

Beautiful Dreamers

A family's treasured mementos from two New York City high schools in the '30s say volumes about the way the world was then.

By Penny Wolfson



ALARM CLOCK

1. Sleep grapples with the universe.
Weary souls and bodies
Yield to its hypnotic charm.
... Remembrances, hardships;
Return of the joylessness
And cruelty of toil;
Poverty, that darkness cannot snatch away,
Torment the nightmares called "dreams" . . .
And then,
The long, shrill sound,
Incongruous with the sweetness of slumber,
Startles the aching body
From the stupor of sleep.

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LINCOLN

2. Toil, that stiffens the back with pain,
And deadens the senses of man;
Toil, that is part of the nightmare of life—
Timed by the tick-tick of the time-lock,
Ticking all through the day;
Breaking the irksome monotony,
And forming part of it.

3. And living corpses,—broken souls
Are waiting—
In whispered hope—
For the final morrow,
When the alarm will ring out clearly
To awaken all the sleeping men,
And announce to them, and to the world
That they are human beings . . .
And as such,
Be free to live, and breathe,
And break the dull monotony of their lives
With song and laughter—
And that Tomorrow,
Invading their dreams,
Must come!

—Aron Kramer



CARGOES

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My mother died unexpectedly in January of 2004, after a week-long illness. She had lived in an apartment alone for some years after my father's passing 17 years earlier, but she still had much of their furniture and many of their possessions—including, as it turned out, three copies of their distinctive high school magazines.

The magazines—two copies of *Cargoes*, from my mother's alma mater, Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn, dated 1937 and 1938—and a Spring 1931 issue of *Magpie*, from DeWitt Clinton in the Bronx—were a little shabby but otherwise well-preserved, and at first glance I couldn't believe their beauty, a quality I didn't necessarily associate with my parents. From *Magpie*'s Beardsley-inspired graphics and cool elegance to the sleek Art Deco look and Diego Rivera-like illustrations in *Cargoes*, these publications seemed astonishingly sophisticated. And in the poems, essays, and short

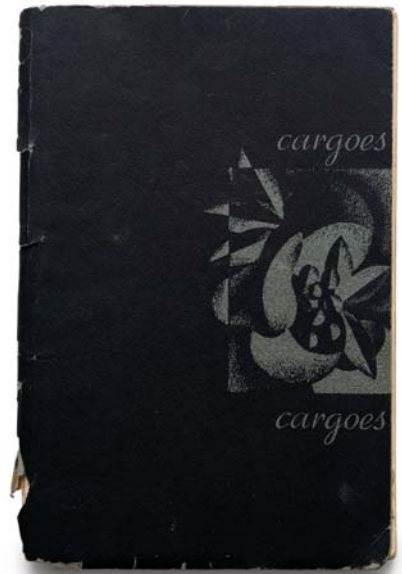
stories, many of which reflected the grimness of the Depression years and the reality of bread lines and factory work, the great seriousness of these very adult teenagers resounded. But I was also struck by the differences in these magazines, differences that eloquently brought back to me the personalities of my parents, Tema Solomon and Henry Wolfson, who grew up Jewish and poor, the children of immigrant storekeepers at opposite ends of the city.

My mother's 1937 *Cargoes*, for example, whose binding appears to have been hand-sewn, looks as though it had been handled many times, and it seems to have been used as a yearbook. Friends and teachers have scribbled notes, jokes, and farewells all over its fly-leaves and title pages. This boisterous, Brooklynish tone extends to the contents, like the Thurber-inspired cartoons and Milton Klonsky's wonderful poem "Swing Band," which prefigures the Beats with its

From left across spread: Cover, frontispiece, and spread from the January 1937 issue of *Cargoes*, the author's mother's high school literary magazine. Cover design and drawings: Simon Frankel. Frontispiece illustration: "Miners," Sol Sobel.



*What I see in the magazine,
and what I may have missed
in my father, is the echo
of the preceding century.*



cocky, jazzy energy: “Get the mush outa your mouth, mister,/Get hot, boy, get hot, truck down the big slam . . .”

