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Our Sainted
Lady Esther

POEMS BY MATT WELTER

MATT WELTER is a poet, naturalist and storyteller. He holds a Bachelors of Art in English from New Mexico State University and a Masters of Science in Environmental Education from University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. His work has been featured in hundreds of small press journals, including *ArtWord Quarterly*, *Wisconsin Academy Review*, and *Rosebud*.

He is inspired by the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Dorothy Wordsworth, Diane Ackerman, Laurie Anderson, R.C. Hildebrandt and Laurel Mills.

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Our Sainted Lady Esther

Matt Welter

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To Betsy

Mermaids

They spent more time in the green lake weeds
than on the raft, waterlogged back-swimmers
resting their arms capriciously over the side
so that only sun and air touched their hair.
They would dive and bubble out of sight

*of the boys, on the beach, the boys . . .
their cacophony of conquests . . .
always building forts and catching fish . . .
the boys, who would need the boys?*

They knew the undersides of pond lilies,
the jeweled spectacle of drowned algae-coated bottles,
the eerie hand-joining fear of swimming
to where the milfoil hid the sunken rowboat.

They used clams to measure their budding breasts,
strung stories of the surfacing world
in each other's hair with driftwood knots.

Spinning below, eyes wide open
they would rub their pelvises against the sandy bottom,
imagine that they were laying eggs
that the pollen coating the lake's surface
was Poseidon's spume drifting down
to fertilize their turtle-hidden children.

Harpy

She found that the column of rock made her eyes soar.
She'd surmount its face, flap out her blanket
and tan her back without a line or a prying eye.
Above all, here, she had the vantage.

The river below murmured to her
that it would carry away her loneliness,
taught her that men with beer guts
could float in and out of her life
without so much as a turn of her head.
She let them pass by the hundreds,

cringed if she heard them back-paddling,
ambled her imagination down her secret ledge
or if one threatened to invade her aerie
give herself over to the thought of the cottonwood drop . . .
No, force him over. That's what she'd do.
After all, this was her sky, her nest, her summer.

Once a summer she would start
with the sound of the boys tubing downriver
fly up with her blanket billowing between her hands,
her arms vulturing a "V".
She would start wailing, moaning, gibbering.

They pointed at her erect, naked form.
She stared them into possessed forgetfulness.
They would careen in disbelief.
She trusted the river to lead their tubes
over that submerged barbed wire line,
that snag, those loin-crushing cascades.

Maleficent

Her mother insisted that she be a Medieval girl
and gave her a daily supplement of arsenic.

It made her skin translucent.

Brought her blue veins to the surface.

Kept her lips and eyelids green.

Arsenic green.

Kept the girl anorexic, throwing up every meal.

Thinned her tongue, made her breath smell of acid.

It simmered her heart in a constant cool anger,

the kind that could kill a princess

like the prick from a spindle.

A migraine of anger horned itself from her temples

adding a self-sharpening growth ring each year.

A languorous anger

that could hold a prince captive

for a hundred years

behind the fear of a kiss

and became her dragon's rage

at the threat of waking love.

The Basket

Her mother filled me
with strawberry jam and apples
as red as her short homespun cape.
She wrapped the goodies in a checked felt cloth.
I loved how my girl skipped and sang to me,
though she dawdled for crows
and a bone gnawing stranger.

These were nothing in comparison
to her hungry grandmother
who made the girl screech
and toss me in the corner,
leaving my willowy ribs cracked,
my pomish worries rolling.

As I peered from beneath my soiled picnic cloth,
I could see her wolfish grandmother
using the girl's red riding cape as a napkin
and I knew that I wanted
to be under another girl's arm:
One from the other side of the world;
One who could scare a witch from the sky
as easily as a Jack-of-Straw to a crow;
One who would make lions into crybabies;
She would use me to carry a wolf so small
it could be kicked with her ruby hard shoes.

This I thought as the woodsman
crashed his ax through the door.

Spider Trust

She knows that
when the thin line
of a jumping spider
creases her brow
she will be safe.

She feels her strides
gain with each glistening
grass spider web she sees
on the old railroad grade
ahead of her.

She releases
half a mile more
of her fear
each time an orb web
nets her upper torso.

The spiders tell her
that no one else
has yet
been on the trail
this morning.

Andrea

She serves burgundy with everything:

Spinakapitas, Arni Psito, Pastitsio.

She feels that meat should be held heavy in the mouth,

and stories should have their own gravity,

like the rosewood beads she ran over her lips

after she pulled them from her mother's cedar chest.

Dowry, the thought makes her laugh,

makes her burst like a berry

squeezed too hard at its peak ripeness.

She wishes she had worn that flamingo pink boa

at her grandmother's funeral.

Yaya would have liked it,

after all, it was hers,

the Kalamata flapper.

She looks out at the leaden day,

wishes the migrating warblers wouldn't hide from the rain

that they would stand up to it like the daffodils.

She pours grenadine, little drops at a time,

into her oversized coffee mug,

and watches her blushing mocha swirl.

