

Waterways

Poetry in the Mainstream



May, 2021

Volume 41
number 11

Waterways

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VOLUME 41 NUMBER 11

How disappointed they are
when it turns out
I didn't understand.

Enid Dame

excerpt from

The Poetry Critic Complains

WATERWAYS

Poetry in the Mainstream

Volume 41 Number 11

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Deborah H. Doolittle

Bogwoman to the Hen Harrier Over Her Head

Hawk that hovers over the fells
and fens, let's pretend
that once we were friends.

That you will feel regret
when you pluck my vitals out.

That you will sense remorse
in some remote sense
of the word, because I am
saturated with them:

My regret tastes bitter,
like fennel root;
my remorse, of course,
is slightly, sickeningly sweet,
like meat about to decay.

You will eat me anyway,
if ever I shift within reach
of your beak.

Please, take me away,
one tidbit at a time,
for I'd rather not stay.

Deborah H. Doolittle

The Body of a Badger

My body is the body of a badger,
which I wear like a winter coat, but with pride.

All winter it has kept me warm and dry.
Wherever I have burrowed, I am instantly at home

among the roots and doodle bugs, the intricate
undersides of flowers. Each spring, when I tunnel

out and look up at the sky, the sun looks right
back at me and smiles and smiles in welcome.

Creature that I am, I feel the warmth of the world
like a second skin, like a gnawing hunger

in the pit of my spine. I feel its weight pressing
down on me even when I sleep curled in a ball

in the back of my den. That's when I slough off
my fur, slip into a paler version of myself,

one that can swim or climb mountains
in the blink of an eye. One that can lean

into the wind, sure-footed. Even in my dreams,
my legs are shaggy and shorter than I'd like them to be.

Marilyn Braendeholm

An Unfinished Song

Always in motion,
this broad and singing dawn.
Robins nibble seeds
and fatten on raisins,
muddle over fat grubs and
a nub of larden bread.
Magpies dress in tuxedos.
Wrens in brown weave.
The air is motion —
dandelion fluff bright
as whirly-spins
against the sun.

Don't listen to me. Listen
to the science, she says.

Pat Anthony

For Galway

I'd read your poem for years
The Still Time taped and re-taped
to the side of the black
file cabinet

wondering what you meant:
was it some implied quietude
or extended possibility

how I stretched my life around your lines
finding hope sandwiched between
words phrases trying
to get to the point
where I, too,
could sing

and one day I wrote
a poem about doors
how one passed through
so many and into or out of
so much and then someone
reading it thought it was
about hands and I went back
and read your words again

*I know there is still time
.... For hands to open...*

how I'd never once
broken your lines there

could see you then hair drooping
over your forehead and laughing heartily
as I asked which of the three ways
was the one you intended your brogue
thick as the Irish of it all swirling
in a heavy bottomed glass with the answer.



May

It's May, a month of subjunctives,
possibilities not yet realized.

Sap is starting to thicken in the barrel
of my pen, oozing not yet flowing.

Sun days lengthen, moon nights shrink,
that rhythm the sole certainty of what may be.

There is promise in uncertainty, see it
in the eccentric cadence of children skipping.

See it in faces still unpocked
by life's unpredictable certainties.

May still has weeks to run, weeks
of chances to be taken or not.

Soon enough we'll see what may be-
come of us, possibility hardening into history.

Ellaraine Lockie

Miscommunication

Did you know I've always
had a crush on you
my dogs' doctor of twenty years asks

I clamp hand over mouth
hiding the smile that the word crush elicits
As out-of-date as this suddenly single
man in his seventies

Eyes divorce mouth
but he contrives a receptive response
As though my hand coquettishly covers
the gasp that ushered an Audrey Hepburn swoon

I finger my wedding ring as if it were a rosary
Appealing to St. Francis of Assisi
for the future health of my Great Pyrenees

Mary K. Lindberg

The Maskerade Blues

Broadcast on April 27, 2021 from NPR-WNYC

Today's landscape of worry bothers me
in a world where slow is still hurry.
What used to be go girl go — now is —
where's my mask, gloves, phone, keys, don't ask.

