

NATHAN MANLEY

Elegy for Heron Town

Pastureside, a slow heat fiddles its cadenza,
white-gold fingers of the sun bright drumming,

expert and pitiless—earth as of oiled rosewood.

Arcs a heron pair, tailing the clef staves

laddered up blue flights of illimitable air,
wingbeats in the grace of each cobalt turn

now figuring like notes, increasingly distant.

Off beyond this ditchwater run they haunt,

soft glides snarled like a sad and counterpointed phrase
(the old song thrilling hypnagogic dies),

they veer out, wind-spinnakered, to the night districts
of Heron Town, where great birds strut and wink,

gab along the cobbles in their pleated suits—how
chic, guzzling crayfish at the dusk-café—

and beak their cigarillos, belching, from the tuck
of red cravats. They relish brandy hours.

Streetlamps wick up, guttering in the violet dark.

There's a music you can't make or make out,

bells or flutes or concertinas: cuticle moon
same as your very own, strung up half-sail,

bronze-shorn in the overcast, shining like a chime.
An old greybeak taps, feathering ashes
into the calyx of his crystal dish, wine-drunk
as he eyes the barges, towboats going
so sedately, trash heaps high and humpbacked, then gone.
For all the prickling in his sky-sulked heart,
all that grey September water pulsing wavelets,
icy underfoot, he cannot hear you,
though he'd like to, as you trace the ditchline homeward,
whistling *All Creatures of Our God and King*
for the pleasure of no one in particular—
so damn sweet that, somewhere, water's bending to it.