



THE ROTARY DIAL *proudly presents*

# CLAUDIA GARY: THE GRATEFUL GUEST

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## Introduction

*By Special Guest Contributor, Maryann Corbett*

Full disclosure: I might just be Claudia Gary's ideal reader. We share basic background: a very proper '50s-to-'60s girl-childhood and a youth lived in the heady '70s. We share time spent in the D.C. metro area of northern Virginia; every year as spring comes late to Minnesota, I long for those cherry blossoms in "Along the Potomac," from her book *Humor Me*. We share the experience of mothering. And we both know what it's like to be intensely involved in music making: she is a composer of chamber music and art songs as well as a singer. Both of us have made a working life out of writing and editing and have seen poetry bloom out of it. Both of us find a native language in rhyme and form.

So it's no surprise that the tuned strings in my brain vibrate to the craft, and to so many of the themes, that I meet in the poems that appear in this issue, in her books, and online in so many venues. I'm especially struck by the poet's treatment of music – for example, by her description in "Mozart's Alphabet" of choral singing as the experience that "takes you there" to the heart of something lived, and by the way the first line of "Riches" echoes the repeating pattern of Beethoven's first four notes, while the whole poem conveys the agitation of performer and listener alike.

But it is a surprise to find how openly she tackles her darker materials. In poems like "The Woman Who Jumped" she pulls a strangely shaped memory out of childhood and makes it solid while somehow leaving it as ungraspable as childhood experience generally is. Several poems confront the daughter's trials at the hands of an over-controlling mother and the discomfort underneath a midcentury middle-class surface. The difficulty of coming to terms with the female body is dealt with in the subtle "Ballet Routine" and the fierce "Royal Hotline, 1987." There's a special poignancy to "The Family Booklet," about an official document "iced in glossy white" that recalls a marriage that failed.

All the aspects I like best in the poems – the pleasures of tight forms like the sonnet, themes with special narrative frisson, and sharp, dynamic language – come together in my favorite of these pieces, "Wrong-Way Driver," with its shocking offer of a life shaken awake, and the relief of tears – and double meaning – in its final line.

–Maryann Corbett



## Aunt Rose

Young ladies in their rubber bathing caps  
swim measured strokes across the basement pool  
of the Barbizon Hotel. Not an ear, not a curl  
is visible. Their strong-legged kicks resound  
as Aunt Rose shows me geometric wall tiles  
and ropes of floaters bobbling between lanes.  
We stroll next door where blue-clad Peter Rabbit  
looks up at me from glossy-coated paper  
pressed, bound, and cut. His mouse friends sort bright beads.  
A kitten nearly gets baked in a dumpling.  
With this month's new book in a crinkly package,  
Aunt Rose takes my small hand and walks me back  
to her own lobby shop, joining my mother  
amid the shelves of thin-boxed shiny nylons.  
The dried-off swimmers march in on high heels,  
then out again. How straight their stocking seams!  
Rose isn't my real aunt but one whose nephew  
died in the Navy during World War II,  
leaving a girl who would have been his bride.  
The young girl pulled together, studied art,  
got a job, went to a dance, and found a husband.  
They had two baby girls whose ties to Rose  
are echoed splashes, chlorine-rubber air,  
mosaic tiles, beige silk, synthetic mesh,  
and stubby books whose sweet aroma floats  
through and around me as I fan the pages.

## Royal Hotline, 1987

*The Princess is believed to have suffered from bulimia nervosa, [which] afflicts millions of American women. – "Di's Private Battle," People Magazine, August 3, 1992*

Soon, Princess Di, you'll lend this thing your name,  
crowning a hushed disease with regal grace.  
Beauty salons will buzz; women will claim  
to know you. But for now I stuff my face  
and then go toss my cookies at the throne  
in secret. Are we sisters, who have yet  
to learn this malady is fashion's clone?  
And meanwhile, where's my image? I forget.

Maybe I left it by the forced-air dryer,  
tucked in a magazine, or by the sink  
where a woman's hands massaged my scalp for hire.  
Wait, here's a doctor's number. Do you think  
he'll help close the two decades, plus or minus,  
that I've been kneeling like Your Royal Highness?

## Antiseptic

Her father dabbed peroxide on her foot  
and watched it bubble where there'd been a splinter,  
reminding him of something he had learned  
from training in the Air Force. "It's surprising,"  
he said, "but you will never be without  
an antiseptic: your very own urine."

