CutBank

Spring/Summer 1979

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## Contents

**POEMS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poet</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HILLEL SCHWARTZ</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHRISTOPHER HOWELL</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALBERT GOLDBARTH</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEA OPENGART</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEPHEN DUNNING</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROBERT SIMS REID</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARK RUBIN</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEBORAH GOODMAN</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIM BARNES</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHARON DUNN</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEBORAH POPE</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOHN QUINN</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIM MALTMAN</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WILLIAM KLOEFKORN</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KATHERINE KANE</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PATRICIA WARE</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEE BASSETT</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCOTT SIMMER</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JEANNE FINLEY</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROBERT WARD</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEVIN CLARK</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAM HAMILL</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JIM PETERSON</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KAREN PROPP</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEVEN CRAMER</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAVID KELLER</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RUTH GARDNER</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highwire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinnamon is the Secret</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dreams of Cellos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spirit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking In</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday, The First Hour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Again</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepping Out</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Until I Was Older, I Believed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming Was Learning to Breathe in the Womb</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue with Herself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter Fog along the Willamette</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mail Order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buck</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ring-necked Parakeet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crocodiles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honeymoon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pig Saga</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watermelon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazarus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Neighbor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wakening</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda and the Cowboy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Women with Mangoes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Dream of the Body</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behind Us</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alarm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOWARD LEVY</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRUCE SMITH</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NANCY McCLEERY</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAUL CORRIGAN</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOHN ADDIEGO</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICH IVES</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARILYN FOLKESTAD</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALBERTO RÍOS</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALBERTO RÍOS</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STORY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RICK DEMARINIS</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>The Swimmer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**REVIEWS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MADELINE DEFREES</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Leslie Ullman, <em>Natural Histories</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOM REA</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>Robert Hedin, <em>At The Home-Altar</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAM HAMILL</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>Denise Levertov, <em>Life in the Forest</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DON SCHOFIELD</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Jane Bailey, <em>Tuning</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KATHY CALLAWAY</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>Norman Dubie, <em>The City of the Olesha Fruit</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

98 Contributors

*Cover painting by Mary Warner, the artist for this issue*
first the sound of the bell
the interruption, the something out of
the blue, the ordinary; so we speak
across prairies, marriages.
is anything wrong?
there are clown firemen frantic
with their net, there is a falling
troubadour, a lion wobbling
on the highwire, unpredictable.
first the megaphone and then
parasols floating under the bigtop
seals diving through diamond rings
hello Elly hello hello.
the sword swallowers the flame eaters
magic a matter of presence
of looking the other way:
is the lord in the cannon?
is the lady in the tiger's mouth?
you could almost say
we were back to watching
the circus come down
monkeys unravelling, tent
coiled in its cage, leaving us
children in this empty field,
the sawdust, the posters:
some temporary disturbance
some way of meeting up
with the animal, something
to talk for, some sound of bells.
CINNAMON IS THE SECRET

Cinnamon is the secret
she said, stirring the chowder
very quiet and without sadness.
You have to add it slow
like rock chipping away in a slow
stream, like a woman
sleepwalking through pain
in a story. And it must be
like a story
told purely, remorseless
as that ending
you spend your life trying
to change, that ragged lack
of a scar where the last spice
dissolves.
THE DREAMS OF CELLOS

Why? A lion in underwater sunlight
suggests an angel, the slumbering future of God. Heisenberg's uncertainty rises like a mist toward the compulsion to speak, the absolute necessity for silence.
A special roaring cast up like a shoe on the beach means *penny* or *exist* or *a left hand full of stars.* It also means *the shocked music of pearls.*
Blue now, thoughtful as the tides clutch our heap of stones, the lion signals for more light, a deeper sense of the wreck to come. He is so quiet he might be dying of happiness or the dreams of cellos.
That afternoon, precisely between the dray horse and the violin, Holmes measured the paper, weighed it, clipped one corner to burn and analyzed the ashes under chemicals and the glass.

That night, Jean Doyle wrote—her living hand a glove for a spirit’s. Her brother Malcolm has crossed over. Conan Doyle’s first wife had crossed over. Once his mother appeared in a seance, gray and vague but “in an ecstasy of delight.” His son Kingsley had crossed over, now he wrote to them, through them, in childish scrawl. And Phineas spoke, he was busy “connecting vibratory lines of seismic power,” and Walter rang a bell in a box. In those days, every pencil a piece of wood the dead knocked on.

“How could he do it? fairies!—Sherlock’s author!” Elementary. Holmes, that morning, counted the whorls in a print. Outside, the hansom passed, and his mind kept track of its shrill, specific pattern of noise over cobbles. There was a Queen, her crown and throne fit—perfect. This many whorls and this many grams of ash, Empire, empirical.

That dusk, somewhere hazy before true dark, Doyle looked up from his photograph of fairies butterfly-winged in a Yorkshire garden,
from his photograph of the “psychic cylinder” manifested when Margery turned intense, from his page: “God’s own light must descend and burn...” A black horse somewhere passed by, or maybe stopped. He was busy, believing. Something... A whiteness could, really could, appear at the door.

“How could he? How?” But how can anyone, and anyone does. It was 7 July, 1930. He saw the world in which Holmes stood, disguised, on Baker Street, the metrics in his head computing such a logical outcome the whole curb shimmered a moment. And then he crossed over.
Children walk past the window
in groups of two and three, their boots
breaking snow like birds
hunting crumbs or the apple core
hidden near the juniper. This year
the sparrows have returned too soon.
They should know better: they’ll die.
Mothers hide the bodies in metal boxes
no child can discover. Here is my room,

bookcase, desk and the red lamp
bends toward me, cranes its neck.
Children pass my window, their mothers
lean from porches to call them home.
Birds veering west above the river
call to each other, and galoshes
and soup in yellow bowls do not
concern them. Light settles

in my hand then scatters the letter
folded on the desk: there’s so little
to say. I watch snow
drop back to itself in clumps.
Twilight, I walk to the river
trailing bread crumbs and sparrows
circle close, one wing
brushing my shoulder.
CHECKING IN

i

When he checked in at Delta
he said he'd left his book in the car
so Barbara had to go for it
and Raoul made his phone call.
If the agent knew
Raoul's plane would blow two tires, skid
off the runway and burn
he never gave a sign. Three people
slid down the chute
scrambled from the pulsing flame,
oily black smoke folding like dough
back into itself, stretching out and
twisting into the morning sky.
We watched until a TV crew
began to film the crash, burning still
no one able to kill the flames inside.
Barb and I
drove home in Raoul's car
talking about what to do.
Ruth was painting an old bed frame
with dark brown Rustoleum.
They already called, she said. Just three
got off the goddam plane alive.
Barbara went to her, sinking her cheek into
Ruth's breast: It was so terrible!
Barb said. Raoul and all those others.

ii

The magazine
folded beneath your arm like
a secret signal; your eyes
roam the lobby, looking for a face.
The fog had settled
on Indianapolis, making people late.
In his call Raoul had said
he was worried about
his talk, the data he had.
Then out of the blue he said: I love you.
If you, standing around the Hilton lobby
knew Raoul was dead,
knew his plane had popped orange
like a burning ping pong ball
it never showed.

At the banquet we
bowed our heads. The master of ceremonies said
it was an honoring of Raoul. Later
we went to the roof. You and I danced.
Nobody else felt you
mourning for your lover.
MONDAY, THE FIRST HOUR

I've been up an hour, startled awake by a nightmare
of home, Garrison and Coon laughing at jokes
as though I weren't there in the roadhouse,
marking well your accurate moves on the dance floor,
agile in stammering light. Without seeing,
I snapped open my eyes, felt cornered and reached
for your hand. Every moment passes before I get
a chance to say what happened. Last winter
I watched the cold cloud of our breath rhythmically ice
the window. I curled in your heat, believing.
There have been days when I could scream the dim sky
to morning and rattle our silent house
awake at dawn. I have this vision of a man
who can only remember. He eats. He talks
and figures. People think he's normal.
He expects a man should be happy
with a handful of rain, a voice calling out
the location of broken loves. You couldn't know.
I set my feet on the floor and feel the chill wood.
Spring. Rainbows upriver before long. Fat, they'll lay
on that granite shelf at the Rattlesnake's mouth
and wait for floods to swim farther upstream,
hunting deep holes and snags. I've watched them snap
the calm surface after May flies at first light.
Dew dried slowly on bear grass. Isn't something
too embalmed, too perfect about that scene?
Air photo-sharp. Fish biting. Water clean.
Didn't we swim there once? Or was that in a lake,
where moon warmed our backs, legs lost
in the dark water, feet buried deep in mud.
That was the night they caught Richard Speck,
killer of nurses. We were afraid and kissed.

—for Gayle
AGAIN

I had no delusions frogs were more than frogs.
Standing in the green light they gave, how beautiful, their subarcticular pads. I knew

they held back
one word, and know
we die one word too soon.
One sound waves into another.
I don't know where it ends though

I believe in Ohio, two lives move close to what they hear.
What one thinks, the other sighs how one frog will dive and not come up.

Watching where they've gone,
I brush the water after them.
Here is the one who believed he was no better than this dreams,
and dreamed of tugboats, the man on deck staring in the water where the water moves on the other side, the face imagined, the face inside.

Here he is again. The one who became what he loved, and loved so far beyond himself there were no words to contain it, how simple, the tympanic membrane.
STEPPING OUT

At night, o-op, o-op.
The way they called meant the rocks
and tree limbs had lost their names.
The way they wanted to smile
but could not,
there was something about bullfrogs
that made the grass sing,
if you cannot live with sadness,
it will live with you.

Father, low branches sweep
the water we threw coins in.
They silver, like names
you’ve named your life.

I am tired, and want to take in,
as water takes in night
losses of private moons.

What am I to do?
If I wait once by the Dutch Elm,
I wait twice for you.

When the moons overcome you,
blessed are they who see
the eyes of carps as dimes. Frogs
this side of music sing softly in reach.
They’ll not let you be alone.
UNTIL I WAS OLDER, I BELIEVED SWIMMING WAS LEARNING TO BREATHE IN THE WOMB

It is October. It is raining. The whole countryside melts into a nondescript gray. A green Ford travels down Highway 96 headed for Woodville. Now and again, logging trucks pull onto the road, the Ford slows, then speeds around them. Most of the farms have chickens, a few pigs under oak trees. The ground is wet, full of a dark odor: feces, the weight of the dying season. Even the houses are gray, the summer white of their paint littered with rain, roof-run. The Ford passes a pasture where horses graze. In the foreground, a mare crops some last bit of grass. Beside her lies a colt, half hidden in the wetness, feet frozen in a run, nostrils flared, the inside red, feathered, almost like gills, as though in last moments he thought of a warm sea womb and perhaps would remember how to swim, would somehow break the crest of this foam, would rise trumpeting, calling the mares, the fleet white stallions home.
Your body spends a lifetime in decay.  
Your body boils with its own waste.  
Your body boils with the venom of ants.  
The art of the flesh is destruction:  
the bee injects its life into your veins,  
the grass withers to bring forth seed,  
the nectar of the sundew is honey to the eye,  
poison to the ants who scurry into its grasp  
searching for centipedes and grasshoppers  
whose eyes they sting and devour.

You know a stone cast into water  
creates ripples, ripples create waves,  
waves wash against the shore, dissolve.  
The body dissolves, the stars dissolve.  
The universe washes the shore of darkness.  
The universe washes the shore of itself.  
We wash ourselves. We consume ourselves.  
We live our death.

Love death.  
Love the seeds dying in your womb.  
Love your sweat, the taste of the death  
of your body. Love innocence, whose loss  
begins with death, begins with life.  
You will never find it in the insects,  
in the delicate red blood of the sundew,  
in the myriad eyes of the grasshopper  
reflecting its life, its death, the body’s decay.  
You gain nothing by living.  
You lose nothing by dying.

