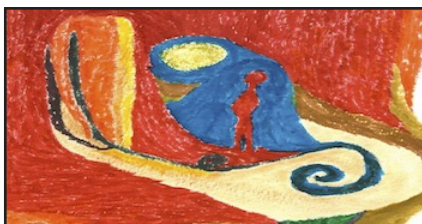


Waterways

Poetry in the Mainstream



February 2024 Volume 44 No. 8

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Volume 44

Number 8

oil tankers
split through
the hide
of Harlem

from "Hudson River" by Maurice Kenny
NYS Waterways Project 1979 #1

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Poetry in the Mainstream

Volume 44 Number 8

Designed, Edited and Published by

Barbara Fisher & Richard Spiegel

A. Thomas Perry, Outreach Consultant

contents

Pat Anthony	4
Ron Singer	5
Robert Cooperman	6
Mary Belardi Erickson	8
Richard Spiegel	10
Bradley R. Strahan	11
Sylvia Manning	13
Gilbert Honigfeld	18
James Penha	20

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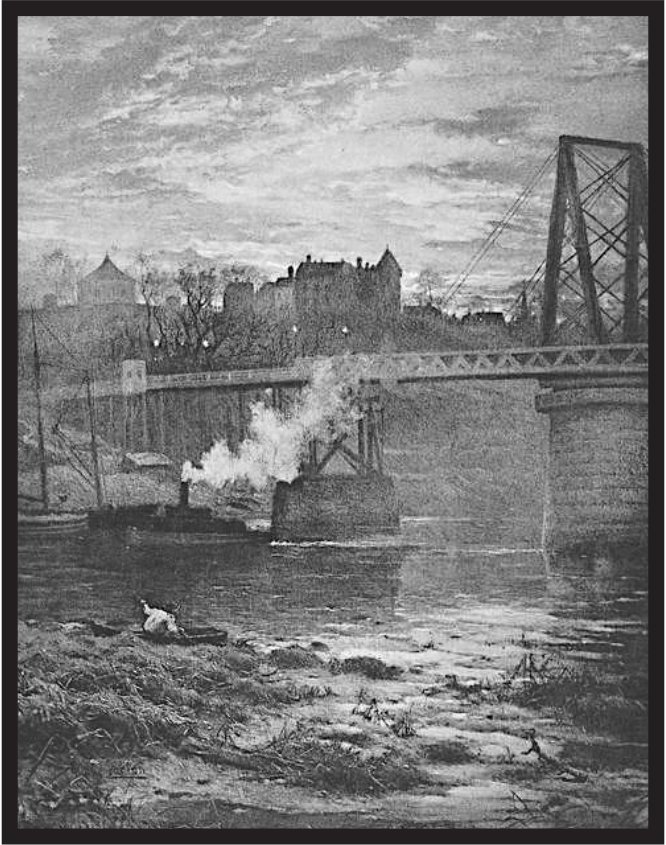
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Arthur Parton (1842-1914)

Harlem Bridge by moonlight. 1890

New York Public Library via Wikimedia Commons

Next

How leaves lie atop green
algae now drought has settled in
to every creek and branch
tiny ships rocking stern by keel
becalmed and waiting the freeing
of an errant hoof in search of water

How we go then barging through
the detritus of our lives hoping
to cleave a clear channel
by brute force by chance by luck
and find a mooring inside
a welcoming port

But barring that we'll anchor
out beyond the breakwaters
and wait it out for nightfall
when we can drop a ladder
lash ourselves onto a raft
and slip ashore under cover
of darkness into our next life

Ron Singer

An Open Letter to My P.C.P.*

Dear Dr. —,

During my seventies,
when I began to think of myself as old,
I didn't much mind. But turning eighty,
as they say, is a whole 'nother story.

My wife and I used to favor used cars.
Back in the old days, when most things were cheap,
we would buy a roadworthy new used car
every few years, for prices in the hundreds,
not even bothering with loans or trade-ins.
(And we're not talking junkers or vintage tin!)

(Not) to compare my body with a used car,
but there are certain religious brethren
(and sisthren) who believe that, when they die
(pick your own metaphor for the event),
they will be trading in the old guzzler
for a deluxe, emission-less model.

Now that, doctor, I'm always in the shop,
for routine maintenance or major repairs,
trying to postpone my fate as junkyard dust,
is there any way to turn back the clock
and let me enjoy some maintenance-free years?
(Shall we say, a decade or two?) Lacking that,
please direct me to the nearest scrap heap?

