Editors: Rich Ives and Elizabeth Weber

Associate Editors
Poetry: Carol Nord   Fiction: Steven Christenson

Consulting Editor in Poetry: Sylvia Clark

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COWBOY

HUGO: ". . . It's as if you were saying you should have flowed all your life like the wind, like the tumbleweed."

STAFFORD: "Yeah"

(Northwest Review, V. 13, No. 3, 1973)

I didn't know the gun was loaded
when they said you'll have to
defend yourself now

hell

I thought it was just another game,
I had nothing else to do, I said
right
hand me the pistol

and they did.

They led me gently to the door
eased me out
shook my hand
said it was good weather for cowboys,
goodbye.

And there I was alone outside
on a strange street that led maybe to a
marshal's job in Kansas
a drug store in Paris
a starring role in an Italian movie
an exciting life with the circus

hell
I didn’t know,
so I took out my guitar and played
“Nights are long oh so long on the Prairie”
“Tumblin’ Tumbleweed”
and suddenly

there they were all those people
on horses I was surrounded the dust had settled,
I didn’t even have time to draw I was so busy
singing songs, so I just
laughed
and said

well I guess I lost
that one and they said

right, and took me
away.
In St. Ignatius the swallows hit
the dead-end of the sky
then turn on themselves. Indians
thanked the church long ago
and changed into trees. Boys are tired
of fishing and throw a dog off the bridge.

This loving is bothersome,
the dust of this town
sleeping in the clothes on a chair.
Twice a day you wash your hair
so you won't feel lonely, trusting
the faint wind at the window. Here
a moan all the way from the river
asks you out of town.

A girl takes her hand off and gives
it to you. You set it on the bed
and mumble. On the tip of every finger
are friends who never come to visit.
She puts all her fingers in your mouth,
they taste like trout
dropping their eggs
and making for the sea to die.
LETTER FROM NEBRASKA

for Steve

Friend, it has been dry here
for so many days now.
I don’t see too well
and my ducks are hissing.

We farmers watch our fields on the news
then sweat out the stars. Our kids got out
by visiting their ocean friends. Raccoons
I’ve known for years pant at night. They say:
Don’t talk, it’s too hot.

My wife’s face is melting. Lately she’s been
looking in the yellow pages under Beauty.
Peggy’s still around and has a job at the bakery.
She hasn’t forgotten Red’s death yet.
Roger is fine as usual, says he needs to make love
and could I please water his pigs.
I’m trying to work on the poems again.
I guess I’m still forgiving, still on fire.

Oh yes, the cat’s in heat.
If there was an aquarium in this town,
we’d all be there. We wouldn’t talk.
The quiet fish, the damp smells
and the invitations to lust. Friend,
this is it: I wish you were here.
SELECTING THE CARP & LICHEN

for Cary

1.
Below the lichen covered elms,
torn down during one spring rain; the sure factory
of an earthworm's body, churning through loose soil,
nourishing itself & the soil; sparrows & wrens
who hop delicately in the branches,
occasionally loosening a leaf or a seed—

a creek runs, & billows in places, & curves
where land's too hard.

Among such a place,
& younger, my brother & I.

There was a certain time each year
carp would fill our creek, their miserable suction mouths
seining the bottom for food.
We must have speared hundreds,
and never took it to mean more than fun.

One after another, we threw their carcasses on shore.
We thought nothing of nature's charm.
At first, their scales would glisten.
Then they would rot for a long time.

*  

When I drink with others, I always
stagger off alone for awhile, take a breather
from mimicry & reprimand myself.
I get sentimental about things.

Well, around twelve years after the last speared carp
wriggled from our prongs,
I stumbled behind a barn. Drunk, alone,
I came across a skunk
you could hardly call a skunk.
The lice within its entrails
pulsed together, swaying like wind
in a high white flag.

If I hadn’t been drunk, I doubt
I would have wondered back at all about those carp—
whether they became soil: mimicking a creek running,
& billowing in places, or themselves,
before death, swimming together under spears,
more than ever coming back each year.

2.
Behind bars, people realize what went wrong.
Outside, it’s not that easy. Suicide, for instance,
reminds us.

My mother tracks everything back
to religion, for guilt. My father plays golf.
I read, & write things down. But strength is derived
in familial terms, from things you can reach
with bourbon, remembering where you’ve grown.

3.
In Japan, it’s ie; Israel, the kibbutz.
In America, well, I suppose we’d say home,
the nuclear line of production:

a seed keeping warm in a bird’s dung;
the eggs of a spider, overlooked by the broom;
tenements of mildew & weeds; or marsupiums,
dark & secure second wombs.

An address, a house,
is where I remember first; where I learned about anger & pain
when my father took out his belt.
Cary, Steve & Joannie—
our vocal inflections rhymed. Each morning,
the mirror in the bathroom at 1031
took each of us in turn, taught us the base
of our faces, scars of our various friends.
We barely hung on to our name—

Church on Sunday. A vacation every year.
None of us kids flunked a grade. Mom,
she cried during pregnancy. Dad made
a few brief visits to the courthouse.
In short, a good deal within the legally sane.

*  

For entertainment, cows have only the weather.
Kids have matches & pins, an abundance
of insects to kill. The elderly, their slides.

Everyone has what their cultures acquire: sex, drugs
& Boy Scouts, bowling or miniature golf.

*  

There were once good springs for the Eskimos.
Each year, they would gather near the ocean, burn
what they’d come to possess, give away their wives.

What mattered wasn’t ownership, or goods acquired there,
but what they could afford to waste,
destroy or give away.
For Potlatch, today,
only its impetus remains—
the need for some foundation of prestige.

*
David Griffith


For instance I'm an anthropologist, studying distinction. I learn that garbage & the use of tools are cultural universals. That language is also common. I discover the grim capabilities of distance. But who can say if kinship ever quits?

The seasons settle around everything: Ceremony. Drunkeness. The spontaneity of anger or cruelty. Two kids killing carp in a creek for no other reason than fun.

4.
The year Iowa lost 40,000 elms to Dutch elm disease is an accomplice of mine. And Indian creek. And the blind man spilling syrup & oranges all over Aldrich, a little girl in a grocery store running her hand through the ashtrays, rats at the dump in our headlights, my friends lowering their .22s, odors of dog shit following me to class, & apple blossoms, & scents of women I've slept with,

a wheatfield with crows, the little snow white feet of the poet's love, & the dog taking itself & its tail considerably away...
They bring me scraps of themselves.
They pass me a baton. The spectators
pull & push like syringes. Among them my father
is twirling a lasso. Another is covered
with buttons from thousands of campaigns.
Snares & fences line the course like coins.
Others flash uniforms, sports cars
or the teeth of their purebred dogs.
Everyone smells of bath soap & underarm sprays.

The oceans breathe; the sun
still offers its cold heat of night to the moon,
a little at a time. When I mutter steady
to myself, the sidelines almost drown me out.
Holding the baton, I run. God how I run.
Clutching that damn baton as if it were stolen & mine.

So; the flowers still open, eh?
In an orchard, rotten fruit discarded
makes a difference
to bugs munching. This year I'm miles
from my family, from the hen pheasant
nesting in the slough along a cornfield, or the time
I came upon a rabbit so completely
it shivered, & would not move.

Out here, it's magpies—overlooking berries
for their play of flight among the junked automobiles.
When it rains in the evening, & then
the new light comes over the mountains just beyond
dawn, you can see earthworms pulling themselves
back into the dirt. You can see green lichen
& white lichen, clinging to things that don’t move, that will never move alone. And sparrows, always the wrens & sparrows. My brother & I, fifteen years past Indian creek & its annual swell of carp, can still sit down & laugh about the same things. The women we have chosen, who have chosen us, are in a small way the same. Our voices no longer rhyme.

Cary, I suppose a great deal of what we remember could be discarded. We’d still feel hunger, the winter, winds through our thighs with our women.  
I don’t believe we ever saw the biggest carp, the one who grew old & died on its own.

From each creek like ours at least one old carp swims up a smaller stream; turned, perhaps, by a rock, a log, or a place where the billows pull hard. With the safety of brush, too dense to cross, or great heaps of garbage strewn on the bank, it feeds, & blends with the muddy water, & gets fat.
LETTER TO JOHN FROM MISSOULA

for Peterson

There is bread in the oven, John; its smell has eased itself completely through this room, rich as the soup you described once, a year ago, in a poem. For three days last week, the air was white with snow & no one could see the mountains. Today it could almost be spring. Our dogs, in the yard, are playing. From a window behind us, the crippled girl has been watching them. She hasn’t been out for days. I can hear chain saws, the big rigs lugging down pine. I can hear gunshots far off in the mountains.

How long has it been, not since beginning with words, but the time you dropped a pheasant twenty odd years from your eye? A damn good shot: that bright fat cock did not even let out a cry. Who’s taken over the white farmhouse in Tiffin? It matters that it’s all been behind us; that we’re writing, always, hunched within our dying & alive. Tomorrow it’s supposed to get cold, so someone wheeled out the girl.

John, this is the worst of the news: It’s warm. She cannot feel weather in her legs. Her mouth is hanging open.

Her mouth is always motionless & open.
ON HALLOWEEN, THE RETARDED

keep coming back, pressing
their broad grins against
the glass, bags open
& inviting, like lame excuses
for laughter. They don't wear
any costumes. They seem
to know their inherent fright
when drooling. By the third pass
we have come to know
it's them: they knock harder.
Each time we refuse
they open the bags wider,
stay until we give them more.
Then they shrink
to the edge of our porchlight,
their faces barely sticking out
from the darkness like pumpkins.
The fourth time
we try excuses: that we have
no candy, that the people
next door have more. They fail
to understand. We turn off
the lights, close & bolt the door.
Behind the curtain
we vow to each other
never to admit them again.
Should they return once more,
we will scream
that no one here is home.
They are wrong.
This isn't Halloween.
BRAGGING

Once I caught a weasel with my bare hands.
One summer with Danny Shelton,
who years later drowned trying to fake his death,
I put a priest’s car in neutral
where it sat on Mercy College hill—
through a fence & off a tree & into a neighbor’s house.
I remember we scared up an owl when
we ran. Its five-foot span seemed larger then.

In high school while the owner
of the finest hotel in town toured Europe,
we rummaged his basement for booze: thirty-two fifths
of the oldest gin I’d ever seen. Bo got sixteen.
Danny was dead by then.

Sometimes without even trying I blow a smoke ring
through another. I can warble like a bird.
Maybe that’s not much, but Gary Cooper
got his first big role because he could roll a smoke
with one hand.

But often I’ve my own misgivings,
mornings, the same stupid face looking back,
such need as suggested by sleep,
by diversion in sex & crime.
Still, if nights when I’m inside my love
my intentions poise like dares, & here
I come so near her heart
It’s best I leave this way:
withdrawing small & slowly, shyly as a child.
It would be nice to imagine my past as somewhere else, a place where things are done differently. And yet again I find myself imagining white barrens of the arctic where small animals and birds camouflage themselves in snowy colors. In that cold silence only the clicking of caribou hooves can be heard on the loose wind-swept stones.

Sitting in the sun, my feet propped amidst my ferns and wandering jews, I feel beads of sweat roll slowly down my side, staining my fresh blouse at the waist. My gin and tonic is icy; I press the glass against my wrist, feel the cold slipping through the pulsing veins and arteries of my arm. Eskimo have fifty-two words for snow. They say you don’t know a thing until you can name it. Sliding the frosted glass inside my shirt, between my breasts, I feel the beating of my heart. I have tried to break this habit for over twenty years.

“Pressure points,” my mother used to say. “The quickest way to cool the body is to freeze the pressure points.”

Liesl, my mother, never told me where she learned about pressure points. Perhaps my grandmother taught her, maybe she learned them during the years she spent in hospitals. Now that I am older I imagine some lover searched out the secret places of Liesl’s body. That they explored each other softly on sweaty afternoons.

We always lived in my grandmother’s house, a place too large for only the three of us. My mother told stories, as much for herself as for me it seemed. She filled the house with pictures of moths that act like hummingbirds, myths of Triobriand Islanders, details of the mating habits of aborigine. Since I was eight or so I understood the erotic significance of whales with long ivory tusks like unicorn. It was as if she learned about life from the National Geographic.

Hot summer days when my grandmother was gone Liesl and I would go up to my bathroom on the second floor. To have a party, to cool off. I carted our supplies to the seldom-used elevator that ran on a track alongside the stairs while Liesl selected records for the livingroom phonograph. Lemons, limes, cherries, the tall glasses we
kept hidden for just this occasion, an ashtray, cigarettes, vodka, gin, the little cutting board for the fruit, a sharp knife. When everything was ready Liesl would turn on the phonograph as loud as she dared and begin making her way up the long stairs. I drove the creaking elevator slowly, trying to keep just above her, the music growing fainter in the humid air.

Propping her crutches on the first step, Liesl would haul her thin body up by the strength in her arms until her foot hit the stair. Steadying herself, she attacked the next one in the same ungraceful manner. Hot and exhausted, she finally reached the second floor, still humming with the music. When I suggested using her bathroom on the first floor she would laugh at me.

“It wouldn’t be the same,” she always said. Like the elevator, to her it was a matter of pride.

Brandenberg Concerto, second movement. The allegro has a hurried expectant air with fanciful violins and occasional horn. From the old wardrobe that sat in the hall we took the lurid silk print kimonos we always wore after the bath. Keyed up to the the music we undressed, hiding our regular clothes in the bottom drawer where the kimonos had been. Liesl would lay a kimono over each of the crutches making headless, one-legged Chinese colored people on the floor outside the white tiled bathroom. She always made them look like they were dancing, holding hands on the deep purple rug.

Sitting naked side by side on the edge of the porcelain tub we cut up lemons, limes, and oranges, dropping them into separate fluted glass bowls. While Bach played softly in the afternoon air Liesl made sweet drinks in the tall glasses with fruit and ginger ale. I broke the ice from the metal trays; the frozen steel sticking to my fingers, a faint ripping sound as I pulled my hand away. She always put the gin in last, stirring it slowly with a green plastic stick. I sat on the cool tile floor, swaying in time to the music. The gin burned my throat.

“Caribou,” Liesl said, “have hollow hairs.” She explained that in winter the hollow hairs keep the caribou warm. In summer the hair helps dissipate the heat.

“Is a dog’s hair hollow?” Her explanations were always thorough: the function of blubber for walrus and seal, the metabolism of the arctic char, build up and expenditure of energy in birds. Always a new set of facts for each party. Always eskimo, always arctic. “Think cold if you’re hot, happy if you’re sad.”
The arctic is a violent place. Volcanoes can create new islands. Glacial hunks of land sometimes drift out to sea. In such cold things end with terrible swiftness.

In early June of 1844 three members of the skerry Eldey went ashore ten miles west of Cape Reykjanes, Iceland. There they battered in the heads of two Great Auks, giant flightless birds expert at swimming and diving, a white oval spot between the bill and eye, light grooves along the beak. In the nest they found a single cracked egg and smashed it among the rocks. The skins of these birds were sold to Christian Hansen in Reykjavik for nine pounds. These were the last two Great Auks ever sighted.