Nothing  
but the bittersweet memory of children  
spinning around, two at a time,
Deborah Goodman

until their hands dissolve, the clasp breaks, 
the bodies spin into a field of grass 
delicate as stars, the final slowing 
of the earth the one moment of living 
when we know we are living and dead, 
when we know the ant moves in the thick juice 
of the sundew, lifts one leg, another, 
breaks free. The world spins, the ant 
dies another day and we wake up children 
glad to be still in a moment of resolution 
before the stars fade in a flicker of blood and light.
The hills across the river
turn slowly to mist,
this afternoon, all
the way to the coast,
trees fade from
their forests, farms
leave their chickens
and goats, housewives
look out windows
into a vanished
yard. Toddlers drift
from their trikes.

The crow and his cry
are lost where rivers
wave to their beds.
A sigh that is almost
a shudder
breaks from the bull
in the field as he chews
the thoughtful grass
down to simply nothing.

It is similar to snow,
to TV static, an
interference of air.
Your best friends
evaporate in the distance,
the way roads blow
away into winter.
No knobs or wheels
can recall them.
There is nothing to fix, 
now, nothing to focus.
Your hands, your eyes, 
no longer hold
what you wish,
which, at this moment, 
is only your body—
that it might remain with you
in any weather
on earth.
MAIL ORDER

You work alone at the shop
on the second floor above the grocery.
It smells of sawdust, paint and rain.
On school vacations I come with you
and at the shipping table you show me
what I will do.

Your hands
dwarf mine, wrapping screws in cellophane.
You fill the window feeders
and the evening grosbeaks flock
as soon as your back is turned.

Hours go by.
This is a small town, no traffic, no noise.
Only the flutter of back and yellow wings.
At lunchtime you turn on the radio.
I smooth the waxed paper
and finger a jewel of grape jelly
from the edges of the bread.

We work till five,
you in the back room spraying feeders,
and me separating labels saying
Fragile, This End Up, Do Not Crush.
RAPE

No, I say,
don't lock the door,
I'll wait awhile—
and follow you outside.
Cradling the key, we watch you leave,
the dog and I, waving to
your turned head.
The evening settles and I fill
her red bowl with water
from the green hose curling
in the wet mint, the palest peach
bloom amid the nasturtiums
under the tap, the herbs near flowering.
People going home from the park
carry the sun down the street.
The dog runs after them
and the summer birds beat
in the last rainpools.
Enveloping dusk comes up the steps;
ahead of the dark, I
enter the house, lock the door.
In an ordinary yard,
in an ordinary time,
I am afraid
and you are afraid for me.
Another life
twirls its skirts over the grass,
dances away.
BUCK

His is a world of power that clouds the senses. He keeps a harem and a thicket if he can. If he is very young or slight he can't long, and when he's old he won't. But in his prime, when he is heavy headed with the rut and all his caution is inflamed it seems at times he'd sooner fight than mount his does. The one here on the slope above Tom Cole's camp has six does and four points on each antler. Another, last year, hung around the clearing at the fence near Minor Spring. He had five points and kept an even dozen does, but he was gaunt with greed and two young forked horns that worried him about the outskirts of his herd. He saw the future in those two, and he'd chase the one while the other sported with his wives. That old boy's not around this year, and this one above Tom Cole's camp is not so foolish, though he's foolish not to run when he sees me. Instead he
stands his ground alert for me
to make a sign. Fight or run.
But I'm not here for deer this
time, and when I whistle he turns
toward me and drops his head,
steps sideways behind some brush.
His does, confused, begin to move
downhill, slow, heads bobbing,
alert but dumb. Whatever's up
the old man's not his courtly
self. And when he does appear
again, head low behind a fallen
log, all those horns seem nothing
more than brush behind, before,
above no four point mule deer
buck but just another feeding doe.
RING-NECKED PARAKEET

Big Green, the day your lady died
everything went wrong.
Her boyfriend in the yard
next door went into mourning
from his locust tree. But you
just walked around on your perch
looking for something to eat.
At least you didn't drink
from the water dish she died in.
Did you think she'd be right back?
I know it wasn't just a ruse
to get your freedom because
when my lady opened your cage
you wouldn't leave. She had
to chase you out like a cat.
Some lover you were. You made
such a fuss. You acted like
a bird built for a cage. Shame,
Shame on you. Shame on all of us.
CROCODILES

They smile, the stupid leatherheaded beasts, like natural liars.
This is the permanent the stable smile, the lazy stripped-down smile that boredom breeds,
the smile of ducks vanishing from ponds into their red grins.
Let me remember that she smiled too (once or twice)
and meant it
or that I did also on occasion.
Unerringly inside the trap is set, off-center from the backbone, smiling down at all of us.
Our mouths have opened wide.
We smile back by habit, hopefully.
HONEYMOON

I

We spend the better part
of the opening hours
counting our toes.

Everything must be at least perfect,
if not normal.

Doris wants another glass of juice.
We will begin again, counting.

I have never not been within a snapshot
of Niagara Falls:
it is the underbelly of a rock back home
that I can't imagine.

Doris assumes the shape of a pasture.
Clouds begin slowly to form.
A raindrop, then,
amazes the eye of the beholder.

Yes yes yes.
Keep your shirt on, Howard.
Everything is going to be all right.

Doris cannot imagine
that all that she imagines
might not be.

Her eyes in daylight are awash
with the unadulterated flow
of playthings.
So much so that at night,
Doris asleep,
the candle barely burning,
I can see their shapes myself
struggling against the ceiling.

That one there, I whisper, pointing,
is our first child, forming.

Listen:
it is here already in the bed between us.
Listen:
you can almost hear it breathing.
This morning I can see more clearly
the shape of the first child,
its head now a shadowed indentation
on the pillow.
It is a boy—no, a girl.
I am at the bedside.
It's a girl, Doris says.
With one finger she nudges gently
at the indentation.
I see my own life in the eyes of the child.
I am growing up all over again,
the ages a heavy door, revolving.
There are too many things
yet to be done, to have changed, to be changing.
Doris, I say, wake up!
It is time for the honeymoon to begin.
I go into the haymow with Doris
into sunslants festive with dust.

Doris fills all those gaps between her teeth
with splinters of hay.

We lie long and warm on our backs,
haybales for pillows.

Doris reaches back to pluck a wire:
music swells the head, a cacophony.

Doris is so godawful beautiful
I want to touch her.

She takes my hand and guides it
along the softness of her sweater.

The splinters of hay taste sweet almost
as sorghum.

As if wingshot,
a swallow dips from a rafter.

We are dying in the haymow year after year,
unable to control the bleeding.
SONG

Where is the boat goes there,
to the islands in the Baltic sea?

I hear there are boys so blond
as to seem flowering quince,

light of the moon, memory.
I knew of no way then

I know of none now
against their ardency.

Where is the boat goes there,
to the islands in the Baltic sea?
The woman in my best painting—think of Soutine’s lonely nude, the meat-faced woman with red knuckles—has lost her two children to the lake. The lake does not appear in the scene, nor do the children. They are either twin boys, or a boy and a girl, also twins. Someone who will not identify himself has promised to do his best, to swim out to the lost babies and retrieve them. It is a promise he cannot keep.

Do you recall the boating accident on Blue Lake? That’s what I’m getting at. It was in the papers. The woman squatting on the boat ramp in ankle-deep water—remember the human-interest Wirephoto?— clutching her breasts as if the blame was somehow in them. A vision to break whatever is left of your heart.

The woman in my canvas, though, is clutching a black guitar, her long, oversucked breasts resting on the cold ebony. I am trying to rekindle an interest in ‘Les Fauves’, their brutal expressionism, their informed hysteria, their unfaItering eye for the nuclear joke at the core of agony. They had a sense of, how shall I say it . . . an underground drift, a submerged necessity, the deep current that moves history along. I am speaking of Truth. I am not speaking of the operative relationship between ‘facts’.

Her mouth is a dark crescent of sorrow. She is (yes!) singing. The scud of clouds in the vague distance resembles body bags. There is an oriental flavor to this. Her clothes are institutional gray. I’m beginning to see what I mean. My message is deadly. As is her lullaby. Is there a heart left to break? This is part of my search.

I can only paint when the light is just so. That would be between the hours of seven and nine a.m. Later than that and the grays are diluted, the blues frivolous and powdery—feminine—and worst of all, transparent white coagulates into a disgusting cream. In this latitude, a latitude suited to convalescence and benign detention, colors become corny as the sun rises into the late morning sky. If you are at all serious about your work, you must regard the major part of day as
false, unusable, an illusory trap for the witless, a temptation for the unprepared, sentimental bait concealing the barb of necessity.

*Necessity:* a word to hang your failures on.

The morning I discovered the treachery of this local light was crucial. It was past ten. Something was going wrong but I didn’t know what or how to stop it, short of putting down my brushes. And that I could not do. I saw her mouth open to become a dark cipher, affecting a swift intake of breath, as if the lake had given her a rare surprise, a revelation, something to take, cherished, to the grave. Something unspeakably apropos. I wanted to put my fist through the betraying canvas . . . *Grieve, God damn you!* My hands were shaking. I watched her fingers grow plump and soft, the color of standing cream, almost as if a mocking dabbler had taken over the brush. Her brow bulged like a white melon with a single, dominating idea. The painting started to cry out, *Salvation past all sorrow!* My hands curled into stony fists. I paced and stomped. The model, Miss Klein, a student from a local community college, became alarmed. I splashed her rosebud breasts with a scummy ochre. *Madonna! Madonna!* the idiot painting shrieked at my eyes. “Miss Klein, you stupid slit, come back in fifteen years!” It was a bad moment. It wasn’t her fault. I had a serious idea, but it was the light, not the girl, that was at fault.

I didn’t destroy it. I needed to study my failure so that I could discover its source. Several inept observers complimented the painting. The chaplain applauded and simpered his dewy approval. (“Now that’s just delightful! It gives me a lift!”) I almost kicked him in his vestigal manhood. Others came over. (“Decent work, old man!” “Now you’re cooking, sport!”)

I studied it alone. An odious will, warped and stinking of nullity, had taken over. I thought of Van Gogh’s ear, but it was my *hand* I wanted to mutilate. I became anxious and self-destructive. I took obscene photographs of Miss Klein, but she didn’t know they were obscene. (“You stupid cunt! Come back in fifteen years!”) I fell weeping into her arms, pulled at her scarless breasts. (“You’re such a *character,*” she chortled.)
They put me into the hospital for a while. Valium and muzak. I was not allowed to touch my paints. I was given a diet of fluorescent light and featureless surfaces. My unopenable hospital window gave out on a sweeping view of smilax and goldenrod. I had nothing to work with. And so I collected my own semen in a plastic juice glass and painted monochromatic landscapes on the sheetrock walls of my room, taking a bit of color from my wrist. Back to basics: finger painting with gism and blood. Gism binds and glazes the sanguine pigment.

memo:
During the period of enforced quiet, I worked out the impersonal principles of my personal esthetic and I became, in that time, artistically mature. My subsequent work will, I promise, reveal this.

I’m sending away for Kodachromes of the Eiffel tower. I hope to show, in a small, post-cubist way, the point where nationalism and art leach at each other’s breast, and how the exchange is mutually poisonous. Working title: The Poisoned Tower. Some time ago we realized there is no such thing as democracy but only kinetic arrangements of force. I have asked Neil Armstrong to send me a snapshot of his hand, preferably gloved and resting on a lunar instrument. I made no mention of my esthetic motives in my telegram, certain that he would find them incomprehensible and therefore offensive—a midwestern characteristic. We met once in Dallas, and later in D.C. Do you think he will respond? Do you think he will remember me?

