

# 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

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## 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 fuchsias  
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 penetralium  
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,