

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Karen Poppy: “Diving at the Lip of the Water”

Karen Poppy · Thursday, November 18th, 2021

### Diving at the Lip of the Water

*for Rachel*

I am the wall at the lip of the water  
 I am the rock that refused to be battered  
 I am the dyke in the matter, the other  
 I am the wall with the womanly swagger  
 I am the dragon, the dangerous dagger  
 I am the bulldyke, the bulldagger

From “She Who,” by Judy Grahn, at the beginning of Chapter Six of her book, *Another Mother Tongue*, about the linguistic history of the word bulldyke/bulldike.

*The common duiker [a small antelope, name pronounced dyker] uses a pair of glands under its eyes for scent marking with a tarry secretion. Duikers run with a distinctive darting and diving style when they flee danger. This gives rise to its common name which is the Africans for “diver.”*

From the website of *Fascinating Africa*.

Between trees, within edges  
 Of forests, woodlands.  
 Among open clearings.  
 With scent markings below eyes,  
 We label another our own.

This is how we bull duikers do it.  
 We males secrete a substance,  
 Deftly labeling, marking with  
 Our tarry, leaf-scented names,  
 Our territories, calves, mates.

When we run, we dive at the lip  
 Of the water, be it a field, a deep  
 Forest, a body. We do this from love

Or fear—which you understand,  
For you and I mark in the same way.

—

Humans cover with other scents,  
Afraid of labels or diving into them.  
Each marking, energy, power.  
Labels we give ourselves,  
Labels we use to mark another.

Some names change in meaning,  
Mutate over time, original markers  
Lost. Some we mistake in origin:  
Bull duiker, a male antelope.  
Never the origin of bulldyke.

We cull meaning from sound,  
Just as our eyes tell us what  
We see. We feel. An energy,  
A power. You misread her,  
By mistake or by design.

—

We can only guess at origin  
Of bulldyke and bulldagger.  
Roman times. Harlem Renaissance  
Novels. Women singing the Blues.  
Dig within erasure and resistance.

I like the Blues best, the song  
Written and sung by Bessie  
Jackson (pseudonym of Lucille  
Bogan)—explicit and raw,  
Prophetic dirty Blues, peel

Back the layers, and here  
It is, lay of the land. Women  
Can be whatever they choose:  
*Comin' a time, B.D. women*  
*Ain't gonna need no men.*

—

“Bulldike is the kind of word  
Most women hope to avoid  
All their lives, for few things  
Are more horrifying to be called,”  
But these women hold the dagger.

---

Surrounded by hostile bulls.  
Sometimes surrounded by  
Women afraid of difference.  
Sometimes by people who  
Insist that she must be a man.

We can reclaim the name  
“Used on a woman like a whip.”  
We can reclaim our own swagger.  
Our own swagger can be womanly.  
Our swagger can mark our love.

—

So says my lover, who loves me  
Body and soul. There must be  
Space for everyone. For women  
Who swagger. For all women.  
Don't say she isn't lesbian because

She loves me. There must be space  
For her. For me: queer, never quite  
Within borders, between, on edges,  
In the open. I want to make that clear.  
Embrace and don't isolate us.

Surround us with love, define us,  
Mark us by our love for each other.  
I love a woman, but my gender bleeds  
Beyond labels and markings, no matter  
What I'm called, and what you call me.

—

No matter what I call myself, I am marked.  
I bleed monthly. I've been attacked with  
Thrown stones, called a dyke. I swagger  
Womanly, and I love a woman, but  
I am not one. I swagger, and I shift.

—

We have to love each other.  
Those on either side of gender  
Binary. Those who transform,  
Transgress—and those who  
Stay hidden in heavy cover.

Also those like me,  
Who don't fit evenly,

---

Who shift and move  
Without gender, and  
Within sexuality.

Some things, especially hate,  
Can mark you. They have  
Marked me. Call me what  
You will. I love you,  
As I do, unconditionally.

—

I will love my lover,  
Knowing her beauty  
Shakes the earth, comes  
From another place, full  
Of energy, power.

The sleek duiker dives  
In escaping run, zig zags  
Like my lover's tongue—  
But my lover is not afraid.  
My body a safe field, a sheltering forest.

She cleanses me, recitations  
Of sacred ash, this beautiful  
Burning, a pooled release.  
When I cry, I am hers, and  
I am her. She holds me.

—

There lived a warrior queen named  
Boudica. Bulldike, or bulldiker.  
In a last stand, with warrior daughters,  
Boudica burned Londinium,  
Now modern London, to the ground.

She led a vast uprising when Romans  
Invaded to destroy her people.  
What happens if we erase her name?  
What happens to our own markings  
Of energy, power? Let her be named.

Let us dive at the lip of the water,  
Into love, and fearless. Let us  
Mark each other with freedom,  
Like bold Boudica at the helm  
Of the chariot, horses charging—

---

No one holding the reins.

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[Click here](#) to purchase the chapbook *OUR OWN BEAUTIFUL BRUTALITY* by Karen Poppy

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