

ALEMBIC

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Photograph
Jim Baker



the car wash

An open grave
where toothless men stoop to
wipe your fenders. Winter's

breathing up their sleeves and you
can only loathe
yourself for not serving them
(a hot meal, at least) and listening to
how each came to kneel
clenching dirty rags.

Jane Lunin Perel

Pillow Mountain

We sleep and make nightmares together.
My body turns and enters your
dreams. Your body turns
and enters mine. It is
altogether fitting that we
do this. Two lemmings
drowning each other
in the black
cotton of
death.

Drew Maciag

Sunset Trilogy

- 1.) Someone's Bloody Mary
Splashes, spreads across the sky-
Sororicide
Around the lemon circlet.

- 2.) Crushed ice melting
Dilutes
Roseglow to pink,
Cools the evening ...

- 3.) As the party grows
Intimate,
And they slowly draw
the black velvet curtains.

Betsy Stachura

The Fat Girl

I never thought it odd
That the curly blonde fat girl
Skipped a few steps and
Looked down at the body
That jiggled and jello'd
Beneath her

I didn't think it odd at the time,
She must have thought herself alone
The skinniness within her
Must have reminded her
For she stopped
And didn't look up

I did think it odd
That she was dressed in pink

Jay Charbineau

On a remote mountain
the archaeologist
will discover me
my mantra chant
Shall slip into his sleeping mind
and rouse him
bamboo rustles
as he ventures among
Sacred rock gardens
edging the obscure path
with the moon
he will come upon
a mute and ancient shrine
set back into the stone
he will gently take
the tiny statue
carved of polished
green jade
turn it over in his ivory hands
observe how the universe
reflects itself in the
shining surface
and like his
sculptor ancestor
his eyes will close in meditation
as the saffron sun
begins to rise

Nancy Shea

The Archaeologist

The archaeologist's shoes clicked across the mosaics. The only other interruption offered to the almost-reverend mute afternoon air was the swishing, probably of a broom a few hundred yards away sweeping sand off the perfectly preserved tile patterns that had only been violated by vines pushing up through cracked plaster. How old was this city, the archaeologist wondered; how old were the compelling tile sidewalks arranged in patterns of mockingbirds and owls and angelic human faces with features so carefully delineated that one could count the teeth in the smiling ones. This, the archaeologist's new Atlantis, would soon be neatly catalogued in art books, he thought, so that students sitting between the high black metal stacks of college libraries could gaze upon carefully restored ruins and dream of discoveries they would make one day.

The archaeologist, however, loved the city now while the yellow bricks of temples lay in brittle chunks on the mosaics and weeds grew inside the scummy water in old fountains. He felt like a boy with a building block set who had to put everything together again. What truly fascinated him was a building he presumed had once been a school. A mosaic walkway depicting a man holding a miniature city in the palm of his right hand led to a side door of the white marble structure. Small tiles were arranged in words above the man's head, but the archaeologist could not read the cryptic figures. He just presumed that the mosaic depicted the original founder of the city. An ivy-like vine had grown through a crack in the founder's right hand; the archaeologist made a mental note that it would have to be pulled up during the restoration.

The archaeologist had been amazed to find unbroken glass picture windows on the side of the school. He peered down into a classroom, for the bottom of the school rested in a pit with the surrounding terrain sloping up from the sides of the building. The archaeologist looked in at neat wooden chairs arranged in two impeccably straight rows. They faced a long, low table, which he presumed was the teacher's desk, and a black slate wall which seemed to be a blackboard.

Every day the archaeologist came here. Every day he stood on the mosaic of the founding father and stared into the classroom for about a minute, then turned away, as if he had heard someone coming into the class and did not want that person to see him eavesdropping. The heavy silence clasping the empty chairs was alien to the archaeologist. In his house in London, he always expected silence to be broken, either by the sound of shopping bags full of cans dropping with a muffled bang onto the kitchen table and his wife saying, "I'm home"; or by the voices of his children complaining about their teachers as they walked up the sidewalk at the end of a school day.

