

About Jane Shore: A Profile

by Lorrie Goldensohn

It was a scraggy landscape, a Vermont mentally and physically full of uneven footholds, dirt paths, and dark trees—but green with possibility. In 1965, Jane Shore and a few other classmates came to the door of Cate Farm, the place we rented from Goddard College, where my husband taught, and they all stepped in for what Jane later called my "killer spaghetti," a dish of caloric mega-tonnage that dropped the strongest. But Jane survived to become like another member of the household. Of course she was memorable: an eighteen-year-old with a bright, pretty face, a deft tongue, and a nice ringing soprano laugh.

Along with Norman Dubie, another poetry student, she was my kids' favorite baby-sitter. Once when we were ambushed by a blizzard on our way home to Cate Farm and Jane was left alone with the children for an unplanned overnight, my nine-year-old son taught her how to roast a chicken, and, in turn, she taught my eight-year-old daughter how to iron hair — put your head on the ironing board, spread your hair, turn the iron down to Rayon, and press flat. Jane told them stories about growing up over her parents' store in New Jersey, and somehow we all entered the life that rose so quickly into poems, poems that sparked in so many different directions that it was hard to tell where the future writing might go, but immensely easy to see that it would. From the beginning, Jane had a secure sense that making poems would be her work.

And work is the operative word, in a place and era which frankly discouraged the industrious, and where complete concentration on the weight to be accorded a word, a phrase — the sequencing of any artful raid on the immortal — was a mental practice that most people in the progressive sixties would have traded in for spontaneity alone. It's interesting that at Goddard, that home of Wild Abandon, dusted with marijuana and the call of the Impulse, Jane Shore taught herself that poetry needed craft and formal cunning, as well as the blade of feeling.

There was a sharp playfulness to her early poems, a sense of lives and styles being tried out and examined for soundness, utility. Jane was checking out the tradition in the classroom, and all the while reading and memorizing contemporary poetry in great gulps elsewhere. In addition to the Yeats and Eliot we were feeding her, she'd bring us her latest acquisition, Adrienne Rich's *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law*, or Donald Finkel's *A Joyful Noise*, or *Somewhere Among Us a Stone Is Taking Notes*, a new chapbook by Charles Simic that she'd found at Grolier's in Cambridge, testing these things on us, forcing us to open our own eyes, think about our allegiances, and, always, working fiercely at her own poems.

Then and now, people around Jane write poetry. Then, she would bring her poems over the fields to Cate Farm, or go knock on Norman Dubie's, or Roger Weingarten's, or David Mamet's door at two in the morning, and read somebody the latest manuscript, getting and giving in return a friendly, but raking critique.

Within weeks of Jane's arrival at Goddard, word passed about Allen Ginsberg at Dartmouth. In the middle of a poetry reading, he had declared Hanover, New Hampshire, to be the "spiritual center of the universe," and dropped his pants. By the time Ginsberg made it to Goddard to read his poems, says Jane, "We were all very excited when he reached the climactic line where Plainfield, Vermont, became the spiritual center of the universe, and then we waited; but this time he didn't pull his pants down, and we were very disappointed." Very shyly, when her idol Robert Lowell read nearby, Jane invited him to come to her college. "Goddard?" Lowell answered, rearing up to his full height. "What's that?"

But it was always clear to Jane that poetry, written in solitude, is still an act of live community making, community in the widest sense: the personae in even the first of her poems stretched in time from the soldier poet Archilochus, halted in an archaic olive grove, to a future vision of herself, wheeling a shopping cart in some suburban community. If the mind proceeds from the meat of a distinct self, if you are Jane Shore, that self is always part comedienne, part chameleon, and alert, wise, curious, and acquisitive. George Starbuck, introducing her in *Lying Down in the Olive Press*, the chapbook she published at twenty-one, said: "Jane Shore knows us, gets us, talks of us or hears us talk of ourselves, with a faultless, unsettling, illuminating interest. And of herself. . . . [I]t's a good voice and good judgment. Not only, not even mainly, in the comic vignettes, there's the joy of precise observation." And this is still right.

