



**KATHLEEN BRYCE NILES**

## DEDICATION

For G. S. Bloom and S.C. Blumenfeld  
who taught me things about family I would  
never have known...



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**THANKS TO:** My dear sisters and "real family"....Jennifer MacPherson and Peg Flanders...and to the Editorial Board and staff of the **Comstock Review** who have granted me the honor of being their Editor Emerita in perpetuity.

## **AN INTRODUCTION TO VENERIES**

**Veneries are a 15<sup>th</sup> Century system of classification for groups of animals, birds and fish. Our English-speaking ancestors were conversant with scores of veneries that subsequently have been subjugated to the vagaries of language and usage.**

**Throughout the centuries, other collective noun groupings slid into the vernacular. They were not relegated simply to the beasts of earth, air and water. Rather, they were so naturally digested into the ordinary parlance of the day that we give them virtually no notice whatsoever.**

**The most readily recognized of veneries is “an exultation of larks.” However, there are many that we use on a daily basis without being cognizant that they are the progeny of hunters who lived five hundred years ago—think of “a flight of stairs” or “a bouquet of flowers.”**

**English is the richest of all languages. Some of the veneries used as titles in these poems are generations old while others are newly minted. Scholars and casual speakers alike have challenged themselves to be creative in naming new groups.**

**Please enjoy these in their current manifestations. And, the next time you need to gather together something, anything, challenge yourself to discover new veneries. You will never see our language quite the same again.**

**KBN**

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## **A ROUTE OF WOLVES**

**My mother-in-law will tell you  
how wonderful I am how I call her listen  
to the litany of complaints send her money  
bring her child to her wish her the best**

**And I will tell you she is a carnivore  
a mother who dined on her children  
a middle-aged jackal who loped into my life  
devoured hope consumed passion**

**An old woman now she shoves vegetables  
to rims of small dishes meat gives her  
indigestion I ache to force feed her**

**watch her inhale large chunks of beef  
flash her ripped pieces of my flesh  
remind her that once she swallowed  
my soul**

**Sometimes I take her out to dinner  
a Steak or Chop House an ancient wolf  
toothless and docile she can no longer  
steal food off my plate**

## **AN EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES**

**My mother-in-law squandered  
money when she was flush  
loved her freedom and power  
allowed her children to be raised by wolves  
never understood their distance**

**gnawed at three good husbands until they  
ran screaming into history  
wanted to complain to her neighbors  
of how she bravely endures their holiday**

**She whined and cajoled  
four grown children for just one gift  
by December  
every window in that small apartment  
screamed an eight candle curse  
She was there  
among them  
never one of them  
The statement was made**

## **A BILL OF PARTICULARS**

**She was the one on whom  
he practiced his art,  
She was crazy about him.  
And, she was crazy:  
five days a week on the couch  
pills and shock therapy  
two children**

**a collection agency full of bills.  
there was nothing to do but  
cut her loose, cut the losses.**

**He was not brutal then;  
that was left for the real wife.  
He was apprenticing as a husband.  
No father of his own to imitate  
he was making it all up,  
starring in his own biography,  
and the first wife and the first heirs**

**their names never on the marquee.**

## **A NEST OF WASPS**

**With their insect tongues like hypodermics  
they inoculate each other over and over**

**Thirty years does not lessen the sting  
nor make them perfect this prescription  
for family**

**My in-laws take particular delight  
in passing out pain like vials of pills  
for whatever may ail**

**They are physicians  
long studied with the same clinicians  
It is time for them to stop practicing**

**They are perfect**



## **A BUSINESS OF FERRETS**

**we wondered if his wife  
was ever embarrassed  
if she chided him in private  
begged him to control himself  
to restrain from opinion  
from conjecture  
from denial  
from finding out that the sound  
he couldn't quite make out**

**was the footfalls of people  
tripping over each other to get  
away from him**

## **A PITYING OF TURTLE DOVES**

**He always wanted a son  
who was nothing like him  
the first born came with carbon paper  
in his image with his soul  
a womanizer a thief a dog  
they were the best of friends  
snuffing powder up their noses  
playing with the same women  
dancing to music only they could hum**

