

CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUES

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF
MICHAEL BECKERMAN



Edited by Aleš Březina, Anja Bunzel
and Lorraine Byrne Bodley

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“Here I Glisten”: A Garland for Gloria Brim Beckerman

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Abstract

Gloria Brim Beckerman Stamler (1924–2021) transcended many cultural expectations of her age. A remarkable poet, she was married at the age of sixteen to Bernard Beckerman (1921–1985), Shakespeare scholar, theater director, later Brander Matthews Professor of Dramatic Literature at Columbia University’s theater department. His departure in 1940 to fight in World War II was the catalyst for the unfolding of her creative gifts, as she sent him poems of love and hope, which were astonishingly rich in their mythic symbolism, literary allusion and humanity. In contrast to many female poets of her age, whose bequest is hidden in history and unpreserved in literary archives, Gloria Brim Beckerman Stamler retained a quiet sense of herself, first as Professor of Literature at Adelphi University and secondly as published poet who safeguarded her own artistic bequest. Her work was launched in leading periodicals such as the *Yale Poetry Review* and later gathered in a published collection of seventy-seven poems which document not only an astonishingly long and fully-lived life, but capture the essence and wit of a woman, who is unafraid to voice truths which are universal to other women. This essay explores the wonderful gift her poetry brings to the door of other women’s lives and alludes to the creative ancestry handed down to her sons, daughters-in-law and their children.



Figure 27.1: Gloria Brim Beckerman as Joan of Arc (Collection of Karen and Michael Beckerman).

- 1 Bernard Beckerman, *Dynamics of Drama. Theory and Method of Analysis* (New York: Knopf, 1970); *Shakespeare at the Globe 1599–1609* (New York: Macmillan, 1962). See also Gloria Brim Beckerman and William Coco, eds., *Bernard Beckerman. Theatrical Presentation: Performer, Audience and Act* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990). For an account of his heroism, see Jim Beckerman, “We found our family’s Nazi flag. Now what?” <https://eu.northjersey.com/story/entertainment/2018/04/05/found-family-s-nazi-flag-now-what/365351002/>
- 2 See Anna Beckerman, the Artist Daneshevskaya in this role paying tribute to her grandmother: Danielle Chelosky, “Artist to Watch: Daneshevskaya,” *Stereogum*, November 6, 2023, <https://www.stereogum.com/2241649/artist-to-watch-daneshevskaya/interviews/band-to-watch/>
- 3 Gloria Brim Beckerman, “Once upon a Time,” in *The M5 Bus—and Beyond* (New York: Vineyard Press, 2010), 10. Hereafter referred to as Brim Beckerman. All of the poems discussed here are from that collection.
- 4 See also Brim Beckerman, “Toothache,” 12–13

“The best nations, like the best women, have no history,” wrote George Eliot in a famous adage. Gloria Brim Beckerman Stamler (1924–2021) would not have agreed. Mage, melodist, maker of songs, married at sixteen to Bernard Beckerman (1921–1985), she herself was woman of the theater.¹ Student at the Yale School of Drama and Actress, she was most tellingly cast as Joan of Arc, an historical role which for her granddaughter would interlace family life with mythic life.² In later years she became a much-loved Professor of Literature at Adelphi University, convincing her students of the power and reality of poetry, a truism that abounds in her own art. In her ninety-six years, she lived through many eras. Her interesting history and life story, her lifelong commitment to poetry, was to liberate the poetry of her past and realize its potential for future generations.

For a short period as a young intellectual Brim Beckerman wrote poems from the remembered world of childhood. In “Once upon a time,” she recalls family trips with her parents and two sisters, “packed into the car and drove to Coney Island [...] not to swim – too dark/but to wander on the broad walk/and feel the still – warm sea breeze” (ll.12–17). “When we got home” she nostalgically recalls, “Exhausted and happy/ we lurched into sleep” (ll.21–25).³

The sharp wit for which she is remembered first appears in the opening lines of “Kindergarten”⁴:

“It’s not the place for your dolls,”
mother said, on the way,
Not the place for me, either, I thought.

She conjures up that world very immediately from the vocabulary of her childhood:

A boy grabbed my brown crayon
right out of my hand
to color his bear. [...]
Miss Taylor, the other teacher
in a long black dress,
moved quickly, like a night-time angel.
She came to my table,
pulled the yellow crayon from my hand,
and led me to the piano
in the very front of the room.

