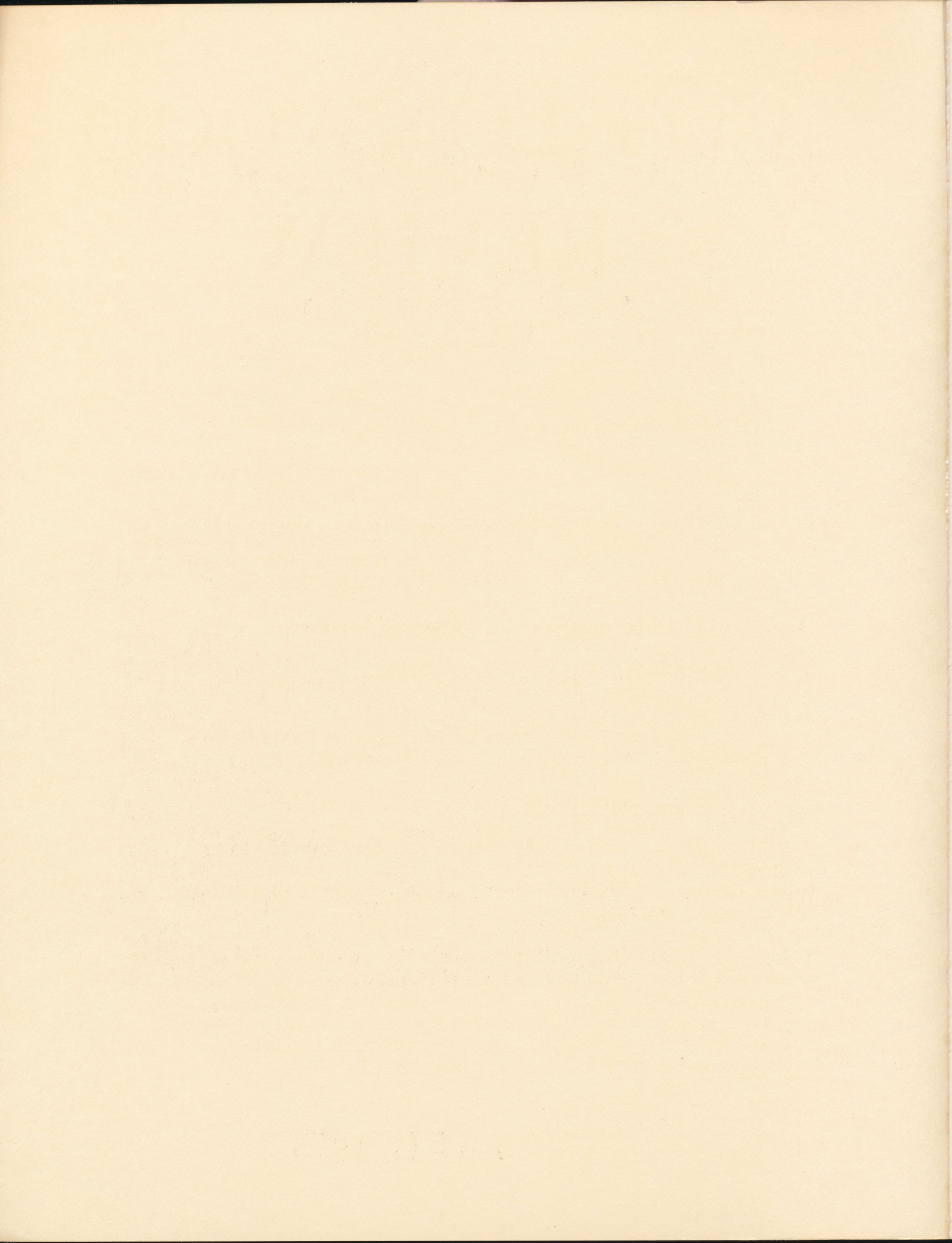


COTTONWOOD REVIEW



FALL 1975



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Cottonwood Review is a national literary magazine with its home at the University of Kansas. Our goal is to make national poetry, fiction, and photography available to readers in our area of the country and, at the same time, to make the best writing and photography in our area available to a national audience.

Since Cottonwood Review has no regular source of funding, we depend heavily on the interest and support of our subscribers. In the past year, we have received the additional support of grants from the University of Kansas Endowment Association and the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines. Cottonwood Review is a member of COSMEP.

Cottonwood Review is published twice yearly. Subscriptions are \$4.25 for two issues of the magazine and 6 issues of our bimonthly tabloid Open House, which we will begin publishing this fall.

We welcome submissions of poetry, fiction, graphics, and photography, both from local and national writers and artists. Please include a stamped, self-addressed envelope for return. Our address is

Cottonwood Review
Box J, Kansas Union
University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas 66045

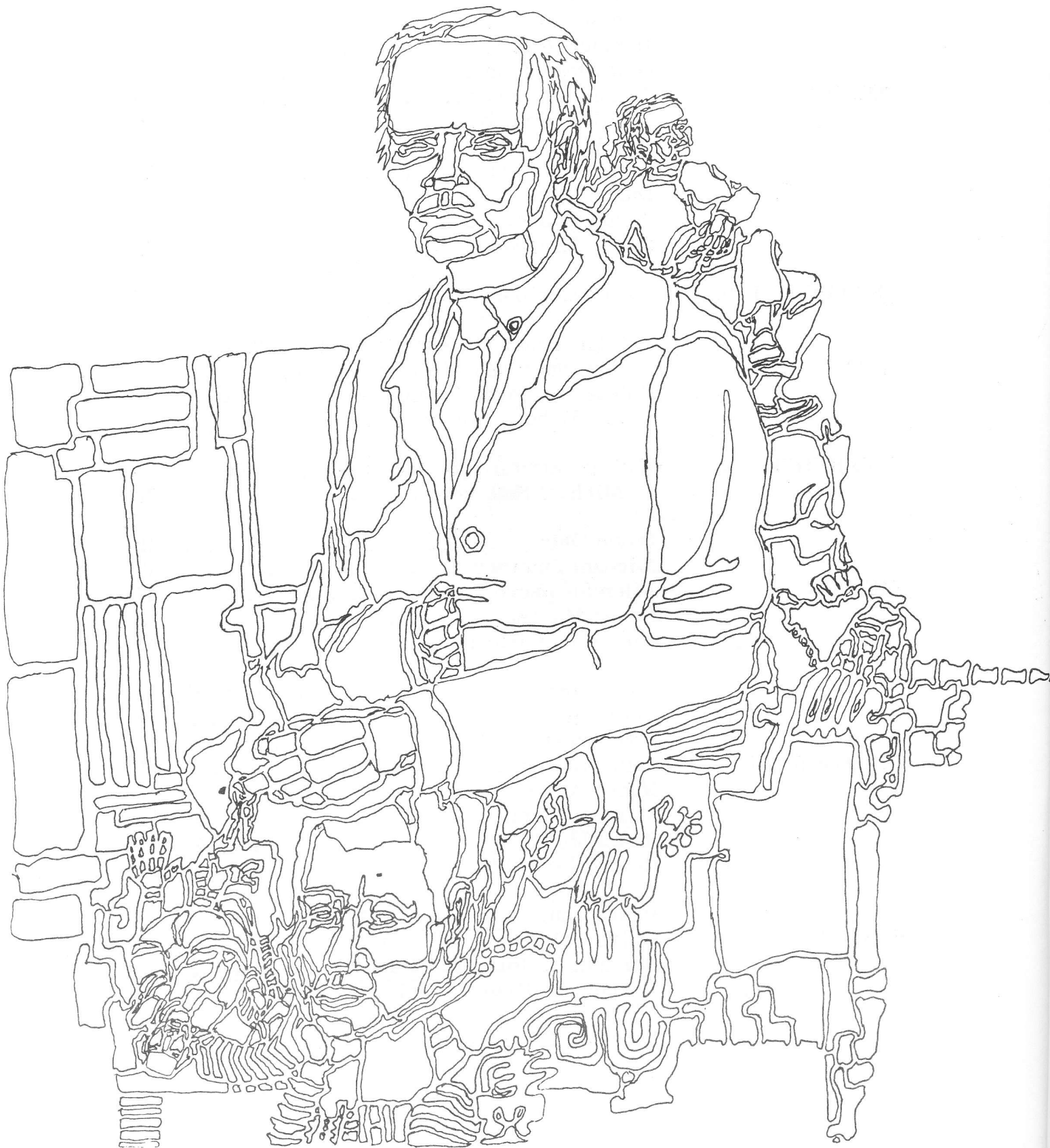


"Kansas"

With this issue we are introducing two new continuing features designed to explore the writing being done in the Kansas Midwest. Each of our future issues will feature a selection from the work of a widely published poet living in Kansas or the surrounding states. Our second new feature is a review section designed to examine new books by writers of or about the Kansas Midwest. These reviews are not intended to flatter our friends but will be frank appraisals of their work. We would be glad to hear your comments on our efforts.

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Thea Liston-Clark

It was snow

in the sleep
easing down,
forgetting to fall
for an instant,
and then swelling again
in a curve.

And you and I throwing snowballs.

(I have touched
you so
in dreams.)

One huge snowball
glides towards my jacket
then mists
into milkness,
into moist stars.

And even as I bend
to throw one back,
it forms and flows
from my hand,

in a spell,

(in the dream
it was snow.

4/27/67

EVIL FRUIT

Evil fruit grows in
old Nguyen's ricegarden
when steel seeds blossom
and showers of dry soil
fall gently into dust.

CAN THO FAMILY

1.

Perplexed, a child
asks words from frowns:
a cough in a hushed temple.

2.

Two women light fires
and breathe slow smoke,
their trance a gift.

3.

In sleep Tran stares
through closed eyes:
full wombs, glowing.

4.

The moon swallows stars
and eats the night.

AFTER THE INTERROGATION

Stung to stumblershuffling,
Xuan danced before their eyes,
his pain a theater for the deaf.



Lee Merrill

DEAR TO ME

Electrically clean
And dear to me
Is the ping pong champion
Of the psychiatric ward
First man up in the morning
The day of his release
Coffee boiler of the cuckoos
Checking me out across the table
His dreams discharging
Across the long gap
Of a love affair in Switzerland
And the future
He can see into the future
All but the endless day ahead
Staring at the locked doors
Waiting for his doctor
Wondering if I've turned him in.

LETTER FROM SHEPHERD PRATT

Black rook, black rook cawing
over the fence - how many fences
- the amber sparks - shot sunlight - hit my eyes.
That man is my shadow
that man hidden in the long grass.
He wheels carts of pills down the long corridors
takes them to the kitchen where they poison my food.
The black man demands to make me tractible.
He is determined.
I stare at mirrors all day long
trying to verify my existence.
Lawn privilege means a locked gate.
Warden's cat has more freedom.
She has energy because they do not drug her
ambles over fences - out onto the schoolgrounds.
There are children playing. I can hear their voices
high pitched voices - shouting names.
My name means night.
I have changed my name three times
and it now means night.
Our nurse is not a nurse. She's just a student.
Lois says she's waiting till her time is up.
She says she wants to be a nurse in children's wards
of general hospitals.
These three months are part of the course.
She reads a woman's magazine, then changes Mrs. Murphy's diaper,
fetches hershey bars from the canteen
(they charge your parents).
Lylah, Lylah, oo halylah, lylah, lylah, lylah, lylah, lylah
kicking in a circle.
The Chosen Ones are kicking in a circle
shout my name.
Bombs once rained over the holyland
whores with ripped open bellies
(all whores here)
Uncle William was a timber merchant from Crackcow.
The black man carries a white coat with straps to bind your arms.
Karen is screaming. They set off the alarm.
That black man is my shadow on the lawn.
I make a fist and try to grab the sun's beam.
Black man, that black man is calling "ALL LINE UP"
The ward will smell of urine.



Gale Oppenheim

the pool

light and dark mingle through soft rain
rocks slip down into the mud slip
with the frogs. with orange blue pails,
I skim the greened water careful
not to disturb the mud bottom frogs.

friend one lets a pink hanging lip pick
soft bread and sugar from her open palm.

friend two might have come with me,
but she is busy pressing engagements.

friend three might have come with us,
but she is busy dying. she cries
until she falls asleep dying.

sometimes I listen to my friends,
but it is simpler easier to watch
the tv getting louder.

HOW YOU LIVE

How do you live with a wife without love?
You grow a beard. You pace the room in your sweat-shirt.
The walls slip back like waves. You are on a ship.
Your wife waves to you from the dock. She yells
something about wishing you would never return.
Before you have a chance to respond, she disappears
in the arms of a sailor and you are back in your room
staring out the window. The night steams
like a tropical plant. The air you swallow burns.
You examine your prospects. This takes less than a minute.
Later, in bed, the wind torments you. It whispers:
"You are the hole inside the hole." You wake up crying.
Your wife continues to smile in her sleep.
You pack your duffle bag and each night
you run away to sea. Those you do not love
and who do not love you, never see you again.

