



# ELIZABETH MCFARLAND; *A Poet Who Brought Poetry to the Millions*

**E**lizabeth McFarland was so modest and private a person, she would have been astonished had she known she'd be featured in *The New York Times Magazine* on Christmas Sunday as one of the most notable persons who died in 2005. She is the only editor in the history of publishing in America who brought into over six million households new work by the most eminent poets—W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, Richard Eberhart, Mark Van Doren, Theodore Roethke, John Ciardi, Walter de la Mare—and the then most promising younger ones, among them Maxine Kumin, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Donald Hall, Galway Kinnell, William Jay Smith, William Stafford, and John Updike. This is a service to literary culture not likely to be repeated. From 1948 to 1961 she was Poetry Editor of *The Ladies' Home Journal*, where she also published her own romantic, lyrical poems. As the 1960s began, the Curtis Publishing Company's manager retired; his replacements made timid, money-losing decisions that led to the resignation of the top *LHJ* editors. No wide-circulation magazine since has published poems as did the *LHJ* when Elizabeth McFarland, with the assent of her editor-in-chief, Bruce Gould, influenced the taste of millions of readers and brought leading poets the most generous payments for single poems they ever received.

That this was possible reflected the role of magazines in encouraging, after the Civil War, the role of women as the keepers of culture. In the newly industrial, mercantile and capitalist nation, men hustled in the business world to

support their families and make the country grow. Their wives would comprise a leisure class, pursuing artistry in quilting, knitting, and home decoration, and in the fine arts by painting, and reading and writing fiction and poetry. So it was, before the 1960s, that journals such as *Vanity Fair*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *McCall's* and *Mademoiselle* published fiction by leading authors. In presenting poetry, however, the *Journal*, with six to ten poems each month, was paramount. Bruce Gould and his wife Beatrice wanted their magazine to uplift as well as entertain their readers (in addition, of course, to providing household, marital, and medical advice), but the verse they published was mediocre until Elizabeth McFarland was brought onto the staff.

Poetry was central to her life. At six years old, she was the darling of the Harrisburg Manuscript Club, brought there by her great-aunts to recite her rhymes. As a schoolgirl Liz crammed her memory with anthologies of poems, and was writing her own. When she was nine her parents were divorced; a few years later her father was remarried to a Southern woman of strict decorum, and took his four children—Liz was the eldest—to his wife's home in South Jacksonville, at Glenlea, the estate beside the St. Johns River where the composer Frederick Delius had lived. Liz won the nation-wide high school contest poetry of *Scholastic Magazine*, placed second in fiction, was graduated from the Bartram School, and was offered a tuition scholarship to Vassar. This, however, her stepmother said she couldn't accept, for with three younger children to educate the family

couldn't send Liz north. Florida State College for Women was then a good liberal arts school where, guided by inspiring literature and journalism professors, reading the same poems I did at Columbia, she won the poetry prizes and edited the literary magazine. Then she came to New York City, to find her way in the literary world.

In August 1946, I was just out of the Army Air Force, resuming my junior year. On a sultry night I walked out of my stifling dorm room, down Broadway for 18 blocks to the Thalia, an art theatre showing a different film classic each night. Its lobby, like those in London or Paris, had a coffee bar and paintings on the walls. Arriving between shows, I noticed in the queue a pair of young women. One really caught my attention, she seemed, even across the room, so vibrant and attractive. I managed to join their conversation, and when the bill changed, sat next to the one I favored. After the film I took them to a bar nearby on Broadway. We sounded each other out—what brought you to New York? Saying “summer school” would sound rather square, so, quickly changing the subject, I said I'd had a stroke of luck that afternoon, finding, in the Strand Bookstore, a copy of Oscar Williams' anthology, *New Poems 1944*. I already owned *New Poems 1940*. Wishing to appear *really* avant-garde, I added, “I suppose you're familiar with these collections?”

Oh, she replied, she had *New Poems 1942* and *1943*—there was none in '41. In a city teeming with eligible young women, by the smiling of what gods was I permitted to pick up the poetry editor of *Scholastic Magazine*! There began the intermingling of our books, and of our lives. Our marriage seemed foreordained, and lasted 57 years.

