

THREE POEMS



István Vörös

THE WAY OF MILK

A drop of milk is dripping
to the ground, under the bed
on which a long-haired woman
is breast-feeding. The floor
cracks with a hiss, like a snake
slithering between floorboards.
The drops falls into the crack
and begins to push the furniture
in the flat below, separating
all the pieces to the left or right.
Two buzz saws spin between them,
one white, one black. The house
is splitting and multiplying,
all that is one wants to be two.
Whoever notices the black saw
will start to grow a beard,
and his fingernails will blacken,
his hair go white. The street
and the neighbourhood will split
in two, and into the chasm
water will run, and gas
from the city will bubble
up through the water.
Whoever notices the white one
will find fruit in his pocket
and a letter in his mailbox.
The city will break in half
like a communion wafer,
and between the two sides
the rough hand of the sea
will slide. On one shore
the sea will fling a fish,
and on the other an empty shell.

TORSO AT DAWN

Things turn serious, like the tram
at the switching point on Liberty Bridge.
A headache at dawn pushes me from sleep,
and I'm not amused by the lilac of sunrise,

a bruise. And I don't like to fight. Recently,
when I had occasion to, I bolted.
Why the hell should I change my life, why
are you going on about sculptures, aren't

demolished streets and torn-up tramways better,
or the sudden turn in the road on the embankment
where I ran away that day? *You* have to change!

It's enough to get used to things. Or just
give up. I go to the garden. The birds, of course,
are awake. Good for them, they're singing.

MOUSE, DOG, CHICKEN

Is it due to cowardice or a headache
that a mouse in my dream wakes me?
I take my hands out from under
the covers. A spasm splits my skull

into two hemispheres, and in both
there is self-pity. And the knowl-
edge that I was afraid of a familiar
dog. I'm slipping in and out

of my borders. I can only think
about the slaughtered chicken
in whose carcass we found

a soft but fully-formed egg.
Don't be afraid of adventures hiding
in your body. Death is one of them too.

Translated by the author and Phillis Levin

THE ACCOUNTANT'S VISION



Harry Clifton

MARK JARMAN AND DAVID MASON (EDS.), *Rebel Angels: Poets of the New Formalism*. Story Line Press, \$12

Years ago, in a tattered copy of *Best American Stories 1962*, I came across the tale of an American poet on a Fulbright stay in Paris. Below him lived an American girl pestered by a scruffy Beat poet whose attentions only lessened when he was morally and psychologically faced down by the Fulbright man, who then went off with the girl. If he still exists—the Fulbright poet, that is—he would surely feel comfortable in the pages of *Rebel Angels*, with its clearcut conservative notions of Americanness and its Blakean cover illustration of the Good angel (formalism) protecting a young innocent from the Evil Angel (everything else).

From Whitman to Frank O'Hara, an American model exists of an all-inclusive poetry which rafts its way down the white waters of contemporaneity, saying Yes to everything. Europeans associate this strain with what is revolutionary in American poetry, and its opposite, the formal verse of the Yvor Winters school for example, with reaction. *Rebel Angels* tries to turn that on its head. Formalism is presented as revolutionary, in some unclarified American sense of revolution, and pointing to the future. If it is in fact revolutionary, then it seems to me a right-wing revolution trying to get back to a lost, supposedly more secure past, not unlike the Eisenhower era of the Fifties from which our Fulbright poet came.

Who is he/she, this Fulbright poet? From the pages of *Rebel Angels* an identikit picture can be put together, of someone mainly white, Ivy League educated, Europe-travelled, domestic rather than streetwise, favourable to the powers that be, whether academic or business, rather than subversive or marginal, aurally out of touch with language as an evolving idiom, and tending towards minor emotion and private rather than political sentiment. Exceptions, such as some of Marilyn Hacker, or R.S. Gwynn's Sassoon-like laments for friends dead in Vietnam, merely prove the rule, which is one of implicit collaboration with Middle American sterility and wholesomeness.

We are told by the editors that they left out poems that were "merely formal, sound exercises in prosody", but much of what is included is sim-