When I was in government service, my associates used to call me “The Swimmer.” No flap, no adverse turn of events, no shake-ups, no coup or loss of face could disturb the measured strokes with which I carried out my duties. And I was no minor functionary. I was Cabinet Level. I answered only to the Chief. (“What’s the word from Santiago, Smitty?” he’d ask, and I’d reply, “They’re calling you boca loca, Boss. Crazy mouth.”) I mention this to give you some idea of my former rank, how long my fall, and how I’ve landed on my feet, even though locked up, urging a substratum of universal pain out of oil. I wore a blue suit and eighty dollar shoes before the media-event that killed us all. My name is not Smith. My crime was loyalty to the Boss. My crime was efficiency, decency, intelligence, idealistic pragmatism,
Am I bitter? Don't you believe it!

"The Black Guitar." That's my working title for this anti-madonna, although I do admire the direct simplicity of "Woman Grieving on Boat Ramp," like an understated Hopper. (Hopper: "My Roof." Or, "House With a Big Pine." Hopper knows.) I've shown Miss Klein my collection of Hopper prints. "He gives me the willies," she says. She expects me to call her "stupid cunt" again, but I tell her, "No, Miss Klein, you're perfectly right to feel that way." Hopper, though his surfaces are opaque, impenetrable, gives you X-ray vision.

Her mouth (mother of all our innocent dead) though collapsed at the corners, is strong. Her hands are welded to the music, the knuckles raw and gray, the long metallic fingers scraping at the strings as if at the fresh ground above a grave. Why have we never believed that the harnessing of grief is possible through song, that pain empowers beauty, that it is the engine that redeems itself through great works? Or the converse, that grief itself is not possible without its ritual archetype, the dirge?

I am speaking to you, chaplain.

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, Smitty," he says.

"I'm not asking you to follow me, Chaplain. I'm just asking you to listen patiently."

And yes, her eyes. They have seen too much today and are closed, turning away even under the shielding lids, escaping in this way a vision that she has suddenly apprehended as universal, a vision crossing time and space, all of it, from the Big Bang to the final whimper of entropic fizzle. In the background there is the bare presence of helpless shapes: bystanders, trees in late autumn introspection, a cold house, its windows blind and its doors massively closed. A touch of sacrificial red is blaring behind the forest
suggesting the lights of an emergency vehicle. This is what I refer to in one of my memos as 'the archangel effect.' I have reached this point before, perplexed. Technically speaking, it is finished. Yet I know that the thing missing is—and this is where my mind always goes uncomfortably blank—essential? Absolute? Vital? Vaprous abstractions, all, and incapable of inspiring body, shape, and color. I stare at the canvas and beyond, at my model who is staring at the wall clock, hoping that in the blur of lines and planes her facial bones will give me a hint. She is from a snug suburb and cannot know the mind of my tragic anti-Mary. Her small, unsuspecting womb is tight with piquant notions. It has channeled no darlings into the merciless light. I requested an older woman, a pain-scarred mother of a confusing brood, a tranquilized insomniac of depth and power, but no one answered my call.

"Do you know yourself, Miss Klein?"

"No."

In such small ways, she continually redeems herself. Her eyes show promise.

*I touch the slippery ramp and shake the water out of my ears. I tried to save them, I did all I could. I did. I did. God forgive me, I did.*

I sometimes see the swimmer as a failed Christ, alive and free, a politic man, taking a steambath from time to time with Pilate himself, good as ever in heart, but suddenly short of grace. Short of grace, long on time, belly plump with chutney and chops. The eyes of defeat are the eyes we must come to love.

*My head, from the shore, must seem like a dark button on the water's bright surface. I'm turning again, slowly scanning the water for the fourth or fifth time, confirming the loss of the children.*

I feel the swimmer's desolation. Not lonely, not overwhelmed by the grim realization that the children are dead, and certainly not bitter over the misunderstanding, betrayal, and journalistic abuse he will have to suffer. Even his imprisonment will not make him bitter. He is
proud, too proud to fall into a self-righteous slump. He will swim and swim, he will survive, he will outlive the public memory. See him out there, strong and natural in the water, perhaps a one-time channel swimmer, friendly to the lake despite its treachery. The situation, though, is devoid of hope, and he decides, finally, on the breaststroke, a smooth, non-disruptive way back to the boat ramp where she stands, her large farm-wife hands pressed against her face, where are my babies? the mouth turning down at the corners, a burnt umber crescent, the wide eyes fierce with panic and accusation before they slowly close, and the wavering song, ah no ah no ah no, the song no one can endure for very long. This is the instant I want, watching her again and again sink to her knees, her long fingers tearing at her breasts only now it is the black guitar and the music she rakes out of it is the essence of mother grief, the only grief there is.

“Are you crying? asks Miss Klein. “What’s wrong, Mr. Smith?”

I let the chippy see my damaged soul. Yes, the tears are real. She slips off her stool and touches my face. “But why?” she asks. “Why are you crying?” Her tone is what her social services professors call ‘supportive’. She means well but she doesn’t know what she means. Her words come from an impulse she doesn’t recognize, perhaps never will. I am shaking. She allows her virgin tits to nudge my trembling skin as she examines her image as it has been transformed by oil and sorrow. “Oh wow, Smitty,” she says, touching my wrist.

memo:
there is no consolation for loss short of ritual. Ritual atones for the emptiness. We have something to learn from the backward country that we soon shall rehabilitate and propel into the future. Sometimes a step backward is a leap forward. A motto I have been known to use when in the service of the president. He thought it was irony. He would grin in that tight-assed way of his, purse his lips, then tap his temple with one dancing finger, indicating the madness of things in general. He had several extemporaneous gestures that indicated to us his wise grasp of the general human catastrophe that persists beyond the reach of politics, religion, and pragmatic compassion. And we admired him for it. We thought he was hot shit. He was primarily an actor, meant to play Polonius.

I once taught with great confidence at a fine eastern university, but now I am a humble student of grief. I have had motion pictures made
of little yellow women nodding with beautiful necessity over the
government-supplied body bags, green plastic, in which their charred
and mangled infants are sealed. When the little bag slips into the
ground the woman always leans toward the hole as if she means to
follow it under. But she does not and never will. She nods and nods
and nods, assenting to fate. The notion of a personal fate is backward,
reeking as it does of magic, astrology, and insanity, but it is one
illusion we would do well to encourage among our own people who
already have a wondrous capacity to tolerate madness. It would make
so much possible and impossible. I'll work these ideas up into a
cogent memo soon.

There are others here, painting, potting, or writing in minimum
security. Felonious hobbyists. Lightweight felons are generally
hobbyists. One of them is writing a novel of vengeance. Another is
fabricating history. Most of the painters are marking time. But there
are a few, besides me, of real ability. These are trying to give shape,
color, and moment to the ineffable. Of these, I am the most advanced.
(Though I fail and fail again.) My work was exhibited on visitor's
day. My first canvas received local acclaim and was purchased by the
mayor of a nearby town. It was a dispassionate, irreducible vision of
napalm. Symbolism is nothing more than irreducible realism.
Realism that can be reduced is the ultimate fantasy. I am speaking of
representationalism. A greater artist than I am has said this. Soutine?
Beckmann? Roualt? I would like to paint a rigid side of beef, too. The
snapped ribs fluorescent purple. The yellowing fat. The sweetly
cologned butchering Hun idly cleavering the rugged joints. You must
do such things to anchor and validate your perspective. The severed
thighs, the shattered cranial vaults, the quartered torso.

memo to Soutine:
Dear Chaim, my friend, my teacher. This much is true: there are always two of us
in this landscape, baffled by rivers of wind, blond roads, furrows that subtend
unnatural farms, and the inevitable distortion, my poor ulcerated Jew: brutal
eclipse of the land, birds strangled by trees, one memory of a flaccid nude, her
caked hands pressed to the broken sex. They came so suddenly that she had no
time to take the smile off her face and it lingers even as she bleeds, the mud they
shoved into her face striated by tears. We've been here before, no? and we'll be
here again. The jackboot horizon is always there. And the foreign cry that stains
the air is ours. Simple outcries of need dissolve our lips. We are children, Chaim,
always children, unable to understand the green rage that lifts the sky behind us,  
shag of cloud, rose, wind.  
hoping, you will answer soon,  
I remain your devoted student and comrade,

Benedict Smith

My name is not Benedict or Smith, but I enjoy the quaint bifurcated suggestion of treason and anonymity.

Perhaps the problem lies in the woman's throat. Up to now it has been hidden in shadow. A question about light remains to be answered.

The warden permits wives once a month. Ours is an enlightened time. I try to picture the moral statistician who arrived at the interval between conjugal visitations.

Helen (her name is not Helen) sits on my cot, horrified by the monk-like simplicity of my new life. She is lovely as ever, more so now that personal disaster has slapped the girlish chatter out of her, as well as the gay elegance of the highly-placed wife, a face she was prepared to carry into her middle age. Now she is wearing her years in her eyes. Despair broods in the hollows of her cheeks. I love her and I want her.

"Here, Ben? Here?"

"Sure. What do you think conjugal visitation means?"

She submits. It isn't good, but I love her for making the sacrifice. She sits on the edge of my cot, head bowed. "Poor Helen," I say, touching her hand.

"Poor Ben," she says, touching mine.

memo:
lying in the cool yoke of her flesh, half asleep, I glimpsed them, the twin babies, a boy and a girl. My heart stopped. Our tears mingled on her face.

"You had no energy when you were in government, Ben," she says. She speaks softly into my shoulder.
But now all I have is energy. Prison life seals it up. If she has taken a lover (and I am sure she has, for the distance between us is more than the simple distance of calamity and shock) then he is a work-ravaged functionary, full of belief, serious with self-esteem, forceless.

memo:
I am swimming down to them, the infants. They are very still in the gelid water, and I take them in my arms, hugging the cold, unresponsive flesh. I float slowly toward the green light of day, weeping, weeping. One is a boy, one is a girl. They are beautifully formed, beautiful beyond understanding or mercy, the opened eyes large and punishing.

"I still love you, Helen," I say.

I make coffee in a porcelain pot. We sit in my room, drinking, measuring the distance between our words.

"I feel so abandoned, Ben," she says.

I've decided to paint several canvases of the milieu. These will be relatively benign investigations of the events surrounding the tragedy—the stones that line the shore next to the boat ramp, for example. Are they washed in the milky light of the sun, or is there the smallest suggestion of incandescence? Are they massively intransient presences, or ghostly images? What of the lake itself? Where is the swimmer, how far from the ramp, and can his eyes be seen, his features distinguished? Is he swimming heavily, pushing the water away from him, or is he embraced by the lake? Perhaps the closed house has something to say. A stolid comment from local history. In the public park a softball game continues despite the arrival of the ambulance. Has the pitcher taken something off his sinking fastball? This exercise will take several weeks.

My first subordinate painting is of the players. They are white figures against impossible green. The ball has just been hit off the canvas, and all the players are facing toward the brooding trees beyond the outfield, arms down. This is good. The smell of supernatural threat is in the air. Mystical rage expressing itself in Hooker's Green, Raw Sienna, Cobalt Blue. God is color and form. God is so simple he can't
stand us. Color, form, and kinetic arrangements of force. We have lost more than the game.

But the main problem lies behind the shock of color. It lies in the accuracy of form, in the certainty of line. An abstract problem.

I try to paint the woman from the point of view of a once-optimistic public official. He stands ten feet behind her, reading aloud from a uselessly subjective report for which he will be demoted, perhaps fired:

My dear madam:
Something the size of your sweet babies' eyes floats in the wide, brown gutter. Simple marrow soft as butter leaks from their skulls. Lady, there are no lulls in the general slaughter. Pray, pray, for your giddy daughter.