On *Scholastic* Liz conducted a Round Table, corresponding with talented high school poets, printing the best of their verses. Also, under various *noms de plume*, she filled in for other staffers with articles on teen topics, and, as “Valerie Weed,” contributed short fiction. The magazine was deluged with entries in the national contests Liz when a student had won; now she had to screen the poems, stories, and also essays, sending only the few best to the judges. English teachers as well as their students loved the magazine, in part because Liz interviewed such real poets as Marianne Moore and José Garcia Villa. When his first book, *Have Come, Am Here* appeared in 1942, Villa was widely hailed in the

absence of other poets away in the war. He was from the Philippines, and introduced his country to modernism—Eliot, Cummings, Edith Sitwell. His next book, portentously titled *Volume Two*, was a sensation too, as the only book of poems ever published with a comma between every word. This, worked, rather, well, in, his, poem, about, a, centipede, but elsewhere seemed rather an affectation, like writing backwards on the flyleaf so his inscriptions had to be held to a mirror to be read.

When Liz wrote to Marianne Moore, c/o her publisher, asking for an interview, she was soon invited to come to Brooklyn. In her excitement at actually meeting the poet she so admired, Liz forgot to bring the copies of *What are Years* and *Nevertheless* she hoped Miss Moore would sign. The next day she enclosed her thank-you note for the interview and tea in an envelope containing the books. Two days later the books arrived from 260 Cumberland Street in a re-used publishers' carton, wrapped in a page from *The New York Sun*, and inscribed “For Elizabeth McFarland with affectionate good wishes / Marianne Moore / March 3, 1948.” Inside the cover of *Nevertheless*, Miss Moore enclosed two booklets from the post office of 24 three-cent stamps (then the cost of a posting a letter), plus two loose stamps, scrupulously totalling \$1.50, exactly the price of the little volume.. On one of the booklets she had written, in her spidery hand, “In lieu of purchase—I'd like to have given you the book.”

That was the last interview Liz wrote for *Scholastic*; a few weeks later she was hired by the *LHJ* and moved to Philadelphia. Several months after Liz died I attended a reading by Rhina Espaillat; looking through her most recent book, I was startled to notice, among the acknowledgments, *Ladies' Home Journal*—which had not, to my knowledge, published a poem since 1961 or '62. I asked when her poem had appeared there. “Oh, that was in 1948,” she said. I replied it must have been accepted by my late wife. “Elizabeth McFarland!” she exclaimed, 57 years later remembering the name of the editor whose encouragement launched her career. She'd been a 16-year old high school junior whose teacher had sent her poem to the *Journal* without telling her. Liz's letter was the first of several she wrote to Rhina, giving the girl confidence that she really could write poems, and confirming her desire to do so.

Rhina must have been paid a dollar per line. At this time *Poetry* paid 50¢, *The New Yorker* two dollars. Learning how much authors of articles received for their prose, Liz proposed that poetry was underpaid in the *Journal*, and, to attract better poets, she persuaded Mr. Gould to raise the fee to \$2, and before long to \$10. She wrote to poets she knew and to others whose work she hoped would be submitted, and soon the roster in the contents page contained names well-known then and today. This generosity was much appreciated. Bill Stafford wrote that she had helped him meet his mortgage payments, John Ciardi that he could now winter-proof his house in Metuchin. Philip Booth thanked her for a much-needed augmenting of his writing fellowship. Liz had become a one-woman Guggenheim Foundation.

On her job about a year, Liz thought wouldn't it be a *coup* to publish a poem by W. H. Auden! We didn't yet know him, in fact had seen him only once, in the Spring of '47, when I smuggled Liz in her trench coat, trousers, and her hair done up in a beret, fooling noone, into a meeting of the all-male Boar's Head Poetry Society (Columbia wouldn't go co-ed for nearly forty years) to hear the great one read his poems. Now, in 1950, responding to her request he sent her a 26-line poem, "Secrets," quickly accepted and published in the August issue. The correspondence about this has disappeared so I don't know what he was paid, but surely more than the ten dollars lesser lights received. In 1952 I invited Auden to read for the Philadelphia Art Alliance, and, at the dinner before the program, Liz asked would he send another poem to the *LHJ*? In his note thanking me for "taking care" of him he included a poem. My guess is that he stuffed into that envelope the latest poem he had written; "Fleet Visit" described, in a couple of stanzas, innocent middle-class boys on shore leave, but told that they got "drunk" and were approached by "a whore." This obviously wouldn't do for the *Journal*. My files reveal this much, but not who declined the poem. It must have been I, since he had sent it not to Liz but to me asking that I pass it on to her. Auden held no grudge when, the following year, he chose my ms. for the Yale Series of Younger Poets. Liz used to say she lived in fear of having to send a rejection note to W. H. Auden; obviously she hadn't written this one, nor, since he didn't try the *LHJ* again, did she ever have to send back a poem of his.

