

1978

F—

Joyce Carol Oates

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### Recommended Citation

Oates, Joyce Carol. "F—." *The Iowa Review* 9.3 (1978): 94-95. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2426>

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*F— · Joyce Carol Oates*

*For Robert Phillips*

If you stare long enough perhaps it becomes beautiful.  
If you translate its colors into comely sounds—  
ochre, russet, coppery-pink, nutmeg—  
perhaps it becomes merely an anti-world,  
another way of seeing.

An industrial slum gaily glaring  
in a mid-summer squall:  
porous smoke rising heavy and leaden-pale as a giant's limbs,  
the sickly air heaving in gusts,  
sulphurous blooms whipping in the wind.  
Here, an ancient sea-bed  
guarded by a twelve-foot chain link fence.  
Clouds break companionably about the highest smokestacks.  
Factory windows, opaque with grime, slant open  
into the 100° shade.  
You stare, you memorize, you do not wish to judge.  
Your lungs shrink shy of the bold air.

Scars' stitchings in the earth,  
high-tension wires whining thinly overhead.  
What is there to say about what we see,  
what is the compulsion to make judgments,  
to invent visions?

This is the base of the pyramid, of course.  
But it is not strewn with workers' bones:  
it glowers and winks with their acres of parked cars.  
If the air is noxious perhaps it is you who have weakened.

It is you who wonder what creatures gaze in such pastures,  
brood beside such rancid ponds—  
giant crab-spiders of wire and rust,  
toads with swollen white bellies,  
armoured things with spiny tails and eyes  
staring unperturbed at the ends of stalks.  
It is you who observe most of *Ford* obscured by filth: *F—*  
And you who see again at the top of the highest smokestack  
the same plastic wreath you'd seen at Christmas,

wondering if it was a joke:  
*Joy to the World*      *Gilmore Chemicals.*

What is there to say about what we see,  
what we cannot not see?