

# I·N·S·C·A·P·E

Fall 82

Vol. XIX



# I·N·S·C·A·P·E

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Fall 82

Department of Languages & Literature  
Morehead State University  
Morehead, Ky.

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# I·N·S·C·A·P·E

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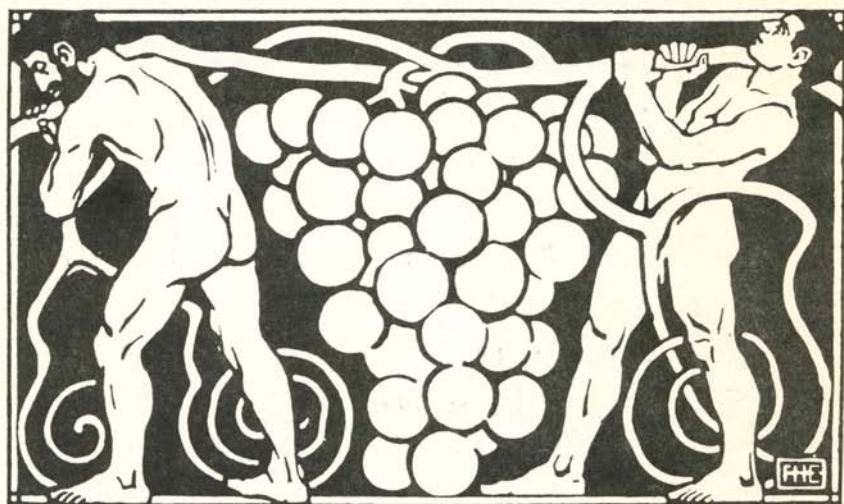
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# THE HIGHEST MOUNTAIN

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KATHY WORRELL



## I

It had been unseasonably warm this October, but I tightened my windbreaker when a chill in the air reminded me that Indian summer was almost over. The night was dark, illuminated slightly by a sliver of moon and a few scattered stars. The blackness below appeared even darker as I stood alone on a 150-foot mountain of coal high above the world. What a long distance I had traveled to arrive at this place.

To believe this awesome, godforsaken spot was where I would find myself seemed incredible. Born at the end of the Depression, I was raised conservatively by parents who also lived through the upheaval of two World Wars. Always believing in my uniqueness, I would have been amazed to know young people all over the country were following the same pattern.

We danced our lives away with Dick Clark and the big bands, cheered at football games, flirted with the boys, and passed on to college. We married promising young men, produced 2.5 children, joined country clubs, and, as husbands proved even more successful, became statistics in the ever-rising divorce rate of the early seventies.

Throughout the nation, magazines, television, and awareness groups were expounding on the joys of the modern woman finding her own identity. We women believed in this philosophy, so I like others joined the countless ex-wives searching for our real selves only to discover that food was more important.

Out of desperation, I used the one thing we women had going for us—minority rights. The corporation where I worked had plenty of secretaries (earning meager salaries) but no females at the coal dock (where the males earned more substantial pay), so I begged, flattered, and finally threatened my way into a new job. "One month," I was told—one month to prove I could handle heavy equipment, cope with the conditions, control 500 truckers a day, be accepted by all male co-workers, especially the rough, bawdy dock hands, all of whom had never seen a female inside those gates.

The male ego is a frail thing. It must not be threatened, and threaten them I would. This was where they could feel superior to those "big wheels in their three-piece suits sitting on their asses all day," superior to their wives, sweethearts, lovers. If a mere woman could handle the job, their self-images would be shattered.

Trying to summon self-confidence and so scared my trembling legs wouldn't support me, I walked into the scale house which resembled three large outhouses crudely nailed together. The stench and filth were unbelievable. The smell of urine, sweat, and chewing tobacco permeated the air. A thick layer of coal dust covered everything. Loud raucous laughter greeted me—then silence. Three pairs of hostile eyes glared at me.

Gathering all my courage and trying to appear self-assured, I introduced myself to this stone-faced trio. After what seemed an interminable silence, I tried again.

"I'm Carrie Johnston; I was told to report to the foreman—Arnold, Arnold Coleman."

The only sound in that foul-smelling, dusty shack came from the waterfront as the passing barges blew a greeting to the dock hands on their way down river to deliver yet another load of coal.

Were these giants mute? No, I thought, they couldn't be. Hadn't there been laughter as I entered the scale house?

