

Waterways:

Poetry in the Mainstream

VOLUME

26



Waterways: Poetry in the Mainstream, Volume 26, #5

and he did not have
the mental stamina
of a jonah to resist the
insidious
process of assimilation

the robin and the worm
from ARCHY AND MEHITABEL

WATERWAYS: Poetry in the Mainstream

Volume 26

Number 5*

Designed, Edited and Published by Richard Spiegel & Barbara Fisher

Thomas Perry, Admirable Factotum

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Sun Flowers and Dark Paint — James Penha

A painter
who cannot afford paint
will wash his brushes,
keep them clean.

Li Chin Pao hung
his brushes from the ceiling
of his shack
their vulpine tips immaculately
like pencil
points
down
reminding Li,
needling him.

Li turned on them
and walked for days.
Collapsing with fatigue
and hunger,
he found shade
and seeds
in a grove of wild sun flowers.
Idly scraping the stalks' skins
with his thumbnail,
he uncovered a snow-white wood
that wanted sculpting.
Li peeled hundreds of stalks
for hundreds of days until
he learned to sliver a paint-thin

density to fashion
back beneath the brushes
art:

a snow-wood locust
gnaws a bamboo leaf

a caterpillar descends
a branch of a cherry tree

At the Sunday market,
Li's snow-wood paintings
dazzle all who pass

but they pass

for what wife wants
a locust in her home?

what husband hangs
a downward spiral in his office?

A painter
who cannot afford paint
cannot afford to see
the world
upside down.

So Li's caterpillars
turned upward with a flip of a frame
and rabbits munched where
locusts once plagued his world,
and Li sold snow-wood enough
to capture the truth
elsewhere
with brushes and paint.

Rehearsal Wedding — R. Yurman

Your families have long since chosen a date and place
mailed out gold-bordered invitations—
so you must gather your closest friends in secret.
At City Hall they surround a Civil Servant
who hears your vows and delivers the proper papers.
Then the whole crowd surges off to a family-style joint
long wooden tables
platters of spaghetti and meat balls
huge bowls of tomato chunks and chopped iceberg lettuce
endless baskets of garlic bread
and as many pitchers of cheap chianti
as this mob can guzzle.

At the end no tasteless 6-tiered
white thing covered in white icing
no sugar bride and groom
balancing silly grins on top
but an enormous devil's food cake
rich and daring.

Most of these folks have not made it
onto the carefully controlled guest list
for next month's formal affair—
a tailored catered photographed evening
with a sedate band.

Here one of your buddies flashes a cheap camera
captures everyone stuffing their faces

crooning tearful off-key ballads
and staggering table to table
eyes out of focus.

Nearing midnight
frayed at the cuffs
tomato spattered
they spill onto the narrow sidewalk
flushed and howling

Reunion
Patricia Wellingham-Jones

Black hat cocked over a brow
ruddy from dank fog,
black leather jacket creaking,
the man enters the café
with a cautious step.

From a table in the corner
two women lift to their feet,
fling themselves in silence
across the room, into his arms.

He lowers his head for their kisses.
They all hold each other
so hard they are breathless.

Back at the table they sip coffee,
strive to look normal, keep voices low
while tears drip down three beaming faces.

Overload — Harvey Steinberg

I bite off a chunk of learning
that's next to everything.

Yet I'm yearning.

My books rattle on the shelves.

The genius of a book
is lit by a thousand thousand nuances
quivering next to the next book on the shelf
—culled from some forgotten place—
containing supernova in its nanospaces.

I down-load texts from Papyrus-In-Print
up through Borders dot com,
hard-copy all messages onto my sheets
(plus the fizzy gists between lines),
count the letters one by one on a sheet,
multiply them by the sheets in the stack
by reprints on the rack
by...

Does this immensity
mean, "Read all the volumes,"
or signal: "Don't try"?

Does this say I'm a homunculus
too scant to be scanned?
What is the plot?
Am I an "I,"
or not?

Gone to Jail — Lee Evans

There's no alcohol
in the Detention Center.
Just sweat, bars and rage.

And no music blares
from your house into my yard,
pounding my windows.

Someone took your dog.
She had a good home with you,
though she got lonely.

No one cuts your grass
or plants corn in your garden.
Your bills are unpaid.

The bedroom window
of the house right behind mine
gapes with a bullet hole.

The neighborhood's Fear
is not unlike your Anger.
Your absence remains.

Down, Down, Step, Step, Down
Charity Eva Runden

Down, down,
Step, step down
Through the starling's dung
And the maple leaves,
Along the sidewalk
Under the eaves,
Down,
One, two.
Down, down.
Steps, steps,
Step, step down.

The door is open.
No need to knock.
Turn right,
Then left.
Don't look.
Have a chair.
Slide in.
Watch the floor.
Wait, wait.
How many here?
Count feet.
Man, woman.
Black, white,
Black, man.

Black, woman.
Young, old
Black, white.
Black, black, white.
Don't look
Don't talk
Don't listen.
Don't hear.
Wait, wait.
Sit still,
And here I am
In the courthouse cellar
With black and white,
Tan and yeller.

We're none of us rich,
All damned poor.
We all came in
Through the cellar door.
One, two.
The courthouse clock.
Chime, chime.
Time, time.
Chime, time.
Time, chime.
One, two,
Me and you
You and me,
And where do you be?

It's all by rote,
Note, note.
All by rote.
Wait, wait.
Doctor and nurse,
Nut-house and hearse,
Needles and pins.
Got no money,
Got no shame.
The man on your right
Has got V.D.
And on your left
A son-of-a-b.,
Sulfa-re-sist-ee.

