



# BLAZEVOX 2KX

buffaloFOCUS  
Norma Kassirer



## BuffaloFOCUS

A swath of pieces from *Katzenjammered* a work of fiction by Norma Kassirer

### Introduction

Buffalo Focus is a special section of each issue of BlazeVOX that takes an extended look at one writer from our hometown, Buffalo, NY. It is a real honor to present in this issue a swath of pieces from *Katzenjammered* a work of fiction by Norma Kassirer.

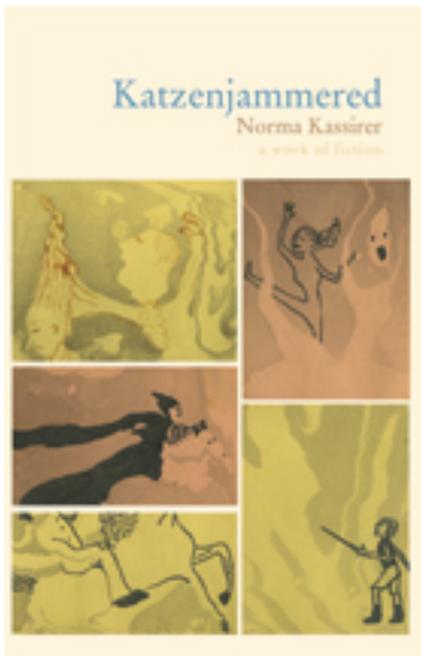
These stories surround the memoirs of a young girl confronting life by way of her father's war experiences. Shocking, illuminating, traumatic and compelling these stories grab hold of reader in the most gentle of grips. Each story begins with a short epigraph from the girl's father's writing of his experiences as a soldier in World War One. The juxtapositions create a wondrous tension of these very short stories. Each section develops the things that make up the self: history, country, family, name and politics. The father's drinking overshadows each story, which is, in a way, self-treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This is an amazing work of fiction. I am sure you will agree.

The full book is now available from BlazeVOX [books], more information is on the following page. And you can order it here <http://www.blazevox.org/bk-nk.htm>

Rockets, Geoffrey

Geoffrey Gatza  
Editor & Publisher

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BlazeVOX [ books ]  
Publisher of weird little books  
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*Katzenjammered* a work of fiction by Norma Kassirer

*Katzenjammered* is a brilliantly compelling illumination of the nature of storytelling. Through the haunting imagery of interwoven narratives, the tale carries the reader through family mythology, tragedy, and beyond. With, in the words of the young protagonist, “each syllable broken into light and shadow”, the language is a joy to read.

—Donna Wyszomierski

Norma Kassirer’s insouciant partnership of teeth and stones in a bowl on a small desk and her glance at the surface of a pond where “the water breaks into oriental script” are just two of her many perfect gestures. In *Katzenjammered*, a watchful child perceives and senses and sometimes almost understands the dark waters seeping up under the suburban world of tennis and Sunday dinners surrounding her. Woven through the book are bits of journal entries from her father’s tour of duty at the Front during World War I: a leit motif which events ultimately rise to meet. There is more to come. You won’t want to miss it.

—Ann Goldsmith

“I pull the green shade and cancel her,” tells nine-year-old Martha, lending privacy to her narrational eye. This is narrative of cancellation: canceling as it does the separation of knowledge and innocence, discovery and secrecy, poetry and fiction. Cross these categories as Kassirer does—with irreverent caution.

—Edric Mesmer

## Book Information:

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Norma Kassirer lives in Buffalo, New York. *The Hidden Wife*, a collection of her stories with artwork by Willyum Rowe, was published by Shuffaloff Press in 1991. Other stories and poems have appeared in various journals, including *Blatant Artifice*, *Sow’s Ear*, *Yellow Edenwald Field*, and elsewhere. Her short story cycle *Milly* was published in 2008 by the Buffalo Ochre Papers.

She has also written two novels for children, both published by the Viking Press: *Magic Elizabeth*, in 1966 (reprinted by Harper and by Knopf and Scholastic, and most recently appearing through *Breakfast Serials*), and *The Doll Snatchers*, Viking, 1969. Both of her daughters have long been engaged with writing and publishing, the cover images having been drawn by her daughter Karen as a child.

