

"HER SHEER GIFTS AS A WRITER . . . PLACE HER IN A LONELY LEAGUE OF ACHIEVEMENT."

—THE NEW YORK TIMES

"A REMARKABLE LITERARY VOICE REDISCOVERED." —KIRKUS

CALM SEA
AND
PROSPEROUS
VOYAGE

THE
SELECTED
STORIES
OF

BETTE

HOWLAND

ALSO BY BETTE HOWLAND

W-3

Blue in Chicago

Things to Come and Go

CALM SEA AND PROSPEROUS VOYAGE

A Public Space Books
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Brooklyn, NY 11217

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FOR
THE ONES
BETTE
LOVED

QUIET SEA

Deep quiet rules the waters;
Motionless, the sea reposes,
And the boatsman looks about with alarm
At the smooth surfaces about him.
No wind comes from any direction!
A deathly, terrible quiet!
In the vast expanse
Not one wave stirs.

FORTUNATE VOYAGE

The mist is torn away,
The heavens turn bright,
And Aeolus unfastens
The bonds of fear.
There, the winds rustle,
The boatsman stirs.
Quickly! Quickly!
The waves rise up again.
The distant view draws close,
Land ho, I call!

—*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*
translated from the German by Scott Horton

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AFTERWORD

In nice chairs on a stage sit five North American writers born in the 1930s—three are dead, but only one was lost, Bette Howland, born in 1937. They're seated younger to older, which has Bette flanked by Raymond Carver and Joyce Carol Oates, both born in 1938, and Margaret Atwood and Toni Cade Bambara, born in 1939. Neither of the two others dead is as out of print as Bette Howland was until this volume. I love the very literary story: In 2015, Brigid Hughes, editor of the magazine *A Public Space*, finds *W-3*, Bette's 1974 memoir, in a sale bin at a used bookstore, reads everything she wrote, and plans for the present collection result. A press is founded, A Public Space Books. Publication of *W-3* will be next—placing Bette next to Maxine Hong Kingston and Vivian Gornick as progenitors of the resurgence of memoir.

Wherever you position Bette Howland's absence, the vacancy is glaring—she has the kind of large presence on the page that reconfigures the literary history of its moment, as, for instance, the revival of Jean Rhys did in the 1960s. Both were mentored by an A-list great male novelist—Jean Rhys by Ford Madox Ford; Bette by Saul Bellow, whom she met at a writers conference on Staten Island in the early sixties. Like Rhys and *FMF*, Bette and Bellow were “lovers for a time.” He continued as her friend until the end of his life, giving her advice that's solid gold for a blocked, often depressed writer lacking in self-confidence: “I think you ought to write,

in bed, and make use of your unhappiness. I do it. Many do. One should cook and eat one's misery. Chain it like a dog. Harness it like Niagara Falls to generate light and supply voltage for electric chairs."

That Bette is being revived now makes her a member of a cohort who have benefited from the forty-year gap between the end of a woman's youth and beauty when, at say forty, one's reputation goes dark, until eighty or so, when one becomes a discovery! Think Marie Ponsot, American poet, the above-mentioned Rhys, the recently deceased Diana Athill, "discovered" in her late nineties. When Bette came into this company she was some years into dementia and multiple sclerosis; but the likenesses reproduced were of a 1960s babe in bathing suit and sunglasses, a 1970s beauty in a fedora. Not recognizing her in the photos, I was drawn to the exhausting formulaic epithet, "a lost woman writer"—then I saw the name: So it's finally happened, I said to myself, I actually knew one of them.

My friendship with Bette Howland began in January 1977 at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire. There were feet of snow, and she had invited a group of us for a drink. The three stairs down to her studio were covered with new snow, beneath it a slick casing of ice. My feet went out from under me and I fell hard onto the right upper quadrant of my back. It is actually true that whenever I feel that ache, which I often do, I think of Bette Howland, writing there in the dark, her typewriter in a pool of light. As I sat quiet that evening, she held court with the men and I watched, intrigued. This woman did not have the luster of the women poets I knew who were already called "great," nor did she have the sheen and confidence of the men she was entertaining, who despite their accomplishment or lack thereof lurched through colony dinners with confident boasting. She had a resonant alto voice and an intensity and kindness that pulled me in. We became friends.

I remember long talks in that very dark writing studio—what we discussed is long gone, but my preoccupations at the time were "am I really a writer" and that I lived with one man and wanted to have an affair with another, one of the colonists. What a waste, I think now, when we might have talked about sentences, the density of words, or how imagination works when you are writing from your own life. We were both writing

from our lives, and we were both wounded but she was older. “Make use of your unhappiness,” Saul Bellow had told her. Did she tell me that? We corresponded and visited for a few years, but then at the end of the 1970s my life exploded and we lost touch, though when it was published in 1983, she sent me *Things to Come and Go*, a collection of three novellas, and the following year she won her MacArthur. At the time, my writing life was fully supported by an inheritance, and Bette had often been broke, even homeless, relying on artists’ colonies and the apartments of friends. Now she had money. I’m sure I wrote congratulating her. But she never published another book. In accounts of her life, lack of self-confidence is the general diagnosis for her silence. The loss of her in those years when I might have returned her favor of encouragement still hurts.