By 1957 I was teaching at Swarthmore College and invited Richard Eberhart to give a reading. Ever confident of his role as a bard since he wrote in fits of "extreme intuition," Dick was nonetheless insecure about each new poem. He sent me several, asking my opinion. Of course Liz read them too, and found one she really liked. She telegraphed that she'd want to submit it to the *Journal* where, if accepted, he'd be paid \$10 a line. Dick had already sent the poem to *Botteghe Oscure*, but its editor, Princess Caetani, acceded to his request to release it. The poem was a fresh, closely observed New England cadenza on the theme of Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence." Swiftly accepted, "The Clam Diggers and Diggers of Sea Worms" brought Dick Eberhart a hefty check for its 46 lines. He wrote to thank Liz for what would "pay this summer's rent in Maine." He must have boasted of his good fortune in the Dartmouth Faculty Club, for in the next few weeks Liz was deluged by poems, verses, limericks, and jingles, none publishable, from just about every member of that college's English department.

The Goulds in the 1950s were supporters of the Academy of American Poets, and, having purchased a pair of tickets at \$500 per place for its twenty-fifth anniversary dinner, gave them to Liz. Thus it was that when a photo was taken there of Marianne Moore wearing a triple orchid corsage, she stood between Liz in an off-the-shoulder white evening gown and me in black tie. Miss Moore was relieved to find Liz, someone she actually knew, among the donors. The photo appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* on Christmas Sunday, 2005. We saw Marianne Moore again, at the Columbia Phi Beta Kappa initiation in 1956. I don't recall who was the orator—probably Jacques Barzun—but we were there to hear Miss Moore read her poem, "Blessed is the Man." As soon as the ceremony ended Liz rushed up to ask could she have the new poem for *The Ladies' Home Journal*? Miss Moore agreed, but Liz had overstepped her own role—she could choose and recommend poems, but their final acceptance required Bruce Gould's agreement. To encourage that assent, Liz sent him a telegram—"IF WE MOVE FAST WE CAN OUTBID MCCALLS FOR NEW POEM BY MARIANNE MOORE."

Mr. Gould of course saw through Liz's stratagem—*McCall's Magazine* didn't publish poetry—but to bring out a new poem by Marianne Moore, then at the peak of her fame, appealed to him. There ensued a correspondence between Miss Moore and Miss McFarland, the poet insisting that *The Ladies' Home Journal* publish not only her poem but the notes in which her Puritan conscience acknowledged each of the sources of phrases she had borrowed—"Psalm 1:1," "Campaign manager's attack on the Eisenhower administration," a review in the *Times*, etc. Liz had to persuade her that such modest honesty would only confuse readers of the Journal not accustomed to footnotes, but after all the notes would appear with the poem in her forthcoming book. And indeed they are in *Like a Bulwark*, where acknowledgment is made to Elizabeth McFarland as well as to *The Ladies' Home Journal*.

Marianne Moore was overwhelmed to receive a check for \$362.50 for her 29-line poem. For her, the recompense was \$12.50 per line; the last year given on the internet inflation calculator, 2005, reveals the purchasing power of that check now equivalent to \$2,500. In 1958, Miss Moore let the *LHJ* have her poem "Boston," later re-titled "In the Public Garden." At 62 lines this one brought her \$775, equivalent in 2005 dollars to \$5,084.93. That, no doubt, was the most generous check she had received for a single poem. She showered Liz with photos and clippings about the Boston festival for which the poem had been commissioned. (Liz gave these and her letters to the Moore Collection of the Rosenbach Library & Museum in Philadelphia.)

The poets and poems mentioned above were, of course, the *crème de la crème* of the 1,000 submissions that reached Elizabeth McFarland, on average, every week. These she read, scanning every one in her search for good poems by unknown poets as well as by recognized names—among the then-prominent poets she chose for publication were Katherine Garrison Chapin, Elizabeth Coatsworth, Robert P. Tristram Coffin, Jean Garrigue, Rolphe Humphries, May Sarton, Jesse Stuart, and Edward Weismuller. When our children were infants and toddlers Liz worked mainly at home, her secretary Rita coming out by train to Swarthmore with the week's poems in a strapped carton like those college students use to send home their laundry. Rita returned to the office in Philadelphia, her carton filled with the last week's

poems and drafts of letters to be typed for those accepted. Liz went to the office one or two days to sign these. Some of the rejected submissions, if written to mourn a recently lost child or from a would-be poet with a serious illness, needed letters too; as a family magazine the *LHJ* had a heart. Liz was very accomplished at quickly identifying the 98% in the slush pile, returned with printed slips. The possibles-but-not-quite-purchased, like unsuitable poems by former contributors or other published poets, required diplomatic letters.

