



A Gilford Offering

Kelley Jean White MD

Accepted 5/16/04 Finishing Line Press

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Gilford Public Library

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Sarah Fisher (1834-1852)

My sister and I lie separated
by the husband we shared. My second son
lies beside me. The first is lost to us.
She raised them both. I didn't live to see
my baby's teeth, watch him toddle, walk free;
she took my place. She came to be my nurse
when I lay in fever, saw my soul gone.
At my funeral I think she hated
my husband for his tight face and dry eyes
but she loved our boys and though to love him
seemed too much they married, she bore him twins.
My younger boy loved the two little girls.
the older felt turned away by their cries,
he ran, even here I felt his anger.

Gilmanton

We girls might have been happy. Indeed we have memories of sweet grass and orchards, fresh warm milk and new kittens in the barn, but father and mother always worried that crops would fail and our days were hurried from before dawn to dusk and oft beyond—we smaller girls cared for the chicken yard and each had three cows to milk, pigs to see to. We each helped when the crops were planted and at harvest. Our small hands were never able to do enough. Then the Colburn's Hannah came home to be married. She told us there was good pay for steady workers in the mills. Our small quick hands were wanted.

Fair Days

How grateful we were when we reached the end
of harvest. Here were still warm autumn days,
most chores done, our most prized livestock to tend
and groom for judging, but the best always
were the oxen, and the great town wagons
garlanded and gilded, piled with the fruits
of the year's labor, each town's girls waving
to the crowd, our finest dresses, in truth,
proof of our skills at the loom and needle,
our hair shining, each holding a basket
of pears or apples, ears of corn cradled
in our arms, all laughing. The gay crowds met
us with cheers, how the oxen's coats did gleam,
two score or more, each town's competing team.

Lowell

We met in the mills in 1850.
He was from York, I was from Gilmanton.
We'd both left farms in the North. Thought the mills
might suit us. But days were long there, from dawn
'til past dark, danger, noise, machines, and still
a few of us wrote poems, asked for beauty.
We met Berthe and Claude at the Culture
Society. We printed three issues
of our magazine. They both missed Quebec.
We told them about New Hampshire. Farms were
cheap now. We made plans leave. Two couples
would have a chance to make a go of it.
Then we lost Berthe and her baby both.
Claude buried them alone and went back south.

Moultonboro

Alone, we found our fields too overgrown
with brush to cultivate by just our hands—
indeed it seemed our only crop was stone—
these we hauled by a young team of oxen
we begged use of from our neighbor, having
none ourselves we could give only promise
of assistance at harvest, thus saving
work in spring for work that later would cost
us dearly, our own crops unharvested
until September and thus much profit
lost. We knew no other way. Thus wasted
our investment 'til we came to regret
our choice to leave Lowell and with little grief
we traded farm for town with much relief.

Fisher's Mill

Ours is the fifth mill on Gunstock River.
It is equipped to do work in season:
to saw wood, to card flax, to shape shingles,
to grind meal. The four mills set above us
have ponds which control the flow of water
to our wheel, two are sawmills only, one
like ours, changes in season, the one grist
mill has agreed to send some work to us.
To power our wheel channels from five ponds
must be opened. Our small boy runs upstream
at his father's word and must make a sign
to each miller to send the water down.
In between times he fishes and daydreams—
it is not a bad life when weather's fine.

Industry

Indeed, our house was once one of three stores in our new town. My husband and I were not inclined to keep shop and already there was a fierce competition between those established nearer the river. Keen rivalry occurred. Those that were steady customers at Jewett & Thyng's were near all democrats. Those that went to Morrill's voted republican. We had cobblers, coopers, blacksmiths, a tavern, and a still rumored hidden. There card-players gathered, sometimes even dancing on potter's hill. I never saw such a thing but once heard fiddle music, laughing, unholy words.

Additions

The blacksmith Wadley made new latches for each door on the new side of the house. My husband says they are an improvement in appearance—each has a bead of pewter at its center. I am merely pleased for they fit nicely the palm of my hands. Why did we need things of such style? We begin to prosper. We employ three men. We earn enough to keep a horse though my husband does not see a need for such. Soon I will bear another child. How I wish once more to see my mother, my sister, the land where I once played in childhood. Not until the birthing may I travel as before.

