

## Joan E. Bauer – Three Poems

### Why I Remember Fiorello & His Sister Gemma

Because he was ‘the Little Flower,’ his first name from Italian.  
Five foot two & New York’s greatest mayor.

Because he built airports, the West Side Highway,  
parks & playgrounds, subsidized housing.

Because during a newspaper strike, he read kids the Sunday  
‘funnies,’ Dick Tracy, on the radio.

Because he opposed Prohibition. *I am certain the good Lord  
never intended grapes to be made into grape jelly.*

Because he loathed mobsters & put Luciano in the slammer.  
Because he was Republican but an FDR ally.

Because he was fiercely anti-Hitler. Stubborn & tireless.  
*It makes no difference if I burn my bridges. I never retreat.*

Because his older sister Gemma, teaching in Budapest ,  
married her Jewish student. Because Eichmann ordered them

arrested so he could hold her as a hostage. Because  
at Ravensbrück, Gemma was a ‘prize’ & so spared forced labor.

Because she taught the women English & they called her ‘Mutti.’  
She didn’t know her daughter & grandson were

also prisoners at Ravensbrück. Because as the war ended,  
Fiorello was directing UN Relief & Rehabilitation.

Because he wouldn’t bend the rules to bring his family quickly  
to America .

Because when they reached New York in ’47,  
La Guardia was dying of cancer. Because he installed them

in a Queens housing project. No other provision.  
Because in ’62, Gemma died in Queens at Elmhurst Hospital ,

but not before writing of the the children wearing rags  
at Ravensbrück. ‘The little skeletons.’

## **Bodies Upon the Gears**

*There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious...  
you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels...  
you've got to make it stop.*

— Mario Savio (1942-1996)

The firebrand grew up with a speech defect.  
Shy & solitary he planned to be a priest.

He went on a Catholic mission to the Taxco slums.

Freedom Summer — registering voters, teaching  
in Mississippi. Attacked by men with clubs, survived.

At Berkeley he hoped to raise money for civil rights  
but the university had banned all political action.

*Can we forget the sharecroppers?*  
The Free Speech Movement was born.

Tall & gangling in his sheepskin coat Savio spoke  
atop the police car October 1964.

Stood on the Sproul Hall steps in December  
inspired a spellbound crowd.

When Savio spoke his stutter disappeared.  
*His words coming out like a torrent.*

The FBI would hound & spy on Savio for years.  
Three children. A worn out heart, depression.

He'd earn degrees in physics teach college.  
Remain committed to free speech. Civility.

The Sproul Hall steps now named for him.

When asked if he was Mario Savio he said:  
*Someone has to be.*

## **Those Years I Lived in Berkeley**

What was it called, that Durant Avenue coffeehouse  
where I'd go on Sunday morning for cappuccino  
& cozily read *The New York Times*?

Not Caffe Mediteranneum . That was on Telegraph  
& more for hippies & bohemians which I was not.  
I was up from LA, getting my bearings

in a teaching program at Cal, then ‘inspiring’  
& fending off 7th & 8th graders, but first,  
I’d cut short my waist-long hair to get the job.

I lived on Hillegass Avenue near People’s Park,  
then Dwight Way , then Ellsworth in a studio  
with a creaky Murphy bed & big windows.

True: I dreaded my 5th period class, mostly  
the boisterous Mangione brothers who weren’t  
much interested in anything I was teaching.

Students thought my three pairs of matching  
vests & slacks were some unofficial uniform.  
Was I a nun? One Basic Reading student

hated me so much—one early morning, he put  
dog shit on my classroom door, later threw  
a rock that nearly broke my nose & glasses.

True: I’d spent the summer before studying  
on my own, ‘How to Teach Basic Reading,’  
but still knew next-to-nothing how to do it.

One night I took my teaching buddies L & D  
to see *A Woman Under the Influence* by Cassavetes  
only to find they’d both been through the ringer,

so quite a night of tears & revelations. Later,  
L, right there in the faculty room, would have  
a near-psychotic break. Welcome to teaching .

**Joan E. Bauer** is the author of *The Almost Sound of Drowning* (Main Street Rag, 2008). With Judith Robinson and Sankar Roy, she co-edited the anthology, *Only the Sea Keeps: Poetry of the Tsunami* (Bayeux Arts and Rupa & Co, 2005). For some years, she was a teacher and counselor and now lives mostly in Pittsburgh, PA where she co-hosts and curates the Hemingway's Summer Poetry Series. Her second full-length book of poetry, *The Camera Artist*, is forthcoming from Turning Point in 2021.