

Al Savard Poetry Contest 2007 1st place

*Patricia Hale
West Hartford, CT*

In Tahiti

*from "Christmas Night: the Blessing of the Oxen,"
painted by Paul Gauguin, c.1896, in Tahiti*

Gauguin wakes one day and thinks of France.
The sun is already hot through the palm thatch
and the rough bed beneath him

offers scant comfort. Perhaps a water buffalo
he saw yesterday standing in shallow water
reminds him of the oxen waiting so patiently

on Christmas night, content for once
to bear no burden, to stand mute
in the churchyard, rather than on the threshold

of the slaughterhouse, to wait for whatever constitutes
a blessing in these times – a dash of holy water,
words murmured over incense.

He was a boy then, and snow lay thick
on the roof like a girl's hair upon her shoulders.
Now his body is broken by dysentery, heartbreak,

and fevers that rise from the soil at night
to take lodging in his blood. But for today
the sweats have left him. He takes his brushes

from their leather pouch, ignores for once
the bare-breasted girl with the flat basket
of fish. He gazes across the water, sees France.

Al Savard Poetry Contest 2007 2nd place

*Sheila Murphy
Portland, CT*

Saltmarsh Silhouettes in September

First, the stillness after rain, then slow movement
against wet-slicked leaves: a buck. Slender and young,
his muscles ripple under a coat the color of those weathered boards
on the abandoned chicken coop that sags near the old stone wall.

Trimming the tips of bushes and saplings, he follows

the bend of the wall to the west where stones blend
into tree cover. His rack is pure symmetry, the shade
of old ivory, smooth and mottled.

Silhouetted against the scrim of cedar, ailanthus, oak, and stones,
he looks up as if our staring out a hilltop window has drawn
his gaze. Does he see mere hazy shapes, or is he taking measure
of reflected light, angled roof, and twilight sky?

On the marsh side of the wall, a swath of brown stirs within the green:
another buck, his eight-pointed rack emerging tall and wide. Heedless
of the motion behind him, the hoofs slowly scaling the wall,
the younger brother nibbles and pauses, grazing

Turning to face each other, two heads bow low, antlers quivering
ever so slowly. Two racks weave, interlock, and separate.
With the footwork of lightweight boxers and the stone wall
as backdrop for their sparring, the two bucks advance and retreat.

Does a sound of clashing antlers reverberate over marsh and river
as two heads toss and shake, stop and separate? This meshing
seems more minuet than boxing match. Another dance, another pause,
until two shadows fade behind a curtain of night.

Al Savard Poetry Contest 2007 3rd place

*Lewis Parker
Middletown, CT*

A Sixteen-Year-Old Reflects

Sometimes in dry August, I have traded cigarettes for sex:
Steffanie, bold fourteen and cool as fresh cream,
Meets me in the shadowed basement under our house,
Amid toy guns dampened into rust, crocks of pickled beans,
Deflated snow tires strung on pegs,
And my father's hunting jackets, pockets torn bare.

Hair in tangles, raspberries' stain on her denim shirt,
She bends down to the gray cracked floor, cold to her thighs,
Sips on the Kool, which has been forbidden
By her Sunday-school teacher father, my uncle.

She glances at the cobwebs on the cedars,
As I touch her where she is moist.
And when it is over,
She leaves her smell on my fingers,
While the smoke stings my eyes to tears.