Focusing my attention on the largest, darkest, most insolent man I'd ever faced, I asked, "Are you the foreman?"

"Yeah," he responded curtly. "Reckon you could call me that."

I had felt resentment from the other two, but from this one nothing. He then made a grunting sound and pointed to a large, heavy shovel looming in the corner. "Over there—git that—scales gotta be cleaned afore trucks come acrost."

Bewildered, I looked around the room. "Scales, what scales?" The only scales I'd ever seen outside of those on which I'd weighed myself were at the produce market.

"Gawl damn stupid female," he muttered, pointing out the small opening in the scale house. Ignoring his derogatory remark, I stared out behind him and understood from these few disconnected sentences that I was to use that shovel each morning (if 5 a.m. can decently be referred to as morning) to clear the tons of mud and coal that covered the over-sized 40-foot scale on which the trucks were weighed.

As I struggled to pick up the shovel that seemed as long and wide as my 5'3", 115 pound frame, I wondered how I would ever lift and toss that heavy mass. It seemed as though a hundred hostile eyes were fastened on me as the dock hands at the waterfront and those in the scale house mutely watched me make my way out the door and to the scales.

Taking the shovel from my shoulder, I dug in and scooped a full load only to find it impossible to lift, let alone throw, the muck over the side of the wide scale. Letting most of the mud slide off, I finally managed to get rid of the first shovelful. After only a few more small loads, I felt burns on the most tender parts of my hands: those burns would soon become painful blisters.

As I worked slowly and steadily, I became acutely aware of every part of my body. My arms and legs began to quiver and throb from the unaccustomed movements. I felt a growing dryness in my throat each time I bent and straightened as a searing pain ripped through my back.

My thoughts became warped. Had I reached the depths of hell, and would this continue through all eternity? Bend, scoop, straighten, tighten arms and legs for the ordeal of half-throwing, half-dumping the ever-increasing weight from the shovel.

After what seemed like hours of pure physical torture, I weakly made my way back into the scale house only to hear Arnold ask what I had been doing all that time. As I glanced out the small opening, I realized the scales looked little better than when I started. Arnold disdainfully swung the heavy shovel easily over his broad shoulders and in no time removed the remaining debris from the scale.

So the day went—one grueling test after another. Men spitting tobacco at my feet, using obnoxious language, and communicating only in those fragmented, nearly incomprehensible sentences to direct me to my next impossible task.

After four or five hours, I asked the question I had dreaded all day. "Where's the bathroom?" They pointed to a space between two boards in the floor, and I knew from where the smell of urine had come. I never knew I could feel such relief as I did when Arnold at last admitted there was a bathroom down by the waterfront in the shop.

**W**alking into the monstrous garage, I faced at least two dozen grease-covered, smirking workers and once more that silence as they spotted me. I asked "where?" and a man who later I would know as Worley, mutely pointed to an open doorway. As I walked across that massive garage, I heard the familiar snickers. Inside the doorway was the filthiest, blackest, coal-dust-covered commode I had ever seen. What now? No door and total silence from the other room. I decided my need was more desperate than my modesty.

After the toughest ten hours of my life, the next shift drifted in, totally ignoring me, as did the others. No friendly goodbyes, joking, or pats on the back for me as I limped out to my car. As usual, the old clunker refused to start without a fight. Oh no, Lord, I thought, please—not today. Faces appeared at the scale house opening, and the dock hands stepped out of the garage to stare. Not one man came forward to offer help. Was it my imagination, or were they actually sneering? After about ten minutes, I finally pulled out, stripped of what little dignity I had left.

Tears streaming down my face—more from humiliation and loneliness than the physical pain wracking my body, I stumbled into my house. My hands and feet were covered with blisters, my back ached from bending, my arms could barely move from the heavy shovel loads, and all the pain was becoming unbearable. I cried deep painful sobs.

Once I realized more tears would do no good, I saw the humor of my situation. I felt laughter start to bubble—the contrast of that self-confident, charming woman surrounded by friends just a few months ago and this miserable, bruised creature was ludicrous. I collapsed in gales of laughter, and with the laughter came a new feeling. I had done it—I had stuck it out. I hadn't run. I felt the beginning of new determination. There would be rougher days, physical labor almost beyond my tolerance; there would be elements to battle; there would be that silent group of men who shunned me simply

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because I wasn't one of them. But I now believed, that one way or another, I would cope. Every damn man down there would know I was one of them, and like it or not they would respect me.