Toccata in D Minor. Baleful horns building in a crescendo. We began with our wrists. Liesl believed in doing things in the order of their logical importance. Pinioning the ice without the use of our hands, our fingers were splayed like dancing clam shells. The hot afternoon sun shone pale through the window. Melting ice dripped down our naked arms, huge drops gathering at our elbows before falling of their own weight to the floor. The ice skidded and slid; our hands and fingers pivoted on the ice and performed tiny arabesques.

The ice had to melt entirely before we could move on. Each pressure point received fresh ice and a small shot of gin. Often I squeezed my ice cube, causing it to melt more quickly. I would suck on limes until my teeth ached.

"Everything is functional for the eskimo," Liesl told me. "Carving a wooden bird snare appeases the spirits of the wind."

Clasping our hands around our necks we cradled the ice tightly in our elbows until the cold water ran down our arms, the long torsos of our bodies, making a sticky sweet smell rise in the room around us. Over the soft violins and cellos Liesl told me myths and legends of lost arctic beasts and giants. I asked her if she had ever been there, but she only smiled at me.

In little yellow notebooks I collected facts from the Public Library. Eskimo facts to tell Liesl.

"Do you know lemmings commit suicide?" I asked her.

She smiled. "They are good swimmers. Where there are too many of them, some swim to another place far away."

They say fish can not discover the water, that an islander is the only one who can find the main land.
Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring. Languid violins, a proper minuet tempo. Our bodies would be sticky and cool; Liesl would take a fresh piece of ice for her chest. Her firm breasts made a neat hollow for the ice cube. Thin pianist’s hands fanned out across her chest as she let the ice water run slowly down her arms, down her smooth belly to be trapped in a small glittering pool in her navel. Out of habit or impatience, I slid my ice across the thin lumps of my ribs, feeling the tingling sensation pass fleetingly over the tiny nerve endings under my pale skin. Liesl said that was cheating: the object of the game was to hold perfectly still.

Her hands were beautiful. The miniature moon shape of her fine clear nails always made me want to hide my own stubby fingers splayed upon her chest like ten tiny clubs. She sat motionless, listening to the music as she held an ice cube over each of my freckle-looking breasts. Using my palms, I tried to balance the ice on the tips of her warm brown nipples. My fingers traced delicate circles in the downy hairs silhouetted by the slanted afternoon light. Our nipples would rise, pushing the ice into the sensitive hollow of each other’s palms. The melting water glittered and slid slowly down the smooth curve of Liesl’s soft breasts, leaving little wet trails down her belly, lost in the soft folds of her waist.

Often I asked her if I would ever get real breasts, like hers.

“Some people don’t,” she replied.

“Who?” All the women I knew had breasts, even my teacher at school.

“Men,” she said.

Liesl said everything operated according to a rhythm; we always made a fresh drink when Mozart began. We filled our tall glasses with plenty of fresh fruit, ice, ginger ale, and vodka. Vodka for Mozart, gin for Bach. Liesl explained that vodka was a Russian drink; the Russians were the bravest people in the world.

Sonata in G for violin and piano. Rapid counterpoint of the piano against the fluid violin. Liesl listened until the adente before putting her drink down and handing me an ice cube. She moved her leg over just a little on the side of the tub. Gently, searchingly, I put the ice cube in the secret place up inside her. She would smile, sip her drink as I positioned myself on the wet tile floor. The water would no longer be cool; it was only a damp layer over the tiny concrete fills laid between the white tiles. Softly, numbingly, Liesl put an ice cube up inside me. I was expected to hold absolutely still, squirming silently
while Liesl gave us each another shot of vodka, stirring it slowly with the swizzle stick. I tried to tell her how the vodka and ice made me feel hot and cold at the same time, how I felt I was soaring into the soft light of the afternoon yet invisibly anchored to the tile floor by the melting ice.

"It's supposed to," she said.

Lying on the tile floor looking through the afternoon light to the plain white ceiling, I could watch little dust motes dance and twirl in time to the soft music. I could see the smoke from Liesl's cigarette curl through the air to lie in little blankets separating the dust. Sometimes they seemed to float up and down, back and forth, gently driven by the force of the music. Inside me the ice cube melted, making me feel I would swell, burst, become no more than those little pieces of dust and smoke.

"When the eskimo first saw airplanes they were very happy, very relieved," she said. She told me for centuries their shamans had been travelling to the moon to bring back the souls of unborn babies. Now the airplane could take them to the moon. They had learned a shaman's secret; they possessed a powerful charm.

Saltz. Piano concerto No. 21 in C Major. Slowly standing, I could feel the dizzying rush as my whole being seemed to drain out of me, trickling down the inside of my legs, numbing every part of me as if I had dissolved. The ice water slowly slid through the maze of childish hair on my thighs, my legs. Sliding around the bones of my ankles, the water would finally seep into my instep, pooling on the tile floor. Ice water from Liesl's body ran slowly down the side of the white porcelain tub, a small glittering stream that caught the light.

Sonata in F. Rondo. A music-box tune in treble piano. Placing ice cubes behind my knees I squatted by the tub in front of Liesl. Sipping my drink with one hand I slowly rubbed ice over the slick hard stump of what had been Liesl's right leg. The stump was wrinkled a bit, not like the scar hidden on her head beneath the thick auburn hair, but like a picture of skin in an old flawed mirror. It felt leathery and dead. I always wondered where the bone was, the exact point within the leathery stump where the bone had been sawed, cut, broken away from what must have been a long slender leg. Sometimes I would move the ice up until I found the hard knob of her hip bone. But the bone vanished somewhere deep in her thigh.
Only if there are objects can there be a fixed form of this world. Even today I do not know how she lost her leg; my grandmother would never tell me after Liesl died. “If your mother wanted to tell you, she would have.” Always the same reply.

Liesl told a different story everytime I asked. Sometimes the leg had been given to a fair princess who later became my fairy godmother. Once she told me my grandfather had cut it off because Liesl had been bad.

For a long time she told me it was because she had been a baby. My grandmother did not want a baby she said. When Liesl was being assembled my grandmother became so angry at the fine detail work she threw away Liesl’s leg in sheer frustration.

“Don’t think I don’t love you,” Liesl always said. “At least I put you all together right.”

But the story I believed was the myth of Paija, a giantess with a single leg springing from her genitals. She is covered with gnarled black hair. In the quiet of that frozen world, eskimo whisper to their children, tell sacred stories about the spirits that guard their souls. To see Paija is to die. Hunters lost in blizzards sometimes see her. These men are found standing upright in the snow, a picture of her in each dead eye. In the long winter nights Paija stalks the arctic wastes searching for strayed huntsmen to help her ward off the loneliness. The spirits of their eyes dance in the auroras against the faint horizon. Wives and children weep and moan for the lost ones not even airplanes can return.

Sonata in G for violin and piano. Rapid counterpoint of the piano against the fluid violin. The fresh ice is hard; I balance it on the end of my fingerbones, feel it cut into the chilled flesh of my hand. Softly, Mozart plays in the afternoon sun. The little concrete cracks between the hexagonal tiles catch the melted water in tiny pools. I give myself another shot of vodka, drink of the Russians, the bravest men in the world. I think of my mother and the husband she never had. Run the ice slowly up my legs and listen to the sounds of snowy ptarmidgans soaring over the tundra. Eskimo huddle together in snow houses, wrapped in warm pelts and hides against the silence and cold.
CLEM SETS THINGS MORE EFFICIENT

They’re so drooling loony
every time it happens: the angel’s coming,
the angel! They’re polishing their windows and even
their gold teeth, mamas almost axe-hack
parts into sons’ hair, the daughters sport velveteen bows.
And maybe a light does prance
down Main Street, in a cone of whirling bees, but so far
as I can see it just piss-frights the sheep
a day or two out of grazing land, litters the shop-fronts
with glowing bits of debris, like forestry
snail-slime, and just leaves everyone’s eye-whites turned up to heaven
like hard-boiled eggs so long the damn town turns into a sepia
photograph of itself, each year, dog-eared at the edges. See,

in their religion, you work to become an angel
at the end, some sort of reward: all that floss
and cotton-batting, all that celestial marshmallow jazz.
Well, maybe. I’ve seen the Northern Lights
some nights when I muck out over the rank dried creek
to the woodshed and check the next day’s fuel. And run
my hands, for a woodsmoked moment, over the black, shit-gnarled bark,
and press, and leave the tree reversed
in my palm-flesh, a kind of signing the contract for trade
of carbon dioxide and oxygen all through the long toad night.
The wife breathes in. Breathes out. And eases me
up inside her where the gas exchange takes place, a delicate,
glandular, coming-together. Our candled linen-sweat
mixes with the musks of the fields . . .

Well here’s my religion: we start out
angels. And have to work
to keep ourselves up.
THE SINKING OF THE ANDREA DORIA, 1956

Such a heavy dream the water holds up—
a ship where an earth goes on.
The people, escaped from the world,
have smooth faces, eyes that never close.
Life in miniature, magnified,
every movement becomes how you get to the end.

In the daylight this walking on water
is not possible. Another dream
sinks below the place
where you can go back to it
without holding your breath.
FARM ON THE WAPSIPINICON

The ducks are gone,
the hay baled and
stacked in the barn

where the stray cat
sleeps. A thin sheet of
ice slips over the pond.

The wind rises
and the cornstalks
rattle in the field.

The field waits.
The field waits
to be buried in snow.

The sun goes down
behind the house.
The doors are latched,
the cracks stuffed
with strips of flannel
and old newspapers.

The storm windows
are on, the screens
in the cellar

resting against the
shelves, the shelves
full of Mason jars

lined up like the
days ahead: tomatoes,
pickled peaches, pears.
THIS HOUSE

1.
I see my mother
on the porch sewing.

The thread winds around
her finger and tries to forget.

The needle sticks her finger
and her finger does not bleed.

Her hands have no feeling.
They move through the dark

like indigo buntings
on a fall night.

They navigate by the stars.
They find their way home

in the spring when the red oak
in the yard turns green.

The red oak in the yard
turns green, turns red.

The branches droop,
sweep across the porch.

The leaves fall, stabbing
tiny holes in the snow.
2.
I hear my mother
in the kitchen singing.

She loses her place,
she loses her breath.

She places her hand over the stove
and the stove steams.

The stove swims toward her.
Her apron flaps

at her waist like a fin.
Her body slackens and shivers.

Her arms rise
and her body stiffens.

She floats through the door,
through other rooms.

She swims back
to the stream of her birth,

a salmon
ready to spawn.

3.
I see my mother
on the basement stairs

carrying a laundry basket
braced against her hip
as if it were a child.

It is Monday.
It is always Monday.
The old Maytag chugs and spits.

The cement floor cracks and the water drains from the tub.

The soap separates—a slab of fat, lye leached from ashes.

The clothes curl, roll into a ball.

The whole cellar goes into torpor.

4.
I hear my mother in the attic hunting for her winter coat.

A trunk opens. Daylight burrows in, darkens.

My mother’s coat hangs in the corner, its arms tucked under like wings.

My mother’s coat hangs from her body. She sways.

She stoops. She slumps to the floor. She nestles under an eave,

draws her legs up to her chin, crawls into herself, buries her face in fur.
5.
I sit on the stoop,
Mother, watching

the moon emerge, molt,
glide home,

move through the rooms
of this house,

rooms becoming
red and swollen.

Under the windows
the snow melts

exposing the sun,
an unlettered stone.

The sun rising
over this house,

spins, turns north,
waits for you

to return,
or take wing,

glide toward the moon,
glide home.
CALLING IN THE EXPERTS

Earth tremors dismember the dead
and splinter their skulls.
Molten rock no longer cools
and porpoises conspire against us.

But you know none of this.
You're at home to receive the plumber
who enters through the back door,
not bothering to knock.
He crawls beneath the sink
and for a moment forgets
the purpose of his tools.
The leak appears natural
as it would in a limestone cavern.

As he crouches in thought,
staring at his calloused hands,
there's an awful thud in the apartment
upstairs. You imagine
the ceiling will buckle and collapse.

The plumber tells you his heart is bad
and that he's too old to tamper
with problems like yours.
Maybe you'd better just live with it.
On the way out his trick knee slips
under his weight.
He falls hard on the concrete
but doesn't make a stink
or threaten to sue.
Later in the night you hear
the drip in the kitchen.
Dreams leak slowly from your sleep
and trickle through the floor boards
to the cellar.
Tomorrow the exterminator will come.
You'll know him by the warts on his face
and the smell of his poison.
At this very moment he's awake, planning,
testing his traps on the invisible beasts
that gnaw his nerves.
W.M. Ransom

THE POSSESSED

The quiet mouth of our darkness opens
like a stolen egg.
All the singing of the night fades inside.

The day is a thin gnaw of silence
stumbling early through the trees.
A close brush of leaves
prickles the quiet in an old crow’s eye.

The swell of this day glows
under a warm red cavity of sky,
a babble of small tongues grows
and casts us spinning to our trances.
THE FIST

Age huts in the bones, and we are
Everywhere, each,
A peninsula, whelked with
Cellular clocks, held

By a tribe of opaque squatters
Knotting time on the bloodrope, their canoes,
Splinters of the first
Birch shinnied
As a child, beached at the brainsand’s edge,
So many
That some, in search of docking,
Moor to our palms, acquire
The look of fingers

And from the deathbed
We will be glad for them, glad for
So little as the fist
They allow us to make, by whose
Hardness our going
May have a small, a simple
Lantern.
SHE CONFESES TO A COW
from the fat girl poems

You stand and move your jaw
in a slow sideways chew,
but if you knew what it is like
to be called a big fat cow
by a boy walking home from school
who pointed and laughed with his friends,
you’d stamp and stop that stupid chewing.
Except, you are a cow and I’m a girl
who should be stamping and shouting names
like “snakeskin”, “toadbelly”, “cow-plop-eating fly”
and letting him have it with a hand as big as his.

But some days I hug this extra fat of mine,
soft and full like a cloak around me.
I might be someone thin, wearing a disguise.
No one thinks of you as only hide,
you have good tasting meat underneath.
So might I, if someone cuts through skin,
turn out to be like steak, look fat
taste thin, but I’d rather not let anyone in.
DEPOSITION OF HAROLD M—, GARDENER, AT THE INQUEST OF THE HON. MISS GLORIA MADELINE HASTINGS, 21st APRIL, 1936.

I
The topiaries were just my pastime.  
Clipping holly or laurel  
In the shape of a begging dog  
Or a crowing cock amused me  
During slack times. Miss Hastings praised me for these fancies,  
But hardly noticed the trellis  
Of climbing hybrid roses  
Outside her study window  
That gave me so much trouble  
Before the right kind of yellow,  
Dark as gold, took the graft.

The croquet lawn was her whim,  
And tiresome work, on my knees  
Over every inch weeding  
Dandelions and scutch,  
And every day for weeks  
With the roller to get it as flat  
As a table. I kept it that way  
For years, though no one used it.

At first there was plenty to do,  
The elms on the drive to rescue  
from fungus, the walks to rake,  
The banks of perennials  
To thin out and make neat.  
By the second Spring, there was time  
To try new things in the hothouse,  
And clip topiaries in the hedges.
II
She gave me a free hand,
Never a word of the cost,
Nor of praise for the work,
When she strolled the grounds in good weather,
Stooping a bit on her cane.
But when she saw the shapes
Of the peacock and unicorn
That I cut from the privet between
The hothouse and the old stable,
I had to tell her my name
Before she could praise me.

