

On "Tatting in the Ancient Playground," New York City, and the *Notre Dame Review*

While I was thinking about what to write for this page, it occurred to me that one of my first poems to be published, "Gramercy," had appeared in the *Notre Dame Review*, and that it had certain things in common with this new poem, "On Tatting in the Ancient Playground." For starters, they were both set in New York City. In fact, I wrote the first draft of "Gramercy" soon after moving here from Texas. I had very little money and usually brought my lunch to work. Often I ate it on a bench looking into Gramercy Park, a gated garden accessible only to the rich people who live around it. As you can see from the poem, the park came to symbolize the discrepancy in wealth that I saw in NYC:

Gramercy

Rich man,
loan me the keys
to your park.
You can see that it wants me:
gardenias smile
and the branches of the yew trees
tremble with hope as I walk by.

On the day that I fit through the bars
of your fence,
fragments will find each other,
ends will meet,
grieving will release the bereaved.

In spring the grizzled men
say "yowzah"
when they like the look
of a passing girl.
That will be the whole world with me:
Yowzah!

How did the ship get into the bottle?
And that camel, the needle's eye?
I don't intend to stay.

Rich man, loan me the keys.
Some mysteries were born to be revealed.
I have certain opportunities,
and I mean to squander them all.

Sixteen years after writing “Gramercy,” following an afternoon at the Ancient Playground in Central Park with my son, my cousin, and my cousin’s daughter, I wrote “Tatting on the Ancient Playground.” The Ancient Playground sits beside the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the Upper East Side, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods of a city that’s among the wealthiest in the world.



The author’s son that day at the Ancient Playground. Photo by Ginny Wiehardt.

Like “Gramercy,” this poem reflects my ongoing concern with inequity, though now, as a mother, I’m thinking about it in terms of inheritance. What does one generation manage to pass on to the next? What does that mean in terms of opportunities? As the poem says, my cousin and I didn’t inherit a lot of money or physical objects when my grandmother died, and our grandmother was a difficult person, so our memories of her were mixed, to say the least. But I was sure that we had received some valuable lessons from her — and I found them in the lace. Functional, home-made, it reflects the poverty my grandmother grew up with, and it illustrates her resourcefulness and her commitment to making her home beautiful in the ways that she could.

Beyond the theme of inheritance, the lace also reflects a focus on domesticity and traditional female roles that isn't present yet in "Gramercy." My grandmother and my mother had conflicted feelings about being caregivers, and I worried about having children as a result. Because I have more choices and more resources, I have been able to work through that conflict differently. Nevertheless, being a mother has made obvious to me the huge amounts of work women do that goes overlooked by society. So I love that this lace, this symbol of my grandmother's domestic life, got its own poem – and that the poem was *not* overlooked, that the editors at the *Notre Dame Review* chose to publish it! And of course it's wonderful that it ties in so nicely with "Gramercy" and shows my evolution as a writer and in relationship with the city.