Here the noiselessness itself became a brooding presence in the classroom, and the archaeologist did not feel he could interrupt the solitude which the classroom had gathered close to itself in the years before the city was found. He was like a small child who tiptoes by a cemetery lest one of the dead rebuke him for disturbing his eternal rest. The archaeologist feared that the tiny echo of his own voice would reprove him for disturbing the wooden chairs petrified in one position so that not even their joints creaked any longer. He could not turn the knob of the door leading inside and let the squeak of rusted metal and the squeal of brittle hinges interrupt the concentration of the objects in that room.

The archaeologist walked away as the rays of sun filtering through dust on the windowpanes dissolved into the shadows which blanketed the room for the night. But he returned every day, and eventually began walking down into the pit and pressing his forehead against the glass to watch the class through the clouds of his breath on the windowpane. Sometimes he came in the mornings now and at other hours when there was at least enough light to see—even during the full moon. Every day he came, he knew the room better, as a man comes to know a woman who never says anything just by the flickering expressions that pass through eyes she tries to keep expressionless.

One afternoon the archaeologist perceived nothing new about the room. It was his intimate now. It looked to him as it had on the previous afternoon, and as it had two nights before in moonlight; as it had for all the time he had known it and, he knew, even before he had known it. The room was eternal; it had become everything it ever was and ever would be.

The archaeologist walked to the door that led inside and tried to turn the knob as quietly as possible, but it made no sound. He walked in and sat in one of the chairs off to a far corner. And he stared at what he supposed was the teacher's desk, but there was no presence there. It was his place. He walked up and stood behind the low platform, looking down at the students' chairs. It seemed he was back in the university teaching, and the students had suddenly quieted down so that he could begin his lecture. But he could say nothing. It seemed that the eyes of every student who had ever sat in those chairs were upon him, waiting. Only the archaeologist's thoughts spoke, begging the ghosts to teach him.

The room began to glow red with the remnants of sunset. There were long shadows in the room now, across the chairs and across the platform in front of the archaeologist. As everything grew grey, the room took on a funereal

aspect. The side of the pit behind the windows loomed as a backdrop to the chairs, and the archaeologist noticed that there was no grass growing on it. It was barren, stark as the stiff-backed chairs holding their breaths, bleak as the black table in front of him. Darkness glided into the room as the light retreated. The archaeologist thought someone else was in the room, waiting in the corner for him to finish his lecture so that they could both leave to go home. The bars on the backs of the chairs in front of him were now just black silhouettes. The archaeologist lifted his head for a moment to the crumbling mosaic of the founder of the city which he could only see vaguely from the side. From that angle the founder looked as if he were lying upon a bier formed by the sloping side of the pit. The archaeologist glanced again at the words above the founder's head; he thought he recognized a symbol. Since he could not see the whole mosaic, he stood on the teacher's desk. The ciphers above the founder's head began to coalesce into the letters of the archaeologist's name.

He only sighed, but his breath was not audible. He stepped down from the table and looked again at the chairs in front of him. Something of every person who had sat in the room lingered because the room would not acknowledge death. And so the chairs and the wooden platform he now knew were his bier had never decayed. Nothing in that room had moved for centuries, as if in fear that one joint creaking, one sliver of varnish flaking off would be the final movement, the last breath. As long as nothing moved, it could remain as it always had been. For death was movement, the movement of shadows across the room every day as if inspecting it to make sure all had remained motionless. Death was the blackness the archaeologist felt waiting for him in the corner. The corner was totally dark now, and when the archaeologist turned to it from the faint light of the room, he saw the swirling of several depths of black, very much like a dancer pirouetting the flowing black satin skirts.

The archaeologist turned to the slate wall, slipping a piece of chalk out of his pocket that he had been using in the restorations. Moonlight eavesdropped through the gaps between the bars of the chairs. The ghostly students, the mourners at the archaeologist's bier, waited. The archaeologist started to write, but his hand shook. The chalk dropped, splintering with a shattering echo on the mosaic floor of the mausoleum.