She sold the parklands for taxes
When the new government took over,
And paid off the indoor staff,
But kept me on.
A day's work a week took care
Of the lawn and the flower gardens
Down to the road that she kept
With the house, though she seldom walked
Those paths any more. I learned
A new trade by taking the bricks
From the ruined stable to build
A wall. On her side,
I planted a hawthorn hedge
And let it grow wild.

After she sold the lodge
Where I'd lived from the day she hired me,
She moved me to a room
By the kitchen, and taught me to cook
Plain meals. We never ate
Together. In the evenings
She had me read to her.
I stumbled often at first
Over the strange words.
The house now stood in a suburb,
The elms on the land she'd sold
Replaced by bungalows.
From behind the four high hedges
We could hear the shouts of children,
The hammers and mowers at weekends.

III
We were reading *Vanity Fair*.
I thought she'd fallen asleep,
As she often did, holding the cane
With the gold band, sitting
Across from me in her study.
I stayed there watching her
Till first light surprised me.

I made a coffin from boards
That I took from the ballroom floor,
And dug a grave, not deep,
On the croquet lawn.
I was in her service
One week short of thirty years.

I spent that week carving her name
On the hearthstone I hauled from the house
To the lawn. Just her name
And the year she died. I knew
None of the other details.
FOR NANCY, A BEGINNING

I come from men who must drive,
can't let go their grasp
of the wheel: men with their heads
hidden in cameras.
You ask me to look back and forget
a flooded field one January, my high school
shut down, when I skated between brown trees
and left my home without a word.
I'm giving up the nervous nights. I prayed
only for sleep.

These hands
are my grandfather's. The last
words of a tree drift to my lap.
I could live to watch the ripe leaves
dangle in the window-frame, to find
my place in the five-storied building.
I want you badly these days.
Even as you reach toward the half-eaten pear
I feel change.
There is a light that fails in my mouth, a taste of thorns in my throat. How can I explain what this means? I wake at night with the smell of thorns in the room. No one can sleep well here.

Today I was too ill to leave my bed and when the shelling began I could not move to the cellar like the others. Sunset approached; the field beyond the window blossomed with explosions, small fists of flame, these cannibal lights out stalking.

A new man was brought in from the front yesterday, half a leg shot off, blind. He will not speak to the doctors. He holds a round glass paperweight in his hands at all times, turning it endlessly.

And inside it a snowstorm begins. A glass sleigh with three riders makes its way through the blizzard. In the distance a campfire burns. Perhaps it is a piece of agate meant to glow when exposed to light. I watch it in his hand until it flickers and disappears.

I know this fire; it is cold and far away, a luminescent needle weaving back and forth in the dark night. I feel this light in my mouth, a neon shimmer on my tongue. Phosphorescent tablets ignite there, dissolving, dissolving in a deep tunnel.
PICTURES FROM THE CZECH PILGRIMAGE

I
You stand on some hill,
over your shoulders, below you,
two old women,
their grey discs too distant for faces;
and one smaller, a daughter, we can’t be sure.
There are many we can’t see.

The three of you do not understand
Marketa Luskacova. The middle one
carrying the cross frowns,
not understanding, and with its weight.
The other two carry pikes.
You have come in your lined faces,
in canvas coats and your whiter shirt.
The cross has a ladder up to the beam,
a nail, branches of a hawthorne
curved, its long spikes. A grey hammer
is attached, and thick heavy tongs.
The letters at the top
do not say in Rhode Island.

II
The women in white
carry huge madonnas in gilt rococo frames.
They lead, and the men
in black behind them.
The line they make: black upper left
down across the hay field, white near the woods.
III
The pillar is taller than the man with large ears, 
his head angled, his eyes, his open mouth. 
He holds a paper and must be chanting. 
The congregation sits, an old woman, 
white face and hands, a black hooded cape, 
she neither hears nor sees, she is inside.

IV
It is a world of old women. 
That plaid can’t be called a dress. 
She is no older, no more lined 
than the land she came from.

V
This is enough. 
They are seated on a fine hillside. The far hill 
has farms, a road along the river. 
There are no children. 
He stares, looking away below, 
or at the new hands on his knees. 
She is younger, face intent on some patch of grass, 
hearing only. 
She looks on him, fingers holding up a cheek, 
frowning, thinking. 
The old one has pain. 
Three others stand. And the priest, 
flowers bloom at his feet, 
what he says is nowhere in the picture.
FISHING ON LAKE HURON

It is Tuesday night and
I make it down Juniper
to the beach where my brother
is fishing off the dock, dragging
in huge salmon and perch. Some
are bigger than he is. He straps
them to the side of the pier with
rope. Looking up the cliff, I see
that girl who moved in on Emerson
last week. Her hair is strung up
in trees; her eyes billow like
half moons toward Lexington.

Three campfires sprinkle
the shore down by the creek.
A north wind was sailing over
from Canada, slapping me silly,
when my brother pulls in a body
from the lake. I grab his knife
and stand in the water, slitting
below the stomach while he ties
the man to the pier with the
rest of them.
The man is raining. A gray cloud hovers above his forehead. His friends and children must stand three feet away from him when they talk or else they’d get wet. The man blinks his face and water splashes out.

Neighbors have asked him to water their lawns for a sizeable amount of money but he refuses violently. He yells at them saying that it isn’t water, it’s tears. The people laugh. Silly man, anyone can tell that you are merely raining. It’s a simple fact of life.

The man has stopped going for walks although his wife does occasionally. He sits by the drain in the basement. Cobwebs glisten in his hair. Late at night, he climbs upstairs into bed, his muscles snapping like turtles. The wife places buckets underneath him and then goes outside to dry her clothes. The man pulls the sopping blankets over his shoulders. This is not at all how he dreamed it would be.
LAST SNOW

A rumpled sheet,
torn, with washed-out stains

of blood rust where a tressle clots
in the south shadow of the railroad yard.

Beneath its girders
frozen current
cracks and flows.

It's how the worst winter of my life
was left behind:

an image of a train
crossing a cow's eye.
WHERE YOU ARE

The room is small and square, filled with dry air and bright light. There are no windows. The sealed outline of the door shows through the white paint, newly applied. The light is so bright you are blinded, and do not see me, braced against the wall beside the outline of the door. You stare blindly at the walls and ceiling, sniff the air, finger the minute cracks in the concrete floor. You try to climb the walls, and fall. You run your hands along the smooth surface of the walls. You find the outline of the door. I understand the initial terror, and move away when you come near. I have been here for years. I have grown accustomed to the light and the faint sound of water falling behind the walls. When you hear it you stop and listen. Then you put your hands to your ears. I understand. There is no need for me to speak. Soon, your sight will return and you will know where you are. It would do no good for me to try to tell you. Soon the room will be yours alone.
ECHOES IN A LANDSCAPE

Brother: from this round hill
we shouted our names at the wall
of the barn, waited for them to wash
back over us, like a priest.
chanting the landscape.
We used to camp between those tall pines
knowing they mark an old aunt and cousin
buried there by smallpox and no money.
We never knew death till we named it
and it echoed over this ground.

That old barn kept as many secrets
as it gave, trapdoors and cracks
and boards stamped in by steaming feet.
By the window we found the skeleton
of a bird who forgot that the way in
is the way out, and broke a wing
beating against the glass.
In the west corner the calf
too big for the black and white cow
was cut from her tired body.

Over there the old seeder rests
on warped wheels, filled
with dust and gray wheat
and the rusted plow lies
broken by the ground.
Once everything here moved.
Now the branches of the pines move
and barn shutters slam in the wind.
Farther is the crumbling foundation
of the old house, kindled by hands
we feared were ours
till the sheriff found the firebug
trembling in a car on the back road.
We knew his terrible joy as the house
burned, each board defined red
the chimney exploding in a storm
of orange brick, the dark attic
and cellar freed into the night.
HUNTING FOR ARROWHEADS

Search for any circle
or softness of earth—
neither comes naturally to the plains.
River bottoms, valleys, groves
of cottonwood trees are best.
Try also any hill
where you can see
the enemy approach for miles.
If you should find a place
where the buffalo grass still
wants to lie flat, stop.
Fall to your knees.
Let the earth sift
through your bones.
Forget about history.
News from the Glacier

a portfolio of new work

INTO THE GLACIER

With the green lamp of the spirit
of sleeping water
taking us by the hand . . .

Deeper and deeper,
a luminous blackness opening
like the wings of raven—

as though a heavy wind
were rising through all the houses
we lived in—

the cold rushing in,
our blankets flying away
into the darkness,
and we, naked and alone,
awakening forever . . .

by
John Haines
As a poet I was born in a particular place, a hillside overlooking the Tanana River in central Alaska, where I built a house and lived for the better part of twenty-two years. It was there, in the winter of 1947-48, I began writing poetry seriously, and there years later I wrote my first mature poems. Many things went into the making of those poems and the others I’ve written since. The air of the place, rock, water and soil. Snow and ice, human history, birds, animals and insects. Other things, surely, not related directly to the place: the words of other poets, learned once and forgotten, and remembered again. Old stories from childhood, voices out of dreams. Images, a way of seeing got partly from several years study as a painter and sculptor. And further, human relationships, life shared with another person whose existence mingled with my own, so that we saw the world as one person. But it was finally the place that provided the means of unifying all these into a single experience.

There must have been in me from an early age some vague design of such a place and such a life. I grew up more or less homeless, moved from place to place, and came, I think, to regard all residences and relationships as only temporary. There must have been in me a great wish for something more permanent. What I got from that early life was a good sense of geography, but also great insecurity, and uncertainty about who I was. I think I knew that I had to find a place, and in a real sense be born over again as my own person.

Why I chose that place rather than another probably can’t be answered completely. I might have gone elsewhere and become a very different poet and person. But there was, most likely, no other region where I might have had that original experience of the North American wilderness. Unlike other “wilderness” areas, Alaska in those days seemed open-ended. I could walk north from my homestead at Richardson all the way to the Arctic Ocean, and never cross a road nor encounter a village. This may no longer be true, but the illusion of it then gave the country an air of limitlessness and
mystery hard to find now on this planet.

From the first day I set foot in interior Alaska, and more specifically on Richardson Hill, I knew I was home. Something in me identified with that landscape. I had come, let’s say, to the dream place. Not exactly, of course, for there never was an exact place, but something so close I could accept it at once. I think such recognitions must be rare, and I was extremely fortunate to have it happen when it did and as it did. Such a purity of feeling, of joy and of being in the right place, I have not often felt since.

What that experience meant to me, in terms of self-finding and the sort of work I was to do, could be told at great length. But I will only try to suggest in this essay what seem to me to be some of the more important elements in it. There was, first of all, the experience of the wilderness itself, of finding life on some more basic terms than those given me without thought as a child. To make a general statement: at times it becomes necessary for people to turn back and grasp real things. One of the consequences of having a culture and a language is that these begin to exist for themselves in place of the original things we once lived by. Words become abstract, institutions and customs unfastened to anything necessary or authentic. And they begin subtly to sap vitality from us; we begin to live falsely, and after while it becomes necessary for us to turn away from them and find ourselves once more in the hard, irreducible world of simple things, of rock and water, fire and wood, flesh and blood.

So here, on a steep hillside seventy miles from Fairbanks, was a place to begin. It was for me the beginning of what I have come to understand as the myth-journey of humankind. This life of food-gathering, of making for ourselves out of what we can find around us, this is what we come from, and what we return to. Out of this, into what?

The Scottish poet, Edwin Muir, in his poems and autobiography, speaks of it in terms of the biblical Fall from Paradise, and he may be right. Think what we have done to the earth and ourselves. This fallen kingdom, witnessed in the landscapes we have made everywhere and go on making, scenes devoid of beauty or grandeur. I can still remember the intensity of my feeling, of actual pain and outrage, seeing the landscape of Southern California once more after twelve years in the wilderness. I saw it slowly, as one drives south from Alaska, through Canada, the accumulating ruin of the North American landscape. I am exaggerating, perhaps, but not much.
I had when younger a habit of mind, of dreaminess, a vague drifting through the world. I was naturally observant but unfocused. Living as I did there at Richardson, limited by circumstances to a small area, I found it necessary to learn more and more about it in order to get a living from it. I was forced to pay attention, to learn in detail many things of a kind I could not have learned merely passing through. I learned quickly, because it was an adventure for me, a young person from the city unused to knowing intimately any place, to distinguish real things, particular and exact, from the vague and general character of the world. Words began to fasten themselves once more to things. I learned the names of things to be found there, characteristic of the sub-arctic the world over; trees and other plants, their sorts and uses, what made good building material or fuel and what did not, what could be eaten, preserved and put up for later use. I began for the first time to make things, to build shelters, weave nets, make sleds and harnesses, and train animals for work. I learned how to hunt, to watch and to listen, to think like a moose, if need be, or a marten or a lynx. I watched the river water, and saw under that grey, rippling silt the red trace of salmon, and knew where to set my nets. I read the snow and what was written there; the forms of frost, the seeding of the grasses, the swelling of the birch leaves. I watched a tree, an aspen, no bigger than my wrist when I first built there, grow tenfold over the years, until I had to cut away its branches every year from the rain gutters of the house.

Digging in the soil, picking away the rock, uprooting stumps, I became in time a grower of things sufficient to feed myself. Slowly finding my way into the skills of hunter and trapper, I understood what blood and bone, hide and muscle, marrow and sinew really are; not as things read about, but as things touched and handled until they became familiar to me as my own skin. Land itself came alive for me as it never had before, more alive sometimes than the people who moved about on it. I learned that it is land, place, that makes people, provides for them the possibilities they will have of becoming something more than mere lumps of sucking matter. We today who live so much from the inheritance of land and culture do not understand this as well as we need to. Few of us these days are really residents anywhere, in the deep sense of that term. We merely live off the surface of things and places, the culture as well as the land; a derivative life, taking what we find without thought, without regard
for origin or consequences, and unaware for the most part that the resources, both natural and cultural, are fast diminishing.

Big lessons, and basic things, certainly, and I was a long time assimilating them, understanding their significance. Never really priviledged in youth, I was never in actual want, either. Like most people in our society I did not know what it was to be hungry, to look for food and find myself short when I needed it most. That old life, unchanged for centuries, in time with the seasons, the rising and setting of the sun, the coming and going of birds and animals, the sources of food and light, became for me not a passage in a book of histories, but a matter of daily occurrence, a way still vital and full of meaning. I grew to feel that if civilization failed, I could still make my way, and in general thrive. I still feel that way, though I am old enough to know that it might not be as easy for me now as it was ten or fifteen years ago.