Before I could say, “Stop”, she said,
“This little lady will turn pages for me,”
and opened a song book.
“We’ll all sing ‘Three Blind Mice.’”
Attached to her nod,
my fingers just seemed to know
when to reach the page’s edge.
Following little black notes
became my job
and I was proud to be chosen
(ll.1–8, 15–31).⁵

The poem links the childhood core with the adult opus, where Brim Beckerman’s presentation of her early self infuses a universal memory with prophetic intensity. We rediscover this in “Smile” in which she captures the slow-motion ordeal of family photos:

When my father took pictures
nothing was ever right:
 the bellows stuck
 the metal spool didn’t turn
 or turned too quickly
past tiny lines and arrows
pointing to the next number.

Squinting into the eyepiece
he’d lift his head
“For God’s sake, smile.”
I open an old album:
faded pictures trapped by black brackets.
Most of those photographed are dead. [...]

Then I come to a picture of my sisters and me
 leaning against a stone wall.
Even in muted black and white,
nothing seems to match
except for the knee-highs
pulled up for this occasion.

5 Brim Beckerman, “Kindergarten,”
12–13.

Like an arrow, pointing,
 a long shadow looms in front of us:
 it is my father.
 And we are smiling
 at his command
 as I do now.
 (ll.1-13, 17-28).⁶

Custodian of old usages, Brim Beckerman invests significance in things which are usually ignored. She gives her girlhood self a guise to roam at large in “Old Sounds”:

My skate wheels
 Fighting pebbly concrete as
 I sped downhill, afraid
 I’ll never stop.

I loved the tools of escape:
 My skate key,
 Constant adjuster for take-off
 nickels for subways
 to foreign places like Coney Island
 and my library card:
 sound, motion, people,
 disappeared.
 I started with the A’s...
 (ll.13-25).⁷

She mines her memories of a New York adolescence in her first launching pad, “The Upright Typewriter”: “I’m twelve again,/allowed to pound sacred keys [...] I remember the magic/ as I thumped out/my anguish on the white page” (ll.6-7, 17-19). The poem recaptures not only the suffering of adolescence—“I loathe my body, everyone over twenty-one” (l.11)—but also the boldness of getting going from the first base of her being.⁸

Along with that energy is a familial delicacy, an ability to capture microcosms of love. The collection is an unbroken string of monologues where the speaker is sometimes in the skin of a daughter, in others that of a mother of two sons. The collection is thick with memories of her deceased father, who weaves in and out of his daughter’s lines: “my ‘old’ father/ and I’m older than he ever was.”⁹ In “Bessie’s Birthday” she humorously explores the standard

6 Brim Beckerman, “Smile,” 14.

7 Brim Beckerman, “Old Sounds,” 11.

8 Brim Beckerman, “The Upright Typewriter,” 27.

9 Brim Beckerman, “Smile,” 14; “The Upright Typewriter” (ll.12-13), 27; “Old letters” (ll.7-8), 29, and “What did I know” (ll.15-18), 33.

and appropriate ambivalence of daughters towards mothers.¹⁰ The poem probes the power relations between mother and daughter, and what can feel to the child like the adult's imperial sway.¹¹ In contrast to the feminist ambivalence about being a mother of her near contemporary, Adrienne Rich (1929–2012), mothering for Brim Beckerman is culturally so different, more akin to Ireland where it has never felt like a minor role. Gloria is no more feminist than post-feminist. She is resolutely herself while not being immune to the social movements and politics that have fueled important cultural and social change.¹² Able to revel in the richness of experience while acknowledging the challenges of motherhood, she recalls the birth of her first born on his eighteenth birthday. Her closing sestet, laden with significance, apprehends the fleeting and profound closeness of mothers and sons.¹³ In a similar way, “Son on Television” undercuts facile feminism in the psychic fusion of mother and son. In the patent love and joy of the closing tercet is a celebration of her son’s separateness:

Son on Television

Beethoven
over-flows from the next room.
I don’t like to watch musicians on television,
the close up
a violation, somehow,
an intrusion.
If necessary, I watch the bows go up and down,
mysterious as a group of flapping kites,
free, yet connected.

You flew real kites,
explored
tag, baseball, painting, books —
and later, the piano
up and down scale
until pulse and music intertwined.

The concert ends.
I begin to pile dishes
when I hear your voice
telling me
what I heard in the music.

10 Brim Beckerman, “Bessie’s Birthday,” 19–20.

11 Brim Beckerman, “Bessie’s Birthday,” 19.

12 See, for example, the closing poem of this collection, “If I were a man,” in particular its closing lines.

13 Brim Beckerman, “Son Number One”, 28.

I rush into the room
and there you are, on the screen, lucid, certain,
playing the piano to make a point.

