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CutBank

Fall/Winter 1979

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*Cover painting by Anne Gregory, the artist for this issue*
MANIFESTO
for Rene Char

To babble, to break into a curse,
there is such cruelty in the crazed tongue.

*  

Snake in a cool jar, my tongue coils
and strikes at random. Great birds fall,
angels clutch their throats, and midgets
search for their eyes on the forest floor.

*  

My tongue is a weapon, a tool, a gift.

*  

In a dream, my mouth fills with sand.
I want to sing with the lazy gulls,
the dark rumbling sea. Silence is grit.
I spit every grain through my teeth.

*  

To speak, to break into wild song,
there is such beauty in the human tongue.

*  

This autumn night, a honking dampens
the air. Like geese, in a languorous
spiral, words circle the dark earth.
The laughter of spheres. Dust. Light.

*
Our tongues are more than thin-sliced meat. They sing and will suffice.
MONTANA PASTORAL

I have seen fear where the coiled serpent rises.

–J. V. Cunningham

Late afternoon,
I pull off my boots and burn
the slow undersides of boards.
Out a window, young corn wavers
two feet up and I wash the earth
of our garden from my hands:
our garden of the green shoots,
of the mud that slides,
of water and no water, only memory
of a full sluice. I light the lantern
and we gather around this table,
the dogs, a stray child, women and men.
The sun draws us, caught by marigolds,
lodged sharp-edged in honey.
We raise our knives and plunge them
shaft deep. The village priest bleeds,
a yellow stain spreading down his legs.
We moan with him and drive back the hungry dogs.
Old friend, I am nearly awash. My house fills with boiling sound, the unfamiliar clatter of rain against tin. The garden dampens a darker green. You might think some strange orifice had opened in the churning sky. I know better. Oregon is moving east.

* 

It is evening. Worms sleep at the roots of things, in rain-swollen apples and soft, ovular pears. The streetlights are muted. Like the torches of an underwater city, they struggle to burn. The house shifts and settles. Oregon is moving east, I tell the quaking walls. Though asleep, my cat believes. In her dream of elusive fish, she drowns and drowns again.

* 

Perhaps, like two old sealions, we should meet and discuss this damp despair. And forget what isn’t worth remembering, until nothing remains, but mildew and two chairs by a streaming window. Already, I’m discarding an image or two: white, coiling dust; the last edge of sunlight; love in a sweating room. Tell me, if bones turn wet, won’t they crumble like decaying stone? Yes, we should meet. I have many questions. And a letter is not sufficient answer.

* 

What is a letter, after all – a crude approximation of internal weather, a report from the coiling guts, some epiphany clarified? No, a letter is a mask, a clown’s painted face. Once, you showed me a certain shrub, with white enfolded blossoms. Patiently, in a cool scientist’s voice, you explained their inner workings, revealed, with gentle finger, the tiny sexual parts. Now, as I tend my garden, those white blossoms – emblems of an earthly paradise – set me trembling, bring my blood to a raging fullness. Nothing could be simpler. This letter, symbol for
what might be true, remains a grinning, lying mask. And there, on the mantle, beside photographs and a broken pipe, the wild sexual blooms of rhododendron breathe, are present, and presence is true connection. Each afternoon, for my pleasure, they elucidate forbidden texts, strange erotic practices. And each evening, I prove a willing student.

* 

Tonight, my cat swims across the floor. And I caress a woman’s thigh, touch the essential dampness. In that bottomless, liquid well, my fingers drown and drown again. Her breath quickens, her soft breasts rise before they fall. *Writers speak a stench*, said Kafka. He was sorely mistaken, that fearful, saturnine man. Her scent — of seaweed and stale sweets — still lingers on the hand that writes these words.

* 

Do not be fooled. Some days, the white blossoms are stained and withered; they do not kindle my loins. A botanist, you understand these things, the inevitable turning of seasons, the small deaths and births. On such days, I let the needle scratch across the grooves. I close my eyes and listen; hard-pan drums, sly piano and somber tuba, the stinging wail of trumpet and clarinet, locked together in pure conversation. Jazz, jass, jism, stained sheets in an uptown hotel: the world begins again. Underfoot, sand crumbles like *tabac du caporal*, that foul and fuming blend. Mice gnaw my dreaming feet, the bindings of old and beloved books. I will not be bothered. I am listening to the creation of a world. A botanist, you may not understand this subterfuge: an old record, a mechanical, wind-up toy. But the music is elemental, rising out of roots and stems and leaves, out of the ancient, surging earth.

* 

Asleep, the woman smiles and stretches, arranging her limbs. She is composing: a song, a lyric of ecstasy. With her body, her round, Grecian form, she composes the simple verses. They are not to be sung. They will not translate. They must be danced. In a softly glowing bed, at the hour when rain is music.
FREEING THE APES IN THE NEW SAVANNAH

Goodbye swinging tire. Goodbye shelf of many dreams.  
So long muraled forest, urine straw, lettuce heads.  
There goes your little family: father, mother,  
baby so often flung through your walls  
like a pipe-cleaner toy.

A truck backs into the new savannah.  
Guards open the doors, head for the hills.  
Slowly the apes step down:

They stand together in a moonless night.  
A strange grass pokes through their toes.  
Here comes a little wind. Here comes the smell  
of buffaloes, zebras, goats, llamas,  
Skippers, McDonalds, the Guadalajara.  
A plane slits the sky. Rain pelts their backs.  
Their flat feet are sinking in mud –  
they’re up to their knees adapting:  
bone still, slope skulled, shivering,  
shivering, rolling their pearly eyes.
You wait in a corner of the schoolyard, damp in your peppered cords. At last, down soft, sucking asphalt your father's car comes shimmering toward you.

You have never been swimming together and you sing down the country roads, past barns and withering pumpkins. His collar is open. His false teeth curve in his pocket like the hoof of a tiny horse.

You walk through madronna leaves to the harbor.

In the shadow of a huge stone you turn from each other. When you look again, his skin is the color of sliced pears. His bathing suit is deep blue wool, with a belt, and a buckle where a slim woman arcs in a swan dive.

He dives through the water. His hair flows from his head like kelp. He is turning. He is kicking and stroking with a smooth, terrible grace you have never seen. He is the sea for you. He is the pelican lurching through a long, white sky. You will swim in his wake forever.
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 carp as dimes. Frogs
this side of music sing softly in reach.
They'll not let you be alone.
AGAIN

I had no delusions frogs
were more than frogs.
Standing in the green light
they gave, how beautiful,
their subarticular 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 not better than his 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.
A DEBT

When George banked the eight ball into the side pocket, I couldn’t pay time on the table, much less pay George $25 escudos. In fact, neither of us had any money so we climbed out the men’s room window to the alley and ran, leaving the men’s door bolted from inside. We raced past avenida de Palmas, where I lived with my parents, then ran on to rua d’Ingleterra, a cobbled street where the buildings are painted blue or white or yellow and the street lights hang from wrought iron. The August night was hot and we sagged, finally, into two of the white metal chairs outside Cafe Befica. George bought a lemon-ice.

