

James Ulmer

The Art of Poetry

A light rain on the last day
of summer. I was playing
outside the empty school
when he stepped out of nowhere, banged
my head against the bricks, threw me
down and got on top. I lay there
dizzy, my ears ringing, felt his hand,
cold from the rain, reach into my pants
until he rolled my tiny cock
between his thumb and finger.
The scream caught in my throat.
I felt his breath on my neck,
saw the field of goldenrod
in front of us go gray, the world
for an instant drained of color.

A path of chipped stone wove
through the field, through a dense
patch of blackberries, the fruit
like pieces of night that had torn
on the brambles and stuck. When I
reached the bridge over Salt Brook,
he stepped out suddenly into my path
as if the ground opened beneath me.
I know it now: he was playing,
letting me get almost home,
a hundred yards of woods between
the bridge and my blue house.
My brother was leaning
over the rail, stood there
looking into those eyes, and wouldn't

run or back away, not even
when the other kid, a foot taller,
flashed a six-inch hunting knife
under my brother's chin and shouted
cunt and *fucker*, words
I remember but didn't understand.
He finally laughed and walked
away, the knife shining in his fist,

not a tragic story, just
the way things are.
In this lost, broken world,
only the details are in question.
When school began, I scanned
the crowds of older boys,
their slicked back hair and chinos,
but never saw him again, never
found the words to tell what happened.
The other night on television
I saw how Matthew Brady's photographs
of the battlefield dead, lurid
and rain-swollen, drew fascinated
crowds in New York City in 1862.
Later, when every family
had its loss, a son or father
gone and itching like an absent limb,
and everyone was sick of glory,
no one wanted those pictures.
Brady went broke, and the glass plates
were sold for greenhouses, tomatoes
swelling under the sun-faded images,
the purple wounds of orchids
bursting open. I thought maybe
horror can turn, in unexpected ways,
into new possibility, the green lines
of this poem flowing, finding a way
to flower, a way to go on.