

The Nine Choirs · *Len Roberts*

Michael weighed the souls of the dead,
Gabriel announced birth after birth,
 twelve legions
gathered on the head of a pin,
on the blackboard where Ann Harding
wrote the nine choirs, from lowly angel
 up to seraphim,
the girl with the largest breasts
 and curved legs,
the one who walked into the dark
alley with Ronny Michaels and did not
 want to come back out.
Invisible, unapproachable, unaffected
 by our needs,
they came with God's Word, all light
 and radiance,
to roll back the stone from the tomb,
cast the millstone into the sea,
capable of anything although they had
 no bodies,
making me whisper my brother had been raped,
that my other brother was in a far country,
 leaping from planes. Reaching
out my hands to either side, I tried to touch
my Angel of Wickedness, my Angel of Justice,
willing to side with the one who helped,
willing to curse and swear, to drink the holy
 wine before serving mass,
willing to call upon Blackness itself those
early Saturday mornings I held Christ's blood,
 three times circling the coffin.
Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, I called them up,
and the fourth, unsanctified, one we weren't supposed to
 know, Uriel, the angel with the sharpest sight,

and, finally, Satan, whose black wings I'd felt
in my black house every night,
knowing they would never appear in human form,
knowing they'd come the way they wanted to
even as Sister flapped her black-robed arms in the wafting
chalk dust and said
an angel would come at the moment of our death to lead us
into Heaven or Hell,
and I turned around to see Al Aldon going up in flames.
Jackie Schuster smoldering on a spit,
his greasy hair sparking with light, his mouth twisted
with sin
while Gabriella Wells and Irene Tousignant grew white wings,
their chests, their legs
covered completely with glaring white robes, their hair
neatly curled
as they slowly ascended behind Sister Maria's fading form,
Johnny Dumas, who would lose his legs in eight years, set
in a giant angel's palm,
Richie Reese screaming for another sandwich as two small
angels carried him off,
that classroom so filled with wings I could not breathe,
knowing that angels themselves could sin, that I once may
have been an angel myself,
moved the stars and governed the growth of rubber trees,
that it may have been my face engraved on tombs, doorframes
and rings,
my hymns adrift as the sun went down behind Saint Bernard's
church in upstate winter, Cohoes, New York
and the kid nearest the door flicked the glaring light on.