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# Pro Rege

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Volume 39  
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue 2010*

Article 22

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December 2010

## Presumptions

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### Recommended Citation

Dengler, Mary (2010) "Presumptions," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 39: No. 2, 32 - 33.  
Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol39/iss2/22](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol39/iss2/22)

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# Presumptions

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*Mary Dengler*

“She’s up there, vacuuming again,” I said  
Of Anne, my upstairs neighbor. Nothing more  
To occupy her time than watching dust  
Accumulate—a sad, pathetic, wasteful  
Fate, I hurriedly assumed. Divorced,  
She’ll find no mate awaiting her return  
From military life. And time for friends  
Is rare: a truck or car occasionally parks  
Outside. She’s not a reader, I assumed;  
No great books break her rituals of work. Just aging  
Parents each July to cook, clean  
And sit with her before the screen. Just killing  
Time with rituals—cleaning, shopping, church.  
“Is this what she foresaw?” I asked, “that year,  
Enlisting as a hopeful girl, or later when  
She made it her career?” Supply clerk for  
The troops—what kind of work is that? I’d hear  
Her move about at 4 a.m., then out  
The door by 5, in full regalia, even  
Heavy boots, then home at 5 to chase  
The dirt from room and hall and clothes till TV  
Took her off the clock.

Turning a page  
In *Mrs. Dalloway*, I heard Woolf’s scorn.  
She’d wince at my assumptions. She preserved  
Each person’s mystery. She honored every  
Mrs. Brown. From upstairs oven-cleaning  
Fumes descended wrath-like on my tea.

When weeks of scentless silence overhead  
Declared Anne gone, I asked a neighbor “Where  
And how is Anne?” “Deployed in Qatar,  
Near Iraq,” she said. Anne’s typed letter,  
Thumbtacked to our condo board, detailed  
Heat, dazzling sand, endless streams  
Of military men and women through her camp  
Where she equipped them head to foot, her marches  
Under desert sun in heavy boots

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On blistered feet, repeated chants from minarets  
To Allah, rock from GI radios, and smells  
Unlike the Midwest plain, the pain of muscles  
Overused. "But the food is good," she wrote.

When she returned, we dined simply where  
She ordered baked potato, pork chop, pie  
And quietly sat, as if she'd never left.  
"What was it like?" a neighbor asked. She helped  
Her father with his plate before she spoke:  
Outfitting hundreds in protective gear from inside  
Airless tents, always under threat alerts:  
"We never knew if we'd be bombed." And boots  
on open sores made marching hard, and trying  
To shower first, before the guys; and hearing  
Dirt from younger women in her troop.  
She'd stare straight ahead, she said, when targeted  
By verbal sexual missiles from the men. At night  
She'd try to clean her room before she fell  
Exhausted on her bed. "The food was good,"  
She said. "My room was never free of *dirt*.  
My *feet* still hurt. But I made friends I'll never  
See again. I wish I could have told them  
*More* of Jesus' love. I don't know who  
I helped. No one seemed to care if any  
Of us were there. I'm glad I went. I'm glad  
I'm back. It really was *okay*."

I watched  
This tall, straight girl of 50, growing mythic  
In proportions now, with clean blond hair,  
Gently lead her father to her clean  
Bright car. I looked at my apartment later  
On that night. It needed light and cleaning  
Long and deep. I knew we'd sleep below  
Athena, warrior, artless child of God.