

Call and Answer



Poems by Joyce Brown

Illustrated by Mary Swann

Call and Answer

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The following poems have appeared in these journals:

Yankee: "Power"

Light: "Apple Pie"

Smartish Pace: "Urgency of Birds"

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The Poet

Joyce S. Brown is a poet who lives in Baltimore, Maryland. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Smartish Pace*, *The American Scholar*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Journal of Medical Humanities*, *Commonweal*, *Yankee*, *The Tennessee Quarterly*, and other journals. For 10 years, she was a teacher of high school English and world religions; for another 10, she taught fiction and poetry writing at Johns Hopkins University. She also served as poetry editor of Baltimore's *City Paper*. In retirement, she has tutored at a juvenile prison and is currently working with at-risk teens in a program called Learning Inc.

The Artist

Mary Swann is a landscape painter and quiltmaker who lives in New Park, Pennsylvania. A graduate of the Maryland Institute College of Art, she paints in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Nova Scotia. For many years, as a member of the former Gomez and Paper Rock Scissors galleries, she showed her work regularly in Baltimore as well as in juried exhibitions throughout the USA. Her paintings are held in private collections both here and abroad, and one of her prints is owned by the Baltimore Museum of Art. Her monoprints also illustrate a children's book, *The Story of the Close Cat*.

Artist's Note

The poems chosen for *Call and Answer* from the large and varied body of Joyce's work were the ones that presented themselves to me in pictures. As it turns out, many of them are little dramas. It seems natural that a painter of scenes would feel most competent to respond to these.

The illustrations are not meant to demonstrate or explain the action taking place in the poems, but rather to provide a pictorial response to what is being expressed. I hope that they have managed to do some justice to the wit, awe, irony, and concern that inform the peculiar insight of these poems.

The spontaneous medium of monoprint seemed most appropriate to reflect the immediacy and truth of Joyce's thought.

—*Mary Swann*

Poet's Note

Mary's illustrations—playful, fresh, surprising—never betray the labor expended in the complicated printmaking process, and remind me of what Yeats wrote about poetry:

*A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.*

Each of Mary's responses delights me with its angle into the poem and the color, in every sense of that word, she gives to my words.

—*Joyce Brown*

*for
Anne and Max*



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Fishing

With thin thread she fishes
in a murky pond. She would lure
fragments of last night's dreams
to her paperclip hook, reel
from the deeps,
these shimmering bits, sift
them in the shallows, stitch
them together, pull them
like silk scarves
through her sleeve until
a reconstructed fish appeared.
Then she could say: *The scales
represent...the fins surely signify...
I will free this fish...I will cook it...
or I never eat fish because
of the little bones...*



Cat Girl

My daughter's cat perches
on the rim of the toilet.
He leans towards the bowl,
and bats a brave paw
across its little pond.



Once I watched a boy in a boat
toss his cat overboard, then curse
as the terrified cat clawed
its way back up his bare arm
onto the gunwale.



At summer camp, the cold
lake water shocked me
like a daily death. Bloodless, I ran
to the changing shed, my red wool
tank suit sodden as fur.



Mornings, when cold water
hits my face, I want to claw
my way up the bare arm
of day, crouch back down
into the old dry boat of night.





Alice

“Alice C. Turnipseed, ... 81, ... a self-taught florist ... died Saturday.”
— obituary, The Baltimore Sun

Even as a child, Alice loved flowers.
Her mother would find her sitting
cross-legged among clumps of daffodils,
comfortably quiet with them as if
belonging to their group. She loved fruits
and vegetables too, not to eat so much
as to view in the garden, or hold when harvested.
She admired the glossy skin of the eggplant—
its purple, and the pale kernels of corn
in their rows, the homely wrap of the potato,
the ruddy radish. When, at twenty, she met
Willis Turnipseed, she married him, with
a vague hope of bearing turnips—not just sons.

Apple Pie

*“The fear of mice is an anxiety
of our own murderousness,
because mice symbolize our weaknesses.”
— Silverman*

Because of the homemade apple pie,
we had the cheese.
Because of the cheese or the winter sky,
we had the mouse.

Meeting a mouse upstairs
made me more murderous
than the farmer’s wife who took only tails.

I took with a doorstep the entire life.

Now a member of the Humane Society,
murderer member,
my hair and skin gone gray,
I wait for the THUD. The doorstep, any day.





Purple Coat

The first time she wore the coat,
one of its flat black buttons flew off

like an angry crow, exposing
her neck to the cold. Nevertheless,

she was bolder wearing that coat,
its pyretic purple startling the night.

After a few years, the entire flock
of buttons disappeared, even those

whose purpose was simply to perch
on sleeves. Still, eyes followed her,

their whites overcast with fuchsia.
Right now she is standing near

the window's light, licking an end
of thread, poking its little point

through a needle's eye. She is set
to tame this wild coat. But wait:

the purple sleeves begin to flap!
The woolly bulk of winter coat arises

from the window ledge,
while on a table where the spool

and scissors lie, a dozen
egg-shaped buttons start to roll.

