

Illinois Wesleyan University

From the Selected Works of Michael Theune

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The Value of Man

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Featured Poet: Michael Theune

The Value of Man

In a museum in London there is an exhibit called "The Value of Man": a long coffinlike box with lots of compartments where they've put starch—phosphorus—flour—bottles of water and alcohol—and big pieces of gelatin. I am a man like that.

—Stephane Mallarmé, letter dated May 17, 1867

One man feels lifted up.
Another, drained.

One man is frightened:
Our emptiness is so real.
One man takes comfort:
So our emptiness is real.

One man marvels.
Another can't stand that
Our vision rises up just
To give us...*this*—

Indignant, one man
Thinks this is in bad faith.
Indignant, another
Thinks this is in bad taste.

One man does the math,
Works it out: about
Three pounds and change.
One man wants to know
What is the value of woman?
Is it the same?

One man decides to marry.
Another, to leave his wife.

One man feels angelic.
One man thinks he'll run amok.
One man wants to know exactly
What phosphorus and gelatin are.

One man decides Christ
Was lucky to have been
Butchered—at least that way
He felt right up to the end
That he had a soul.

Looking at his reflection
In the case's glass, one man
Sucks in his cheeks a bit.
Another brushes his hair.

Aghast, one man thinks it is too ugly.
Another wonders if it's too aesthetic,
If the neatly arranged boxes
And the crystal decanters might
Give someone the wrong idea.

One man thinks, *Just as I thought.*

One man thinks science instills
An appreciation of design.
Another thinks, *Evolution.*
Another, *The Fall—*

One man thinks of a grocer's shelf.
Another of a cold crucible
To purify the mind.

One man thinks it is too antiseptic.
Another wants to know, *What's that smell?*

One man thinks, *I could do this.*
Another wants to purchase one of his own.

One man begins to imagine equality,
A Brotherhood of Man.
Another thinks, *Mixed right, this*
Material could make a bomb.

One man looks up quizzically at another man.
One man thinks, *I am a man like that.*

One man finds the experience educational.
Another feels quite simply he has paid
Too much for his admission.