

# UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Lili Fabilli and Eric Hoffer Essay Prize

2014-15 Topic: Carillon Ringing

Winners: Alexandra Kopel, Bruno Mikanowski and Carolyn Winter

## Alexandra Kopel

Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* centers around the lives of four strangers on one London June day. The chimes of the Big Ben ring throughout the text, symbolizing the passage of time, connecting the various strangers and alluding to the idea of a collective consciousness. So much of literature, so much of life, is spent resisting the clutch of the clock. Authors manipulate language with slow dropping words, they flash back, pass seasons, fragmentize, resurrect, and yet, are as powerless as anyone to the passing of time. No one can escape those cruel carillon chimes, the willful second hand that slashes minutes and lives, the continual falling of days and nights, weeks and months, year after year.

Now a senior, I have felt the taunting Campanile clock haunting me for the past four years. I live a block away from campus and every hour, the tolling of the Campanile rings through my ears, jolting me, reminding me that I only have four short years. With every chime questions race through my mind: How can I read all the books in Main Stacks, meet all the professors, meet 20,000 students in only four years? How many times can I afford to resign myself to impulse? How many times can I afford to change my

major? Biology? Will I learn how to understand my face? Psychology? Will I learn how to understand myself? History? Will I learn how to stop repeating mistakes? When will the hours start slowing and the days stop speeding? When will a class teach me how to live in the present and not in the future or the past?

I have used all the knowledge I've learned here to try to fool those Campanile chimes; I've stayed up all night writing papers, I've left chess games at a stand still, I've taken classes with my favorite professors again and again, and yet, I am nearing the end. Even now, I hear the Campanile's laughter ringing, mocking, her sirens singing, steering me into the rocks of regret and nostalgia.

My only solace is that others share my plight. I am one of many Berkeley students who has failed at thwarting the Campanile's cruel chimes. Every hour, every student, on North or South side, in fraternities or cooperatives, studying engineering or English, hears those tough thuds, those heavy stamps ring; and for those few seconds, the Campanile, just like Mrs. Dalloway's Big Ben, unites us all. Those rings are electric shocks that jolt our collective consciousness awake. In an instant, we are united, not just in a communal grieving of another hour passing, but in a communal commemoration of the present moment. For as long as those carillon bells ring, the campus stands still in celebration; together we celebrate; celebrate the relief of day, the gift of community, of history, of discovery, the pursuit of knowledge, the love of we and the joy of now.

## Bruno Mikanowski

I've been at Berkeley a couple years now, but I have to confess that the Campanile and its carillon have always been something of a mystery to me. Something about them just doesn't seem to fit. It's not that they aren't beautiful. The bell tower might be the grandest building on campus, and the carillon sends rings out three times a day with a sound so enormous and eddying it feels as if it must reach the Pacific. It's more that the two — building and

instrument — feel like they belong to a different time. There's something medieval about them. Their very grandeur shocks, especially on a campus whose buildings look best when they try to blend into the landscape, instead of fighting against it. I guess I've always chalked this up to West Coast eclecticism — the way the ambition to include the best from different traditions turned the old Beaux-Arts plan of the university into the charming (if odd) mishmash we have today.

But in my time at Berkeley, I've also found out that there are few questions that can't be helped with a little time spent at the library. I learned that to grasp the original importance of village bells, you first have to understand the auditory landscape of the medieval world. In a time when there was no other means of transmitting information instantaneously, bells were the only way of synchronizing action. When danger threatened, whether from fire or bandits or hail, bells sounded the alarm. Bells told people to gather together. They announced the start of the harvest and of the holidays and when the market was to open. Bells gave a village its rhythm, and when something important happened in the life of one of its members, whether it was birth, marriage, and death, it was the bells that told everyone about it.

There is a deep connection between bells and the holy. Bells set the times for prayer and fast. Theologians once believed that bells had the power to summon angels and drive out demons. In Zen monasteries, different kinds of bells told the monks when to wake, when to meditate, when to work and when to sleep. The biggest bell in the temple held the spirit of the monastery. Its sound was said to pacify the soul.

For all these reasons, people ascribed tremendous importance to their bells. In Russia, czars spent fortunes forging the largest bells anyone had ever seen. In France, villagers fought to get their bells back after the Revolution, and rang them in defiance of the law. In Poland, my part of the world, people would bury their bells every time invaders would arrive and dig them up after they had left.

They knew that without their bells, their town or village wasn't a community. It was just a place. And the same is true of Berkeley. The Campanile and carillon aren't an aberration or a bit of whimsy added to the university. They're its beating heart.

## Carolyn Winter

The carillon rings. It's 7:50 a.m. on a weekday. In fall and winter, the light is spare and thin. Students on their way to early classes heed the bells and push towards their next lesson. During spring and summer, the heat might already be rising, but the bells ring out, undaunted by air heavy with humidity and smog.

One hundred years ago, did Jane Sather imagine that students, serious-minded but frivolously young, would today attend to the musical resonance of the carillon? Probably she did. She must have understood the weight and permanence of the great bells, the lasting value of listening.

Now it's noon on a weekday, and the campus is busy as the bells sound. Students, faculty and staff alike seek lunch or air or the next class. Some look up and around, as the reverberations bounce off adjacent buildings, masking their source. Some identify the music that plays. Most don't. Some have become so accustomed to the sound that they no longer register its presence, but find themselves humming the tune later.

The carillon and the tower that holds it were a gift to the University of California. Such a gift! A gift of music, a gift of tone and echo, a gift given on the hour every day.

It's 6 p.m, a weekday, dark, and the nights are colder. The bells offer their musical respite to staff hurrying home after working late, to security guards just coming on duty, to students laboring in the library. This time of year it's a plaintive sound that encourages reminiscence. Or instead, it might be the beginning of a warm summer night, as friends gather in assorted lots to appreciate the

light and the promise of a reflected smile. The music is a backdrop, a soundtrack to accompany the breath before the dive.

“It’s like a piano, only the hammers strike bells instead of strings,” says an astute passerby, overheard in the campus scramble. It’s ineffable, it’s notable, it’s harmonious, this music. It’s easy to forget that a real person is playing with great attention and strength to produce the evocative sounds.

Then, it’s noon on Saturday. People are on campus; people are always on campus. Perhaps there are more visitors than usual, tourists paying their few dollars to climb to where the bells are housed, from the 19-pound baby to the 10,500-pound Great Bear. Later, it’s 6 p.m. Most of the visitors have gone home, but there are still people to hear the bells. Some of them respond to the music’s suggestion to pause and reflect.

The carillon rings. It’s 2 p.m. on Sunday, the day of bells, when the carillon adds its voice to other Berkeley bells, rebounding and resounding and endorsing music as welcome communication that needs no words. It’s the longest declaration of the bells each week. As the sound fades, the silence is but the promise of return.