

A FREE VERSE QUARTERLY

VARIEGATION

VOLUME V / SUMMER 1950

A reading edition from the complete issue

19

ISSUE 19

VARIATION

A Free Verse Quarterly

Volume V · Summer 1950 · Number 3

*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*

LIFE SENTENCE

Elinor Lennen

Hoarded words
Breath did not wing into your heart
Lie heavy on my own,
Or beat in frustrated strength
Against walls of loneliness.

Not all my clamorous remorse
Can free the guilty words
That have nowhere to go.

DIALECTIC BEFORE THE JOURNEY

Howard Sergeant

1

1.

I hold no brief for those unfortunate ones,
saviours chosen from birth
to carry their private calvaries,
prophets without conviction
who were compelled
to walk the hungry water at flood tide
and, faltering, discovered
the gestures of history
as indifferent as lapidary winds.

Time will undoubtedly resolve them.

2

Out of their lives, perhaps,
out of their pilgrimage, our children
must inherit the relevant star;
but for us in the purlieus
they merely foretell
new legends of futility.

Having omitted to proof our lintels
with their proleptic blood,
we hoard against the angel's indiscriminate

4

fingers, our eucharist,
unknowing its potence,
waiting a revolution in the human heart
to release the spirit's foliage;
waiting in silence
with only ourselves to wait for.

3

Not less than theirs
our topiarian flowering,
not less our failures.

For we have been satisfied
with a limited perception of beauty,
too eager to discard
the dangerously high altitudes
of childhood,
where dreams meant more
than technicoloured romance
under mortgage to the Screen.

Focus your thoughts
on the empty lives and faces,
finger the wounds,
trace suppurating scars
to the ultimate source,
and question these as the hallmarks
of divinity.

Though here the earthquake,
wind, and still small
voice compete, do they
identify humanity

as the leaping images of God?
How narrow the margin
between men and wholeness,
yet O how wide!

4

Now we have come to the summoning brink
from which there is no retreat
and no horizon;
already the waves are swirling
about our ankles.
Standing at the sea's edge
in a perilous moment,
wind buffeting our lives,
how can we convince those who follow
of the infallibility of love;
we, who have nothing but words,
bequeath to them light?

Time, it is time to liquidate death,
tear loose its tendrils
from the hearts of the living
and let the leavening mountain air
restore lung's purpose.
So man achieve terrible wings
to weather the ocean's fury.

FALSE SPRING

Nell Tucker

False spring,
Shadow on the lip of night,
Light and shadow.

Life is an image,
Your reflection, lost in a molten silver pool,
Played upon a recording of despair.

Sunlight is my friend,
And Time is a misconception
Of Eternity.

THERE IS GRACEFUL EXPLOSION

Leslie Woolf Hedley

There is graceful explosion
in your language
covering the flesh of your face
when no not language is necessary
nor even sounds
just the motion of angels
of stars and sunsets
the graceful explosion of your hair
the deep pit of your eyes

there is no love anywhere else
because the world ends at your lips.

A W A K E N I N G

Mary Moores

Sun of breakfast,
Scratching upon cream cement
And crumbs of wall,
Pulling my sleep from me
With yellow crawling claws
That scrape across the frozen
Waves of flesh in dream:
The skin of sleep you leave
Deflated upon the wrinkled sheet,
Which houses now
The daytime hours.

ASSIGNMENTS

Aveline Perkins

7

Impellers are gathered in a bunch,
Brass flowers
Plucked from the booming garden

Where the hand grinder's shrieking sparks
Light a fire in my ears;
And martyred metal,
Broken on the wheel of carborundum,
Perishes for the doctrine of perfection.

Survivors of the ordeal
Live as impellers,
Live
To drive water upward.

8

The building's delivery
Is a highwire act.
The tightrope-walking surgeons
Perform their operations
As they move about
On threads of steel.

I explore skeletons
Whose bones signal
Birth and new existence.

Men walk like cats—
With hammers in their hands.
Precarious their task;
Gravity snaps at their heels,
Trying to drag them down.
Only their casual air
Lifts them above death.

