

THE EMPTY NEST NEWSLETTER

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"Gone! O these flighty girls."
-- Le Guin

Didn't you
always
just figure
it for a
SCARECROW?



WOODEN WOMAN MEETS LEGUIN

OR, LEGUIN MEETS WOODEN WOMAN? ANYWAY, THERE'S A MUTUAL MEETING!



There is, of course, a story that goes with the poems and pictures of this issue. As you know from ENNL Vol X No 3, Ursula LeGuin was coming to teach at Beloit for six weeks, and the ENNL Ed, who teaches LeGuin's works every semester, was looking forward to hearing her read in person, and meeting her. Also, most of you family members are familiar with the wooden stick figure that Grampa's had on the porch for who knows how many years? standing there in the corner with an old hat on its head. Over five feet tall, arms and legs, all one stick. Rather remarkable, if a bit ungainly in stance. Well, it occurred to me on one of my drives between Spfld and Beloit that that natural and intriguing figure might give LeGuin

The Wooden Woman
for Jacqueline Jackson

The long-limbed lady leans against
her mother in an easy attitude,
a snow fill on her straw bonnet
and a gingham ruffle to keep out the cold.

People passing turn around,
and mutter, and go on.

With strangers
she is polite, but stiff

One day she'd fallen over.
I helped her up.

"A little too much shubarb wine," she whispered.

The day before the Equinox she dropped
her basket of plastic flowers.

"Spring," she said, "has come!"
It showed next morning.

Last thing at night I look down & see her
calmly lurching through the dark
to tell me

That, strange as it may seem, I'm home.

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a smile if it were greeting her when she got to the house across from the campus where the college was providing her with an apartment. So when next at the farm, I brought the stick inside the front hall, dusted off the cobwebs, dressed it in a straw hat with red ties, a little blue gingham dress that Mom had worn the year she spent in bed in the living room, and gave her (no longer an "it"!) a basket of bright plastic flowers in one hand, and a sign in the other saying "Welcome, Ursula LeGuin." Elle, watching the proceedings from a perch on the front stairs, remarked that the unique thing about the stick was that it was all ONE stick, and with the dress, you could no longer tell. So I draped the dress from her shoulders as a gingham cape, and that exposed the splendid wooden body again. Since I'd be in California on LeGuin's arrival date, Elle agreed to put it down there for me, and she did.

Several weeks later I made a quick trip to Beloit to hear former Beloit College professor, birder, and ENNL reader Marion Stocking give two lectures at the college (see another issue for the writeup of these) and was surprised to see the stick woman standing at the back door, out at the

2 Continuing Observations of
The Wooden Woman

Gone! Off on her broomstick!
O these flighty girls.
I am bereft,
and her oakmama stands there, arms up lifted,
in an imprecation of squirrels.

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She's back again, my switchwitch,
with new flowers, new hat, new purple dress.
In a fit of the creeping giggles,
She's tied herself to mama's apron strings.

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Gone again, and how I missed her,
my loving little wooden sister!
"She'll come back," the oaktree whispered.
And she did, with the bells at Easter.

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With love from Ursula.

farm. Elle explained that hardly had the stick departed before Grandpa began agitating. Would she be safe? Someone would steal her, etc. (I'd wondered about this myself, but figured it was a chance worth taking, and a worthy end for the stick, if she did come to grief.) Such was his unexpected concern for his stick that after a week or so Elle fetched her home again. I figured the welcomer had accomplished her mission and was going to let it go at that (as well as keep her anonymity), but I confided to John Rosenwald at one of Marion's lectures that I was the perpetrator. He said, "Ursula likes that stick woman. I was with her when she'd fallen over, and she picked her up and steadied her with considerable concern."

Well, at that I decided to carry the joke a little further, so I selected another of Mother's "hospital" dresses (Cressie and I had picked them out at the Goodwill five years ago, selecting handsome and cheery cotton frocks), a different bonnet--lavender rafia that a plant had come in--and a different bunch of bright plastic flowers for the basket. (As you know, you

FROM THE WOODEN WOMAN

for Ursula LeGuin (after her departure)

Well, my moment of unexpected glory is over.
I'm back home.