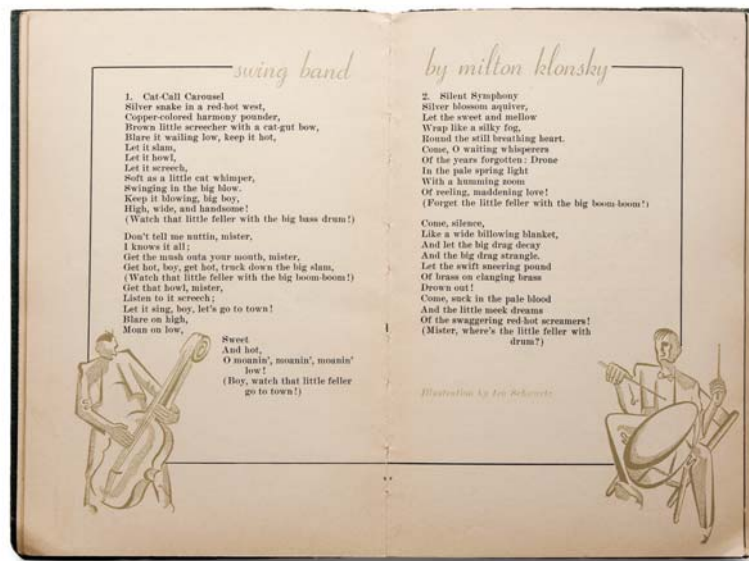
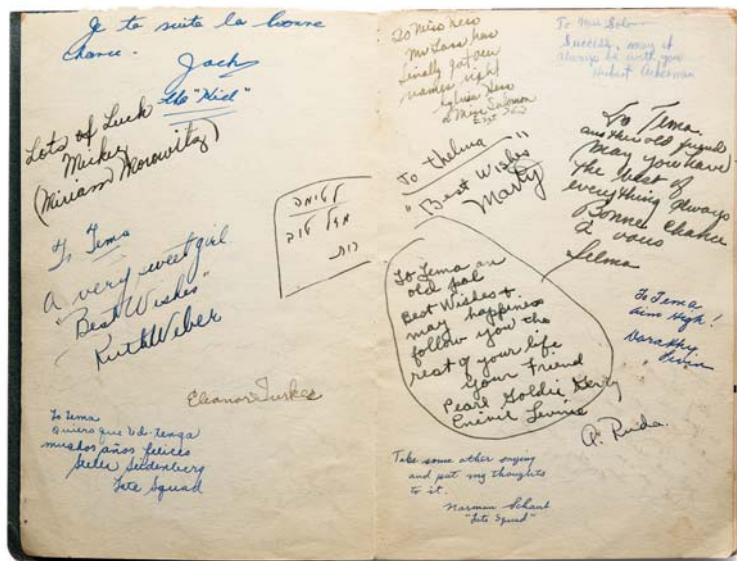
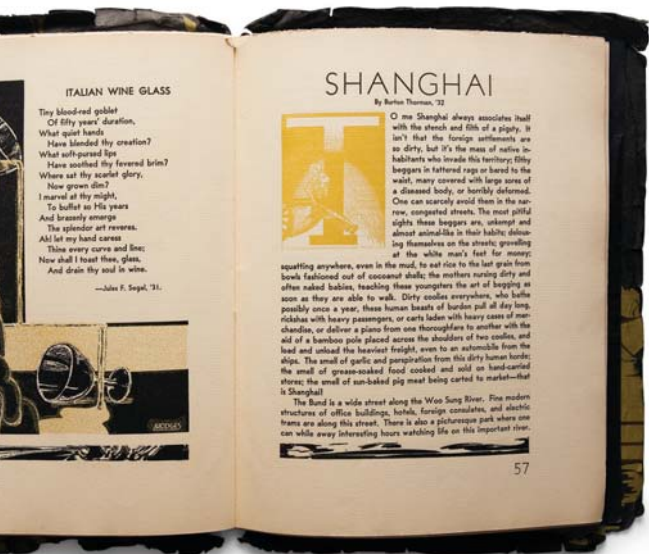
That lightness coexists with the darkness of the war in Europe: On the flip side of an eerie drawing accompanying the editorial “*Cargoes* of peace and *Cargoes* of war”—gas-masked soldiers, approaching tanks, and weary refugees—is the inked message, which has partly seeped through the yellowing paper, from my mother’s girlfriend Maybelle: “To a swell pal.” I don’t know if all the girls wrote this verse in their books—“My cargoes open come and see/Will you waste a line on me?” But when I read those words recently I had to choke back a sob for my lost mother, whose brave openness and sometimes aggravating humility they so neatly portrayed.

My father’s magazine is practically pristine. The velvety 8”-x-11” dustcover, which masks a smaller-format book, is crumbling at the edges; otherwise, his *Magpie* is immaculate. Nothing mars these

pages—no one has scribbled fondness, wished my father luck. This may have been because my father had no friends, which wouldn’t surprise me, or it may have been, as my sister suggests, that he treated books like Torahs: You didn’t mark them up and you didn’t throw them out.

What I see in the magazine, and what I may have missed in my father, is an old-fashionedness, the remnants of Victoriana, the echo of the preceding century. The images and writing hark back to a mythological, classical past: The inner cover opens up to a full-page print, in somber tans and browns, of a young woman in a bathing costume with what looks like a quiver at her belt, leading a fawn to the water’s edge—the huntress Diana, perhaps?—and we find translations inside of Heine, as well as serious considerations of Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Spinoza.

The magazine projects a dark reserve, a formality that I associate



with my detached, often depressed father. He prided himself on being cultivated; he had a smoothed-out, nearly Midwestern accent, and corrected our grammar if we got it wrong. “Was graduated from,” he would repeat to us often, “not graduated from.”

His own exactness, his precision of language, is utterly apparent in the work of his classmates. *Magpie* became famous in the early 1940s for publishing the first work of the teenaged James Baldwin—Baldwin and Richard Avedon, then a poet, were co-editors—and even at this early stage, the quality of the writing is superb. (The future film critic Stanley Kauffmann is one of this issue’s editors.)

Top: Cover, frontispiece, and spread from *Magpie*, Spring 1931, owned by the author’s father. Cover and frontispiece illustrations: James Alexander; illustration for “Italian Wine Glass”: Augustus Hodges. **Bottom:** Cover, autograph pages, and spread from *Cargoes*, June 1938. Cover design: Leo Bukzin; illustration for Milton Klonsky’s poem “Swing Band”: Ira Schwartz; typing: Secretarial Practice 251.

Where in any student magazine these days does one come across sentences like these, in Max Rosenbloom’s “In Poland”: “Unable to linger in Czechoslovakia, we boarded an international train for Poland. Every stop in our tour thus far had been ex itinerere; our destination was an insignificant village in Poland, called Rohatyn.” Or this blunt poetry, from Robert L. Mintz’s story “Good Sunday”: “Night came. The big leather-cutting machine droned softly as the grey shadows crept across the rough wooden floor.”

From *Magpie* and *Cargoes* I have a new, vivid sense of who my parents might have been as they grew, the forces that shaped them in those difficult times. But anyone, I think, would be startled and awed by the extraordinary work of these young writers and artists—and also by the New York City Board of Education’s willingness to fund such stunningly professional publications at a time of national crisis. They are a triumph of public art. **P**