

Elizabeth Thompson Oakes – 1943 – 2017

MEM Missive 1 by Mary Ellen Miller

“He Kindly Stopped For Me”

-Emily Dickinson



I. Elizabeth Ann Thompson Oakes loved Dickinson’s work almost as much as she loved Shakespeare’s. She gave Dickinson presentations here at Western Kentucky University and elsewhere. She loved reading Dickinson’s poems and talking about Dickinson’s personal life from information in the dozens of biographies and in the poems themselves. Dickinson’s life, seemingly quiet and uneventful, was filled with drama and melodrama. Once in a talk Libby mentioned Dickinson’s brother Austin and how he used the family dining room table in his childhood home as a nesting place with his mistress. This was while his two sisters still lived there. His wife lived next door.

Professor, poet, lecturer, feminist, activist, daughter, wife, mother, grandmother, mother-in-law, transcendentalist—though

I don’t recall her ever using that word. Nevertheless, Emerson and Whitman would have embraced her as one of the gang. Thoreau would at least have nodded.

Several years before she died and long before she and her husband John moved from Bowling Green to Sedona, Arizona, she told Jane Olmstead and me:

I have no fear of death—zero. I died once on the operation table, and those few seconds in the hereafter were beautiful beyond description.

Medical doctors call this state of euphoria ugly, insensitive names: the brain playing tricks; false memory; and probably some impressive-sounding Latin name. But doctors don’t know everything. (Some people say they don’t know anything). They are not poets, usually. They tend to account for things like transcendental experiences with what they learned from their textbooks. Liberto, as I always called her, needed no medical textbook.

II. November 15, 2017

MEM,

I wanted you to know that I have pancreatic cancer that has spread to the liver. There's no cure, zero, and I'm not doing the chemo that would give me another month or two. I'm okay with it—74 is a long life.

Libertino

I never called her anything but “Libertino,” and she never called me anything but “MEM.”

Below the above, there followed a few loving, appreciative sentences. Later I learned she sent similar loving “goodbyes” to a few other close friends. They cherish these as I do mine.

And then on December 31, 2017, by email:

Elizabeth Oakes transitioned at 12:48 A.M. on December 30, 2017, surrounded by love and family.

III. A portion of her obituary follows:

She was also active in various groups in Sedona. She served as vice-president and president of the University Women of Sedona, was on the board of the Sedona Culture Collaborative, gave several talks on the history of women’s right to vote to the League of Women Voters and was a member of P.E.O. University Women established the Libby Oakes Lifetime Achievement Award to recognize her contributions as past president, scholar, poet and activist.

Elizabeth held a Ph.D. in Shakespeare from Vanderbilt University and taught at Western Kentucky University, where she also served as Graduate Director. In her career, she was published in Shakespeare journals, including the premiere one, *The Shakespeare Quarterly*, and presented her work on Shakespeare at many conferences, among them the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., and the International Shakespeare Conference in Tokyo, Japan. She retired in 2008 as a full professor and a professor emerita.

Elizabeth, who was a poet, graduated with a B.A. from the Creative Writing Program at the University of Iowa. She wrote poetry through her academic career, but in 2004 she won the Pearl Poetry Prize, a national award based in California, which began a second career for her. In her sixties, she published four volumes of poetry and two self-help spiritual books. Her poem, “When I Remember Lucille Clifton” was included in *Veils, Halos and Shackles: International Poetry on the Abuse and Oppression of Women*.

IV. “I shall not look upon [her] like again.” According to Libertino’s husband, John Oakes, HAMLET was probably her favorite Shakespeare Play.

I miss our Shakespeare games. Of course, we had to give them up after she moved too far away for afternoon cocktails and games. I would quote a Shakespeare line (probably one I had just looked up). Her job was to identify the play the line or lines came from:

Sing all a green willow.

She just sipped her Pinot Grigio and smiled sweetly as if to say, “Give me a hard one.” Well, that was hard to do and not just from Shakespeare or Dickinson.

Poet, professor, scholar, but for me most important: poet, poet, poet. From THE FARMGIRL POEMS, my favorite and John’s, and no doubt a favorite of many other people:

THE GIRL WHO WANTED TO SPEAK OTHER LANGUAGES

Since she was born on a farm,
she wanted to speak cow,
especially when they lay
in sunshine on the distant hill
beyond the oil well.

