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*American Life In Poetry*

Column 232

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

I've built many wren houses since my wife and I moved to the country 25 years ago. It's a good thing to do in the winter. At one point I had so many extra that in the spring I set up at a local farmers' market and sold them for five dollars apiece. I say all this to assert that I am an authority at listening to the so small voices that Thomas R. Smith captures in this poem. Smith lives in Wisconsin.

**Baby Wrens' Voices**

I am a student of wrens.  
When the mother bird returns  
to her brood, beak squirming  
with winged breakfast, a shrill  
clamor rises like jingling  
from tiny, high-pitched bells.  
Who'd have guessed such a small  
house contained so many voices?  
The sound they make is the pure sound  
of life's hunger. Who hangs our house  
in the world's branches, and listens  
when we sing from our hunger?  
Because I love best those songs  
that shake the house of the singer,  
I am a student of wrens.

American Life in Poetry is made possible by The Poetry Foundation ([www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org)), publisher of Poetry magazine. It is also supported by the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Poem copyright ©2005 by Thomas R. Smith, whose most recent book of poetry is *Waking Before Dawn*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2007. Poem reprinted from the chapbook *Kinnickinnic*, Parallel Press, 2008, by permission of Thomas R. Smith and the publisher. The poem first appeared in *There is No Other Way to Speak*, the 2005 "winter book" of the Minnesota Center for Book Arts, ed., Bill Holm. Introduction copyright © 2009 by The Poetry Foundation. The introduction's author, Ted Kooser, served as United States Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 2004-2006. We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

**Words to Use**

**Intumescere:** If because of heat, you or anything else bloats up, like a bubble or balloon, then you have done this.

**Lallation:** Here is a word to describe the talk of an infant, sometimes untranslatable to us.

**Marinate:** We use this word to describe when we steep meats in anything, but some would say it only really applies to soaking meat in brine.

**Otarchy:** Government by eight persons, and only eight persons, even if there is a relative in the group.

**Plutocracy:** The eight may be wealthy, and this noun denotes government by the rich.

**Rhymes To Word With:****Judicative****Suasive****Spiv****Missive****Give****Concussive****Effusive****Laxitive****Laudative**

*Need: Poems, Short Stories, Poetry Related Items*

*The pen is mightier than the sword*

Submissions sought to:

**Star****P.O. Box 29  
Eastland, TX 76448**email: [thebairdspotlight@att.net](mailto:thebairdspotlight@att.net)

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.**

**Mozart**

I hear yon clarions note from curtained past  
Who broke from shackled crib of yore  
To be met as primitive face, madly shouting to gain  
thy place  
Though mocking and lewd the projected forecast  
Those private hurts ye bravely bore.

Your skillful inventions surmounted the blame  
Though none would tamper nor erase  
Or move to quiet troubled breast, though mans dull ear  
would soon attest

To the existence of such absorbing strains  
Which mirrored fame yet left no trace.

Such anthems did surely call such bawdy head  
To being by your shameful birth  
Wearing thy souls sullen breath, with anticipation of  
death

Denying thirst with apologies instead  
Of nudging the blindness of earth.

Graceful swan who from ugly duckling did spring  
Ascended from such wounds compiled  
Your battered horn sang sweetest note, whose lines ap-  
peared though angels wrote

The rustic notes which surge forth for KING and  
Queen

'Til firma dubs thee reconciled.

-Weldon L. Smith

Eastland, Texas

We have enjoyed the poetry of Mr. Weldon Smith of Eastland, Texas, for some time. Here we are re-publishing two recent poems that were transcribed incorrectly when they first appeared. Take pleasure in this poet's works!

**Sweet William**

Sweet William was the blossom, that I found  
along the lane

Where fragrant flowers called as I walked by  
Never toiling, never spinning, never joining in  
the games

Of others toiling hard before they die.

I found you there Sweet William, while strolling  
along the road

And there you helped to brighten up my day  
By lifting from my shoulders, such a hurtful  
heavy load

And helping me to find a better way.

Your sweetness seems to com so naturally  
While lifting your bouquet from off the  
ground

Your purple flowers glow so beautifully  
And help to spread your beauty all around.

I wish that I could capture, your beauty and  
spread it 'round

So that the world could share your point of  
view

And when the world should take a look, Sweet  
Williams would abound

And lives so lost as mine could be renewed...  
by helping all to do what all can do.

- Weldon L. Smith

Eastland, Texas

**Surpassing The Self Through The Self**

A close reading of Louise Bogan's early poem, "A Tale."

By Caitlin Kimball

Poetry Media Service

"That woman will be able to do anything," declared Robert Frost after reading Louise Bogan's "A Tale," the opening poem in her first book, *Body of This Death*. At the time of the book's publication in 1923, Bogan was just 26 but had already experienced marriage, motherhood, estrangement, and widowhood, as well as launched a career as an incisive critic and technically masterful lyric poet. Frost's assessment was high praise, but as a casual prediction it seems impossible to fulfill. When Bogan's definitive collected works, *The Blue Estuaries*, appeared in 1968, just two years before her death, the volume contained 105 poems—hardly a negligible output, but evidence that her periods of creative frustration far outnumbered those of productivity. She could "do" anything—and did a great deal—but she did most of it with that first volume and even, arguably, with that first poem.

