

Waterways:

Poetry in the Mainstream

VOLUME
30



#10

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I sing to you across fields of maize
Your grandmother cultivated before your birth

Virginia Scott

"I sing to you across fields of maize"

WATERWAYS: Poetry in the Mainstream

Volume 30

Number 10*

Designed, Edited and Published by Barbara Fisher & Richard Spiegel
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Dust Bowl Relatives — Donna Fox

Flat Texas scrubland
and the severe clear sky
of summer heat
frame your harsh eyes,
undiminished by
deteriorating photo paper.
I've heard the family stories but
such black and white
intensity tells me why
he left you for California
and why you stayed behind to farm
—just to spite the dirt.

Female Cardinal — Sylvia Manning

female cardinal
sips of flow
from yellow garden hose
left on through city star-poor night
to save the rose.

Blind Migrations — Bill Freedman

My granddaughter is five,
a New Zealander, a Kiwi.
My grandfather, as I told the politely curious
Maori man who asked,
was from a shtetl west of Vilna.

We shook two heads
at the weary smallness of the world,
the blind migrations of the tribes.
Joseph waking from his dream in Egypt
was a morning stroll to this.
When you loose a spore to wind,
as we loved to do,

it belongs to history and space.
It lands on Lincoln's hat,
on Rameses' cow embroidered pillow case,
on a Maori's tattooed tongue.

But I digress, or blindly wandering, prepare.
What struck me was her saying,
on the telephone last week,
that "actually," she "finds writing
easier than reading."

And when I, probing trenchantly, asked why,
that she, like Marconi, Joseph's brothers,
Grandpa Yaakov and I, in that Bay of Islands,
rural north of Auckland twang, "had no idea."

July 21 — Robert Schuler

at noon changing the suet
in the birdfeeder
near the nectar bowl
just behind the scarlet day-lilies
a ruby-throated hummingbird
whirs the air near my head
stares me in the eye
what am I doing down here
now

Behind — Scott Owens

Hour after hour this ancient bed
gives up its bounty of lily, daffodil,
periwinkle, gifts of a gardener
long forgotten, given to children
not his own, digging, exclaiming
tuber and seed.

I imagine his back bending and rising,
year after year, thinning and spreading,
claiming another piece of yard
from obscurity of no definition,
leaving this legacy of giving
beyond years, beyond the reach of knowing,
where all that's left is what is left
behind.

Edge of the Divine — William Corner Clarke

From the corner of your eye
You may have sensed
The passing of Gods and Goddesses
Behind the grain of what you think is real
But by the time you understand what is happening
It is always too late
They have slipped away and given you instead
The sound of a car, a voice, a newspaper
A telephone, rain
Yet if you are serious
About catching sight of the Divine
There are methods — and states of mind

You have to stand outside
Above, beyond, within yourself
You have to be irresponsible, you have to be marble
You have to be statue still and pay no heed
To the drifting debris of the world
To breathe slowly one breath
At least the distance of an afternoon

But most of all you must be prodigal
You must let your death sift through your fingers
Like pine dust from a mountain precipice
You must expect nothing
Least of all, the Divine

The slow mime of summer heat
On the stage of a dream
The clear precision of winter ice
Far below pain
The moon seeking the sanctuary
Of temple ruins
The forest of lost childhood
Possessed by a surreptitious wind
The circle of lamplight in the empty street
Of an unknown town
Such are the times and places
Where you might witness what you seek
These are the edges
Of the Divine

this dear snapshot america — Wayne Hogan

two old codgers
standing on their canes talking
about Social Security and some other
of the things Roosevelt done a
small black boat drifting
down the Mississippi somewhere
through Ohio it looks
to me like here and there a
whooping crane and a lone gas station

where somebody else pumps
your gas and another one rushes out
with a wet rag to wash
your windshield and ask if you'd
like to have your oil checked
and oh yeah could they kick your tires
for you too this dear snapshot
america what happened
I'm sobbing for you now

The Old Indian — Wayne Hogan

The old Indian took one look
at the Sonoran Desert tracks
and pronounced them made by
eight men with two extra horses. Said three
were Mexicans who
spurred their horses too hard,
one was a young Cherokee,
that the others were all Texans
who ate and drank too much.

One, the old Indian said,
sat on his horse too far to the right,
one played guitar and sang
a fair song, another read Dickens
and wished he didn't, the last
was destined, the old Indian said,
to be strangled by love beads.

Learning Curve — Katie Vagnino

I don't remember learning how to wrap a gift, who taught me how with steady hands to tie the string around my fingers, curl the ends. Tying shoelaces I'll credit to Dad, along with telling time and jokes, balancing a checkbook, chopping onions without crying. In fifth grade, Val showed me the way to run a razor over my legs, said *Watch out around the ankles*. French kissing: the honor goes to a wiry boy whose name was James

or John. He slid his timid tongue across
my gums, placed his hand on my hairless knee.
You can break a promise and be forgiven
I learned from my mother, as well as how
to flirt while knotting a necktie around
your lover's throat. Lying I picked up myself,
first small things like *I've never felt this way
before*, then bigger, hungrier untruths:
This glass will be my last; sex means nothing;
bruises are beautiful; I am not a poet.

