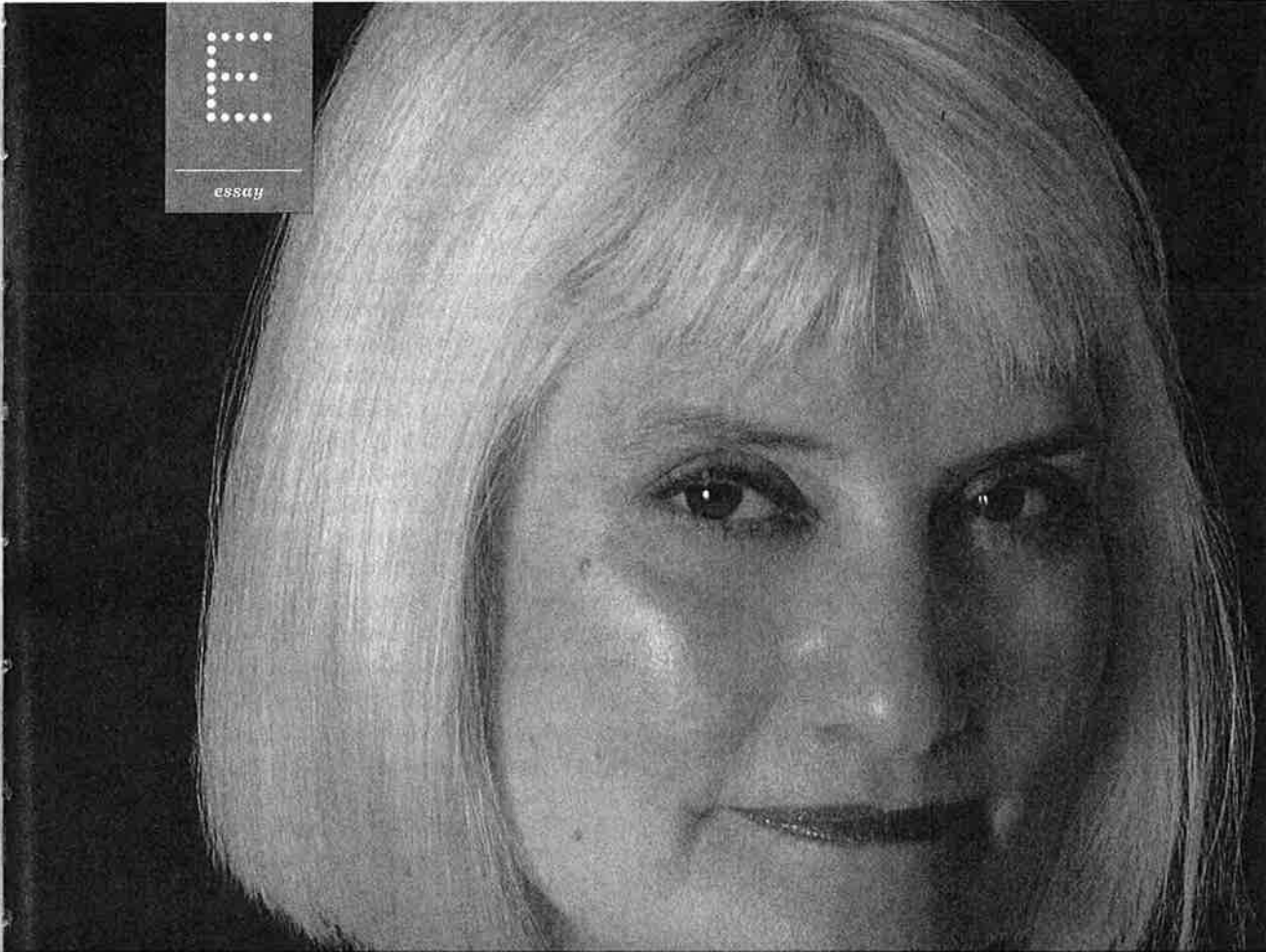


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Lola Ridge:

Manhattan's Forgotten Poet of the Proletariat

PHOTO: OTTOBRI

By **Terese Svoboda**

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"All life is the domain of poetry; not only the ancient rituals of love and birth and death; but all vast happenings, from wars, strikes, the endless crucifixions of labor, to the beginning of the smallest flower."