Something in the aspect of her shoulders, a sudden lumping, as if the canvas has become animate, disturbs me. My perspective goes haywire when I try to concentrate. The lake is rising vertically, a blue barrier. The stink of hate contaminates the paint. The sky, what's left of it, is a thin crimson band at the top of the canvas, like a femur lifted out of a freshly shattered thigh. I must let go, let it go, stop. The woman, something in her neck, shoulders and arms, is trying to turn. The small hairs on my neck stand, my heart shudders. I am painting with my fists, with my face, butting my forehead against the canvas, and yet she is turning, she is turning. I hammer her back until the easel tips.

"What's wrong, Mr. Smith?" asks Miss Klein.

I am on my knees, weeping. "Get dressed," I tell her.

"So soon? We just got started."

"Get your clothes on!" I sob.

She is accustomed to the kindly modulations of her professors. "I—I'm sorry," she stammers.
“Wait, wait. No. It's me, Miss Klein. It's me. Something's wrong.” I put my arm around her deeply tanned shoulder. She puts her arm around my waist. She is weeping too. Where do such tears come from, Miss Klein? I kiss her eyes, lick the salt.

The painting of the white stones is pleasant and quite good. The indifference of the house, its smug insensitivity comes through with power. No, the swimmer can't be seen from the boat ramp. He is now in deep water, embracing the little corpses. I paint a single grappling hook resting against a red fender. Behind the wheel of the ambulance sits the president, tapping his finger against his forehead, giggling to himself. He is dressed in medical white, always the clown, always the actor.

Her face must be chalk. Bleached stone. Absolute white. Gesso.

You may believe by now that I see my art as a science of interior cosmetics. Secret, abysmal engines beneath the fleshtones regulate your face. It isn't your fault, but you must suffer patiently just as if it was. I am sorry. I don't make the rules. And there can be no exceptions. Are you a winner? More's the pity.

Miss Klein likes older men. Their winded thrusts touch her heart. Could I fill her with babies? "Miss Klein, will you marry me?"

"I'd have to think about it. You have a wife."

The sequence of her logic is pure. She would be a strong wife. She might regulate my abstract fits.

Title: "Incinerators." After Hopper. Hopper white, Hopper blue; Hopper's thick, dreamy realism. I spent the whole day by the old concrete incinerators, away from my room, away from my paints, away from Miss Klein. I am trying to widen my perimeter, to gain objectivity. I'm thinking about an unrelated painting, something to get my mind away from—from what? From her, her face, and from the swimmer himself. He's rising toward the surface now, twin corpses in his arms, green bubbles streaming from his mouth, about to break into the light. I need time.
The incinerators have not been used for years because of the pollution. But I love their patient readiness. Massive, pyramidal, the charred, half-open doors of the ovens! Models of self-sufficiency and plain purpose. Emblems of the long-lost straightforward past.

The president said, "Ben, don’t you think there’s something flagrantly unreal about all this? Isn’t reality a joke? Lord, but I can’t seem to make myself believe that any of this is happening."

“It’s happening, Boss.”

“Sure. I know that. I understand, Smitty. But I am trying to explain something to you, I’m trying to explain how I feel.”

memo:
No, sir. Reality is not a joke, false as it is. And yet surrealism is unnecessary and represents, simply, a failure of the imagination.

memo:
In that backward country we knew only as a media-event, the dead are sent on their way with burnt offerings: a toy bridge so that they may cross the wide river that separates the living from the celestial garden. A rickshaw so that they won’t have to arrive on foot. A hut to live in. Rice cakes. Anything you can think of that will help them avoid inconvenience and humiliation in paradise.

A swift triad of dreams seems to point the way:

1. The swimmer has reached the surface. The babies are in his arms. The woman’s mouth is opening.

2. The swimmer is treading water in the middle of the lake. He is unwilling to swim toward the ramp and the kneeling woman. He can hear her heart beating, as though it is the last heart in the world.

3. The swimmer’s face. His face. Lord, lord, his face.

The amused eye of the president is on me. I feel I’ve lost all skill, patience, and esthetic distance. I don’t know what I’m doing. I never did. But now I can see that it is true. Miss Klein is staring into a
daydream of consequence. The president winks, guns the engine of the ambulance, leans on the horn. "Hurry up, Smitty!" he yells, in good humor. "Hurry up, boy!"

I pick up my brush. I begin.
THE PIG SAGA

We were proud of the boar. We castrated him to fatten the hams even more. Each day the little globes of his eyes guessed where the slop would go, the hidden tusk would graze my wrist. He didn't flinch at hurting me: it was important to be first in a pig's world. I watched the destruction in his jaws — fish, apples the crunch of centers in the teeth, the blow and push of his nose.

It had to be Fall: we heard ways pigs were killed, guns, knives, a moon not whole but getting full. We read the specific times and days; it had all been done before. Nights I dreamed the whites hovered under the flames of his ears, his body in a long overcoat. Nothing could make me kill this pig I said. We took the customary charge and the slaughter house cut the head. In four days I picked up his heart and the halves of his face, each eye attached to my movements still.

Cooked and opened I put them on a stump out back. And the eyes guessed
again what was next: my finger
dug in the sockets, the orbs
circling like sprinklers
scanning and escaping my grip.
Even the blade that took his masculinity
could not clip the chord
that made us so alike.
And still toward dusk
I got them out, my treasures,
the sweating flexible eyes.
My forefinger was stiff
as a hunter's horn and my hand
danced and winced in the night.
WATERMELON

Inside the watermelon
a man bites his fingernails red
and wishes the night would leave.
He is drinking and trying to remember—
something in the night cannot be loved.

He remembers being young
inside the watermelon, sitting near
a girl with bad teeth. High in the trees
he lets her talk, but when she sings
he cannot look at her mouth.

Eyes, like hands, go wrong.
Inside the watermelon, a bitter red sky
looks toward something, toward animals
and birds and friends. The man drinks
his whole life tonight.

Upstairs in the watermelon
his children sing a song. The little
black and white seeds should be asleep.
The fussy man limps and blunders, finds
the room, and spanks their bottoms red.
FLYING

Sunday
two brothers fold movie bills,
church bulletins, and newspapers
into airplanes. Thousands
are piled in their attic.
Different creases make divers,
spinners, loopers

into the yard
of the old woman next door
who climbs the hill behind her house
and huddles beside a thorn bush.
She scatters handfuls of rice
from the basin of her skirt
muttering "Caw, Caw, Soul.
Caw, Caw, Soul."
LAZARUS

She gives me no bag for my bread
so I have to ask. Says for day-old
I don’t get, sets her chin
and shrugs, so I take. Too bad
about the shirt, my breath, ratty cap, the crap-stained shoes; all lies, but all
I have is here. Fifty-five again
blinks from the shoplifter’s mirror
but I have paid in silver
for this breakfast, I am no thief. My cane
catches on the counter and she
wants me to be gone. The patrons
shift impatiently. Not one of them
is thinking about death.

At the door the door
opens from my shoulder,
morning multiplies, spills over,
that old easy miracle. All I need
is here: I am Lazarus, reliable
as yeast, proof of the risen recipe. Now
I say the hard part—
matins, kaddish, grace—
thank her, this time,
for the sack of anonymity.
ADAM

His blackness eases in the light before dawn, comfortable, as if he owned it. This is his time. Everything has slowed into winter. Like lichens on the rock walls, their patient hunger. Choirs of light, he follows the stars all the way along the locust fence to the pasture, the white boards circling into corral. A winesap, a spy his horses might find there still: a cold, tart pressing of apple wine. When I was born my mama held me up by the legs an' slapped me herself. This is my boy. This is Adam, 'cause he's my first born. But December's when he senses immortality; the small voices asleep in arms of the wind. Carried from barn to sty, the shape of cow's udders; the breath of pigs cloud up, snouting beneath his fingers — till he thinks of himself as hands, hands floating above the bones of the landscape, the lives stretched out before him like candles he has lit. Groundsel, chicory, pokeweed and teasel bend to him, stubborn but immanent.

A fistful of foxtail he takes, easing the calyx: the seeds sparrow the air. Ol' times my father sang 'someday, I'm goin' to see that dry well come table'. But it's the land itself that makes him rich. Twenty acres, Pennsylvania, the whole earth. If he plants wheat he'll have bread and whiskey, if he stocks sheep he'll be warm and contained. When I hear the Angelus four miles away, I hear snow. The air so thin somethin' got to fall. He listens to his daughters, fat like black diamonds in their beds, lazy to light. Breakfast is pulling him back. His wife's wide eyes. The land steeps with clouds, grackles and red-wings, all the creatures he can remember and named soft in the ground, the air wincing with roots. He watches the sun come up. In one breath, he thanks God; in the next, himself.
THE NEIGHBOR

My uncle is not yet
dead and the last red
bloom of summer has spread
to take the sun
when a neighbor clips it
and places the stem
in the water of her own
crystal vase and offers
the beautiful gift
at the door. She is welcomed
and led up the stairs
to the room where he is
propped on the bed
watching baseball on tv,
and he smiles
and wisecracks the old line
about doors left open.
She laughs and hands
him the flower.
He reaches to take it,
to place on top
of the oxygen machine

and that night at dinner
she is staring at a cut
violet in her centerpiece
when she remembers how
she held the vase a moment
too long, how he almost
had to pull it from her hand,
so surprised was she
at his forearm,
the vessels bulging
blue, and awful the way
the whole thing pulsed
like a lung, and she thought the word 'nitroglycerin'.
The violet is growing darker, the sound of cars arriving in the street, when she looks up, surprised now at the remarkable steadiness of his hand, his kind eyes, and finally she lets go her grip.
THE WAKENING

Up all night
with a hundred dying chicks
in the jaundiced light
of the coop, my father steps
into the first pools of day
pausing at the door
to scrape the dung from his boots,
leaning his back to the jamb
as he thumbs small curls of tobacco
into the burnt-out bowl of his pipe.
All night his ears rang
between the echoes of his heart
with the sickly cheep, cheep
of small white heads agape
from twisted necks,
beaks dropped open to ask
what no one ever knows, refusing
feed and drink as they died,
twisted in the palm of his hand.
And as the sun tears itself
on the blades of new roofs where
orchards he farmed once stood,
he strikes a match and draws deep,
and the gray mare ambles into dew
from the musky shadows of the barn,
her dark tail switching
the first flies of the day.
Squinting into the light, a pain
too subtle to name settles
in his chest, and as he begins
his chores, the morning
spreads over him like a stain.
LINDA AND THE COWBOY

Your old green cap is on the table. The sun is finally breaking through. Good old Cowboy Billy, solid as a phone pole and half as tall, through the screen door just a dark shape with a white grin standing in the front yard, says the weather is good for something and you'd better come on out and collect what he owes you. I tell him you're usually under that green cap this time of the day but he doesn't laugh just grins, just grins, and says he'd hate to hurt a woman on such a nice day but I know he's all talk, and the wind blows through and picks up your cap and sets it on the chair. I figure you're down at the creek for a swim or walked into town for a beer and you sure picked a fine time because old Bill's leaning on the screen like a bear in heat and grinning twice as big and says he's done run you out of town, put you in the trunk of an old Cadillac bound for Texas, and I say sure, sure, and his hand hits the screen big as a hat, a black hat, and I tell him how hard we've worked to save this place to keep it alive and his hand comes through and hangs in the air, it seems, like some fleshy thing in an old horror show that sucks all the air out of my space and I can't breathe and I've worked so hard just look at the blood in these walls I tell him just look at these hands just look at them
He sits down in your old chair, props his feet in the flowers, lays his gun on the table, and sails his big white hat, the wide brim tipping like wings, across the room.
WORMS

May, the laundry hanging,
the back steps piled with gardenias,
potbound, aching
to be planted, but the garden
still being turned, opened.