“You swine,” I said, “You did have money for the table.” “Who me? The winner?” George said. “You could’ve paid, man.”

George pressed the ice to his forehead. “I’m hot. You hot, Wart?” “Why didn’t you pay? Damn it! I live just about next door to the place.” “Aw,” he said, “I didn’t have enough.” “Like hell.”

He stood up and pulled out the front pockets of his khakis. “See? No money.” There was only a blue handkerchief, which he stretched square, a corner in each hand. “See?” He shook it and showed me the other side.

“You swine.”

Later, we swam in the water hazard on the 15th fairway of the Cascais Club. Sweetflag and mint grew on the banks of the black water and a thin moon was floating. A stand of pine screened the water from rua d’Angola and the walled houses beyond; but the fairways stretched off – blue as jade and cool – beneath huge jets of water slapping onto the grass, revolving in the huge night.

I was lying naked between the pond and piled mowings, on bristly grass: belly-up, high-ribbed and vulnerable. Dental floss was tightly knotted around the wart on my lower lip, in the center, just below the red. The floss strands hung to my chin.

“String’ll never work,” said George. He was lying naked on his shirt, with his pale legs splayed back in the grass. “You’ve got to cut it
off, I’m telling you.” And with a straight razor from his shoe, he slit a golfball open to the tight rubber windings. Seven more balls – fished from weed root and mud in the water hazard – were stacked between us, in the yellow beam of George’s flashlight.

“O your dad’ll be thrilled about his razor,” I said. “He’ll just . . .” A passing car swept headlights through the pines, and I stared across the water at the bulging shadows. I sat up, crooked my hands around my eyes. “Do you see someone? Over there?” I asked.

George razored blond hairs from the back of his left hand. “You’ll have to cut,” he said and slit a vein that piped down the hand. His blood welled out, channeled between his fingers into the bristley sour-smelling grass.

I watched him dab at the bleeding with his tongue. He lifted up the hand, skimmed blood off the cut with a stiff finger, and I saw the blood spill down his white arm. Pressing his thumb on the cut, George waded through a patch of mint into the black water, where he dipped his hand. In my mind’s eye, the blood rose in streaks, then billowed. A newt swam into the cloud.

“Hey Wart, bring me a sock,” said George. “And the flashlight too.”

He wrapped his cut hand once with the sock. Gripping one end in his teeth, he tied a square knot across his palm. Calf-deep in water, ankle-deep in mud, I held the flashlight. Glancing from time to time at the pines, I sloshed my leg through frogweed; the light wobbled on green ripples, the water bent my leg askew.

Twenty yards off, a man stepped out from the pines. George saw him too, as the man leaned a suitcase against a stump. I snapped off the weak yellow light. Unexpectedly, I heard crickets and the waterjets, and the powerlines humming over the road. I felt the warm black water on my legs and the strands of floss on my chin. Then the man was limping towards the pond, one leg stiff, staggering with each lame step; I splashed through the water to the lawn.

Trousers, shirt, white underwear were strewn on the pile of mowings. My wet feet stuck in the twisted cloth of my jeans. I sat down to pull them on and George stood on my trouser leg.

“Scared?” he said.

“Hell no.”

“Scared of that crippled old man?” he said.

“Just don’t want my clothes stolen.”

“Your clothes? Your clothes? Fuck your clothes! He wants your
money.”

“My money?” I said.

George threw up his hands. “Well, I don’t have any. How can I when you don’t pay your gambling debts.”

“I’ll pay. I’ll pay. Get the fuck off my pants.”

“Now now, Wart. Nobody likes a loser. Not a poor loser.”

“David. The name is David. David. David.” But the lame man was already by the pond and it was worse, I thought, worse to flop about with my wet feet stuck, then to be naked. I kicked my jeans away.

George shined the flashlight on the man. An old man. He wore coveralls and a brown felt hat, broad brim pulled over a thin face. One leg of his denim coveralls was tucked into a grey sock; George’s razor was open in the grass by his feet. The man crouched down to the pond, lame leg straight back, stiff. His hat brim slanted into the water as he drank. Then he sat down.

“Hot,” he said. Drops of water hung in the grey stubble on his face.

We didn’t say anything. George walked forward and picked up the razor. Reaching down, he noticed blood oozing through his make-shift bandage. He knelt at the pond, washed out the blood, and packed two fingers of mud over the cut.

“Fucking hot,” said the man. He peered at me and smiled, his upper teeth gone, the smile pulpy. Beneath the hard round eyes, his skin sagged. He had a long nose that bent to one side and ears with huge lobes. When I noticed that grey hairs grew out of his ears, I moved my leg more to hide my dick.

He was staring at me.

He opened his mouth, slowly slid out his tongue, and on the tip was a small black stone. My ears began to ring. The ganster hat tilted back and his tongue slid out wide as the stone came out. When the stone fell, he caught it in cupped hands. He rubbed his hands together, then he blew on them, and when he opened his palms the stone was gone.

My fingers throbbed. The slap-slap of the waterjets filled my ears, but I knew where the stone was. In the fold of his thumb and hand. I knew it. I reached towards his hands, then hesitated, turning my palms up finally, arching my thumbs.

The old man giggled. He scooted through the sour grass until he was beside me, stiff leg straight out, palms straight up and down. I saw that the fingertips of one hand were severed. When he arched his thumbs out, a snail fell from his left hand.

“A small thing, really,” he said and shrugged. “Once, I swallowed a
dog.” And rolling back his lips, he threw back his head and began to howl.

I barely breathed.

“I swallowed a house painter,” he said in a grave manner. “His wife, too. It was a great relief to their daughter. She still thanks me.” He narrowed his eyes and slapped his chest. “Even sent me a picture.”

George kneeled beside me. Bits of grass were pressed into the mud over his cut.

Opening two buttons of his denim coveralls, the man pulled out a square photograph from an inner pocket. A tiny cross dangled from his neck as he handed me the black and white of a slender, naked girl. She straddled a wooden chair, blindfolded but not bound, her body oiled, her sex sagging open. There were pinholes in the corners of the picture and a soft, white rip from one border into her waist. I realized her image was barely tinted with watercolor.

“... slit,” said George. The old man was doubled up giggling.

“What?” I said. The picture disturbed me in the same way as the tilt of my leg in water.

George said something.

“What?”

“Don’t try to be funny, Wart. You’re too deep in debt.”

At that moment, the neighborhood guard interrupted us. We saw his light rising and falling through the pines as he walked rua d’Angola. Pressing ourselves facedown to the grass, we listened to him pass by, one boot scuffling gravel on the road’s shoulder.

The old man had crushed a sprig of mint and was massaging his gums with the pulp. Pausing, he said: “The string will never work.”

“We’ll have to cut.” said George.

“No . . . no . . . no.” said the man. “Let’s see . . . have you got a cigarette?”

“Sure,” said George. “They’re in my shoe, Wart.”

“Get them yourself.” I said.

