

ECLOGUES

ROSE NOVICK

*So Meliboeus, carefully set out
Your plants and pear trees, all in rows – for whom?
For strangers, for others, we have farmed our land.*

- Vergil, *Eclogue I* (tr. Ferry)

PREFACE

Vergil's *Eclogues* are, in my estimation, underappreciated, both for their intrinsic merits and for the light they shed on Vergil's later works, especially the *Aeneid*, that great epic of exile.

My own *Eclogues* are dedicated to Vergil, who showed me to myself.

Pittsburgh • Lafayette
2016-2020

CONTENTS

Exchange	1
Deferral	2
Veils	3
Scale	4
Exile	5
Terrain	6
Seeds	7
Autumn Garden in Winter	8
Diogenes	9
Floating World	10
Departure	11
Here You May Wander	13
Cicada	16

Exchange

He stands before her with his gift of fire
cradled in his rugged hands, revealing now

a dim red glow, now the light itself,
now again his illumined flesh. He sets it

gently in her coruscating eyes,
then steals away, scampers over footpaths

long-forgotten back to his cragged home.
She follows his receding form, her eyes fixed

on the faint impressions of his footfall,
burning his path into her memory.

She turns to face the early morning moon,
and its pale orange cast sicklies the sky.

Far away, Prometheus ruins his nails
on the rock: thus he endures the eagle.

Mira, too, keeps her nails short and ragged,
the better to remember his courage.

Deferral

Nihilism will be given its due,
Mira thinks, walking. Even this stick
shouts its own senselessness. Knobbed like a bone
where it meets the joint – for what? A senseless
resemblance, wholly unpersuadable,
one death masquerading as another.
But life is the thing that goes on against
all reason, so she tosses the stick aside,
leaves it to its destiny as nutriment,
saying, *Now seek your meaning there.*

Making note

of each deferred completion (a walk
is a series of private precisions:
it never quite spans the gulf intact), Mira
chances on a plastic cylinder, its stark white
word-interrupted, CAUTION, GAS PIPELINE,
beneath it the ironic signature
of ancient deaths commemorated here.

Veils

Make me receptive, Muse, to the song
that silhouettes the city, that like a fog
shrouds its gloomy substance. Subtraction
is beauty, beauty subtraction, something less
than truth entire. This much, I know. Whisper
to me of Mira walking, giving voice
to the vestiges of her perception.

Rails, once crossed, stifle the city, dulling
its clamor to ambience, and Mira
has crossed them. She shadows past the stagnant,
frogless murk of an unkempt pond, herself
become stagnant, pure feckless observer.
Distant cars, oblivious, with muted
susurrations echo the disquiet.

Then, causeless if the eye is judge, a call,
unlocatable, wordless yet human,
something ineffable caught in a throat
and expelled with loss. The call, beautiful
in its diffusive rarity, recurs,
modulated, broken in the middle,
a variation on an absent theme.

A train recalls function to the mind, brings
Mira to her feet – the oscillation
of reception and industry swung back.
A frog, weighing life and death, with needless
prudence chooses murk. Crossing the rails once
more, Mira departs the blankness for form.

Scale

Cars rumble over the bridge, minimized
by distance to water's echo, traces
of fervor suggestive now only
of stasis. Excitation has become haze.

The water, dashed, runs down to a small pool,
algae-ridden and rutted in torpor,
its surface dappled by light frames, vassals
of alien forces: not gravity,
but tension – a realm of laws fathomed
yet impalpable. Unyielding all the same.

It wearies him with the old exhaustion,
this stasis and necessity. Leth sits,
fading into earth's languor. A strider
lumbers through algae, of elegance stripped.

Exile

Unrooted Muse, who drifts through the world
like fog, evanescent Muse, here now,
before you vanish, teach my eyes your sight
and my mouth your haphazard, local song,
a miscellany snatched from who-knows-where.

A heron, cumbrous, at once bulbous
and gangling, wades through shallow water,
legs parting the scum. *Where does it live?*
It hunts here, but where does the creature rest?
Thus Mira, as the bird hoists its bulk
to the sky. Mira turns to consider
the scum: floating leaves from which dangle
into the plenum below roots that find
no purchase. *If only species names were more*
than labels, you would be 'meliboeus'.

Yet Mira finds comfort in system: each
species given place and name; artifice
freely acknowledged. She rises to depart,
takes a thin path marked by a three-rock cairn,
precariously perched, the next day gone.