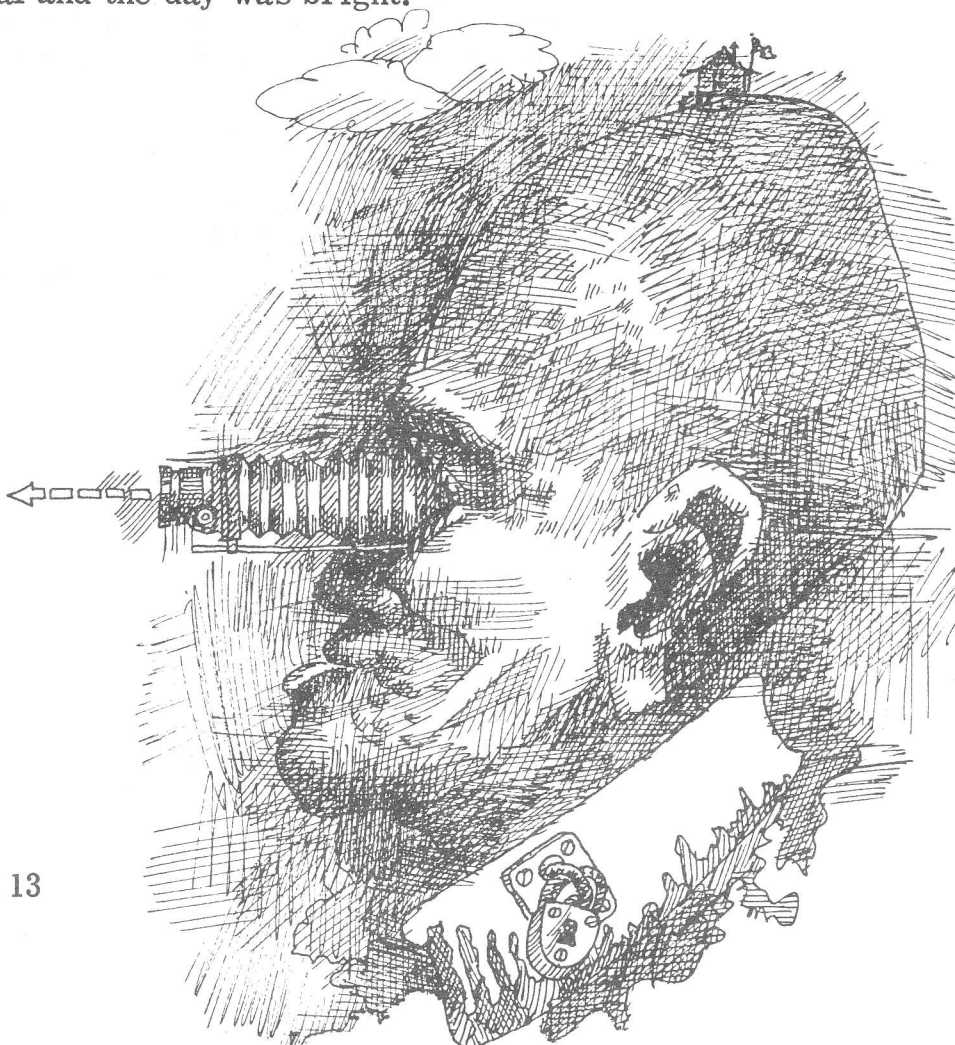


WHISPERJET DREAM

I milked my slow motorbike along a white highway crossing the great plain. Always I've been an employee of the government, an agent, born in a city north of T-bus junction, which is east of agency headquarters in old Miami. On this crossing I have taken the trouble to bring along a plastic sack of chicory and clear jel. I will not go hungry. Getting off occasionally to rest the bike I walk out in the clear zone and look over the great plain itself, at fascinating distant tree lines and ozone collecting in the familiar shallow valleys. There are palmettoes in the clear zone, oak stumps, dead yellow grass, a single cloud, pinkish, flashing on the southern sky. Haven't seen another vehicle in 200 klick. Also I have remembered to carry along a tin of seeds and a pouch of dry salt fish. These will keep me the rest of the way. I am cycling to Plainville, on the far side of the clear zone, at the edge of the plain. There has been bleeding in late weeks internally, in the pleural cavity and the doctors have made appointments with specialists in Plainview. I am to be there for treatment early Monday. I don't foresee much time to rest on the way. If I am not on time I will perhaps miss the appointment and be sent off to wheeze in the stair well and die with a bit of blood at the lip like a cat. No. This body can be pushed, if the cycle will hold up. If the cylinder fails the trip is over. I could pedal it downhill, but uphill would be impossible, even these deflated hills of the great plain. There is considerable pain attached to this, although the agency has given me medication and a packet of cures. A fungus has taken hold at the elbows and knees and must be scraped and salved endlessly. However, I am not depressed or the least anxious here, as I would have been in the old days, the 40's, the 50's, when I was active in agency business. The glow of Plaintown is visible in darkness from a hundred klick out. On the first morning of the trip, very close to noontime, I stopped to eat and sat in the shade of a derelict pontoon or tank of some kind. I took off the headgear and sun goggles, crossed my legs under me and ate my clear jel. Coughed up a spot of blood and spat it in the sand. Swallow agency spansules and feel loose and easy enough at this point. The sun is high and formless, distorted and stretched across the western sky. I am alone here, no vehicles yet, not the single chirp of a sparrow. Occasionally a dead city dog flattened and snarling at the roadside in a swarm of bottle flies. I never slow at the junctions. The odds against my meeting another vehicle are satisfying enough that I don't bother to look anymore. I rest my helmet back against the rusty pontoon, close my eyes and flow out ten meter or so from the pontoon, watching myself resting back against the tank listening to music in my helmet, my

eyes closed. But this illusion is momentary. I take a can of oil and a cloth out of my sidepouch and clean my pistol. Now and then the clack of a crow above me, the only other heartbeat around. The chrome of my cycle throwing out rods of light. A handful of this dirty sand yields shards of fossil shell and cola glass. The sweet odor of the gun oil is satisfying in my nose. Until I get into the Plaintown traffic the driving will be easy. Locating the agency clinic will be difficult in the fast flow of vehicles and the maze of numbered streets. I have been away from the city for years, on other assignments, working for other agencies. I am Agent Mott. The sky darkens and a small rain patters in the sand, vanishing in a hiss. If I should collapse here an agency truck would be sent out. All of this takes place automatically and needn't be worried over. I walk off from the cylinder and urinate against a palmetto leaf, the urine white, purified by agency medicines. The rain continues at the same drizzling intensity through the afternoon. At one end the pontoon, ten of my short paces long, a hole the size of a saucer has rusted out. I place my boot in the hole and kick out a larger space. I have my pistol drawn here, at this point of time. The sky has broken and a brighter sun is showing. Kneeling down I shine my flash into the hole. There is sand inside the tank, a redeye skink posing in the light, frozen with natural fear, and the faint odor of kerosene, or gasoline, otherwise an empty cylinder. Now that I've seen the lizard I am not compelled to feel alone among the living here. This place has an aura about it, of battlegrounds decades after the battles, of agency graveyards. Something of moment happened here. It is felt, it vibrates up through the warm sand. A great burst of energy was expended here at some time in the past. I walked around the side of the tank and saw that it was not an autonomous unit, but a part torn from something else. There were metal attachments, hoses and wire hanging down. By evening my chest is knotted. I've swallowed all but a few of my spansules. The itch of the fungus makes my sleeping light, unrenewing and brief. It will spread always. When my body dies it will die with me, my fungus, eventually it will consume me. The moon has come up full and the plain is lit, a dead garden by lantern light. The sand of this area gives off a bluish suppurating light under the moon. The smell of fuel lingers here even in the night cool. I gather up dead grass, some palmetto bark, and build a smoky fire to distract me from the burn in my rubber stomach. I swallow the last of the drug and the pain subsides. I take my flashlight, not that it is needed in the bright moonlight, but it comforts me to have something in the other hand, to balance the pistol. I walk generally in wider circles and begin to find various things in the sand. A wrist watch case empty of its movement, two belt buckles, rotted

shoes, small round spheres of plexiglas, like gull's eggs. By morning I have walked far from my cycle, so far that I can only see a faint point of light in the flash of chrome. I have found the fuselage. The ceiling is fully fifteen meters high and as wide as the T-bus tube in Plainbert. The sun rising sends obelisks of light through its windows. The sand has piled up ankle deep in the main aisle. In the lounge there are bottles sealed, unbroken, and containing Pimm's Cup and American gin. I open one and put another in my sidepouch, sit down in one of the naugahide chairs and drink the pain of the fungus away. In the narrow hallway between one cabin and another, twenty or so seats forward I saw what I took to be a head, the back of an older woman's head, the hair silver grey, soiled with dust, the collar of the dress rotted away. I walked to her and stood in front of her and looked at her face. There was flesh, as dry and brittle as onion skin. Her eyes were closed and sunken, the lips stretched tight over protruding dental plates. I stood back and shot a bullet into the head. As it entered the skull a puff of black dust went up and a fine black powder spilled out of the hole, particles of it floating off like spores. I gathered a sample of this substance, put it in a specimen bag in my sidepouch. I would turn this into the agency in T-city. As I expected, the traffic there was normal and the day was bright.



Trans. Don Eulert
Stefan Avadanei
Cornelia Hancu

TRISTAN TZARA

(1896-1963)

After editing The Symbol in 1912 (with Vinea and Maniu), Tristan Tzara founded, with a large group of friends, the Zurich Cabaret Voltaire whose bulletin was Movement Dada (the name that Tzara chose; "Da, da" in Romanian means "yes-yes," though the word was chosen from a French dictionary, and Tzara was aware of the further ambiguities). In the same year (1916) he published his first book: La premiere aventure celeste de Monsieur Antipyrine. The group organized performances, lectures, exhibits of painting and cubist drawings. All these forms of art, together with Negro dances and songs, were used in shows as a background for "simultaneous" poems. Among the collaborators and contributors to their publications mention should be made of Apollinaire, Aragon, Cocteau, Paul Klee, Gide, Valery and Andre Breton.

Although in his later years Breton (who became the "Magus" of surrealism) dismissed the importance of Dada, it seems clear that the Paris movement was not born independently. Breton was involved with the Geneva publication; he adulated Tzara's early work and was acquainted with his "Manifesto" (published in 1919, a year before Breton's first surrealist text Les Champs magnetiques).

Tzara's poems translated here were written between 1912 and 1915 but published in a volume only in 1943 -- First Poems (Primele poems) and republished in Romania by Sasa Pana in 1971. Tzara returned to Romania and died in Bacau, the city nearest the village where he was born.

VOICE

Crumbling wall,
I ask myself
Today, why
she didn't hang herself

Lia, blonde Lia
in the night with a rope...
She would have swung to rest
Like a ripe pear

And there would be barking
Dogs on the street
And there would be gathering
People to see

And they would have shouted
"Look out she doesn't fall"
I would have locked
the latch at the gate

I would have put up a ladder
And taken her down
like a ripe pear
like a dead girl
And laid her in a beautiful bed.

DISGUST

Here are shores of the dead sea
Bridges of tar, clouds of stone
Here the skyline is empty of ships
The waters of algae of whales of coral
And I hurt, I hurt with the siren's screech

On yellow hills
Many kinds of animals swarm
Spirit of illness
Don't you want to lose yourself
In green pools
In the abandoned factory with ghosts of smoke?

Slopes of clay
Have drunk snows of many winters
And I want to kiss you to kiss you
With caresses of the worm.

TRIP

Crumble down outworn house
Over a girl's tomb; in lazily overturned smoke
In a stained sky and in hurried hens, the rain sends us signs
You'd like to meet grey-haired poor people, to give them alms
It's your too-large eyes, it's your cold lips
You ask the mirror less often if you're liked
Here are four whole people
Who leave for four strange places

Along the road the poppy plantations, poplars split by lightning
There are bridges thrown over royal waters
Over yellow sulphur sands where not even weeds grow
At the feet of mountains are new, clean villages
With fowl in the yards, with orchards
With belfries, windmills, boyar's palaces
At the edge of the earth are broken hills
There are threshing machines and granaries

In the small station where only we shall descend
The old coachman is waiting for us
You'll ask about villages, about inns on the way
About things to which I answer I don't know

We'll live in a house covered with thatch
On which cranes make their nests
We'll receive guests, go to the mayor, to the school
We'll collect insects from the air

In our forests are bears, squirrels, stags
The woodsman's house is empty
From there we can see the whole village
And wait for the mail from Dumbraveni

And I go endlessly, in the train, with a neurotic woman
How could I not get out of the depths of marches and weeds

THE MONOSEXUAL ON PARADE

I first noticed The Monosexual on a visit home to my parents in the country. My mother had called me home to witness the historic re-enactment of Daniel Boone's famous visit to the area which was to become, in the prosperous years after they drained the swamps, the growing community of Boone's Bog. The event, in honor of town unity, had been highly advertised in the area weekly, and the main staging area was alive with woody old farmers ready to tell stories and spit.

Spitting, it should be mentioned, is the main local recreation, being indulged in far more often than story telling. Legend dates the origin of the custom back to the first settlers from Germany who had tried to farm the region before the ditches were dug, an effort that often gave them much cause to spit.

Unfortunately, the attempt of the steering committee to find something in which everyone could participate had carried itself to the logical conclusion, so that, when it came time for the pre-re-enactment parade, I was the only one who did not have a place in the marching line. It was probably owing to this difficulty of trying to watch a parade in which one is a marcher that none of the gathered residents saw The Monosexual. However, he was clearly visible to me from the first, and I will report him truthfully.

My honesty is a well-established fact throughout all of Porter County. Ask anyone (except the Krinklers). I was universally respected in high school and am greatly admired now as the only one ever to bring a Boone's Bog class sweater onto a real college campus. I say "real" in deference to old John Barleycorn's son who once took a correspondence course in hog diet from the Home Economics Experimental Station at Purdue. However, he did not really go onto the campus, and, since he dropped out after three weeks when the going got tough, I do not consider him my equal as a college man. If you ask about, I think you will find that this is generally accepted, though there is some dispute amongst Barleycorn's relatives and, of course, with the Krinklers.

When you actually pin the old folks down to it, not much happened when Daniel Boone visited Boone's Bog. He simply slept one night on an old tree root and left with a stiff neck the next day. He is still well remembered in these parts, however, and his example has been followed by all the progressive citizens since. But still, we must admit that this is not much meat for a play. It was probably in unconscious realization of this fact that the community placed such great stress on the parade.

A fortunate thing too. At the last minute, old John Barley-corn, who was to play the lead (if only) role in the play, got detained. Seems his cows broke down that old north fence of his and went to eating wild onions along the slough. In such straits, a proud dairy man like John can be excused if he turns from historical drama to more practical concerns. Still the steering committee was upset. A delay can play havoc with a complex timetable.

After much discussion, it was decided to run the parade around through the town twice. For me this had the distinct advantage of letting me have a second look at The Monosexual as he marched in line. For the steering committee, it held all kinds of knotty problems.

To begin with Boone's Bog is cut into two halves with only one bridge between. This is not usually much of a problem as there is only one real street. However, the plan had been to march from the school end of the street across the town bridge to the church end. Unfortunately, at that end there was no convenient way to circle the parade. As fate would have it, the time to begin came, and somehow the march began without this little problem being solved.

Leading the parade, in lieu of a mayor (the town being unincorporated), were the members of the steering committee, followed by the school dignitaries, teachers, and cooking staff. Behind these were the various young people's, farmers', and ladies' organizations. At the rear came The Monosexual. All told the community had gathered nearly two hundred talking, waving, excited, happy participants.

From my vantage point on the bridge, I saw their waving placards and heard the tooting of their horns as the parade, swelled by the singing of the school chorus, marched up the steep ascent, over the bridge, and on to the church. Behind walked the quiet Monosexual.

Then the point of crisis came. They reached the church and stopped. John had not yet arrived. What else could they do? I've heard much reproach of the committee since, but their decision seemed wise at the time. You can't leave a column of people standing in the sun while a man chases cows. The steering committee cleared their throats for a while, then called for the marchers to turn and parade back to the school.

The Monosexual was now leading the parade. Previously unnoticed was a small placard hung on his back. There are many dark rumors as to what was written on it, but I can attest, having read it both coming and going, that what the sign said was this:

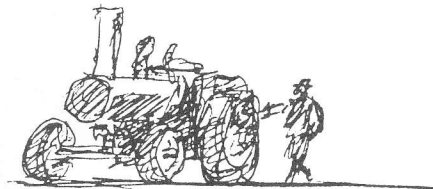
MONOSEXUAL FREEDOM
ENJOY YOURSELF

With many vexed looks and low mutterings, the crowd followed The Monosexual back over the bridge and into the schoolyard. The committee, not knowing what else to do, called for the parade to turn around again. Hot and annoyed, the people would not march to the church until they had John Barleycorn.

Well, in all the ruckus, The Monosexual disappeared. No one noticed where he went, or cared (so long as it was away). And I suppose it doesn't really matter. By the time Barleycorn arrived, the city had broken down into its old north-side-south-side feud. Each side stood at one end of the town bridge and made hog calls for the other side to come over.

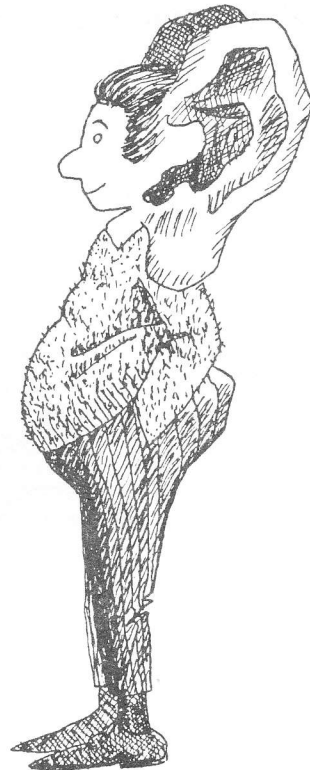
Such open rivalry had not been known since the end of prohibition when the church half of town had voted to remain dry. To support their stand, the south-siders had turned a manure spreader over on the bridge and, with the aid of a favorable southerly wind, had held the advantage for two days. But, with the cooling effects of time (and a change in the wind), they decided to make things up. After all, there had never been any place to buy liquor anyway. The whole affair could be quietly forgotten. But neither side had ever re-voted the issue, and, until recently, each had maintained its own general store, just in case.

Now things had broken out again, there was talk of re-opening the south-side store. When I left the scene, a group of south-siders could be seen heading towards old Barleycorn's spreader, but the wind never stays from the south for long.



june and july

when Roberta and me
put on black patent shoes
hard to tie shiny elasticized ribbons
and flew
pigtails flapping scalloped taps
snapping at heel scuffing toe
on top of
the painted green wood picnic table
to peck out
a raucous recitative
that invited the whole neighborhood
to join in
a cacophonous chorus of
Shine shuffla shuffla shuffla
on tippety tappety kick
Shine on two three
slide four har
five
vest rest
moon clickety clackety clackety
break.



INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM STAFFORD

William Stafford, poet and teacher, was born in Hutchinson, Kansas, in 1914. He received his BA and MA degrees from the University of Kansas (1936, 1947), and his doctorate from the University of Iowa. Though he has taught at schools and colleges in California, Kansas, Oregon, Iowa and Indiana, Mr. Stafford has also worked as a farm laborer, oil refinery worker, and U. S. Forest Service laborer, and has been active for the Church of the Brethren and Church World Service. In 1970-71, he served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress and is currently Professor of English at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. His work has received numerous awards, including the National Book Award, Guggenheim, Poetry's Union League Prize, and the Shelley Memorial Award. Mr. Stafford's publications include Down in My Heart (1947), which is an account of his experience as a conscientious objector during World War II and which was also his KU master's thesis, West of Your City (1960), Traveling Through the Dark (1962), The Rescued Year (1966), Allegiances (1970), and Someday, Maybe (1973). This interview took place in October, 1974, at the University of Kansas. The interviewers are David Stewart and Michael Smetzer.

STEWART: Last night at your reading you said that you don't have a "sense of place" which seems to run through a lot of contemporary American poetry.

STAFFORD: It's a strange thing, I really don't know where to come down on this question, which side of it or some other dimension. Because I hear many writers talk, and usually in a very committed way, about "sense of place." And there are places I like, but there are quite a number of places I like. But I have a feeling that the place is not so important as a feeling about whatever place it is. So I thought of a way to put this (just a juggling of old ideas) that is: There are places I wouldn't want to visit, but I could live any place.

STEWART: Last night you also spoke about writing and the connection between writing and speech. You said that writing is something easy because it's connected to speech. But you saw some problem in an unsympathetic reader being able to pick up the signals of speech from a printed page. What is the relationship between speech and writing?

STAFFORD: Well, the fluency in language that we all have when we talk among friends -- because we practice every day -- is something

that seems to me important to keep hold of when you write. And I guess I was trying to be on guard against being part of a university experience for students there last night that would strengthen what seems to me to be a mistake: the idea that writing is something that you learn in a university. No, no, no. You already have -- even before you start grade school -- you are already adept in language. And this is much more important than little things like comma splice or something like that. It seems ludicrous that those things would have at all the importance they have than the knack of language. The knack of language is something we practice every day, talking and thinking. And I think writing is using that knack.

STEWART: You compared using this knack to something like leaning back against a snow bank. You suggested that we don't clothe our ideas with words, but we pick up on something and try to find a pattern.

STAFFORD: Yes. Writing, like talking, to me, is following leads that open up. Just as I'm talking now without planning it ahead of time but knowing that there will be leads, because the activity makes things happen. And many people get frozen about writing because they are induced to feel -- and maybe induced by a classroom -- that the interesting part of writing is something that's done before you start. That is, you have the ideas, and you just plan it all out, and then you do the drudgery of putting words around it. But writing isn't like that to me. It's more like flying. It's more like finding those ideas in the process of entering the activity.

STEWART: You said that you don't start out with an idea. Do the words alone suggest the direction of the activity?

STAFFORD: Often the words do. You know anything. A sound that happens when you begin to write might turn out to be "the beginning of the plot." So what I want to induce in myself and to suggest to others is that there's a kind of now feeling about experience that we should all be ready for. And to freeze yourself into any kind of stance about what you are then going to do as a creative person is a mistake. You are not frozen. You are ready for the signals that come at the moment you're living. So you inhale, and that's part of the writing you're doing right at the moment.

STEWART: In many of your poems there is an attention to the immediate. Do you think the poet has a special sensibility to the immediate --

or not a special sensibility -- but does he let those signals come to him? Does he read them better than others?

STAFFORD: You make me feel clearer about this than I've felt about it before. And I think I can sort of fumble my way to a formulation of it -- but it's too new to be sure. It's about like this: I don't really believe that writers, poets, or other writers have a special sensibility. But anyone who happens -- either through inherent ability or just luck -- to write something good, has done it, I think, by becoming available to an immediacy. And some people may do this more readily than others. And they will probably write more things and will have this immediacy in them. But if -- say I choose some awesome writer like Auden or someone -- maybe he has a good idea. Well, I mean there are a lot of good ideas. You can go and look them up in the encyclopedia if you want to. So it's not just an idea. It's something else that happens with that in the process of engaging with it. And out of it will come something that's not in the encyclopedia. It's in Auden and his immediate experience. I'm not sure this is a good formulation.

STEWART: You're described as a "minimalist" poet. Do you think that's a fair description?

STAFFORD: I don't really think it's fair, quite. But, of course, I identified myself that way, partly maybe out of superstition. In order to stay available to this immediacy, one must be ready to welcome even insignificant things. And so it's like touching wood or something to stay in contact with where it all comes from. If it's a little idea, that's all right, that's where I am. But if I feel that I'm reserved for greater things, greater things won't come.

STEWART: When you read your poems, there often doesn't seem to be a clear break between the poems and your comments on them. Is this intentional? Do you feel your poems are an immediate expression of yourself -- your way of speaking?

STAFFORD: I guess I do. I'm sorry to be so wishy-washy in this response, but I don't make the conversation and the poems blend consciously. But I do agree with you that often they seem to, and other people don't know when I'm reading a poem and when I'm saying something about it. And of course I can have all sorts of tremors about that. But mostly, I don't like forensic things. I don't like to be framed by a forensic speaker and I don't want to be a forensic speaker myself. I'm very jumpy about proclamations. And it's just not for

me. I like communication with people in circumstances in which it is possible to say, "Wait a minute," or "What do you mean?" And I would like language -- well, all of it except maybe for a few hymns or something -- to be the kind that it's easy to interchange about. This is not anything final about this topic we're on. But one thing I would say is: A good full half of communication is listening. And I'm an aggressive listener -- I just think of putting it this way. Most people would say something like, "I really told him off." I would like to be the kind of person who would come away from an encounter and say, "I listened better than he did."

STEWART: You also said you were feeling kind of superstitious about language. You wished that you could get away from using figures of speech, metaphor and simile. But you also said that this was impossible to do. How do you arrive at some compromise?

STAFFORD: Well, I know it sounds like a tangle, but I was accepting the metaphorical basis of language -- and when I said "basis" just then, I suppose in a way that's a figure -- so I know that language is like that. But my attitude toward language is not the attitude of striving for metaphor. It's the attitude of getting from here to there. And metaphors will come along like vaulting poles and get me there -- like what I just said. But if I say "like vaulting poles," it's better if I hadn't planned to say it. If it just happened to come along, it's more likely to be a part of getting from here to there. Whereas, if I'm trying to induce figures of speech, they're more likely to be distractive. That's just a feeling I have about language.

STEWART: Do you self-consciously try to eliminate them?

STAFFORD: Well, if they come, if they occur to me talking or writing -- of course, if they occur to me talking, I can't erase them, they're there. But in writing, the ones that occur to me are usually okay, because often they occur because I haven't gone out looking for them. But if I wrote something, and I read through it, and it seemed to be ... and if I noticed the metaphors too much, I think I would be nervous and probably would get rid of them, if I could. "If I could" is a strange thing to say. But I mean there are some ways to get from here to there in language when you can't think of a better way than what has already occurred to you.

SMETZER: What takes the place then of conscious metaphors in your poetry?

STAFFORD: Well, the metaphors are there. See, I'm not saying they won't be there. But the ones that get there, get there sort of by instinct. I was almost going to say, by their instinct, not mine. I guess I was making a little sashay to identify an attitude toward fine writing or forensic effect.

STEWART: Last night you apologized for what you said was "fine writing" in the line, "The far away hills surged back to mind."

STAFFORD: Yes, I was trying to make a point on that -- when I wrote that poem -- it was called "Old Dog" and it was a minimum statement. And I think a poem is something that starts out to be a certain thing, and it really keeps on being that. You know it's a poem by virtue of some kind of ... a sort of laser-effect in language that comes closer and closer to being one kind of language beamed down one kind of effect. And that poem, "Old Dog," the main effect -- the laser part of it -- was this directness. And then suddenly this stray beam goes off it, this "surged back to mind," which was too ... it was, to me, kind of a random stroke. But I didn't think of a better way to get it, so I left it in.

STEWART: Death and dying are often themes in your poems. Frequently you use the image of reaching one's hand through the rain.

STAFFORD: Last night I said, "I hold up my hand for shade." Well, in this topic or general area of poetry I recognize many poems like that. But as with anything else that is in what I write, it just happens to get there -- I mean it's not a policy. But then once you identify it and say it's there, I say: yeah, that's right. And I guess there's a meaning to that. But I think that the frequency that you detect of this topic in the poems is partly a function of what the society wants in a writer. That is, I write many kinds of things, but some things catch the attention of editors better than others. I've even had a poem that has a pessimistic beginning and an optimistic ending, and the editor of the Atlantic accepted the pessimistic beginning but not the optimistic ending. And you know I felt I'm balanced, and he's unbalanced. But if one would read what I've published, he would say that I'm unbalanced. But that's the editor of the Atlantic. Maybe that's a distraction really from being serious about the frequency of this topic. It is an important -- it's one of the ultimates. It's like one of the guardrails of your life -- that's where it goes off on one side. So it would frequently come to your attention. I wouldn't want to be obsessed with it, I guess. But, on the other hand, I wouldn't want to avoid attention to where that

guardrail ends.

STEWART: The first book you published Down in My Heart was a book of prose. Do you ever think of returning to prose? What is the separation between prose and poetry?

STAFFORD: Actually, I prefer prose to poetry, and I think I have all my life. I've read a lot more prose than I've read poetry. I've written more prose than I've written poetry. And mostly I think today that whatever talent is being given to writing, there's more talent writing prose than poetry -- I have this feeling. And when I start to write, I don't know if I'm going to write prose or poetry. I just start writing something. But it just happens that in my life I've been able to excerpt pieces from this on-going, journal-like writing and call them poems and persuade the poetry editor that they are poems. So the publication -- again it's like that editor to the Atlantic who accepts a certain thing -- I'm writing this whole big journal of my life, and I'm selling off pieces of it as poems. This is the feeling I have.

STEWART: Last night you said you would like to have a poem so finely tuned that it could run on the vapors. That seems like the opposite end of starting out a poem.

STAFFORD: If I may take you up on one part of what you said -- the opposite of starting out a poem. Like starting out a car you've got to have plenty of gas going into the carburetor. After it warms up, you can lean it out some more. But actually, I would like as a listener, to talk -- to revert to my saying I'd like to be an aggressive listener. Or reading alertly as a reader, I would like to be available to the vapors from the beginning. I mean it might be that the language would even sound bombastic, but the effects would be refined. That is, you could be misled; there could be some ironies in what's bombastic, for instance -- which would be the real message -- and that's what's delightful. So I'm not just saying that someone has to be quiet. I'm saying that it's got to be rich for a live being who's reading or listening well. And I'll just refer to a passage that strikes me as a wonderful example: the beginning of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" -- the sentence that begins it. It doesn't seem to be starting out as if it's going to be horrifying. But even by the end of that sentence -- if you're really reading alertly -- you realize there's some terrible distortion in this person's mind. You know there's something terrible gone wrong.

STEWART: You've been teaching for many years. Do you feel teaching

takes away your energies for writing? Or does it have some connection with your writing?

STAFFORD: Teaching often gets into a conversation like this, because for many it seems to be an activity that would distract from writing; that it's somehow dangerous -- like grounding both poles of a battery or something -- you're all run down. But I don't have this feeling about teaching or it being an especially dangerous occupation. To write, you must spend some time. That is, some sustained parts of your life must be given over to the sequential effects that will come from starting something and letting it keep on going. And to do so takes time. But any job would take time away from writing. And teaching is just the job that has happened to me. I wasn't so much chosen, as it just came along. I like to read, I like to write. And I'm a ready reader and writer. So it's a convenient thing to do. I don't have either a dread or worship of teaching as a way to connect a writer with a career. It's one of the things to do. I don't think it's especially dangerous.

STEWART: Do you ever teach writing courses?

STAFFORD: Yes, I do, but not regularly, and I'd prefer not to. But just because it seems to me that it's hard -- it's hard to do. Teaching literature is a more relaxed activity to me.

STEWART: Do you think there are any ways of teaching writing?

STAFFORD: Yes, I am a believer in it even though I don't like the practice it -- the teaching of it. It's intricate to talk about. I feel different from many people about teaching writing. I don't believe in correcting a person's writing. And I don't believe in any kind of moving decisively onto someone else's writing and showing them how it should have been done. I believe, rather, in leaning back and letting the person who's doing the writing suggest the issues that are important to that person. It seems to me that the other way floods the writer with what are to him or her at the moment distracting and irrelevant issues. The relevant issues for the writer are the issues that occur to the writer. And I don't want to be the kind of teacher who keeps distracting a writer from what is primary for the writer at the moment. And I think many teachers do that. They are forceful, they are older, and sometimes, they are accomplished. And their effect is to make the writer feel that those little minimum impulses that have been sort of at work in the writing are, most of them,

apparently irrelevant, because they're not hit by the teacher. Well, they are relevant. I mean, whatever the writer feels is the most relevant thing there is. I don't know if this is clear, but it may say something about how I feel about the teaching of writing. I don't know about the teaching of writing, but I think we can induce writing and can carry it on under conditions where the person's little incipient impulses get the kind of credit and attention that they deserve.

STEWART: Do you as a teacher then feel that you present the opportunity for writing to the student?

STAFFORD: "Present the opportunity for writing" is a good formulation. I think another is to be receptive to what happens, what comes from a person's writing. But my ideal response to a person's writing -- and I've memorized this -- it is: "Un huh, Un huh." It isn't blame or praise, just, "I hear you. Tell me some more."

SMETZER: Your poetry has a directness to it. I wonder though, I notice many times during your reading that there's the very direct words of the poem, and then there seems to be a sort of slyness coming out and checking out the audience. Do you feel that you have a certain kind of wariness beneath your poetry? Would you describe your poetry as a kind of wary poetry?

STAFFORD: Yes, I think it is wary. Apparent directness, and even actual directness, can be the occasion for all sorts of ripple effects. And the ripple effects are interesting to me, sometimes, when the directness is just a way to make the ripples. So I'm not surprised to hear you raise this question. I feel congenial to the implications back of the question that you can sound forensic, you can even sound bombastic, you can sound any way you like, you can sound direct; but for an aggressive listener, or someone who is thinking in the presence of what's happening, there may be all sorts of secondary effects which turn out to be of primary importance.

SMETZER: Do you think there's something about the Midwest that tends to produce this kind of undercutting humor that's very much aware of its own honesty?

STAFFORD: Well, I think losers are likely to cherish those parts of communication that allow them some freedom in the presence of apparently overwhelming forces. So that, to be in a remote area, or to come from some place other than the center of power, or to have

found your way into the big world through the quiet reading of books, undisturbed and unnoticed by those who might otherwise put you to work doing something more productive for them; that this kind of life is conducive to a kind of language and a way of thinking that welcomes nuances and disguises and ironies. And I myself feel a part of the counter-culture. The counter-culture to the forceful-culture that otherwise would overwhelm me.

SMETZER: What exactly is the forceful-culture?

STAFFORD: Well, I was thinking of any official culture. Even in some ways, though this is uncomfortable for me to say, even prevailing culture. And in a sense this means any imposed culture is automatically subverted by thought. And there's a literature that springs out of that kind of -- there's a kind of "yes, but" literature. And I feel a part of the "yes, but" part, rather than the "yeah team" part of our time.

SMETZER: Do you think then of New York and California as the culture centers that dominate?