*At 2:45, our fire increased in intensity,  
and silently we prepared to go over.  
Fresnoy, France, May 9, 1917  
Pte. Martin Gresham*

One pull was carved in a pear shape and there was an apple, cherries, a peach. The two small drawers at the top had grape pulls, very real looking, my father liked to point out; a fine, noble chest of drawers he called it, made by his grandfather on the farm in Canada of cucumber wood from their own forest. That was the place with the trout stream and the wide skies my father dreamed through the Great War. That was before I was born, when he was Private Martin Gresham of the Princess Pats, fighting the war that would end war forever.

His father, said Agnes, was a real horror. She was my mother. An agnostic of the fallen Protestant variety, she distrusted any intimation of the hierarchical, and preferred her first name to a title, even one so universal as Mother. My father, although he also called himself agnostic, was not so fundamental about it. So it was that he was Daddy, she Agnes.

One of the horrible things Grandfather Gresham had done was to sell that farm. And this while his only son was in a military hospital in England—two years with shell shock and a broken back, and all that time yearning for what his father had not bothered to tell him was gone. Never mind that my father wouldn't have lived there anyhow after Aunt Emmy introduced him to Agnes, who was definitely not the sort to live on a farm, didn't know what in the world cucumber wood was, for lord's sake, she used to say. My father didn't either. It was what they called it back then and he'd never thought to ask.

The chest was too big for the room he called his den, which also contained an easy chair, rolltop desk, and of course, his typewriter. My father wanted everything—Agnes said so. And there was no wall space in there, for heavens sake, with the door to the hall, the one to the attic, a window to the front and another to the side that looked into the next door lady's house. She was the one with the fur coat that matched her dachshund, and so stuck up she'd cross the street so she wouldn't have to speak to you. Agnes said the coat was mink, ridiculous she said, to walk a dog in.

It was so crowded in that room, how could a man think, much less write?

*The deadly silence was weird  
I braced my foot on the scaling  
ladder, set my teeth firm, and  
waited.*

*Pte. M. G.*

I find the key in one of the little grape drawers at the top. It fits the peach drawer at the bottom, but I forget about the lady next door, and lo and behold, as Aunt Emmy often says, there she is, in that mink coat. She's staring straight at me. I stare back, my hands full of papers from the drawer. Her lips move, and though I can't hear her through the two layers of glass that separate us, I know what she's saying, that I have no right to be in here snooping in my father's office. I pull the green shade and cancel her.

After that, I put the shade down first, when I come in, so I can read IN PRIVATE, what my own father wrote about the War, in articles that were clipped from Canadian newspapers, and pages torn from Canadian magazines published by the army. PEPANDGO, a shiny-papered magazine published by the insurance company my father works for, is there too.

I close my eyes and leaf through the papers until I feel like stopping. I take out whatever my hand is on and read it. There is always a moment when I pray, well not really PRAY, just hope, very hard, that it won't be the one about my father stumbling over the German soldier with his head blown off.

*I know the poem in PEPANDGO by heart.*

*The Man Who Wins*

*The man who wins is the average man,  
Not built on any particular plan,  
Not blessed with any particular luck,  
Just steady and earnest and full of pluck,*

*For the man who wins is the man who works,  
Who neither labor nor trouble shirks,  
Who uses his hand, his head, his eyes,  
The man who wins is the man who tries.*

The rhythms are good for masturbating. My friend Gladys told me what that was. She knows everything, though she isn't much older than me. I'm scared of her because she has no limits. She'll do anything. Agnes says she's crazy, and it's no wonder, with what goes on over there.

This is in 1932. I'm nine. My name is Martha, for no good reason. Up until my generation, people in Agnes' family had been named for the people who came before them. Even earlier, they'd been named for virtues, like charity and prudence. Agnes wants nothing to do with any of that. The passing on of names smacks, as she would put it, (she often uses mildly violent imagery, as if she feels pursued by something she knows is going to get her some day) of organized religion. It makes her itch all over, she says.

*Far down the line a whistle sounded.  
The officer shouted an order, and over  
we crawled, into the fumes of cordite  
in "no man's land."*

*Pte. M. G.*

The house is white, the shutters green. There are matching yews on either side of the front stoop. Mr. Rose, the block gardener, who is really Mr. Ross, but has an herbaceous sense of humor, never gets them just right; no one could, a fact that nags at me just beneath the surface of everything else. (I don't notice until adolescence that the shutters are fake and are consequently not wide enough to cover the windows.) Stella, who is the maid, polishes the brass knocker on the front door every morning.

