

17

Dorothy Bevis

1904-1996

Neither Mom nor Pop was each other's first choice. Mom had felt special about a guy named Horace. Horace married someone else, and Mom and her friends were invited to the wedding. "Oh, Holly," said one of her friends, "it should have been you." And Mom, telling the story, added. "I thought so too."

One of the few books on our shelves was a slim volume by Leura Dorothy Bevis, called *Silver Farthing*, published in January 1993, in a limited edition of 325 copies, signed by the author. The first poem picked up on the book's title:

The Silver Farthing
 Oh, foolish the words I'm writing.
 And foolish the songs I sing!
 I'll dance my songs for a farthing,
 And sing my words for a ring.
 One little silver farthing
 One round and golden ring.
 Oh, who will give for the writing,
 and who, the songs I sing,
 One little silver farthing,
 One round and golden ring?

Dorothy was born in Duluth, Minnesota, on 19 April 1904, the daughter and only child of Philemon and Leura Bevis. The name Bevis (or Beauvais) is from Old French; there was neither a Bevis nor a Beauvais in all of England, until the Norman Conquest of 1066.

At some time before 1910, the Bevis family relocated to an apartment at 2910 Sunset Place, Los Angeles, Dorothy being still a child.



Dorothy attended Pomona College, confusingly named since, due to some sort of mixup at the time of its founding in 1879, it is not in Pomona, but in neighboring Claremont. This was undoubtedly where she met Pop, whose own undergraduate college was Claremont.

Silver Farthing includes not a few poems about loves loved and lost. But this one stands out stunningly from the others:

Finis

I have burned your letters.
 The masculine rigidity
 Of the strange black characters
 Has curled swiftly upward
 In small wisps of smoke.
 Each grey page is blackened,
 Scarred and scattered.
 I am glad to see them so,
 And if I could,
 I would burn every word
 That you have ever said to me.
 Why?
 Ah no! I do not hate you!
 I only love you –
 Far too well –
 To wish to keep your memory.

That was Pop.

A Lost Love is not necessarily a Last Love, but this one was going to be. Wrote Dorothy sometime afterward:

A Wine No Man

I would be splendid in defeat!
 No shriveled thing from which
 The bitter blood dries slowly out,
 No cord unraveled, stitch
 By stitch, until the end hangs loose,
 A worn and frayed-out thing.
 My ears must hear the silver sound
 Of bugles trumpeting,
 The wash of seas, the sweep of tides,
 The storm of rain and wind,
 A hammer stroke in cloudless skies,
 A cry no man could find.
 I would be splendid in defeat,
 My mouth a crimson stain,
 Kissed fiercely by the passing years,
 A wine no man could drain.

And that was the end of that.

On graduating from Pomona in 1927, Dorothy took a course in a business college, but soon realized that her real interest was in books. In 1928, she was hired at Dawson's Book Shop, then located at 627 South Grand Street, famous for the breadth of its offerings. Dorothy went to work there as a clerk. She became friends with Ellen Shafter, the presiding figure in the second floor rare book area. Soon they were sharing her apartment at 215 Sunset Place. Dorothy remained there until 1939, when she went to work for San Pasqual Press, and served as an associate editor for the University of California Press. Also at the University of California, she earned an MA in Library Science.

It was at the Book Shop that she and a friend met the poet Hamlin Garland (1860-1940). This was in 1932, when he was 72, and she was getting together the material for *Silver Farthing*.

She wrote to him afterward, enclosing some of her own work:

2915 Sunset Place
Los Angeles, March 20

Dear Mr Garland:

I have tasted over and over again, the delight of those hours with you, Sunday. I wonder if you know what you really do for people? We came away feeling that no matter how turbulent the world, how reckless Hitler might be, what the effect of an upset economic system . . . there is a fundamental grace and beauty, a sanity and balance, a wisdom and a harmony. You are those things, and with all the stimulation you impart, you give, too, a quietude of spirit that leads to a depth and more graciously considered living.

I am going to see the flowers, tomorrow, and shall enjoy them more because of our conversation.

There are two snow poems which I particularly like, and I hope you will too!

With happy memories of the "silver study" and treasuring the acquaintance of its occupant –

Most sincerely,
Leura Dorothy Bevis

Hitler was not all that reckless. but in 1941 war did finally break out, and the country began to be nervous about its coastlines. New responsibilities fell on the Coast Guard, and a women's auxiliary service, the SPARS, was created to help. Dorothy, who since 1934 had been working at the UW Library, took leave and joined the Coast Guard's 13th district, headquartered at the Puget Sound Navy Yard. Her executive ability earned her the rank of Lieutenant (jg). Here she is, chatting with visiting First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt:



And with that glimpse, we will leave her for a moment.

Dorothy was of course known in our family, and I was aware of her when, straight out of Conservatory and knowing the classical texts only in English, I was applying to graduate schools. Those were the days when a student knowing no Chinese could be accepted for a graduate program in Chinese; the field was just getting itself together. Of the four schools to which I applied, three accepted me. None went so far as to offer me financial support, but Seattle did mention it as a future possibility. That (and not, I think, the presence there of Dorothy), decided it. To Seattle I duly went, finished the epic cross-continental drive in a car running on only five cylinders, located the campus, parked on a tree-shaded street two blocks north of it, and promptly went to sleep. I was awakened next morning by the sound of buckeyes drumming on the car roof. I went up to the nearest house and rented a room.

And there I lived for the next eight years.

At some point or other, I looked up Dorothy Bevis at the Library School. Of course she knew who I was. We became sort of friends, and I visited at her apartment now and then. She developed an allergy to wheat, and had to dispose of many cans of Campbell's soup. She gave them to me. Which was a break, since, having no money at all, I was reduced to eating things like blackberries gathered from the railroad switch yard at the bottom of the hill. Once when she was ill, I visited her in the hospital, and left with her my copy of *The Young Pitcher* by Ohio native Zane Grey, one of Grey's early works, reflecting his own college experience as a baseball player (I was already assembling what would later become the largest library of Ohio literature outside Columbus). Dorothy more or less concealed her amusement at such a nonliterary gesture.

We finally quarreled, over the matter of the Library School's foreign language requirement. The school didn't accept Chinese. Given the obvious directions in which post-WW2 librarianship was going, I thought they should. And on that note, we parted, not to meet again.

The star student at the Library School in those days was Loretta Gibbs, the Chinese wife of a fellow student. Here, by way of supplying the otherwise missing farewell, is her memory of Dorothy:

Miss Bevis treated us students like equals. We often had tea together after class. I was a slow learner, and lacked the American cultural background needed to grasp some ideas presented in the class lectures. Miss Bevis saw that and she was patient with me, and was generous in giving me extra instruction. Ker [her second child] arrived during my finals week. Miss Bevis sent an assistant to my hospital bed to let me write my final exam there. After graduation I was appointed to positions I don't think I deserved. My first job was at the brand new Seattle downtown main public library's children's room. My next job was in a branch public library near our house. I could walk to work. I think Miss Bevis might have put in a good word, to get that job for me.

I once happened to mention to Loretta my own connection with Dorothy. She stared at me, and said, "She might have been your mother."

I tried to explain that, if it had been her, it wouldn't have been me.