

“All That I Remember”

— *Countee Cullen*

An Editor’s Note

The presence of horses in this issue—here more by coincidence than design—takes us the slow way to the tip of a gravel road, to the horizon, where we can speak about memory and the artistic process. In Daniel Woodrell’s “The Horse in Our History,” an elder presents some historical details to the story’s young narrator and then yells at him, “Don’t write that.” Art is about exposures; and the process of creating a story, a poem, or a life, inevitably must come to confront those details that brought us to the present state.

Horses would not seem to mean much to someone like me. I grew up in the city of St. Louis, where we negotiated buses, hopped on bicycles or motorcycles, sat in traffic, cut through alleys, and parked our cars in backyards along North Grand Avenue to attend Cardinals’ games at old Busch Stadium (the stadium before the stadium just demolished). Until recent years—when I seem always to be meeting people who ride, or own, or bet on, or study horses, or have kids who do—I had only one encounter with those house-high creatures; and that encounter has been returning more and more to memory. At age 9 or maybe 12, in the late 1950s, my best friend, Johnny McCarthy, and I decided we wanted nothing more than to be around horses; so we approached the supervisor at the stables in Forest Park, St. Louis’ grand city park, and volunteered for

the only kind of work we imagined we were qualified to do, shoveling manure.

I remember the man's disdain for our offer, and how he told us that we actually did not qualify for the job. We were white boys. Shoveling manure was a job for another kind of boy; and, judging from the man's tone, we should have known that. I won't quote here the man's perfectly succinct, declarative sentence, but, like the boy in the poem "Incident" by Countee Cullen—who rode "in old Baltimore" from May until December—that sentence is one I always will remember.

What my and Woodrell's stories have to do with art goes well beyond the task of knowing what a horse is—as Dickens' schoolteacher Thomas Gradgrind would demand of girl number 20—and attempts to understand what an artist is. This issue also includes representative canvases of words and drawings by the poet Mark Strand, an evocation of the process of arriving at a finished poem, a process that fellow poet Jorie Graham discusses in "The Art of Revising," her lyrical essay about Strand's work. "We are watching a life," she says. As with Countee Cullen's memory of Baltimore, or my memory from the other end of racism, Jorie Graham sees the process of revision as one that confronts, suppresses, and finally exposes the web of associations created in the creation of art—the submerged bits of memory and connections not always visible in the finished work or, I want to say, in the persons we are.

The miracle of simultaneity, as Graham describes Mark Strand's canvases, amounts to, in her words, "a moving erasure without being able to erase the exposures such erasures erased." Every poem, story, essay, in this issue has confronted that erasure-and-revelation process. In its most basic sense, a memory dredged up from the past, or a dream, reveals some part of the process that results in this, the art, and perhaps the human being. Mark Strand's distinctive contribution is to fix every point of the process in time. "Each drawing of [of breath, of line]," Jorie Graham says, "remains side by side, in spite of time."

All art is a celebration. Readers sometimes lose sight of that because artists and writers must be willing to face everything, even visions of evil and tragedy. They write it. Artists, by their nature, I believe, do not turn away. “The body fell within a shout of a house that still stands,” reads the opening sentence of Woodrell’s story. What took us there? Where will it lead? When the elder in the story explains to Woodrell’s narrator, “These were not men lamed by any sorts of doubts about anything they did,” I hear that stable manager again in my mind. The art we hope to present in this magazine takes us to some moral dilemma and confronts it. That’s the story, and the story is ours.

Mark Strand’s canvases—if I can stretch my conceit a bit further—take us along that gravel road, exposing and leaving open each stop and wrong turn. We might double back and try again, emblematic of literary art. In that way, we appreciate the process, and we gain courage. The story condemns nothing. It celebrates everything.

—Robert Stewart