Featured Poet: Molly Peacock

Molly Peacock’s latest book is *The Analyst*, a collection of poems that tell the story of a decades-long patient-therapist relationship that reverses and continues to evolve after the analyst’s stroke and reclamation of her life through painting. Peacock’s other volumes of poetry include *The Second Blush* and *Cornucopia: New and Selected Poems*, and a prose poem/tiny tale collaboration with Kara Kosaka, *Alphabetique: 26 Characteristic Fictions*. Passionate about bringing poetry to a wider public, she helped create *Poetry in Motion* on New York City’s subways and buses and inaugurated *The Best Canadian Poetry* series. Molly Peacock is also the author of the noted biography *The Paper Garden: Mrs. Delany Begins Her Life’s Work at 72*, named a Book of the Year by *The Economist*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Booklist*, *The London Evening Standard*, *The Irish Times*, and *The Sunday Telegraph*. A fellow of the Danforth, Ingram Merrill, and Woodrow Wilson Foundations, as well as the Leon Levy Center for Biography, recipient of grants from both the NEA and the Canada Council, Peacock also wrote and performed “The Shimmering Verge,” a one-woman theatre piece in poems. One of the subjects of the documentary *A Life Outside Convention* about women’s choices not to have children, she is married to the James Joyce scholar Michael Groden.

Peacock is the conference Poet Laureate. She will lead a workshop on *The Ekphrastic Muse*.

Description: This workshop, designed as both a seminar and a studio, invites participants at every level. We will consider how the visual inspires poetic craft and vice versa. We will delve into the uses, functions, rhythms, forms and dreams of word painting, both as visual art inspires poetry and as imagery is created in poems. What does a repeating form or a limited form do for an ekphrastic poem? How does a striking image function in a formal poem? Although ekphrasis can extend to borrowings among many arts, we will focus on poetry and visual art. Each class will provide an opportunity for the participants to start or sketch a poem.

**THREE POEMS INSPIRED BY THE EKPHRASTIC MUSE**

**BY MOLLY PEACOCK**
**GIRL AND FRIENDS VIEW NAKED GODDESS**

*After Pier Celestino Gilardi's painting "A Visit to the Gallery"

She'd rather be nude, she'd rather be dressed,  
rather cover up her bum and breasts.  
If she dropped her clothes would she look like this?  
A sculpted goddess, bare as an almond?  
Her girlfriends buzz about those goddess tits,  
though the shy one stares straight ahead -- stunned  
to see what she might become.  What might  
the goddess become if she could untighten  
hers gaze and be part of her watchers' scene?  
Ruffled, laced, stockinged and corsetted,  
this girl's dying to shed it all; a sheen  
of longing on her face asks, "Can't I be rid  
of my stays?"  But the object she'd become  
would have to stay in the hall alone

in the clammy gloom of every Roman night . . .  
Goddess, her ideal, may you not feel  
or have to possess a soul . . .  Let that light  
inside these girls, who'll dash down the hall  
with arms linked, out for a bite to eat and  
lots of gossip at their visit's end  
(for now they've seen her, and she's inside them,  
a man's ideal, and they see they could be she,  
the naked lady of a sculptor's whim,  
cold as the floors they walk on), let that light glow.  
May they dress up daily, may their servants stir  
hot washtubs of bloody cotton strips to insure  
they won't bleed on their taffetas.  May they laugh  
at a man inserting his soul in a sculpture.

May the sculpture not feel it intrude there,  
and chafe. And may her observers have futures.

From The Second Blush, W.W. Norton and Company

**GUSTO**

Skin the asparagus for their lives,  
whip the eggs, parmesan and chives,  
miming your zest with my zeal...  
Once, we shared a restaurant meal.  
Slice the baby potatoes, skins on,
turn to the smooth black surface on
the stove where two steamers—enamel—
swim like red fish painted on enamel
and prepare with attention, like you,
my intimate witness, like you
who will never speak to me again
whom I will never see again,
hearing from your friend who tried
when you said, LET ME DIE,

I WANT TO DIE, to help you.
How horrible they got you
to the Emergency Room on time,
hemorrhaging in the brain,
a malformation that had lain in wait
77 years for you, supine,
slumped in your watercolor class.
Spoon the mustard and parsley sauce
on the perfectly steamed potatoes…
watching over them, keeping on my toes—
as you watched over me.
You were only forty
when you took me on.
Thirty-seven years! The stove is on.

The stove is a painting
from which the omelet leaps, and fainting,
folds in three on the plate
where sliced strawberry fins await.
And it was red food you ate with gusto at
the ristorante where we shared that goodbye meal
—I was off to grad school, done with therapy,
so we thought. Marinara sauce on the hint
of lipstick left on your lips, red on red.
Your dark brows swam across your forehead
as you watched me with a pure gaze,
and I watched back from the haze
of confusion—patient? or not.
Our new distance. The stove’s still hot.

It was as if you’d painted my cranium
as a fishbowl: there my ideas swam.
Though my thoughts misfired for me,
you painted me a copy of their beauty.
With attention now, I eat my food all
alone, recalling the words of your friend
who brought your clothes to the hospital. Fraught.
“She can’t say the names of her sons, though she can still feed herself.” Undone. But you eat, the friend tells me, with gusto. “Hospital food?” I say in shock. White on white. Humble, the new appetite. ‘No,’ your friend says, “I sneak her lattes.” Pain? “Not in pain.” White with a quick espresso stain.

This poem originally appeared in Plume online, and now appears in The Analyst, published by W.W. Norton and Company.

**FRET NOT**

When you welcomed me for the first time since
your brain hemorrhaged, you looked so trim and well
in black and white you could almost convince
us both you were whole. Your living room welled
with light, the wall above the couch arranged
with your watercolors. “I hung them myself,”
you said proudly. Almost nothing was changed
(except for the attendant, making herself
small by sitting silently.) You’re witnessed now,
as you’ve witnessed me. “May I have a painting?”
I’d been afraid to ask, but I did somehow.
“You really want one of my paintings?
Then come in here.” Your bedroom? But I was
your patient! Before your brain bled. Yes, was.

I followed you into the narrow room:
plain as plain. Like a nun’s cell, the bed,
a single pallet, no headboard, a deep red
*Nuns fret not at their narrow convent’s room.*
No one could climb into that cot but one.
A tall row of wooden cabinets. One
you opened, and small paintings that had loomed
above my head (as I’d lain on your couch
and talked about, around, for, yet, because…and wept)
you brought out now from where you slept.
Your pallet. Next to your palette.
Red blanket like a hemorrhage contained
after a time bomb exploded your brain.

The painting I chose was small: two lemons
against a blue background, one with a tip,  
a salmon-colored aureola. Lemons  
like breasts, nurturing companions, the tip 
of a sensuous world on a piece of paper 
folding out and beyond and inward and 
onto the contours of the conquered land 
of your mind, landmined. We’re. Were.  
You laid the yellow watercolor down 
on your bed, a camp cot for the wounded 
in a tent pitched on a plot of scanty ground. 
Fret not. Fret you not. Forget-me-not: found.  
So I lifted it up—then laid it in this frame 
now on my wall. Hourly I pass your name.