Writers Night

RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

March 2019
Writers Night: Resilience and Sustainability
A selection of poetry and prose by Northfield writers presented at Content Bookstore on Friday, March 1, 2019, as part of First Friday Art Night. Works for the program were chosen in a blind judging process.

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Orick Peterson

Domestic Resilience

Books, tidy on the shelf,
still gather dust.
I'm told that dust mites poop in my sheets.
Where the ceilings meet the walls,
lady bugs lay dots of egg
that leave a golden smear behind.

My days are factories of debris.
Every salad strews green confetti.
Every egg peppers the table.
A crisp crust means crumbs will fly.
Even fresh laundry I haul up the stairs
molts downy lint.
My very breathing taints the air
with my own signature biota.

Shoveling snow,
I scatter grit to melt the ice,
then grind my soles on the outdoor mat
and again on the mat inside the door
and take off my boots before my coat,
but the litter keeps on sneaking in.

This very house is shedding its pelt.
The furnace exhales filtered chaff.
The stone walls in the old basement
crack their white paint and exfoliate
a silt that gathers in corner drifts.

Gravity gathers it all to the floor,
and only the airiest particles rise
to float in a low-angled ray of sun---
at least I can see what I'm up against!

Every stroke of sweeping the floor
lets me practice
resilience.
Christine Kallman

The Garden

He hobbles round the border of the yard
to lift the garden’s soggy leaves and free
what has survived the winter. Laments
fallen limbs, victims of a weird
March windstorm that felt more like June.
He flattens with his toe uneven ground,
careful of his newly-mended hip.
Attends the rose she gave him, somehow spared,
the stem surprisingly unchanged.

December’s cruel freeze, though, took down
some lilies that he loved. The papers say
the melting ice up north blasts polar air
right to his door. He plunges in the spade,
turns them under. That’s that. In the fall
his brother died, the last except for him.
It was no blessing. The poor guy was beat,
but breathed on for days, a homesick immigrant
who stubbornly protests, “By God, I’ll stay.”

Pray for the best, anticipate the worst.
Even the desired can daunt. An April wind
can slap down Canada, whip
the old green hopes fool cold.
Still, summer days turn on a ripe tomato,
a finely sculpted pepper, firm green beans,
snapped, steamed, served with sweet corn
rolling, buttered, sighing on a plate.

In the dim shed he roots out stakes
for plots of rows, the peeling hopes
of onion bulbs in darkened bags,
the bulging shiny packets
which seduce and he succumbs
too much for this year’s smaller patch
and slower blood. The full mean clouds disgorge
on sandals, brimmed straw hat. Four days of rain.
Later, in the drought, he’ll wish for this.

He walks the yard again. Forty degrees
but no need to move fast. The blooms
of wild blood root take their time unfurling,
happy to be wet then wilt. He’s wet and cross,
he’s lost so much, with so much left to lose.
He feels a fool. Still, into thickened muck
he presses dry peas all day, slow,
and, leaning over black, across his back
the rain unwinds its spools.
Christine Kallman

The Most Difficult and Best

like hoofing it up the longest hill in town in a hurry
but afterwards we have lively coltish legs
and the nicest tired feeling
from the heart pumping faithfully
nose entertaining whiffs of snow
the crunch of ice underfoot
and a keen attention to not slipping

we are reviewing the week
bringing our minds to touch
thoughts springing out by the movement
of our limbs and the action
of pushing the earth away
there are hard things as always
not just our painful differences
but the ailing climate
our woeful leaders
knees, backs
doubt

the sparkling clean of good, too
our children
friends
birds and insects
weird true breathtaking events
like a sixth grader heaving a basketball
the length of the court in the final seconds
and winning the game

and the astonishment
of being married forty years
carrying together the weight of things
up and down up and down
and you turning with a hard-won smile
that says
I’m still keeping at this, don’t worry

we grab hands
not just for safety
and only a little embarrassed
that the whole town might see
our love
Leslie Schultz

**Sonnets Before the Sixth Extinction**

I.

What does it imply when we lace up shoes?
That we’re going somewhere? Since time began,
long before history, before the span
of sapiens commenced, there have been clues
that time is not forever. Now tattoos
circle back in fashion, poignant human
graffiti, blue-prints for a tribal plan
to bang drums, call back swallowed moons, confuse

Chaos into Order with quaint beliefs
that passion moves tides, averts disaster.
Thumbs twitch, then pixelated texts are hurled
like virgins into the abyss. We’re-thieves.
Our blind crimes roam while our words flow faster,
form rivers, deluge our swift-melting world.

II.

We need sonnets now. They embody turns,
point footsteps toward the inconvenient truth.
Sonnets steer away from slippery untruth,
make us face the music, though it burns.
Sonnets are shaped as perfectly as urns.
Strung with rhyme, they are balanced like tuned lutes;
their shell-forms are helices, convolutes,
testaments to roses, nebulae, ferns.

Human art can yield fruit from love and pain.
We also need to cultivate the earth
with all the care a poet gives a poem.
I ask my sorrow to instruct my brain.
I ask that death gives always rise to birth,
that life always cradles this green-blue home.
Leslie Schultz

**Planet Burning**

Once on the slope
of Mount Rainier—
with other children—
I lit a match.

