'THE STROKE OF AN OAR GIVEN IN TRUE TIME'

Home • Chronicle & Notices

from Teint.

By ZOE SKOULDING.

for the Bièvre

La Bièvre représente aujourd'hui le plus parfait symbole de la misère féminine exploitée par une grande ville. [...] Comme bien des filles de la campagne, la Bièvre est, dès son arrivée à Paris, tombée dans l'affût industriel des racoleurs ; spoliée de ses vêtements d'herbes et de ses parures d'arbres, elle a dû aussitôt se mettre à l'ouvrage et s'épuiser aux horribles tâches qu'on exigeait d'elle. Cernée par d'âpres négociants qui se la repassent, mais, d'un commun accord, l'emprisonnent à tour de rôle, le long de ses rives, elle est devenue mégissière, et, jours et nuits, elle lave l'ordure des peaux écorchées, macère les toisons épargnées et les cuirs bruts, subit les pinces de l'alun, les morsures de la chaux et des caustiques. Que de soirs, derrière les Gobelins, dans un pestilentiel fumet de vase, on la voit, seule, piétinant dans sa boue, au clair de lune, pleurant, hébétée de fatigue, sous l'arche minuscule d'un petit pont!

The Bièvre today represents the most perfect symbol of feminine misery exploited by a large city. [...] Like many country girls, the Bièvre fell prey, upon her arrival in Paris, to the industrial snares of touts; despoiled of her dresses of grass and adornments of trees, she had to set to work immediately and wear herself out with the terrible chores demanded of her. Surrounded by rough merchants who pass her daily, but, by common agreement, imprison her in turn the length of her banks, she has become a tannery worker, and, day and night, she washes the filth from stripped skins, soaks the spare fleeces and raw leather, suffers the grip of alum, the bite of lime and caustic. There you see her in the evenings behind Gobelins, in a foul-smelling sludge, alone, trampling in the mud, by moonlight, crying, dazed with fatigue, under the miniscule arch of a little bridge.

J.K. Huysmans, La Bièvre, 1914.

Not a river but its

shadow harmonics hidden

level in the glass note

glissando between a

movement and a sound

half in the performance

where I ran to you I

ran as tainted water

while tarmac shines in rain

the channels you don't touch

well up on tomorrow's

tongue to flower there don't

leave or was it this way

that now I'll run from you

Not a trace but the same

line writing itself

over and over again

it can't wash away

the evidence that

gathers in the silt or

in the edges of a

map of the city's growth rings

a habitat constitutes

the physical structure

perceived by living things

each living thing

also a habitat the human

becoming river

L'inhabitable : la mer dépotoir, les côtes hérissés de fer barbelé, la terre pelée, la terre charnier, les monceaux de carcasses, les fleuves bourbiers, les villes nauséabondes

The uninhabitable: sea as rubbish dump, coasts bristling with barbed wire, bare ground, mass burial ground, heaps of carcasses, boggy rivers, stinking towns

•

Not a beginning but

backwash hidden upstream

industrial blood scrubbed

clean away chopped offal

the skins you didn't see

stitched up into polis

rinsed into leather boots

for wars fought in footsteps

if blood hangs in sight lines

reddening the mirrors

look away as water

swallows every story

the city's vibrating

skin behind it more skins

•

Not wormwood but stream of

piss so says Rabelais

six thousand and fourteen

dogs went howling after

the woman in crimson

Panurge couldn't charm so

his revenge a river

of dog-desire maddened

by scent the dogs all came

at once they pissed on her

they pissed at her door in

streams of bitter water

this territory marked her

satin asking for it

Panurge n'eut achevé ce mot, que tous les chiens qui estoyent en l'ecclise accoururent a ceste dame pour l'odeur des drogues qu'il avoyt espandu sus elle ; petitz et grandz, gros et menuz, tous y venoyent tirans le membre, et la sentans, et pissans par tout sus elle ; c'estoyt la plus grande villanie du monde. [...] Quand elle feut entree en sa maison, et fermé la porte apres elle, tous les chiens y acouroyent de demye lieue, qu'ilz y feirent ung ruisseau de leurs urines, auquel les cannes eussent bien nagé. Et c'est celuy ruisseau qui de present passe a Sainct Victor, auquel Guobelin tainct l'escarlatte, pour la vertu specificque de ces pisse chiens [...].

