

THE ARROW THAT FLIES by Nancy Owen Nelson

You are the bows from which your
Children as living arrows are sent forth...
Let our bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,
so He loves the bow that is stable.
—"On Children" The Prophet, Kahlil Gibran

1996 - IT IS EARLY OCTOBER, a few days before my son's 16th birthday. Today, I brace myself against the cold and wet days of fall. I meditate on the loss of friends and family. I think of the fragility of life, of my fears for my son's well being. The front door opens and I hear the energetic footsteps of Owen Wallace, and then his voice, sounding its emerging manhood. Life is endurable again.

Life Child
Life Child of mine,
When you are gone,
The silence in this room
Rings in my ears,
A bell to summon all I know
of you.
—Nancy Owen Nelson

My pregnancy and childbirth experience in 1980 was a textbook model: a metallic taste in my mouth, but no nausea; a subtle bloating in the abdomen; obsessive hunger for chocolate sundaes with nuts and cherries, for nectarines. The doctor tells me, "Keep your weight gain to 25 pounds and eat the Michigan sweet corn, lay off of the sweets, coffee, beer." I do well, but I crave the sweet lusciousness of a banana split while the new life forms in my belly, my hardening nipples spread and turn a soft brown color. I'm absorbed in my body, watching, touching myself, as this life grows. I take deep, dreamless naps in the hot summer afternoon, awakening to find an open book rising and falling on

my large belly as I breathe. At four months, I feel the fluttering of butterfly wings near my heart, kicking of the tiny feet and legs, swimming motions of the hands, fingers, and toes of my growing child. I gain 34 pounds, weighing 153 pounds one week before the birth.

For three years after my divorce from Owen's father, we lived in the second floor apartment in Westland, Michigan. From our door wall we saw the natural woods above the Rouge River. Fierce winters of the 1980s brought sub-zero temperatures and deep drifts of snow.

On an afternoon in January or February, 1982, after a blizzard, I dress Owen in a blue snowsuit with matching booties and furry hood, an appliqué of the Beatrix Potter bunny on the front, a Christmas gift from his grandmother, "M.M." Owen walks gingerly in the snow, piled deep above his knees, and then falls on his bottom. He looks surprised. The cold is fierce. We try to roll balls of snow and make a snowman, but the wind stings our faces. Inside where it's warm, we'll have a cup of warm chocolate and play with his LEGO®s or a puzzle. After I've given him his bath and dressed him in footie pajamas, I'll put on the record of children's songs by Peter, Paul, and Mary, and as we do many nights, I'll rock Owen to sleep while I sing "Puff the Magic Dragon" along with the record. From the beginning, my life with Owen has mirrored Helen Reddy's lyrics - "You and me against the world/Sometimes it feels like you and me against the world/When all the others turn their back and walk away/You can count on me to stay."

He was born into a marriage which was dying. He may have heard, in utero, the sounds of conflict, weeping, and violence. How much of this pain did he bring into the world? How much does he carry today?

In many ways, we've been allies, cohorts in the

struggle to understand why life holds pain and suffering. Owen's sensitivity has always been sharp, and his response to poverty and pain timeless.

January 1993 - Washington, D.C. - just after the Inaugural Parade. Owen and I sit on a park bench to recover from our efforts to see President Clinton and Vice-President Gore take their oaths of office. We've tried desperately to wade through the moiling crowds of cheering people to see. We're both close to tears. Finally, we reclaim the day to make it memorable, despite our disappointment. As we walk toward the Museum of Natural History, a homeless man comes toward asking for a handout. Owen gives him the five dollars I have given Owen to buy a souvenir. The man looks at the money and at Owen. "God bless you!" As I walk beside my son, I memorize the look of compassion on Owen's face. I remember other times.

On a drive through downtown Detroit one Saturday morning, we pass a group of homeless men gathered around a small fire in an old trash can. It's January. Owen speaks. "Mom, I wish I could give them all of my savings." On a warm autumn afternoon in our neighborhood, a young boy is riding his bike on the sidewalk. Two older boys stop him and try to take his bike. Owen bounds down the street, using the long-legged run he perfected as a defensive soccer player. He stops the big boys and sends them away. The irony of Owen's sensitivity is that it was embodied in a child in conflict.

