

The Foot · *Michael Van Walleghe*

I rang his doorbell  
every day for a month

I knocked on his windows  
I kicked hard at his door

with my frozen Redwing boot.  
It was winter of course.

A month of deep snow. And  
I could see from his slurred

footprints that he was home.  
He was in there alright

reading the paper, watching  
the tube maybe—the bastard.

He owed me five dollars.  
Christmas was coming up.

And I was twelve years old  
an ordinary paper boy

freezing my ass off, trying  
to collect, that's all. Then

the door opens. A hot  
sour wind, like cabbage

boiled in piss, springs up  
from deep inside somewhere

and almost knocks me down.  
“Here, you want it?” a voice

is saying, “here, take it!”  
and a shower of quarters

nickels, dimes goes sailing  
past me over the porch rail.

When I look back, the door  
is closed again, or rather

almost closed. A dirty foot  
I remember his dirty foot

poking out into the snow  
the filthy yellow thickness

of the toenails, the dead  
grey, sock-like grime

that covered it . . . I never saw  
his face. I was too young

even to imagine it. I just  
dug up the money I could

and ran home to the stoic  
misery of my own dumb feet

thawing in a yellow dishpan.  
Small, snow-white, delicate

they hurt for a long time  
and looked all wrong somehow.

My face looked wrong . . . staring  
back from the kitchen window

where it was night already  
and the night looked wrong

as if there might be nothing  
out there, that owed me anything.