

## Len Krisak – Five Poems



### Special Feature

#### Authority

Hard die the habits of command,  
If die they ever do.  
Your boss expects you'll understand  
He's always right—not you.  
Some someone somewhere put this shit in charge,  
And ever after he's been living extra-large.  
His power is as certain as his air of self-regard.  
You disagree and he will come down hard.  
He's always right, and always has the right  
To crush the peons that some underling has hired  
To execute whatever he's desired,  
No matter how slight.  
Don't, and you'll be fired.  
Here, place a line with something about ego, right, and might.

#### Roofers

I heard a man say just the other day  
That iron workers, at skyscraper heights,  
Performed as if their job were a ballet:  
A beam-dance turning danger into play-  
For-play's-sake. Well, he nailed *that* dead-to-rights.  
Because the roofing crew a block away  
Keep up their little jokes all morning long:  
In lieu of chantey, chant, or chain-gang song,  
Their guns tap “shave and a haircut—two bits,”  
Or “S-O-S,” then pause a space for laughter.  
It might sound silly, but somehow it fits  
The sense of what that man I heard was after:  
To what they work at, like the dyer's hand  
Subdued, they give themselves. I understand.

## Arboreal

I looked from too far off—  
Nowhere close enough  
To tell the aspen leaves from oak.  
They flew—and fell—like snow on fire,  
Though there was no smoke.  
Their tinsel glittered like a choir  
Of angels on a million pins.  
They all went down in flames,  
Before the autumn winds—  
As if the trees had sent their snow  
To kindle all the earth below.

## Two Figures from *In A Budding Grove*

Exhausted as he fell back into bed,  
He felt the sheets form round his body—head  
And hip and thigh—as if some sculpting master  
Called by Sleep had come to take a cast or  
Make a mold of him.

As if by grace,  
In her still-plastic profile, in her face  
Unformed yet, showing there a brief resemblance  
To some forebear, Time had, for a remembrance,  
Paid to one now dead, a courtesy  
Commemorated in that family.

Valéry Versified —*Les dieux, gracieusement, nous donnent pour rien tel premier vers;*  
*Valéry, Preface to La Fontaine's Adonis*

That perfect first line comes to us for free: The gods present us with it graciously, But then it's up to us to find the second—We need to make a verse that can be reckoned Consonant with what the gods have given. That is, our audience must know we've striven To make each line as worthy as that other— Its perfect, older, Muse-inspired brother. For even everything we feel and know May never equal what the gods bestow.

Les dieux, gracieusement, nous donnent pour rien tel premier vers ; mais c'est à nous de façonner le second, qui doit consonner avec l'autre, et ne pas être indigne de son aîné surnaturel. Ce n'est pas trop de toutes les ressources de l'expérience et de l'esprit pour le rendre comparable au vers qui fut un don.

**Len Krisak**'s most recent books are translations of Rilke's *New Poems, 1907-1908*, from Boydell & Brewer, and Catullus's *Carmina*, from Carcanet, U.K. With work in the *Hudson, Sewanee, Southwest, PN*, and *Antioch Reviews*, he is the recipient of the Robert Penn Warren, Richard Wilbur, and Robert Frost Prizes, and a four-time champion on *Jeopardy!*