

Canal Poems for Sixfold

Canal Poem #8: Pondies

Dear canal, child of the river, child
of one who led ancient trees to mill,

rolled clipped logs in all manner of wind
and weather, floated them toward destiny:

well-oiled saws cut them to planks
and boards for book shelves, post office,

church, fruit stand, mortuary, school.
Your legacy, one of transport, the rising

of new towns with old names, settling
the land with sheep and cows, holly hocks,

porch swings creaking a dusty song.
My friend Rita has lived eighty years

in Bend, says here it was the “pondies”
brought to harvest, long-needled pines, wood

nougat sweet, a bit like licorice when cut, bark
peeling away, layer of dark almond chocolate.

Lumber men ran the logs, rugged boots
rolling them along, steering a gangly

roped-in procession down river, poles in hand.
At ten I got to spin a log in Spirit Lake, wearing

sneakers, not cork-lined boots with spikes.
Falling: an icy splash, pummy stone crunching

underfoot. In your shallow bed built of lava rock,
only an occasional branch tumbles down. But

Canal Poems for Sixfold

it remembers what has gone before, the fate
of forefathers, desecration of owled forests.
So many birds flew to their deaths in wildfires,
so many more after the logging stopped, heat

rising ahead of the blaze, dry brush without
shade, ready kindling. The floating branch and I

honor your long history, living tributary,
lineage of noble fir and water, blackbird stream

on high, calls piercing this lofty desert air.

Canal Poems for Sixfold

Canal Poem #10: Horizon

Some say the Deschutz was born to bring
a watering hole to wild horses, manes tangled

in the wind, hooves keen on deceiving cougar
or human snares. They're out there still, beyond

your trickling bid, thundering across the vast
prairie on and off the rez. Near Prineville, a rider

took her steed down a remote mountain trail,
suffered catcalls from revved up Harleys,

afraid they'd spook her horse, more worried
about the throw than what they'd do to her,

bucked off saddle once too often, back askew.
But the wild horses saved her, defiant

challengers rising up to pummel the bikes,
leaving a tame sister to run back to camp.

I've never been that fond of horses. My sisters
loved to saddle up, canter in the open field

beyond the corn and barn. What I liked:
the smell of oats in the bin, the warm nuzzle

after handing over a humble carrot. They had
gratitude down. In this world, the wild horse,

a conundrum, symbol of freedom, grazing
the desert grass, silhouette on the horizon.

Some say they trample too many vineyards,
deprive cattle of lush growth along the reservoir,

kick over stone settings for barbed fences.
We must decide what to contain, what to let

Canal Poems for Sixfold

roam free. Who can bear witness to their cause,
to the cloud that dares defy the skies? We know

this tension: rules of grammar, or poetic license,
the sermon or the song, news story, or naked memory.

I offer a block of salt for wild horses neighing
in the distance, pray the cattle don't get there first.

Canal Poems for Sixfold

Canal Poem #11: Hides

The history of the world lies – may I be so bold –
in a duet of vacillating poles – scarcity, its gong

lean and gaunt, and plenty, chimes twinkling
in the heart's balm. Therein we know

the changing tides, the axis along which we align,
claim the canal's abundant flow, or lobby

to shut off the source, curtain drawn on this era's
channeled chords. Water, like life, is a shifting

discourse. Take the gray wolf, trapped and pelted
almost to extinction, then saved by law,

transplanted from the tundra of Canada
to Yellowstone, the steppes of Idaho and Montana.

Five breeds have grown to love this land:
coats of white, black, brown, cinnamon

and gray, a range not unlike our human hides.
Ranchers rally to change the rules again,

permit free range shooting, save the cows,
fatten bulls for market without lurking shadows

drawing down their weight, their yield.
Wolves raise their young in acres of buffalo grass,

call to mind another hunt. Scarcity. Plenty.
Playing out again, the gong, the chime.

I watch your free form waves traverse
a tender slope, helicopter humming overhead,

stirring the warm air, tourists on board
for the lava caves due south, where

Canal Poems for Sixfold

they'll descend, trade high noon for the mystery
of deep cold. I wonder when these whirring

blades will sport a gun to clear the land,
wolves in hiding once again, two-legged brethren

in pursuit, yet another round of plenty.

Canal Poems for Sixfold

Canal Poem #17: Sinkhole

In May, horror movie in Deschutes River Woods:
while wildfires caught the zip lines of dry grass

further west, you sucked yourself down and out,
steep sinkhole wide as my living room. What

were you trying to say, collapsing in on yourself?
They shut you off at the source, drove backhoes

to fill your dark cavity with rock, then gravel,
grated finer as jagged walls received

their layered fill, the morass finally topped
with a smooth blanket of cement, cured

24 hours to handle the held-back flow.
Customers, assured the break in service,

short-lived, could even watch the repair
in real time. Your history eulogizes injuries

we should have been the wiser for: 1947,
the original flume of untreated lumber

gave way to the risk of rot. Crews bellied up
to a steel flume banked by creosoted timber,

concrete base, remnants of the old Crook County
office in Lytle footing the cost. You rode high

above the earth, air-born river, rumbling
through the lofty dry desert, bellowing

your deep-throated glory song. Now a chorus
of cousin flumes shares the wind, the crows'

Canal Poems for Sixfold

calls: *Suttong, Fry, Huntington, Slack,*
Stennick, Billadeau. Hopeful, I open the door

to walk your restored path, but shut it hard
this early September morning, choking

on smoke. Air quality on the purple monitor,
only one digit less than the days of a year.

One hundred, putrid enough for porous lungs,
burning eyes. By evening, throats swell

indoors. We have run ourselves underground
with careless excess – gas, oil, plastic, coal –

where was it we thought we had so urgently
to go? A sinkhole of unsurpassed gluttony.

Canal Poems for Sixfold

Canal Poem #18: Requiem

Last night's rains have rinsed the air's burden
of charred smoke on this twentieth anniversary

of the twin tower siege, Pentagon aflame,
a field in Pennsylvania laden with splintered

heroes from flight 93. Devoted Diane Sawyers
has gathered the babies of 9/11 first responders

and top-floor waiters who, alas, succumbed
in the rubble, now twenty, reunited in New York.

How they resemble their determined fathers!
Mothers cultivate memories of those they never

knew. I walk the canal again, cherish the sound
of what tumbles over rock, overcoming dark

obstacles, flowing toward the unity of hope.
The aspens flutter, tip their boughs to nod.

At the pond below the Bridges, the outer circle
of lily pads yellows in the warm September air,

while inner leaves float their green vibrancy.
Blooms punctuate the rippling surface.

I find a requiem of color, movement, grace.
The song of death is long this day. Lilies raise

their petaled arms, praying for deep repose
of the souls of the dead. Whatever wind

prevails, they revel in the moment granted.
I take their cue, await a call from my daughter

Canal Poems for Sixfold

in Manhattan, seven when the towers fell, now
contending with Ida whipping her tangled hair.

So much is scattered, broken, leveled,
crushed. Vigils fill the streets. Candles light

my daughter's island home. The spirit of geese
calls overhead. Ducks nestle in grass. *Amen.*