



PROMPTLY

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Promptly

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Winter 2014

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Introduction

The introduction to our final issue will be short. What is there to say about endings that cannot be better said by everything that came before speaking for itself?

All things have lifespans, and we consider Prompt & Circumstance a wonderful little experiment in building a community around a common tinderbox for creative sparks. Those sparks lit so many beautifully diverse fires, kindled and tended in ways we couldn't have imagined before encountering the hands from around the world that did so. It is, and will always be, a wonderful little thing that all of us—editors, readers, writers—did, for a couple of years.

We'd like to thank everyone who gathered with us and felt the warmth of creative communion. That, in itself, is proof that words matter, that what we do matters. All our work, our attention to the tiniest of letters, the particulars of feeling, the—in the words of Tony Hoagland—"spectacular range of idiosyncratic flavors that can be embedded in a particular human voice reporting from the field," matter.

All that work will continue to matter after we've gone. Reporting one last time from the great field, this will be our final broadcast. All we ask is that you continue turning your dial, seeking out voices in the air, listening to what they have to say, and maybe speaking out some lonely night, for someone out there to hear.

Thank you for tuning in.

Shenan & Brandi

1st Place

Stemma

Judy Kronenfeld

A day of bright winter haze.
I fold myself deeper
into my jacket and wrap my hands
around a cup of black coffee on my patio
table. After a while, I draw it toward
me, the liquid swaying like a boat
in double-time waves; the unpruned
wild bare branches above me—
etched against a white sky—
mirrored in the depth-filled
surface seem to shake against the cold...
Until they settle into a tracery
of naked arteries leading me back
to the souvenir pictures of my father's heart
angiograms with their little
“before” and “after” the-balloon-
pushed-through arrows—
from a time before “before”
and “after” were collapsed
into never.

When I take a sip

and set the cup down, it's as if
pebbles have been tossed
into a lake; cross-cutting
light breaks against itself,
and the image is obliterated.

Prompt: Imagine, May 2014

Judy Kronenfeld



Judy Kronenfeld's most recent books of poetry are *Shimmer* (WordTech Editions, 2012) and the second edition of *Light Lowering in Diminished Sevenths* (Antrim House, 2012), winner of the 2007 Litchfield Review Poetry Book Prize; her most recent chapbook is *Ghost Nurseries* (Finishing Line, 2005). She is also the author of a controversial literary study, *King Lear and the Naked Truth* (Duke, 1998). Her poems have appeared in many print and online journals (such as *Calyx*, *Cimarron Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Sequestrum*, *The Pedestal*), and in eighteen anthologies. She is Associate Editor of the online poetry journal, *Poemeleon*.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

I was immediately drawn to the mysterious, almost numinous photographic image: the reflection in the cup. The distorted thinner and thicker branches looked like blood vessels; before long I was picturing the copy of my long-dead father's 1990s angioplasty that I still keep in a scrapbook with other mementos related to him. The distortion lent a slightly jumpy quality to the reflection—in my mind—which was perhaps why in the early stages of the poem I kept trying to include an anecdote related to that angioplasty. The cardiologist who performed it told us that he could see that my father's former surgeon had bypassed the wrong vessel in an open heart operation over a decade previously. When we asked how this could happen, the cardiologist said something about the difficulty of identifying the right vessel when 'you're holding a slippery heart in your hands and the vessels are jumping around.' My mind's eye image of the fragile human heart also led me emotionally to my husband's recent discovery that he had significant arterial occlusion, so that, for a while, the poem tried to include both of these men, one sadly long gone, the other threatened. I located the angioplasty image, and saw, again, the little arrows that pointed to my

father's occluded artery "before" and "after" the cardiologist's little balloon cleared it.

At some point in the process of writing (though I cannot say exactly when), it seemed to me that the poem could not sustain both the tie to a person long past and the fear for a person still living, which led in different emotional directions, and I dropped my husband's situation altogether. It also seemed that the anecdote was neither here nor there, so that went out the window, too.