The place I lived in, Richardson, which included Banner Creek and the Tenderfoot area, had once been a well-populated gold-mining camp, from around 1905 until the late teens or early twenties. As with many such settlements, conditions changed fast, and by the time I came there in 1947, only six or eight persons still lived along the creeks, or in the hills above the Tanana. Most of the buildings were gone, and it was only by listening to what the residents told me that I learned some of the history of Richardson. And what I learned seemed to confirm what Thomas Hardy once said in respect to local life, long residence in a certain place, and the changes he had seen take place in his lifetime:

"...The change at the root of this has been the recent supplanting of the class of stationary cottagers, who carried on the local traditions and humors, by a population of more or less migratory labourers, which has led to a break in continuity in local history, more fatal than any other thing to the preservation of legend, folklore, close inter-social relations, and eccentric individualities. For these the indispensible conditions of existence are attachment to the soil of one particular spot by generation after generation."*

What I found at Richardson was the beginning of just that local condition of which Hardy is speaking. The few gold-rush survivors, men and women, could not have been living in the area for more than fifty years, but in their memories and the stories they told, full of

*Preface to Far From the Madding Crowd, Thomas Hardy, 1902.
humor and spite, already the place had begun to acquire the dimensions of myth. Each of the persons I came to know before the last of them died in the late 1960's, had a clarity of outline, a distinctiveness of temperament, that only simplicity and a certain isolation allow human character. For the first time in my life I became aware of individuals, of persons in all their quirkiness and singularity. I was fortunate indeed, because this condition of things has by now nearly vanished from American life, and all life begins to take on the same bland mediocrity one finds so plentifully in the suburbs. It may be true, as I sometimes believe, that this change has been more than just a sign of deterioration in social life. In order for a new form of life to occupy a place, another must die. When our imaginations have grown enough, perhaps we will understand that for us the local must some day include the continent, and finally the planet itself. Nothing else will allow us to thrive as a species. But it is also true that meanwhile we are painfully aware that a way of living has disappeared, leaving an empty place in our lives.

It would be easy to say that something of the cold and clarity of the land, and much of the rest of what I have been talking about, just somehow got into the poems I wrote while I lived there. In a way this is true, but it is more than that, and other than. It was an awakening, profound and disturbing. Everything was so new to me that it was like finding myself for the first time with my feet on the earth. I began to see, and to the extent that it was possible for me, I entered the original mystery of things, the great past out of which we came. I saw the midwinter sun sink in a cleft of the mountains to the south, and felt I had learned a great secret. The winter solstice was an actual event, and it came on with a menace and grandeur not to be put aside by mere magic.

But most important, as I have already suggested, was the meeting of place and dream. Without my being entirely conscious of it, this place and this life were what I had wanted more than any other thing. All doors seemed to open there; things hidden away, brooded upon for years, came to life. The owls I sketched as a child, the grass flowing on the hillside, the lynx track in the snow. An example of this might be seen in the poem "Book Of The Jungle" from Winter News. When I was five or six years old, my father read to me on winter evenings from Kipling's Jungle Books. Something took shape there in my mind: the wolf in the mouth of the cave, ready for the night's
hunting, the forest coming awake, and far away, the village of men. Thirty years went by, and that shape surfaced in a poem.

The animal, rising at dusk from its bed in the trampled grass—this is how it all began.

Far off the shaggy tribesmen listened and fed their fires with thorns.

Secret paths of the forest, when did your children walk unarmed, clothed only with the shadow of leaves?

We are still kneeling and listening; as from the edge of a neglected field there rises sometimes at evening the snort of a rutting bull.

Poetry seems to have been a natural response to my living there. My first winter in the cabin at Richardson, unable for some reason to paint, I began attempting poems in which I could express some of my feeling for this place I was coming to know, amazed at all I was seeing and learning. The poems were not, of course, very good. I had a lot to learn, about writing and about myself. For me to really know the place, I had to live there, build there, become intimate with it, and to know it for a long time, before I could say anything about it that would be personal and distinctive. It was nearly ten years before I wrote anything that satisfied me.

On that hillside, remote from many distractions, it was possible for me to see things, all things, more clearly, and to think in a quiet hard to come by these days. The events of my life seemed to reach into both past and future. Sometimes on fall evenings, looking out on that great
valley, the route of migrations, I saw, or felt, a future invasion of the continent; some force out of Asia, as in the not so remote past. In the poem "Foreboding" I tried to say something about this, a kind of vision, or suggestion of something not yet here.

Something immense and lonely divides the earth at evening.

For nine years I have watched from an inner doorway: as in a confused vision, manlike figures approach, cover their faces, and pass on, heavy with iron and distance.

There is no sound but the wind crossing the road, filling the ruts with a dust as fine as chalk.

Like the closing of an inner door, the day begins its dark journey, across nine bridges wrecked one by one.

I hope it will be clearer from this brief description how much and in what ways those years at Richardson formed me as a person and as a writer. There is one part of it I have hardly mentioned, and that concerns the two women who lived there with me much of the time, and one in particular. It seems only honest in an account of this sort not to have it appear that I was alone all the time, or that whatever was done I did all by myself. Without the companionship and support, physical and emotional, it seems unlikely that I would have got through those years, deprived as in some ways they were. And it seems to me not the least of things that I did finally learn to live with another human being.

It is still a place I go back to, in mind and in spirit, though it seems I cannot go back to it in fact. The material it gave me is still a part of my life, and I go back to it in poems, and in prose, trying to understand as well as I can the significance of what happened to me there. The
experience was so powerful it has influenced everything else I have done. Probably I measure everything else against it. Of all things I have and am, it is something I do not lose. While writing parts of this essay I could see on a table before me a broken sandstone seed mortar that I dug up from a field in California a few years ago. When I found it I was out early in the morning, looking at some Indian rock paintings not far from where I was camped with my wife and a group of school children. Such things, and the landscapes of which they are part, would not have for me the significance they do if I had not explored for myself during those years in Alaska something of the original life of the continent.

I no longer live at Richardson. In more ways than one, perhaps, that life is gone. Place for me has shifted from the Northcountry wilderness to a house in suburban California; from there to some rocks in the arid California foothills, to the rainy outlines of a city in the northwest, and from there to a windy street in Missoula, Montana. But behind all I write there is a landscape, partly idealized, perhaps, against which the human figure, my own or another's, acts out a part of its life. That original place still sustains me. It gave me a way of looking at the world I might not have got otherwise, and not least, a solitude in which I could learn to listen to my own voice. But as I have tried to show, I do not think place, outer place, alone can account for this. There must be another place, and that is within the person himself. When that interior place, formed out of dream and fantasy, and by intense imagination, finds its counterpart in a physical landscape, then some genuine human reality can be created.

The homestead at Richardson provided a place of departure, from which I might go out into the world as on a journey. I think it is in the idea of the journey that one of the important metaphors of our time can be found, the journey out of wilderness into culture, the forms of our complicated and corrupted age, with its intense confusions and deceptions. The eventual disintegration of these cultural forms returns us once more to the wilderness. This journey can be seen as both fall and reconciliation. And place, once again, means actual place, but also a state of mind, of consciousness. Once that place is established, we carry it with us, as we do a sense of ourselves.
PLUGGING THE HOLE IN THE BUCKET

(John Haines interviewed by Bob Wrigley)

INT: In your essay, "The Hole in the Bucket," you say right off: "Our poetry lacks ideas."

JH: It's difficult to define what we mean by "ideas" in poetry, though I tried to do that at one point in the essay, that I meant among other things a conviction about the world and the place of poetry in it; a certain perception, or way of seeing, something that might be abstracted and stated as an idea, but not necessarily. I think I was asking for a kind of seriousness, and my complaint was maybe a reflection of the general condition of things today, that we have few convictions about anything, and little motivation other than just getting away with whatever we can, ripping off the rewards. Possibly the same thing is true of poetry. You don't need ideas if we have a big network of presses and magazines, and you can imitate one of the going styles successfully enough. You won't need any ideas, not to get published anyway. It seems obvious to me you will need them if you are going to grow. You will need ideas (content might be a better word), convictions about something. I still think that's true.

INT: Where do the poet's ideas come from? Not great philosophical ideas.

JH: If a poet writes long enough he will come into them out of necessity. Otherwise his entire life will be spent in a series of random accomplishments of one sort or another. I think it will be almost an instinct, a basic urge in an artist to pull together what he has seen and what he has learned, and see if he can't make something coherent out of it. He might not be able to spell it out in philosophical terms, but it will begin to assume some kind of order and clarity. I should think he would want it to. There are poets who have written over a long period of time of whom that's probably not true. And there
have been people whose ideas peter out; they don’t get any more ideas and keep on writing the same poem. I think the poet’s ideas come from a variety of sources, not necessarily acquired from philosophy or religion or science, put to use in poems. Though, strictly speaking, what’s wrong with that? There are all sorts of ideas, discoveries floating around these days, but we don’t make any use of them. Possibly the best ideas just grow out of the work. A poet sees that his response to the world has taken a certain pattern and from that he may abstract something—for himself, anyway—that becomes a working principle. So that what he wrote twenty years ago relates to what he is doing now. If we read Williams we can see his ideas about the language slowly maturing. And this leads him on to do something else, to write Paterson. It all holds together. I think that’s important. I think these ideas are important. It doesn’t mean people can’t write poems without them, but it seems to me they are important.

INT: Is this lack of “ideas” a general indictment of the entire body of contemporary poetry?

JH: No. I was speaking in a very general sense. I knew that and said so. Well, who is there among us who has ideas? I’m not sure that I know. Well, Wendell Berry writes out of a certain attitude toward things; our relationship to the land, a certain kind of life that is appropriate for people. How original that is, I don’t know; it has a considerable ancestry in people like Thoreau. But it gives Berry’s work a focus and coherence. I’m not sure what ideas Bill Stafford has, but he also seems to have a certain slant on existence that you could call an idea if you wanted to. I don’t think there are many people writing in this country of whom this is true. I suppose it could be true of Bly. Maybe in Bly’s case, the ideas are just in the way. He has ideas about the sort of poetry we should be writing, and he tries to write poems out of that.
I felt very strongly about what I said in that essay, but another way of putting the whole thing might be this. I was asking myself if I had any ideas, and if not, why not. Or if I have, what are they? It's been helpful to me to think this way, and if someone else reads that essay and thinks "Ah! That's right. Do I have any ideas?" then I will have accomplished at least a part of what I set out to. Such questions, even though they seem a bit larger or outrageous, can be valuable to anyone.

INT: You also say that the lack of ideas extends into criticism too.

JH: We have a lot of people reviewing books of poetry today, but very few of them have any ideas of what poetry ought to be. I cannot think of anyone, except Bly sometimes. I find most reviews of poetry boring simply because I don't discover any real point of view in them. They don't tell me anything, and are no help in thinking about poetry. If a person has strong, passionate feelings about an art and can say them with enough conviction, they take on the form of an idea. I'm not sure to this day how coherent Yeats' ideas were, but he had some. The work seems to make sense, to hang together. Maybe you can take the ideas and throw them away. They aren't important; but the poetry is there anyway. The ideas served as a scaffolding, if nothing else. It's too much to ask of hundreds of contemporary poets that they all have ideas. One in a hundred might have a real idea.

INT: A lot of people, a lot of poets I should say, Donald Hall and Robert Bly for example, blame some of the mediocrity they see in contemporary poetry on writing workshops and MFA programs. What do you think?

JH: I think they may encourage the sameness or mediocrity. It's possible that such an environment, if the description is at all accurate, tends to discourage real ideas because those ideas threaten the status quo. I don't know that this is true, but I suspect it is. I don't know what one does to change that.

INT: Is the whole idea of workshops wrong somehow?
JH: We had good poets before anyone started the workshops. The poets today aren't any better, we just have more of them. I don't think poetry needs the workshop. If you are a poet, you will write poems—murder will out. If you want to go to school, go to school with the best writers you can find, by reading them. But on the other hand, possibly the workshops, looked at in the right way, are not a matter of making poets out of people or anything like that, but of creating an environment in which it is possible to think about poetry and talk about it, as we might not be able to do otherwise. An audience, though I think the university-sponsored writing group is a somewhat limited and artificial response. It certainly doesn't touch the community at large.

INT: Bly says that they teach people how to get poems in *The New Yorker* and that's it.

JH: Or, how to get poems into magazines, period. To the extent that anyone is encouraged to think that merely because he or she has a few poems accepted and has been praised for them, that he or she has really arrived at the threshold, has "made it," someone is being dishonest.

INT: A false sense of importance. "Me and William Butler Yeats are both poets." You said before that some poets ignore the important figures of the past because they don't seem related to what is being published now. Do you think workshops encourage that kind of thinking?

JH: Something about people who don't read much poetry, only what is current, in the air at the moment? I saw something in the paper this morning about the decline of interest in history as a subject. People aren't interested in reading about the past. Current events, that takes the place of history. And I wonder about the reasons for this. Charles Fair describes the situation, and explains it better than I could. He describes the kind of person typical today, someone who is not interested in the principles, the ideas that have brought about the
civilization we have. They are disconnected from it, untouched by it, almost. They have the products, the results, and use them without thought. You know, we have all this stuff, for example tape recorders, hi-fi, we can listen to Beethoven and Fleetwood Mac at the same time. It all comes to us so easily, and we don’t think what it took to make this possible. What use is history? We have what we have, and we don’t need it. We are rather like spoiled heirs. Anyway, if this is true, and I think it is—Ortega said much the same thing years ago—then we might say that something like this is also true of poetry today. And it is possible that the workshops, by making it easy for people to write and publish, do encourage this—a product everywhere much the same.

INT: And of course, as I’m sure Fair points out, that applies to practically all of contemporary life. Someone can say: “This is my life. This is all that’s important.”

JH: Yeah. If I say it’s good, it’s good. Why should I read all that stuff, anyway? There have been periods when art seems to have been a sort of community undertaking, the individual talent wasn’t all that important. Probably the Middle Ages would be a good example. Those carvings on the cathedrals; some of them may have been signed by individual craftsmen, but on the whole it was a kind of mass effort. But for us literature has been mainly the individual talent or genius impressing itself on the language in such a way that the style was unmistakable. Someone has used the language, filled it with passion and thought, and left an indelible mark on it. When we don’t find this, we find pretty much a standardized product. One poem by so-and-so reads pretty much like a poem by someone else. I don’t think it’s possible to claim that we have a worthwhile literature under those conditions, but a lot of stuff will eventually sift out and a few good poems will survive this period. I think they will because there are some good people writing.

INT: I’ve heard you quote Radcliffe Squires on the Italian poet, Mario Luzi—a very interesting quote. He said: “Ninety percent of the poetry today fails . . .”
JH: “fails to make anything of experience for the simple reason that it makes everything of experience, so that experience becomes not the tutor but a kind of trivial tyrant.” This seems clear to me. It goes right along with some of the things Fair has been saying in APR, and elsewhere, about the loss of imagination. If I understand Squires, I think that’s what he’s talking about. We have hundreds of poems today that tell us all kinds of day to day things about the poet, his girl copped out, something red flushed down the drain. “Today I took out my teeth.” I’m oversimplifying it, but it is the ability to take that bit of personal experience and go beyond it that finally makes literature. Really fine writers are able to write about things they haven’t themselves experienced because they have the ability to take the bit of personal reality given to them and expand it, make it into something much larger and inclusive. It’s a quality of mind we call “imagination”. If Fair is right, that this is being lost, and I think he may be right, then perhaps there is no point in blaming the writers themselves. The problem is so much bigger than that, and the poverty of the writing is simply a manifestation of the general condition of society. What to do about that I don’t know. Wasn’t it Kafka who said about World War I, that it was caused by a great lack of imagination? But perhaps one can deal with it in poetry by recognizing that the situation does exist, instead of pretending that it doesn’t.