Her mother shouted from the next room, "Hey!  
Don't tell her things like that!" and the girl sensed  
new light, but couldn't say just what it was  
or whether it was pretty. Pretty meant  
so much to Mother: pretty furniture,  
sculpture and bric-a-brac beside the window

to cast unusual shadows. Pretty, too,  
were glimmers of the 59th Street Bridge  
as seen from Sutton Place in bumpy-textured  
new paintings by an alcoholic aunt.  
But what was wedged below the prettiness,  
and how far down? Was it buried too deep

to tweeze it out and cleanse the wound? She soon  
would find an elixir captured between  
décor and rough landscape, between alluring  
reflections of an old bridge on the oil-  
slicked surface of a long-polluted river  
and fish you mustn't eat, swimming below.

## Announcement

Mom takes you on a lunch date, someplace chic  
in early 1962 L.A.

She's been mysterious but now can speak.

"You'll be a sister soon!" you hear her say  
with her slow, careful smile, indelible  
pink lipstick outlined with a little brush,  
then colored in. Her dress is oddly full  
but no less elegant. Did she just blush?

Eight-and-a-half, you shrug your shoulders, since  
this *can't* be as unnerving as the flames  
that grazed your house last fall. With chewy mints  
you ladies leave for home, discussing names.

Back in your room you hug yourself with glee.  
At long last, maybe soon she'll let you be.

## Ballet Routine

Curves on a graph controlled by x and y  
express acceleration or decline.  
But on your hips, what do they signify:  
each muscle winning, losing your design?

*Plié, et dégagé, et balancé,*  
you're at the *barre* with seven other girls  
all beating legs in rhythm as you sway  
to strict piano music that unfurls  
a private wish to conquer every ounce  
of flesh spanning each crested ilium,  
each arc held hostage, mute as you all bounce  
and stretch your bodies, hurting, healing them.

And then the class is over: time to meet  
for pizzas, ice cream cones, across the street.

## **Kidney Stone**

You've whipped the sheets into a funnel pattern.  
The window shades are blown  
outward, balanced together in a silence  
that may yield to a moan.  
Some of your words have lodged beside the sink,  
and since words have grown scarce  
I bring them back to you along with gestures  
too desperate to parse  
as suddenly the total-body version  
of walking on a splinter  
commandeers your attention from the small  
comforts of early winter –  
our past, our plans, our pleasure sponged away  
or left to calcify.  
Clench these abandoned words until you sleep  
and wake without a cry.

## **Mad Universe Disease**

*for a prophet of doom*

Becoming spongiform  
it must acquire gaps –  
black holes – but will not stop  
its quickening expansion,  
turning each hairline fracture  
into a mazy crevice.  
The flower of our wisdom  
will be to name its madness.

## The Cure

Could you have freed yourself now from what tugged  
your spirit down? They say:

No, you deceive  
yourself. You must be treated, doctored, drugged  
before a sickness will pack up and leave.  
Any disease that's worthy of the name  
demands *real* medicine. You have imagined,  
therefore, the plague you say you overcame.  
It's no more real than the fake cure you've fashioned,  
no more substantial than the energy  
you say you now have found for doing good.  
Such errors come to light whenever we  
come to our senses – and you know you should.  
True as your heart may be, your head is wrong.

Don't ever say what cured you was a song.

## Author Event

My talk today will not extend  
to anything that terrifies.  
This century is not our friend,

but pessimism may offend  
those technophiles and other guys  
who talk today. Let me extend

a welcome. Glad you could attend!  
Now listen to my soothing lies.  
This century is not your friend,

but even so, I'll try to blend  
your fears with hopes. Let's compromise.  
You talk of days that won't extend

much longer, but you must suspend  
your disbelief and euphemize  
our century, to be its friend.

Put down those books that recommend  
a course of action. Rest your eyes.  
My talk today cannot extend  
the century. But be my friend!

## Two Conversations

"Just like your mother!" "No, sir, I am fully aware and rational, and leaving soon. But you? You have no need to be a bully. Where is the kind sage I recall from noon?"

And in that moment, you and Dad discover a rusted iron bond has turned to gold.

What of the specter he invokes? She'll hover throughout your home and mind, scheming to hold you back. Is she in fact a witch, a Fury? Or can you conjure up a magic key to unlock her mind, too – Socratic query she'll dodge by redesigning endlessly your plain clothes, curly hair, unpainted face?

This other dialogue does not take place.

## To a Former Associate, on Finding a Photo of Familiar-Looking Flower Children

Blindfolded in the backwoods,  
you walk to find *samadhi*  
and learn to trust. The real goods  
come later, for the body.