STAFFORD: Well, most of the writers I know from those areas would not feel at all that they're identified with anything official. So, I think this is a very hard thing to talk about and to hold steady so that you are really making some progress on something that has a meaning. Because the dominant and subordinate cultures shift with every new thing that you think about. I was thinking more of myself as a counter-culture person in terms of power in our time. I feel the world is spinning in the wrong direction, but I can't do anything about it. I mean that's the counter-culture feeling.

SMETZER: Like Brer Rabbit in the Uncle Remus stories?

STAFFORD: Yes, I think so. Yeah, don't throw me in the brier patch called Oregon, please.

SMETZER: In terms of literary culture itself, do you feel at home in what is happening today?

STAFFORD: In many ways I do. For instance, the poets I meet, I like to meet, just a whole succession of people we'd all think of who are orbiting around the country. And when they come to our part of the world, I go and listen. I like to meet them. And I'm thinking

about people like Bly and Merwin, Galway Kinnell, Caroline Kizer, Adrienne Rich, and so on. These people are congenial to me as people. This is not to say that we don't find many disagreements or at least many differences in the way we write -- the way we face the world. I do feel different and a distinct minority in the face of current events.

SMETZER: Is that partly because of the simplicity of the language? What would make you a minority?

STAFFORD: I guess I was thinking more about interests and convictions than I was about language at this point. I wasn't thinking so much about the manner of speaking or writing, but the obsession -- or so it seems to me -- of many of the people I meet. Well, even when I was a student back here, way back when, even then I was splintered off from the main culture in a drastic way at the time of World War II. I went off and lived in a concentration camp for four years. And that's maybe had a lasting effect. I don't want to be distorted by it, but I accept it. I still belong in the concentration camp so far as many of the main endeavors of my society are concerned.

SMETZER: In poetry, Merwin, for example, makes great use of myth and poetry that rises to a sort of general level of truth. Do you feel that your poetry is separate from his?

STAFFORD: Yes, I do. I think he's very interesting, and the liveliness of his mind is admirable to me. What happens though is quite different from my own feeling. It's ... I just feel quite different from him. For instance, even when you described the level of truth, I immediately feel disquieted. Truth is something that's just some kind of temporary harmony among random atoms, so far as I'm concerned.

SMETZER: Is there any characteristic that seems to be predominant in contemporary poetry? Do you see any movement that seems to be taking place?

STAFFORD: Yes, I think I see one kind of characteristic that I don't feel in harmony with, and that is, most poets I know are quite ready to take seriously their insights and advice about things pretty remote from their areas of competence. I'm thinking about politics, economics, cultural things, sex mores, and so on. I don't think writers have any kind of lock on the truth in these areas. I myself put my

trust in concentrated, sustained researchers, in those who are in actual practice in the intricacies of politics and economics, than I do in poets. I like to listen to poets, but I don't believe them.

SMETZER: Well, do you think that that's characteristic of poets? Instead of speaking about themselves and their particular experience to speak about the general truths?

STAFFORD: Come to think of it, it's been a characteristic of poets I guess since Homer and Sophocles. So I feel a little bit even more a minority. No, I don't think there's a peculiarity now, but the intensity of the commitment to the truths that happen to be current now is something that a contemporary person would feel more anguish about. I feel the anguish of separation from the convictions of many of the writers I meet. I feel more in harmony with many people I meet who are not writers, who are not under the treacherous influence of public acclaim when they speak.

SMETZER: Does this grow out of the social awareness of the Vietnam War period?

STAFFORD: I think that the Vietnam War period gave many of us a chance to be right, to be morally right. And from being morally right to being righteous is too easy a step. There are all sorts of complications in the world, and I like the exhilaration of being right so well that I have to watch out lest my momentum carry me places that my best self wouldn't want me to go.

STEWART: Do you find that being a poet casts you in a certain role you don't enjoy?

STAFFORD: Yes. Yes. It's still very awkward to be identified as a poet in most parts of our society. And even in those parts that welcome poetry, it is also awkward. Well, I feel it's awkward because it doesn't seem to me that poetry is distinctive, but distinctions are made. I mean that once you identify with this, what I think is a common, inevitable activity of delight in the language, sometimes when you're talking -- and I think we all share this -- then, if you have published some things, you're separated off and there's that kind of feeling that maybe that person is either inferior or superior. Whereas, I don't feel either of these things.

SMETZER: There's a general sort of apathy that seems to characterize

our society following the letdown from the active years, '68 and '70. How is that going to affect poetry and people who write poetry?

STAFFORD: Well, I think that the apparent stimulus that came to public poetry in the years of activity was interesting, but it was not necessarily all good. And that the apparent apathy now is not necessarily apathy. You know people are thinking, and that's a good thing. But I'm not sure that students are apathetic now, just as I'm not sure that any kind of activity is always a good thing. Maybe there's some kind of balance. I do feel sort of dead-ended myself, so I'm not speaking out of any deep conviction for the present times. It's just that when I think about it -- if I try to be an intellectual about it -- then I realize it would be easy to make mistakes about whether we're really apathetic or whether we may be doing better than we did then.

SMETZER: There does seem to be a kind of social apathy. But I guess the question might be about what was going on all along in poetry and the other arts. So I guess that part of what you were saying about the apparent interest in poetry at the time was, you know, "Let's go down and hear the poetry reading where he's going to say bad things about Lyndon Johnson."

STAFFORD: Yeah. Well, those days -- in many ways they were exhilarating. I went to these meetings and I'm part of it. But now, when I think about it, suddenly I think of an image: you know our car had stalled then, and we were hammering on the hood; now, we're down there testing the spark plugs.

SMETZER: And there's fewer of us down there, do you think?

STAFFORD: No. I think we're all busy down there. Hammering on the hood was fun, but it didn't start the car.

STEWART: One thing you were talking about was writing as an excursion, and you didn't feel that people were taking excursions in the imagination --.

STAFFORD: I was thinking that education as I felt it in the high school I visited was being presented to students as the kind of activity in which you read about and you studied about the activities other people did. And you accepted the history of recent events, and you vicariously took trips in the travel magazines; but education was not made to seem like the sustained venturing forth with your own impulses, your

own feelings and ideas, into places that the real world might not even present in actuality. That all the myth, fiction, poetry part was made to seem irrelevant; whereas, in a person's life, the actual things that happen may be pretty largely irrelevant. Something else is taking over. And that whole part or torrent of our inner life was getting no recognition in what was being presented to those people in a library.

STEWART: Is there some kind of pattern in this torrent?

STAFFORD: Yes. I don't know how to account for these patterns, but there are certain inherent readiesses for harmony in the way people think and the way they feel that can be touched. But we find how to do it by our own feelings and our own thinking, not by studying some critic's analysis of twenty variations on the Oedipus plot. We find it the way Sophocles found it, or whoever found it: by feelings.

STEWART: When do you think a person is ready to follow his feelings in that way?

STAFFORD: I think we all do, we can't help but do it. But the surroundings we are in may make us feel more or less confident about the significance or worthiness of such a following out of our own feelings. And I was afraid that education to those people was systematic frustration of their impulses, rather than helping them to realize that for some of the most vivid things that have happened to people, they have come from a willing following out and indulgence in these feelings: a readiness to imagine things.

STEWART: Do you think that that's a trait of poetry?

STAFFORD: Yes, I guess if I had to find an element that's distinctive for poetry, and in fact for the other arts -- I'm not trying to separate poetry from the other arts -- it is that readiness to pay sustained attention to -- to give allegiance to -- the inner life that is distinctive for each individual. And I'm afraid that in some contexts in education we're made to feel that that inner life is irrelevant. But it is relevant, I feel.

STEWART: In your own teaching, do you feel that you can set up the conditions for the expression of these feelings in your students?

STAFFORD: That's my intention, that's my endeavor. And when a student says something, even something that is ... you know a student

may repeat himself or herself, and if I were one kind of teacher, I would feel like pointing out to them that they don't need to say that twice. If I'm another kind of teacher, I know that twice has a meaning. And it's all right. I mean not until they decide to say it only once is it time to say it only once. This is just an example: people come into my office and wave their arms, and I don't feel like saying, "Put your arms down and save your energy for what you're saying." Waving their arms is part of what they're saying.

SMETZER: I'd like to ask you kind of a concluding question. Where do you think personally that you go from here?

STAFFORD: Where? Oh, this is something that it's like being able to ask me to have x-ray eyes and be able to look around the bend in the mountain. To me the fun of it is -- well, the inevitability of it is -- not knowing. Letting immediate experiences lead to unanticipated places.



poonspiece 6/11/74, Indianapolis

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Albert Stainton

NO CROSSING

-for Anthony Smith

Locked in early storms,
just short of the covered switches,
three black gondolas rise--
suspended in the strong waves
of stone that press against them
then stop, fixing their simple
forms-- soaring upright,
flatbed, and prow--
in lines of certain reality,
their elegant steel frames
as motionless as the cedars
placed behind them,
as calming as the washes of snow.

BOILED NICKELS

I. Circus
naked bright buffalo dance
thru dark slots of cave
jungle electric grass chew cuds
of flashing coil silver coats
tinged with tinsel mangle
worn grey worn to dull bonenickel
hoards of stamped beasts cornered
in the fences of railroad pockets

Buffalo Bill heard the clank of bones
saw the plains swept to the till
nailed a redskin's scalp and beak
to the plank flanks of buffalo
saw the prairie dog drown in blood drain
heard prairie chicken lose rhythm
in the clink of skulls and holed aces
piling under the circus guns of Annie Oakley
Calamity Jane and Kit Carson

and Old Bill dead center ring
hawking boiled nickels flayed and boned
and whitehot tender as old moon
falling apart in blackpot sky
served with genuine
buffalodick souvenir toothpick
and scalplock hankie

II. Night in the Museum
Bill Cody rests now
hooked deep in
finger of Denver mountain
amid the assembled clutter
of longquiet guns Sitting Bull's feathers
stuffed buffalo and faded posters:
the spent casings of
an American Shooting star

an owl's cry comes like sudden frost
wrinkling windows to an old man's eye
the straw packed bones of creaking buffalo
shift uneasily under the heavy flanks of night

hoping for the quiet of bright crowds
everywhere dim sandy photos rustle lightly
in their frames remembering the starved eyes
that caught these moments and held them
like a heroin in the blood praying for time
phantoms hang like longlegged girls on calendars
snagged to the wall on bent rusted pins
and below in the frost bitten dirt lie
a few leaves of bone the bare
cold web of the dust of Bill Cody
trembling in the wind of nickel hooves

III. Mountains

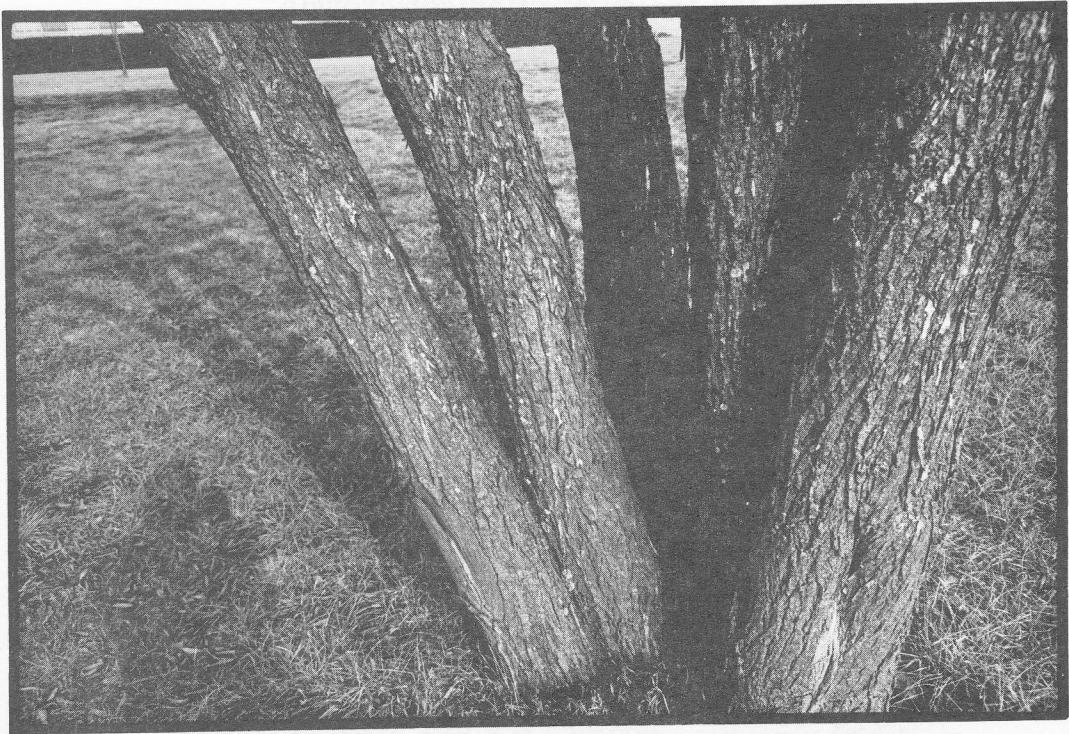
Old Bill knew mountains
knew the nubs of time
the giant stone fists
clenched in the skies
of Colo. Utah Nev. and Calif.
knew the rush of water and wind
that trickled thru the fingers of rock

now the blueburnt smell
of diesel gas and oil
and bright ruffles of steel and plastic
and rubber surge thru
those gummy blackened cracks

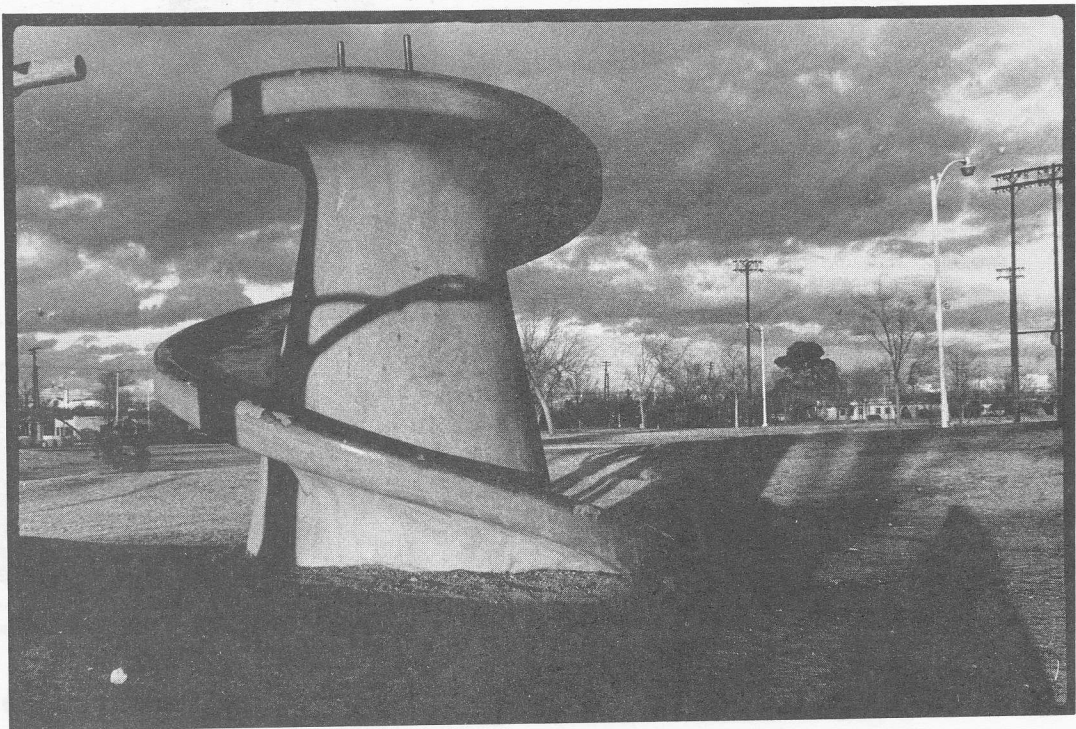
links of tar gravel and cement
bind the stiff still motion
of mountains

like fists
like buffalo purple
humped and horned against
a bloodeye of swelling sun
like buffalo that Bill Cody
plucked like ants
pasted on nickels and clung to
while he drowned in sawdust rings