**That one would never be his heir  
But this one the little Asian  
child of the new wife  
this one was nothing like him  
here was where he would build his legacy  
The grandmother said the boy had  
to be his *just look at his hands***

## **AN ARMY OF CATERPILLARS**

**Her progeny come with  
invisible scars heralding them as kin  
like battle gear to ward off  
the drudgery of living**

**Four of them are doctors  
self-medicating and self-loathing.  
Others, damaged and frail,**

**survive life but fail to thrive.  
Each declared at puberty that they  
would not make more soldiers for her.  
They have ripped ovaries from  
their bodies and filled the void  
with grief.**

**Some still believe she is their general,  
a brilliant strategist who wins all wars.  
They follow her into worthless battles.  
They propagate an unbroken line  
of despair.**

## **A BOUQUET OF FLOWERS**

**my brother-in-law may not be handsome  
but no woman will tell you that  
    he has eyes that deftly tango  
    around the room  
        a nose so sculpted  
it must be studied like a Rodin and  
beautiful hands that make butterflies weep  
    he is thin not muscular  
    he dwarfs the largest space  
his grace is natural  
    his movements never fractured  
        he has a beauty that women  
        understand and envy  
he is a mirror wherein we  
    search for our own faces**

## **A BUSYNESS OF FLIES**

**on the 2:25 from LaGuardia  
to anywhere  
manly men among men  
buzz buzz buzz buzz**

**desperate to impress  
someone they don't know  
talking of football  
and selling quotas**

**they flit from subject to verb  
from predicate to predilection  
forgetting they are just flying by  
just humming in the same  
airtight cabin  
buzz buzz buzz buzz**

**landing now and again  
sniffing the trash of idle chatter  
they talk and talk and move on**

**one simple swat would so delight me**

## **A RHUMBA OF RATTLESNAKES**

**Slithering into the chamber,  
scores assemble;  
vulgar reptiles  
dissemble history,  
reconstruct laws,  
posture, proselytize, promulgate  
a vision of despair.**

**The pattern we recognize  
starts slowly,  
builds with confidence,  
moves rapidly  
across the polished floor.  
It swallows small dissenters,  
until all is devoured.**

**My husband's mother has led  
another family meeting.**

## **A TIDING OF MAGPIES**

**Sometimes she weeps for him  
would give him voice  
but she is just now learning to speak**

**Struck dumb  
he can no longer chastise her for trying  
to slip in words between his monologues**

**The sound of her voice  
resonates within the quiet of their lives**

**She is hearing her ideas for the first time  
thoughts floating perfectly on the air of speech**

## **A YOKE OF OXEN**

**At ninety aches are plentiful  
Pieces of hard candy overflow dishes  
blown glass slivers with age  
lace doilies repose in raspberry and maple**

**Her bones crack when she stands  
quick snaps twigs under a cat's paw  
her hands are mysterious hummingbirds  
flying around her meager body seeking  
a place to nest**

**Her mind grows lean  
recent memory locked in antiquity  
she cradles rag dolls dreams of Uncle Morty  
longs to sleep a whole night through  
waits for the light sees the moon**



## **A STREAK OF GAMBLERS**

**She took a chance on him  
considered his bald pate  
a natural consequence of genius  
ignored those ears  
huge exotic foliage  
unfamiliar plant  
holding that serious face  
pondered his thinness  
melon-sized Adam's apple  
impatience with the banal**

**and threw the dice.**

**She was a jewel  
movie star beauty Betty Grable smile  
Hollywood knew her name.**

**She passed it up  
let him believe that he needed her  
that his life depended  
on a film star  
retired  
before the cameras ever rolled.**

## **A DESCENT OF WOODPECKERS**

**My brother-in-law was the heir apparent  
for as long as any of us can remember.  
He gave orders,  
made decisions,  
created the stress  
that felt like life to him,  
the rest of us, minor players.**

