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Struggle — Chad Lee Perry



Rejection Slip

Ann Kruse

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Jill heard a bell ring but she kept on reading.

Kristin knelt by the bier in the death-chamber. Arne was dead. His throat had been slit by Bentine Priestson, the man who had tried to rape her that night on the public road. Now, Kristin listened as Arne's mother shrieked that Kristin had given herself to Bentine, but that she thought she was too good for Arne. Bentine and Arne had quarreled over her and now Arne was dead.

Kristin swore she was innocent of dealings with either man and, taking a candle from the bier, she held her hand over the flame until the flesh burned. The other mourners in the room became frightened and angry at such an oath. Kristin, her father, and the rest of their party summarily left the house and returned to their own home.

Jill stopped reading and sat musing on the scene. She was supposed to have read this book for a course in modern novel but it had not arrived in time. Even though they had pretty thoroughly hashed over the plot in class, Jill was glad the post-office had finally come through with this book. Thirteen Braille volumes took a long time to read, but she knew the time would be well spent. She wished she could write so well.

The bell rang again and this time she heard it. "Damn!" she said aloud to the empty room. "For a would-be writer, my dear girl, you're doing just great. You've just missed the first five minutes of your advanced composition tutorial and Sister James will be furious."

Quickly, she checked her clipboard to make sure that both copies of her assignment were on it and hurriedly put on her coat. Then she lifted the top section of her folding cane off the desk, smiling to herself as the elastic snapped the telescoping sections together. The people at the rehabilitation center would be irate if they saw her using it. True, the fiberglass cane they advocated was sturdier and gave more tactile information, but the collapsible model didn't embarrass her by clattering down from its corner in the middle of class. And besides, she could fold it away in her purse and stop reminding everybody that she was blind.

When she got outside the dormitory, Jill knew she was going to be even later. Snow was falling and soon the sidewalks and grass would be one indistinguishable realm. She had tried to explain to one of her teachers once just how delightful snow could be for blind people, but he hadn't seemed particularly interested. She wondered if he thought she was making excuses.

The sidewalks weren't completely buried yet, and she found the one to the administration building. It was funny, she thought, that small Catholic colleges always had "administration" buildings. Right now, her younger sister Jean was taking some home economics class or other in the basement. The science labs, post-office, and maintenance systems for the campus were downstairs too. First floor contained the cafeteria and kitchen, administrative offices, chapel and

library. Classrooms and offices occupied second floor with the nuns' quarters on third floor. And, this particular administration building also had a tower where some of the novices lived.

One of her readers last term had lived in the tower so she had spent a lot of time there. Sister Anne was not the best reader in the world, but she was cheerful and reliable. Sometime before Jill met her, Sister Anne had been fitted with a dental retainer. Like most people, she didn't like to wear it, so she was always putting it down somewhere, only to have it picked up by the other nuns. They wrapped it in a pretty package and took it down to the mail room. Jill felt that the repetition of this joke was just a bit cruel but Sister Anne seemed to take it good-humoredly. Well, Jill thought, maybe she herself was too sensitive.

Because she was late and in a hurry, Jill didn't use her cane properly to help her find the entrance to the building. She turned too soon and immediately slammed into the high shrubbery which flanked the entrance. It wasn't the first time she had done this particular stupid thing but now her face, coat and clipboard were covered with snow, and she had almost lost her cane. Yes, she thought as she untangled her cane and brushed off the snow, the nuns were definitely right. One of them was invariably suggesting that because she was blind, God loved her better than other people. It was times like these that made her long for a little less Divine consideration and a little more vision.

She walked up the middle of the steps to the ad building, being careful to avoid the wide, stone railings which were probably covered with snow. Her hands were cold and wet enough already. Even though she did not use the railings, she thought about them. They always reminded her of the chapter in Hardy's book. Tess had spent her last night of freedom sleeping on an altar at Stonehenge. After that night, Tess was taken to prison and hanged for stabbing the man who had seduced her. Unyielding stone equals unyielding justice.

Jill shook the thought from her head as she opened the heavy door. She was late and this was not the time for philosophizing.

Or maybe it was. As a sophomore in college, she was taking advanced composition from the same woman who had taught her sister Jean in the fourth grade. It was a little weird. Jean avoided Sister James as much as possible; but then, Jean had her reasons.

Jill hurried along the second floor corridor. She heard Sister John Mary's voice droning on as she passed an open classroom door. Sister John Mary was teaching Dante this term, and even if there were only three students in the class, she conducted very formal, very boring lectures which allowed for very little discussion. She had another habit which especially annoyed Jill. They would probably finish the discussion on the *Inferno* this afternoon and sometime during the endeavor, Sister would mention Paulo and Francesca of the second circle. Dante had assigned lustful folk to the second circle, and Paulo and Francesca were the extramarital lovers, who had "read much of Lancelot and practiced more." They fascinated Sister John Mary, and she was forever mentioning them.

Finding "sexual images" was obviously one of Sister John Mary's favorite occupations. Jill found the whole thing rather boring. She was interested in sex, but,

having lived something of a wall-flower existence through most of high school and college, she had long ago decided to worry about that sort of thing if and when she was asked. Like other children, she had satisfied her natural curiosity about anatomy one day in the bathroom at home, when she was four and her brother was five. She was willing to allow that bodies change as they develop, but she found Sister John Mary's obsession somewhat puzzling.

After making a right turn off the main corridor, Jill slowed down. Because she was not so familiar with this part of the building, Jill began counting doors. Before she came to the right one, she decided not to go in until Sister James spoke to her. She remembered sitting in the office one day for ten minutes wondering whether or not Sister James was there. She had been both relieved and angry at herself when Sister James finally arrived. She hated herself for being too afraid and embarrassed to ask questions in empty rooms. Her mother always said she was proud.

Jill knocked forcefully on the door. She waited. There was no sound. She knocked again. Finally, from inside, Sister James said, "Come in, Jill."

There was certainly no status or prestige in having this office, Jill thought as she opened the door and entered the small room. A desk with a swivel chair on either side of it filled the center of the room. The walls opposite and to the right of the door were fitted with bookshelves, and a low window in the left wall was there for appearance's sake only. Jill doubted if much sunshine ever found its way into this room.

"You're late," Sister James said as Jill took off her coat and folded her cane.

"I know," Jill answered, taking the chair closest to the door. "I got involved in a book and didn't notice the time. I also forgot that it was snowing."

"You know, Jill" Sister James pressed on, "you are not my only special appointment student. I could be meeting with someone else or doing my own writing, instead of waiting for you to get here. You're a sophomore now and you really should be more considerate of other people."

Jill squirmed uncomfortably in her chair but said nothing. She knew Sister James had other things to do besides teach. After all, she was a published poet of sorts. But Jill also knew that she hadn't been late on purpose. She wondered why all the teachers here took everything she did as such a personal offense. She didn't dare ever cut class, because they would find her in the cafeteria or somewhere else, and start grilling her about where she had been.

When the silence had lasted long enough for Sister James, she took Jill's typed copy of her assignment and began reading it aloud. It was an analysis of a poem by Emily Dickinson, and Jill was pleased with it. When Sister James had finished with her comments on content and typing, she looked up from the paper and asked, "Where are the footnotes?"

"Footnotes!" Jill exclaimed. "Don't you remember, Sister? You dictated that poem to me during our last class session so I would have a Braille copy of it to use."

"I know that, but you should have gone to the library, found that poem in a print book, and cited your quotations from it in footnotes."