It seems to me that one of the things we can do is to learn from the past. Pound said in one of his early poems, speaking of his songs, that he wanted them to “stand in the hard Sophoclean light” and take their wounds from it gladly. That’s the attitude of a serious artist. I think it is the only way you can learn and grow. And it can be very saddening to find that your own work just doesn’t measure up. I may be wrong, but I think many people are not willing to take that risk. It’s much simpler to be praised and have your poems compared to someone over in the next state who writes pretty much like yourself. You can feel pretty good about that; you don’t have to ask yourself those hard questions. You needn’t put your poems next to Yeats and have to say, “Jesus, what a slob I am.”
INT: You said that the really good writers don’t necessarily have to experience what they write about. James Dickey calls this the “creative possibility of the lie.”

JH: Sure it’s a form of lying; if you like, a creative lie. But the intention is to transform reality, or what we like to call reality. We need a very strict sense of aesthetic morality, to know that the facts must be altered in order to reveal another reality, one that lies behind appearances. We do it all the time when we write. Why write a poem if all you want to do is relate the facts? The power to select and transform convincingly and consistently is what makes the artist.

INT: You used to paint and study painting, but then you moved to poetry. How did that come about exactly? Was there a point when you said: I’m a poet, not a painter?

JH: I’m not sure of all the psychological apparatus that went into that.

INT: There was no gong that went off or something . . .

JH: No it wasn’t like that. What happened was that I went to Alaska in 1947. I was going to art school in Washington at the time, and took a year and a half off to go north. That first winter, somewhere past mid-winter, I thought I would try to paint. I got out my stuff, some canvas I had with me, stretchers, and paint. But for some reason I could not get into paint what I was feeling about the place. It just didn’t feel right, and I don’t know why. So I began writing poems instead. It turned out to be a very free and natural outflow of feelings and impressions concerning what I had so far seen there. That was in 1948. I left Alaska that fall and went back to Washington and art school once more. I got very involved with painting and with sculpture the next year, but I kept on writing poems, and more importantly reading a lot of modern poetry I hadn’t known before. A real conflict came of this. I had excruciating headaches that I didn’t relate to anything at the time. When I moved to New York in 1950, I came to a decision at the same time to give up art and be a poet, as good
a one as I could. The headaches stopped at the same time. I kept on with art school because it gave me the GI allowance to live on, but even though I went to school and did some work there, I never again painted. It was a conscious and deliberate decision, not arrived at without considerable searching and pain. I don't remember the exact date, it was sometime in January or February, 1950. All my friends were painters, except one or two writers I met, among them Weldon Kees, who was very much involved with the art world in New York at the time. This was the world I moved in. I spent much of my time writing, but hardly ever showed the poems to anyone. And of course the poems weren't very good. I had a lot to learn. Why I made that decision, the kind that changes one's life forever, I am not sure. From time to time I've considered reasons for it, and even stated them, but finally I have to admit I can't be sure. There were certain practical considerations that may or may not have been valid.

INT: Then it was roughly sixteen years between the time you decided to write and the publication of the first book. That's a long time.

JH: Is that right? 1950 to 1966—God, yes. I took a long time to publish, didn't I? Not that it was deliberate, but that's the way it worked out. I suppose it's unfair to cite my own experience and claim this is the way it should be for all. But I think now there is something to be said for time and ripeness. Some people must think they will be the great exception and, like Dylan Thomas or Keats or Rimbaud, flower with the first touch of adolescence. But I don't think any of us can count on being that. Certainly it's been true for others, Stafford, for example, that a long period of apprenticeship lies waiting. This is a private matter, and isn't undertaken in any workshop. It is between you and the universe, with the aid of the literary tradition, those writers from whom you learn and for whom you have respect. And out of all that, if you're lucky, someday will come a thing that is entirely your own. It might happen in a longer or shorter time, but there's nothing
really lost by being patient. The seriousness that attracts me can't be pushed. It arrives when it must. You can force things in a hothouse. Maybe that's what a workshop is, a hothouse.

INT: Bill Knott said recently that we shouldn't criticize anyone for publishing less than he or she is capable of writing, for publishing crap, as it were, because we don't know for sure if we'll be around tomorrow. The world may be blown to bits before we get a chance to write our next poem. Is that a defensible excuse?

JH: It seems to me a very poor excuse for publishing bad work. If things are that bad, what's the point of publishing at all? Unless it's a matter of getting what you can while there is still time, making a dogpile out of it, the way they do in business. But to hear it rationalized in literature that way is unpleasant. I don't have it here with me now, but Jeffers wrote an essay about things like that. He was encouraging the young poet not to be in a hurry; that finally the only judgement that mattered was beyond the person's control, other than his ability to produce good, honest work. The judgements were going to be made sometime in the future, not now. The only sort of praise worth having, according to Jeffers, was that which would still be given a few hundred years from now. If your work has that quality, it will survive. And he said that having any other audience in mind was a distraction because you would always be tempted to write things to please that audience. Anyway, it seems like pretty good advice to me, if a little extreme and no doubt not easy to follow. We need some standards of excellence in our head so we will know what good poems are. If those standards are good enough that we can read a poem from ancient Greece and know that it is good, there's no reason to think the standards have changed. The same aesthetic or critical sense that allows us to feel that a poem today is good or not good, and the same sense of fitness is going to be valid another thousand years from now.

INT: You're getting your rewards now.

JH: I am. But it's all incidental. They have come to me, but I sure
didn't go out looking for them. There's no money in it, or not much, but if you mean recognition, praise... it's nice to have. It probably hasn't anything to do with whether I'll write a good poem tomorrow or the next week. Such rewards as I've got, and I suppose that includes the right to publish what I write... even if it's bad, someone will probably take it because it has my name on it. And on the basis of all this I get a job now and then. But I say it is incidental because they have come from having paid attention to something else, and done the best work I could.

INT: Williams Matthews recently spoke of you and your work in a magazine interview. It was great praise, particularly for Winter News.

JH: It still surprises me that Winter News did mean a lot to a number of people. I am only beginning to understand what it meant and why it still seems important. When I go back into that book today, it is a little like entering another country.

INT: You feel your work has changed that much in nine years?

JH: The voice is the same, but I have changed, and the person who wrote those poems sometimes seems ages away. It's a bit like going back to a house you lived in as a child and finding everything changed, grown smaller.

INT: I'm sure some of that feeling comes from having left Alaska, wouldn't you say?

JH: It comes from having left not only Alaska, but the person I was when I lived there. This has been a very strange thing to me—possibly a journey of some kind, as I have tried to say elsewhere. I relate to the poems in Winter News as poems, but it is almost as if they were written by another person. It is me, and yet it is not.

INT: The earlier poems were pared down. There was nothing like fat.
JH: There was no fat on me, either! The poems in *Winter News*, the language of the poems, came directly out of the environment and the life I was living. It was a life pared to essentials. There was no room for excess. Well, I needed that kind of discipline. I may have picked up a certain amount of baggage since then, I don't know. Certainly the environment has changed, and I have lived through considerable confusion, subject to all kinds of things from within and without. The clarity or crispness of the earlier poems may not be there now, at least not to the extent that it was. But you know, I wouldn't like to feel I had lost that for good.

INT: In a short review of *The Stone Harp* and *Twenty Poems* that appeared in *Stinktree*, Robert Bly said: “An alienation, deep, has slipped in overnight, the human community seems to him unworthy, a hostility toward it, subtle, like the cold coming from a wrench left outdoors overnight, moves into the hand, and into the air. He finds it hard even to love animals, though he prefers them to human beings.” And he goes on to say that you have not “lived out” your own life, but rather that of the “dream of a disintegrating community.” How about it? Is/was your alienation so acute that you felt yourself superior to, or at least outside of the rest of mankind?

JH: I had come out of a world in which I had discovered something completely fresh and new, and that was the arctic, the north. I had made it my own, and I felt at home in it. I left that and re-entered contemporary society which I believe now is far more corrupt than I ever thought it was. To some extent, perhaps, that discovery has destroyed some of the freshness of my own feeling about the world. I see what we have done, and what is being done, and it has been like a slow catastrophe. The alienation Bly speaks of was for me a true finding. It was real. The alienation *is* there. Alienation from the original perception of things and alienation, finally, from oneself. I feel it everywhere I go, even in Montana, one looks at the world and realizes it has been touched. Things have been done to it. I didn't have that feeling about the far north.
INT: Did you have much problem in getting back into the populated world? Coming back from Alaska?

JH: Yeah. Superficially, I learned to adjust to things here. I learned to drive on freeways, that took me quite a while. There were constant little collisions between myself and the world I found here. It has been difficult. Disorienting might be the word for it.

INT: Did this cause any changes in your writing? The reason I ask is that there are certainly more people in your poems now, especially in *Leaves and Ashes*. You're writing poems now, about your family, about the people for whom you feel some intimacy.

JH: Yes, I think that's true. Initially I tried to keep the style or tone of the poems in *Winter News*, and write out of a completely new situation and subject matter. I suppose that was inevitable, but it made some problems. Some of the poems in *The Stone Harp* and *Leaves and Ashes* are that sort. I had to loosen up, and change in some way to accommodate a new kind of experience. That took time. The great thing about having left Alaska and come back here has been the re-encounter with parts of myself I had forgotten. It has allowed me to include people, individuals, not only in my life, but in the poems, in a way I never have before. This is probably the best thing that's happened. *Winter News*, you know, was a pretty self-contained world, and having lived that out, what else could I do with it? It easily became a confinement. I had to break out of it, and leaving Alaska was my way of doing that.

INT: I'd say you have maintained the style. You have always had the same consistent voice throughout all the books.

JH: That may be true . . . perhaps the changes aren't so much in style, but simply changes in attention, and in the number and kinds of things I could respond to and write about.
INT: You’re writing more prose now, essays and the like. And some pieces that have been a sort of weaving together of prose and poetry, like the thing for Bill Heyen’s new anthology.

JH: Partly I guess, there are things I want to say at greater length; or in some way I can’t in poetry. Among other things, the kind of essay you are talking about that I did for Heyen’s anthology.

INT: What’s it like writing about your own work?

JH: Well, I thought I wouldn’t like it, but I found that it allowed me to write about the situation some of the poems came from, and to tell a story. Not so much how I came to write down my first lines, that sort of thing, which is mostly bullshit. But to explore some of the background of the poems, and talk about them in a way that, for myself, made an entirely new thing. I don’t think of it so much as writing about my poems as writing about the experiences the poems came from. For me they still have a lot of interest, a lot of possibilities. I wrote a poem about Fred Campbell, “Deserted Cabin”, in which I think I gave pretty much the essence of the man and his life. But there is still so much fascination for me in that person and the way he lived. I want to go into it in more detail. This wouldn’t be a poem, it would be a story. As long as I feel this kind of interest in the material, I’ll want to write about it.

INT: Do you think you might write long poems? Your poems are not usually long . . .

JH: I don’t know that I’ll ever write a really long poem. I used to think I wanted to, and sometimes think I may still. I still have scraps of long poems, epics of life at Richardson. Scraps of conversation mixed with lyric passages, pieces of journals and letters and so forth. I had it all planned out, but never wrote it. I didn’t know how at the time, and I may never do it that way now. But there is another way, I think, partly prose and partly verse. I think I might be able to do that if the interest holds. Who knows?
New Year's Eve, and all through
the state of Oregon
we found the gas pumps dry,
the stalls shuttered, the vague
windmills of the shopping malls
stopped on the hour.

The homebound traffic thinned,
turning off by the roadside;
I lost count of abandoned cars.

This is the country we knew
before the cities came,
lighted by sun, moon and stars,
the glare of a straying comet,
the spark from a hunting fire
flying in the prairie wind.

The long land darkens, houselights
wink green and gold,
more distant than the planets
in fields bound with invisible wire.

We will drive this road to the end,
another Sunday, another year;
past the rainy borders of Canada,
the wind-shorn taiga,
to the shore of the Great White Bear;

and stop there, stalled in a drift
by the last well
drained for a spittle of oil.

The driver sleeps, the passenger listens:
Tick, tick from a starlit engine,
snow beginning again
deep in a continent vacant and dark.
HOMESTEAD

I
It is nearly thirty years
since I came over Richardson Hill
to pitch a bundle of boards
in the dark, light my fire
and stir with a spoon
old beans in a blackened pot.

II
What did I come for? To see
the shadows waver and leap,
listen to water,
birds in their sleep,
the tremor in old men’s voices.
The land gave up its meaning slowly,
as the sun finds day by day
a deeper place in the mountain.

III
Green smoke and white ash,
the split wood smelling of honey.
And the skinned carcass of a fox
flung red in the snow, frost
flowering in the blue, flawed glass—
these are the images.
The canvas tent-wall warmed
by a candle, my halfway house
of flies on summer evenings.

IV
One morning in my first winter
I met a tall man set apart
by the crazy cunning in his stare.
From him by tallow light
I heard his tales of Richardson
and Tenderfoot, names and antics
of the pathfinders and squawmen,
Jesus-workers, quick whores.

I followed where his hand
made a hill or a hollow,
saw their mark on the land,
the grass-grown scars,
fallen bailiwicks, and heaps
of iron scaling in the birches.

These shadows came and went.
One still September day
I knew their passing
left no more sound in the land
than a handful of berries
tumbled in a miner's pail.

V

From the spent dream behind me,
the Dakotas, reeling Montana . . .
came grass fires, and
a black hand mowing the plains.

The floor of the sky littered
with shackled farms,
dust through the window cracks,
a locust cloud eating the harvest.

California, pillar of sandstone,
Oregon still vaguely green—
these are the images.

And now on the high tundra,
willows and water without end,
come shade and a song like death.
VI

Old ladders shorten, pulled down in the sod, half-rotted houselogs heaved by the frost; my hand spans the distance I have come.

Out of a passion turned searing and blind, like a theme of bitter smoke, a deep blow strikes at the granite roots.

By oil-light and the glint of coal, forcing its way, a rougher spirit invades the land, this ruin carved by a plow.

VII

Here is the place I came to, the lost bridge, my steep camp nailed to this hillside, by a road that trails out of nowhere.

I walk here evenings when the light clears after rain, and a thrush song soars in the birch grove.

A door blows aside in the wind, and a path worn deep to the spring showers familiar leaves.

A battered dipper shines here in the dusk; the trees stand close, their branches are moving, in flight with the rustling of wings.
THINGS. . .

For a long time now we have heard these voices singing along eroded wires, murmurs from the veiled partitions of clouds, little whispers tracing the dust. . .

They tell us what we partly know, hidden by the noise we make: the land will not forgive us.

Crushed and broken things, shapes of clay and burning lignite, come from the soil of the plains and speak to us their words in smoke—the hawk of the nightmare is flying again.

The past returns in the lightning of horses’s manes, iron shoes striking sparks from the pavement; in the idleness of men who circle the night with their sliding ropes.

Everything we have known for so long, a house at ease, a calm street to walk on, and sunset in which the fire means us no harm. . .

Rolling back from the blocked summit like an uncoupled train with no hand on the brake, gathering speed in the dark on the mountain grade.
NEWS FROM THE GLACIER

I
That mid-fall morning, driving north toward Glacier Park, we came down into Flathead Lake to find a world of mist:

an inland sea rolled in by night, spreading across the valley, lapping the hillsides.

As if we had slept a long time, more than a thousand years, and awakened, the world we came from known by these vague fossils held still in the fog:

grey masts of the pine trees, the half-roofs of barns and houses, cattle standing asleep in an air like water.

Nothing living or awake; no wind, no sound, and the light drained of color.

