

Three Poems · *Alexander Thorburn*

THE CANAL

Because its cemetery is so small,
our town is a place to live.

Whoever settles here will leave
 the past behind,
receive a new start,
the sign we put up says.

As we stand at its edge
and look toward it, its first inhabitant—
our father's tiny figure . . .

My sister and I lay rows of bricks
along its roadbeds in a herringbone pattern
 to match his suit.

A bank faced with marble stands downtown,
 a barometer of our town's drive
to complete itself—deposited in it,
our investors' funds.

It shouldn't take long for its log cabins
to fill—with all our internal improvements,
I tell my sister.

The tunnels of the cave we have uncovered,
and straightened one by one,
are our town's streets.

And since our town has so little space
 for dead people, anyone
can see it is a good place to live.

I know it will soon reach
all the claims we've made for it.
Our father won't be lonely for long.

We move him from house to house
to convince anyone watching our town
that it is full of citizens . . .

In the daytime, he stands outside
the general store,
where he polishes spoons
as he waits for his first customer.

We just don't want too many people
to settle here,
or it will be as noisy
as the towns they are leaving.

But the steamboat landing is silent
on the river, many miles away.
The boulevard we've cut through the trees
is turning to mud in the rain

as again we clear the forest away
from the buildings we know are there,
and look at one another.

We can build a canal, I say—
afraid now that our town will end up
one of the mounds we've found in the woods.