

REVIEW:

Michael Culross, *THE LOST HEROES* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974) 97 pp., \$2.95

ENGRAVED ACROSS THE ENTABLATURE OF THE ART BUILDING at the University of Iowa is that Horatian chestnut, *Ars Longa, Vita Brevis Est*. Michael Culross must have seen it a couple of times a week, back there eight or ten years ago when he was prowling around the Iowa Writers' Workshop. I did during my days there, and I always gave it a friendly nod of recognition as I went by; I thought it was a pretty-hard-to-beat little truism. Reading Culross' poems, I was nagged into remembering that adage again, but only by virtue of an unshakable feeling for its converse: *Life is Long, Art is Short*. Here are these spare poems, compressed, precise . . . *short*. And the lives that they—*celebrate* isn't the word—*mourn*, maybe—are oh so achingly long. These are, after all, the lives of heroes—*lost* heroes, but heroes nevertheless—and for even a failed hero the moment is very long, the lifetime nearly endless. For the whipped boxer, the eternal bushleaguer, the famed pro receiver busted by scandal, the black musician busted by drugs or the other hypes of a deaf world, for all those who have to catch yet another bus, play another game, another gig, life is long, long. Culross' lean elastic poems capture in summary the dragged-out, bone-wearying quality of these lives that go on and on. *Vita Longa, Ars Brevis Est*.

For the lost heroes, that One Big Moment hangs always just beyond the outstretched fingertips, like the ballooning touchdown pass in the slow-motion dream. Exactly: "dream" is Culross' favorite word. I count it twenty-one times in these sixty close-cropped poems—three times in titles, twice in an epigraph; and the last work of the book is "dreams." The lost heroes are our own private and public American dreams gone down the drain. These lives, with their heroic yearnings, labor on like that terrible feathers-and-molasses

running that we do through the bad dreams. Like the film of a political assassination run in ultra-slow motion: no one can duck in time, no one can make it come out differently, no one can stop watching it forever. Slow, dreamy, straining

No one else that I know of in our time is writing either so consistently or so seriously about athletics and athletes—the only even *vaguely* mythic heroes, lost or otherwise, that America has; this of itself makes Culross' book worth reading. There is an old and honorable tradition of poems about athletes, which, curiously, has had no service in this the nation and the age of the most powerful athlete-cult of all time. Culross takes up the standard worthily. I think his poem about the football player Travis Williams is one of the finest in the book, and fine in anyone's book. I wish I could quote it all here. It begins,

He stands with the others
But the pure speed shows
Brutal and perfect
There is no hiding it

The others look away will not accept it
If they must face it they blame him

He has no control it is more evil than good
It expects too much of him

and, after seventeen more lines, concludes,

Clinical and absolute
The violence becomes a classic race
A mismatch from the start

His every step contains
The elegance of sin
Flashing by the others

Burning away

All the weeks and miles away from home

One most refreshing feature of Culross' book is its paucity of "I" poems. Ever since Robert Bly announced "A Wrong Turning In American Poetry" over a decade ago, we have been bombarded by poems that confuse genuine inwardness with self-absorption. Bly had a legitimate and necessary point to make about the need for a poetic energy which sprang from inner depths rather than outer stimuli; a poetic vision focused on an imaginative inner life rather than a descriptive outer. Bly neglected to caution, though, that inner, imaginative energy and vision are not obtained through self-absorption; that, indeed, the self can be the worst *outer* trap of all (Blake's Specter of Selfhood). A table has its innerness, a minor-league outfielder has his innerness; a poet's innerness is best realized by seeking the innerness of The Other. (Sorry if I'm sounding like a half-baked Buberite.) Not much of our recent poetry, in the taxing effort to be acceptably inner, has escaped the malady of self-absorption. We are surrounded by well-meaning "I" poets, eager to present us with the handful of stones (the stone is the symbol of the hour; if I see one more poem with a Meaningful stone in it, I will cry; there is, thank God, not one stone in all of Culross' ninety-seven pages), which they have brought back from their perilous journeys into their own psyches. We are being viviseptured in gnostic statements about inner stones, but have very little reason to believe that they come to us from real gnomes. Culross writes like a man who has lived, not among stones and fur-bearing animals, but with the vast majority of his generation, among bubblegum cards and phonograph records and television antennas. He looks into these for his poems. He is concerned to show us, not how *he* feels about Charlie Parker's jazz or Willie Wood's pass interception, but how they feel. How *it* feels.

— JAMES CRENNER