Personal Accounts

Selected poems.

BY ROBERT PHILLIPS

The Mole

“There goes the Mole!” Mother cried. “You children look quick or you’ll miss him!” It was Father, disappearing down the cellar stairs. Every day he’d retreat to his radio shack, stay past midnight.

He’d built a rig others envied, came from miles around to see. Every day he’d jam the airwaves, ruin the block’s TV. Every day we’d hear him sit before the mike calling “CQ, CQ calling CQ” to whoever listened at the other end. He once claimed to reach Moscow. “Ralph’s the handle, calling from W2CAT, the Old Cat Station—W-2-CAT-Alley-Tail.” He was a handsome cat; Mother once adored him, I know.

But what I’ll never know is, Why he’d talk to any stranger far away and not once climb back up the stairs to the five of us to say, “Hello . . . hello . . . hello . . . hello.”

Suburban Interior

Sun-streamed afternoons,
your apartment is flooded
like the Grand Canal,
the room a chiaroscuro.

Vermicular shadows slide
the walls. Like Venice,
we are suspended in time,
the only movement a drift
of notes, we two adrift
within a vermeil glow.

There is no winged lion,
no muscular gondolier,
but a consolation, church-
bells in an empty piazza.

You never mind so much sun.
When you draw the venetian
blinds, I take it as sign
you want to make love. Segue
into dark, the interior
of the Basilica of St. Mark.

The doves outside flutter
into a single mass.

Running on Empty

As a teenager I would drive Father’s Chevrolet cross-county, given me
reluctantly: “Always keep the tank
half full, boy, half full, ya hear?”—
the fuel gauge dipping, dipping
toward Empty, hitting Empty, then
—thrillingly!—way below Empty,
myself driving cross-county
mile after mile, faster and faster,
all night long, this crazy kid driving
the earth’s rolling surface
against all laws, defying physics,
rules and time, riding on nothing
but fumes, pushing luck harder
than anyone pushed before, the wind
screaming past like the Furies . . .

I stranded myself only once, a white
night with no gas station open, ninety miles
from nowhere. Panicked for a while,
at standstill, myself stalled.
At dawn the car and I both refilled.
But Father, I am running on empty still.

ROBERT PHILLIPS has written
poetry since junior high school and has
14 books to his credit. Last year, he
received a $5,000 Award in Literature
from the American Academy and
Institute of Arts and Letters, and was
one of 14 American poets invited by the
National Endowment for the Arts to
read at the Library of Congress. His
most recent book is Personal Accounts:
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