But I have been admired,
Wondered about ("Who can she be?"),
Had my picture taken,
Even had a poem written to me
By the one I'd gone to honor--

The honor returned.

And the reaction at home!
I didn't know that I was valued
Until I disappeared.
They'd got so used to me,
There in my apron and straw bonnet,
Weeding the garden, hanging out the clothes.

Now--

Now, they're looking at me with some kind of awe.
Some kind of--well, perplexity.
"Have we ever really known her?"
"After all--what might she do next?"



WOODEN WOMAN AT HER SECOND ARRIVAL

can find anything on the back stairs and in the back room; those failing, there's always the attic and basement.) No sign this time, and I carried her down at midnight, and tried to get her to stand against the oak tree where Elle'd had her before, but she wouldn't stay up. Luckily I had a jump rope in the car, and it was just long enough to fit around the tree. I took a few pictures of her, to show Grandpa how she looked in situ.

A week later was LeGuin's public reading. I brought up three students from the many who were eager to hear her, and the stick woman was still standing serenely against the tree. The reading came, the chapel was full, Tom McBride gave a lovely pre-introduction, dedicating the evening to our beloved Chad Walsh, and then a fine introduction of LeGuin, and then she began. "Beloit College has given me an office, and a computer, and plenty of time," she said, "and so I have been writing poetry. I'm going start by reading some of the poems I've written while I've been here." The first was to her predecessor in the Mackey Chair, William Stafford. At its conclusion, she looked down, looked up, and spoke the title of the next: "Wooden Woman." I was, of course, shocked (but a delighted shock), and John and I caught each other's eyes as she read the poem you've already seen, down as far as the apron strings line. At the end she said, "Nobody's been able to tell me where the Wooden Woman has come from. I certainly hope that by the time I leave I will have found out."

(The reading continued, with a poem about lines from Vachel Lindsay keeping coming up on a friend's computer, then "the obligatory poem to the chapel clock" and then a long and major and moving poem about a women's language in China that is dying out. The next section was an essay on women's work, and the third and final section, a reading from her latest book, SeaRoad. This is not fantasy or science fiction, but a group of connected stories about the people in a small seaside town in Oregon; it defies the category of novel. I'd recently read it, and had actually read the story she selected to read, twice. However I'd stopped short of the final pages of the book, with the very heavy pressures of schoolwork, and so when she read those as her finale, they were new to me, utterly different and unexpected [though I recognized strong echoes of the start of the book] and quite literally stunning. It's indescribable here. As LeGuin said when she agreed to go on and read one more thing, "There's no use explaining what's gone before." The college made a videotape of the reading, and I got a copy from Tom McBride, which came just before England and my departure to Vermont, so I haven't viewed it. But if it's an okay tape, I will make 3rd generation copies for any of you who are fans of Ursula LeGuin, or of the Wooden Woman, or both.)

Near the close of the reception, John told me it was time for me to meet her, and also, he thought, to tell her about the source of the Wooden Woman, and that he'd make the introduction. I was wavering about the anonymity, after her saying she wanted to know, so agreed and John said to her, "If the oak tree is the mother of the Wooden Woman, then this is her other mother." LeGuin looked puzzled from him to me and back again, and John repeated it. At that point her face broke into smiles, she clasped my hand, and from then on we were friends. She said the woman had actually fallen down frequently, so the rope was a good idea, and that her new dress was "spiffy."

