

The New Orleans  
**AVANT-GARDE** ©



## THE LEE MEITZEN GRUE STORY CIRCLE

by Phyllis Parun

The Lee Story Circle was inspired by the final conversation I had with my friend and colleague, Ann Lee Meitzen Grue, on the occasion of a visit to her bedside in the last month of her life.



Lee Grue at Delmonico's

Lee loved to read biographies, which she did a lot in her last 10 years, and she would try to interest me in doing the same. As the art of the short story was one of her favorite subjects, I asked her, “Lee, I know that you enjoy short stories, so I would like to know what is it about the short story that you love so much?”

In spite of her frailty and failing health, Lee reported this poignant memory: “As a child I was introduced to storytelling when family and neighbors would sit around telling stories about an event or a person they all knew. Each person had a different perspective on the same event or person, and that is what made it so interesting.”

Lee’s reply is the kernel for this issue. I have printed stories about the Lee we knew and loved from her many friends/colleagues who span six decades of her life.



## GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

by George Koschel

I met Lee through Jon Laws and Pam Meredith. The three of us met in a fiction writing course through the continuing education program at UNO. Jon and Pam knew Lee through the Poetry Forum. At that time, it was either the late 1970s or the early 1980s. Jon and Pam were screening short stories for Lee for the *New Laurel Review*. They told me to submit a satirical piece I had written on Ernest Hemingway, “Big Hairy-Chested Fairy,” and they would advocate it to Lee for me. The result was my first publication in the *New Laurel Review* in 1983. It was a mixed blessing because the piece wrote itself. There were no revisions. Stupid me, I thought: fiction writing is a snap. Wrong, wrong, wrong. The true blessing is that I got to meet Lee. As I write this,

I recall an adage she had on her wall in her living room: Write drunk, edit sober.

Over the years Lee and I would periodically see one another. Sometimes I would go to meetings at The Poetry Forum. Occasionally I would help screen short stories for her. Once we got together in New York City for breakfast. Another time she joined me and a group of friends one Saturday night, and we saw the movie, *The Grifters*. It wasn’t until after I retired at the end of 2004 that I started to see Lee on a regular basis. I told Lee I would screen submissions on a regular basis, and she was happy to accept my help. What Lee needed was a sharp eyed, left-brained critic. What she got was a romantic, slightly insecure, right-brained neurotic.



Lee Grue with George Koschel

So 2005 started out by screening the many submissions Lee received for the upcoming Borsodi issue of the *New Laurel Review*. But as most people who are reading this know, 2005 brought to New Orleans what Lee referred to as “hell in high water,” Katrina. By the

*continued on page 5 ...*

# I REMEMBER LEE

by Carolyn Levy

I first met Lee Meitzen at LSUNO in 1963. She was working closely with Dr. Robert (Bob) Gibbons on a project called ARETE and wanted me to submit something. Lee was never part of my set, which Phyllis Parun refers to as the “avant-garde.” This so-called set sat in the cafeteria every day holding forth as the young are wont to do.

We also left the campus and spent beaucoup time in the French Quarter, skylarking. The Surf bar was close at hand, so Bob and Kathy Gibbons of our English Department were the matriarch and patriarch. Lee never joined in any of this frivolity. I graduated from LSUNO in 1963 with a degree in French, a minor in Spanish. Off to Cambridge, Massachusetts, work, the international set, back home, marriage.

Lee resurfaced in my consciousness — I don’t know when. I ran into Phyllis one day at the Delgado Museum (NOMA); she was up to her neck in caregiving. We enjoyed touching base, and it was with amusement I heard she had called us the avant-garde.

Next I remember Lee as part of “An Evening of the Avant-Garde” to be held at her small theatre on Lesseps Street. I had married AJ Levy, a busy trial lawyer, who didn’t mind me doing my thing. Alas, the evening took place without me because I was cast in NORD’s musical *By Jupiter*, and it was held over.

## WOMEN OF WISDOM

Phyllis organized a group called “Women of Wisdom.” We met to share

and enjoy our talents. Most of us were into poetry, art and literature. We weren’t your suburban housewife clan. Not at all! Lee participated in a sort of mother-hen style. For the rest, we were equals but did defer to Lee’s need to be “La Matriarch.” Then Lee’s house in Bywater became a citadel of sorts. She had been extending her home to many writers. Phyllis continued our meetings, writing about LSUNO. It was the eve of their Fiftieth Anniversary. We liked to work off one another.

## ALVAR

Enter Lee’s Writing Workshop at Alvar Library. I was driving back and forth regularly, finding true nourishment from Lee’s workshop and also The Garden Poetry Saturdays. Lee enjoyed a good turnout, at least fifteen writers. I met Valentine Pierce there.

