

VARIATION

A Free Verse Quarterly

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*Set from the scan of the magazine. The poems, their titles, the poets'
names and the figures at the feet of the leaves are the printer's; everything
in this color is this edition's.*

*Free verse is not a desertion of prosody; it is an
exploration, intentional or unintentional, of the
mysteries lying at the metrical core of speech.*

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GROVER JACOBY, *Editor*

VAN GOGH

Marguerite W. Truslow

Intimations of the atom
came to Van Gogh through no formulas,
himself a conscious part of cosmic whirling.
No merciful tegument protected him from the
universe;
his mind knew the torture of ceaseless motion.
For him spheres crowded towards the earth;
trees became gigantic with unspent power
or writhed in unfulfillment;
still life, full of voltage;
seed, blossom, fruit, were chain reactions, in
color exploding
and light ripped along the ploughman's furrow
in an apocalyptic spring.

DILEMMA

Helen Gressang

Outside the door the shimmering curtain of everyday
Waves and beckons an invitation to vegetate,
Invites one to partake in the bright serious business

Pick a fallen leaf, pull a weed, help the corn grow;
Live the unanswerable question of whether
The complete mobile of flying birds
Is added to by observation, or not.

Inside the room the springs on the covers of books
Lie taut, waiting to entrap us at a touch,
Enmeshing us in the precision grind of words;
Forcing the search for the elusive connection
Of meaning to meaning,
If it can be effected.

Finding no place of its own, the unfortunate soul
With the faces of Janus
Grows tenuous, thin and poor
With running in and out, out and in.

INWIT

Helen Gressang

Who can find a comfort
In the black and white of paper words
When the worm turns and feeds,
Turns and feeds, in the heart?

With a therapeutic desperation one gathers
Green leaves, hoping
For a salutary change
In the offering of new diet.

But oh, one sees the green leaves blanch
In trembling, fluttering hands
While the inexorable worm turns and feeds,
Turns and feeds, in the heart.

ASSIGNMENTS

Aveline Perkins

*(Continuation of the poem wherein each numbered
Assignment covers a different industry.)*

12

In the dream without a sleep,
And hypnosis of assembly lines
Mass production lulls into insomnia
The plan of suspended assembly—
Which fluorescent miles illuminate.

The auto frame is hung
Upon an overhead conveyor—
Travelling through assembly stages.

Curving down from depthless wells of space
Something of the sun's fanaticism
Invests machine tools.

Two assembly lines converge
As a complete chassis
At the body-drop.*
In simultaneous procession
Bodies are welded . . .
And painted . . .
And upholstered.

The air shrieks and shivers
With the metal finishing of bodies.

* Point in assembling cars at which body is dropped down onto the chassis.

Power is poured into the plant
And scheduled
By the teletype network.

Power flows and fluctuates;
Constructing waters sweep
Along the shore of men and hands,
Breaking at the base of the capitalist cliff.

* * *

Spurred by sparkplugs,
Hungering for hills,
Insensate squadrons drum
Treaded hooves along asphalt miles.

Lunging into already tunnelled wounds
The glittering, automotive lance
Runs through
The assassinated landmark.

13

Machines are often ailing.

The flesh of the propulsion motor
Is heir to a sickness of coils
And the devastation
Of loose windings.
With the slightest fluctuation
From the regimen of precision,
The machine and its human shadow of power
Languishes—

Its inordinate nerves
Burn out,
Bringing on the inflammation
Of the Diesel electric engine.

Exacting medics
Diagnose the sick mechanism;
The electrical chief surgeon
With swift mechanic surgery
Keeps body and soullessness together.

* * *

The march of the inexorable irons—
Moving out of waste products—
Invades worlds and spheres of power

With a tide of wheels,
In a dreaming thunder
And a thundering dream.

14

Senile irons die,
Are laid to rest
In the graveyard of deceased machines.

Indifferent sun beats
Hot upon the scrapheap;

On other days the rain
Washes the iron's wound.
Here the rotting iron awaits
Disinterment,
Then cremation in the cupola,

Where charging-doors* are brought up
And sealed—
A layer of sand, tamped down—
Then a layer of coke . . .
Bringing up the melting bed
To the melting zone.

Iron is melted by coke,
And the measured blast of air
For maximum capacity.
Mangled and corroded members are converted
By the maintained
 And managed heart of heat
 Into the strength of towers.

* * *

The Desk commands investigation
Into the soul of soullessness:

“Ask new questions
Of the oracular and thunderous fire.

“Spend time in the temple of technique
And listen
To the confessional of wheels.

“Discover the precise instrumentality
Of involuntary fortune.

“See how they worship and torture
The revered engines.”

I enter upon fortuitous circuits
Where wheels are broken

* At the bottom of the cupola-shaped furnace are doors, raised prior to the charging or loading of the furnace with iron to be smelted.

On the wheel.
Then the sermon of the pendulums—
The metallic hypothesis
Of inflexible vacillations.

I join with the mechanic choristers;
My ears resound
With hymns of fearful hope,
Portending
The trudge of engines
To far and fearful destinations.

MONTAUK FISHING FLEET

Barbara Leslie Jordan

Where rickety piers
Jut into Great Pond,
Gulls perch precariously
On rotted piles
Screaming Long Island's story.
In the channel
Fishing boats churn green water,
Black buoys bobbing in their wake.
Shagwan Reef passed!
The call goes out for water buckets
To flush the fish wells.
"Cut the Diesels;
Get a quote on porgy!"

