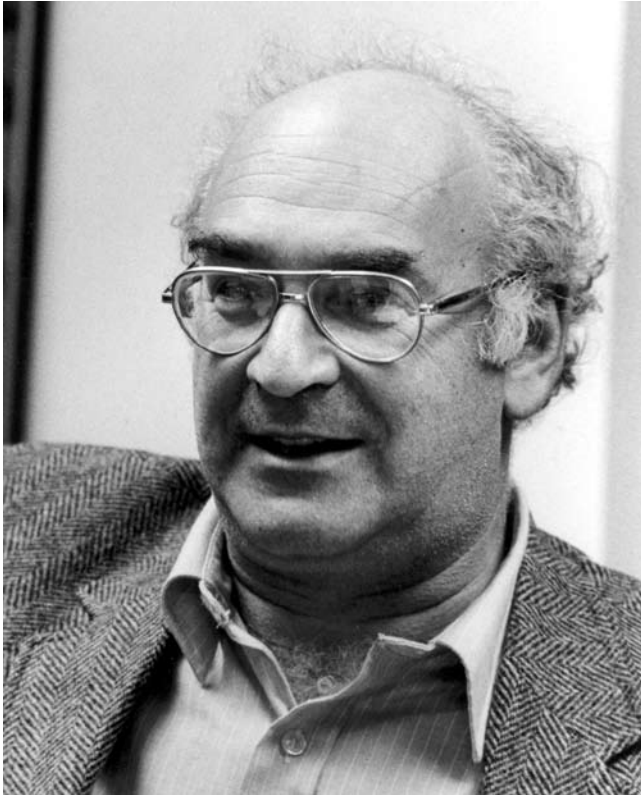


THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY



## WINNER

### DAGUERREOTYPE PORTRAIT OF WOMAN & BIRD Maureen Alsop

A woman, a soldier, a bird—all born  
within cages, learned quickly to pipe songs  
which rose wildly upward  
into the sky's orange skirt, & changed  
into liquid. They were narrowed, eventually,  
by the weave between clouds.

\* \* \*

In the mind's well-lit alleyway, a wavering  
billboard holds  
the image of an 8-year-old girl  
& a bicycle that she is yet  
unable to ride. The wind pulls her leeward. She

is crossing now over crosswalk dust, &  
a shadowbroken shoreline.

When larks fall from the sky, an indiscriminate sound,  
a bellow, ruptures in the reeds—scrape  
of coccyx & lull. Wakeful wing-beats  
alternate with short periods of sailing.

\* \* \*

The heart's iris dilates, machinery lips  
swell. The monkey inside the child  
peddles madly to maintain motion's  
steadiness.

How does she measure her motive  
to meet unconscious wing? She studies  
herself, steadies the mirror. She props  
her nipple into the cup of her palm;  
beneath her left breast, a nest  
of cartilage & wing exposed:

tremor & breath. Half dressed  
by moonlight, gazing, she sees  
her face backward.

In the unfurnished room, windows  
warped with winter frost, she glances  
the tremble & slip of leaves from the pin oak.

\* \* \*

The woman inside the girl  
will never know whether she's seen  
herself. She will grow from the radiance  
of the girl's warmth; the girl will depart  
without contemplation or shade. The woman  
will lie down with a soldier

who carries a letter in his left hip pocket—a letter  
from his brother who fell down the stairwell  
of the Osawatomie Sanatorium, during the war.

She has forgotten  
his face  
he is nothing but a wave  
capping at sea, or a stain in the linoleum, something  
occasionally referred to. Each winter

he unfolded the cramped paper  
& read to her. His ink thinned annually

until she was left, after two decades,  
with a page that read:

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—specimens of gray feathers  
& soot—fragments pulsing

wildly within her veins: little birds  
with stitched up eyes  
soaring under lithium rain clouds—

\* \* \*

He is what made her small as she carved  
him from wood—shaving his face with a pen knife.

He rises from the struggling mid-ground,  
a wisp of fuel. He is the thud  
where her heart fell from the bough.

No one will ask about the aperture  
of lilacs unfolding or the animal memory  
of sparrows. They are phases. She sketches  
diagrammatic references to landscape. She assigns  
rooms for each tree. The unit between trees  
is a weightless motion. Loose

bits of gravel drop from her pen. Horses are pulled  
out of her body blown open  
& spinning from the lungs . . .

Knotted faces in the box elders  
twist into the horizon. Filament  
roots silence her. A serpents' whistle  
advances through the glowing dust. The slack  
softness in the woman's jaw was the light  
turning its anchorage. Into what  
does she not sink? Slagheap & shoal

at the edge of town—a field where cicadas crackle  
from the treetops & the stars rattle.