You look up, as if right at me
as if saying, "Hi"
I grin
and grin to see you
live and reborn.¹⁴

Here, as in other poems of this collection, Brim Beckerman is at her best when she holds this balance between humane aloneness and intimations of human belonging.

Deeply aware of poetry's covenant with life, Gloria's shadow self enjoins in "Intensive Care" a searing elegy to her husband, Bernard Beckerman, in which she attempts to make vocal the inner life of grief.¹⁵ As elegist of her husband, she is capable of devastating economy in "Loss" and "The Widow," two of countless elegies which mourn this event: "The eyes give it away./ Only secret tears engrave such lines/tears that harass, torment, defy rest" (ll.1-3).¹⁶ Over and over she looks for reassurance in art to communicate the silence of great loss:

I am looking for you
Among barnacles, sea weed, broken shells. [...]
Life ending in stone:
[...] Beloved at Rest.¹⁷

Again and again her lambent intelligence investigates but never exhausts the darkness it nonetheless penetrates:

Missing you is like
wandering in an empty circle [...]

Did your ashes
turn back into you?

Tell Me!¹⁸

This nimbus of introspection descends in "Winter," the poet contemplating yet another steep, personal angle and within the unfolding of "Winter," plural,

14 Brim Beckerman, "Son On Television," 32.

15 Ibid.

16 Brim Beckerman, "The Widow," 52; "Loss," 53.

17 Brim Beckerman, "After Cremation" (ll.1-2, 4 and 6), 46.

18 Brim Beckerman, "Tell Me!" (ll.1-2, 13-14), 54.

destabilizing positions.¹⁹ Poetry is not equipped for life in a world where spouses die: “Death, you begin to understand, is irrevocable,” she admits.²⁰ Brim Beckerman is a poet who endures more than the pains of composition, for whom writing is a matter of insight through confrontation with memory and the harsh reality of loss. Gradually grief goes to quieter places in “The Ghost of Me” and “I Wonder If?”²¹ The vision of reality which these elegies offer is transformative, moving beyond the given circumstances of time and place. Survival depends on great fortitude, but also the ability to face the hard truth that life is forever changed.

After this, the conversation between new and old things deepens steadily and wonderfully in her work, where poems such as “I have Meandered” allow Brim Beckerman to traverse a vast and challenging psychological terrain. Her irreverent humor, and oblique angle on reality and an afterlife comes through in “Full House.” “Sound the alarm/No space in heaven!/See the warning signs on the Obit page: Beloveds, the Kindest, the Devoted/dying like flies,” she writes with disarming frankness, a somber reminder that a poet must delight as well as instruct.²² She does not absolve us from all the shades of life in black and white, but suggests through gradually changing content and subject, how, in time, sorrow can be managed, and, some days at least, banished to a quieter place within. Suddenly alive to the sweetness of living in one’s body in summer, Brim Beckerman makes us aware of the quickening of her poetic senses.²³ “Snorkeling for the First Time,”²⁴ signals new adventures and new pathways first pondered in “I Wonder If”:

I wonder if
time and space were reversed
the moon setting before it rose
tide rolling only out

could I walk backward
into a sunny night

find the book I lost
the road not taken
or the boy I loved
once and for all?

This motif gains momentum through the collection, as her shaping intelligence presents elements of personal experience in “Predicament” and in the closing tercet renders them representative:

19 Brim Beckerman, “Winter,” 47.

20 Brim Beckerman, “A New Widow” (II.17–18), 49.

21 Brim Beckerman, “The Ghost of Me,” 59; “I Wonder If,” 60.

22 Brim Beckerman, “A New Widow” (II.1–6), 70.

23 Brim Beckerman, “Heat,” 84.

24 Brim Beckerman, “Snorkeling for the First Time,” 63–64.

Long ago
 I lived with my people.
 A tall boy came near.
 I welcomed him.
 We made our own circle
 where he stayed
 for many seasons, decades,
 until called away.
 I remained,
 near friends, but alone.

Now one of my people
 wishes to claim me.
 Do I stay with yesterday
 or walk backward
 into a new life?²⁵

Love after Love characterizes the lyric poems leading into and beyond “The Boy from West Orange.”

The Boy from West Orange
 has grown
 tender
 serious renowned.