## II

Without looking, I knew the luminous dial of the clock radio read 4 a.m. For a week now my days had started at this ungodly hour, and as usual, my eyelids started closing, tempting me to drift back to sleep. No, Carrie, don't—don't do it, I thought, as I forced my eyes open. Think of coming in late to work and facing Arnold . . .

After slipping on my jeans and shirt, I walked across the room to the full-length mirror on the closet door. Turning my back to the glass and glancing over my shoulder, I was satisfied that these jeans revealed less than those I had worn at the beginning of the week. They had not been excessively tight, but the snugness had been enough to cause a slow-down in the yard as the truckers stopped to gape and whistle with my every movement. Seeing Arnold's reaction to this mass of confusion, I decided things might go more smoothly if I replaced T-shirts with blouses and wore looser jeans.

In no time at all, I was driving down the dark, quiet road past the sleeping houses into the dawn. As I turned onto the deserted highway, the darkness suddenly, without warning, disappeared. In its stead a fiery, brilliant redness broke forth, blazing across the endless sky. I found myself wishing that this breathtaking view could last forever, but it too disappeared, leaving behind the beginning grey light of a new day.

At the entrance to the coal dock, the escaping emissions from the nearby plants mixed with the morning fog, almost hiding the endless line of trucks already parked on the side of the road. Tarps protected the huge mounds of coal while the drivers dozed in the cabs of their idling trucks. It wouldn't be long until the trucks would move inside, dump their coal, head back to the mines (forty to a hundred miles) for another load, only to return and start all over again.

I went past the sleeping truckers, into the coal dock and straight to the scale house, grabbed my shovel and started cleaning the scales before that long line of trucks began its continuous procession. Through repetition, I was slowly adjusting to the rigors of physical labor; and when, to my satisfaction, I had completed my first task of the day, I started through the yard to see what Arnold had waiting for me.

When I finally found him, he reluctantly led me to the heavy equipment. Standing next to those gigantic pieces of equipment, I knew this day wouldn't be any easier than the one before.

Arnold gestured to one of the pushers, saying, "Ther'—thet one—git on up ther'."

I stood gaping as my eyes traveled over the huge machine. There was a large shovel-like blade in front of the 10-foot doorless cab, and the first step

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was three feet high. Just climbing into the pusher, as the men stood around refusing to give me a boost, was a major production. All those gears, that fierce-looking blade, and the thought of climbing straight up that mountain of coal did nothing to stop my racing heart.

As I strapped myself in, Arnold climbed in alongside me. After an intense practice session and a few bad starts, I managed, under Arnold's tutelage, to get up the mountain, push a little coal to the hopper, cut part of a road, and get back down without killing us.

The deafening noise and constant vibrations of the pusher had left me shaken. As I walked away, deep in my own thoughts, I almost jumped out of my skin when I heard a nearby thunderous crash as several trucks careened into each other.

"Gawl damn female."

I'd heard that oath often enough in the last few days to know who said it. Turning, I automatically shielded my eyes with my hand as the bright morning sun blurred my vision. Taking a step backward to look up into Arnold's angry face looming almost a foot above me, I felt a dryness in my throat as I managed to ask, "What have I done now?"

The seams of his shirt strained as he flailed his muscle-bound arms in the direction of the piled-up trucks. "You tryin' to git us all killed?" he yelled. "Ain't you got enough sense to know them damn truckers don't got a lick of sense in ther' empty heads?"

Too shocked to move let alone speak, the unusual silence almost escaped my attention as one by one the men stopped what they were doing and gathered around us.

Arnold noticed none of this, but continued his tirade. "They see you paradin' and prancin' around in those blasted tight jeans—they don't know where the hell they are—let alone what they doin'." His face became contorted as he bent towards me and said in a loud, steely voice, "So help me, missy, this is gonna stop, or you're gettin' the hell off'n this lot!"

**H**e had gone too far. I thought of all the pain and humiliation I had suffered at the hands of this macho bigot. Coming out of my daze, I felt my fear leave; and all the anger I had suppressed spilled out in blind rage as I screamed back, "The name is Carrie—Carrie Johnston—not missy, not gawl damn female—but Carrie—have you got that?"

