientific knowledge that we have of this world, is as an island in the sea.

—Chet Raymo, *Honey from Stone*

To be fruitful in invention, it is indispensable to have a habit of observation and reflection.

—Abraham Lincoln, 1859

Death on pillow, be thine.

—ancient Celtic prayer

A very great vision is needed and the man who has it must follow it as the eagle seeks the deepest blue of the sky.

—Crazy Horse

Besides learning to see, there is another art to be learned—not to see what is not.

—Maria Mitchell

Grateful thanks to the following journals in which poems are published or forthcoming:

Illinois Times: "Northern Cross Railroad, 1838"
Nanny Fanny: "Water Works, 1836"
After Hours: "Nothing to Relate but a Dream, 1824"; "Beginning of a New World, 1833"; "Cornscateous Air, 1834"; "Elm Grove, 1835"; and "To Brood a Wood Thrush, 1851"
Spoon River Poetry Review: "Nothing to Relate but a Dream, 1824"
Diner: "Stone of the Flag, 1841"; "Father Time, 1876"
Into the Teeth of the Wind: "Wings, 1846"
Floating Holiday: "Widow's Weeds, 1844"; "Birth Quilt, 1841"
Florida English: "Mourning Quilt, 1844"; "New Year's Day, 1848"
Willow Review: "Wedding Quilt, 1828"

According to the Custom of This City, 1825

Tea at our usual hour.
Housework being dear to me,
I get through my lessons,
grateful to gift my mother
a comfortable day.
At our fireside,

we darn stockings. Fiery
sap crackles with hours
of laughter. These several days
which face year's-end belong to me,
almost seventeen. Mother
begs me recite my lessons

as I weave, saying the lessons
of a fanciful girl blow in fire
like ash. Simply a mother's
yen to while away hours
with her chaste daughter. My
unquiet dream? To spend my holidays

strolling up Broadway, marking today's
fashions, the lessons
of high society women—how I
should bind my hair, wear soft gowns, bring fire
to my cheeks. The hour
draws near when a mother

fades like dying embers. A wise mother
knows when days
shorten to hours.
Vapors, fog, mists, clouds—lessons
for my school journal. Fire
is the story she waits to hear me

tell her when I
greet young men who pretend to visit my mother,
eating our parlor fire;
who bring prayers on New Year's Day
for luck and health and blessing, lessons
cherished by the hour.

Mother stares at her face in the fire as it sizzles
asking again for this hour's lesson. My whisper:
Someday I will be someone's wife.

Open House: A Blessing, 1835

On the front door, the pastor
chalks initials of the Three Wise Men—
CMB—Caspar, Melchior, Balthazar—

then leads us—my children, husband, women
from my sewing circle, church, political friends
and enemies—through each room

saying peace to all
and to all who enter here.
Remember the Israelites who wandered

forty years in the Wilderness of Zin—
a prayer on three floors
for doors which open to strangers,

a hearth filled with aged wood.
The house swells with bread baking,
stew simmers with vegetables

from our garden.
My body waxes with child,
perhaps a boy who bears

my husband's given name.

Birth Quilt, 1841

October opens with a line-storm, avenging angels,
east winds
darker than I saw near the Bay.
My nestling babe swims.
I massage my stomach, feel her thrust
beneath my palm.
She rides uneven inside me, tires me
as lightning tears
through our yard elms.
My pains come
in front of that storm, ending as it passes,
leaving tall grasses
green enough to heal me.
When my baby girl
breaks through the pain
in my joy, my doctor doses me laudanum;
my midwife swaddles us
in my quilt of blue muslin,
with its violets, primroses, clovers;
piecework,
a history of hands
from the Ladies' Sewing Society—

large enough for mother and child,
as long as I have strength to hold her.

Widow's Weeds, 1844

At night by your bed, my husband, a candle, matches
you ask for so you can take your remedies: rhubarb, aloes,

blue mass: mercury, liquorice root, rosewater, honey,
sugar, dry rose petals.

Then bleeding, leeching.
Long nights we remember

brackish Potomac air when I first curtsy to you,
mountain passes when I save fellow passengers
from the crevasse, light from candles and matches
I always carry.

Pearl of great price.
Wife. Soul. Children.

I comb your hair; bathe your face
with toilet water, your lips with my tongue.

Your breath labors in the same bed
whereon I lay but to different ends.

When I awake I give suck to the babes
you seed in my womb.

I press your hand to my cheek
until you take my tears as your last memory.

Your open eyes—fearless—see
the face of God.

Mourning Quilt, 1844

Cut trousers, coats I sew for my husband, you,
with the nimble fingers of a young woman;
use each garment; trace petals
for a starburst of daisies;
our initials chain-stitched on their brown discs.
Small squares from the back
of your burial shirt, weskit, claim your heart, my heart.