April Selley

I had a friend once
somewhere across the western sea.
We swapped cat eyes
and multicolored spheres, clearies.
Jumped into leaves piled
laboriously for each.
Where has he gone?
Faded with the child
swallowed by dead leaves?
I couldn't cry when we left
and said goodbye. Now
I don't remember his name
just his memory
and the leaves, dead.

People scorn me, one
pillar of salt
who dares look back and see
their god daemon
fire that lit the stones
leaping, reaching to eat me.
In his grasp I crumbled
fell to my knees, in a pew,
praying to you, me
a pillar of salt.

I saw my god
on sunday noon
in a cellar church, with
other wooden gods, who
tortured souls in curtained boxes
illuminated by stands of fire.
For a dime you could burn a wish
and watch it fade into smoke.
She was an old lady
who made me walk slowly on my way
becoming a religious cannibal.
In her slowness and surety
she believed
She believed as I couldn't
at that moment
she was revealed as god
and I as wooden

J. W. Little

Medical Talisman

I
Twilight brings you from
the depths of
your destruction

Mourning anticipates
another sunrise
Patients hold a
double meaning

Cafeteria
smells dawn a misty sense
you
cut the dew
with your breakfast
knife and butter
the bleeding wheat

-unaware of your dis-
location

II

August brings
this day a sun
-drenched ember
Unable to seed
Your fingertips spread
wide each petal of hope

and send a blossom
back to the forest

No sleep.
The Innocence of Purgation
is signing her name,
sending Talisman
to an early dusk

III

The roses are
 resting
quietly in their bed

Dormant
mourning sat in your palm
-and wilted.

Maureen Keaney

someone else's eyes have replaced the black
fog of yours
and his smile cracks the stale
air of your descent.

morning rain will splash and stream other
windows and moon
circles will dance
for him, too.

Debra Prevey

San Juan Sea Search

It came upon me and I went.
The dormant embryo was fed by the elements, rain and wind.
I roused my supine person
And with haste have pulled down toward the archaic mold
of stone steps.
Emotion led the step-taking.
The call was fulfilled.

I stood.

I stood resigned to be as secure as the stone rectangles
jetty torn by her might.
Though stone, it too might be shaken and destroyed.
So much else of so much strength had ebbed away.

I stood.

In other worlds, sea too lapped the sand.
But, now, the black sea-carved shore stone withstood a
new watery warmth.
A humid ooze rose from a new characteristic of her
eternal changing.

I stood and gazed.

As the power splashed on stone, fear poured into me.
I again knew naught of what is.
The mind had lost another key,
Answers were wrenched away, locked deep and far from me.

I stood shaken.

Then, fear drained away.
The confidence of experience and being was replacing.
I was not to be touched.
The might, lay distant, all at my feet.

I stood.

Now rising through me I knew the limits of man, one man.
I went away as sea-might subsided again and again
to rejoin, replenish and return.

Anonymous

Cave-in, a natural event

and did you go to
the cave-in everyone asked
fresh after our neighborhood's
latest evening entertainment when
pete and tony were hoisted up
bluer than evening-in-paris

we all cringed around our brand
new drop-stage awaiting the
election results since the firemen
said two of the three could be
saved. election-in the
grand puritan manner seemed so strange

full half the block was here
on the heath with the three witches
yelling with beer cans in two
girls in braids stiffer
than pitched tents gazed
away from the gape

while most of the boys just
stood grimmer than an ancient
reaper. yet too many men showed
all the bravado of gladiators
on the sidelines cheering on their cronies

dim from the crowd perhaps some
were nobly and properly tragic
as a Picasso blue mood.
for most of us this was a
grand event our own private
carnalville giving us a chance
to kick life in the guts

someone coming back from the
funeral home described a
chalky white face Christ the harlequin?

come on to my own cave-in
next saturday after supper
i'll have candles for you
to curse while i
leap down the rope and
stir avalanches

Ann McDonald

A Cornerstone

Mr. Lombard was a man not given to excess. He lived in a moderately furnished boarding house on the outskirts of downtown Louisville. Why a man who had accumulated enough money to buy a house of his own had never done so was a topic of speculation among the middle-aged women, typical in this neighborhood, who still hung their dripping clothes on the line in the backyard, taking the opportunity to observe and discuss the idiosyncrasies of those who lived around them. The fact is that Mr. Lombard was afraid to take the risk. He had never been able to cope with the uncertainty of any adventure requiring hope and, consequently, inviting despair. The daily paper and three meals were his only necessities, and he relished the former more than the latter.

