

explorations



Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

Three Poems by Paul Farley

Ink

A word begins in the wind
a scribe thinks, and, thinking,
his hand slips. His mind
enters a gap between scratching
and nib taps. The lamp flickers. Owls
screech in the top woods.
He holds his breath. His soul
is looking down at the words
and the word he tripped on
looks back, puzzled, like it dwells
on distances—between dip
and driving quill, the ground
it's put between ports and turf smoke,
the flights over frozen lands,
flinty waves, the dark narrows it took
to reach here. The scribe's hand
hovers above the page
where he left it, waiting to be found
and grasped again—the village
rising slowly, the cold side of a bed
he'll retire to after the first bell
or cockcrow, the small hours'
rows and columns stacked—
but before the ink goes everywhere
the word looks back, holding him still,
and he listens down, for as long
as he dares, into a deep well
that's swallowed his tongue.

Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature, 12 (2024), pp. 14-16
DOI: 10.25167/EXP13.24.12.2

Our Father Who Showed Us Sea Level

The world had weighed anchor. The docks were deserted.
We took turns on his shoulders to look at sea level
there, carved in the sea wall, slick and green.
The heights and depths of the world are measured from here...
It went over our heads. I remember marks
in the stone, a salty, solder smell, being sick
on the bus going home. The heights and depths of the world?
Its mountains and mineshafts, skyscrapers, canyons?

Turned out he was half right, maybe not even half
as I learned myself further away from him,
as the idea of the absolute datum point,
the line in the sand, the seeing things in black and white,
recedes. The glaciers melt, the moon hauls gravel,
even the land itself rises and falls.

I'm drawing a line under it all—our father,
who didn't rule the waves or make the rules,
who must have been a believer in sea level
on some level, who lifted me from the bus,
not eight feet high but wrapped, like the child I was,
in a donkey jacket rough with smoke and rain—

drawing a line and leaving it like a pilgrim
who's waited long enough, home from the cave
or sea grotto where once, in an apparition,
some saw the heights of devotion, the depths of love.

Great Northern Diver

Listen. Big divers calling at twilight,
home for their annual refit on a sea loch,
bobbing like grids of floats that cage
salmon in their farms, or mark a wreck,
breaking the silent routine of night
coming on. Say what you like,
there are no words. Say it's where birdsong
begins. Say you're standing at the edge
of this water when the world was young.
Say it breaks the surface of our age.
Say it stands us in the middle of things.
Say it overdubs the sound of what's
to come—not tonight, but soon—and sends
a ripple through your heart. *It's not
all about you...* Say it's where birdsong ends.