

Passage

Clark Holtzman

We descended via Cerberus.
Knowingly, as if by our own Root
or Gnash or Sounder or Bark,
the back of each hand, knuckle
sampled by the wet-warm snouts,
moistened by the foul breaths,
friendly. A switch of the barbed
tail and we moved on,
with no more fuss than that.

Near us in line were the cohort,
some still in battle gear, some stripped
to nakedness above in the moment
of their slaughter. One named Billy
waited bloody, his head still
in its helmet and swinging by a strap.
Many others handed glory
in such ingenious ways: piked
through the jaw, fingerless, footless,
and a liver impaled,
and a thigh cleaved clean,
and ribs splintered, and faces
tattooed with shrapnel, and one
toting her guts in a duffel.

Killed by Hector,
 killed by Achilles,
 killed by Johnny,
killed by Jimmy,
 killed by Ajax,
 killed by Scooter,
 killed by Odysseus,
killed by Aeneas,
 killed by Darnell,
 killed by PFC Monica,
 killed by Cpt. Jenny . . . killed
by and killed by and killed by . . .

We were shopkeepers, we were
clerks and priests and teachers and healers
come this way, too—not one
so impatient in life as to be impatient here.
We queued, we said nothing, we remembered
imperfectly what life had been,
but we remembered.

Everyone sensed the slipping
and no one spoke. The dog, delighted,
smelled about, fetched us away.

Clark Holtzman lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. His poems appear in journals and periodicals such as *Adelaide*, *all roads will lead to home*, *Antiphon*, *Autumn Sky Poetry*, *Bangalore Review*, *The Dark Horse*, *Heron Clan V and VI* (anthology), *North American Review* (online), *Oddball Magazine*, and *One* (Jacar Press). You can hear his jazz poetry ensemble at <https://www.program4jazz.com/>.