

Living Midair

poems by Karen June Olson

Number 26 in the 2River Chapbook Series

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2River

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About the Author

Karen June Olson is Professor Emerita of Early Care and Education at St. Louis Community College. Her poems have appeared in *The 2River View*, *The Mas Tequila Review*, *Third Wednesday*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and *UCity Review*.

About the Artist

Brianna Vuagniaux, a musician in a women's folk band called Hot Missouri, works with children as a nurse. She lives in the Ozark hills, where she also paints and doodles.

About 2River

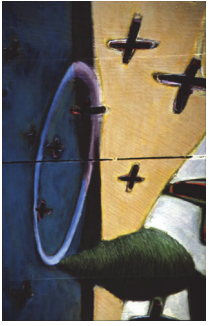
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Richard Long, Editor
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all rose higher into a full chorus, the marsh rippled
with life. We stood, talked of temple bells,
crisp and sure, the hands that held them,
and how they ring
and ring
and ring.

2River

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Awakened

We hiked along a gray summit trail where wild grass was slapped flat from winter's rough hands.

The trails were easy, even without compass we found our way, yet oddly, redbud trees lit the dead woods with a discomfort of color.

We had walked miles, circled hidden groves that clung to their dried fruits, admired those unwilling to drop summer's bounty.

We managed to avoid certain dangers—(yes, the path was uneven), it was the edge of things, a ledge or trail's end we shied from.

In the weeds a painter set an easel and brushed a slice of moon into his sky. We wondered if it was waxing or waning, or if that even mattered.

As we walked toward the forest edge a red-tailed hawk swooped our caps. From the whoosh of wings, small birds scattered like dry leaves. We crouched. We waited, disquieted.

Hundreds of peepers were silenced by the movements of the hawk. When danger passed, the soundscape re-emerged: the drill of a woodpecker, the trilling of frogs,

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Living Midair

Our hotel was built to hang
off cliffs with an overlook
above the Adriatic. We'd traveled
far, managed the Rome airport,
rented a Volvo, and driven unknown—
two tourists passing through dark mouths
of mountains on roads that coiled
to the sea. It was late to entertain
fear. Hadn't we always lived midair?

That night we sat on a veranda,
our glasses clinked a cheer or two
and we noticed the moon rise
from the water as waves
seemed to give the needed lift
and curled around its bright edges.

You pointed to the illuminated cliffs,
and past,

where waves and wind carved
limestone, created cracks
and fissures. Rocks serve

witness to the sea,
tall ships and drowned sailors,
eras of pleasure and plunder. We overheard
the repeated beating and wash,
the moan of polished stones,
as if rocks spoke straight into our faces.

Landscaping

for Marv

Light seeps across the land
opening another day. Robins
sing the garden awake, rustle
in the thicket and couple
on boughs.

Wild liriopse has spread, choking
viburnum and pine. We scrape
away mud and brick, sort
tangled roots, rake
and unearth: a brass ring,
some broken beads, a child's
faded lion.

Wind frees maple spinners easily.
Hundreds whirl down, glints of yellow
gutter our hair with crowns. You whistle
a little out of tune. I know the song
and fly to an opening beside you.

For my daughters, Rachel and Michele,
and for Marv

Door-To-Door

Each day begins early, when sparrows start to sing,
And the truck is filled with baked goods, layer cakes and pies.
He drives through the neighborhood and rings a bell on a string.

His customers will ask him, *What bread did you bring?*
Today, just for you, Italian, French and Rye.
Each day begins early, when sparrows start to sing.

Woolen garments in winter, short-sleeves in spring—
He'll call, *Fresh donuts, nutty dunkers, jelly-filled, and fried!*
My grandfather drives the truck, rings a bell on a string.

Cookies, the size of hands, their baker-man brings,
Chocolate Chip and Peanut Butter, the children will cry!
Each day begins early, when sparrows start to sing.

A shiny silver dollar is pay to my liking,
For a half days' work, what will it buy?
Tomorrow comes early, when sparrows start to sing,
We'll restock the truck, I'll ring the bell on a string.

Snapshots of My Grandfather

1
I conjure him with clippers
snipping flowers. He grew carnations,
peonies, and roses, and stacked his tackle
alongside a fishing pole. My old man
trolled Canadian lakes, caught and fried fish
on a hot camp fire.

2
Each spring, yellow petals flame
in my garden, all from a single
plant he dug from a Michigan
wood, wrapped in wet paper,
and flew inside a pocket
to St. Louis. One uprooted rhizome
retells the story to descendants
in a king-size bed of primrose.

