

BEAUTY

He entered the sty, and she cringed. She'd always
Remember him, a beast with black hair
And blue eyes, a young German, and the sound
Of screeching ducks and gunshots in the barnyard
Where treacherous neighbors had gossiped
Away the good frightened family who'd stashed her
And hers like livestock with souls, butchered then
Or driven off in a truck. Comprehending
Her face, his rifle still trained, he lowered
His stare to the straw laced mud. He left,

And with this beautiful act became like a pig
That had swallowed a diamond: whoever
Slit him open would wonder where it came from.
She knew what she rarely said afterwards,
That he looked like a boy she could have liked,
Like the tall coachman who let her ride
With the crates once on his flat wagon
Or the rabbi's son she'd daydreamed kissing
In the lilacs behind the gymnasium, a real prince
At whom she could never so much as smile
Without having her decency questioned...
And so the curse is lifted, the one
Who sprayed their blood in the usual ritual
All over the rotted stoop hasn't urged them
To kneel in his grunting, accurate tongue
Because he's in here with her and in love,
Transformed by it, if only for an instant.

(First appeared in *Ploughshares*)

ODE FOR ORVILLE AND WILBUR WRIGHT

I don't yearn for their steep excursion
Into fame and fortune, for it had
The usual price, and Orville died bitter
And Wilbur died young. I envy them
Only the slender and empty distance they left
Between them and a seaside's grassy bluffs
In mild December, the frail ingenuity
Of dreams, a lifetime's hopes made of string and cloth
And a little pattering motor that might have run
A lawn mower if the brothers had put their minds
To one first. For dumb exhilaration, nothing --

Not an F-16 thundering from its base
In Turkey nor my redeye circling O'Hare --
Comes close to what they must have felt
For less than a shaking, clattering minute
Clearing all attachment to the world
Of dicking and petty concerns: for some
No other heaven. So I take note of them
As they took notes from the lonely buzzard, obsessed
To the point of love with the ghostly air
And the small fluttering things that wandered
Through it. Eccentric but never flighty,
Bookish but not above nicking their hands
In bicycle shops and basements, they lived
With their sister and tinkered with the future.
Propelled by ambition, the mandate
It invents, they still heeded the laws
Of nature, trimmed needless weight, saw everything
Even themselves as burden, determined
Not to crash and burn. Sheer will launched them,
Good will, because those first forty yards
Skimming shale and reeds were for everyone.
Face down between the struts, staring at the ground
As it blurred past, they failed like anyone
To grasp the implications. But legs flailing
They hung on, buoyed by never and almost
And then just barely. I could do worse
Than their brief rapture, their common sense
Of purpose. Or I could, if only
For a moment, exalt them, go along
With the jury-rigged myth, the quaint
Contrivance that lets them rise above it all.

(originally appeared in *The Southern Review*)