The startled look on his dusky face and the twitching of his strong jaw told me I should stop, but there was still too much anger eating away at me. "Let me tell you Arnold Coleman. You want prancing? You want parading? Well, I'll give you prancing and parading! You just keep an eye on me cause you're going to see how a real woman moves it when she wants to."

Both of us, forgetting that we had an audience, were startled as out of the crowd one of the truckers yelled, "Hey Coleman—if'n I was you, I sure would lay off that little gal. Nobody bettah mess with the filly. Why, Mister, she just gonna prance and stomp all over yew—yesiree!"

Shaking his massive fist at the laughing trucker, Arnold shot back, "You jest keep outta this, ya hear? All of ya—git back to work!"

More furious than I'd ever seen him, Arnold didn't even seem to notice that no one moved as he quickly swung back to me. His wild, black eyes blazed with fury as he shouted into my face, "And as fer you, if'n you don't change your ways, you gonna find yourself walking out thet gate and not comin' back. Do we understand each other?"

"No," I yelled. "We don't understand each other. We don't understand each other at all. Look at me—just look at me—I'm exhausted, covered with coal dust, dripping with sweat. I don't have the energy, let alone the inclination, to do what you're implying—furthermore—"

"Thet's another thing," Arnold interrupted. "I know yer kind—usin' thet fancy talk, lookin' down on the rest of us. Think you're better'n everbody, dontcha?"

Speaking with more frustration than anger, I said, "No Arnold, I don't think I'm better than you or anyone else. How could I? But I'll tell you this, if you want me out of here, you're going to have to pick me up and throw me out! And believe you me, I'm not going without a fight."

With that I turned on my heels and strutted down the yard. Anger made my whole body shake. But I remembered my angry threat, and I was determined to give those watching a real show. They got it.

As I called forth everything in me to create the promised effect, I heard one loud, shrill, lascivious wolf whistle and knew this real woman had "moved it" just fine.

### III

The Ohio River could rise ten feet in a few short days (during a heavy rainfall), and recede just as quickly (during a drought). Every industry along its banks depended on this mighty expanse, and we were no exception. In the two months I had worked at the coal dock, barely a quarter inch of rain had fallen—until the last week. We had also been plagued by a heat wave that kept temperatures well over 90 degrees.

As the water level dropped lower and lower, fewer barges traveled until finally all river transportation ceased. Suppliers complained bitterly as late penalty charges cut deeply into profits, and shipment delays caused monetary losses to the coal company. The heat and fear of layoffs due to business losses made everyone touchier than usual.

Today, after a week of heavy, torrential rains the river was alive with activity. Barges, laden with coal, made their way down river while those not yet filled would soon be loaded and on their way. Although there hadn't been any river transportation, the trucks, unaffected by the drought, had continued their constant procession; and the mountain was higher and more treacherous than ever.

By 9:15 a.m. the temperature had already reached a blistering 110 degrees. On top of the coal pile the heat was so intense, so merciless, that

nothing escaped its painful touch. Anything alive was sweating. After working the pusher for three hours, I felt my skin chafing under heavy work clothes. My body was sweat-drenched. Thick gloves alone kept each part of that burning box from scorching my hands.

The day seemed to have no beginning—no ending. We pushed tons and tons of coal to the hopper and tried to create more roads so even more coal could be dumped. Steady rains had flooded the coal yard, and truckers were finding it almost impossible to get the needed traction to start the long climb to the hopper where they would unload. Some were starting to lose their hold. Others buried their wheels as they became stuck in the soft coal.

**A**s we strained to pull 50 tons of dead weight, the tug ropes were constantly hosed down, supposedly to ease the frictional heat and keep the ropes from snapping in two. More often than not this precaution failed. Released from their weight, the pushers lurched forward, almost hurling us into space. Invariably, the yard grew quiet as everyone watched our frantic fight to stay upright.

After two months of hard labor, I thought I was in good condition. Now I knew better. My palms blistered under the gloves as I struggled with the many levers to shift gears. My clothes and face took on the color of coal. Coal dust was everywhere. It invaded my nostrils, eyes, throat, lungs. The painful tightness in my chest told me it would be a long time before I stopped coughing up the thick, black phlegm so familiar to coal workers.

We went on like that for hours. Suddenly my arms and legs shook violently, sweat blurred my vision, my heart pounded. The pusher began to veer crazily over the mountain. From out of nowhere, Arnold jumped on the cab, reached in, and turned off the engine. Offering me a hand, he said, "C'mon, lean on me—let's git ya outta ther'."

