

Blaze VOX 2k9

Fall 2009

BuffaloFOCUS | Sherry Robbins



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Buffalo is a wonderful city of words! Words, says Beckett, are underlined with silence. And that is the strange beauty and power of Robbins' poems. She can see with the clear vision of a poet who knows both love and loss and continues to make—to embrace—“*the seeds of its opposite*.” These poems give us the natural world in stunning beauty and history in all its inconsolable grief.

The title and many of the poems derive from Herman Melville's Moby-Dick, which was first published in London on October 18, 1851 in an expurgated three-volume edition titled The Whale, and weeks later as one massive volume as Moby-Dick; or, The Whale on November 14, 1851. In a circular sort of way, the publication schedule mirrors its namesake. The poems included here have been published in a smaller chapbook and in different forms and formats, but BlazeVOX [books] will present the whole work in book in 2010.

Here is the whale, in words, underlined in layers and dimensions forming a rich portrait of what it means to be human—all through the generous, attentive eye. In a few words, Robbins gives us the circle of an inner and an outer, the personal and impersonal, a poetics of upheaval wrapped up in a journey of ritual and reversal. A winding path with an abrupt end, “like a dead end” to cause a stop, a graven silence. This is a quietly eviscerating, astonishing and silent.

Sherry Robbins Bio

Sherry Robbins is a poet, teaching artist, and free-lance writer. She has two books of poetry, **Snapshots of Paradise** and **Or, the Whale**, as well as dozens of poems published in literary journals and anthologies here and in Spain and Portugal, including *Earth's Daughters*, *Salmagundi*, *Denver Quarterly* and **Poets at Work**. Sherry received her M.A. in the poetics of ecstasy and is also a certified yoga instructor.

Cover woodcut by Cristoph B uchler

A Swath of Poems From

Or,
The Whale

Stubb and Flask Kill an Afternoon on the Econfina And Then Have a Talk over It

If this canoe tips over
we could spend the night
in the gator's belly.
I see him on that log
sizing up the weight
and taste of us.
My mind was open
before we left –
Nature and all –
but damned if he doesn't
look satanic. That tail
he carries behind him
so casually – he's all
tail really – could penetrate
our souls, undermine our lives
of duty, and eating out and sitcoms.
I could twist that tail off
and use it as a whip.
I won't bargain with the devil,
I tell you. I have powers too
and Beelzebub can just...

This canoe will only tip
if we give a form to fear.
How do we know
that alligator exists
anyway? We talked
about the possibility
of death by alligator
so much before we
dipped our oars in this
experience that we
perhaps imagine him.
Before we drifted
around the bend
he was the mere
idea of alligator
sunning on a would-be log,
hungry for phenomena.
It took our active minds
to color in the tail
and legs and teeth
and furthermore...

Oh, ye foolish! throw all these thunder-heads overboard, and then you will float light and right.

The Sperm Whale's Head – Contrasted View

Small eyes small ears clean mouth

I clamber around your be-

headed head taking notes

and measurements for the

enlargement of my mind.

See how you are able

to examine two disparate objects

at the same time.

I've caught you now.

And with these holes

too small to stick my

finger in you hear

your sister's song

from another world

as it were.

As it were

is a favorite expression

of mine.

And this mouth –

so delicately lined,

so huge –

sometimes, full fathom five (op. cit.),

you glide along slack-jawed

as though bored senseless

by the small fish in your company.

Observe! Even now in death

the jaw relaxes

and you open wide

for me.

The Right Whale's Head – Contrasted View

Dead.

Just as I always knew

I would be.

Hung up here

to be compared with

and contrasted to

another dead head.

Metaphor factories.

I am a viola an oak a shoe

a crown a wigwam.

Ancient dames

moved about gaily

in my grandfather's jaws

as it were.

But I am dead,

and "Plato" over there

is deader. Something

breathes in the universe

which can never die

but you will not find it

in this head, nor in your own.

The Battering-Ram

There is no face
to this front.
It has eyes to see,
ears to hear.
It breathes.
God knows it eats.
But none of these
openings
face me.
Up against a wall
behind which swims
a mass of tremendous life
I feel for a hold,
I fold prayers into its chinks,
I beat my head I beat my head I beat my head.
Face it.
To break through stone
I must be stone.
Look what befell
the last guy.

The Great Heidelburgh Tun

Balm of Gilead!
Oil of Olé!
Five hundred gallons of sperm!
I'll drink to that
and more:
forty years of laying
all these eggs eggs eggs
in the same well-made
and ever-changing basket.

Cistern and Buckets

Man Overboard!

Head first
into the sanctum sanctorum
of a head full of sperm.
Oh, fragrant drowning!
Head to head
and all heads sinking
slowly in the sea.
Who will deliver
our native son
from this sweet double death?