Bottle House Woman

for Kari Coughlin

She may be considered as cracked
as the Devil's Golf Course, but let me tell you
that lady taught me to appreciate history.
To search for the stories within your own community
like looking for gold, the old-fashioned way,
don't denude the hills, dig into them,
fill them back up when you're through.
Speak quiet and let the pallid bats sleep
especially when they're endangered,
leave the cave and pan for desert gold.
She dug in deep as screwbean mesquite
between the Valley of Death
and the Mountains of Pain.
Taught me to adopt the stubborn and the abandoned,
to fear the trickle becoming the flash flood,
to look for graves along the way.
Mostly, she taught me
the importance of finding anecdotes
once you tapped the aquifer
of staying in one place.
That pack rats are better to have
than snakes or scorpions
because the presence of the gold dust rodent
meant the absence of the other two.
That ghost towns need to be remembered
as much as the hookers and the gold-diggers
that spat life into them, left us with more than snakeweed.

That you should listen to those like herself,
locals with turtleback voices,
the kind that warble and accent
with the dust devils and the burros
and crawl into the crevices of memories
like chuckwallas searching for a home.
The kind that if you sit back and listen to them
you will find that they are as deep and filled with secrets
as the sound a house made of bottles makes
singing in a peppergrass breeze.

Woman Sitting in the Center

To her left is her husband, a lighthouse keeper,
who hoots a, “Whoo-weee, ain’t she pretty?”
as he reclines and slides his fingers
down his suspenders.

He’s thinking of the row back home tonight,
to their lighthouse, on another island, six miles away,
there’ll be plenty of fresh air for her during the ride,
they’ll beat that nasty old fog.

To her right and behind her is her son.
Just like his father, he’s wearing a tie,
‘cause its Sunday.

With his hat on tight and his eyes all squinty,
he rasps, “Come on, maaaaaaaa, smile.”
He can’t wait to help his dad with the rowing,
wants to be Jack Armstrong and save his ma
from that elusive killer fog.

Directly behind her is the other keeper’s wife,
in her turn of the century white blouse
and black serge skirt.

She’s 20 years behind the times, a staunch Victorian.
She refuses to speak or even breathe in the presence
of this other woman, saw this disease wipe out
half her tribe in 1918, starting with just a cough.
She knows the fog will come.

To her right is the man who set this portrait up for her
the keeper of the lighthouse she’s visiting.

He’s scratching a white cotton, heart on his sleeve,
looking at her with deep concern.

He knows what it’s like to be powerless,
the fear of not knowing
when your wife is going to leave,
helplessly listening to others drown,
unable to see them through the fog.

And she, the woman in the center,
held upright by her chair, smiles only for the camera.
She's not yet sure if it's consumption or influenza,
but it has blackened her eyes like a vamp's.
She has just coughed, was just looking at her wrists,
was just thinking of the sanatorium south of Bayfield,
of how it looks like the signal house
and how it reminds her
of the time she had to help pull the fog whistle,
of how she wasn't strong enough and had to
tie a red cord around her wrist and then to the chain,
had to pull it with her full weight until
the whistle screeched its mad threat of death,
continuing all night against the unabating fog.

Offerings

to Monica

The old fisherman's daughter
has hair the color of wonder
bread she crumbles and lets fly free
over the white and cobalt hull
of her vessel, the Wenonah,
she does this from the breast

for herring gulls who swoop
like clots of whitewash
flying off the Rock of Ages
lighthouse against ultramarine
pointed snowy wings interlace
fold, drop and baptize in aqua.

“You've got to make offerings
to the seagull gods or they'll hide
your fish under the deep blue sea
or not lead you back to shore
when there's a dense fog or
when the whitecaps are blowing.”

Her words are tender as whitefish cheeks
and I can see the old man's nets
looming the veins of her hands.
A cloud of gulls follows her
like the spirit of her father
as she tosses her hosts skyward.

Our Sainted Lady Esther

And the blessed virgin of aqua-sports
appeared to the divers of Tierra del Fuego,
dressed in her fuchsia bathing suit and scarf of chiffon.
riding on a font as high as a drive-in movie screen.

And she told us of her holy journey to the afterlife,
how she swam up the long dark tunnel,
assisted by those who swam the English Channel,
and those who tread water in the North Atlantic for hours,
still clinging to the Hope of Heaven as they went under.

And as Saint Cousteau pulled her from ocean of souls,
Saint Weismeueller announced her arrival into heaven
with his divine Tarzanic yell,
and all the swimmers in heaven then plunged into
God's Olympic-sized swimming pool
and began kicking water in all directions around her,
until she was raised on a dais of holy water
as bright and glorious as Old Faithful.

And how, after being given her water wings by Our Eternal Savior,
she was sent to Earth to give us these messages:
“Tolerate the jet-skiers, for they will someday be great movie makers,
and have not yet been given the gift of the four-stroke engine.
Place Little Mermaid dolls in your birdbaths and by your wading pools,
so that your daughters may be inspired to become Olympic swimmers.
The cure for swimmer's ear will soon be within your grasp,
if women's sports are bumped up to ESPN I.
Tell Ted Turner it is alright to colorize
what few black and white film clips remain of me.”

And the font disappeared from below Our Lady Esther,
and she dropped like a swan whose neck was broke,
and 20 Argentinian men shot like torpedoes in their Speedos,
jackknifing underwater, surfacing with arms extended.
And as she reached the bulls-eye of aquatic machismo,

her fuchsia scarf and garments began to unravel.
And she twirled like a spool being pulled by a sky-bound marlin,
until her naked, sacred form burst like bubble,
popping droplets of Her Holiness into the eyes
of all who witnessed her.



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