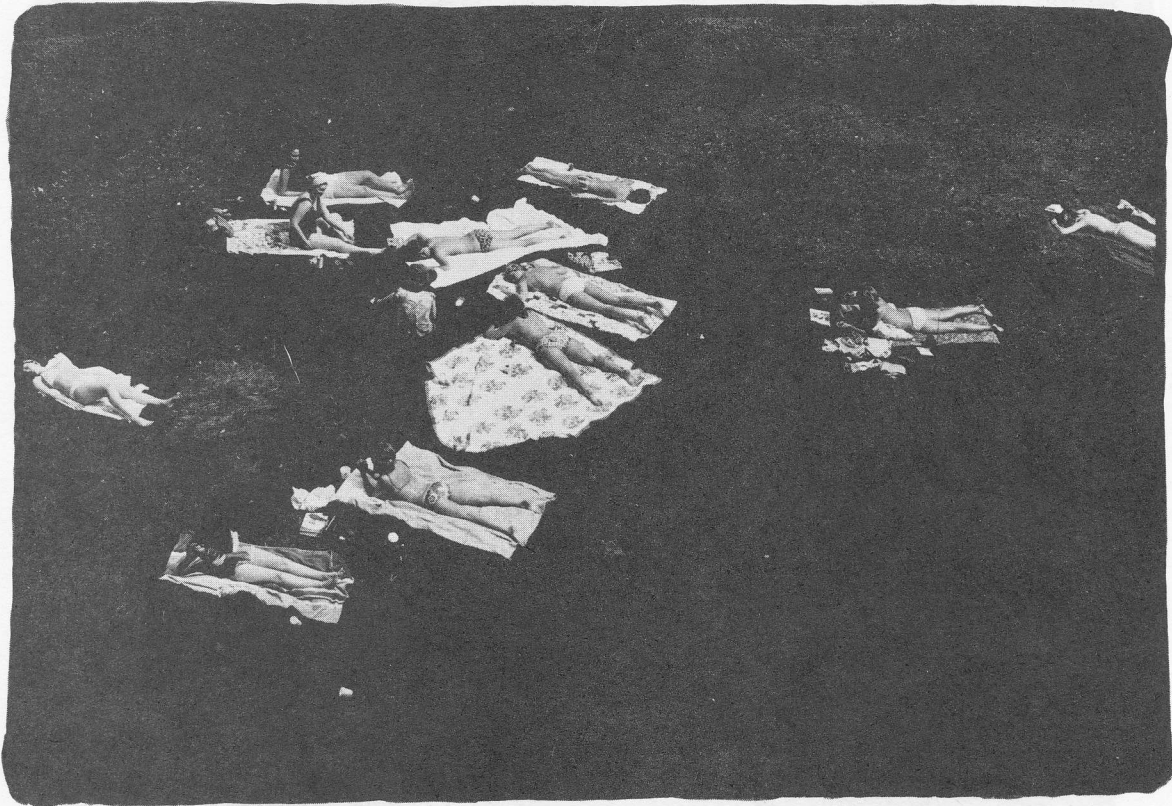




ZOE CLARK



ZOE CLARK



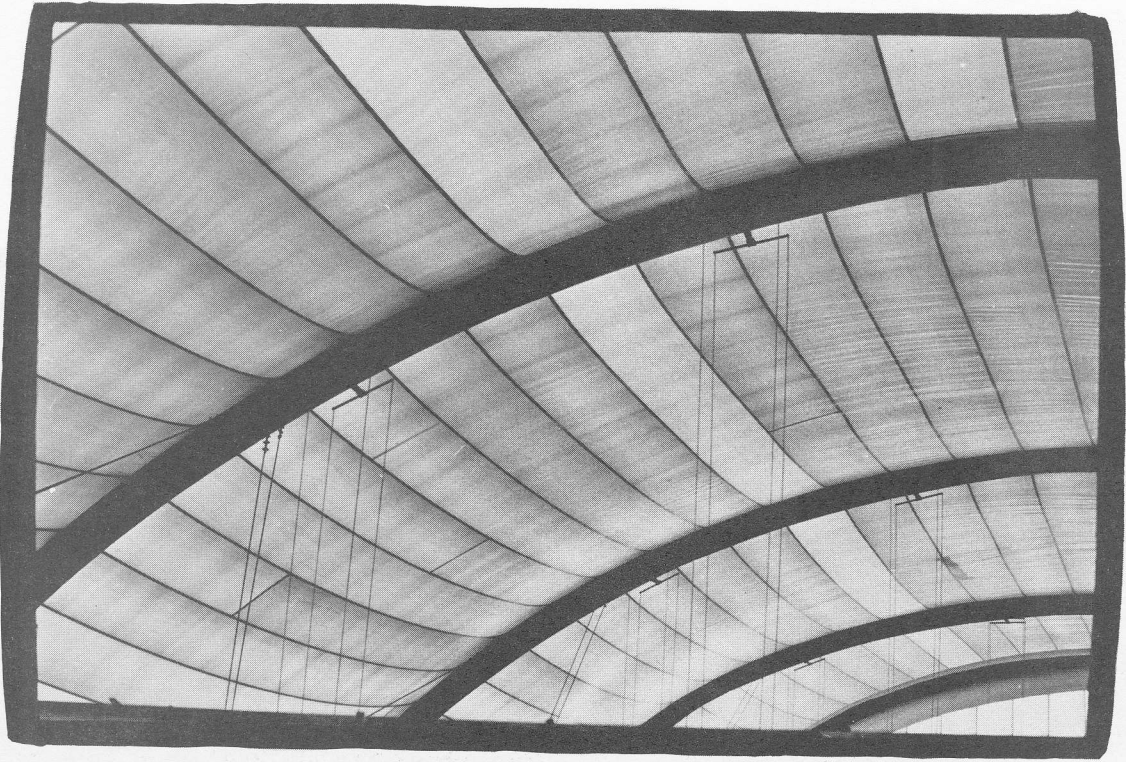
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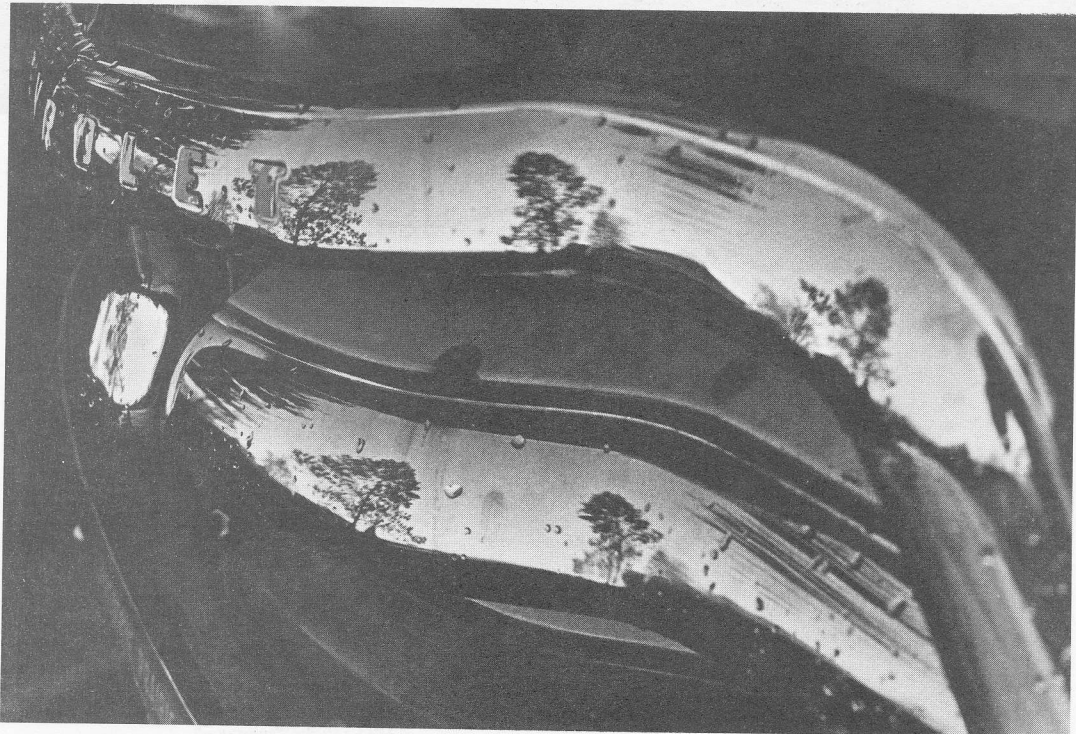
DEBRA SEEMAN



BOB MYNSTER



JULIE RITCHIE



NANCY ALBER



MARTHA PERRY

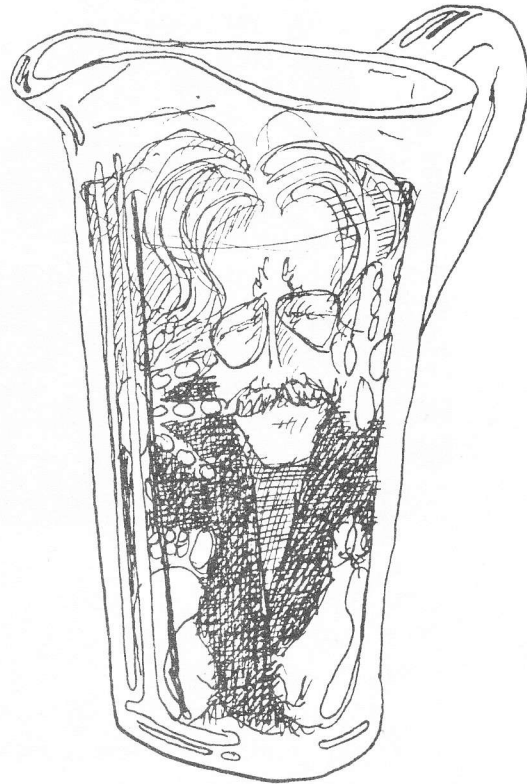


MARTHA PERRY

AMONG THE NYMPHS

We meet at midnight on the steps before the crumbling fountain. Each night the gushing water wears away a bit more plaster, new leaks sprout. Streams of water trickle down the "thousand steps" towards the village. In the morning workmen come and patch them, skim off the leaves and debris with what look like butterfly nets.

I wonder how you'd look among the nymphs, standing bare, waist-deep in the dark swirl, hair down under a shower of spray. Pouring out your bottomless urn. Looking on with morning white on your shoulders as the walls collapse and stairs become waterfalls men try to ascend, waving their butterfly nets and shouting.



CAT

After the turtles died, they were going to have a horse. So his daughter Gail had declared, with what seemed an almost chilling casualness. The turtles, three of them, lived in a clear plastic tank in the kitchen, basked in their own sun, a 150-watt bulb focussed on their rock, ate worms and hamburger and occasionally flies. A little utopian community under his care: Gail had long since lost interest in them. The pan of milk, though, she had set out for a stray cat, yellow, half grown, which had happened by that afternoon, purring and intent, of course, on setting up residence. Gail wanted to keep it. Though it would never do (No, you may not!) Harold rather liked cats, honest, clean and independent. They could be depended on to get the point, this one to take itself off. No hard feelings, just one realist yielding to another.

That Gail could have a pet (not necessarily should) he had some time ago conceded, though he still pointed out dead dogs and cats, run over, when they went out for drives. The turtles had worked for a while, then came the guinea pig, Freddy, who was better (warm body and fur), but one night he gnawed a hole through his cage and disappeared. Mother and daughter pressed the point: why did he not want a pet? Harold had answers. You can't keep a cat indoors all the time. They're destructive and it's no life for a cat. You let them out and you can't control them and with the traffic they're likely to get hit. There was the Steeles' cat, for example; that one, Harold knew, was hard to argue around. An old, smart cat, chased a squirrel out in the street, got flattened. Dogs? Well, there's the leash law; a dog would have to be walked two or three times a day. And no, he didn't believe Gail would do it. Harold didn't want to do it and it wasn't fair to make her mother do it. But Marjorie said she would, she'd do it.

At 9:00, 9:30, the cat began to miaow, steadily, sitting out there on the front porch in the dark where the milk had been. Persistent. Harold went to the door, turned on the light, looked out. It sat there, miaowing, looking up. Damn cat. Water would do it, drench it. Whoosh. But he slipped out the door, pushed at it with his foot: not kicking - nudging, showing it the way. It miaowed, moved, dragging a little. It left a small pool of bright blood near the milk box.

One hind leg was hanging by a tendon, a few shreds of flesh. That must have been the dog barking. Yapping. He felt that he ought to look, to be sure. To see how bad it was. The cat had fleas; it was not thin. The leg, left hind leg, was almost off. The pain, he thought, must be incredible. He remembered -- would never forget -- passing out after skewering his hand to a metal fence spike. In the school yard, at recess, playing something, he'd swung down hard (at a ball, some-

body's head), down on the rusty spike which had pierced his hand, punched all the way through. He hadn't been able to get his hand up and off; the arm was limp, his right hand jumped and fumbled until he fainted. But the cat was quiet, not even breathing hard. Or maybe it was in shock. But it didn't seem to be. Ready to leap back, he scratched it under its chin. It purred a moment, then began to lick at the leg. The blood disappeared as he watched. It was a tomcat.

He turned away and with three steps was in the house, the door safely shut. He called his wife up from the cellar. She didn't hear him, didn't come at once. He yelled. Now! That damn dog, the black one. There was a leash law. And it had dug up the tulips. And if Gail, who had been told, hadn't encouraged the cat, it would never have happened. It would be safely somewhere else. He would give her what-for in the morning. What can we do for it, his wife wanted to know. He was, he knew, going to be made the cat man. Yes, as a boy he'd had cats, but they either died themselves or disappeared or if they were hit by a car, his father shot them. He didn't even own a gun. He wished he had a gun, a .38. He used to, he remembered. He'd got rid of it when Gail was born.

Marjorie was right: something had to be done for it. Obviously. Make a box for it, with a blanket. And gloves, heavy gloves. It might bite. With the pain, who could blame it? She got the box and blankets, he the gloves. She went out first, he -- gloves on -- followed. "Close the door," she said. He held the cat up, clutching it around the chest, pointing at the leg. The cat miaowed, once, hung limp. Marjorie looked but wouldn't touch the cat. Harold swung it nearer to her and she flinched. "Don't," she said. And Harold said, knowing it was true, "He's not going to live, you know. Not a three-legged cat."

He folded it back into the box, trying to work the leg underneath. The blood near the milk box was drying. As they squatted looking at the cat, it began to growl, to make its fighting noise. Then it reared up. The dog, a dog, was standing in the driveway, in front of the car, watching. Motioning Marjorie to be still, he looked for something to throw. Nothing. There should always be a pile of rocks by the door. Taking a deep breath, he leaped down the steps, almost lost his footing, then pounded after the dog, which barked and then loped easily through the thin place in the hedge and off down the street. It was the Kilgores' dog, Ethan, big and black, quite capable of chewing up a cat. He slowed to a trot, a walk, stopped, glad that he hadn't yelled. Or suppose, even, that he'd caught it?

Under the porch light he found that Marjorie was riffling through the phone book. She had left the cat. Why? Suppose another dog....? To get the phone book to look up the Humane Society, since

he had the situation so well in hand, chasing Ethan. A hundred-yard run and his heart was pounding, he could scarcely speak. He would take the book, make the call. She would watch, watch the cat. And this time, not leave it. With the door safely closed, he stopped, sucking air. But what, just what did they want? Someone to look at the cat? Advice? How could he drive the cat over by himself? Suppose it got out. They wouldn't send anybody over, not now, not at this time of night. But they might. Why shouldn't they? He'd seen their truck once, "Gift of the Jaycees" painted on the back.

