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Poems by Jean Kreiling

Jean Kreiling

Bridgewater State College, jkreiling@bridgew.edu

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Georgia O’Keeffe’s “Oriental Poppies”

Their gaudy dignity a paradox,
their private centers dark but half-exposed,
they open wantonly, not quite enclosed
by painted borders. Roses, mums, or phlox
might be contained, but wild abandon mocks
this frame: each petal sprawls, forthrightly posed
with dazzling pride, all modesty deposed
by blazes that unpinned their ruffled frocks.

Their scarlet fire and inky mystery
ignite the air around them, but reserve
a secret seed of mischief or mad sleep;
and pallid mortals eye them jealously,
for Georgia’s poppies never lose their nerve
and always sow far more than we can reap.
Georgia O’Keeffe, Oriental Poppies, 1927, oil on canvas, 30" x 40 1/8"
Collection of the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis
Museum purchase 1937
See the painting at the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis:
http://www.weisman.umn.edu/education/artwords/36_OKeefe_OrientalPoppies_Lorsung.html
The title's gentle forecast understates the threat of this discolored sky; the ash of clouds confounds the air and agitates the water, raising crests of foamy flash. The boat heels sharply—its distended sail could dip into the brine with one more blow; two boys lean backward on the starboard rail as portside pitches perilously low. But no one on the boat appears alarmed—their rounded backs reveal the sailors' ease; the sky's broad scraps of blue may have disarmed its darker, more malignant auguries. What sun remains makes youthful faces ruddy, and fills the sail they nonchalantly study.


Winslow Homer’s “Breezing Up”
John Singer Sargent’s “Helen Sears”

The girl with porcelain skin cannot resist the milky blooms too massive for a bride; the shadows at her back hardly exist as brightness beckons brightness to its side. She plays the petals like piano keys, but looks beyond them into light that pours through unseen glass. Do unknown liberties entice her from the dazzling world outdoors? She neither smiles nor frowns; the pretty turn of white-bowed toe hints at a childhood spent at graceful indoor games—but does she yearn to feel unfiltered sun? The brightness bent by privilege illuminates much less than we might wish or Helen might confess.

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Photograph © June 2011 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
(See the painting at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/helen-sears-33550)
Edward Hopper’s
“Deck of a Beam Trawler, Gloucester”

He saw the art of work, despite the lack of workers: the expectant energy aboard the unmanned deck, the sinewy preparedness of heavy ropes left slack, the muscle of the mast. Where rusty black abuts the dullish red of industry, we know men labored, though we cannot see their forms or faces or what they brought back.

They likely sailed before this sky turned blue, before sunlit perspective clarified the architecture of their work; they would have felt their way through chores. The trawler’s crew—unlike the painter—didn’t need a tide of light to show them work they understood.

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