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CALLAHAN COUNTY STAR SPOTLIGHT

WRITERS SHOWCASE

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Poetry Media Service**THE LINEBACKER AND THE DERVISH**

Lowell's and Bishop's collected letters.

By Michael Hofmann

Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell. Edited by Thomas Travisano with Saskia Hamilton. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$45.00.

This is such a formidably and dramatically and lingeringly wonderful book, it is hard to know where to begin. Well, begin in the manner of the physical geographer and the embarrassed statistician and the value-for-money merchant, with quantity, though that's absolutely the wrong place. Here, then, are 459 letters, 300 of them not previously published, exchanged over 30 years, between 1947 when the two great poets of late-20th-century America first met—Robert Lowell just 30, Elizabeth Bishop 36, each with one trade book and one round of prizes under their belts—and 1977 when Lowell predeceased his friend by two years; covering, all told, some 900 pages, from Bishop end-papers—one hand-scrawled, one typed—to Lowell end-papers—one in his laborious, also not greatly legible child-print (“I know I’m myself beyond self-help; and at least you can spell”), one typed. The apparatus of footnotes, chronology, and compendious glossary of names—take a bow, Thomas Travisano and Saskia Hamilton—is modest, helpful, and accurate. At this point in our post-epistolary (no joke), post-literary, almost post-alphabetical decline, we would probably receive any collection of letters with a feeling of stupefied wistfulness and a sigh of valediction, but Words in Air is way beyond generic. It feels like a necessary and a culminating book, especially for Bishop. To read, it is completely engrossing, to the extent that I feel I have been trekking through it on foot for months, and I don’t know where else I’ve been. “Why, page 351,” I would say. “Letter 229; March 1, 1961. Where did you think?”

But what is it like? How, in fact, do you read it? “I am underlining like Queen Victoria,” Bishop remarks at one stage. How do you filter, assimilate, crunch it down to the space of a review? Its 800 pages of letters—every one of them bearing my ambiguous slashes of delight, interest, controversy, revelation—still left me with eight sheets full of page numbers of my own. It’s like starting with a city, and ending up with a phone book—hardly useful as a redaction. Really, I might as well have held a pencil to the margin and kept it there, for bulk reread.

It’s an epistolary novel—if not a full-blown romance, then at least, at moments, an amitié amoureuse. It’s a variation on Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s Love in the Time of Cholera. Or it’s an Entwicklungsroman in later life, both parties already poets but perhaps more importantly still on the way to becoming poets (echoing the title of David Kalstone’s study), as perhaps one only ever and always is becoming a poet. It’s an ideally balanced, ideally complex account of a friendship, a race, a decades-long conspiracy, a dance (say, a tango?). It’s a cocktail of infernal modesty and angelic pride. It’s a further episode in Bishop’s increasingly sweeping posthumous triumph over her more obvious, more ambitious, more square-toed friend. It’s a rat-a-tat-tat ping-pong rally, an artillery exchange, a story told in fireworks, a trapeze show. One can read it for gifts sent up and down the Atlantic, from Lowell’s traditional Northeast seaboard to Bishop’s serendipitously-arrived-at Brazil, where she mostly lived from 1951 on, having arrived on a freighter for a short visit; for projects completed, adapted, revised, abandoned, published, and responded to; for blurbs solicited, struggled with, and delivered to greater or lesser satisfaction; for houses bought and done up and left; for other partners encountered and set down; for visits and time together passionately contrived, put off, and subsequently held up to memory or guiltily swept under the carpet; for gossip and the perennial trade in reputations; for a startlingly unabashed revelation of mutual career aid (“we may be a terrible pair of log-rollers, I don’t know,” writes Bishop in 1965, having asked Lowell for a blurb for Questions of Travel after he had asked her for one for Life Studies); for loyalty and demurrals, independent thinking and prudent silence, insistent generosity and occasional self-seeking; a longing to submit to the other’s perceived discipline and a desire to offer unconditional admiration; for personal, professional, and public events. One can read it for movements of place, for gaps in time, and discrepancies and disharmonies in feeling or balance; for the dismayed Bishop’s agonized criticism of aspects of two of Lowell’s books, the rather coarse free translations in Imitations of 1961 and the use of private letters from his second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, in The Dolphin of 1973; for various other crises and cruxes: their heady, teasy-flirty mutual discovery of 1947, Bishop’s difficult visit to a near-maniac Lowell in Maine in 1957, Lowell’s visit to Brazil and another manic episode in 1962, the death by suicide of Bishop’s companion Lota de Macedo Soares in 1967, Bishop’s uneasy return to Boston (to fill in for Lowell’s absence, if you please), and Lowell’s ultimate shuttling between wives and countries of the late ‘70s. It’s social history, comedy of manners, American dissidence, the search for a style. It’s not least a gender myth more astute about men and women than that of Atlanta and Hippolytus (in any case, I always think Atlanta, like Bishop, should have won—she should have been provided with the apples, and Hippolytus, the ambitious, distractable male, goofed off in their pursuit, rather than the other way round). He is her anchor, she his kite.

Excerpted from “The Linebacker and the Dervish,” originally published in the January 2009 issue of Poetry magazine. Michael Hofmann’s most recent collection of poetry, Selected Poems (April 2009), was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. He is currently working on translations of Gottfried Benn. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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Submissions sought to:

Star**P.O. Box 29
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S.A.S.E. for returns

--WANTED--

20 lines,

double spaced or less

Poetry

Fiction or Non

Each entry with brief biography notes. All must be family oriented; no smut, slander or liable material.