He hitched himself up on the telephone stool; he'd lost the place, the Society number. Underline it. Looking in to the kitchen he could see the turtles, stacked up on their rock, legs out, all asleep. After eleven rings he hung up the phone. There were three vets in the yellow pages, one reasonably close. The tape told him to call back at 8:00 in the morning; in case of night emergency, to call Dr. Barthel. Barthel was thirty or thirty-five miles away, way out in the country. All Harold could think of next was the pediatrician and he couldn't do that. They'd have to do it themselves. Something. There was that baby squirrel, though, last spring. Mauled by a cat probably. Or maybe just born defective. But they hadn't done anything for it, couldn't; it had squeaked and curled up in the box and died. Gail had found it in the back yard. She had wanted to put it up in the oak tree, in the hole, which did look as if it might be a squirrel hole. Knowing nothing better, he had gotten the gloves -- the same gloves -- and the step ladder and had stuck it in the hole. A minute later it had crept out, looking like a rat, fallen to the ground, danced broken-backed across the grass. It died in the box.

Cracking the door, he called Marjorie into the house. The cat looked up. There was, as he said, nobody at all. Yes, they would have to do something. "Well, what?" Marjorie wanted to know. Out on the porch waiting for Harold to do his phoning, she had finally touched the cat, with one finger. It had purred and she wasn't afraid of it any more.

"How about some medicine?" She agreed. But what kind: that was the question. Something to make it feel better. And Marjorie said, without thinking, "It doesn't seem to be suffering." And Harold: "If you'd had one leg torn off. . . ." "Well, what then? Bufferin?" Marjorie was still annoyed with herself for saying that about the cat. What a stupid thing! But it didn't, it really didn't! To get to the bathroom, at the end of the hall, they had to go past Gail's open bedroom door. Harold thought they did not need her in this, although -- again -- maybe tomorrow he would tell her what had happened. In the bathroom they searched the medicine cabinet. Bufferin. Donnagel. Erythrocin.

Ampicillin 250. Darvon. Allerest. Coricidin. Robitussin. Dimacol. Palmolive Shave Cream. Blades. Chanel Bath Oil. Ardena Skin Deep Milky Cleanser.

Jumping from the porch Harold had twisted his ankle. His wind was back, but his ankle hurt, a shooting pain. It really shot, right up to the knee. He had to walk and stand carefully, so as not to favor it. He didn't want Marjorie to see it. He was about to say that Bufferin was as good as anything when he saw what she hadn't seen. Right there. Seconal. This he did know how to do: put the pill in a ball of hamburger, pop it in. You got their mouth open, put it at the back of the tongue: they had to swallow. He explained. Marjorie wasn't sure. Could she think of anything better? Seconal wasn't strong, never worked worth a damn for him, but on a cat it should. Just go to sleep and not wake up.

In the kitchen they made the pill ball, hacking at the frozen hamburger, kneading it, forming it round the Seconal. They made two. Best to have a spare. Harold left three still frozen chips of hamburger near the sink; the turtles would like them when it was over. The gloves, where were the gloves? They'd been by the phone, he'd taken them off there. They weren't there now. Sitting up on the counter he conceded, almost expansively, that he couldn't keep track of anything. They'd try it without the gloves. Yes, he thought it was safe. He opened the door for his wife.

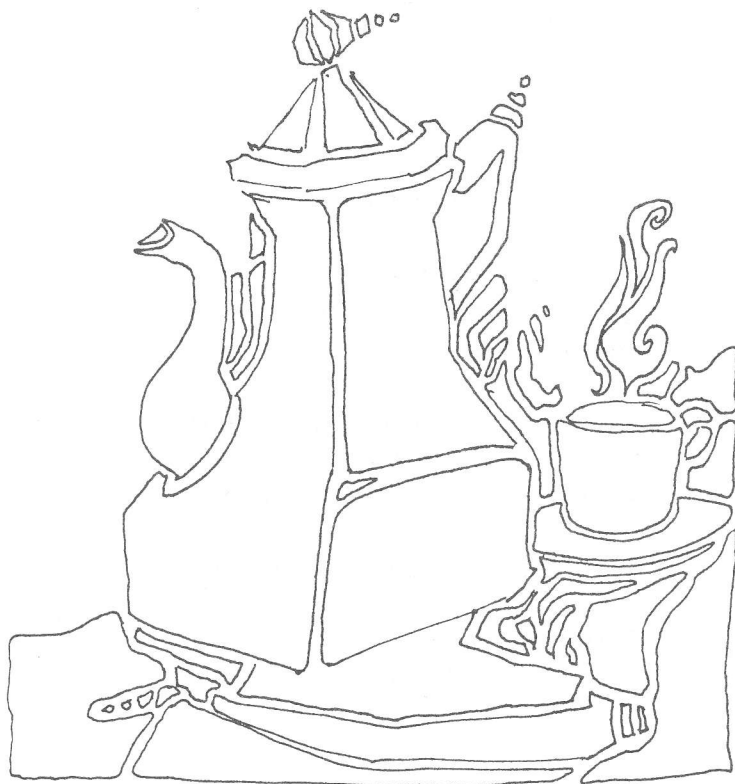
The cat was gone. No trail of blood, just gone. That was what cats did, he told her, just creep off somewhere and die. Where was the flashlight? Why didn't they have it? She would get it. Quickly. After a minute or two they found the cat, sitting round the corner of the house, under a rose bush. It was alive, it purred as he scratched under its chin. How could it purr, how could it possibly? As Marjorie watched, he went back to the porch to get the box.

They gave the cat both the pills. Harold put them in. It choked, swallowed again, licked its lips, looked up at them. The pupils of its eyes were very small. Marjorie squatted by the box, patting it with both hands. Harold sat down on the milk box. They watched. It might, as he said, throw up the pills; they should stand by until something happened, until the symptoms began to show. With Harold it took at least half an hour before the stuff worked, before he felt anything. If he thought about anything, it took longer. He wondered what the cat was thinking about. You couldn't tell, no way of knowing. But it was probably starting to feel something -- heavy, limp, sick at its stomach. But maybe the pain was better. Five minutes and the cat began to shake its head as if bothered by flies. It began to breathe quickly, shallowly. As Harold reached for the box, it bristled, then shook its head, then

purred. Marjorie suggested some milk but Harold said no. He was afraid it would dilute the Seconal. The cat licked a front paw, then yawned widely, showing sharp teeth and pink tongue. Marjorie looked misty eyed, swallowing and swallowing. Harold thought it was time; he picked up the box. The cat's eyes were almost closed and it was drooling. After a quick passage, he deposited the box near the snow tires, closed the garage doors, listened a moment at the crack. Nothing.

Marjorie was waiting on the front porch. "That poor, poor thing," she said. Though this was the time to make the point, that that's what happens to pets, Harold only nodded. He wondered what was happening to the cat now. He fed the turtles and he and Marjorie went to bed early, before the 11:00 news. They didn't sleep well.

In the morning the cat was dead. It had gotten out of the box and died with its nose at the crack in the door.



VICTOR CONTOSKI

Born in Minneapolis in 1936, Victor Contoski received a B. A. in Ancient Greek (1959) and an M. A. in English (1961) from the University of Minnesota. He spent three years studying Polish and teaching American literature in Poland before receiving a Ph. D. from the University of Wisconsin. His books of collected poems are Astronomers, Madonnas, and Prophecies (Northeast/Juniper Books, 1972) and Broken Treaties (New Rivers, 1973). He has also published a number of short stories, of which the best known is "Vongoom's Gambit." His work in Polish translation includes his most recent book, a translation of Jerzy Harasymowicz's Planting Beeches (New Rivers, 1975).

Of the following poems, "Keepsake" is from 31 New American Poets (Hill and Wang, 1969); "Unkept Promises," "Teeth," "Broken Treaty," "Sea," "Love Poem," "Rearranging the Furniture," and "Nocturne for the U. S. Congress" are from Broken Treaties. "Honor" was first printed in Poetry Now, vol. 1, no. 5. "Pain" was first printed in Kayak, no. 14. "The Fingertips of the Dead" was first printed in Everybody's Ex-Lover, no. 1.

HONOR

Blood on my shoes
honor on my shoulders
like epaulets

I pass the children of smoke
who sit by the road
weaving a crown of thorns.

Is it for me, I cry, for me?

Yes, yes, they say.
Wear it with honor.

UNKEPT PROMISES

It was rotting in the wall
for months like a mouse
caught in the hidden wire
and executed offhand.

Gagging we gingerly
took it out in pieces
with pliers and threw
the hunks in the garbage.

Then we opened windows.

But the wall
will never be clean again.

REARRANGING THE FURNITURE

"I don't like the wall," she said.
"Knock it down."

True to my vows
I set my hammer to work
no questions asked.

"Is it done?"

"Not yet."

"Hurry up."

"Now it's finished.
Look:
the house is tottering."

but she ran out crying:
"freedom! freedom!"

TEETH

1

Kiss the one you love.
Behind the lips
teeth are waiting

like a man with a weapon
waits in a dark alley.

2

They are not knives
but clubs.

They come down on meat
like a lead pipe
on the head of a woman.

3

Sometimes in dreams
they wither and turn soft
like rotten cactus.

They curl up and fall out
like men refusing to fight
an unpopular war.

4

If you are beaten long enough and hard enough
your teeth will be knocked out.

Then you can use them as chessmen:
front teeth, pawns;
back teeth, pieces.

5

They line up in the mouth
like soldiers for inspection.

Ever since I can remember
they have surrounded the tongue,

reminding what is soft
of what is hard.

PAIN

Pain lives in a house
by the side of a road.

Only the regulars
know her number.

Her girls solicit so quietly
hardly anyone suspects them.

Yet one day when you are lost
you will knock on a door

hoping for directions
and there will be Pain.

And her beautiful, evil daughters
who have long desired your body

will take you in their arms.

NOCTURNE FOR THE U. S. CONGRESS

Shadows fall like men
on the steps of the U. S. Senate Building.

The sun goes down over the House of Representatives
like a motion to discuss secret wars in Asia.

The janitor turns out the lights one by one.
He searches the empty washrooms for bombs.

The urine of our elected representatives
disappears like the young. It goes underground
where it mingles with the urine of the poor
and the statesman-like urine of the president
and the pale virtuous urine of the first lady.

Oh, it is night
when taxes ripen like grapes.

It is night for the Department of Commerce.
It is night for the United States Treasury.
It is night for the Ways and Means Committee.

The pure stars march across the heavens
of Washington D. C. like armies.

And darkness descends on the Department of Justice.

THE FINGERTIPS OF THE DEAD

Plant the fingertips of the dead
in a cool, dark place. Pray over them.
They will come up through the ground
like mushrooms. Poison, of course,
but beautiful. Beautiful.

They touch our faces like lovers,
leaving cool spots, white as frostbite,
that will never be warm again.

LOVE POEM

Because of you
I do nothing.

You have sewn pockets
around my hands.

SEA

1

The sea inside my chest cavity
surges with the moon.

It pulls me so
I can hardly stand.

When I lie down the tide goes out,
revealing the scattered bones.

2

No one will know
 what teeth stalked this hollow.
No one will know
 what small things were devoured.

3

What has eaten
will not feed again
for some time.

Somewhere in the depths
the ravenous fish of my heart
lies hidden.

KEEPSAKE

I keep a pair of lovers in my pocket,
shrunk and mummified according to
traditional rhythmic incantations.

No bat wing or mandrake root for me.
They say my stuff has good seasoning
with just the old, reliable lovers.

And yet I can't help thinking of late
they've lost the early flavor, being
perhaps too long without light and

having the unpoetic company of greasy
coins, buttons, and snotty handkerchiefs.
Someday I'll have to get rid of them

for a fresher pair with more juice,
but I'm a sentimentalist unabashed.
I like the homey feel of old lovers

jouncing together there in the dark
like nickels, all their rough edges
removed. Souvenirs of the war.

BROKEN TREATY

These words
written in trust
lie now
shaming
the good white paper.

BOBBY

To Bobby, there was only one band, the Jefferson Airplane, and only one drink, 7 and 7. We stayed in New York City with a famous country and western singer Bobby met in the army, right after we got married. He introduced Bobby to the Jefferson Airplane. Bobby said they were "good people" and liked them right away. Pretty soon we had to go back to Muncie. Bobby drove a dump truck all day and come home and flopped.

Him and me went to St. Louis for Easter of 68. We drove past the arch on I-70.

"I know some guys got stuck up in there once. On the elevator."

He said that's all he remembered from what the guys told him. We didn't go up in the arch but took some old boat down the Mississippi.

It goes past Cairo then turns around. It's a pleasure boat. We stood on top deck, near the whistles, cause it'd rattle when they blew. He kissed me so darn hard he give me a beard burn.

There was a dance floor on the boat, air-conditioned, and below that a game floor where Bobby wanted to go, he said, to try his hand at lady luck.

I couldn't hardly get Bobby on the dance floor. It was polished up like a glass. Tables set all around the floor, underneath a balcony. Once I got Bobby out on the floor though we really danced up a storm. He started cutting up in front of everybody, like a funny monkey or a dog. The music had a lot of saxophones in it. Finally Bobby had it though and after telling me he was sorry, left me standing right there. It hacked me.

We both thought the world of St. Louis though so we drove to Muncie, rented a U-Haul and drove everything we had back to St. Louis. For five years Bobby kept watching the papers to see would the Jefferson Airplane come to the city.

Against his will, Bobby, a natural carpenter, began riveting for a living. He worked for Lucky Aircraft. Swing shifts were his and my life for three years. But he had low seniority, even then, so they laid him off. He pulled some pay from Seven-Eleven but was held up and his right hand shot off by some trash who didn't get sent up when they caught him.

Bobby turned sour. Looking for an answer, we turned to welfare. The social worker come after we moved our bed to the kitchen when January was godawful. Stood in our living room scribbling on something. I said come into the kitchen where its warm but she said it was alright. Bobby come out and says Whyn't you chickens come in

here and cluck. I asked how it felt to be ignorant as well as ugly. He turned his face to the side and traced his profile with his middle finger. He thought he was cute.

The social worker said let's go to the kitchen.

It was a little dirty thing and had our bed in it cause it was the warmest place in the house. I try to keep the place decent but living with Bobby and living decent ain't always the same thing. I had the bed covered with a plastic sheet, so if Bobby spilled a Pepsi or something on it I wouldn't have to launder it.

The bed was pushed right up to the sink. Usually I kneeled in bed to wash the dishes and my back got sore. Me and the girl come in. Bobby was laying in bed smoking a Pall Mall and reading a model railroading magazine. I picked up the onion I was peeling on before. I heard her take her coat off. I turned around and looked. Her skirt was short. Her thighs were worse than mine, but her skirt was awful short. Bobby stared at her but then didn't say anything. He clams up when you want to get something out of him.

Bobby's new vinyl hand was hooked onto his arm. Took a whole buncha straps and wire to hold it in place while it mended. Specialist said when the hand took Bobby'd be good as new. I personally think he charged a lot for having a ratty little office. The location wasn't that hot either.

"Mr. Ronald?"

Bobby just stared at her. He was hanging a cigarette out his mouth.

I told her she could call him Bobby. I knew he wouldn't say nothing.

"The caseworker, I'm the caseworker." She handed him a little card, or tried to, then had to take it back.

Bobby was drunk. He winked at her.

"I dig the Airplane baby. Write that down."

"Mr. Ronald, I'm the caseworker. The city sent me. Please don't make this trouble."

She asked Bobby what he made. She wanted bank books, rent receipts, stuff we ain't got.

They told us we don't qualify. After three months we got a phone call said you don't qualify.

To this day, I don't know why Bobby didn't turn completely mean. In a way, he tried to be sweet. One day I got out of bed, he was on the drainboard holding a terry cloth towel. It was all drippy. I asked him whats in the towel.

