

2012

A Mind Like This

Susan Blackwell Ramsey

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples>

Ramsey, Susan Blackwell, "A Mind Like This" (2012). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters*. 148.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/148>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Nebraska Press at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.



[Buy the Book](#)

A MIND

PRAIRIE SCHOONER BOOK PRIZE IN POETRY | EDITOR KWAME DAWES

[Buy the Book](#)

LIKE THIS

Susan Blackwell Ramsey

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN AND LONDON

[Buy the Book](#)

© 2012 by the Board of Regents
of the University of Nebraska

Acknowledgments for the use of
copyrighted material appear on
pages xii–xiii, which constitute an
extension of the copyright page.

All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United
States of America



Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Ramsey, Susan Blackwell.
A mind like this / Susan
Blackwell Ramsey.
p. cm. — (Prairie Schooner
Book Prize in Poetry)
Poems.
ISBN 978-0-8032-4338-5
(pbk.: alk. paper)
I. Title.
PS3618.A4785M56 2012
811'.6—dc23
2012004732

Set in Granjon by Bob Reitz.
Designed by Nathan Putens.

[Buy the Book](#)

*For Dorothy Blackwell, who taught me to read.
Thanks to you I've always felt safe.*

*And for Wayne Ramsey, my luckiest break—
and the only person in the world who reads
poetry but doesn't write it.*

[Buy the Book](#)

Which of you is literary, and
which one likes to dance?

NICHOLAS DELBANCO

What Remains

[Buy the Book](#)

[Buy the Book](#)

CONTENTS

Source Acknowledgments *xii*

A MIND LIKE THIS *i*

Pickled Heads: St. Petersburg *3*

Louise Erdrich Learning Ojibiwemowin *5*

Tell Me If You've Heard This One *7*

Kalamazoo Decides She Likes Her Name *9*

“And All Trades, Their Gear and
Tackle and Trim” *10*

Boliche *11*

Peripheral: Emerson, 1847 *13*

Knitting Lace *15*

The Duc de Saint-Simon Buys
Lady Murasaki a Drink *17*

January, Tulips *18*

Gaudeamus, Full Band Version *19*

A Mind Like This *21*

The Comfort of Pickup Trucks *23*

Why I Hate Storytellers *24*

Aftereffects of Bell's Palsy 25
Ode to My Bladder 26
Outside Interests 28
Learning Curves 30
Mount St. Helen's, May 18, 1980 32

SEXING THE ALLIGATOR 35

The Sword 37
Mariah Educates the Sensitive 39
Crocheting Chaos 42
Children in Church 44
Beads 45
The Kalamazoo Mastodon 46
I'm in Love with Leonard Woolf 47
In Order to Swallow, a Frog Has
to Close Its Eyes 49
Neruda in Kalamazoo 51
Deadheading with Kellee 52
Valentine's Day in Kalamazoo 54
Taking Jimmy Stewart to Bed 55
The Year Hits Perimenopause 56
Sow's Ear 57
Lilium Orientale 58
How to Seduce Henry David Thoreau 60
To a Picky Eater at Love's Table 62
August 63

Letter to Matt on the Opening
Day of Deer Season 64
Stalling 66
Amplification 68
Sexing the Alligator 69
The Genome for Luck 70
Lidian Emerson Watches Her House
Burn, Concord, July 23, 1872 71

PATTERN AND GROUND 73

Consider Hairs 75
Emerson's Eyes 77
The Only Other Female in the House 79
Egg Tempera Painting, Koo Schadler,
Kalamazoo Institute of Arts 80
The Tuesday before Our Friday Visit 81
Afterthought 82
Meeting Edward Lear in Heaven 83
Elegy from Halfway Up the Drive 84
Our Third Wedding Reception
This Year Hits Its Stride 86
Pattern and Ground 87
Washing My Husband's Kilt Hose:
A 32-Bar Reel 89

SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Atlanta Review: “Children in Church”

CALYX: “Stalling,” “Why I Hate Storytellers” (as “Storytellers”)

The Hiram Review: “I’m in Love with Leonard Woolf,” “Consider Hairs”

The Indiana Review: “Tell Me If You’ve Heard This One”

Margie: The American Journal of Poetry: “Lidian Emerson Watches Her House Burn, Concord, July 23, 1872”

Marlboro Review: “The Genome for Luck,” “Sexing the Alligator”

New Poems from the Third Coast: An Anthology of Michigan Poets [Wayne State University Press, 2000]: “Aftereffects of Bell’s Palsy,” “Our Third Wedding Reception This Year Hits Its Stride”

Passages North: “Lilium Orientale”

Poetry East: “Amplification,” “And All Trades, Their Gear and Tackle and Trim,” “Gaudeamus, Full Band Version,” “Pattern and Ground”

Poetry Northwest: “Emerson’s Eyes,” “Letter to Matt on the Opening Day of Deer Season,” “A Mind Like This,” “Outside Interests,” “To a Picky Eater at Love’s Table,” “Washing My Husband’s Kilt Hose: A 32-Bar Reel”