3
Random objects he saved:
a slab of gold pyrite,
wildflowers pressed in cowboy books,
jaw bone of a Pike festered
in fly larvae (the one Grandma
threw to the road),
and a rabbit's foot, curled inward
by time, as age does to things that have lived.

4
I promised not to follow his coffin,
drove west to the Rockies,
pitched a tent in Estes Park. There, wisps
of clouds, wind in pines, perhaps
a young deer that shadowed
my trail.

Never forget, he said to me.

I only remember.

Living Near the Edge

From the window I watched
a hawk take down a mourning
dove. Its mate perched still:
a stone in a sweet gum tree
as hawk stripped feathers down
to skin. The tight knit sweater
released with ease over the dead
bird's head. I looked for a single
feather. Not one remained.

That night I heard cold yips
of coyotes. Are they across
the frozen pond in shadows
of the wood or closer to the house
where the dogs bark?

I imagine their sharp mouths
drooling saliva on fur rusted
from deer kill. Shall I serve
them a bowl of stew or stalk
with a shotgun? Either way
they watch, they gather
as I prepare to fight
for my right to sleep
or walk the wood alone.

Jagged Tattoo

She lay in the dark
atop sheets sweetened
by afternoon sun,
her only cover a warm breeze.
She recalled crickets and tree frogs caught
up in their work, as she floated
by the edge of a dream—
consumed, until her dog growled
at the foot of the bed.

It
was half way inside the room,
a hand, a leg—
her scream burned corners
in cells, her words
were fire. She coiled into a corner
drew a knife and waited.

Police were long to arrive,
quick to wrap;
a pretty girl, alone like that,
house by the tracks,
could have been a loner,
some passerby,
a nobody,
a purely random act.
Nothing's missing,
is it, ma'am?

A Struggle to Get Out

Not a ripple.
At home, the silver lake
was unmoved, flat and dark
as a grave waiting.

She fought for life knowing
there would be no return. This time,
in the hospital they drew blood
until she emptied, made her mute
with morphine and masks.

For five days we waited, rubbed oil
into her unmoving hands, sang parts
of prayers that were remembered.
Was time bruised with transcendence or blunder
we wondered as we opened the window
for the small bird banging against the glass.

This Time Around

We walked white halls and gazed
in grace. In another medicated room,
a woman sang to a body that was curled
toward shadow. You choked and remembered
no hymns of comfort were sung
for your dead son, bare elegies given
over to a priest—what could he know
of a mother's loss?

Another mob of complaints labored
between breaths so shallow words
were work for you to form:
*the sheets are thin as skin,
those vinyl pillows,
and the certainty
of cold canned beans.*

Through the window we saw
a cloudless night, nothing would stop
the stars from mapping the sky. People
departed. Cars passed on
going somewhere. For a brief moment
we imagined the leaving,
and then we saw the moon, the big white moon.

It's Only the Wind

Where I 've walked or now ride
a rusty Schwinn, hundreds of bees
mob a ceiba tree's January blossoms.

In the Yucatan, some believe the tree
is sacred, a berth where the dead find passage
between the heavens and underworld.

A tree where bats wing their way through leafless
branches, swoop and rise with impossible
speed, voracious, swallowing moths throughout the night.

Bees and bats can frighten
a passerby. My hands might cover
my head, or if I walk slowly, possibility hosts

what is eerie— an unlit street,
a missed step, seeing myself
wrapped within a cape of darkness.

I seek safe crossing,
to be steady on my feet, to feel for the heavens
in the company of wings, while still standing.

Voice Lessons in a Writing Class

She had forgotten her armor.
Only the wall clock spoke in loud
ticking seconds. She talked context,
her life in short stories, lived
behind veils of addiction, relapse,
and crashed cars. I wondered
if she cared less for poems
and more for razors to sharpen her voice.

In the valley a dirty wind
swirled. If I followed
her to the river
—would she keep her dress,
leave her boots in the reeds, cradle
stones?

Rivers speak stories.
I couldn't hear
what she had left to say.

Nevertheless.

The sun will rise and moon will follow
in expected time. Yet, in the middle of night
when dreams are set in motion, the children asleep,
and dogs inside, an incessant clock
ticks.

~

Remember bright costumed days.

That evening, they read poetry on a stoop, watched fireflies
flirt as cardinals called their families to nest. The daughters
begged
for a story, one that began long ago, and ended happily after.

Their mother's voice was music.

Their Mother's Voice Was Music

Stories beg for a teller.

Once a mother and her daughters sat cross-legged in a field of wild clover. Soft wings of honeybees brushed their skin, they were not afraid.

They ate sandwiches and pie, guessed names of birds, drew pictures on squares of paper. *Whoever said sparrows are plain does not know beauty*; a daughter thought

and sketched a crown and crest on a brown body. The other, tired of sitting, stood, twirled circles in the unmowed field, arms out-stretched, said the names of every state she remembered,

and their capitals.