Maybe there is more to it,  
but hey, these are the 70s:  
Don't question why you do it,  
don't let them think you're ill-at-ease.

This moment's not immortal,  
nor even of high quality.  
Its picture is a portal  
that opens into jollity.

Why, then, had you not seen it?  
With cameras that had film in them,  
a photo of one minute  
could turn up next millennium.

## **A Difficult Choice**

Bottomless as a fable,  
his gaze caught hers across the conference table  
and nearly rendered tears.  
Was this the woman he had sought for years  
before giving them up?  
He blinked hard, drank deep from his coffee cup,  
recited words well set,  
squeezed her hand, and marched back to his Corvette.

## Wrong-Way Driver

### I. Close Call

Returning home at twilight from the store –  
your baby safely strapped into her seat,  
the main road not yet widened into four,  
then six lanes – in your northbound path you meet  
two headlights. Is he crazy? Suicidal?  
You swerve onto the shoulder but, for reasons  
unknown, you spin around. Your shrill recital  
of "No!" explodes the day, the night, the season.

You don't know how it happens, but you land  
across the road, turned in the right direction,  
stopped on the southbound shoulder. What calm hand  
has helped? The baby slumbers in perfection.

Arriving home alarmed, you phone your parents:  
You're still alive! The day before, you weren't.

### II. Adrenaline Speaks

Here on this shoulder is your place to watch  
the wrong-way driver who missed killing you.  
Still in his wrong-lane, slow-motion approach,  
interior lights all lit, he barrels through  
your consciousness again. He can't be real.  
He has the spirit of a broken brick  
throwing itself against a porcelain wall.  
He's grabbed your life and given it a kick.

Was this enough? Is this what was required  
to make you value each day as a gift,  
or will you linger on, stubbornly mired  
in everyday sensation till you drift  
downstream leaving no more than alibi?  
Here on this shoulder is your place to cry.

## **The Woman Who Jumped**

*for Shari*

You remember more  
than I. They only told me  
after years had fallen  
across the memory.

You and I were neighbors,  
small, in love with life.  
Then one night she fell  
down past a balcony –

maybe yours. I heard  
sirens in the street,  
gossips in the hall,  
words I didn't yet know.

Men came stomping up  
and down the fire escape.  
Flashlights danced around –  
maybe in my window.

What about the angel,  
the dazzling beam of light,  
the resonating voice?  
"Don't be afraid," it said.

Isn't that what angels say?  
Or was it a policeman  
or fireman consoling  
while checking on the dead?

## **A Visit from the Original Owner's Ghost**

What's that ruler measuring – my old shadow?  
Wait, you're checking tiles for a straight edge? Don't blame  
me, I did this all on a postal pension.  
Sure, I cut corners,

curved some lines that should have been straight, but you know  
that won't kill you. Plus, they're beside a door frame.  
They'll be covered most of the time, attention  
drawn to bright borders.

Don't forget the view from the attic window.  
See that brick box where I was town Postmaster?  
Soon retired, I needed to make the days go  
just a bit faster:

add two rooms enclosing a porch of flagstone,  
raise brick posts, fit tub with a new brass shower,  
build garage too close to the neighbor's garden –  
no idle hour.

Decades passed. It's priced like your average condo,  
stripped, foreclosed, but nothing too wrong – a treasure!  
You arrive and notice the dancing willow,  
promise of pleasure.

Bless this hill I chose when the farmer sold it  
after World War II. (You can hire a snowplow.)  
Bless this cottage-castle of mine! Must go now;  
your turn to hold it.

## Atlantic Beach

*for Linda*

Paint blisters carry cabanas.  
Cabanas deliver Atlantic Beach  
onto memory's beach – not stepwise  
but in waves through sunken castles.

Memory, love, composed alike,  
are just at arm's length this evening.

When we would arrive at Atlantic Beach  
the air rippled over hot tarmac.  
Out on the sand were grain-filled towels,  
shovels and pails and sifters.

We rode the waves with mothers and aunts,  
goggled, skirted, slathered.

Cabanas smelled of suntan oil,  
not sunblock cream – yet here we are.  
Blisters that burst at fingertips  
were lead-based paint – yet here we are.

Wind from a beach umbrella  
escapes to my inland roof tonight

and memory/love, mocking the tide,  
whistles and whispers in one warm breath  
through naked-pink shells  
composing our selves.

