



UNIVERSITY OF
SAN FRANCISCO

Gleeson Library |
Geschke Center

Ontario Review

Volume 67 *Fall/Winter* 2007–08

Article 18

October 2014

Sea Nettles, Clearing the Brambles, Everything But the Ashes

Michael Salcman

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Salcman, Michael (2014) "Sea Nettles, Clearing the Brambles, Everything But the Ashes," *Ontario Review*: Vol. 67, Article 18.

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol67/iss1/18>

For more information, please contact southerr@usfca.edu.

Three Poems

MICHAEL SALCMAN

Sea Nettles

—*Chrysaora quinquecirrha*

The trembling lampshade heads
and shivering arms
have no strange beauty to speak of—
no phosphor glows at night.
No bones, no heart, no brains, no eyes.
The day I no longer recall their name
I feel the onset of age while hauling up
the anonymous curling slime
of tentacles on the anchor chain.
Whatever I once called them
there's no swimming in the midst of this,
so many small ones float by our boat
there's no safety reclining on a raft either,
the conditions precisely as they wish:
hot and humid, a briny mix.
If relief comes, hours later
it's not the name but the knowledge
of how forgetting goes:
life's awful and terrible things wiped first
some small resentments next,
before steering towards a final music,
the mind set free of memory.

Clearing the Brambles

In Old Saybrook, the braided trunks of cedars
 shade my Father's face, his legs askew
 with the effort of carting lawn chairs to where we wait,
 his gravitational platform deserting his desire
 to play the host still going strong at ninety-five.

Drinks in our hands we drowse in the sun;
 I watch him snatch at sleep like a cat,
 gone and back in minutes, his neurons sputtering lamps
 decades past the use-by date of his brain.

His nose twitches with the sun, its light flickers
 in the maples and birches, rouses swarms of flies and gnats.
 Later, my Father and I put seed in the birder
 but no cardinals come.

He gets up to work the brambles, pulling up branches
 and straggling creepers, snapping them in two
 on his knee. He's clearing this field for someone to sell to.

Everything But the Ashes

If a man saves a single life
 it's as if he saved the entire world—The Talmud

Too weak to kill himself, Weisenthal was saved by starvation.
 The ninety-seven pounds that remained on his release
 from Malthausen couldn't stop his brain from thinking
 of ways to remember the others.
 For the brain is a savage beast, it eats when and what
 no other organ eats, so the head and eyes
 become as large as a child's, the body starves
 extremities shrink and the belly develops a paunch. . . .
 He said *I am the last... the one who can still speak,*
 I will repeat and repeat and repeat this year's inventory:

bound for Berlin, twenty-five freight cars of women's hair,
 248 of clothing, a hundred boxcars filled with shoes
 and jewelry taken from the Jews;
 400,000 watches, four thousand carats of diamonds,
 one hundred and sixty tons of wedding rings
 the Germans shipped everything but their ashes.
 He knew how a grand indictment like this might fit
 on a lading slip, how a number might hold a memory.

After the war his brain was still hungry
 so it went hunting; Ecce homo! In Sao Paolo,
 Franz Stangl of Treblinka and Franz Wagner of So bib or;
 in Argentina, Josef Schwammberger of Poland;
 in Vienna, Karl Silberbauer, the man who'd arrested Anne,
 working as a policeman. Not counting Eichmann
 that group was his biggest meal.
 His brain snacked on frau Ryan, a housewife in Queens,
 where the former queen of Maidenek lived without her whip,
 and bit on a Romanian killer in Michigan who hid as an archbishop.
 Not that he saw through every disguise:
 he missed the Angel of Death.
 All in all, he spent fifty years in Vienna,
 a city that hated him like a poke in the eye,
 surrounded by file cards and photos, affidavits and writs
 not a scrap was wasted. This was the life he had to give
 and the metabolism of starvation its special gift.
 When he died in his sleep at ninety-six
 everything was shipped but the ashes.