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Upright

St. Francis on the grass,
concrete arm broken at the elbow.
Vandals pushed him from his pedestal
last night, left him face-down,
basket empty.

This morning someone
righted him. Among the cattails
redwing blackbirds issue sweet commands.
It’s not a high-wire act whether
we fall or rise.

A goddess walking
to the swimming pool demands
our eyes, fans herself, wears 5-inch
spikes. American as apple pie,
brass knuckles.
Author Notes

After retiring from the Department of English at West Virginia University where she taught 20th Century Irish and British literature, Susan Shaw Sailer completed an MFA in the low-residency Program in Poetry at New England College in 2007. Her poems have appeared in such journals as Persimmon Tree, THEMA, and Paterson Literary Review. Her chapbook, Coal, was published in 2012 by Finishing Line Press. Her book, Ship of Light, was published by Port Yonder Press in 2013. Her reviews and articles about poetry have appeared in Indiana Review, Prairie Schooner and Alehouse Review. Sailer lives in Morgantown, West Virginia.

About the Work

Usually my poems evolve over a period of weeks and months, going through at least a dozen revisions, but “Upright” is an exception in that it arrived to me nearly in the form in which it has been published. The basis for the poem grows out of an experience:

I walk my dog, Loki, after lunch. We live in a condominium in Morgantown, West Virginia, and there’s a driveway leading from the top condo building where we live down between buildings two and three. At the bottom of the driveway is a three-foot statue of St. Francis, placed there by one of the residents. One day I noticed that the statue had been knocked off its pedestal.

Next day, the statue was back on its base, the worse for wear since the fall had broken its arm at the elbow. That arm had held a basket of seasonal flowers, but with the arm now a stub, it could hardly do so any longer. I felt outrage that this figure of love had been so badly treated and wanted to write about the incident.

Continuing down the driveway, I heard redwing blackbirds singing to each other, which echoed the spirit of St. Francis with his love of birds. I couldn’t help but think that we are often not in control of our lives, for better and for worse.

I tend to write concise poems and realized that this poem would be more powerful in a brief structure than in a lengthier one. In the little revision I felt the poem needed, I deleted an image that competed with the St. Francis statue in order to focus on where I wanted the reader’s attention to be.

Susan Shaw Sailer on the Web


www.persimmontree.org/