Barefoot, our shovels hacking,
we keep watch: first a squirming
then those rings around the neck.
It's worst to see them thicken
move from dark to light, our hair
washed so carefully in our eyes and mouths.

My mother in her bedroom resting, silk
scarves hanging on pegs in the closet. This
time, behind the garage where the leaves mulch,
my brother throws worm taunts so close
I can see the hair on his face.
TWO WOMEN WITH MANGOES

One of them seems to offer her breasts as if they were fruit, though she holds the canoe-shaped bowl of mangoes like a gift received. Her eyes dart off to the right, one hand curving around the bowl’s rim as though to guard what it presents. The other woman holds a small bouquet of pinkish-white flowers, presses them between her palms. In that green dress which exposes only one breast, she looks even more chaste than her friend. Is it correct to call them friends? Certainly the wash of green and yellow in the background is not friendly, implying turbulent weather or a growth of weeds. If these women and their island offer nothing we could say we need, then what should we ask for?

Gauguin, at 17, joined the navy and traveled to Brazil. When he left his wife, five children and impressionism for Brittany and then Tahiti, he must have been aroused by what he found at first—the coppery skin, the bodies uncorseted. But these women do not look like lovers, either for himself or for each other. If the fruit they hold and the breasts they show are anything to give, they’re not for us: we don’t know what to ask for. Perhaps their pose was Gauguin’s own rendition of two women, two refusals—the head of one turned slightly toward the other, as if she were about to speak, or had just spoken.
IN THE DREAM OF THE BODY

The cedar took over an hour of digging, and cursing when the shovel stuck on a root or a rock, pitifully small when it came out. There was sweat in my eyes and hair as I pulled and rocked the trunk, the ground heaved, a last root snapped and I hauled up the tangled shape. It was damp, clay covered both of us like lovers come back out of the earth.

Sometimes I could just sit in the front yard, not even reading, only the landscape, the park across the street in mind. If I spend enough time here I'll become calm as an old farmer watching the branches on a hillside. Later, when no one's around for blocks, I'll try to think what the trees were like and remember trucks passing in the background.

If I had a woman's body, I think the shadows and the roundness would excite me. I'd wrap my breasts in thinnest satins, for the outline, the sheen of myself. The air would be full of motion. In cotton I'd walk back and forth past the mirror, the smooth cloth touching my body, and know my breasts were perfect.

The dream has only inertia and loneliness. Sitting here, some days there's nothing I want. That's a lie. I wish the morning would lead me into the shade by the porch. I want something substantial as fatigue to lift my arms toward, the sunlight present in some other life beyond the woodpile, the air I could almost hold.
BEHIND US

We celebrate on into supper
toasting some lust for excess
beyond what we say.

Behind us at the concert
three people say It’s not
on the program; he’s deviating.
He adds another prelude
to the long program.

The way the notes he plays
gather under the hands
and lift them from the keys:

I want one passion
to grow my life around.
The pianist leaps from the bench
reckless and sweating.

Our applause celebrates
something else, an hour perhaps
here and there that falls
out of place
into the excess
that belongs to it.
ALARM

In the garden I half bury a bone
upright, a white fist

and think of my grandfather fishing
for bleached boards from the wrecked steamer
ten feet under water out near the point
spreading them on the beach like piano keys.
He thought he was building a hotel
but it was the Big House
for his seven children and most of the grandchildren
while he bent over his wheelbarrow
hauling seaweed to the rutabagas and currants.

If home, and this is possible,
is where I haven't been yet
I will understand the white refrigerator
on its back in the desert lot
and the alarm ringing blocks away
all night like the moment before stopping,
the house torn down
to its great stone porches.
FOR MY FATHER: ON LOOKING AT A ROBERT CAPA PHOTOGRAPH

1
I come across a photograph of Spain. it is Barcelona, 1938. these are soldiers of the International Brigades, scarves tied around their necks like dockhands. they are losing and going home, but they salute, right arms bent at the elbow, fists clenched.

you were not there, but I see you in the photograph. I see you whenever Spain comes up, though you were not there. you raised money for them in Manhattan.

2
it is unimportant what you did. Spain has become a word that stretches between us, a rope bridge across 30 years of ordinary life, the cliffs of father and son.

I remember you on the blue sofa telling me about the Ebro, the Jarama, door to door fighting in Madrid, Guernica and the war lost. quiet and subdued, the words fell into the canyons between us.

and now, it is 1978. I am on a bed in a rooming house in upstate New York, a photograph of Spain on my lap. we have never been further apart.

3
and I am also a photographer of loss. this room, picture this: the gray, green carpet, the drawers with knobs missing,
not even in a pattern, the sunken bed
I don't fit, the obligatory
cracked mirror.

a closeup of me with the photo on my lap.
my face grave and childish.

I am haunted by these men.
they seem from a world that has blown up,
their sun gone nova.
BELONGINGS

Into the closet in their bedroom that day, summer, into the hot box of breath. What was I looking for? In the dark among their belongings, my cheeks first brushed a heraldry of ties. On a field of business blue, black, slashes of egg yolk, dun. This man will not show his nerve. Neither the suit coats of exact saturation and hue, each with the right arm coiled like conduit, like intestine, each with its extra pair of pants, radiant on the seat. The shirts the Jew-boy, Jay Gatz, discarded. Hung on their wooden shoulders, black wires from the neck.

On her side nothing flimsy. Peignoirs of flannel, skirts of worsted gabardine. Nap and fuzz. Pieces I'm still ignorant to name function, form or texture. But this is sick, fingering these women's things.

What I found there with the hems and belts on my back, a letter in a shoe box in his perfect hand: "I've never really been the kind that waves the flag, my dear..." The rest is shrapnel and traction, a return in two years, sleepless on the first night of his discharge. A night full of the noise of stars. She's in her slip on the chenille bedspread when he covers her...

I forget all but the opening and the edge
of the letter that I remember still
takes my sweat into its fiber.
Blood in my members, in the rooms
of my chest, there,
the source of my forming.
MILL RUNNING, 1909

We have other names
than the men give us for the looms.
For the woof, a bark; for the warp,
we're wild geese. The skeins of cotton,
leash rods, and heddles we call by knots
and fits we make with hands—a dialect
like mother's mute morning chores.
Most of the time we don't speak,
like her, against the air stitched
so thick with noise it's a white freight,
a waterfall. The sign we make for *mill running*
is a fist as piston cranking the elbow
in small circles, like one-armed shadow boxing.
Or we whistle our way through
our cocked ears for wings.

Mother woke me up an hour earlier today
when the mist hung on the road like muslin.
May, and the dew on the new shoots
is a million fisheyes. My boots are slick,
black, and shine when I get here
where the cotton sucks the light
from the thirty-seven windows.
I punch into the dark.
I have no feet or hands.
I'm the black name the looms make
for us all. I'm a man.
Near Papillion, Nebraska, now and driving across the bridge over Papio Creek with one swallow and two meadowlarks, nine of them head into the wind toward the goldenrod, sunflowers and Queen Anne’s Lace. I slow down to recall all the butterflies that once flew against the windshield of my car and died falling into a rush of air behind me. They pass before me flying only the song of their colors with the flowers. My eyes fill with the only voice they know, brief days. What the monarchs say is what I repeat, rising, resigning and falling on any warm prairie day. Old loves, new friends all fit into a small dominion where snow will come. Bright flowers at the feet of mastodons encased in milleniums of ice.
COMPLAINT OF THE DAM TENDER'S WIFE

Around 1850, Jules Thurlotte, who was noted for his tremendous strength, built a log cabin here and brought in a young bride... It was said that he abused his strength by such feats as draining the brine from a barrel of pork and carrying it two miles, that he gradually went blind, and his young wife finally eloped... leaving her blind spouse to shift for himself here in the deep woods.

—Henry Red Eagle
_Cruising Maine's Wilderness Waterways_

The boom chains clang against the gates these nights. Each day the freshet rises. Soon I'll take your hand and lead you down the footpath to the dam where you will ratchet free the swelling waters.

As winter thaws your eyes cloud over. You pace, restless as wind, forearms flailing air. Your trapline goes untended. You gather me up like stovewood, drowning my shudders, arms tightly coiled around my ribs, eyes harsh in deep-boned hollows.

I recall too well the day you pressed your foul, trap-smashed thumb to the block, yelling, swing woman! How, as I seared the bleeding stump, you winced, then calmly asked about you supper, saying you were famished and must eat.
Two hungry years with you
and now another spring roars through
the spillways, and soon the cleated
loggers come with tales that fill
our solitude awhile.

If I ran out downriver,
traveling light, you'd hunt my warmth
each night among your bed folds,
wounded and wailing till sunrise.
TWENTY-SEVEN

I keep folding things and sitting on them,
a street, the name of a woman in Redding,
California, with large lips.
We spent one night together
on a Greyhound, talking about duck hunting,
the Air Force, college.
And rubbed elbows and knees. It was snowing,
and I felt like a capsule within a capsule,
layers of steel, plastic, cotton,
flesh. It seems like I'm always sitting
in this uncomfortable position of not knowing
where to get off. The years
are farmlights flickering through snowfall
on the other side of a window.
I have nothing to show, no children,
no peaches put up in jars. Old
Uncle John; who keeps brushing the strings
on his guitar and singing through his beard,
corny tunes his niece is bored with,
Salty Dog, Goodnight
Irene. I want to really get out of here
sometimes, you know, not come back.
SOME WINTERS THE WOLVES RETURN

When the pack comes down from the high country
I hear blood stammering in my veins.
I feel the ice melting in forgotten rivers.
They come back to us because we need them.

It is too easy now to think we have gotten away
from our four limbs reaching for common ground,
too easy to ignore the furred board of a dog’s body
thumping against firewood in the back of a pickup.

Planting their gray bodies with steel seeds
we protect our few frightened animals
from their hunger and ourselves
from our own dark needs.

Still, there are times I come upon them alone
and the circling hunger moves in a single animal.
Standing deep in my human tracks I take aim and fire,
falling in the snow as the bullet enters.

The sudden lack of motion the body stumbles into
leaves a silence at the end of the path
and a part of me moves out from the change
turning four-footed to the hills in search of family.
LETTER TO SANDY FROM SAN JUAN

Dear Sandy: We listen to marine calls every night. Bad news, mostly. One wife, cheery as sparkling wine We didn’t hear his side. Someone else is waiting for the baby, another took on water in the storm. The gillnetters are angry. You have our number.

Sunny weather, minus tides—good for digging clams. We used the depth finder only once, proceeded dead slow into Oak Harbor. Customs laughed at my bouquet—31 varieties of wild flowers picked on Lopez. I watch them every day. I think of you.

There was that real estate agent at Friday Harbor, wanted to sell us the top of the spit overlooking the cannery. “God doesn’t make any more land,” he said, “and the zoning’s getting strict.” They haven’t raised peas since the rabbits invaded.

The night of the storm, we found a berth at Lopez, went ashore for dinner. One restaurant, 46 pages of menu. The locals were cheering up Otto. His wife took him to court and won 2/3 of the farm and the fishing license. It could be worse. He has his health and friends.

I’m beginning to notice the intricate patterns of flowers. I would like to transfer these designs to fabric. I feel dowdy with no shower for a week. You must keep up your strength. We anchored to a buoy in Roche Harbor, took our drinks on deck and counted hemlocks. We know them by the way the tops lean. We watched the eagle perch, turn upside down as the branch brushed ground.
My favorite flower is the weed
I havn’t learned the name of. There must be
a hundred perfect pods before it’s in full bloom.
You would like the churches here. Old
and white, ideal for weddings. They play
sing-along hymns on their chimes at night.

