

Concord Repatriation Hospital

WILLIAM CHRISTIE*

I

One bruised high summer's afternoon
two tempests
in which the Word *was* not,
yet seemed to be,
ruptured the customary drain and dressing
of encrusted sores
on the shattered limbs of veterans
crammed into wards
like barracks, built in a time of battle
long before.

II

The first was unforecast; ensconced
in progeny and love
a Greek patriarch died: his face
flint, scored
and eroded like the Peloponnese;
his voice, guttural
once in gaiety and command,
choked mute.
Both face and voice surrendered
their ancestral power

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as in that instant the stars of two
dark eyes
burnt out. His death decreed
a whirling, first,
of winds of disbelief throughout
the ranks of family.
The storm followed: a shrill of pain
and protest, choric
fury, as an old, now dead man lived
his last intensity.
Grief so abandoned, dionysiac,
would not be quieted
by the short shrift, ritual sympathy
of nurses, or the dumb
scorn heaped on emotional weakness
by embarrassed diggers.
No more could Priam—racked, enflamed—
have been restrained
by counsel when Hector in his howling arms
hung befouled
as Patroclus. With the logic of a tempest,
love and hate,
end self-consumed, and not admonished;
grief that burns
into the being will not be cowed or scolded
into silence.

III

The second storm,
exploding on the corrugated iron with wrathful
suddenness
like a firing squad, was short: a simple
blast of rain.
As suddenly as it began the deluge
ceased; spent.

IV

A trick of evening light enshrined
the first, bright
hovering stars of darkening sky
in a row of raindrops:
one elementary jewel after one,
beneath the jungle-
green railing of a sloping ramp
they hung.