In the space between one
breath
and the next
the newborn flame
began to burn my fingers,
so, without thinking,
I dropped it
into a nest of pine needles
where it crackled, flared,
surged like a fever,
wandered like a river.

Fortunately, we were many.

Five children stamping furiously
and singeing our rubber soles
saved the forest
from ourselves
that day,
but who,
Smokey,
will save us now?
Becky Boling

angel’s harp

Fukushima, 2011

submerged in a haze of nuclear waves
I am tossed and tumbled into plutonium’s
cavernous maw, a diver into our wreck and ruins
draped in lead lamé, a fall of pewter folds
encases me as I hold my breath,
hold, my breath, hold,
until my lungs suck
air, this burning, caustic blast

broken ribs and angel’s harp,
crushed bodies, tissues perforated
by a thousand blades, shards of atomic waste—
I exhale stale air, rattling like stones
over a metal grate—what harmonies we have unleashed—
flesh melts and resolves itself into a dew—
can the whole world be placed on a respirator?

air ignites
oceans catch fire
we drown in the contrail
of last century’s dreams
our treasures—music, art, poetry
and breath itself, the zephyr of the soul—
tossed onto the tempest pyre
Linne Jensen

The Birth of Memory

Just because you have no recollection of it
doesn’t mean it isn’t affecting you.

Chickens peck the ground
In the protective shade of lush, green hazelnut trees,
Eating insects and ticks.

Before the chickens were here,
This land was bare pasture for beef cattle.
Until they were taken to feed lots,
Where they were finished on corn,
And shipped to the slaughterhouse.

The chickens leave the hazelnut trees,
Retreat to their coop to roost for the night,
And to lay their morning eggs.

We planted the hazelnut trees.
We care for them and the chickens.
The chickens greet us when we come
To accept the gift of their eggs.
We are nourished by the hazelnut trees and the chickens.
The chickens nourish the hazelnut trees,
And the hazelnut trees protect the chickens.

The land is relieved it is
No longer supporting the cattle pasture.
The hazelnut trees and the chickens are so much gentler.

Yet the land remembers long ago
When it was covered with grasses taller than we are,
When showy spring flowers greeted the warmth of the sun,
When buffalo grazed on the tall grasses,
And the sky was big.
D.E. Green

On the USS Albatross

This is our ship
  various as a city
  intimate as a village
  less like a nation
  more like a world
  with all the possibilities
  of neighbor and friend

This is our ship
  swift in the currents
  winds behind us
  but in frigid seas
  and dark wintry North
  it grinds through
  excruciating ice

This is our ship
  We will not get another

If we cannot pull together
  our lips will dry and split
  our tongues crack and swell
  our ears blister shut

We will lose our way
  our fragile home
  each other and ourselves

But this is our ship
  We do not have to drown
  nor to die of thirst on these ironic waters

We can traverse these seas together
  Together we can reach our ports of call

This is our ship
  We do not need another
  We will not get another

This is our ship
D.E. Green
Take a Deep Breath

Even the air we breathe is processed, has to be now that the fires in the north and west have flung particulate matter across the continent. So we carry on, don our masks and our oxygen tanks before we sit down to play the harp or piano—no trumpets or trombones since we cannot inhale enough to blow, Gabriel, blow any more—and pretend life is good, still pretty good, as my friend Bob likes to say, just as the gauge on the tank veers toward empty and the lightning cracks and the floodgates open and we become, in nature's wild parlor, curios and knick-knacks.
Steve McCown
Ice, Fire, and Sand

What we deny they suffer.
A polar bear on a floe,
hunting ground remnant,
waits at water’s edge
for the restoration of snow and ice.

A dog left behind in Paradise,
under a California sky raining ash,
remains loyal to place,
to an abandoned burning house.

But a desert in a drought
revels in irony, thrives,
expands its empire of sand
over a wind-swept savanna
and water buffalo bones.
Steve McCown

Pinecones

Trees fall from a tree:
pinecones cover my yard,
winter survivors, cold cured,
icc hardened, thawed intact,
so whenever I step
on these seed-bearing miniatures—
a crunching not breaking sound—
they spring back.
Steve McCown

**Recyclables**

“Give them a life beyond the landfill.”
—Recycling center motto

Hope that is true for us as well,
but for now our trash serves a higher purpose,
collected glass pulverized to pellets,
reincarnated as bead necklaces
or splashbacks, Pinot Noir bottles.

Scrap metal bridges rivers,
or is hammered and welded into sculpture.
Plastics give knees and hips a second life.
Transplanted organs provide pulse
to a body with a faint one.

Our dreams recycled are dreams reborn,
sustainable and sustaining.