Uncle Flavius had given us the table in the front hall, the one that holds the telephone, which resembles a daffodil in shape and posture. The table is ebony with intricate mother-of-pearl insets, and, according to Agnes, is extremely valuable. Uncle Flavius is an artist. This means that he has good taste, except in wives. In that case, he is simply wise. Aunt Charlotte is rich, an excellent thing in an artist's wife, says Agnes.

Flavius Josephus, I know, is more or less from the bible. There'd been lots of ministers, generations of them, on Agnes's side of the family, but they were all gone by the time she became an agnostic. Essy and Donald and I (I'm the oldest, Donald the youngest) have never set foot in any Sunday school, and never will, not if Agnes has anything to say about it. Some people, she says, need to be herded into churches. She knows how to behave without that sort of prop. We don't have our tonsils out either and will never be inoculated for smallpox, not because of being agnostic exactly; it's simply another intelligent decision, says Agnes. Doctor Billy Martin, at school, always gives the nurse a funny look when he examines me. Well, he says, I see that Martha still has those tonsils. I know by heart why he doesn't mind making me feel bad. He's mad at the whole family because long ago he was engaged to marry my cousin Miranda and she broke it off the day before when all the arrangements had been made for the wedding—you know Miranda.

*Jumping across shell holes,  
stumbling over dead bodies and  
equipment, we ran along.*

*Pte. M. G.*

Inside the stairs, in the closet in the dark, I hear how they walk, drumbeats that make the wire hangers ring on the metal bar over my head, or soft, like wings, as if the stair wood has turned to air. Up in the den, the peach drawer words stir and hiss, break into syllables, come down one syllable a stair, BAY O NETS FIXED TO RE PEL THE EN E MY. I am part of the stair spine itself, in the mothball, hot-wool-cat-smell, me smelling the smell of myself and liking it. Listening to Agnes talking on the phone. *Well*, she says, my *mother's* idea of *economy* was olive sandwiches. Honestly! she says. HmMMM, she says. She laughs. Can you *feature* it? she says.

I know that story. I know all the stories. Hers always have a lot of underlinings.

*The body lay very naturally  
in the field and the stump of  
his head was covered with dirt.*

*Pte. M. G.*

Aunt Charlotte had given us the desk in the upstairs hall. It reminds Agnes of Charlotte, expensive, spindly-legged and useless. The green blotter with the brown leather corners is never ink-stained. It is changed when it fades. The desk's job is to hold the lamp with the green glass shade, the blue bowl of tiny white stones mixed with Essy's, Donald's and my lost teeth and the feather pen stuck in among them. The pen has never been used. It is just for decoration.

Our parents' room is across the hall from the feather pen. There are little lamps with orange silk shades in here. The shades do magic things with the light against the dark walls. Everything smells of perfume, even the clock with radium numbers that glow green in the dark, and the two high beds side by side, heaped with comforters and extra pillows. The cat has scooped a cradle out of the bottom of the springs of my father's bed. Venetian blind light and shade stripe the beds and the walls and the floor.

I am in that room. I open the drawers of the small table between the beds. The gun is still there. I knew it. I for my father's bed, KNEW for the table, IT for my mother's. Each syllable broken into light and shadow.

*He was wounded, but I  
dared not let him live.*

*Pte. M. G.*

Great Aunt Emmy's daughter Miranda went to finishing school in New Orleans where she was valedictorian of her class and had red hair so long she could sit on it. Why would anyone want to? Agnes wonders.

There were no schools suitable for Miranda in Blue Fields, Nicaragua, where Doctor and I lived in great happiness for so many glorious years until one of those silly revolutions chased us out and everything went straight to hell, excuse me darling, says Aunt Emmy. She calls herself Mrs. Doctor Marshall with servants and department store clerks. Agnes says, She's your father's aunt, not mine.