Our daughter's schoolbook says Penelope
unweaves each night her cloth
to buy one more day to wait
in faith that no black-sailed ship
bears news of a funeral pyre. No one sees
the shears that hang at my waist on velvet cord.
What hurts: the emptiness.
My arms hold air. When I see you again,
I wrap myself in this quilt.
You walk toward me from your shattered grave
at the last trumpet blast,
hands open to hold my face.
The quilt falls. I stand before you
naked, young, trembling as on our wedding night.

For now, I moor
within black silk borders, lines nothing unholy can cross.

Wings, 1846

So I grant her independence, my eldest,
Mary, whose angel voice
many a troubled night lulls me beyond blurred faces
of dead children, my husband
in the cold ground. School tires her, she says,
its purse-lipped teachers,
questions with only one answer.

The choice I offer: become a milliner—decorate hats
with cattails, pine cones, acorns, feathers. Prairie grassland
gives over beauty
for the having.
In the larder, strawflowers hang
by their stems from the rafters. Grossgrain ribbons and crèpe

for crowns dangle off brims. Silk bluebells, daisies, coneflowers.
Each day, the culling, drying, stitching to please
madam of the long face.

Felt steamed to shape, a gauze veil. Black for mourning, white
for weddings. Needle scars.
Fingers numb from the thimble;—

or a school girl I raise, a favored child
who finds heaven's limits
in this house. She wonders how much of herself must die
for the dreams of others.
It's the wind in her hair, she says, makes her feet rise
over the horizon.

So I wind her curls into a bun, tortoise-shell combs,
until the day her husband
unravels her braids, spreads her wings.

Winter Harvest, 1847

Julia, my baby, sits on the rug near the hearth, her head
on my knee. Not afraid,
she whimpers, when wind creaks the door,
a frostbitten traveler seeks shelter. Not afraid, yet fire
lights her eyes like candles in frosted windows.

My hand on her back stills her as I speak of reports
in the Sangamo Journal, homesteaders—
whose end I have not heard—
who flee Springfield reeling like schoolboys with stones,
giddy to hunt squirrels;
ox-drawn wagons bound for California.
Soft fireside. Sap boils in the wood when the man
spits his throat clear.

With each crack his eyes melt shadows.
At first, he says, whispers of desert's dry hell;
then a mountain blizzard.
What food remains, eaten in frenzy. The snow says
hunker down. Let the pass
shield you from wind scarring rock walls as the dying starts.

Not your father, I tell my daughter, only seven when February
cold lays him vaulted in his park.
The traveler's voice traps us in hearth fire.
Gaunt faces, he says, stretched over bone. One by one.
Ice when bellies clench with hunger.

And someone thinks. No. Says. Harvest the winter garden.
Hoarfrost grain. The meat quick frozen
the younger the beast.
Thou shalt not. Kill. Dominion over the dead. Taste
the flesh of yourself.
A clean death in pure snow.

Not child, not woman, at ten unable to sift truth from nightmare
my daughter hides tears in my hands
as the traveler reads
a brittle-yellow page from the California Star:
made meat of the dead bodies of their companions.

Martha Modena Vertreace-Doody

New Year's Day, 1848

This day four years
ago, my only thought—my husband's
swift return, to fill the stockings—
trinkets, apples, nuts—our children
begging for a Christmas tree.
Nothing lasts this side

of grace, this side
of promise. For years
I keep before me Heaven's trees
of life, of good and evil. At the last, my husband's
eyes fix on me, our children
our entire stock

in joy, takes stock
of this world, then sides
with the angel at the gate. Our children
wear a year's
deep mourning for a father, husband.
Winter elms

wait leafless for spring; the evergreen
drops needles in the parlor. The stockings
want darning, my husband
would tease, at my side.
Pilgrims, now, all of us, until year's-
end. Soon, my favorite cousin marries. Children

follow, in due joy. My children
weep. Our farmland maples,
the home we've had for years
will slip from our hands. We stock
our hearts, take sides
against the coming storm which my husband

could not bear, this father-husband
whose sole care was for our children.
There are no safe sides
where ivy strangles the tallest oak.
What land remains, our living stock,
shields us for years

to come. Blessed husband, sweet ghost, your stocking,
too, hangs hearthside, which your children
of Elm Grove mend every year with tears.

To Brood a Wood Thrush, 1851

> Whenever a man hears it he is young, and Nature is in her spring; whenever he hears it, there is a new world and one country, and the gates of heaven are not shut against him.
>
> —Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

Give birth to a daughter, Mary, my oldest,
strong child, who tickles me
rhyming her songs as she rides Dancing Feather.
Hooves spark
quail into the scrub-brush.
Years hence,
she lulls her babes as I hum to mine,
to her, this autumn girl,
born under a Barley Moon—
who reads that Jenny Lind
thrills Castle Garden Theatre
with coloratura, in New York City
I left when I was nine.
Her American
tour, thanks to showman
Barnum. Boston, Chicago, San Francisco,
more cities to come—someday
for my child with the voice of wind
in the oaks.
Hymns
her needlework, each stitch a silver note
to summon grace or peace
or thanksgiving, prayers
from our scant larder.
For twenty-five dollars,
the milch cow sends

my Mary to Saint Louis to hear
the Old World Nightingale,
but learn to trill of oaks which bend
overlow with their weight of acorns which darken
the path around our house;
pines close their cone-scales,
whose thick skins, the old folks say, speak
a hard winter of cough, fever,
newborns melting blue with mothers' tears.
She breaks the shell that binds her,
becomes a wood thrush
who brings heaven to corn and wheat fields
with her spotted breast, brown wings.