I could tell numerous anecdotes. Lee Meitzen Grue was many things to many people. It’s with a grateful heart that I was part of her large entourage. When Lee became ill, I went to visit her and had the first one-to-one exchange. Alas, it was to be the last. She appeared to be comfortable in bed. When I began to reminisce, she told me that she used to call Phyllis and me “the little girls.” When I flashed back to our appearance in the early sixties, it seemed apt.

The writing community is bereft of a major figure. She touched so many lives. That she wrote a blurb for my first novella was not only appreciated by me but certainly by my publisher. That she would say, “You need to write about that,” after I told her a funny anecdote encouraged me to indeed sit down and write about it.

Thanks, Lee. It has meant more than you could know. I think your muse will forever hover over my head.

I remember Lee Grue ...

The tallest tree standing  
in the swampland by the  
water.

The sweetest words  
from southern lips.

The best of local food  
done right,

and conversation,  
and wine,

and celebration

of home and friends,  
and questions

pointed

and round ...

intended to fall

from firm lips,

insisting on answers

revealing

the kernel

of truth,

the secret remedy,

the illumination

of darkness,

unwrapping the core

heretofore unseen.



by Melanie Owen

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## MEMORIES OF LEE WHEN I WORKED AT THE ALVAR LIBRARY by Mary Ann Marx

Lee walked in, speaking so softly  
and so reassuringly  
that together  
we were going to put on writing  
workshops  
but there were no library funds.

Lee drew on her experiences  
sharing with me that funds were  
available  
through *Poets and Writers* -  
all new to me but I was willing to try.  
So I wrote and was thrilled when I

received the news  
that we were awarded the funds.  
While to Lee it was just another day  
in the life of a writer who struggled  
for funding.  
We did several workshops over the  
years.

Meeting and working with other  
writers and poets in the  
community,  
holding several poetry programs at  
Alvar Branch library.

Lee's impact on my life was  
tremendous.

She even got me to read one of my  
poems to the group -  
which was way outside of my  
comfort zone.

I will always remember her gentle  
and supportive manner  
and miss her.



Lee Grue at Alvar Library

## MEMORIES OF LEE GRUE

by Susan Tucker

I first met Lee in a class organized I think  
by the public library or perhaps the  
Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.  
It was a class organized by Randy Bates, on  
local women poets and held at the JCC.

I had a very young child at the time, and I  
was a single parent, but for some reason I  
always thought I should have one night out  
a week. That course fell on the night where I  
could be sure to have a babysitter. I also  
thought I should excel at gardening, my job  
(then as what was called an intake  
coordinator for the ACLU, plus completing  
and then editing oral histories), and  
mastering various recipes. What I really liked  
was not so much staying out late, but two  
particular moments in the frame of leaving  
the house and returning. I felt lifted by those  
magnificent oaks on Napoleon Avenue. I  
felt comforted when returning home and  
briefly talking to the babysitter, a woman  
some ten years older than I. I watched her  
ride off on a bike. She lived just two blocks  
away, and she would wave her arm high in  
the air as she reached the midway point  
between my little half-double and her own.  
The wave, we had established, was meant to  
say that someone else was on her porch, so

there were two of us, watching her. This was  
in the 1980s when there was more crime.

Lee, somehow, made my focus on these  
however small moments somehow  
understandable. She was about the third  
poet to come to the class. She came with an  
entourage of three male poets. One of them  
wore a hat. Lee herself wore a hat with a  
feather in it. I loved how she walked into the  
room, tall and erect, and at the same time,  
lazily. I liked how she moved her arms when  
she spoke. I don't remember what poems  
she read. She exuded a sort of happiness that  
could be passed on, and that was enough to  
change my life.

Of course, there were other more formal  
meetings with her and her spirit. I next met  
her when she read for one of Peter Cooley's  
classes. By then I was an archivist at Tulane,  
and I asked her about her papers. Oh, she  
said, she would love a place to put them and  
wasn't that what archives were for? We  
began going through them one summer,  
likely around 1995. My child then was a  
teenager, and she liked Lee's house too. She  
would sit on the porch and read books while  
Lee and I worked on the papers.

Then around 2002, Lee said she wanted to  
give some money for a lecture on sewing  
and women's lives. How many women in  
the world sewed and how little did we know  
of them? We never did find the lecturer Lee  
wanted, so instead we decided to solicit  
poems, stories and essays on the subject.  
But we would look for men too, we said,  
after all, we were in New Orleans and  
weren't there many men sewing for  
Carnival? By then my child was at Tulane  
herself, and sometimes if she wanted to talk  
to me, she would come by and read aloud  
the submissions Lee and I had on hand,  
give us her opinion.

By the time we got to seriously collecting  
more materials, my daughter was pregnant  
with her own first child. By the time the  
book came out, *Mending for Memory*, there  
was a second child. And by the time Lee  
died, there was a third child on the way. On  
that night, back in early April 2021, I was  
walking home when I got the text message  
about her death. I remembered all over  
again her permission to delight in the  
world, to see those passages, one home to  
another, under trees, as enough of  
happiness for a lifetime.

