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CONTENTS

- 1 A. L. LAZARUS *Smaller Elephants*
 Cooler Poems
- 2 JACK CRAWFORD, JR. *The Enchanted Isles*
- 4 ROGER MITCHELL *Letters from Siberia*
- 15 CYRIL A. DOSTAL *Three Poems*
- 18 DOUGLAS FLAHERTY *Birth*
- 20 L. C. PHILLIPS *The Kite*
- 32 B. BYRD *Three Poems*
- 37 PETER H. SEARS *American Hero*

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SMALLER ELEPHANTS

In the Land
off the Bluffs
they use pairs of tusks
on the backs
so that as you
the rest
like a ton
may crash
through your
it is then
of
(the uncertainty
the not too distant
you may sweat
that mini
or even Mari
can sometimes
than a sauna
a sauna

COOLER POEMS

of Kalevala
of Beowulf
for tog hooks
of bath house doors
sit entranced
of the elephant
of recollection
at any moment
fragile privacy
in such a state
untranquillity
of steam —
trumpeting)
the inspiration
ature elephants
anne's real toads
prove more useful
full of ivory
full of gold

A. L. Lazarus

THE ENCHANTED ISLES

Amazing Galapagos! Encantadas! Enchanted lava!
 Here ring the bells of broken seas, out of ages
 Breaking its water like broken bells. Hurling on
 beaches
 Where silence basks and bathes—basked and bathed.
 Only the moon. The
 Absorbed stars. Silence in the eyes of Actaeon.
 O stag of islands. Orphans of Ecuador.
 No Venus reclining here, who Paphos prefers,
 Mild in her scudding. Jagged. Bare. Sprung
 Jets of lava. Hardened. Razor sharp.
 No man. Only moon. Only
 Sun. Only the tongues of iguanas. The sleek
 Seal. They ride the oncoming fresh surge of wave
 As if they were slick surfboards under boys. They
 Are whiskers in the belling spray. They ride, leaping
 in abandon
 Their blaze. Their black blaze. Supple
 As flame. In the furious beautiful easy
 Wave. Oncoming. Abandoned. Bleak. Bare.
 The bare-backed wave—the heave of the sea.
 The way it forms on the many shapes. Rocks. Cliffs.
 Small basins. Inlets. Broken volcano cones making
 Marvelous marinas. Lizards bask or slither. Iguana
 Waddles toward water. Swims

With an easy sway, weaving his sinuous body,
 Leaving his hindlegs dragging limp.
 O playful seal! Coming
 To clamp his mouth on the tail of the iguana! As if
 to say,

Come, old ancient Galapagos friend! Come,
 Old Basilisk, old Falstaff! And tumbling him over.

Loosing

Him. Swimming away—then returning with great
 surges

Of his slipperiness to pounce on the slow swimming
 Only lizard on earth who works in water. Great
 Tortoises. Prey of whalers. Stumbling clumsily.

Whose

Plated ancestors, steeped in sun and moon, wallowed
 and waddled.

Listen now! Be still. The Galapagos mockingbird!
 Loving and quick. Coming to dip his beak in coffee
 cup. As

Darwin said it did. Darwin in his Pacific ship
 Hull down. Wallowing and young. The seas
 Brilliant with evolution. O Galapagos! Some
 Model, mayhap, he wrote, of incunabula. Nostril.
 Thigh-bone. Darwin said a mockingbird
 Dipped its beak in his drinking cup, singing
 Outrageously. Bells of bird-note. Bells of the sea.
 Bells that rang in Ishmael's ears.

Shaking loose seals from its endless surge.

O Galapagos! Enchanted isles!

Brilliant with mutation, hull-down, home

Of sun and moon. Haven.

Bells of broken waves abrupt on stone. Bells

Breaking. The surge slippery and thrilling with seals.

Jack Crawford, Jr.

LETTERS FROM SIBERIA

I

. . .

And I have seen nothing but prisoners
these four months. The Siberian spring
is cruel to men in leg irons.

They are indistinguishable from mud.

It is as though the earth lay under lava
except that there is no flow,
only this sliding back and forth.

I have filled six notebooks in as many weeks
though with what, I cannot say.

It is difficult to talk here,
and one finds little to read.

The mentality of the prisoners
quickly becomes that of the guards.

Curiosity about the struggle is met
with intolerance, so that one must assume,
in the absence of knowledge,
an air of having taken sides already.

I have often asked myself why I am here.

They will of course say he was guilty,
that this was his atonement.

This will satisfy them.

Yesterday, I saw a guard beating a prisoner.

Though the man lay lifeless in the mud, half naked,
the guard continued beating him.

Each time he hit the man,
he fell upon him, and getting up,
flung himself down again.

Each time, I heard a noise
such as I have heard only at night

in the blank forests of my dreams.
Forgive my poor attempt at elegance.
You see what my mind has come to here.
I called to the man, but he did not hear me.

II

I have been dining with the director.
He wont say it, but he wants to know
what I'm up to, thinks I might work
for a newspaper in Moscow or Kiev.
The innkeeper tells me I should be flattered
since it is not everyone who dines
in the director's company.
Except once a year when he invites the villagers
and those from the surrounding countryside
to drink vodka and eat roast pork.
It is said that the director's feast
is made up from the prisoners' stores
and that the prisoners go hungry for a month
afterward.

I have also heard that the feast takes place
on the wide field before the prison gates
and that the prisoners are forced to watch
long into the evening when the revellers themselves
lie like broken sacks or stagger
under the night's invisible load.
Once, in a private moment after dinner,
when the other guests had drifted into the parlor,
he showed me his decoration from the Czar,
unbuttoning his shirt front and holding it open,
silent for several moments,
as though he knew I would not see it at once,
small and dulled by contact with him,
in the dense hair of his chest.

