

EKPHRASTIC POETRY

Spring 2024



Photograph by Jerry Siegel

All art images courtesy of the Jule Collins Museum of Fine Art at Auburn University

All photographs courtesy of Jerry Siegel



FIRST COMMUNION

after "The First Communion" by Birge Harrison

Mary Arnold

Brilliant light glows white

Folds of cloth sweep spring flowers

A moment of quiet



Kindred

after Todd McGrain's "Lost Birds" sculptures

Ken Autrey

The past closes in on all of us.
We scan the horizon for lost birds,
winging through our immortal dreams.
On the prairie, the hen with wide eye
and variegated breast struts into
oblivion, as does the greater auk,
whose white breast, giant beak,
and penguin-like countenance never
suited it well for life on this continent.

Likewise, the Labrador duck
who once swarmed the Chesapeake,
stood no chance in the face
of burgeoning bayside settlement.
The reds, yellows, and greens
of the Carolina parakeet,
too gorgeous for its own good,
better suited to jungle flamboyance,
doomed it in the Pee Dee swamps.

And the dove-like passenger pigeon,
killed by kindred thousands
in swerving murmurations,
could not last. We often speak
of them in the singular,
as though one bird
could signify a species,
and indeed in the end, one
is all there was. Then none.

A lone sculptor brought back
their figures using the lost
wax method: plaster, ceramic cast,
wax, melting, then the pouring in
of bronze to a thickness of an inch or so,
the result five hollow shells, each
dark as a pigeon-filled sky, black
as the auk's head or the webbed
paddles of the missing duck.

The white-clad maker burnished them,
rubbing their features smooth
as he embraced their larger-than-life
frames, roughly equal in size,
stretching or preening, indestructible.
Then he placed them where
they huddle, almost touching,
as in life they never could,
frozen in place in a fallow field.

When night descends, they fade again,
invisible, themselves without descendants,
saved only by the morning sun
that daily resurrects them into a semblance
of communal life. If we glance
their way, spotting the huddled flock
from a distance, do we see a revival
of glory, or do we shun them as omens
for our own wavering, imperfect line?



UNRELENTING POVERTY

after “*Bud Fields and His Family at Home*” by Walker Evans

Margaret Craig-Schmidt

TRAPPED

By unrelenting poverty,
An Alabama sharecropper stares blankly,
Barefooted, saving his boots for work in the cotton fields.
When worn out, his boots are passed down to the elderly grandmother.
The farmer's thin, malnourished arms hold his feeble-minded, half-clothed son.
His young daughter in a dirty, safety-pinned dress echoes her father's feeling of hopelessness.
Sitting on an old iron bed, the wife holds a two-year-old daughter sleeping contently after being fed.
Photojournalists were sent by the government to record this Depression Era poverty in the American South.
The photos of Walker Evans and narrative by James Agee revealed abject poverty and social injustice.
With the advent of WWII, conditions did improve with military-related jobs offering better pay.
Government programs after the war offered greater educational and job opportunities.
Women were empowered: marrying and having children at an older age.
Mechanization of farming forced sharecroppers off the land.
The next generation became landowners, free
From unrelenting poverty,
ESCAPED



SIESTA

after "Will Be Continued" by Bo Cronqvist

Wendy Cleveland

See her standing alone, feet pinched in heels
high and tight, swollen from shopping, too
many wines, too much pasta and tiramisu.
She can't wait to strip off her clothes, that dress
of tight waist and tighter bust, heaving
over her cleavage of bovine breasts
aching to be released. Off comes the dress,
the satin camisole, the push-up bra, and, Ah,
how good it feels to be free at last of constraining
hooks and straps, stiff pinching underwire.
She flings aside the bra and sighs once more
before sitting on the bed to undo her shoes,
slip out of those stilted heels and dig those
ruby red toes into the plush green carpet
before reclining on pillows, her plumpness
ample against cool cotton, expanding loose and large
like a creamy magnolia unfurling in the flush of June.