Eternity Begins

As a thief in the night, He came with mighty shout
To let all the world below know, that time has just run
out

He lifted the fallen, the sad and sore oppressed
The children, the aged, and all the in-between He
blessed.

Many faithful praise Him, for them He came to save
The bring sea gives up its dead, He opens every grave
While Angels are singing, All Glory To The Lamb
Their voice is joined by risen hosts, to Hail the Great I
Am.

Eternity’s beginning, will end the time of man
And put an end to endings, just as I Am has planned
Forever will be a day, and day will never end
Messiah comes today, and Eternity begins.

Many have faltered, and lost their way in the dark
And despite some valiant efforts, they failed to find the
mark
They’re now separated, from all of God’s redeemed
And there’ll be no crossing over, the gulf that’s in-between.

I’m thankful I listened, to all of His commands
While closing my ears to teachings, proposed by mortal
man
Glory to the Father, the Holy Ghost and Son
Eternity begins today...We won...We won...We won.

By Weldon L. Smith
Eastland, Texas

Poetry Foundation And Chicago International Children’s Film Festival Award \$10,000 Poetry Film Prize

CHICAGO — The Poetry Foundation and Facets Multi-Media are proud to announce that Fear of Snakes, by filmmaker Andreas Mendritzki, is the winner of the second annual Poetry Film Prize. The prize awards \$10,000 to a filmmaker whose use of verse in film opens new artistic vistas and inspires children to appreciate poetry.

Mendritzki’s film is based on the poem of the same name by Canadian poet Lorna Crozier. Unique to the field of poetry as well as to the film industry, the Poetry Film Prize celebrates the best film based on a poem or poet while also recognizing excellence in language and cinematography. Jury-selected from among more than 90 entrants, the award was presented on Sunday, November 1, at the closing night ceremony of the 26th Annual Chicago International Children’s Film Festival (CICFF).

The Poetry Film Prize was created as part of Reel Poetry, a larger initiative between the Poetry Foundation and CICFF that highlights the possibilities of poetry in films, especially those directed to younger audiences. Based on a young girl’s memories of a summer day when she overcame her fear of snakes, Andreas Mendritzki’s winning film Fear of Snakes (Canada, 2009, 6 minutes) artfully depicts a reflective and intimate poem.

As the filmmaker describes it, “For me, the film—and Crozier’s poem—remind me of what ‘adults’ often forget: Children are much more aware of their surroundings than we give them credit for. They are every bit as attuned to the gravity of events as their older kin—in fact, probably more so.”

Nicole Dreiske, founder and artistic director of Facets, underscores the significance of such a prize as it relates to children’s learning: “Creating

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American Life in Poetry

Column 243

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

Lots of contemporary poems are anecdotal, a brief narration of some event, and what can make them rise above anecdote is when they manage to convey significance, often as the poem closes. Here is an example of one like that, by Marie Sheppard Williams, who lives in Minneapolis.

Everybody

I stood at a bus corner
one afternoon, waiting
for the #2. An old
guy stood waiting too.
I stared at him. He
caught my stare, grinned,
gap-toothed. Will you
sign my coat? he said.
Held out a pen. He wore
a dirty canvas coat that
had signatures all over
it, hundreds, maybe
thousands.

I’m trying
to get everybody, he
said.

I signed. On a
little space on a pocket.
Sometimes I remember:
I am one of everybody.

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films based on poems gives children a special opportunity to connect to poetry in ways that are richly layered and deeply meaningful. The music, the images, the cinematography, and the poetry reading itself open new sensory and emotive paths in children’s minds, and create a unique tapestry of experiences from each poem. By encouraging excellence in this highly specialized area of filmmaking, the Poetry Foundation has created a visionary bridge for children in our digital age to enjoy and appreciate poetry.”

“Overwhelmingly, the jury felt that Fear of Snakes demonstrates perfectly the way in which a poem can serve as the narrative base of a film,” said Anne Halsey, media director for the Poetry Foundation. “Mendritzki is a talented young filmmaker, and we hope that this prize will inspire and enable him to continue bringing poetry to young audiences via film.”

Mendritzki’s success lies in using a poem as inspiration for creating a narrative that children and adults can relate to. As he points out, “Our lives are marked by specific events—seemingly small events—that for one reason or another lodge themselves into our absorbent young minds. This film speaks about issues that children can undoubtedly comprehend, and about an event similar to ones they might

have experienced themselves. It provides them with a short sensorial adventure, an empathetic view of their own fears or those of their friends, brothers, sisters, or cousins. For adults, it is a guided tour back into one of these life-marking moments, and a reminder of our own childhoods and the events that shaped them.”

Since graduating from the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema in 2008, Andreas Mendritzki has been actively writing, directing, producing, mixing, and watching movies. He has a particular interest in and love for film sound, and in 2008 he was the winner of the Atlantic Film Festival’s Best Sound Design award. Mendritzki is a founding member of the Montreal-based production company GreenGround Productions.

Initiated in 2007, Reel Poetry is a multi-program partnership between the Poetry Foundation and the Chicago International Children’s Film Festival designed to engage children as audiences, aesthetes, and appreciators of both poetry and film. To date, the program has reached more than 4,360 Chicago-area middle school students. The collaboration celebrates poetry, making the art form’s complex beauty and craft relatable to a young audience. Supported by special curriculums for teachers and discussions facilitated by trained media educators, the Reel Poetry program is designed for upper-level elementary and middle school students and has garnered the attention of public school teachers and arts educators across the country.