

Introducing Maryann Corbett and Alexander Lazarus Wolff

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Maryann Corbett and Alexander Lazarus Wolff, Corbett's junior by about half a century, both write poised, thoughtful, and musical poems about history, love, and much else. Corbett takes the long view. The three poems of hers here published for the first time share precisely the qualities whose lack she quietly notes in 'Archaeology,' describing a clumsy novice: 'And there you are, untrained for this, alone, | too pressed by habit to be still.' The hasty and unskilled archaeologist is unable to achieve the 'retrieval' of what time has concealed, and the poem ends with an eloquent phrase describing what feels like a recurrent failure of communication: 'the old unsaid'.

Corbett's work demonstrates precisely the 'slow, soft patience' the archaeologist fatally lacks. Every word in her meticulous work has been carefully chosen, and the result is doubly rewarding. We can look at her poems – for example, at these three – from close up, but they also afford space for us to step back and do a kind of double take. 'Archaeology' could be describing a botched excavation (I thought of Richard III's remains unearthed beneath a parking lot, though perhaps that retrieval was in fact successful); but the trope of digging down into the past is, as I've suggested, about more than archaeology. 'Chronicle' applies to multiple pasts and also – all too vividly, as soon as one takes thought – to the present. 'The world's false subtleties' takes a lingering, clear-eyed look at a generation's worth of cultural change, and not change for the better; that the poem is also a *bouts-rimés* for a Shakespeare sonnet is almost a bonus, as well as being a *tour de force*.

Corbett's pronouns in these three poems deserve notice: second person in 'Archaeology,' third person in 'Chronicle,' and first-person plural in 'The world's false subtleties'. The voice comes at

us from a range of sources and angles. The ‘I’ is intriguingly absent from these poems, but Corbett’s voice and sensibility are everywhere present.

In the landscape of today’s poetry, the absence of that ‘I’ feels spacious and refreshing. In the same way, Corbett’s effortless command of prosody, her crisp lineation, and her clarity and economy of phrasing give her work a lapidary quality.

Young Alexander Lazarus Wolff, by contrast, is at home in the first person. But Wolff is a canny craftsman whose attention to the achieved shape of each poem is palpable in all his work. Avoiding solipsism or obscurity, he clearly takes pleasure in the challenges and rewards of forms; and his syntactic control and feel for metaphor give his graceful lyricism a structural integrity.

Whatever situation occasioned ‘Controlled Burn’ (I love that title), the poem aches with sadness. Even so, Wolff keeps all his senses alert to the now-extinguished candle, so that we see the pale melted wax and coiling smoke and sniff for the departed ‘scent of hyacinth.’ The scale of this poem accommodates both sequoias and fluttering curtains; every image bears symbolic weight without ceasing to be vividly itself. Unlike Wolff’s villanelle and sonnet, also presented here, ‘Controlled Burn’ doesn’t rhyme. But each line falls with an authority and finality that give the poem a musical cadence. Wolff’s sure feel for meter, which he deploys subtly and flexibly, I have found to be very rare among poets of his generation.

Far from detracting from their themes, the technical skills Wolff shares with Corbett enhance the eloquence of their poems – poems whose authority and control invite us to enjoy them, even as they often point toward subjects and moods that may not be so pleasurable to contemplate. Both of these well-read poets write in a generative poetic tradition, yet their images – fake news, ‘the stalled car in the left lane’ – also speak to our moment. Both Wolff and Corbett are artists with language who also, like all good poets, are concerned to tell the truth.

It’s a pleasure to introduce these two poets to readers who are probably unfamiliar with their work.