

POETRY

Stones

Loretta Sharp

The following poems are taken from a collection called *Letting Go* and center on the experiences of three Mormon women, Beth, Elise, and Willene, who are spending the summer in 12N, an efficiency apartment on the upper West Side of New York City. Directly across from their windowed wall is a building where transients come to observe them.

Antonio, the liveried doorman who nods
and beams like a scarlet top, has approached
Beth. Each night-school exam is a paragraph
saying something like "American children
watch too much t.v. Agree or disagree."
Could she ask Willene to teach him when
to agree? Or he'll stay a doorman the rest
of his life, and he's already forty-eight.
How much might she charge?

Willene complains: she cannot understand
half that he says; Beth learned Spanish
on her mission, Elise Portuguese on hers;
they are English teachers. "He wants *you*
to teach him," says Beth sweetly.
Elise grins, knowing how this will end.

"But you and Elise *pray* to bless others;
i ask to be left alone." Willene feels
a stone roll to the wall that holds her in.

LORETTA RANDALL SHARP established the writing program at the Interlochen Arts Academy in 1975. She has received two NEH Fellowships and a Fulbright Fellowship to India, and she has been selected as a Klingenstein Fellow for 1987-88. In 1984, she received a Michigan Creative Artist Award to finish the collection, *Letting Go*.

Raise a child alone. That's good for a row of stones. Put yourself through school while you raise a child alone. Take on boarding school children and learn that each student poem costs five of your own. Stones shoulder high. Your daughter finally off to college, and you take on a nephew failing in school and life. And when you finally get to New York and your first writing workshop, learn that Dorette's afraid to cross Washington Square alone after class, that Marie can't decide whether to marry the man she lives with. That the teacher wants the workshop to succeed because this is a new writing program. And no publicity's gone out for the Kunitz reading on Friday and what can we do?

Oh, yes, Anne Sullivan liked teaching Helen all right, she liked teaching that water "has a name — it has a name." But try teaching anyone that an essay has shape. Try it, and fall a year behind.

But Willene gives in. "Tell Antonio he can pay by bringing his family once to church." "And," she frowns, "the three of us must take turns." Elsie grins, knowing how this will end. Willene knows, too. She's the one at home every day.

And how can she teach Antonio that he may agree or disagree? Reaching for a pen to sketch an essay's shape, she does not see the trowel waiting in the pen's place. It's always there, a clean promising that its mortared swish will still all sound outside the apartment — all sound within.

The Salutation

Deciding they should visit teach, Beth dials Brother Evans to get the number of someone in the Relief Society. The listening Willene thinks of her first attempts at Mormon salutation. "Sister" was not so bad; everyone's met a nun or heard someone say, "Sister

so-and-so” or “Sister says.”
 But “Brother” meant revival tents,
 collection plates, people of anchored
 intelligence and soaring intent.

At church she’d said “bishop” or “elder”
 or managed without name and salutation.
 But one day at work, Willene needed to call
 Brother Bailey because her throat was sore,
 and she wanted to know if Four-in-One
 was okay even though the label read *caffeine*.

Brother Bailey counseled the young bishop
 and everyone else. He and his wife
 cleaned the chapel, and nobody littered it.
 He’d joined the Church in England,
 been on three missions, and believed
 that no man would set foot on the moon
 because God prescribed bounds. And so
 did Brother Bailey. Willene knew that even
 the Trinity would address him as “Brother Bailey.”

She dialed, hoping he’d answer, but his wife
 gave a prim, “Bailey’s.” Sister Bailey
 probably did not know his first name. Willene
 whispered. “Is Bro —” and her boss looked up.
 Another try: “Is Brother?” Once again — this time
 aspirating every dry syllable, “Is Brother Bailey
 there?” Her boss grinned. Brother Bailey
 was in. Four-in-One was out.

It took years before none of that mattered, not
 even explanations to nonmembers that the salutation
 expressed love, was a reminder that everyone
 shares the same eternal parents.

And how could small things have mattered so?
 But they did. And maybe still do.
 Or Willene would not smile at declining to tell
 Beth just what’s in the giant Grand Marnier truffle
 Elise is dividing in three exact pieces. Feeling
 the chocolate warm her tongue and throat, Willene
 decides to disbelieve that alcohol evaporates
 when cooked. And she links arms with her two
 sisters as they go off to take the month’s message
 to the shut-in sisters, bedridden north of the Bowery.

The Problem

Willene wakes up, stumbles to the kitchen,
pours juice. Babies again. Whenever
there are so many things to do, she can't
write her poems, she dreams of babies.
She's just been left with seven babies,
can't get them fed, runs from one diaper
to the next, and the house is a mess.
Or she watches a two-year-old fall,
unattended, over a balcony and the phone
won't work and the ambulance won't come
and she starts carrying the child
to the hospital and doesn't know where
its mother is and the child is too heavy
to carry all the way.