George leaned back on his elbows. “Pay your debts or bear the consequences.”

“Fuck the consequences.”

“You’ll never gamble with me again.”

“Damn right.” I said, but I went.
My bluejeans were still on the grass and the legs were wet with dew. I spread them beside my shirt on the dry mowings, then pushed my and into the damp, heating core of the pile. I liked the ammonia smell.

George’s tennis shoes were neatly side by side. A red stripe sealed the canvas to the rubber soles and two red stripes sailed up the grommets. One shoe was empty. From the other, I pulled out the blue handkerchief – the swine – and found his Marlboro’s in the toe. And George’s wallet: black matte leather, folded in three. Opening it, I imagined a keyhole. Inside a yellow room, a grey suited man lay sleeping on leaves.

In the wallet, tucked between his condom and a picture of Susan Fields, were five bills of $20 escudos.

“What’s taking so long,” called George.

“Looking for matches,” I said. For some reason I took out the bills, unfolded them, and hid them under the loose insole of the tennis shoe.

When I returned, the man fingered two cigarettes out of the pack. One he lighted, the other he tucked upright in the band of his hat. He smoked for awhile, then asked: “Have you ever had a woman?”

“Not him,” said George.

“Hell yes,” I said.

The man spread his arms. “That’s the problem. Your balls are full.”

“What?”

Gripping his crotch, he said: “When our balls are full,” and he puffed out his cheeks, “When they are full, sperm enters the blood. This causes lice and boils and warts. See?”

“Sure,” said George and nudged me. “Let’s cut yours off, Wart.”

“Only a woman,” said the man. “Only her belly, her blue rose, can help now.” He seized my wrist. “And I will bring you one. A gypsy really, but your need is extreme. How much money do you have?”

George rolled his eyes.

“How much?” the man insisted.

“How much do we need?” asked George, examining his nails.

“$40 escudos.”

George snapped his fingers. “And I only have $20.”

“Then there’s only enough for one,” said the man and he released my wrist.

Only enough for his lemon ice. “$20?”

“Too bad for you,” said George.

“What about . . .”

“What?” interrupted George.
I tugged at the grass. "I'm the one who needs it."
"So you are, Wart, so you are." He slapped me on the back and said: "Tell you what. I'll give you a sporting chance."
"O thanks."
"We'll wrestle," said George. "If you win, the $20 escudos are yours and I'll cancel your debts as well. If I win, well it's just more hard luck for me."
I slipped a blade of grass between my thumbs and tried to whistle with it.
"O she has a big tambourine," said the man.
I tried again to whistle the grass. "All right, George."
"Please," said the old man, gesturing at his lame leg. "Please bring my suitcase."
"Wart . . ." said George.
"Sure George," I said, "Anything for you."
The suitcase was cardboard, tied with sisal twine. It leaned against a tan and yellow fungus that curved out from the stump. Snapping off a piece of the fungus, I smelled the woody pulp, then dropped it. I pissed on the thick segmented bark of a tilting pine, tried to see how high I could extend the darker wet bark, the water splattering my feet. I held my breath as I carried back the suitcase and gauged my steps to arrive on my left foot. I began to jog. As I passed the water hazard, George stood up, the water rushing off him, pale and slick in black water to his knees. He waded to the fairway and ran towards a bank of sandtraps.
I set the suitcase before the man, who unknotted the twine, breathing with abrupt exhalations from his nostrils. He coiled the sisal around the stiff fingers of one hand. Angling the lid so that I could not see in, he opened the suitcase and rummaged about. "A big tambourine," he said and removed a lipstick. "To keep in mind your prize." And he smeared magenta on his cracked lips, stretching the lower lip expertly, sucking color onto the upper. He giggled and the grey hairs on his cheeks bristled.
I lept up.
From nowhere, George stepped past the suitcase. "Pay your debts," he said, "or bear the consequences." He was caked in sand. On his face and his chest and his arms: sand. He rubbed his palms on his thighs and sand trickled down. The cut was bleeding openly. The old man touched my calf.
I ran. I sprang past the man in lipstick and ran, rushing over the wet grass. George chased me, our feet flicking up clear drops of water. The jade grass spilled into the dark. The pines were flat as knives.

We ran through jets of water towards the 14th tee, which rose as a low, flat mound. Then we were past it, neither gaining on the other. As I ran, I tasted a garlic flavor, my mouth filling with saliva. I breathed the sour odor of mowed grass. I spit, my chest tight as a fist. A black hose curled through the grass and the hairs on my arms lifted in chills.

George began to lag.

A gang-mower rose suddenly from the dark, deserted in the ankle deep grass between the fairways. I could just make out the tractor hitch, tilting into the grass, turned at an angle to the mower. An image of its wheels formed in my mind: iron wheels notched like coins. Over the first cylinder of blades hung the huge sagging intestines of a horse.

“David, come back,” yelled George. He slowed to a walk, then stopped. “Come back. I was only kidding.”

But I ran on. Down a long gentle slope, I ran even faster, hips rolling with each stride, white legs reckless. I felt the air pushing over my body, my hair streaming, heart pounding. I threw myself to the ground, pressed my body to the sharp grass, as violets sprouted from my throat.

The old man, of course, stole our clothes.
THE RETURN

for Paul

Under the summer walnut trees we welcomed
the sting of nine-volt batteries with our tongues.
I can still taste that dullness:
Margie's wild fists slamming my nose until it bled
great drops on the dusty infield.
The Lowcamp brothers holding you down
jabbing chestnut spikes into your belly.
Brother, let's go back.
I heard young Lowcamp is fifty, drunk,
and won't answer his door. Let's go back
and knock. Knock until the knocking
becomes a stubborn nightmare, his only sound.
Shake the old tree for the few nuts it still grows
and skid on the black skins until the stains
and our mistakes refuse to wash away.
The hello man draws tourists to him. He greets couples in double time or a small crowd of girls who gape, remembering too late the cameras in their rooms. A group of boys splits as he approaches, and he pivots, addressing each one, meeting their eyes somehow as they pass. They are happy; they keep him fit for the summer’s challenge. No stranger in town has passed without welcome. He has a record to preserve as he strides to meet them. “Hello” and “hello” and “hello” again, a boy running, unable to dodge. He is pleased but alert; he remembers his failure, the man he passed without greeting. When he fell, he was surprised how hot the sidewalk felt on his face. There was no point in opening his eyes. The boot met his head like he knew it would; he was punished. The cement smoldered and he moaned, the hands working at his pocket. When an umbrella of faces covered the sun, he looked for a boot that would fit his head and cried. “Hello” he whispered to the nearest face. Penitent, he repeated “hello,” seeking forgiveness and grace, the heat still working at his skull. He would not be indifferent again; the town would love him, his greeting welcomed like a natural treasure.
Your neighbors come too close,
scare you with good
mornings over the fence.

You stay in bed.
Your wife stays with you,
some dreams

she doesn't. You need
the not-knowing.
Then your daughter says

your name and you sliver
so small you grow
under her skin, watching.

