

POEM OF THE MONTH – ARCHIVE

My fourth Poem of the Month is from *Surfacing* (2012, Cinnamon Press). I've never written an elegy inspired by an obituary, before or since, but I have some special memories of the extraordinary Betty Hutton, and wanted to celebrate her. For a sense of the extraordinary life force of this woman, check out ['Rumble Rumble Rumble'](#) from *The Perils of Pauline* (1947). What a life.

Elegy for Betty Hutton

In your Mom's speakeasy,
just as tall on tiptoe
as the greasy table-legs,
you belted out the numbers
up at drunken men
whose faces loomed and flushed,
and glasses clinked, and cutlery: oh
what a pair of lungs at ten.

Your family hounded and broke
in Detroit, your wake-up call
insistent as a bell, you had to be
the little bigmouth now,
sassy with lipstick
as you put yourself about in bars
to feed your Momma's habit,
explicitly relied on, hardly aware
of the premium of trust.

Long, long life by fifteen:
the break came, early and at last
with the big band, Vincent Lopez
and His Orchestra. Just a kid.
The His a capital, like Jesus.
He had time for you
who were hard work,
little star hoofing it always
and only to please us:
all of a sudden
Let's Dance, Fred Astaire,
Dorothy Lamour. On the trapeze
in *The Greatest Show on Earth*
eyed stolidly by Charlton Heston,
he of the freedom of the gun.

Diminutive and difficult,
always a determined diamond,
always pressure.
Then fallen
incomprehensibly far.

Full of yourself, pushing your husband
on the studio: Paramount push back
harder, on and out the door.
That unscripted jink a bit unsteady.
Fairweather friends thin out,
old demons gather,
unreasonable demands.
Go home and sleep it off, Betty.
You step out onto air.

And wake up having lost it all.
Washed up star
that drank like a fish:
now housekeeper to a priest,
astonishingly not a role.

Banished the flounce.
Breakdown, the driving nails
of humility.
A reappearance,
sixty-year-old smiling
hostess in a sports centre
in Connecticut,
with some of the old bounce.
Then surprising graduate.
I wouldn't call it a circle:
it was your curve,
Betty's originality.

I would have wanted you to know
that I was marked at four
by Betty Hutton's Annie Get Your Gun
in Holyhead: dragging my mum back
to the Empire to see
if Annie and the Indians were there,
and the Lion,
though you were all long gone
but for the Lion

and the Naked Man with the Gong.
Was that you in there?
Strutting your innocent stuff
through the dark to me
in front of the cardboard scenery,
behind the make-up slapped on
in all of the dazzling hokum,
you were fallen for:
caught with your cowgirl's lariat,
two horses, eros and laughter,
pulled my stagecoach,
propelled my Hollywood and Holyhead
short-trousered, spiky-haired confusion,
my future mangled Ben-Hur chariot,
out into the grainy light.

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