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For release 09/01/09

(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “all the poems that followed it.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact [media@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:media@poetryfoundation.org) for the correct version.)

### SURPASSING THE SELF THROUGH THE SELF

A close reading of Louise Bogan’s early poem, “A Tale.”

By Caitlin Kimball

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“That woman will be able to do anything,” declared Robert Frost after reading Louise Bogan’s “A Tale,” the opening poem in her first book, *Body of This Death*. At the time of the book’s publication in 1923, Bogan was just 26 but had already experienced marriage, motherhood, estrangement, and widowhood, as well as launched a career as an incisive critic and technically masterful lyric poet. Frost’s assessment was high praise, but as a casual prediction it seems impossible to fulfill. When Bogan’s definitive collected works, *The Blue Estuaries*, appeared in 1968, just two years before her death, the volume contained 105 poems—hardly a negligible output, but evidence that her periods of creative frustration far outnumbered those of productivity. She could “do” anything—and did a great deal—but she did most of it with that first volume and even, arguably, with that first poem.

Bogan’s loyalty to conventional meters, rhyme schemes, and imagery may give a superficial impression of starchy high-mindedness set to music. In her first volume, you won’t find a lot of imagistic razzle-dazzle or ornamentation. The poems are relentlessly austere, scattered with shards, echoes, withdrawing tides, and mowed-down fields. She mistrusted the lily-gilding and lush sighs of the Romantic and Victorian verse that had nourished her as an adolescent, and she was equally suspicious of what she saw as the high-strung and erotic expressions of fellow “lady poets” she otherwise admired. She kept a tight lid on the emotional occasions of her poetry. Her poetic personae are often found in aftermaths, playing out the brittle affections left after the sensuous assaults of passion. A poem, Bogan wrote in a 1923 issue of *The New Republic*, “must . . . be the mask, not the incredible face” and “can never be more than a veil dropped before a void.” In her view, this isn’t just a statement of poetic taste but a psychological necessity: the

poem can't embody rage or love—that's already been done by the poet. "The poem is always a last resort," she insists. By the time of its composition, the intellect must be involved. She didn't want her art to aggrandize sensation, but to subdue and transform it. Her language of restraint belies a passionate ambition for "surpassing the self through the self," as she once described it.

Her "tale" is actually a short lyric framed as a fable-in-progress, rather than a recounting. As such, it feels both immediate and remote. We know the male protagonist not through his thoughts but through his actions: he is a symbolic figure rather than a habitable persona. His journey is rendered in short, small words that propel the mostly iambic rhythm. But Bogan's careful linguistic counterpoints and echoes balance and enrich this terse quality. Rhymes of sound are also rhymes of meaning: "break" and "make" are opposites; "together" (unity, consistency) plays against "weather" (change); "lock" and "clock" are containers; "waits" and "gates" both suggest measure and control. Such delicate, careful word choices particularize the protagonist's situation: he is not all youth, yet Bogan reveals little of his story's origins or effects. His quest is described almost casually:

He goes to see what suns can make  
From soil more indurate and strange.

He is not fleeing, but he is also not heading off on a carefree adventure. "He goes to see" suggests both decisive action and passive curiosity. But this is not spring break. It is a breaking-off:

He cuts what holds his days together  
And shuts him in, as lock on lock:  
The arrowed vane announcing weather,  
The tripping racket of a clock;

Seeking, I think, a light that waits  
Still as a lamp upon a shelf,—  
A land with hills like rocky gates  
Where no sea leaps upon itself.

The first three stanzas propose a disturbing paradox: Mutability is monotonous. Change—of an hour or an era—has a cumulative effect of stasis (or, as the saying goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same). In this "land of change" tides, weather, and the days themselves are oppressive, and made even more so by measurements. Bogan's balking youth wants out of this place where he is doomed to witness and mark patterns in chaos. He cannot hold change back, so he puts his hope in total escape. The otherwise omniscient narrator's arresting "I think" feels like a distancing technique, a way to hold the youth's distress at arm's length and remind us that this is, actually, a "tale." But the self-consciousness of the brief gesture betrays Bogan's investment in this crisis. Is this carefully compressed story one of her "last resorts"?

The narrator reaches the youth's stark conclusion for him: this paradox really has no resolution. Striving toward enlightenment lands you in a kind of hell:

But he will find that nothing dares  
To be enduring, save where, south  
Of hidden deserts, torn fire glares  
On beauty with a rusted mouth,—

Where something dreadful and another  
Look quietly upon each other.

The final passage is a travesty of the hardscape outside of time that the youth first envisioned: the sun-baked ground now splits open and threatens to swallow the soul that dares to venture so far. Bogan's inferno is actively sinister, with a face (glaring fire, rusted mouth) to mock our own. What "beauty" is being scorned? It may be the very idea of beauty, or is it the youth's energy and desire to throw off consciousness, the root of desire itself? The concluding couplet, with its lilting polysyllabic words and feminine rhymes (another/other), is both pat and riddling. The words gesture toward the resolution often found in the final lines of a sonnet, but what (or who) are these dreadful "somethings"? The two spooky figures could evoke a standoff—eternity as a confrontation—or they could suggest conspirators, looming over the young man in silent judgment of his attempt to shirk his fate. The youth (and the reader) will be denied any consoling insight or even a concrete vision. Bogan has placed her carefully staged drama so close to the void, perhaps as close as she could get.

"I broke my life, to seek relief / From the flawed light of love and grief," declares Bogan's persona in "The Alchemist," another poem from her first volume. It is a more direct, intimate expression of the desire to surpass the self that she first approached in "A Tale." Those "flawed light[s]," the emotions and surface tensions that govern our worldly, subjective experience, are fragments of an ultimate, unknowable tension. If she could indeed break her life, surpass the self and be absorbed into the force that outlasts it, would the force be benign or malignant? Or both? Or . . . nothing?

If Bogan really did see a poem as a last resort, her task would place her, again and again, at this limit. The compulsion to make language both convey experience and transcend it, not knowing what waited on the other side, could provoke a poet or stop her in her tracks. Perhaps this first poem enacts Bogan's struggle to create all the poems that followed it.

Caitlin Kimball is a poet living in St. Paul, Minnesota. This article first appeared on [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org). Learn more about Louise Bogan, and her poetry, at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).

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