

Ruthie, the Duck Girl

It's the Monday after Hurricane Gustav,
and in Greenwood Cemetery
rain is pouring down on the mourners.
Ruthie doesn't mind the rain. It's good
for the ducks. The artists, dancers,
and musicians who don't like to stray
far from the French Quarter
don't let that or a hurricane stop them
from saying their final goodbyes
to the Duck Girl.

For fifty years, Ruthie
was a fixture in the French Quarter.
Some called her eccentric;
some called her simple.
I remember the first time I saw Ruthie,
a thin girl with a sweet smile.
She appeared like an apparition
rolling down the middle of Bourbon Street,
her long white skirt flowing around her,
her ducks trailing behind her.
She seemed weightless as she glided by.

Tourists stopped to take pictures of Ruthie
dancing and singing on street corners
or skating the streets and alleys
of the French Quarter with her ducks.
Until her health failed, she spent many nights
at Pat O'Brien's and other local bars,
with her water fowls waddling at her side.

A Mass was held for the Duck Girl
at Jacob Schoen Funeral Home.
Chris Rose in The Times Picayune quoted one of Ruthie's mourners
who spoke her farewell from the altar:
"She did not walk the stage, a poor player.
She was just Ruthie. She was a light
that was happy and alive. This thrilling
little person--she gave just by being herself."
--by Elaine McDermott