

James Deahl

A BRIDGE IN PITTSBURGH

for Gerald Stern

Day of no school; no homework; no chores.
I'm walking across the 6th Street Bridge in snow
to reach the North Side and Olga Snyder's
Books and Magazines on Federal Street
where I will buy *Side Street* and *Sound of a City*
by James T. Farrell and a science-fiction collection
edited by Judith Merrill, whom I will meet
twenty years later in Toronto at a café on Spadina.
Her anthology will cost all of 15 cents, and
the two Farrells will go for 20 cents each.

Later I will read about Heinie Mueller and his wife
living over Calumet in Chicago in their
third-floor walk-up and of three Americans in Paris;
but for now it's the bridge slanting through storm,
and the grey river lifting its barges into frozen air
on a Saturday afternoon in January. At mid-river
the city's towers are lost in gusting flakes,
the grimy brick storefronts along Federal
not yet in sight. And I'm above these cold waters
the Allegheny's brought down from its mountains.

One might expect to meet Whitman
on a day like this, his pockets crammed with poems,
his arms waving as he strides through clouds
reciting his love for Lincoln, his faith in America.
The snow falls thicker now, blotting out
the tugs moored against the far bank, and shrouding
the occasional walker hunched into the wind.

Behind me rise the hills of fire where coal smoulders
deep underground, the snow never sticking
along fissures where hot fumes rise.

They are the hills of my youth,
the hills I will leave behind in smoke and flame.
But today I'm straddling a river I can barely see,
thinking of the dust of used books, of hissing
steam radiators, of the plump old woman
in her shapeless sweater at the scarred desk.
It seems as though my entire world is swaying
high above the Allegheny, above the glowing hills,
pungent with intimacy. It seems as if
this is my only day, the only life to live.

DREAMING OF JACK GILBERT

I dreamt of you last night, Jack.
You were reading in an art gallery,
polished wood floors, wide-planked
and glowing. The paintings were of the '50s.
New York. Jazz-inspired.

A storm that had been building all day
broke later that evening, then
subsided slightly. You would not know
Pittsburgh should you return. So much
has changed, so much has vanished.

Perhaps we cannot hold memories
together or defend what is good
in the life of a city. You moved
to Greenwich Village to write of Orpheus.
The seasons turn without regard for us.

In my dream you were tired, Jack,
an old man even older than I am,
white-bearded and heavy;
yet you were married to a
much younger woman.

She and I stood in the fields of rain
talking about Paros, Kos, and the poems
you wrote there years ago.
Inside the gallery you read to the night,
great fires still burning in your voice.

ABOVE THE RIVER

for Ed Gelblum

A blue veil hangs over
the Appalachians of northern Pennsylvania
showing autumn has finally embraced
the farms around Montoursville.
The harvest nearly finished, things move faster,
chores become more urgent, the breath of holsteins
steams in early morning pastures.
Truly such beauty cannot arise by accident.

From this ridge the valley opens
its patchwork colours of field and woodlot;
the surrounding hills mirror
the serenity of sky, the serenity of clouds
that have ceased to care if or where they drift.
And the people behind the walls of the white farmhouse,
how do they live? How fortunate they are
to witness another season fulfilled.

And how grateful I suddenly feel
standing high above the river
as it carelessly pulls its blue dreams
south to Chesapeake Bay, the unknown oceans beyond.
Corn stubble stands sentinel against the cold.
A sharpness rides the breeze, and the hill
slopes into a hollow where an unpainted barn
stands awash in weedflowers swollen with seeds.

On this morning in early October
one can almost return to an innocence
unmarked by evil. Cattle wander
uphill to where a flame of maples
has risen along a freestone wall.

Now it becomes clear; the scene
illuminated by goodness without bounds.
I turn and walk towards the river, going home.

FLAME TOWER

The fire through the trees
is a Moorish window
hung on the wall of the night.

Inside the flame, lust flows
and is consumed
by its own burning, its own desire.

I think of Mingus playing in
the south of France,
sailing free on a hot breeze of summer.

An airless wind comes out of Africa,
a desert where the soul is lost
and found again in its blue sirocco.

FUNDY

*only the sea
is washed by its own surfaces*

– Jeffery Donaldson

I

A land so sharp
it falls away in screens
as it rushes to reach the bay

where great tides sweep
and withdraw to cleanse
the land of memory

raise a black finger
to point out a destination
your every motion
a gesture of desire

dark figures moving
across a dark background

voyager

II

Salt tang
salt smell
sharp edge of brine

cage for the moon
caught in the cross-currents
of a thousand waves

402 Janus Head

the voice of a woman
is heard
singing in her blue chamber

singing her song of the marriage bed
song
of the endless night

III

Honeycomb of clouds and stars

the quiet of a heart filled
with longing

only these things remain
after the autumn wind
has gone

the bay is more black
your hands more empty
without the summer birds

IV

Who will speak the word
that summons the snow?

This is the blue season
of late October

the season of the love of a young man
for an older woman

off Cape Forchu
the ocean opens
like a rose.

RESIDUE

All afternoon I have been travelling through the vast whiteness of Ohio in
December.

The trees, so thin in their nakedness, stand ranked like aged men awaiting
death.

The frost has broken all but the strongest grasses.

When my father went he was twisted, his legs snarled into an inhuman
position.

His hands were the claws of a great raptor,
each yellowed nail clutching at life. No letting go.

Behind the trees a grey sky brims with the possibility of snow.

Dusk comes early and a loneliness arises out of these fields.

It must be the loneliness he left behind for it is not the soft feeling of a
romantic.

It is stark as the winter moon, too cold, too remote
to touch.