II
Sunlight struck before us at Marias Pass.

A pack train loading by the roadside, horses and red-shirted men standing in the chill;

three mules already loaded, roped and bound uphill, splashing the icy shallows.
Like figures held over
from the day of stampedes
and vigilantes, another light
than this sun glinting
on the barrels and buckles.

Their tents still half
in the morning shadow,
smoke from that fire
winding up to the ridges,
throbbing before the hunters . . .

And out of the sunlit,
steaming grass before us
a coyote bounded—
gone in the smoky thickets.

III

We climbed all afternoon
up Avalanche Creek,
following a track in thin snow,
over roots, and loose stone
tunneled by water;

and came near evening
to a small, half-frozen lake
held in a cirque.

Snow was the dust on those peaks;
at the lake's far end
an orange tent
blazed in the mountain shadow.

I sent a stone skittering over
the ice, that made a sound
like a creature that cries in the dusk,
warning of night and the cold.

And we stood and listened
in the silence that echoed after,
to know what cried,
what bird, what thing that was.
IV

Nine thousand feet in the Rockies,
staring into the blue vault,
we saw a cloud
form out of vapor and wind . . .

Swiftly a hurrying whiteness
spilled from the rock ledge
above us, and plunged,
terrace by terrace,
tearing itself into rain
and mist . . .

As if a whole summer held back
in the desolation of the sky
had spent itself,
foam and radiant bubble;

to lie regathered, quiet,
a blue pool staining
the yellow rock at our feet.

V

West of Logan Pass, where
the snow held back another hour . . .

The mountain goats came down,
out of the cliffs above us,
down from their pasture
of sedges and lichen.

Small groups of them, bound
for water, shelter from storm;
snowdrops, small clouds
bringing their shadows to earth.

And seeing the people there
below them, they stopped
and quietly grazed out of sight
in a thorny thicket.
All but one old billy
who stood alone on the ridge,
his beard in the wind,
watching the watchers who
waited and stamped their feet.

We left them feeding
in the windy darkness
and went down, slowly
descending in loops of stone,
while the mountain turned
slowly white behind us.

VI

On a bend in the road near St. Mary
the rock wall gave back to us
the eroded shape of a whale,
something part fish or reptile
stranded here when the seas went down
and the mountains lifted.

Slowly the meat rotted, then water
came back, and sand piled again
on the windy skeleton.

Far above us in the remote divide
there are seams of sediment
packed with little shells,
stone surf breaking green and rose
in the high snow air.

The deep lake of the west is gone,
only this beached leviathan
sleeping here in the rock wall
slowly turns on the wide earth bed.

That spine has changed to quartz,
the bleached bones break
into fragments that cut our fingers.
VII

Toward Many Glaciers, where the granite coiled in a gritty pattern, like the thumbwhorl of a giant imprinted when he strode from the west, and paused:

Nothing much to see there in the watery east, he braced himself on this mountain, skidding a mighty stone over the flooded continent.

VIII

East from Glacier Park an immense herd lies buried.

Thighbones, blunt ends of ribs break through the soil, a little grass like hair straying over them in the wind.

Whatever they were, Mastodon, Great Horse, Bison or something no one has named, they were hunted down by the cold, starved in the great earth changes.

We read in this landscape how they came and went:

Faces to the ground, feeding, following the gusty ridges, they had lakes for eyes, and the future drained away as they moved and fed.
After the twenty thousand year siege of rain and ice
the broken gates stand open;
a few rocks piled at the portals,
far plains strewn with bones.

From the long march overland,
scouring the rockwalls,
making camp at the foot of moraines,

we came to this sprawling
settlement of wind and dust,
these streets laid out
among the boulders, metal signs
pocked and flapping.

No great encampment stands in view
at Browning. We are awake
in our own desolate time;
clotheslines whipping the air
with sleeves and pockets,
little fists of plastic bags
beating the stony ground.
COUNTING CRACKS IN THE WALL

1.
I was counting cracks in the wall, nose stuck between brick and mortar, eyes yellow as egg shells when I was sucked into the central heating system. I flew past windows opening into bedrooms, kitchen, living room. I watched children cut dog tails with plastic knives. The rest of the family tried to separate the TV from the living room.

2.
I was counting cracks in the wall when a man, looking over my shoulder, said I miscounted. He claimed I counted a tree shadow as a crack. He made me start over. I learned all cracks in walls are shadows. I began to lose interest in walls.
3. I was counting cracks in the wall on a day when grey skies fell low and rain sang through trees. I mixed mud with rain in my boots, walked up the walls to shelter, filling cracks.

4. I was counting cracks in the wall when one opened to a room of mirrors. I could not tell how large the room was. All the mirrors faced me. Each showed a crack in the wall. I thought I was being born.
LIVERTREE

You can’t call to one
in the line
carrying his bone
to the sun.
And that man
piling hides
on a wooden cart
is not to be disturbed.
The last time
there were visitors
the songbirds left
and changed the season.

You will see important progress:
lines are longer,
transport up.
We now have with us
men who ferry
salt to ocean.
See now, a boat
descends from the moon.

Stumps in the marsh
have been burned,
the melons
there will feed
our young.
Lately, all the costs
have doubled.
Sun, moon, and bone.
We blind the crow
and tie its wings,
watch the hole
for spear to quiver,
end thong
fast to timber.
And which of you
will pound the grist
we gathered in the spray
of whales?

Your fire must be out
by moonskin.
Worlds are piling
in the night.
Lay your mat
along the shore,
and sleep. Sleep
will bring her ashy mittens.
Deep, deep
the whale.
THE RETURN

Your hair still blows
with the wind off the river.
Geese make arrows with
the sharp points of their wings
and spin the eyeball
through the gray to what we
once imagined as heaven.

The water is silent.
Any troller will tell you
how the current drags men
further downstream than fish.

You want to believe this river
has direction,
that small tributaries up north
empty into this wide span of gray water,
that there is a system
of xylem and phloem
beneath the bottom
that guides the water carefully
to a point where gulls
appear from behind black rock.

The sky swells
in one eye:
the water in the other.
The moon fat with a full month
hides the tiny center
we think of as yolk
and sucks half our cheek out
from the bone beneath.
When you undress
yourself to this, remember:
The Amish farmer has patience.
A cold night in late April
leaves his beard a little longer.
He believes his tomatoes
have bloomed small yellow flowers
and will close to a white inside
they use for heat.
The hex sign on his barn
rotates his wife's face
in a pattern that keeps
each season's sorcerer
beneath the corn.
Dream of the Druid

Anita Endrezze
Ben. I never made it back to that bar in Elmira where you and that thug Fitzie used to end weekends in rage. Where you crowned your girl with broken glass and washed the body from your hands. Every mirror broken and still your face whole in each frame. And that last headpiece you made from rusted lead. They believed you’d pillage every town from Elmira to the border and disappear into the North wood waiting for the second coming.

They say you were unrecognizable. Steel twisted around your arms, handlebars locked around your head. When I went back, your room still stunk of clay and wet cloth. Nothing untouched. Beer cans in the toilet and that selfless portrait without eyes dug into the plaster. Everything was still except one woman on the sill, your hand half-pulled from her head and her eyes still waiting for you to attack them.
THE DAY I SAT WITH JESUS ON THE SUN DECK
AND A WIND CAME UP AND BLEW MY KIMONO
OPEN AND HE SAW MY BREASTS

When an extraordinary event occurs in your life, you’re apt to remember with unnatural clarity the details surrounding it. You remember shapes and sounds that weren’t directly related to the happening but hovered there in the periphery of the experience. This can even happen when you read a great book for the first time—one that unsettles you and startles you into thought. You remember where you read it, what room, who was nearby.

I can still remember, for instance, where I read Of Human Bondage by W. Somerset Maugham. I was lying on a top bunk in our high school dormitory, wrapped in a blue bedspread. I lived in a dormitory then because of my father. He was a very religious man and wanted me to get a spiritual kind of education. To hear the Word and know the Lord, as he put it. So he sent me to St. John’s Lutheran Academy in Regina for two years. He was confident, I guess, that that’s where I’d hear the Word. Anyway, I can still hear Mrs. Sverdren, our housemother, knocking on the door at midnight and whispering in her Norwegian accent, “Now, Gloria, it is past 12 o’clock. It is time to turn off the light. Right now.” Then scuffing down the corridor in her bedroom slippers. What’s interesting here is that I don’t remember anything about the book itself except that someone in it had a club foot. But it must have moved me deeply when I was sixteen, which is some time ago now.

You can imagine then how distinctly I remember the day Jesus of Nazareth, in person, climbed the hill in our back yard to our house, then up the outside stairs to the sun deck where I was sitting. And how He stayed with me for awhile. You can surely understand how clear those details rest in my memory.

The event occurred on Monday morning, September 11, 1972, in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. These facts in themselves are more unusual than they may appear to be at first glance. September’s my favorite month, Monday my favorite day, morning my favorite time. And although Moose Jaw may not be the most magnificent place in the world, even so, if you happen to be there on a Monday morning in September it has its beauty.
It’s not hard to figure out why these are my favorites, by the way. I have a husband and five children. Things get hectic, especially on week-ends and holidays. Kids hanging around the house, eating, arguing, asking me every hour what there is to do in Moose Jaw. And television. The programs are always the same. Only the names change. Rough Riders, Blue Bombers, whatever. So when school starts in September I bask in freedom, especially on Monday. No quarrels. No TV. And the morning, clear and lovely. A new day. A fresh start.

On the morning of September 11 I got up at 7, the usual time, cooked cream of wheat for the kids, fried a bit of sausage for Fred, waved them all out of the house, drank a second cup of coffee in peace, and decided to get at last week’s ironing. I wasn’t dressed yet but still in the pink kimono I’d bought years ago on my trip to Japan, my one and only overseas trip, a 300-dollar quick tour of Tokyo and other cities. I’d saved for this while working as a library technician in Regina. And I’m glad I did. Since then I’ve hardly been out of Saskatchewan. Once in awhile a trip to Winnipeg, and a few times down to Medicine Lake, Montana, to visit my sister.

I set up the ironing board and hauled out the basket of week-old sprinkled clothes. When I unrolled the first shirt it was completely dry and smelled stale. The second was covered with little grey blots of mould. So was the third. Fred teaches junior high science here in Moose Jaw. He uses a lot of shirts. I decided I’d have to unwrap the whole basketful and air everything out. This I did, spreading the pungent garments about the living room. While they were airing I would go outside and sit on the deck for awhile, since it was such a clear and sunny day.

If you know Moose Jaw at all, you’ll know about the new subdivision at the southeast end called Hillhurst. That’s where we live, right on the edge of the city. In fact, our deck looks out on flat land as far as the eye can see, except for the back yard itself which is a fairly steep hill leading down to a stone quarry. But from the quarry the land straightens out into the Saskatchewan prairie. One clump of poplars stands beyond the quarry to the right, and high weeds have grown up among the rocks. Other than that it’s plain—just earth and sky. But when the sun rises new in the morning, weeds and rocks take on an orange and rusty glow which is pleasing. To me at least.
I unplugged the iron and returned to the kitchen. I’d bring a cup of coffee out there, or maybe orange juice. To reach the juice at the back of the fridge my hand passed right next to a bottle of dry red Calona. Now here was a better idea. A little wine on Monday morning, a little relaxation after a rowdy week-end. I held the familiar bottle comfortably in my hand and poured, anticipating a pleasant day.

On the deck I pulled an old canvas folding chair into the sun, and sat. Beauty and tranquility floated toward me on Monday morning, September 11, around 9:40.

First He was a little bump on the far, far off prairie. Then He was a mole, way beyond the quarry. Then a larger animal, a dog perhaps, moving out there through the grass. Nearing the quarry, He became a person. No doubt about that. A woman perhaps, still in her bathrobe. But edging out from the rocks, through the weeds, toward the hill, He was clear to me. I knew then who He was. I knew it just as I knew the sun was shining.

The reason I knew is that He looked exactly the way I’d seen him 5000 times in pictures, in books and Sunday School pamphlets. If there was ever a person I’d seen and heard about, over and over, this was the one. Even in grade school those terrible questions. Do you love the Lord? Are you saved by grace alone through faith? Are you awaiting eagerly the glorious day of His Second Coming? And will you be ready on that Great Day? I’d sometimes hidden under the bed when I was a child, wondering if I really had been saved by grace alone, or, without realizing it, I’d been trying some other method, like the Catholics, who were saved by their good works and would land in hell. Except for a few who knew in their hearts it was really grace, but they didn’t want to leave the church because of their relatives. And was this it? Would the trumpet sound tonight and the sky split in two? Would the great Lord and King, Alpha and Omega, holding aloft the seven candlesticks, accompanied by a heavenly host which no man could number—descend from heaven with a mighty shout? And was I ready? Rev. Hanson in his high pulpit in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, roared in my ears and clashed against my eardrums.

And there He was. Coming. Climbing the hill in our back yard, His body bent against the climb, His robes ruffling in the wind. He was coming. And I was not ready. All those mouldy clothes scattered about the living room. And me in this faded old thing, made in Japan,
and drinking—in the middle of the morning.

He had reached the steps now. His right hand was on the railing. Jesus' fingers were curled around my railing. He was coming up. He was ascending. He was coming up to me here on the sun deck.

He stood on the top step and looked at me. I looked at Him. He looked exactly right, exactly the same as all the pictures: white robe, purple stole, bronze hair, creamy skin. How had all those queer artists, illustrators of Sunday School papers, how had they gotten Him exactly right like that?

He stood at the top of the stairs. I sat there holding my glass. What do you say to Jesus when He comes? How do you address Him? Do you call Him Jesus? I supposed that was His first name. Or Christ? I remembered the woman at the well, the one living in adultery who'd called Him Sir. Perhaps I could try that. Or maybe I should pretend not to recognize Him. Maybe, for some reason, He didn't mean for me to recognize Him. Then He spoke.

"Good morning," He said. "My name is Jesus."

"How do you do," I said. "My name is Gloria Olson."

My name is Gloria Olson. That's what I said, all right. As if He didn't know.

He smiled, standing there at the top of the stairs. I thought of what I should do next. Then I got up and unfolded another canvas chair.

"You have a nice view here," He said, leaning back on the canvas and pressing His sandaled feet against the iron bars of the railing.

"Thank you. We like it."

Nice view. Those were His very words. Everyone who comes to our house and stands on the deck says that. Everyone.

"I wasn't expecting company today." I straightened the folds in my pink kimono and tightened the cloth more securely over my knees. I picked up the glass from the floor where I'd laid it.

"I was just passing through on my way to Winnipeg. I thought I'd drop by."

"I've heard a lot about you," I said. "You look quite a bit like your pictures." I raised the glass to my mouth and saw that His hands were empty. I should offer him something to drink. Tea? Milk? How should I ask Him what He'd like to drink? What words should I use?

"It gets pretty dusty out there," I finally said. "Would you care for something to drink?" He looked at the glass in my hand. "I could make you some tea," I added.
“Thanks,” He said. “What are you drinking?”

“Well, on Mondays I like to relax a bit after the busy week-end with the family all home. I have five children, you know. So sometimes after breakfast I have a little wine.”

“That would be fine,” He said.