Terrain

Rain has cleared the algae, and in its place
deposited pebbles, sand, enough
to form an island, divide into halves,
barely connected, the once single pool.
A prospect unseemly, morose. Even
the striders – those few that were not washed
downstream – are lethargic: lazy, lazy.

Another morning after rain. Having passed
the scum, great naturalizer of plastic
and plank, teeming with small striders, Leth
rearrives at his pool, the island
grown larger overnight, the striders all
but one swept away, this lone remainder
large, impressive so far as such things go.

Thoreau, in the middle of the nineteenth
century, sat one day for hours and watched
a bullfrog (this also sat), very much
to the consternation of his neighbor,
a farmer none now recall. Nothing much
came of it: a few words in a private
diary and, sitting here, perplexed, Leth,

who, as he watches the strider aimlessly
traverse its vacated, crowded home,
seeks consolation in the cycles
by which Geology perambulates
from nowhere to nowhere and back, and sits,
and thinks about Thoreau, and hungers for
the rain that will undo that rain has done.

Seeds

As when a dandelion, its flower
finished, becomes a flimsy puff of seed
awaiting the wind will sweep it from
the stalk, scatter it where it can and can
not grow, some few in luck, the rest condemned
to die, perhaps never to live – and that
is why there must be many – so also
does sympathy billow out with the wind,
blooming where it lands, wherever it lands,
goaded the risible muscles of the
maudlin no less than of the looker-on.
Come, Felicity, have a laugh with me
at mawkishness. Shall we not have a laugh?

Mira walks, touched almost to weeping now
by strutting geese (how they hardly remark
her presence), now by thronging crows (how they
mottle the very heavens), the world
friendly because vacant, not a soul else
beside the iced-over pond, and this, this
isolation, seems the world's essence,
and she could weep for it all.

Leth rises
from the stone on which he sits, having stared
his fill at the still ice. As he passes her,
Hello, and she halts, wanting almost
to die, hating him fervently with a small
hatred. *Hi*. And on, the both of them.

Autumn Garden in Winter

Muse, flickering faintly in the distance,
bring your burning madness near. The rain falls
but lightly: how could it quell your fire?
Felicity, come. Scorch me with your song.

Mira, slowly roving through thick air,
feels each particle resist displacement,
her feet falling fitfully earthward
in a *gagaku* rhythm, her mind removed.

Crows wing their way across the interlude
between nothing and nothing, tree and tree,
dreaming darkly stubborn dreams. Mira watches,
awake to the exile of awareness.

She circles the concrete rim of the pond
until she reaches a low stone wall, and sits,
the crows crying craven or victory,
she can not tell. Leth joins her on the wall.

“Imagine that crow-glutted tree on fire,
branches burning like ravaged Troy, the flames
licked lightly by the soft rain.”

“Imagine
the crows on fire, fleeing on fire, their scorched
bodies falling flaming to the water.”

Diogenes

For a minute there, the rain seems ready
to rip the trees from the earth. Leth looks out
the window, an inchoate thought drumming
his periphery. Rain rattles the glass.

If Diogenes was not rattled, so...

Quieter now, gentler. Leth rises to leave.

On the grate where the pond drains lies a fish,
still living, carried here by a fervor
wholly unfelt. That's what Leth loves best
about nature's passions: that they never
rise to consciousness, insensible
as the sandbags below the mud-dark surface.

Back you go, little fish, and then the toss.

The toss, and the feeling small, frivolous
in his rebellion. By the strider pool,
not yet repopulated, Leth listens
to water frothed by its falling, goaded
by the sky. He watches as it carves the dirt,
threatens to steal the ground beneath the feet
of two unruffled ducks. He feels the rain.

An arthritic train grumbles down its track.
Mira, Leth presumes, is somewhere beyond
its stiff and scraping bones, somewhere where form
does not fathom its own tenuity
quite so starkly. At least, she is not here.
All the better, for Leth stinks like wet dog.