Jill was almost angry. If she wanted the thing documented, why hadn't she said so. A three-page analysis of a poem, without using anyone else's criticism, had not even struck her as something needing footnotes. She wondered if she would ever figure out just what Sister James wanted.

"I guess I must not have understood the assignment," she said. "I'll remember to be sure and include them the next time."

"That's very commendable of you, but we won't be doing any more poetry analysis in this class. By the way, have you had any word on that essay you submitted to **Glamour**?"

"No," Jill replied, groaning inwardly. The assignment had been to prepare an essay for publication, and Sister James had decided that Jill should send an entry to a contest in **Glamour**. The essay was to be written "against" whatever topic the writer chose. Jill had written against the word "blind." The essay had begun as a genuine effort on her part to explain the negative connotations of the word, and to suggest some possible alternatives. Sister James had discussed, revised, chiseled and cajoled until the essay had become something Jill barely recognized as her own. By that time, she found the basic premise possibly a little silly and definitely over-dramatized. The final indignity had come when Sister James had re-typed Jill's copy. Jill had spent time and money getting the essay into presentable form. It was not the subtlest way to find out that she was a failure so she decided it might not be true.

"You know," Sister James was saying, "you really should write more about your experiences at the School for the Blind. The things you have already done for me were really quite good. How long did you go to school there?"

"Until the middle of my seventh grade."

"There probably wasn't too much to do after school or on weekends, was there?" Sister James mused aloud.

"Sure there was," Jill said, smiling as she remembered. "I was busier there than I was when I went to school at home. We had class clubs, dances, skating parties, and even wrestling matches with other schools. There was always plenty to do."

"I suppose," Sister James said reflectively, "that at that age, you explored each other—to find out the difference between boys and girls?"

"We did not! Where on earth did you ever get such an idea?" Jill had been so startled by the question, that she answered it without thinking. She felt trapped and angry. By just denying them, she had confirmed Sister's wildest suspicions. She would have said more but Sister James was trying to calm her.

"You don't have to be embarrassed to talk about these things with me, Jill. Sighted children have all kinds of visual ways to find out about each other and since you didn't, I just assumed you handled the problem the way you handle many others, by using your hands instead of your eyes."

Jill turned her chair toward the window so she could stare without looking at Sister James. Sister had kept on talking and Jill knew now that her best move was not to say anything. Sister James was trying a different approach and as Jill listened, her anger turned to nausea and she swiveled her chair until it faced the

door.

"I've known your family a long time," Sister James said. "I taught your brother and sister when they were fourth-graders. Your mother and I have always been the best of friends, so you shouldn't worry about discussing personal things with me. I know your background and I probably understand you better than anyone else on campus."

"Liar!" Jill wanted to scream. She pressed hard on her upper lip, trying to choke down the nausea. Sister James had gone from merely pumping for information to outright deception. "You haven't the right," Jill raged silently, "to assume anything about me or my family. You really do think I'm blind! You think they never told me how you used to pick Jean up by her hair and lift her out of her chair and tell her she could be the smartest kid in the class. You think I don't know that she came home nights crying so often that Mother cut her hair so short you couldn't get your hands in it! You and my mother were never friends."

Jill stood up. She wanted to run out of the room, down the stairs and out into the snow.

"Where are you going?" Sister James stood up too, and almost reached to stop her. "I haven't given you your next assignment yet."

Jill sat down and copied out the assignment. She nodded in answer to Sister James' questions. Finally, there was nothing else to say, and Sister James watched her gather up her things and walk down the hall to Sister John Mary's Dante class.

* * *

When she got back to the dorm later that afternoon, Jill found Jean waiting for her in the lobby.

"There's a letter for you here, Jill. It's from **Glamour** magazine. Do you want me to read it to you?"

"Yes," Jill said, "but first, let me see the envelope."

Jean handed it to her and she felt the crease down the middle which showed that it was the self-addressed one Sister James had sent with the manuscript.

"It looks like they've sent it back to me," she said, opening the envelope and handing it back to Jean.

"Dear Miss Kline," Jean read. "Thank you very much for your essay, **Against the Five-Letter Word**. Unfortunately, we had already received material on this subject so we are unable to use it. Sincerely, etc., etc. Well, Jill, better luck next time."

"Thanks."

They walked upstairs together, but Jill didn't stop at her room.

"Where are you going?" Jean called after her.

"Nowhere. Just down the hall. I'll be back in a minute."

She walked to the end of the hall and felt along the wall at about chest level until she found the handle. It was warm, almost comforting. The door tilted back easily and she slid the manila envelope in as far as she could. She slammed the door shut and heard the whoosh of the paper as it slid off the shelf.

She went back to her room, folded her cane and took off her coat. She poured herself a cup of coffee from the percolator that was always on the desk and sat down on the bed. After her hands had warmed up a little, she decided, she would read some more of **Kristin** until it was time for supper.

Strictly Confidential

Carol Wright

Dear Abby,
my best counselor
and secret betrayer.
Please answer
truthfully-

(if you can,
if you must):

(Abby, "you
deserved a break
today")

It all began
with drills and skills

Slept too far,
lived too late.
Annoying dreams,
maddening habits:

an expertise of words
danced beside
neurotic recreation
behind kitchen desks

Time out! T.V. commercials,
sips of caffeine.
But wait! What's this? Oh, no—
it's finicky Mrs. Olson's remedy
for poor house-broken wives
(with chubby kids), to perk
fresh thrills and brew
competition around the neighborhood.

(Time's up! And
the day ordered more
whoppers than you
could swallow)

Letter's company.
Psychotic stacks-crowds:
hamsters with midriff bulge,
dogs who master, egos,
Freudian Complexes, blemished
love affairs, and "fetished,"
"sobbed inksplotches,"
"tired of red rings around
his collar" —
what a headache
of sore lines
for sore eyes!
(#?!..kick the whole bunch)!

(Ms. Abby, in quiet rebellion:
coaching forlorn teams —
disjointed families,
you will always be
Household strength —
a President, an E.R.A.
tie that binds)

Today was a holiday
of strangers . . .
Jethro Tull battles
Tammy Wynette upstairs,
again. The sun hates
to settle down . . .

(and Abby,
you could have
had "your way"
for one day of prayer) . . . in all your sanity
for oaths at home?

Sign me,
one lash .
er . . . lick
at a time.

(P.S. Good luck, Abby
and write soon —
tomorrow waits
for a seal)

On leaving

Melinda Melhus

Since the age of two,
or three, we're told
that death puts kittens
with broken necks out
of their pain and rests
men like Grandpa;
but we feel only
furry absence under
night-time quilts and
see Grandma's white hat
alone in a pew, shadowing
blue eyes that strain to
see beyond the sermon;
so God, it's not strange
that I fear the cold, clammy
earth, that I wake in the dark,
gasping for breath, alone and
smothering under heavy heat.

It's only the earth I fear,
the damp-ant disintegration.
A grass-green hill would be a
place for me, when daisies
and wild roses bloom
white and pink and
free, with no "ashes to
ashes" refrain—
only Love to sit on
a rock and watch the
powder of my bones be
carried by south wind
to the yellow-orange,
yellow-warm Sun.





Bench — Paula Meyers

A Midwest Soldier

Megan Marks

If he could sift through the layers and arrive at some conclusion then he would know how to act. Should he punch her back? Should he instead forget about it, assume that it had been a case of nerves? What was she, the gentle woman he had imagined or was she a vixen?

As though sensing his confusion she began to speak again, repeating several words over and over. Couldn't she try to say it in English; why did she even attempt to use her language with him?

The sheets were rough against his skin. The bulb glared. When he shifted his gaze from it to the figure who stood before him he saw dots of light instead of a woman. He wanted to go back to his original vision of her. This other one confused him.

