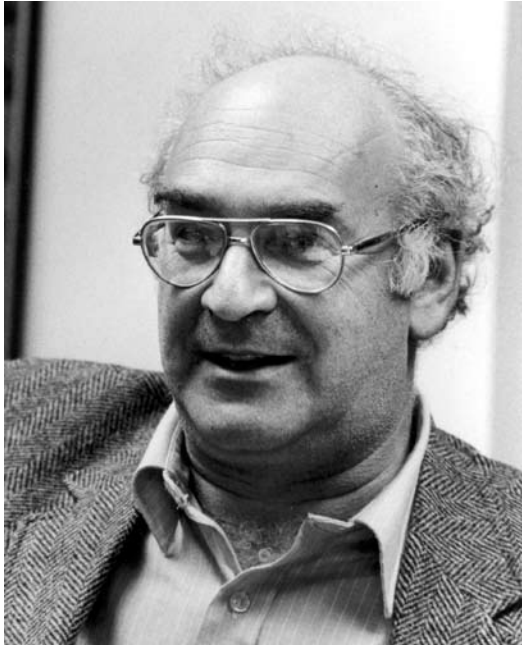


THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY



WINNER

MOMENTO MORI

Jonathan Rice

Your daughter showed me the ones you kept
as proof that you sold those parents the pictures

they asked for, their instructions in brackets
at the glossy-white margins:

[*Blush/Powder*] an infant whose eyes could not be shut.
Another, a girl who would be ten this year, [*Dress/Blanket*]

glowed in her yellow gown, over-exposed
after the run red light and sutured mother. [*None*] worse

than the rest: gone in utero, its flesh still womb-water taut,
the wrested expression of its purpled face not to be believed.

Never an explanation. She said the parents were led
out a side door, released to the mornings or late afternoons

of their loss, to take themselves home before you arrived.
No one stayed for that. And the body, if what remained

could be called a body, was left alone in the darkened room
of failed birth, and that often, you had to wash it yourself:

lower it gently to the stainless sink, cupping the neck,
careful of the soft skull, the water warmed to your wrist.

~

Only now do I understand why you let us wander
alone so many nights through the warm fields and stables,

and know what you hoped for from the tallgrass pastures
while her father slept, drunk and barely rising

from the couch. I return to these thoughts when I wake
and stare with fear and then wonder at my wife's stomach.

In the morning dark I am waiting with a hand at her navel,
for the subtle kick, a heel swung out from the suspended dream.

There is nothing to do but wait. In the doctor's office,
we watch the shape of our child form in the black and white

resin of sound on the little monitor we all must look up to see.
The sonographer's face is as impassive as a mechanic's.

Then flow chart and pen scratch, the transducer lifted,
and our daughter recedes, kilohertz at a time.

~

Those first years after your daughter, I knew a girl
whose boyfriend was in the army, then gone for war.

He came home twice before mortars or the broil
of a blown-up vehicle kept him. The last time he left

she was sleeping. This was their agreement, since
she could not willingly let him go. Rumor was she quit

the pill weeks before his last furlough, then met him
at the airport and took him home. And of course,

of course she didn't tell. You'd have to know her
as I knew her then, to see how years piled under her eyes.

Her hair thinned with waiting. The boy was healthy
when he came, and she brought him around.

The other story followed. She could not leave him
in his crib to sleep, but woke to check his breathing

every hour, obsessed to know that he lived, even when
he wailed to be changed, or took to her breast, or began

to crawl a little. When she turned away, he was gone.
He'd been on the bed. He had been lying on the bed

near her. With her hand on his back, she'd counted
breath-falls and minutes of heartbeat. When he woke

she would tell him another story of his father
coming home. He was gone. She'd left to take a call

and come back and found him face down in the folds
of a plastic bag between the bed and wall.

When I'm driving home after work, and think of this,
I swerve to keep course, and sometimes wander

the aisles of superstores filled with gadgets and toys,
plush clothes pressed to the shape of six months,

nine weeks, one year, stand gawking at self-rocking cribs,
the crystalline rows of bottles and modestly packaged

breast pumps, pacifiers and bibs with lion or chicken or frog
or innumerable constellations of stars stitched in their corners.

After your daughter showed me the snapshots
of what had been lost, neither of us asked why

anyone would want such a portrait. To frame
and have blessed, or keep locked and untouchable,

preserved like a promise held in the silences
of unspeakable memory, it didn't matter

to us then. We walked out together, toward
the stream at the edge of your land. It was

summer. The heat was unbelievable, even in
the coolest place we knew. We pulled off our shirts

and spread them under us to lie down.
Though there was no moon, we did not kiss

or touch each other, wanting only our own silence
in the scald of such knowledge we should not have.