
GLADYS FELD HELZBERG
FOUNDERS' AWARD
Best Poem



WAITING DAYS OF GRACE

By Bruce McClain

A stench hovered over Dachau.
The air was thick with the smell of corpses.
Prisoners crammed together like sardines,
hopes of reclamations dispirited over time, yet
we kept our mezuzahs buried in our hearts.

Each day billowing ashes tumbled from the towers
into the air. If one listened carefully, ghostly sounds
of sighs and weeping could be heard
in those rolls of dark smoke that blocked the light of day.

Mounds of shoes, shoes of every shape, size and cut
gave evidence of the decimation of human life.
A child's shoe snagged on the barbed-wire fence.
A doll's head thrown onto the heap.

In '43 typhus, the pale rider, swept through Dachau.
Those infected were marched outside the camps
into the ghettos to disinfect.
Black coffee fed to the babies to hasten their deaths.
A thousand prisoners died,
a grim reminder of the brevity of life.

I'm a leftover, a story of survival, no real triumph
to speak of,
just waiting days of grace. Long after my liberation,
I kept my dust-encrusted shoes in a wooden box
carved with the dates: December 1944-May 1945
on its lid.
The longest funeral I ever attended.

VAMC—Kansas City, MO

REMNANT

By Bruce McClain

I ran with the wind when I was a lad,
hence, now I am old—
my feet fleet no more.
In my decline, memories I have had,
but I am grateful for my years, the score.

Nearby my rocker, my slippers neatly stay,
my wrinkled robe hangs
like an old soldier,
The clock breaks its silence, another day.
My body scent is of an aging odor.

Though my strength dwindled, my will continues.
My steps are short
and my legs do quiver.
I'll make my way down to the Avenues—
yes, to eye the drift of human endeavor.

What is left of me—a blur—a hoary head?
The more I diminish—I dance with the dead.

VAMC—Kansas City, MO



Drawing by Bruce McClain

Healing and Restoration

*By Scott D. Sjostrand
—Hallock, MN*

Well, here's a difficult letter to explain what I'm experiencing.

To start with, I was born September 27, 1964. President Kennedy had been assassinated the previous November. The cold war was building up. We were still recovering from World War I and World War II (mushroom clouds, death camps, extreme inhumane methods of torture, etc.), and Korea (the so-called forgotten war).

We had just entered the Vietnam War; we had a poor economy, instability, draft dodgers, the OPEC crisis,

discrimination, the fight for civil rights, and so on.

I was a product, from the moment I was born, of that confused, but sometimes, well-meaning generation. I was also a volunteer for the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Army in both peacetime and war.

I am proud to have been able to do my humble part for a better, safer world. However, I'm only human and along with that goes a lot of impossible-to-explain baggage. I'm on the road to recovery, thank God! ■

Typist: Mary R. Dobbins

The Raven's Take on Mental Illness

*By Michael Carroll
VA Medical Center—Dallas, TX*

The night was cold and dark. I sat alone reading a book of poetry by candlelight and drinking a glass of wine. Hours passed me by. As I sat there, I could hear the wind and see the rain beating against my window. The book I was reading was by Edgar Allan Poe.

Gradually, I lost my grip on reality. In a state of confusion, my emotions ran out of control. I started to experience the author's feelings; I suffered his hurt and his pain.

The winds were hollering and skeletons began to walk throughout my house. I snuck upstairs and grabbed my shotgun. I continued drinking wine and I kept on reading. The more I read about the horrors, the smaller the room became. I thought I saw birds flying near the ceiling. As the winds increased. I worried that a draft might extinguish my candle.

The thunder and lighting grew worse. I could feel a presence in my house and detect a dead odor. I felt as if I was trapped in a graveyard on Halloween night. Then, I thought I saw the old poet, the old master himself, standing in my doorway, the lightning broadcasting his shadow across the floor. As he stood there looking at me, I cowered before him and wondered what would happen to my soul.

I stopped drinking that night, and since then the lordly poet has not stood before me to quote the Raven, "anymore!" ■



Drawing by Bruce McClain