You remember to be alive
is to choose:
you choose to get up,

to make good.
But it's not easy, nothing breathing
can help you.
BOAT POEM

Someplace under these strewn skies
I own a boat.
You see, a sailor learns to hide
beneath the sky;
but I just wanted to look down
into the mysterious green
that could’ve been our blood.
I also wanted to find out
what was still afloat on this earth:

One morning after a storm
and before the sun
a drunk fisherman said—
If you’re no damn good you sink;
if you’re good, you rise
later.
BRONZE

Now, I never dream of clowns. A man you loved with an apartment full of clowns is someone to dream about. Awake, I sometimes imagine that under his woolen jackets and grey hair was stuffed the dust of a doll with a white smile and surprised eyebrows.

His other collection was of statues: a Carrara marble girl, the bronze Mercury on the breath of the wind, the bronze David whose fingers pointed toward the closet door, the bust of the girl, the red sofa. These are too elegant and frightening to dream about, for in a dream

I would become the erotically suicidal face of the marble statue, I would remember how it felt to be shipped down the Arno with your face locked and hidden in a block of white stone. He would become David, or Mercury poised on a thin stream of tin and copper, his thighs would emanate the heat of the furnace that welded the metals together.
CONSTRAINT

“I hate constraint. It’s like the sight of blood.”

—Luis Bunuel

It’s like this: New York murder victims always fall face up and they always wear pearl gray hats.

When you try to write a letter you spend hours on the date, Thursday of Jealousy, Tuesday of No Regrets: they’re still the same.

(You’re standing at the top of a staircase. There’s a woman hanging wash in the courtyard. The plants weave like sea anemones in the garden.

No: you have the hands of a musician. You are chopping wood. If the tree were to fall in the wrong direction you’d lay yourself down like a worn carpet.)

It’s this Trojan gift of summer, perfectly groomed but full of lies. It brings out the worst in you, and like a fig rotting from the inside the sun only makes matters worse, coming up, going down, whispering about the wilting ivy and lack of light.

As if by following a man you could learn everything, how he breaks
Julia Mishkin

the necks of cigarettes, drinks his whiskey neat, relies too much on luck

when crossing the street. By the time you round the corner
you find him face up and fallen, a letter clutched in his left hand.
This is everything.
It's addressed to you.
THE STORY OF ONE WHO SET OUT TO STUDY FEAR

after a tale by the Brothers Grimm

All I wanted to know was where my mother had gone. I tried to imagine the dead were among us, walking with great caution, vases which the smallest noise might shatter. My father loved my brother, the practical man, so I left home and married well.

I return to watch my father’s face. Or simply I look out the window. Fires burn through the village. A woman approaches dressed in blue flame. I rise and run to join her down streets where each charred ruin knows my name. “Son,” they call to me, “my son.”
IF YOUR REAL FATHER
DROVE THE CAR FOR BONNIE AND CLYDE

You would fight the grain
which lures you like an old hawk
chasing a young jack rabbit into a field
of lovegrass. Your father
splintered in that hot soil.
You make a religion
of the mossy side
of cedars, move north.
Plant field corn
conserving moisture, invest in dairy cattle
things that shine.
What if the land slides
the skin
off your father’s face. His strong body falls
into your lap
wrinkles your cotton dress,
his vocal cords vibrate an old song
about going home. You follow him back
to guns laid on the table like silverware,
you polish his boots.
Fast plans drawn with your black crayon
shatter daisies
on the kitchen wall. A kachina windchime
puts you to bed
on the screened-in back porch, jangles
the night loose, brings shadows of Kansas
Oklahoma and Arkansas within reach. Armadillos
carry the farm off
bit by bit.
RITUAL AT MIDNIGHT

This is what I do. First I kneel
to the gods of desolation.
They give me the sacrament of memory.
It never satisfies.
It is the consolation
I have no use for except to fill
these silences you leave behind.

From this silence there is no reprieve.
I am ready to promise anything,
swear I will starve,
live on bread and water, a little fruit,
the gatherings of dust.
If I could only find some bark
to chew on in this wasteland
where there are no trees.
If I could only sleep.

If I could only sleep myself awake
back in the day we saw the two
eaglets in their nest,
when we heard with all our ears
the yellow beat of wings;
when the edges of the light
were crystal and we were the shining
feathers of the eaglets’ flight.
I fall into the familiar dark.

Then the dark gives you up to me
whole, dressed for the meal.
The butcher of the night
slices you piece by piece, turns
you on the spit, feeds me
this expensive dish. I take
your flank between my hands and bite.
THE LAST TIME I SAY HEART

From now on, the tongue will do my talking. At least it gets to see daylight. The h---t stays down in its hole, like a big red gopher, and gains so much weight it can never come out.

From now on I’m going to keep my eyes closed. Daylight isn’t good for them – they try to act like philosophers and see relationships between things that just don’t exist.

I’m giving up all the old habits and starting to really live. I’m going to change my life, put on a new pair of shoes, beat my rug, grind my valves, polish my shell, purify my spring, mend my fence, pound out my dents, crack my nuts, and balance my books.

All the things that in the name of something I’ve forgotten never got done, or even started, I’m going to do. I’m filling all my holes, pruning my shrubs . . . . . . . .

I’ll feel better with my tongue in its new job. The old fat h---t can go to hell, and stay there. I’m talking now. Even when there’s a new mouth to explore, and the great excitement of despair jumps all over me, this big pink fish up here under my nose will keep flopping on the wet sand.
THE TROUBLE WITH LOVE

A white note lying on the carpet by the door
gets up and waits at the desk. As the sun drops
outside the window, the note takes on color,
and curtains shut in the windows across the street.
The note is everywhere. A bum’s shirtail,
a young woman’s slip, the flash of steam
in a horse grazing by the roadside.
If you sit down and made the pen work,
you will have your own note before long.
Your chest will feel empty like a wax carton
they pack poultry in. But it’s better
than watching everything stop outside.
It’s better than stumbling on the telephone
and hitting the wall when you hang up.
There’s no solution. Some notes get tired
and just want to be put to bed in an envelope
and sent away for awhile.
It's how I woke at Oak Street, in first light, in the pink room. I stood, rattled the sides on my crib, began to cry and then didn't, struck by the bright eye of all I was.

Later, it's how I woke with the twins. We played in another room on beds with sheets rigged up as sails. Crocodiles swam under the beds in the sea that rolled over that floor, the ceiling of the room where downstairs our parents slept.

In the moment before waking they are all with me, my parents, my brothers and sisters. Oak Street gone I must wake where I am, gather what light there is and get up. I see one long chain of lighted faces.

Light out of light out of light.
FINAL NOTICE

For a hundred dollars, I have the only cabin
in Manhattan, on top of Victor Herbert’s
former home. I leased it from a young Brunhilda.
Everything’s here: piano, old letters,
*Tannhauser* and *The Ring Cycle* damp in a corner.
She left tracts on Rudolph Steiner,
gone to live with her voice coach
three blocks down. Smokestacks rear up,
fat horses; for the first time in years
I can hear rain.