When they find out
how to clone a boy
we're done for, Anna.
Don't be so paranoid
she says, all my ideas
death to her.

I'll pray for Queequeg then,
the OB/GYN of the high seas.
Make your deft cuts
underwater and pop up,
you and yours.
I wish you breath
and deliverance from the head.

And I have always had a soft spot
for Ohio honey-hunters whose heads
come too close to the crotch,
willing to be sucked in
and embalmed – oh,
delicious death! – in honey.

This queer adventure
of the Gay-Headers
requires all hands to work
on a slippery deck.
I'll lower the bucket for you,
sailor, and bring up all I have
if you'll swim down for me
should I fall into Plato's honeyed head.

The Prairie

Lake, river, rock, tree,
falls. This town
has a hundred languages,
a million mouths to speak them,
but the land beneath the noise
has none. We are so close here
in this currency-forsaken place
to our birth-right,
the silence that once filled
the now egotistical sky,
the now unhaunted hill.
Buffalo's great genius
is in doing nothing.
Your economics, sociology,
politics, like all human sciences,
are passing fables. If you
can't read the deeper meanings
in this town's flat face
then how can I, unlettered Ishmael,
hope to read the ground beneath it?
I but lay this place before you.
Read it if you can.

The Pequod Meets the Virgin

He is a virgin,
this artist visiting
from another country.
By that I mean he's clean.
By that I mean he's empty.
He's here to borrow
a cup of funk
from our funky town
and we oblige.
But once that blind
old wounded bull
swims into view
our civil intercourse
is done. Every seeker
for herself,
advantage
to the full, the dirty,
and this fish is mine.
I know where the harpoon
goes. I know how to kill.
What I don't know yet
is how to keep
my catch from sinking
when it doesn't want the virgin
and it doesn't want me.

The Honor and Glory of Whaling

My father was a rock
shaped like a whale,
my mother a constellation
on her back, legs up.
They tied me to a rock
shaped like a wedding bed
and left me there for my whale
husband. Bring him on.

But along comes Perseus—
St. George—Davey Crockett
to the rescue. Oh, boy,
I get to go home with you
and have your kids. A little
disorder in this enterprise,
if you please. Not that easy
to live happily ever after
with me, who every night
dives down with my fish
Vishnu to the Vedas
on the ocean floor.
Any man may kill a snake.

Jonah Historically Regarded

I dove into
a cell into its molecules,
hiding from the song
of the cold night sky
only to slide
down
a double helix
into atomic galaxies.
As above, so below.
Everywhere I go
I find a vastness
that swallows me.
This before microscopes.
This before the astral probe.
Modern history is a lie.
The old book lies too.
No matter where you toss me
there will be a storm.
No matter where I sink
there will be singing.

Pitchpoling

Lancing

Harpooning

(again and again

the dexterous dart repeated)

fountains must run wine tonight

yet I sit in my party dress

paper cup of pop flat

run dry dry run dry and tired

of this greased boat

I have cut you up till now every way but

loose

The Fountain

Up until this point,
seventeen minutes past ten
on the morning of the twenty-eighth
of October, 1999 CE,
no one has discovered
whether we are particulate
or wavy.

The dog chases squirrels
in the back yard
where salvia thrusts
stiff red flags of summer
into fall air, lilac leaves
are green as Spring,
elder branches bare, and I,
enveloped in a thick fog,
think, what gives here?
Are these things tangible
or maya? Is maya particle or wave?
Should I unask the question?

(I should hold my tongue
but am forced to stammer something out
by way of getting a living).

All ponderous, profound beings, Sappho, Emily,
Herman, Satan, Cybele, Elizabeth and so on,
steam while thinking,
as if dissolving particle to wave.
Thinking thinking thinking,
neither believers nor infidels,
until harpooned by some heavenly ray,
that is, until everything is
Rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
and they let the fish go,
doubting, in the meantime,
all things particulate,
intuiting the wave.

The Mouth

Other poets have sung
to their tails. I celebrate
the mouth. Sometimes
a woman is soft as Christ
begging in the garden
for a change of fate,
her mouth pressed to the moon,
“Oh, please, please,”
but most days she gets
the sun up, singing
Dinah Won't You Blow
like an old salt, birthing
gods out of her mouth
one after another
only to bury them each night
back where they came from,
such is the subtle elasticity
of the organ of which I treat.
Sometime with mystic gestures
she signals to her tribe, no,
to the whole world,
in a language forgotten, embedded
just under the skin. This way.
Ah, but sometimes a mouth
is just a mouth. I know her
not and never will. She is full
of strangeness and unaccountable
to her most experienced assailant.

The Grand Armada

Darling girl,
seconds away from rowing out
to the expanding rings of madness
where you will chase and be chased
by every imaginable distraction,
buckle your power belt,
sharpen your knife,
your eyes already hunger
for the storm.

