

# *Scarlet Letters*

*Number 7 April 2018*



*Wellesley Class of 1956 Officers at their 40th Reunion: Shirley Schneider Henderson, Nancy Chernoff Wetstone, Lois Cowles Harrison, Esta Berkall Ress. Photo by Toni Holland Liebman*

*Scarlet Letters*, a journal for the Wellesley College Class of 1956, aims to foster interaction among Fifty-Sixers and to encourage them to write. Class members are invited to submit pictures and short prose pieces, up to 700 words, in such categories as first memory, significant Wellesley experience, travel commentary, and work experience. An ongoing effort will be the production of our own obituaries, before we need them, while we still have time to revise them!

*Scarlet Letters* is mailed to class members quarterly as well as published and archived at the class website.

**This issue features the work of**

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## The Career

The development of the women's movement brings reflections on how things were in 1956-62.

The handsome HBO headquarters in New York is located on Sixth Avenue and 42nd Street—where our older daughter started a strong career at a good salary and with a subsidized lunch. In 1956, in the same location, a dingy building housed the Speedwriting Institute and Typing School—all too familiar to young women who hoped to work in publishing. You needed to prove you could type and take some kind of shorthand before a publisher would hire you (if you were female).

I was there for months after college, plodding away, unable to type sixty words a minute without mistakes. I took the subway from Brooklyn and ate for less than a dollar at the Automat facing Bryant Park, then so dangerous that no young woman would venture into it. As fall edged into winter, the typing teacher finally took pity and gave me my certificate and I was free to look for a job. No good publishing jobs were available, so through a friend, I got a job at the Institute of International Education (IIE), housed in the old Gould mansion at 67th Street facing Central Park. That neighborhood was somnolent, with small stores on Madison, including the working girl's couturier, Peck and Peck. My work consisted primarily of writing endless form letters, thanking this and that senator or other bigwig for endorsing some young person for a Fulbright Scholarship to study abroad. You cannot imagine a worse job for a bad typist. My chair was surrounded by balled up papers, each with a typing error. I persisted in my publishing job hunt but nothing came up.

One day the drawer containing 3x5 cards for each of several hundred Fulbright applicants fell over and it was my good fortune to spend three days re-alphabetizing the file. With a splitting headache, I again applied to Doubleday (my third try) and got a \$50 a week job in the juvenile department—my absolute preference. When the IIE vice president heard of this, he offered me a very good job at much higher pay—but too late, I was out of there for good.

I loved that children's book department, publisher of many wonderful books I enjoyed as a child. The editor was a woman (that made her even tougher on us

“girls”), one of only three on the whole editorial staff; the two others were in charge of cookbooks and mysteries. Doubleday was on Madison between 56th and 57th Streets—a glamorous place to work for no money. Celebrities came in and out, the offices were attractive and the people were nice. I traveled again on the IRT, this time in stockings (no panty hose yet); girdle or garter belt, crinoline, mid-high heels, and string gloves. There were several major law firms in our building and I kept looking for attractive young lawyers in the elevator—but no luck. Lots of blind dates, but nothing there either.

In the next few years I had several promotions that brought more interesting work and a little more money. There was a Wellesley woman, Mimi Kaiden, a few years older. She was the go-to person for Wellesley women who wanted to move elsewhere in publishing. Every time I planned to call her, something came up in my department, which is where I wanted to stay and advance. But, after almost six years, my salary was only \$110.

In late winter of 1962, a crisis threatened. The 56th Street brownstones were torn down and a huge office building was being built that would block the light from my window. Then a miracle—through a Wellesley friend I met Peter. Peter had worked as a hod carrier (bringing cement where needed on a construction site) for Uris Brothers construction one summer, to pay for Harvard Business School. When the girls in the office learned that a simple workman might be a Harvard College graduate and potential HBS graduate, they paid a lot more attention to the workmen—and we had all just read *The Fountainhead*, so one never knew who might be in a construction crew.