Lola Ridge

Lola Ridge knocks me out.

A REBELLIOUS LEFTY POET FROM IRELAND VIA New Zealand and Australia, Ridge presided over a Thursday afternoon soiree with the likes of these 1920s hotshots: William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Kay Boyle, John Dos Passos, Marianne Moore, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Mina Loy. At the time, Ridge was the editor of the influential literary magazine *Broom*, sharing new work and gossip with her guests. Her own poems were among the first to delineate the life of the poor in Manhattan and, in particular, women's lives in New York City. Here's a small bomb of a poem of hers, likened at the time to the work of H.D. and Emily Dickinson, that remains for me a model of Imagist engagement.

Debris

I love those spirits
That men stand off and point at,
Or shudder and hood up their souls—
Those ruined ones,
Where Liberty has lodged an hour
And passed like flame,
Bursting asunder the too small house.

Using what Ezra Pound called "luminous details," Ridge turned the demoralized situation of homeless immigration into a celebration. Pound, at the time,

was more likely to see those minions as "petals on a wet, black bough." Where he and T.S. Eliot saw "hell on Earth," Ridge found hope in struggle. "She made a religion of it," mocked Williams.

Even after her literary success provided a small income, Ridge lived in deliberate poverty in a miserable, unheated apartment on the Lower East Side, the neighborhood that inspired her first book, the symphonic *The Ghetto and Other Poems*. Jews and her fellow Irishmen were equally reviled at the time of its 1918 publication, and Ridge infused the poems with ferocious empathy: "All gutters are as one."

The book begins in the summer torpor of nighttime on Hester Street and captures the lives of the merchants, property owners, and sweatshop workers just a few years after the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire. The following excerpt is from "The Ghetto":

They are covering up the pushcarts ...
Now all have gone save an old man with mirrors—
Little oval mirrors like tiny pools.
He shuffles up a darkened street
And the moon burnishes his mirrors till they
shine like phosphorus ...
The moon like a skull,
Staring out of eyeless sockets at the old men
trundling home the pushcarts.

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Three years later, Charles Reznikoff published "Beggar Woman," with lines such as "The witch in my fairy-book came walking along / She stooped to fish some mouldy grapes out of the gutter."

Ridge belongs to a rich tradition of poets who wrote or write about class and the displaced, beginning most famously with Whitman: "See in my poems immigrants continually coming and landing." Muriel Rukeyser wrote poems about the effects of the Depression in Manhattan that parallel Ridge's in many ways and many poems about women in the city. Rukeyser's motto, "Not Sappho, Sacco," refers to the infamous execution of Sacco and Vanzetti and mirrors Ridge's anarchist stance. Galway Kinnell's *The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World* extols nearly the same neighborhood as Ridge's. Contemporary Anne Winters's Marxist take on the city as found in her two books, *The Key to the City* and *The Displaced of Capital*, is similar to Ridge's in subject matter, and often so is Philip Levine's work. This excerpt from his poem "Coming Close" describes the female factory worker:

Consider the arms as they press
the long brass tube against the buffer,
they are striated along the triceps,
the three heads of which clearly show.
Consider the fine dusting of dark down
above the upper lip, and the beads
of sweat that run from under the red
kerchief across the brow and are wiped
away with a blackening wrist band
in one odd motion a child might make
to say No! No!

Levine's poems about quiet tragedy in the working class remind me of Ridge's "The Fifth-Floor Window." The following excerpt of that poem is from Ridge's leftist-titled book, *Red Flag*.

Walls ... iridescent with eyes
That stare into the courtyard
At the still thing lying
In the turned-back snow ...
Stark precipice of walls
With a foam of white faces
Lathering their stone lips ...
Faces of the shawled women
The walls pour forth without aim

Under the vast pallor of the sky.
They point at the fifth-floor window
And whisper one to the other:
"It's hard on a man out of work
an' the mother gone out of his door
with a younger lover ..."
The blanched morning stares
In like a face flattened against the pane
Where the little girl used to cry all day
With a feeble and goading cry.
Her father, with his eyes at bay
Before the vague question of the light,
Says that she fell ...
Between his twitching lips
A stump of cigarette
Smoulders, like a burning root.

