

# The New Criterion

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## Grand Canal

by Karl Kirchwey

*for Gregory Dowling*

Once I saw Black Angus in a pasture upstate  
                    move like this, or on men's shoulders a coffin,  
jostling slightly, angular and deliberate,  
                    unimpeded through the bitter green:

a gondola, warping through the salt emerald  
                    and S-curve of the Grand Canal  
obscure in its purpose, its draft lopsided,  
                    moving by contraries, its carved oarlock a bole

for baleful owls to nest in, sex and death  
                    surefooted amid the gentle slap and swelling,  
behind a mask half-constraint, half-release, with  
                    a button sewn on, past the lace and gilding,

to take in the mouth and so prevent speech,  
                    pill of oblivion and the river to cross  
—for these commuters on their zigzag reach  
                    who feel the ferry's trembling reverse,

the furious churning, the hawser deftly tossed  
                    around a bollard, boom of steel on steel  
and snapping taut, making a puff of hemp dust  
                    that gradually sifts down on the gunwale,

that sags, then shudders, expressing water.  
                    The green widens; the ferry is away.  
I scoop some up in my palm to remember,

custodian of love's catastrophe.

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