

Rare Book of Powerful Poetry

"Tall and slender, it shaded the temple gardens of Yu, / and Siddhartha Gautama saw its sparse irregular branches / weird in the moonlight. / It knew Homer and Ptolemy, Michaelangelo and Shakespeare, / and Goethe wrote one of his minor poems about it, / comparing its clefted leaf with the duality (ach!) of / his soul. . . ."
—from the title poem

Poets have always fascinated me, probably because I remember when the only live ones around Madison were a couple of out-of-state imports named Peter Lisca and Charley Tinkham, both gentle, brooding, starcrossed boys who seemed prematurely bent, like thin saplings struggling for growing places in the wind. They are gone now, grown, hopefully, God knows where.

Now there are the likes of John Tuschen, Bob Watt and all the Wisconsin Poetry Alliance poets, still young, still starcrossed, still struggling but the gentleness burned out of them now. They poke around in the broken bottles for a little bit of beauty and find even less than that.

Poetry as a profession is probably the hardest one around on young men, soldiering possibly excepted.

One thinks of the organ-voiced Dylan Thomas drinking himself into the early grave. The driven young d.a. levy, blowing himself apart with a shotgun. The cerebral John Berryman, casually waving to a horror stricken witness and then throwing himself off the bridge.

The attrition rate seems awful.

They say psychiatrists have a high suicide rate because people expect them to be God and the burden is too much. Perhaps poets have the same syndrome: the burden may simply be too much for a young man to bear.

Felix Pollak is an Old Professional. He has, as the saying has it, "survived the madness." He has the moves of a survivor, of a battle-wise infantryman pacing himself, not drawing fire needlessly, not making dumb moves, watching, waiting, know-



BOOKS of the TIMES

By GEORGE VUKELICH

Ginkgo
by Felix Pollak

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ing pretty much now what there is to be seen — and what there is not to be seen.

In "Circus," written for his brother Hans, Felix Pollak describes his terrain so effortlessly, so skilfully, you feel you're right there at his shoulder, listening to him whisper.

"Suddenly thinking how too long / it has been since I've seen a circus / I remember my father's wistful voice / (he was my age then) saying the same thing / —and smell again the lilacs in the park. / The lilacs in my garden smell of Vienna / the lilacs look as if their name were **Flieder**, / the lilacs are performing like a circus, / the lilacs in the park in my small garden, / the lilacs speaking with my father's voice. / He never went. His chimera was a circus, / high wire to his youth. I am his age now, / yearning for a circus. Evening is folding / like a tent around the lilacs. Fragrance tonight, / tomorrow more pink blossoms will be down."

The subtle beauty of Pollak's craftsmanship emerges in the poem, "Passages." No young poet's words have the patina that only time can lay on them — that is, no young poet without much genius.

PASSAGES

I

"When childhood had jumped me like a low hurdle and Indian summers died of the common cold and curtains fell all around me like so many scales from my eyes: God passed away on the wooden bench of a synagogue, my father was headline-far, and my mother (fingering the medallion on her chest in mourning for a lost infant) averted her eyes from the secret hair sprouting in the heartland of my mind; while the remaining mystery was laid bare for me by a whore, whom I, facing the final solution, asked, 'Is that all?' —and who answered, twisting in golden-toothed mirth, 'That's all, sonny, there ain't no more.'"

In the narrative poem, "A Matter of History," Felix Pollak writes of the infamous Nazi death camps of the Second World War: Dachau, Belsen, Buchenwald, Auschwitz, Theresienstadt.

This poem, probably the most powerful in the collection, speaks of the unspeakable in a voice remarkable for its taut control.

"It has all passed," the poem begins, "and is gone, the cries silenced, the blood / congealed in the earth. The cries dissolved in air, the blood / sucked up by grass, transformed into the sap of young trees. / The torturers again what they had been before — hotel captains / clerks, engineers, raising families and pets, watching wrestling / on Fernseh screens, with only a faint remembrance, a vague / nostalgia for Kraft durch Freude — wo sind die Zeiten . . ."

The poem concludes with a sorrow so old, so familiar, it no longer evokes tears. One is left numb, only numb, truly numb and then, unbelievably horrified all over again.

". . . The camps, / concentrating on tourists, now sideshowsights for travellers out / to learn the fine art of shuddering. No smoking, please, in / deference to the martyrs — a slight but symbolic sacrifice. Keep / off the grass, you might be walking on a grave. The touching of / the torture instruments strictly **verboten**, read the signs, ladies / and sirs, and kindly refrain from loud laughter, as it would / violate the decorum of the place. This way to the gas chambers, / if you please. — All past and gone. The murdered dead, the / blood of the red headlines congealed in archives, the writers, the murderers, forgotten — have and are. **Wie gehts? — Man lebt.**

"And already a child coming home from school asking, / Daddy, who was Hitler?"

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Felix Pollak is Curator of Rare Books at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. That is only fitting and meet, for in Ginkgo, Felix Pollak himself has written a pretty rare book.

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