

AMANDA POWELL

Stitch in Time

Mrs. Morton was great for adages.
But I was eight. Convention,
or invention? It all rang from above
as chalk dust rose in ceremonial clouds
around her Palmer Method hand.
“When It Rains, It Pours,” she’d say tartly
when asked her name. I gnawed
my pencil at the mysteries of that new school.
“Waste Not, Want Not, Children!”

We Used Both Sides of the Paper, Scraped
All The (tasty) Paste from the Jar,
scolded baby siblings for not
Polishing Their Plates, for Mrs. Morton.

At a strange house in alien fields things
got worse. Wind bit on the wait
for the school bus. Shadows
stretched Marine Blue from the box
of Crayolas, across the first snow,
under the grown-ups’ eyes.

Even, pale in her yellow cardigan,
one mid-morning, Mrs. Morton’s: “Children!
Children.” Terribly, her voice broke.
“A Terrible Thing Has Happened.
Our President Has Been Shot.”

November wept all night, but Mrs. Morton
even so would arise tomorrow
and Review Assignments, which made it possible
to bear (the day school closed) on TV
down the halls of our dark house, the rat-tat
Catafalque (I Looked It Up),
that unbearable Riderless Horse,

the Little Boy and his Big Sister
(nearly my age). Their impossibly-like-mine
beautiful mother. “Children, You Will
Remember This All Your Lives. Children,
Memory Is The Source Of Wisdom.”

Naturally the spirit was willing. Anything!
for Mrs. Morton. But Multiplication
Tables Past Eleven were a thing never
drilled at my old school, let alone
Long Division. While others Carried Forward,
I raised my hand.

Deeply, “Yes?”

Then I draw near her gleaming desk
and set down my woe.
The pearl-buttoned cable-knit hovers
to survey the place I’ve put 8 twice
into 15, and carried one. “Amanda. *God
Helps Those Who Help Themselves.*”

I go back to my seat with the message clear
—Hauling on Bootstraps—but puzzled.
Is Mrs. Morton... Messenger?
Or Source? It’s *her* help I want. I bow
to retie a scuffed oxford. Under
the desk I count on my fingers: Oh.
One, carry 7. And lo, at the dais
my wobbly column this time does
find favor in her sight. Mrs. Morton
nods. Then she winks.

I spend four months, weekdays, in the odor
of linseed and Plain Brown Soap (“Nothing
Beats It”). Then one dawn we shiver
in the driveway and a family friend hurries
the suitcase, mother, sister, infant brother
and me into the car, leaving
the house and town we never
ever go back to.

And whether

I have God to thank for Mrs. Morton
or the other way round
or something else again—I do.

KAREN VON FELTEN

Approaching the Crossing, 2004
Etching and Aquatint, 9 x 6 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

Amanda Powell's poems have appeared in *Agni, Hunger Mountain, Partisan Review, Ploughshares, Poetry Northwest, Women's Review of Books, and Sinister Wisdom*. Her translations include Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (*The Answer/La Respuesta*, 2009). An NEA Fellowship funds her current translation-in-progress of the novel *El gato de sí mismo* by Uriel Quesada. She teaches Spanish and Latin American literature at the University of Oregon in Eugene.