

The Waters Under the Earth

Robert Siegel

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Books by Robert Siegel

The Beasts and the Elders

In a Pig's Eye

Alpha Centauri

Whalesong

The Kingdom of Wundle

White Whale

The Ice at the End of the World

The Waters Under the Earth

Robert Siegel, *The Waters Under the Earth*

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For Ann

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Versus

Versus. . . came to mean *the turning of the plough*, hence, *furrow*, and ultimately *row* or *line*. —*Robert Wallace*

We hear his heavy kick against the stall.
“No rest for the wicked,” the farmer smiles,

shoving back the door. The dark inside
teases the nose with chaff. It takes them both,

father and son, to back him out, resisting
bit and blinkers, showing the white of his eye.

Harness and plow attached, he stamps,
sweeping away the retinue of flies,

nods and strains forward at the farmer’s grunt—
head sideways, feet rising and falling like pistons.

The harness jingles, the plowman arches back,
riding the stilts as the coulter slices sod,

casting it in bright heaps. The plowhorse blows
flies from his lip, small stones click on steel,

black sod turns over. His neck muscles coil,
slide, and draw his head in tight

to a flared red nostril, marble eye,
jaw wrenched and foaming. Meanwhile the son

dwindles behind the massive haunches,
jerking from side to side down the shining furrow,

until, tiny in the distance, the blade flashes
as he turns and starts a new row coming back.

Later that night at my desk, I still
breathe the rich humus on the damp air,

see that furrow stretch before me, moist ditch
rank with all promise, crooked line

starting here, returning here, forever.

One

The Newly Dead

Time is the moving shadow of eternity.

—Blake

The newly dead are concerned
they can't help us. It was only
a moment ago they were trying to clear up
some ultimate point, some elusive light.

They leave us with the other dust,
are gone, and we are here. Where?
Perhaps it's we who leave while they,
caught for a moment in a puzzling reverie,

wake immersed in the full light
knowing themselves and the place at last,
to find we have plunged ahead in time,
shadowy creatures chasing the shadow of a shadow.

Cancer Surgeon, St. Mary's Hospital

The wounded surgeon plies the steel.

—*T.S. Eliot*

While I wash my hands, the patient is wheeled in.
The nurses help me with the gloves, the mask.
Skinless, breathless, I am surgically remote:
detachment is my viaticum and end,
more to be valued than a steady hand.
Already under, his face beyond the moons

blinding the ceiling, he lies, a serene icon,
comatose throughout his martyrdom.
Ritually clean, seven of us gather
like devil's advocates around a body
embalmed in the lilies of anesthesia
to seek and question each putative relic.

The sheet is drawn back. I take the knife
and make the incision below his clavicle
in one long stroke. The blood blooms
like arrows in the side of St. Sebastian,
carnation upon ivory. An unholy tangle
of tubes and clamps fastens to him

like a mechanical mantis. Its hoses suck
and quiver as I guide the knife
through swollen tissues. Slowly from their mesh
the cancer unfolds root by root,

a radical knot of cells insane with life.
The residents closely observe all,

watching my fingers move
warily over rivers and swamps of flesh
to cut the cannibal orchid from its jungle
and drop it in a pail.
Then with needles, quick and quick,
they stitch the suture to a neat half-moon.

Washed, swaddled in sheets again, he drifts
beyond time in the brilliant shallows
of eternity, his pulse rising like a line
of surf while the siren anesthesia
still calls to him from inhuman depths.
They wheel him out into the dim night

corridor. The nurses clean up. I remove
my gloves, stoop to the basin, the water
winks and flashes on my wedding ring.
Another day ends and I return
home to my wife. A meal, a few hours' sleep,
and once again these hands will take
up flesh to be broken for all our sakes.

for Richard Selzer

Primary Red

*You are every image, and yet
I am homesick for you.
—Rumi*

Red night of lips, of fuchsia
bowers, red pollen choking the heart.

Red of lights standing, streets blazing,
soldiers melting into the ground, red

of the sun burning down into itself.
Red of liquors, of lacquers, of heart's blood

pulsing through the wrist, of fingernails,
of nipples, earlobes, and secrets.

Red of high noon, and the last
thin thread of lips along the west.

Red as the dark thought on the darkest night,
red caught in the dog's eye.

Red as a skirt, as the hibiscus,
as selvia, as the cloven worm.

Red as the mouth, holding the only word
secret until dawn speaks.

Red as the utter penetratum
that all love knows.

Red as the lace slip, as the bikini,
as a kimono and Chinese lantern.

Red as the light speaking in two heads
together, the tongue

caressing a lip, the finger
opening a bud to a rose.

The red shaken loose by language
into the fire of contemplation.

The red star winking,
drawing the heart to the red planet

that swims down
to drown in the blue ovum of the sea.

Red of the bull flag
and the toreador's hose.

Red of the firetruck passing in the night
and the taillights of a thousand semis,

red as a gas pump, as
the waitress' smeared lipstick,