

Two Poems

by *Ben La Farge*

View of the Catskills from Judith's Porch

In Flemish paintings, almost hidden from sight
By faint unworldly fields and clumps of trees,
You sometimes glimpse a river's pilgrim light
Wandering through that landscape to the seas.
Far off, behind the Cross, the background view
Of town and spire amid the ploughland's green
Fades into mountains hazy with far-away blue,
A measureless vista set in a miniature scene.
And seeing the Hudson tucked in its valley bed,
A Flemish painter, under these New World skies,
Would place the river there, behind your head,
Shading the Catskills blue to match your eyes,
As even now, painting this picture for you,
I see no other background scene would do.



Black Ice

After his ship went down in World War Two
And Tom, my uncle, drowned with all his crew,
It wasn't just impatience I should have blamed,
Wrong as that was, but I was a boy, ashamed
That North Atlantic waves, like storm gods bent
On teaching him respect for what they meant,
Caught him foolishly risking a short-cut home,
And raging over the starboard side in foam,
Smothered the deck in layers of ice, a seal
Of doom so thick the ship, uplifting its keel,
Capsized and sank beneath that deadly weight.
So by what name shall I call it now but fate
That on the same cold day, my brother and I
Were skating over an ice pond's mirrored sky,
Swooping and veering, hockey sticks held low,
Keen for a chance to strike the winning blow?
Each of us knew, since *he* would not give in,
Ours was a war that neither side could win;
And when at last, worn out, we saw no use
In fighting on, both of us called for truce.
But having no patience with a battlefield
Where only melting ice would ever yield,
Heedless I scrambled homeward up the hill,
Leaving my brother behind, and I can still
Recall my shame, still after all these years,
When afterwards he told us through his tears
How rising to follow he fell, hitting his head,
And lay there dazed, like someone left for dead.
And so, although our warfare came to nought,
I know it was to kill we both had fought;
And though his own impatience was the cause,
I see, in my uncle's death, the random laws
Of chance, for his was the only body found
Out of more than a hundred men who drowned.
And on the day his vessel, shrouded in white,
Sank like a coffin with its lid sealed tight,
The pond ice chilled my brother to the bone,
Where he lay stiller than a chiseled stone,
As though he heard, transmitted on short-wave,
The drowned man calling from his deep-sea grave. □