

Waterways

Poetry in the Mainstream



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Volume 44

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But how much can art do at all?

from "Hand-painted Picture Postcard on the Eve of War"

by Felicia Mitchell

Waterways volume 24 number 9

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Beegibly



My Bed

My first five-year-old night
in the bucking bronco of a real bed,
a dream of riding the gopher-hole-
treacherous range tossed me to the floor.

But I soon was the great rider
of the prairie-headboard,
firing cap six-shooters at outlaws,
before I slid off my mount, into sleep.

One night, my bed-board-mustang
collapsed under my thrashing weight,
my parents rushing in at the crash,
my mother hysterical with possible
injuries to her angel; my father —
a human lie detector — eyeing me
like a rustler he'd string up
when I told him I'd no idea
how that accident had happened.

From then on, it was just a bed,
not a magical mustang
I could ride like a real western hero,

and suddenly cap guns and a cowboy hat
seemed a bit silly, if not stupid:

when Soviets could bomb us from space:
at least what the president and all the reporters
on the Evening News told us.

After the Fire

that leveled Quarry, Colorado Territory, Sylvia Williams dissuades
John Sprockett from going after Augustus Van Der Berg: 1870

Looke here, if'n you go after that fire starter,
it'll be for your love of vengeance and mayhem,
not for the town. We need every hand here,
to help rebuild, can't go gallivanting
all over the Territory and beyond, and for what?

To drag his mangy pelt back for trial,
or, knowing you, John, you'll just shoot him
like a frothing cur while he begs for mercy:
one more death hanging from your soul
like that albatross you always recite on.

Lord, you're a confusion: a man so quick to kill
if I blink I'll miss the gunfire; but you rattle off poetry
like a locomotive outrunning road agents,
tears dripping down the good side of your face
to start, "Fear No More," and suchlike.

But to the business at hand: we got two masons
who'll teach us how to make the bricks we'll need.

And besides, I've finally found a place I can settle,
after I ran from that Arkansas plantation and dodged
slave catchers 'til you and me met up and rode west,
facing down varmints that wanted us dead.

I ain't gonna give Quarry up so quick,
I'll tell you that.

This is where I landed,

and this is where I set down roots,
even after that fire that tore through the town
like that devil Quantrill ripped through Lawrence,
and you with him, 'til the killing got to even you,
not so in love with murder you couldn't feel shame
for the evil way y'all left that peaceful town.

And now you want to run off and kill some more?

After the Fire

Sylvia Williams Addresses the Town
of Quarry: Colorado Territory, 1870

Sure, we could put tails 'tween legs and slink off like mangy coyotes; or we can stay and rebuild the town that verminous Back Easterner set a Lucifer to, jumping for joy over flames fandangoing. This time, we'll use bricks.

Sure, cheaper to cut down trees on the mountain, but we can mix mud and straw and slather on mortar like jam on a fresh-from-the-oven slab of bread, to make buildings hold firm and last generations, not just 'til the next blaze turns all our hard work to charred slats where homes, the church, the court house, school, and businesses like my restaurant used to stand.

Y'all know I've weathered hard times: a slave, then a runaway facing down dangers that still fantod my dreams. I ain't gonna lie that this fire ain't nothin' compared to my past troubles, but if we pull together we can make Quarry worth living in again.

Now, y'all line up for my stew, to tide us over: on the house, and more than enough for everyone.

P.D. Poems

1. Things Slow Down and Speed Up (12/25/23)

I take ten minutes in the bathroom
and, even then, the production is pathetic.
In the afternoon, Liz and I decide to cope
with Christmas by walking in Riverside Park.
Since I can't walk fast enough to keep
up with her, I resort to trekking sticks,
which more or less equalizes our speed.

Beyond the garden at 96th Street,
bare for winter, aside from a few flowers
—stubborn red roses and little white dots—
the tree limbs are black against the gray sky.
I marvel at a squirrel, so nimble, so quick,
as he flies from branch to branch, up and down
the trees, going about his squirrel business.

2. The Author Who Helped Me Discover My P.D.

I have long admired the work of Martin Cruz Smith, a part-Native American who wrote a number of detective novels set in Putin's Russia, which he portrayed with authenticity and panache.

In Cruz Smith's recent books, I've noticed a sharp falling off from *Gorky Park* and *Polar Star*, my favorites. The new ones are set in places outside Russia. *Independence Square*, about the onset of the Ukraine war, is a weak novel, but an Author's Note implies that the weakness was caused by disease. Both the detective, Arkady Renko, and his creator suffer from P.D.

Recognizing the symptoms, I scheduled an appointment with a neurologist, who told me I have the disease. Like Cruz Smith's, my own case, caught early, is treatable. (It's lucky I read that book when I did!)

Ron Singer

3. On Listening to Bach and Beethoven during the Holiday Season

My newfound disability has had
a host of unforeseen consequences.
Among the more fortunate is enhanced
enjoyment of the arts — notably, music.
I'm like Gregor Samsa, who felt that being
a despised cockroach sharpened his pleasure
listening to his sister practice the violin.