The whore in front's
Got a fresh G.C.
You and me
Have got V.D.
The doc is late
With forty ahead
And maybe more.
You came at one
And'll wait till four.
The saint-faced nurse
Who'll call you Joe
Is kind and curious
And pure as snow.
Your whole sex-hist'ry

She's got to know.
She's got to know
And she'll call in
Every contact
Since way back when.
Sloe-soft eyes
And a voice so sweet—
But Doc said
She gave me
A spi-ro-keet.
This smile is free
With the penicillin
For your V.D.
Turn left

Then right.
Step up, step up
Step out through the starling's dung
Amid the maple leaves
Along the sidewalk
Under the eaves.

Early Man — E.G. Burrows

No one buckled in ropes,
goat-footed and geared for high heaven,
whooped to flag a summit
or risked the slick granite
more than he had to.

As the ice departed,
his kind tracked small game
through riverbeds toward the plains
where the prayersticks of great bones
lay discarded.

Always a green fortune lured him:
easy street
and the plastered dry cave,
a sabre-tooth pelt on the wall.

I have my doubts about Early Man,
his humility, his noble state.
He descended the same valleys I drive
and seldom if ever looked up.

Last Winter, One by One — Ron Singer

Last winter, one by one, the machines all died. Both our home computers crashed. Once a week, about, a light bulb flashed, four in all. Since we had spares on hand, both 60's and 75's, that part was almost fun. But it was also just the start.

Tape and CD players — both gone in a shot. We fell back on the radio, spun a few LP's. There were other consolations: stove, fridge plugged away, and when the boiler broke our four-square little heater stood fast like a rock.

But, alas, the failures mounted, becoming, you might say, systemic. It was a cold winter, very. The boiler, as I mentioned, needed close attention. Pipes burst — several — including the stand pipe on the roof, which connects the

system to the water tower. Voices were raised, fingers pointed, the Super and the Manager just about went mad. All in all, a lot of aggro, as our British cousins say.

Then, early New Years Day, both elevators seized, freight and passenger, marooning us on eleven and threatening our party — sixty invited guests, ages two to ninety, plus all that food and work. But they did get one of them, the freight, up and running just in time, and, for sacrificing her holiday to ferry our guests up and down, we gave the Super five crisp twenties, plus a heartfelt message enfolded in a greeting card.

Yes, minor jobs, major jobs, two hours to a week, everything got done. Not just the Super, but plumbers, electricians, those who work with pipes, towers, computers, elevators — a lot of people logged a lot of overtime.

All of these failures prompt me to call last winter hard or, even, cruel. As weak basketball teams are said to live and die by the jump shot, so we with our machines. But don't get me wrong, let's keep this in proportion: the season was no harbinger of some dreaded nuclear one. No, it was only a matter of lines and feet, of climbing flights of stairs and waiting for the water.

But, even so, nevertheless — and I hate to sound a whiner or, even worse, a wiener — last winter was, in fact, just a sort of sequel. For, the summer before, you may recall, a squirrel gnawed through a cable, and, the collective bungling of a gaggle of greedy big shots kicking in, the lights went out in twenty million homes, a quarter of the continent. Neither to over-, nor to under-react, but, sooner or later, the coordinated efforts of tycoon, squirrel and politico may run us all to ground.

Jazz Scenes from a White Writer's Life — Ron Singer

The hippo lady of cartoons,
dignified in beige
(though tv's then were black and white),
glides across the screen.
She wears a tiny pillbox hat
and clasps her patent-leather purse,
while a muted trumpet dances her
on her funny way.

Says he, the fierce black-bearded pa,
piradical, paternal man
— in short, a Panther, lean and swift —

"Brush those teeth, son, brush them well!"
It's, like, the sixties now, you know.
He keeps a crossbow on his porch
on the South Side of Chicago.
Meanwhile, Coltrane —John, that is—
blasts man and boy
into or-
bit of their day
with his Fa-
vorite Things.

And finally, nor late, nor soon,
we come to nowadays,
when even white folks sing —we do—

the Me-Too You-Too Blues.
Yes, reading, digging Langston Hughes,
as he, in turn, digs Lady Day,
who sings —oh, so sublimely—
the single-word Holiday tune,
"te-
le-
vi-
sion."

Strict — Anselm Brocki

"I'm paying," Laughing Mildred says to Yousef behind the counter at the All-Nite. "My state check for being crazy finally came, and it's Easter. What the hell, we'll both have the ham-and-egg special. Okay with you?" Harvey nods, and they go on talking.

Yousef sets down two big oval plates — eggs sunny-side-up, slab of slick browned ham

three eighths-inch thick, and green onions showing in the hash browns. First bite and a big guy in white sweats with hooded top up and a bible under his arm is standing behind them.

"Enjoy it while you can, Ladies and Gentlemen," he says, "cause you're going to burn in Hell."

"It's Lady and Gentleman to you," Mildred says.
"Can't you count?"

"What's worse than the genocide you two are committing?" H baritones.

"Buzz off," Mildred says.
"You've got the wrong place.
Hell is two blocks down
the street.

"Those earthquakes in Texas are just the beginning," he says. "More will come."

"So you're a seismologist?" Mildred says.

"Nah," Harvey says, "he's just a strict vegetarian."

Survivor — Ida Fasel

Today there's a little too much wind
for a windy day. I climb its
capricious stairs oblique,
a whiplash underfoot now and then
bringing me staggering to a complete
stop for breath. The air
is hackneyed with debris -
dandelion dervishes in frenzied feather,
leaves whirled up from curb rest
by a siren racing to a rescue,
morning headlines casting words
in a turmoil across the sky.

My body is in rage, struck, pierced.

A last assault. The wind picks
me up and suspends me in air
for the part of me that won't yield.
I hang from it like a crystal pendant
I light, letting myself be shone on
till we both come down, calmed.