Yesterday we were caught in the ferry’s wake.
The flowers tipped over. Everyone was mad.
I cleaned up the mess, threw away the dead
things. The columbine is too fragile to last.
The salal, sturdy. Our boat is named Loki.
From mythology, I think. The Indians stick it out
together on Lummi. I saw the women at the shore,
that ritual waiting, as we cruised by
on our way to Orcas.

We got the Cuban cigars over the border. No problem.
And your china vase. You’ll be pleased, I think.
The charts are accurate. We learned to understand
the legend: red, right, returning.
The last thing I did was toss the flowers
in the sea. Bless the fleet. Marilyn
THE MAN WHO NAMED CHILDREN

Panfilo's head was shaped awkwardly so that his mother would let out one side of his hat. He prayed for himself and confessed this, finally to the priest, Father Torres who recognized Panfilo's voice in the confessional and said it was all right. The priest was there when Panfilo was born, when his mother almost died and needed extreme unction. Panfilo remembered being scared. He was taken wrapped in a blanket to his father who wanted a son. But this is ugly! said his father and held him up by the lightbulb so the other men could see. I will name him Panfilo he decided, and the men looked down at their hands and said to Panfilo's father yes, each in his turn.
"In some other life she traveled light. In some other life she slipped away at dawn scarcely disturbing the thick branches."  

("The Woman at the Desk")

In museums of Natural History, extinct animals are frequently presented against a flat painted backdrop simulating the subject's characteristic environment. If the visitor shares the capacity of some visual artists to attend to the ground without loss of figure perception, an effect follows, not unlike that achieved by gazing fixedly at certain diagrams in psychology textbooks. Thus, the viewer learns to reverse figure and ground to a degree not easily achieved by the casual eye.

The comparison seems an apt one for the inner dynamic of Leslie Ullman's poems. The freedom with which she moves from foreground to background, whether the latter be inner landscape, history or prophecy, may present a difficulty for the inexperienced reader, who readily understands the words and the sentences but is mystified by their combinations. At the same time, it is this freewheeling movement through space and time that gives the poems richness and depth, and I believe that those of us who have trouble will simply have to improve our vision.

When Ullman speaks of her life as "ferociously normal," the reader is reminded of the woman in "Midwife" who

... smells blood in her hair
and dreams of crouching at the limits of her skin.
Such “new mothers sleep like men/ in the scant of what they are.” Their normal lives and natural histories issue in a veritable menagerie of offspring, and we are lucky that the home, most often the natural habitat of the species, does not prevent the travelling heroinism Ellen Moers identifies in *Literary Women*. Wives are expert at such travel, having trained their hands to go on “folding the loose garments/ fingering the sheets on the thin bed . . .” while memory and imagination join “The Voyeurs” in “passing a night/ remote and inevitable as the history/ of our ancestors/ who avoided all reference to the body.” Unlike them, the persona in “The Friends I Had as a Child” can be direct and explicit:

I swallow coffee and remember semen
in my mouth. How I cupped my hands.

The woman in these poems is simultaneously tough and susceptible, a tender realist, and it is as a woman that her most astute readers will identify with her. The tone is never strident, never confuses art with politics, but neither does it repeat mindless phrases meant to perpetuate the status quo. It seeks to escape its conditioning, pushes at the outer limits of the self. While the mother/daughter stares at children whose “deaths seem to rise inside them,” the husband of “In Barcelona You Tried to Scream” wants nothing to interfere with the itinerary. When he tells the wife JUST DRIVE, she holds “the wheel like a pair of shoulders.” Even so, she is conscious of that small gesture towards shelter and dependence, as she is of the later parallel between people “lighting lamps for their frightened children” and the “husband [who] offers [her] a light.”

Unwilling to settle for remaining a child, Ullman explores the past with all its familial and cultural influences as well as the alternate selves that appear to any woman schooled in introspection. It is this courageous testing of other lives that gives her poems, unassuming as they often appear on the surface, a quality of fierce integrity. Unconfined by time and space, precisely because of the intensity of her inner life, Ullman gives us poems simple in diction and syntax, accurate in their uncluttered imagery, often with a narrative or dramatic component. In fact, one of the most striking features of these poems is the absence of the descriptive mode, the insistence on
action as a gauge of emotional temperature. This quality is entirely appropriate to the interrelationships among all living things, and between them and their environment—relations which constitute the domain of natural history. Histories, rather, because each story is individually observed and recorded in the patient manner of the inductive scientist.

To relinquish childhood is to let go of both innocence and security, and again, the woman of these poems is equal to the responsibility. Unlike the nuns in “Shade,” who “knelt and rose/ as though made of air” . . . “as though they were leaving their bodies,” the speaker in this poem

. . . must think before rising:
*I went to him without*
*thinking. I touched him everywhere.*

If *My Mother/ My Self* is at all accurate, most women readers will commiserate with the persona in her guilt, but the poets will have to call it a *felix culpa* when it produces lines like these:

> Already the sun grows
> and you rise, porous
> with sleep, and sweating.
> He makes room as you pass.
> You remember how the leaves in midsummer
> clouded the stained glass,
> and the litanies—
> the murmuring of their voices
> like insects moving into the shade.

From the very first, the women in these poems know and rehearse the shape of loss. In “Last Night They Heard the Woman Upstairs,” the wife pictures the husband with whom she is lying

> not in the bed, not alive
> and a scream cracking

> like some withered thing from her lips.

The husband, on the other hand, has already gone where the real action is: he says

81
She must make love slowly, the way she climbs the stairs.

In "Plumage," the woman's hands tell

... of a room
she once knew. The curve
of the bowl on the table

and his, telling her "she is the last of a kind," search all the while

as though a door might open the way
to the stranger inside him.

The distinction persists, as in the final poem, "Dancing," the woman driven deeper into herself

... can take the trembling,
when it begins, deep inside

like a gypsy swallowing flame.

She has

... heard that men
are frightened of [her] body,

that they conjure it in the dark
over women they've made into wives

and there is little in that rumor to reassure her. "My last lover never closed his eyes," she says, and goes on to give us a devastating sketch of his self-absorption

Magnificent, he said carefully
as though I were water

and he a swan poised
over a swan's image.

With that line, we are transported straight back to Yeats's Leda and the indifferent beak, another choice bit of natural history, presented with the wry detachment of the trained observer, for there is no self-pity in these poems, no whining, only the honest intelligence of a
woman who knows what it means to be constantly inhabiting some other body, some other skin, furred or feathered.

Madeline DeFrees

At The Home-Altar
Robert Hedin
Copper Canyon Press
Port Townsend, Washington
$16, cloth

Since Homer and Dante Western writers have steadily used the metaphor of descent, a move downward as a way to knowledge of the self, before that self can rise again into light and air. Readers familiar with Snow Country, Robert Hedin's first book, will remember how the speaker in those poems was always rooted firm in the landscape around him. Landscape and poem were nearly indivisible, supporting each other. The Alaskan cold was pervasive. In this new collection we have moved away from Alaska, to Minnesota, France, and North Africa. Places and things are more foreign. Again and again we find the speaker isolated from his surroundings, separate in a way that forces him to descend down and in, to the wilderness of himself or to a watery land of the dead, in order to find what he is looking for. Thus in "At Betharram," deep in a cave the poet finds

There's a calm here at Betharram
Deeper than I've ever known.
And down this far,
The heart slows and beats
As calmly as the water
That I hear
Far down in the caves,
Dripping for miles through stone.
But such calm is hard to come by up above, on the surface of the world. Time and again Hedin manages it only by a persistent refusal to let things mean more than they do, by insisting that facts have their greatest value when left as they are. At the end of “1959,” after talking about the lights “Looking like gulls/ Or geese/ Heading out over a flyway of dead elms,” he writes

Brother, I am writing to say
There were never
Any geese,
The lights were only lights,
And no one comes North any more.

It is a calm that approaches despair, but is never that exactly. Call it instead a necessary acceptance of the painful world, the kind that comes often in pale dawn light, as it does at the end of “Waiting for Trains at Col d’Aubisque:”

Finding the world no better or worse
And ourselves still wanting
To be filled with its presence,
The words we’ve waited all night to say
We will have to turn into breath
And use to warm our hands.

I find this an appealing stance for a poet to take, to admit that there can be more important, practical things to do with breath than speak, that warmth is a stronger need than expression. Hedin is telling us things are things. When we try to make them more than that, to layer over them lustres of distorting “meaning,” we let them hurt us more than they do already. As it is, “no one comes North any more.”

The persona in the poem “Houdini” is similarly forced to deal with his separateness. When the poem opens, “Tricky Harry holds his breath” at the bottom of the river, his descent already made. The poem moves with him rising up out of his past, his puberty, his body, the river, until finally

Rising he bursts the surface of this poem.
He listens for shouts.
He hears only the night
And a buoy sloshing in the blue.
No applause, no acclaim, just the fact of him there in the night, confronting himself and the bare world around him. These poems are smooth and round, self-contained like an egg. Hedin’s control is masterful. But the solitude in them is not always so chilling. At times it is rich and glorious, as in the sensual poem “Sloughing” where the words are so plain they fall away, and we are left with smells and flesh vivid on the memory:

Back here in the bottomlands  
The sloughs lie flat  
As hides, breathing quietly  
Among dead trees  
And reeds. It is June  
And almost fifteen years  
Since we stripped  
And waded into those warm  
Lungs, drifting among turtles  
And sunfish, in what was dying  
Or dead, or having to grow  
Simple to survive. And  
What I remember most  
Was how you stood there  
Knee-deep in the smoke  
Off the water, naked and wet  
With algae, that old rotted  
Shell you’d found  
Lifted up into the cold light  
Like a horn, that white strand  
Of fish-eggs strung down  
Dripping from your neck like seeds.

One further note. Copper Canyon has been forced by certain sad economic facts to issue this book at $16 in a limited letterpress edition of a hundred copies. Lovers of fine printing will want to own one; they will love it as much as any book they’ve held. But not everyone can pay so much. Those of you who can’t afford it, ask your local library to buy a copy. The poems are excellent and deserve to be read. It is a sturdy little book and will last well on public shelves. That way you can read it and all your friends can too.

Tom Rea
In her introductory note to *Life in the Forest*, Denise Levertov mentions a “recurring need to vary a habitual lyric mode...” and a necessity to try to “avoid overuse of the autobiographical, the dominant first-person singular of so much of American poetry—good and bad—of recent years.” I am delighted to report that she has met with only partial success.

Several years ago, in his *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, Kenneth Rexroth noted that American poetry “divides increasingly into Mandarin and non-Mandarin.” By Mandarin, he alludes to the classic poetry of the T’ang and Sung periods during which poetry achieved perhaps its apex in all of written history, a time when poetry was everyone’s business and was competently practiced by most every literate member of society, and practiced exquisitely by an inordinate number who became literary immortals. The best of the Mandarin poets combine Confucian notions of exactitude of language with the mysticism of Ch’an Buddhism and Taoism, the personal or “confessional” with the political and social. Poetry then, as now, was “news that stays news.”

Levertov clearly belongs to the “Mandarin” poets of modern America. For the past twenty years her poetry has been personal in the most political sense, and political in the most personal sense. The daily workings of her life have long been the foundation upon which her literary career has turned—poems of love and marriage and motherhood, poems of opposition to war and of protest against sexism and racism at home, poems of nature and contemplation. She has never fallen into the egocentric trap of most first-person poets, but has steadfastly maintained aesthetic distance, producing a poetry of commitment and engagement, passionate without being strident.

In *Life in the Forest*, she successfully varies her “lyric mode.” But, and more importantly to the body of her work, she has failed to remove the first person from the poems. She has merely spoken of
herself in the third person, much as Gary Snyder frequently removes the intrusive first person by simple omission. While such a tactic tends to make the first person less obvious, Levertov’s recent poems are autobiographical; she is a poet whose depth of perception is inexorably linked to experience, and those of us for whom she has been a great teacher and friend have learned the importance of that assimilation through her work.

