

Question of Nymphs

By Randall Brown

As he dragged the garbage cans out onto the driveway in the early morning, he heard his name to the left of him, down a hill, in the birch woods that stretched for a few acres and ended at a small pond and black iron fence. It called with an urgency, like his grandmother's summons for dinner, "Come on!" It called without echo. Its intensity never wavered. What choice did he have? He walked down the hill, into the woods, voice-guided to whatever summoned him.

Night still hung in the woods, in the dark in-between of trees, fallen limbs, trampled leaves. He twisted a way toward the voice that never grew louder. It had nothing except direction. Sometimes jagged bushes tore bits of skin from arms, ankles, ears and cheeks. He thought of himself as becoming lost and bloody, how no one would notice his absence for days or weeks. If he came back as a phantom, he would haunt places rather than the people.

The woods opened to the pond and there she stood. like a rose bud opening, veiled by the left-over night--and he knew what danger lay here, the price of witness. Likely he'd become nymph-struck, falling forever silent, love-sick, crazy, or dead. Nymphs were bound to places. They were quick, capable of invisibility, able to ride air, slip through the tiniest of holes. Since third grade, these past ten years, almost nightly, he dreamed of them--in woods, in oceans, dancing, singing, bathing.

"Look at you," she said. "Wondering about the cost."

She had the feet of frogs, but the rest flowed naturally,

ever-changing, like wind and seasons.

"What will happen to me?" he asked. He hadn't meant to. He meant to say Wow! Or something about how rarely dreams found their way into the world.

She said he could marry her--and then eventually the pond would dry up, the woods would wither, and as she took in the wasted world, he would have to hold her and her grief, how she would sink with the weight of it.

He loved her then, for the unrecoverable world of woods and water. He'd been happy in childhood, wading in the stream, turning over rocks. Stonefly nymphs clung to the stone, skittering away from him. And the wrapped and threaded cased caddis, the infinite smallness of a blue-winged olive, the banana-like crane fly. The world transformed them into ephemeral flickers of wing, lives measured in hours, a rising, a mating, a spinning fall back to water and earth. He'd not been too happy lately, the world less wondrous, his loneliness more apparent.

"Or?" he said.

"Or you could leave me here, bound to the tiniest place, calling your name."

She sat upon the nothingness of the air, looked both at him and past him.

"Why now?" he asked her.

"Oh, to know 'now.' There's only eternity here--no now."

She'd die, of course, soon afterwards.

"How afraid you are!" Water flowed over her. He'd yet to get a clear glimpse. Veiled, like a bride, like what's behind curtains. like the underside of rocks and trees and the undergrowth of woods. She'd be ugly in the world; she'd turn old. Her skin would peel off like bark, her hair fall out

like leaves. It would happen in days or weeks, not years.

He knew now the question.

What is your love of nymphs like? Liquid like water or hard like stones?

dislike for the juvenile label, I remember you now. My Dear, that wasn't a founder's meeting. Five of us— and she went on to call the roll of that absent august body— organized The League in my parlor two weeks before that meeting. The meeting at the church was simply the first regular one of The League. If you'll recall, we put a notice in the paper announcing the meeting and invited all interested parties to attend. Don't you remember?"

"I think you're right, Abigail. It seems like I do recall now that The League was already named in that announcement. All this time I prided myself on being a founder, but I see now that I wasn't, really. How've you been keeping Abigail?" Julianna queried fondly of her newly found old friend as they exited the hall arm-in-arm.

The remainder of the membership was on its feet, milling about and buzzing excitedly about what had occurred and what to do, when Sarah June recovered and nudged the still-bleeding Joe aside. Snatching up the familiar gavel and pounding the podium, she managed to gain enough attention to declare, "Attention, please. I have an announcement."

Reluctantly, the membership quieted enough to allow her to be heard, and crowded closer to the podium, mainly to get a better look at Joe's futile attempts to stay the flow from his nose.

"At the close of this meeting, I will resign as President of the Poughkeepsie Authors League." Over the protestations from the members, Sarah June rapped the gavel again and again, harder and harder, until the shaft broke and the mahogany head flew off into the standing crowd. Someone scrambled among the feet of the throng and recovered the

damaged gavel and returned it to Sarah June, who, grasping it in her palm, continued rapping the podium until the hubbub subsided once more.

“The Chair will entertain a motion first, that the normal succession of officers be set aside. As everyone here knows, our esteemed vice-president, Paul Duncan, has no real interest (she didn’t have to say ‘qualifications’) in serving as president . . .”

“Motion so offered”

“Thank you Paul.”

“Seconded.”

“No, Paul, you can’t second your own motion. Do I hear a second? Thank you Audrey,” Sarah responded to the frantic waving of The League’s recently appointed secretary.

“All in favor? . . . Opposed? . . . The ayes have it. The Chair now will entertain a motion that Joseph Beckett be elected President of the Poughkeepsie Authors League by acclamation.”

“Motion so offered.”

“Thank You Paul.”

“Madame President, I object!”

“A motion is in progress, Joseph. Your objection is out of order. Do I have a second? Thank you Audrey. They’ll have to watch her. She’s much too eager. A motion has been made and seconded . . .” Applause drowned out the balance of the ex-president’s pronouncement. She handed over the gavel head to Joe who tried to refuse it, and then unwillingly took it from her.

“What are you going to do Sarah June?”

“I’m going to write a book,” she responded triumphantly,

“or perhaps just read one.”

“But, what are we going to do?”

“Mister President, I suggest that you close this meeting,” and tucking her purse under her arm, she made her way through the dumbstruck mass. She managed the hint of a smile at the faint thumping of the broken gavel behind her as she closed the door on the Poughkeepsie Authors League.

- Randall Brown