

FRESHMAN

Main Street, Geneseo. Saint Michael's Church with its steeple
like a bony finger pointing past the sky toward heaven,
to where God observes, where Christ expounds to God
what sin is and what sin isn't, in this small out of the way town
That quietly bustles, silently hustles, unaware of the timeless,
lost pilgrims of dreams, the slaughter of natives, the Redcoats gone.
Now, professors roam, strict chalk marks, academia unbound.
I seek fond friends, fond lovers, the bond of grace on the kneeler
In the vestibule.

But I vacuum the aisle leading to communion,
The gray pathway where timid footsteps follow the way to the sacred
Wafer that wakes the unawakened soul hidden by sin, approach the altar
not to Golgatha or the Last Supper, but the tabernacle of hosts, the body
of once Silent sorrow and suffering. As an Altar Boy I bowed,
and beat my breast, incense laden, grace bestowed,
I think of the congregants with mercy and love.
But now, I am no longer one of the them, but just a poor freshman
Caretaker of sorts, bottomless soul, empty pockets, self-pity.
Waking to prepare the church for the 6 AM Mass.
The night sky breaks with a sudden sliver of sun,
Ending in a solemn gray. I'm late, I'm late.

Yesterday I raked the leaves into two growing piles along Maple Street ---
A small-town street lined with clapboard houses, quaint doorways,
cracked sidewalks, sliding and sloping, I thought, because of too many walks,
too many falls, too much running away from all those halloween ghouls ---
I raked red, yellow, brown up from the wide expanse of lawn around the Church,
and parish house where Father lived, ate, and prayed.
Leaves surrendered their life spans, fell, disembodied,

piled up like shreds of summer memories.
Before I had a chance to burn them, they scattered
down the street some in cyclone patterns adding mystery
in their surrender to the fall winds.

The night before I drank six mugs of beers at the Oak Tree Inn,
and later, ten beers poured in juice glasses, at the Hodel Bar.
So, I was late. Very late. Christ had risen from the dead but
I couldn't rise from a beer induced sleep, and, unlike Christ, I had no
Meaningful message to impart, only a cry for forgiveness.
I was a poor lad in search of a way to pay my way through school
without having to sacrifice my right of passage to get drunk whenever I pleased.
And so, I had to take care of a church and bow to the demands of an angry priest.
Out of breath I arrived.

Father Hart, furious, tongue like a whip, breath like black coffee
Backed me against the Saint Michaels' doors compared me to
An insect buried deep in the ground.
The wind blew as he shouted unholy words about scattered leaves,
dust on the communion rail, boot marks on the carpet.
And late. I felt shame. Who was I? I was only a sinful boy.
“Get out!” The holy priest cried. “Get out of my sight.”
His rage attacked me like a swarm of bees but I couldn't run.
I needed to run, grab some mud,
cover my wounds, get away from the shameful tears.
and never see that angry priest again.
There were hills to flee to beyond that street of leaves.
A town to run from --- one way in, one way out.
I was dazed by the early morning, the mortal sin of over-sleeping.
Destroyed by the man of God who turned out to be no such thing.
The dark clouds let loose, the din of sin, the scream of aloneness.

The despair circulating with the air currents, leaves swirling across
Saint Michael's asphalt parking lot, free, forgotten pieces of thought,
A cold rush of wind made me want to run. I turned away.
Stumbling down, down, farther away from the empty church.
Stooped, weak from God's shout from the heavens,
down the hill. Not back to my dream of early lost dreams.

Saint Michaels slowly faded behind me, grace gone.
I kept walking down, down, but now lost in a foreign valley,
a place where the cold rain made rivers rise. Rain.
The message from the sky in its turbulence
with its cold wet scream.
The once tranquil air where a High Mass choir sang,
became a hurricane within,
Where once a pure soul lived, now an old man dwelt.
Down the hill, down into some once veiled valley,
the light of the sun gone through the mist.
The sun too far away to warm,
The bony finger piercing the dark sky.