She came over to the side of the bed, blocking the glare from the bulb. Her face had a certain softness. She extended her arm. He saw how the light behind her fringed it and as it floated toward him it seemed detached, not a part of her. Just an arm. He wondered if he might grasp it, confused as he was, because it was simply an arm; and with night beyond them and the wreckage of a city below them, there was something essential in it, something he wanted to have.

He had been born in the Midwest in a town that had once been a river pond. At the time of his childhood the water was brown and sluggish; the few barges that traveled it went straight through to Kansas City. The newer homes were built far from its course because it gave off a foul odor at certain times of the year. His family lived in the old neighborhood. The smell of the water was endured, nobody mentioned it particularly, it was one of those things that existed. It was a quiet town. The older houses were flanked by lawns and canopied by the same trees the first settlers had planted. They had porches, some of them with the sloping roofs more characteristic of the South. Those houses were the most admired. They attested to an elegance and abundance that was a part of the past. His house was one of those. It had wooden inlaid ceilings and parquet floors and outside on the porch, hand-carved pillars. The porch was the center. In the evenings the adults sat in the swing sipping their drinks and talking, some of them smoking. He would play on the lawn amongst the fireflies and locusts, aware that in the darkness those on the porch watched him. Their voices carried and sometimes they talked about him:

I went to the store today to buy Jerry some overalls. That child grows so quickly! It was only last summer he wore size 10. Now he really needs a 12 and that's not even counting growing room. Did you go to Lerneds? They have some beautiful boys pants on sale. That child! It's so hard to keep him in clothes. Oh, he did the cutest thing yesterday, did I tell you?

Or else they talked about cars or tv shows. They didn't care much what they said and they only half listened. They just wanted to add their voices to the night

sounds, to say to them, "we are here too." Or so he imagined. But implicit in the porch talk was the idea that evening was not for great things. Those had been accomplished already. If not during the day then in some past time and if not in the past of their memory it was in the time of their ancestors, when the river was clean.

What he saw when he was young, standing only half the height of the others, still persisted. When he stood on the lawn and looked up at them his eyes rested on their feet. Sometimes he saw as many as ten, his mother's in slippers and the others' in walking shoes, all of their ankles crossed and their feet propped up at an angle. They sat that way for hours. He envied them their leisure. Out on the lawn there were so many dramas, he wondered that they didn't heed them; then he realized that they were resting for a reason. Something was in the offing, a calamitous event. They had known them in the past and they were resting now, waiting for the next to come. That impression settled his mind. He played on the lawn a little anxiously from that time on knowing that when the event approached he would be the first to meet it. Small as he was, his forehead creased and he pursued his games with a fever.

When he grew to their height the war appeared. It swooped down on them with the majesty of a great white bird. No one questioned it. It seemed to have been anticipated and even called for. The evening talk gained in volume and there was a stirring of feet. He felt he had at last discovered a purpose. It seemed natural for him to enlist. When he kissed her goodbye his mother had tears in her eyes but he knew that if given the chance she wouldn't extend her arm to stop him.

The war suited him. In that sunless, rainy country when he saw and heard the guns he wasn't as disillusioned as the others. It made sense to him that one place should be overrun by soldiers. They would return, after a time, to their homes on the other side of the globe and rest and forget, and they would feel, underneath, that they had been well used. He stayed longer than many and he grew to know the country. It was different. The rivers were alive and every square of the land was planted on. When the people came home from the fields in the evening there wasn't time for any talk. If they had extra moments they sat alone and prayed. Their houses were very simple. The women were different. He admired their type, the smooth olive skin and the depthless eyes. They were narrow, hardly built as bearers of children, but in them, as in the other things, the minimal served well. He knew instinctively that he would find one to bring home as his wife. He imagined sitting on the porch with his parents and his bride, his mother asking his wife how she put up her hair, it was so beautifully done, and admiring her as though she were a strange and elegant ornament and his bride perplexed by the lawn on which nothing was grown, and the trees that were planted for shade, not fruit, and the sound of the locusts, and the restfulness and creaking of the porch swing. His mother would tell her when the house had been built and how many generations had sat there and they would sip their drinks and afterwards talk lazily of nothing in particular. He would return to his parents' porch every evening and prop his feet on the railing and watch as a beautiful olive-skinned

child played on the grass.

He called her Linda because he was unable to pronounce the name her parents had given her. She spoke some English—she had been close to the soldiers for only a short time but she learned quickly. Each night before they went to sleep he taught her new words. She would repeat them in the rhythms of her language. He made her name the parts of her body and when she would come to, “and this is my breast,” and lay her hand over the brown nipple, he couldn’t imagine a greater bliss. She slept with her head on his chest and often during the night he would wake up and feel the unfamiliar coarseness of her hair against his arm and he would touch her skin wondering at its softness. He loved the way she moved, the way she bent her wrist or curved her arm. What she had done to survive didn’t matter.

The city where he was stationed had grown unpleasant. Because the bombings had created a shortage of housing they lived in a tiny room. He had submitted a request for his departure and the papers for Linda’s entry into America were on their way. He still went to the post each morning; it was a long walk picking through the rubble and the sleeping bodies but he had begun to close his senses knowing that soon he would be home. He could feel a drowsiness take over. His father had written, he had found a job for him and on the next block one of the older houses was up for sale; it had a nice porch and a big lawn . . . From where he stood he could see the few buildings that still rose up against the horizon. The others had been leveled and the white dust from their broken walls covered the grounds. There was nothing but whiteness and here and there a few ghost-like figures bent among the rubble scavenging for valuables. One seemed like Linda. He was about to go and ask her what she was doing when the woman turned toward him, her hand cradling a necklace, and he saw that the face was wider and not as gentle.

“Things will be O.K. now,” she said in a pained whisper, pointing to the glimmering jewels.”

“Yes, I think they will be,” he replied.

She laughed sardonically but he hardly heard her as he turned away and walked toward the post.

In the evenings when he opened the door to their room he was always struck by a sense of timelessness, as though nothing had happened from the moment he had shut it that morning. Linda had a key of her own and could go out if she wished, but in the way she came towards him, hardly lifting her feet, her arms hanging at her sides, he knew that she stayed indoors. He wanted to take her home soon and lay her down in the short midwestern grass to heal. Her face was swollen and her eyes seemed deeper, had she been crying? He pulled her into his arms. She felt wooden. He kissed her face, kissed off the salt till she forced a smile, and then he said cheerfully in a soldier’s voice, “That’s my girl!” and patted her rear as she went into the kitchen.

In bed that night he turned to look at her. The simple lines of her features, the dark shallow eyes, the curve of her brow, he loved her so. He ran his hand over her hair and it felt as coarse and thick as grass, and he asked her, “Where is

your breast?"

She parted her nightgown. "This is my breast," she said, the curious rhythm of her language making the words more delicious. As her olive fingers felt for the nipple her eyes suddenly teared and she turned away from him and huddled against the wall.

He felt hurt. He wanted to touch her but he couldn't lift his arm, the space between them forbade it. He lay on his back and watched the flies.

The flies were thick by the river. When he was young his mother washed him directly after he came home from playing there. He was glad to sit in the tub of hot, soapy water. It was a warmer, more secure world, a nice contrast to the river, which always, from the perspective of the tub, seemed fearful. But he never stopped going. The river had an appeal—the fish on the banks, the rusted metal anchored in the mud at rakish angles, and the water itself, thick with oil, hardly water anymore; it was more like death.

