

Waterways:

Poetry in the Mainstream

VOLUME
31



Waterways: Poetry in the Mainstream

VOLUME 31, #10

We never finished our conversation, my hand lightly
on yours not to add to pain, blood running down the sheet.

Ida Fasel

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WATERWAYS: Poetry in the Mainstream

Volume 31

Number 10

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*"Cabeza de ángel".
Francisco Goya*

O Muse — Charles Rammelkamp

“At least you should get
a couple of good poems out of this,”
Mary Alice consoled
when I told her about
my cousin’s suicide.

She didn’t mean it
in a grave-robbing sort of way;
more like a tribute
to the enormity of the event,
as if the poet’s burden
to mine experience for nuggets
of poignant detail
were a sort of monument-building.

But still, it struck me
as the last thing that mattered.
When I thought of Teddy
shooting himself in the town cemetery
a thousand miles west of me,
my mother calling with the news,
eight hundred miles to the north,
my brother on the opposite coast
acknowledging the tragedy,
cousins overseas writing to share
their shock, astonishment, distress —
the world shrank to the size of a pea,
and all we did in it —
the working, the fighting,
the fucking, the crying —
so microscopic as to be invisible.

Casting the First Stone — Charles Rammelkamp

“That’s just ghoulish,”

Alyson’s pronouncement as final as a *fatwa*.

“And he asked your *permission*
to write about your cousin’s suicide?”

“It was Albert’s decision to write a poem
or not,” I conceded, “ but he didn’t
want to trespass on our friendship,
wipe dogshit on the living room carpet..”

“But it’s not like he even *knew* your cousin.”
When she got on a judgmental roll
there was no stopping her,
as if she were virtue itself,

and I couldn't help remembering
how she'd emptied the joint account
just before she divorced Mark,
the checks he'd bounced
paying the mortgage and phone bill,
her self-righteous justifications afterward
in the face of the hardship she'd put him through.

Nor could I forget
the poem I had written
about Mark kicking her in the gut,
slugging her in the face,
the neighbors pulling him away from her,
Mark spending the night in jail:
the final abuse that caused the divorce.

“Exactly,” I said. “It’s not as if he were sullyng my cousin’s reputation or telling tales out of school.”

Afraid to Move We Wait — Scott Owens

Afraid to move, we
wait, wordless by the bed,
our hands shaking,
stomachs rolling,
faces sagging with
uncertainty's weight.

We know beneath the
sheets her body
is broken open. Her
skin has turned white
and swollen. Her
hair is limp as threads.

They tell us her
lungs are full,
that she is
breathing under water.

We see only how
white she has become,
how her body melts
into the bed.

We know the ties
that bind her
merely hide the
consumption inside.

We know they cannot
put her together again.

We know she is
dying in a way she never wanted,
her body more tubes
than flesh, more machine
than heart. We
stand beside her searching
our mouths for
words, our pockets for answers,
afraid of her
body's cold unfeeling, unmoving,
afraid of "No" or "Yes."

The Kiss — Thomas D. Reynolds

Like a frail, fevered child,
She leaned back
While her legs were lifted,
Then lay still while a blanket
Was pulled to her neck
And tucked beneath her.

On the porch in low tones,
We drifted from her
Curling away like smoke.

What passed between us
Was without words,
Like water around a stone.

Later, she willed herself
To the faded porch chair
For perhaps the final time.

Leaning down, I pressed
My forehead to hers,
As fathers do to infants,
While she turned to kiss
My cheek with formless
gums of a newborn.

Perhaps her life was a dream,
And now she looked out
Again as a child,

Wordless and somber
In the soft dusk
With sleep coming on.

The Ruse — William Corner Clarke

And the time comes
When everyone must lay
Their beauty down
And see it for what it is
The means
Of making others
To take your place
When you are gone
Where Beauty
Holds no sway

So lay
Your mirror down
And see your face
In all the ones around you
And in their eyes
Realize the others
Yet to come
And know that
While you were fretting
Over the gathering grey
Beauty has had its way

The Palette — Frank Murphy

I walked out one day thinking about a picture
of a painter's palette.

It was from a large book,

Teotihuacan:

Art From The City of the Gods

— and I

kept thinking of the palette as I walked

carved from a single block of stone,
figures with green feather headdresses
almost completely faded

But as I walked into Washington Square Park
I saw two men standing beside a police
car, handcuffed.

