

Michael McDowell

Book Boxes

Doubleday Bookstore, San Francisco

In the gray morning light I rolled down the green awnings
of 190 Post Street and with the vigor of a new hire
I push-broomed lines of ink-black soot
from storefront to curb and gutter.

When the clerks and managers arrived
to handle registers and money and customers,
I descended to the basement with Phil.
We opened boxes and set the books on shelves.

Phil showed me how to use the knife
to make the boxes do my will: to gush
forth crumpled packing paper, reveal their hearts,
and finally, lie flat and be still.

We filled the shelves beneath the sidewalk
with books in order by author.
The Ss always caused problems, sprawling
across so many shelves, selling fast, and sprawling again.

Then the returns. We brought flat boxes to life with wide tape,
carefully laid in the unread, unwanted, still-new books
to go back to their makers, trimmed the boxes with our knives,
and sealed up all in wetted brown tape.

Late afternoons I rode the freight elevator through the sidewalk,
rising from the book-filled underground like a Catholic saint

ascending bodily, a protective steel aura arching over my head.
Foot traffic parted and flowed on either side.

We would unload a truck onto the elevator,
then slowly descend with the weight of books.
Winds sent quick white wisps across the overhead blue
but by quitting time had pulled a gray winding-sheet over us.

At night I dreamed of boxes passing at a steady pace,
from darkness arriving at my spot of light,
opening at the touch of my knife,
and disappearing into darkness.

I opened and opened and stacked piles of books,
never-to-be-read best-sellers, advice, and how-to,
while the finest soot gently settled on sidewalks
and books and crumpled paper everywhere.