They hadn't spoken of her losses. When they talked of leaving he asked if there were people she needed to say goodbye to. She shook her head sadly, no. He wondered then what she had suffered.

The flies on the ceiling moved in an ever-evolving form. Of course he would never know. He turned towards her. She lay facing him now and he looked at her, past her skin, past her eyes, into the stench of the river, and past that into darkness . . . and then he shyly lowered his gaze.

He thought of the times he had made love to her recklessly and he felt ashamed.

As though to say, "I'm sorry, I understand now," he leaned over her, lifted the hair from her neck and kissed the hot skin underneath. He pitied her. He pitied the little tufts of hair, the skin, the bone. She had suffered so much and the back of her neck where heat and darkness were trapped seemed particularly sad. He wanted to wrap her into his arms, this precious doll fallen into his hands miraculously, he wanted to rock her in his arms until her suffering vanished. He wanted to hold her head against his chest and kiss the back of her neck over and over. It's sadness made it so delectable. As he bent to kiss it he felt her fist come down hard on his shoulder. It shocked him; he had never before known her to be angry. Her teeth glistened. She straddled him, pressing her knees into his side and viciously pommelling his chest with her fists. He felt limpid, unable to move. Her bare thighs gripped him tight.

His skin turned a splotchy red and his chest stung from the impact. He felt betrayed. She stopped as quickly as she had begun, dismounted him gracefully, and walked to the window. For a moment she stood looking out into the night and then she turned to face him. Though she knew he couldn't understand her language she began to speak, slowly at first, as though to force the meaning on him, and then more excitedly, gesturing with her hands. He knew she wanted him to understand but he couldn't. His pride wouldn't let him. He looked at her as he might look at a stranger. The night seemed to dissolve the window behind her and lift her into space until she stood far from the foot of the bed. Far beyond him.

Her face grew indistinct. He was no longer aware of her loveliness. He remained inattentive, leisurely examining the notion that theirs was probably the only lit window for miles. That here above the rubble, in the only building that still broke through the horizon, in a tiny room where night pushed against the walls, a small human drama was taking place. A drama between a woman and a man, two people surrounded by night. He looked at her. He thought of the bare thigh that had gripped his waist and pushed its muscle into him. She was strong. Too strong to rock in his arms like a child.

Symphony

Paula Meyers

Dark chimes struck late November air
and made holy the chilled words
of arm-entwined autumn lovers;
as the heavy notes froze across cloud-scuffed sky,
their crystal breaths met and swirled
in momentary moonlight, then shattered away.

Across town, checkered swatches of music
tugged at crumpled leaves.
With the side of her hand,
she swiped at the misted window,
watched as another gusty chord
coaxed russet renegades from the front yard maple
to tumble and writhe in the aura of the porchlight.
Slow amber headlights bleached the asphalt blackness:
two fluid columns of whirlwind
that harnessed the end of the block
and shot away from moist eyes.

She let fall the drape
and rearranged it carefully
as the chimes faded away
across town where he buried his face
in her cold fragrant hair
and whispered words to the music.

Chestnut

Ken Shedd

These are the windows
of my last years. Yesterday,
I welcomed your stay
outside my windows. Then, I
joined the larks, they nestled in

their heather beds and
I in mine, to praise your gifts —
candle-like cones that
blossomed white, and showered
hope upon the bleakness of

our lives. But today,
I see your mockery — how
you robe yourself in
white, only Godiva-like,
to peel to pallid yellow,

withering all the
while. Even at night, I see
your face. Mirrored in
rivy black, it wavers
like a moth, trying to pry

its way in. Using
your long arms, you feast on breaths
resigned, and stretch your
suckers down to X-ray
rooms and cobalt stations, a

banquet of slow death.
Relentless observer, go
ahead — spy, delight,
parade your health and strength. You
will never leave the gray squares
of the courtyard, nor I the
white sanctity of this room.

Harvest

Joel Cederberg

A pendulum
In sweaty rhythm
Swings and cuts
As the shining
Sun-bronzed spring
Coils and uncoils,
Advancing with each tick
Slowly through the field
Of golden waving wheat.

The Arched Window

G. T. Cook

Time goes in. Goes out.
Endlessly goes out, comes in,
through the arched window
where awareness started.

It pools on the window-sill,
spills on the ancient floor,
on the uneven rose bricks,
reaches the ceiling in shadow.

It fills the space like air,
dances in the light motes,
hovers in the night,
clocks every sunrise.

Time goes in, goes out,
through the arched window,
where awareness started.

Time past was fluid motion
of blue, transverse sky waves,
of sun-selected greens.
Time was translucent light.

Now time is in the wind,
robbing the trees of flowers,
is in the taste of dust,
is in the sound of echoes.

The body hates its deception.
The mind, cursing its prison,
raps on the arched window
where awareness started.

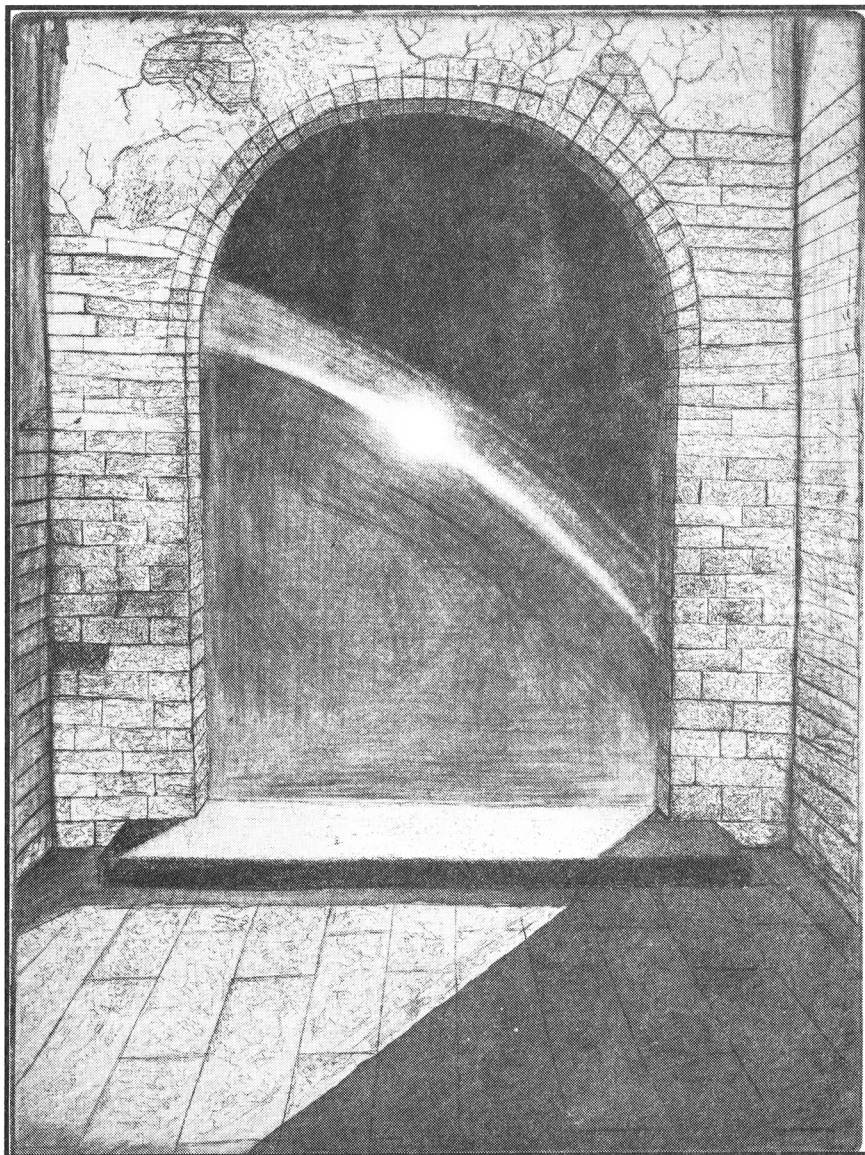
St. Veronica's Handkerchief

Ken Shedd

No nimbus now surrounds the
face, only this dark
aura that would obscure the

crown of thorns, but for
the blood that trickles down his
brows and weeps into
the muslin cloth. The closed
lids, set deep within the
sallow visage, slowly

lift and speak, as no eyes
ever will again: "Why
have you forsaken me?"