I was thinking of Storm God vessels,
of Feathered Serpents,
of that palette just waiting to be filled
The painter dabbing a brush here, there
his critical eye, steady hand
maybe fifteen hundred years ago
and suddenly
the handcuffed men were in my head

and the palette forgotten, left behind
in the overgrowth of my mind
like an abandoned city waiting to
be rediscovered.

Angel Down — Frank Murphy

They enter and leave, the doctors
and nurses while above the beds
people play doctor and nurse
 between commercials
and she cries,
“I just want to die.”

All the televisions
in the hospital are
tuned to the same soap-opera

“Why are you torturing me?”
An old man shouts down the hall

Now there is a quiz show, so many
questions...

I'm sorry. There is nothing
we can do.

When We Drank — Frank Murphy

We called the
empty bottles

dead soldiers

and used them to play
spin the bottle

or to
hold flowers

or we tossed them into
the waves

thinking

they would carry
their own messages

The way real dead
soldiers do

He'd Always Soothed — Jari Thymian

the household plumbing. Sewer lines
in the basement back up while the elderly
man lies in intensive care. Monitors, oxygen,
dialysis machine — hum, beep, swoosh.

Downstairs in his home, laundry suds refuse
drainage. Murky islands of exercise equipment,
board games, photos, magazines saved
in labeled boxes. Toilets can't be flushed —
family members gather. Whispers dipped
in alcohol. Floods of words still-birthed.

A dead baby's blankets, bibs. Golden tones tinged
with dank edges. The ghost baby attends the funeral
like a grief-bearer for the whole family. The water
recedes after his father's ashes come home.

Off, Into Eternity – Michael S. Morris

Of course you knew that Ishmael was a school teacher,
Broke and suffering no interest for anything on land.
Thus, the grand eloquence, but isn't it odd, you'll
Agree, that nary a woman is mentioned, but in passing.
Did you realize Ahab was an Egyptian? Naturally, everyone
Knows that he had a wood stump for a leg, chomped off
By the great leviathan Moby Dick. It's made perfectly
Evident that Ahab didn't give a seagull's screech for his
Supposed mission: above all the profitable searching out &
Slaying, particularly the sperm whale in order to fill
Every nook and cranny below deck with precious drums filled
To the brim with whale sperm, the street lights oil,
Not to mention the flexing bones that perfectly bell-shaped

Corsets, being the fashion of Society's Belles. Queegqueg,
The harpooner — think of it — sold shrunken heads around
Town. And let us remember: Men, complete strangers, often
Shared beds. It was the custom. But what did you think when
Ishmael said of Queegqueg, "I found his arm thrown around
Me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You'd almost
Thought I'd been his wife. There is no place like a bed for
Confidential disclosures between friends. Thus, then, in our
Hearts honeymoon lay I and Queegqueg — a cozy loving pair."
Did it make you laugh that Ishmael was a Presbyterian Christian,
And Queegqueg a Pagan from Hokovoko, not down on any map?
And the Pequod, yes, everyone's shipped on the Pequod.
Our Ishmael, "for a whale ship was my Yale and my Harvard."
And the ridiculous names Starbuck Native of Nantucket
And a Quaker by descent. And the pencil named Stubb

Second mate, a Cape Cod man. One never has to tell you,
Below decks there was a secret: the Islami crew
Sequestered for the sole purpose of avenging Ahab's,
How would you say, monomaniacal hatred for what, of course
Is, the symbolic Great White of Uncontrollable Nature.
So one has read the lines: "Ahab stood before them with
A crucifixion in his face" or, "Ahab's unalterable old: Dream: Boss
like Cellini's cast Perseus." Then, as you say, The voyage
begun, enter the Cetology of Whales: Sperm, Right, Fin Back,
Hump Back, Sulphur Bottom. Lay bare every board of the ship,
And you still fly to Those Sentences, "Over Cartesian
Vortices, you hover." And Passion fills your breast
When Ahab, forgoing sleep, food, sanity, cries, "Death
To Moby Dick!" And you are off, one agrees into eternity

A Father's Advice — Robert Cooperman

He was a man distant
as the frozen summit of K-2
But when you visited him
for the last time in the hospital,
and told him you were marrying,

he smiled — an occurrence
so infrequent you feared
it was the final rictus — and gasped,

“Make sure, son, you keep her’
entertained and happy, even more
that you let her see you laugh, and cry.”