Sundays, Aunt Emmy and Doctor have dinner at our house. Aunt Emmy always gets drunk as a skunk, she says so herself. Doctor won't drink, it's against the law. Essy and Donald and I are katzenjammered—my father's word for stomach-down on the German oriental reading the Sunday funnies. Player piano doing Two Little Girls in Blue, Lads, the fake Ming vases humming along. Aunt Emmy in a black dress, long pearls, pokes me with a patent leather toe tip. Never mind, darling, she says, never mind. It's what she always says. I'm the one she loves. I know it, everyone knows. I look the way Aunt Emmy used to and wishes she still could. I give her a smile from the floor by way of recompense. Oh, you'll end in Hollywood, she whispers, with thrilling emphasis. She whirls and bumps a vase, it teeters and she catches it and makes a dance of balancing, hugging that Ming thing to her as if it's someone she loves; not me, this time, anyone can see. And certainly not Doctor.

*I plunged my bayonet into  
his body and closed my eyes.  
Pte. M. G.*

I'm shelling peas on the rustic table in the garden. One pea says to the other, Olive sandwiches, that was my mother's idea of economy. A gooseberry says, Was that when she was poor, Pea dear? Yes, olives! Can you feature it? They cost the earth, you know! Did you know she gave me away?

Gave you away, poor dear! Oh, my god, what kind of mother would do that?

She was a fool, no backbone.

Oh my, no backbone! And you were only eight years old?

My father died, and she just fell apart. Some children are fortunate. They're eight and their fathers are around working very hard and their mothers are sensible.

Enter Green Tomato. You went to live with your grandfather, dear?

Oh yes, he was rich, that was my mother's excuse, she said he could give me what a girl ought to have.

What about your brothers?

Like peas in a pod, olives in a jar, they stayed home and were poor. My mother wouldn't accept help from my grandfather except for necessities. Olives, for instance.

I surprise myself with that peas in a pod, olives in a jar. It seems very clever to me. It has emerged somehow from my mother's habit of ironic emphasis.

Olives! the peas all shriek, Olives! Oh my god, those olives! What a fool that woman was!

I heard you say a bad thing, Martha! Essy says from the sandbox. I'm going to tell.

You're lying. What did I say? Prove it.

You said, my god.

Now you said it, now I'm going to tell!

Essy begins to wail.

A sunflower shrieks in a terrible witchy voice that even scares me—That one in the sandbox takes after her grandmother! We call her Olive!

Essy's screaming now. She's having one of her fits. I let Stella take care of it. I'm too shaken by that creepy sunflower.

*I was conscious of his warm  
Blood, running down my hand.  
Pte. M. G.*

Great Grandfather in sepia on the wall over Agnes's bed looks like God.

Oh, how your mother loved him, I say to Donald, in a voice that thrills me from top to bottom; it's the sort I imagine a preacher might use. Donald looks down at his hands.

Pay attention, Donald, you could grow up to be like him if you stop wetting your pants.

Donald looks unhappy.

You did it again, Donald! If you go on like this, you'll be poor with Agnes and eat olive sandwiches, but I'll rescue you, don't cry, Donald, Martha will take care of you.

Donald's face puckers. He cries without making any sound.

Stay here, Donald, don't move, I'll tell you what I'll do, as soon as I get out of high school I'll come home and get a job no matter how my grandfather begs me not to; he loves me and I love him, he calls me the little Marchioness, it's in Pinocchio. It's in his own hand-writing. He gave it to me for Christmas.

That's not your book, that's Agnes's, says Donald.

Shut up, Donald. Listen, I hate my grandmother, Donald.

You don't hate anyone, Martha! Don't talk that way! Shame on you!

I hate you, Stella! You sneaked in! You didn't even knock!

Go to your room, young lady! And I'm telling your mother about this, you kept poor Donald from going to the potty again. Look at that, he peed all over your mother's rug!

You said pee! I'm telling Agnes! It's ignorant!

*And then, suddenly, as I watched,  
they came, not in fine charging  
line, but in veritable droves.*

*Pte. M. G.*

The story was that my great grandfather begged Agnes to go to Syracuse University, he even had her all registered, and she might have done it if she'd had a normal life, which, as she often remarks, she never did, of course. No, she marched straight back home after her graduation from high school, to help her mother and her brothers and she got a job on the draft board and that was where she met Aunt Emmy, who introduced her to her nephew when he came back from the war and they fell madly in love. That's Aunt Emmy's version. Agnes says that if her own mother hadn't been such a hapless fool, she wouldn't have been working at the draft board and never would have met my father—she would have gone to Syracuse and had a career and would never have married anyone. She would have been too smart by then.