The Choice is Ours — Roy W. Gerard

The Conversion

Donovan Hendricks

You and me
Listening to Debussy
Four in the morning.
Inseparable —
Like frozen cuts of beef.

Soon
The war starts up
Again, the old battle
Between idealist and realist.
I, you say,
Am stubborn — no
Doubt runs in the family.
You, I refute,
Are whimsical and liable
To believe anything —
Typical woman.

Red eye rising now,
Long yellow lashes licking
The world to life.
But outside is yet
A black and white photograph;
We walk down a country road —
I, kicking stones and avoiding glances,
You, smiling and waiting for
My inner ice to thaw.

“See? Lehua tree —
He who picks the blossom
Of red will release the rain
From the bondage of the sky.”

And I, seeing that
All was clear, and hearing
The squawking mynah birds
(Who never speak when
Rain is near)
Picked two blossoms —
One for me, one for you.

We didn't have to
Put them in water
When we got back.

Parc Monceau

Ken Shedd

Rainbow-dappled leaves
mirror swirling ballroom gowns,
now at rest beneath
summer skies and parasols,
a ballet of aftertones.

Airing

Mike Hurd

I think I'll take my books out
for a walk.
(I know I'd hate to spend my life
wedged in a corner—
Camus on one side,
Kierkegaard on the other;
occasional forays into midnight rooms
of cluttered desks and hazy lamps
would not suffice for me.)
I think I'll leave them
open in the grass,
let the wind sift the pages,
dry up the damp
and blow out the dust and old ideas.
Perhaps the grass and leaves
will wedge along the binding,
leaving autumn-dry perfumes
to replace that musty
old-book smell.

Books, once faded and yellowed
in airless rooms,
open to renewing breaths
of wind and sun;
for their ideas
are only abstracted patterns
of sun and wind
on human skin.

Whether to Stay or Go

Carole Smith

Now I have come to a bend in the river
Where willows sway at dusk and voices
Rise soft from the water and call me.
In the morning sun I see no difference
From other places I have lived,
Except perhaps the clapboard is
A little whiter here.

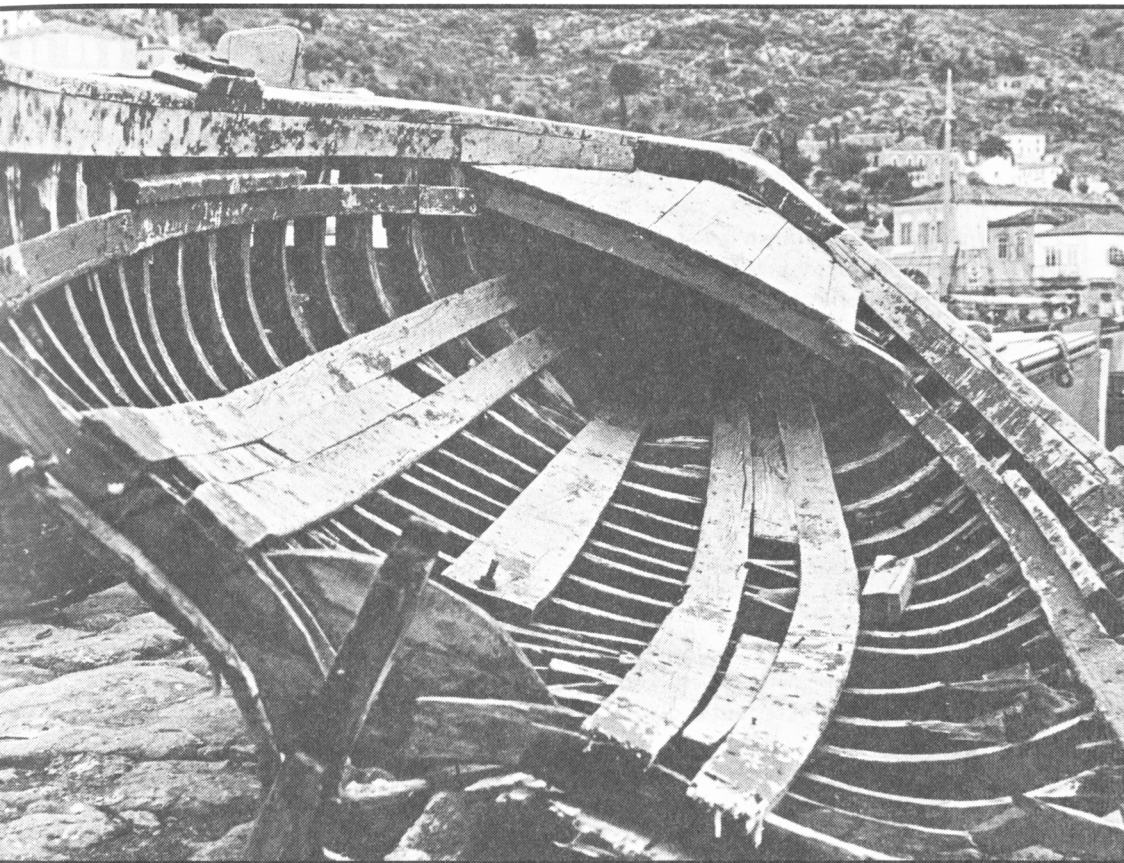
And I think I'll move on unless I hear
The voices again at dusk this evening.
I've been here seven years now;
Some nights the fog muffles the river
Sounds, and then it's only fair
To wait a day and listen again.

Watercolor

Cindy Bily

Colors splashed
upon a shimmering, watery canvas
create an illusionary world
separated from the real one
by a barely perceptible line.
To the despondent observer it seems
that the reflected trees are greener,
the skies brighter, the clouds calmer;
he will never notice the insects
dancing triumphantly on the canvas
or the stirrings from the icy caverns beneath.
He will only see a heaven,
and the trees he must climb to obtain it.

If ever you journey to water's edge,
gather up a few wildflowers
or pretty pebbles
and toss them in,
they will be swallowed up gratefully
to be caressed by the shadows below.



Untitled — Kolean Pitner

Crescendo

Paula Meyers

Late morning,
When stifled light illuminates robed windows
Before the opening of eyes and drapes,
The staccato heartbeat of many clocks
Tempers the soft rise and fall of sleep,
Like the asthmatic wheeze of traffic
From somewhere outside windows and walls;
Shreds of stairwell conversation
Press against blankets and pillows
To mesh tatters of sluggish morning thought
Which sway to rhythms of upstairs bass
And sudden stubborn bursts of ignition
Until heavy fabric slides away from bright windows
Where the glint of white light on wrought iron
And giddy October leaves sparks glassy eyes
To note the passing of sky across the sky.

Morning

Donovan Hendricks

Dirty, dusty streets of dawn
Talk to me as I walk along.
Here an old ticket stub,
There a dead brown bag
Shift aimlessly.

