

Nancy Walker



March 17, 1935 ~ May 20, 1996

What makes of life coherent whole
Is love and constancy,
Communing with another soul
In perfect honesty.

from *For Charlotte at Sixty*
by Nancy Walker

Nancy Walker



A selection from the writings of Nancy Walker.

A selection from the writings of Nancy Walker.

November 14, 1985

Dear Penny,

Oedipus has made me think. You have to play the hand you're dealt. That is what makes Bridge so fascinating to me. I had forgotten. In Chess you have to make the whole world because, aside from someone's having the first move, everything is equal. In Bridge, all you have to do is play the hand you are dealt, and the point is not so much to win as to get the most out of your cards, whatever they may be. Sometimes you know it is a losing battle and all you can do is pass, but you still can play out the hand in a better or worse way.



MOUSIE MOUSIE WILDFLOWER

Christopher Creep has robbed our sleep
We don't know where to find it
Leave him alone with a chew or a bone
and he puts too much noise behind it.
I'm sure I'm too old for this puppy so bold
who cons me each day before eating
takes my breakfast away for his romp in the hay
and is sorely my patience depleting.
Enough of this talk, let us go for a walk
without Christopher Creep in the bargain
We can stroll hand in hand but I don't understand
Why all we can talk is dog Jargon.
A vacation we crave from this cute little knave
But I doubt that we ever could leave him
We like him too much, like his soft furry touch
and we never would want to bereave him.
So I guess we will stay and with Christopher play
and pretend that we've actually rested
But I'll come back to work feeling more of a jerk
by a little dog having be bested.
All my love, Porcupine.



All we have in common
is mortality
a spark of life
instantly extinguished
so all that matters
is the brightness
that perishes us.
The tree and I
are the same
and so are the weeds
without a name
the fish in the sea
are also me
and I
am the birds
the 'habit the sky
the dogs and the cats
and venomous bats
my mirror images are
and even the remotest star
is made like me and you
so what we must do
is shine



The disconnected

For a long time I have wanted to write about some of the heart-stirring drama I daily observe in the city, the flow of countless lives squeezed out of shape by loss or failure or whatever great sadness drags so many individuals to the ragged edges of despair. Since I work downtown for the City of Boston, when I take to the streets at lunch time or after work. I encounter a sea of humanity in the raw, and it shivers me to the bone.

So many people walk around unseeing and unhearing, in a world all their own. They engage in muttered conversations with themselves or shouting matches with invisible long-gone husbands or wives, friends, children, who knows what. I am always astonished at the intensity of the anger displayed and vented into the unoffending air. But once, as I was walking alone, returning to my job after lunch, an obviously drunk man, probably in his fifties, stuck his face into mine and said, "Queer bitch!" so loud that other strollers turned to star at both of us. The man did not know me, nor could he have known that I was indeed "queer." Like a phone ringing in the real world but heard in a dream, I chanced by at just the right moment in his fantasy, and he lashed out at me. Who was the person in his life that rally inspired such acute anger? He would have done me bodily harm, I believe, had I not kept on going without ever looking at him directly or interacting with him.

Such individuals always attract my interest or arouse my concern, but I do not know how to make intelligible contact with them. Sometimes, when the weather is fair, the old, loveless women walk around carrying their shopping bags, their stockings rolled around their ankles. I wonder if any of them is gay. I wonder what does happen to old gay people who have neither family nor lover nor friends, nor any significant thing that anchors them to life. I am troubled. I think there should be institutions set up among us to provide for "our own." Being gay is not an adolescent activity. It goes on and on, and some of us are much luckier than others. Should not the luckier hold out a helping hand to the less fortunate?

When the weather is really balmy, the old women sit on stone ledges built out side some of Boston's banks. Once, as I passed by, one of them was singing. She had a lovely, clear, strong alto voice. I wanted to tell he how beautiful she sounded, but she did not see me. She was looking through me to a better world.

Our society creates these human catastrophes, lost to themselves, lost to all of us. There seem to be more and more such people, many of them homeless. No address, no welfare. No welfare, how do they live? I wish for soft weather. They live in the open on the benches in our great cities" parks. They seek shelter inside entrances to subways and in the halls of apartment buildings from

The Disinherited

which they are chased because they also use the halls for bathrooms. But how far are "they" from "us?" Are we not all related?

Once, at a church flea market, my sother and I saw a woman wearing a plastic hospital identification bracelet. She purchased a stuffed animal and held it to her bosom before she put it in her shopping bag and walked, in a daze, away. If only she could have a real companion. I thought that perhaps she had had a baby and lost it. She was not old. I could not accurately guess her age. My sother knew I was distressed and we did not discuss the occurrence. But the image has stayed in my mind for several years. I wonder, where is the woman now? Does she still have the animal?

