The Colossus in Quicksand

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THE COLOSSUS IN QUICKSAND

One night I read philosophy.
When Plato went to sleep on me
I made this dream up willfully:

I saw a stone Colossus rise
from Lybian sands through the nine skies.
Someone's idea of someone's size.

Man's of man, I seemed to know:
somehow the dream refused to go
so close that a whole truth might show.

It made it clear enough to guess
the thing was no high mightiness:
no emperor or empress
ever had slaves enough or stones
breaking each other from the bones
of time-enough—though it were aeons—
to haul so much of earth so high.
The figure stretched from sand to sky.
Its very height, as first, was why

no one had noticed it was sinking.
Only a dream could see it shrinking,
is what I dreamed the dream was thinking.

One sky after another cleared
to nothing as the great head neared.
Shins, then knee-caps disappeared.

It slid like weather from the skies.
Thighs, the great sex in the thighs,
the first rib. Then I saw its eyes.

And what I saw as it went by
was its own image in its eye,
still standing higher than the sky.
Whatever the thing was meant to be
all Greece and Rome intended me
to look into those eyes and see.

I watched the chest and then the chin
go under, and the sands begin
to rim the mouth and trickle in.

Then it was eye to eye, And then
the desert was all sand again.
A nothing where a dream had been.

John Ciardi

John Ciardi, distinguished American poet, has published five volumes of his own verse. He is Poetry Editor of the “Saturday Review,” and has caused considerable controversy among the readers of that magazine with the frankness and truthfulness of his poetry reviews. He is also Professor of English at Rutgers University, and directs the Breadloaf Writer’s Conference that is held each summer in the mountains near Middlebury, Vermont. Ciardi has gained great fame in literary circles for his translation of Dante’s “Divine Comedy.”