

# ***ALEMBIC***

Alembic

The Literary Magazine  
of  
Providence College

Volume 53 No. 2  
February 1974

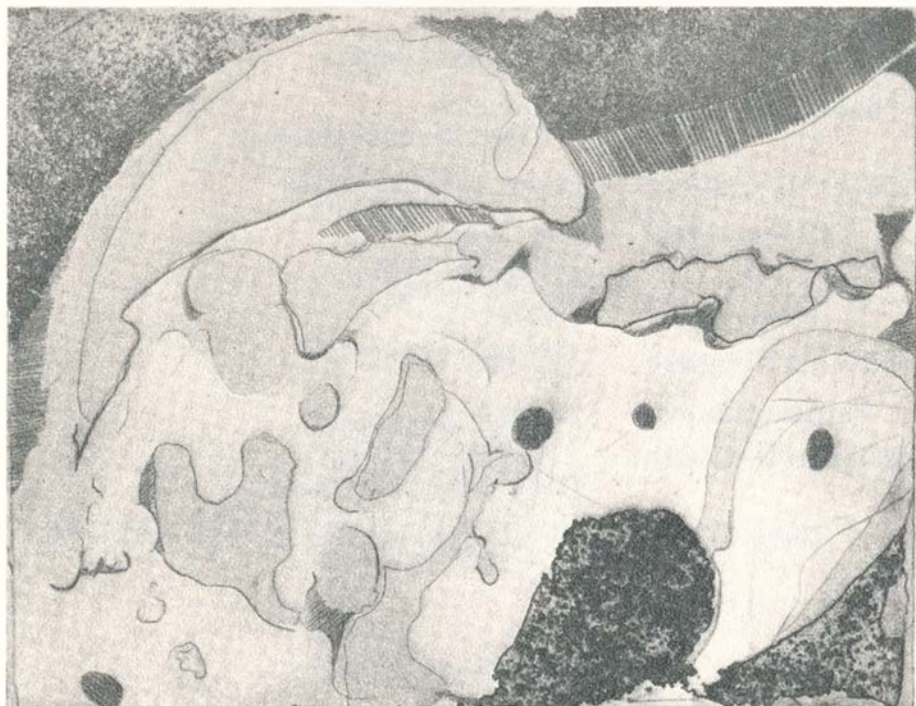
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Prints  
Louise Regan



"The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.  
My hours are married to shadow. . . ."

from "The Colossus"  
Sylvia Plath



## *Now I Am a Man*

Like a giant sand-hawk the jet screamed down the sky, its talons of steel and fire diving steadily and with instinctive precision into the soft flesh of a helpless prey. It killed without preamble, finding its riveted, slow-crawling meat alone and helpless in the grassless veldt of the desert. Death came quickly to the lone iron rabbit, its turret-head unable to offer the slightest nod of recognition for its infra-red murderer. It gave up its ghost quickly, in a winking flame and a tall, meandering billow of black smoke that hung heavy, the only cloud in a sky that knew no rain. And as the sand-hawk turned, dipped, and, with such indifference, whispered back into the sun, the lifeless metal rabbit slowly assumed the nature of the sand.

He saw the Mig begins its dive, he screamed a first and final warning even as the armour-piercing missiles jumped out from under the swept back wings of the jet. But he was so far away, and the great engine had just begun its boiling rumble that overcame any sound outside of the tank, and most noise inside its small, armour-plated cabin. And he watched, unmoving, a scene he had witnessed so many times before, a textbook encounter between the two most deadly weapons in the desert. The Mig, a black star in the blueness, diving with grace at a forty-five degree angle, its pilot waiting patiently until his range finder grabbed its target, and then the twin white trails, and the missiles, called "smart" because of their computer eye, not failing. The huge tank shuddered under the direct hits, bore a brief growl of internal explosion, and stopped dead. Oily smoke poured swiftly from every gunport.

He stood on the steep crest of a dune and watched his crew die. And as the Mig pulled out of its dive not more than fifty feet over his head, he stood still and stared at the tomb, unbelieving yet clinically certain of the tableau he had witnessed. The hot wake of the jet tossed his dark, curly hair and kicked sand into his eyes.