In hazardous silhouette
Men are patient spiders
Spinning the hard webs.

9

The kinematic ocean
Has many currents.
Industrial cascades
Ripple the estuary of strength,
Pouring into the productive sea.
Within rectangular steel creeks
Flowing chains
Draw the material torrent.

* * *

Slaves are freed
By no scrolled proclamation . . .

Their release announced
By the oration of tube and shafting,
The principles of the carrier roll—

The Redler Conveyor's declaration!

From vibrator screens and power-drives
Flow material tides
And immaterial new meanings.

10

When the world was adolescent,
An ocean perished here.
Dead lagoons
Stain the desert.
Ringed by intractable mountains,
An industrial oasis
Wells from fruitless sands.

No gouging of the ground
In this liquid mining;
Stealthy, automatic vampires
Are sucking the salt blood.

By the drought of the evaporators
All water is swallowed.
Filters and digesting driers
Glean potash—
Dust of fertility.

Industry has cut
The throat of sand.
Booster pumps drink
From the salt flats which once drank men,
And in every gulping minute
Lap 2100 gallons
Of the conquering solvents.

Industry's saline carousal
Rollicks day and night.

11

11.

Mandible cannon
Bombard us microscopically.
Crops and orchards crumble
Before the blitzkrieg of the boll weevil
And the blasting of the orange worm.

The counterattack is launched in desperate time.
"Dusters" fire the barrage of calcium arsenate.
Airplanes hurl down sulphurous bombs
Upon the cavalry of beetles.
Mobilized chemicals deploy
Against the miniature Mongolian horde.

The insecticide plant is a war plant.
In sheet metal shops
"Dusters" are stamped out.

Sacking machines fill bags with dusty hope.
In the dustclouds of the grinding mill
Is the choking breath of life.

And out of the mouth of sifting machines
Issues the saving grace of nicotine sulphate.

SEAL ROCKS

Gertrude May Lutz

(From the Cliff House, San Francisco)

This is where slashes of land break upward
out of sea.

Where—on precarious jut and jag—
seal-browns and cormorant-blacks
mix with color of gulls; are one
with crash of spray,
with lean of sky.

Traveler, look from this window.
This is sea before our seamen came:
where long sound splinters endlessly. Listen:
faint through glass, the over and over sea-pound,
bark of seals, and always
the cat-mewing of gulls.

In this framed square, see—
beyond rocks-how waves flatten to emptiness;
to far horizon ... haze ... Yesterday's
sea—
prowless-sailless.

This is the sea of Gaspar de Portolà;
lined eyes bright with wanderer's amaze!
booted feet astride on raw ledge of land
high over water!
plume blown backward, pointing the way

of salt wind
through undreamed city streets

Look, traveler.
Look well on cusp of rock, of wave,
before today is mirrored in your eyes;
before blue-comber-spaced—
takes on its shapes of ships!

POEM REVIEWS

“Suburban Portrait” by Helen Curry. Gale, November 1949.

Helen Curry is a regionalist in the most absolute sense; she can withdraw herself from imagining any background save the one with which she deals. The seasons become her own. “Suburban Portrait” describes a section where winter cannot exist. The effect lies in the lines themselves: shadow-drenched, sun-happy ... “across a valley divided by light.” While there is nothing in the poem that could not have been written in—say Kenosha, Wisconsin—the total is something that inheres to the lands that never know winter. A timeless quality, in an eternal summer of light and darkness, lacking anything as hard as frost. Here death is an inadvertency, and the cats prowl forever after the rising doves.

Hanson Kellogg

"Seagulls" by Eric Wilson Barker. *Saturday Review of Literature*, May 20, 1950.

This is a daring subject, which in the hands of some, might exert no wing power. But here it does lift, and goes out beyond horizons in its implications. The visible scene on the dock is set in a few words, but that is only a point of departure. The scene-within-scene, the poem-within-poem, is in the stanzas concerning Chatterton, with the conjecture that to see wings might have saved him from a despairing death. In structure, the poem seems to have created its own form. The irregular stanza length, the rhymes that fall where they may, serve as commentary on Debussy's dictum that "Rules are made by, not for works of art." The important thing here is less the effect than the aftereffect, which is the sight and sound of wings.

