

If the Moon Kept Goats: The Veteran's Tale,
and: The Moment before a Change.

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If the Moon Kept Goats: The Veteran's Tale, and: The Moment before a Change

Christopher Howell

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**If the Moon Kept Goats: The Veteran's Tale,
and: The Moment before a Change**

Christopher Howell (bio)

If the Moon Kept Goats: The Veteran's Tale

I can't believe I'm saying this
again after so many years, but those things that keep
coming back
name us
and we have to let them in.

There was a war.

Unquenchable roaring bells surrounded it
like a woman on fire inside a dress. Some of us
were taken away on ships to be part of this
and came back full of broken furniture, our faces **[End Page 135]**
black kites over fields of ice.

We had walked in harness so wrong and deep,
not even the sand man
would let us sleep.

And me? I was a case.

I left everything lie like dead thieves in a bank,
and, beyond loyalty and war, set my desperate bones
to hold a woman
who could barely hold herself
inside the world become a world
I didn't know.

And what if she had left her husband then
and the light by which we thought we knew
ourselves
had not failed, as it does, when we needed it
exactly?

What if the moon kept goats?

As I touched her to lure happiness out

of its tormented cage,
I thought of my father's faithfulness
and wondered how it was,
and by what right, he had returned from his
war and fashioned
from the remnants a whole
life.

I thought of the southern cross and the enemy—then
now and always—looking up, as we had,
but breathing easy, minds luffing a bit, buoyed out
by the wonder of clarified commitment
and it occurred to me that from a certain point of view
there was no hope at all. **[End Page 136]**

I saw things in the trees.
I stopped eating salt
and grew a red shadow that drifts with me
still under the April wood, circling
a candle of dead confusion, unable to blow it out.

Think of that.

Think of a whole generation of us, hands
in our fathers' hands
and the sun seething with impossible conjunctions, war
on both sides of us and love
in between.

The Moment before a Change

In shallows, among reeds and whispers
of the troubled lilies,
I am uneasy.
The yellow mouth of the moon is shut.
A grey glow comes upon the world again

and again it is Mercer Lake in 1955
when I crept out of the rented cabin
and saw the huge black angel bathing,
hard pewter-colored pieces of lake
falling from his wings.

I gave some of my eyesight
and most of what I had been hoping for
as a bribe that he might bless me **[End Page 137]**
and he gave me an onyx lens
to hold against the change of light
and its bread
bumping darkly under layers of mist.

All common prayer is uselessness
when memory dresses and descends
into you, leaving doors ajar
and immense fir trees and mirrored alleyways
of fallen shelves everywhere you step.

I know you, it says,
you're the one who stands reed still
under new stars and the old ones
with their faces turned away,
the one who's uneasy, who remembers
and hasn't quite paid.

Christopher Howell

Christopher Howell's ninth collection of poems, *Dreamless and Possible: New & Selected*, will be published by the University of Washington Press next year. Other work may be seen in current issues of *FIELD*, the *Journal*, *Crazyhorse*, and *Gettysburg Review*.

"I was born right at the end of the war and have gone through my whole life with this huge knot of people, like a snake swallowing an orange, as they say. In some ways it has been good, since it provided us all with many compatriots whose general understandings about life had similar bases. But that large population group also created unprecedented competition for jobs, housing, notoriety, perhaps even for spouses: by external measure, the very terms of satisfaction. I think the interplay between the collegiality and the competition has driven many of us inward, away from

As a journalist I wrote what candidates said
But I didn't believe them
No hardly ever
No
The people who got elected always seemed to be crooks
Elections made me think though
Once my friend ran for mayor and I felt excited
I still don't think voting is much of a thrill
I know
I know
You do
Jimmy Carter was the only one I trusted
I wrote him a letter
Said he was the best president I ever had

Christopher Howell

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