He had gone out ahead of the tank, trying to scout a safe path through a hopeless mesh of Egyptian front line positions. Caught in the middle of heavy repairs at the outbreak of hostilities, he and his crew had been unable to join the full scale retreat, the order of that first, futile day. Finally, their tank ready to travel, the journey back to Israeli lines had seemed the only course of action that made sense. And although the odds would be truly gargantuan that the whole, lost lot of them would end up dead or captured, he knew that there was simply no other logical choice for him to make.

His plan, then, had been simple. He would scout twenty yards ahead of the tank and periodically, through hand signals, report the conditions that he encountered back to his crew. He would serve as human mine detector, small and silent, able to blend with the desert and flush out its dangers.

The plan had worked fine for a time.

It was late afternoon, on a Friday. He sat down and waited for the fires in the tank to die. There was no heavy ammunition left to go off inside, and, with any luck, he would be able to salvage some of the little food and water that they had begun with. As the sun slipped easily behind a distant dune, the last trace of smoke lost itself in the darkening sky. He rose slowly and walked back to the tank. He climbed to the main hatch. The steel was hot, it burnt skin from the palms of his hands as he opened the hatch. He climbed down, then, into the cramped cabin, avoiding the pulpy red piles of trash that overflowed out of every seat. The sweet stench of burnt meat rose and swirled about him like an invisible dervish. Three minutes later he emerged, some tins of three-in-one ration and one canteen, almost empty, swinging from his web belt. He retraced his steps from the cooling tank, up and over the high dune, never looking over his shoulder until, when he finally turned round, all he could see was sand. Then he stopped, sat at the foot of another



large dune, ate and drank sparingly. Soon he lowered himself into the sand, folding his arms behind his head as a pillow. The stars were cold, the air was cold, no breeze stirred the sand around him. A full, fluorescent moon floated at leisure across the blue-black sky. He dug in with the silence, brought his knees up to his chest against the darkness, and rested.

Fifty yards away, three figures in kahki uniforms lay on top of a sand dune and watched the lone man slowly settle down for the night. They spoke quietly amongst themselves, in Arabic. The eldest of the three, his lieutenant's bars catching and holding a shaft of moonlight, watched through night glasses. When he was certain that the Israeli was asleep, he put the binoculars down and turned to his fellows.

"He must be the last one, from the tank back there. I do not understand why he lives." His voice was deep and hoarse.

"We can take him quickly. He must have water, food. Could you see anything, a canteen?" The Arab in the middle was sweating heavily in the cool of the evening. His young face was hard, desperate.

"There is water," the lieutenant answered. "He seems lost, like us. We shall have the water, and the man." He spoke with desire.

"We can circle around him, take him from behind," said the second Arab. "One quick shot and we sleep without thirst!"

The lieutenant picked up the binoculars again, looked back down at the prostrate figure. He turned to the other two. "You and I will circle off to the right, walk towards him. I will take one rifle, you carry my automatic." The second man nodded that he understood.

"And you, boy, here, you take the other rifle and go off to the left, and you walk towards him too. And if he manages to kill the both of us here, then you can finish the job and have all the water for yourself, right?" The two men would have laughed out loud, but something in the boy's eyes stopped them.

The boy appeared not more than sixteen years old. His skin was sun-burned and raw. A mop of wirey hair fell over a high brow. His eyes were brown and intelligent on either side of a small yet unmistakably semitic nose. He breathed deeply, moistened two thick lips with a parched tongue, and nodded once. He decided, as he reached carefully for the rifle, that he would shoot the Israeli whether or not his two comrades were successful. He had seen so much death, these past two days, yet he had been responsible for none of it. As he checked to make sure that the gun was loaded and primed, he promised himself that, after this night, no one would ever call him "boy." As he would watch the life's blood flow from his victim, he would place the heel of his boot in the Israeli's face and tell all the world that, now, he was a man.

The boy looked up, and his comrades were already carefully making their way out across the desert. The lieutenant looked back over his shoulder and waved menacingly towards the boy.