My old papers: opportunities for others,
blank sheets for future scripts, a novel,
perhaps a new book of common prayer
we can all lay hands on,
turn together like the turning earth.
Bruce Anderson  
Old Ways  

A wall of green tamaracks lines the far northern shore of the bay, and the sky overhead is deep blue. Eight feet away from me, facing backwards in the canoe’s bow, Andy reaches left, bends a sheaf of wild rice stalks over the canoe with the flail in his left hand, gently taps the rice heads with the flail in his right hand, and a shower of ripe grains shatters from the stalks and falls into the canoe. As I pole slowly through the dense stand of *Zizania palustris*, he reaches right seconds later and repeats the motion with his right arm and flail, and the rice again rains down. Back and forth he switches, the canoe ever so slowly filling. The only sounds are the “swoosh” of the rice being gathered in, the gentle patter of the rice falling into the canoe, and the occasional quack from a startled duck or the descending whinny of a Sora.

We both sweat profusely in the September afternoon sunshine. We’ve been working hard for hours, with only a brief shore break for lunch. We switch between poling and flailing roles every few hours, as flailing is more satisfying, and poling can be backbreaking labor when nosing the canoe through dense rice stands.

We traveled from southern Minnesota to north central Minnesota’s Hubbard County to harvest, in an area still abounding with waters harboring good rice stands. At the time of European contact, *Zizania palustris* was found throughout much of what is now Minnesota and other Great Lakes states. *Manoomin* (as it is known in Ojibwe) was found not only in northern, but also central and southern, Minnesota, and was a staple food for both Ojibwe and Dakota peoples.

That we had to drive 240 miles north to find rice beds, when waters in our own figurative backyards were full of rice just two human lifetimes ago, is a sad commentary on regional water quality. *Manoomin* requires clean water to thrive, and clean lakes and rivers are a distant memory in southern Minnesota. Pesticide and fertilizer from lawns and farm fields, industrial pollution, polluted stormwater runoff from parking lots and roads, and other insults to once-pristine waters have made most lakes and rivers in southern and central Minnesota unfit for wild rice growth.

Even some northern Minnesota lakes and streams are under threat of pollution which could render them unfit for rice. In recent years controversy has raged over the role that sulfate pollution plays in the health of wild rice beds. Minnesota has had a wild rice sulfate standard since 1973 based on studies showing wild rice was found primarily in low sulfate waters. Concerns about the scientific validity of the standard led the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to convene a Wild Rice Advisory Committee in 2011. Evidence that sulfate is converted to sulfide by bacteria in lakebed and streambed soil, influenced by the amount of iron and organic matter in the soil, led to new proposed rules in 2017, subsequently struck down by a judge in 2018.

A task force appointed by then-Governor Mark Dayton recently issued recommendations, including creation of a Wild Rice Stewardship Council, to protect wild rice from sulfate pollution.

Much of the controversy stems from sulfide mining operations proposed for northeastern Minnesota (the farthest-along and most controversial being PolyMet and Twin Metals). Proponents argue that our society badly needs copper and other metals that would be produced, as well as mine construction and operation jobs, and that developers will take reasonable precautions to prevent surface and groundwater pollution. Opponents argue that nearly every sulfide mine elsewhere in the
world has caused surface and groundwater pollution, and that the only way to protect the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness from the threat of the toxic pollution created by sulfide mines (which would need to be managed for at least 500 years after mining ceases) is to ban such mines permanently in the surrounding watershed.

*Manoomin* beds are also threatened by climate change and the rapid ecosystem disruption it will cause worldwide. Many ecologists project that the boreal forests prevailing in northern Minnesota in recent millennia may be replaced by oak savannah by late-century. This could lead to ecosystem impoverishment, as many species will be unable to migrate or adapt as rapidly as climate change necessitates. *Manoomin* could be a climate change casualty.

Such dreary considerations were mostly absent as Andy and I spent idyllic days ricing. The scene as we worked through the rice bed toward the shore was timeless. When we approached the shore, we turned the canoe around in a small patch of open water and made another southbound pass several feet to the west, parallel to the northbound pass. Back and forth we worked as the afternoon progressed. Swoosh, tap, patter; swoosh, tap, patter. Two hundred, two thousand years ago, Native American predecessors worked these same beds, using the same harvesting method, the sole difference being that our canoe was made of Kevlar, not birch bark.

This feeling of connection to an ancient lifeway washed over me repeatedly for the five days we riced, bringing a deep sense of satisfaction and connection to the natural world and our hunter-gatherer predecessors. This feeling intensified when I brought our rice to a business (Spirit Lake Native Farm) on the Fond du Lac Reservation to be processed. I talked at length with an Ojibwe tribal member my age who reminisced about her parents, like untold generations before, disappearing into a *Manoomin* camp for two weeks every fall.

Whether future generations can continue this ancient practice will be determined by actions we take in the coming years and decades. It is my fervent hope that *Manoomin* will thrive far into the future. Its fate is in our hands.
Riki Kölbl Nelson
When Coyote Moved into Town

When Coyote moved into town
he crossed the street safely, found food
mated, raised pups in a parking lot.

Ray Fox started to date Helen Wolf,
they danced a mean fandango
at the Contented Cow.

They read that frogs in far off Indonesia
gave birth to live froglets
and semi bored scientists in L.A.
spiked juice for zebra finches
which slurried their songs.

Things shifted. New stars emerged
earth warmed up, ice caps shrank.
As for me, I try to hold steady
even as I read that every galaxy
has a black hole at its heart.