**This illness  
planning its  
takeover for years  
came swiftly  
without warning.**

**Who will knock at this oak?  
Who will pick up the logs?  
Who will take firewood and make a house?**

## **A CHARM OF FINCHES**

**Auntie was a beautiful West Indian woman  
pendulous breasts hung like plantain  
legs like palms sturdy and strong  
brown cane arms sugar dripping from fingers  
an archangel's voice  
every sentence ending on a high note  
every word an Island song**

**She followed my grandmother to America  
their lives a competition the best son  
most beautiful daughter-in-law most brilliant grandchild  
curry in every dish spice in every word  
a hot pepper assault at every turn**

**They forgot they had come North  
where the heat of family  
was all that would keep them warm**

## **A DECEIT OF LAPWINGS**

**His world of women is in control.  
Small in stature,  
he stands on stepstools to tilt a hat  
or slip a dress on a naked form.  
Their every move, every gesture  
is his to design.**

**This girl on the right plays tennis.  
She is all in white,  
virginal and perfect.  
This one, on the left,  
is sophisticated, aloof.  
She has known things  
sacred and profane.  
He dreams about this one.**

## **A MESS OF CARVERS**

**I know these boys.  
I can call them out of their names.  
I taught their daddies. I watched their mothers cry.  
Once, they were beautiful black babies.  
They sang in church choirs;  
wore blue suits with tiny red ties.**

**Now, they lounge on the corner of Almond & Pearl.  
Riker's Island wannabees  
Levis hang from slim hips,  
t-shirts advertising some famous  
white man's line of clothes,  
sneakers that other boys  
will kill to keep.**

**Nappy-headed little bad asses,  
mean little mothers with spray can machine guns  
will cut you if you get too close.**

**Do not love these boys.**

**I used to know them, but  
I will not call out their names.  
I no longer see their daddies. I hear their mommas.  
I hear them in my sleep.  
I hear them praying  
too late for babies looking to die.**

## **A MURDER OF CROWS**

**We stopped counting at a hundred;  
black heads bowed, penitential and solemn,  
barely nodding at the bells;  
oblivious to puffs of gentle smoke and  
scent of mystery.**

**This matin ritual,  
devout repetition, is history.  
Millions before,  
perhaps only hundreds after,  
will pause,  
fingers dancing along rows of beads  
like crows at corn.**

**Ebony cowls,  
spines of shimmering pitch  
curved over pews,  
flying into eternity.**

## **A CHATTERING OF STARLINGS**

**He consoled himself  
that he didn't seek out little boys  
nor big ones he had a family  
who didn't much like him**

**Sometimes he did wonder  
did think what if and who  
but stopped those thoughts dead  
almost he had better things  
to do with too much time on his  
hands didn't he**

**the dreams were troublesome  
came at the oddest hours  
took the most inane forms  
and had begun to repeat themselves  
like summer reruns**

**He could make those stop too  
a few drinks after supper a toddy before bed  
maybe a cocktail in the afternoon a nip in  
the morning soon he had other problems  
to deal with few thoughts at all**

## **A SKULK OF FOXES**

**they preened in black dresses  
tested the pumps could they still dance  
in three inch heels would the makeup  
be subtle hair just the right balance  
casual yet sincere**

**could they walk into the room still turn  
a dozen heads more than half a century had passed  
since they spun the men around laughed as one  
after another waltzed and samba'd to their sides**

**did they still have it two ancient widows  
leaning on each other's frail arms  
and would he notice with his wife laid out  
surrounded by the flowers he never bought her in life**



## **AN UNKINDNESS OF RAVENS**

**Old women convene at country clubs  
sip Manhattans, talk of Brooklyn in the twenties.  
Just past the 18<sup>th</sup> hole, palms daven in the Boca breeze,  
memories of trolley cars to Brighton Beach  
rise and fall above the mahjong tables.**

**They have crafted themselves  
blue hair red nails diamonds and pearls  
Palm Beach Gold Coast Bergdorf Saks**

**They have forgotten  
Papa's broken English Mama's lack of style  
Shabbat gefilte fish Rebbes Shul**

**The waitress  
merely another Green card  
spills the vinaigrette  
another inconvenience in a privileged life  
constructed on the backs  
of street cart peddlers**

