



Give Way to the Wind: A Collection of Oakhurst's Poetry
Lynn Farmer and Terri Sarratt, Editors

Oakhurst Baptist Church Library Committee
February 2010

"Why Poetry Matters," A Laudatory Review by Carolyn Copenhaver

In this, the second month of the Year of Our Lord 2010, does poetry matter? In his book, *Why Poetry Matters*, poet, professor of English, and literary critic Jay Parini conceded that "to most people it doesn't....That is, most people don't write it, don't read it, and don't have any idea why anybody would spend valuable time doing such a thing." We live in an age of prose, he concludes. Fortunately, despite this fact, poems from 67 of our Brothers and Sisters, "young and older, in town and in the diaspora, members and relatives, living and living on" had 175 of their poems published during 2009 in the beautiful and moving anthology, *Give Way to the Wind: A Collection of Oakhurst's Poetry*.

It took an Oakhurst tribe to produce this book, including editors, Lynn Farmer and Terri Sarratt, who artfully compiled the book, grouping together poems loosely by themes: reflections on life, parents, nature, love, loss, social concerns, death. The poems are cleverly book-ended by two poems about two teachers, Terri and Kathe, separated in age by decades, but connected by their same sweet hope. The designer and typographer was our own talented Joe Canzoneri. The delicate water color on the cover, created by Carol Burgess, lovingly depicts the Swint Garden in spring. The editors note the contributions of more church members on a "Special Thanks" page.

Does poetry matter, including the poems in this book? If so, why? Professor Parini, along with other poets and literary critics, has made bold claims for poetry, examples of which are published in the Introduction and on the flyleaf of this book. Besides these, Wordsworth made a famous claim in 1800: "The Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth and over all time." Eighty years later, Matthew Arnold declared that "mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us." Three decades after that, in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the author contends that poetry "has exerted as much an effect upon human destiny...as the discovery of fire."

Poet and reader Kim Rosen, in her 2009 memoir, "Saved by a Poem," presents a more current assessment of poetry. She writes that "a poem is a physical event....It...entrains your brainwaves, altering your biochemistry and allowing shifts in consciousness that can bring healing, understanding, and unexpected insight." In fact, cognitive scientists agree that poetry "integrates different kinds of cognition, even kinds that might seem to be in conflict with each other." Rosen, other literary critics and cognitive scientists

now point out that the brain loves pattern and repetition and musicality. The brain loves poetry. Poetry, like music and dance, is ancient and universal, perhaps as ancient as the capture of fire.

Indeed, my spouse and I, like many at Oakhurst, have, in our past, “turned to poetry.” In May, 1948, when Jim was 11, he wrote five rhyming stanzas (creating a family treasure), condemning the greed and venality of coal mine owners and extolling the Taft Hartley Act. He was expressing the grief and powerlessness experienced by his dad, a coal miner in West Virginia, during a long scary strike. The boy knew intuitively that ordinary language could not bear the full burden of the anger and fear clutching his small village. As for me, most of my youthful efforts imitated e. e. cummings. But when I was 19 in May, 1957, about to be married in three days, I wrote a sonnet (what else?), celebrating “the wedding ring I wear around my soul.” Though sentimental and certainly effusive, 51 years and seven great-grandchildren later, that line still works for me.

The Oakhurst poems work for me, too. After reading all the poems twice, certain images continue to rise in unexpected moments. In “Sunday Travels,” I see Stefanie on her cell phone seeking rescue by her mother, and I feel a surge of gratitude to Jim for my own frequent cell phone rescues. I see Kathe greeting me on the sidewalk beside the church on that autumn morning of my first day at Oakhurst, and hear her say wryly, “I still don’t measure up.” At the same time, I see Mother, after reading Kathe’s poem, “I’m Not Afraid of Dying,” confess to me: “This is what I am afraid of, too, ‘Just living til I’m dead.’” In “Trinity Requiem,” I see Paula, after her mother passed away, swaddling herself in her mom’s “blue and white paisley pajamas,” just as I, after my dad’s fatal car accident, swaddled myself in his flannel shirt, the one with the bright red wolf-head print. I see Robert, in “Blackberries under the June Sun,” picking fruit with his father, and I, too, “feel the sugar rush under my tongue,” as Jim, Mother, Joe, and I picked and ate blackberries massed beside the road that one glorious sun-drenched day in Oregon. And more images rise. Many, many more.

Cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter, in a book published last year, offers the insight that photographs or crazy geometrical “marks on paper” (musical notation) are “soul-shards,” with “the unique power to bring back to life, inside our brains, some tiny fragment of the internal experiences of another human being....” It’s no great leap to imagine that poems, too, are soul-shards, allowing us to meld, however briefly and incompletely, with the hearts of our Oakhurst Brothers and Sisters, in a small synchrony of “grief, joy, paradox, irony, disappointment, celebration,” as Lynn and Terri write in their Preface.

Perhaps the extravagant claims about poetry are not so far off, after all. Of course poetry matters, a least for a large American subculture. A thousand books of poetry are published in the United States every year. Hundreds of blogs on poetry scatter across the Internet. As for me, and perhaps for others, Oakhurst poetry matters even more. These lovely tribal poems, sometimes touching, sometimes humorous, that co-mingle the reader’s and the poet’s minds, are indeed nothing less than soul-shards—the soul-shards of those we love, both the “living and living on.” We have a book waiting for you in the OBC Library. Better still, order one for yourself from Lynn or Terri. Enjoy. Be sustained. Be comforted. *A Collection of Oakhurst Poetry* is almost as good as fire.

Notes:

Lynn Farmer and Terri Sarratt, Editors, *Give Way to the Wind: A Collection of Oakhurst’s Poetry*, Oakhurst Baptist Church, 2009 (Paper).

Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am A Strange Loop*, Basic Books, 2007.

Jay Parini, *Why Poetry Matters*, A Caravan Book, 2008.

Kim Rosen, *Saved by a Poem: The Transformative Power of Words*, Hay House, 2009 (Paper).