

Trilogy

MARY ALICE KESSLER

I TO MAN

The curtain rose with a threatening, quiet swish,
Like the brush of a dove's wing on a whitened face,
And dullard drums were married to the heart
In softly steady beat of skin near skin.
The stage lay gray and barren to the eye
And in the center sat two gray-faced youths,
Like smooth-hewn rocks in parody of age.
Their new-born eyes were damp with mute confusion
And their beardless cheeks were traced with twitching eddies
Of tangible nerves (the sea melting the rock).
Now, like violin strands from the depths of a cave,
Their voices rose in muted cadence, sank,
And lay in brave, monotonous pools of words.
"Are we the voices in this pithy jungle?
Are we the dizzy sound in Time's plugged ears?
Are we the throttled pulse in proud men's necks?
Are we the rib made flesh and pain and fear?
Are we the meaning of a dream, a speck
Of dust extended to a star's cold frost?
They call us egocentric tongues and men
With frightened souls, pale bovine minds, confused,
Inhibited herds prodded by steel whips
That shine in the night with a mocking, latent frenzy,
Waiters who thirst in a sea of smothering flotsam
For clean coolness in our parched souls.
Ah, listen to the jagged, screaming notes
Of boogie, hear the strangled cornets moan,
Taste the bitter liquor in a darkened
Room, and squint to watch the neon paths,
Inflate your nostrils with the stench of frightened,
Angry men and rivers clogged with blood,
Oh, feel the glorious push of a stagnant age!
We have sown, we watch, and the hand of the Reaper trembles."

II TO NATURE

The curtain rose like a billowing cloud in the wind,
And the high-flung roar of November nights and the bang
Of a loosened cottage shutter, the raveling sea
Seemed to crash upon the trembling pastoral stage
And toss the gray-faced youths on a crest of black
Into the ecstasy of intangible stir.
They gazed with awe-swollen mouths at the power of the scene
And pulled their young, smooth necks with a passionate jerk
To sing valiant songs to the ruffled cliffs.
"You will blow our dreams to ashes with the dawn,
But we cannot remember seething nerves
Or shallow promises made with blood and wine;

There are no human horns or blistered cries,
 But only two men fastened to a hill.
 We cannot hear our words above this wind,
 Yet we can hear a symphony of sounds and flecks
 Of subtle whispers in the groaning hills,
 The mystic brush of weeds and rub of sand,
 A hollow gull cry, the breaking stem of phlox,
 A thorn-scratched leaf, a fawn's hoof in the lake,
 All the sounds submerged beneath the stratumed
 Layers of wind and waves and painted night.
 Crimson poppy tissue, clean, cold moon
 And tangled waves of fern beneath the roar,
 Push away the memories and empty
 The mind of glare and brass and floating rocks,
 Let us forget our postponed dreams, the grooves
 Of blest normality and sleep-filled nights;
 We'll take the flower, a handful of the sea,
 A moment, like a raindrop on the clay.
 Oh, stallion night, trample down desire,
 And the hand of the Reaper will sleep on the broken scythe."

III
 TO GOD

The curtain dropped away like the mist in the sun
 And the stage was warm with a shimmering, gold light,
 A silence — a silence of the quivering harp string,
 The becalmed sea, the canyon of shapeless night
 Lay on the youths and their faces were warmed and still.
 They stood in the quiet, golden light and watched,
 Their eyes hard-closed as if they saw a perfect
 Patch of calm and tone on each closed lid.
 Their voices litanized the beaded words,
 A soothing raptness etherized their rock-filled pride
 As two men sank into the golden light.
 "Our voices *are* the voices from a jungle,
 But what tossed repartee, what hills of intellect
 Can hope to cut the maze away and free
 The vast but single soul of man,
 When everything means nothing and compasses are steel,
 And coins and towers and flesh (all melted steel),
 Rise to strangle decency and peace?
 Oh my God, we are not lost, we have forgotten,
 We have lain before idols who have woven mats of lust
 In our weary minds, and now we stand and see
 That jungles are uprooted and idols ground to dust
 When men feel golden light upon their faces,
 And know the strength of walking through the halls
 Of pain and fear to reach a destiny
 Of understanding the power of a flake of snow,
 Of moving lips made noble with the dust,
 Of scattering seeds of humble loneliness,
 Of watching pregnant fields beneath the clouds,
 Of placing calloused hands upon the scythe,
 And gathering the grains of golden light
 To the breast of the solemn, watchful, eternal Reaper."