## HEAVEN'S PORCH

©2021 Valentine Pierce

*D*riving through the Bywater

Easter bonnets and cold beer roam the streets

Cousin Dimitri on Oz

Dedicates his Acoustic Blues music show to Lee

I envision her in her Easter bonnet — a purple tam,  
Fringed purple scarf, ankle-length cotton indigo skirt

Favored soccer shoes, from Big Lots

Sitting in a wicker chair on heaven's porch,

A glass of red wine — two ice cubes — cradled in slender fingers.

A plate of cheese, crackers, maybe grapes, watermelon

Eeks out a spot on the table.

Peabo snuggles in her lap;

Kichea sits on her right,

the wine bottle carefully tilted to the stemmed glass.

They talk about the neighborhood goings-on,

Wave to neighbors, speak, as we say, to passers-by

Ponder the way of the world,

Share news of their most recent books and photos.

Phrases, sentences plucked from arbitrary chapters

Litter the brick path like magnolia leaves.

They toss about choices: should they

take in a movie,

grab an early dinner,

catch some live music

If it's Friday, if Little Freddy King is at BJ's tonight

Lee's sure to have a seat in the barber chair at the end of the bar

Amelie, Phyllis, Jennifer or anyone might join them

As they laze, wooed by the cranberry kiss of a Spring afternoon,

Revel in an azure sky slipping into sunset hues.

Settle in as day languishes into evening

And they sip their second glass of wine.



From left to right: Kichea Burt, Lee Grue, Valentine Pierce

*M*y first job after residency was as an associate pathologist at LSU in New Orleans. I soon met a virology Professor at Tulane, Dr. Jules Hallum, a gifted poet. Neither of us knew the local poetry scene, but we'd heard of Lee Grue, who met with us to discuss forming or joining a few others for reading and criticizing our work.

Lee was tall in her ankle-length black skirt and white long-sleeved blouse, casual and reserved. A pale oval face framed by deep red hair drawn into a single long braid, full hips and extremities in voluptuous proportions, and with her a quiet, handsome man whom I would eventually come to know as Reggie.

We compiled a list of people we would invite to our first meeting. Lee was equally enthusiastic about everyone who came to read, and we all enjoyed her poetry and her criticism.



by Don L. Horn

# THE JOYS OF TIME TRAVEL ON LESSEPS STREET

by Sara Jacobelli

We'd sit and watch the world from her porch.

Lee always told me, "I have no sense of time. Because I'm a Poet."

I would laugh and say, "Well, I have no sense of direction. I could get lost anywhere."

She'd add, "I don't have one of those either."

We'd sit and watch the world from her porch.

Weeks before she died, I reminded her, "You told me many times, you have no sense of time, because you're a Poet."

She smiled. "Oh, that's such a lame excuse."

We'd sit and watch the world from her porch.

Wave to the neighbors, the dog walkers, the bike riders. Play with the cats, listen to the rain. Marvel at the bees and butterflies and hummingbirds, the flowers and plants and trees, the wonder of the sky.

We'd sit and watch the world from her porch.

She'd talk about growing up in Anahuac, Texas and in New Orleans, a much-loved only child,

Her seamstress mother. Kids, Grandkids, Travels, Adventures.

We'd sit and watch the world from her porch.

Reminisce about friends and pets we miss and love.

Trade tales of living in the Quarter, when rent was cheap.

You don't need a sense of time, or of direction, on Lee's porch.

All you need is Lee.

... Koschel, continued from page 1

end of 2005 and the beginning of 2006, many of the displaced writers and poets in Lee's orbit began to reestablish themselves in New Orleans. That fire engine red living room at the end of the long entrance hallway became a salon for lots of us. Despite the darkness of the room, warmth existed in it that nourished us all. No doubt the ambiance of the room was aided by Lee's unflappable calming presence. Eventually things in New Orleans returned to its traditional abnormal ways.

During this time, Lee put out two more editions of the *New Laurel Review* after the Borsodi issue. One dealt with trains, and the last edition dealt with all things New Orleans. Lee also published her last novel, *Blood at the Root*.

A year or so after Katrina, Lee's dog Blue died. Subsequently, Lee adopted Peabo. Peabo was a dog only Lee could love. He resembled Shari Lewis' hand puppet Lamb Chop but with mange. And Lee would not let anyone make

fun of Peabo's looks. The only presence in the house who could get away without singing the praise of Peabo was her cat, Boudy. Once when Peabo went missing for a day or so, Kichea Burt turned to the cat and said, "Okay Boudy, what did you do to Peabo?" Luckily, Peabo was found and returned to Lee and assumed his rightful mantel in Lee's household. Boudy grudgingly acquiesced. The only other person who loved Peabo as much as Lee was Ray, Lee's chief cook and bottle washer for the last year or so of her life. Sadly, Kichea died of a heart attack a few years before Lee died.