Mary Fisher (1837-1913)

Sister, I never thought to lose you. When
they came for me I packed quickly, glad at
the chance to be with you. Worried, yes, but
I believed you young and strong as I. Then
there was the baby. And the older boy.
Each day I bathed you, tried to feed you. Kept
the children quiet and away. You leapt
at any small sound they might make. Hot joy,
face flushed, and then you'd weaken, drift toward sleep,
I hear where you now live it snows year-round
and yet you feel no cold, you hear no sound.
But also know a mother's love runs deep.
I will keep your children. I'll keep your house.
If must, your widowed husband, I'll espouse.

George

I was oldest and perhaps I did feel
Mother's loss most. I have no memory
of sickness but can remember quiet
and my aunt's weeping behind the shut door.
I missed my toys that were put away more
than Mother, in truth, I won't deny it—
I was an angry child, they called lazy,
and it is true that I began to steal,
just a few things, and only because much
had been taken from me. I grew truant
while my brother and the twins did not want
to do anything forbidden. Three such
cowards you never saw. What they forbid
I did. I took much. There was much I hid.

Deacon Fisher

No one ever called me that. Nor miller.
Nor master. I was just Fisher. My wives
neither, called me by name, my children said
"Father," but said it seldom. We'd little
need for speech about the household, littler
yet about the millworks, our very lives
dependent on steady hands, level heads,
quick judgements—the works could as quick whittle
a man's arm as a log, tear scalp as scrape
a shingle, it was few men could escape
such work with hands whole, with full ten fingers—
no idle speech—we'd no time to linger
in conversation with passing neighbors
minds not for reflection, thoughts for labor.

The Union Meetinghouse

We were all most grateful for the gift bell—
hung high in the tower of the Union
Meetinghouse, it had, it was said, been cast
by that famous Patriot Paul Revere
and was bought by Morrill to be rung where
all might hear, as alarm, or danger passed,
and mark our lives with its each new ringing,
births and weddings, Sunday Meetings, death knells,
but the new church did not prosper, it gained
few members from other congregations;
the minister stayed but two years, the place
then stood empty a year, the next remained
but a few months, with these resignations
the bell was forgotten, its gleam effaced.

Baked Bean Sundays

The oven we fired only Thursdays.
Heavy pots of beans and molasses slid
to the back, a dozen pies, apple or
peach in season, pumpkin, mincemeat, berry,
and thick dark loaves of bread. Every family
in our section of the village came for
Sunday dinner—each carried dishes hid
in baskets and cozies, attention paid
to each cook's skill and thrift; garden's bounty
set the table, best in all the county,
grandparents' heads down as blessings were said—
and we children laughing beneath our breath
poked our neighbors—we had no fear of death!

Hoyt Cemetery

This was the old burial place—far from the village, past the Weeks schoolhouse, downhill from the Old Liberty Tree ground, a half dozen families and a few in-laws, Thyngs and Goodwins, Gilmans, Hoyts, and in between at least three lines of Weekses, Ben, John, Seth, each with two wives outlived, seventeen children living to maturity, nine more dead before five, here were raised flags each fourth of July on the graves of veterans of the Revolution, all forgotten by my time, my war, nothing to mark them but the occasional Co. or Captain beside a list of names of battles fought.

Slates

Everyone knows this picture of our school—
bonneted lasses, barefoot lads, teacher
with a stick before the blackboard, benches
in rows before a red-hot smoking stove—
everyone knows how we walked through deep snow
nine miles and more, had such great adventures
fighting hungry wolves, mountain lions, bears
merely for book learning, and of the cruel
pranks played by big boys upon the smaller
students, but know these days were far gayer
than we admit, easier than daily
farm-life or work upon the family
mill or forge. Here we had friends & laughter
(and stories we tell forever after.)

Winter Pastimes

Snow and more snow, months of our breaths frosting
and hard white clumps clinging to knitted wool,
dark so early, all spilling out of school
and running, dodging, we'd go out coasting,
all the village, boys and girls flung into
a single sleigh, bearskin rugs and blankets
tugged around, balanced at the very tip
of Schoolhouse Hill—still—then one good shove-to:
oh the swoop, the speed, two quick boys steering
by their single sleds roped to the runners
but soon pulled behind us, spun, dragged, out-run,
and all crashing through forest and clearing
spinning across river ice to a stop--
then the cold mile long trudge back to the top.