There an old man rests—
Graying beard and bleary eyes,
Covered with yesterday's rags,
Huddled in the doorway of the
Chase Manhattan Bank.

Maybe you saw him too.

Drought-Making

Kim Wilson

Blue sunlight
and violet storm bank
lull in the sky
first this one overhead
then the other on top.
They melt and blend,
give in and overwhelm
in the smoothslow
pattern of timeless lovers.

While below
the rusty milo
lazily awaits
the warm
prick of rain.

Drought

Carol Suderman

Dust-air in which there is no wetness-
And in the long adagio
Dust ground adds dust to dust.

Listless wind of days detained-
A pause or hold, then quick robusto,
Poco a poco pianissimo.

Trees, their movement silenced now-
Flurrious trill in decrescendo,
Leaves of playful ending.

Dog moves by in shadow's trance
Leaving shade to find its cool-
No coda left for resting.

Fields in barren patches lie;
Movement grazioso, ending.
Poco ritard. Decrescendo.

The Fence

E.C. Malcolm

"Hi mister Tarbox, sorry I'm late."

"That's alright, don't worry about it. Got the paint yet?"

"No, I haven't gone to the basement to get..."

"You get the paint, and I'll run the cord for the electric sander out to the fence, alrighty?"

"Alrighty."

I don't want to work today. My summer vacation and I have to work on painting a fence. Where's the light? Jesus, it's dark down—Ouch! Oh that hurts . . . God damn that hurts . . .

"You coming boy!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming."

"What are you limping for boy?"

"I'm limping because I hit my knee on the metal shelf."

"Never mind that, let's get you started. You take the steel wool and rub the rust down, like this, see? You watching?"

"Yes sir, I'm watching."

"Then you take the sander and smooth out the old paint; get it even, make sure you get it even, especially on the outside of the fence."

"Yes sir."

"Okay, that's all. Oh! by the way, be here on time tomorrow."

"You mean on Sunday?"

"Yes, on Sunday. The preacher wants the people to see you out here working, so they know the bums won't bother their cars while they're inside. I'll be back at lunch time to see how you're doing."

"Yes sir."

Yes sir, yes sir, Oh yes boss, I'm working, I'm working. Who the hell does that old man think he is? I'm no genius, but after painting this fence last year, I can sure as hell remember how to do it again.

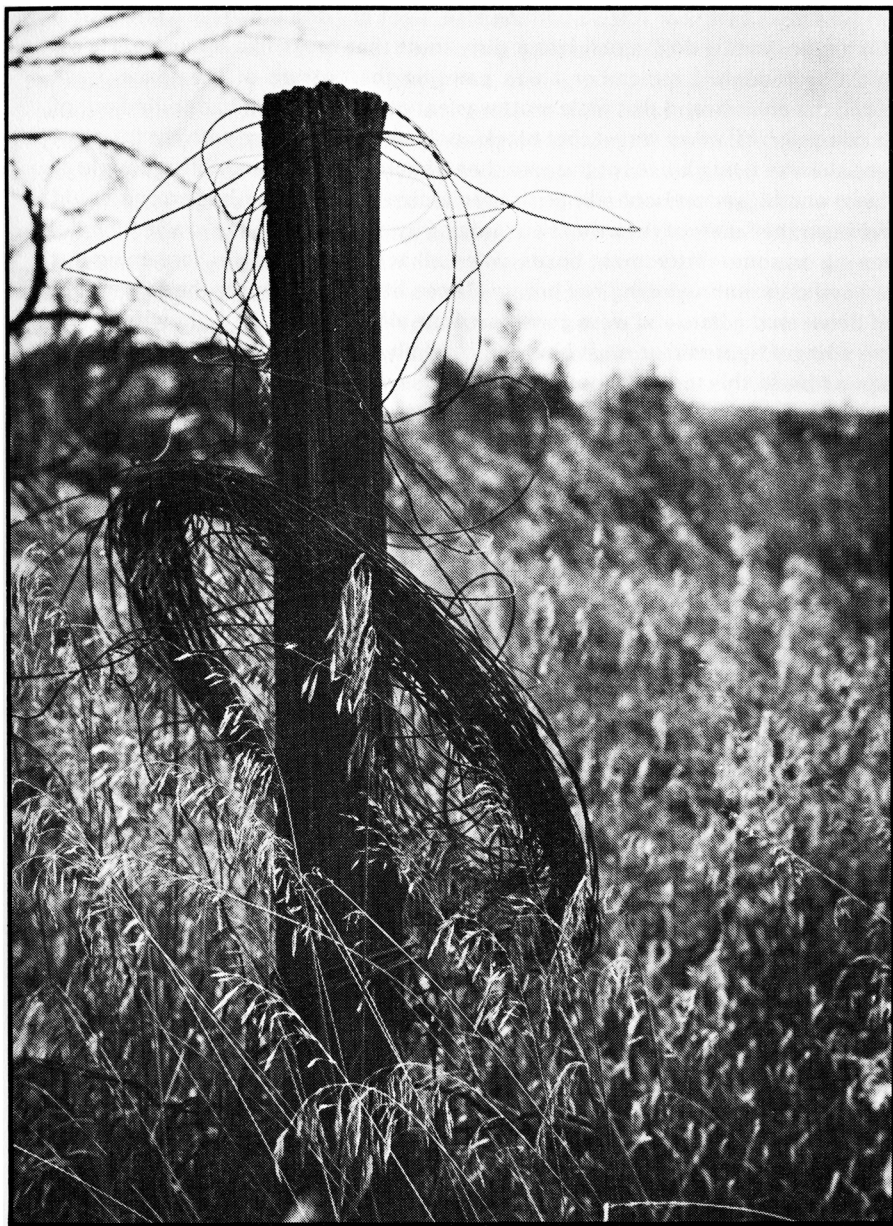
"Tom, Tom! Start the outside first, so it will look better from the street tomorrow."

"Yes sir."

"And be sure and yell if the union boys come."

"Yes sir, I will."

Man, I hate this job. Two weeks of scraping and painting, scraping and painting a whole square block of fence. It wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't downtown. Scraping and painting in the middle of downtown. I remember last year when I was painting the outside. Man, I cut my hand bad, real bad. There's a grassy strip, or I should say, weedy strip between the sidewalk and the fence, and I have to pull the weeds so I can paint the bottom of the fence. There aren't any weeds on the inside, because ol' Tarbox cuts the grass down nice and even with his garden tractor. I was pulling these weeds, when right as I pulled, some junkies' needle



Fencepost—Melinda Melhus

caught me right across the palm. Man, did that hurt. Three stitches and two shots later, I was back right where I am now, painting the fence.

Last year, last year was something else. I got my dog down here last year. I didn't even want a dog, much less a dirty mutt that looks like a coyote. He's a good dog though. I remember I was painting the outside of the fence, back behind the church, and that little mutt was eating garbage that had spilled out of the dumpster. I'll never forget that black 'cook when she hit him with the broom. I guess she was fixing lunch for the preacher. That little dog, along with a couple of others, one bigger and one about the same size as mine (the bigger one could have been the father of the other two, judging by color) were lying in a semicircle, chewing on some rotten meat boxes, when all at once she comes screaming out the back door and swinging her broom. Those little dogs ran for the fence, slipped between the bars and were gone down the alley. They knew right where they were going. I figured that must have been a daily scene. A few minutes later, my dog was back: this time without his friends. I saw him slipping back through the bars when, for the first time, he looked up at me. He looked at me for a moment or two and he was gone, back down the alley.

