

Wanderers from Sirius

*Katrina Roberts's poems suggest
that life springs from stardust.*

DOGS DO FIGURE mightily in *Underdog*, the fourth collection of poems by Katrina Roberts '87. In "Cave Canem," for example, a meditation on, and reimagining of, the volcanic denouement that doomed Pompeii, the narrator speaks of

...my quiet urgings to the children
 accompanying me in
 my tasks, this August 79 AD
 always dogs
and at Marcus Vesonius Primus'
 gate one whose collar
 glints with studs of bronze—
 until he sees me
for who I am, simply knocking
 to retrieve laundry.

Such lines, stitching together a domestic task, a family moment, an historical backdrop, and a geologic cataclysm, suggest the texture of this collection, whose underdogs are not limited to the four-legged kind. They include a solitary 90-year-old Chinese immigrant who died in Walla Walla in 1957; a grasshopper frozen before a kitchen door, waiting to dare a leap to freedom; a cancer-stricken mother of a six-year-old boy ("There's no remission, he knows, despite the tufts blooming beneath her kerchief"); French prisoners in Wales, circa 1807, building a model guillotine from sheep bones; urban Chihuahuas set to barking by a police siren; and even herself and her own vulnerable offspring ("...when I leave my children hungry for attention and drive myself to the ER a random Wednesday evening because I can't take a full breath for pains in my chest—").

Indeed, we are all underdogs. The poetry, though infused with compassion for beings caught between rocks and hard places, doesn't plead their case in abstractions, but pin-



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points the heartrending details of their predicaments. In “Whiskey,” she describes the common mid-nineteenth-century British “turnspit dog”:

scorching heat, how tantalizing
the waft and crackle of browning
meat, oozing
juices....To be caged within
a small wheel attached to the spit
(fire
so near!) and made to run, saving the
cook
in a large household hours of effort
in cranking by hand—your fate.

Whiskey

ran and ran (such a tiny thing!) so
they all ate and ate.

Roberts’s poems sometimes flex a large vocabulary—the grasshopper poem is titled “Entelechy,” an earlier one is “Sfumato”—and in other cases draw on carefully targeted research: “Ground Water, Enchanted,” spreads across five pages, its lines studded with two dozen italicized Chinese proverbs (“*No matter how tall the mountain, it cannot block out the sun*”). Her first book, *How Late Desire Looks* (1997), whose



Katrina Roberts

KIMBERLY MINER

title poem first appeared in this magazine and was anthologized in *Best American Poetry 1995*, spun glittering beadworks of the poet’s nuanced imagination. *The Quick* (2005), rooted in her experience as a mother of three children, was “an exploration of creation myths,” she says. “Threaded through that, there are these moments of

looking back toward Greek mythology and Welsh mythology—and re-envisioning what one’s own creation mythology might be.” *Friendly Fire* (2008) is all sonnets, each with a one-word title and each distilling a shard of experience that resonates beyond its particulars.

“Firstborn” from *The Quick* illustrates

The smart place to stay.

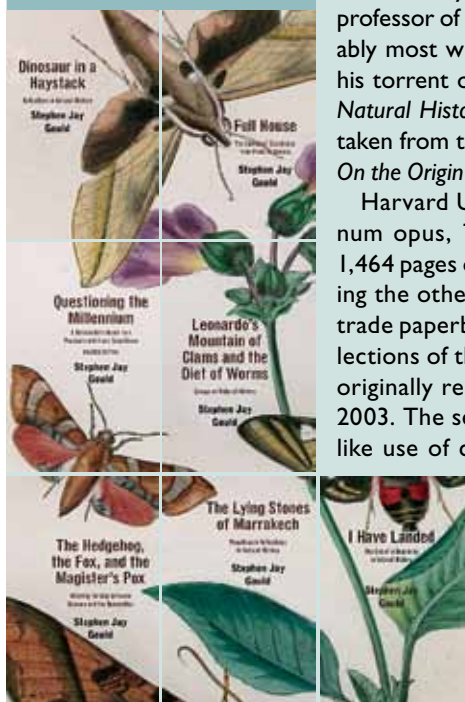
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how a contemporary poet can respond to an inhumane incident occurring halfway around the world; it's a found poem taken from a 2002 *New York Times* report on starving Afghani parents who sold their children for wheat in order to survive. "I had just had my first boy," she recalls. "And we live here [in Walla Walla] in the midst of wheat fields, and bread baking is important to me. I was thinking about wheat, and about this small loaf of a child I held in my arms, and then about these mothers who had to trade some of their kids in order to stay alive. I was interested in how the poem might function personally politically, as well as in a social sense."

Underdog repeatedly probes the theme of immigration—of aliens, in the broadest sense, discovering themselves in unfamiliar environments. We meet gandy dancers laying the transcontinental railroad ("Someone swung to hit a gold stake/and missed"); a lonely miner in Oregon, 1919 ("Somewhere, a mother's arms encircled me if only/for months awaiting my birth"); a predatory raccoon family that ravages half the poet's flock of hens overnight;

Gould Goods



The late **Stephen Jay Gould** (1941-2002)—Agassiz professor of zoology, paleontologist, theorist of evolutionary biology, baseball fan, and Astor visiting professor of biology at New York University—is probably most widely known for his popular writings and his torrent of essays, especially his regular column in *Natural History* magazine, "This View of Life" (a title taken from the concluding words of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*).

