

LUCIEN STRYK

from ZEN: THE ROCKS OF SESSHU

(Joei Temple Garden, Yamaguchi)

I

What do they think of
Where they lean
Like ponderous heads, the rocks?—

In prankish spring, ducks
Joggling here
And there, brushing tails,

Like silly thoughts shared,
Passed from head
To head? When, gong quavering

About a ripened sky, we
Up and go,
Do they waken from a dream of flesh?

II

In the Three Whites of
Hokusai—
Fuji, the snow, the crane—

What startles is the black: in
The outline
Of the mountain, the branch-tips

Piercing the snow, the quills of
The crane's wing:
Meaning impermanence.

Here, in stainless air, the
Artist's name
Blazes like a crow

THE PIT

Twenty years. I still remember
The sun-blown stench, and the pit
At least two hundred yards from
The cove we'd anchored guns in.
They were blasting at the mountains,
The beach was nearly ours.

The smell kept leaking back.
I thought of garbage cans
Behind chopsuey restaurants
Of home, strangely appealing on
A summer's night, meaning another
Kind of life. Which made the difference.

When the three of us, youngest in
The crew, were handed poles and told
To get the deadmen underground
Or join them, we saw it a sullen
Sort of lark. And lashed to trees,
The snipers had us dancing.

Ducks for those vultures in the boughs,
Poles poking through the powder-
Bitten grass, we zigzagged
Toward the pit as into
The arse of death, the wittiest
Of us said but did not laugh.

At last we reached it, half full
Of sand and crawling. We clamped
Nose, mouth, wrenched netted helmets
To the chin, yet poles probed forward
Surgically, touching for spots
The maggots had not jelled.

Somehow we got the deadmen under,
Along with empty lobster tins,
Bottles, gear and ammo. Somehow
We plugged the pit and slipped back
To the guns. Then for days
We had to helmet bathe downwind.

I stuck my pole, clean end high,
Behind the foxhole, a kind of
Towelpeg and a something more.
I'd stare it out through jungle haze,
And wonder. Ask anyone who
Saw it: nobody won that war.