There is a way in which all of Bette Howland’s characters seem like visitors from a parallel universe, where they are freed rather than confined. This is the eponymous visitor in the opening story of this collection: *I was catching on at last. The bad roads, the crash, the minor injury. This petty bureaucrat. This place. Sir? I’m dead? Is that it? I’m dead?... That’s what they all want to know! he said. But that’s the whole show! I can’t give that away, can I?* An uncle’s young wife is *a big handsome Southern girl, rawboned, rock jawed, her pale head dropped over her knitting. Peculiarly pale; translucent, like rock candy, and almost as brittle.* It is as if they step into a room accompanied by their own lighting. “*When are you going to get married?*” *Uncle Rudy asked, towering over me.* Imagination is what she calls what she does with them, imaginative selection from the panoply of life. *He’s a scofflaw. He’ll go out of his way to park illegally. He’ll drive around the block looking for a No Parking sign or a nice little fire hydrant.* Reading the prose brings a Bette I’d forgotten—a glass of Scotch, how she threw back her head and uproariously laughed. Ah, yes; here’s the one with verve, the woman in the fedora photo.

Story is the melody, but the art is in improvisation, the voicing. As in her native city, lines of blues give way to jazz, in the progression from *Blue in Chicago* to “Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage.” Experimental, someone called that novella somewhere, but I say no, just the workings of the mind. Anything to rough up the calm of mere narrative—music born within the

bounce of her language. She's at the grave of Victor Lazarus, who cheats death, as much a victor as the New Testament character he's named for. She'd want you to get that joke. *Here? Where the grass lies uneasy? It's hiding something. Three strips of sod, dried and muddied, like coco-matting. A marker as ancient, rusted, as the rest. I knelt to read it.*

She withholds the identity of the speaker. She's the final lover of Victor, her telling toggling between the Jewish funeral of this non-Jew and his pre-death in a hospital. *Cut some more here, drill a hole there—and when they had done, you sat up, you held out your hand. That stumped them. They stared. A fakir on your bed of nails, your naked arm bone trailing needles, tapes, wires, tubes. A tin cup, a beggar bell, they could understand. But a hand?*

"And always the prose with which she searches is arrhythmic, nervous, self-questioning, passionate," wrote Christopher Lehmann-Haupt in the *New York Times*. "You can't fall into step with her, because the moment you do she shifts her cadence and takes off for another part of town..."

In an article in *StoryQuarterly*, the interviewer, Roslyn Rosen Lund, introduced Bette as "a strong featured volatile woman who maintains her own balance between reticence and assertiveness." She goes on to say that she also found Bette "intuitive, easy to interview," as if that were a relief.

For a start I reminded her that her book has been called "non-fiction," "a series of sketches," "an autobiography." She added that it has also been called "a short-story collection," "a first-class novel," "a chronicle." She shrugged and said she is not concerned with labels. Yet the question of form, which has been thrust upon her, dominated our conversation.

The controversy was then just as dreary as now for those who write that way. Here is the brilliant Bette:

What form did I use? Well you don't *use* a form. That's the whole trouble. You *find* a form. When people ask is this non-fiction or fiction, they mean: is it fact or fiction, is it true or not.

For Bette, this was not a frivolous question.

But when people worry about whether something is fiction or non-fiction, they are worrying about how much *invention* there is. They should be worrying about how much *imagination* there is. Imagination is the only way of experiencing life.

I'm walking a street in Chicago and I feel the surge of energy that I always identify with that city, wind blowing toward me, bracing, inspiring, literally filling my lungs with an air different from New York. "We are not in the same line of business as Paris, London, or New York," Bette quoted from *Blue in Chicago*.

And here is the opening of this book: *I was driving an expressway through a large city. Interchanges, on-off ramps, bridges, underpasses. Traffic glittered, roadwork stretched ahead forever. I kept heading the wrong way. You know how it is: the wrong lane, the wrong turn, and you're stuck; nothing to do but just keep going, on and on, until the next exit.* Once you get onto those roads and into the night, she seems to be saying, you're stuck unless you admit the possibility of alternative realities. *You know how it is.* Well, yes, I do know how it is, but I have not before encountered the experience in literature. A woman driver, no despair, just observation, recitation of reality. The traffic does not roar or undermine, it glitters, offering the reader not obstruction but "forever." The "wrong way" it seems is not so wrong, just leads to the next exit, the next departure from reality.

—Honor Moore, *March* 2019