I intended to go back to Doubleday after we returned from Europe where Peter worked for eight months, but it didn't happen because Carolyn came along and I didn't want to leave her.

Today it would all be different, but then the publishing world for women was limited—in money and position. And we were told that if we continued, we would be taking the place of a man who needed the job to support a family. We joked a lot but didn't question much, because we understood it was just the way things were.

**Laura Ginsberg Strauss**

## Richard Purdy Wilbur

To the best of my knowledge, Richard Wilbur was a member of the Wellesley English department for three years, which happily coincided with our time there. I was fortunate to study with him, although I was a somewhat indifferent poet at the time. I would produce a poem, or part of a poem, about once a week, and he, kindly soul that he was, would critique it gently, make a joke or two, and send me on my way.

What I remember far more vividly than his poetry were his strolls around the campus. 35 years old, at least 6' 4" and drop dead gorgeous, he strode about in a cowboy hat and cowboy boots. Behind him was his adoring fan club, giggling and pointing, with the occasional swoon thrown in for good measure. Always the gentleman, he never let on to what was happening just behind his back, but I know he enjoyed it thoroughly.

When it was time for our 50<sup>th</sup> reunion, I thought he might like to join us. I managed to locate his home phone number in Cummington, MA, and screwed up my courage to call him. I should not have worried: he was as gracious as ever. But he was then in his 80s and said didn't feel strong enough to come. That was the last time I talked to him. Rest in peace, beautiful spirit.

**Sheila Owen Monks**

### How Much Have Things Changed?

Laura's great account of the professional life after Wellesley probably rings a bell with all of us. The poignant part is that while we were at Wellesley we were taught women could do anything, go anywhere, be anything. The phrase "glass ceiling" may not have been invented yet, but we knew we were going to crack it. And then we graduated and reality hit. We were still secretaries.

It's been 61 years. It's changed, hasn't it?

We'd love to hear your opinion: send us an email!

Claudia and Sheila

### Love Calls Us to the Things of This World

The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,  
And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul  
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple  
As false dawn.

Outside the open window  
The morning air is all awash with angels.

Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses,  
Some are in smocks: but truly there they are.  
Now they are rising together in calm swells  
Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear  
With the deep joy of their impersonal breathing;

Now they are flying in place, conveying  
The terrible speed of their omnipresence, moving  
And staying like white water; and now of a sudden  
They swoon down into so rapt a quiet  
That nobody seems to be there.

The soul shrinks

From all that it is about to remember,  
From the punctual rape of every blessed day,  
And cries,

"Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry,  
Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam  
And clear dances done in the sight of heaven."

Yet, as the sun acknowledges  
With a warm look the world's hunks and colors,  
The soul descends once more in bitter love  
To accept the waking body, saying now  
In a changed voice as the man yawns and rises,

"Bring them down from their ruddy gallows;  
Let there be clean linen for the backs of thieves;  
Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,  
And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating  
Of dark habits,

keeping their difficult balance."

**Richard Wilbur**  
1921–2017

## Daffodils

Early last spring, leaving Cambridge to drive home to Cohasset, I found that yet again I had turned right off Brattle Street toward Garden, instead of left toward the Charles River as I had planned. I knew why. At Zero Garden Street sits Christ Church, founded in 1760. Charlie and I were married in that elegantly simple colonial church on September 8th, 1956—just three months after Wellesley’s graduation. Through the years, as we have lived around the world, Christ Church has become a lodestar for me, giving me a compass to navigate by, wherever we are.

On that spring afternoon last year, I drove slowly by, thinking of following my wonderful Wellesley bridesmaids down the aisle to join Charlie. Next door is the Old Burying Ground dating from the 1600s, its venerable stones surrounded by a tall wrought-iron fence. I was surprised to see a brave daffodil, already in bloom, by a nearby marker. As I headed home, the daffodil became a symbol of all the woof and warp and challenge and joy that has followed that happy September day.