Almost immediately, the poems of death of the poet’s mother stand out: they are among the most moving of all her work, and often achieve an almost unbearable compassion, as when, in “The 90th Year,” she says,

It has not been given her
to know the flesh as good in itself,
as the flesh of a fruit is good. To her
the human body has been a husk,
a shell in which souls were prisoned.

“...I am so tired,” she has written to me, “of appreciating
the gift of life.”

As she has elsewhere stated, Levertov insists that “the obligation of readers is: not to indulge in the hypocrisy of merely vicarious experience. ...” And again, “The obligation of the writer is: to take personal and active responsibility for his words, whatever they are, and to acknowledge their potential influence on the lives of others. . . When words penetrate deep into us they change the chemistry of the soul, of the imagination. We have no right to do that to people if we don’t share the consequences.”

This attitude is preeminently Confucian, and would account for her desire to remove her self from her poems in order to make them more easily entered by the reader. She stands aside, prepared to take full responsibility, not only for her words, but for her deeds, even for her humanitas.

Again, quoting from “Poet in the World,” she states, “Poets write bad political poems only if they let themselves write deliberate, opinionated rhetoric, misusing their art as propaganda. The poet does not use poetry, but is at the service of poetry.” Perhaps it is her
eagerness for a full participation in the business of living that informs these poems with strength of conviction, with the indelible muscle of quality meditation.

Several of the new poems are propelled by the necessity for rebuilding her life following the death of her mother and the dissolution of a marriage. While it must have been tempting to be seduced by the desire for bitterness, for vitriol, Levertov calms her voice through the meditative, into a soft full contemplative understanding. Throughout her publishing history, she has consistently presented poems that are at once politically active and brimming with pure humanity, humanness. And even now, she says, in “Movement:”

Towards not being
anyone else’s center
of gravity.

A wanting
to love: not
to lean over towards
an other, and fall,
but feel within one
a flexible steel
upright, parallel
to the spine but
longer, from which to stretch;
one’s own
grave springboard; the outflying spirit’s
vertical trampoline.

Her work is filled with examples of resistance to the too-simple laying of blame. It is her trademark, the uncanny ability to make even the most caustic experience into something dignified and useful, as she did with “Those groans men use/passing a woman on the street” in “The Mutes” ten years ago in The Sorrow Dance. There, she took an experience that must have been equal parts horror and revulsion, and made it over into a form of understanding, a pity for the empty lives of the self-deceived. And now she again demonstrates this strength of character in poems like “Wedding Ring:”

My wedding-ring lies in a basket
as if at the bottom of a well.
Nothing will come to fish it back up
and onto my finger again.

88
It lies among keys to abandoned houses, nails waiting to be needed and hammered into some wall, telephone numbers with no names attached, idle paperclips.

It can’t be given away for fear of bringing ill-luck.

It can’t be sold for the marriage was good in its own time, though that time is gone.

Could some artificer beat into it bright stones, transform it into a dazzling circlet no one could take for solemn betrothal or to make promises living will not let them keep? Change it into a simple gift I could give in friendship?

How easy it would be to turn back on this small symbol of a marriage that didn’t last forever, to transform it not into a gift of friendship, but into the image of bondage and failure. But as she so often does, Levertov sees that it was “good in its time.”

If there is a lingering sense of loss in Life in the Forest, it is of a quality that is rare. Time and again I am reminded of the exquisite sorrow of Li Ch’ing-chao or of Yuan Chen. But this is not, finally, a book of sadness, nor of losses. It is a book of strengths and endurances measured against the losses we all learn to live with, and learn to live with more easily through poetry. These are poems of mature affection and engagement written by a mature poet at the height of her power.

Sam Hamill
Jane Bailey’s first collection of poems, *Pomegranate* (1976, Black Stone Press), begins with the following epigraph:

> In the Orphic creation story,
> Eros, the force that attracts,
> shapes a world,
> sets it spinning.

And indeed the force of eros spins throughout these early poems. All the poems are concerned with erotic relationships. “I’d love to bury my face in your beard” she says in “Friendly Note.” In “For Kevin,” the opening poem, her concern with eros is even more explicit:

> You rise, the great thick snake
> slides, moving into the marshes.
> My tongues lick round.
> You swell, the tree thrusts
> branches to me, shaking.

> You’re hard and good.
> I’ll smolder with you,
> even in the rainy streets.

The best poems in this collection are characterized by a quiet, lyrical tone, lush and often dreamlike imagery.

In *Tuning*, the poems are again quiet, lyrical and candid. The eros is still there:

> The aluminum tang of her deep
> rushing breath
> recalled his fluid taste;
> she slowed to savor
> that gift.
But in these newer poems the sexual imagery is not so explicit. The body takes on a new, more sophisticated significance. Her concern is no longer to “know no edges/ cunt or cock,” but with mouths that “stretch the air open” and “Amazing throaty cries.” She now has “the stomach to laugh.” She no longer sees herself merely in relation to others. Now she is, as the title of the last poem in the book suggests, “Living Alone.” She has left the claustrophobic rooms of *Pomegranate* and has, as she promised in that earlier book’s final poem, “built another kind of bed/ on solid ground . . .”

But the ground is not solid. Bailey has discovered a “landscape. . . constant as the wind.” This world is not closed but open, so open that the horizon becomes “unstrung” and people hold each other with “sparse, leathery roots.” Constantly shifting, her world has become one where hands are “wide-eyed” and sink into the “speaking river,” where deer and horses float downriver and the earth is “still-faced.” Clouds take “more shapes than the mind could encompass.” In “A Vision of Horses,” past, present and future, dream, memory and fantasy all blend:

Years ago  
when they first married  
she was thin  
with bones that slipped  
quick under his hands  
Leaning against a willow  
he opened a lunch pail  
looked down river  
for a mare, swimming  
In a movie long ago  
the horse and boy swam together  
into the sea  
Back to the sharp dry dust  
of summer fallow  
he and his wife rode through  
to a hilltop  
Miles of tiny farms  
dots of horses  
mouths too small  
for hunger  
Like the big Percheron mare  
of his childhood  
he’d let her graze under him
Distracted by a vision of mouths
growing and more, in her body,
he'd driven her large
Resting his thermos gently
on his belly
he saw his dream mare
floundering downstream

There is a sense of mystical participation in these poems; everything becomes an echo of something else. A truck hauling water has the “unlikely grace of a pelican/ taking off.” The prairie swallows the river and

We reach out still eager,
start again to meet.
With that motion
the scene shifts,
the light changes.

Bailey's concern is no longer to understand “why . . . this jealous hold on your juices,” but to gain “a strong hand on space.” In this “white confusion of forms,” the poet is struggling to get hold of things that she knows can't be held:

She waited on her flattening voice,
fingers closing on nothing,
screamed against the grain.

In “Stalemate” she asks:

Would it matter, my losing my grip?
I might as well ask
the damp seeping under the door.

If Bailey has not gained solid ground in these poems, she has acquired a sense that language can trivialize the terror and loss. There is a sense of punning and playfulness here that is absent in her first collection. She has the wit to juxtapose “My hand in the curling/ nest of your body” with “We have the stomach to laugh.” Her wit also shows in a surprising, almost playful use of line breaks:
A long black snake, the Missouri cut through a hundred miles of prairie and another hundred and another.

She has also discovered the power of naming things:

No one town had a name so long. Missouri flowed along the tongue with cottonwood, gooseberry, chokecherry and willow.

Language, the names of things, punning—in a shifting world, these are what give her “a strong hand/ on space” and what she must hold to. They are the constants behind the illusory: “I feel you disappear/ in a wash of words.”

There is another, perhaps even more significant constant behind her poems: the river. More than just a metaphor for the poet’s state of mind, the river is, as mystics are fond of saying, form in formlessness. For Bailey, it contains memory, loss, all that is loved and feared, as in “Decoys on the Water:”

Rounding the point,
I saw two deer swimming red in the sea.
I was not prepared for red deer swimming leisurely in the sea.

My father hunted ducks.
Small children, quiet in the blind, we wondered why ducks came to papier-mache decoys on the water. We were not prepared.

My father’s ashes float the Missouri to the sea. Visions drew him through the bottle’s widening mouth into the endless water.
The river remains constant, not the land. The horizon may become "unstrung" but the river is always there, "a wash or words," "the damp seeping under the door."

But the river suggests a more subtle and comprehensive thread running through these poems: the Orpheus myth. Just as, after they were thrown into the Hebrus River, the lyre continued to play and Orpheus' head continued to sing, so the river for Bailey is a "speaking river" and water is "whistling water." We "sink like stones" and "rise like young birds." Children "learn the still/ surface float/ that would ride to a neutral current." The roots of people are "thin wire/ searching out a radiant current." This wire is then likened to a musical string which is playing "for a strong hand/ on space." Even the notion of tuning gains much of its significance from the myth of Orpheus. The title suggests that these poems are Bailey's lyre, her way of soothing the savage beast, of stopping the river's flow. A sound, some abstract in space, is what she holds to. She says in "The Children's Room:" "I . . . find my timing,/ feel my way in." In this latest collection of poems, Jane Bailey has "tuned the distance from her." She's shunned the society of lovers, come through the Bacchanal of Pomegranate needing little more than a voice.

Don Schofield

The City of the Olesha Fruit
Norman Dubie
Doubleday & Company, Inc.
$6.95, cloth

Norman Dubie's fifth full-length collection of poems is a carefully-woven fabulist tapestry, a series of tableaux in which history, at first glance, seems rejected in favor of the drama of detail. The backdrop is night and day—their interstices, in particular—and against these,
bright patches of blue and yellow occur again and again. There is an almost moral correlation of color to part of day, as if the narrator were hoping rather wistfully to fix each detail of the world and make it static by stitching it that color. Blue pears, blue turtles, blue clay, blue rags, a blue blanket; daffodils, yellow spears of colic-root, clarified butter, yellow forsythia, goldfinches, yellow bonnets—one soon gets accustomed to the brightness and discovers with a little shock that these details are not the ones being pointed out. It is the red and black images that trouble the narrator. They occur at dangerous transitional points, between life and death as well as night and day, and stand out like raised figures: a red flag, a black and silver Winchester,

The other mural
Is a procession of animals without human companions:
The mouth of the fox holds an onion that is red like apples!

* * *

The black widow spider who nests in the corner of the barn
Beside the bales; you have named her Obsidian. The red fiddle
On her stomach, you tell her, is worthy
Of Chagall.

Animals are everywhere, especially barnyard animals—cows, mules, donkeys, ducks, pigs—for whom repeated drudging service or the slaughterhouse are always near at hand:

My sister here, at Yalta, goes sea bathing with a rope

Around her that runs back to the beach where it is
Attached to a donkey who is commanded by a servant
With a long switch.
The sea tows her out and then the donkey is whipped

Sorrowfully until he has dragged her back to them.
I named the donkey, Moon, after the mystery of his service
To my sister . . .

The narrators of these poems are troubled by the spectacle of history, of how one event succeeds another and inevitably repeats itself whether it’s a footprint or an atrocity. This service to time becomes equated with sacrifice, which becomes a figure for love, which is the real subject of this collection.
Doesn't the mule want to be outside in the real dark
And at the true center of his burden
On a blue clay path with sparks of colic-root

Beneath him; free
To drag everything along behind him . . .

The sacrifice is the bondage to sequential events; love becomes the desire to see some connection, to believe in the round. In the poem “You,” the water in the fountain

does succeed, like us,
In nearing a perfect exhaustion,
Which is its origin. The water

Succeeds in leaving the ground but
It fails at its desire to reach a cloud . . .