EVIDENCE

after "Street Group" by Jerome Myers

Curtis Shannon

I came to New York City
to paint the streets
documenting real people
living in humble neighborhoods

Delancy Street
Little Italy
I wanted to get them on canvas
before they were gone

I'd stand in a shady spot along the avenue
sketchbook in hand

I'd find a simple composition
to please my eye

I'd put in the people next
mostly women and kids

I'd leave out the mends and tears
in folks' clothes

I'd mute the colors
so the painting hung together

I'd clean things up
if the streets looked shabby

Listen, they were decent neighborhoods
Folks are just busy is all

Listen, I'm no romantic
artistic license is a matter of good judgment

Listen, the buildings and streets
the hairstyles and the clothing
that's what life in the city was like back then
I promise you

Soon the photographers arrived
with canvas bags of fancy equipment
and a vague stench of chemistry
documenting the streets

They put me out of business!

Their lenses projected
perfect likenesses
etching permanent imprints
into glass and plastic
with electrons and precious metals

The exact opposite of alchemy

They came with their light sensitive meters
and silver stained fingers
resembling scientists, not painters
making measurements, not marks

Where I provided impressions
a trout in the milk
they offered evidence

Facts

All the gore and shit-stained human misery
were there for the public to see
And they wanted to see
They were ready to see

But maybe ugliness is just ugliness
Degradation is degradation
Maybe there's no poetry there
Maybe there's no beauty either

And maybe you'd be foolish
to send a painter off to war

I'll end my days
knowing my paintings captured
something beyond mere evidence

Call it human feeling or experience
A precious liquid still warm from the mother



JESSICA

after "Jessica" by Jerry Siegel

Nancy Penaskovic

Weather worn face
reflecting the wisdom of well-lived years.
Lines that echo the worry and wonder
of decisions made.
Her eyes carefully scan the horizons
of her memories.
This is a far cry from the innocence
and untouched beauty of her
picture as a young girl that
hangs above the mantle.
She has experienced joys and sorrows,
suffering and healing, birth and
death. Each event etched
a line across her visage.
In another picture her hand
holds a card with the image of
young children. Does she also
wonder if her life story will
leave a lasting imprint?
Her life and finger
hold the "pearl of great price."
She is a legacy to all who knew her.



BETTY WAITS

after “Betty” by Jerry Siegel

Bill Wilson

She waits.
For what?
For whom?

She does not fret.
She does not weep.
She stands and stares.

Left hand, bare.
Props the door.
Expectant. She waits.

Why wait?
Teen runaway?
Fallen soldier?

A query not answered.
A conclusion not reached.
A veiled future.



The Still Sad Music of Poverty

after “*Bud Fields and His Family at Home*” by Walker Evans

Stephen Gresham

The Soundtrack here is Bach’s Cello Suite #5 – often called “Darkness.” Listen to it, become immersed; Rostropovich is playing – life continues. And the music surrounds this family as an anthem of hard times. They are sharecroppers sharing every common note of despair. They have given up before the sun rises and pine warblers chime.

Poverty has dismembered them.

Bud the father hears with his eyes; his exhausted glance reaches out to us as if looking is never enough. Shirtless and bereft, he is no longer the tenor in his own lonely opera. His thoughts are repetitive and meaningless, like the sound of playing cards being shuffled. There is no rock to his roll, and the only heavy metal in his world is a rusting plow pulled by the off-key braying of his tone deaf mule.

His wife, too tired to stand, once sang lullabies. But her face no longer holds melody. Her tongue now is as mute as the unsung ballad of the sleeping child sprawled across her lap. For too long this woman has played the instruments of motherhood, the empty-too-much of gestation and birthing: another mouth to feed, another heartbeat of need. She has lost herself somewhere between lyrical sadness and barefoot grief. She has even forgotten how to weep.