ACADEMY CONFRONTED

Helen Curry

The ground is raining
and the air splits wide.
Oh what can be wrong
with your elaborate position?
So well worked-out.
Such intricate brocade.
(Like the mandarin you leave
color of tea and tangerines.)
And quite correct.

IF YOU KNEW

Elma Dean

What if this were the day—
the last flat circle of Time . . .

Stop by the shelves on the north wall,
finger the bright bowls, lift them.
See the color, the light and your face—
see the stranger.
Repeat the motions like ritual.
Now look through the window at sunned water;
it was nothing yesterday—you had it.

Count the cross lines on the wallpaper—
the important, silly old wallpaper.
Turn lights off. Turn them on.
Look at each other and prolong love;
you can't. Tomorrow . . . tomorrow . . .
Lips say it and the fast heart
pushes blood to it, making a tune.

O day, come under the drawn blind slowly!

SILENCE WILL COME AGAIN

Eric Wilson Barker

Where two of our coast hills
have been razed to the roots,
ten years ago was ample ground
for a day's solitude.
Now, to escape the raping bulldozers,
the thick air and the stale talk,
I walk as many miles inland
to earth still fallow for a poem's seed
where trees and stones give better counsels
than our cuds of words:

Avoid the peopled places,
drink mountain and desert air.
The wide-winged bird that roosts among
the stars,
falling in spirals on the corpse of sound
is what the planet waits for.
Not the earth wanes, but what encumbers it:
the latest, and the least.

PRELUDE TO DIVORCE

Grover Jacoby

Hit leaf and hit leaf:
Throughout the hedge
The light rain plucks selectively.

Drops of time
And instants of water.

But what is your voice doing here—
With its misplaced sunlight
Wandering in and out
Among the grey intervals,
My excessive darling?

POEM REVIEWS

"The Moon (Thoughts from an Observatory)" by Gemma d'Auria. *The Scientific Monthly*, January, 1950.

In an unusual treatment of a worn subject this poet, who commands the facts and the language of astronomy along with the perceptiveness of the artist, gives thanks to an earlier writer of similar qualifications. Giovanni Batista Riccioli, astronomer of the seventeenth century, drew on his poetic imagination for names to designate certain level areas or depressions on the moon's silvery but arid surface which were still without scientific identification: Sea of Tranquillity; Valley of Endymion; Lake of Dreams. So, says the present poet, he left "his own geography . . . under the clear and austere symbols" which have now been charted through the opened "Eye of Palomar,"

"Thrust out beyond the shallow windows
Of the insatiable brain."

"What desert death/ The poet's phrase redeems!" exclaims Gemma d'Auria, whose own lines, despite her modern learning, carry the beauty and cool tranquillity which Luna must ever bestow even on unscientific observers.

Neeta Marquis

"On the Early Morning Bus" by Jean Burden. Reprinted from "The Poetry Chap-Book" in "Poetry Awards 1950" (University of Pennsylvania Press).

This poem is rich in symbol and in implication. The language is simple but extremely definitive. Here is intense yet disciplined feeling—a quiet juxtaposition of an item of concrete experience with a universal concept.

"Three Audubons, female . . . riding between town and bird."

". . . today with polished lens

they plan to stalk the Godhead in the linnet's wing."

The rhyming is casual yet musical, and there is a freshness of imagery. If the purpose of the poet is to see, to feel, and to record emotion "recollected in tranquillity," then I think that the closing stanza is a particularly good example of this function:

"No one knows when I avert my head

I have memorized their heartbeats in ventricle and wrist
And buried their dead."

Barbara Leslie Jordan

"Venice" by Lloyd Frankenberg. Harper's Bazaar, April 1950.

In less sure hands than Mr. Frankenberg's, Venice might have proved an uncontrollable temptation to indulge in sentimentality—of all literary criminals the most deadly murderer of poetry. Lloyd Frankenberg, however, describes his impressions of Venice with a skill at once objective, concise, and rich in imagery. He asks (quite rhetorically, no answer is expected)

"from what stone seed, we wonder,
these giant lotus pads took root."

Harper's Bazaar devoted two pages to the poem and to a color reproduction of the painting "Venice" by the poet's wife, Loren MacIver. Cold print often has a hard time competing with the colors of a painting; yet the reader has fine word pictures painted in his head by such lines as "domes that like jugglers' apples drift into the sky."

For climax we have two mysterious lines to match the mystery of Venice:

"And in the piazza
water sank like a stone."

Aveline Perkins

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

HELEN GRESSANG lives in San Lorenzo, California. She has received encouragement in her work from Josephine Miles.

A poem by AVELINE PERKINS which treats of the manufacture of ice is expected to appear in the Winter 1951 issue of The Pacific Spectator.

BARBARA LESLIE JORDAN and Marguerite Truslow are the only contributors to this issue who do not happen to live in California.

ERIC BARKER was born in England, and he now lives in San Francisco.

HELEN CURRY and her husband, Richard Curry, are building a new home in the vicinity of Mount Washington in Los Angeles.

The classes of Neeta Marquis have furthered the interest in poetry in Los Angeles for many years.

ELMA DEAN lives in Oakland, California. A poem by her appears in the current issue of Recurrence.