

Bio:

JUDY WELLS was born in San Francisco and raised in Martinez, California. She received her B.A. from Stanford University and her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Berkeley.

She has nine books of poetry to her credit: *I Have Berkeley*; *Albuquerque Winter*; *Jane, Jane*; *The Part-Time Teacher*; *The Calling: Twentieth Century Women Artists*; *Everything Irish*; *Call Home*; *Little Lulu Talks with Vincent Van Gogh*; and *I Dream of Circus Characters: A Berkeley Chronicle*. Her poetry has been reviewed in several issues of the French magazine *Femmes Artistes International* (Paris), edited by Laurence Moréchand-Peraer, Docteur ès Lettres.

Her essay, "Daddy's Girl," has appeared in *The Borzoi College Reader* (Alfred A. Knopf), and an Irish essay, "The Sheela-na-Gigs," was published in *Travelers Tales Ireland*. Judy is also co-editor, with Marsha Hudson, Bridget Connelly, Doris Earnshaw, and Olivia Eielson, of *The Berkeley Literary Women's Revolution: Essays from Marsha's Salon* (McFarland, 2005).

Judy taught creative writing, women's poetry, composition, and literature at various Bay Area colleges, before a career as an academic counselor and faculty member at Saint Mary's College of California, working with adults returning to school. Now a full-time poet, she lives with her husband, avant-garde poet Dale Jensen, in Berkeley.

WHAT WE FORGOT

"Beware, beware, Mac Conglinne,
lest the gravy drown thee!
The Vision of Mac Conglinne
12th century

*For 4th and 5th generation
Irish-Americans*

We forgot our language
We forgot the land we came from
 had rolling green hills
We forgot our songs
We forgot our stories
We forgot we were cattle people
We forgot our voyage tales
 where the West didn't mean
 only Death

where the West meant
 Tir na n'Og
The Land of Youth
where there was no decay
We forgot the islands of women
The land in the sea
 surrounded by sea horses
We forgot the sea
 was a plain of red flowers
which Manannan mac Lir
 thundered through in his chariot

We forgot we ever had a vision
 of a silly land of surfeit
 where we rowed on a lake of milk
 skimming cream
 where castles were made of
 butter and lard
 and our palisades, of bacon
We forgot we had cheese gates
 and cheese stepping stones
and a voracious demon who slipped
 inside our mouths
 in an apple
whom a cleric called Mac Conglinne
 enticed from our king's gullet
by enumerating
 all the things
the demon liked to eat--
 curds and whey
 and milk and lard
 and bacon and mutton
 and buttered rolls and mead
until the demon couldn't stand
 it anymore and leaped
 from the king's throat
and there were lands
 where you could eat a bird's egg
 and then sprout feathers
and lands where the fragrance of
 crimson trees satisfied your hunger
and lands where multi-colored birds
 blue, crimson, and green
 sat three in a row
 and sang away your grief

and Yeats tried to tell us
but only a little

And we tried to forget in America
We wanted real bacon
in our bellies
and we wanted shoes
and then we wanted fancy red-flowered hats
and we wanted an education
so we could become lawyers,
and nurses and school teachers
so we would not have to be domestics
and serve roasted birds
to “our betters” who would never sprout
feathers

Never fly as we did
with the knowledge of our tales
over seas of red flowers
over seas of red flowers
We forgot, we forgot our tales
and remembered only
dark seas
and coffin ships
We forgot our seas of red flowers
and Manannan mac Lir on his steed
galloping to meet us
where we were
Queen of the island
with 17 daughters
Queen of the island
with 17 daughters

**Published in *Everything Irish* by Judy Wells
Scarlet Tanager Books, 1999**

**A version of this poem was published in
*The Walrus***

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE FUN SIDE OF CATHOLICISM AT ST. CATHERINE'S SCHOOL

Take Father Coffey, for example.
I always thought his name was spelled
 with two e's
 until I went to Ireland.
He had a bright red balding head
 and a bum chipped tooth
and was always smiling.
Every year he went to see
 his Irish spinster aunts
 in New York,
Saw all the Broadway musicals
 and returned to St. Catherine's
 with big ideas
 for his new play,
 “The Song of Siena.”
Then he'd sport flashy shirts
 and pal around with buxom
 Barbara Schultz,
P.T.A. mom and part-time producer
 of “The Song of Siena.”
The whole Catholic School was in it,
 grades one to eight
and each year it got more elaborate
 until we finally had a full scale musical,
 “OKLAHOMA”!
Dennis Watson played the hero,
 Louise Koller the heroine.
I don't know how she got the part
 except she was big and well-
 developed for a kid.
She didn't have to sing.
 We lip-synched the whole play.
I had a long red skirt and bonnet
 for a square dance number,
and the guys had cowboy hats
 and drawstring ties.
We all wore bright red lipstick,
 and backstage, where we waited hours
 to go on,
we danced rock and roll
 we had learned from T.V.--

Dick Clark's American Bandstand from Philly.

