

# Six Women In Search of Each Other: Inside Quatrain

by David W. Kriebel

When I first heard of Quatrain, I thought, what a novel idea—a group of women who get together to exchange ideas on their writing and then perform together in public. Kind of like a girl band for poets. Then I realized that this was not the point. For one thing, Quatrain is not a “women’s group”—it’s a group of writers who just happen to be women. Men could join, although none have as of yet. Second, Quatrain is not a performing group or a professional organization. When we went to member Kathleen Corcoran’s house, we found everyone sitting around the parlor, having tea and snacks. Kathie was preparing dinner for everyone and had a table set where they would dine with her husband. That’s when it hit me that these people were family. I have been at many writing workshops, and while there is often a friendly atmosphere, there can also often be unspoken competitiveness, which can emerge in the form of unkind, sniping comments about another person’s writing. I cannot imagine such a thing at a meeting of Quatrain—you don’t do such things to your sisters.

The group, which consists of poets Liliane Roy Anders, Norma Chapman, Kathleen (Kathie) Corcoran, Danuta E. (Danka) Kosk-Kosicka (and mother Lidia Kosk), and Denny Stein, was formed in 1998. The first four met in Mary Azrael’s poetry workshop in Johns Hopkins’ Odyssey Program the year before and then attended Danka’s 1998 Artscape-sponsored readings at Artscape and Barnes and Noble in Columbia. All four women began reading at the Columbia bookstore’s open mike night, but soon began meeting at Kathie’s house in Owings Mills. Once they started performing together, Danka notes, they needed a name. “So Norma and I submitted names. I was reading Emily Dickinson and she writes in quatrains and we were four. “Denny joined the group after it agreed on that name, making Quatrain a quintet. The group has also adopted Danka’s mother, poet Lidia Kosk, whose work has been translated into English by Danka. At Quatrain performances, Danka reads her mother’s work in Polish and Kathie presents the English translation.

Quatrain has performed twice at Historic Old Salem (see *Lite*, Aug-Sept 1999) and will be there again on May 9. Their most recent performance was in Westminster at the Carroll County Arts Council on March 1 where they were joined by a cello duet featuring Danka’s son Peter Kosicki and Helen Vo-Dinh. This summer they will perform at the American Music Festival on the same stage as legendary folk singer Pete Seeger.

Quatrain has its own chapbook—*Semi-Sub-Unconscious Mind of Quatrain*. The volume features poems from each of the members, plus a childhood photo of

each woman, except Lidia Kosk, who is pictured as a young adult.

Azrael’s class set the tone for the group. As Liliane notes, “(Her) class was wonderful—we were very supportive and when it was over I went into withdrawal. We’re very different and we’re not mean to one another. Mary Azrael told us, say what you like first.” Adds Norma, “We all respect the particular talents that we have.”

## The Members of Quatrain

We asked the members of Quatrain to talk with us about their favorite writers, the influence of their families, and what they do when they’re not writing poems.

Liliane describes herself as a stay-at-home mom and housewife. She grew up in France and Germany, an experience which had a great impact on her writing. “Listening to the opera at home ignited the romantic in me.” Her French grandmother had memorized portions of the epic poem “La Chanson de Roland” (The Song of Roland) and recited them to her. Liliane recalls that he boy down the street was named Roland. In her college years she majored in French; her favorite French poet is Jacques Prevert. Her favorite in English? “When I first met e. e. cummings I fell in love with him. You have to fall in love to have a favorite poet.” She also enjoys the work of Robert Pinsky and Pablo Neruda. “Last year, I met Neruda and his odes are out of this world.”



Speaking of matters out of this world, Liliane is a science fiction and fantasy writer whose work in that genre has appeared in the pages of *Lite*. She is currently working on an sf/fantasy novel. Some of her inspiration comes from another French writer. “When I read Voltaire and we read *Candide* and he pretends he’s someone from another planet and he’s never been in society before, that’s the way I observe and that’s the way that I write.”