One day, while in the office on Independence Square, Liz was called on by half a dozen grim-visaged men in uniform. The American Legion had convened in Philadelphia, and these members demanded to see the poetry editor who had turned down a contribution by the wife of one of their number. They'd come to object, and to threaten. If she didn't agree to publish the patriotic verse of Mrs. Legionnaire, they would demand at the convention that all members' wives cancel subscriptions to such an unAmerican magazine.

During the McCarthy hysteria and the prominence of the John Birch Society this threat had to be taken seriously. Liz looked at the page again, scanning it hyperpatriotic ejaculations, then said that while its sentiments did credit to the writer, she couldn't publish this in a conservative American family magazine. *The Ladies' Home Journal*, she told them, represented core American values, and this statement, that neither rhymed nor scanned and had no stanzas but was written in lines of all different lengths, would, to the Journal's readers, look *foreign*. Taken aback, the legionnaires grumblingly headed for the elevator. Liz earned her keep that day, protecting the *LHJ* from thousands of cancellations.

Some time after Edna St. Vincent Millay died, her sister Norma came on a poem in her hand that didn't turn up in any of her books. Thinking to place this find before the millions who'd read it in the *LHJ*, she bypassed the poetry editor and sent it directly to the top of the masthead, Bruce Gould. Of course he shared his excitement with Liz, but it was short-lived, for she immediately recognized that Millay had hand-copied a poem from Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*, and so saved the Journal from becoming the jape of the *cognoscenti*.



Liz took a leave of absence from editing when I taught in France, and we and our children spent the year abroad. Mr. Gould had hired a woman to run the poetry section, but, dissatisfied, replaced her with another—no more adequate than the first. He wrote Liz, half-jokingly—“With you at the poetry helm we got good poetry. Without you we get nothing. So please come back, dear girl, forsaking your husband and children. We need you bad!” She did come back and continued to fulfill her mission. During a later sabbatical, in 1961-62 when we were in London, Mr. Gould had Liz listed as actively employed though unsalaried, because, he said, there were threats of war in Europe and, were she included as Curtis Publishing Company personnel, pressure could be brought on the American Embassy to hasten her and her family’s repatriation..

In the event, she never returned to the *LHJ*, for in a circulation and advertising war with *McCall’s*, *Life* and *Look*, the new Curtis managers lost the *Journal’s* preeminence and rejected sound advice from the Goulds, who

resigned. Poetry was killed in the *Journal* forever. Fiction and homemaking articles brought in advertisers, products could be named in the prose, but poems sold nothing. The *LHJ* never again attained the six and a quarter million readership it had under the Goulds. The Sixties had begun, and along with the general distrust of authority came changes in women’s roles: now women justifiably demanded equality with men, holding the same jobs for the same salaries. Women’s magazines no longer appealed to their readers as a leisure class lifting the candle of culture, but now as consumers, and, in magazines competing with the *LHJ*, as sexually desirous and desirable. The great shift in mores was under way. I was then at Swarthmore, and later at the University of Pennsylvania; there was no suitable employment for Liz in the Philadelphia area. She directed her creative instincts into writing further poems, raising our children, and emulating her famous great-uncle, J. Horace McFarland, who had helped establish the National Parks Service and the American Rose Society, by cultivating

magnolias and roses and landscaping our meadow overlooking Penobscot Bay on Cape Rosier. Our alternative life of long summers amid the tranquillity and rugged grandeur of the Maine coast refreshed us.

This young woman who attracted and published so many eminent poets was of course a poet herself. She had, when still in school, immersed herself in the mellifluous versing of the silver poets of the English Renaissance; in Emily Dickinson's mysterious compression and metaphoric power; in Donne's astonishing imagery that presented "two souls [as] one... Like gold to aery thinness beat"; and in Hopkins with his sensuous language and heart-wringing intensity. She had early developed a style quite her own. Here is a poem, titled "Myself," written when she was nineteen:

I have stood so long in this place  
I have lost account of my face.  
I have stared so long at this tree  
I am grown blossomy.

