

1956

## Bernadette

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### Recommended Citation

Falch, Sally (1956) "Bernadette," *Exile*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol2/iss1/12>

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## 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.

## II

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.

### III

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.