Lee's life changed irrevocably perhaps seven years before she died when she was mugged outside of Wasabi's Restaurant one Saturday afternoon. In my mind's eye, there was a correlation between this incident and Lee's death. If there was empirical causality I don't know. Lee told me that if she had known he just wanted the purse she would not have fought him. But in the heat of the moment, she didn't know it. She made it home, and from there they called the ambulance. It amused her that the ambulance, in taking her to the hospital, went up Rampart which at that time was a torn-up mess due to the construction of the new streetcar line. To this day, I don't know if it was Lee's hip or leg that got broken. Suffice it to say that from then on out, Lee needed a walker to navigate the sidewalks of New Orleans.

I want to emphasize this: never in the time subsequent after her mugging and going endless times to physical therapy did Lee ever voice any animosity to the person who mugged her. Even if she felt it, which I don't think she did, she never gave voice to that sort of negativity: a true sign of grace under pressure.



Lee on her porch with treasured pet Peabo

## WARM EMBRACE: A REMEMBRANCE OF LEE GRUE by Deirdre Drummey Boling

I grew up cold. From the day I was born, I was always cold and dreamed of moving somewhere warmer. Being from Massachusetts, Florida was the logical conclusion because everyone in Massachusetts ends up in Florida at some point. But then I drove cross-country in a van with my dog on a quest to see America and, among my travels, I passed through New Orleans, where I stayed for weeks.

My destination became clear.

I moved to the Crescent City in the early '90s. Initially I stayed with a college classmate, someone I hadn't actually met before. She had a spare bed and a freezer full of pizza, leftovers from her customers at Café Roma. That was fine for a while, but it wasn't permanent. I needed a job, and I needed a place to live.

It was through Lee Grue that I found the latter. We were introduced by an acquaintance who said Lee had a place "in the back" she was looking to rent out. "In the back" turned out to be The Theater, an A-frame, two-story building separate from but also connected to Lee's house set in a virtual jungle of foliage.

Meeting Lee was like something out of a novel. She lived in a grand home by Bywater standards, with columns, a wide porch, full-length shutters coving the windows. Upon entering, you walked down a long hallway, filled with books and dolls and framed art and photos and who knew what else, before coming into the receiving room. That's not what she called it, but the term is apt. Visiting Lee felt like being received by royalty, Bohemian literary royalty.

After moving into The Theater, I often sat with Lee in the receiving room where she talked about her early life in Plaquemine, a town that I couldn't have placed on a map, much less pictured. Her life in the Bywater sounded mythical. She talked about a house fire but somehow made it sound like madcap adventure. I remember her laugh, her eyes crinkling. That laugh was distinctive, pure Lee, unlike anyone else's.

She knew I wanted to be a writer, and she tried to guide me, but I think I was too young, too afraid to run out of money, too caught up in the concerns of someone in their twenties. I can't imagine Lee having

been caught up with those same petty concerns when she was in her twenties.

I grew up in The Theater, came into my own. It took a while, but I found some financial stability. Got a job I enjoyed, even if it wasn't exactly the writing life I had imagined. I met my future husband, and the three of us would sit out by the frog pond, drinking beer underneath the wild growth of bamboo, oak tree branches, and "volunteer" foliage, a term Lee shared for the vines that *volunteered* to join your garden.

We'd sit out there talking about musicians, New Orleans the way it once was, and the idea of a creative life. It was magical.

I came to New Orleans and I found warmth, but it wasn't from the heat and humidity. I found the warm embrace of a surrogate mother, the snug comfort of place to call home amidst all the creativity that Lee surrounded herself with, and the balmy ease of a friendship that was never demanding or set expectations. Lee accepted you for who you were, not who you were supposed to be or thought you should be.

## MEETING LEE MEITZEN GRUE

by Joan Jeffers McCleary

I first met Lee Grue when I was the Director of the Pacific Grove Art Center in California. She and a group of artists had a group show scheduled there called "Hurricane Katrina Blues." Many of the artists had lost their artwork, their studios or their homes in the storm.



Lee Grue in Pacific Grove, CA.

My husband John was on the board of the nonprofit Art Center, and they decided to waive the usual exhibit fees for the group due to the circumstances. I also found places for them to stay while they were here for the show. Artists and other members of the community were pleased to welcome them as guests in their homes, and we also enjoyed showing them the sights and getting to know them. Some lasting friendships were formed during this visit.