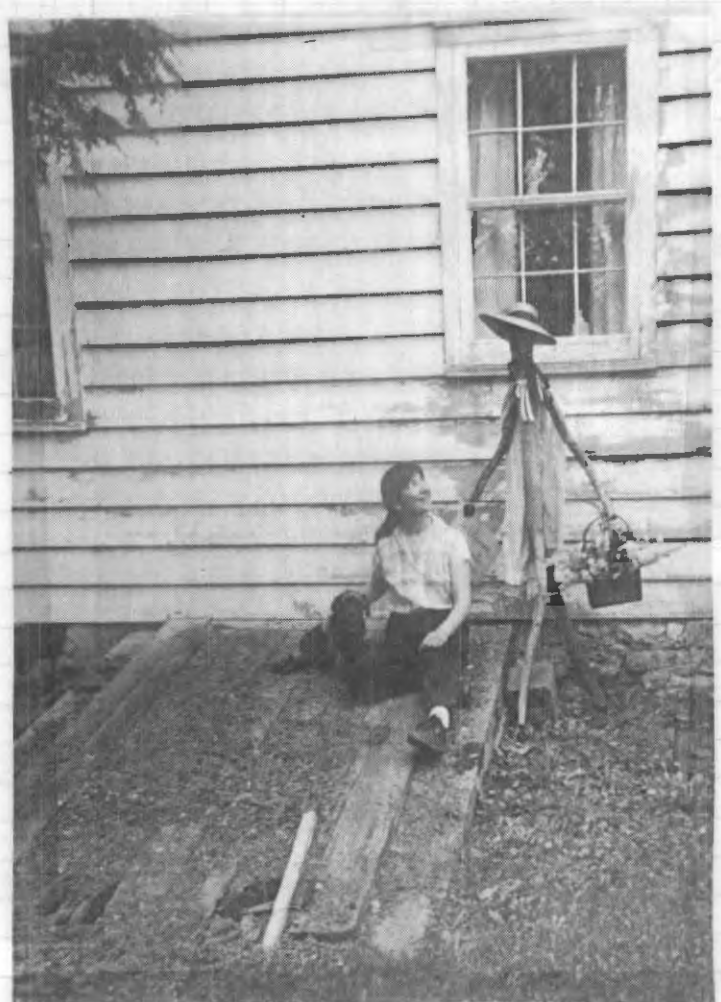
About the final four lines: A number of days after her reading, LeGuin broke her stay at Beloit to go to New York and receive some big honor. Before the reading, I'd figured I'd take the stick after the reading, dress her in some "farewell" sort of garb, (none of Mother's Goodwill frocks remaining came up to the "spiffy" one) and have Elle put her back for LeGuin's return and final stay, still maintaining her anonymity. But it seemed wrong to snatch her the very night she was publicly recognized, so I asked Elle to bring her home after LeGuin left. Then I went up over Easter, which I had

not intended, dressed her in my old high school formal "daisy dress"--(been in a trunk since the late forties! It was unusual even while I was in h.s., being made of cotton pique, and very simple, but I'd always loved it and so had saved it--thinking my girls might wear it, but they never did, though they refused tactfully. A student in the writing class, which meets at home, was not so tactful--I'd hauled down an armload of candidates for the final garment, from dressup clothes, etc, to get the class's opinion, and the student referred to the dress as "an old tablecloth." !)--I added a grand broad hat of Mom's that wasn't in good enough shape to worry about rain or losing, and switched the roses on it to daisies (fake but pretty; I actually had to go buy these), filled her basket with more daisies, and was set to replace her against the tree, except it was midnight again and pouring rain. "She'll be a soggy mess by morning," my audience Elle commented from her stair step. So I got her back to her tree around 7:15 on Easter morn; all was quiet, but it turned out the LeGuins were up and took pictures through the blinds, unbeknownst to me. Ursula added on the last four lines to the poem and sent it to me, and later sent the pictures, plus the one of herself and the Wooden Woman that I'm printing here.

There's a bit more. The Wooden Woman wrote her own poem, a response to having a poem written about her, and her whole experience of leaving the farm, and I gave it to LeGuin when John Rosenwald and Ann Arbor put on a splendid farewell wine-and-cheese that I came up for. Those who've seen both poems have said they make a nice pair. I asked if it would be okay for me to print the Wooden Woman poem in this newsletter, and LeGuin said the poem was mine, and that if she ever published it she'd ask me for permission. So there is the story, O Best Beloveds. I hope you enjoy the poems, the pictures, and this issue. The whole event generated fun.



WOODEN WOMAN IN HER USUAL SPOT



DAMARIS, MUFFIE → WOODEN WOMAN
ON THE CELLAR DOOR