Then she wanted to speak wild rose,
the one that grew below the barn,
and it seemed to speak to her
of all she could not yet have
or know, but she couldn’t
speak to it, even of it, for years.

Then she wanted to speak orchard
where pears turned the ground gold,
where yellow jackets swarmed,
where she couldn’t go alone.
Years later, grocery stores were safer,
and she forgot this one.

Others she never forgot—the pond
with its lace edge of scum, the hoof
prints of cows and horses along the edge
making a kind of writing.

The hay, too, that clung to her father
and brothers, tracing into their sweat
as they worked in August
to bring it into the barn,
where notes of it hung
in that cathedral.

And the magic her mother worked
with peaches, tomatoes, green beans,
how her small hands turned them
ever more beautiful—shining in the cellar,
luminous on the supper table.

Listen, the world said,
Listen!



THE FARMGIRL POEMS was awarded the 2004 Pearl Poetry Prize. The judges said of this particular poem:

This radiant poem from Oakes' prizewinning book THE FARMGIRL POEMS imagines that all her experiences of farming—the “writing” of hoof prints around the pond, the “notes” of hay hanging in the barn air like music—are the world’s secret languages, which she risks forgetting when she moves into a more isolated urban life.

Libertino was born February 28, 1943 in a small Kentucky town, Pellville in Hancock County. She was the third of four children; the other three were boys. Two survive as do eleven nieces and nephews. All three of her and John's children in descending age order: Chris, Marya, Antonia, and her granddaughter, Mira, survive.

All of Oakes' children are gifted poets, talented people—artists. How could they miss? John is an artist and a photographer. All photos included are by him.

V. Elizabeth Ann Thompson. Thom's Son or Thom's Dottir as it would have been at one time. I always thought I was more interested in her Nordic ancestry than she was. She could have been the poster child for her Viking ancestors. Tall and willowy and soft-spoken with her blonde hair and pale blue eyes, she was incredibly beautiful.

Once she mentioned to me a dream about her baby cradle—a kind of cradle she did not know existed. A few years after the dream, she saw a documentary on how the Nordic people had structured their cradles. Oh, yes, of course: identical to the one in her dream.

My late husband had a German literature teacher at Vanderbilt who had a serious interest in Old Norse mythology and in paranormal abilities often attributed to the Nordic people, especially those with pale blue eyes. Jim told him that my father had what we called "Second Sight." Dr. Sten Flygt asked him what color my father's eyes were. Jim didn't remember but asked me when he got home. "Blue, pale blue," I said. He could not wait to tell Dr. Flygt, who then could not wait to meet me. I had to disappoint when I said none of the children had Dad's gift, but I did have stories for him about my father's gift. He seemed to gobble them up.

Well, Libertino had some stories for me as well. I told her about my father. As you would guess, she was keenly interested.

I never told her that I thought Woden had messed up a bit. In his excitement (probably watching the Eagles beat the Patriots) he hit all the blessings buttons on his god-phone. (Time was totally irrelevant then, as it is now. We just don't understand it.) Kindness, brains, beauty, grace, talent, and incredible physical agility. He let the button stand and changed only the date to February 28, 1943. That day and that day only. His men didn't care. They were happily whoopin' and hollerin'. Woden said, "Hail Mary's ain't gonna work every time."

VI. Mary Ellen:

On a beautiful sunny day with temperatures in the 60s we distributed Libby's ashes at Red Rock Crossing in the Oak Creek in view of Cathedral Rock.

Love, John

VII. *Dear Libertino,*

There is a hymn my father loved to sing, "I will meet you in the morning." I think it is as lovely as Dylan Thomas's line, "After the first death there is no other." Your John sent me a color photo of the beautiful stream all of you visited at one time or another.

All were present for the ceremony there of returning your ashes.



The color photo shows the ashes caught in the bubbles of the rushing stream. This action created a slight cloud clearly visible in the picture—light, shadowy, but distinctly blue, pale blue.

Everlastingly,

MEM

P.S. I will meet you in the morning.

Mary Ellen Miller has taught in the English Department at Western Kentucky University for over 54 years. In 2017 she was named WKU's first poet laureate in celebration of her long and storied career as a poet, teacher, mentor, and champion of the arts. This piece is the first in a series of what we are calling *MEM's Missives*. Every month or so, Mary Ellen will write about a subject connected to WKU's English Department, WKU, the arts, or anything else we will allow her to cover (as if I could censor her). We could not think of a more fitting subject to inaugurate this series.
--The English Department