Darling girl,
you made this mute calm here
that first night you drew
mortal nourishment from me
while your old eyes feasted
on unearthly reminiscence.
Ponderous planets of unwaning woe
revolved around us, yet, deep down,
deep inland, you fed me joy,
a joy that's now my permanent home.
So leave me in this underwater nursery,
battle is our birthright, too.
Grip your oars, clutch your soul.
Who knows to what strange waters
contraction may some day impel you?

Ambergris

Let me tell your fortune.
You will die.
And before your death
you will meet sorrow,
know cruelty and ruin.
Your purse will be haunted
by doubt and your heart will, too.
Anger will knot your mind,
confound your vitality.
As Marlene Dietrich
told that whale of a man,
your future is all used up.

Where are you going?
I'm not done yet.
Each card contains
the seeds of its opposite.
Though you blunder through life
like the fool you are,
there are diamonds
in your bowels, roses
in your excrement –
is this nothing?
The truth is,
living or dead,
when you treat yourself decently,
you don't smell so bad.

One dollar, please.

The Castaway

Down into the Dead Lakes
down to their Queen
and her hoard of pearls
down, a pip, a point
of self dissolving
in her arms
down to where strange
shapes of the unwarped primal
world glide by, down and
drowned and up again,
indifferent as my god,
am I now to make sense
when sense is a lost oar
bobbing on her vast blank body?
Stick to the boat
is good advice.
Leap from the boat is mine.

A Squeeze of the Hand

Squeeze! Squeeze! Squeeze!
A daughter's son
sucks at his mother's breast,
one tiny hand helping
with a friendly squeeze
to shoot the milk home.
Each woman in the room
is lost in the sight
and memory of the tug
of a suckling babe,
and our own breasts ache
with the phantom urge to help.
His rosebud mouth, the sucking sounds,
lull us into a reverie of milking.
So sweet! So warm!
You could bathe in it!
It could almost be
Paracelsus' universal solvent
as we unconsciously reach out
to touch each others' hands,
divinely free of all ill-will,
or petulance, or malice.
He sucks until we almost melt
into the very milk
of human kindness,
almost squeeze ourselves
into each other,
visions of rings of ancestors
crowding the room,
each with her breasts leaking,
each awash in this attainable felicity.

* * * * *

Now, while discoursing of milk,
it behooves to speak of other things akin to it:
the sighs, the gazes, the drunken smile.
Have you seen his little toes?

The Try-Works

Anna's first driving lesson,
Forest Lawn, no one
to hurt but the dead.
Up and down its winding paths –
turn here, try this way –
past angels, soldiers,
mausoleums like little banks
storing dead bankers,
ducks and groves and
meditation points. She
is careful by nature
and I slip away.

Here lies the Seneca
with the silver tongue,
here the president, the spiritualist,
here the grain merchant
and his pretty children
who waltzed in fire lit ballrooms,
who talked of opera, not hell.
All vanity.
And towering above the green
and white, the crematorium,
red brick oven like an open wound,
like a dead end,
from which you sent
your last smoke signal as I drove by.
Good-bye. Good-bye.
Now what?

Now what?
Now where?
How did I come
to hang upside down
from this yew tree
by one ankle,
my head grazing graves?
There is a wisdom that is woe;
but there is a woe that is madness.
Wake up, Mom. I'm stuck.
Time to practice reverse,
Anna. Let's head home.

The Lamp

No one in this town
who has money
gives money away.
Of all the towns in the country,
this town is the stingiest.
Our merchants dress themselves
in darkness, like the thin men of Haddam.
Artists and visionaries and children
should get jobs, jobs requiring
urine tests, or leave town.

How odd then
that of all the towns in the country
ours has the most persistent art.
We hunt the food of light here.
We work in light.
We lay down in light.
In the darkest night
a child makes up new words
for light and all the immigrant
women learning English
add to its vocabulary,
and the artists make their altars
from blood and tinsel and shut-off notices
that somehow still
house an illumination.
We work here with a fuel
unknown in the boardrooms downtown,
not solar, not lunar, not astral,
but one pressed for free from a darker source.

Stowing Down and Clearing Up

Every day, for Aphrodite's sake,
I sort the spilled grain
and bag it in neat bags
and store the bags below.
And every night I wait
for her son to come back to me
back to bed in our pitch-dark room.
In the morning all the grain is spilled again.
This is life.
Oh! The metempsychosis!
Oh! Paul, that in bright Rome,
two thousand years ago, did die,
so chaste, so spiritual, so sure,
I gave birth to you
last time around – a girl! –
and, woman that I am,
taught you, a voluptuous thing,
to feed a man ripe apples in the dark.