

Denise Mostacci Sklar
The Poetry Reading

I was the featured reader along with my husband at the Episcopalian church in Hamilton, a block away from our home. We had fun taking turns reading with a jazz pianist improvising. The audience seemed energized and happy, enjoying the joy that writing and a little music can bring. During the open reading, instead of the white haired schoolmarm-type poet lecturing us on alliteration, drawing our attention to the “teh” sound of the T and the snaky soft Sss’s squeezing through her false teeth spitting saliva, she lifted her arms up to do a little jiggle dance as she let out a breathless laugh. Even the large square-jawed man, chiseled and looking as if he’d just walked out of a Norman Rockwell illustration with white hair, blue eyes and voice booming—rhymed his short morality poems, with renewed old time gusto. However, it was business as usual as the brittle, thin lady with grey hair and pointed confidence confessed heading toward the podium that she does not entertain, SHE only writes poetry. That managed to put a damper on the evening, but only for a second—as we daydreamed through her rhyming couplets like a bunch of school kids impatient for the day to end.

But we all froze when the Argentinian woman stood at the podium and announced that years ago she was a child victim of political abuse in her country and that all she could hear was the laughter that went on tonight and that maybe we should think about people who are suffering or have suffered or whose life is struggle with no place of laughter. We all sat with our backs straight, not daring to move as she read about her childhood conversations with god and her connection with the dead raccoon. Her story revealed how awakened she had become to something real and important in life—unlike the innocent joy that seemed to have spread around the room, softening barriers, now quickly drying up. I thought about god and wondered why he forgot to tell her about laughter and expression and sharing and how it can soothe the sting of painful memory, in her case the stinking horror of her suffering, even for a single moment, an exhale. But what do I know about another person’s life, I can only listen and hope to see.

Or maybe laughter comes in another chapter of her book, one that she hasn’t lived yet. I thought how I would like to write that chapter, tell her that the young girl in my story knew the girl in her story and how some part of them was the same. If they could only stand barefoot in the lake or here in this room together on one spring lit afternoon with pink blossoms falling. How their tears would fall blending into the warm water that would hold them and their breath would rise into the air. And if their eyes could meet like fingertips touching, would they see the face of god? Would he be laughing?