I am accustomed to creating or tampering with dramatic situations in order to "house" a poem; I sensed from early on that I would need to create a dramatic situation in this deliberate and—for me—less common act of writing a poem from a prompt. I knew there would be a cup with liquid, a natural scene reflected in the cup, a self in some sort of relation to that cup, and I sensed that the motion of the liquid in the cup, whether slight and/or strong enough to obliterate the image would be part of the poem. But before I could develop the roles of the object, reflection and self in the poem, I had to understand how such a reflection would occur and behave. I actually went outside with a cup of black coffee, and then with a cup of milky coffee; the black coffee reflected the bare branches of an apricot tree in my backyard better under the overcast—if not literally wintry—California sky than the milky coffee did. (I wondered whether a sunny sky would prevent my seeing so clear a reflection of the bare branches, but, fortunately, didn't have to answer that question.)

At some point I must have sensed that the arc of the poem would involve motion and then greater motion of the liquid in the cup, maybe even motion strong enough to obliterate the reflection—something like what I'd seen when several stones are skimmed across a lake. This little poem arc would have to be based on the plausible. Indeed, I discovered that less motion than I expected (i.e., walking around with the cup held firmly in my hand) could obliterate the image, and less motion than I expected would make the reflection in the cup quake. So an initial "smaller" motion had to be imagined and tested—the cup is drawn across the surface of a table—as did a "larger" motion—the cup is set down solidly enough to cause the obliteration of the image.

Describe your creative process generally—is there a certain way you normally set about writing something? (e.g., a series of questions you ask yourself, steps you go through, etc? Do you start from the beginning, middle, or end, or a mix? Any interesting rituals you engage in?)

For years I have scribbled down images or thoughts or rhythmic collections of words and sounds on random pieces of paper, and tossed them into a file folder I keep on my desk. My habit has been to type up these accumulated bits every few weeks or months, and that process alone often generated a first draft of a poem. Or, I would go back to the last one or two of these typed collections looking for the *something* that caught my attention—for its seeming authenticity, interest to

me in the present moment, mystery, artfulness...and that spark might start a poem. Once in a while I am very lucky and there is a happy conjunction of the stars: something I have just read or seen dovetails with or rubs up tensely against one of my *somethings*, and a whole gift poem emerges, nearly complete in first draft. That's not the usual case.

Of late, I have found something wanting in my *somethings* (perhaps they have been reread too often) and have looked for different ways to compose or get started. I have looked at websites and books that include exercises and prompts (e.g., *Wingbeats: Exercises & Practice in Poetry*) and written poems from collections of random words and the like. Sometimes this is liberating. Sometimes, without the authentic *something* motivating and guiding it, the poem falls flat. But it may yet get revitalized later on, in conjunction with something else.

I think I usually begin at the beginning, as there is a narrative element in much of what I write. However, I really began at the end, with the obliterated image, didn't I, in the process of "Stemma."

I have few interesting rituals or habits. I do find that it is wonderful to go directly from early morning sleep, without fully coming awake, to my desk. But, so often, I cannot do that for one reason or another. I have, of late, tried writing to music—something with grand swells of emotion, like Rachmaninoff—but not often enough to sense whether it is a good thing or a bad for the work that results.

How do you go about revising a poem and when do you know when a piece is finished?

Sometimes, when I am on a roll, I am revising as I write; those revisions are often the most in the spirit of the poem, and can be very astute (for me, this possibility only came after years and years of writing), but may need to be revised in turn. I often have to wait a long time before I can really *see* the poem, although those years of practice may mean that I can see false moves more readily than when I was starting out as a poet. A long time means at least weeks, often months. (However, those "gift poems" mentioned above may be different.) I have a variety of poet friends, as well as a non-poet husband, with whom I share my work and am very grateful for all serious comments. These can show me how the poem is being heard or felt and sharpen my own sense of how I want it to be heard or felt. I generally revise a great deal. I am very happy when a non-gift poem goes from falling flat on its face to suddenly *working*, but I have no formula. Often, certain notions about writing—or at least my writing—turn out to have considerable usefulness. *Less is more. Don't be over complex. Make sure there are spaces in the poem, something for the reader to do or get. If you have a doubt whether a phrase or image is too familiar or easy, drop it.*

Does your writing tend to be factual or fictionalized? How about this piece?