Panurge had no sooner spoke this but all the dogs that were in the church came running to this lady with the smell of the drugs that he had strewed upon her, both small and great, big and little, all came, laying out their member, smelling to her, and pissing everywhere upon her – it was the greatest villlainy in the world. [...] When she was entered into the house and had shut the door upon herself, all the dogs came running of half a league round, and did so well bepiss the gate of her house that there they made a stream with their urine wherein a duck might very well have swimmed, and it is this same current that now runs at St Victor, in which Gobelin dyeth scarlet, for the specifical virtue of these piss-dogs [...].

François Rabelais, *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel*, Livre II Chap. XXII, 1534, trans. Thomas Urquhart and Peter Anthony Motteux.

Not a torrent but furred

mud silks through time stopped up

to flood a future where

beavers have vanished with

only bièvre to bite

its way into the tongue

castoreum musky

your sillage at arm's length

dog-river bares its teeth

at the devil's dye-house

this quality of water

mordant how do you like

my scarlet what will this

will it never be clean

•

Not a river but its

nymph already complaining

late 1500s in

Baïf's lament for injured

water where your goblins

where your poisons tint

inhuman dyers taint

the mixing of our waters

her own name blotted out

by Gobelins she runs

in the glint of bare life

are you even listening

the city doesn't

count what lies underneath

Not the source but the effluent

will rather the multitudinous

waves incarnadine

making the green one

Gobelin scarlet

affluent in muddy commerce

all the insect blood of America

rinsed in the piss-poor river

runs as weft in this repeated

gesture where evenness

is all that hangs

between hand and eye

a landscape opens on a wall

the wool pulled over

Not a rill but run-off

guttering to a halt

or flood that stutters in its

struggle with silence

you have to be so quick

to catch the impossible

when money falters time

sells out the cuts cut in

her wavelength takes you down

her flame red her curlicue

stepped in the bitmap weave

that makes it seem natural

on the rue Berbier-du-Mets

in steeped scarlet the slow loom

Not a stream but a laundry

where the washergirls are

wringing and beating and

thumping the linen

rain running down their necks

to the arch of the back

no longer smelling of

amber and benzoin says Huysmans

the air that chokes them is

fecal bass notes overture

of soap to animalic

accord a memory

in the dry-down of moss

earth harsh on the skin

♦

Not a conscious movement

but not without reason

he's just forgotten why

he's made the detour

through teasel and ragwort

Rousseau botanizing

on the Bièvre avoiding

a boy who knew his name

water streams out of its

classification dodges

and weaves round old duties

remembered by no-one

begin with pimpernel

chervil borage groundsel

Nous n'avons guère de mouvement machinal dont nous ne pussions trouver la cause dans notre coeur, si nous savions bien l'y chercher.

We have hardly any mechanical movement whose cause is not to be found in the heart, if we are acquainted with the manner of seeking it.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Sixième promenade', *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, 1782, trans. Charles E. Butterworth.

♦

Not memory but moire

in the silkstream's marbled

lines wet layers pressed on

cloth shifted like ray trace

or a photograph of

television before

it existed before

the river changed to this

bee hanging in breeze sus-

pended water's version

of itself held in a

breath doubling up as speech

behind Paris seething

its lava of events

Le ruisseau de moire et de soie

The stream of moire and silk

Not water now but ink

the river's leaking black

staining my hand in this

blotting out of image

its refusal to be

anything but body

touching its own absence

blind in concrete channels

curved and folded a

skin tattooed with its own

mottled pulse a tremor

sloughed off running in the

hollows all its water

pure evaporation

Est-ce de la boüe ou de l'eau? Est-ce de la suye ou de l'encre?

Is it mud or water? Is it sweat or ink?

Claude Lepetit, Rivière des Gobelins, 1668.

•

Zoë Skoulding's fourth and most recent collection of poetry is *The Museum of Disappearing Sounds* (Seren, 2013; £8.01 | \$16.44). She is also the author of the monograph *Contemporary Women's Poetry and Urban Space: Experimental Cities* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; £50.00 | \$78.20) and the translator of *In Reality: Selected Poems* by the francophone poet Jean Portante (Seren, 2013; £7.66 | \$15.32). Based on research into the Bièvre, a lost river in Paris, the poems published here are part of a sequence written during a 2014 residency at Les Récollets hosted jointly by the Institut Français and the Mairie de Paris. Further poems may be found at Blackbox Manifold