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Macalester-Groveland artists, poet Margaret Hasse (left) and painter Sharon DeMark, have collaborated on a new book of broadsides entitled *Shelter*. PHOTO BY BRAD STAUFFER

Poet and painter find ‘Shelter’ from COVID in collaboration

BY ANNE MURPHY

Seeking refuge from the stress and isolation of COVID-19, Macalester-Groveland poet Margaret Hasse and artist Sharon DeMark set to work last April on *Shelter*, a newly published collection of 30 poems and watercolor paintings. In Hasse’s verse and DeMark’s watercolors, readers too may find a haven in the collaborators’ depictions of the hug of a loved one, the care of a doctor and the friendly confines of a front porch.

“Our book began out of anxiety,” Hasse said. “That was its origin: feeling the distance

of COVID, feeling isolated as if the community of people who helped further my work wasn’t going to be there for me.

“So I contacted Sharon. We had an idea that at some point we’d create a broadside with a poem of mine on one side and the artwork of hers on the other.”

“We’d talked about trading our art and poetry back and forth,” DeMark said. “First we did just a few poems and paintings. And then we did a few more. We got about seven or eight. And then Margaret said, ‘I think this could become a book.’”

‘SHELTER’ ▶7

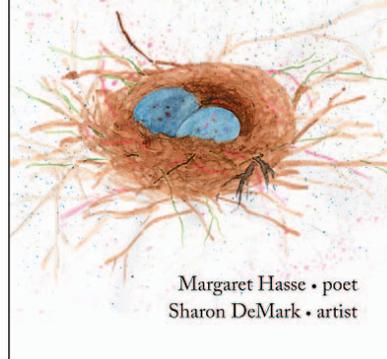
TENT

It was difficult to see her, the thin girl in a parka
protecting her cardboard sign from snowflakes
drifting up like insects in the wind
as you drove home from Target in a car humming
with heat and music.

Her refuge, a ruffraff of fabric and plastic sheets,
draped over a broken shopping cart like a tent for ghosts.
Her back was up against the wall, the cart, the cold,
the dark and those of us who passed by
without noticing.

— Margaret Hasse

SHELTER



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The collaborators communicated mostly via Zoom, phone and email as Governor Tim Walz's shelter-in-place directive changed the way people lived, worked and looked at the world. When they began the project, "we were looking at shelter by way of definitions," Hasse said. "We needed comfort. We needed coziness. But we also needed to find something that made us feel safe and protected, that made us feel still alive to the world."

"For me, the shelter of the creation of the work was important," DeMark said. "When I paint, I'm very present-tense, very in the moment, and that's what saved me during the first few months when there was so much unknown and a lot of anxiety about not knowing. Am I going to get sick? Is someone I know going to get sick? Should I go to the store today or not? When I'm at my desk with my paints, I'm not thinking of any of that. I'm just painting."

While they were at work on the book, "it was summer and it was pandemic time and I was working full time," DeMark said. "At the end of the day, I'd go for a walk, and I'd be highly attuned to the kinds of shelters there are in the world. So I took a ton of photos."

"When I had a topic, one that I had thought up or an idea from Sharon, I tried to think about it many times during the day," Hasse said. "I'd have the images come up as I was going to sleep or I would dream about them. I'm in a household with my husband, which is grand, and with a puppy, which is grand, and then to have Sharon's artwork arrive that was just so surprising and interesting was so marvelous."

Hasse and DeMark each provided the inspiration for half of the 30 entries in the book. The poem or painting that came first is on the left-hand page and the poem or watercolor it inspired is on the right-hand page. "That made it fun," Hasse said. "If I had had to come up with 30 shelters, it wouldn't have been nearly as lively."

Hasse recalled a typical exchange between the collaborators. "Sharon would be out walking and send me a photo," she said. "At one point, Sharon was out walking near Hidden Falls by the edge of the Mississippi River and came across this tiny structure in the woods. She eventually sent me this tiny painting."

That A-frame home, complete with miniature portico, inspired Hasse's poem, "Mouse House." DeMark was similarly inspired by the wintry setting for Hasse's poem, "Tent."

"Our minds turned to the fact that we're privileged in how we're sheltered," Hasse recalled. "(The girl in the poem) has this little tent, whereas we have houses. Three times in the book, people who are much more vulnerable than we are turn up. There's a man who is living out of his car and a young girl in the sanctuary of a church that's providing shelter to her and her refugee family."

In other broadsides, Hasse and DeMark alternately describe and illustrate the refuge that can be found under an umbrella, in a turtle's shell and from the well-worn pages of a book you loved as a child. Their hope is that their *Shelter* will serve as a source of comfort and joy for others during the pandemic and for years to come.

Shelter (Nodin Press, 74 pp., \$19.95) is available at independent bookstores, from the distributor Itasca Books, and from Amazon.