"Buncha dead things. God knows what all."

I told him to watch out or the little men in white coats would

come. He fired the towel at me. All these dead things flew out. There was something sticky on them. It made me mad but Bobby laughed himself sick. Bobby liked to throw these dead things.

He started drinking 7 and 7 in the morning and sucking up sleeping pills in the afternoon just to avoid the real world. One afternoon I was out shopping and come home early. I found him in the bedroom, down in a corner, wearing my underwear. A polaroid was set to photograph him.

I was pretty disgusted. I said did he feel sick. He said the hand wasn't taking. It wasn't healing right, he was sure. It bothered him.

"Cocksuck doctor."

That language is ugly to me. If you use a stool mouth you should be spanked like a puppy. The specialist didn't have nothing to do with the fact that Bobby was dressed up in his and his wife's own house like a woman or a homosexual.

One thing led to another and our criminal life began. Bobby said nothing was worth anything to him, not even getting caught.

I was almost caught up in his thinking but not quite. He would say that the only prison was the mind itself. In my dark hour this thought come to me: a man may lose everything but his self-esteem for himself and family. And out the window with his self-esteem goes his manhood and his pride.

The Jefferson Airplane finally come to St. Louis. For the show, Bobby bought a black cowboy shirt with purple embroidery and a silver satin star on the back. His slacks were tight and he looked good, his hair slicked.

I lay in bed reading Life. I was dressed.

He had angry words over the phone with a hotel clerk he called up early to see if the Airplane was staying there and the room number. I got upset and my back started aching with Bobby yelling. Bobby was awful nice to me though, and laid down the back seat of the Ford so I'd have a flat place to lay on. I rode to the concert that way.

There was a ticket box outside the auditorium. We was told the only seats left was standing room only. Bobby paid, but before he walked away he spit on the glass, and left it to dribble down in front of the girl's face.

In the lobby you could tell everybody and his brother had showed up. It was so literally packed that we just barely got in. We was really hacked now. We figured they wouldn't sell tickets if you couldn't get in. We tried to push our way by some people but they just looked at us like dirt. Bobby shoved one guy real hard.

On the street you could hear the band over loudspeakers. In

the lengthening evening shadows around the houses and bushes, and eventually work our way across the street and through a line of tall, leafy trees to the empty house, from whose dark, wall-less first floor we could watch the goings-on of the adults in the street- and porch-lamp light across the street, without being seen ourselves. It was a simple ploy, but it took cooperation to set up the proper situation and not give one another away.

On this particular night, however, we found that we had been followed, by Brenda Sue McMichael, the five-year-old little sister of Donny McMichael, a neighborhood hero who wore a black leather jacket and combed his hair very carefully into a wavy ducktail that one made fun of at his peril. Donny rode a big, noisy motorcycle that he was always working on, and that the grownups all hated, but he was a hero to the rest of us because, if you didn't do anything stupid, to make him mad, he would sometimes take you for a ride on the motorcycle, and he had taught Lester Tibbetts how to shoot a jumpshot, and promised to do the same for me when I was in junior high.

Being Donny's little sister didn't give Brenda Sue any special status, but we couldn't very well send her back across the street and expect her to keep her mouth shut about where we were, so we were stuck with her.

It seemed unbearably tedious in those days, to be burdened with the company of a younger child, so we did what we could: we told Brenda Sue to stay on the first floor and play, while we risked a trip to the empty, open second floor, even though the adults had not gone in yet, and could see us if they were looking for us. To lessen the chance of discovery, we lay side by side on our bellies, chins resting on crossed forearms, on the far side of the house, looking out over the dark river at the darker prison farm beyond. Only if we turned sideways and peered upriver could we see the faint reflections of downtown lights, rippling in the water.

"I wish there was something to throw off," Roberta said after awhile.

I thought about it for a time, though it didn't occur to me to ask why.

"Go get something," I said at last.

"Where?"

"Down below."

She gave a giggle, which she muffled by pressing her face against her arms, then said: "That's dumb."

We lay again in silence for awhile, and after a time, I noticed that the wind off the river had grown stronger, as it did before a rain. Brenda Sue's voice came up to us softly from below: "It's getting chilly."

We wriggled to the edge of the second floor and looked over, our arms dangling, at Brenda Sue, who stood on the ground just outside the unfinished building, near the concrete steps to the basement. She was looking up at us, and we were near enough to talk without shouting.

"I think it's gonna rain," I said, and then, on a sudden inspiration, added, "Maybe there'll be a tornado."

"I've never seen a tornado," Brenda Sue said, sounding more curious than frightened.

"Neither have I," Roberta added, as if it were one of the major disappointments of her life.

We all looked around at the edges of the clouds for awhile, Roberta and I rolling over onto our backs to get a better look, but nothing looked much like a tornado. I turned back over on my stomach and looked at Brenda Sue again.

"It looks like tornado weather to me," I told her. "Maybe you ought to go on home."

She shook her head.

"If there's a tornado, you're s'posed to go in the basement," she said. "We don't have a basement at home, but I can go in this one here."

After a moment's thought, I said, "It's real dark down there. You'd get scared."

"There might be someone down there," Roberta added.

"Maybe that guy from the P-farm is hiding down there, with a big knife."

"I'm coming up with you," Brenda Sue announced.

"No," I said, more loudly than I should have, but it was too late; her steps were already sounding on the rail-less stairs.

"Maybe he really is down there," Roberta said to me, more seriously than before. "I'm getting scared."

"If he is we'll catch him," I said, not really taking the possibility seriously. "I'm not scared of him. Probably some old wino."

"I bet he's real big and mean," Roberta argued. "And he's got a scar right across his face, right between his eyes and his nose, and he's got a big knife."

Just then the wind whipped across the wooden platform, blowing up Roberta's skirt momentarily like a parachute, and she shrieked and pulled it down. I spun over on my side and looked apprehensively toward the houses across the street, a bit startled by Roberta's yell, thinking the grownups must have heard it too. Fortunately, however, everyone had gone inside except two neighborhood men, neither of them related to any of us, who were talking heatedly about something, with

jerky, emphatic arm movements. They didn't appear to have noticed the shriek. Footsteps tapped behind me and I spun back the other way, half-sitting now, to find Brenda Sue grinning at me.

"I scared you," she said.

"No you didn't. You were supposed to stay downstairs."

"I didn't want to. It's getting dark."

I decided that I didn't want to argue about it, so I lay down on my back again, my head flat, looking up at the dark, cloud-covered sky.

"There's a couple of guys there," Roberta said softly.

I rolled over on my side, toward the river. Two boys, teenagers, were coming slowly along the gravel riverside road that functioned as an alley for houses on this side of the street. One of them had blond hair and, for a moment, they looked like Donny, Brenda Sue's big brother, and his blond friend Bobby Duckworth. I had an impulse to hail them with the same kind of mock-insult they used in talking to one another.

"There's one of them juvenile delinquents," I called. "Two of them."

They stopped and looked up, startled, and there was enough light to see that they were total strangers to us. As soon as they spotted us, they started moving toward the house.

"Don't let that kid that yelled get away!" one of them shouted to the other.

I whirled toward the street, my heart suddenly pounding, knowing they would reach the bottom of the stairs before I could get down, but thinking the two men across the street must have heard the exchange. To my horror, the yards were all empty, the porchlights extinguished. I looked back at Roberta, my mouth wide open, and saw her standing wide-eyed near the edge, her hands clenched at her sides. Brenda Sue was sitting crosslegged beside her, looking curious, as if she thought it was a game.

They were big kids, though they looked a little younger than Donny -- probably junior high age. The blond one, who was shorter than the other, had a sharpchinned face that seemed incredibly, malignantly ugly in the shadowless dark of the second floor. His hair was not wavy, but kinky, like a nigger's, I thought, though I had never seen a black man, except on the Busbys' television, on news shows. The other, taller boy had long, black, very wavy hair, piled up in a pompadour in front, more elaborate than Donny's hairstyle. Though the blond looked very angry, the blackhaired boy looked amused; he even gave me a little grin as he rose up out of the open stairwell, as if it were some friendly misunderstanding. I was still staring at him,

perplexed, when his shorter friend grabbed the back of my neck, his fingers pressing painfully just behind my ears.

"How come you yelled at us, you little son of a bitch?"

"I didn't yell," I said without thinking, and the other boy broke into laughter.

"There's only you and the chicks," he said.

"You better learn to watch what you call people," the one who held me hissed. "You deserve a kick in the ass. You know that?"

Before I could respond, the other said, "Come on, Bing, he's just a little kid." For one crazy moment I wondered if the blond boy were called Bing because of some imagined resemblance to Bing Crosby, which seemed somehow frightful, or if it were his real name, and I pictured for an instant a boy I had known in second grade, whose parents had named him Smoky, after reading Smoky the Cow Pony.

"He's old enough to learn not to call people names," Bing said, in an odd, fretful way, and shoved me away from him, so that I fell to my knees a few feet away, my back toward him. I edged around carefully, staying on my knees, to see what they would do next.

The darkhaired boy had turned his attention to Roberta, who stood with her back against the only upright fixture on the bare second floor, a two-by-four with a plywood section nailed to one side, as if someone had started putting in a wall and given up after nailing one piece of wood to another.

"What's your name?" he asked her.

"Puddentain."

Roberta's response so astonished me that I wondered for a moment if I had misinterpreted the whole thing, if it were really some innocent bit of joking, which she had somehow seen through. Then I saw how she glanced jerkily at Bing, who had come up beside her.

"You're not bad looking," he said in a quiet, neutral voice that was startling in its contrast to the strained voice he had used to address me. "How old are you?"

"Old enough."

The darkhaired boy grinned and said, "Maybe you are, at that."

In that instant I realized for the first time that their interest in Roberta had nothing to do with their anger at the name-calling, that it was somehow more serious and profound, though less clear in my mind. My heart had begun pounding again, even though I understood that I was now out of danger. I kept absolutely still, wanting them to keep their attention where it was, not only because I was afraid of them, but also because I suddenly wanted desperately to know what they might do to Roberta, and to see them do it. Where a moment

before I had only wanted to get away, I now held my breath for fear they might notice me there and send me away.

"She's in the sixth grade," Brenda Sue suddenly burst out, belligerently, as if she had only just realized that something serious was going on. "And I'm going to be in kiddy-garden," she added zannily, "and Donny's bigger than you are and he'll beat you up."

There was a little moment of silence as the two looked over at Brenda Sue, standing with elbows out-thrust at the edge of the platform. Bing made a little movement with his wrist, as if he were skimming a rock off the top of the building, and I focussed carefully on the hand he held out before him and figured out that he had flipped open a gravity knife.

"Who's Donny?" he asked seriously.

"My big brother," Brenda Sue said, not lowering her voice in the face of the knife. "He rides a motorcycle and he beats up niggers. He'll beat you up too."

The darkhaired boy laughed, and Bing snorted and let his knife hand drop to his side, then jerked it back up again.

"How'd you like me to cut you with this?" he asked Brenda Sue, but instead of advancing toward her, he backed up, bringing the knife around in a little loop to just in front of Roberta, who had closed her mouth so tight her lips were wrinkled.

"You better not," Brenda Sue shrieked. "I'll tell."

"Jesus, Bing," the darkhaired boy said. "Knock it off, will you? If that kid starts screaming, our ass could be grass." He stuck his hands in his pockets and grinned at Roberta, who stood up straighter against the two-by-four and stared back at him. Bing shrugged and walked around to put the section of plywood between them and himself. He backed up a couple of steps and tossed the knife end-over-end at the section. It bounced flat on its side against the wood and fell to the floor. He walked over and picked it up and stepped back again, though a little closer than he had been, and threw it again, but it wouldn't stick.

"I'll tell," Brenda Sue repeated, though not so loudly, as if she just wanted to remind everyone she was still there.

Bing picked up the knife and threw it a third time. It hit on the wrong end and bounced back straight at him, so that he gave a little jump.

"Goddammit!" he said, picking it up again and inspecting it, as if there might be something wrong with it.

I glanced back at Roberta, on the other side of the plywood, and saw that she and the darkhaired boy were still staring at one another, though he was no longer smiling. I had the impression that she hadn't heard any of the knife-throws or Bing's final curse. Somehow,

Brenda Sue's challenge and Bing's failure to stick the knife had drained the tension from the situation, as far as I was concerned. I climbed to my feet and stepped to Roberta's side, though keeping away from the area where Bing had been throwing the knife. I touched her arm and she gave a little jerk, but didn't look away from the darkhaired boy.

"That other guy's throwing his knife at the board behind you," I said.

"Whoops!" She came suddenly alive and jumped forward, away from the plywood section. She and the darkhaired boy both laughed at the way she jumped, but then she stopped laughing suddenly and stepped further away from him.

A change came over his face, too, then, and he shook his head sharply, as though there were a fly on his nose, and said, "Come on, Bing, let's drag ass out of here."

I noticed that it had started to sprinkle very lightly, though the wind had died down. Bing threw the knife once more, overhand, as if it were a baseball, as if he were throwing it away. It ricocheted sideways off the plywood and skidded across the platform toward Brenda Sue. She watched it slide toward her and then, just as it stopped, she gave a little kick and it went flipping off the side of the house, dropping out of sight in the darkness between the building and the river.

"You little bitch!" Bing shrieked, and it sounded for a moment as if he were going to start crying, but then the other boy took hold of his arm and pulled him toward the stairs.

"We'll find it," he said.

I thought they were just going to leave then, but instead the darkhaired boy walked over to Roberta and patted a hand on her chest, as if frisking her for weapons.

"Not yet," he said. "But look me up in a couple of years. I got something you want." Both of them laughed out loud then and they disappeared down the stairs. It started raining harder.

We all stood around in silence for awhile, not looking at each other, until we heard the darkhaired boy's voice, from below, saying, "Here it is. Jesus, let's get out of here before we get soaked."

"I'm cold," Brenda Sue said. "I want you to take me home."

Roberta gave a little sigh and went over and took hold of Brenda Sue's hand and they went down the stairs ahead of me. Walking behind them through the front yard of the empty house, where I had started out to be a baseball player, I found myself trying to imagine how Roberta would look without any clothes on, because I thought the darkhaired boy had wanted to make her undress. Thinking about it made my heart beat fast again, but I couldn't really imagine anything very clearly. As we came out of the yard into the street Roberta's face came

into the light and she looked at that moment like someone I didn't know, and I couldn't make her fit in my mind with the memories I had of her. It made me feel sad, but I didn't know exactly why. The wind was blowing very hard again and it blew Roberta's wet skirt against the back of her legs, so that for a second my fantasy of her was partially fleshed out, but instead of making the fantasy seem more real, it made Roberta herself seem more a stranger to me, nearly an alien being, and I felt shivery and cold, not from the wind and rain, but as if I were going to be sick. I ran a little bit to catch up with her and Brenda Sue on the sidewalk in front of my house, trying to recapture something that I felt was lost.

"Do you think those guys were from the P-farm?" I asked.

Roberta shook her head.

"They were just big kids."

"I wasn't really scared, anyway," I lied, wanting her to talk.

"I was," she said. "I still am."

That surprised me because only little kids usually admit that they're afraid of something. I didn't know what to say.