On another occasion, as I was walking hurriedly in the downtown after-work throng, a young woman, dressed in a raincoat and not looking at all strange or derelict began walking next to m and said, "Give your pains to Jesus and he will make your burdens light. He will make you happy." She really was talking to me. She kept asking my name, and I kept not answering her, trying to figure out what her angle was. There was not angle. She was not handing out religious literature. She was an individual whose inner turmoil did not show outwardly at all, and she was reaching towards me for something. Perhaps she

wanted, really wanted, someone to share her great religious discovery with her. I finally told her my name, explained that I was not a Christian, but that I was very happy for her. I did not want her to feel rejected.

Just the other evening when I went out to buy my dinner, a young woman came to the counter where I was waiting for my fast food and asked for water. "I'll pay you for it," she whimpered. The man behind the counter wanted no payment and gave her the water. The look on her face was one of indescribable torment. Was she on drugs? In physical pain? She asked for a second drink and when she received it, she thanked the counterman very courteously and walked out. I was stunned. I don't even know what I witnessed, but it was shatteringly painful.

Even when I sit at my desk doing my "straight" job, seemingly absorbed in my work, I am observing the struggles of the disconnected. A woman who works in the office immediately adjacent to mine lives all alone. She has few, if any friends. She is sixty, not gay, was never married. She devoted her life to her parents until they died. "Edith" often touches my hand or my face when she talks to me in an attempt to hold onto the slender thread that prevents her from becoming too much like the people out on the streets muttering to themselves. Another woman who works in the same building as I do is both brilliant

and emotionally disturbed. She too is isolated, living alone, without companions. Sometimes she says, "Nancy, I am so upset." I know. I know.

What stroke of fortune has kept me from being in her shoes? Are we not all hanging onto our sanity by our fingernails? Are we not all touched by the suffering we see around us? Does it make any difference whether we are straight or gay or bi- or ambi- or non-sexual? If we are human, we must share each other's burden.

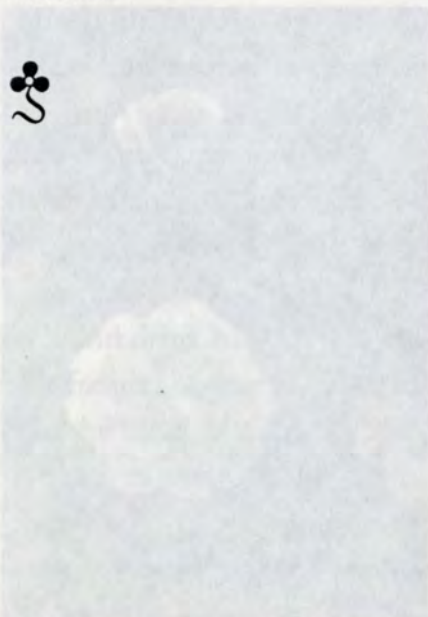
I have written about these people, so removed from the kind of life I am privileged to lead, because I cannot help feeling a kinship with them. I cannot help recognizing their essential humanity, nor can I avoid the prick of conscience, realizing that no one seems to care and that even my own "concern" can bear so little practical fruit.

Still, if only in passing, I offer up a benediction. Perhaps there is a better life beyond this one in which we breath and move and make mistakes.



Today my work consisted of
sending small donations for a
home for gorillas on Maui,
a more peaceful life before death
of hapless farm animals
a renewal of hope for all Greenpeace means
a Thanksgiving meal for the old and hungry
a mini zap of the oil industry before
it gobbles up what's left of our natural beauty
and finally to stop the trade in wild birds.

This is only one day. It never stops.
The world is so full of cruelty
and pain
that trying to stop them
is trying to stop
the rain.



MOUSIE MOUSIE WILDFLOWER

Gay Pride approaches and recedes
answering some of our pressing needs
giving us hope for one more year
strengthening us against our fear
Parades and bands and marching feet
militate against defeat
the homophobic world to show
we will not back to closets go.
And you and I still holding hands
listen to our hearts' commands
Return to home and gentle sleep
and keep the promises we must keep.
All my love, Porcupine.



Out in birdland

A free lunch is waiting for feathered friends in JP

My sother (significant other) believes she has a solemn obligation to invite all the birds in North America to breakfast. She wants to operate the IHOP of the flying set. I suppose I should consider myself lucky that she doesn't want to feed all the feathered creatures on all the other continents as well.

My beloved goes to extraordinary lengths in this incredibly cold weather to make sure that her flying freeloaders are liberally supplied with edibles and potables. She shovels a path about 50 feet long through head-high drifts so that she can reach the feeding grounds, and then she shovels the table to be spread before her ever-ravenous winged guests.