Bogan's loyalty to conventional meters, rhyme schemes, and imagery may give a superficial impression of starchy high-mindedness set to music. In her first volume, you won't find a lot of imagistic razzle-dazzle or ornamentation. The poems are relentlessly austere, scattered with shards, echoes, withdrawing tides, and mowed-down fields. She mistrusted the lily-gilding and lush sighs of the Romantic and Victorian verse that had nourished her as an adolescent, and she was equally suspicious of what she saw as the high-strung and erotic expressions of fellow "lady poets" she otherwise admired. She kept a tight lid on the emotional occasions of her poetry. Her poetic personae are often found in aftermaths, playing out the brittle affections left after the sensuous assaults of passion. A poem, Bogan wrote in a 1923 issue of *The New Republic*, "must . . . be the mask, not the incredible face" and "can never be more than a veil dropped before a void." In her view, this isn't just a statement of poetic taste but a psychological necessity: the poem can't embody rage or love—that's already been done by the poet. "The poem is always a last resort," she insists. By the time of its composition, the intellect must be involved. She didn't want her art to aggrandize sensation, but to subdue and transform it. Her language of restraint belies a passionate ambition for "surpassing the self through the self," as she once described it.

Her "tale" is actually a short lyric framed as a fable-in-progress, rather than a recounting. As such, it feels both immediate and remote. We know the male protagonist not through his thoughts but through his actions: he is a symbolic figure rather than a habitable persona. His journey is rendered in short, small words that propel the mostly iambic rhythm. But Bogan's careful linguistic counterpoints and echoes balance and enrich this terse quality. Rhymes of sound are also rhymes of meaning: "break" and "make" are opposites; "together" (unity, consistency) plays against "weather" (change); "lock" and "clock" are containers; "waits" and "gates" both suggest measure and control. Such delicate, careful word choices particularize the protagonist's situation: he is not all youth, yet Bogan reveals little of his story's origins or effects. His quest is described almost casually:

He goes to see what suns can make  
From soil more indurate and strange.

He is not fleeing, but he is also not heading off on a carefree adventure. "He goes to see" suggests both decisive action and passive curiosity. But this is not spring break. It is a breaking-off:

He cuts what holds his days together  
And shuts him in, as lock on lock:

The arrowed vane announcing weather,  
The tripping racket of a clock;

Seeking, I think, a light that waits  
Still as a lamp upon a shelf—

A land with hills like rocky

gates  
Where no sea leaps upon itself.

The first three stanzas propose a disturbing paradox: Mutability is monotonous. Change—of an hour or an era—has a cumulative effect of stasis (or, as the saying goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same). In this "land of change" tides, weather, and the days themselves are oppressive, and made even more so by measurements. Bogan's balking youth wants out of this place where he is doomed to witness and mark patterns in chaos. He cannot hold change back, so he puts his hope in total escape. The otherwise omniscient narrator's arresting "I think" feels like a distancing technique, a way to hold the youth's distress at arm's length and remind us that this is, actually, a "tale." But the self-consciousness of the brief gesture betrays Bogan's investment in this crisis. Is this carefully compressed story one of her "last resorts"?

The narrator reaches the youth's stark conclusion for him: this paradox really has no resolution. Striving toward enlightenment lands you in a kind of hell:

But he will find that nothing dares

To be enduring, save where, south  
Of hidden deserts, torn fire glares

On beauty with a rusted mouth,—

Where something dreadful and another  
Look quietly upon each other.

The final passage is a travesty of the hardscape outside of time that the youth first envisioned: the sun-baked ground now splits open and threatens to swallow the soul that dares to venture so far. Bogan's inferno is actively sinister, with a face (glaring fire, rusted mouth) to mock our own. What "beauty" is being scorned? It may be the very idea of beauty, or is it the youth's energy and desire to throw off consciousness, the root of desire itself? The concluding couplet, with its lilting polysyllabic words and feminine rhymes (another/other), is both pat and riddling. The words gesture toward the resolution often found in the final lines of a sonnet, but what (or who) are these dreadful "somethings"? The two spooky figures could evoke a standoff—eternity as a confrontation—or they could suggest conspirators, looming over the young man in silent judgment of his attempt to shirk his fate. The youth (and the reader) will be denied any consoling insight or even a concrete vision. Bogan has placed her carefully staged drama so close to the void, perhaps as close as she could get.

"I broke my life, to seek relief / From the flawed light of love and grief," declares Bogan's persona in "The Alchemist," another poem from her first volume. It is a more direct, intimate expression of the desire to surpass the self that she first approached in "A Tale." Those "flawed light[s]," the emotions and surface tensions that govern our worldly, subjective experience, are fragments of an ultimate, unknowable tension. If she could indeed break her life, surpass the self and be absorbed into the force that outlasts it, would the force be benign or malignant? Or both? Or . . . nothing?

If Bogan really did see a poem as a last resort, her task would place her, again and again, at this limit. The compulsion to make language both convey experience and transcend it, not knowing what waited on the other side, could provoke a poet or stop her in her tracks. Perhaps this first poem enacts Bogan's struggle to create all the poems that followed it.

Caitlin Kimball is a poet living in St. Paul, Minnesota. This article first appeared on [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org). Learn more about Louise Bogan, and her poetry, at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).

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