. . . .

III

Yesterday, I took a walk in the forest.
It lies in every direction for hundreds of miles
on ground which rarely bothers to notice.
They say it is the best guard of all,
and that the prisoners fear it less
for its endlessness than for its emptiness.
Even in its midst, miles from camp,
I came across a small unguarded group of men
cutting and stacking wood,
each of whom knew his task precisely
and performed it, limb by limb,
muscle by muscle, in measured silence.
I passed through them in equal silence,
and even now I cannot be sure
they knew I had been there.
I am hardly sure myself, any longer.
They keep their secret in the open,
whatever it is. To them,
I am one of "them", one of the trees
they tirelessly cut and stack.

IV

You must not mention it to him
but Petrov is terribly sentimental.
I admire the man, God knows.
He has been trying to tell us something
for years, something we refuse to hear.
His painted peasants are most pathetic
and undoubtedly bring a tear to the coldest eye.
But I would not have the matrons of Moscow weep
or the court counselors shake their heads,
for that is their luxury, their moment of being moved
which, to them, proves them human.

Petrov rescues them from doubt,
which I, in my anger, could not do.
Neither the Moscow matrons nor the court counselors
nor, as I sometimes think, even Petrov himself
knows how far the forest reaches.
I hope you never have to do this, my dear,
but the trip across Russia,
which even I have not completed,
would teach you more than you were bred to know.
I have looked hard at Petrov's paintings
to see if he had this knowledge,
for I can understand the man who has it
but cannot find in him the justification for saying it,
some undertint to the sky or marginal detail,
but I cannot find it.

...

V

...

As to your repeated questions about my return,
I can only say that I will.
You must indulge an old man his mystery.
It is all an old man has,
unless he have the misfortune to lose that, too.
I write with the window open.
The breeze is fresh even at midsummer,
and it brings with it the smell
of that strange flower whose name I forget
which blooms only in the dark.
I have not smelled it since my childhood.
I had forgotten I had a childhood until now.
What a terrible place to come upon it
and to realize, for the first time,
that it, too, blossomed in darkness.

...

VI

The street is empty now, or nearly so.
The last horsecart has clattered home
through the hardening ruts.
The curfew keeps everyone but the soldiers off the
street.

Even I must be in my little room by nine
unless I dine at the director's,
in which case I am escorted back to the inn.
The soldiers are lonely, and no one trusts them.
Most come from Georgia or the Ukraine
and they do not understand the Tartar peasants
whom they are here to protect.
They look down upon them,
and the peasants naturally resent it.
Many are arrested on suspicion of aiding the
prisoners.

Only last night they entered a peasant's hut.
They found him in bed asleep.
Tonight, soldiers will sleep in his bed
and his wife and daughter must cook for them.
One cannot hate the soldiers.
They do what custom and the laws permit,
which in these days is a great deal.
I saw the daughter today buying eggs in the market
place.

She cannot be more than thirteen.
Ludmila was no prettier at that age,
but this girl is nearly a woman.
In five years she will be thick everywhere.
She inspected the eggs closely

and knew at once the good from the bad.
All eyes watched her and many
said comforting things under their breath.
The memories of her father and the uncertain future
surrounded her. She was gracious to all
so that no one saw how quickly
she found her eggs, bought them and left.
I almost said something to her myself,
but I would have only frightened her
and, almost certainly, she speaks no Russian.

VII

Tomorrow, my promised visit to the prison.
I have had to work hard for this
and to convince the director of intentions
which are not rightfully mine.
But, I am no longer as eager as I was.
Six months under its walls among those
who are a permanent part of its shadow
have made the prison like my own shadow.
I no longer trust my motives.
I have had a lifetime of random interests,
followed my nose wherever it led.
Now it has led me here, and I am afraid, frankly.
Yes, my dear, this is your father,
who has always explained everything.
Tomorrow, for the first time,
I enter one of my explanations.
I put myself into its clear configurations.
You might say, I touch thought.
I will let you know how it feels.

VIII

I have just returned from Irkutsk,
a twelve days' journey by carriage and open cart.
They are building a railroad station in Irkutsk.
It sits alone on a wide piece of ground.
One day the tracks will come creeping up to it,
all the way from Moscow.
I thought about touching something
which at its other end touches Moscow.
It was raining the day I was there
and work was suspended.
Rain entered the unfinished roof
and the windowless windows. I stood looking
westward over a plain of stumps.
Perhaps you will show this to Ludmila.

. . .

IX

No, my dear Ludmila, I am not dead.
But then I do not know what I am,
other than a silly old man
who has given up the company of his daughter
and who has not kept his promise to her,
so many promises. A melancholy fool
moaning over his uselessness,
trying to make his insignificance work.
You are kind to think of knitting mittens for the
prisoners,
but believe me, were they to reach them,
they would go unnoticed. Frost is nothing
to the man who has no name,
who cannot look straight ahead of him,

whose gaze has been permanently bent.
In the prison, I asked a man who he was.
I can no longer be sure what I saw there
It seemed to be more than the mind was made for,
children folded into briefcases.
But, lying in his straw, he said,
after a long pause, "I will not know".
Knit mittens, if you must. They will be worn.

X

I have moved out of the inn,
with many apologies to the innkeeper.
The company had become too noisy, too Russian,
imperial prisons inspectors, travellers,
merchants and railroad speculators,
looking for neatness and new markets,
God's eyelash and something to chase.
Now I am living in a small hut, very snug,
with an old peasant widow to look after me.
She knows only about ten words of Russian,
but happily they are the ten words that count.
You could not tell it from her behavior
but she is only three weeks a widow.
I am what keeps her from begging.
I would thank God for letting me do so little
did I not suspect that I am also
the wind of her memories.

. . . .