Lee impressed us as a very accomplished, but modest, poet and writer. We made a wonderful connection with her and became good friends. When John and I were planning a trip to New Orleans a few years later, Lee very graciously invited us to be guests in her wonderful Bywater home. She hosted a gathering for the artists who had shown their work in Pacific Grove, and we enjoyed a wonderful evening of conversation, food, and friendship.

We continued to stay in touch with Lee, and we returned to New Orleans a number of times. We always spent time with her when we were there, and it will seem very strange to know that she is gone when we visit New Orleans again.



Lee Grue with John and Joan McCleary

# SHE HAD MORE LIVES THAN A CAT - REMEMBERING LEE GRUE

by Dennis Formento

I have the hardest time remembering a lot of first meetings, and meeting Lee Meitzen Grue for the first time is one that is shrouded in vagueness. Having missed the Poetry Forum readings in her backyard - "too far" in my bicycling pre-Bywater days - it was only when I got access to a car that I went out to Upper Nine for parties and readings at Lee's.

What I remember best is the time I helped put together an issue of *New Laurel Review*. It was a time like this, of honoring a New Orleans poetry mainstay, Robert Borsodi, who had recently died.

Lee asked me to edit a tribute section for *NLR*. I was into that, having conducted a slew of interviews with poets, artists and activists from the 50s to the 70s, and Bob fit the profile of someone who preferred the relaxed culture of the New Orleans underground economy to any mainstream coffeehouse business. For almost thirty years, his place featured poetry readings and original plays, and Lee wanted to pay proper homage.

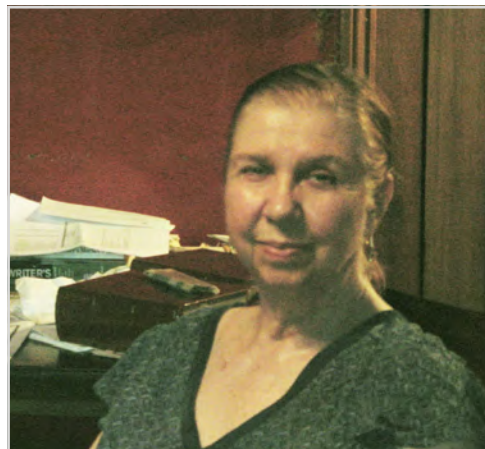
That meant interviewing Bob's widow and his former girlfriend, some coffeehouse regulars, and collecting poetry and written reminiscences from friends. Oh, and trying to get Lee to return phone calls. I guess the problem was that I didn't understand Lee's method; *NLR* at that time was

produced not by Lee but by a couple of volunteers. After a half-dozen or so unreturned calls and about as many emails, I finally got it through my thick skull to call Valentine Pierce. Well, I was free to do *whatever* I wanted. That was pretty much what I wanted to do, but I thought I had to have permission to do that!

**"Remember, people are complex. We know very, very little about most people. I have had more lives than a cat."**

-- Lee Meitzen Grue

But that was the great thing about *New Laurel Review*: having come up through the Sixties, Lee was DIY before it had an acronym. So much had to be created from scratch in 1964 because so much had to change in race relations and gender equality and even how poetry was presented publicly. From the time of the Quorum Club and the Fencing Masters, Lee pushed the limits of collaboration across racial boundaries,



Lee Meitzen Grue

performing with jazz flautist Eluard Burt at the Fencing Masters club and the Quorum, where the members reverse-engineered the segregationist "club" status to allow *anyone*, white, African American or whatever, to be a member by the simple act of buying a cup of coffee and signing the membership book.

For years, she struggled with the limitations placed upon women poets, up to and including the 1996 Insomniacathon, a 24-hour reading in New Orleans, from which

she felt left out because the organizers did not follow through with an invitation to participate. It was the underground magazine *A Gathering of the Tribes* that called upon her to write and present a poem at the event.

While I never thought of Lee as angry, impatient, beating down doors that limited her freedom, that was because I knew her only as the *grande dame* of downtown poetry, settled, suave in her comfy lounge chair, mother of grownups, her life's work still in progress, but her place at the table set. She was also the "tall girl named Lee Grue" that Eluard Burt remembered from their first meeting, the young wife who with her husband Reggie Grue, rented an apartment above the Quorum Club, their monthly tithe supporting its defiance of race laws.

## A SMALL HOMAGE TO LEE GRUE

by Kathleen Grieshaber

**M**y ego prevented me from knowing Lee Grue better than I did. As a Women's Caucus for Art member, I had attended a salon at Lee's house. Kichea Burt, who I considered an extraordinary photographic talent, and Carol Scott, an amazing painter, were among those who displayed their work and explained their processes that day. Lee's house was comfortable and warm, sloppy in the way those who read too much have books everywhere; the way those who have too much enthusiasm for life live. Lee fussed over everyone—would you like a drink? Tea, wine, we're open minded here. Lee's eyes were like a steel trap: she saw everything that went on—but those eyes always had a twinkle and a speck of humility in them as well.