The old rifle was light, easy to handle. His boots made shallow waves in the sea of sand. The moon was lowering now, and his shadow darkened the desert before him. From where he was, the boy could see the other two Arabs, about fifty yards to his right. They walked close together, in a crouch. They circled cautiously until parallel to the prone man, then paused until the boy drew even with them on their flank. As the two Arabs began to straighten and walk toward their prey, the boy stopped, primed his rifle, and watched the scene passively.

The two jackals would have howled at the moon this fine night, had their stomachs been full. But now, with the heat pains of hunger burning deep into their beings, the only thought was of the hunt. The rabbit lay peaceful, unaware. The jackals could smell his body, their hearts beat faster and faster as they closed with the kill. This Jew vermine will die and we shall live, they



thought as one, and the food and the water of this rich, sated kill shall be our salvation. And they were on him, and poised for the death strike, but the rabbit jumped and rolled, and his teeth were of lead and powder, and he charged with the strength of thousand jackals and bathed in the blood of the predators.

The Jew was up on one knee and firing before the Arabs could lower and aim their heavy, old weapons. The lieutenant took two shells in his stomach before he could scream. His rifle fell to the sand, he dropped to his knees, died, and toppled headlong into blood and desert. The second Arab fired his pistol once, into the sky, as he tumbled backwards following half his face. The Arabs died instantly, with thought of victory their final delusion.

The Jew stood over his kill and smiled a smile of vengeance.

The boy saw this. His rifle pointed at the sand. His mouth yawned open. His eyes stared vacantly at the Jew's back. He watched the Jew stand still for a while, then, reacting to some movement at his feet, take a long knife from his boot and stoop down over the lieutenant. The Jew's arm rose up and down, up and down. Steel shone in the dimming moonlight.

The boy walked slowly, silently, his eyes fixed on the battle scene. He raised his rifle as he moved, fixing it on the Jew's back, on the animal who had known of their presence all along, who had killed without effort or remorse. The boy stopped ten feet from the Jew and saw the man's hot pistol lying out of all reach. He made certain of his aim.

"You did not win here."

The Jew stood quickly, spun around. The boy thought that he was trying to reach his gun and began to fire. The Jew dodged, dived to the desert. Sand flew into his mouth. He was so well trained, had killed in this desert for so many years. He was master here. As the Jew reached his gun, the boy shot his final round into the stomach of the half-crawling man. The man lay still. The boy thought to smile.

He stood there for a time, thinking he had killed a Jew. Then, at his feet, a voice in his native tongue asked for water.

The Jew moved his head slowly. His body was on fire, his throat was melting. He looked up at the boy's feet and asked for a drink.

The boy squatted, the Jew grabbed his ankles. The boy threw down his gun and reached for the Jew's canteen.

The dying man drank, spat blood, then drank deeply, draining the canteen. He knew there was no water now.

"You kill good, Arab boy. Your mother will be proud."

The Arab boy began to cry. The Jew's face was twisted in pain. His hair, gray at the sides, was wet and thick. The boy turned the Jew onto his back and watched the stomach open. The Jew called for his wife and his child.

The Arab boy sat in the sand, crossed his legs, and cradled the Jew's head in his lap. In the east, the sky was beginning to tint red. The boy ran his fingers through the Jew's hair. The Jew died.

It was high noon. The roar of artillery carried easily across the expanse. The sky was gun metal blue, the sun an unbearable, fire-yellow.

"What is your name?" he asked for the hundredth time. "Is your wife pretty? We look alike, you know."

The afternoon passed. The artist's palette of desert shades swirled and dimmed in the failing light. Artillery fire slackened in the distance.

Dusk, the first cooling. The boy's legs ached, they had been crossed all day. The head in lap began to stink.

"I will tell you about my school. Do you have a boy who goes to school?"

The strange silhouette on top of the dune grew less and less distinct as the sun disappeared, until blackness fell like a shroud over the desert, man and boy merged with sand, and the circling vultures lost their shadows and their patience.

Soon the boy's questions ceased.

Charles R. Drago

## *Joe's Lunch*

Trapped in the dank room that he calls his office,  
Joe ate a greasy burger washed down with a coke.  
For desert he enjoyed a "Twinky."  
He relaxed for five more minutes  
And hurried back to the grill  
So his wife could eat lunch.

