

Not as a Poet

by Bill Yarrow

She's not a poet, but does she have to be? She comes to the reading to read the poems of her recently dead husband, for she made a vow: that she would read his work at an open mic. Now she is keeping her word. It's her way of keeping him alive or maybe it's his way of keeping her alive.

She stumbles over his words—not out of grief perhaps but because they're not assembled in her rhythm, and they're not her words. She limps along to the end of the small batch of poems she brought.

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It's over. Well, that's done. She got through it. She sits down to polite applause. She takes a breath to calm herself. She doesn't weep outwardly, but neither does she leave. As another poet walks to the mic, she pretends to listen.

There's no end of poets wanting to read, no end of reasons for wanting to read one's own poetry out loud in front of a crowd.

The words wash over her; they do not penetrate her skin. She tries to enter the poem, but there's no situation she can put herself in, no story she can latch onto. It's all just an unconnected series of phrases she doesn't really care about.

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She concentrates on bringing her husband back into her mind, to have him appear before her, but he's just an angry ghost now and refuses to appear. Her memory is just not strong enough to hold him in its arms. As in Homer, as in Virgil, as in every writer who has

tried to describe this phenomenon, he just slips away and she is left in the moonlight staring at her hands.

She thinks to herself, "What is that person at the podium saying?" She asks herself what she's still doing there. She could be home doing nothing until she went to bed. Until tomorrow, that empty terror, came around. What was that line in *Dodsworth*? Jesus, she just watched the film on TCM. She tries and fails to recall it. Then, after a minute of hard concentrating, she remembers:

"Love has got to stop someplace short of suicide."

She was stopped short when she heard Walter Huston say that to Mary Astor in the film. "Love has got to stop someplace short of suicide," he said. What did that mean? What was he trying to say? She wasn't sure, but she was glad she remembered it so she could keep thinking about it. She repeats it to herself as if it were a mantra.

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Maybe she should try writing herself. How hard could it be? These people were all pretending to be writers. Why shouldn't she pretend also? I'll put that *Dodsworth* line in my poem, she thinks. Maybe begin with that line. Or maybe end with that line. Or maybe have it appear right in the middle. Or maybe it should be the title of the poem. She decides she'll think more about it.

She looks up, looks around. Everyone, necks craned forward, is listening intently. She stares at the ceiling of the bookstore. She begins to work on her unwritten poem, a poem she decides to dedicate to her husband. He'll like that I'm writing a poem. He'll like that I'm dedicating it to him, she thinks. "Love has got to stop **someplace** short of suicide." Someplace short of suicide. That's it!

That's the title! She smiles. Around her, the open mic creaks solipsistically to its end.