Kathie, who teaches English at the McDonogh School, had a father who loved Shakespeare and the romantic poets and recited poetry at home. “He was a hardware salesman, not a literary person,” she recalls, but “he had a book called *101 Best Poems*” which Kathie

explored herself. “My first influence was Dan McGrew—‘Dangerous Dan McGrew.’ My father used to recite that Dan McGrew.” She also draws inspiration from her mother, who told her many old family stories.



Kathie’s primary influence “used to be Wallace Stevens. Now it’s more Seamus Heaney and Czeslaw Milosz, also Yeats, Frost, Rilke, Louise Glick and Elizabeth Bishop.” She met Heaney at a party following a concert of Irish poets several years ago. “He’s someone who any of us can sit at the kitchen table with and just enjoy chatting.” Kathie is the author of the chapbook *Bloodroot*, for which she won the 1997 Artscape Literary Award in poetry.

Danka, a biochemist and former Hopkins professor, was influenced by her mother’s work as well as Polish poets Adam Mickiewicz (“You can’t grow up in Poland and not know Mickiewicz”) and Konstanty Galczyński. She is still learning about English language poets. However, she notes, “Since I don’t live with poetry all the time, it’s more poems than poets. There are poems that I love.”



When she first considered writing her own poems, rather than translating her mother’s, Danka faced a problem. “Part of it is to I write in Polish or English? So I started painting. There’s no verbal commitment in painting. My paintings are my poems.” This will come as no surprise to readers of Danka’s poetry, much of which exhibits a strong sense of image and may fittingly be described as “painterly.” She

is now the author of two chapbooks, *Between Here and There* and *On the Verge of Light and Shadow*.

Norma is a medical transcriptionist, a California native, and a Quaker, “which takes time.” While her mother “read books like *Naughty Nurses*,” her father had a love of the classics. “My father liked ballads like Kipling. He quit school at 14, but he read and he loved Rabelais and Shakespeare.” But Norma learned to love poetry at Berkeley, where her classes “really opened things up.” Her poetic influences are many and eclectic, including Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, Lucille Clifton, and Jin June Miller. “I also fell in love with (Polish poet) Zbigniew Herbert before I met Danka. I also like James Tate, which a lot of people don’t, but I do. I went to see him once, but he was drunk and didn’t perform. And Stanley Kunitz, who I did see, who was there and very present.”



Denny Stein is an attorney and works as an advocate for children with disabilities who need special education services. She considers her colleagues at the Maryland Disability Law Center to be some of the brightest, funniest, supportive, dedicated friends she has. Denny’s parents encouraged her interest in writing from an early age. “My parents, coming from the 1940s intelligentsia, were well-read, smart, loving and funny. My mother quoted poetry in the carpool and sprinkled her conversation with Dorothy Parker quotes as though they were her own. Both she and my father were avid readers. My father read to us from the *Wizard of Oz* books and then made up his own *Oz* stories to tell us.”

Among her favorite poets are Lucille Clifton, Mark Doty and Billy Collins, John Donne, William Blake, Frank Bidart and Norma Chapman and Shakespeare. “Isabel Allende’s prose is like poetry to me. I adore hearing Kurtis Lamkin perform his poetry. My poetry is influenced by any poet that I read, hear and am excited about. The excitement gives me the impetus to continue writing and the particulars of other poet’s writing challenges me to try something new or perfect my own work.”

# The Poetry of Quatrain

## Entrapment

*In memory of six million Polish citizens  
killed in WW II*

Crouching on two sides of silence  
fields and forest  
black in a no-moon land  
ready to run from the same  
enemy

Wounded bed of leaves and bare furrows  
frozen in listening  
for each others' breath  
to cross the night  
together

Then, needles of shouts  
growing into beams of light and bullets  
tearing the nightshroud  
into the swarm  
of uniforms

Blank faces cut down  
to emptiness, soaked  
in helplessness still warm  
from the bodies dragged away  
behind horse and wagon to the town square

*Danuta E. Kosk-Kosicka*

## Molly Sings to Me of War

When Molly grew up, she became a lucite  
cube swinging on a yellow rope. Andy  
Warhol called from Fifth Street in purgatory  
to ask when are you coming to dinner? Molly  
remembered the taste of his blue Brillo  
cartons and declined the invitation.