Leaves of Bamboo — James Penha

Tangkahan, North Sumatra

Bamboo branches are not easily moved
by the day's fluctuations of light and air.
They trust foundations firmly dug in,
grounded, and so resist
the easy titillation of breezes
while they inhale deeply the climax
of a shimmering jungle sun
after the all-night storm;
they respond
respectfully, reservedly,
with the applause of leaves
open now to enlightenment

Comanche Eyes — David Jordan

Found a 1944 photo
of my Nemaha grandmother
and her four sons,
including my wandering
father, Neil. I don't know
the uncles' names. Or hers,
for that matter. Plump
and silver-haired, she stares
away from the camera
with the dark, wary eyes
of her Comanche ancestors

My other grandmother
I lived with and loved,
called Mom. The woman
in this old photo
is a mystery, except
for the eyes, which glance
past me
as if flashing from my mirror.

Lucky Seven — David Jordan

I was Grandma Quigley's seventh son,
the one inherited from her second-oldest
daughter after that no-account husband
hocked the clock radio and ran off
to Idaho. When things went awry
at our Harlan Street house, like the day
Grandma found Pokey the turtle dead
in the pocket of my overalls, she went
to shouting the names of her boys
until she hit the right one: James! Bill!
Art! Guy! Milan! Lanny! Oh, darn it, Davy!
Number seven felt lucky to be included.

On the plains of Minnesota — Mary B. Erickson

grows white man's maize, field corn.
When I was young here, I was not taught
the plight of the American Indian.
Maize was only a word spoken by teachers
before Thanksgiving
from an abbreviated U.S. history book.

Unlike Indians on reservations,
I always had plenty, but was guarded
by unspoken words.
Grandpa Smith was a good man,
though I never heard him sing.

Prairie winds dried field corn
heaped in wood-slatted cribs:
a crop, Grandpa shelled and hauled,
shipped by train to factories—
maybe Kellogg's making cornflakes.

Half Sicilian, from New Jersey,
I was too sheltered on Grandpa's farm
to perceive any animosity
in small town America toward me.
My eyes were then closed,
as much as my ears opened on Franklin Ave,
Indian section in Minneapolis.
My college boyfriend was Norwegian

and Indian. O those blue eyes
and long black hair! His brilliancy
was in chemistry. His mixed potions
were like the beauty of colors in maize.
We parted ways, but never forgot each other.

At my son's graduation from college—
long ago an Indian school in Morris—
after the Indian drum ceremony and song,
the wind carried our applause.
One of Joe's buddies is Indian;
both graduates in computer science,
its binary language's a sure beauty to them.

**A fateful day my Grandma, still living, seldom speaks of
Russell Jaffe**

Bombs fell and there

were raisins coated with sugar like

air filled with white sand

how Grandma says Jews talk in sprays, quieting

only for warm quivers

the hot discomfort when you cry out for your parents

Do you recall? It was as if

the Earth parted for a minute and there were our father's fathers rushing

hither and yon like pictographs spinning
to fix what was wrong
that day, stomachs filled with blood, my mother
conceived, and on the
fallen slopes of French beaches,
plateaus of iron we
learned what it meant to be hungry

History in a Nutshell — Ellaraine Lockie

The well my father found
with a willow stick has been filled
The last apple tree chopped down
from my grandfather's orchard

Power line soldiers tall as skyscrapers
march across virgin country
Declaring war on the prairie's view
of the mountains

The meadowlark's nest by the cabin is empty
Her morning music comes from the belly of a barn cat
And the blues, pinks and purples of wildflowers
have browned into the ground

Yet sunflowers frame the fields and roads
Their native tongues remember the taste
of well water in my grandmother's green glass vase
Petals wave in yellow surrender to the wind
while motioning menus to meadowlarks
Seeds that feed the perpetuity of the prairie

Epidermis, Dermis, Mine — Susan C. Waters

This skin follows itself around,
and would hide in rye grass
if it were small enough.

This skin is tough as cardboard
and I can only carry myself
in it, even if it gets rebellious,
decides to divide and start a new government.

This skin would like to bloom as wild roses
near a summer kitchen. This skin examines itself
every morning and then forgets its size.

This skin has been around a while now.
This skin wants to know the night
the way dragonflies must.
This skin can wind itself around
a man and push—

This skin worries about itself. And it tastes
like salt. It takes an average cell
up to one month to work its way from dermis to epi so
look out . . . this skin started the Boxer Rebellion.

Scold as you might, this skin has never believed
it is mortal.

A Public Radio Interview — Donald Lev

Eighty eight years young and he's still shoveling shit.

I say, Mr. L. What's it like to be eighty eight and still shoveling shit?

Well, if you asked me if I was eighty eight years old and not shoveling shit, I would have an answer that it would be awful.

But as it is, being eighty eight or whatever and shoveling shit is for me the only imaginable way to live, I've been doing it since I was 13, and if I do say so myself, I am very good at it.

Well, you certainly must know all the ins and outs of shit shoveling.

You must be privy to any number of trade secrets.

Well, there is a right way and a wrong way of shoveling shit.

You must get the right amount on your shovel if you don't want to shovel it all over your shoes. And then you must be able to gauge the consistency

at any one time, be aware of the seasons, the weather. Winter shit for instance, is often frozen. Then you have very wet shit when it rains. All must be handled accordingly.

Do you think you'll retire soon, now that you're eighty eight?

What would I be retiring to? What would I do if I wasn't shoveling shit?

Thank you for speaking with us, Mr. L. And happy birthday!

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