That grandmother of Agnes's! We all know about her! What a snob! No wonder Agnes hated her! She belonged to the DAR and she was a Suffragette and President of the WCTU and she drank whisky every single day with a WCTU ribbon pinned to her lapel! She pretended it was medicine! Her husband saw right through her. He called her Jake, to tease her about being a Suffragette—why, she was just like that woman in Bleak House who helped all the African children while her own went around with runny noses and earaches. Then my great grandmother wouldn't speak to my great grandfather. She had no sense of humor, that woman. Also, she was jealous of Agnes. Her Christian name, can you feature it?—was America!

*They swarmed over the trench  
and came at a jog trot towards  
our position.*

*Pte. M. G.*

Quite often I find crumpled paper on the den floor with Buried Alive typed at the top. Usually, there is a line or so of text, but sometimes just the title heading a blank page. I knew that my father had written something called Buried Alive long ago for a military magazine called The Bulletin.

Agnes tells him he should stop thinking about it. She has one of the crumpled sheets in her hand when she says it, so I know that's what she means—Stop thinking about being buried alive. My father doesn't answer. He closes the den door. Agnes stands there in the hall for a while and then she turns around and throws the crumpled paper into the wastepaper basket under the Aunt Charlotte desk. Then she farts.

When Agnes sees me standing there in my nightgown so late, she slaps me. What are you doing? she yells, Get back in bed, you little sneak! I do get back in bed, but I lie there in the dark thinking how she's just like her horrible grandmother, maybe even worse. Probably, I tell myself, her grandmother never farted, thinking she was alone.

My father doesn't read to Essy or to Donald. Essy is too restless. Donald is too young. My father reads to me. He reads Alice. He reads David Copperfield. The black and white pictures scare me, but I don't mention it.

Seated in his lap, I smell the sweet pipe tobacco smell of him, feel the scratchy tweed. I compare the tan of his skin with mine. The same sort of skin, a mole on the cheek, as if we are marked for one another, blue eyes, black hair. When he calls me his Old Standby, it is as if he is speaking in code. No one else understands. Not Essy, not Donald. My father cannot get along without me.

There is a shiny brown jug on the sideboard in the dining room. The jug holds whisky. Its stopper is a monk's head and its round body represents his brown robe and rope belt. It is really a music box that plays How Dry I Am whenever it is tipped to pour. Agnes gave it to him for a joke. He never winds it, except when we are alone, and that is another joke. He winks at me when he turns the key. The jug sits next to us on the end table while he reads to me. Agnes is away. When he shifts me in his lap and picks it up and pours the whisky into his glass and it plays its silly little tune, he winks at me again.

*I was crouching on the fire  
step, shells of all caliber  
bursting around me. I heard  
a big one coming.*

*Pte. M. G.*

Listen, Donald, listen, be very quiet, if Stella finds out you're in here—listen to this, Father wrote this—I remember seeing a German with his head blown off clean as a whistle. The body lay very naturally on the field and the stump of his head was covered with dirt.

Don't suck your thumb, Donald. Did you hear what I read, Donald? His head was off, Donald! His head was gone! If you're going to wet your pants, Donald, do it in the hall. Hurry! Stella, Stella! Donald wet his pants again! You better not tell her we were in there, Donald, or someone might take your head off. What are you yelling about, Stupid?

I don't know what's wrong with him, Stella. What is it, honey?

Essy listens to the story about our father killing the German. I don't believe it, she says.

It's true, Essy, it's true, he wrote it, do you think our father lies? Are you saying he's a liar, Essy?

I've brought the page into our bedroom, I'm taking a chance my father's drunk. He's alone downstairs. It's a delicious game I'm playing.

You have to listen, Essy, or you can't come to the party.

What party? she sobs. Any party, ever, I say.

Essy's having one of her fits, but no one cares. No one does a thing about it, no matter how loud she yells. Father's the only one at home and he's drunk, all right. I hear him winding the key on the bottom of the brown jug. We can hear it playing HOW DRY I AM It sings, in a tiny, tinny voice, over and over, Nobody knows how dry I am, nobody knows but Jesus, over and over, it sings the same words, and when it begins to run down, he winds it up again.

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