From the beginning, he did not know a consistent father. His perception exceeded other children his age. He told me on the way to pre-school

one morning, at about age 3, "Mommy, you fwustwate me!" Yet he struggles with the disorder which many young people experience, ADHD, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. I ask myself from time to time: How responsible am I for this condition? Did I do something wrong in pregnancy? Is it the lack of a consistent family life? Has my life as a busy professional made him feel ungrounded?

On a typical evening during middle school, I ask Owen to show me his homework or talk with me about his French or English assignments or his journal. He evades me, saying everything is finished, that he doesn't need help. When he finally brings the French book to me, he is unable to focus on the page. His eyes wander about the room. Owen's intelligence level, tested a number of times, is well above average. A psychologist tester stated that "Owen could succeed at any major university of his choice." He has many gifts. In sixth grade he draws a

sketch in pencil of an Iraqi woman in mourning, kneeling in the dust and weeping over the bones of a loved one. Despite his inattentiveness at piano lessons, in his high school band he progresses with ease from the alto saxophone to the clarinet.

This conflict between brain and body, intelligence and disorganization, was evident early in Owen's life. One morning Owen becomes frustrated because he can't make a toy truck run across the floor. He works with it for a short time, then throws it against the wall. Owen and I go to the grocery store to shop. As I drive the cart down the aisles, Owen reaches his pudgy hand out to grab cans of tuna and beans. I stop every few feet to replace the items he's knocked on the floor while holding one hand on his stout, wiggling body to keep



him from falling out of the grocery cart. At the checkout counter, he grabs the Reese's Pieces, scattering packages on the floor. As we leave the store he's crying because he didn't get candy. I'm exhausted and I feel alone. I'm the only caregiver of this overactive baby.

In kindergarten, the principal reports that Owen beats his head against the wall in frustration as if to destroy the wonderful mind he will cultivate, when his body and brain become coordinated. Owen's first grade teacher calls me at my office to report that Owen has run full force into a metal fence he knew was there. His driven young body conquers his better judgment. In a photo of Owen in a blue knit cap, he is smiling at the camera, his right eye swollen shut from the impact of the fence. He looks as if he has a golf ball under his eyelid. Later that year, his teacher reports that he has run into a door in the hallway and bumped his head. She tells of carrying a crying Owen to the office.

As the years passed, I was determined to keep Owen in the gifted school. They provided consistency, and most importantly, the school gave us the necessary understanding and support that we needed. As I reflect back on those years, I know I didn't realize the impact on Owen of the changes in my personal and our family life. I have struggled to find a healthy relationship, a good marriage. I wonder if Owen carries a seed of my problems?

During my marriage to a man named Lawrence, a stroke victim, Owen displayed the patience and understanding of an older, more mature boy. On an afternoon, we return home after school. Pulling into the driveway, we see Lawrence polishing stones in the back yard. Since he can't understand our talking, he has a pad of paper and pen next to him, ready for our words. Owen greets him, points to his new tennis shoes which we just bought this afternoon. Lawrence exclaims at the shoes' bright color. He asks Owen a question about school and Owen carefully prints the answer in large letters so Lawrence can read them easily.

Maybe Owen grew up too fast. Maybe there were consequences to my being so open with him. One night, I brought Lawrence home drunk from a dinner

dance. Instead of looking frightened, Owen simply opened the side door to the house to let us in. The next morning, I told Owen that I would be leaving this marriage, that he deserved a stable home in the next few years when he would become a man.

Become a man. It seemed an odd notion as I talked with my 12-year-old son. One afternoon soon after the separation, I chatted with Owen's French teacher, Nancy Roma. He had told her that he must now take care of me. He must be a man now that we two would be alone. She told him what I neglected to say, that he

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needed also to be a boy, to do the things boys do at 12 and 13 and 14 years old.

On another afternoon, Owen and I are standing in the kitchen talking. I ask him how he would feel if I had a male friend. He props his lean body against the kitchen counter, crossing his arms. "Mom, your personal life is your business. You are 48 years old, and I just want you to be happy." I'm astounded at the inflection I hear, the mature tone of a young man.

Very little escapes his notice, even at an early age. In a wedding photo of Lawrence and me cutting a wedding cake, Owen stands to one side. He tells me today that at that moment, he knew the marriage could not last. He says when we left on the evening of the dinner dance, he could feel the tension and was not surprised that the evening ended in crisis.

