

WHITE SHROUDS

From our kitchen window I watched the hard sleet chipping
at the granite pond, the white ducks
huddling in their giant mushroom, and felt against
my leg the warmth in the heater vent die.

Did you feel how cold it dropped that night?

At nine below, water expands into rock, the pipes peel
back like ripe fruit,
the heavy branches of the post oak bang like axes
against the house. The power fails
all over the neighborhood,
the ferns on the windowsill crack like china.

I went down to the basement to check the firewood,
wormy, maybe enough for one night,
then pulled the couch in front of a fireplace
too shallow for any real heat, wrapped you in a skin
of quilts, let you tuck and sleep
inside what comfort it gave.

On the end of the couch,
outside the eye and breath of the fire, ice
actually crusted the tips of my beard.
And in that other place where the cold takes you
out of yourself with each white breath,
I listened all night to the fanatical ministry
of the brain, the alarm
it sounds to keep the body alert,

which wasn't the ringing of bells over city shelters,
or the sirens of ambulances spinning out of alleys,
but was only that breathing,
the white easy breathing of sleepers curling
in doorways, behind dumpsters, their ears
slowly turning into stone, and no one
to husband the small logs, two at a time, onto the fire.

DAVID BOTTOMS

THE WINTER AFTER THE ASSASSINATIONS

This is how we worship in the winter
under the dead weight of luminous snow,
around the card table, at the piano —
Requiescat in pace, while storms come off the sea,
my wife rolls me between her knees,
Requiescat, requiescat, this is how we pray.

I saw three dawns
taut as the sound of Mahler tympani
and suddenly the mountains stung
like gold coins in my hand
when the sky lifted before snow came again.
This was the way the year ended.

One morning we built a fire.
The children woke, and that was how we prayed,
our fingers around hot cocoa
on days off before the fire under the iron sky,
reading about the elephants
that stand in circles around their dead,
their hurt hearts calm, their peaceful eyes.

STANLEY RADHUBER

MAN ON THE RUN

You came to me this morning
all a-tremble
and told me of your great escape.
You had to take out the guard
but he will recover in time.
Five minutes we had together
before you had to run.
Is this good news or bad news I wondered,
will they ever let us be
or must we hide forever?

Or am I still dreaming?
Rubbing the sleep from my eyes
I led you from the curtained shadow of my room
out onto the wet porch
and scrutinized you by the light of a nearby star.
"Why it is you!" I said,
and your smile redeemed the morning.
I loved you so much then
I forgot to tell you,
and with my hands on my head
I watched you go.

SHARON WINTER



HELMI KUUSI, "GIRL WITH MATCHES" (1937)

COMMENCEMENT

A voice like a razor blade, a voice thick with passion,
the evening scarlet and smelling of poverty.
Washed in gold light, everyone trots down the road
after money, blood or love as the first snow continues:
the air so pure it pushes out bitterness and boredom:
the light in each room very bright and hot,
the slant of the sea easily viewed from each window.

How they fused and broke apart in a small circle of heat
governs the laws of emotional poverty. The more spirited horse
bolted towards imagined opportunities, their old lovers' upturned faces
wounded and charming along the walls and in various corners.
The princess with a halo of flames sang at the appointed blackened hour.
A violin in its cracked case also held the silver key to disorder;
and the air was sweet and heavy with the underside of passion.

You may be looking at your future, or at her predatory mouth,
or at a man putting his head between a lion's teeth.
If you turn around you can hear the night calling you
through inadequate walls sweating tears like fire.
Their lips will be cold and the strange shapes of men and women
will flicker through a blue window, tiny and square and filled with the world's
dirt and diseases, but this will fill your hours and days with meaning.
Losing balance and dignity you will suddenly see a strangler's face,
a stranger's face, and superimposed on this, the winter sun shining,
your voice flowing from the head of a cow.

CHRISTINA ZAWADIWSKY

LANDSCAPE WITH DRIVER

:for Stephen Bangs

I had my tubes tied on the coast
road to Astoria today it was chilling
driving the weather windy and the sea bright
grey I was alone in the car I was thinking again
I say yes believing you will not harm me having no cause
to believe such things I thought I was being
brave the sea hissed openly the road threw
curves you were back with your father
extending the hearth palm-sized
pebbles in your hands a dull
like your language
weapon

I drove towards the center
for battered women to read my work believing
you will not harm me having no cause no part
of that work I had no bruises I kept on
driving hugging
myself around the wheel and driving faster forcing
my attention to the road you were the only
man I made exceptions for believing wanting
to believe we still
could cleave to each other married soul
on soul sloughing our politic
bodies

OLGA BROUMAS