

Waterways:

Poetry in the Mainstream

VOLUME
30



Waterways: Poetry in the Mainstream

VOLUME 30, #2

I really like that kind of bridge
Because the trains go over it.

Manhattan Bridge - A. Thomas Perry

Pier 13 Staten Island, July 21, 1979

WATERWAYS: Poetry in the Mainstream

Volume 30

Number 2*

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LAX — James Penha

We stare, and I see him
like me flip
a mental rolodex
of names this way
and that
for faces
like the twirling digits
and letters
on the big board
ever spelling airlines

and flight numbers
and places
with each takeoff
reassembling
one line higher
to boarding
and assumption
save a delay
like our standing there and stuttering
with our eyes.

Speed Of Light — William Corner Clarke

We were travelling so fast
Our bodies were transfigured
And we no longer knew our names

And when we reached the city of the Sun
We made that ancient streetcar run
So far beyond its speed
That the whole place turned transparent
And emptied of its crowds

You saw the sand
Within the window glass
As the frames began to burn
I heard the clicking of electrons
As they reversed their spin
We felt the tingling of neutrinos
As they passed through our skin

And now it seems
We're almost at that place
Which lies beyond
The limits of our mass
That realm of unmade stars
And deep dreamed wells
Where light's own motion
Comes to rest

The Acceleration Of The Child In The Train — William Corner Clarke

From the thousand windows
Of the dark sphinx factories
Shone an underwater yellow
They are working
They told me

And an iron bridge of great complexity
Sprang immediately from beneath my feet
Like a glistening snake
Its massive back arched
Into caverns of thunderous clouds

Listen close if you can
The great iron wheels
Are rolling back the curtains
The furnaces are smelting
The scenery

I was too young to understand
The nature of my eyes
And their deep draughts
But plunged on regardless
Down the line of fearful night encampments

I tasted the chemical of flight
And an opera of shrieking steel
Engines whispered into my ear
Stories
Of a vast and relentless task

They are building
The Real
I was told
Go to
Sleep

From 'The Blue Sky Door' William Corner Clarke, 1977

Rails on top — Mary Belardi Erickson

I listen for the whistle blasts, the reverberating metal
on the rail bridges.

What does it give me? A trained ear for rail noise
in cities I've called home, the trains coming and going—
the feeling of being under all—water & dirt—
then rises in heart as the cars swish above the streets.

I've been in a room shook every time the train
ran above, just like a scene from The Blues Brothers—
being rhythmically held by the vibrations
just outside the window. I like those kin of train's best,
when they can announce their coming, shake & jazz.

Trains can emerge like flashing dragons from their caves.
In minutes, they thrust their engine heads up
throbbing and shaking on bridges, while tourists wonder
why the pedestrians just ignore these monsters.
It doesn't take long, though, when you settle into routine
to take these marvels for granted
& who digs their tunnels, builds supports
& what guides their drone drivers.

I like it when I can lift my head from my pillow,
with an Ahhh, I'll be happy here too. I can hear the train.

Rails — Scott Owens

Every child should have one, a pair, really,
a matched set, set apart just the right width
so that one foot pressed against each one
leaves you stretched out about as far
as you can go, unable to move, feeling
almost trapped, almost actually in danger.

And every child should walk them as if
that's what they were intended for,
leading out of town, around the curve,
along the river, revealing the backsides
of people's homes, clotheslines and refuse,
the yards you weren't supposed to see.

And every child should learn to balance
atop the railhead without the constant
unsightly tipping from side to side,
should be able to step exactly the distance
between the ties consistently, almost
marching without kicking up ballast.

And every child should have a bridge
they go under to hide and look
at dirty magazines and smoke cigarettes
and place coins on the rails to flatten
and see if this could be the one
to cause the train to leap the tracks.

And every child should know the lonely
distant sound of late night travel
when bad dreams have kept them awake
wondering where they come from, what
they bring or take, and where when it's all
done they might return and call home.

North Country Deconstruction — William Doreski

Dismantling the railroad bridge
over the Connecticut River
looks easy: pull the bolts and let
each section drop. Later a crane
will hoist the navigational
hazard onto a barge. The girders,
floated downstream to Bellows Falls,
will bring a hefty price for scrap.

Simple. But we forget to plan,
so with Mount Ascutney beaming
in the west and the river churning
in spasms below we pull four bolts

and find ourselves stranded on a pier
with missing spans on either side.
The plush gray depth of river
has absorbed the steel without a splash.

We need a boat, a rope to descend
the thirty-foot pier, and improved
senses of humor. The December
nightfall hushes like velvet skirts.
The lights of Windsor, one mile north,
redde[n] the furthest line of trees.
On the new railroad bridge, a mile
downstream, a train passes in a rush
of troubled air.

No one can see
or hear us, so we'll spend the night
trying to neither freeze nor fall.
Perhaps tomorrow someone will search
and bring a powerboat and ladder,
or better yet, a helicopter.
But we're reasonably confident
that our brains, before this night's over,
will boil in our skulls and save us
with unnatural warmth.

Our survival
will bring momentary fame
and an article in Yankee,
though the wrecked bridge in the river
will nominate our carelessness
for blame, and the water, unseen now,
will retain our startled images,
though chemically inert to our fate.

Beneath the Black Arch — William Doeski

Where the brook stumbles over ledge
as it ducks beneath the black arch
of the railroad bridge a crumple

of blue plastic has snagged
on a shopping cart. I note
a tiny hand thrust from the wreck.