J.S. Bach's wonderful "Well-Tempered Clavier,"
has helped me temper the disappointment
of my sense of looming mortality.
The B-minor Mass, that treasure house
of polyphony, is another strong hedge
against the fact that all creatures must die.
I seem to find comfort in counterpoint.

The old master knew what lifts the spirit.
Ein feste burg is unser Bach.

I've also experienced, this season,
paroxysms of delight listening
to Beethoven, whose rhythms counterpoint
my shuffling gait, a dangerous trait.

Syncopation inspires me to look
six or seven ways before I cross the street.

Both masters understood our human needs.
Zwei feste bürge sind diese B's.

Ron Singer

4. Two Friends Afflicted with P.D.

Lis Harris and Leon Goldin were artists, a journalist and a painter, that is.

Both of them taught, coincidentally, at Columbia University.

Lis's work appeared in *The New Yorker*, including excerpts from a book about Jewish and Palestinian families residing in Jerusalem. She worked on that book for years.

Leon summered in Maine and spent the other seasons in New York, until his death in '09. (Was it really that long ago?) Meticulous, like Lis, he painted abstract landscapes and seascapes.

(If you chose to be uncharitable, I suppose you could call him "a poor man's John Marin.") After his death, I used one of his seascapes as the cover image for my book, *Look to Mountains, Look to Sea*.

Lis also gave me something of value: it was her example that prompted me to join the Dance Center's P.D. classes. (Could there be painters or writers in these?)

5. Helpers

Last night, Liz says, she dreamt of killing me.
Small wonder, since my burgeoning needs
must sorely try her limited patience.
Her daytime self is much more sympathetic.

My second helper, my daughter, Zoe,
would never dream of such a thing
—or never tell me, if she happened to.
She anticipates my every need.

They take turns escorting me to classes
for P.D. victims, at The Dance Center,
in downtown Brooklyn, a wonderful place
founded by renowned dancer, Mark Morris.

The Dance Center is staffed, for the most part,
by volunteers whose names I don't remember.
Never mind! Theirs is a labor of love,
so let them be anonymous. Let Liz
and Zoe stand for all my kind helpers!

Mary Belardi Erickson

Dry Leaves and Bulb Flowers

Today's wind lifts the dry leaves
like worn book covers.

They drop again to the struggling green.

When a windy teacher so motions,
students at desks close their opened texts--
notions of memory solidified by repetition.

All those academic everyday moments
no longer depend on classroom wall clocks,
the quick steps through halls,
beginnings and endings of classes.
Memories seem hermetically sealed.

Living condenses as a researched abstract.
The wind sweeps the seasons into one heap,
a pile of dry leaves.
The When ceases, and time seems irrelevant.

What matters is that dry leaves in wind
still blow, as book covers lift and close.
Spring urges perennials to bloom:
purple, blue, yellow, white.

Lost

A brittle photo
from a distant war
shows an accordion girl
maybe just in her teens
in the Great Hall of
a train station under
bombardment in one of
those European cities
with a long history.

She's playing for coins,
lead or silver, her open
case showing an oc-
casional paper thaler with
the crumpled face of a dead king,
her music, mostly minor
key I've imagined, lost,
the young girl as well.

Home Remedies

It mends the spirit and returns Beauty to the shelf.
It opens books, fills undreamed dreams, and leaves
a corner of the room not to be used
except by Art itself that paints and draws
a memory that will happen later
after night rolls day away and we
look through our bones to find the answer
written for the future not yet finished
and yet not begun, fabulous finding
no one expects to see in today's pit
with apples, oranges, a cat with no
whiskers and the silver bullet that has no pzazz
or, as you'd say, all that jazz that goes
back into a heavenly creation
where art will reign beside a silver moon
that rocks itself to sleep in golden seas.

Max's Color Wheel

The child with a broken blue
and frivolous green
combines these crayons
with ruby red
to create a picture
that belongs at home,
his mother said--
the sky, the grass
and flowers agreed.
Art clung to the refrigerator door.

Later the young man
packed his bag
with daring clothes, a beret,
sketchbook
and wild colored pencils,
a school award.
He flew away to find
his "room to let"
near a boulangerie
so near Monmartre
where he could see
patterns in shadows
and what he needed
in a skillet and coffeepot.

And old man now,
he dreams of younger days
when art was free
and love was by his side
(handing him the blue,
green, and ruby red).

Window

It's the willingness to be a window through
which others can see all the way out to
infinity and all the way back to themselves.

*from The Way of Art,
poem by Albert Huffstickler*

That's what it is,
what it is that art can do.

Someone said as much
for Huffstickler's poetry
at his memorial gathering
at the Hyde Park Theatre in Austin,
filled that night to standing room,
his community taking a last stand
en masse for someone who, like Whitman,
gave his poems out from a backpack
— Walt's were from a basket — freely.

Someone said that night,
"His poems bring us home."
A home with a window.

Our Geography of Poets

Colorado

Robert Cooperman

Kentucky

Jane Stuart

Minnesota

Mary Belardi Erickson

New Jersey

Gilbert Honigfeld

New York

Ron Singer

Texas/Vermont

Sylvia Manning