

Liane Ellison Norman

A Generous Voyage

Susan Shaw Sailer. *Ship of Light*. Shellsburg, IA: Port Yonder Books, 2013.

Susan Sailer's *Ship of Light* is a gift of energy, tenderness and courage to a reader grateful for experience so generously shared. A woman of impressive scholarly credentials, Sailer here opens up her heart and lets us in.

The speaker of the first poem, "When I was ten I walked on downed trees," expresses the courage of a child adventuring along the Nisqually River in the Pacific northwest. "I mounted the root end, / stepped goat-foot along the trunk / to midpoint where the Nisqually / raced below in glacial melt." "Queen of logs," she "surveyed / the river as it tore downstream." Nearing the end of the book, she mourns "Leaving Rock Lake," a beloved West Virginia home place. "Next fall I won't be at Rock Lake / to see 200 trees—oaks, maples, / black walnuts, poplars—turn magenta- / gold-copper-bronze. // What will become / of the young red dogwood / we protected from deer / with rebar and chicken wire?"

In the final poem, the speaker walks her dog, Loki, for the last time at Rock Lake. "I am content to be. / For now I do not need to see. If God / shares this dark, good. If not, good. / I twist the flashlight on, walk up / the drive toward home. Loki stops / once more. We enter light."

In between the child's courageous adventuring on downed trees at river's edge and the older woman's walking her dog in the dark, Sailer gives the reader various and recurrent themes. In "I've Been Feeling Very Darwin Lately," she begins, "My big toe feels a sudden urge to fly," and a little later tells how "My Granddaughter, 13, Paints my Toenails" a color called "Pearly Purple." ". . . After six weeks / the polish on my left big toenail and / right fourth toenail cracks, begins to peel, / the other eight the toes of a goddess."

Sailer recounts how the aging body's demands supplant "Hope that love could end war" with "hope I can pay bills on time, schedule / an appointment with the doctor. Will two / friends diagnosed with cancer survive?" Her appetite is now closer to home: "I adore the kohl-smudged / throats of tulips, the bite of endive, / frisé, French sorrel."

But the fierce appetite for life sings in "To My Vulva": "How

could you wilt, withered, / a six-day bud gone bad? / You used to throb at touch. / Now you might as well be anybody's elbow. / Old girl, you let me down . . . Let me come until I'm sated, / more plant than animal, a purring daffodil."

The title poem, "Ship of Light," derives from an Art Deco panel rescued from the French luxury liner, *Normandie*, permanently exhibited at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art.

The lavishly appointed ship carried, among others, Gary Cooper and his girlfriend, whose shipboard high life contrasts with news clips documenting labor strikes, political assassinations, evidence of anti-Semitism. A section in the voice of the ship's designer follows its seizure by the United States, its repurposing as a troop ship for World War II, its burning from a welding torch accident, scrap sold for \$3.80 a ton. The book's other long poem, "Seedcorn Must Not Be Ground," observes the impact of war on those who fight and those who love those who fight. It juxtaposes soldiers' injuries—" . . . Most nights Lopez / blows up again before his eyes, one boot up / to the bloody knee standing in a ditch. / Harley can't stop crying"—with West Virginia's National Cemetery which "looks / too full though it has plots for thousands more."

The poems in *Ship of Light* exhibit range and complexity with precise detail. It's as if what takes a novelist 390 pages, Sailer can accomplish in thirty-nine poems. Here is a woman's life in all its variety, inviting readers to think about their own complex lives. There's this voice: "At the dinner party, Darwin says to Noah: / 'What about that pterodactyl?' / Noah says, 'Just ran out of time'." And this one: "that we found each other, perfect in our imperfections honed / then jailed by intellect // that flesh be warm, my pelvis against you, breasts cushioning / the space below your shoulder blades."

While trying to represent the range and tenderness of this entirely satisfying volume, I find I want to quote each poem in its entirety because it's hard to represent such richness in a few lines from here, from there. Each time I read *Ship of Light*, I find new resonance, re-discover a speaker who unites precision with tenderness, courage with vulnerability.

Susan Shaw Sailer's poems appeared in *Kestrel* 24.