Beyond brambles
 fallen trees
 wild columbine
 now, fifty years later
 he reaches for my hand.

Past and present
 over-powered,
 denial, impossible.²⁶

25 Brim Beckerman, “Predicament,” 72.

26 Brim Beckerman, “The Boy from West Orange [New Jersey],” 74. The poem and series of poems marks a new phase with the cardiologist, Dr. Jeremiah Stamler (1919–2022), whom she married in 2004.

27 Brim Beckerman, “Snorkeling for the First Time,” 75.

28 Brim Beckerman, “Travel,” 68.

There is a personal intensity, a sense that much is at stake. “I’m in someone’s heart/but I don’t quite fit,” she writes in “Second Time Around” (ll.1–2).²⁷ That taut navigation is reiterated in “Travel”: “In someone else’s house/I’m not sure where the floor boards squeak” (ll.1–3).²⁸ In this particular sequence Brim Beckerman writes huge poems in small spaces. “Fragment” is a series

of clipped understatements with a well-aimed conclusion.²⁹ “The Unknown” beautifully evokes the largely unrecorded experience of late love within the ineffable privacies of a poem:

What has no one heard?
What has no one said
about the comfort zone
belonging to lovers
who meet
at the edge of sunset
when colors deepen
and lavender gives way to purple?

The unknown
blissful in its power
hovers on the horizon.

Here is a poet of luminous light with her own luminous beauty, which has the power of uncovering the truth she touches. Hidden in the seductive mixture of lapidary sheen and colloquial ease of “Sides” is a reminder that history and our individual lives within history, somehow insist that we forever begin:

Until soft fingers
discreet and silent
unraveled the
tightly woven thread,
there were sides of her
she did not know.

Life, she discovered
is different with
a left-handed lover.³⁰

Here, as elsewhere in this collection, the poet revisits her personal experience, the loves, the losses, while acknowledging the realities of life. Her story is not ordinary. Neither is her poetry confessional: it is the power of memory forming consciousness: landmark moments in a life.

Poems born out of unvarnished daily living are a trademark of Brim Beckerman’s art. A hoarder of memories, casting her mind across many decades in “Ruminations on Birthdays,” she weaves a colloquial tone and vocabulary

29 Brim Beckerman, “Fragment,” 77.

30 Brim Beckerman, “Sides,” 76.

into a feat of artful variation to the point where it becomes revelation. “Age isn’t only a lined face [...] It’s the emptiness of a filled bookcase, / an unexpected quiet, a poem unwrit, / It’s riding neither the wave nor the wave’s crest, / unwilling to make the unfamiliar, familiar.” The Autumnal effect of poems like “Aging” convey the transcendent singularity of her poetic voice. Poetry—as much as aging—is a reality in Brim Beckerman’s world, born out of the watermarks of the self:

Even the spelling is a problem.
Why it looks better with an “e”
 I don’t know,
but that’s the least of it.
Being is the trial
 challenge
 a non-giveaway.

Dullness in the knee
and you know
 “Age.”
Reaching for a glass.
and fingers won’t grasp it?
There is the other hand,
 but that’s not the issue.
The issue is
 the process.

Eat well, exercise,
 but like a recalled catastrophe:
 a tornado or spring flooding
 It’s been, and worse,
 it will return.

Though you may look the other way,
 if your neck will allow,
 age is there, waiting
 waiting
 to have its way.³¹

31 Brim Beckerman, “Aging,” 80.

This personal experience of “Aging” is close to the common reality in which we all have to live if we are to survive with grace. Its tone of comprehension, its courageous speech implies a universal dimension to what Brim Beckerman is voicing.³² Her poetry registers with honesty and delicacy the most intimate felicities and desolations we all know (and can only know) alone.