After graduating from Goddard, Jane moved from Vermont to the Writers' Workshop at Iowa, then won a Bunting Institute Fellowship at Radcliffe, which she followed with a Briggs Copeland Lectureship at Harvard. After that, she went on to New York, Princeton, and Washington, D.C., through Guggenheim, Hodder, and NEA fellowships, and produced three books of poetry. As each appeared, the literary world tipped its hat in recognition. The first, *Eye Level*, the University of Massachusetts Press published in 1977 as the winner of the Juniper Prize. The second, *The Minute Hand* — with its eerie, unsettling cover painting of an old-fashioned child in lace collar and pantaloons, all large, anxious eyes and tight, quivering mouth, her legs folded and crossed under her rocking chair, her preternaturally delicate hands fingering an indistinguishable object — showed exactly the cross of domestic and uncanny that brought the book the Lamont Poetry Prize for 1986. The current book, *Music Minus One*, really a vividly compressed Bildungsroman in poems, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. All of these collections show the same brilliant finish, the same unerring, targeting metaphor. The folding intricacy of reference in a poem like "The Russian Doll" seems quintessential:

at last, the two littlest dolls,
too wobbly to stand upright,
are cradled in her cavity as if waiting to be born.
Like two dried beans, they rattle inside her,
twin faces painted in cruder detail,
bearing the family resemblance
and the same unmistakable design.
The line of succession stops here.
I can pluck them from her belly like a surgeon,

thus making the choice between fullness
and emptiness;

Gentle and unstoppable, the poem advances over and through the contours of an object recognizable but exotic, graphing curve by curve the magnetic field of the nesting dolls and the perplexing pull of the generational ties between mothers and daughters, as the poem teases out the rich problematic of femaleness and female connection. Other poems into the nineties explore Jewishness and family history with the same nuanced complexity.

Eye Level occupied itself with the underside of the flesh's miracles: the flesh transforming, its boundaries eroded by loss and love. In these poems, blind albino fish adapt to an underground cavern; her father's movie camera stops and rewinds the trapeze artist's fatal fall, so that the body flies upward, instead of downward into the corpse that it became; Houdini in chains goes under the river and undoes all of his locks again. Tactile image by image, Ghiberti's doors in Florence swing open for Jane Shore backwards in time into biblical epic. Flesh is magical, clowning; and materia, never simply matter, streaks into the mystical.

When Jane Shore met Elizabeth Bishop at Harvard during the seventies, the older artist confirmed the odd and original angle at which the younger poet met the world and its artifacts. But like Bishop's, Jane Shore's later poems bloom overtly into dramatic narrative, grasping with an almost blind but instinctive trust for the smallest tentacle of memory, to haul forward from past time the whole huge load from which we reconstruct a life and a meaning. *The Minute Hand* spun object after object into exquisite parables of relation; but in *Music Minus One*, the pairs and things assume a new kind of gravitas. Shore's novelist husband, Howard Norman, pressed her to recognize the autobiographical worldscape unfolding in these poems. Jane Shore herself said of the collection as it emerged: "There was a template in my head for this book. I'd write an early childhood poem and there'd be another poem that would balance it, or fill in about a later part of my life. It was an arc, and there were points along this arc that needed to be told."

The new poetry is propelled by an urgency both formal and emotional, the world it holds peopled by her parents, her husband, and her daughter, Emma; work takes place in an old farmhouse ten minutes down the road from Goddard. As she scans her world — archaeologist of feeling, custodian of memory— the woman in Jane Shore tests the shapes of mother, lover, and daughter. While we watch in suspense — funny or painful, and so often both — she's always a virtuoso of the act, locked and shining on the trapeze bar of the poem, within those entangling alliances from which we dare not, may not, loosen ourselves.

Lorrie Goldensohn has published two poetry collections, *The Tether* and *Dreamwork*. She is also the author of *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*.

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