

## Poems by Felicia Sanzari Chernesky and Robert Pack

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### Flexibility

Toby found an abandoned nest of rubber bands  
on the coffee table. Jeff slipped them past his wrists,  
worn as bracelets, and down across his teenage hands  
while watching *American Idol*. He insists

on pure comfort to relax, prefers elastic  
over gold and honors, like most *peeps* at this stage,  
every nimble manifestation of plastic.

Like stiff-backed Bronze or Iron, this our pliant Age

is in decline. As banks and politicians fall  
down, tumbling us all about like dumb dominoes,  
Toby laughs, aims, and shoots. Band hits unbending wall,  
boomerangs—to the cat's delight. A mother knows

the simple gifts can still enchant in priceless ways.  
I come across these worthless rubber bands for days.

## Robert Pack

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### EXCHANGING NAMES

My mother sometimes called me by  
My father's name long after he had died;  
Sometimes she called her brother by  
My name or called me by her brother's name  
Or called her grandsons interchangeably,  
All three of them, each by each other's name  
Until she got it right on second try.

My father on his deathbed—so mother  
Informed me when the time had come  
To choose what college to attend—  
Picked Dartmouth as the perfect school.  
Though she could not recall the reasons why,  
Yet she was sure that was his final wish,  
What he determined would be best for me.  
His certainty left nothing to discuss,  
And I departed with Mom's blessings on  
One luminous September day.

But in my sophomore year, vaguely  
Dissatisfied, I told my mother that  
I wanted to change schools and attend  
Columbia back in New York, the city  
That I knew from childhood on. Maybe  
I missed the crowds, the anonymity,  
The flashing company of girls  
(Dartmouth had not yet gone co-ed),  
Or maybe what I felt was just  
Inevitable homesickness.

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My unconvincing explanation was  
Most Dartmouth students didn't like  
Discussing books, and yet I felt serene  
Observing the impartial sparkle of  
The country sky or on the silent walks  
I took along the nearby river as the ice  
Receded and the maples bared red buds  
In promise of oncoming spring.

But she was adamant: my father's wish  
Decreed that Dartmouth was my destiny,  
That I was meant to graduate from there.  
"Don't you have teachers you admire to whom  
You've grown attached?" my mother asked.  
And so at Dartmouth I remained, and so  
I walked along that frozen river in  
Constricted winter or in thawing spring,  
Or looked up in the clear pulsating night  
To see what constellations I had learned  
To recognize and to identify.

Five years flowed by, or maybe more;  
Some details fade and cannot be recalled  
With certainty. Again we're having lunch,  
Which has become our monthly ritual,  
When from the shadow of her frown,  
My mother blurts out that she still  
Feels guilty for not letting me  
Change colleges: "Surely your father  
Would have understood," she pleads.

Now skip ahead another dozen years:  
We're sitting at a crowded street café  
With gourds and spices hanging from the beams,  
And I can recognize my mother's frown,  
The twisted way her smile descends,  
As she confesses that she still regrets  
Preventing me from changing schools:  
"I fear I might have done some harm,"  
She says, "I think you could be happier."

“What’s gone is gone and can’t be changed,”  
Was how I groped to comfort her.  
And yet her shaken thoughts come spilling forth:  
“There’s something that I never could admit,”  
She says, “I’m not sure Dartmouth was the school  
Your father named with his last breath;  
Williams was what he might have said.”

My first reaction was appalled dismay;  
I wondered if I might have followed  
Quite a different path: might I have married  
Someone else and had just daughters who all lived  
Not far away from me, or maybe had a son  
Who joined the army with a purpose that  
Befitted him, or joined a business firm,  
Made money, got elected governor.  
From what abyss did such thoughts come  
That never occupied my settled mind  
In those cascading years preceding when  
I found myself astonished on that day  
My mother’s secret was revealed?

But then my body started in to laugh  
With sobs and spasms shaking to my bones—  
As if such laughter had been lurking there.  
My mother was confused what in this world  
I possibly could have been laughing at;  
She called me by father’s name, then mine,  
And then joined in despite herself—“Williams!”  
The unwilling name leapt wildly from her lips.

The life I never lived, can never know,  
No longer beckons me; accepting laughter,  
Echoing throughout the star-strewn universe,  
Appears as power that can set me free,  
And that must mean I’m on my own at last—  
Or so my mother said at lunch today.