



## The Little Lady with the Snake Tongs

A tribute to Roberta Evans Wilson, 1931–2023.

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**T**here wasn't a lot of hardscape around the Malibu home where the renowned Harvard professor and adviser to presidents James Q. Wilson lived with his wife Roberta. A paved driveway curved down from the road. But the Wilsons, both native Californians, had planted the steep surrounding hillside with hardy, aromatic native species such as sagebrush, lupine, vervain, ceanothus, poppy, thistle, clover, and bush mallow, buzzing with bees and whirring with hummingbirds. It was only at the bottom of the driveway, where it flattened to accommodate the garage, that there was



enough hardscape to attract a less welcome native species: the timber rattlesnake.

During a particularly hot summer in the early 2000s, the Wilsons decided that instead of waiting for the professionals, they would deal with those venomous visitors themselves. So Roberta called a highly rated firm in Texas and asked for their best snake tongs. The man who answered was happy to oblige, but wanted to know how tall Roberta was, so he could sell her the right length. A little over five feet, she told him, and his reply lives on in memory: “Well, little lady, then I’d advise the 60-inch tongs, to keep you out of harm’s way.”

From the day he heard this story to his last phone call with Roberta shortly before her recent death, Peter would address her as “little lady,” and she would respond with that salty-sweet chuckle of hers. The Texas tongs salesman must have heard the same chuckle, because to his credit, he expressed no doubt about Roberta’s ability to handle the serpent in her garden.

We say *her* garden because that lovely Malibu house was largely Roberta’s creation. Compact and neatly proportioned, it perched high above the Pacific like a natural outcropping bathed in sun, shadow, and sea air. Roberta added rugs and tapestries woven by her artisan sister, black-on-black Pueblo pots, and the vividly colored Mexican folk carvings known as *alebrijes*, in the shapes of lizards, pythons, and jaguars. A wall of windows opened to the sky with its revolving sun, cloud, moon, and stars, and the ocean with its fluctuating blues, violets, magentas, and greens.

We never entered that house without feeling as though someone had given us a powerful intoxicant. And that was before Jim opened the wine. Refined but never pretentious, Jim’s taste was always suited to the occasion, whether Thanksgiving, Easter, or evenings warm enough to follow the path down to the little promontory where we would watch the sunset while sipping wine and pitching popcorn to Winston the Labrador, whose efforts to catch it were a study in comic persistence.

We first encountered Jim in the mid-1980s, when he was the Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Government at Harvard, and Peter was one of his doctoral students. In September 1992, when Jim was president of the American Political Science Association, we attended the annual APSA convention in



Chicago.

To us at the time, Jim was not yet Jim but the formidable James Q. Wilson, who had left Harvard in 1987 to become the James Collins Professor of Management and Public Policy at the Anderson School of Management at UCLA—and his diminutive blonde wife was barely in the picture. So in Chicago, when Peter suggested that Martha invite Roberta to lunch, Martha hesitated, mindful of her own auxiliary status as a wife and unsure what to expect. It will come as no surprise that all doubt was swept away during a long afternoon that began with Roberta knowing just the right restaurant and continued with a three-hour walk along the blustery lakefront.

In 1997 we moved to Claremont, California and became frequent visitors to that lovely house in Malibu. We moved back to Massachusetts in 2003 and were glad to see the Wilsons do the same in 2009. They settled into Edgewood, a bucolic “Lifecare Community” in North Andover, to be close to the growing families of their daughter Annie and son Matthew, and it was a pleasure to see Roberta work her magic on a pleasant if generic small house in Edgewood’s “independent living” section.

Then in 2012 Jim died, and while our own sorrow was great, we could only imagine Roberta’s. Soulmates since the 1940s, when they were high school debaters in Long Beach, California, they excelled in debating at the University of Redlands and married in 1952, when (as Peter once remarked) their more serious debates must have been behind them, because as far as we could tell, they never disagreed.

After Jim’s death, Roberta spent the next 11 years giving new meaning to the term “independent living.” From that same house, she pursued most of the activities she had always pursued, and new ones besides. In her late 80s she hosted and was hosted by old friends including Suzi Garment, another former doctoral student who became a respected author and *Wall Street Journal* editor and columnist; Morton “Mickey” Keller, an American historian at Brandeis; and Mickey’s wife Phyllis, a witty and formidable Harvard dean. For many years the Kellers had traveled in the same poker-playing circles as the Wilsons, and as she approached her 90s, Roberta attended both their memorial services, along with those of untold others.



Now that Roberta is gone too, the world feels hollow to us. What we remember best is how gracefully she and Jim aged. If philosophy is not a system of ideas but a way of living, then the Wilsons were the finest philosophers we knew. The touch of envy we sometimes felt at what seemed a charmed existence would always fade on contact, because in true Aristotelian fashion, Roberta and Jim kept each other in the sweet spot between excessive pride and undue modesty.

Jim was a renowned scholar and policy intellectual, whose research in police behavior and crime led to his “broken windows” perspective on community policing and ultimately to a Presidential Medal of Freedom. On this and other crucial policy issues, his worldview is well captured by these lines from James Madison’s *Federalist No. 55*: “As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence.” The only sustained argument Martha ever had with Jim was over his stubborn belief that, while Madison was right to regard *mankind* with circumspection and distrust, *womankind* should be credited with esteem and confidence.

That argument was usually jocular, with Martha harping on the crooked timber of female humanity, and Jim touting the moral superiority of women. When challenged, he would not cite evidence but insist that his view was common sense. It now seems clear that for Jim, as for everyone, common sense was the product of experience. His books contain very few personal remarks, but this one, from *The Marriage Problem* (2002), stands out: “When I was teaching at various universities and I introduced my wife to colleagues, many would immediately ask her, ‘What do you do?’ When she said that she kept house, their unspoken reactions ranged from concern to disdain. Somehow, they suggested, she had failed.”

We strongly suspect that, instead of contesting those unspoken reactions, Roberta filed them away and made use of them while maintaining the unseen but very real boundary between the private life of her family and the public intrusiveness that came with Jim’s career as a politically engaged public intellectual. She was not a professor or a professional, but any disdain directed toward her on that basis was sorely misplaced, because in addition to maintaining that boundary with a degree of wisdom and tact that could serve



as an example to others, she raised two children who did not hesitate to start families of their own. She was also a skilled debater, gardener, birdwatcher, competitive swimmer, quilt maker, architectural tour guide, horseback rider, cattle roper, and gourmet cook.

And, to quote the jacket of her 1985 book, *Watching Fishes: Life and Behavior on Coral Reefs*, Roberta was an “amateur naturalist.” The phrase is too modest. Co-authored with Jim, with whom she spent 30 years exploring the world’s coral reefs, the book is graced by Roberta’s fine pencil drawings, color photos taken by her and Jim both, and lucid prose that occasionally ripples with mirth: “We still do not know the complete significance of coloration and color change for even one species. Fishes are hard to interview.” An avid reader of history and biography, Roberta’s coffee table always included at least one book about the myriad other creatures who also inhabit this earth.

Our only complaint is that this same little lady was a ruthless killer at the poker table, and equally merciless (we are told) with those snake tongues. In the end, Martha’s best rebuttal of Jim was that his judgment about women was clouded by years of love and companionship with Roberta, the rarest of soulmates.

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*Image: Roberta Wilson. (Photo courtesy of Martha Bayles)*

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