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At Jane's

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At Jane's · Gerald Stern

For Gil Orlovitz, 1919–1974

I touch the rose to see what happens there
before I go inside to eat, I pull
the clothes-line down and kick the cracked cement,
I howl to myself for mercy. One more time
I walk through the rotten tomatoes. I will end
with little leaves on my shoes, with spoonfuls of mud,
with a beating heart, with a mouth that's open—
I hold my arm out straight like a dirty drunk,
I walk the plank between the rhododendron
and the little pear. For all I know
I could live here happy, I could walk
from here to the river and back without a thought.
I could stop at the Super-America
and read the morning paper. I could sit
at my pancake dreaming of heaven, smiling like a lamb,
listening vaguely to all the garbage, finding
my cave and my twine, my dark place, chewing and listening
while inside I wander—I beg for justice—I crawl
through hell for a little justice. I turn to the wall
and sing a little, and dance a little—
just as the fall is breaking on the Ohio,
the leaves are turning yellow, in Marietta,
the backyards stretching out for hundreds of yards
the way they do in America, all that richness,
all that Utopia, wasted, a little dog
howling out there, inside we're barking, inside
I'm finding another heaven, I'm turning around
this way and that, I'm finding my hole in the sun . . .
We're talking now about Spanish music, the difference
in soul between northern Europe and southern Europe;

we're talking now about Crete, we're talking
about Robert Lowell and Delmore Schwartz; I'm lecturing
on Orlovitz, I'm talking about his sonnets,
I'm talking about his death on West End Avenue,
about the poet we lost, about his life,
about the dull politics of poesy,
about the nineteenth century, about Keats,
eighty miles from Wheeling, West Virginia,
a million miles from Rome. Poor Orlovitz,
he wrote 500 poems. I remember the letters:
"Is this a poem, could you send me twenty bucks?"
What do I do with him now? He fell in the street
in front of a doorman; oh his death was superb,
the doorman blew his whistle, Orlovitz climbed
into a yellow cab, he'd never disappoint
a doorman. Now I'm brooding a little, absent,
the way I get, listening to the refrigerator,
the only music we have in North America,
cursing the Reagans a little, saying inside
one of Orlovitz's poems, going back again
into the cave, remembering Shelley's words
about his cave, and Vergil's, and Milton's, knowing
that mine is like theirs, a half mile underground,
where you go on your knees, where you keep the candle outside—
the underground journey—shivers and tremblings. We walk
to the river after breakfast, I'm in heaven,
I saw the meadow, I heard the voices, I felt
the light on my face—in Marietta, Ohio—
with Rachael Stern and Jack Killian and Jane
Somerville, there are alleys between the yards,
it is the oldest city in Ohio,
I wore my black suit for the reading, I roared
and whispered through forty poems, I sat like a lamb
in the mayor's living room, I sat like a dove
eating cheese and smiling, talking and smiling,
thinking my thoughts, my wise and tender thoughts,
the mayor's palace, Marietta, Ohio.