. . . and this loud, falling
Water is a figure for love, not loss, and

Still heavy with its desire to be the cloud.

Everything must be willed out of the blackness of the specious present. The animals know this; lovers know this. “The animals had a garden party without us . . .” “. . . By the brook, nevertheless,/ Two lovers embrace . . .”—despite the personae of these poems who resist these appalling sacrifices. The variable narrator cannot have his static yellow-and-blue world; he comes, at the end, to an acceptance of the mystery, of the brutal interplay of life and death: “An aspect/ Of the mother must be concealed from us; that aspect/ Emerges, after much thought, in the lovers she selects for us.”

The people in these poems die violently, for the most part—of murder, cholera, plague, influenza, and there are no complaints. And whenever the narrator approaches a scene of death, the scene cuts abruptly, often in the middle of a thought, to something else. Again and again he turns his face away:

. . . and what I understood to be a large ham
That the authorities, nevertheless, declared
The torso of a male child of nine or ten. The Czar,
In their memory, placed a tiny trout pond over them
And this inscription: *A blue blanket for my little ones.*
My wife goes nearly naked to parties in Moscow.

Like the blue and yellow signposts that point the wrong direction,
Dubie’s exclamation marks are naive arrows away from the sordid
reality towards some trivial detail, while the ship goes down in the
background (or Icarus drops like a fly):

Have you ever measured distances by sound;
If the steam from a ship’s whistle is seen
And, say, ten seconds elapse before the sound
Is heard by you again, then she is just
Two miles off—entering a fog bank, I think! Mother is
Dead. She taught me the night signals of the Cunard Line.

There are three orange lights, one forward, one aft . . .

The reader cannot turn away from the brutal reality when the
narrator does, but at the same time we feel his shock as he averts his
face. It is the reader who is thus in the position of bringing the blue
and yellow hemispheres together, and who sympathizes with the
willed naiveté of the narrator not to see the blood-red disc that joins
the two halves. We wish him to see more, to solve the dilemma, and
poem by poem the narrator does. Step by step Dubie comes to an
understanding as he moves from the static tableaux of the fable to an
embrace of the round:

What does this sick girl have to do with
Our lives? That excellent man, *Rosen,* knows:

Open your eyes: there’s sky, mountains; the moment
Of death is instant, contrived.

It is a stunning collection, the fabric complete.

*Kathy Callaway*
CONTRIBUTORS

JOHN ADDIEGO is a VISTA worker and assistant poetry editor of *Northwest Review*. He lives in Berkeley, California.

TIM BARNES lives in Oregon City, Oregon and works for the Poets in the Schools program.

LEE BASSETT's collection of poems *The Mapmaker's Lost Daughter* is due out from Confluence Press this summer. He resides in Missoula, Montana.

KEVIN CLARK is poetry editor for *California Quarterly*, teaches writing at the University of California/Davis, and has poems current or forthcoming in *The Florida Quarterly, The Georgia Review* and other places.


PAUL CORRIGAN has had work in *Poetry Northwest* and lives in Glens Falls, New York, where he teaches in the New York State Poets in the Schools program. He has recently received a CAPS fellowship from the State of New York.

MADELINE DEFREES has poems coming out soon in *Woman Poet*. Her book of poems *When Sky Lets Go* was published last year by Braziller.

RICK DEMARINIS's story, "The Swimmer," is part of a collection, *Games Without Children*, pending with Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. His four other published books are *A Lovely Monster, Scimitar, Cinder*, released by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux last year, and his new book, *Jack and Jill*, just out from Dutton. He has taught at San Diego State and the University of Montana, and lives in Missoula.

SHARON DUNN co-edits *The Agni Review*. We are reprinting her first poem to be published, "Mail Order," from *CutBank 11*. We omitted a line inadvertently, and offer our apologies. Sharon is a partner, with her brother, in a direct-mail business in New Hampshire.

STEPHEN DUNNING lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

JEANNE FINLEY teaches a writing workshop for women at the Albany County Jail and Penitentiary in Albany, New York, and at the State University in that city. She has poems out and forthcoming in *Greenfield Review, Tarmarack*, and elsewhere.

MARILYN FOLKESTAD teaches a writing workshop at the YWCA in Portland, Oregon, and has work in *The Portland Review*.

RUTH GARDNER is a lecturer in composition at the University of Arizona. She has a chapbook *From Here* out from Blue Moon Press.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH has a new booklength poem, *Different Fleshes*, coming out from Seneca Review Press in the fall—as well as his collection, *Comings Back*, which is available from Doubleday. He currently lives in Austin, Texas.

DEBORAH GOODMAN has new work coming in *Cottonwood Review* and *Kansas Quarterly*. She is completing an MFA at Wichita State University.
SAM HAMILL is editor and publisher of Copper Canyon Press. His latest collection of poems is *The Book of Elegiac Geography*, available from Bookstore Press, Freeport, Maine.

CHRISTOPHER HOWELL is currently Poet-in-residence at Colorado State University, and his fourth book of poems, *Through Silence: The Ling Wei Texts*, will be out this fall from L'Epervier Press. He directs Lynx House Press.

RICH IVES's *Notes from the Water Journals* is due out from Confluence Press next winter. He plans to start The Owl Creek Press in Missoula, Montana, and print a new magazine, *The Montana Review*.

KATHERINE KANE's “Song” is part of a new collection, *Ferry All The Way Up*, from Porch Publications. She also has work in *The Iowa Review*.

DAVID KELLER has taught at Whittier College and has work forthcoming in *Ploughshares*. He is the only poet who attended The University of Iowa for its School of Music. He lives in Trenton, New Jersey.

WILLIAM KLOEFKORN teaches at Nebraska Wesleyan. His fifth book of poems to be published was *ludi jr*, from Pentagram Press. Two new books forthcoming are *Not Such a Bad Place to Be*, from Copper Canyon Press, and *Cottonwood County*, published by Windflower.

HOWARD LEVY lives and writes in New York City.

KIM MALTMAN is from the prairies of Alberta and currently lives in Toronto. She has published in several journals including *Dalhousie Review*, *Quarry*, and *University of Windsor Review*; her first collection was published by Fiddlehead Press.

NANCY McCLEERY lives in Anchorage, Alaska, and sometimes works for the Nebraska Poets in the Schools program. Her book, *The Jane Poems*, is due out this year from the Pi-right press in Utah.

BEA OPENGART is in the writing program at the University of Iowa.

JIM PETERSON is from Elgin, South Carolina, and is founder and co-editor of *Kudzu*. He has recently had work in *Kansas Quarterly*, *The Cincinnati Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. He and his wife are about to go into the horse business.

DEBORAH POPE will be teaching at Duke University this fall. She has had work in *Cimarron Review* and *Cornfield Review*.

KAREN PROPP is a student in the Creative Writing Program at Oberlin College. JOHN QUINN's book, *The Wolf Last Seen*, is forthcoming from the University of Nebraska. He is currently teaching in Nagoya, Japan.

BOB REID lives in Missoula, Montana and has poems in *Slackwater Review* and *The Iowa Review*.

ALBERTO RIOS has poems in *Prairie Schooner*, *Porch*, *North American Review*, and others, and in the excellent anthology *A Geography of Poets*. He has just completed an MFA at the University of Arizona.

MARK RUBIN was one of *The Nation*’s Discovery winners for 1978. His work has appeared in *Antaeus*, *The Nation*, and elsewhere. He is presently teaching a course in creative writing at the University of Montana.

HILLEL SCHWARTZ teaches dance at the Del Mar Arts Cooperative in Del Mar, California, and previously taught history, humanities and religious studies at the University of Florida and elsewhere. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Denver Quarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, and other places.
SCOTT SIMMER teaches writing at Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa, and directs the Three Rivers Writers' Conference. His work has appeared in several magazines.

BRUCE SMITH manages a Black Angus cattle ranch in Deposit, New York, and is an editor for *The Graham House Review*.

ROBERT WARD's chapbook, *Voices*, will be appearing soon. He has had work published in *Quarterly West, Kansas Quarterly, The North American Review*, and elsewhere. He lives in Eugene, Oregon.

PAT WARE has a small farm in Washington. Her work has appeared in *Portland Review, Slackwater Review, Spectrum*, and other places.

MARY WARNER, the artist for *CutBank 12*, teaches painting and drawing at the University of Montana.

**BOOKS RECEIVED**

*Adirondacks*, Greg Kuzma, poems, Bear Claw Press, $3.95.

*Alliance, Illinois*, Dave Etter, poems, Kylix Press, $5.95, cloth, $3.95, paper.

*As If It Will Matter*, Jody Aliesan, poems, The Seal Press, $4.00.

*Barn Fires*, Peter Wild, poems, Floating Island Publications, $3.00.

*The Bus To Veracruz*, Richard Shelton, poems, University of Pittsburgh Press, $3.95.

*The City of the Olesha Fruit*, Norman Dubie, poems, Doubleday, $6.95, cloth.

*The Eggplant and Other Absurdities*, Duane Ackerson, poems, Confluence Press, $3.75.


*The Marriage of the Portuguese*, Sam Pereira, poems, L'Epervier Press, $3.75.

*Pebble Creek*, Harald Wyndham, poems, Confluence Press, $2.50.

*Peckerneck Country*, Walt Curtis, poems, Mr. Cogito Press, $2.50.

*Poetics*, Rostam Keyan, critical theory, The Philosophical Library, $7.50, cloth.

*The Postcard Mysteries & Other Stories*, Albert Drake, fiction, Red Cedar Press, $2.50.

*Remember Our Years*, Florella Galt, poems, West Main Books, $2.00.

*Ride the Shadow*, David Lenson, poems, L'Epervier Press, $3.75.

*Rubbing Torsos*, John Latta, poems, Ithaca House, $4.50.


*The Ten Thousandth Night*, Gwen Head, poems, University of Pittsburgh Press, $3.95.

*Trunk and Thicket*, Robert Morgan, poems, L’Epervier Press, $3.75.

*Tuning*, Jane Bailey, poems, Slow Loris Press, $4.00.

*Wakefulness*, Bruce Renner, poems, L’Epervier Press, $3.75.


*Zuni Butte*, Peter Wild, poems, A San Pedro Pamphlet, $2.00.
MAGAZINES RECEIVED


Beyond Baroque (784 & 791) George Drury Smith, ed., 1639 W. Washington Blvd., P.O. Box 806, Venice, CA 90291.


Fiction (vol. 6, no. 1) Mark Jay Mirsky, ed., Department of English, CCNY, New York, NY 10031. $15/4 issues.

The Iowa Review (Spring, 1978) David Hamilton, ed., 321 EPB, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242. $2/copy.

Kudzu (7) Jim & Harriet Peterson, eds., P.O. Box 865, Cayce, S.C. 29033. $4/year.

Long Pond Review (4) Patricia Powers et. al., eds., English Department, Suffolk Community College, Selden, N.Y. 11784.

Phantasm (vol. 3, no. 5) Larry S. Jackson, ed., Heidelberg Graphics, P.O. Box 3404, Chico, CA 95927. $8/year.

Poetry NOW (vol. IV, no. 2) E. V. Griffith, ed., 3118 K St., Eureka, CA 95501. $5/6 issues.

Porch (5) James Cervantes, ed., Department of English, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85281. $7/year.


Stand (vol. 20 nos. 1 & 2) Jon Silkin et. al., eds., 59 Clarendon St., Boston, MA 02116 (USA address). $2/copy.


Waves (1) Eric Torgerson, ed., Route 2, Shepherd, MI 48883. $6/4 issues.

Willow Springs Tom Smith, ed., Department of English, Eastern Washington State University, Cheney, WA.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Issue Description</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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and others.

Edited by Lex Runciman and Rick Robbins
With an Introductory Note by James Wright

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