War broke out in the night of her life. Too many  
died of wounds, hunger, and inattention. At the back  
of her head Molly heard the bombs fall  
for ten years. I couldn't talk to her then. Obdurate  
was the only word she understood. I thought it was  
a verb and didn't know how to use it in a sentence.

In the seventh war, Molly's great granddaughter will  
tell her personal facilitator, a creature  
of wave and blue light, that she had wished  
for more stable progenitors, the sort whose welcoming  
toes could catch the moment, especially  
the moment when the last dawn mingled  
with Tibetan dancers of sky.

In the morning of Molly's remembering, ancient  
bombs searched for their exits, fins awash in yellow  
while cubes of clearest lucite learned their necessary  
sins before they swung into their necessary places.

*Norma Chapman*

## Phototropism

The sun  
plays like a Harley sounds on an October afternoon, warm  
moving fast, snuggling curves, now fading toward a  
yellow light, pulseing, pausing. Red. Foot to tarmac  
nose snuffling from the cold, a taste of leather, old  
Marlboro lingering inside the cupola of the helmet.  
Lifting the visor does nothing for the glare. It is Sunday  
on Route 1. Green.

—Zoom zoom zoom—

Miles away the boy in the TV ad sings a car song.  
We are indoors, curtains drawn. Turn it off.  
Finish reading about Vincent. He writes to Theo  
he can only paint what he sees. See him leaning into  
the mistral, burdened, a blown beast. The easel suddenly  
set down. Paint tubes squeezed onto  
a flat scrap of wood. A canvas quickly to be made  
yellow. But first, the blue windy sky. And now  
The sun.

*Liliane Anders*



Quatrain, L to R: Norma Chapman, Liliane Roy Anders, Danuta Kosk-Kosicka,  
Kathie Corcoran. Not pictured: Denny Stein, Lidia Kosk. Photos by P.E. Kinlock.

## The Blacksmith's Daughter

The twinkling little stars of her childhood sprang  
From the burning-hot iron  
Hammered by her father into  
Horseshoes. Not for good luck but  
For protection of horses' hooves

She kept the fire burning—  
Bellows and quickened breath—  
She hardened like a red-hot  
Horseshoe plunged into water

She kept for life the iron strength  
And the longing for gentleness

*Lidia Kosk*

## The First Time

I never forget the first time  
you reached across the brown plush seats,  
elbow on the armrest, the length of your  
forearm unfolding,  
your palm open and waiting,  
as we passed the Mobil Self-Service Gas  
Station with the \$1 car wash,  
for my hand to move into yours.  
I didn't know what you wanted, then.  
I didn't understand what it would mean  
so I laughed lightly  
at the time  
before moving into the soft quilted expectant  
belly of your hand.

*Denny Stein*

## The Dark of the Moon

Plant potatoes in the dark of the moon  
the way your father did  
in our victory garden, Mother said  
on the telephone last night  
as we spoke of the week's weather,  
the rising river, and spring planting.  
Once, in the moon's dark phase  
he sowed cucumber seeds,  
but they produced only vines  
and leaves, for the time was wrong.  
This is old knowledge  
from the earth, she said.

Though he died thirty years ago,  
I tried to picture my father  
in the low field beside the river,  
a bent figure in the dark  
surrounded by solid black hills,  
digging and molding long drills  
where he buried each potato eye.  
But he was not a farmer.  
He sold hardware to company stores  
in hollows where coal mines clanked  
and hummed, and on Saturday nights  
he danced in jazz-filled ballrooms.

Last night I dreamed he stood  
in a wide field overgrown  
with leaves and vines beneath  
a starless sky. He wore a dark  
blue suit and dapper hat;  
light touched his unlined face  
and his eyes shone as though  
waiting for the music to begin.  
Then holding out his arms  
he said simply,  
I am so glad to see you.  
Smiling, I moved toward him  
in the dark of the moon.

*Kathleen Corcoran*