Thomas Kennedy

## *A Creed (through design)*

Yaweh, O Lord, Your presence exists  
in my every action.  
I know you are there;  
your design can be interpreted:

Spring daffodils boogie in the morning sunshine;  
Dew eyes winking to everyone.  
The dying orange nudged van Gogh into yellow,  
and to us the miracle of birth each season.

The moon's tide, the waves, and the fish in the sea  
are not coincidence.  
I held a conch shell in my hand  
and listened and saw and believed.

Thomas Kennedy



## *Poem: for Greta Garbo*

I have lived with her  
picture for years —  
the soft, chin-length hair  
the fine nose and those misty  
eyes of Camille.  
Beneath the Indian chimes  
and the castanets  
and the plumosa fern  
and my gouramis,  
mute,  
aloof  
black and white she is  
the corner of my bedroom.  
In the mornings as I comb  
she stares over my shoulders  
                    and I glance —  
her expression, eternal  
though the paper is cracked  
and yellow.

After the blue  
years of adolescent skin  
and plucking my brows to resemble hers  
it happened.      Mirrors stopped  
laughing and I could face  
the mornings.      I thought of folding her  
into a velvet box  
like tarnished silver.

This morning I combed  
my hair and found one  
white  
against the brown; I yanked it out  
as I will all others.  
I looked at her.  
Ah, Greta.  
Your youth is only a photograph.

Ana Margarita Cabrera

## *The Gulls*

1.

The grey seagull stood on one  
leg at the edge  
of the lowering tide. His eyes  
were perfectly round and  
they rolled in his head  
as he watched the sky.

Never had I seen a gull so large  
and so silent.

2.

One cold summer the beach was cluttered  
with seaburds. Muddy  
and squealing they pecked at the empty  
clam shells in the sand.  
Their wild cries echoed off the ceiling  
of clouds  
as they plundered the ocean of its shimmering  
fish and baby  
turtles.

3.

The gulls are squabbling pirates  
living the only way they knew.  
And in the autumn they follow  
the river into the city.  
Old women feed popcorn to pigeons  
while in the garbage heaps the seagulls  
bicker among themselves: scavengers.

The souls of impoverished children,  
they are brilliant in the city  
sky. A touch of seaside.  
Still it is strange to wake early  
and see those white birds  
fluttering over this grassy soccer field.

Kathleen Mele





## *Shatter*

The early bird was worming  
in my yard  
black feathers mocking sin  
digging his talons through the scalp  
of the earth marking tormenting tatooing  
the bloodless earth.

My window pane scratches  
its' way up the frame  
high-pitched frenzy explodes but  
the black bastard squats  
and squawks at handfuls of breeze  
his stropped razor beak glints.  
Glare, focusing through the sight, blinds me.

I am the cyclops after Ulysses made his point  
mad burning rage, stinking  
scar flesh  
as the retina melts like cellophane  
blue flashes rush  
my body as  
minute totalities of pain and ash spill  
down my wax face.

My finger pulls the trigger and  
the bird, in a flourish of feathers,  
exits to hell.

Mark Casey

## *My Baby Grand*

Beneath a slinky black satin gloss  
Her smooth and slender legs  
stab the floor boards with shining claws.

Showing off her string of black and white pearls,  
she throws her head back and cries  
a misty melody  
her heart throbbing within.

Edward Ruggiero

## Willow

The ice storm took her by surprise.  
She heard only a sudden howling thunder,  
looked up sharply,  
with that twisted toss of her head —  
too late.

His hands were already there.  
Her hair, snarled in the wind  
caught up  
blew back,  
and froze.

How was there ever beauty, 'till now,  
encased in glass, each perfect  
strand frozen for all the world  
as if no sun were ever coming.

Those swaying strands,  
always humbled to the noon  
in hues of summer green  
or early gold,  
rise fierce and tangled  
in the coat of crystal armor  
her lover's hands laced  
into her hair.

It is the street lamp, though  
strange, artificial light  
that poses her ghostly outline  
to the winter sky.

The birches bend low  
backs broken in homage

to this fierce moment of willow

queen of the night  
for this one night.

