

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Autobiography of Eve

Wearing nothing but snakeskin
boots, I blazed a footpath, the first
radical road out of that old kingdom
toward a new unknown.
When I came to those great flaming gates
of burning gold,
I stood alone in terror at the threshold
between Paradise and Earth.
There I heard a mysterious echo:
my own voice
singing to me from across the forbidden
side. I shook awake—
at once alive in a blaze of green fire.

Let it be known: I did not fall from grace.

I leapt
to freedom.

Ansel Elkins¹

Reflections

Allow me to share with you an excerpt from an interview with Ansel Elkins shortly after her collection of poems, *Blue Yodel*, won the Yale Series of Younger Poets' Prize, one of the most prestigious honors awarded for a first book manuscript. Printed here is a response to a question concerning the achievements of that work, from an interview titled "To Shake Them Awake" with Ivelisse Rodriguez, published in *Kweli Journal* in 2014:

I don't recall what my first hopes were for my work because I was feeling my way blindly through it, trying on this hat, then that one, trying to carve out a voice. But one thing I always knew was that I wanted my poems to jar people, to shake them awake, to touch them in some way. I don't want to write tidy little poems that are polite and refined and forgettable.... It's my natural tendency to inhabit multiple voices, multiple selves. On one hand, it's a form of play. But there's another aspect, too. Henry Fielding has a line that's always stayed with me: "who masque the face, t' unmasque the mind." Inventing various personas, wearing and speaking through multiple masks, allows me to explore different ways of being.

¹ "Autobiography of Eve" by Ansel Elkins from *Blue Yodel*, Yale University Press. Used by permission.

“Autobiography of Eve” is a persona poem written in the imagined voice—using the mask, that is—of a modern Eve. I make reference to the poet’s commentary on her use of persona allowing an artist to explore “different ways of being” as a way of attending to those evocative lines we read: “...a mysterious echo: / my own voice / singing to me from across the forbidden / side. I shook awake—...” That we are privy to the poet’s motivation and intention enriches what we can learn from the printed page: Eve is a dynamic, complex, and prismatic character with a voice not even she is used to hearing. It strikes me that Elkins’ desire to have us be “shook awake” mirrors what she may be illuminating about Eve, that Eve herself has awakened to a realization that perhaps she has been underestimated, diminished, and misconstrued. Whose fault it is may be irrelevant; it is Eve’s turn to set the record straight—for her own sake and for ours.

That Eve would sit down to write her autobiography—which is to say, claim her own narrative and thereby *reclaim* her identity—is enough to make me say, *Yes! Amen!* And that she would put that serpent finally to good use and fashion for herself some snakeskin boots makes me want to stand up and cheer. *This* is my kind of Eve!

I recently presented this poem in conjunction with the first chapters of Genesis in a course exploring the Hebrew Bible. You may recall from last week’s *Wellspring* that my aim for that class is to offer poems that complement rather than correspond, poems that reimagine rather than retell. Elkins’ poem is of course more than a portrait and more than an exercise in persona; it is an invitation if not a challenge to consider what we may not have considered before, or to *reconsider* what we may have, until now, left alone.

Remarkably, Eve makes no mention of Adam, does not address God, and stands “alone in terror at the threshold.” I cannot help but feel she is talking directly to our class—a diligent and studious group making its way methodically through the Old Testament—as if, indeed, to shake us awake, look us in the eye, and dare us to think again. Where she leaps, into that unknown freedom, we will certainly follow.

✧ About the poet

Ansel Elkins is the author of *Blue Yodel*, winner of the 2014 Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize. Her work has appeared in *The American Scholar*, *Oxford American*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*, among other journals. She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the North Carolina Arts Council, and the American Antiquarian Society. She lives in Greensboro, North Carolina.



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