

TWO POEMS



John Tranter

SESTINA: THE WILL (KANSAS, 1942)

For too long he'd tired us with his narrative
until we were suffocated, longing for air.
The mint juleps weren't chilled, and they were late,
but at least Becky's soothing chatter set
our minds at rest. Then, though we'd paid our fare,
we found ourselves back on the cold street

where weakness and strength contend, in the strait
where unfeeling readers unfurl our secret narrative.
Becky's cheeks were rainy, though the day was fair—
turbulent dreams had troubled the sultry air.
I'm dozing, or bamboozled by a book. Can we set
the jelly of our desires, or are we too late?

The Dodge was dinged and rusted, though a late
model. Swerving and bumping onto the street
with an expression of dreamy confusion half-set
on his face, Path related his marriage narrative.
It seemed a windbag's tale full of hot air:
a flick of a lighter, and his heart was on fire.

When had he met his sweetheart? At the State Fair:
they'd smoked and canoodled furiously, stayed up late—
next thing, pregnancy, threats in the air,
the kids shit-scared, caught in a narrow strait.
Oh, Path, blurt your dopey narrative
all over Kansas! His father's will set

brother against sister—the old jerk had set
the siblings up to quarrel bitterly. Is that fair?
The documents disclosed a kind of spite narrative.
Even old Dodsworth, the family lawyer, felt it late
that evening, strolling home, pausing under the street-
lamp to peruse it again, bugs doodling on the summer air.

Of course! Becky was the rightful heir!
But what could be done? Pop's mind had been set,
and now his wishes were a legal one-way street
and the kids got bugger-all. It was not unfair,
but it sure wasn't generous. Sipping my café-au-lait,
I idly turn the pages of this hick narrative.

And if I betray this narrative, or tell it with an air
of tenderness kindled too late, let me at least set
before you nourishing fare, and the story straight.

WRITING IN THE MANNER OF SAPPHO

Writing Sapphics well is a tricky business.
Lines begin and end with a pair of trochees;
in between them dozes a dactyl, rhythm
 rising and falling,

like a drunk asleep at a party. Ancient
Greeks, the lingo suited it, spouting Sapphics,
not a worry; anyone used to English
 finds it a bastard.