I am willing to fictionalize any situation in order to stay true to human emotion. Literal truth to my life (which is not to say plausibility) is of no concern to me. In “Stemma,” making up a cold little outdoor scene counter to literal truth (I don’t generally drink my coffee outside, and it’s rarely wintry enough in Southern California for me to fold myself deep into a winter jacket) allowed me to explore what compelled me in the photographic prompt—the fragility of a heart, of a sorely missed life. (I was aware of the echo of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73, “That time of year thou mayst in me behold,” and tried to keep it quiet and unassuming.) As said, I did look at those “souvenir” angioplasty pictures in the process of writing, re-saw those sad little optimistic arrows, and was thrilled when my rhythms and play with “before” and “after” which were pretty spontaneous, captured the image-oblivion of “never.” And thrilled, as well, when, suddenly, those old “stemma” in grad school bibliography class popped into mind to give me a title that encapsulates being led back along a historical tree.

2nd Place

Lost Corollary to Warhol's.....Found

J.B. Pravda

'...all lives will have soundtracks.....'

Stepping aboard the subway car, into collective isolation,
All those faceless apparitions, on a kinetic track, go;
Dangled wires, flowering electronic tropism,
spindly finger-like digits of the digitALL, feeding limbic waves to their neural
Narcissus,
addictively adoring some other-authored self-imagining:
feedback, a track-ed thing, it will be,
the new personified prosody.

Who knew!?! I'm doing research, white surgical gloves on, Andy's archives, at the Collection Room, New York Public Library, for my latest short film, 'Self Portrait with Giant Squid'. I find this prediction, buried among all the attributed quotes about '15 minutes', including his irritated last spinoff: '...everyone will be famous in 15 minutes....', followed by this handwritten paen, about our collective, isolated pain.

I stumble into the downtown subway car, it's late.....dude calling himself Narcissus comes in from the next car, he's got the same retro glasses on, almost white, guy/gal---can't tell---with dreads, out comes the prose poem, verbatim, from his/her androgynous mouth; then, he/she says he/she's 'impressed, but not surprised'---- that last phrase, something the misdirection self-pimping Scarlett O'Hara might've said, on the 'you WILL take me, Rhett, honestly, you will make--- that's right, not surprised....that no one can hear him! They COULD NOT make auditory contact with those words, those oh so worthy words----they were in some recording studio with their band du jour, slamming their soon-to-be increasingly deaf inner cochlea into tone morph critical mass!---- all the while he/she's cool, collected, some Christ impersonator from the local look-alike convention, totally in character, confident because, well, he/she doesn't have to

get the voice right, right!? Nobody's listening and, even if they wanted to, or could, in this case, who's gonna correct her/him----- oh, yeah, like you've got the 'Best of Messiah' double disk album---- Hell, 'Hay-Zeuss' coulda sounded like Tiny freakin Tim, for all they---or he/she--- knew....so, let's say, for the Hell of it---which it would be, trust me, that's the truth;[beat, recovers from tangent]where was I?

Right, Andy, soundtracks; you can see it now, can't you----- I mean, they've got your ears, you can write 'em off, okay, Thelma & Louise, they've taken them with them, off the cliff, whoa-man ---- but, your mind's eye, they don't have that, yet, do....they? Focus..... 'cause Narcissus wasn't done, no.....

"You, who have eyes, SEE me....." Screwed again, I'm thinking, ok, mine are open, but it's La-la time, off to drive-thru narcotized dysfunction, at the corner of Alpha & Theta.....I'm feeling like Pontius Pilate, letting this.....person, even possible deity stand-in, bleed, slowly.....hey, we're already in the longest underground tomb going, going separately, together, to the promisedstop, express.

Just when I'm expecting a cup to appear in his/her outstretched hand, the proverbial passing of the plate to get him/her over what that untimely tsunami did to his/her personal belongings while he/she was passing through that resort in south Asia, what I see, and hear, unplugged as I ironically am brings on my own personal flood of biochemical fluids, inundating my neuropep-tidal messaging system with waves so high they easily reach my own lastpsychic resort, there go the palm trees, the private beach on the vulnerable shore of my consciousness.

A damned fine tap dance riff, rocking the whole car above its usual seductive shimmy, all eyes open; he/she mimes each hand removing invisible earpieces; they all do it.

Like some schmuck on TV with the 'that's not all' refrain ----- except that there's no tin cup anywhere in site, the filling of which would fulfill the 'act now' part of the melodrama ---- he/she whips out a stack of CD's from a trench coat, and begins to pass them out, like some personal offering of the blood and body of you know who, en.....well, [beat, wait for it!]mass.

