

FRANK PAINO

Falling

What if the buffalo, fur matted with mud
and dung,
had tucked one glass-slick horn beneath the ribs
of the man who led him aboard the
decommissioned
schooner, her two masts jutting into autumn sky
as she scraped the wooden dock a mile or so
up the
Niagara where the Horseshoe’s thunder seemed
more like the hum of honeybees in summer?

What if the raccoon had dragged its rabid teeth
along the pale flesh of its handler’s wrist,
a surgical
slice just above the glove-line he would shrug off
until night fell with its fever and slow
asphyxiation?

What if the lioness, half in her dotage but
still mad
for life, had clawed a mortal gape into her
captor’s jugular,
leaving him to bleed out across the bleached
fir decking?

Or what if the she-bears, all three of them,
had made
of their claws a crown of thorns to tear open
the scalp of William Forsyth—baring the skull
of the hotelier who dreamed the marvel of
“ferocious beasts” swallowed by the cataract
would fill the rooms which stood,
too-often, empty?

What if and what if...

but there is no such happy ending, there are only
15,000 revelers gathered at the end of
September, 1827,
to watch this “reverse Noah’s ark” carry
her startled

freight over the lip of eternity. Only the
well-dressed
young men, polished brass keys to the
finest hotels
warm in breast pockets, flushed brides
with gloved
hands looped through their arms. Only fine
leather
shoes and long skirts going dark where they
wick wet
pavement, all eyes turned toward *The Michigan*
as she floats from Flat Rock into view, her
rusted rails
lined with the absurd forms of burlap pirates
lashed
tight and unmoving, though it is the wild-eyed
beasts,
already drenched from the tossing, that draw
the crowds’ attention, animal cries swallowed
by the Roman coliseum roar of water and
men who
lean hard out over the ledge to better see
the spectacle.

How they cheer as the keel screams over
upthrust
boulders, sending a silver fox into white
turbulence
where he disappears into his airless fate,
and then
the ship herself, torn beneath the waterline
but sound enough to answer the current’s
incessant
call until the moment she is buoyed only by air,
water sluicing from ripped timbers, what
creatures
remain held by chains or terror one last,
uncountable
moment before ship and animals drop through
the rippling curtain and break upon the rocks
below.

The breathless crowd will stay a while
longer, search
for any sign of life under the faded rainbow mist,
they’ll watch a few splintered planks breach the
foamed
surface and drift placidly away, then they’ll
stroll to
posh hotels where they’ll dine in candlelight
and relive
the day’s distraction, each man boasting the very
best view
while the women lie about deep swoons or
how they
had to turn away. Later still, they’ll retire to
gas-lit rooms
where the sheets are strewn with roses and
they’ll fuck
with rough abandon, then fall asleep with
windows
thrown full open to the water’s lullaby.
All night they’ll
dream of hands that lift them in a kind of halting
flight,
a lightness that slowly takes on dead weight,
the way a dress
or winter jacket pulls a swimmer down, a tug
that will at last
give way to a terrible, ceaseless falling.

Frank Paino’s poems have appeared in *Gettysburg Review*, *The Journal*, *Iowa Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and the anthology *The Face of Poetry*. Recent work appears in *Lake Effect* and *Hunger Mountain*. His first two volumes of poetry were published by Cleveland State University Press: *The Rapture of Matter* (1991) and *Out of Eden* (1997). He is currently at work on his third manuscript.