The girl, a daughter with flesh of white dust, looks into an unwelcoming now, and what she sees is a jazz riff of hypnotic Alabama blues.
And you wonder: will anyone ever write a poem to her?
Or carve her initials on the trunk of a barkless loblolly pine?
Has she already abandoned the plangent hope of love songs?
Notice that her mouth is so wordlessly tiny that it's about to whimper away into the aftermath of promises unkept.

A black cat – the family's spirit totem –sleeps, wisely indifferent to the camera. It seems to accept its role: to purr forth hymns of bad luck.
Or no luck at all.

But the boy – ah, the boy - he is unabashedly open-mouthed
as if singing an aria only he can hear, one that transcends the
wretchedness around him. He is an oblivion seeker and what he seeks
seeks him. His nakedness is a saturnalian chant against the family's
futureless future. He is Pan piping at the Gates of Dawn.
His small penis is not an organ of concern. In his ethereal realm, size does
not matter. It just doesn't.

And finally let's call her the grandmother, sitting, her posture
a many-angled round, her right shoulder drooping, her hands
clasped so that they cannot escape the past into an
adagio movement of better times. Her eyebrows and stoic
chin tell us that she has heard it all before and now awaits the end
of an unfinished symphony. Her large ears no longer listen
for the chorus of Hallelujah. And she cannot remember the last time she smiled.

We hear the camera click or perhaps issue a mechanical scuttle.

What has been captured?

The still, sad music of poverty? Or only the memory of harmony,
for this family has nothing, nothing, nothing to sing about.
Or perhaps in the never, nowhere, not much of their lives every song
has ended and once again tomorrow is a dirge of hopelessness.

The rest is as silent as the Evans photograph.



THE YOUNG COMMUNICANT

after "The First Communion" by Birge Harrison

Kathleen Tajeu

We see you, but who are you?
Are you going to or leaving from?
Do you know who YOU are?
How fragile or strong are you or will you be?

After your first naïve confession
Required before your First Communion
Venial sins forgiven,
Serious sins yet to be committed

Carrying flowers, picked by you
From a newly blooming field
A child, a girl
Newly blooming, like the flowers

Walking in the white clothing of innocence
Only arms revealed...
But the sensuous folds
Appropriate for a bride to be wed

Not yet, and maybe never
A nun devoted to Christ, or
Not yet and maybe never
A wife, a lover, an opening flower

Turn around and face the sun, the light
Let it shine on the path you're finding
Take those tentative steps moving forward
Share your gentle self while creating your very own future



SADDLE AND HANDS

after "Hands,saddle" by Jerry Siegel

Gabi Darch

Calloused and brown
dirt under fingernails
these hands grasp
the braided reins
of a dark chestnut mare.

The tawny saddle is worn
as is the red woolen blanket.
a working horse
carrying a working rider
pausing to rest for a moment
before moving on.



AN ELEGY TO THE NEAR EXTINCTION OF THE GREAT EGRET

*after "The Great Egret" by John James Audubon
and with gratitude to Harriet Hemenway and Minna Hall*

Sandy Halperin

The lengthy wispy white feather
fetched twice as much as gold
in the millinery marketplace
for vanity
in the late 19th century.

Socialites thought
nothing of the massive massacre
and savage skinning of the Great Egret
which was so extensive as to
send the bird into near extinction.
This tall graceful heron
with its long black legs
and elegantly curved neck
graced our land by the thousands.
They soared through our skies and
waded in our wetlands unmolested
until the hunters came for profit.

Two women of wealth and influence
outraged by the slaughter
enlisted 900 ladies to battle to stop it
with the ammunition of closed
pocketbooks
refusing to buy
or wear
any hat adorned with feathers.

Their battle was won in 1913.
A new law was passed forbidding
the plume trade.
One hundred years later
the Great Egret is thriving.

But, alas, now it is our planet that's dying.



AUBURN UNIVERSITY