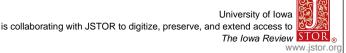
Four Poems · Gerald Stern

FIRST DAY OF SPRING

I have been such a follower, first Porphyry, then Alexander, I have gone so long without shaving, that now I have nothing except this moustache and this forked stick. Behold one T-shirt I have travelled with from one wrinkled continent to the other; behold one leg that lifted me up over 40,000 thresholds. My heart-such as it wasalways surprised me, and my curved back, it never gave out on the stairway, it never paused once in spite of the lifeless ankle and the unlubricated lung.

There was a red carpet once in the north of France that wandered like a river from the staircase to the first turn and lapped against the plastered walls. I stood outside a door listening to two cries, one guttural and despairing, one frantic and birdlike. I shifted my trunk to my left shoulder and began another climb, three steps to the landing, sixteen or eighteen steps to the next river. As far as I can remember, even with the closing of the door



and the admiration of my own face in the unsilvered mirror, stuck as it was wrongly between two loose pillars on a mahogany wardrobe, I listened to their cries half with shame, half with desire, and half with terror and half with unabashed regret.

That was the beginning of grief, the start of a second life, although it wasn't that the love cries themselves did this, it wasn't the moaning or the creaking floor or the creaking floor or the exploding pipes it was, for the first time in my life, I was abandoned. I had to grab some rail or vestigial fixture sticking out of the wall and do a shaky dance under the heavy trunk. I was suspended.

I guess I lay on the bed staring at the ceiling and the painted wire going into the light bulb, or I guess I lay there remembering although I know I cut short the first years and I know I concentrated on the early tribes, crying out with rage and disappointment in their slide from shelf to shelf; though what I should have done, and what I was able to do later, was smile at what they *did* do in the 200,000 years, the first half aeon. It took me one decade till I could lie peacefully, and two or more— I think it was three or more to forgive myself, or just to ignore myself, for singing at the wrong time, for interrupting the way I do, for moaning, for talking out loud, for being a dwarf.

In the great and lasting argument that overwhelmed the Mediterranean for more than a thousand years I took the losing side. I would do that in Spain in the time of the two Solomons and I would do that in America in the time of the two Stevensons. I wanted to mourn for kings, I wanted a bonnie prince, and I wanted to feel the stinging salt on my face toothe silent ship, the sympathetic sailors, the letters wrapped in leather, a bottle waiting to be opened, a ribbon around the neck. I solved problem after problem in 1985 in the campo dei fiore not only at the fish stand but in the freezing movie house where we sat in leather coats and rocked in our chairs watching the Blues Brothers

in English and Italian. This is where Bruno died, this is where my foot dragged on the way to the river, this is where Brutus-may the Lord keep him insaneswam before eating. My favorite church both then and now was Il Gesu where the Jews were herded together on Holy Thursday to listen to a sermon on the joys of conversion, only a few blocks away from the Vesuvio Palace, my own crowded bakery.

It was astounding to walk up that red carpet in the fifth decade, and it was astounding to rock by the river in the middle of the eighth. Something was in my mind both then and then and something later brought it back again. Sometimes you wait for forty years, it was a little less for me when I first thought of Alexander and Porphyry. I have forgotten now, but I remember it was a sweet elation, I was happy and I was half-suspended. I am sitting in Arizona, the moon is full, so check the twenty-first of March, 1989. I am reading Horace tonight, who never wrote by porchlight, maybe a dish of oil

outside Brindisi. Ah, the stricken soul, he sat till midnight waiting for a girl who never came. I love his sense, he knew where the ludicrous lay, he hated quackery. I wonder if maybe in the palace he had seen a bromeliad once and touched the drooping flowerthe rubbery claws; I wonder if he talked to a passing fox about the frogs that lived in those leaves, if he had exchanged some wisdom, how it only eats air, how it clings to palm trees; I wonder if March twenty-first was when the plum tree bloomed in Tivoli, if he had also seen hundreds of butterflies in those branches, if he lay down and wept-in spite of his careful mindif that is the third suspension, the third abandonment.

Three Hearts

A chicken with three hearts, that is a vanished breed, a day of glory in the corn, romance against a fence. It was the sunset just above New Egypt that made me wince, it was the hay blown up from Lakewood. God of chance, how much I loved you in those days, how free I felt and what a joy it was sitting there with my book, my two knees braced against the dashboard. How empty it was then, and how my mind went back. How many hearts did the chickadee have? How much whistling and singing was in those fields? How far did I have to go to disappear in those grasses, to pick those trillium?