Harvard University Press published Gould's magnum opus, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (all 1,464 pages of it), in the year of his death. Now, keeping the other side of his work in print, it has issued trade paperback editions of seven volumes (four collections of the essays, three original popular works) originally released commercially between 1995 and 2003. The series is handsomely unified by the quilt-like use of cover illustrations derived from a plate originally used in *The Cabinet of Oriental Entomology* (1848), by John Obadiah Westwood, another nineteenth-century English naturalist, who came to his passion as a lapsed lawyer—a crossing of boundaries that might well have pleased Gould himself.

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O P E N B O O K

The Chinese “Good Life”

selves of people who have undergone profound changes in their sense of place, opportunities and circumstances, sexual mores, and more. The scholarly collaboration, moreover, illustrates a global web of China studies, embracing Rabb professor of anthropology Arthur Kleinman (also professor of medical anthropology and of psychiatry), five Harvard Ph.D.s (Yunxiang Yan, Jing Jun, Pan Tianshu, Wu Fei, and Guo Jinhua), and two Harvard postdoctoral fellows (Sing Lee and Everett Zhang)—now teaching at four Chinese universities and three American ones. From Kleinman’s concluding chapter, “Quests for Meaning”:

Think of what a Chinese man or woman in their eighties has lived through: the chaos of the warlord period and the uncertainty of the early years of the Nationalist government’s efforts to reunify a fractured country; the long war with Japan during which hundreds of millions of people were uprooted and 20 million were killed; the turmoil and disintegration during China’s civil war; the brutal excesses of the early days of the Chinese Communist Party’s efforts to exterminate class enemies, with perhaps a million landlords killed; the deep tragedy of the Great Leap Forward...with 30 million deaths; the whirlwind of destruction called the Cultural Revolution, when intellectuals, cadres, and ordinary urban dwellers got caught up in the fire of mass political campaigns, brutal struggle sessions in every work unit, and the meltdown of government and civil institutions. Add in the Korean War, when China suffered a million casualties, and all the paranoia-generating campaigns against rightists, counter-revolutionaries, and others labeled enemies of the people. Then consider the early days of the great transformation to a market economy, when uncertainty was so substantial people didn’t know which direction would bring safety and security. Against this troubled and troubling historical background, isn’t the audacity of simply being happy and enjoying life the most remarkable of collective and personal changes?

China is an economic powerhouse, and a rising strategic force. But outsiders often have little sense of the Chinese as people. In *Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person* (University of California, \$65; \$26.95 paper), eight scholars grounded in anthropology and psychiatry examine the inner

...Thirty years on, the situation for ordinary Chinese is so very different that we can say without exaggerating that the psychology of the Chinese people has undergone arguably its most dramatic transformation since the decline of the Qing dynasty in the late nineteenth century...Or, put differently, hunger for food, which had beset Chinese for centuries and become a fixture of their cultural imagination, was no longer (for most) either a reality or a fear. Now it was replaced by a hunger for those good things in life that were flooding the market and the imagination.

...[T]he quest for meaning for hundreds of millions of Chinese is the search to build and sustain a good life: a life filled with simple pleasures; a life that is relatively and modestly secure in a dangerous and unpredictable world; a life that offers better chances for children and grandchildren; a good life that represents a new normal.

The new made visible: Shanghai’s Pudong financial district, created since the early 1990s



LAURIE NOBLE/GETTY IMAGES

three Mexican immigrants waiting in the local post office (“...*Lo siento*, one nods/our direction, his poncho—picture a simple wheat-colored/chasuble, like a solar system’s oval with a hole in the middle/for a head to pass through—”). And always, the ceaseless invasion of our planet by human babies, those souls groping so poignantly to find their way in this world.

The book’s opening poem, “From *Po Tolo to Emma Ya*,” climaxes in a synopsis of the cosmology of the Dogon millet farmers of Mali, who believe that *all* Earth’s crea-

It’s a found poem, taken from a 2002 report on starving Afghani parents who sold their children for wheat.

tures are, in essence, immigrants from the distant Sirius system. The poem’s title invokes the names of two stars in the constellation Canis Major, where Sirius, the Dog Star, resides. “Sirius—twice as large as our sun and twenty times as radiant/is axis of their universe from which all souls emerge in a great spiral.” The poet declares this Dogon narrative “...well, as credible to me as any dogma,” and it becomes the subtext for a vision that extends eons past the human life span, in both directions. “We’re treading this earth’s skin/,” she concludes, “leaving imprints, and afterimages however ephemeral for whomever/comes after.”

Roberts (www.katrinaroberts.net) studied with Seamus Heaney at Harvard and with Jorie Graham (now Boylston professor of rhetoric and oratory) at the Iowa Writers

Workshop. She is Schwabacher professor of English and the humanities at Whitman College, and she and her husband, Jeremy Barker, also make wines at their Tytonidae Cellars and distill spirits at their Walla Walla Distilling Company. Her life, like her work, resists categorization. “All human life astounds me,” she says. “That any of us exist is miraculous.”

~CRAIG LAMBERT