Poof, gone, and it was during lights out for half-a-second , but we're moving, no stop.

I look down, there's a CD in my hand, and in those of the others!

"Cut!" some guy with a baseball cap embroidered with 'Communion' appears.

“Sorry folks, indie film, and you’re part of the.....movie, we need your help with the soundtrack!”

Hey, it happened, okay?! And all in just 15 minutes.....peace, outta here.



Prompt: Six Words, July 2014

J.B. Pravda



Born Brooklyn, NY, US Government Attorney during Watergate, when he 'Felt' uneasy about governments, and laws; later, public company CEO, lobbyist, now, multimedia artist, published produced playwright (paid royalties), columnist for leading magazines; a cancer survivor, he retired, on doctors orders, from business & lobbying; self-taught in visual arts, his paintings have been published & exhibited as well as included in a national touring exhibition as well as several multimedia exhibitions in NY and other venues. Published diversity author via major university, winning Finalist in Stymie Magazine's 1st annual collector cards edition. Invitee, 2nd & 3rd Annual 'Slice' magazine Literary Writers Conference; Lifetime Guest Artist @ Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts via 2006 Playwriting Intensives (invitation only).

In short, his work's been....paged, framed, screened & staged .>))

<http://www.jbpravda.com>

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

New York subways, and their 'stolid & stunned, brother to the ox' (borrowed poetry.>)) visages, earbudded.....enervating for so reputedly social an 'animal'.

Describe your creative process generally—is there a certain way you normally set about writing something? (e.g., a series of questions you ask yourself, steps you go through, etc? Do you start from the beginning, middle, or end, or a mix? Any interesting rituals you engage in?)

Rituals.....free association, usually beginning with strange / strangely spelled English words.

How do you go about revising a poem and when do you know when a piece is finished?

Revisions—pleasing to the ear; as Steven Dietz the great playwright/mentor at KCPA told me: 'write for the ear, else 'to be or not....' becomes 'why don't I just kill myself'

Where is the strangest place you've ever been struck by an idea? What is the oddest source of inspiration for a piece you've ever drawn from?

No pride of place—a certain apartment in Manhattan, ceiling, mirrored

Does your writing tend to be factual or fictionalized? How about this piece?

But, alas, fact is merely—and staggeringly—a metafiction, true here; Warhol's 'deep superficiality' as confessional fraudulence

2nd Place

nine one one

Jess(i)e Marino

white snows itself in
three pieces of a tea
cup, torn wires from
a pilot's circuit board

he dropped like chalk
in a morning class, milk
strewn, spoiled

we give our silence one
minute: for the towers,
fallen bricks, religion
unwound at airport security

powder is what's left
of him and they forgive
the box, blame the god
that made him fly

I pass by three questions
in remembrance. once,
forgivable; twice, a hindrance;
three times, indolence

he does not bleed like
the rest of us. as a
flower or a target
or nothing at all

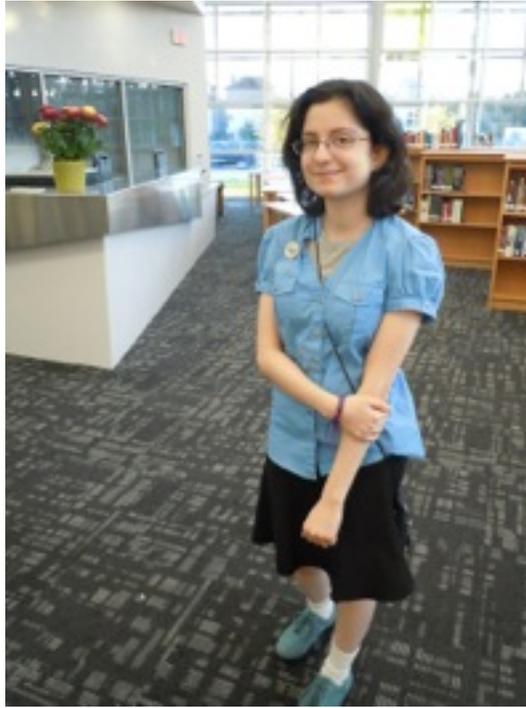
melancholy burns pink
they showered him with
staples, torn propaganda
the grand canyon's heart
grows more cracked
with every gunshot