## **A CRASH OF RHINOCEROSES**

**Assume a skin so thick it is impenetrable.  
Assume you are wrong.  
In a spa, somewhere near Ames, Iowa,  
huge women; a herd or more,  
ponderous in resolve,  
lift lead legs,  
pound the floor boards,  
to the earthy beat of an anonymous mambo.**

**In leotards of yellow,  
huge vats of butter  
dream of latin lovers who  
will sculpt their flesh,  
who will hear these enormous bellows  
as subtle moans of ecstasy.**

## **AN OSTENTATION OF PEACOCKS**

**I suspect that if the Pope's name was Sid  
he might get an invitation to the club  
be asked to join the Wednesday foursome  
date my cousin Sylvia  
bring her home too late**

**If he lived on this side of the Avenue  
his mother made knishes to die for  
if his father had started selling postcards  
and owned a dozen stores in Manhattan  
he could spend time with my brother Benny  
hang out at Coney Island  
watch gentile girls**

**That is how it goes in this family  
or the Pope would have to know somebody  
who knew somebody  
then maybe**

## **A TRICKERY OF WITCHES**

**She was my nemesis.  
A freight train of a woman,  
ripping up the miles I put  
between us, blowing black smoke  
into a marriage that tried to be.**

**Decades later,  
she feigned no memory of the terror  
she manufactured so skillfully,  
so simply into my innocent life.**

**It was my faulty remembrances.  
The threats just my fantasy...  
How could *she* do those  
things when she loved me so?**

**Slowly pouring that single shovelful of dirt  
on that single wooden casket could have been  
enough.**

**It was not.**

## **A CHANGE OF HEART**

**Dressed like the person he should have been:  
all feathers, glitter and heels to stretch  
ankles thin and taut, he was, indeed, every inch  
a woman.**

**In that face, all soft and pink, she saw all her  
grandmothers; generation after generation of  
useful women who washed with river stones,  
wove new wool into sturdy garments, swept  
and scrubbed homesteads for men gone to field  
or war. Here, she was at home in herself.**

**Despite the pleas and prayers, each new morning  
exposed the stubble of reality. Shaving away  
yesterday's face, he consoled himself that  
nightfall was mere hours away. Grandmothers  
are patient. They will wait.**

## **A SKYLINE OF REGRET**

**He had regrets...that man hunched in shadows  
where no reflection could assail him.  
He often wondered "Who am I...the one who  
made promises...who wrote notes in sand  
and traced desire on bathroom mirrors?"**

**"Where is my child now?," he quizzed the dark.  
"And that woman, his mother...Where did they  
go when all was deferred by fear? Where will I  
find me? Why would I go looking?"**

**A gothic moon  
crawls through ominous clouds,  
splays out uncertain promises.  
It drags night's cloak behind, covers  
the dreams that never were.  
The guiltless moon moves swiftly,  
without guile.**

## **A FLIGHT OF DESPERATION**

**My sister-in-law,  
age four, teased Chopin  
from an ancient grand.**

**Her childhood was more precious  
than a series  
of sonatas and concertos.**

**Ivy-Leaguer at sixteen,  
she found her other great talent:  
she could fly!**

**For forty years,  
she hummed only the tunes  
that heroin wrote,**

**symphonies of regret.**

## **A BLACK ANGEL**

**The kitchen stove,  
sainted relic at  
Most Holy Rosary rectory,  
exploded.**

**Single clap of thunder  
flash of brilliance,  
huge strike of bells,  
like a call to worship.**

**My grandmother,  
their West Indian cook,  
was scorched.  
Beautiful black face,  
lost in bandages,  
white as resurrection cassocks...  
dark pupils reflecting brimstone  
small nostrils remembering incense  
mouth round as Sunday's host.  
Those, (and God's sense of fair play),  
separated her from being a ghost.**

**The priests went hungry for some days,  
whining about, picking at leftovers,  
burning bits of meat,  
washing self-pity with altar wine.**

**The nuns,  
unable to eat,  
hovered around the bed,  
swathing burnt flesh in gauze,  
praying through smoke and ash  
promising litanies  
reciting rosaries  
reminding the saints that this was their angel.**





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