Third Week in March

George and I made a good profit throughout
the week of Town Meeting. With the twins' help
we fired up the oven, baked salted
pretzels, then choose the best fall apples from
the shed. These we stacked on wooden trays slung
on ropes about our necks. When debate stalled
we pushed between the benches calling sharp
"Two for a penny." Men were quick to shout
orders to us, board for farmers in town
being generally poor, and suppers
often delayed. Here we could also learn
much news of matters both small and profound,
even accounts of national debate,
Lincoln and Douglass, so far from our State.

Clock-winder

There is a new and surprising problem about the house--now that old Gran-father's mother, has come to stay in the sick room near the kitchen we find that our clocks keep time strangely, the one stops, the other creeps ahead by a few minutes each day. Soon we will have gained tomorrow. The bother of resetting them troubles Mother. Gran, though bedridden, finds this most amusing. She says she is grateful of the days gained as they will give her time to finish her hair wreath and bring another spring closer for renewed warm weather, or yet again--and her smile grows wider--she says--in truth the stopped clock may bring again her lost youth.

Fishers

If you are lost follow water downhill—
you will always come to a village, if
not your own than surely one of strangers
but kind, kin to one or two of your own
family; children could never become
lost, we early learned to handle dangers
by quiet movement and careful feet, half
a Sunday in summer we might thus “kill—“
in lazy wandering beside a stream.

George and I knew which brook carried fine trout.
We might in a few hours reach the lake,
such hours sun-flecked, glowing golden green,
barefeet on sweet warm earth, gentle breeze: Doubt
not Providence, what she gives we may take.

Milliners

There are always some who do not marry. In this town two such women, Miss Ada Weeks and Miss Elvira Parker lived as milliners, taking in work as expert seamstresses who practiced also the art of hat making and trimming and each has yearly made a trip to Boston. We saw their small cottage neat as a pin, narry a speck of dust and wondered that no man had ever sought nor gained their maiden hand in matrimony. Yet they seemed content with their quiet life, their two gray heads bent to their work in the lamplight. At the end their wish, a single gravestone, one word: "Friends."

Haunts

In the days before the war great Auntie
was brought to live with us. She did not speak,
a thing which no one understood. Yet each
night we heard her singing in her sleep, free
it seemed of whatever ailment befell
her in the day. Daily she worked weaving
at her attic loom, we boys, believing
her a witch were afraid she'd place a spell
upon us if we tried to make her talk.
We knew she was not deaf. We knew she heard
each word we spoke. Still we teased the schoolgirls,
brought our cousins and classmates home to gawk
at her odd faces, her curious twitches—
claimed such signs were always true of witches.

Thomas Lilly

He was a rich man, that was all we knew,
with lands well-situated for grazing
and well-suited for many crops. A pond
of excellent sweet water lay near-by,
a fine sugarbush, handsome house, and two
fine barns, each filled with hay, his herds lazing
and fat, his gardens bountiful beyond
our hopes and yet these riches did belie
his melancholy. And he did so fear
thieves that he kept always dogs for sentry
and stayed away from fellowship and cheer,
the dogs, in truth, his only company.
One day the dogs howled mad--the neighbors found
Tom hanged in his orchard by Lilly Pond.

Ransom

My son, always so good, always so kind,
an industrious student, loyal friend,
careful helper of father and mother,
obedient keeper of his brother,
and now, my brother brings him to this end--
family holding his debts, falling behind--
and my boy, turned away from the army
for his youth now seeks a place as cabin
boy, the bounty earned he gives his father
to redeem family honor, the debtor's
bills paid, this uncle, my brother, again
proven shiftless and no account, today
my good boy beams again with pride; oddly
schoolmates avoid him: such is Jealousy!

Bricks

Of all our citizens Benjamin Rowe
is perhaps most blessed, in his ninth decade
he has seen his children prosper, a fine
house, built of bricks from his own clay and kiln,
even his windowglass was made here so
he has needed little that was not made
by himself or his sons. In his long time
he has seen great changes below his hill.
Now our children go to school two seasons
whereas in past they were only winter
scholars, now boys and girls each have two terms,
the choice of families who now reason
their beloved youth may grow to enter
greater prosperity with what they learn.

Library

A spinster, the house empty, our Carrie could not sit idle. Always bookish she began a work she loved, a library where the store had been. She offered books free, her own and then, always forward, she went before town meeting, imagine! And asked the town for monies, proposed they be spent for periodicals and such books as would most benefit the moral learning of our young folk, in particular young women, who were, she said, indeed yearning to better themselves. Thus she had begun work of literary and cultural improvement in a manner suitable.