Because I know it's not a doll
I flag down a passing cruiser.
The cops descend to the river,

wade under the railroad bridge
upstream to the shopping cart.
The gray overhead thickens and sobs

and the rain pockmarks the brooks
and sours the cops' expressions.
I retreat to the little tea room

that replaced the barber shop
when the barber accepted cancer
as his fate. Let the police absorb

the stress: they're paid to. Yet
the way the small rain addresses
the situation reminds me

of fishing in the Scantic River
with my father, the rain dimpling
the rough current where sunfish, perch

and bluegills grazed. Nothing
about the greenish river grooming
though the hardwood forest suggested

dead infants, shopping carts,
sinister wads of plastic, nothing
soiled the clean flux of current

or broke the concentration
we focused on the deepest pools,
bottomless and busy with fish.

Man-Bat — William Doreski

Looking down the abandoned
railroad embankment at dusk,
I see a creature unfold wings
while upright on two legs—
not Batman but an actual bat
as big as a man. I grip
the ranger's arm and point. She laughs
and says, "I'll show you its nest."

Bats don't build nests, but this one
inhabits a huge squirrel nest
tucked under rusty plate girders
of a disused railroad bridge.

The man-bat scours the sky
with wing beat like the downwash
of a Blackhawk. The ranger claims
it lives on mice and rarely attacks
even a rabbit or squirrel. Its bulk
absorbs so much starlight
that as it passes overhead
the universe nearly goes extinct.

Why haven't I seen this creature
described in zoology textbooks?
And why is it wearing shoes?
The ranger assures me that questions
like mine betray an ignorance

she's not obliged to resolve.

We stalk along in silence till
the ranger station and trailside
museum lounge in pools of lamplight
a few hundred yards ahead.

A shadow pours over us. A shriek
of pain or joy as the man-bat
claws the ranger into the sky
and throbs away toward its nest.
Should I follow and rescue her?

I grab her Smoky the Bear hat
and walk to the ranger station

where no one wants the report.
I insist on filing anyway.
I'll read about this tomorrow
in the *Globe*. Or maybe not.

As I walk to my car, I note
the stars burning brighter than ever,
casting my shadow before me,
deforming to suggest I'm also
about to flourish my wings.

The Deerfield River Railroad Bridge — William Doreski

The Deerfield River railroad bridge
sprawls in a mass of black girders
over a stretch of current subdued
by imminent dispersal
in broader, more famous waters.

We've always been startled by this bridge,
the height and over-engineering,
the depth of the truss structure,
which as we drive beneath it
intimidates with passive bulk.

We'd like to walk across it,

but the railroad cop who cruises
the nearby East Deerfield yard
would probably object. The old
plank walkway's surely rotten,

so we'd have to walk between the rails
and risk being smashed by a train,
though few actually cross this bridge,
most detouring to the big yard
where carloads of Canadian

lumber and other building supplies
are sorted for travel west through
the Hoosac Tunnel to Albany.

Rather than tempt fate for a view
the long way west toward the Berkshires

or the short way east to Mount Grace
we drive to the yard overpass
and watch a freight train kink through switches
in a series of elaborate groans.

Carole's bored and suddenly

so am I, so we drive back under
the bridge, raw and scabbed with rust,
and turn right through the center
of Greenfield and align ourselves
with the mottled northern sky.

The Dingle — William Doeski

Crossing the railroad bridge above
the Dingle, I feel a train huffing
from Springfield, bearing down on me
like an avalanche. I run the last
twenty feet of bridge and leap aside,
and the rush of train's so terrible
I think of the blitzkrieg crushing
Danzig, Warsaw, Kiev. Too far
to those ancestral places, too sad
in their post-war, poured concrete
manifestations. Better to walk
the tracks in shy Connecticut towns

where no one walks, everyone drives.
No wonder the shoppers in the malls
bulge like latex obscenities
and even the teenage girls look bleak
as they suck on cigarettes outside
in the post-Christmas cold. The light
in the Dingle is yellow and dim.
I could slide down the steep wooded slope
and watch the brook rush over sandstone
red with iron oxide. Once
Joanne took me there and pressed my hand
and I almost died of the thrill,
but being twelve and strong-hearted

survived although her parents and mine
dropped their friendship. Decades later,
yesterday, I met her in the mall
and she bragged that her grown children
support her, sending checks from Texas,
Utah, and North Carolina.

Good for them. When her husband died
she returned to that house not far
from the Dingle. So I'm walking
the tracks in memory of that day,
the one day we touched each other
with timid but effective force,
almost under this railroad bridge.

Its trimmed granite blocks are ashen
as my face when she took my hand
and I shook like that passing train,
the brook trickling across our bare feet
shallow and red as a murder scene.

Praising the Hudson — Michelle M. Mead

Overalls and skinned knees praising the Hudson
or is it digging for things unseen in the mud
things left by distant histories or littering train passengers—

"I like this bridge,"

he said

hands a brown fan of wings on concrete
five years of Poughkeepsie living close by

"Trains go over it."

Trains out to places foreign and smelling of dirt
different dirt, the kind left by people's dreams
evaporating in broken whiskey bottles
and unopened contraceptives

at the edge of the station

dreams still of riding the rails with cowboys
bandits in overalls just like his only in black
no smiley face patches covering holes
ones made playing at the local parks
and in suburban backyards

he walks away eventually
hand in hand with his mother
where the trains once ran across steel
ghosts dark and mysterious climbing
yet they roam wild in present imaginations
sitting by the river's storytelling tongue

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