

Leveling
Alan Berecka

*But I've no spade to follow men like them
—“Digging,” Seamus Heaney*

Quietly, my father
and I worked,
leveling my mother's
fresh grave. We moved
in slow circles, raking
the broken earth flat.
We shook seeds
from handfuls of hay,
then covered the ground
with the straw that remained.

We didn't speak.
Nearly thirty years old,
I strained to stay
composed. I aped
his movements. I wanted
him to think that I might
yet become a man.

When we finished
filling and emptying
our watering cans,
my father, who cared
little for words, spoke
what I have come
to believe was his
greatest compliment:

*Hey, kid,
don't forget
how to do this.*

*From With Our Baggage (Beaumont: Lamar University Literary Press,
2013)*

In Defense of Harlots
Loretta Diane Walker

*As an early frontier town, San Angelo was characterized
by saloons, prostitution, and gambling.
— Texas State Historical Society*

Decades are long rivers;
fourteen of them flow in the channel of my cheeks.
My throat is a memoir.
The tiniest secrets curl in me.

I know the roots of harlots.
Why they open themselves before strangers.
Why shadows are their friends.
Why darkness breathes in their lungs.

They come with all they are in burlap sacks.
Find a land tented with fat weeds and skinny trees.
Hope as dwindling piles of poker chips.
Fate as a pair of loaded dice.

A swift roll, they watch life from their backs,
stare at the sky with snake eyes.
The vig of difficult beginnings—
the breaking and changing of lives.

To fill their mouths
with the booze of derelict dreams
and smoky disappointments
is not their desire.

In their dim kitchens where purity is a dustless ledge,
dignity is timid candles.
They eat their tears,
listen to night's vanity.

I drink their sadness.
Conceal their faces in an eddy of years.
The strong moon is my promise;
you will not remember them this way.

Their names are sealed in the smooth bellies
of river stones collected at the edge of your gardens.
The soft scent of lilacs is the memory
I leave drifting on the trail of their hard distant past.

Visiting the Nursing Home, 1962

Elizabeth Raby

Grandmother is sagged in a chair, slumped
against canvas strips that keep her more
or less upright. Her hands lie still,

palm up in her lap, but her eyes are
squeezed shut, her face pinched and pulled
together. She remembers me and is glad,

but her back aches, can't she just lie
down? I go to find the attendant who says
no, it's not time yet. I urge

Grandmother to let me do something,
isn't there something I can do?
She recollects that she was always partial

to a nice glass of milk, she wouldn't mind
cold milk. In the hall again to find
the hurried attendant. Her supper will be along

soon. Milk is always included. Don't think
she doesn't get plenty of milk.
No milk now, Grandmother, but soon.

She hears my sorrow and is sorry,
sorry to be a bother.
Can't she just lie down?