Floating World

*It's a futile business planning for
a future you will never know. Oh, sure,
Apollo's readying his horses, but
tomorrow is a fantasy, and what
about those horses? They look a little ill.
Sorry. Today, the sun will rise. I will
not dither longer. Where has Phoebus gone?
It seems he's bringing flowers, a rosy dawn
to prick our homes. Even as these are rousing,
the lunar world begins its dicey drowsing.
What will become of these nocturnal beasts?
Will they wake? Some will; some will be feasts.
But let us let them sleep in peace. The sun
is shrugging off its light, which settles on
a creek, just where it widens to a meager
pool. Once, water striders danced here, eager
to find love. (Who could deny them pain?)
And now? You will not see them. Blame the rain
that sliced the earth, reworked the whole terrain.
The striders bowed before this frenzy, too.
Pool became current, and the current grew,
and they were powerless before it. That's why
the place is vacant now, and that's why I
am writing you. The world's fragility
staggers me. You, whom I might never see
again, still share this sun with me, this horse-
drawn happiness. May Phoebus stay this course
forever! I'm kidding. He won't, and that's okay.
Mira, what – really – am I trying to say?
It's a nice day. You want more, I can tell.
But that's the laundry. I should go. Keep well.*

Departure

This song is of absences,
of swallows disappearing
over the tops of buildings,
of pigeons half-occluded
by the stiff remnants of trees
from whose wires sparrows fall
and vanish behind a wall.

*Are you there, Felicity?
Felicity? Are you there?*

It is the season of frogs,
the season when their stillness
pauses time, as there, there where
water reaches a short ledge,
where water flows over it
and past a branch from its tree
severed – there where two bullfrogs
rest, one on the log, one off,
where the water is, for once,
the same each instant, the same
up and down its entire length.
But then I, cumbersome, heft
my bulky, threatening mass,
and time resumes with a squeal.

*Are you there, Mira? Mira,
have you found your way back here?*

The strider pool is changing,
with every rain swapping out
its face, its integrity
now restored, now lost again:
just yesterday deep and clear,
today despondent and cramped,
overridden by pebbles,
more fit for frogs than striders.
Of these last, many, but small,
small and shadowless on this,
this cool, cloudy August day.

I rise, and the frog that had
been studying me darts back
to what water still remains.

*And Leth? Are you there? It is
not raining, Leth, not today.*

This song is of absences.
Felicity? Mira? Leth?
Gone, all figments of a dream,
that dream we call 'remembrance'.
Now, only dragonflies. Now,
nothing more than frogs, unseen –
ripples through the scummy green.

Here You May Wander

Setting out is always the risky portion
By the time you're drifting on open ocean
lost in the vastness
turning back is out of the question sameness
greet you mocks you taunts you in all directions
scintillating beckoning *Go on Float on*

Mira waits vacating her mind for nothing
Orbing around her
an uneasy silence begins to take form
clotting in the ruts of her brain then passing
into something other unspeakable but
Mira you must try to upend the voiceless

Leth unsettled sitting beside the Wabash
watches the water
turbid and turgid
move along He thinks *even this is stasis*
flow without purpose
cyclical nonsense

Swollen as if injured the river makes no
answer carries on with its silent carving
Let the water be as it must then I've no
wish to dispute it
Leth and his muddy
sneakers depart us

Mystic consolations arise to startle
Mira as she watches the gash meander
through the city's flatness arise and vanish
for a wound is water is unconsoling
Mira still sitting
shifts her position

hearing the small sounds
gathering in silence light wind through branches
long since stripped bare birds the few winter has not
driven out plucking
worms from the soil

death for the eager
Then she hears his footsteps approaching sneakers
sculpting the flooding's
muddy deposit
Old flame Mira thinks as if flux could harden
halting its changes
Elegance forgotten -Hello and him -Hi

Silence The awkward
lifting of old shrouds
wrapped in which the past had been buried grieved and
set aside this past now returning every
burial a planting unbidden Softly
-How have you been Leth

-Changing the city
does not change the well or its stillness Meeting
here in a new town
smaller and remoter is nothing Changes
lose themselves in Change in its sameness Thus Leth
toeing the soil

-Maybe you've heard Leth
how the turtle living inside regards its
well as the world
More power to it
I though desire
nothing familiar

nothing but the wide-open wilds bursting
into flames ungiftable and ungifted
nothing but rivers
rain-swollen ignoring their margins as they
spill all their secrets
nothing but this water this fire this longing

-Guess I should go then
and he does his figure receding slipping
back out of being
Nothing that is cannot be known but him I
never did know him
Mira grasps the hollowed-out air around her

Wind is carving mountains the river's surface
craggy and dire
Mira drifts off losing herself among them
rising turning home as the steady current
carries the mountains
out to the ocean

Cicada

after Thoreau after Anacreon

Cicada – dew-lover yet unmodeled,
chirr-coater of trees, land-suffuser, Muse-
amuser, earthborn, earthbarren, bloodless,
godlike – Mira pronounces you happy.

Acknowledgments

“Cicada” appeared in *Notre Dame Review*, issue 45.