



Stars Feed Our Roots

Challenges, Quilts, and Poems

by **Linda Marshall**

Poetry and quilting came together for me when I sought to understand what drove my increasingly urgent preoccupation with patchwork and quilting. Specifically, it was the question, posed as the theme of the 2007 CQA/ACC *Trend-Tex Challenge*, “Why Do I Quilt?”, that kindled recognition of how both quilting and poetry set off in me delight passing into ecstasy, to the point of bewildered obsession with colour, light, line, cadence and patterning in all I saw or heard.

As I was thinking about the Challenge, I was also absorbed in contemplation of quilts made by the women of Gee’s Bend, Alabama,

and paintings by the German-Swiss artist, Paul Klee. Both seemed to shake out ever-changing configurations of something like the Log Cabin block, the loom of infinite geometries. Perhaps of all the blocks quilters have devised, exploded, refashioned and set every-which-way, the Log Cabin excites the most fascination. It may track some mystery in the labyrinth of art.

Under such influence, I composed a long, thin Log Cabin variation, which could bring to mind a portal to life or the grave (the one is also the other), and it came to suggest some meanings quilts were gathering for me. Quilts might be “Banners of Light in the House of Life,” my title for the piece. I was

at a loss, however, to formulate a statement indicating how I had interpreted the theme. I did my best, but something else happened. I wrote a poem in which some of the motives compelling me made themselves known. On the back of my banner I stitched the poem:

As long as lucid line and flowing light—
 Turning, streaming, dusk-blurred or bright—
 As long as restless line and changing light
 Conspire to shake me and delight,
 While quilts unfurl Life’s oriflamme
 In lines of light I quilt,
 Therefore I am.

This bit of verse could never pass muster in the ranks of current poetry, but writing it was unexpected and gratifying. As a young woman I wrote a lot of verse, long buried, but years of teaching English had directed my love of poetry elsewhere. Along the way, I studied and published articles on medieval Latin poetry, English poetry of the Romantic period, and the poetry of Christina Rossetti, author of *Goblin Market*. Nevertheless, after retirement, two years of catch-up sleep, and daily walks all over creation, I abandoned academic research and writing to fixate obsessively on an art and craft which I was minimally equipped to pursue. Even in quilting classes for beginners, I was too slow, clumsy, and embarrassed to proceed very far.

To feed my amateur desire to quilt forever and ever, amen, I turned to books for instruction and inspiration. Eventually, I gained a little skill, and the more I gained, the more quilting projects turned and turned in my head, a virtual kaleidoscope of all the colours, shapes and transformations encountered on my walks.

In the poem and the quilt that tried to answer the question, "Why Do I Quilt?", I find clues to what possesses me. Light, colour, and the ever-changing and remarkably self-patterning shapes issuing from and constituting the natural world, command my attention. Repetition, in all its variations, is an endless source of wonder and pleasure. Roots spreading and branches springing, true rhyme chiming and half-rhyme shifting, "Cornerstones" squared up and "Housetop" waving – all these may differ each from each, yet dance alike, and turn like mirrors facing one another, opening to infinity. The English artist and poet William Blake catches this in a vital stream of recurrent and altering elements: "For every thing that lives is holy, life delights in life." Attracted to such formulations in English Romantic poetry, in medieval Latin poetics ("Let one and the same thing be concealed under multiple forms – be varied and yet the same," says Geoffrey of Vinsauf in his *Poetria Nova*), and in Christina Rossetti's poetry, I am trying now, however awkwardly, to make my own.

Subsequent Challenges have provided fertile ground for poems and quilts. In 2008, the theme, "Quilts from the Edge," inspired a haiku (a seventeen-syllable poem, divided 5/7/5), which I embroidered on the face of

the quilt: "Quilts from the edge of / Joy, if nudged, plunge to pure Joy, / tumbling from sheer Joy." Here "Joy" is, obviously, the self-duplicating element, along with various sounds obliquely related: edge, nudged / plunge, tumb- / pure, sheer. On the quilt itself (called "Of Joy"), the haiku was divided differently, so that a double "Joy" was funnelled into a central golden panel, with the "plunge" and "tumbling" streaking down on either side. The concluding "Joy" hangs in a separate, Courthouse-Steps pendant, threshold to a bright path of Joy, Joy, Joy.

"Roots" in 2009 set me thinking about our interconnections with the stars:

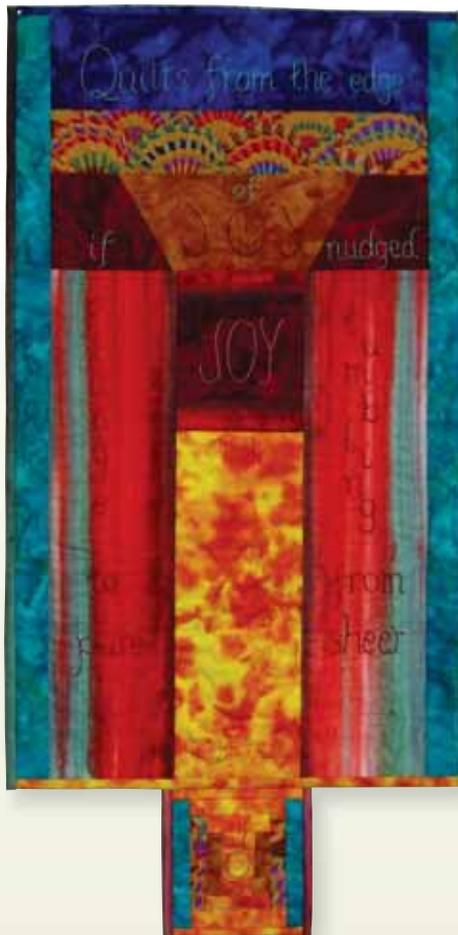
Stars feed our roots, our roots the stars;
Here you took root, raised up a star—
Stars rooted here shoot up to stars:
Stars, roots, asters rise here, afar.

The quilt, on the reverse of which I stitched this poem, brought four starry "Japanese Flower" blocks together to embrace a padded, appliquéd flower cut from

one of the set fabrics. Twisty, freestyle hand-quilting links silvery ripples on the blue star-points with mossy fissures on the green background. Repeated elements in the quilt, like the mirrorings in the poem, produce through variant proliferation something more than the sum of its parts.

Since I was challenged to wonder "Why Do I Quilt?", every quilt I have made comes with a poem, either one of my own, or one by a poet I admire, for whom the quilt is tribute. The quilt I donated this year to The Quilt, Support for People Living with Cancer, was pieced from drapery materials found in an old sample book left at a St. Vincent de Paul thrift shop. On the back of "St. Vincent's Quilt", this poem testifies to and enacts the continually restorative energy fuelling my quilting life:

Beloved, no throwaway,
Yet new, renewed now
Through love, yes, thoroughly
Renewed: be new yet.



Of Joy



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