Bernadette

By Sally Falch

Merry the mother drops her
Led by the hand to the water's edge,
A four year stitch of bar-sown life,
Legs bare brown in lunch box glare
That shows she will not,
Will never go through a day alone
Or with hunger gnawing that handful
Of flesh ruffled in polkaed red.
As a piper skits on diminishing toes
She tracks the tide-mopped sand;
Her wary eyes pierce morning haze,
Her lunch box jettisons from deafened hand
And she squats Buddha-legged to build a home—
While round her bony bottom swirls the surf
Where sandy shoulders shun the grasping sea.
Shellacked by the shine of a summer sun
Visitors, marionettes steered by
Shortening strings, enter her whitening home;
Puppy welcome sparkles her amber eyes,
And wagging ruffles, she tosses seaweed curls
And hurls oaths as soft as summer sounds;
As welcome yet as strange as a foreign ship
She sails, casting lines of warmth from
Cabana tent to Turkish carpet and back again,
Till the sun goes out and sun-seared sprawlers
Wend away—and weary, her mother finds her
Legs and arms akimbo upon the fading shore.

Of fourteen summers, this one the same
Except others swam more sweetly by—
Apparent bones of adolescence and potpourri
Belie a mind furrowed by seas of things
That should not be in the seashell that is summer.
Alien child growing from herself she walks,
Not fathoming the many no longer in her grasp,
Nor the love of one that starred last night
In moon-cool kisses by the shadowed sea,
Two bodies newly made for night
Turned over-worldly by the day.
Avoiding forms that sprawl till stopped
By stubbled dunes, she picks her way
Beneath the stars across the beach
To stand upon their trackless space
And stare with finite eyes
That would snare the solace that surges
And recedes—the enigma of the sea.
As if in antiphony to her hope
Tufts of ship's smoke dilute her gaze,
And when the long awaited day is dawning
She walks the slow mile to her fate:
No house wreathed in smoke or smell of stove
But a strange woman who could have made it so,
Who passes disguised and denied as
Any mistress of the street, her mother
And herself within the mirror and compass
Of the ever-eager, the all-devouring sea.
After fourteen some summers slide
Faster than scuttled ships at sea
Till doubled they come back as inevitable
As the tide that envelops tawny shores—
She wanders, blending brown of skin with beiged sands—
A fleeting oneness fused by onetime passions
That cascade, then fade—
Twenty-eight years of rebellion blacked
By haze of unused smoke that
Cowers behind page-like doors only to emerge
In a kaleidoscope of loves and laughs
To be shot down like the birds that fall
At twenty-five for five along her beach and boardwalk life.
As time tarnished shells rake her naked soles
She rejects the raping surf to sink
On drifted wood—brown-limbed relic
That has merged—submerged and returned
To the home that nourished it!
Stoic warmth of summer and persistent sun
Wipe her wetted flesh, unsmoothed
By the creams of rising years;
And having squandered its prey, the sea
Chants the taunting love song of the Lorelei,
As it withdraws to uncomplaining depths
There remains the pledge of a widening shore.