

Paperbark Literary Magazine

Volume 4 | Issue 4

Article 3

February 2023

Carolyn Oliver

Carolyn Oliver

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/paperbark>

Recommended Citation

Oliver, Carolyn (2023) "Carolyn Oliver," *Paperbark Literary Magazine*: Vol. 4: Iss. 4, Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/paperbark/vol4/iss4/3>

This Poetry is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Paperbark Literary Magazine by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Carolyn Oliver

Field Notes: Worcester County, February

Morning road: coyote tracks, cigarette packs, and three new fences. Neat pieces of star moss and lichen, discarded coins from another country.

After the bus turns, some ones of the high school students hang their masks on the arborvitae hedge. Prayer flags or sails or protest signs.

Black and white and pale, pale blue.

(windows / houses / sky)

Too tired to decompress their meaning, too tired for a battle of wills.

New snow coming, the city overprepares. The plows scrape the road bare. The sparks ignite nothing.

Someone takes a picture of the hedge. On an app the neighbors complain.
Who raised these kids.

Just before sunset, ice-branches blaze into chandeliers.

But someone says the masks are litter. But someone says the flutter will frighten birds.

Not yet the hawks or the owls or the precise woodpecker.

(In a museum, once: a row of study-skin woodpeckers arranged standing, their jaunty red caps and glass eyes tilted up. Like schoolchildren waiting for the next spelling word to fall from their teacher's lips.)

Tricky to loose, the ingenuity of their looping. My hands in gloves though surely the sun has bleached the breath out of them.

Smell of melting. Jellied mouse body revealed by receding snow bank.

Helicopters low. War exercises weekly.

Carolyn Oliver

Field Notes: Worcester County, May

Blackberry intelligence: the only explanation for the trusswork yards of vine below the mulch, time-biding, sly shoots snaking up beside the serrate leaves of turtlehead, wood sorrel, sapling ash.

At night after a shooting he asks me, *Is the Big Y safe?*

I try not to lie to him. Offer the morning's oriole, rich orange of squash flesh.

[The robins' bloodied brick breasts beat every lawn.]

Overnight the trees lay their own roofs.

Without intervention, mint/sage/sorrel/garlic wake and green. Without its gold, forsythia catches white light. Holds it.

Tiny amaranth seedlings rise from the oak stump, an alien hot pink profusion.

Robin's egg halved on the cusp of a driveway, its craze of small cracks like a heap of broken mayflies.

Less a benediction than an afterthought, the mildness of these passing storms.

Then the nights turn so hot and still. Sleeping seems foolish.

And the stillness is new, as if the peepers were only frog-shaped mounds that wilted into blistering mud, maybe never again to grind the air into a wet pulp with their cries.

I thought it was a problem of elevation, but the rhododendrons are sick, flower late and listless.

We count what does bloom. Apple tree, azalea, lilac. Columbine.

At night after a shooting he says, *Can you give me something good to think about.*

Useless to tell him that one day, a sun-edged break in the clouds becoming a photonegative starling murmuration will have to be enough. Desperate, desperate, I give him bunnies on hot air balloon rides, butterfly orchestras, alpine picnics with parsley tea.

[When I dug up the blackberry vine, I killed a baby snake. With a trowel. My hands alone could not have cropped it into pieces writhing.]

My fingerbones too few to count my lies.

Carolyn Oliver

DE PROFUNDIS

In another life I'm a vampire biographer
of many names, but these are the final days
of the Anthropocene, so nobody cares.

Human and otherwise we fled our citadels
for caves long ago. I watched your mother feed
you a rabbit roasted over my gilt-edged books,

I watched her dream of silent forests on fire.
I've been writing your life in bat bones, deep
in caverns too ammonia-rich for human breath.

You are Earth's last painter, old enough to render
from memory pelicans and foxes, strawberries,
hybrid daylilies I never saw open. I think you

must have loved light, must have loved what gold
was left of the world. No hair for brushes, you paint
with your fingers in the dark, with your own blood

you trace landscapes soon erased by cave wall wet.
I suspect a temporary madness, this futile wish
I harbor, that you would paint my likeness too

for I am only a shadow, a long time hungry.
Besides, tonight when you ventured up and out
to glimpse the stars no ship could reach, I knew

you wouldn't return. I've seen that look before:
Paris, 1348, a goldsmith with your blunt nose
and strange heartbeat, river unsure of its course.

For months I watched her fashion the exquisite
miniature fountain, finer even than the sunburst
monstrance lifted for the new cathedral's faithful.

From an eight-pointed star she grew the stems
 of fluted columns, bloomed shields and trefoils.
 As her sister worked the basse-taille—for flowers,

fur, amber sun: copper in the crushed glass—
 she raised crenellations and little gargoyles
 to spout bergamot-scented water. I gulped

her midsummer sigh when the toothed wheels
 finally flew, and set the bells to ringing. Of course
 when he presented it to the prince, their father

called it his own, this beautiful useless machine
 that survived plague and centuries. I wonder, would you
 find such a thing repulsive, or would imagining

stir you, all the hands that polished its basin
 of beaten silver, starlight on snow? But I digress.
 The goldsmith: a half moon after the fountain

she traveled south, carrying a pilgrim's staff.
 She left the sleepers in a convent garden
 to seek me in a field of flax, ready to be her rest.

How toothsome she was! And yet unsatisfying
 to leave of her nothing, until I wrote the savor
 of her name into a young rowan. A kind of life.

From the depths bells chime some unknown hour.
 O my lady who's known my watching all along,
 soon I attend you! Daylight beckons, last palace

of the chosen. On shores of ice you wait.
 Breathless, I climb, I find—O my lady of nights
 ever-fallen—the portrait you've left for me to taste.