The *M5 Bus—and Beyond* is a poetry of movement, of journeys, of arrivals and encounters. The energy beating between words—which the poet brings into play in breath, conversational and incremental development units—continually communicates a personal angle and a rhythmic signature. The feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating below thought and feeling, is immediately evident in “I have Meandered” and “Here and there.”³³ The felicity of cadence and rhythm which energize “Old Letters,” with its interlacing half rhymes, flood this love lyric with a particular light.³⁴ The consonantal diction of “I have been collecting all my life”³⁵ and “The Brim Girls” offer a real sense of Gloria’s musicality and resonance. In Sicily (ll.3–14), Brim Beckerman’s realistic narratives come off the page and right into the ear with the apparent ease in which fine poetry attaches itself to memory or the personal vernacular. And yet we catch a glimpse of her shaping a poem in the two versions of “On a clear night” and “Hey Diddle Diddle,” handling and testing a line until it conducted the right musical strain from the lives before and after.³⁶ The evidence is in the perfected feel of the second version, where her writing is characteristically fluid and consonantal. There is so much to savor in her rich consonantal language and changing rhythms—the vernacular of New York—which combine to create an instantly recognizable style, *sui generis*. But perhaps what is most striking is how intimately bound up sound and meaning are in Brim Beckerman’s vocal authenticity where the path into and through experience involves being true to the actual givens of her life. True to her own solitude, Brim Beckerman understands that deeply personal experience is what allows her to speak so immediately to others and links us most vitally to each other. Her grace in giving and receiving “as her various houses over the years became second homes to hundreds, and she welcomed anyone and everyone in for a cup of coffee and good conversation” is a tradition not only handed down in life but also in her art.³⁷

One of the challenges in writing about Gloria Brim Beckerman’s poetry is not to lose oneself in the rich array of themes and concerns of *The M5 Bus—and Beyond* which would mean missing something truly valuable. We return to poets for their unique take on life and because their individual musical language operates on mind, heart and body and remains in our ear. We return because their singular shaping of sound and sense seems so absolutely true and unimaginable in any other way that we want to listen repeatedly:

32 See, for example, Brim Beckerman, “Heat,” 84.

33 Brim Beckerman, “I have meandered...,” 71; “Here and There,” 62.

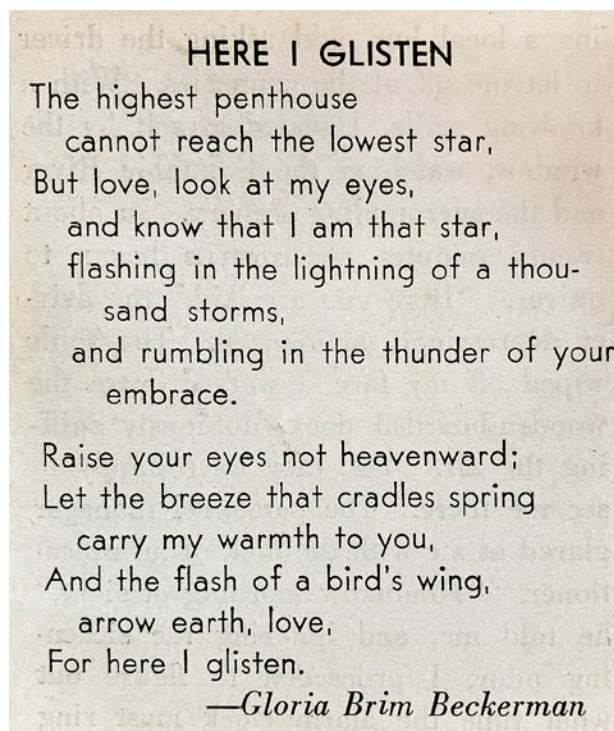
34 Brim Beckerman, “Old Letters,” 29.

35 Brim Beckerman, “I have been collecting all my life,” 7.

36 Brim Beckerman, “Hey Diddle Diddle,” 90.

37 Gloria Brim Beckerman, Obituary, *New York Times*, April 25, 2021.

Figure 27.2: Photograph of
Brim Beckerman's typed
poem (Collection of Karen
and Michael Beckerman).³⁸



Here, in an early love lyric written when she was sixteen years old, the Latinate and the local go hand in glove. The poem is an arrival and setting forth: a treasured talisman of memory for Gloria and her family, and a reminder of the soldiers who packed a poem written by their child or spouse. To be reminded of this, of the value attached to intensely expressed human feeling, is a reminder how one must never forget the power of a true poem. What matters most is the value attached to a poem intimately experienced and well-remembered, a poem in which time and history and thought and self all merge in a most alluring way.

It is always difficult to gauge the impact a writer makes. A poet's reputation is not fame, it is more subterranean. "Poetry is a dividend of what you are," Czeslaw Milosz wrote on his work in the English tongue. As devoted wife, mother, grandmother, solicitous friend to so many in the wider neighborhood of her life, Brim Beckerman has put life before art. The dividend is poetry of integrity and humanity, art as benevolent and as unpretentious and indeed as undeluded as I imagine the woman was herself. It is this simplicity that costs everything which makes Gloria Beckerman such an irresistible poet, capable of lyric rapture and tragic meditation.

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38 See also "Moon shine," 43.