I think of hands, other hands
they've clenched,
chained by the history of
an action they did not own

in coats adorned by
cloud-plucked feathers,
we cannot forget
quickly enough

Prompt: Imagine, September 2014

Jess(i)e Marino



Jess(i)e Marino writes and studies in the bubble of Kenyon College. They're really into soft sounds, YA lit, and astronomy. They geek out over line breaks and gender in their spare time, and you can find them at inkysolace.tumblr.com, a home for inspiration and occasional original work.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

Once I saw the image, I considered a metaphorical approach, and that was the idea that prevailed. It was right around September 11th when I started working on the piece, and the idea of transporting carrier pigeons—protocol mixed with what could have been everyday—fit well with ideas of war and perspective.

Describe your creative process generally—is there a certain way you normally set about writing something? (e.g., a series of questions you ask yourself, steps you go through, etc? Do you start from the beginning, middle, or end, or a mix? Any interesting rituals or habits you engage in?)

I keep a list of things I find poetic and add to it constantly, and when I find a prompt, I run through the list to see what jumps out. The image I associate with both that memory and the prompt is where I start, and I work the rest of the poem around it, no matter where I determine it belongs. I always have to write a piece twice before I start revising—both times on separate pieces of paper, or at

least on separate sides. They cannot meet before I decide how they will come together.

How do you go about revising a poem and when do you know when a piece is finished?

I type up my combined drafts and piece them into one, and then I delete what doesn't fit in entirely and highlight the parts I feel could be better. Sometimes, when I cannot come up with any other places for red, I decide whether or not I need to look at the poem in a completely different way or if it is set as it is. I wouldn't say I know when a piece is finished; it feels much more a matter of luck whether or not I find that alternate way of looking at the poem before I reach the deadline.

Where is the strangest place you've ever been struck by an idea? What is the oddest source of inspiration for a piece you've ever drawn from?

I took a statistics class one year that gave me a multitude of ideas. Perhaps it was because the class was at the end of the day or because my teacher encouraged our amusing tangents but nudged us back into focusing enough to get our work done, but I ended up using my stat notebook as a poetry notebook. I had to mark the corners of the pages on which I actually took notes with "STAT" in bold purple letters so I wouldn't fail the class.

Does your writing tend to be factual or fictionalized? How about this piece?

My work almost always starts at a factual place and deviates. Most pieces become roughly half-and-half, though there are some I make up entirely and some I keep close to the truth because I want to capture a particularly interesting moment of my life. Those "real" pieces are always the hardest for me, but they are always the most important—the moment has to be particularly special to demand a factual account. This piece was inspired by the events that took place during this year's September 11th and is consequently close to the truth in matters concerning that day. When I talk about the pigeon, however, I stray—this is one of those 50/50 pieces.

Honorable Mention

Carrier

Lavina Blossom

Of course, for all of us, erasure. The thing is, for my mother, memory has preceded the rest of her. And while the prospect of psychosis terrifies me less, these days I dread a more likely prognosis, dementia. Yet I remind myself that none of us sense exactly what others perceive.

My husband may not take in a sound I hear repeatedly, and although he will deny both hearing loss and lack of attention, it could very well be both. Also, who hasn't stood still in a room unable to recall why she went there? We go back to the place we were, and quite often the memory,

attached in that space, resurfaces like a slippery dream. If only I could relax. There is good evidence stress clouds the brain. Perhaps, too, it's natural that sitting still in meditation becomes more difficult as I age. It's tougher to deliberately intend to clear the mind when blank seems a blotting out

and may be coming about without my efforts. I have forgotten many people, streets, occasions, conversations, books. Given how much information shouts and scrolls and crowds close, is it any wonder I save and file voluminous documents? Yet what I'm losing seems to expand exponentially, becoming ineffable. Like a gargoyle, my mouth

hangs open as a drought continues, worsens. Over the years I've even misplaced my starchy boldness, my pride in understanding... what? I wish I could tell you half. I was a pontoon of high expectations, of intriguing facts and insights, my cargo valuable, afloat on the wide sea of knowledge. I was confident, acknowledging

my stash was miniscule by comparison to that of the truly erudite, yet it was rich. These days, it's as if I'm a beach bungalow with low ceilings. Once stuffed to the thatch with plush furnishings, now I seem to contain a widening bare floor. And soon, too soon, I fear I may harbor little more than a few sticks of termite-latticed chairs.

