

Fall 1976

On Lisel Mueller

Lex Runciman

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Good morning,
you are with the snow in the branches
with a life of beauty, liberty and peril.
Measures of snow will drop off like babies
to a lullaby, branches will toss without wind,
far into the day, into good evening. Then,
at best, you are shadowed not by the planet,
but by a single leaf or a single hair.

Goat hair is coarse, short, close
to the skull, the upholstery of a chair.
You did snap shut your purse at the aviary,
at the carving in an ivory horn, a brittle
price and a brittle beak and a brittle tusk.

Sing around the corner, mornings,
crane around in a gown with perfect stitches.
The birds are invisible, in another shell, and
a waterfall beats with a heart's obligation.
If there is anything to willingly care for,
it is the candle in the hand of the gown,
buoyant and stubborn in a starless passageway,
something never overcome as it would overcome.

The risk Laura Jensen takes is that her surprises can be bewildering rather than revealing, but the individual accomplishment of her successful poems makes this a risk well worth taking.

Rich Ives

The Private Life

Lisel Mueller

Louisiana State University Press

Baton Rouge \$3.50 paperback

Lisel Mueller's truths are not the stuff of surrealism, but simply of a life. It is a life not without its own luck, as acknowledged in "Alive Together": "Speaking of marvels, I am alive/ together with you, when I might have been/ alive with anyone under the sun."

Balanced against such private affirmations are public intrusions, as in "Untitled", with its unexpected turn: "Don't ask me what/ switch in my mind flashed on,/ unbidden, the Algerian girl/ who had a

bottle jammed into her/ to make her talk,” or as below in “Late News”:

For months, I accept
my smooth skin,
my gratuitous life as my due;
then suddenly, a crack—
the truth seeps through like acid,
a child without eyes to weep with
weeps for me, and I bleed
as if I were still human.

Throughout, the voice that speaks in these poems is reasoned and humane. There is no shouting, no hysterics or ravings. What lightens the book, and makes it so readable, is Mueller’s fine and peculiar wit. It shines in poems like “Sleepless” and “Love Like Salt”, and here in “Snow”:

Telephone poles relax their spines;
sidewalks go under. The nightly groans
of aging porches are put to sleep.
Mercy sponges the lips of saints.

While we talk in the old concepts
—time that was, and things that are—
snow has leveled the stumps of the past
and the earth has a new language.

It is like the scene in which the girl
moves toward the hero
who has not yet said, “Come here.”

Come here, then. Every ditch
has been exalted. We are covered with stars.
Feel how light they are, our lives.

Lex Runciman