

## *Lynne McMahon*

### Little Elegy for the Age

We've sworn off nostalgia  
 this time for good, no more recounting the sixties  
 and those astronaut hairdos giving way to a wilderness  
 of plaits and frizz and blonde Marianne Faithfull falls;  
 or the beautiful freak embroidery above the monochrome  
 of blue; or the music, or the aphorisms, on the front  
 porch, on the grass, on the courthouse steps.  
 The tatterdemalion aggregate's slangy shorthand  
 cutting through to God or beauty *was* a kind of beauty,  
 a transcendent sloganeering that got the mind out  
 of the way of the body. It was Byronic, at least part  
 of the time, for the aloof and tormented. It was certainly  
 Shelleyan: accumulating lovers, sending  
 poems and manifestos out to sea in Molotov  
 cocktail bottles whose tiny conflagrations Shelley  
 and Mary and Claire Clairmont watched from shore  
 in a miserable joy, exacting love's price only later.  
 Italy without glooms, poetry part politics, part  
 Mont Blanc — that was the portion we appropriated.  
 Sexual carouse and anarchy. But Mary Shelley later wrote:  
 "He died, and the world showed no outward sign."  
 That's the part we come to now. The scale of grief,  
 and losses, that for all their grandeur, were  
 only personal. It's the *only* that rends our hearts,  
 now that we too are only personal, private now  
 and retreating to houses we'd not foreseen, on streets  
 where demolition goes on in cordoned sections  
 struck off by carnival flags and cones, and where,  
 showcased at the front curb, we find ourselves,  
 our life really, frozen for a moment — foot lifted,  
 or hand, as if to signal the life on the street —

arrested by the beauty of measurable diminishment,  
concrete crushed into smaller and smaller bits until  
it is just dust, a gray-whiteness on our shoetops,  
then not even that.