

THE
SPOON
RIVER Poetry Review

VOLUME XXIII NUMBER 1

WINTER/SPRING 1998

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Cathedrals

Whenever I sight a steeple through a train window
that I've propped my lolling head against,
I snap out of my hypnotized half sleep.
Wide awake, I watch the tower mount
earth's curve like a mast until the roof
and walls it straddles thrust over the horizon,
too huge to take in with a single glance.
Arriving at the station, I hop down,
though thirty pounds of stuff's strapped to my back,
wave off taxis parked beside the platform,
and dive into the babbling stream of tourists
drawn from all six populated continents
which flows through alleys of medieval hovels
remodeled into Discos and boutiques
until it pours into the Cathedral's square.
There, after a minute's rest in its cool shadow,
I circle its quarter mile of nave and transepts
searching for the small Official Entrance
cut in the great carved portal for crowd control.
When, at last, I find it, there's a sign
thumb-tacked to it, listing Services
during which tourists cannot stroll and gape.
It's always Holy Week when I arrive,
with daily all-day ceremonies scheduled
which commemorate a miraculous plague cure
effected by the patron martyr's bones.
Evening after evening I haunt the exit
waiting for the surplices to recess
bearing the relics back into the crypt.
But when the faithful finally stream out,
the festival Committee bars the door
to all but holders of organ concert tickets.
Between music and religion, there's little time
for my kind to rush in, drop the "donation"
demanded by the guard into the poor box,

and quick step down the aisle glancing up
at carved capitals and acres of rose windows
until the bell rings signalling communion,
vespers, or practice for a society wedding.
It's not my business to complain, but Christ,
how I ache to stroll the flagstones slowly
reading the inscriptions on Knight's tombs
and piecing out the stained glass picture stories
lit by setting sun. Not that I'd comprehend
Church Latin cut into the cenotaphs,
or recognize the flayed, beheaded, de-breasted,
boiled in oil defenders of the faith
blazing blue and ruby in the clerestory
a hundred feet above me. But so what?
We do not admire what we do not understand,
but for a quarter, I could buy a leaflet
explaining mysteries etched in glass and stone.
I prefer to moon in ignorance,
my sore neck craning at the barrel vault
raised by a crazed ambition I comprehend—
to build a mountain on the boring plain
and cram each inch of it with secret meaning.
When the little verger comes along
and shoes me out for Evensong, I grumble
"the trouble with Cathedrals is religion."
Then I look at the modern city skyline's
dominoes, built in less than a year
by greed, instead of centuries by faith,
and I'm half ready to forgive religion
for raising artful lies into the clouds.