Even thirty years before Levine's populism and Frank O'Hara's pop Manhattan headlines, Ridge was syncing these very qualities in her work:

Morning Ride

Headlines chanting—
youth
lynched ten years ago
cleared—
Skyscrapers
seeming still
whirling on their concrete
bases,
windows
fanged—
leo frank
lynched ten
say it with flowers
wrigley's spearmint gum
carter's little liver—
lean
to the soft blarney of the wind
fooling with your hair,
look
milk-clouds oozing over the blue
Step Lively Please
Let 'Em Out First Let 'Em Out
did he too feel it on his forehead,
the gentle raillery of the wind,
as the rope pulled taut over the tree
in the cool dawn?

There's the breeziness of the distracted New York subway rider and then the insistence that the reader identify with the headline, using a cubist/collage technique to underscore the pathos of learning about a man's wrongful death so casually. Ridge often introduces a note of sarcasm or a mocking formal device in a poem that has a very serious subject. A prime example would be her poem "Lullaby," rhyming quatrains spoken by a white woman to a black baby she is about to throw into one of the fires of the East St. Louis riots. Similarly, in "Morning Ride," "The soft blarney of the wind" invokes the Ireland of her infancy, the country her mother fled from to settle in New Zealand, the same flight Ridge made twenty years later with her own child in search of a better world. But what a disappointment! Lynchings, homelessness, senseless murders, epidemics, oppression of all kinds.

Oppression in any milieu inspired Ridge. Her poem "The Everlasting Return" describes the demeanor of a Greek galley slave: "Many a whip had coiled about him / And his shoulders were rutted deep / as wet ground under chariot wheels." Like Pound again, Ridge did not neglect to point toward the historical root of the problem: money.

Wall Street at Night

Long vast shapes ... cooled and flushed
through with darkness...
Lidless windows
Glazed with a flashy luster
From some little pert café chirping up like a
sparrow.
And down among iron guts
Piled silver
Throwing gray spatter of light ... pale without
heat ...
Like the pallor of dead bodies.

Hart Crane was eighteen when Ridge published *The Ghetto and Other Poems*. Invited to her soirées, he reviewed the book with condescension: "When work is so widely and minutely reflective of its time, then, certainly other than questions of pure *aesthetique* must be considered." But it contained two poems that must have impressed him: "Manhattan" with its phrases "Vesture of gold / —Span of innumerable arcs, / Flaring and

multiplying" and "Brooklyn Bridge." Reading like an S and M tribute, it dramatizes the threat of the mechanized world in a mere four lines.

Brooklyn Bridge

Pythoness body—arching
Over the night like an ecstasy—
I feel your coils tightening ...
And the world's lessening breath.

Ridge's review of *Key West* and *Collected Poems* after Crane's death in 1932 began with "Like most men of creative power, Hart Crane lacked the ability to invent; he could only discover." When she published *Dance of Fire* in 1935, the critics accused her of stealing from him.

In addition to lamenting the city's poor, Ridge gave voice to children, particularly in her second book, *Sun-up and Other Poems*. She did this without patronizing or even retrospection, especially in the long poem "Betty." Ostensibly about her upbringing in New Zealand, the poem is by turns cruel and mysterious, and its abused doll reappears in other poems in the book.

From "Betty"

My doll Janie has no waist
and her body is like a tub with feet on it.
Sometimes I beat her
but I always kiss her afterwards.
When I have kissed all the paint off her body
I shall tie a ribbon about it
so she shan't look shabby.
But it must be blue
it mustn't be pink
pink shows the dirt on her face
that won't wash off.

**

I beat Janie
and beat her ...
but still she smiled ...
so I scratched her between the eyes with a pin.
Now she doesn't love me anymore ...
she scowls ... and scowls ...
though I've begged her to forgive me
and poured sugar in the hole at the back of
her head.

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Ridge belongs to a rich tradition of poets who wrote or write about class and the displaced, beginning most famously with Whitman...