The Dakota is across the street
where Rosemary had her writhing baby.
Little monsters cry on the corners;
a boy in a velvet jacket
drops rocks on spooked pedestrians.
Central Park from here looks innocent,
though I’ve seen things—
silk pants bloodied under dogwood
from the heads of Haitian chickens
(the pink riding up like litmus)—

The heirs of Victor Herbert
are forgetting us. Here’s a notice
the power’s going, taped
in the wheezing gold cage that cranks me up here.
There’s only me, anyway, and Frank, retired
from the liquor store on Amsterdam.
He prowls the worn hall carpet barefoot,
suspenders on his hips like handles,
leaving me oranges and yesterday some
thrown-out radio he’d tinkered with.
The city put him here, he told me.
*They’d put me anywhere.*
Today when I came home
I found his blood all the way to the elevator—
the city moving in on remainders,
the way you’d know bad ships
by their helpless timber.
MARY, MARY

When I lived on the alley I was
flush with growing things.
I made a garden right away, could feel
lettuce and dill in their two-way stretch,
one arm proliferating downward, the other
fluting open with light. I gave them
everything they wanted.
I was faithful.

The neighborhood on my alley, old toms,
a moon-mad dogpack, berry-drunk
cedar waxwings, all came to see my garden.
And one old man who likes to watch me
preen the aphids at noon. "Things
mostly stop, where I go," he said. Each night
he closed the bars in his DeSoto,
keeping us safe, like a clock.

One night I had two visitors. At eight,
a man asking for his friend. He held his
arms out, touched the screen door
with pulley-hooks for hands, ashamed
of my fear, an old falling-away.
Together we didn't look where his
hands had been. The garden
was alive behind us.

At midnight, a woman in jodhpurs.
She looked like me, surprised, held
a polished bridle in her right hand,
rosettes embossed on the joinings.
We stood there, I was happy.
"Wrong house," she said,
the horse between us missing,
my garden growing.
The Plan

Five days
I've practiced the sabbath
kneeling at the foot of a Joshua –
made five fires, held
each one as a finger
against the rain-tried
to build a boat, but my family
stayed behind.

The Question

I ask my grandfather
where is the moon?
He is at my side
and leans
close enough to answer. His mouth
is the moon. He will not speak, though,
but bends
as his skullcap falls:
swim, we shall get there sooner.

The New Ark

Grandmother
kneeling for us
in her backyard
begins the new ark:
lemon peel, boxer,
crook of the forked olive.
Rib-bone, thighbone,
skin of a thousand moons
laced with daughter’s hair.
The rough of a tree. A birdbath.

Her breasts lull me into the afterlife.

The Portent

Mother
standing at the screened door
reminds my father:
    gold for the pantspocket, goldstone.
    Bread for the breastpocket, never go hungry.
    For the sandals, bung shards. Try to keep afloat.

For some reason
he would not dress that morning
but wandered downtown naked
through the streets, whistling
as he passed the schoolyards,
his clothes strewn in a star
upon the front lawn.

The Journey

Five days
I've watched trout
well in the belly
of a pond, numinous eyes
trailing into white.
Have fingered my pockets
wanting almost to mount their frail bones.
Placed mud on my scalp
only to hear them murmur
and rock.

Still, I have decided
to wait with the rain, listening
for their tiny hulls
and to follow behind them
into morning light.
CURRENTS

_Cadiz, Spain. 1967_

The rich girls walked arm in arm, untouchable, big silver crucifixes between their breasts, while the men in outdoor cafes smacked their lips at the country girls too poor to forget their bodies. Each night my blonde wife and I would leave our house for shrimp and baby eels, or sherry and langostinas, and the men turned and turned, whispered and made gestures. The ships came in. The whores from San Fernando vied with the whores from Cadiz. At Carnival, amidst the crowds, it was possible to touch a rich girl’s ass. Sundays it all exploded; the bulls dipped into the horses, the matadors into the bulls, then the streets filled up again with a wild vicariousness. Late that summer, I'd skin dive for moray eels. You had to anger them so they'd charge, shoot the spear straight down their throats after the huge mouths opened. I was never brave enough to catch one, though I wrote a poem one dreamy morning about bringing an eel back to my wife, how she took it from me and held it.
That autumn when the summer stayed well into November and so many friends were inconsolable, their lives already in winter and their breath still invisible, we marvelled at the flies that hadn’t died, gloated at midwest snowstorms, and kept ourselves prepared for the sudden, inevitable fall.

But one day it turned a little cold and in increments got colder, and because everyone is lonely nothing essential changed, and the snows came and the bitterness. Our friends took winter vacations far away from their lives and we, who stayed close to ours, were hardly aware of it.

How still it got in the house after an argument lapsed into cruelty. That stillness a clamor, like someone using a capo on a nerve. Hours went by. Whoever spoke first would lose something, that was the stupid rule. I stared out the window: Cold night. The flirtations of stars.

And when our friends returned, darkened, with their smokescreens of joy, we were speaking again, of course. There’d been a cardinal by the bird feeder; one of us was shameless enough
to say so, the other pleased to agree,
and sex that night was a knot
untying itself, a prolonged coming loose.
Almost a solution. Almost, like spring.
THIS MORNING'S TORNADO

Tonight it's in the paper, how it killed forty people in my hometown. This picture, taken just before, shows the sky black, but should have shown the sky green, calm, and the town moving about in the language of animals, waiting.

I can't find the names of the dead. This doesn't say whether Banks had opened the filling station by the time it happened, if he looked up with eyes dirt yellow, and saw it coming - whether Mr. Moss saw anything at all or if he forgot to pull the shades in the store, if he sat with his head bowed after the roof came off and the ancient black shoes lay torn from their rows out of the dusty bags.

I try to call my mother. She would have watched me take the back path to school. And J.T. Henley, in his sheriff's car, would have chuckled this morning at any who trembled. Even now I can see him out at the Ritz on the highway waiting for the National Guard. He is eating slowly, eyeing Charlotte who comes just close enough to pour coffee and ring up the bill.
TRYING ONE OUTSIDE

With one quick nod
he locks his chin
and teeth, snarls
"let's git,"
sets his hooks
hard in her neck
and holds, toes out,
as the bronc bails from chute six,
a marlin trying to spit the barbs
in midair, twisting, throwing half a ton
six different directions at once, six
thousand pounds of fast jerk and snatch
on hundred pound test arm
tapered at the wrist – this frail line
frapping horse to man. His rowels
sing on every jump, wire
line stripping from deep-sea
reels, and hooves slap air,
divots flinging like tips of waves
shattered against the breakwater.
Just try to straddle the dorsal
fin of an angry fish
and stay with it out to sea
for eight long years, till the bell
bouys or foghorns call you
back to solid ground.
PARTNER

As you hit ground off Ol' Staircase at the State Fair Rodeo in Great Falls, it was hard to hear vertebrae cracking above the murmur of ten thousand hometown hearts. You cowboyed-up and hid your grimace deep, walked out of the arena, stubborn, on sheer pain and took the ambulance, like a cab, front seat to emergency.

