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SECTION OF THE AMERICAS

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The Wider Quaker Fellowship program of Friends World Committee for Consultation is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

The Fellowship was founded in 1936 by Rufus M. Jones, a North American Quaker teacher, activist and mystic, as a way for like-minded people who were interested in Quaker beliefs and practices to stay in contact with the Religious Society of Friends, while maintaining their own religious affiliation, if any. Today, WQF Fellows live in over 90 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and even active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. The Fellowship does not charge a subscription fee, but depends on donations from its readers and other supporters to cover costs.

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Poems by Joyce B. Adams:

"Quakers Marry, Late in Life"

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Friends Center, 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102 USA

tel: 215. 241. 7293, fax: 215.241.7285

email: [wqf@fwccamericas.org](mailto:wqf@fwccamericas.org)

website url: [www.fwccamericas.org/about\\_us/programs/wqf.shtml](http://www.fwccamericas.org/about_us/programs/wqf.shtml)

# Reflections of Light

## *Quaker Poets of Today*

NANCY THOMAS

Northwest Yearly Meeting

JOYCE B. ADAMS

Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Nancy Thomas** was born in Iowa, raised in Southern California, and attended George Fox College and the University of Oregon. Nancy received her graduate degree from Fuller Theological Seminary, and is an accomplished poet and writer as well as a teacher. Nancy and her husband, Hal, have served regularly since 1972 as missionaries in Bolivia. They have just retired from co-directing a master's program in intercultural studies at the Bolivian Evangelical University in Santa Cruz.

**Joyce B. Adams** is a lifelong writer. A teacher, translator, and librarian by turns, she has lived in Eastern and Western Europe, as well as many regions of the United States. Some of her poems are dedicated to peace and justice. Others spring from times when everyday consciousness expands into heightened awareness of the unseen. Joyce is a member of the Friends Meeting in Bloomington, Indiana, where she lives.

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Joyce B. Adams

NEW YEAR'S EVE, 2001

You who work day and evening, light a slow candle:  
it will burn only at one end.

You who walk through the park, forget your destination:  
watch for the high white dance of mockingbirds.

You who are told you sing off pitch, join the chorus:  
sooner or later each singer finds his own key.

Or haven't you heard? What teachers served up on your desk  
was without flavor and thus untrue.

Whatever gaudy signs paraded before the moon,  
if you looked closely, changed into tired smoke.

You who lost love rejoice greatly:  
it is all around you.

You who lost your money, rejoice even more:  
yours is the green of eager fields, gold of late sun.

You who lost your home, be at peace:  
those live who never had a home.

Listen to me! These are no times for caution  
desperate does not mean serious.

Don't try to have a happy year, forget it,  
for happiness will never look you in the eye,  
but this is your only year this year  
so live it up, down, sideways, live it new!

Nancy Thomas

TOMATO JUDGMENT

In the restaurant today

I ordered tomato judgment  
rather than tomato juice.

They don't sound that different in Spanish.

My co-workers laughed, and I did, too,  
but I felt embarrassed.

And it's not as though this were an isolated incident.

All of a sudden, speaking Spanish is no longer a game,  
a classroom drill, or a vocabulary list  
to master for tomorrow's quiz.

It's life.

All those people walking down the street

buy, sell, play, work, write letters,  
sing songs, read newspapers, flirt, curse,  
and tell jokes in Spanish!

In perfect, effortless Spanish!

Even the kids

jabber away like linguistic experts.

I can conjugate "decir" better than they can,  
and explain where in the mouth the "g" sound is formed,  
but can I order a simple glass of tomato juice?

For friendship to happen,

I need to be warm and spontaneous.

Yet how is that possible

when I have to mentally coax every phrase

before it has the nerve to creep out of my mouth?

Patience, I'm told.

Just have patience, practice lots  
and keep laughing at yourself.

Guess I'll have to, Lord.

Everyone else is.

Nancy Thomas

ALL CREATURES

“All things wise and wonderful,  
All creatures great and small,  
All things Bright and beautiful,  
The Lord God made them all.”

I like that song, Lord, really I do.  
But the part about all creatures,  
the great and the small—  
is it true? All of them?  
Did you, Lord, make amoeba?  
And if so, why?

