

# CutBank

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Volume 1  
Issue 8 *CutBank* 8

Article 44

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Spring 1977

## On Stanley Plumly

Rick Robbins

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### Recommended Citation

Robbins, Rick (1977) "On Stanley Plumly," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 8 , Article 44.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss8/44>

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Similarly, the last two stanzas in the last poem, "Apology", concern a question:

What animal  
have our dreams scared  
deep into burr and gnatmesh?  
Our skittish sleep is its appetite:  
recoil and shudder  
toward what it craves.

Outside the gourds, bloated on August,  
clutch their emptiness  
climb the walls of grass  
like a ward of idiots.  
Tonight we hear them  
fatten on nothing  
banging their faceless heads  
into human features.

The willingness to risk noticing the "critical" thing in a landscape, inner or outer, and the severity of vision to bring it home, to rob it of its power, or to raise it to innuendo, makes these poems worth reading. They are alive and gutsy, and they leave us waiting anxiously for Nancy Steele's second book.

*Ralph Burns*

*Out-Of-The-Body Travel*

Stanley Plumly

Ecco Press

New York, \$6.95, hardcover

One thing good poets do is to remind us of things we should all know, things we *did* know once, but have forgotten. That is, they remind us of what we have left behind in the mad dash to escape our histories, or merely the fear of sounding trite. They bring us back to our references. Their poems say, *Look here, friend, we all fall asleep too easily these days. Follow me.*

And so we follow Plumly back, into that childhood where our kin still matter, where weather matters, showing us always it belongs:

Winter is one long morning.  
She will get into the car, it will be  
snowing, the car will go from here  
to there, in time, the car's tracks,  
like the scuff marks on linoleum,  
will outlast the traffic, then disappear.

Many of these poems are portraits, the simultaneous remembering of persons long dead (at least to these scenes) and the speaker's place among them — apprehended in part through the writing of the poem. This constant positioning expresses a desire throughout the book to acknowledge that side of one's self which is determined by birth and lineage. In "The Tree," Plumly sees the various names of ancestors on a genealogical chart as forming

the stalk of the spine as it culminates at the brain,  
a drawing I had seen in a book about the body, each leaf  
inlaid until the man's whole back, root and stem, was veins.

His life, then, becomes in part a gathering of all old ghosts, and at the same time a conduit through which a larger continuity in blood is flowing. The recognition of what necessitates us begins our lives as free individuals. We place ourselves at the cross of this duality.

Children with child. The night Alma  
Schultz hanged herself her baby had  
not been born. But it lived, blue ash,  
blue coal. It came out into the room of  
fathers twice tied to its past and flesh

of the flesh of her father. Alma was older  
and taller. We were children. It was summer.  
The dead go down and down, we were told,  
in new clothes and a book. And rise among angels  
and our father's ghost. In shadow, yes, in light.

Family portraits are bound at times to be inaccessible for those unrelated to the subjects. These poems are no exception. What must carry us through them, then, is tone: and here that tone is one of continual blessing. Blessing the father in the dream, "grinding bone back into dust," working his shift

only to lie down  
among the million  
upon million  
and rise again,  
individual, to the wheel.

Blessing the mother, and passage itself, as expressed in the passing of  
a train:

The whole house shakes — or seems to. At intervals,  
the ghost smoke fills

all the windows on the close-in side.  
It's our weather. It's what we hear all night,  
between Troy and anywhere, what you meant

to tell me, out of the body, out of the body travel.

*Rick Robbins*

*The Illustrations*  
Norman Dubie  
Braziller, 1977  
\$3.95, paperback

Dubie's third book is a kind of well-lighted historical tour, and the lights, or "lustres," are Dubie's own, widely varied, but immediate. Through certain historical presences and personae, he achieves a distance allowing him expression of his own stylistic nuance, his unique idiosyncrasy, as it were, put to music, as in "Horace":

Along the borders of the Sabine farm,  
Runners of strychnine and lime,  
A bearded man stands in a wheelbarrow  
Singing. And why not? Give him  
The vegetables he wants.  
Or knock his brains out with the loose  
Curbstone from the well. The Goths  
Have been defeated, and Maecenas was his friend.