

Mary Maxwell

Trail

Trail is a digital chapbook
with accompanying audiofiles
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at the LongNookBooks website

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for Saskia



Serena Rothstein, *Sketchy Landscape* (detail)
Oil on paper, circa 1958

I

--

Nervous house sparrow's rooftop outburst
heard, its *a cappella* warmup in repeat.
Anxiety about tunings, timings. Restless
nature, rustling audience, awaits its notes.

--

Recording going forward, rocket-like
mechanism of verbal upward voyage.

--

Flying through scrub-oak openings, poem
beneath cloudless page, steepness winding.
Raspy breath, the ear, the air picks up panting,
expressive effort's throaty steam engine.

--

Rising voice, rising volume, microphoned
incline of emotion, pitched duplications.

--

As pair of widening wings in ascent,
two legs, two arms, climbing poles.
Lined by last year's pine needles, in
sun warmth, mayflowers find shine.

--

Dual cellos, offspring tones, twins
in paired playback, nonidentical.

--

Understood, music's journey, its path.
Familiar switchbacks and *ritornellos*,
passages scored, phrasings marked
in pencil, higher octaves heart-changing.

--

Repetitions, windmill-turning cycles,
seasonal rhythms of birth and death.

--

Your aspirations, pumped up and still
rising, like that echoing rooftop call.
Social feathers follow from afar;
hawk eyes upon you will always fall.

--

II

Pinecones full of *pizzicato* futures
Property passed on through quitclaim deed

Breathtaking fortune, unwrapped gift
Of legendary stork, or wide-eyed osprey

*Chanted codes played in lines
Passed-on spells, predispositions*

Startled moths, flustered whippoorwill
Play against ground's dappled gavotte

Fairy glen of twisted trunks, helix
Forms hanging in anticipation

*Strange copper fruit, stranger voices
Mischievous gremlins in the machine*

Magic spheres and orbs, timbrels
Sequined tambourines flash light

Timpani sparkles, wood-fairy dew baskets
Floating spider webs' reverberations

*Chords sung beyond human range
Undetectable save on glowing screens*

Real and imagined tiny dance beings
All attuned to unheard frequencies

Untempered music, neatly bending in
Ancient adaptive harmonizing

*Phonic relay or revelation, elfish voices
Heard from deep within the head*

Where the moon rises full each month,
Its face mistaken for a searchlight

Fiddled airs of the little people, rondos
Overseen by winter's night-lamp

*With trembling tones of skilled vibrato
Calling you by name, the winged ones*

III

Deep well of dialogic crystal
Receptacled pulse reflections
<
Chamber music's taking turns
Within skull's resonant caverns

*Network of infinite similitude
Harmonic correspondances*

Instruments alternating or in unison,
Ancestors conversing, in communion
<
With otherworldly oddities, local dialect
Planetary puff balls, lady-slipper orchids

*Spun in a medium of magic
Pull of white wizardry's trap*

Sticky genealogies reaching back
Attaching themselves to branches
<
Matrilineal lines of lost patronymics
Recitation of hyphenate ethnicities

*Tools of sonic orientation
Methodology of self-location*

Crackle of one's own step upon
Tick habitat, feared attachments
<
Miniature natives underbrush
In shaded bearberry attending

*Sun risings and hill-settings
Resetting the heart's compass*

Sleep, its long, cool way down, brain
Bucket dipping into self-reflections
<
Last century's cisterns, entrances to
Mental underworld, subconscious

*Haunting keys, ghost percussion
Communal dreams, clarity recalled*

IV

Still center, winds abstract
Blueberry bloomlets entranced

Among fern-filled prehistory
White bonneted heads attend
Unseen vibrations, shiftings,
Felt through strange effects

Tuning-forked beloved tree
Favorite uncle's ancient arms

Fauna as land's descendants
Regroup to family homestead
Deliberate presence sensed seated
At very back row of mountain theater

Empty core of seven movements
Silent axis-turning spiral

Path now pivoting into descent
Away from where rose the dawn
Shaky second-hands ticking down,
Tales as tedious as a metronome

As inky page reproduces
In reverse, mirrored type

Past and future unfolding
Youth and age *en face*
Each day's rehearsal for next
Count-in of one bar, then nod

Prophecies of dynamic triumphs,
Themes inch towards resolution

Whisperings, horsehair touches
Intended for your ears alone
Fast rewind to yesterday, clock
Chime decline of second childhood

V

Trans-generational perfected pitch
From breath-life to another state
>
Restless rustling in treetop choir stalls
Forest bathing, cathedral thinking

*Against playhead's propulsive habit
Grim impulse to hit square of stop*

Fallen trunks, massive giants' bones
Entangled in thickening undergrowth
>
Buttressed centuries, faceless effigies
Brought down, then newly incorporated