At the WCA holiday dinner, Lee would always ask *what I had been doing*. Here was this awesome talent, a doyenne of writers, asking about *me*. Whenever I said I was trying to write, or had a story that had won a small recognition, people brought up Lee's name. *Go see Lee Grue*, they said. *You have to go see Lee*.

Not only did she live in the coolest house in the world, situated in the ninth ward with the charm of an old neighborhood, a front porch and shade, but she co-owned a bar steps away, a hip bar—BJ's Lounge—where young people went to hear music and where throngs of people gathered, spilling out into the streets at night. Age was not a factor in her world, nor a barrier to conversation with anyone.

*I will send my story by email*, I said. *No, she doesn't do email*, people told me. *Go bring a copy and she'll read it*.

You have to understand that Lee was New Orleans royalty. She would have been the last to say so, but she had been involved in poetry and writing readings since the beatnik days. To me this was the epitome of coolness. She knew everybody because at one time or

another, she had helped everybody. She didn't seem to have a selfish bone in her body. Everyone had stayed at Lee's house between apartments. She was a mother hen, a literary star, and a radiating kind heart.

Oh, I'd been rejected, as all writers and artists have. But somehow I could take rejection from *The New Yorker*. I didn't think I could take it from Lee, who was admired by so many of my contemporaries, so I never got to know her really well. I see now, too late, how stupid that is and how stupid it sounds. Reading her obituary by John Pope in *The Advocate*, I realized that I had missed out on having a great friend and a living idol. Still, I remember the few conversations we had, and the laughter which always followed Lee around.

Life is short and temporary, and I missed out on personally knowing Lee very well. But her poetry and spirit bring to mind what she loved: the poets, the



Lee Grue and Kichea Burt at WCALA event

hardworking people redoing the city streets, the vagabonds, the struggling, the sensitive souls seeing the hardships and beauty of living in the city that care forgot. Lee was loved because she gave to life, and adored because she adored others. She left us with a hole in our hearts. New Orleans has lost its literary matron, and we wander lost for a while, waiting to know her kind spirit and hear her laugh again.



Lee Grue with Elizabeth Hopkins at the Pacific Grove Art Center



## OVER THE OYSTERS

©2018 James Nolan

for Lee Grue

Bobby Blue Bland wipes  
 beads of sweat from his brow  
 with a big blue handkerchief  
 then drapes it over the mike  
 while back in a far corner  
 we have burst out crying—  
 birth death marriage divorce  
 failure success money sex—  
 waiters tilting to us tray  
 after tray of half shells  
 and pitcher after pitcher  
 of Dixie beer because here  
 in New Orleans feelings  
 are cheap and raw and opened  
 and we eat them by the dozen,  
 weeping like the Walrus  
 and the Carpenter over life  
 because we are living it,  
 weeping over the oysters  
 as one by one we swallow them,  
 the sea finally paying attention,  
 its own tears arranged in a circle,  
 each broken as a secret locket  
 and smiling slowly, we drown  
 as Bobby Blue Bland mops  
 his face, stares straight  
 into the spotlight  
 and belts out one more song. ❖

From *Nasty Water: Collected New Orleans Poems*  
 (University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2018)



Lee Grue with James Nolan

## SOME MEMORIES OF LEE GRUE

by Martha McFerren

I first met Lee in May, 1976, just after I'd moved to town, and soon enough was awed by her unnerving lack of nerves. She was the calmest, most unstressed person I'd ever met. No matter what happened, Lee remained placid.

"Not always," she assured me. "I was pretty angry the time Arnold's kids shoved Ian into the alligator pit at the zoo. I had to climb down and pull him out myself. I was screaming and shouting and jumping up and down, but Arnold only said, 'Aww, don't be so hard on the boy.'"

As I didn't witness this meltdown, I couldn't picture Lee red-faced and screaming, especially since her friendship with Arnold and his children continued undamaged.

Years later she updated me on Arnold's daughter. "I ran into K— in the Quarter with her family. Her marriage is much better since she shot her husband." "Shot him?" I yelled. "You think that improved things?"

"Well, he used to hit her," Lee continued pleasantly, "but she finally decided enough was enough and shot him. It put him in a wheelchair, but he didn't press charges. He said she should have done it a lot sooner."

"So," she concluded, "they're much happier now."

Lee even remained calm when we found ourselves caught in the Rodney King riot in late April of 1992. We'd gone to New York to visit friends in Brooklyn. When we emerged from the subway in midtown Manhattan, we were literally in the middle of it. We looked down the street to our left and saw the riot approaching. Then we looked in the other direction and saw the police coming in force.

"Let's move a block over," Lee said. "I feel like shopping."

And so we did shop. Staying one hop ahead of the riot, we bought cheap

jewelry, went to an art gallery, had lunch in the White Horse Tavern.