I wondered how they made it through the winter, and how they got past the dog catchers. Near as I could figure, they slept in the old condominium buildings around the area, at night. And as far as the dog catchers, there must have been just too many of them to catch. I figured if the dog catchers missed just two bitches, there would be at least twelve or thirteen more dogs around in a couple of months. It wasn't until the next day that I saw him . . .

"You working boy?"

"Yes sir, I'm working."

"How many sections you got done?"

"How many what?"

"How many sections you got done?"

"Ah, two and a half."

"Two and a half! That's all?"

"Yes sir."

"I've been watching you; you'd better stop staring at the trees and the church, and get to working."

"Yes sir."

"If you don't, I'll tell the preacher, and he'll chew your ass."

"Yes sir."

"He'll chew your ass good, boy."

"Yes sir."

"Don't yes sir me, work!"

"Yes sir, I mean, alright mister Tarbox."

That dumb 'janitor', Oh, I mean 'caretaker'. He's always on me. Jesus, here I am working for money, for summer school, and I have to take orders from a dumb janitor.

"You working, boy?"

"Ya, I'm working, God damn it."

"What did you say?"

"I said, yes sir, I'm working."

Painting, scraping, God, it's hot out here. Let's see, I was thinking about my dog. Oh ya, the next day I saw him eating garbage again. I guess he figured I wouldn't hurt him. I started to calling him, saying good dog and the like, but he wouldn't come within ten feet of me. I guess he didn't trust people much. And I could see why with that cook around. So I got a cheese sandwich out of my lunch sack and laid it on the ground by my foot. I started painting, and within about five minutes he was creeping up to me real slow, like he was expecting a trap. I didn't let him know I was watching. I just acted like I was painting. He crept right up to my foot, grabbed the sandwich and ran back about ten feet to eat it. After two days of putting the sandwiches on the ground, I finally got him to take it out of my hand. Man, did he smell! I didn't realize how a street dog can smell. He stunk worse than the garbage he ate. His hair was all matted together. His hair was so matted and gummy that when he finally let me pet him, I almost didn't want to. He looked like he was still a puppy, maybe three-quarters grown; but I wasn't sure. It was right after that, I guess the next morning, that I saw him eating rats. I could hardly believe it.

He'd lie on the sidewalk, right over the water drainage holes in the curb, and when a rat would run out the hole, he'd snatch it right off the street. I can still see him shaking his whole body with the rat in his mouth. He'd shake the rat until it stopped moving, carry it into the churchyard and eat it. God, I felt repulsed, even though I knew it was his survival over the rat's. I was sure that dog had every nasty disease in the world. And later the vet told me he just about did. The only thing he didn't have, it seemed like, was rabies, thank God. But after seeing him kill that rat, I knew I wasn't about to take him home.

It wasn't until later that day when I was eating lunch in the yard, ya, that was it. I was eating lunch. By now the dog was running right over to me and begging for food. I was wondering whether to feed him or not, when two men called to me over the fence. I didn't come at first, because they didn't look like bums; bums never hurt anybody. They looked like your average laborer types. And from their expressions, they didn't look happy. Well, they kept yelling to me, so I went over to them, keeping the fence between my ass and theirs. The short one started talking.

"You painting this fence?"

"I might be; it depends."

At that the tall one spoke.

"He's painting the fence, George. He's painting the fence alright. His jeans are black, ain't they?"

"I can see that, dumb-shit," said the short one. "All we want to know, kid, is you gotta union card?"

"What?"

"You gotta union card?"

Like a bigger fool, I said,

"No, I go to church here . . ."

Before I could finish, my head shot back, and I hit the ground. The big one reached over and clobbered me while I was talking. He really didn't connect well, but Jesus, my head hurt later. I didn't realize that the mutt followed me over to the fence. But as I was getting up, the big man started screaming, and I saw the shorter man kicking at his leg. As my head cleared, I saw my little mutt hanging on the big man's calf, just below the knee, like he had hung on to the rat earlier. The shorter man finally made contact with the dog, knocking him out into the street. By this time, ol' Tarbox was there. I couldn't seem to do anything, but Mr. Tarbox grabbed the bucket of black paint and threw it on them. Then, while they were in shock, he threw the empty paint can, bouncing it off the big one's head. The big man started running, and the short one followed, screaming and cussing at us all the way. I'll never forget those two union men, running down the sidewalk cussing, with that little black mutt close on their heels. Needless to say, I fed the dog the rest of my lunch and took him home with me when Tarbox gave me the rest of the day off.

"You working, boy?"

"Yes sir, I'm working."

"How much you got done?"

"About five sections, sir."

"Is that all?"

"Yes sir, that's all."

"You been daydreaming, boy?"

"No sir."

"Okay then, take off for lunch."

"Yes sir."

"You'd better get more done this afternoon."

"Yes sir."

You know, that ol' Tarbox ain't really a bad guy at heart.

Smile

Patty Roberts

Smiles are moon crescents on their sides
that catch the falling rain.

When the crescents become full,
they overturn.

September

Carol Suderman

In flurry of leaves
And in shredding grass, echoes
The summer's dry laugh.

Where the Hell is Prince Charming?

Kathleen Cashman

Distant and intimate candidates
Seen over several watchful years,
Some princely, some charmingly,
A few — merely candidates.
Two got past the once-upon-a-times
But forgot the lines between
There and happily evers.
Then, there were those who looked the part
But had never been astride a white horse.
And a most memorable "mere"
Who intimated that the prince
Was in some dark corner with a princess.

A Dime's Worth of Myth

G.T. Cook

Apollo Citharoedus, the Muses have gone.
Swans, nightingales, grasshoppers lamenting:
Clio, reading history in monotone,
Erato, writing erotica and fermenting.
Stargazer Urania, fell in a manhole.
Tragic Melpomene overdoses daily.
Euterpe swallowed Shelley's book whole.
Terpsichore go-go dances gaily.
Calliope and Polyhymnia are now Mormons
and Thalia laughs in her padded cell.
Still, heroically, poetry stumbles on,
while I screw this sonnet all to hell.
They tell me a Renaissance is coming on
where poetry will be worthy if it sells.

Sparrow

Chad Lee Perry

Those eyes,
so possessive,
are piercing my talent
For overlooking obvious
entail-
bloodied
feathers or that
splattered windshield. Then that
head rolling, and the wind rustles
nothing.

Revision

Bilal F. Abdur-Razzaq

If, as we went
to room 222, down
two clean corridors
that echoed back our progress,
if, in our ways,
we wondered much like pilgrims,
expectant in their pilgrimage,
it is only because
the large, round glasses,
with the stubborn smile beneath them,
and the pride of lions,
that covered her covers
with so many meanings of gold,
and the quiet mother,
withstanding the white bed
and half-finished in a copy
of the **Gulag Archipalego**,
have taught us, afterwards,
to think it so.

At a Place

Joel Cederberg

Where a river absently turns
There lies a small beach
With sand like grains of wheat
Spilling out below the banks
Rising around it.

It has lain there alone
For so long it is now
Unremembered by even a path.
And yet, the shattered empty
Armor of several unwary crawfish

Scattered carelessly around
A set of tracks, testify
To the gluttony
Of a shuffling, furry raccoon,
Its nightly visitor.

The trees above stir
And rustle in low murmurs
Like faintly heard voices
Of several old men nearby.

Their gnarled fingers
Weave a latticed pattern
Of shadows on the sunlit sand.

The river mumbles to itself
In its moody soliloquy
And as it passes, absently,
Dampens the cool breeze
And scents the air
With the sweet smell of decay

Phrase-searching

Velina Houston

In a rearview rendezvous,
your blue madness
ruined my rhetoric.

