

Victoria Korth

Cloisters: Palmesel

On granite ramparts, in a garden
I have never seen before, you ask me
about St. Catherine's head, is there really
a skull inside. I have dragged you here
to find for us some ancient safety,
consecrated order. Yes, I say,
but probably not hers.
Point out brick paths, manageable beds,
espalier pear, pear with stones hanging
from the longer branches, trellises
of trimmed willow, a useful gardener
crouching over mint blush, thorn apple.
And, inside again, a palm donkey:
Christ seated on a drooping beast
who is mounted on wooden cart.
It was my idea to fill our gaps
with stone and silence. You look
but cannot feel the palm switch on your cheek
or smell the faithful in their patched, holiday garb,
and I don't see through you. Instead
the unusual crowd on a foggy Sunday
casts us from this medicinal green.

We process to the gift store
where I buy a postcard of the Belmont Michael
and keep it on my desk: huge peacock wings
over a night blue cape, slim silver-armored legs,
shield shaped like a globe, pristine lance
incising a demon's mouth, and he, or she,
such a motely claw-foot made of seven laughing faces,
eyes were breasts should be, peaked head
tapering to a smiling snake, legs of bovine
beast-heads, triceps of small triceratops.
Perhaps that's why Michael stays absorbed in grace.
Foolish, I know, but today I hear what both are saying.
Small words, hard to take back.

Creature

The beach was wide enough for ten to walk abreast.
Waves were small that morning. Limpid water
rushed up and fell back. Small birds threaded lacy foam
where holes with bubble tops appeared. We did not talk.
This was our sand. We were masters of the hour of walking.
And because the sea and air were both so full of motion,
it was not peace we felt, but fearlessness.

I must record what happened on that memorable day.
A creature hurled itself from shallow waves,
twisting like a boxer's arm as if it took our walking there
a personal affront. I will refer you to a painting
in the Cloisters: a dull metallic demon shrieks
beneath St. Michael's boot. So, what of this is tragic?
We blame each other for our fear. The beach is gone.

St. Francis in the Desert, Bellini

The donkey's sleepy gaze holds mine
as it looks in the same direction as the heron,
though not seeing the same thing— it is not possible
that they see the same thing—but gazing
softly the way animals do into the distance,
more listening than looking.

The heron stretches tall, ready to drop over
the limestone outcropping, drop off the canvas
away from careful ivy and alder, willow, grass,
foxglove, all magnified into truer shapes,
rude proportion perfected
by an attention hardly natural.

It would be searing, it would be hungry,
frigid, tired on the stone escarpment, pale
blue as the Mediterranean is beautiful.
The molded city on the hill a woman's grace.
Dedicated shepherd leaning, watching.
The man with open arms, bare feet,

believable not as he was, but as he
yet must be. I don't understand what he sees
as there is nothing there except a motherly
love, turf like a blanket beneath the donkey's
hooves, wide-set ears asking me to rub them,
ragged trees, cave, actually a cave; this was true.

At the Funeral

It had to be here I would see you next,
as the people we knew together begin
to die. We're in line with our children,
my siblings, cousins who loved her—
each holding a long-stemmed rose—
processing in state down the left-hand aisle.
As you walk in our group you lower your head,
yet toss a rose just the same across her box.

This one is easier, this puddle of flowers left
in church, ritual shaped to know when to cry—
with a rising song—start now on the organ's rain,
heat we should have expected, hail
watched from beneath a wide underpass.
You're no longer trapped though you've chosen
my pew, it's ok, you'll dry off in another state.
I won't need to now, though did then.

Horse Farm

She wanted to see them because I had seen them
so my sister loaded her walker into the narrow trunk
and drove down the country lane
and up the rise to the closed farm, pulled off
in the dusty lot where Dora the goat had been tied
at noon to the apple tree. The horses were pastured,
their stalls open and empty. She fretted, a hungry child.

Slower than melting ice, one foot forward,
the other held up a moment as if about to step back,
we kept pace, my two sisters and I. The horses,
deep in the pasture, did not look up. Mother waved
her hands before her face and, panting, plopped down
on the seat of her rolling device, sat in the silent
late-day road that led by a stream to somewhere.

I stayed while one sister, concerned, walked back
to the car and the other, annoyed, went with her.
Stayed still enough—what took them so long—to see
at first a black, then roan, then two black, two roan
and a dapple, move sweetly across deep tufted fields
to the bottom pasture, the stream and out of sight.

They followed each other at intervals—evenly, pauses
between, yet as if slyly aware of something they might not
get to see, perhaps curious, thirsty, yet still hiding their need
to be like the others, looking contentedly up then walking,
a trot, soft gallop, each pace the same from my distance,
as was the smooth light on their backs
as if each horse imagined that lowest pasture first.

Victoria Korth is a recent graduate of the Warren Wilson College Program for Writers. Poems have appeared or are soon to appear in *Ocean State Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Ithacalit*, *Damselfly*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Barrow Street* and elsewhere. She has twice been long listed for the Montreal International Poetry Prize. Her chapbook, *Cord Color*, was released from Finishing Line Press in 2015.