The next morning, in my studio, the lone bloom by the church multiplied, becoming a whole field, while my memories of that day sixty-one years ago grew into lifelong reminiscences of Cambridge, radiating out. First, I thought of the summer of 1956 when I left right after graduation, the wedding plans in place, for my first trip to Europe. At last I could actually see the art introduced in slides by Teresa Frisch, Seymour Slive and Sydney Freedberg. I travelled alone by train—standing up overnight to get to Venice to see the Titians, I went



on to Florence with no place to stay, finding a family who introduced me to figs (at breakfast) before walking to the Cathedral. I never dreamt that years later I would be in Luxembourg, teaching Art History to students of the University of Miami at Oxford, Ohio. Those students could take their Eurail passes each weekend, and immediately visit what I had just shown them.

Nor could I know how much my bridesmaids would mean through the years. I felt great pride when we lived in Rome, and Maud, then Dean of Students, became Wellesley’s Acting President. I celebrated when Heidi visited us in Luxembourg and gave a concert to rave reviews. She even came to the classroom/studio where

I added the “Wellesley method” to art history classes, letting students make gesso, try egg tempera, and swirl glazes as they studied each period. I marveled as Judy went on to graduate school and combined science and art with her pathology, then morphing into music and harp therapy. I am rejoicing with Anne as she and Bob, in Toronto, look forward to becoming great-grandparents.

Then more blossoms brought back earlier times, when my Maid of Honor sister Susie and I walked each Saturday morning from Fresh Pond Parkway to Harvard Square, weekly allowance nickels clutched in hand, to buy a new pencil or eraser at Bob Slate’s. I still go there for calligraphy pens.

Another daffodil, and I was thinking of my first autumn at Harvard Graduate School, bicycling past Zero

Garden from our Buckingham Street apartment to the Fogg—and then circling past it, to take notes in Law School classes for Charlie who was recovering in Mt. Auburn Hospital from a bug contracted in India that summer. Then I remembered flying back from Algiers and Rome, passing Christ Church as I installed our sons Tim, and then Steve, in their freshmen dorms—an experience echoed last spring as I delivered brownies to grandson Chris at Winthrop House. That unintended detour down Garden Street with its lone daffodil multiplied into an exuberance of reminiscences, interwoven lives and promises, all anchored in the colonial church where Charlie and I began our life’s adventure.

**Genevra Osborn Higginson**



*Four of Genevra’s seven bridesmaids were her Wellesley friends: Maud Hazeltine Chaplin, Heidi Nitze, Judith Hardy-Stashin, and Anne Rhoades Farquharson*

## The Man on the Train

I can't remember whether Lenore moved into the new development across Hillside Avenue during seventh or eighth grade, but whichever it was, the timing was perfect. After the miseries of sixth grade, her friendship melted me into a puddle of giddy gratitude.

First, I'd never known anyone like her. Her last name was d'Alessio, the first Italian to go to our school who wasn't from the wrong side of the tracks. The other, in our class, was Guy Romano, who wore T-shirts with a cigarette pack rolled into the sleeve over his bulging biceps. He gelled his dark hair into a high pompadour, très avant-garde for 1948; there was no doubt about his side of the tracks. Lenore's dark hair was a short thatch of kinky curls. I found that exotic, mine being Scandinavian: long, straight, and blond. Her eyes were dark brown and shiny, like buttons on a gingerbread-man's face; mine were wishy-washy pale blue-gray.

Second, her father was different, too. He didn't commute on the Long Island Railroad like most local fathers did, mine included. He owned an ice cream parlor in Manhasset—he made something you could hold, and told Lenore's friends that if they visited, the first one was free. I never got to Manhasset to order a hot fudge sundae with coffee ice cream, but I'm sure he'd have kept his promise.

