

The background of the cover is a photograph of a bright blue sky filled with numerous small, white, fluffy clouds. The clouds are scattered across the entire frame, creating a sense of depth and lightness.

# Waterways

Poetry in the Mainstream

December 2023 Volume 44 No. 6

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Volume 44

Number 6

It's all a free fall  
once you jump.

from "Downhill Racer" by Rex Sexton  
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Poetry in the Mainstream

Volume 44 Number 6

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sculpture on the beach

**Je suis en train**

Je suis

(Jesus i desperately do not know  
now now how to not despair, dis-pair)

Je suis pas -- no, know

I am not Princess Cassandra  
nor was meant to be

not as Cassie nor as Sandy

but yes androgynously

shoul'da been born a man

but then to want to be born again  
woman, Libana-ish, wishing  
for earth and air, fire and water  
to return again,

for Grace to be ours as  
we speak our mother truth  
to old appalling Apollos

and rapist chauvinist Agamemnons

still killing to eat, still eating to kill

still making stillborn the real

children born to cry out

Mais je suis en train! Nous sommes...

on the Crescent, say, through the south

through the graciousness of The Sisterhood  
of Sleeping Car Attendants in our dreams,

their unbelievable beauty  
learned from the beloved powerless  
their eternal patience  
to teach us the truth of beauty  
for innumerable generations:  
the power of regeneration

if we can hear ourselves  
listening, then responding  
responsibly, deeply, honestly

to the quiet screaming whispered  
mother-effing warning:

when you kill our children,  
even were we cattle, even  
were we not human but insect,  
you kill yourselves.  
You know not what you do.

Nous sommes en train.

The Crescent, say, old loveliest,  
riding with Cassandra in a roomette  
to the end of the line, attended  
by the Sisterhood, forever kind.

Je suis. En train a little shabby  
since our taxes go for killing,  
nothing for these old laid rails.

Nous sommes, new sums,  
forgive us for giving up  
if indeed we have done.

Que nous soyons.

En train. Qu'il en soit ainsi.

Nov. 22, 2023  
Seguin, Texas

*Deborah H. Doolittle*

## **Landscape with the Fall of Empires**

A vortex of vultures spiral over  
the place in perpetuity. Pine trees  
rise up like columns to lift and support  
the sky. Straight and taller. The sunlight plays  
through the frond-like clusters of pine needles,  
casts shadows on the carpet of rusted  
out pine straw and the small bushes that draw  
themselves up from the mulch. Beneath our feet,  
weavings of roots dig deep into the truth  
too intricate to excavate. That we  
should suspect what lies were told, the thousand  
slips of the tongue and ships of war, what fortunes  
lost or stolen, justify the wrack and  
ruin, the tumbling down, this hallowed ground.



from the crown  
of sycamores  
ride the back  
of a Great Blue Heron  
lifting off from  
its heronry  
with those six  
empty nests  
checked now  
for the woven sticks'  
ability to winter over  
until herons' return  
come next spring

Together you soar  
on the steady flap  
of his wings  
your legs  
in a perfect line  
aligned with his own

you having become  
just another bird  
winging on  
no thought of  
freefall or landings  
just the flying  
hair straight behind  
you like a sail.

*D. R. James*

## If Only I Moved by Instinct

*Life has been a grand migration  
to where you are today!*

—well known wisdom

I didn't know!

Otherwise,  
when those raggedy squadrons  
clamored overhead last evening —

three V's disarrayed  
like frayed arrow feathers,

their leaders insistent as clowns  
with braying horns, honking  
for plane geometry —

I would have taxied, sprinted,  
lifted arthritically  
from water's edge (granted

more dodo than goose,  
my splayed toes just scuffing  
the webbed crests of waves),

and elbowed my way  
into a rhythmic wedge

to claim my slot  
in that mindless rotation  
toward the life-saving draft.

*D. R. James*

## Lakeside Bird Feeder, Squirrels

Now if I had ambition I'd be  
this kung fu squirrel, this lighter one,  
this Jackie Chan, scaling stucco

to ledge to chimney to the hovering skid  
of the evil whiz kid's waffling chopper,  
perpetual motion my only gear,

my sidekick wacky as this blacker one,  
who tries but can't quite nab his half  
of the substantial stash. Their

choreography is manic, their fight scenes  
replete with wall-walking, roof leaping,  
jumps across gaps and gorges — all

their own improv'd stunts, every feat  
a fleeting, one-take opportunity. It's  
those reflexes that make the difference:

when gravity catches their rare missteps  
they can spin around an inch-thick span  
of diagonal steel or the slippery rim

of a seed-spill dish, always squirming  
all four feet first — whereas I'd just drop,  
back-ass-down to the unforgiving earth,

my spindly claws and my mangy tail  
spread like a shredded chute, a plea  
for anyone at all to catch me. So,

I'll leave these antics to my friends,  
for today, the squirrels, until I can find  
a way to foil them, deter them from

this wintertime welfare I've intended  
for the birds, whose more manageable  
business will give me the docile pleasure

I've been seeking: sitting here in a chair,  
swathed in luscious listlessness, slinging  
these escape lines toward anywhere I wish.