In my branches, words  
Bicker like birds.

The cross-stitching between the words linked by rhyme with those by alliteration—the two most significant words both alliterate and rhyme—intensifies these lines, proof of her intuitive command of technique. With swift economy they tell that the poet loses her sense of self as she is in meditation transformed into a flowering part of nature, and her language, too, becomes alive and winged. This is the first poem in her book, *Over the Summer Water*. A dozen of its poems first appeared in *The Ladies' Home Journal*, not out of place among those by the famous and soon-to-be-famous contributors mentioned above..

After Liz died I found a folder containing her verses—some 70 poems, many to, for, or about our children—these I hope are destined for a second volume. I have chosen and arranged the poems in her book, since she had never done so. The temper of the times did not welcome her personal style. In the late 1940s and '50s, when most of her poems were written, there were two poetry movements dominating the *zeitgeist* and the literary magazines. One was the formal, metaphysical, ironic, impersonal style derived from the example and papal influence of T.S. Eliot. The other, in

reaction to this, was the so-called confessional school, flat-lined free verse often in language indistinguishable from newspaper prose, recounting personal traumas—rebellion against a tyrannical parent, sexual abuse, alcoholism or drug addiction, the acrimonies of divorce, thoughts of suicide. Liz was attracted to neither of these period styles. Hers was a romantic imagination, in love with the sounds of the language and committed to intensifying feeling through indirection, subtleties and surprises of metaphor.

"Plums" treats a subject many contemporaries would offer in explicit, tabloid versions. Her resonant, sensuous language, precise observations, and the indirection that engages the reader's imagination evoke and explore the emotion embodied in the poem. The feeling is the more intense for being implied. In "No Other Love" the passion is lyrical and direct, in "Two Voices" poignant yet serious beneath its playful wit.

When in our thirties the idea of our own death is a distant abstraction, serving at most to stir imagination and evoke images. "Reminders" is both an *homage* to Emily Dickinson and, half a century before needed, an assuagement of the grief of the poet's survivor. Her title poem, "Over the Summer Water," is her paean to memory. With its vocabulary (boater, braces, dagueurreotypes, esplanade...) distancing its subjects in time, it moves from a jaunty first stanza through the nostalgia of the second, to the *gravitas* of the final lines. There "Water is ghost-freighted with memory," and "widens in rings beyond telling" where, gallantly in the breeze, "their scarves and bannerets swelling," "Time's old excursioners go down to sea." These poems offer the pleasures of their harmonies of language, surprises of imagery, and truths of feeling.

Now there is a welcome resurgence among younger poets of interest in formal poetry. The stylistic Balkan wars of recent decades may continue, but poets committed to the shapes of their own talents, as was Elizabeth McFarland, will, as she did, write poems of permanent value.

— DANIEL HOFFMAN

## PLUMS

We went to gather beach plums while the moon rose  
Tremulous, large, impatient from the sea,  
Turning our pails to canisters of silver,  
Making a fable of the fruit-thick tree.

The sea in glimmering cowl paced back and forth  
Chanting a watery "Anguish!" or "Rejoice!"  
We had come to gather purple plums by moonlight  
And we made our choice.

Sand holds the warmth of sun when day is over;  
Rabbitgrass leans to the path the wind went through.  
When we left there was moonlight paling over the water  
And in our buckets, a plum or two.

—Elizabeth McFarland

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## NO OTHER LOVE

Your gentleness has softened all my days,  
When you bend toward me your warm curving mind,  
You calm the thoughts that one time coiled and twined;  
My name is first of those I hear you praise;  
In every room of yours my chair I find—  
And you know surer ways of being kind.

Yet still in dreams I see your coin-pure face  
Cut out in stone and set where torches hiss,  
Washed in the sun, as in a legend's mist,  
Borne up by wreaths, high in a flag-filled place,  
While I, forgot, shake ravenous for your kiss:  
The first is peace. There is no love but this.

—Elizabeth McFarland

## REMINDERS

The day I die  
May not dawn fair  
But, later, afternoon  
Will clear.

A gawky breeze,  
Say South-Southwest,  
Will hesitantly  
Touch your face;

And where you go  
To choose my grave,  
Flowers will lie  
All night for love—

Mosses and stones,  
Thin-fingered twigs,  
Leaves with the sun  
Ablaze in the ribs,

And the soft, incon-  
Sequential rain,  
And so I'll not  
Leave you alone.

—Elizabeth McFarland

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