Patricia L. Slonina

## *I Wait*

Quiet with a trace of a smile on her lips  
She knows what you will say.  
She knows the city way,  
But is content in the Northern woods,  
Cold icy winds, Thor blowing.

She is Cassandra,  
Virgin, prophetess, high priestess to Apollo;  
None may trespass.  
She has known sailors and poets,  
But waits Still.

Waits to be taken up whole, pure  
Quiet, for she has seen it all.

William B. Godin

## *Drive South*

(for Marla)

I

The trouble is when you stand  
too close, it always looks  
like the end  
the sun goes down  
draining colour from trees.

The dying rays of day  
trapped in the window pane —  
dance  
gold and red arcs of light.  
I trace the curve under your lips.

II

A flock of birds hangs over  
the highway stretching over and down  
your cheek a tear crystalizes  
in the sunlight  
still.

III

The only ending is when they  
don't write about you.

William B. Godin





## *St. Christopher*

For C.W.B.  
and D.W.C.

Christopher,  
haunter spirit of highways, riverfords,  
begins the crossing.  
The rocks are black; nothing grows here.  
The river rises in the night,  
overflows,  
threading through the low places  
silver tendrils curling over the cracked ground.  
The long-sleeping frogs awaken in the earth  
and rise.  
The roots rumble in the mud. The hollows fill.  
The rocks, submerged, move and long to be emptied.

This is the revenge that life takes on death —  
the embrace.

Christopher strides:  
Black water parts at his waist.  
The feet are planted in blackness.  
Head tossed back, face open to the night — This  
is the hound-headed devourer,  
the mad dream of holymen?  
Here at the mudborn root he moves,  
the dream, perfect, wrapped about him.

The body surrenders its weight to the water.  
The brain, held high, turns in the skull,  
burning itself out in nightmares, in madness,  
in death.

Morning, the sunlight streams languid through the open door,  
splashing over the image on the southwestern wall  
touching  
as the hands of Nicaea  
and Aquilina had touched him  
at the bidding of Dagnus,  
the king, moments  
before their conversion into light  
and cinders.  
A wave of the arm,  
the king released a thousand shafts of darkness, each  
seeking the light.  
Christopher stood untouched.  
The arrows hung in mid-air,  
quivering,  
shattering in a surge of light  
flooding down the empty nerve-corridors  
into the brain of one blind from birth.  
The king roared forth in his blindness —  
axe falling,  
wedge of black iron between mind  
and body  
where it stands.

Midnight;  
the giving of names.  
The black cock crosses the line of the circle  
and dies.  
The form of man is torn from the earth; the hands,  
the toes — splayed roots — cry  
for the earth.  
The hag reels off down lighted alleys clanking  
iron and steel as she whirls,  
arm raised,  
grand  
and sinister as a sky-scraper; her hand,  
strip-mining earth-eater, clutches the frail  
human form,  
limp,  
exhausted victim of a dry suicide.



This is the history of death and madness  
of which nightmares and poetry are but the shadow.  
In dreams spawned of emptiness  
did the priests first unleash the false image  
of the croc-faced devourers  
and the hound-headed  
ferryman.

And all the while the poets were busy scribbling —  
rats gnawing at the heart —  
giving it all a hollow form.

Anubis, death god, rages  
across time, across the wastelands  
sinisterly brooking over cities raised up in his honor,  
hands dripping nightmares.

And death passing wing-like over the sun;  
silent spectre in plague and ague humours;  
driving the uprooted races over empty plains of glory;  
flashing on the tips of edged weapons  
and tongues.

The cities, their windows blinded,  
stinking,  
whisper of death.

Yet, in the islands, it is said,  
the dead are spirited away by civil servants  
before they are seen, (a state secret,  
the secret that piles up mountains).

Far downstream of the crossing,  
the mad uprooted cities rush toward the cataract,  
the edge of disaster.

Upstream, the Saint is a light out over the water.

He stands, rooted in the mud, hands  
shaping the mudra of the lotus  
that lifts its freshness out of decay,  
the blossom opening to the light.

The mist thins  
vanishes,  
the river, widened to a lake  
turns all gold and green in the dawn,  
murmuring its way through the dripping  
first forest  
where all things have roots  
or lose them.

Terry O'Neill