In shared mortality

Your (im)patient

Robert Cooperman

**In the Lair of Dr. Alvin Slotkin
the Demon Dermatologist of Ocean Avenue, Brooklyn**

I was sixteen, afflicted by the worst case of acne in the history of New York, but lucky enough to be granted a series of appointments with Dr. Slotkin, worshipped for his miracles with faces more pitted than coal mines.

While my mother leafed a magazine in the waiting room, he showed me into his office, pointed to his surgical table, an ominous strap on either side.

“Nothing to worry about,” his grin more Wells’s Dr. Moreau than kindly Dr. Spock. My arms lashed to my sides, he started with dry ice swabs over my whole face, then whipped out a pair of pliers modified by Nazi butchers with a long, sharp needle gleaming, jabbing out from its center, and stabbed into my blackhead-ant-army, while I writhed, moaned, and he muttered,

“This’ll teach you, you little bastard, to eat chocolates and fatty foods, and God knows what you do to yourself in your bed at night.”

When he was finally finished for the week, another swab of dry ice, then some goop that reeked medicinal, or worse, smeared all over my face; at last, he loosened the buckles, steadied me, and led me to his waiting room.

In the car, Mom asked how it had gone.

“Great,” I assured her, knowing if I told the truth, next time would be even worse.

Set the Stage

Remnants fancify sills, walls,
and shelves:

a decorative green light bulb,
a silver bowl engraved Cast of Tom Jones,
a gold-backed portrait of immigrants
 joining the horizon —
the long, wide-rutted mud trail left behind,
the dog-eared desk copy of Ethan Frome you'd kept.

In the dividing and closing of Mother's house
even the heartbreak of the present cannot overshadow
the past's clutter — an uncle's blackened attributes,
their effect on children, props in an adult drama.

It's like viewing our own adapted version of
the Dickens of literature merged
 with the unmannered
in Austen on Masterpiece Theater — how siblings cope
with a black sheep left unfenced
 in their country home.

After many decades, a mother admits,
"I should not have allowed him here."
As we age, we pick at our sorrows
clinging to our psyches, past puppets playing
on a 1950's and 60's adults' stage.

There are shadows following us,
bric-a-brac tagging along in families.
My Brother rides his Harley onto back roads,
which made him who he is today.

I brush troubled flesh, morph cells into words—
memory a skin I wear of a child's soul,
origins in a meadow of naturally-flowing waters.
When siblings talk, our wounds fill with a fresh tissue
attached to our beginnings.

Dusk

As if covered by yellow crepe shade,
the sinking sun haunts in its afterglow.

It sends streaks of pink into low clouds
above the abandoned gravel pit.

Brush and pines lay in the shadows
beneath starkly darkened trees,

which above the woods' ghostly depth
shine like coal without its burn.

Rerouted

Often traveling by train,
I'd look over the marshes
to the Hudson's burdened waters,
polluted by GE's PCBs,
and much of our spilled guilt.

Now, 20 years later, tankers
of digital debt, bit-laden algorithms,
spew my conscious stream
with pixels of merchandise
from as far away as the Amazon;

while I sit at home and pet
the dog asleep at my feet.

Bradley R. Strahan

**A Note to James Wright
Singing Among His Ghosts**

Your name drifts in smoke
of failing Ohio factories.
The drunk and homeless
offer you libations
from beneath highway bridges.

Your words glisten,
green flies that buzz
in the ears of the unemployed,
nightmares of rusted machines.

You haunt their dreams
with forgotten anthems
of union solidarity.

Porch Song

Porch boards gape, sprung by decades
of rain. Shingles hang, autumn leaves
ready to fall with the first storm.
The door sags on a single hinge.

The old woman clutches the door frame,
squinting through morning as if to catch
a shape across the narrow valley.

She hobbles to a spavined rocker
and sits humming an old song
he used to sing for her.

Who's been here since I've been gone?
Pretty little girl with a red dress on...

Dead Feathers (for the War Wasted)

Dying young, flesh keeps
its uniform surface.
Remembrance hardens to marble.
A gleam remains,
sun off rifle barrels.

Jarra

Old clay pot on thrift store shelf priced at 40 bucks
bought once for penny pesos by someone escaping
their shopping mall nation to stroll through some
Mexican market, then lived with it through fading
wintry decades here on northern border of the great
US of A

great jarra it was and still may be waiting empty of
chili beans and chili. And Chile, though that was
farther distant, but even so, Chili, so that

this jarra with two r's could hold tears for Jara with
only the one, for Victor and to nourish la jara, rock-
rose flora

(Jara means that, with only the one.)