Ice Bridge, 1852

Each day, foxes thicken their coats, walnuts gather
by the bushel.
Muskrats bend reeds, rushes to cone dens
high above marshland.
Corn husks tighten against January, waxing in half-light
of the low-slung moon.
No surprise when ice floes lock the Susquehanna River

between Havre de Grace and Perryville. I remember
my husband Joseph's passion—the Illinois and Michigan Canal
he buys with his weeks away
from his babes, from me.
I dream myself preserving currants,
plums, raspberries, blackberries—treats he spoons on puddings,

compotes, bread—when firewood sparks through dawn,
him, come home
from Washington, Philadelphia, New York.

To hold heat on our knees, we huddle in quiet; listen
to our children sleep
whose antics—knotty samplers, buttery kisses,

pulled braids—amuse us in the telling.
Our Julia marries in this house.
My Joseph, gone these past several years.
The Wilmington and Susquehanna Railroad Company
lays tracks on ice as thick as he was tall
to bring people, goods, mail

to those left behind who wait for news of the outside world.
Ice groans, cracks like all creation
beneath metal wheels
that search for solid ground.

Martha Modena Vertreace-Doody

York, 1858

Afternoon tea with my husband, ages ago,
watching vultures glide
above New Salem
where they overwinter, circling the furrier's house, as they
taste the smell of flesh
scraped from rabbit, coonskin pelts.
Dark wings barely stir the updraft.

No bird is kinder to air.
What drives me past this point
of safety, the parlor where neighbors
leave calling cards in a silver tray scattering light on wallpaper?
When the moon traps
frost in the garden, dead stalks
crumble next to the bones of sparrows

the stray cat leaves to teach me
the fine art of raising young.

My newborn cringes in candlelight
as if she quit too soon the pool where she swam, mermaid,
Mary Louisa, born in 1832, the year
traders float stories on the Missouri
about York who travels with Lewis and Clark, friend to one;

slave to the other. When they set out, my husband
was a child, and I, my mother's dream.
Yet spirit sieves words
like sand across the prairie, like tears falling through sunlight.
York shoots deer, buffalo, geese, elk,
ducks for the cook-fires he feeds
with wood he whipsaws; swims to a sandbar to harvest greens;

trades for provisions along the trail;
votes like the others to choose
a winter camp. Midwife to Sacajawea
in her confinement, he proves himself big beyond his birth,
as much a man as Clark
who says his slave died of cholera,
broken by freedom,

seeking to serve him again.

Trappers say the Crow gave York,

a tipi, finding their words smooth
on his tongue. If the York River named him, as I've heard,
I should have named the child at my breast
Illinois, Mississippi, Sangamon
for rivers healing the prairie her father served,
seeking to mend a house divided.

To Taste Salt, 1859

The Old Farmer's Almanac prescribes
a rapid walk in the open field, or running
up and down stairs
several times before taking to bed—night's tonic.
Instead, sleepless tonight,
by candlelight I read to you, Mary Louisa,

of Maria Mitchell, first schooled in her father's two-story;
unpainted shingles aging grey
in Nantucket brine.
Restless like me, she follows
her lantern to the roof walk,
pins her telescope
to clear autumn sky. Like you, her father's prize.

Of my ten children whittled to three,
you, my daughter, this year a bride,
promise to fill my widow's lap with grandbabies, your womb
more cradle than mine
to grow children fatter than mine.
At home on Vestal Street—unmarried, perhaps

for always—Maria Mitchell wears
summer silk, winter wool, no cotton

plucked by slaves. In faith
with the Society of Friends.
Sunday. The bottom of the year. Bright Venus in the west
and your face meet
in my window. Your father
would salute her quiet war,

this mouse-nibble at the granary
bite by bite until the silo empties;
this Lot's wife
who dares sweep the galaxy for her name, finding a faint blur,
the comet she discovers
before anyone can.

Notes:

"Acccording to the Custom of This City, 1825"—title quoted from the *Diary of Mrs. Joseph Duncan*, p. 20.

"To Brood a Wood Thrush, 1851"—Brought to the United States by Phineas T. Barnum, Jenny Lind toured the United States from 1850 to 1852.

Some birds are poets and sing all summer. I am reminded of this while we rest in the shade and listen to a wood thrush now, just before sunset.... It is not so much the composition of the strain, the tone that interests us—cool bars of melody from the atmosphere of everlasting morning and evening. It is the quality of the sound, not the sequence. In the pewee's note there is some sultriness, but in the thrush's alone declares the immortal wealth and vigor that is in the forest. Here is a bird in whose strain the story is told.—Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862.)