

# Lights and Shadows

---

Volume 19 *Lights and Shadows* Volume 19

Article 45

---

1975

## Elegy for the Pale Sky

J. Daniel Byford

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.una.edu/lightsandshadows>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Byford, J. D. (1975). Elegy for the Pale Sky. *Lights and Shadows*, 19 (1). Retrieved from <https://ir.una.edu/lightsandshadows/vol19/iss1/45>

This Poetry is brought to you for free and open access by UNA Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Lights and Shadows* by an authorized editor of UNA Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact [jpate1@una.edu](mailto:jpate1@una.edu).

by J. Daniel Byford

ELEGY FOR THE PALE SKY

The world rocks round and round:  
A cradle on a wheel.  
It is yawned across the lawn  
In vain attempts at morning.

Born to a world of turned earth  
I will no more break the mold  
Of these circular mornings  
Than hoe deep faces upon this cold, tight field  
Of Alabama sky midwinter rising.

My heritage is of burlap and loose twine,  
Of weary wagons and snapped reins, of curses  
Settling their dim lethargy in low red mud.  
My yesterdays are of gray faced people, of feet  
Grown thick in summer's log-snaked path paling yellow.

If not for harnesses  
What would guide the loose world?  
How would slow morning break?--  
If not for the fast flecks, the instant,  
Primal brains of slim kindling bursting.

I

Morning's memory is but a blade growing dull--  
For once I plainly saw the purple horizon  
Staged upon the many worlds like honeysuckle  
Growing strong and wild upon a high-boned terrace.

It was a play of plentitude;  
An act of celestial rhythm.  
And I was caught upon its fire--  
Hollow, spitted, eaten by wind.

If only I had heard the mean brains of scarecrows,  
Or soft sighs of thin blackbirds flittering away  
At my flung rocks. Who can say of garden spiders,  
Of the broken fingers of barked squirrels jerking,  
Of spasmodic, cold black racers? --  
And what pale sky will ever tell you?  
My wisdom is of rusted rakes--  
Shorn handles in careless corners.

Hardship closed in like wrinkles in my father's brow;  
As close as the snow-gravelled grave or debtor's pen.  
The life we ate became scarce as midday plates;  
As chill and dreamed inside as a high steam whistle  
Echoing from flat-faced grins of  
Kicked cans passed across yellow grass.  
My wisdom is of broken things--  
Frigid cowbells in December.

Upon the whirlwild corn in the Valley black belt  
I slew a sky-driven virgin each sweat-stewed day  
And came upon the vision of the solid man  
As chopper of strong wood, drinker of black coffee.  
I came upon me as shadows;  
As a fleeing creature of fogs--  
A slim-winged stranger to hard fields  
Aching for sleek air and new marsh.

I spiralled upon the world as a lost magnet,  
I fell from the sky as a prism raindrop;  
Witnessed in the beauty of beginnings  
Seared strides of soft destruction cooling.

II

Through lame wind and the final rain;  
Through laughs which fled the aproned dawn;  
I was bees in busy weather, ants involved in heather.  
I kept my sudden head above the amber tassels;  
I kept my soul for next Sunday  
And my money in a tin box.

Pale Sky, I loved you like a hungry cup!--  
Hung cold and slim upon a dim brown nail.  
I ached for your liquid, your elder brains;  
I longed for your simple, constant colors.  
I settled for spare wind through careless cracks  
Moving me about my slight position;  
Contented myself with wry dips into  
Tight iron water of a dreamy bucket.

You saw me as a star-spit seed cast upon the frosty ground;  
You saw me as a low bound weed about the kitchen table.

How can I climb the spinning stair?  
In leaden shoes, dictated hooves?  
I was created with baling wire, with garment scissors;  
I was made with beeswax, cottonseed, and three-leaf clover.  
You roll me like an unrimmed wheel!--  
An unshod circle with loose spokes.

The fields!-- I am drawn to the burning fields  
Like Prufrock to the sea, his britches rolled.  
Upon this howling song of land I reel,  
Dancing to the hand of a drunk fiddler.  
I shall laugh the long, hollow laugh again,  
My only comfort--the open window.  
I must weep for the motherless infants,  
And wail for the speechless children staring.

The honeysuckle, tramped beneath asphalt feet, speaks to me  
The honeysuckle and I will soon disembark together.

O give us to the low red mud--  
Send us past the long horizon;

Cover us with sweet morning's flood--  
Revolve us slowly 'til we're done.

A school wagon lumbers softly down the road  
Conveying its dim load of dark children;  
The wind that rocks about my door  
Whispers closer things than winter.