Maybe some of its seeds save memories of the old now
new democracy, folksongs and dances some grand
and great grand children haven't learned

and for Violeta Parra who knew and loved him,
guided him to the future she would never see, toward
El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido ...

Violeta whose youngest children carried Arce as sur-
name (Sir name), meaning maple.

Violeta who wrote Gracias a la Vida, a fine Thanksgiving song, not long before she took her own life

before Chile had its true victory, before the coup that killed Allende and her young friend Victor, to leave his body in a ditch where the rockrose thrives.

October 24, 2023, Glover VT

To M. 12-26-68

A nightingale sang a song of his own,
softly, so to be heard
above the yang of jingle bells.

I took his gift of song
yet still could not reach out
to blue long feathered notes of Christmas.

Please, my nightingale, come again.
The palace is empty of all the king's men
who whistled mere fragments and then
went away to find you.

An old foolish emperor
sits there alone,
knowing at least that his bird
made of gold
cannot save us.

Yesterday

Yes. Yes twice and both nice
in wholly black and white.

First there in silence with Friends
through miracle of space time
and here who I am where I am,
only human, ready to cry, really,
loving my neighbors as myself,
all of us far, in real time,
from the St. James Infirmary,
us ourselves alone beneath presence
of something All Mighty.

Je suis ici. Beyond Christology
but before: Jesus là (so close to Jesus,
young prince of the old
I Am Who I Am. (The Man.)
Je suis. Ici. I. It's ok to cry.

Aye. Silent sit with Friends,
leave early then be somewhat late
for Black church music, words
like music without words,
aspirational as jazz,
letting all saints fall free or fly,
letting the weary sit down and cry
our beloved country,

cry y/our heartbreak
however long it takes,
whatever it takes,
whoever you are, we are
just comin' to Jesus
who cried Himself to say
WHY THE HELL
CAN YOU NOT
STOP THIS KILLING?
(Just askin'. Just sayin'
Peace, Man.)

*Dec. 11, 2023 after attending
the NEK Quaker meeting by Zoom
and the Wesley Harper Methodist church
in real life, a bit late, YESTerday, Seguin TX*

**A Ghazal for Simin Behbahani, 1927-2014
and Neda Agha Soltan, 1983-2009**

“You are neither dead, nor will you die,”
you wrote for another, dead. “Nor will you die.”

The ghazal cannot fare well for us without Farsi,
but even we can hear the thread, “Nor will you die.”

Written for Neda Agha-Soltan, killed for going
where her conscience led, “Nor will you die.”

Writing your long life long for all women — for
prostitutes, for wed and unwed, “Nor will you die.”

Beaten, jailed, threatened, detained, you wrote
always, as though your soul bled. Nor will you die.

Taking as your own the male-favored ghazal as easily
as you took pleasure in his bed. Nor will you die.

We learn late of you. Even so, we know your words
are ours to use as you to Neda said,

“Nor will you die.”

August 26, 2014

Burner Man

He can come home only so many times
drenched in stench of #2 heating oil,
coveralls permeated with the stuff,
its ooze pervading hands and face

the man, to be fair, a hard-worker,
ready to go back out whenever called

but you can expect only so much from
a woman after all, and can't blame
her for wanting something a little finer
from life, something else to fill her
house beyond the reek of #2 utility crude.

The Lure/October

I tempt them, unsuccessfully,
with sunflower seeds
(Kansas blacks, loaded with oil).
but no one comes
to hit on their new tube feeder.

I know they're there,
winter finches and other sopranos,
eager to squabble and to sing,
but I don't think we'll see them
'til the desp'rate days of December.

The Writer as Chef

In youth she skewered her friends
on her pen, barbecuing them over smoking coals.

In middle-age she simply diced her pals
into crisp greens, oiled them and added vinegar.

In old-age she slowly grated her chums
and tossed them into a boil of pudding,
gritty as tapioca.

Doe-Eyed Sonnet

Where are the deer? my husband
not just asked or said, but almost
cried. We always see them there
(the vast meadow just passed near
Harriman) or by your brother's place.
Not one. What's wrong? True, we saw
no deer all the way upstate and back
during this year's New York visit. But
en route to JFK inside the City border
a young whitetail doe wandered within
the Expressway's tree-lined shoulder
safe from hunters if not from wayward
cars. Still he worried even as we flew.

Our Geography of Poets

Bali

James Penha

Colorado

Robert Cooperman

Kansas

Pat Anthony

Minnesota

Mary Belardi Erickson

New York

Ron Singer

Richard Spiegel

New Jersey

Gilbert Honigfeld

North Carolina

Bradley R. Strahan

Texas

Sylvia Manning