As I sank down on the soft coal, Arnold said, "Wait," and took off across the mountain—returning in a few minutes with sandwiches, salt tablets, and a jug of water. Gratefully, I gulped the water as Arnold watched with some commiseration. A fit of coughing wracked my body. When I finished, he said, "Easy now—yer doin' fine, you just ain't used to this kinda work. We only got a couple more hours—whyn't you just call it a day?"

If I had been sensible, I would have taken his advice, but my stubborn pride wouldn't let me quit. As I shook my head, he shrugged his shoulders and reminded me to eat and take salt tablets. Other operators yelled a greeting as they passed and asked if everything was all right. I hadn't expected this concern, and somehow this little bit of kindness gave me the strength to climb back in my pusher.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. If trucks kept coming, I thought, this man-made mountain would soon stand taller than any God created. I hadn't realized how deafening the noise had become until it gradually dropped to a low roar. Glancing at my watch, I realized why I was so totally drained—we had been running our equipment for over sixteen straight hours. Finally, the last truck rolled out of the gates.

As I wearily crawled off the mountain and into the scale house, I felt a definite change. Unsteady from being jarred in that vibrating monster for more than sixteen hours, my legs crumbled. Before I could go down, another operator grabbed and steadied me. Someone handed me a coal-stained rag to wipe some of the sweat and grime off my face, and Arnold placed one hand on my shoulder, giving it a friendly, lingering squeeze, while handing me the most welcome cup of coffee in my life.

The coal-blackened faces, the coughing, the feeling of a job well-done obliterated male-female distinctions. No longer was I the exception, the out-cast. In our common relief I finally had become an equal member of this hard-working group. The scale house resounded with laughter and outrageous stories, praise for each other, praise for ourselves, real and exaggerated tales, and verbal pats on the back.

As we finally out-talked ourselves and slowly headed for the parking lot, Arnold turned me away from the direction of my car, saying, "Carrie, Worley stopped by earlier and said he wants ya to stop by the shop on yer way out." My name—had he actually used my name? The others said that since they weren't in any hurry, they "guessed they'd just wander on down with us and see what ole Worley was wantin'." I sensed they knew exactly what Worley wanted, so I asked what was going on. The only response, however, was their old, silent deadpans.

In the garage the first thing I noticed was a swarm of worn-out, dirty mechanics and dock hands gathered around my car—all wearing the same tired, sheepish grins. One of the dock hands spoke up and said, "Tired a hearin' ya grind out thet car each time ya leave—won't happen no more." I raced across the floor, forgetting my exhaustion, almost knocking him down with a big bear hug. Although he turned purple with embarrassment, his eyes sparkled as everyone hooted and yelled.

Worley put an arm around me and suggested that I wash some of the crud off my face if I was going "to go around hugging people." With a gentle push, he steered me across the garage. As I reached the bathroom, I opened the door and went in. "Door!" I yelled, running back out. Gales of laughter filled the garage as I stared in awe at the newly installed "HOT PINK" door. That door, that set me apart from my co-workers, now guaranteed that I was finally one of them.



P·O·E·T·R·Y



# P·O·E·T·R·Y

12

## Awake

a  
wake  
with julie  
on the phone  
I lie naked  
watch candle shadows  
chase across  
the ceiling  
and listen to how  
her goldfish  
met disaster

replaced in  
the bowl  
freshly filled

from the  
kitchen sink

it soon became  
inebriated  
by chlorine  
and began zip  
zapping up and  
down and up  
and

out  
onto the kitchen  
linoleum  
where watchful clyde  
alias cat

pounced  
snacking it off

i grunt  
sympathetically  
and offer  
a brief  
candlelit prayer  
for all the poor  
goldfish  
who never return  
to the  
water

— Ron Mohring

## Nuts

see the squirrel  
on the sidewalk  
chatter  
twitch  
scramble furiously  
beneath crackling leaves

he's getting his nuts  
together  
for the winter

we're the same  
you know  
i've stocked my shelves  
with dried fruits  
cashews  
and tea

when you start to go  
on winter mornings  
i can say "oh let's eat"  
and maybe  
you'll stay

knowing your hungers  
i realize i  
must save myself  
and  
i'm willing to go  
hungry now

—i'll survive on you  
this winter—

see the squirrel?

no, i can't laugh  
he's not cute  
he's just trying  
to save  
his nuts

— Ron Mohring

# P·O·E·T·R·Y

13

## She

She sits by the dusty stained window  
Staring into the azure sky.  
Her shoulders are slumped.