*Revolution, earth's orbital rise
Planet spinning in astral loop*

Gentle recline to noughtness
Busy mushrooms in retirement
>
Slow decay, leaf nap, forest floor
All is cemetery unbeknownst

*Flatlined silence of hill-less track
Horizontal of only-apparent death*

Drone of the mind without tempo
Increasing thought absences, forgots
>
Ringtones arrive like alien presences
Reminders of human obligation

*Airwave-carried, the dead move us
Blowing against nearly invisible hairs*

Coming closer: Growling motor chords,
Sirens, beeping tones of backing-ups
>
Triadic space away from harshness
Held as small bird noiseless in hand

*Hit Play's triangle to see it again,
Flashing by on mind's last screen*

VI

Continuation of schematic map, wayfinding.
Mind trailing along hillside, crumbs consumed

Rear-viewed nest, its over-accumulations
Family histories, stuff beneath roof repairs

*Torah liturgies lichen-green through
Bark shadow memories come*

Early sprouting left behind, seeding
Under straw, trope melody starting up

Verdigris of springs come and gone
Energy pressing up against dried gold

*Shared notes, ritual sheltering in place
Gerund modems of current frequencies*

Cooing dove sending out soundwaves
Child atoms soothed, genes spiraling

Waiting then winging her way away
Leaving behind a shattered shell.

*Blood-allied lineage made articulate
Fuzzy hum prayers for future ears*

Ever-alternating dynamic, flee or seek
Up-bow and down-bow, inhale and sigh

Centrifuge move away, worldly exoteric pull;
Centripetal returns, their gravid support

*Coalescing into gaited phrasings, introits
Or hymns concluding, commencements*

Escorted by songbird psychopomps
ever-present on level way now gained

Steady footing and tacit recognition,
Acceptance of kinship's eccentric turns

*Incantation as word force, history's healing
Idiolectic inheritance, embodied scar*

VII

--

Electronic end-point, audio file unsaved.
Clearing of last light and flower litter.
Rhododendron family, cricket section
gather bedside in orchestral semicircle.

--

Gut-stringed hospital squeaking,
medical equipment's vocal chords.

--

Incipience of tree blossoms, magnolia boles.
Shad flowers transformed to berries, fruit.
Real gardens inhabited by worry,
dooms of imaginary toads, low kettle drums.

--

High notes of increased tightness;
chest tension channels mortal fearing.

--

Traversed dirt-path prelude, ultimately
circles back toward cedar shingles.
Closure, resolution, reciprocity.
A warm gesture of embrace, home.

--

Discordance unfamiliar, exit leading
back to comfort of the tonic blanket.

--

Long-legacied vertical of sturdy elms
line the estate's paved road, enduring.
Vehicles cross the screen and score
a meadow expanse's unmarked bars.

--

Final phrases linger with undertones grave;
keyboard TapTap here marks their beating.

--

With evening age's widening view, its
pano frame acquired with distance.
Memory's composed curation, out of time.
Seconds minutes decades, all left behind.

--

About *Trail*

Trail began as a birthday present for my musician daughter at a moment when we thought 2020's sheltering in place would be relatively short-lived. My idea was to create text for a "soundscape" for her to listen to while following a specific walking path my husband and I created on lands adjoining the National Seashore of Cape Cod. Recording apps on my laptop, as well as earbuds and cellphones, have made such a project not merely possible but fairly easy. The primary medium for the resulting seven movements was never really the page, even though this is the paper analogue for the present chapbook. These digital poems were first intended as more of a score for corresponding audiofiles of voice and electronic instrument, rather than as an independent text for a traditionally published poem's subvocalized experience, the reader's own voice silently articulating the printed word.

Instead of page and ink, lettered markings are here set upon the white of a monitor screen, as though the solid product of trees had been replaced by a medium of electrically produced light. But trees are still here, with the accompanying image from the landscape painting of Serena Rothstein meant to evoke, rather than duplicate, the experience of a forested footpath. At first I'd thought of using photographs of the actual walked trail but soon realized that literal photographic reproductions diminished rather than enhanced my words. The non-figurative quality of my poem's attempt to evoke auditory experience resisted literal illustration. Trying to "translate" the poem's referents in nature into my iPhone camera's visual field made me even more aware of the distillate power of abstract approaches.

One of the enthusiasms shared with my daughter has been the music of Morton Feldman; his more meditative work was very much in my head as I made my recordings. As Feldman spent time on Cape Cod in the previous midcentury, I like to think not only the Outer Cape's specific light, but also the feathered and distinctively translucent sounds of its oceanside may be detected in some of his compositions from the era. In both poetry and music, of course, one speaks of the figurative idea of "color," a sense of tone and timbre growing more or less intensive in unfolding expression. The most obvious painterly example of this quality might be the paintings of Mark Rothko; by no coincidence Feldman's *Rothko Chapel* has been a piece of music known to me since I was my daughter's age.