As if that were not enough, in the bitterest of bitter weather (and she is very sensible to the cold, so she goes out layered like an Italian sub) she schleps a bucket of water, removes the ice from the previous day, and provides bath and drink to both the wild and the tame animals that frequent our yard. I am sure that other people feed the birds, but I doubt that many of them stretch themselves as far as my sother does.

Usually a moderate, sensible individual, my sother thinks the sky's the limit when it comes to birds. Therefore, we

spend an exorbitant amount of money on these beautiful yet anything-but endangered species (pigeons, crows, starlings, sparrows), an expenditure to which I do not object. What gets me is seeing *my* lunch on the ground when I look out the kitchen window.

I have often brought home the uneaten portion of something wonderful from a restaurant and looked forward to indulging in it at a later time. Then, lo and behold, I see it peeping up at me from under the birds.

If I say anything wistful to my sother — like “What the hell is my lunch doing in the yard?!!!” — she ever-so-charmingly replies, “It’s a very bad winter. The birds are hungry, we can always make more spaghetti.”

“But,” I sputter, “you don’t understand. That was *my special* spaghetti.”

It’s just no use. The peanut-butter jar is almost empty, its contents down in bird haven. My precious poison, junk food,, constitutes a collective time bomb. At some mystical, magical moment, never revealed to me, my sother decides that all candy, chips, pretzels, and pastry has been transmuted into bird food, and that’s the last I ever see of it.

We have discussions about lunch. She asks me what I would like, I say, "Remember the Genoa salami I bought? I know there was quite a bit left." An utterly irresistible sheepish grin appears on her radiant face. "Uh-huh," I mutter, "you gave it to the birds." She doesn't have to talk. Everything is written in her childlike expression. Who could get angry? I settle for an American-cheese sandwich.

This is all part of her campaign. She *deliberately* lets my cold cuts spoil by developing complete amnesia about their existence until I recall them, by which time it is too late and they legitimately have to be donated to her favorite charity. By the way, birds, especially crows, are very fond of meat, and if it is a little spoiled, well, so are they. It works out pleasantly enough — for them. I'm the one left holding the bag.

When I ask my sother why she is stuffing the birds so much, she answers that it is an excruciatingly cold winter and the birds need more food than usual to sustain themselves. Is that my responsibility? I don't know, but she is dedicated, like a proper Saint Francis, to all this aviaian gourmandizing, and I have no choice but to go along with it. Sub-zero weather does seem a little hard to take, and a world without birds would be bleak.

Carrying the bird saga in my head, I am so guilt-ridden that when I am about to bite into a sandwich I hear the ghostly flapping of wings and have haunting visions of a giant pterodactyl gnawing on THE HOUSE.

Well, as is often the case here in this crazy New England climate, we were treated to a big February thaw for a few days, and I noticed that there was food left on the ground after the birds had finished their lavish repast. The birds apparently have a shut-off switch that ensures that they eat less when the weather is warmer. (Before the thaw they have been vacuuming their "plate" clean as a whistle in a matter of seconds.) My lunch may not be converted into a sacrificial offering for a while, but I hear another snowstorm is on the way, so I am seriously contemplating putting a padlock on the refrigerator or hiding my food under the bed.



Whoopee, I'm Lucky!

I have a little Cancer
That began as mammary
And what the hell it's good for
Is something I can't see

Now it gnaws my aging bones
Destroys blood white and red
I have to be transfused a lot
To keep from getting dead

They give me radiation
They give me hormone pills
They give me chemotherapy
With its attendant ills

I've had CA for 20 years
That's why they say I'm lucky
But living without fear and pain
Would have been just ducky

The doctors were astonished
When they learned how long I'd fought
And often called me "lucky"
Never asked me what I thought!!

How lucky to hallucinate
on Morphine while alone
And push all the wrong buttons
On your bedside telephone

How lucky to be able
With exquisite pain and slow
To reach the sweet commode you love
Before you have to go

Ah, yes, it's very lucky
To be stuck at home except
When doctors' dear appointments
Must be timely kept

But luck or not, I am still here
Laughing and bitching and loved
And love, not luck's the reason
I'm here and not aboved.

April 17, 1995



December 1994

Love is the only gift worth giving
Love is the only gift we need
Love is what keeps the living, living
Love is the heart of the mustard seed.

Richness of *things* is temporary
Easily blown by winds of change
Easily torn by adversary
Easily pushed beyond our range.

But richness of spirit lasts forever
Tossed by tempests, beaten by gales
The bonds it creates do not sever
The brightest gem, beside it, pales.

And so, this season I wish for you
Strength of spirit, gifts of love
A sense of purpose in all you do
And blessings of wisdom from above.

I wish you health and happiness always,
Nancy Walker



December 1994



2