The poem is a precursor to Roethke's "The Lost Son," his long poem on memory and childhood, and shares the directness of Plath and Olds. Oppression of women is a subject Ridge frequently explored, either unconsciously or directly, a subject prominent in the minds of many women of that era, when suffrage was finally granted. Ridge toured the Midwest speaking on "Woman and the Creative Will," a speech about how sexually constructed gender roles hinder female development. This was in 1919, ten years before the publication of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Ridge, a Virginia Woolf look-alike, divorced her first husband and lived with her second for ten years before marrying him: "[o]ne of the most beautiful signs of women's emancipation," wrote the immigrant poet Emanuel Carnevali. When critics couldn't rate the strength and breadth of her poetry, they called it "masculine."

The twenties was a golden era for female editors: Harriet Monroe at *Poetry*, Louise Bogan at the *New Yorker*, Marianne Moore at *Dial*, Elinor Wylie at *Vanity Fair*, and Lola Ridge, first at *Other*, then at *Broom*. Ridge was credited as a major force behind the revival of both magazines, and in *Broom*, she presented contemporary poetry in the context of avant-garde art and photography, insisted on the exploration of ancient cultures, resurrected forgotten important American writers, and prompted essays on new directions for writing in the United

States. Jean Toomer and Hart Crane published their first work in her pages. She introduced Mina Loy's wild poetry to traditional poets such as Louise Bogan and organized a reading series that drew crowds of hundreds. At her parties, Ridge encouraged Marianne Moore to read Kay Boyle and introduced William Carlos Williams to Robert McAlmon. Together, Williams and McAlmon began to publish the influential magazine *Contact*. Ridge instigated conversations between artists of all kinds to discuss what was American about their work, pushing them toward modernism. She resigned her position on *Broom* after refusing to publish Gertrude Stein. She insisted the work was too European and without enough commitment to the world. Four years later, she was arrested with Edna St. Vincent Millay for protesting the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. Katherine Ann Porter remembered a police horse rearing over Ridge and her fearless, unmoving figure. In Ridge's sonnet about the execution, "Electrocution," the guards are "Monstrous deft dolls that move as on a string, / In wonted haste to finish with this thing, / Turn faces blanker than asphalted yards." A broadside featuring Ridge's poem "Stone Face" was plastered all over the United States and helped free the labor activist Tom Mooney, who had spent a decade in San Quentin after being falsely accused of terrorism. "Poetry makes nothing happen," wrote W. H. Auden a few years later.

Ridge traveled alone through the Middle East in the mid 1930s. She received a Guggenheim a few years later that she partly spent traveling alone to Mexico City. She also twice received the Shelley Memorial Award, underscoring Shelley's own social conscience, as evidenced in poems such as his "England in 1819," which concerned "a people starved and stabbed in the untilled field." She died in Brooklyn in 1941 of tuberculosis contracted decades earlier. After her death, it was learned that along with changing her name, she'd taken ten years off her age. She'd given herself more time, sensing, perhaps, how hard it would be to start over as an immigrant with no connections to the New York literary life she eventually championed. After all, she was 45 when her first book was published. Marianne Moore, Aaron Copeland (whom she met at Yaddo), and the social-issues photographer Paul Strand were among the mourners at her funeral.

Hailed as “one of America’s leading poets” by *Publisher’s Weekly*, Ridge published five books. Such magazines as *Poetry*, the *New Republic*, and *Saturday Review* featured many of her poems, which were widely anthologized by editors such as Louis Untermeyer and Alfred Kreymborg, but her reputation sank after her death. The Poetry Society of America sponsored a Lola Ridge Memorial Award for ten years until World War II, with its determined warmongering, snuffed out leftist interest. When McCarthyism appeared in the fifties, even the mention of Ridge’s *Red Flag* was a red flag. Ridge’s taste for multiple aesthetics, neither traditional nor avant-garde, which distinguished *Other* and *Broom*, in her own work made it difficult for critics to label her, especially the New Critics, with their emphasis on the poem as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. Feminists should have rediscovered her in the seventies, but there are no collected works, only the recent publication of *Light in Hand*, an edition of selected works, edited by Daniel Tobin. He calls her “the most impassioned and certainly the most authentic of the proletarian poets of the New York modernist avant-garde.” Robert Pinsky, in a recent post on the online magazine *Slate*, deemed Lola Ridge the first great urban American modernist.

