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CALLAHAN COUNTY STAR SPOTLIGHT

WRITERS SHOWCASE

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American Life in Poetry:

Column 236

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

Cecilia Woloch teaches in California, and when she's not with her students she's off to the Carpathian Mountains of Poland, to help with the farm work. But somehow she resisted her wanderlust just long enough to make this telling snapshot of her father at work.

The Pick

I watched him swinging the pick in the sun,
breaking the concrete steps into chunks of rock,
and the rocks into dust,
and the dust into earth again.

I must have sat for a very long time on the split rail fence,

just watching him.

My father's body glistened with sweat,
his arms flew like dark wings over his head.

He was turning the backyard into terraces,
breaking the hill into two flat plains.

I took for granted the power of him,
though it frightened me, too.

I watched as he swung the pick into the air
and brought it down hard

and changed the shape of the world,
and changed the shape of the world again.

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Though Lettered

What about Psychology
In consideration of cause
Was it lack of P. H. D.'s
That caused the breach of all our laws.

From whence comes this carillion
That peals out sweet portions of charm
Their sound represents millions
Who void the voices of alarm.

So flavorful as batter
From the tables of eastern shieks
Are the burdens that matter
Whenever truth is what one seeks.

Though burstin with our knowledge
And with degrees of every kind
No diplomas from college
Will heal the hurts of humankind.

Our hands may quiver with age
Our eyesight grow dim with disease
No one turns the tarnished page
Of progress with himself to please.
Pitch your tents upon the dust
Of distant instants now revealed
Where nothing but windy gusts
Have shown the worth of all consealed.

- Weldon L. Smith

Wanted: Writers & Poets

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S.A.S.E. for returns

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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.

Poetry Media Service

UNPAVED TERRAIN

Poet Lucia Perillo talks about her poetry, her disability, and her changing relationship with nature.

By Maria McLeod
Poetry Media Service

Maria McLeod: Lucia, your background and early training doesn't include writing. I wonder, as someone who has taken a more nontraditional route, how did you enter the field?

Lucia Perrillo: In 1980, I had just gotten a job at the Denver Wildlife Research Center. I believe that place is closed now, but it was an animal damage control facility, meaning that it researched ways to kill animals to keep them from destroying livestock or agricultural crops.

We killed coyotes; we killed birds. I killed lots of things. So I graduated with this degree in wildlife biology to go off and study wildlife, and I end up killing wildlife. So it was really a weird time, a troubling year in my life.

But how I got into writing was this way: I was a single woman living in this strange city, and I didn't have any friends. I didn't want to go to a bar alone, but I discovered that I could go to plays alone, and it wasn't weird, or I could go to poetry readings alone. So, it was just a way to have places to go at night that would be safe. And that's how I came to poetry, too, by going to open mics, and just kind of stumbling into them, because it was something you could do.

Also, when I lived in Denver, I saw Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg read in Boulder. Ginsberg played with the band, and Gregory Corso's wife was drunk and got bounced from the bar. The whole thing was very surreal. I remember that Gregory Corso's wife stood up on a chair and then started screaming, "Where's mah man? Where's mah man?" [laughter] And I remember that he said something about her. "My wife just got bounced!"

MM: When you left Denver, what did you do after that?

LP: I went to California in 1981. I got a job at the San Francisco Bay Wildlife Refuge. I did a variety of things, but I led a lot of nature walks around southern San Francisco Bay.

Again, I didn't know very many people. I lived in Palo Alto, and I was writing a lot, and one day I pedaled my bike over to this writing workshop at the local community college. I saw this man give a talk, and I don't even remember what the talk was about, but he had a captivating presence. I learned that he was giving a class at San Jose State, a night class, a poetry-writing workshop. That was Bob Hass. So I went and enrolled in his workshop.

MM: When I read *Dangerous Life* [Perillo's first book, published in 1989] again in preparation for this interview, I looked for repeated themes. In the end, I decided it was a book about victimization, about calling attention to the victimizers and the victim. What was that book about for you?

LP: I don't know why I was so interested in victimization, or I felt that I had been victimized as a woman. Certainly I was a person of privilege. I've never been a victim of a violent crime. I've never been raped, never had an abortion. I mean, I've lived sort of in a bubble. Maybe I felt like I had to create that myth for myself, or these violent events, because I hadn't had one. . . . But I will say that I

became less interested in women's issues when my identity as a woman was subsumed by my identity as a person who was sick. It was in '88 that I was diagnosed with MS [multiple sclerosis]. Then that identity overtook these earlier concerns because they paled. My earlier feminist concerns, my feelings of discrimination, were small potatoes compared to what I was up against subsequent to that. I acquired a new identity. Now, you know, I don't even feel like a woman anymore. I don't feel that's my primary identity. It stopped being my concern. I felt that: Oh, I'm this other thing now.

MM: So in 1988, was *Dangerous Life* completed as a manuscript at the time you were diagnosed?

LP: It was already complete, and it was already in [with the publisher]. The funny thing is that it has an epigraph from Nietzsche at the beginning of the book, "I sometimes think that I lead a highly dangerous life since I'm one of those machines that can burst apart!" But when the book came out, Tess Gallagher pointed it out to me. She said, "Oh, you've got this epigraph. Were you already diagnosed with MS?" But no, the book was already created before that. So it was a little prophecy from Nietzsche.

MM: Your book of essays, *I've Heard the Vultures Sing: Field Notes on Poetry, Illness, and Nature*, was published by Trinity University Press in 2007. It seems that your work as a researcher is especially evident in that book. In fact, you mention conducting research in the essay "Knowledge Game: Gulls." You call a person from Audubon and you ask what kind of gulls you are seeing. But you also really study them, read about them. Can you tell me what brought this book of essays about for you?

LP: A friend of mine, a nonfiction writer and journalist, said, "Well, you should write about your life," prose about my life. So I wrote some prose about my life. There was not too much to say about having a terrible disease. I hadn't really figured out what I would say about it except it sucks, you know. But that's not a very profound statement. So I decided that I would write about the kind of interactions you can still have with nature as a disabled person. It's hard because you don't have the ability to go on unpaved terrain anymore. I lost that thing that I really loved, and what could I still do? It was a way of making little projects for myself. I had to write the essays, so I had to go look at the gull so I could write the essay.

Maria McLeod is a Bellingham, Washington-based poet, freelance writer and documentarian. She authored a history of the Washington state Department of Ecology, which was published in 2005. This article first appeared on www.poetryfoundation.org. Learn more about Lucia Perillo, and her poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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