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Waterways Poetry in the Mainstream

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How disappointed they are when it turns out I didn't understand.

Enid Dame excerpt from The Poetry Critic Complains

WATERWAYS Poetry in the Mainstream

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Deborah H. Doolittle

Bogwoman to the Hen Harrier Over Her Head

Hawk that hovers over the fells and fens, let's pretend that once we were friends.

That you will feel regret when you pluck my vitals out.

That you will sense remorse in some remote sense of the word, because I am saturated with them:

My regret tastes bitter, like fennel root; my remorse, of course, is slightly, sickeningly sweet, like meat about to decay.

You will eat me anyway, if ever I shift within reach of your beak.

Please, take me away, one tidbit at a time, for I'd rather not stay.

Deborah H. Doolittle **The Body of a Badger**

My body is the body of a badger, which I wear like a winter coat, but with pride.

All winter it has kept me warm and dry. Wherever I have burrowed, I am instantly at home

among the roots and doodle bugs, the intricate undersides of flowers. Each spring, when I tunnel

out and look up at the sky, the sun looks right back at me and smiles and smiles in welcome.

Creature that I am, I feel the warmth of the world like a second skin, like a gnawing hunger

in the pit of my spine. I feel its weight pressing down on me even when I sleep curled in a ball

in the back of my den. That's when I slough off my fur, slip into a paler version of myself,

one that can swim or climb mountains in the blink of an eye. One that can lean

into the wind, sure-footed. Even in my dreams, my legs are shaggy and shorter than I'd like them to be.

Marilyn Braendeholm

An Unfinished Song

Always in motion, this broad and singing dawn. Robins nibble seeds and fatten on raisins, muddle over fat grubs and a nub of larden bread. Magpies dress in tuxedoes. Wrens in brown weave. The air is motion dandelion fluff bright as whirly-spins against the sun.

Don't listen to me. Listen to the science, she says.

For Galway

I'd read your poem for years The Still Time taped and re-taped to the side of the black file cabinet

wondering what you meant: was it some implied quietude or extended possibility

how I stretched my life around your lines finding hope sandwiched between words phrases trying to get to the point where I, too, could sing

and one day I wrote a poem about doors how one passed through so many and into or out of so much and then someone reading it thought it was about hands and I went back and read your words again

I know there is still time For hands to open...

how I'd never once broken your lines there could see you then hair drooping over your forehead and laughing heartily as I asked which of the three ways was the one you intended your brogue thick as the Irish of it all swirling in a heavy bottomed glass with the answer.



Gilbert Honigfeld

May

It's May, a month of subjunctives, possibilities not yet realized.

Sap is starting to thicken in the barrel of my pen, oozing not yet flowing.

Sun days lengthen, moon nights shrink, that rhythm the sole certainty of what may be.

There is promise in uncertainty, see it in the eccentric cadence of children skipping.

See it in faces still unpocked by life's unpredictable certainties.

May still has weeks to run, weeks of chances to be taken or not.

Soon enough we'll see what may become of us, possibility hardening into history.

Ellaraine Lockie

Miscommunication

Did you know I've always had a crush on you my dogs' doctor of twenty years asks

I clamp hand over mouth hiding the smile that the word crush elicits As out-of-date as this suddenly single man in his seventies

Eyes divorce mouth but he contrives a receptive response As though my hand coquettishly covers the gasp that ushered an Audrey Hepburn swoon

I finger my wedding ring as if it were a rosary Appealing to St. Francis of Assisi for the future health of my Great Pyrenees

Mary K. Lindberg

The Maskerade Blues Broadcast on April 27, 2021 from NPR-WNYC

Today's landscape of worry bothers me in a world where slow is still hurry. What used to be go girl go — now is where's my mask, gloves, phone, keys, don't ask.

