

Robert B. Shaw

Dinosaur Tracks

Beside the river where they used to wade
mornings or evenings in their hotter world,
relaxed as only those can be whose link
is soldered nicely high up on the food chain,
they've left a mincing trail or three-toed prints
in mud that time medusa'd into slabs
of sandstone brown as mud. The steps advance,
even less hurried now than when they first
pressed muck along their marshy avenue,
then vanish where the stratum is disrupted.

Each one about a man's handspan in size
and looking avian enough to plant
visions of carnivorous prototypes
of ostriches and emus (and in fact,
we're now informed such foragers wore feathers),
these tracks lead nowhere, and we're left to posit
the river of rivers in Connecticut
broadened and lush with swampy margins but
pursuing its primeval, silty creep
down reaches dense with hot fog and tree ferns,
as alien to us as any predator
traipsing along its banks. Again the world
is warming, sliding back toward a climate
like the one enjoyed by the old slashers,
and we, after scanning their once-soggy
plod into extinction, quicken our pace,
knowing what is forewarned and knowing too
we may at last leave less of an impression.

“Pity the Monsters!”

--Robert Lowell

Yes, at this late date, I pity them,
fang-flashers stuck with the dead-end job
of devouring bodies and/or souls
of victims hapless, foolhardy, or
corrupt, and always more on the way.
Think of Egypt's Eater of the Dead,
Ammit, equipped with crocodile head,
leopard torso, hippo hindquarters,
slumped and sulking beneath the balance
weighing the heart of each new would-be
tenant against the feather of truth.
Intent on nothing but the hoped-for
guilt overload that would fill her gorge,
she had to stay awake slaving
while Thoth droned out the court proceedings
and Anubis yawned, holding the scales.
Think of the sphinx (the Grecian version),
part woman, part eagle, part lion,
roosting by the main road into Thebes,
a chimerical, bored tolltaker
programmed to plague each passerby
with her musty riddle, molting wings
unauthorized to flutter her off
her post even for calls of nature.
Think of chivalry-pestered dragons
who probably wanted nothing more
than a few well-spaced human gobbets
and peace and quiet while they caressed
their coin collections, snug in their caves.
Think of the centuries of bad press,
followed by years of no one taking
them seriously—to the point that

they became moth-eaten jabberwocks
scarcely able to alarm children.
It was their misfortune that we learned
as soon as we did not to fear them;
and after all, why should we ever
have done so, having earlier learned
to do unto others all the things
that made them infamous—things that now
we think may remain tolerable
if kept for the most part out of sight
while we dragoon the world purged of myth
into our own brittle regimen.