No, he didn't die, cinematically,
upon that revelation, but lingered
an hour or two, while you serenaded him
about the woman who'd agreed
to make you the happiest man alive.

"Entertained and happy," you mused,
it could've been his own self-reproach,
for the way he'd kept your mother
miserable with his taciturnity long
as monks who've taken vows of silence.

“For Christ’s sake,” she’d demand,
“say something, anything!”
He’d scowl a witticism sharp
as an ice shard, and withdraw
into scotch’s better company.

When you made arrangements,
you knew you’d be the one mourner.
regretting you’d told Emily
to “stay home in your distant city.”

**The Former Slave, Corrine Walker Wakes from a Dreadful Dream:
Boston, 1877 – Robert Cooperman**

Dreams don't lie: she's back from France,
her that called herself "The Lily of the West,"
Miz Flora, that my brother Silas and me
escorted North to earn our freedom
before the War scalded the country.

She sashayed down the gangplank
like Salome, expecting the world to bow
like when her husband owned that plantation,
and her son Willy fell for me like a sawdust pine.

Willy visits me in dreams, too, asking
if I still love him: me, married with children
I'd protect like a she-wolf from hunters,
but, "Yes," I call out in sleep, "I love you,"
my husband thinking it's him I'm swearing to.

Poor Willy, doing that deal with his daddy
to free my brother and me: volunteering
to fight on the slavers' side he hated
more than the pretty planter daughter
who snickered at him when words stuck
in his throat like water behind a beaver dam.

Miz Flora once bragged she couldn't
get shut of "Yankee yokels fast enough,"
when Silas and me watched her board
that ship to Paris, France, and a life
of chocolate and champagne pleasure.

But now, I bet she's lost everything
and will haint-suck me drier than a peach pit
field-hands wetted their mouths with.
Let her go back to fancy Paris, or Louisville
or Lexington in the song about her;
or back to Hell, where she belongs.

One Unfinished Slave — James Penha

after Michelangelo

We've proven love's resilient as a broken mattress sprung and soiled with unrequited passion, stiff and sallowing, lover.
Quiet lips enchanted once to know
a Siren, inspire and ingest your cry,
are deafened now but their voice uncover.
To a different drummer now they hover:
the only lips my lips will touch are mine.
Alone and independent, I shall drink
old dreams unbittered by tastes that belie
attractions sweet. In the midst of other woe
than ours, my friend, my Attic shape will shrink.
Action foresworn, I'll oppress all instinct
to kneel, to touch, to feel, to rush to know.

Finding You Gone — Bill Roberts

I learn by accident of your accident,
your passing, quite a shock,
your life suddenly over.

We lost touch these past few years,
and that's regrettable — my fault
more than yours, certainly.

Your life scrolls before me in segments
familiar only to you and me,
nothing monumental.

But there were times we had fun,
together and I'll remember,
our funny moments.

Life is over for you, gone
but you're on my mind, will be,
as long as I have one.

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March — Thomas Pescatore

25 days from 27
years, with children looking
up to daddy, job, meatloaf Tuesdays
playground afterschool hurry home
from work, spring flowers in the air
hugging mommy,
and I'm so... *old*...so much older than
I should be when fathers will die after me
in the cold empty sad world of early Mondays
coffee Ford Taurus roaring like kittens
in the window as I leave, placing my foot
firmly between the door creaking shut
and outside —

I can't remember my father's face when I was young
and he was towering above purple sky,
athletic, throwing baseball back and forth
with old softball mitt legendary,
I'd run my hands through it,
wonder at how it never missed,
he never missed,
holding his hand along mountain
roads —

grass brushing cars silently,
I scraped my knee, blood and bruise
so we sat on old forgotten dug out bench,
grass above my waist,
watching the old ball game roll along
where my father was the hero
at 3rd and short,
bugs screeched loudly in the root jungle
cheering, in the hollow Pocono heat

we've got miles back to walk
on the oh long ago road of childhood
and fatherhood,
where I forget to grow old
catching pop-ups
dad fires
higher than the sun

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