Her hands, speckled with age,  
Lie motionless in her lap;  
The weathered cane-bottom chair sings  
As she rocks back and forth.

Her eyes, once sparkling blue,  
Have dimmed like a fading candle.

She sits by the dusty stained window. \_\_\_\_\_ Vera Stamper

## Woeful Ride on a Beggar's Back

i am sure this thing  
on which i sit  
is a  
TRAGEDY  
yet i ride its  
infected back.  
i am careful to hunch  
far from where it can  
devour toes from  
dangling legs.  
it will make me  
stroke it  
feed it  
watch it grow like a tick  
until it  
bursts all over me. \_\_\_\_\_ Bob Callihan

# P·O·E·T·R·Y

## A Clue

Somewhere between  
my morning existential blues  
and weekend hedonistic fancies,

Somewhere among  
the mildewing convolutions  
of my mind,

Somewhere  
within my capacity  
for (somehow) surviving  
my masochistic tendencies

There lies  
a clue:

A schizoid other  
who  
forces me  
to unwillingly participate  
in his acts of madness.

Or perhaps  
it is an illness:  
I am being fed upon by  
an evil seed metastatizing  
in my brain

Which saps my strength and  
leaves me helpless,  
spinning madly on a strange journey.

I cannot stop  
its frenetic insistence  
that I continue.

In accidental moments  
of clarity, I attempt to discern  
its peripheral movements.  
Trapped inside myself,  
I must submit to  
the inner wishes  
of a stranger.

\_\_\_\_ Ron Mohring



# P·O·E·T·R·Y

15

## A Modernist Prayer

Whosoever  
Please let whatever happens  
happen for those  
who are ready.

— Steve Graves

## Stopping by McDonald's on a Snowy Evening

Who owns this place I think I know  
His house is in the suburbs though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
to buy Big Macs and fries to go.

My little car must think it queer  
to stop without a tow truck near  
Between Save Mart and House of Steak  
The drunkest evening of the year.

Its engine gives a violent shake  
As if the rusted mounts will break.  
The only other sound's the beep  
Of some young driver on the make.

The parking lot is dark and deep.  
But arches gold are bright and steep,  
and I'll eat junk before I sleep,  
and I'll eat junk before I sleep.

— Donna Spencer

# P·O·E·T·R·Y

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## Curtain

I saw his face from my morning-dreary office.  
It was just between the curtain edge and  
the frame of the glass pane.

I mistook him for you.

                  though my reasoning told me (again)  
(it couldn't possibly)  
                  because you were five years  
                  back in Colorado  
Somewhere.

But I pulled the curtain aside, anyway  
and watched (you)  
walk down the steps of the subway ,  
(time's shadow

                  on  
                  a                  rain-splattered

                  window.

                  \_\_\_\_\_ Kati Hancock

## Opening Night Flowers

Honey-colored sunlight flows  
through panes barred against  
January to spotlight

                  two vases,

One with bright carnations, red and white,  
fresh ribbon tied about strong green stems,

One with crumpled roses and faded daisies  
overflowing olive from dust-laden glass,

The future and the past  
both presents.

                  \_\_\_\_\_ Janet Rose

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# P·O·E·T·R·Y

## Prowl

Wind sharpens down these hills  
cutting deep their black-and-white relief  
from graying skies  
it prowls, a dark punk,  
through corn-stubbed fields  
that lie pale and passive  
as the unshaven face of an old  
widowed man watching  
young tough winter  
push random dirty snowflakes into  
the freezing pond,  
bringing night from the north.

— Donna Spencer

## Unsettled

Unsettled today as if I  
cast down or lifted up anchor.  
The uneasiness drove me ten miles  
to Cloverport to sit by the river.

Maybe something's wrong with you.

I consider that your world no longer  
includes me  
and if your world goes nova  
I would only sense it awkwardly.

Yet, maybe the fluctuations  
are within me.  
A barge passes  
and  
the water pushes to the bank  
and splashes my feet.  
The mood is carried off with the sand.

— Cynthia Howton

# I·N·S·C·A·P·E

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