Prompt: Six Words, May 2014

Lavina Blossom



Lavina Blossom grew up in rural Michigan and now lives in Southern California. She divides her creative hours between poetry and painting (primarily collage and mixed media). She has an M.F.A. in poetry from the University of California, Irvine, and her poems have appeared in various journals, including *The Paris Review*, *The Literary Review*, and *Kansas Quarterly*, as well as in the online journals *Poemeleon* and *3Elements Review*. Her short story “Blue Dog” appeared in the online journal *Women Writers*. She is an Associate Editor of Poetry for *Inlandia: a Literary Journey*.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

My mother has been in an Alzheimer’s facility for several years. Since I live in California and she lives in Michigan, I don’t see her often and each time I do I am more aware of her deterioration and mourn anew the loss of who she once was. And I can’t help but wonder if I’m destined to develop the same condition. The title of the poem comes from the idea that there may be a genetic predisposition for me to lose my memory in the same way my mother has. “Carrier” is about my worry and attempts not to worry (explain those memory lapses). Using the prompts helped prevent the poem from becoming too ponderous.

Are there any themes that tend to pop up frequently in your writing? What draws you to write about these?

The theme of “mind” comes up in my poetry relatively often, and in various ways. I’ve written about the philosophy of mind, including some of the arguments in favor or against the concept of mind as transcendent of physical

matter. I meditate, and try to keep an “open mind” about whether one could reach a different sort of consciousness through this practice. It is difficult to articulate, since language itself seems to be a potential impediment. And what one might realize, the sort of recognition achievable, remains quite mysterious but very intriguing to me. Of course without the ability to focus, meditation is affected, which is touched on in “Carrier.”

So I sometimes think and write about thinking and about language (the means by which we think, arguably). Yet I try to ground poems in the concrete and the sensual, for the most part, and be playful in order to keep the poems from becoming abstract and dull or circular. And I should say that I also write many quite straightforward narrative poems, which might be called character sketches.

What appeals to you about the particular genre(s) (i.e., poetry, fiction, non-fiction, etc) you tend to write in?

As a writer, I’m a poet, foremost. I have a number of close friends who are poets. I am in a poetry group (workshop), and share poems with a number of my friends. Community, I’ve realized, strongly influences my production. I thrive and have a greater commitment to writing when I can regularly share what I write with people whose poetry I admire and whose opinions I value.

I’ve tried to write non-fiction (unsuccessfully). I’ve written short stories and drafted a novel. I no longer have strong connections with any fiction writers, though, and that has affected my engagement with fiction. Off and on, I revise stories. And I intend to revise the novel again, in spite of the diminished prospects for novelists. I think it’s much harder to get a novel published these days. And the short story gets little respect.

Yet, writing (in any genre), for me is for love of language and the form. I can’t really consider the prospects of “success” when I am writing. I have tremendous admiration for those who teach me and enrich my life with their unforgettable characters and places and events shaped with words, or their ability to express feelings and ideas in new ways. I strive to do the same when I write. And I am especially drawn to the economy of poetry, the ways one might touch others with few words.

Is there anything that you have just never been able to write, or write about?

I have many beginnings of poems that remain incomplete, but I think you are asking whether there is a particular subject or experience that I simply cannot address or discuss in a poem. That’s a hard question to answer. I want to say no. Yet it could be that I’ve blocked out certain events or subjects so successfully that I don’t even recognize that I am avoiding them.

What is the oddest source of inspiration for a piece you've ever drawn from?

What comes to mind may not be so odd. When my husband and I first moved into our home, I had a pretty creepy feeling sometimes and imagined we might have a ghost, even though I honestly can't say I believe such things exist. That suspicion revived when a neighbor agreed to come in and water houseplants while we were away one summer. She told us, when we returned, that she felt very spooked when she was in the house and believed there was a "presence" here. She couldn't leave fast enough. Consequently, when I was attempting a sonnet for the first time, I wrote about a lonely woman who comes to believe that a ghost (a man) is in her home with her. The poem is titled "She Used to Undress in the Dark."