By luck I found a clean tumbler in the cupboard. I stood by the sink, pouring the wine. And then, like a bolt of lightning, I realized my situation. Oh, Johann Sebastian Bach. Glory. Honor. Wisdom. Power. George Fredrick Handel. King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He’s on my sun deck. Today He’s sitting on my sun deck. I can ask Him any question under the sun, anything at all, He’ll know the answer. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Well, now, wasn’t this something for a Monday morning in Moose Jaw.

I opened the fridge door to replace the bottle. And I saw my father. It was New Year’s morning. My father was sitting at the kitchen table. Mother had covered the oatmeal pot to let it simmer on the stove. I could hear the lid bumping against the rim, quietly. She sat across the table from Daddy. Sigrid and Freda sat on one side of the table, Raymond and I on the other. We were holding hymn books, little black books turned to page one. It was dark outside. On New Year’s morning we got up before sunrise. Daddy was looking at us with his chin pointed out. It meant be still and sit straight. Raymond sat as straight and stiff as a soldier, waiting for Daddy to notice how nice and stiff he sat. We began singing. Page one. Hymn for the New Year. Philipp Nicolai. 1599. We didn’t really need the books. We’d sung the same song since the time of our conception. Daddy always sang the loudest.

The Morning Star upon us gleams; How full of grace and truth His beams,
How passing fair His splendor. Good Shepherd, David’s proper heir,
My King in heav’n Thou dost me bear Upon Thy bosom tender.

Near—est, Dear—est, High—est, Bright—est, Thou delight—est
Still to love me, Thou so high enthroned a—bove me.

I didn’t mind, actually, singing hymns on New Year’s, as long as I was sure no one else would find out. I’d have been rather embarrassed if any of my friends ever found out how we spent New Year’s. It’s easy at a certain age to be embarrassed about your family. I remember Alice Johnson, how embarrassed she was about her father, Elmer Johnson.
He was an alcoholic and couldn't control his urine. Her mother always had to clean up after him. Even so, the house smelled. I suppose she couldn't get it all. I know Alice was embarrassed when we saw Elmer all tousled and sick looking, with urine stains on his trousers. I really don't know what would be harder on a kid—having a father who's a drunk, or one who's sober on New Year's and sings *The Morning Star*.

I walked across the deck and handed Jesus the wine. I sat down, resting my glass on the flap of my kimono. Jesus was looking out over the prairie. He seemed to be noticing everything out there. He was obviously in no hurry to leave, but He didn't have much to say. I thought of what to say next.

"I suppose you're more used to the sea than to the prairie."

"Yes," He answered, "I've lived most of my life near water. But I like the prairie too. There's something nice about the prairie." He turned His face to the wind, stronger now, coming toward us from the east.

*Nice* again. If I'd ever used that word to describe the prairie, in an English theme at St. John's, for example, it would have had three red circles around it. At least three. I raised my glass to the wind. Good old St. John's. Good old Pastor Solberg, standing in front of the wooden altar, holding the gospel aloft in his hand.

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God
And the Word was God. All things were made by Him
And without Him was not anything made that was made.

I was sitting on a bench by Paul Thorson. We were sharing a hymnal. Our thumbs touched at the center of the book. It was winter. The chapel was cold—an army barracks left over from World War II. We wore parkas and sat close together. Paul fooled around with his thumb, pushing my thumb to my own side of the book, then pulling it back to his side. The wind howled outside. We watched our breath as we sang the hymn.
In Thine arms I rest me, Foes who would molest me
Cannot reach me here; Tho' the earth be shak-ing,
Ev-ry heart be quak-ing, Jesus calms my fear;
Fires may flash and thun-der crash,
Yea, and sin and hell as-sail me,
Jesus will not fai-l me.

And here he was. Alpha and Omega. The Word. Sitting on my canvas chair and telling me the prairie's nice. What could I say to that?

"I like it too," I said.

Jesus was watching a magpie circling above the poplars just beyond the quarry. He seemed very nice actually. But He wasn't like my father. My father was perfect, mind you. But you know about perfect people—busy, busy. He wasn't as busy as Elsie though. Elsie was the busy one. You could never visit there without her having to do something else at the same time. Wash the leaves of her plants with milk, or fold socks in the basement while you sat on a bench by the washing machine. I wouldn't mind sitting on a bench in the basement if that was all she had. But her living room was full of big soft chairs that no one ever sat in. Now Christ here didn't have any work to do at all.

The wind had risen now. His robes puffed about his legs. His hair swirled around his face. I set my glass down and held my kimono together at my knees. The wind was coming stronger now out of the east. My kimono flapped about my ankles. I bent down to secure the bottom, pressing the moving cloth close against my legs. A Saskatchewan wind comes up in a hurry, let me tell you. Then it happened. A gust of wind hit me straight on, seeping into the folds of my kimono, reaching down into the bodice, billowing the cloth out, until above the sash, the robe was fully open. I knew without looking. The wind was suddenly blowing on my breasts. I felt it cool on both my breasts. Then as quickly as it came, it left.

I looked at Jesus. He was looking at me. And at my breasts. Looking right at them. Jesus was sitting there on the sun deck, looking at my breasts.

What should I do? Say excuse me and push them back into the kimono? Make a little joke of it? Look what the wind blew in, or something? Or should I say nothing? Just tuck them in as inconspicuously as possible. What do you say when a wind comes up and blows your kimono open and He sees your breasts?
Now, I know there are ways and there are ways of exposing your breasts. I know a few things. I read books. And I've learned a lot from my cousin Millie. Millie's the black sheep in the relation. She left the Academy without graduating to become an artist's model in Winnipeg. And dancer. Anyway, Millie's told me a few things about bodily exposure. She says, for instance, that when an artist wants to draw his model, he has her either completely nude and stretching and bending in various positions so he can sketch her from different angles, or he drapes her with cloth, satin usually. He covers one section of the body with the material and leaves the rest exposed. But he does it in a graceful way, maybe draping the cloth over her stomach or ankle. Never over the breasts. So I realized that my appearance right then wasn't actually pleasing, either aesthetically or erotically—from Millie's point of view. My breasts were just sticking out from the top of my old kimono. And for some reason which I certainly can't explain, even to this day, I did nothing about it. I just sat there.

Jesus must have recognized my confusion. He said—quite sincerely I thought—“You have nice breasts.”

“Thanks,” I said. And I didn’t know what else to say so I asked him if he'd like more wine.

“Yes, I would,” he said, and I left to refill the glass. When I returned, He was watching the magpie swishing about in the tall weeds of the quarry. I sat down beside Him, and watched with Him.

Then I got a very, very peculiar sensation. I know it was just an illusion, but it was so strong it scared me. It’s hard to explain because nothing like it had ever happened to me before. The magpie began to float toward Jesus. I saw it fluttering toward Him in the air as if some vacuum were sucking it in. And when it reached Him, it flapped about on his chest which was bare because the top of His robe had slipped down. It nibbled at His little brown nipples and squawked and disappeared. For all the world, it seemed to disappear right into His pores. Then the same thing happened with a rock. A rock floating up from the quarry and landing on the breast of Jesus, melting into His skin. It was very strange, let me tell you, Jesus and I sitting there together with that happening. It made me kind of dizzy, so I closed my eyes.

And I saw the women in the public bath in Tokyo. Dozens of women and children. Some were squatting by the faucets that lined
one wall. They were running hot water into their basins and washing themselves all over with their soapy wash cloths, then emptying the water and filling the basins several times with clear water, pouring it over their bodies for the rinse. Others, who'd finished washing, were sitting in the hot pool on the far side, soaking themselves in the steamy water as they jabbered away to each other. Then I saw her. The woman without the breasts. She was squatting by a faucet near the door. The oldest woman I've ever seen. And the thinnest. Skin and bones. Literally. Just skin and bones. She bowed and smiled at everyone who entered. And she had only three teeth. When she hunched over her basin, I saw the little creases of skin where her breasts had been. When she stood up, the wrinkles disappeared. In their place were two shallow caves. Even the nipples seemed to have disappeared into the small brown caves of her breasts.

I opened my eyes and looked at Jesus. Fortunately, everything had stopped floating.

"Have you ever been to Japan? I asked.
"Yes," He said. "A few times."

I paid no attention to His answer but went on telling Him all about Japan as if He'd never been there. I couldn't seem to stop talking, especially about that old woman and her breasts.

"You should have seen her," I said. "She wasn't flat chested like some women even here in Moose Jaw. It wasn't like that at all. Her breasts weren't just flat. They were caved in. Just as if the flesh had sunk right there. Have you ever seen breasts like that before?"

Jesus' eyes were getting darker. He seemed to have sunk further down into his chair.

"Japanese women have smaller breasts to begin with usually," He said.

But He'd misunderstood me. It wasn't just her breasts that held me. It was her jaws, teeth, neck, ankles, heels. Everything. Not just her breasts. I said nothing for awhile. Jesus, too, was not talking.

Finally, I asked, "Well, what do you think of breasts like that?"

I knew immediately that I'd asked the wrong question. If you want personal and specific answers, you ask personal and specific questions. It's as simple as that. I should have asked Him, for instance, what He thought of them from a sexual point of view. If He were a lover, let's say, would He like to hold such breasts in His hand and play on them with His teeth and fingers? Would He now? The
woman, brown and shiny, was bending over her basin. Tiny bubbles of soap dribbled from the creases of her chest down to her navel. Hold them. Ha.

Or I could have asked for some kind of aesthetic opinion. If He were an artist, a sculptor let’s say, would He travel to Italy, and would He spend weeks excavating the best marble from the hills near Florence, and then would He stay up night and day in his studio—without eating or bathing—and with matted hair and glazed eyes would He chisel out those little creases from His great stone slabs?

Or if He were a curator in a museum in Paris, would He place these little wrinkles on a silver pedestal in the center of the foyer?

Or if He were a patron of the arts, would He attend the opening of this great exhibition and stand in front of these white caves in His purple turtleneck, sipping champagne and nibbling on the little cracker with the shrimp in the middle, and would He turn to the one beside him, the one in the sleek black pants, and would He say to her, “Look, darling. Did you see this marvelous piece? Do you see how the artist has captured the very essence of the female form?”

These are some of the things I could have said if I’d had my wits about me. But my wits certainly left me that day. All I did say, and I didn’t mean to—it just came out—was, “It’s not nice and I don’t like it.”

I lifted my face, threw my head back, and let the wind blow on my neck and breasts. It was blowing harder again. I felt small grains of sand scrape against my nipple.

Jesus lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly.
While the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is nigh...
black like that. But maybe he'd been smoking. It's probably not the same thing. Jimmy Lebrun. He never did think it was funny when I'd call him a Midnight Raider instead of a Grim Reaper. People are sensitive about their names.

Then Jesus finally answered. Everything took Him a long time, even answering simple questions.

But I'm not sure what He said because something so strange happened then that whatever he did say was swept away. Right then the wind blew against my face, pulling my hair back. My kimono swirled about every which way, and I was swinging my arms in the air, like swimming. And there right below my eyes was the roof of our house. I was looking down on the top of the roof. I saw the row of shingles ripped loose from the August hail storm. And I remember thinking—Fred hasn't fixed those shingles yet. I'll have to remind him when he gets home from work. If it rains again the back bedroom will get soaked. Before I knew it I was circling over the sun deck, looking down on the top of Jesus' head. Only I wasn't. I was sitting in the canvas chair watching myself hover over His shoulders. Only it wasn't me hovering. It was the old woman in Tokyo. I saw her gray hair twisting in the wind and her shiny little bum raised in the air, like a baby's. Water was dripping from her chin and toes. And soap bubbles trailed from her elbows like tinsel. She was floating down toward His chest. Only it wasn't her. It was me. I could taste bits of suds sticking to the corners of my mouth and feel the wind on my wet back and in the hollow caves of my breasts. I was smiling and bowing, and the wind was blowing in narrow wisps against my toothless gums. And then quickly, so quickly, like a flock of waxwings diving through snow into the branches of the poplars, I was splitting up into millions and millions of pieces and sinking into the tiny, tiny holes in His chest. I was like the magpie and the rock, like I had come apart into atoms or molecules or whatever we really are.

After that I was dizzy. I began to feel nauseated, sitting there on my chair. Jesus looked sick too. Sad and sick and lonesome. Oh, Christ, I thought, why are we sitting here on such a fine day pouring our sorrows into each other?

I had to get up and walk around. I'd go into the kitchen and make some tea.

I put the kettle on to boil. What on earth had gotten into me? Why had I spent this perfectly good morning talking about breasts? My
one chance in a lifetime and I let it go. Why didn’t I have better control? Why did I always let everything get out of hand? Breasts. And why was my name Gloria? Such a pious name for one who can’t think of anything else to talk about but breasts. Why wasn’t it Lucille? Or Millie? You could talk about breasts all day if your name was Millie. But Gloria. Gloria. Glo-o-o-o-o-o-o-oria. I knew then why so many Glorias hang around bars, talking too loud, laughing shrilly at stupid jokes, making sure everyone hears them laugh at the dirty jokes. They’re just trying to live down their name, that’s all. I brought out the cups and poured the tea.

Everything was back to normal when I returned. Except that Jesus still looked desolate sitting there in my canvas chair. I handed Him the tea and sat down beside Him.

Oh, Daddy. And Phillip Nicolai. Oh, Bernard of Clairvoux. Oh, Sacred Head Now Wounded. Go away for a little while and let us sit together quietly, here in this small space under the sun.

I sipped the tea and watched His face. He looked so sorrowful I reached out and put my hand on His wrist. I sat there a long while, rubbing the little hairs on His wrist with my fingers. I couldn’t help it. After that He put His arm on my shoulder and His hand on the back of my neck, stroking the muscles there. It felt good. Whenever anything exciting or unusual happens to me my neck is the first to feel it. It gets stiff and knotted up. Then I usually get a headache, and frequently I become nauseous. So it felt very good having my neck rubbed.

I’ve never been able to handle sensation very well. I remember when I was in grade three and my folks took us to the Saskatoon Exhibition. We went to the grandstand show to see the battle of Wolfe and Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham. The stage was filled with Indians and pioneers and ladies in red, white and blue dresses, singing “In Days Of Yore From Britain’s Shore.” It was very spectacular, but too much for me. My stomach was upset and my neck ached. I had to keep my head on my mother’s lap the whole time, just opening my eyes once in awhile so I wouldn’t miss everything.

So it felt really good to have my neck stroked like that. I could almost feel the knots untying and my body becoming warmer and more restful. Jesus too seemed to be feeling better. His body was back to normal. His eyes looked natural again.
Then, all of a sudden, He started to laugh. He held his hand on my neck and laughed out loud. I don't know to this day what he was laughing about. There was nothing funny there at all. But hearing Him made me laugh too. I couldn't stop. He was laughing so hard He spilled the tea over His purple stole. When I saw that, I laughed even harder. I'd never thought of Jesus spilling His tea before. And when Jesus saw me laugh so hard and when He looked at my breasts shaking, He laughed harder still, till He wiped tears from his eyes.

After that we just sat there. I don't know how long. I know we watched the magpie carve black waves in the air above the rocks. And the rocks stiff and lovely among the swaying weeds. We watched the poplars twist and bend and rise again beyond the quarry. And then He had to leave.

"Goodbye, Gloria Olson," He said, stretching from his chair. "Thanks for the hospitality."