Elinor Lennen

"At The Setting of the Sun" by Gustav Davidson. *American Mercury*, July 1949.

The fresh juxtaposition of familiar ingredients distinguishes this poem. As with an etching, the clean space around it makes its few strokes effective. Scarcely sixty words are used, yet they include such discriminating phrases as "the shimmering daylight grieves," "the opal talk of birds," and "the fluent paw of fox." The setting of the sun here transfixed in words has a long, long afterglow in the mind's eye.

Elinor Lennen

"Forgive My Guilt" by Robert P. Tristram Coffin. Atlantic Monthly, May 1949.

Although the verb in this title seems to be an imperative, and although it leads one to expect Coffin's usual smug performance, that clue is false. He can only hope to be forgiven, and it is evident that he will forgive himself only after his victims have done that. This hopelessness creates the pathos which is the poem. The boy with the gun, the wounded plovers, and his long remorse are compressed in two lines:

"Those slender flutes of sorrow never cease.

Two airy things forever denied the air!"

With only alternate lines rhymed, instead of Coffin's frequently too-obvious couplets, the poem itself seems to flow in air, rather than be earth-bound and brittle.

Elinor Lennen

"The Elder Brother" by Elma Dean. The New Yorker, July 1949.

The "Poem for All Good and Loyal Dogs" (Mrs. Dean's subtitle to "The Elder Brother") shows how deftly the traditional Shakespearean sonnet may be put to the uses of modern poetry. An interesting use of capitalization focuses the Biblical connotations. "After Light and the shaping of Land he came, The four small footmarks on immaculate green." The clean lines are almost sculptured in effect. Mrs. Dean's highly individual gift for delicate imagery tends to heighten, rather than obscure, this effect. The charm of the poem is at once universal and specific. Who would not respond to the final couplet?

"To go with gladly from that forbidden place.

Adoring through the many falls from Grace."

Winifred M. Johnson

"Listen, The Fog Horns!" by Eric Wilson Barker. The Yale Review, Spring 1950.

Fog horns do more for us, and to us, than prevent nautical traffic accidents. Fog horns give a splendid sadness to ports and harbors, and flavor the atmosphere with the essence of tragedy and poetry. More specifically, fog horns gave poet Eric Wilson Barker an idea; Mr. Barker in his turn has given us a marvellously stimulating poem, in which he

has achieved with consummate mastery the imparting of character to the essentially lumpish fog horns which in the poet's language become "the bass-voiced bulls . . . calling one another." Secret of the poem's success seems to be the poet's capture of the interchanging of emotion between the human and the inhuman. Each acquires a sense of transcendent sadness from the other—for the fog horns "bawl stupendous love no fog can smother" and "Like mournful Stentors they invade our town, Sadder than far-off cannon heard through sleep, Searching our dreams for solace till we drown."

Aveline Perkins

"Radio" by Irene Bruce, from the book, "Night Cry" (Poetry West).

This poem forces upon us one gratifying conclusion. Irene Bruce is an original poet. She may at times display a lack of erudition, but if she were a *bas bleu*, would she still be able to approach her subject in verse that contains these welcome surprises:

"Octopus of air,
you siphon sound
threshing shores of silence . . ."
"Conceived of space

you grow enormous of nothing . . ."

Mrs. Bruce knows how to take this invention apart better than any mechanic, and she does not bother to put it together again. There is a certain very real air about all her dissections which will become apparent to readers of her remarkable new book, "Night Cry." It would be doing Mrs. Bruce an injustice not to add that she is a versatile poet whose other poems display a number of rare qualities.

Grover Jacoby

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

HOWARD SERGEANT is the president of the British Poetry Association. One of his anthologies is used in the British school system, and he has written several books of poetry and criticism.

AVELINE PERKINS is now an American citizen. His talents are still focused upon the industrial scene here in Southern California. An article by Kimmis Hendricks in the Christian Science Monitor outlined very ably the plan and purpose of "Assignments."

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