During lunch, we phoned our friend's law office and were told by a secretary that a mob was breaking into The Gap on the ground floor and all the lawyers had fled. We laughed, but we did phone our friend at home and persuaded him to join us later for dinner at an Indian restaurant. While we were eating curry, the riot swept by outside, and we emerged to find cars overturned, shop windows broken and a street littered with trash. We took a cab back to Brooklyn.

I remember almost every detail of that day, but Lee scarcely recalled anything. To her, any day was an adventure.

Another time, much later, Lee attended Carnival in Brazil at an age when most women are home doing crafts. "The crowd was so close I fainted," she told me, "but the closeness of the crowd held me up until I came around. I was fine."

Toward the end of her life, Lee was told she had severe stomach ulcers. It was a myth, I remarked, that ulcers were from stress. They were caused by infection. "That makes sense," Lee laughed, "because I've always been the least stressed person imaginable."

On one occasion, she found it necessary to deal with distinguished poet Stanley Plumly, who was coming to New Orleans to do a workshop and reading. "He's acting a bit horsy," she told me. I was unsure what *horsy* meant but was able to guess *too full of himself* because Lee added, "I told him, 'Consider, Mr. Plumly, one day you might be remembered only because you corresponded with me.'"

I can only hope that Stanley Plumly received this information calmly. ❖

## A TRIBUTE TO LEE GRUE

by Mary Gehman

When I think of Lee, the word “heft” comes to mind.

Not only her physical size as a tall woman who carried her weight well in those long skirts, her head wrapped in braids or a bun.

Not only because of her 3-worded name Lee Meitzen Grue, refusing to give up her father’s surname to marriage in a gesture appropriate to her time yet slightly ahead of it. Never a Mrs., always a Ms.

Not even because of her initially solid marriage to a river pilot, the wonderful side-hall Victorian they bought and refurbished themselves and the three children who filled that house with life and laughter.

It all fit so well, like the baffling jigsaw puzzle of a 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist’s lot that the rest of us women writers were never quite able to piece together for

our own lives. There were no missing or lost pieces in Lee’s life – not that we could see.

Lee had a history as a writer in New Orleans before the rest of us got to know her. She was part of the Quorum scene, the French Quarter beatnik coffeehouse, and spoke proudly about the night it was raided by police because Blacks and Whites were present – together – in the same space – in illegal proximity.

Lee knew many people in the literary world both famous and otherwise, not only in New Orleans but in other cities and other states. If she hadn’t met them in person, she knew their work, corresponded with them, wrote poems about them. For a girl raised upriver in the hamlet of Plaquemine, Louisiana, she had come a long way.

Lee created a poetry theatre in her back patio among the banana plants, and a tropical house with open windows and

open doors and walls painted in rich hues of reds, gold and blues, where we met, some sitting, others sprawling on well-worn furniture to read our poetry and have it read by our peers.

Whenever I stopped by to visit briefly, she always invited me to the kitchen for a cup of tea and in her gracious, unhurried way put aside whatever she had been doing to listen, comment and add her own advice, a cat or two winding through our conversation. Lee was mother, sister, sister-in-law, neighbor and friend to so many of us, yet we never felt cheated or jealous. Her hospitality and generosity were what held our fragile community of writers together. We reflected that spirit back in our own poems, which were made better by it.

Lee was in all respects, a woman to be reckoned with. We were all so fortunate to have her. ❖

### MY STORY WITH LEE

by Moonyeen McNeillage

My story with Lee starts in Mexico where we first met in 1977 at the pension where we were both staying. We never stopped talking for days and became lifelong friends, meeting up again in Spain a few years later, then visiting each other over the years. Her son Ian spent his 21st birthday with us and was passed around to various friends all over Victoria, moving from grape picking-up in the wine country to fishing down in Philip Island. I am a painter, and Lee asked me to illustrate some of her work, including the cover for her novel *Blood at the Root* which I did online. I sent what I regarded as a rough copy which was deemed suitable for the job! How different from the first illustrations which traveled by mail! My last visit was in 2007, so I had been prior to Katrina and after. Phyllis took me around all the ruined houses, and I bought the book, *1 Dead in Attic*, which told it like it was. I feel a strong connection with NOLA and all the friends I made there. ❖

### MEETING LEE GRUE

by Pati D'Amico

I went over to Eluard and Kichea's about a month after moving to New Orleans in 1997 to ask a question about something I don't remember.

Mr. Burt and I ended up talking for an hour and a half. He said, "You need to meet Lee Grue!" So, a week later we met Lee at her beautiful home and talked about all sorts of things from poetry, art, politics, personal things and funny things. A week later, she was having a fundraiser for her literary magazine, *New Laurel Review*. Bill and I were her skills, selling tickets and whatnot. It was right around the 4th of July.