Elise hears her up, asks if it's the dream
again. She tries once more to tell Willene
she'll find time to finish her work. "Willene,
listen, it's not true that Grandma Moses
started painting at seventy, she'd been practicing
all along, but nobody knew, you see."

The two hold laughter in so Beth won't wake
and say the problem is Willene thinking
she's supposed to do one thing and God thinking
another. That's the problem, all right.
Willene closes her eyes, tries fantasizing
something from *The Rockford Files* or about
Clint Eastwood or the Los Angeles Rams, anything
so the last thought taking her into sleep
is baby-free, baby-free, ba-by. . . .

Grandmother, Grandmother, Grandmother

Beth and Elise know Willene was the reason
her dad left a wife and two baby boys.
Each year he said something like, "Let's see,
Willene is seven — how long have we been married,
oh, six, is it?" Her mother looked away or tried
changing the subject.

Not knowing that tone is the tenor, her dad
kept at it until he supposed Willene old enough
to catch on. Decades later, she forgets to send them
anniversary cards, will not mention her birthday.

Her grandmothers disliked her dad, so Willene's
short on grandmother stories. "Well," she tries,
"when I began genealogy, I learned my great-grandparents
were Reorganized. Both sides joined the Church
under Joseph, left under Brigham. Only one stayed in,
a distant aunt who walked west with the handcarts,
saw what polygamy was like, and walked back.
I was the first after that to find the Church."

Her family group sheets stacked by the couch
go where she goes. And guilt for the unfinished
ones. "Genealogy's supposed to turn the hearts
of children to their fathers, but it sometimes
makes me angry. If they'd stayed in, all
their work wouldn't have fallen on me."

The work's long been done on their lines,
but Beth and Elise can see that walking back
could cost too much, as could the tracing
of birth and death, the sealing of blood to blood.
Still, they love birthdays, so next week they'll treat
Willene to the Russian Tea Room and skip the happy returns.

Bishop

He turns right on 88th, walking slow as an old
man. A bad back for years, always thin, but the bishop
cannot remember this bent-over hesitancy edging in.

Riding to the twelfth floor, he remembers
Willene's dependency. Her husband had told her
they were soulmates, so she could not go
alone to ward socials or movies. "Cellmates,"
the bishop muttered, but all he could do
was give her books and a Christmas subscription
to *The New Yorker*. Yet she was willful enough
to be rightly named. Once he'd snapped,
"If someone deleted 'yes, but' from your vocabulary,
you'd be speechless."

Few matched him at church work, but women were another thing. In the early years, his wife, Nan, did not teach him much. She tried too hard to please. But she confided things to Willene who in turn instructed him. That's how he learned Nan did not like his asking her the recommend questions. The next time hers expired, he'd smiled, "I know the answers," and signed the slip. She was so pleased he grieved, the more because she'd never have told him on her own.

Nan told Willene that raising six children meant hearing a whimper inside her each time someone's child received what she could not give her own. Willene let him know, and he went home, said maybe they'd better look at the budget again, put aside less mission money.

Willene gave a shower for their seventh child, and when the girl turned five, he'd urged Nan to work on a master's degree. Be good to get out of the house a few hours a day. "Yes, but," Willene said, "Nan said she'd rather have another baby than go back to school middle-aged." And he quit pushing the degree.

The "Yes, but's" increased when Willene's soulmate went on the road. Divorce had begun to jar Church statistics, but the Brethren had few suggestions for helping members tough it through. When Willene felt nothing could get worse, the bishop said she could lose her health, her child. He gave her *J.B.* to read and said to snap out of it.

He'd never give *J.B.* again nor counsel gratitude because things are not worse. But she had snapped out of it. Earned two degrees. A good job. Her daughter at BYU.

And him? And Nan? Would things have been better with only one child? Their oldest divorced, another separated from her husband. And the trouble with his youngest. A freshman at BYU, depressed on and off for a year. One day she went hiking in the foothills. A body was found and a red gas can. Only dental records would tell. Someone

had seen three men in a Toyota with out-of-state plates. So many people called, then stopped, awkward at an “unattended death.” And after the funeral, he wrote old friends. Apologies almost.

Through the window he sees Willene reading his note.
“The police have closed the books, but the Lord
has been kind enough to let us know she did not
take her own life.”

He'd like to shout that he's since been told
she's busy and happy. Shout it loud enough
for Zion to hear. His daughter did not kill
herself. But his tears fall quick as Willene's,
and so he'll go home without telling her what
an old man knows: that enduring costs everything,
but she and her sisters must hold on. They must
never, never let go.

