

## Wendy Drexler – Featured Poet

### Five Poems



Photo © Debi Milligan 2017

### Cambridge Common, Sunday Morning

I squat beside Hannah,  
my granddaughter, in her stroller.  
*See the flowers?* and I point  
to the brave crocuses already poking  
their heads through winter dirt.

Let's count them.  
I take her hand in mine:  
one, two, three, four, five, six—

but she isn't really listening or even  
looking at the flowers—she's staring  
at a plastic bottle and flyers  
strewn on the sidewalk.

I walk her to the playground—  
dozens of toddlers in line waiting  
for turns on the swings.  
Beside them, their parents  
are texting or talking to each other  
or calling out, *Michael, don't run!*

One father holds his son's bike helmet

under his arm like a drum and taps  
a jazzy rhythm against the side

And because the ache in my back  
isn't bothering me except a little  
and only when I think about it,  
and because no one I can see  
in the park this very minute  
is being tortured or deported,  
I feel a rush of joy. I look around.  
Smiling. Waiting.

### **Irina Ratushinskaya, Soviet Dissident Poet and Novelist, Dies at 63**

—New York Times, *July 15, 2017*

I read your obituary, four brutal years  
in a Gulag prison where you wrote your poems  
on a bar of soap with a burnt matchstick,  
memorized them, then washed your hands  
and your poems down the drain.  
Despite the freezing, the hunger,  
the forced labor, sharpening your mind  
on a matchstick.      What strength to write  
of the first beauty you saw in captivity—  
frost on a window: *only a blue radiance*  
*on a tiny pane of glass*. I, too, see that  
adamance, that everything is attached to everything:  
the frost to the glass; oyster shells to a rock  
they can't be pried from; the moon to the sky;  
the ocean to its wave; your bar of soap,  
to the burnt ash of the match: long enough.

## Politics

The scuttling

of going.

The hollow.

Countershade,

to blend the

dark.

The roll-

ing back the

circle, tight,

refusing

disclosure.

Presumption

crossing o-

ver whose rights,

whose permis-

sion to en-

ter, whose bor-

der, which bor-

der or who

or what is

the assump-

tion, the spi-

ral slimy  
and empty  
as the shell  
of the chambered  
nautilus,  
always at  
risk.

## **To the Only Softshell Turtle in Walden Pond**

I'm afraid for her as she begins

to scratch the beach with her back legs—

her foot-wide shell looks as soft as a floppy felt hat,  
and here we are—intruders, all of us

swimmers, toddlers, lovers, helpers, hurters,  
threatened, too—and our gear,

Tommy Bahama beach chair, chattering radios,  
our ham sandwiches, a side of Diet Coke.

She shuffles back into the water, pokes her head up  
like a snorkel, hauls herself back up onto the beach,

when I decide to tell everyone to stand back,  
tell the ranger he should set up a safety zone—

hazard cones, yellow tape! I want him to fly in a mate  
for the only softshell turtle in Walden Pond

because *Look!* She's breathing hard now,  
refusing to give up, determined to lay her eggs.

Her legs tear at the hard-packed sand, which begins  
to yield to her stubborn necessity.

These eggs will never hatch. But she will  
bury them anyway—born to this,

and to our indiscriminate earth.

### **In the Lobby after the Movie**

The screen credits fade, and we're slowly wandering  
into the lobby, zipping into puffy parkas, basking  
in celluloid afterglow—the story of a son  
who almost missed his chance to find his birth mother.

In the crowd's a couple, parents of a child  
in my son's school. The mother used to kneel  
at the classroom door to kiss her boy goodbye.

I kissed mine, too. That was 30 years ago.  
My god! She's walking with a cane!  
They pass me before I can speak—  
and was it I who turned away?

Then someone rests her hand on my shoulder.  
*Wendy?* I turn.  
*Remember me? Keri, from chorus?*  
We were friends, always sat side by side  
and saved each other a seat.

She smiles. I hug her. *So happy to see you.*  
*Me, too, she says. And this is my father.*  
*Oh hello, so good to see you both,* realizing  
when I last saw him he was already old.

I surprise myself, pull off my wool hat, say,  
*I'm gray, too!*  
We laugh, all three of us, relieved.

**Wendy Drexler**'s third poetry collection, *Before There Was Before*, was published by Iris Press in March 2017. She's also the author of *Western Motel* (Turning Point, 2012) and the chapbook *Drive-Ins, Gas Stations, the Bright Motels* (Pudding House, 2007). Her first children's book, *Buzz, Ruby, and Their City Chicks*, coauthored with Joan Fleiss Kaplan, was published by Ziggy Owl Press in 2016. Her poems have appeared widely in such journals as *Barrow Street*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Nimrod*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Salamander*, *The Mid-American Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *The Worcester Review*, and the *Valparaiso Poetry Review*; featured on *Verse Daily* and WBUR's *Cognoscenti*; and in the anthologies *Blood to Remember: American Poets on the Holocaust* and *Burning Bright: Passager Celebrates 21 Years*. Her website is [wendydrexlerpoetry.com](http://wendydrexlerpoetry.com).