We all ended up going to Vaughn's during the day. There was a round blow-up pool in the middle of the street in front of Vaughn's. There were two old women wearing silver bras and mini skirts with gogo boots, dancing and drinking.

I met my first Indian Chief at Vaughn's, who had beautiful mint green eyes, while sitting at the bar with Lee. We talked and laughed and felt we had landed in the most insane and

wonderful place. Lee was just absorbing it all with her keen mind and eye, looking lovely with her painted nails on Botticelli fingers, with one iridescent green nail on her pinky.

It was one of the most magical times and fun times with Lee, and we felt we were "Home". ❖



Pati D'Amico and Bill Warren with Lee Grue

## THE LEE I KNEW

by Phyllis Parun

Lee moved downriver to Lesseps Street in 1972 to an unnamed 1800s neighborhood. After a city-naming competition, Lee told me her name “Bywater” was chosen.

The first literary journal at LSUNO, *The Beachcomber*, was published in 1960 featuring my drawing on the cover. By 1963, Lee was the Fiction Editor and I the Art Editor. That is where I met Lee Meitzen, and we remained colleagues over years of our individual life changes with that university as our family glue.

Lee was in the English Department while I was in Philosophy. Lee, editor and grammarian, and I did not agree on much when it came to editing or grammar. I hated both, and she knew it. It was the Art of Questioning that became my lifelong forte. Still, Lee found a way to interest me in what I disliked.

As native culturers and graduates of LSUNO, it was that campus which had imbued in each of us a mission to catalyze cultural events. After college, New Orleans became our glue where we shared communities, both of us showing up for so many activities. We

both wrote for *Distaff*, the first feminist magazine, published by Mary Gehman.

When I moved to Dauphine Street in 1979, I learned that Lee was living just blocks away. I frequently visited her in her Red Room and over many lunches at local haunts. So connected by our unique university experience, I couldn't remember who had an idea first, but it never mattered. We just bounced off of each other in spontaneous exchanges, enjoying a creative friendship.

In 1983 in her newly established First Backyard Poetry Theatre, Lee sponsored “An Evening of the Avant-Garde.” Not unpredictably, most attendees had been at LSUNO where the idea of the avant-garde originated (reportedly my doing!). Since that event, Lee was always a willing participant in any community development ideas that sprung up.

So when Pati D'Amico and Bill Warren moved to Bywater, the four of us promoted the neighborhood as the city's bohemian quarter, reminiscent of Paris's Latin Quarter. When *The Gulf Coast Art Review* was first published in 1999, Lee encouraged me to write about us as part of the developing New

Orleans art scene. The four of us sponsored a multicultural event in 1999 at the Bywater Resource Center called “Bohemian Rhapsody,” thus initiating the St. Claude gallery corridor, with 400 attending for music, art, and food. Lee read her poem “St. Claude Avenue Sweet” in Jazz poetry style accompanied by a sax player. Then when Roberta Shoemaker-Beal asked me to

co-create the Women of Wisdom group, Lee happily participated along with Andrea Gereighty, Anila Keswani and Carolyn Levy. After the levees broke in the flood of 2005, I evacuated to Pacific Grove, California, where Jennifer Colby, then President of the National Women's Caucus for Art, approached me as the only member from Louisiana. Wanting to do something for the artists of New Orleans during this trauma, she suggested an artist exhibit at her gallery and another one in Pacific Grove to be directed by Joan McCleary. Enlisting the help of Bywater artists Pati D'Amico and Bill Warren, we gathered 30 artists to exhibit. Lee created a hand-stitched fabric doll and read her poem about her long-time pet dog Pie, who had recently died after the flood. And in 2008, when I founded a local chapter of the Women's Caucus for Art, Lee was a founding member, participating in chapter events and dinners for eleven years.

In 2008, when I began documenting the untold history of how New Orleans became an art center by creating an e-zine, *The New Orleans Avant-garde*, Lee's story was the first I printed. In 2014 the concept branched into an award project, “The New Orleans Living Treasures Award”, which was awarded to her at the Alvar Branch Library in 2013.

Lee's community mindedness was inspiring, and she was always very happy to be part of any zany ideas we had. In this way, we enjoyed many decades of creative friendship.



Lee receives the Living Treasures Award at Alvar Library, 2013  
From left to right: Carolyn Levy, Lee Grue, George Koschel and Phyllis Parun (presenter)

# MEMORIES OF LEE GRUE



Lee Grue with Joan McCleary and friends in Pacific Grove, CA.



Lee Grue reading at the Maple Leaf, 2014



Jacqueline Mooney and Kichea Burt with Lee Grue



Lee Grue in DC for 2007 WCALA Exhibit



Lee Grue with Kruz



Lee Grue in front of her Katrina exhibit in San Juan Bautista, CA