Tonight, on Tanqueray, good English gin, we vow never again to mention “broken neck.” Instead we talk tough broncs, big shows we'll hit down South, and hunting ducks come fall. We straggle home, moon-struck, to the squawk of geese—a V of snows crisscrossing and circling the city—screwed-up, you say, when streetlight glimmer throws them off plumb.

When my bronc stomped down the alleyway that night, I knew down deep our bones and hearts were made to break a lot easier than we'd believe. I felt your arm go numb in mine, took the gate, weak-kneed, and rode with only half the try. It's bad and good some cowboys don't know tears from sweat. I folded both between fringes of your chaps,
packed your gearbag neat
as you would, and wandered
punch-drunk lost, afraid
into the maze of parking lot.

What's done is done, I know,
but once I killed
at least a dozen singles
in a season, without thinking
how they partner-up for life
and death, how the odd ones
flocking South
survive that first long go alone.

For Kim Zupan
Ralph Beer

RIDING LINE

Father, we ride our line again
and still you take the Roan.
High country this steep
makes even your tall horse blow.
Our trail takes us over clatterrock,
past a fallen jack fence. We stop,
wonder who piled rocks and rail
so high among the limber pine.
Far down the Prickly Pear
a train bugles, echoes Piegan
off the Elkhorns, cries
twilight over Casey Peak.

This country changes after dark.
Strike two chunks of quartz,
watch the dim white fire.
Ahead, I see you look back
over your shoulder, past me,
seeing yourself at twenty
ride your tall roan laughing
into the Clancy Bar.
Lower, three rotten jacks still walk
a buffalo trail, canter like old men
on a spree. They lean on the evening
and watch us pass.
SAN DIEGO DEPOT

The window streaked, I wave. You turn your head, shuffle off through the high white arch, then gone. Bring back your Russian face my hands forgot to touch, heavy lids and jowls; rails pulling this train through steam toward northern country. The shade drawn, pistons clop to another place,
a Brooklyn house, smack of boots over tile, three knocks—Wake up! Yom Kippur Day! How I hated fasting, eyes on a burning oil lamp, the hard pine chairs. If the maples swayed outside, it was only to shake their leaves, red, dancing—come out, you're more like us in the bright still air.

Father, where was home? The shul, your Pullman car, sighing hymns for a dead wife Queens to Bloomington? Where was I when you opened your case of bottled scents? Only back for the holidays, with your dreidels, clocks and chocolate. Going broke, we flew west, miles to empty fields below. You grabbed my wrist but I pulled away. How did I know strength meant fear of the open hand, or the closed hand bearing sorrow in the black folds of a prayer shawl? How a man named Spitler rabbled in your ear—can't blame pogroms and sweatshops and you fought him, twenty years your milky eye, the world turning dark.

Russia's dead. The East Side dead. Now you burn on the southern tip of California, palm trees, salt and wind gusting up their chants. The land won't shrink. Already trees run past my window. Ochre hills fly past the window and you blur: a black fedora, shoes, a wrinkled sportscoat.
And when I see old men curled up in the blue felt seats, or rehearsing their lips for hours, I'm afraid of all that gray between two points, of letting go, sweet thunder of iron rails, the window dark and final. Will I wake to tall white pillars in a town embracing me, a bright green room with flowers, pretending I'm safe? Or return to my dream, how we robbed an eastbound train, silver jangling our pockets and the long leap into marshgrass, the rushing jarred to stillness. You pointed over ropes of windblown fog toward an open field, a pair of cypress twining.
THE TOUR GUIDE'S SPEECH: EAGLES AT FISH CREEK

“You should have seen the sunlight,” he says, “how it glazed the snowfields and rose over their wings, how beads of water covered their backs, how the sky above them and the fish below them bloomed in this gold light. They walked on the banks like children expecting some kind of surprise, and the water foamed, there were so many diving for fish, chasing each other, squawking and fighting like sparrows. The clouds moved in, the water whipped up, snow was falling, and they kept on feeding. That,” he says, “was a sight worth seeing: the park roads closed, the hotels shuttered, everybody gone home to wherever, and sixty eagles fighting for salmon, in the wrong season, in a coming storm.”
THE DOLL IN THE SHEEPFIELD

She sets me high on the fence post
so I can watch them move sheep.
The family can’t afford a sheepdog
so by token of size the girl
runs them, staggering through
mud, a stick in her hands, tripping
herself up, yelping at the stray’s heels.
And over and over they get
away from her, the man yelling
“Can’t you do anything. Turn them.
Turn them all at once. Don’t scatter them.” until at last
it’s done. They go to walk

the fences and she grabs me
soaked with sweat in the cold
wind and flushed crawls in under
the fig leaves. Rolls me
contorted into a ball forced
up to her face to muffle sound.
Her hot breath pushes through me.
I can almost imagine breathing.
Until, calm, she smooths
my arms and legs out and rocks
me, sings me to sleep:
    “Ann’s not alive.
    Neither am I.
    Ann’s not alive.
    Neither am I.”
Infinitely calm and rocking.
Rocking.

THE DOLL AT STATE FAIR

First the animals, the prize stock they'll never afford.
The dense air of crowded barns

with no damp whip of field air
to control this pungence.
The girl holds me by her to peer

through rough slats
at hogs like she says they owned too, before the cholera year.

And next the carnival: O'Riley's hired man takes us
on the Ferris Wheel. Suspended

over Sacramento, he works his hand in under her clothes. Some little girls get scared real easy, he says.

You're different. Pressed in the corner of the swaying cart, the girl can't get away, but one hand works up my body to press the stitched-on heart.
Tonight strangers bones
crawl in bed with me.
Their bandaged arms
float my head
from the pillow. They whisper
Barekhu, come to prayer
with us, and carry me
to the cellar
where I am sure I will drown.
There among the chairs, fugitive
clothes, a thigh of a hog
hangs marked
with a slash. Stumpy
and heavy, it pulls
on its hook.
The forbidden food—trayf.
The ritual slaughter—shohet.
I have said your words

and I too burn.
Burn with your tora rolls
wound in purple cloth,
with your children
huddled stiff
in the blaze. I peel
the tight lids
of their sockets, the tissue
that flags on their bone.
Dream the glow
on white walls.

Now, before the water barrel
I stand naked. Plunge
into the cold sleeve
of water, lose my face
twice to the swell.  
Wrapped in bed sheets  
I return upstairs,  
all ghost.
ON NOT COMMANDING WHAT WE ADORE

Out the window, spotted colts, a good sign for summer, their rumps showing white. It's as though there were no trouble at all, but the woman and the man talk a long time with no joy to their words, how can they say those foolish things? She coughs her choking cough, he sits smoking, tilts back in the green chair. Sap rises in the tree long before the leafing.

They use 'never' a lot, as carelessly as we often do, she closes the curtains and wheels on him after one too many nights like this but he continues to smoke, keeps on saying 'never' - there they are, beside the fire in the morning, the sun laying boards on the floor. There's big trouble in this house, who do we think we kid?