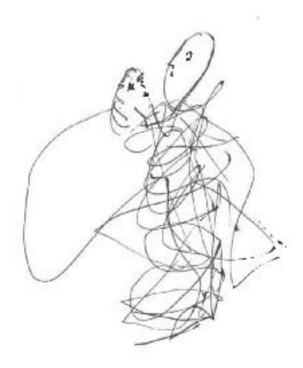
If I meet anyone outside, I take a good look at the face but nothing's there, only hair, brows, eyes that size me up as I do likewise. Do I know the person behind the KN95?

On the street if I see someone walking toward me, I assess not mood, nor clothes, but security of their mask. Is it loose at the cheeks? Do I see a nose?

If so, I pinch my mask over cartilage, sidestep away. If we pass close by, instead of a smile or nod, I hold my breath to give stray particles wide berth.

For those who are maskless, no excuse can relax my vigil, so I move on, quickstep, as if I was avoiding secondhand smoke or, more accurately, Covid quicksand.

There's an upside. Today I saw someone I thought I knew, whom I didn't want to talk to. They didn't recognize me. What a relief! Covid has given me anonymity. But I've still got the Maskerade Blues, so I'll stay inside, dream of days I can leave my house, breathe deeply in and out, undaunted by random aerosols flying about.



William Corner Clarke

Caryatids

We were once Just village girls We did the washing On the river bank Drew water from the well

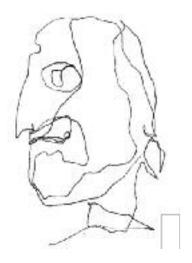
> We knew we would Be farmer's wives And then too soon Black Widowed crones It seemed inevitable

But then a stranger Came among us And we were raptured Limned by light And changed By something Much older Than the world

> When we lived The mortal life It was our lot To carry Wait and keep Our silence And we still do

But now we Proudly stand High and grand

Above the city's Passing crowds Marble, framed By Heaven's blue Forever old Forever new



Sheryl L. Nelms

Tow Sacks

"Now you know there's different

sizes of sacks

I've used big burlap bags

and bigger ones it depends on what

you're pickin

some men couldn't even

pull 'em when they're full

but I did

every day across those Arizona fields

back to the trucks to dump 'em!"

Robert Cooperman

Moshe Breslau, After His Title Fight The Lower East Side, 1916

I'd laugh, if it didn't hurt so bad from the champ's uppercut to my jaw. Almost funny, me shouting before the bout like a Bible prophet, about not throwing this fight, even if it meant getting dumped in the East River by the goons of big shot gamblers betting against me,

'cept I got decked by a champ I mistook for a chump: his fists, I'd joked, slow as snails, soft as cotton candy. But he tagged me; for all the extra weight he carried, he still had cast-iron mitts. No idea how I made it to the dressing room: everything a mist,

like in a sitz bath,

only my head's about to topple to the floor.

I was hoping for some quiet, but Danny's all smiles, thinking I finally "listened to reason."

Esther taps a foot,

peeved that watching me lose got in the way of her being at the theater where she's acting in a play. And here's Ma, wanting to hug me, but afraid I'll break into a thousand little pieces, if she wipes away my tears, like I'm a little kid; I never cried then,

ain't about to start now.

Last, Pa slaps me on the back, like we're in on the best secret in the world. He bet big against me,

on Danny's say-so.

Jesus, I hate my little brother and old man right now. If I didn't feel frozen in cement,

and they weren't family,

I'd belt 'em into outer space, and lam outta this town.

Simon Breslau, After His Son Moshe's Losing Title Bout The Lower East Side,1916

When the kid muttered he hadn't tanked, I patted him on the shoulder and smiled,

"Of course not, Moshe, or Mick, or whatever your ring name is." Danny, my only son with brains, told him to dump this fight, though Moshe swore up and down he'd take no part in a dive.