## Bon Voyage!

*Life is like stepping onto a boat which is  
about to sail out to sea and sink.*

— Shunryu Suzuki

*Doesn't the final meaning of life, too, reveal itself,  
if at all, only at its end on the verge of death?*

— Viktor Frankl

Does Soto Zen ever mention you can't cancel,  
can't rebook for a better week, another season,  
or due to limbo, your marriage gone to hell?  
Life's cruise is now and not never. Oh, sure,  
you could leap, even double somersault over

the side, work your manic cannonball act,  
that full-tuck drop from the poop deck.

Camus, for one, existentially questioned  
why anyone wouldn't have already executed  
that particular kind of a final dive.

Perhaps he'd not considered the sinking. Or,  
considered it and concluded, "Who can abide  
that anticlimax?" But even he stayed  
aboard, the festivities apparently far too  
fetching: his father killed in the Marne,

his uncle paralyzed, his TB, the colonial thumb  
pressing his Algerian brothers while Nazis  
oppressed his entire world, his Nobel  
that should have gone to Malraux—the wreck  
at 46, his own too early disembarkation. No,

Camus knew what the roshi knows: this plague  
of sinking, the bleak catalyst for the celebration  
en route. Why else such great devotion,  
Le Théâtre du Travail, two dozen volumes written  
for *la fraternité*, and all before this middle age  
at which I write? Older, he might have counseled

Viktor's trick, too, like plugging your dear life  
as an unfinished film: millions of tiny images,  
stowing their successive meanings until  
the credits roll, the low rows of deck lights  
ignite, and you bow, the whole exposed cargo  
only now rewound as your celluloid soul.

## Epigraph

*Poems are never completed—  
they are only abandoned.*

—Paul Valéry

So as I begin this one—  
vowing as an experiment  
not to give in to the vice  
of revision, that sumo  
of manipulation I so try  
to apply to my life—  
I wonder where I'll leave it.

Will it be in some sun-warmed clearing,  
a rocky outcropping in an old pine forest?  
And will I have set out this morning  
with getting there in mind?  
Or will it fall out of my pocket  
along a downtown sidewalk  
and blow a few feet until it lodges  
under a parked car,  
the puddle there and the dark  
intensifying the metaphor:  
a poem's being abandoned?

Thus bookended by country and city,  
both speculations in future tense,  
the claim neglects the unfolding—  
as if completion weren't  
every word as it emerges,  
means and ends at once.

The cone is not container  
of future tree. It is cone.  
Nor is an old cone empty.



## **Falling Free**

*(a sort of haibun)*

It takes courage and resolve for a paranoiac to shrug off the slings and arrows most of us take for granted enough to ignore. He lost his Ray-Bans—or The They stole them. The OmniPresentOmniPotentOmniScientThey in whom he believes more than me or his own eyes or common sense. But today he's wearing Armani, asks me how he looks. (Good, I smile.) He hasn't forgotten the disappeared, but has somehow moved on. I do not understand nor dare I ask how he wriggled free.

a day sweet enough  
to be tomorrow—  
midnight no more

*Gilbert Honigfeld*

## **No Spirit of Adventure**

On the 6 p.m. news last night  
there were two separate stories,  
and either would've been enough  
to confirm I've no spirit of adventure.

The first showed a spry old gent  
on his hundredth birthday strapped  
to a professional jumper, the pair  
of 'em flying freefall from a plane.

The second showed the medevac  
rescue of an Australian scuba-diver  
rotating up to the chopper on an air-gurney  
along with what the shark'd left of his legs.

Some guys feel alive only when they're  
on the edge of dying. I'm not one of 'em.

## **Fear of Falling**

It's not the falling that worries me,  
rather the breakage that follows.

In this ghost town of fading heroes  
there are closets full of splints and canes.

And there's a growing catalogue  
of old memories of the dead and gone.

There was a guy on a ladder changing  
the bulb over his garage doors. Hit the ground.

One woman walking her dog got  
tangled in the leash. Died in the E.R.

Oh yeah, another woman carrying in groceries  
tripped on the doorsill. Broke the eggs and her spine.

Now I stay off ladders, even stepstools,  
carry one bag at a time, and chew calcium tablets.

Richard Spiegel

## Hume

Einstein led me to Hume,  
and the Scotsman stayed  
around to shine the light  
on Thomas Blacklock, the blind  
bard of Edinburg, who wrote  
about blindness for the first  
Britannica. How we stumble  
in the dark. I am watching  
the woman I married. She  
typed up my thesis notes  
on blind poets who taunted  
us with the hope of finding  
inner visions. But, that was  
more than 40 years ago.

We've come a long way as  
a married couple, having found  
each other midway through  
our lives. We held hands and  
walked into the darkness  
with our eyes open. What  
did we see? The streets of  
the West Village in Manhattan,  
the bank of the Hudson River,  
the poets and the books,  
the children of the city, who

looked back at us to see if  
we were looking at them.  
We wanted to know  
what knowledge meant  
in an inclusive world  
of diverse urban classrooms  
demanding human understanding.

*Our Geography of Poets*

*Bali*

James Penha

*Kansas*

Pat Anthony

*Michigan*

D. R. James

*New York*

Richard Spiegel

*New Jersey*

Gilbert Honigfeld

*North Carolina*

Deborah H. Doolittle

*Texas*

Sylvia Manning