

Robert Thomas / TWO POEMS

FAST ANGEL

You slip into the back seat of the old Packard.
The young man behind the wheel (Jim, I hear you say)
starts the motor and turns onto the wet macadam.
It's just the two of you now. He stares head-on
at the quarter moon, knowing he's got it worried,
gunning the car till it skips, a flat rock
over the blacktop, making that eerie blue whine,
a fast angel coming in on one holy wing.
He doesn't have to look in the mirror
to know what you're doing back there.
Something, not light, shines on your neck and instep.
Even in the scalloped leather upholstery
your body starts to recognize a pattern, a curling
resonance with its own secret form, and soon
it seizes on it everywhere: the smell of sorrel trees —
squeezed from sour leaves by the relentless
rain like hard cider from an iron press —
that hits when you jack open the window;
and the rough sheen of the air itself,
chafing your skin like a flimsy of raw silk.
Now when you look in the rearview mirror
all you see is a blur of red ricochet
off the perfect black facets of the storm
and get redder as it recedes
toward where you left me standing on the slick
crush of mica. I still feel the finish
of the chrome handle, hear the *shunk* of the door.
There is nothing between you and the whetted horizon.

MORTAL LIGHT

At the Kilauea Crater on Hawaii the magic
is on the rim. When we got there the sun
had set: an hour, like the hour before sunrise,
when light comes from nowhere, just is,
as if the world's grip on it
were frail as its grip on its own
crisp skin of air, as if light
were ours, then, and therefore mortal.
The meadow spotted with perhaps a dozen
wild flowers, as if discarded
in unfocused anger, red cigarette ash
cast out a hot rod window, their small blossoms alert
as the eyes of an erect mongoose
peering over the tips of cane:
it could be Arkansas or, no, Kentucky
but for the question-marks of steam
unraveling, incapable of recalling
what they could ever have asked
of the August air, rising
from hot rifts in the smoky glass stone
crammed with tendrils of blue grass baking. . . .
It was not a *volcano*,
it was a sixteen-year-old *girl*
counting to herself, over and over,
like a miser her coins, how beautiful she was—
the soft, dented gold,
once molten as the gold yolk
pouring out of the vulnerable, star-cut crust
luminous with the bliss of cinders
we were warned of. All we saw
was the wavering edge that kept
that perfectly jet black circle
from the riot of geckos that turned
virid against the ferns, red on the fruit.