~

Grief cries for a window.

Why keep the photograph of a mother clutching a silver casket, her face twisted, her mouth a wound?

At home, her daughter's wedding dress hangs slack on a padded hanger. Days before, bullets ripped

her girl's chest into air. A water glass flew—no one heard them shatter. At the party, fourteen people shredded into a river

of flesh and blood, that day in San Bernardino.

~

A River

A river snakes lowlands, gathers rain and wind-blown seeds, ferries folks and summer picnics, a fishing pole, a kayak, children who will leap off a dock.

But a river is not a dream—

it's our fathers' homemade stew, all that spews or slips into the water from industries, refineries, and farms—notice all the weed-free fields waving grain?

There's a hush in the house where the cards are dealt—what glow leaks from the landfill?

All things run all things run down to the river.

We forget what is drawn from the faucet.

The Suckers Are Running

It's good that we do not have to kill the sun,
or the moon or the stars.
—Ernest Hemingway

When the Longnose fish
mate, their coming and going
is fleet. We'd try to catch sight
as serpentine tails twisted adrift,
and danced in a watery bed.

My father lay wait by the shore.
Sleek bodies churned under a blanket
of water. Still, we were unprepared
when he thrust and lifted,
fish by fish, into the air
writhing on a spear. Gills
sputtered. Soft bellies dripped
rubies and pearls onto the lawn,
the dying gleam heaped by the road.

Why do you cry over some damned fish?

We looked into the sky, illustrated
by a million stars as it darkened. We drew a breath,
gathered our legs and ran.

A Grandmother's Mirror

Grandma treasured her cherry wood
dresser with mirror. So prized, her friend
Marilyn offered to buy it out from under her.
Grandma said she wasn't dead yet
and besides, mirrors keep secrets.

The dresser passed to my mother and it filled
with ruby lipstick, polish, and rouge. Embroidered
handkerchiefs with ironed edges. A string of pearls.
Letters. After the dresser moved to me the secrets
unfolded.

Inside a stationer's box my name was changed
on papers with a notary's seal. An apology written
in slanted script yellowed in an envelope. A photo of a man
with my eyes, my lips. What was untold
remained.

My daughters stand beside me now. One is tall
and lean, the other full-bodied with baby. Together
we feel for movement and nod. Are we within a photograph,
the dresser mirror our frame? My hands move
instinctively and brush away the dust.

Sugar Maple

for Grace

When we were tender green
our pockets full, juicy
and sweet, she held us
close
in wind and rain
with beetles and birds
caught
in the sway.
Bold you were and so was I
letting go and falling. She is standing
still
weathered and lined,
empty
as winter is here.

Wild Ride

It had been a quiet morning
before words collided, chilly
as the temperature dropped
between them. Neither expected
the volume, their roar. They anchored
in a hurry, hid behind interior
walls as a squall blew through—
mean enough to shove
their house into the lake.

Over the bay, sleeves
of lightning tore the sky,
shredded a hickory tree. Tinder
and rain rode the wind
sideways. No one saw the kids
drop the jet skis into the water
to wrangle the waves. They bucked
and bounced out of the cove.

After the storm blew over,
dinner was served, usual time.
Someone clicked the TV and flipped
channels. No one said a word
about the rain or remnants that scarred
more than the landscape.

I'm Sorry Laura Salvatori

Sometimes I become transfixed
with the rear-view mirror—after all, images
go by fast. To be safe, I park
and walk. There's something to be found
roadside in weeds and along fence lines—paper
wrappers, whiskey bottles, and cigarette butts.

Once I found a hair brush and thought of you,
your chiffon dress, dandelion yellow, and my pink lace,
going to prom...two high school beauties,
what could go wrong?

We got high, laughed about our dates,
and our hot rolled hair set perfect
except after we arrived, I could not walk
into that booming room,

join the gowned and tied. Better to sit outside
and notice the movement of clouds.

How quick stars lose their glitter
as they disappear into the dark.

Riding Waves

I swim quick strokes past
the drop-off line. The lake
is rough without regard. I grip
a ladder rung, strung with algae,
look back to sand castles collapsed
on shore. Across the cove, houses
are lit with tempered lights
that bob in and out. Whose homes rest
so far away?

On the dock a mother, or my mother,
watches the waves. Frantic hands
motion a plea for some kind of return.

Today, I can tell you anything.

A lone swimmer rides a wave
into a glass house. She sings
a sailor's tune for her children,
a song her father had sung.
What will her children
say about the seaman's shanty?
She was in over her head,
over her head was she.