Afterwards, he claimed that uppercut landed legit. Hell, I got a payday big enough to take Rivka for steak dinner at the Rumanian place on Second once she gets over how beat up Moshe looks. Enough too, to place a big bet on Moshe's next bout, which he'll win: the odds and money all on the champ. Plus, there's all these young tootsies to impress, the ones in the chorus line in the musical revue my daughter Esther plays second banana in, though, not long, with her looks and voice,

'til she's the headliner,

Rivka wants Moshe to go into less dangerous work. But what? The seykhl for a Talmud scholar, an accountant, lawyer, or doctor?

Don't make me laugh! Lucky he found the fight game.

After his next title bout, he'll retire the champ and help Danny put the fear of Hashem into shopkeepers, make those mice pay up to stay in business and with all their fingers.

If I wasn't kvelling so much about my winnings, I'd call Moshe a shanda, if the fight was legit, for losing to an old zhlub with a belly that jiggled like sheep guts shimmying in the East River.

Esther Breslau After Her Brother Moshe Loses His Title Bout The Lower East Side, 1916

Danny—quiet, and ruthless as a cat—orders me to break it gentle to Moshe (like if we were Christians and I had to tell him there ain't no Santa Claus), that his boxing career's kaput. Danny wants him for muscle against shopkeepers who got to pay to stay in business and keep their arms from getting snapped like twigs for Boy Scout campfires.

"His jaw's brittle as a Seder crystal glass," Danny hissed,

when Moshe practically flipped over backwards from the champ's uppercut—or whatever it's called. "Let him earn his keep; he's family, so he gets to supervise my other ex-pugs," Danny sneered, though he made a killing betting against Moshe.

Whatever happened to the kid who could rattle off Torah verses and had to run from bullies or hide behind Moshe's fists? Now, Danny's a man of influence,

dangerous, while Moshe mopes, doesn't have the moxie

to take a shower, and put on the suit Danny bought him.

For Moshe's sorry performance, I let an understudy take my role tonight? May she stink up the stage, so the producer and audience will miss me more.

"Get up, you big moke!" I whisper so only Moshe can hear. "At least you got the family business! How many washed up pugs can say that?" The look he shoots me could freeze Mama's steaming cholent stews, but he staggers, still woozy,

to the showers.

I'd feel bad for the poor sap: he looked out for me what a big brother should do—when we were kids, but I didn't listen to Danny warn me not to bet on him.

Mosher Breslau After His Loss to the Heavyweight Champ The Lower East Side, 1916

Only Ma thinks to hold me, comfort me, though I never needed her arms as a kid. Still, it's good to hear her soft whispering, especially after Esther's dirty looks, like I got knocked out like a teetering tower of ritzy champagne glasses just to spite her and keep her from hoofing and singing on that Second Avenue stage for one night, her biding her time with more foot tapping impatience, 'til she's the revue's headliner, through one of Danny's arranged accidents to the tootsie who's starring now.

Danny? He got what he wanted, a big payday for him and his mob buddies, no one realizing I tried to win this fight, only my jaw didn't. And Pa? He looks like he raided Ali Baba's cave and stuffed his pockets full of diamonds, sapphires, rubies, and emeralds, not to mention gold coins, him also gloating I took a swan dive in the fifth.

Damn, I really thought I could take the champ even if it meant a swim in concrete boots. I'd've known I was the best, not a punch drunk bum with a jaw a stiff wind could knock down

like a dead branch.

So now Danny tells me I'll be his muscle in "our family business," meaning separating shop owners from what they legally sweat for. Not me! No way! I'll take it on the lam for the Pennsylvania coal mines, or hop a train to Canada and enlist, to fight the Krauts. And if I'm killed, it'll at least be for something good, not this dirty fight game or *Family Business*.



Our Geography of Poets

California Ellaraine Lockie

Colorado Robert Cooperman

> Kansas Pat Anthony

New Jersey Gilbert Honigfeld

New York Mary K. Lindberg

North Carolina Deborah H. Doolittle

> Texas Sheryl Nelms

Virginia William Corner Clarke

West Sussex Marilyn Braendeholm

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