

ROBERT DEMOTT

In The Zero Palace
(for Bill Perine)

In no world but a fallen one could such lands exist.
Melville, "The Encantadas"

In southeastern Ohio, the landscape slides down.
House foundations crack like abandoned eggs,
oak and beech trees bend gracelessly,
mired to their knees in shifting clay.
From Mineral to Santoy, in unnamed hollows,
the greasy timbers of mines and railroad beds
splay loose where a coal seam played in,
or an explosion gathered the bodies of men
downward, like a sullen, unrelenting parent.

All summer, on a hill beside my house,
as I wrestled with railroad ties and blunt rocks,
trying to stitch the dumb gravity of moving earth,
I thought of those men, our Italian ancestors,
who chipped and gouged Orvieto from a mountain,
then built a church to bless the calloused bones
of their brothers, dead in the ascent. Once,
I stood in the broad piazza of that church,
saw how the entire town sloped toward it,
and watched my own father trace the ornate
filigree of its columns, as if he knew
that serpentine vein wound so deep
the pulse of the earth's core ran through it.

Tonight, in the hushed darkness of your porch,
I feel my muscles fall away from their bones,
my words sink beneath my tongue.
In the utter silence the moles own, I hear
the faint, grinding measure of declension,
the inevitable tunnelling at the center.
Bill, before everything collapses,
tell me a story of redemption—
say how walking the tracks alone into Lost Run,
your feet stuttered on the iron ribbon of rail,
just long enough for a copperhead
to strike your heel, grazing the thick boot
inches below the calf's pure meat.
In that moment when your father's voice
dropped through the zero palace,
tell me again how it said we are made
for this progressive sliding,
this blind motion from something to nothing,
as if only in a fallen world can we exist.