Best of all, she liked me. We didn't play dolls, or dress-up, or ride bikes. Mostly we talked, about whatever twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls talk about, and giggled uncontrollably. I adored giggling; giggling makes no sense, demands no thinking, and is completely freeing. It leaves you limp, until the next round. Giggling was like lying on your back, staring at the blue winter sky, making snow angels, without the burn of ice on your wrists, in your mittens. There is nothing mean about giggling.

My family moved to Delaware for the first half of eighth grade, but by Christmas it was clear we were

not going to stay. So my parents sent me back to live with my Aunt Martha and her family, two houses closer to my old school. I was not comfortable in that household, with my three least favorite cousins, not to mention Aunt Martha, who in her fantasy life was Queen Elizabeth II. She was my mother's older sister, so intimidating even my father was scared of her. Which made my friendship with Lenore even more precious.

My mother, during this strange time in our family's life, was living with her parents in Brooklyn, where my sister was enrolled in P.S. 105, a city school with a black-top playground, which she walked to on sidewalks. My father came to visit on occasional weekends.

It was on one such weekend that Lenore and I were allowed, just the two of us, to take the Long Island Railroad into Brooklyn where she also had relatives. This was a first for both of us, and we were as giddy as if we were going to the circus. The risky part of the trip was changing at Jamaica Station, about two-thirds of the way in, and connecting with the correct train to Brooklyn on a different platform. We sat together on the left side of the railroad car, Lenore by the window, me on the aisle, near the front of the car. We giggled, of course, and swiveled in our seats, taking in every part of this adventure.

Once, looking back, I saw a man. He was in the aisle seat on the opposite side of the car, and he was looking at me. I could not help looking back. Then I saw that he was not just looking. One of his hands was between his thighs holding on to something between his thumb and his forefinger. I didn't know what it was but I knew I shouldn't be looking at it, or him, because on his face was a sick grin that I would later learn was called a leer. I shouldn't have, but this was part of the adventure so I nudged Lenore and she looked back too.

We were terrified. We didn't know what we were

looking at but we knew it could be dangerous and we had to escape it.

So we made a plan: just before the Jamaica stop we would walk forward to the door vestibule, and be the first passengers off the train. Then we would run like the devil to the correct platform, dodging others in a kind of platform slalom. We did it. And it worked. We found seats in the proper train and looked around. The man was nowhere to be seen. But we did not feel safe until we reached Bay Ridge and were above ground walking on tree-lined sidewalks. We did not once giggle.

I wish the horribleness had ended there. It didn't. I got to my grandparents' big welcoming house on East 80<sup>th</sup> Street. I was calm now, and very happy to throw my arms around my mother and feel comforted. I wasn't going to say a word about the train incident. It was my secret, too awful to be talked about. I felt ashamed, as if I had participated in whatever was going on, which in a way I had. If only I hadn't turned around. . . .

My father arrived, and my grandfather. The grownups had drinks, we all had dinner, and then Susan and I went to bed. I was in the second floor back bedroom, which had been Aunt Martha's when she was little. Without the chatter of my family to engage me, I was soon alone with my memories of the afternoon. And without knowing why, I began to cry. Not little sorry-for-myself whimpering, but loud convulsive sobs, loud enough so that my mother came up to my room.

She sat on my bed and asked me sympathetically what was wrong. I sobbed even harder. I couldn't tell my sweet innocent mother my dirty story. I didn't know why it was dirty but I knew it was. She must have had some sense of this because she left, and I continued to cry.

Then my father appeared, and asked, not so sympathetically, what was the matter. He was tougher and if I could ever tell anyone it was my father.

"There was this man . . . sitting behind us . . . on the train . . ." I said, between hiccups, "and he . . ." I described the man's hand.

"You saw that?" He sounded angry. "Then you must have been looking long and hard."

The crying stopped and my father went back downstairs, I do not know in which order. I do know that no one ever mentioned the incident again.