He kissed me on my mouth. Then He flicked my nipple with His finger. And off He went. Down the stairs. Down the hill. Through the quarry, and into the prairie. I stood on the sun deck and watched. I watched until I could see Him no longer. Until He was only some dim and ancient star on the far horizon.

I went inside the house. Well, now, wasn't that a nice visit. Wasn't that something. I examined the clothes, dry and sour in the living room. I'd have to put them back in the wash, that's all. I couldn't stand the smell. I tucked my breasts back into my kimono and lugged the basket downstairs.

That's what happened to me in Moose Jaw in 1972. It was the main thing that happened to me that year.
REVIEWS

HAVE YOU LIVED THE RIGHT LIFE?

*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*
by Raymond Carver
McGraw Hill, 1976, $8.95

Raymond Carver's book of short stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, is nothing less than magical. Out of the mundane lives of a man out of work, a waitress, a postman, a writer, Carver draws mystery and depth. Many of the stories contain an "awakening" from habitual life, but there are no cataclysmic events. Something very ordinary is the key to the change, as if to say "Look, it's been here all along."

Carver's characters are not heroes. At their best they are ordinary people making discoveries about themselves, sometimes disturbing discoveries, always discoveries which reveal their humanity. Often they are people who have drifted into narrow lives or allowed basic questions about themselves to go unasked or to be answered by someone else. Carver's characters find in their daily lives a frightening question—Who are you? But even when the answer is not sufficient for them, asking the question makes them come alive.

If Carver is a stylist he is an anti-stylist. His language is as plain as the lives of his characters. For example, this scene from "Neighbors":

The Stones lived across the hall from the Millers. Jim was a salesman for a machine-parts firm and often managed to combine business with pleasure trips, and on this occasion the Stones would be away for ten days, first to Cheyenne, then on to St. Louis to visit relatives. In their absence, the Millers would look after the Stones' apartment, feed Kitty, and water the plants.

Bill and Jim shook hands beside the car. Harriet and Arlene held each other by the elbows and kissed lightly on the lips.

"Have fun," Bill said to Harriet.
"We will," said Harriet. "You kids have fun too."
Arlene nodded.
Jim winked at her. "Bye, Arlene. Take good care of the old man."
“I will,” Arlene said.

“Have fun,” Bill said.

“You bet,” Jim said, clipping Bill lightly on the arm. “And thanks again, you guys.”

The Stones waved as they drove away, and the Millers waved too.

“Well, I wish it was us,” Bill said.

“God knows, we could use a vacation,” Arlene said. She took his arm and put it around her waist as they climbed the stairs to their apartment.

After dinner Arlene said, “Don’t forget. Kitty gets liver flavor the first night.” She stood in the kitchen doorway folding the handmade tablecloth that Harriet had bought for her last year in Santa Fe.

Certainly nothing terribly exciting in that. But Carver finds in two neighbors watching an apartment for friends on vacation, the key to a disturbing and psychologically penetrating story of boredom and envy that gives frightening and mysterious undertones to simple curiosity.

“Neighbors” is by no means an exception. Carver is a wizard at adding depth to the ordinary. In “They Aren’t Your Husband” an unfinished chocolate sundae becomes the symbol of a marriage drifting apart, and in “Fat” a waitress narrates a story in which she takes an innocent liking to a fat customer who refers to himself as “we” and Carver manages to suggest out of this casual affection that a change is probably taking place in the waitress’s life, that she may even be pregnant.

I’m particularly amazed with “Put Yourself in My Shoes” in which Carver maneuvers point of view in a story about a writer who is both the author and the third person protagonist which in effect makes the reader the writer of the story. The danger, of course, is that it might appear too gimmicky, but Carver manages to avoid that all-too-common pitfall by placing the writer/narrator in the easily believable situation of being told by acquaintances what a great story “this” would make. But the fact that the “this” they usually refer to is horribly mundane suits Carver’s special talent for finding depth in the everyday world.

What Carver does for his characters and for his readers is to help them ask in the context of daily situations—Have you lived the right life? He brings us to a realization of the meaning and extent of what can be lost, sometimes by mere negligence, and reminds us how little it takes to shake up our lives.
A few of the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* are perhaps a little too similar, but with stories this good that is certainly forgiveable. And there *is* a kind of theme and variations substructure to the book that climaxes in the title piece. It does however bring up the question of Where next? for Carver. But that's his problem. Ours is how to get a hold of a copy of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*.

— Rich Ives

CONFESSIONS OF A DOUBLE

*BORN*

poems by Michael Poage

Black Stone Press 1975

$7.50 hardbound $3.50 paper

This first collection by Michael Poage is brief but potent. In the space of twenty-five poems an intense voice emerges, working rapidly to possess words and form images deep in a personal line of perception. Poage's opening poem snaps together on first reading.

COMING APART

Something else hit my mind.
A dream
on the edge of my tongue
sweating words.

I am not alone out here.
There are many of us
and tomorrow
we are moving up the road.

We have a war on our hands.
That's all I know.

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“Coming Apart” is an exemplary *Born* poem. No words are wasted to embellish or diminish the impact of language. Although it is impossible to say exactly what the poem is “about” in the world, the structure and meaning are quite clear. The dream which grips the voice causes tension or reveals the tension of a situation: an unexpected group will move with unshakable certainty “up the road.” In an environment with so many possible connections, the sole knowledge of “a war on our hands” becomes as sinister as certain death or the inevitable decay of worlds. The short lines of simple words drive into each other, increasing the sense of compulsion, no escape. In a dark time, “Coming Apart” becomes the final blow, the last “something else.”

Not all the poems in *Born* have the negative implosion of “Coming Apart,” although the usual starkness of language gives many an abrupt edge. “Sweetgrass” revolves around more mundane events and shows a bit of Poage’s wry lightness.

**SWEETGRASS**

Before the phone
rings
I want to write
this down.
I want
to tell you
how the snow
has turned
to rain. How
the work we did
melted white
as steel
like any man.
The wind wrapped
our faces
like cloth.
We crawled
nights
through Judith Gap,
across
the ridge, covered
our tracks
with branches,
took a bride
and showed her
someone crazy
enough.

This poem is like a Chet Atkins guitar solo—the effortless flow hides the fact that it’s a small technical gem. Sixty-four words total and only two lines have more than three words, but like Robert Creeley, Poage is able to extract maximum resonance from sound by selecting exact words for emphasis and making the poem read longer than it is. The voice might have poured six months detailed history into this letter. No stanzas are end-stopped and “Sweetgrass” calls attention more by line breaks and single-word lines (“Before the phone/rings,” “and showed her/someone crazy/enough.”). The final sentence is particularly riveting and only a twist with as much good humor as the last two lines could provide a satisfying ending. Poage tools his work so that only images with a particular, clean inevitability remain. Snow turning to rain becomes work melting “white as steel/like any man.”

The Born poems fall very roughly into four types: those dealing with events (“The Avon Cemetery”), those exploring human relationships (“The Rumor”), poem of the self (“Born”) and fantasies or poems with a secretive core (“The Sink”). Although Poage most frequently writes with tenderness to a lover, “The Sunrise Motel” grinds harsh enough for the most hard-boiled “confessional poem.”

THE SUNRISE MOTEL

When you’re an old woman
you can tell your own story
but now this small room is mine
and I came here to rest,
to get away.

On the other side
of that green door
ice is broken into tiny windows
and men, younger than I am,
watch for girls going in and out.
The plainness of language and directness of imagery in this poem would not be strange to William Stafford. Words from the prairie unify the various directions in *Born*, usually adding weight to ethereal subjects.

Compared with earlier, uncollected work by Poage, the poems in *Born* appear to be moving toward more private meaning, a hermetic language. This shift causes the poet’s *persona* to develop clear attitudes and self-awareness—almost an autobiography in some cases. This *persona* is eerie, nightside, a self envisaged in the place of the traditional rational one. This special self or double overwhelms ordinary phenomena and makes them new in a disturbing way.

**IN BED**

The wind always  
comes to one side  
of the house. Yellow  
flowers stay close  
to the ground. Warm.  
Safe in their weeds.  

All night  
that wind came  
like flies through cracks  
in the wall.  
If it had been warmer  
I would have gotten up  
to kill them.

Poage begins this poem much like Madeline DeFrees might initiate a reflection; but by the end something uniquely Michael Poage has occurred to that north wind. The brittle sound and meaning of the last line fully support its separation.

The richest blend of the “everyman” and “double” parts of the poet’s sensibility appears in “Born.” Here a young man examines his birth, suffers in childhood, gets married, switches body proportions, and (maybe) fathers a turtle. “Born” is divided into six parts. Part two is an excellent example of Poage’s brief poetic conundrum, almost like an Inca folk tune.
II
That was the end
of my fat woman period.
I was born in Peru.
No. No.
In the south,
in this country.
Near dinner time.

Poage is not a prolific creator but a solid one. The durability combined with mystery in his writing may become noted, but already is promising, encouraging. Part six of "Born" is a deft, optimistic poem that embodies, to my mind, all the virtues. You can sit down hard on this poem, even toast it.

VI

"You were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money."

I am early.
Old men call this winter open.

I've worked in blood
all my life. Now, follow me
to my own door.

Come and drink the bride.

Milo Miles
CONTRIBUTORS

PETER BALAKIAN has poems forthcoming in Three Rivers Poetry Journal and Hiram Poetry Review. He is co-editor of Graham House Review.

LEE BASSETT has published in Somahama and has a chapbook out from Saltworks Press. He enjoys living in Japan.

BOB BEHR is from Philadelphia and will be returning to home ground after finishing an MFA in creative writing at the University of Montana.

PATRICK BIZZARO teaches creative writing at Northern Virginia Community College and will have his first book published in the fall by Bartholomew's Cobble, a small press in Hartford, Connecticut.

WILLIAM VIRGIL DAVIS has published poems in Poetry, The Nation, Poetry Northwest, Perspective, Arts in Society, Epoch, Chelsea, Poetry Now, and others. He teaches at University of Illinois, Chicago Circle.

STUART DYBEK has had poems in Chelsea, Paris Review, and Poetry Now, among others, and has more forthcoming in Antioch Review and Ohio Review. He teaches at Western Michigan University.

ANITA ENDREZZE has published poetry in Dacotah Territory, The Malahat Review, and the anthology, Carriers of the Dream Wheel. This is the first appearance in a magazine of her art work.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH has published poems nearly everywhere. His most recent collection of poems, JAN. 31 (Doubleday), was nominated for a National Book Award and contains a poem published in Cutbank 2. His new book, Comings Back, will be issued in October.

DAVID GRIFFITH is an anthropologist studying soap opera from a television on North Liberty, Iowa.

JOHN HAINES has been awarded an Amy Lowell Travelling Fellowship and will be departing soon for England and Europe.

DAVID JAMES is a junior at Western Michigan University and has poems forthcoming in Poetry Now, New Letters, and Bitterroot.

THOMAS JOHNSON has published widely and has a new chapbook from Copper Beech Press called Arriving at the Nadir.

GREGG J. LUGINBUHL has an MFA in ceramics from the University of Montana and is currently working as a stonemason.

JAMES J. MCAULEY, the Irish poet, is co-director of the Creative Writing Program at Eastern Washington State College. His fourth volume of verse, AFTER THE BLIZZARD, was published by the University of Missouri Press last year. His poems have appeared most recently in The Hollins Critic, New Irish Writing, Crazy Horse, Poetry Northwest, and The Malahat Review.

NELLJEAN MCCONEGHEY was born in Canton, China, and has lived in various parts of the world and the United States, most recently in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where she is completing her MFA in poetry this spring. She has also had the pleasure of being co-director of the Arkansas Poetry-in-the-Schools project for 1975-76.

SAMMY MCLEAN teaches Germanica and Comparative Literature at the University of Washington.

MILO MILES was born in Livingston, Montana. His grandfather still owns the Petrified Man.
JOLAND MOHR lives and writes in rural southwestern Minnesota.
KATHY NIELSEN is a native of Kalispell and a junior in English at the University of Montana.
W. M. RANSOM has a new chapbook from Copper Canyon Press called *Waving Arms at the Blind.*
LEX RUNCIMAN is in the Graduate Writing Program at the University of Montana and will have poems soon in *Spectrum* and *Concerning Poetry.* Marketa Luskacova's photographs appear in *London Magazine.*
GLORIA SAWAI is a Canadian writer from Calgary, Alberta working on an MFA at the University of Montana.
MARY SWANDER has recently been chosen as one of the four winners of *The Nation-Discovery* contest for 1976. She is a member of the Iowa Writers Workshop and has been published in *Poetry* and *The Ohio Review.*
SARA VOGAN works with Art Services at the University of Montana and has a novel in progress.
LAWRENCE WATSON is working on a PhD in creative writing at the University of Utah. His poems have appeared in *Chowder Review, South Dakota Review, Texas Quarterly, Westigan Review,* and others, and his stories in *New Writers* and *Mississippi Review.*
DAVID WOJAHN is a night watchman in St. Paul, organizes a series of poetry readings by Minnesota writers, and is at work translating the poems of Luis Cernuda.
ROBERT WRIGLEY is a former editor of both *CutBank* and *Sou'wester* and has recently had a group of poems accepted for publication as a chapbook by Copper Canyon Press.
MAGAZINES RECEIVED

Carolina Quarterly (Winter, 1976), Jeff Richards, ed., Box 1117, Chapel Hill, N.C. 27514. $4.50/yr.
The Chariton Review (Spring, 1976), Andrew Grossbardt, ed., the Division of Language and Literature, Northeast Missouri State University, Kirksville, Missouri 63501. $7/4 issues.
Dacotah Territory (No. 11), Mark Vinz, ed., P.O. Box 775, Moorhead, Minnesota 56560. $2.50/3 issues.
Kayak (No. 41), George Hitchcock, ed., 325 Ocean View Ave., Santa Cruz, California 95062. $4/4 issues.
Midlands (Spring, 1976), Michael Pfeifer, ed., English Dept., University of Missouri-Columbia. $.75/ea.
Pebble (No. 13), Greg Kuzma, ed., The Best Cellar Press, 118 South Boswell Avenue, Crete, Nebraska 68333. $8/4 issues.
The Remington Review (Fall, 1975), Joseph A. Barbato and Dean Maskevich, eds., 505 Westfield Avenue, Elizabeth, New Jersey 07208. $2/2 issues.
Sahara (Winter, 1975/76), Alice Bliss, ed., 239 Mountain View Street, Decatur, Georgia 30030. $1.25/ea.

BOOKS RECEIVED

Arriving at the Nadir by Thomas Johnson, poetry, Copper Beech Press, $2.50.
Backroads by Mark Halperin, poetry, University of Pittsburgh Press, $2.95.
Dance Sequence by John Unterecker, poetry, Kayak Books, $2.
First Selected Poems by Leo Connellan, poetry, University of Pittsburgh Press, $2.95.
Flow by Joseph Bruchac, poetry, Cold Mountain Press, No price listed.
In Lieu of Mecca by Jim Lindsey, poetry, University of Pittsburgh Press, $2.95.
Sweet Gogarty by Matthew Hochberg, novel, December Press, $4.
Waving Arms at the Blind by W. M. Ransom, Copper Canyon Press, $3.
Will Your Please Be Quiet, Please? by Raymond Carver, stories, McGraw-Hill, $8.95.
Wintering with the Abominable Snowman by Linda Lappin, poetry, Kayak Books, $2.