And now, it's having to make up something to help ourselves or them feel better, if we talked louder they'd listen perhaps, hear the hell out of us because there's nothing to eat in this house at all.
WEATHERING

The old woman watched the road ahead as if she were the driver; her left hand braced against the dashboard. She turned slightly toward Leon.

"It's unforgivable, Leon," and she put her hand to her throat, "what that woman does to you."

Leon looked straight ahead at the stream of red tail-lights, at the occasional white headlights of an on-coming car. The heat from the floorboard was too much around his ankles; his socks were hot. He opened the vent in the window.

"What's her spell, Leon? What she got over you? Is it them kids? What?"

Leon heard the old woman but kept the lyrics to a sad Hank Williams' song going in his head. They were more important to him at that moment than anything. More important than his wife leaving, more important than trusting his neighbor to look after his hawks and more important than anything his mother could ever say.

He shook his head. He listened to the cracks in the road clicking, to the hum of the snow tires on the back of the camper.

Morning light was just beginning to illuminate fence posts and alfalfa fields and the gentle roll of the countryside. The mustard yellow center-line seemed to glare with a power of its own as Leon blinked his eyes and searched the dial of the radio to keep himself awake. His stomach was all messed up. He would be all right when he got something to eat.

The kids were asleep in the back of the camper. They didn't mind the drive at all. They enjoyed missing school; it was like a vacation. The frightening confusion of the week before didn't exist now. They were on their way to get their mother. That was all that mattered.

The past week seemed a blur to Leon. The days blended into one long monstrous day. Only two things stood out in his memory and even they seemed more like stories someone had told him than what actually happened.

He had written a check and the bankteller told him he had no money in the account; all the money had been withdrawn. Leon said
it was impossible and that someone had made a horrible mistake. The
teller then showed him the check in his wife’s handwriting that had
been used to take out all the money. Dazed, Leon rushed home. But
she wasn’t there. She had called his mother to watch the kids and she
had left. No one knew where she had gone.

He remembered that. And the call he received last night from his
wife, interrupting the drunk he was on, telling him she was in
Nashville and that she wanted to come home.

That was all Leon knew of the week before. But he didn’t like
thinking about it. Ever so often it crept up on him, though. When he
was driving and everything was quiet, or maybe when he was alone in
the bathroom of a truck stop, it hit him like a gas pain. The adrenaline
would tingle in his stomach. For an instant then he was terrified.

Inside the cab there came the sounds of crunching gravel, the
popping of rocks thrown up against the fenderwelds, as Leon turned
off the road into the driveway of a cafe.

Jackie, the youngest, with ebony hair like her mother’s pecked on
the window separating the camper from the cab. “Where are we?”

“Just crossed the line into Tennessee. Come on. Get your brothers
up. We’re gettin somethin to eat.”

Jackie was the first one out, wondering where the bathroom was,
shivering with her arms around herself. John, the eldest, followed.
Bobby next, rubbing his eyes, trying to get the sleep out of them.

“Where are we?”

“Tennessee,” answered Leon. Vapor flowed like smoke from his
mouth.

“This where Mom is?”

“No—we’re gettin somethin to eat.”

“Oh.”

Leon felt wide awake after the breakfast and coffee. His mother sat
beside him in the cab with a brown grocery sack full of sandwiches
and fruit at her feet, working a cross-word puzzle. Leon’s neck was
tight. He rolled his head around, then stretched his arms out as far as
he could in the driver’s seat.

He wore the green wool shirt he always flew his birds in. He felt
some anxiety wondering if his next-door neighbor would look in on
them like he said he would.

Leon kept a pair of hawks on the property he rented. He had built a
mews with chicken wire over the windows a short distance from the back of his house. Most nights after work, near sunset, he would stand at one of the wire covered windows, squinting to see the hawks perched high near the roof of the mews. On weekends when he weathered the hawks on stumps in the backyard, he would spend hours in a chaise lounge watching them. They sat on stumps in the open sun and would take in the whole sky above them as they moved their heads smoothly to either side. They bathed themselves in a small tin of water he placed near the stumps.

Leon thought of the last time he had flown the red-tailed hawk. He remembered reaching a bluff overlooking a small glade; the setter was poised by his leg. Beech trees and a light scattering of maple surrounded the glade like an amphitheater. With his free hand, Leon wiped the perspiration off his forehead. The other hand, steady, held the hawk while she adjusted her claws to get a better grip into the gauntlet. The sky was overcast. A cooling breeze ruffled the silver nap of the bird’s feathers and sent a soft, swift chill over Leon as he continued on over the bluff; his gaiters attracting beads of moisture from the ankle-high grass. The setter scouted ahead. His coat was like red brushed aluminum in the dim sunlight.

The cab was quiet except for Jackie letting out an occasional muted yell fighting with her brothers and the tinny sound of the radio at low volume. They were forty miles outside of Nashville. Leon’s wife was born near here. Leon had traveled these roads many times driving down to see her before they were married. This stretch of highway worked on him like the scent of an old girlfriend’s perfume. He felt warm and lonely and sentimental.

His mother slept, snoring lightly with her head back and her mouth open, the cross-word puzzle on her lap.

They passed the dance hall. It was windowless cinderblock, pale green, a rectangle surrounded by blacktop that had been dusty gravel before. The second time they went dancing he had taken his wife there. No other girl he had even taken out had smelled so good. Every whiff of her perfume made his stomach go crazy. They sat in the car drinking the pint he brought along, listening to some country fiddler inside the dance hall. All he wanted then was to keep her beside him and to feel her warmth and the slight movement of her chest as she breathed.
By the time they had finished the pint, they were ready to dance. And they did, until the lights were turned up and a tall man in a white cowboy shirt chased them out of the place. They danced all the way to the car.

It was a warm summer night with the air cool and fresh enough to make Leon feel like he could drive forever. The moon was out and they were still a little drunk. Leon had his hand on her knee and she leaned her head on his shoulder. Leon took the long way home. He wanted to drive all night with her. They passed her house.

“Well, what do you think?”

She nodded with her head still on his shoulder. She squeezed his arm.

They kept driving that night, all the way to Elisabethtown, and stopped at the Sandstone Motel. They checked in as a married couple and giggled on the way to their room. They both woke early but stayed in bed until two in the afternoon. They sent out for a pizza when they finally got up and ate it in the room without any clothes on. Leon couldn’t remember when he had felt better.

Leon’s mother choked on something and turned blue; her knuckles were white against the dashboard. Leon pulled the camper onto the shoulder.

Jackie peered through the window going into the cab. “Is she dying, Daddy?”

A man was already in the phone booth. A cigarette burned in the hand that held his forehead. He occasionally gestured with the same hand. The windows were fogging. Leon stood with his hands in his pockets, waiting, his arms tight against his sides. His coat was open.