There is something immensely foolish about attempting to write about the experience of music. Recording that writing as a sound composition only doubles the creative embarrassment. Poetry has always been a sister art to music; I would extend that family relation to birdsong, the sound of the wind in the trees and even the movements of animals in the underbrush. As for several weeks there were almost no airplanes in Cape Cod's sky, and few vehicles on Longnook Road, the extreme quiet became a sound of its own, or at least a neutral background to new awarenesses.

And yet, paradoxically, there became for us even more dependence on the digital realm. In terms of concerns, *Trail* continues the course of *Nine Over Sixes*. *Trail* also experiments with the rhythmic and percussive possibilities of "meaningless" word-sounds, though these have been replaced by synthetic instrumentation in the *Trail* recordings, or by the "natural" voice manipulated electronically. This strikes me as true to contemporary experience, with the everpresent cellphone ringtones or bot voices not only carried into nature but even imitated by cowbirds and crows. So, too, the recorded "strings" don't have the subtlety or beauty of hand-tuned violins or cellos but express instead some abstracted concept of such sounds. Such music-noises can be startling and even fearful, paired qualities I wanted to capture as true to the lockdown.

Besides music, the “subject matter” of *Trail* is gifts and legacies — at least, that was the initial impulse behind its celebratory creation. Most obviously, in terms of nature itself, there is the pressing question of what we are passing on to the next generation. But more specifically, time spent in the National Seashore makes any visitor question the concept of real estate, whether any land can or should be said to belong to an individual or family; National Parks return us to something like Native American approaches of shared land and communal responsibilities. At the same time I remain deeply grateful to my West Virginia settler ancestors, being very much the beneficiary of property ownership and trans-generational inheritance. During this period of enforced hermitage I have become even more cognizant of my extraordinary good fortune.

My daily encounters with the same magical plot of land inspired me to write deeply private poems in dialogue with the nonhuman, even if the surfaces of such efforts might be so cryptic as to be initially incomprehensible. Yet abstract art is not an evasion of reality. What is presented here (and in the work of Serena Rothstein) has been derived from genuine encounter; the forms are not random but drawn from the real. And while my poems were first intended for a specific ear, I've made them public in the belief that authentic movement of the individual soul, the lyric first-person (whether its grammars present themselves as such or not), remains something precious, even in a monetary economy where most poetry continues on its path without affirmation of market value.

These are beliefs which make a poet such as myself something of an amateur. Background sounds of a creaky chair and late summer evening creatures provide backup to my voice and its decidedly unprofessional electronic accompaniment. *Trail*, therefore, is a highly imperfect offering, given away for free. It is the record of a directive to follow private paths shaped by public concerns, formed as an act of vocational perseverance in a context of isolation and social breakdown. Looking at the way ahead, the ongoing task of the artist becomes both political and individual, requiring sincere observation followed by determined reconciliation of assembled phenomena. Truth is grown from scrutiny.

About the Author

Mary Maxwell was born and raised in Clarksburg, West Virginia. She studied English literature at Bryn Mawr College and Classics at Columbia University.

Maxwell has published five volumes of poems: *An Imaginary Hellas*, *Emporia*, *Cultural Tourism*, *Nine Over Sixes* and *Oral Lake*. She is the author of an art monograph, *Serena Rothstein: Discourse in Paint*, as well as the omnibus collection, *The Longnook Overlook*. A winner of the "Discovery"/*The Nation* Award, she has been a visiting artist and scholar at the American Academy in Rome and the recipient of a residential fellowship from the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France.

Individual poems from her collections first appeared in *Agni*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *Paris Review*, *Provincetown Arts*, *Southern Review*, *Southwest Review* and *Yale Review*. Poems from *Cultural Tourism* were recently featured on *The Best American Poetry* blog. Her work has also been collected in the anthologies, *Ezra's Book* and *A Packet for Ezra Pound* (both Clemson University Press).

Her translations of Provençal, Latin and Classical Greek poetry have appeared in *The American Voice*, *Literary Imagination*, *Pequod*, *Vanitas*, *The Washington Post Book World* and the anthology, *Latin Lyric and Elegiac Poetry* (Garland). Her versions of the only Roman woman poet whose work is extant were set to music by the composer Jessica Krash in *Sulpicia's Songs*.

As an independent scholar Maxwell has published in literary periodicals such as *Arion*, *Boston Review*, *Partisan Review*, *PN Review*, *Raritan*, *Salmagundi* and *Threepenny Review*. A collection of her essays and talks on prosody and translation, *Push and Pull*, and a second volume of *The Longnook Overlook*, are forthcoming.