If I meet anyone outside, I take a good look
at the face but nothing's there, only hair, brows,
eyes that size me up as I do likewise.
Do I know the person behind the KN95?

On the street if I see someone walking
toward me, I assess not mood, nor clothes,
but security of their mask. Is it loose
at the cheeks? Do I see a nose?

If so, I pinch my mask over cartilage,
sidestep away. If we pass close by,
instead of a smile or nod, I hold my breath
to give stray particles wide berth.

For those who are maskless, no excuse can
relax my vigil, so I move on, quickstep,
as if I was avoiding secondhand smoke
or, more accurately, Covid quicksand.

There's an upside. Today I saw someone I thought
I knew, whom I didn't want to talk to.
They didn't recognize me. What a relief!
Covid has given me anonymity.

But I've still got the Maskerade Blues,
so I'll stay inside, dream of days I can leave
my house, breathe deeply in and out,
undaunted by random aerosols flying about.



Caryatids

We were once
Just village girls
We did the washing
On the river bank
Drew water from the well

We knew we would
Be farmer's wives
And then too soon
Black
Widowed crones
It seemed inevitable

But then a stranger
Came among us
And we were raptured
Limned by light
And changed
By something
Much older
Than the world

When we lived
The mortal life
It was our lot
To carry
Wait and keep
Our silence
And we still do

But now we
Proudly stand
High and grand

Above the city's
Passing crowds
Marble, framed
By Heaven's blue
Forever old
Forever new



Sheryl L. Nelms

Tow Sacks

“Now you know
there’s different

sizes of sacks

I’ve used
big burlap bags

and bigger ones
it depends
on what

you’re pickin

some men
couldn’t even

pull ‘em
when they’re full

but I
did

every day
across those
Arizona fields

back to the trucks
to dump ‘em!”

Robert Cooperman

**Moshe Breslau, After His Title Fight
The Lower East Side, 1916**

I'd laugh, if it didn't hurt so bad
from the champ's uppercut to my jaw.
Almost funny, me shouting before the bout
like a Bible prophet, about not throwing this fight,
even if it meant getting dumped in the East River
by the goons of big shot gamblers betting against me,
'cept I got decked by a champ I mistook for a chump:
his fists, I'd joked, slow as snails, soft as cotton candy.
But he tagged me; for all the extra weight he carried,
he still had cast-iron mitts. No idea how I made it
to the dressing room: everything a mist,
 like in a sitz bath,
only my head's about to topple to the floor.

I was hoping for some quiet, but Danny's all smiles,
thinking I finally "listened to reason."
 Esther taps a foot,
peevd that watching me lose got in the way
of her being at the theater where she's acting in a play.
And here's Ma, wanting to hug me, but afraid I'll break
into a thousand little pieces, if she wipes away my tears,
like I'm a little kid; I never cried then,
 ain't about to start now.

Last, Pa slaps me on the back, like we're in on the best
secret in the world. He bet big against me,
 on Danny's say-so.
Jesus, I hate my little brother and old man right now.
If I didn't feel frozen in cement,
 and they weren't family,
I'd belt 'em into outer space, and lam outta this town.

Simon Breslau, *After His Son Moshe's Losing Title Bout
The Lower East Side, 1916*

When the kid muttered he hadn't tanked,
I patted him on the shoulder and smiled,

"Of course not, Moshe, or Mick,
or whatever your ring name is."

Danny, my only son with brains, told him
to dump this fight, though Moshe swore
up and down he'd take no part in a dive.

Afterwards, he claimed that uppercut landed
legit. Hell, I got a payday big enough to take Rivka
for steak dinner at the Rumanian place on Second
once she gets over how beat up Moshe looks.
Enough too, to place a big bet on Moshe's next bout,
which he'll win: the odds and money all on the champ.
Plus, there's all these young tootsies to impress,
the ones in the chorus line in the musical revue
my daughter Esther plays second banana in, though,
not long, with her looks and voice,
 'til she's the headliner,

Rivka wants Moshe to go into less dangerous work.
But what? The seykh for a Talmud scholar,
an accountant, lawyer, or doctor?

