

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

Michael Todd Steffen

P a n t u n

Quatrains of two thoughts but of one mind.

—John Hollander

You read about the Sea of Galilee

Though this is not in Luke or John or Mark.

Our fifth-grade math professor claimed that he

Did sums sleeplessly all night in the dark.

My father was prolific for his business

Freezing me to the challenge, How will I?

The prosecutor summonses the witness

To scrutinize the burglar's alibi.

Gadgets of themselves were shining, moving,

Being of service, or to entertain.

Only a child; his parents felt reproving

Him was senseless. That could cause him pain.

The stars are shining, burning out of time,

Thoughtfully thither, diamonds in the sky.

There are stores of poems composed in feet and rhyme

That smack of reason. Who knows how or why?

From afar beauty, up-close otherness

Display life's polarized by paradox.

Wizards and witches curse, good pastors bless,

Vessels arrive in ports—or sink on rocks.

They keep their earphones in for company

To be alone, ignoring how tuned out.

The morning fowl strike up their litany.

And me, I listen. What's that all about?

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“Every morning’s an uphill battle,” said
The Sun that flew as lightly as a bird.
The prodigal rejoiced, wise to be sad—
Re-feasted by his father’s snowy beard.

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T h e N a r r o w L i n e

...poets walk such a narrow line between abject humility and – disgraceful vanity!

—Kathleen Spivack, *With Robert Lowell and His Circle*, p. 48

With arms like gulls' wings spread both sides for balance

Toe to heel as sky-bound on a wire

(Though this is on a sidewalk by the street)

Poets walk the narrow line between

What straits be told. Hot and cold. Shy and bold.

Wilderness and school. Rock and whirlpool.

Poets walking—on their feet, that is.

Un-*stress* to *stress*. Set as stone. Sudden as wind.

Walking the tight squeeze between stone and the wind.

With the greatest of ease, down on hands and knees.

Grounded in confabulation. So

To read a poem is to trace that slendering thread,

To hold your breath syllable by syllable

And feel the wire quaking under your instep

Sensing either abyss, left and right,

Natural as you please

Step by absorbed step, not looking down.