## **Aloe Barbadosis**

"I'm the beach doctor!" cries a man who carries  
rum bottles, plants, and knife across the sand  
under a turquoise sky that never varies,  
sun beating down all week. He pokes a hand  
into his backpack, brings me into view,  
removes one of my branches with a blade.  
This I can spare; he proffers it to you.  
You know you should have spent time in the shade  
and so does he. You nod; you'll buy; he'll sell.  
Slicing along the green limb, he makes flaps  
and opens them like French doors for my gel,  
then scrapes until the fiber walls collapse.  
What's in the bottle now soothes your condition  
better than rum. And I'm the real physician.

## Switzerland, in Passing

“Here, see me here!”  
Summoned from sleep  
I lean on the glass of the Wagon-Lit window.

Climbing and crouching,  
the track winds and twists.  
Is it a light or a song that has called?

Syllables race  
and ring through the air:  
“Now, see me now!” cry the hills through the wheels.

Sparks from the track  
have gilded the Alps  
and turned them to bells.

## Mozart's Alphabet

I.

Whenever Mrs. Glicker babysits  
she brings crochet hooks and a ball of twine.  
While Mom and Dad see movies, she outwits  
toy stores and factories: She can design  
a sweater for each doll in your collection –  
sometimes a dress or skirt – and turn it out,  
a swirly-patterned wool or lace confection,  
all in an evening's work. You have no doubt  
she is the best, so when she asks one day,  
"Are you folks Jewish?" you, of course, will need  
to ask your mother. Mom says, in dismay,  
"I've been remiss!" and soon you have a creed.  
Mom's insecurity has lit a fire.  
At least the cantor lets you join the choir.

II.

Each week you have to learn a Hebrew text  
and taste the flavors of a holiday –  
Hamen's hat stuffed with poppy seeds is next –  
but since this is *your* story, we can say  
the sweetest thing you find that year at Temple  
is polyphonic music you can sing.  
Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, are ample  
with no part sung by any god or king.

A choral alphabet may have been meant  
as practice, but for you it reigns supreme:  
unlike the school tune, this is eloquent.  
This alphabet spells heaven in your dream.

Some other song may hold words of a prayer,  
but those are just words. This song takes you there.

## Riches

*(Beethoven: Rondo a capriccio in G Major, op. 129, "Rage over the lost penny")*

Where – where – where – where?

Scurrying around,  
scouring until  
there on the ground  
close to the end  
of the last page

he has found it,  
has he not?

Where? There,  
something is there  
brighter than the penny,  
richer than the rage.

## The Family Booklet

We paid a visit to the consulate,  
pronounced our vows inside a backyard tent.  
Soon we received a dainty document  
designed as future-birth certificate,  
a *Livret de Famille* from your French state  
with greetings, iced in glossy white and meant  
to stimulate the thoughts of those intent  
on following its message: Procreate.

I fan the tissue-paper leaves that wait,  
decades later, for names of our first ten  
*enfants*. Our fragile bond would desiccate  
too soon, but empty pages mock again  
this would-be family sealed forevermore  
and baked into a wedding *petit-four*.

## Elements

Life is a thing I salvage  
out of the everyday:  
dropped feathers, pennies, shellfish,  
white keys that will not play.  
How can you know you cherish  
the nest wherein you stay?  
A peacock, from its plumage,  
can never walk away.

## Paintbox

Arranged in a spectral ladder,  
flanked by a sable brush,  
eight color tablets on a blending platter  
invite me in to wash

the tedium from a plain day,  
infuse it with a hue.  
I lift the mixture up and let it play  
where paper leads it through

a hall of crooked mirrors,  
a capillary chute  
to rinse an image free of any errors  
adhering to its root.

You bloom out of the pallor.  
My brush comes to a rest.  
The page now filled with unimagined color,  
I am its grateful guest.



A three-time finalist for the Howard Nemerov Sonnet Award, most recently in 2015, and a 2013 semifinalist for the Anthony Hecht Poetry Prize, **Claudia Gary** is author of *Humor Me* (David Robert Books 2006) and several chapbooks, including *Bikini Buyer's Remorse*. Her poems appear in journals internationally and in anthologies such as *Forgetting Home* (Barefoot Muse 2013) and *Villanelles* (Everyman Press 2012). Claudia's tonal chamber music and art songs have been performed at venues from New York to Colorado, and several have been published in *Sparrow*, *Upstart*, and *Angle Poetry Journal*. Her articles on health appear in *The VVA Veteran* and elsewhere.

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