I realize how much my son needed not to be an adult, how much he began to see himself as my partner, as the head of the household, and how, after prematurely taking the role of adult, he came to understand his own dilemma.

One evening in spring Owen goes to visit a neighborhood friend. I am recovering from a broken leg, and my movements are limited to the main floor of our house. Before leaving, my son makes dinner, cleans the kitchen, and brings up a load of clean laundry from the

basement. I hear him enter the house. He comes into the room and sits down on the floor. Over the last year he has grown taller, almost 5'10". He is lanky and has lost his baby fat. As he talks, I can hear the weeping behind his voice. He tells me of the cruelty of a young man in the neighborhood. He fights to control his voice, says this boy repeatedly hounded a young girl on her way to school, that he hates people who prey on others. "I am my own father, Mom...I have had to be my own father from the beginning..." I catch my breath and wonder at the depth of his understanding. I feel my own failure for having given my son such pain and anger.

"Every man who has reached even his intellectual teens begins to suspect that life is no farce...that it flowers and fructifies...out of the profoundest tragic depths of the essential death in which its subject's roots are plunged. The natural inheritance of everyone who is capable of spiritual life is an unsubdued forest where the wolf howls and the obscene bird of night chatters."
— Henry James, Sr.

An unsubdued forest, a tangle of complexities and emotions facing a young person in our time, so much more difficult and confusing than in my day, when we knew the issues were war and race, and drugs were supposed to bring a higher consciousness. Our music spoke of love, not war. Today, I hear the bass from Owen's rap music, as the group Nas pulses up from his room in the basement through the vents and into my study, a steady beat of anger, social and class struggle. My son listens to these words and words like them, voices which pray, hope, beg for a better world. How different is he from myself? From others like me who want peace in the world, an easing of pain and suffering?

I have questions about my world, a world which holds beauty and kindness, but also ugliness and brutality. There are things I cannot speak of, deeds and experiences which have thrust Owen into a world more dangerous than I could ever have imagined at his age. For the moment, he is safe. But what will come for my son? How can he make his way in a world which makes even less sense than the one I've struggled with? In two years, he will be a legal adult. Before he leaves home, how can I help him? How can I make certain that the things he has seen and suffered do not cripple him, do

not misdirect his wonderful mind and body and spirit into a tragic ending? And how, dear God, can I keep from losing him to all of the world's dangers?

I cannot be sure. I know this as certainly as I know that I breathe and eat and sleep and read and write. I cannot save him, any more than I could save Lawrence. I am reminded of Gibran's words, that our children "have their own thoughts," that "You may house their bodies but not their souls." All I can do is to leave a door constantly open, to listen and talk and love and accept. I can't cling too much, yet I can't let go too quickly. I must cultivate trust, must remember how confusing life was at 16 and 17 and 18, and most importantly, how confusing life can be for me even now.

Owen is a work in progress, as we all are. He will not be finished until he takes his last breath, sees the last light fading from his eyes. I hope that what I have given him is there, in his deepest consciousness, that when he faces a decision, he will remember what I have come to value because of him: the sanctity of life, the beauty of relationships - lovers, friends, family - and the surprising revelations and understanding that can come from life's injuries, the anguish which all conscious human beings experience.

Lie down, young Adam, and let the
mother stroke your hair and touch
your face, and soothe the angers
in your long-awaiting soul toward
perfection, away from pain,
and anger no more.

—Nancy Owen Nelson

NANCY OWEN NELSON has published articles in several academic journals and anthologies. She is co-editor of *The Selected Letters of Frederick Manfred: 1932-1954* (University of Nebraska Press, 1989) editor of *Private Voices, Public Lives: Women Speak on the Literary Life* (1995, University of North Texas Press) and *The Lizard Speaks: Essays on the Writings of Frederick Manfred* (the Center for Western Studies, 1998). She has published poetry in *What Wildness is This?* (University of Texas Press, March 2007), *South Dakota Review* and *Graffiti Rag*. Nelson earned her B.A. in French and English at Birmingham-Southern College, and her M.A. and PhD in English at Auburn University. She taught composition and literature at Auburn University, Augustana College, Albion College, and Henry Ford Community College. She also served as Assistant Director of the Hassayampa Institute for Creative Writing at Yavapai College, Prescott, Arizona.