During her life, Ridge inspired many poets and their work: the young anarchist poet Kenneth Rexroth’s poems, Robert Hayden’s early work, and, as Ridge was one of Marianne Moore’s few close friends, perhaps even Moore’s long poem “Marriage.” Genevieve Taggard, another activist poet, tried to help promote Ridge’s second book while she worked for Ridge’s publisher. “Lola’s causes became mine,” swore short story writer Kay Boyle,

Ridge’s assistant at *Broom* and occasional cook for her soirees. “I cherished and protected her as if she were a small bright flame.”

Ridge knocks me out because most of the poetry hasn’t aged, especially the Blakean directness of the child’s voice in *Sun-up and other Poems*, which, at the time, was compared to the early work of James Joyce. Ridge was a force in the cultural landscape of New York City, where I too have settled, living a block away from the Hester Street that so inspired her. Until five years ago, the building next door to me housed illegal Chinese restaurant workers five bunks high—without plumbing. Her life and work revealed to me the dynamic relationship between language and social struggle, and I find her deep belief that people can transcend the world’s strife inspiring, especially in light of the Occupy Wall Street movement. But she was no knee-jerk liberal. People tend to personify the environment today as a suffering deity, but even the ocean did not escape the wrath of Lola Ridge:

Obliteration

The sea is a wrinkled silence
 Moving darkly
 Under the audacious luster of the air ...
 The emptily effacing air,
 That has closed upon so many cries ...
 Yet holds in its blue vacuum
 No bleached white evidence.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: I am particularly indebted to Robert Pinsky’s *Slate* article, which brought Ridge to my attention, and to Ridge scholar Belinda Wheeler. ★

Poem by Lola Ridge

Electrocution

He shudders
 The probability
 Of storm-
 And roads
 Like three
 Monstrous
 In wonted
 Turn face

They hear
 But as a feeble
 Who stare
 When the
 Whose so
 Had fused

Poem by **Lola Ridge**

Electrocution

He shudders—feeling on the shaven spot
The probing wind, that stabs him to a thought
Of storm-drenched fields in a white foam of light,
And roads of his hill-town that leap to sight
Like threads of tortured silver ... while the guards—
Monstrous deft dolls that move as on a string,
In wonted haste to finish with this thing,
Turn faces blanker than asphalted yards.

They heard the shriek that tore out of its sheath
But as a feeble moan ... yet dared not breathe,
Who stared there at him, arching—like a tree
When the winds wrench it and the earth holds tight—
Whose soul, expanding in white agony,
Had fused in flaming circuit with the night.

"Morning Ride"; "Obliteration"; and "Electrocution" from *Light in Hand: Selected Early Poems of Lola Ridge* (Quale Press, 2007), by Lola Ridge. Edited by Daniel Tobin. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Poem by **Lola Ridge**

From "Cactus Seed"

I

Radiant notes
 Piercing my narrow-chested room,
 Beating down through my ceiling—
 Smear'd with unshapen
 Belly-prints of dreams
 Drifted out of old smokes—
 Trillions of icily
 Pelting notes
 Out of just one canary;
 All grown to song,
 As a plant to its stalk,
 From too long craning at a sky-light
 And a square of second-hand blue.

Silvery-strident throat
 So assiduously serenading me,
 My brain flinches under
 The glittering hail of your notes.
 Were you not safe behind—rats know what thickness of
 Plastered wall,
 I might fathom
 Your golden delirium
 With throttle of finger and thumb,
 Shutting valve of bright song.

Poem by T

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Poem by **Terese Svoboda**

Washington: D for Dream, C for Cruel

The capitol's spire, that poke-in-the-face,
wards off about as much anti-
as an auntie—you know the one
who's always telling jokes about race
that tear straight along the fuze,
a zipping sound, with a cartoon Ha!
that questions "we" until Poof!
no "us" in it either, The End.

This white/black world we're bred to, fits.
It's the hits that surprise, our finger
blown "free" by someone else
on the trigger, a cat-smile dum-dum,
dud, doofy "free" that means you
don't have to wash it anymore,
a phantom any-color finger,
saluting the one-for-all obscene.

Start over, Red Rover. Don't send
that next body-to-be-counted into our arms.
We're letting race go, the penny says so,
it's God we trust, say it six times: *God reach us*,
Michelangelo's Yes instead of Ha
and its brothers Ha Ha. Hear that thunder?
That's *Freedom*, cast by 12 slaves and stuck
to the dome—being blown.