Classic Poetry Series

Karl Shapiro

- poems -

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A Garden In Chicago

In the mid-city, under an oiled sky, I lay in a garden of such dusky green It seemed the dregs of the imagination. Hedged round by elegant spears of iron fence My face became a moon to absent suns. A low heat beat upon my reading face; There rose no roses in that gritty place But blue-gray lilacs hung their tassels out. Hard zinnias and ugly marigolds And one sweet statue of a child stood by.

A gutter of poetry flowed outside the yard, Making me think I was a bird of prose; For overhead, bagged in a golden cloud, There hung the fatted souls of animals, Wile at my eyes bright dots of butterflies Turned off and on like distant neon signs.

Assuming that this garden still exists,
One ancient lady patrols the zinnias
(She looks like George Washington crossing the Delaware),
The janitor wanders to the iron rail,
The traffic mounts bombastically out there,
And across the street in a pitch-black bar
With midnight mirrors, the professional
Takes her first whiskey of the afternoon--

Ah! It is like a breath of country air.

Submitted by Larry Bole

Karl Shapiro

Manhole Covers

The beauty of manhole covers--what of that?
Like medals struck by a great savage khan,
Like Mayan calendar stones, unliftable, indecipherable,
Not like the old electrum, chased and scored,
Mottoed and sculptured to a turn,
But notched and whelked and pocked and smashed
With the great company names
(Gentle Bethlehem, smiling United States).
This rustproof artifact of my street,
Long after roads are melted away will lie
Sidewise in the grave of the iron-old world,
Bitten at the edges,
Strong with its cryptic American,
Its dated beauty.

Anonymous submission.

Karl Shapiro

The Olive Tree

Save for a lusterless honing-stone of moon
The sky stretches its flawless canopy
Blue as the blue silk of the Jewish flag
Over the valley and out to sea.
It is bluest just above the olive tree.
You cannot find in twisted Italy
So straight a one; it stands not on a crag,
Is not humpbacked with bearing in scored stone,
But perfectly erect in my front yard,
Oblivious of its fame. The fruit is hard,
Multitudinous, acid, tight on the stem;
The leaves ride boat-like in the brimming sun,
Going nowhere and scooping up the light.
It is the silver tree, the holy tree,
Tree of all attributes.

Now on the lawn
The olives fall by thousands, and I delight
To shed my tennis shoes and walk on them,
Pressing them coldly into the deep grass,
In love and reverence for the total loss.

Anonymous submission.

Karl Shapiro