

The Underground Communion Rail, by Susan Firer.
Albuquerque: West End Press, 1992.
58 pp. \$8.95.
Reviewed by Ann Hostetler.

Susan Firer's provocative new volume of poetry offers a stunning array of images—from angels on Oakland Avenue to a rhumba in Monet's beard, from a windstorm dance of discarded Christmas trees to "fire bouquets" (52) showering from electrical wires. In these poems sacred and profane are juxtaposed until each illuminates the other in a glow that seems to burst from the language itself. Firer mixes metaphors of sense, sight, and sound as skillfully and boldly as she explodes familiar categories, challenging readers to revision the familiar world.

In the title poem, the sometimes hilarious, sometimes dangerous rituals of childhood experimentation become the proving ground of the poet's imagination, her novitiate in the transforming powers of language. Enticing the reader into a domestic interior populated with holy images, she evokes the vivid perceptions of a child's mind remaking the world through play.

My mother would not buy me Barbies;
I didn't care; I had many Marys,
several Josephs, & all different aged
Christs. Christ was usually exposed,
his heart hanging out
like a Neil Sedaka song. (9)

Conducting mass in her parents' "celery green living room," the girl-poet constructs her own initiation into priesthood. At first wooing her followers with sacred symbols and self-invested authority, she is finally censored by her parents for exacting too harsh a penance from a tattling parishioner. "I don't imagine I was the only priest/ that at times forgot they were only that" (14). But when, after reciting an "eight-year-old dirty joke" at confession, she receives a lighter penance from her family's priest, she discovers that language, adeptly used, can sway even God's

earthly authority. At that moment a poet is born.

I took down the altar, bought composition books,
sharpened pencils and started writing down words.
They changed every day.

They still do:
Last night I wrote
he moves like black mylar
in the cockatoo-crocheted lightning
I am.
And I always sign my own name
so the reader will not need family photos
or obituaries (nee)
to find out the family I write from. (17)

"The Underground Communion Rail" establishes Firer's central themes: creating poetic authority and voice, refashioning gender, reclaiming the world from prescribed categories, fusing sacred and ordinary experience. One might conclude that she is "stealing the language," as critic and poet Alicia Ostriker claims feminist poets do, except that the language seems to belong to her as she transforms it.

When I first read "The Underground Communion Rail" I suddenly remembered the countless hours my sister and I spent at our neighbor friend's house, inventing games with her crucifixes and rosaries behind her closed bedroom door. But my pleasure was more than nostalgia and recognition—it was elation at the way Firer reinterpreted that experience for me. Through her eyes I could see myself as part of an underground network of girls playing with the sacred objects of our elders, revisioning—and revising—the "givens" of the world into which we were born.

Moving from the glow-in-the-dark rosaries and shiny red hearts wreathed with thorns of her childhood, the poet casts her transfiguring glance on such daily wonders as her mother's girdle, stiletto heels, the next-door neighbor's desperate night-time ride made stark naked clinging to the hood of her departing husband's car, the changes of light on Lake Michigan, her sleeping daughters, the approach of a deer in a mosquito-