

Rift

POEMS BY

Barbara Helfgott Hyett

Springing back after a split

Barbara Helfgott Hyett's poetry of 'renewal'

AT BROOKLINE HIGH SCHOOL, through most of the 1990s, Barbara Helfgott Hyett and her husband spoke to students about marriage. The couple, who had been high school sweethearts in Atlantic City, NJ and moved together to Brookline after marrying, spoke about how they kept their decades-long marriage strong. They were held up as evidence that two people could maintain an honest, healthy and strong marriage. Helfgott Hyett believed in the marriage as strongly as she hoped the students did—in some talks, she said that she believed in marriage as strongly as most people believe in God.



Barbara Helfgott Hyett

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Hot finds

And then she got a phone call from the husband of her husband's lover.

For some reason, she started taking notes as the man told her what he knew of the relationship. She found the pages recently, and they are covered with indecipherable scribbles—the work of a hand connected to a mind

For some reason, she started taking notes as the man told her what he knew of the relationship. She found the pages recently, and they are covered with indecipherable scribbles—the work of a hand connected to a mind that could not quite comprehend what it was hearing.

that could not quite comprehend what it was hearing. "I was blindsided," Helfgott Hyett said. *Rift*, her new book of poetry, is her attempt to explain that feeling.

A scholar's non-scholarly work

HELFGOTT HYETT HAD PREVIOUSLY taken a scholarly approach to writing poetry. Her four books—which feature the Holocaust, Atlantic City, Christopher Columbus and biology—were painstakingly researched, with Helfgott Hyett either delving into several books or interviewing hundreds of people (every living lighthouse attendant who ever worked in Atlantic City for one book, every soldier she could find who ever witnessed a Nazi death camp for another) before starting to compose her poetry. She tried to start the set of poems that became *Rift* the same way, picking out the story of Noah to use as a potential lens because he and his wife had two sons, just like she and her husband.

She soon abandoned that approach, which had worked so well for her previous work (her 1992 book of poems, *The Double Reckoning of Christopher Columbus*, which began with exten-

sive research of Columbus' diary, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize). The story of how *Rift* became different—how she adopted an intensely personal style of writing—explains how Helfgott Hyett found her independence after her 32-year marriage ended.

Soon after her husband left the house the couple had shared since moving to Brookline, Helfgott Hyett struggled to put her life back together. Her husband handled the couple's finances, and had managed to "clean us out," as she put it. She had taken on several roommates to afford living in the house, and was running 10 miles a day. She weighed 98 lbs., and none of her clothes fit her anymore.

One of her friends suggested the two start walking to the Boston Public Library on Mondays to work on their poetry. The walk would be therapeutic, her friend said, and once at the library they could work in peace. The walks became an anchor in her week, and Helfgott Hyett began to work on her Noah poetry. "My friends saved my life," she said.

Others soon joined her walking group, and life seemed to improve. Then came a Monday morning when Helfgott Hyett, hobbled by a recent knee surgery, could not make the walk to the library. The walking group met at her house instead, gathered around a table and worked on free-association writing. They would pick a phrase from a newspaper and work on writing poetry around it, stopping every few minutes to compare each other's work. The approach worked, and the walking group evolved into a writer's group.

That technique helped her find a more personal voice for the poems she wanted to write about the end of her marriage. She did write poems about Noah, but in a much more personal voice.

A marriage ends, and a book begins

HELFGOTT HYETT DIVIDED *Rift* into four chapters. The first opens the book with a set of personal poems about her marriage and its dissolution. Most of the poems are short, and allusions to her story are easy to spot (and might ring familiar to anyone who read all or parts of an extensive *Boston Globe* feature series written in 2004 about her family as her sons, one straight and one gay, both planned weddings in the wake of the legalization of gay marriage).

Her next chapter features poems inspired by a Bernini sculpture depicting the Greek myth of Apollo chasing Daphne—in the sculpture, at the moment before the sun god Apollo would catch Daphne, her father, the river god Peneus, turns her into a tree. Helfgott Hyett examines the sculpture, and the story, from several different perspectives. She ultimately sees the story as one of Peneus' betrayal of his daughter—"He could have saved her, but instead he turned her into a tree," she said. The sculpture is pictured on the book's cover.

Rift's third chapter concerns Helfgott Hyett's reentry into the dating world after her divorce—a chapter she said her sons jokingly call "the harlot chapter." That subject will be the focus of her next project, a prose book about the 69 men she dated since the end of her marriage—and the four men with whom she had significant relationships.

Rift's third chapter concerns Helfgott Hyett's reentry into the dating world after her divorce—a chapter she said her sons jokingly call "the harlot chapter."

The last chapter is a hard, critical look at the world. Helfgott Hyett said she has always considered herself a witness to the world, but this is her first attempt at judging its merits. She said this chapter aims to share the understanding she has received from the suffering she has endured.

Helfgott Hyett stays humble about *Rift's* prospects for success. "It will have a small readership," she said, adding that if she was lucky enough to win a Pulitzer, "it might sell 5,000 copies." She continues to meet with her writers' group, in the meantime, and teaches poetry workshops from her Washington Square home. Each of her workshops start with the intention of getting her students published—which brings her at least as much excitement as when her own work is printed. ■

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