We adolescent Catholics
couldn't go to mixed parties--
 “No boys and girls together
 after 6th grade,”
but backstage Father Coffey didn't care,
and so we whooped it up until,
“**O-O-O-O----klahoma**, where the wind comes
 sweeping down the plain,”
and we swept out on stage
with our rickrack skirts swishing
 still thinking about Elvis,
and we weren't Judy Wells
 and Mary Jo Chantri
 and Sal Arcato
 and Philip Murphy
pipsqueaks in 7th and 8th grade--
We were **O- K-**
 L- A- H- O- M- A !
 OKLAHOMA!

**Published in *Everything Irish*
by Judy Wells
Scarlet Tanager Books, 1999**

91-YEAR-OLD FILLY

My mother
a 91-year-old filly
kicks her legs up
on her bed
in her expensive
Board and Care
and says,
“I'm bored here.”
but she won't do anything
except watch T.V.
What can I say?
It was the same
when she said,
“I hate sleeping
all the time,”
and in the next breath,
“I just want to go to sleep.”

What can I say?
Dying by inches
is not fun,
but you're more
alive than you think?
When your caretakers
offer you salmon
and chocolate ice cream,
eat it!
It could be your last meal
or it could be one
of a series
of last suppers
which go on for years.

What can I say?
I already told you "Bon Voyage"
when you asked me to
in the hospital,
but now you're back,
many pounds lighter
(unlike the usual tourist)
but still yourself,
sassy, depressed,
at times groping for words.
"They're inside," you say,
"but they can't come out."
The word you searched for last night
was "Jeopardy"—
your favorite T.V. show.

It's not just you, Mom.
My own mental health
is in jeopardy.
I'm hurting inside too
but I can't get the words out.
They won't roll off
my tongue.
So I write this poem
on my bed
with pursed lips
(and kapowie and kapowie inside)
so I write this poem
with lips of stone.

**Published in *Call Home: Poems*
by Judy Wells
Scarlet Tanager Books, 2005**

MISS HAVISHAM DOES NOT LIVE HERE

Today, at 899 Willow,
our childhood home,
my brother
while cleaning out the kitchen closet,
amidst old cans of Campbell's soup,
saran wrap, and childhood valentines,
came across
the top of an ancient wedding cake
in a box.
"It's mom and dad's!" he yelled.

But Mimi thought it looked familiar—
compared the fluffy white-skirted
little bride and the groom in tux
to a photo she had of her wedding.
It was her cake top all right,
40 years old and mom had saved it.
My brother wanted to cut into Mimi's cake.
"It's still moist!" said Mel.
Then he found Nancy's wedding cake top
in another box—
all roses and pillars
with a little vase on top for flowers.
Nancy was modern,
hadn't wanted a bride and groom.
This cake was only 35 years old.

Then my brother found the *pièce de résistance*.
Mom and dad's wedding cake—
64 years old!
"It's petrified!" I yelled, poking it,
and noting the elegant 30s slim dress
on the bride, the slender groom in tux.
Big sugar roses surrounded them,
and beneath this top plate
was a circle of dark fruit cake
on another plate.
"Still good," said Nancy.

Dale took a photo of the four of us,
Mimi, Nancy, Judy, and Mel,
holding all the cakes,
representing something like
140 years of marriage.
Only I have escaped this fate
though I thought later
after the camera's flash,
I'd like that elegant 30s bride and groom
on my and Dale's wedding cake one day.

“Something old, something new,
something borrowed, something blue.”
They were old all right,
They'd be borrowed.
As for new and blue—
we'd have to get something else,
unless the mold begins to grow
on that dark fruit cake—
Then we'd have everything.

**Published in *Call Home: Poems*
by Judy Wells
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THE MATISSE T-SHIRT

I saw it in a catalogue
advertising chic artistic
things to wear—
a Matisse *Jazz* t-shirt
100% cotton in true
Matisse blue
Icarus falling soundlessly
through space
so said the ad—

But when I pulled it
from its package
and over my chest
all I could hear were
sounds—
gunfire, brilliant shattered
stars of yellow

One direct hit—
The red dot on Icarus' heart
His black body falling
 a crucifix
through Matisse's true blue
 jazz sky
and the sounds were so loud
 I knew
I could not wear this image
 blazed on my chest

Not here in Oakland
Not here in Berkeley
Not here in Richmond
where gunfire rings out
 in the night
cross-fire at dawn

and Black Icarus
lies in a pool of
 brilliant red
day
after day
after day

After Matisse's *Icarus*, from *Jazz*, Paris, 1947

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by Judy Wells
Beatitude Press, 2010
The "Matisse T-Shirt" was first published in *Awaate***

SUPERMARKET LOVE

Last week at Whole Foods
as I was reaching
into the refrigerated shelves
for the coldest tofu
with the most future
expiration date
a yellow gloved hand
from the other side
laid itself on mine.

I nearly jumped a mile.
“*Oh sorry!*” said a woman's voice
from the other side.
A man behind me laughed.

This week as I walked by
the same tofu
section
I heard a disembodied voice
from the other side say,
“*I needed you,
and you have never
been there
for me once.*”
“Yes, I have,”
I wanted to protest.
“Last week!”

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