

Joan Colby

Little Big Horn

I was his lieutenant in the war
Against my mother. On weekends, we went
To museums of armory, shields and
Battle axes, or the historical society where Laocoon
And his children struggled
With a serpent. Where his photos of the
Vibrant city depicted busy
Wharves, the toxic river.
He gave me horses and poetry,
How to be observant and obstructive
With a grimly quiet resistance.
Their battles were silent—his strategy
A stalk-out to clubs where naked
Women posed or dunes where he could frame
The perfect tall grass captured
In its perfect sway.
Hers a crusade, novenas,
Litanies. A hierarchy of priests
Attended her parade
Of rosaries and missals.
Years later, when he'd surrendered
In a sick bed, wounded and confessing
The weapons of the weak would
Always conquer any man brought up
To honor a moral code. It seemed
A justification, how he'd sold out
For peace at last. I stood
Like Custer, on the barren mound,
Ammunition gone, waving an
Empty pistol.
At the funeral home, she bargained
For a cheaper rate
Then laid his bones
In consecrated ground.

First Job—J.C. Penneys

Sherry, Joanne, Donna and Sandy
Below in the heart of commerce peddling
Perfumes and underwear. Directing ladies
To dressing rooms. Finding the right size
Of flannel shirt for an old rancher.
Stacking the Pendleton blankets that the
Indians come in for. Whirling the cash and
Sales slips up to me in my locked chamber
Where I sit like Rapunzel bereft
Of company, making change and impaling
Those slips on a prong, then sending
The remainder down in a vacuum whoosh
Like the Chinook winds that surge the weather
Fifty degrees in an hour.
There are bars on the cage I'm in,
Sequestered as a maiden in a tale
While my girlfriends gossip and steal
Lipsticks and eye shadow. End of the shift, I'm
Freed to get in on the plans for the evening
Which mostly involve cruising Broadway
To end up at the Big Boy Burger
Or on the rimrocks making out
Above the lights of the glittering city.
They think you're smart and can be trusted
Sherry envies the five cents more per hour
I earn for being jailed and lonesome. No wonder
Duane can induce me to the roadhouse where
We drink whiskey and dance to a cowboy band
With our hands stamped purple.

First Time

Beer party in a field.
Chug-a-lug, warm quarts,
Someone with a guitar.
Everyone singing. Passing
Around a joint.

The night grows small
Like Alice through the looking glass.
She laughs at the far awayness
Of it all. Darkness takes her
By the hand.

Wakes, a jabbing
Between her legs. The ground
Hard and bristly. He's that dark
Above her, not a boy she loves
Just the one she came with. Sobs.

He stops *I didn't know*.
She wrenches away, pulling up her
Jeans, feels sick and bloody, not
How she meant it to be.
Decides that this won't count.

Hospital Story

Take out the crib, leave the playpen.
The woman in the next bed jokes.
She's randy when her boyfriend
Visits. Her crib and mine defective,
Rails rotting, supports gone bad.
She doesn't seem to understand
The risk we're facing. Swigs
Smuggled wine, describes intimacies.
The charge nurse shakes her head:
It's sad, the prognosis,
Not like mine, caught early.
One by one, we're taken
Our bellies stapled over emptiness.
I will go home and live.
She won't.

Power

When it fails, you fumble in the dark
For a candle stub and a match.
The furnace grows cold
As a faithless lover.
You open the book of wisdom
To find words blurred
Like melting snow. The doors
Of technology shut on
Entertainment. At dawn, the winter birds
Flock to the feeders. The day proceeds
With its lacks. You huddle at the hearth
Warming your hands. How humble you've become
Imagining the perk of the coffee pot
Or the jubilant flush of a toilet. Deep
In its pit, the well is silent
As a dwarf whose tongue has been severed.
Consider the communion of bodies,
The society of the pure in heart. Recite
The canticle of the dispossessed
Until a flash of light
And the house groans into its
Accustomed industry. It takes so little
To empower your spirit. To forget.

Joan Colby has published widely in journals such as *Poetry*, *Atlanta Review*, *South Dakota Review*, etc. Awards include two Illinois Arts Council Literary Awards, an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship in Literature. She has published 16 books including *Selected Poems* from FutureCycle Press which received the 2013 FutureCycle Prize and *Ribcage* from Glass Lyre Press which has been awarded the 2015 Kithara Book Prize. She has two books forthcoming in 2016 and 2017. One of her poems is among the winners of the 2016 Atlantic Review International Poetry Contest. Colby is also a senior editor of FutureCycle Press and an associate editor of *Kentucky Review*.