His hardware store was a tidy place and had managed in its thirty years to secure for Mr. Lombard the comforts he thought essential for a man gracefully aging. At times he considered the job a nuisance — he detested Mrs. Crowley's constant bickering and the way she always called him "hon" — but accepted it. "The man is set in his ways," they said of him, and treated him as you might treat an old broom.

If he had heard them, Mr. Lombard would have perhaps agreed with them. He was smug and settled. The only uneasiness he ever felt was when confronted with Howard, the man down the hall. Howard was physically ugly. The magic is that one forgot his features after two minutes spent enjoying his laughter and marvelling at your own. He could take any phrase, roll it around in his mouth, and deliver it to you as though you were in on the joke.

Mr. Lombard often heard the laughter from his room. Each Monday night kids and old folks from the neighborhood gathered in Howard's room at old Miss Jenkins' boarding house and were helped into the magic that was Howard. Mr. Lombard would be listening from his room down the hall; Monday nights were reserved. He had become so skilled that, with his ear pressed to the door, he could pick out the sustained laughter of each visitor in Howard's room.

He wondered why he listened. The laughter always forced to his eyes an instance, experienced as a boy, that he had hoped to forget the first time he

had seen it. He would listen very closely to the laughter and, after a minute or two, she appeared, standing next to the green garbage can on a corner in the West end. She was about seven or eight and her black skin was beset by pink scars, remnants of catch, jump rope and other children's games not meant for concrete sidewalks. The small girl reached into the garbage and explored as one might search for the toy in a box of breakfast cereal. Her hand emerged with an ant-ridden napkin concealing a half-eaten cupcake. The girl shoved the food to her mouth, discarding the useless napkin. The image faded as Mr. Lombard watched the ant crawling up her cheekbone towards the deep brown eye. Something always compelled him to brush the insect from the black girl's face, and perhaps it was curiosity as to the nature of the elusive something that led to the apparition. The small girl hovered beside him only when the laughter pressed through Howard's walls and faded into the darkness of his own room. Always just beneath the hilarity, Mr. Lombard recognized the insistence of Howard's rollicking voice, and needed to embrace it as he needed to embrace the solitary child.

He slowly turned the door knob and crept into the hall. After three determined steps, he abruptly stopped, studying the laughter more closely than ever before. His next steps were deliberate and for a moment he was sure that they were laughing at him. Mr. Lombard could see the light through the crack at the bottom of the door, and was almost repelled by the odor of cheap cigars. The laughter was pounding in his head and he never realized he was fighting back tears; he could not tell the tears from the sweat. Two more steps would bring him to the door. Through the dim light he noticed the chipped paint on the woodwork around the door, and the dingy wallpaper that had worked itself loose from a point near the doorknob and up to the ceiling. A spider that had made its home in the corner was in the process of extending its domain. The webs confused Mr. Lombard. The spider seemed to nervously ponder him, but continued to weave.

He heard footsteps climbing the back stairs that led to the hall. Mr. Lombard whirled and scurried back to his room just before old Miss Jenkins reached the hall with her platter of coffee and doughnuts for the visitors.

Michael M. Woody

After the Ground Hog

I wake these winter mornings thinking it
is raining but it's really the snow
melting off the roof and trees.

I'm thinking we will never see
the end of winter this time —
I always think that. I think the lamb
days of March will not come
for a long time yet, every Monday you talk
about the waves at the sea
wall after church on Sunday morning
and tell me when mid-
April comes you'll put the boat
back into the river with a poem.

One of these mornings all the snow
will be gone except for patches
that are in the shade all day.
Then I look for mud, the thawed brown
fields, kite flying open arm
days with just enough wind.

Patricia L. Slonina

