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Introducing the SRPR Illinois Poet:
Yvonne Zipter

Yvonne Zipter's poetry collection *The Patience of Metal* was runner-up to John Frederick Nims's book for the Poetry Society of America's Melville Cane Award and was a Lambda Literary Award Finalist. Individual poems have appeared in numerous periodicals, including *The Willow Review*, *Rambunctious Review*, *modern words*, and *The Evergreen Chronicles*, as well as anthologies such as *My Lover Is a Woman* and *The Poetry of Sex*. In addition, she is the author of the nonfiction books *Ransacking the Closet* and *Diamonds Are a Dyke's Best Friend* and the nationally syndicated column "Inside Out." She is a recipient of the Sprague-Todes Literary Award and holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College. She lives in Chicago with her partner of 12 years, Kathy Forde, and their two retired racing greyhounds, Nacho Drive and Yoko Wink.

The Structuring Eye/I of Deflection—
A Discussion with Yvonne Zipter

SRPR: Have you always worked in editing?—I know you have worked on the women's collective *Black Maria*, on *Hot Wire*, you write the column *Inside/Out*, and are a senior copy editor for The University of Chicago Press.

Yvonne: I have also taught writing, which I really loved to do, especially in adult education classes where everybody in the class is so appreciative and really wants to be there. But I never could figure out how to make grading and preparing less time-consuming, so I realized I had to do something else if I wanted to be a writer.

SRPR: Ah, yes, the terrible dilemma. I worry that if I leave academia, something in me would die, some kind of paying attention to ideas, and that I would think of nothing interesting to write. On the other hand, being nearly swallowed whole by teaching, administration and editing SRPR, I've lost not just poems, stories and articles, but whole books! Writers' colonies rescue me sometimes, but only temporarily.

Yvonne: When I do go away to colonies, I tend to write a lot of poems—they just flood. Maybe only four are any good, but the release and time to experiment are fantastic. One of the things I like about writing poetry, though, is that I *can* do it in small snatches—at lunch, during breaks, at night. With the novel, I can't train myself to do that.

SRPR: I'm just the opposite. The poems require the huge blocks of time. I can get articles and stories started and then use smaller blocks of time to keep them going. However, the more intensely I am thinking about something, the larger the circumscribed temporal space has to be. Days, at least. There is a great deal of carryover from teaching into my writing though. Is there a carryover into your creative work from your editing?

Yvonne: My job gives me the opportunity to read carefully types of texts I wouldn't ordinarily read, and odd readings often feed my work. Some archival material I was editing actually became the basis of a novel. Some of the science stuff is really interesting.

SRPR: Is that where you got the finely detailed image of the dead red-winged blackbirds in "Punctuation"?

Yvonne: That was actually from a news item—I was struck by it. Those kinds of images collected from my editing, or the news, or wherever, often push into my poems.

SRPR: Even the attention you have to pay to grammar and punctuation in your work seems to have formed the governing metaphors for two of my favorite poems of yours in this issue: "Bad Grammar" and "Punctuation."

Yvonne: Yes, grammar and punctuation were never my strong suite. I operated pretty intuitively in those areas before I began editing, but I've had to pay strict attention to them, to notice why they work the way they do.

SRPR: Noticing how, or wondering why, something is happening at a formal or structural level is quite often parlayed into a structuring or conceptual metaphor in my own poems as well, and that grasp and usage of design I think is one of the things that drew me into your poems. I love all the places "Punctuation" goes, while adhering absolutely to the conceptual form the metaphor de-

mands. You open with comparing to the “teleology of syntax” the image of finding at the end of every passage the absence caused by your mother’s death. One kind of teleology in the speaker’s life is compared to that of grammar, of the form of language. The poem then jump-cuts to those thousands of dead, red-winged blackbirds we mentioned earlier, dotting the field like “a thousand/ small interruptions in the continuity/ of a long sentence about grace and splendor...” and then jump-cuts again to another comparison between multiple points of view on the design of their “repose” to the imagined *meaning* of the mother’s death: her “arms cradling/ the last of her life like a child.” The final image is an image of form, fleshed—an image of syntactical teleology. This is a gorgeous poem, one that must have required a great deal of time and personal growth for that kind of deflection of the personal grief into a conceptual frame or architectonic.

Yvonne: I think a lot of why I write poetry is that at first I feel drawn emotionally to something, but then, the poem becomes more about why I’m drawn, about the emotion of being attracted than about the thing that drew me, about the form or design of my thinking and imaging about that thing.

SRPR: You can see that clearly in “Flamingo.” In fact, in most of your poems, especially those about your mother.

Yvonne: I tried writing “Grace Lesson” for a long time, which is another poem about my mother. It took years. I think that after she died, I was trying to put everything into one poem. Then I realized that wasn’t going to work, that I would have to focus on one thing. So I focused on just going to that lingerie store where she was fitted for a prosthesis and bra after her surgery. I was pretty young, so there was some embarrassment for me then. And I picked up on what seemed to be even a blaming of her on one hand and a moralizing “look on the bright side” on the other. Some of the things that were occurring to me as I was writing the poem later would never have occurred to me then. It took time to be able to swing around to the recognition of her point of view, what she was going through, and to the appreciation of her humor in the face of what must have been private moments of fear and embarrassment, of being measured for a lack and for an artificial replacement.

SRPR: The beginning image of shame you impose upon the surgical scar is transposed at the end to an image of cleansing, and it’s the humor that allows the image to work like that, as it so perfectly coalesces with the mother’s attitude toward the prosthesis. Seeing things through more than one lens takes living time for reflection as well as deflection into a form, as well as thinking and creating time. That poem is another one of your most powerfully structured.