 Don't make me laugh!

Lucky he found the fight game.

 After his next title bout,
he'll retire the champ and help Danny put the fear
of Hashem into shopkeepers, make those mice pay up
to stay in business and with all their fingers.

If I wasn't kvelling so much about my winnings,
I'd call Moshe a shanda, if the fight was legit,
for losing to an old zhlub with a belly that jiggled
like sheep guts shimmying in the East River.

Esther Breslau
After Her Brother Moshe Loses His Title Bout
The Lower East Side, 1916

Danny—quiet, and ruthless as a cat—orders me to break it gentle to Moshe (like if we were Christians and I had to tell him there ain't no Santa Claus), that his boxing career's kaput. Danny wants him for muscle against shopkeepers who got to pay to stay in business and keep their arms from getting snapped like twigs for Boy Scout campfires.

“His jaw's brittle as a Seder crystal glass,”

Danny hissed,
when Moshe practically flipped over backwards from the champ's uppercut—or whatever it's called. “Let him earn his keep; he's family, so he gets to supervise my other ex-pugs,” Danny sneered, though he made a killing betting against Moshe.

Whatever happened to the kid who could rattle off Torah verses and had to run from bullies or hide behind Moshe's fists? Now, Danny's a man of influence,
dangerous, while Moshe mopes, doesn't have
the moxie

to take a shower, and put on the suit

Danny bought him.

For Moshe's sorry performance, I let an understudy take my role tonight? May she stink up the stage, so the producer and audience will miss me more.

“Get up, you big moke!” I whisper so only Moshe can hear. “At least you got the family business! How many washed up pugs can say that?”

The look he shoots me could freeze Mama's steaming
cholent stews, but he staggers, still woozy,
to the showers.

I'd feel bad for the poor sap: he looked out for me—
what a big brother should do—when we were kids,
but I didn't listen to Danny warn me not to bet on him.

Mosher Breslau
After His Loss to the Heavyweight Champ
The Lower East Side, 1916

Only Ma thinks to hold me, comfort me,
though I never needed her arms as a kid.
Still, it's good to hear her soft whispering,
especially after Esther's dirty looks,
like I got knocked out like a teetering tower
of ritzy champagne glasses just to spite her
and keep her from hoofing and singing
on that Second Avenue stage for one night,
her bidding her time with more foot tapping
impatience, 'til she's the revue's headliner,
through one of Danny's arranged accidents
to the tootsie who's starring now.

Danny? He got what he wanted, a big payday
for him and his mob buddies, no one realizing
I tried to win this fight, only my jaw didn't.
And Pa? He looks like he raided Ali Baba's cave
and stuffed his pockets full of diamonds, sapphires,
rubies, and emeralds, not to mention gold coins,
him also gloating I took a swan dive in the fifth.

Damn, I really thought I could take the champ
even if it meant a swim in concrete boots.
I'd've known I was the best, not a punch drunk bum
with a jaw a stiff wind could knock down
like a dead branch.

So now Danny tells me I'll be his muscle in "our family business," meaning separating shop owners from what they legally sweat for. Not me! No way! I'll take it on the lam for the Pennsylvania coal mines, or hop a train to Canada and enlist, to fight the Krauts. And if I'm killed, it'll at least be for something good, not this dirty fight game or *Family Business*.



Our Geography of Poets

California

Ellaraine Lockie

Colorado

Robert Cooperman

Kansas

Pat Anthony

New Jersey

Gilbert Honigfeld

New York

Mary K. Lindberg

North Carolina

Deborah H. Doolittle

Texas

Sheryl Nelms

Virginia

William Corner Clarke

West Sussex

Marilyn Braendeholm

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