

In Memory



The death of Susann Pelletier on September 15 was an enormous loss for her loved ones, LA Arts, the Lewiston-Auburn community, and the world of poetry.

Her poetry dwells in universal experiences, such as a daughter's cherished memories of her father, but it speaks with specific force to people in this community because of its grounding in the local: the experience of French-Canadian immigrants in Lewiston, the smells of our vegetation, the look of our landscape.

Susann was not just a wonderful poet herself, but a cultivator of poets. As a board member of LA Arts she arranged poetry-writing residencies that showed Lewiston school children how to be poets and she organized public readings by poets from all over the state. Poets need privacy to make their poems, but Susann made a community of these solitary workers.

A writer—an educator—a fighter for social justice—a woman devoted to her family—a community leader: each of these sides of Susann enriched all the others. She was a private person whose inner life gave her the authority to speak up for the public good. We at LA Arts will miss her terribly, as will people from every corner of this community.

Poems from Susann Pelletier, *Immigrant Dream and Other Poems* (Soleil Press Chapbook Series, Volume I. 1989)

IMMIGRANT DREAM I

Back then, the city where I was born
Gave little comfort.
It shook me with the clatter of looms
And night machines,
Blinded me with that immigrant dream
Burning—
Angry flames in men's eyes,
Soot and smoke in the bars
And on the altars
The stuff baked into daily bread.

When I read that the quality of mercy
Is not strained
Or how music is the food of love,
Fair Portia, beneath the wide, white porticos
Did not appear,
Nor Orsino on that Illyrian bank.
The dews of heaven did not rise
Sweet strains did not fall
And I saw only the tired stream
Of men and women
Treading through snowy streets
To the factories.

French people who built cathedrals—
LaMontagne, DeBlois, Thibault—
Their backs stooped now
With the weight of the dream,

Each carrying a black lunchbox.
Not trowels, mortar and stone
Or loads of shimmering glass
Not skeins of silk, wool, linen
For the woof and weft of a thousand flowers,
Virgins and horned horses.

Not even my father, once
A boy with no boots in the Maine winter,
Understood why the people were tramping
Over the old bridges
And gathering at mill doors.

But, then, my father is a maker of whole things
(Houses, fences and gates,
Tables and chairs
Cupboards and counters)
And when his saw sang through the board
And his hammer drove the nail,
The din of those mill machines was stilled,
I heard the sweetest strains of labor
And I saw how a world is crafted
By two steadfast hands.

ONE PLUM

You ask
 why
I leave
 one small purple plum
 on the kitchen counter
 for days

I thought you knew
 how
I love
 the way
 the smell
 of one small purple plum
 overwhelms me
Entirely

With Summer.

I HEAR THE MAPLE TREES ARE GROWING OLD

I hear
The maple trees are growing old
All around me.
They do not flow as they did before
Prodigiously springwards
With buckets of sweet stuff.

I hear
The rain that falls
On the barest branches of trees,
Rain glimmering on summer leaves,
And the rain that seeps under snow-cover
Deep to every root
Looks pure, looks clear
But is poison
In the blood of trees.

I hear
The hole in the sky, over Antarctica,
Above all the silence of blue ice
Above songs we do not hear
Of seals and whales and innumerable birds
(Hole we made with our engines
Of desire)
Is heating up the cold nights
The maple trees need
To surge with sap.

Do not tell my father.
Do not tell him
Maple syrup may go from the world
Before he goes.
Do not tell him sweetness may go.
Memory called up on his tongue:
His mother making *crêpes*
For her several sons,
And my father, the youngest, watching
Waiting for her bony hand to pour
The golden essence over his portion,
Crowning him
Prince of the whole morning.

Do not tell him.