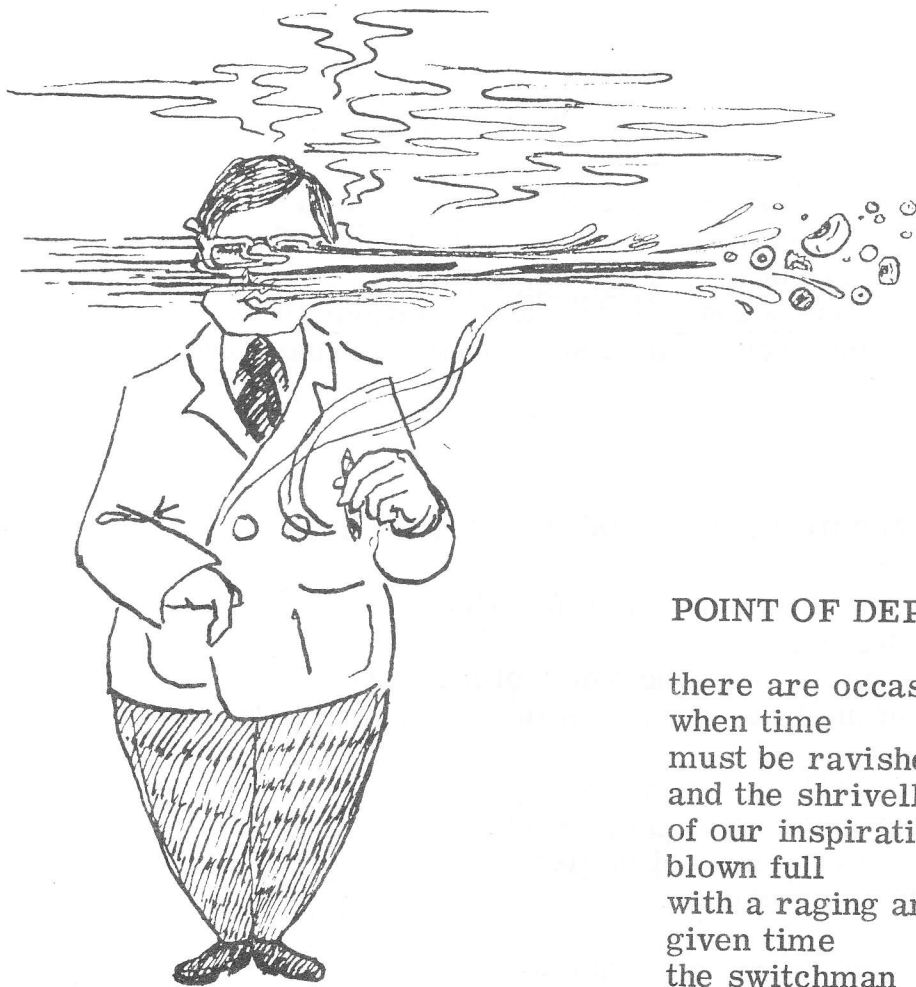
"Do you know what a sex fiend is, Mark?" Roberta asked suddenly, and it sounded like she was mad at me about something. I had a notion of what a sex fiend might be, but I didn't think I could put it into words, so I shook my head.

"No," I said.

"Well, those guys were sex fiends," Roberta said. "That's why I was scared."

We were already past the driveway to my house, so I had to stop. There wasn't any good reason for me to walk further with them, though I wanted to.

"I don't know what you mean," I said, raising my voice a little as Roberta and Brenda Sue moved away from me through the rain, but Roberta didn't even look back to see if I was still there, and she didn't say anything else, that I could hear. She just walked on away from me, holding onto Brenda Sue with one hand and using the other to hold her skirt down against the wind.



David Alleyne

POINT OF DEPARTURE

there are occasions
when time
must be ravished
and the shrivelled foetus
of our inspiration
blown full
with a raging anima
given time
the switchman
will pull his lever
what does it matter
if the train has passed?
a rider killed
in the lounge car
"didn't mean to
just shooting at the train
don't know why"
he was electrocuted
for translating eulogies
of Marilyn Monroe
from the Japanese
(jury's secret)
but he's coming back
to finish
invisible
& perhaps he won't see us
only the train

Trans. Mark Rudman
Bohdan Boychuck

BOHDAN ANTONYCH

Bohdan Ihor Antonych (1909-37) was a Ukranian poet from the Lemkian region. His books of poetry are, by translated titles, The Welcome of Life (1931), Three Rings (1934), The Book of the Lion (1936), The Green Gospels (1938), and Rotations (1938). He was a leading figure among writers publishing in the journal Dzvorry (The Bells), 1930-39. --Ed.

TO THE BEINGS FROM A GREEN STAR

The laws of "Bios" are the same for all:
birth, struggle, death.
What will remain of me--the ashes of my words,
what will remain of us--the grass that grows from our bones.

Foxes, lions, swallows, humans,
the worms and leaves of a green star
are as subject to the laws of matter
as the sky above us is blue.

I understand you, plants and animals,
I hear the noise of comets and the growth of grass.
Antonych is a curly and sad animal too.

BALLAD OF AN ALLEY

Where the night wrings its blue hands
and calls for help without hope,
the drunkards and shadows reel
by the lame lantern.

Bending like a blue flower
the lantern withers--the world's unreal--
only mice are left to lead
drunken shoemakers to the moon.

In that bar with stars and bells
the skimmers and chimneysweepers
sing hymns over their drinks
to praise the voluptuary night.

The lame asthma, lady of sadness,
leans her spongy pocked face over
the unstitchers of safes, crumbling
the false card in her fingers.

Learning on sharp elbows
lovers of shady business
float on blankets of smoke and noise
as stars flutter in the violin's box.

In lairs of chimeras, loose talk and crime,
to the tears of candles--trembling birds--
parakeets read fortunes to skimmers,
words sink into the table like nails.

Tears pour down the cheeks of cutthroats
as they confess their sins to whiskey,
and the forgotten songs crawl
into their husky throats like spiders.

...

Glasses migrate like birds
over the tables, under the ceiling,
beating their glassy wings,
ringing over the bush of smoke
that chokes the bar.

The last star's already withered,
the moon follows and fades,
but in the broken skull of the bar
the choir of chimneysweepers and skimmers
roars and flutters till dawn.

REVIEWS



Paul Kahn. A Kansas Cycle: Poems & Journal. Plainfield, Vermont: North Atlantic Books, 1974.

A Kansas Cycle is a book of poems, prose-poetic snippets, and journal entries -- all relating, one way or another, to Paul Kahn's experiences while, as his biographical note reveals, "working at Lorien Community School (K-4), as C.O. service one year, living in Clinton Township, Douglas County, on rented farm, gardening, tending animals." Originally a New Yorker and a graduate of Kenyon College, Kahn now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts: he was and is an Easterner, and his book in response to the Kansas Midwest is probably the richer and fresher because he is writing about a region to which he is not enculturated.

The opening poem, "The Cycle," concludes with two lines, clearly regional in their reference, which typify part of the author's sense of place and his relation to it and are perhaps the finest in the whole book:

Winds that bow each cottonwood,
flay the mind with their persistence.

These lines are a remarkable statement of the relation between a speaker, one not so persistently here as the trees, and the continuity of geography, of topos, those trees imply. Also, the lines show that Kahn, at his best, has a good ear for language (he is an excellent reader), a good eye for details, and a sense of rhetorical balance in relating the experiential significance of those details for himself. One finds the same qualities in the Gary-Snyderesque "Firewood," where the poet speaks of "Lantern hiss/in night haze closing in." Or in "Hawk," where, by a marvellous act of empathy, the poet says

--I walk
the trails
of air,

I walk
the air
with a sharp eye, --

Or in "The Place," a poem which addresses itself more to the mind-
scape of the poet than to the landscape in which he finds himself:

I must
return to this empty
place: the smooth
blackness, the rough blackness,
rushing by the eye nerves
before sleep.

In each case: a fine evocation -- of place, event, biota, mood.

There are other such fine evocations throughout the book, particularly, I would mention here, of the Kansas sky as a cosmic correlate to mindscape and landscape; they are to be found also, though in less abundance, in the prose snippets and the journal, as well as in the poems. But there are also problems with the book: Kahn is potentially too good a poet to be trying so hard to imitate other poets, such as Williams (surely one of the half dozen greatest poets of the twentieth century and one of its half dozen worst models), Snyder (A Kansas Cycle is, in many ways, almost what he would have written in Earth House Hold, had he lived in Douglas County, rather than elsewhere), sometimes McClure (or so it seems to me -- see "Spider"), and perhaps others; the privacy of some of the allusions may bother readers who don't know Kahn and his friends; the persistent use of ampersand seems an affectation without utility; idiosyncratic or sloppy punctuation may irritate some readers as picky about such things as I am; some of the prose reads like rough draft for poems that never came; some of the poetry is paratactic to the point of unintelligibility; the poet sometimes is self-involved to the point of creating work that is more expressive than communicative; and, finally, although Kahn frequently shows a keen sensitivity to the poetic line, he also gives in sometimes to a certain arbitrariness in measuring the effect of its length and rhythm in relation to syntax (always a debatable kind of judgment, since apparently no one really knows what free verse is anyway).

But these problems should be weighed against the merits of this first book of poems from its author: the fine evocations, the poet's impressive and polymath intelligence, the solid lines when they occur -- and even the first of the three black-and-white photographs

included in the book. Besides, the book only costs \$2.50, a bargain for some good poetry in these days.

--Michael L. Johnson

Norman H. Russell. Russell, The Man, The Teacher, The Indian.
Bigfork, Minnesota: Northwoods Press, 1974.

The thudding title suggests a man eager to write his own obituary and, as the title promises, Norman Russell's Russell is shamelessly, wearily self-indulgent. Russell enjoys several crippling limitations as a poet: a lazy appetite for cliches, a jack-hammer's numbness to language and rhythm, a deliciously studied pretentiousness. Most annoying, though, is his casual lack of self-criticism. This book is swollen with scraps and notebook jottings and merely technical exercises that Russell should have pruned tactfully. Instead of a carefully-selected forty-five pages, Russell punishes us with a cancerous book more than three times as long.

A full quarter of the poems -- "Country Thoughts" -- are absolutely unsalvageable. Whimsies, ventriloquial exercises, they reveal only Russell's hollowness: his "country" is the familiar nowhere of cereal commercials and pop 45s, a landscape as patently artificial and literary as any eighteenth-century pastoral's, as deceitfully barren as those real estate subdivisions that developers insist on naming Misty Glen and Briarwood. When Russell stops leering and mugging he wants to instruct us: the city is bad, he says, the country is good. He pounds this theme at us throughout the book, but in other sections he is occasionally more interesting. "Morning" -- from the miscellaneous middle section, "Other Realities" -- is a typical Russell poem:

how the morning calm
no beaver rises in the black water
the sedges have grown again
a snipe calls
frogs leap
and the feeding doe pauses and raises her head
every thing listens
there are few speakings
the golden balloon of the sun rises and rises
then calling the first wind down the mountain

What a cliché-studded piece like this demonstrates is not the craft of poetry but the ache for poetry, the need to write poetry that will often be satisfied, as Russell is here, with the soothing pseudo-profound. The poet strains, but he cannot make us believe in this poem, he cannot convince us that any part of this poem is more than a literary exercise: this is the work of an apprentice poet fumbling his way toward his own voice. Much of Russell's poetry is like "Morning," and reading it we lean forward to catch a real voice wincing out of the imitative pseudo-voices. I hear it in snatches, in phrases ("all over the city/ people are shrugging their shoulders," "the silverwhiskered bear in the garbage can," "then i heard him coming down in the dark/ behind me making the whisper sounds with his feet," "two little girls whisper secrets to the grass/ little lost sandals everywhere"), but Russell cannot sustain a whole poem. He breaks himself reaching for an animal apocalypse, joining himself to the grizzly and the cheetah and the butterfly. The impulse is too obvious, too arbitrary, too guileful to be wholly satisfying.

Russell actually probes a deeper theme than his simple-minded urban/rural daydreaming, for his book curves from the satirical and melancholy college-life poems of the first section to "Indian Thoughts," in which he gropes toward a provisional resolution, an awareness of tragedy. I suspect, however, that Russell himself failed to recognize or appreciate this proto-narrative, thematic structure since his ersatz country twanging and his pudding poems -- "Other Realities" -- nearly smother it. The book's larger organization seems almost instinctive rather than deliberate, and Russell's instincts are frequently suspect.

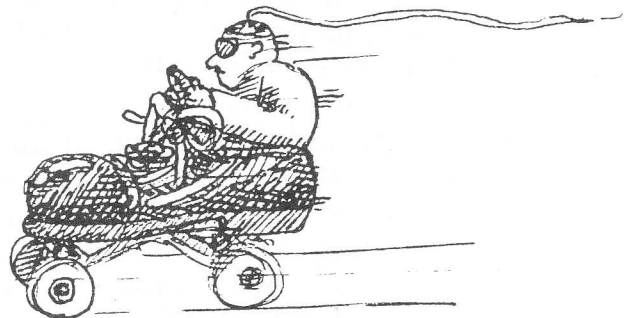
In "At the College," Russell is properly severe. Colleges are sterile, gray; professors lifeless, pretentious; the students are mindless, snarling, ready to tangle, with black-haired thighs and ripe nipples, and someone has shoved them into a hardbacked chair in the library, and we would all rather be someplace else: "hosanna hosanna cried the brilliant sun." But there is something else, too, in these poems: Russell himself. He does not remain detached and his complicity in the academic crime makes some of these dull poems suddenly tart (particularly "The Last Student to Finish the Test," "Grading Tests a Long Semester," and "First Monday"). These poems taste of flesh and most of the words fit my mouth. They betray an anguish that is perhaps soothed but not solved by listening to the sun or watching the squirrel on the power line or breathing out Love to your students at the end of a grinding semester. Empty calories. These are false apocalypses, poetry as spiritual slight-of-hand.

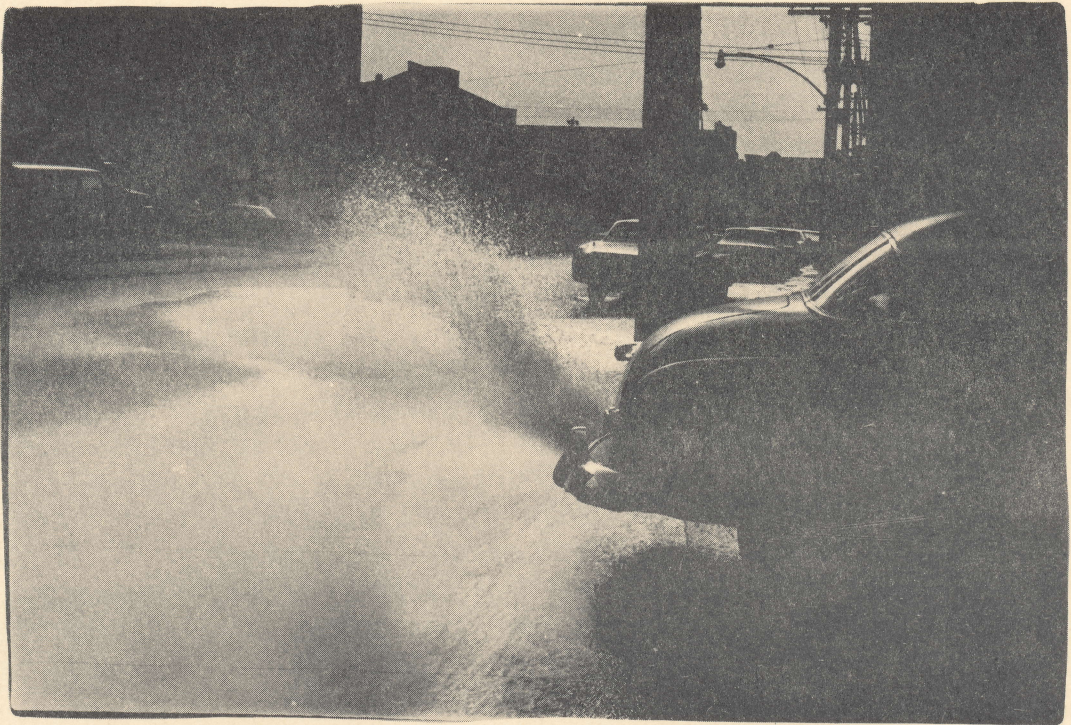
Although the Indian poems are generally predictable, as uneven as the academic satire, Russell does begin stuttering toward a

Columbia, Missouri. Three of her poems appeared in The Last Magazine.

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ROBBIN REYNOLDS