Neither wise, wonderful, bright nor beautiful,  
they have burrowed themselves  
into my son’s liver  
and if you’re behind this—  
what do you intend to do about it?

We’ve been through numerous rounds of Flagil,  
tried some potent “natural” remedies,  
all mixed with generous dosages of prayer,  
and now I’m ready for some answers.

Are these particular little beasts  
part of some vast incredible Plan,  
hatched in the heavenly imagination  
since before the foundations  
of all that?

Do they have a role like Jonah’s feisty worm,  
a place in the Great dance?

or are they jitterbugging in my son’s insides  
just for the fun of it?

Joyce B. Adams

DANCING TO SILENCE

Now  
if some evening  
faint light greets from the window  
I ask “Who’s home?”  
then realize  
I left the bedroom lamp on.

Used to be  
a door stretched wide  
into my narrow room;  
one of them, any time,  
could pop out through it,  
wanting sandwiches,  
needing listened to.

Seems to me  
this way: when the music played  
I always hurried to catch up.  
Now I dance to silence  
in balance.  
My bare toes hear rhythms  
through the bare floor.

Only,  
if I wake at first light

I listen for the baby’s cry,  
listen  
just for a moment  
for boys in the kitchen,  
shifting cereal boxes,  
opening and closing cabinets.

Joyce B. Adams

NOW, DURING THE GRAY NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Twenty-six miles of thronging pines,  
forty-one lame late-Sunday minutes  
after the retreat,  
even thunder mutes its kettle drum.

Despair did not descend,  
heart-numbing –  
yet no word, all weekend,  
rose off the Scripture page  
to hover briefly as a sign.  
At night, the longer the prayer  
the farther  
God stole back  
into the locust-shrill meadow.

Could not the message  
come down even now, as  
fleet electric needles  
blur behind inscrutable clouds?  
Would life and death  
never struggle openly—  
so a soul might  
feel it  
happen?

Now,  
absent any miracle  
of atmospheric stroke, Word snaps off;  
silent branch  
from the invisible fire tree,  
lights that which smolders  
within the homeward, Homeward-bound.

This is ridiculous, isn't it Lord—  
red-faced me shaking my fist  
at the Creator of all creatures great and small.

Forgive me. I know I'm absurd.  
But I'm also scared.

I have a feeling you can take my rage  
and still go on loving me.

But please, if these things belong to you,  
provide some other place for them  
to make their beds and cook their soup  
and do their dances  
so David can stop doing his.

AN ECUMENICAL QUAKER DRAWS THE LINE

Can't say I'm not open.  
I meditate with Mennonites,  
chant with Catholics,  
and belt  
out Baptist blues with the best of them.  
I danced at my daughter's wedding to a Nazarene,  
and once I even rolled the aisle with a Pentecostal.  
But with funerals I reach my limit.  
When my time comes  
I will insist on my homespun,  
tried and true Quaker version.  
I just wouldn't feel dead  
without it.

Nancy Thomas

SIGN ON THE GRAND CANYON TRAIL

*When mules pass stand quietly.*  
Don't whisper, shuffle or sigh.  
If the breeze is right  
you might catch it  
on the edge of memory—  
mules humming the ancient song.

*When mules pass stand quietly.*  
Avert your gaze.  
It's rude to stare  
and dangerous too,  
like looking into the sun  
reflected in a beetle's eye.  
Focus on the far wall of the canyon,  
on the inevitable rainbow,  
the distant storm.  
Pretend you don't see.

*When mules pass stand quietly  
and follow the mule guide's instructions—*  
the hand signals, the cryptic glances.  
Be silent and sin not.  
Mules are passing.  
The moment is holy.

Joyce B. Adams

QUAKERS MARRY, LATE IN LIFE

Here, in the place of promises,  
as their juniors speak of faithfulness and trust,  
they sit  
with amazed eyes and quick smiles,  
yet secure in joy as a boiled egg  
in its china cup.

Before now,  
each has known blissful days,  
known also the long nights  
when train signals  
spelled out seldom comfort.

Their presence in the place of vows  
says to the rest of us:  
Look.  
We chewed our meat, all of it,  
even the gristle,  
and are hungry for more.  
It is all worthwhile.  
Reach in there, take hold of this life,  
pull it to you through pain,  
eat the honey with the comb.