I remember one of my relatives telling me years later that my father at one point in his younger days had considered entering the ministry. And I wondered, (although we were not Catholic), suppose someone else's thirteen-year-old daughter came to his confessional and said, "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned," and told him about the man on the train. What would he have said to her? Would he have given her a penance, agreeing that indeed she had sinned? Or would he have said, "My child, that man was evil, or very sick. It was he who sinned, not you and your friend. You did the right thing."

I also wondered if Lenore, who was Catholic, had taken our story to confession. I do not remember whether she and I talked about it later, or, like my family, were silent, as if it had never happened.

**Nora Macfarlane Nevin**

## **Christmas Letter, December 2017**

Not a good year. Perhaps this year I should have skipped the Christmas letter altogether, but I found I couldn't do that and be true to my granddaughter, Bella Sammartano. She deserved for others to know her, and to mourn with us her passing.

Despite a bright mind, a gentle and sensitive heart frequently tormented by anxiety and depression, and enlightened, loving parents who spent years providing her with professional help, and despite over a year of finally being "clean," Bella tragically succumbed to a heroin overdose at the family home in Kirkwood, Missouri, on March 24th of this year. She was twenty years old.

We hear so much now about this dread disease—and it is a disease; make no mistake about that. It hijacks the brain just as surely as does clinical depression or any neurodegenerative disease. We now know that opioids are available in every village,

town and city across the country, not just in doctors' offices where until recently they were dispensed like candy, but on street corners, and high schools, and in your children's friends' homes. They are available across the entire socioeconomic spectrum. And they are cheap, especially heroin which can be easily obtained when prescribed drugs are no longer available, and the deadly fentanyl—up 540% in three years and ten times more lethal than heroin. There were 64,000 overdose deaths from opioids in 2016 in this country. The figures for this year, expected to be higher, are not yet in and we still don't know how to battle the spread of these deadly drugs. It is a classic example of closing the gate after the horse has escaped...but who left it open? And what can be done now? The future challenges in bringing this scourge under control are staggering, not to mention the pressing need for treatment of the many millions trapped in addiction right now.

But Bella is not simply an opioid statistic. She was just starting to find her way and was filled with optimism. The following are excerpts from the obituary that her father, my son Dan, wrote:

“Bella will be remembered as intelligent and full of love, conviction, empathy, and with a sense of humor well beyond her years. Bella loved her family first, and here at home was where she felt safe and truly loved. Her empathy for others knew no bounds, and she was always quick to come to the defense of others. Bella loved the outdoors, the woods, and all the animals that lived there. She loved bones, fossils, rocks, feathers, mushrooms, and was generally in reverence of everything in the natural world. She could be found exploring the woods, observing nature, and reflecting on the science of things with a passion. Bella was also a talented artist who, though secretive and modest about her abilities, was occasionally proud to share her amazing sketches with her family or closest friends”....”Bella was preparing herself for a future in the biological sciences. She had dreams. She spoke of graduate school and of working in a lab someday, and all of this seemed possible until her life was tragically cut short last week”....” Bella was a strong-willed woman choosing to fight the addiction her own way, but who would ultimately succumb to this terrible disease. It's her family's



*Isabella Marie Sammartano*  
*July 10, 1996 – March 24, 2017*

hope that her passing will bring awareness of heroin addiction as a treatable and organic disease, and of drug proliferation in our communities and homes.”

Her death tore a hole in a family that will be changed forever; it is impossible to imagine the traumatic effect on those who lose a child they have tried so hard to save, and the seismic shift that follows. Or to understand the heart-breaking impact her death will have on her younger, teenaged sister Frankie who lost her only sibling. How Dan, Christy and Frankie cope and mend will be unique to each as they regroup and reshape the family dynamic going forward.

We are all changed. Nothing looks quite the same: The sun continues to rise and set, the trees drop their leaves and will grow new again come Spring; bills will be paid and dinners cooked and all the mundane tasks of living attended to. But we look through a changed lens. We will never forget. Never.

**Carolyn K. Clark (Lyn)**