

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

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Column #36



POETS PRAISE BAG LADIES

The California bag lady turns 48 this year!

By Wanda Sue Parrott

WHEN YOU SPOT a woman pushing a shopping cart full of bulging sacks, do you assume she is a “bag lady” like the women described by poets Gail Denham and Paul Samuels, whose poems appeared in the 2012 *GOLDEN WORDS* anthology of American Senior Poets Laureate Award winners?

Or do you side with 1999 National Senior Poet Laureate Emery L. Campbell, whose humorous depiction of a non-homeless bag lady was written in 2005?

The bag lady commonly seen nationwide on city streets today first appeared 48 years ago in California. According to *American Psychosis*, by the time Ronald Reagan assumed governorship in 1967, “California had already deinstitutionalized more than half of its state hospital patients. That same year, California passed the landmark Lanterman-Petris-Short (LPS) Act, which virtually abolished involuntary hospitalization except in extreme cases.”

No one knows the identity of the first actual bag lady.

The unnamed humorous woman in the narrative poem by Emery L. Campbell defies Merriam-Webster’s contemporary definition of bag lady: *A homeless woman who roams the streets of a city carrying her possessions in shopping bags.*

How would you define her? In fact, how would you define a man who pushes a sack-filled shopping cart?



Gail Denham, Sunriver, Oregon, is a self-employed writer, antiques-collectables dealer, and writing workshop teacher at Northwest Writing Conferences. She sells poetry for publication and enters contests. This free verse won the Oregon Senior Poet Laureate Award in 2012. Contact her at booksgal2@gmail.com

HELEN

Sometimes she drew a crowd, did Helen. It was
the clothes, bright, crazy colored skirts, wild tops,
floppy hats, striped long stockings.

Every Tuesday Helen was first into the 23rd
Street Thrift, moving other patrons away like
a reverse magnet as she dug in the bins.

One dollar a bag yielded her acres of wild stock.
Outside, Jen pulled her basket even with Helen's.
"Whatcha' find today?" the three-layered woman asked.

"This scarf suits you, don't you think?" Helen draped
the woman's faded dirty hair with the filmy paisley.
Nearby, Arthur couldn't speak, but his eyes grew round

With appreciation over the Hawaiian shirt in outrageous
oranges. Shuffling close, Trevor grinned his thanks
as Helen handed him a decorated tin for his cigarette butts.

Helen had been a teacher, high school art. Programs were
cut – band, football, drama, art. Six months her savings
carried her. Then condo and car were repossessed.

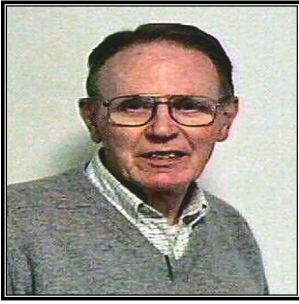
Casual friends peeled off like too-ripe peach skins. Her
world was wide as the city, narrow as the small shed she shared
with Elsie and Emmy, twins who'd once sung and danced on stage.

No one called the shots for Helen now. Trading supplied
immediate needs. Now and then temporary jobs dumped
coins into her rusty baking powder can.

Amazing how generous churches were, serving her soup
with Proverbs. Once a week showers at shelters prompted her
to send one more job application – no one ever replied.

For now, it was enough. She'd need a dentist one day --
and far in the future she envisioned a pile of bright rags
in the far corner of their shed – a bundle that no longer moved.

~ Gail Denham



Emery L. Campbell, Lawrenceville, Ga., won the National Senior Poet Laureate Award in 1999. A retired businessman and aviator, he is a master of droll humor and surprise twists, as this bag lady poem reveals in traditional rhymed iambic pentameter. Contact him at elcampbell08@comcast.net

BAG LADY

A woman, stooped and old, is walking down
the street. She drags two plastic garbage bags
behind her. Every now and then the brown
one sheds a twenty dollar bill. The hag's

accosted by a cop who asks her, "Ma'am,
are you aware that twenty dollar bills
are falling from your bag?" She mutters, "Damn!
I should have known there'd likely be some spills.

These bags are worn and really not too strong,
and dragging them was bound to cause some holes.
I'd best go back to have a look along
the way I've come. It's not as if I've rolls

of money I can spare. I thank you for
the warning." "Not so fast," replies the cop.
"I wish you'd tell me just a little more
about that money. You've got quite a crop

of twenties. Where'd you get them? Did you steal
the lot?" "Oh no," she says. "You see, the ground
behind my house backs up to where it's real
nearby the ball field parking lot. Around

the time a game's to start a lot of fans
are used to peeing through the bushes there,
directly on my plants. The park's got cans
for that. Those people don't take proper care.

So with my big hedge clipper revving true,
I stand behind the bushes and I wait,
and when a beer-soaked sprinkler sticks it through
it's, 'Twenty bucks or thingie meets its fate!'"

"Hey, good idea," laughs the cop. "OK,
I hope it works the way you tell it, yup.
The other bag, what's in it, by the way?"
The woman says, "Not all of them pay up..."

~ Emery L. Campbell



Paul Samuels, Sandy Springs, Ga., won the 2012 Senior Poet Laureate Honor Scroll Award with this free verse. He is the retired owner of real estate training schools and is a licensed broker in S. Car. and Ga. Paul is Co-Chairman of the Poetry in the Schools Program of Georgia Poetry Society. Contact him at www.paulsamuels.com

TWO VIEWS FROM THE FOOT OF THE 59th STREET BRIDGE

She is elegant in her long flowing gown,
an appropriate color for royalty...purple.
Silver haired, survivor of many years in
a man's world, back before "the changes."
She too has come "a long way, baby."
On the ground floor of a high rise,
high priced, Fifty Ninth Street East.
Sitting at a fine wood table
in front of the window,
daintily eating wheat toast & strawberries,
drinking coffee and wondering
if she has room for
orange juice.

Glancing through her *Wall Street Journal*
she is oblivious of me at the foot of the bridge
or the woman below the bridge,
who came a long way on another road.
Now encamped in a cardboard box,
with all her belongings in a shopping cart.
robed in rags, too dirty to tell their color,
her hair, also silver, but not quite so bright.
Sitting on the concrete
leaning against a wire mesh fence,
scavenging through some food scraps
which she lifted out of a deli garbage can,
muttering something about
giving her right arm for
a glass of
orange juice.

~ *Paul Samuels*

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