Window faces,
warm voices,
and the darkness
dismembered the dangling metaphors—
breathing,
bleeding
on face-lifted freeways.

Celebration (for E.E.)

Cindy Bily

I have
always wanted
to go to a wedding
and release a basketful of
puppies.

The Platonic Book

Bill Macomber

Come and see;
There is a shaggy male goat in a high
Peaked hermit hat eating a paperback
Version of Don Quixote in the raw.
The lines are not broken into pages.
It is a platonic Don Quixote book
Laid out in one continuous, disappearing
Line of print to the stars like ticker tape.
It has no rococo trimmings at all,
Or construction machinery supporting
Essential themes and characters.
The sheer weight of the print is not more than the clouds
Can support in bulbous protrusions.
Merlin himself is dressed in long purple
Robes and sitting cross legged facing
The platonic Don Quixote, reading steadily
Along, rolling alongside it on an invisible
Mechanic's dolly running automatically
To the end of the book.
But the goat is eating along through
Chapter two and has the appearance of
A goat who could eat through the whole of Don
Quixote and then go on to something else.
So this long, thin line of square, grey print
Exists with a goat shortening it at one end
And Merlin somewhere near the middle with
Furrowed brow. It is beyond me to wonder
What becomes of Merlin after the last
Sentence. He has purposes; this we know.

The Model

Mike Terry

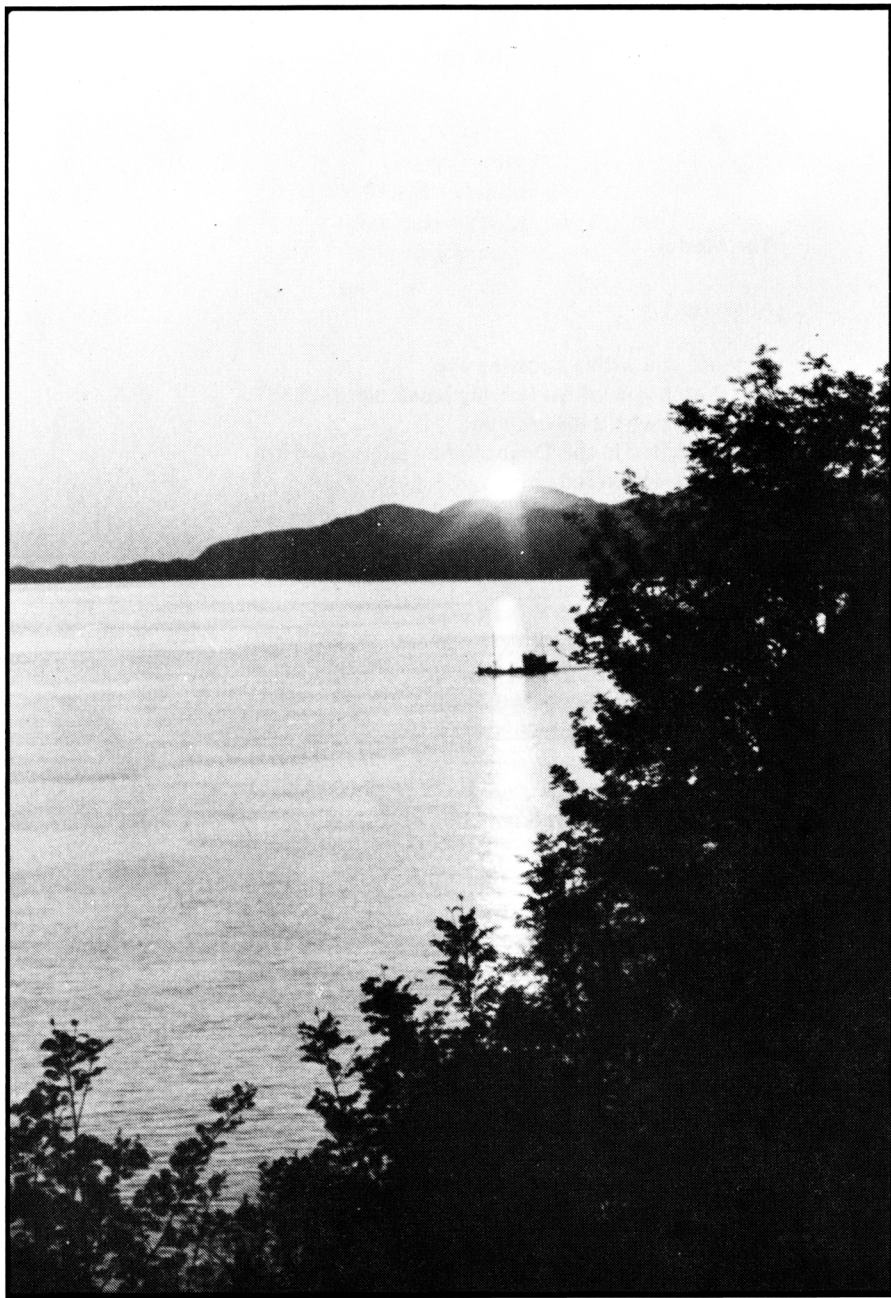
I square you with a knowing eye,
and sketch you with a flowing hand,
I stain you with a lover's dye
and swaddled in this Degas light
rubbing a whiskered chin,
I wonder if I've swathed a friend
in skin as smooth as
love.

Night Watch

Kathleen Cashman

I have seen stars fall leisurely,
Others almost invisible
In their desperate haste,
Their pace showing
The distant exchange to be traveled.

But I hope to be near my star
That we may pass in slow acquiescence,
Nod and smile,
And trace each other's path
In graceful recognition and farewell.



Oslo, Norge — Melinda Melhus

Blue Buttercups

Melinda Melhus

At the tip of the fjord,
they met;
he wore blue
and she, yellow.

Grandmother was born near Stavanger,
in the country,
in a brown wooden house;
she tatted handkerchiefs,
tablecloths, dresser scarves
and bedspreads — her dowry;
she skied to school in winter,
cross country, in brightly colored
woolen sweaters of her own design,
and walked to the fjord
when the buttercups bloomed.

Grandfather was born near Trondheim,
in Melhus County, like his father
and before, a miller by trade — he
ground long hours of wheat and corn
into flour and meal for neighbors'
flat bra and lefse; on Sundays
the stone went dry and he walked
to the fjord
when the buttercups bloomed.

The blue of the sea
and the sky
fused into the yellow
of the sun and the buttercups,
at the tip of the fjord.

He grinds by hand
in autumn;
she bakes flat bra and lefse
for Christmas Eve
with whole wheat flour
out of cream-colored stone jars.

Fifty-two Christmases
the buttercups have bloomed.
Blue and yellow;
he grinds meal;
she bakes.

The fjord runs far away.

Imagination

Joel Cederberg

I have often,
For what reason
I can't be sure,
Though perhaps it's just
To vary by such silly sport
My normal way of thinking,
Found myself prowling about
From room to room, checking,
Popping my head
Around each door corner,
Like some furtive animal
In hopes of catching
Something not in its place,
Or better still,
In the act of moving.
An unwary statue,
Too late hearing me coming,
Or maybe some of the wallpaper patterns,
The horses or the children at play,
Will freeze a second too late
Into their original pose.
(Sometimes, from the corner of my eye
I swear I've seen them move.)
And is it just Imagination
Or have I heard them moving about
Laughing and playing when they think I don't hear?
Oh, I know it's all a bit silly,
Still, perhaps now, if I turn quickly . . .

'76

E.G. Malcolm

Checkers got caught with his pants down;
Hand-picked pulled them back up
And F
 E
 L
 L down.

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