

Frost Notes

Ned Balbo

Anthology

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Robert Frost once said that the perfect education was *classical* and in the same breath, the poet alluded to the education he received at Lawrence High School replete with history, classical learning, and lore. The classical myths continue to provide a firm grounding for today's poetry. Ned Balbo uses classical lore to develop his own unique poem of voices-- a form that Frost used often as his narrative vehicle. Beneath the surface of Balbo's language, one finds some innovations and expansions of Frost's use of the form.

ARISTAEUS FORGIVEN

Eurydice died...

*That's where it often begins,
but remember how she died, the adder's bite
as she fled headlong from the lecherous Aristaeus,
the cause of it all, or, less clear-cut than that,
mixed up somehow in the causes, part of them...*

--Virgil, *Georgics*, IV, David R. Slavitt, translator

I'd watched Eurydice, bees edging near
The bouquet as she reached out, shooed them off
And stepped back, laughing, steadied by her bridesmaids,
Meadow in bloom, fierce humming underfoot
And overhead, snake unseen till it struck
--Such grief. Was I the cause? Desire repressed,
I'd watched her from a grove but stood revealed
Only when it was too late, angry swarm
Confusing everyone, those panicked women,
Spirits of wood and water, shrieking out
Despair and accusations as I fled--
Could they be right? I wondered: had I called
The bees to act as I could not, an impulse
Toward destruction--tear the veil away--
Still unacknowledged as I rose to witness--
Cause the tragedy? And when my bees,
Queenless themselves, mere husks, were dying off
In waves, I should have known my luck had turned
Against me for good reason: secretly,

The angry women watched, waiting their turn,

A grief for a grief, while time and fortune brought

Vengeance against the uninvited guest,

Bridesmaids-in-mourning loyal to the end...

What had I done, or not done? I'd forgotten,

Or fought back the thought, till Proteus

Reminded me. I flinched, but let him speak,

Tale garbled in the telling and retelling,

As I heard the rites that would appease

Mistaken enemies, though in my rage

I'm sure in time I would have sought the bulls

And heifers anyway, slaughtered them all,

And left them gutted somewhere, fury quenched

And vision darkened....So *this is forgiveness*,

I thought bitterly before the altar,

Newly purified....

But when I placed

My hand inside the carcass where new bees

Had gathered in the wound, and felt the nectar

Oozing at my touch, I had to laugh

At such grotesque fulfillment of my prayers,

False respite, restoration that meant less

Than full forgiveness. No, my guilt would last

As long as flesh--grief, too--and more would follow

In the years to come, stung hand recoiling,

Sticky with gold, defiled, a bridesmaid's laughter

Almost audible, sun streaming down

On bloodied altar, carcass, living bees

And empty meadow, all the years ahead.

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Note: Aristaeus Forgiven draws on David R. Slavitt's translation of Georgica IV in *Elegues & Georgics of Virgil* (Johns Hopkins, 1990). *Bulfinch's Mythology* (Random House) includes this summary of Proteus' words to Aristaeus: "You receive the merited award of your deeds, by which Eurydice met her death, for in flying from you she trod upon a serpent, of whose bite she died. To avenge her death, the nymphs, her companions, have sent this destruction to your bees. You have to appease their anger...."

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Ned Balbo's collection, *GALILEO'S BANQUET*, received the 1998 Towson University Prize for Literature. In 2003 he received the Robert Frost Foundation Poetry Award and, in 2002, the John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize. Four times a Pushcart Prize nominee in poetry or nonfiction, he was recently Walter E. Dakin fellow in poetry at the Sewanee Writers' Conference and a poetry fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. His poems have appeared in *Antioch Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Italian Americana*, *Notre Dame Review*, and elsewhere, and his reviews of current poetry and prose appear regularly in *Antioch Review* and *Pleiades*.

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The Frost Foundation accepts entries for the yearly Robert Frost Poetry Award from April through September. The current guidelines are published at: <http://www.frostfoundation.org/>

This year's festival takes place in Lawrence, Massachusetts on the fourth Saturday of October, and details are published on the above website. If you'd like to volunteer, please send an email to [frostfoundation@comcast.net](mailto:frostfoundation@comcast.net).

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