Prairie Schooner: “Peripheral: Emerson, 1847,” “Pickled Heads: St. Petersburg”

Primavera: “Aftereffects of Bell’s Palsy”

Rhino: “Mariah Educates the Sensitive,” “Louise Erdrich Learning Ojibiwemowin”

River Styx: “The Year Hits Perimenopause”

Southern Poetry Review: “The Comfort of Pickup Trucks” (as “Home-town Funerals”), “In Order to Swallow, a Frog Has to Close Its Eyes,”

Southern Review: “Boliche,” “Elegy from Halfway Up the Drive,”
“January Tulips,” “Mount St. Helen’s, May 18, 1980,” “Neruda in
Kalamazoo”

Tar River: “Stalling”

“Lidian Emerson Watches Her House Burn, Concord, July 23, 1872”
won the 2007 Marjorie J. Wilson award from *Margie: The American
Journal of Poetry*.

“Pickled Heads: St. Petersburg” was chosen by David Wagoner for
Best American Poetry 2009.

With thanks to ~

Gail Martin, my first, best reader

The teachers ~

in Kalamazoo: Conrad Hilberry, Diane Seuss, John Rybicki, David
Dodd Lee, Scott Bade

at Notre Dame: Cornelius Eady, Joyelle McSweeney, Orlando Menes,
Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Valerie Sayers (and Coleen Hoover for
making it all work)

The Sunday Group: Kit Almy, Marion Boyer, Danna Ephland, Conrad
Hilberry, Gail Martin, Christine Horton

Dawgs, in all its ever-changing forms

Martha Silano, volcano of daring

Judy Myers, Betsy Ramsey Bird, Ben Ramsey, and Kate Ramsey,
prime movers

[Buy the Book](#)

A MIND LIKE THIS

[Buy the Book](#)

[Buy the Book](#)

PICKLED HEADS: ST. PETERSBURG

For years they floated in adjacent jars,
two heads on a dusty storage shelf,
abandoned in a back room of the palace:
Mary Hamilton and Charles Mons.

We want to make things last. Salt, sugar, sun
will work, and tannin from chestnut bark, and brains
spread on the skins that toted them, and sometimes
words. But new two hundred years ago—

these “spirits of wine.” (Fermenting’s nature, but
distilling’s art.) Not all steam is water,
just as not all passion’s love. Boil wine,
catch what evaporates, trap that alcohol

and it preserves whatever you drop in,
the head of your wife’s lover, for example—
Peter ordered his queen to display it on her mantle—
or your mistress, killed for infanticide.

They say Great Peter kissed the dead head’s lips.
The bodies sinned, the heads were saved. Don’t be
distracted by stories of Joaquín Murrieta
glaring in a jar in California.

Though he was gunned down by someone named Love,
his problems were political, not erotic.
He really should remind you of Evita,
beautifully embalmed, better than Lenin,

then passed around, hot political potato,
hidden in attics, propped like a doll behind
a movie screen for weeks, deaths unfurling behind her
like a red scarf from Isadora's car.

And even if Jeremy Bentham's head was found
once in a luggage locker in Aberdeen,
once in the front quadrangle being used
as a football by medical students, he died

a natural death and landed in that cabinet,
stuffed, propped, dressed through his own will,
wax head on his shoulders, catastrophe in the drawer,
still convinced Utility was his goal.

The uses the dead are put to by the living.
Peter saved one for hatred, one for love,
and they outlasted hatred, love, and Peter
to become flip sides of Death's two-headed coin.

Heads win. Maybe the story
isn't the heads but Peter, unstoppable
monster consuming youth, a Minotaur
trapped in the labyrinth he built himself.

Finally Catherine freed them. After decades
she found them, observed how well their youth and beauty
were preserved, and had them buried, though no one says
whether bottled or free to stop being beautiful.

LOUISE ERDRICH LEARNING OJIBIWEMOWIN

Two-thirds of Ojibiwemowin is verbs,
and nouns aren't male and female, they're living or dead.
(She's learning the language so she'll get the jokes.)
The word for stone, *asin*, is animate.

If nouns aren't male and female, but living or dead,
what you think you know begins to shift.
Their word for stone, *asin*, is animate
and that universe came from a conversation of stones.

Of course what you know will have to shift
since every language has its limitations.
What's geology but a conversation of stones?
and even we know flint does speak to steel.

But every language has its limitations:
French doesn't really have a word for warm,
flint will only speak its sparks to steel,
there's no word for privacy in Chinese.

French has only *tiede*, which means lukewarm.
Can you have a concept without the word?
Certainly there's no privacy in China.
So English added chutzpah, macho, chic,

until we grasped the concept, owned the word
by borrowing it so long it felt like ours,
which takeschutzpah. Macho is learned, and chic
can't be taught, but both take a straight face—

borrow one until it feels like yours.

It's useful, too, for poker, tango, jokes,
all teachable skills improved by a straight face,
by knowing what will concentrate your power.

What improves your poem, tango, jokes—
she's learning the language so she'll get the jokes—
is knowing what will concentrate your power:
two-thirds of Ojibewemowin is verbs.