The man left, but the smoke from his cigarette lingered behind, sweet. Leon entered, shut the door and looked over to see his mother and kids watching him from the camper. He looked down at the tires. The dial felt cool against his fingers; the receiver smelled like smoke. Leon hesitated before dialing the last number. Vacant stares, a few nods; Leon traced the outline of the telephone with his finger. Then he hung up the phone.

After he got back into the camper, he said, “She says she’s ready and he took off for a while.”

“It’s not right, Leon. Goin right up there. And him. How you know he’s not gonna show up?” The old lady lit a cigarette.

Leon shook his head and threw the one he was smoking out the
“She give you directions?”
“Yeah—it’s not far.”

The old lady sat back in her seat. The kids were quiet. Jackie lay on her stomach and the boys played cards. Leon held the steering wheel with both hands.

The red-tailed hawk was heavy. The muscles in Leon’s right arm tensed when he thought of the bird’s weight. He thought again of the day he had flown the hawk. He was at the north end of the glade by the edge of a cornfield. The setter was in point. Leon paused a moment and looked into the sky, then at a row of oaks on the other side of the cornfield. He walked into the corn to flush up a grouse. Three broke loose with an awkward knocking together of their wings and a brief rustling of the corn plants as they took to the air. Leon let them fly ahead a good distance, then released the hawk’s hood with his teeth. He lowered his fist, rolled it slightly, and then the bird was flying hard and fast in pursuit. He reached down and patted the dog’s shoulder.

One grouse lagged behind. It made a quick dart to the right, isolating itself from the other two. The hawk was above it now. She angled down from her high pitch, gaining speed rapidly in the stoop. The grouse looked back and tried one last time to dive out of the way, but was overtaken and knocked out of the air instantly with a blow from the hawk’s talons. The hawk followed the grouse to the ground, landed beside it and picked at the grouse’s feathers.

When Leon arrived, he extended his arm and the hawk hopped to his fist, planting its claws firmly into the leather of the gauntlet. He cut off the grouse’s head and gave it to the hawk. She picked at it daintily. He dropped the rest of the grouse into a leather pouch slung over his shoulder and replaced the hawk’s hood. He whistled for the dog. He came running low through the grass, his ears back. From his coat pocket, Leon took a feather and gently stroked the bird. The setter was panting.

The apartment house looked like a place out of a detective magazine where a gruesome murder might have taken place. It had a flat roof and black wrought iron railings peeling paint leading up cement steps. The apartment his wife was in was on the ground floor.
A white late model Cadillac parked near the door had the initials JHB on the license plate.

Leon stopped at the door. He looked at his hands. They were dry and the fingernails needed to be clipped. The wind was blowing. His neck was hot and throbbed and his ears burned. Leon stood there, looking at the door, looking at the number, thinking about his fingernails.

He knocked and stood with his hands in his pockets, his coat open. The lock rattled.

A big man in a red Ban-Lon shirt opened the door. He didn’t say anything right away, then he called over his shoulder, “He’s here.” He walked away from the door, leaving Leon standing with his hands still in his pockets in the open doorway. Half way across the room, he turned and motioned to Leon. Leon stepped self-consciously in and pulled the door shut behind him. He stood there by the door while the man walked over to a red vinyl covered bar. He looked at Leon.

“Want a drink?”

Leon shook his head.

The man fixed a drink for himself. Leon nervously scanned the room. The curtains were pulled and everything had a greenish tint. He noticed his wife’s coat crumpled in a pile on a chair. He liked that coat; he had helped his wife pick it out. Now it looked unnatural, like seeing the same coat on a fat lady in a shopping mall.

Leon’s wife appeared in a doorway of a room right off the one they were in. She didn’t look right, either. Her eyes were swollen. She was wearing a new dress. She looked up at him. “Just a minute. Okay?” she asked.

Leon nodded with a blank stare. She disappeared into the room again. Leon stood there listening to the muted, airy rush of the highway in front and the TV mumbling in the background. The man belched.

“She’s really got you. Doesn’t she?” The man grinned and shook his head. He laughed. “That’s too bad.”

Leon stood with his hands in his pockets, looking into the room into which his wife had disappeared. He saw an unmade bed with yellow sheets. The floor was shiny linoleum and shoes were scattered under and around the bed. Leon was hot. He had kept his coat on.

“I guess you just don’t have what it takes, pal, to keep her home.” The man leaned against the bar holding his glass in both hands. A diamond ring in the shape of a horseshoe on his middle finger caught
what light there was in the room and sparkled.

Leon got a broader stance on the floor, looked down at his feet and back into the room where his wife was. He turned over and over in his pocket a lock-washer he had found on the floorboard of the camper.

"But I tell you, pal. I'm damn glad you got here when you did, because she's driving me crazy." The man took a drink. "She's wacko, pal."

Leon's wife walked back into the room carrying a blouse and a coat and some other things on hangers. Leon thought she looked childish.

The man pointed to her and shook his head. He said to Leon, "I wouldn't put up with it." Then he walked over to her and began to go through the clothes she had on the hangers. "I didn't say you could take that." He ripped a black dress from one of the hangers. Some of his drink spilled on the floor.

She looked up at him, her eyes wide open and starting to tear. She tried to stop herself. Her face wrinkled up; tears dropped down her cheeks.

Leon turned to walk out the door, his wife was behind him. The man poured himself another drink. He called after Leon. "You poor bastard. All I got to say is I'm glad it's you." The man made the gesture of a toast with his drink.

Leon paused in the open doorway, his hands on either door jamb. He stood there until his wife whispered, "Come on" behind him. He walked straight to the driver's side of the camper. His mother's and children's eyes followed the woman to the passenger's side and watched her get in.

"Hi Mom."
"Hi Mom."
"Hi."
"Hello Elouise."

Leon's wife reached through the window going to the sleeping quarters of the camper and tousled the two boys' hair and touched Jackie on the cheek. The old lady looked straight ahead.

Leon stopped at the first packaged liquor store on the way and left the engine running while he went in. He came back with a six-pack of beer and a carton of Coke. He handed the Cokes to the kids in the back and took a can of beer from the plastic ring for himself and offered the others to his wife and mother. His wife took one and handed the rest back. Leon slid them under the seat.
His wife sat up straight in her seat, her mouth firmly shut, staring out over the hood. Leon placed his beer between his legs and turned up the volume on the radio.

Leon's mother watched the road ahead; her leg leaned against his. The kids were quiet in the back. His wife held her beer in her lap with both hands.

Just outside Nashville, they passed a roadside attraction called the African Safari, a red aluminum pole building with lions and tigers painted on the side. Jackie pecked on the window and pleaded, "Let's stop."

Leon pulled into the parking lot. There were only two other cars. The old lady stayed in the cab while he and his wife and the three kids went in. They kept together while they looked at each exhibit. They stood in front of a giant python and the boys tapped on the glass cage. The only bird in the place was an ancient, badly stuffed golden eagle. When they got to it, Jackie said that it was just like the hawks he kept. Leon explained to her that it was an eagle and they all looked at it a while longer. When the boys went off to see the tiger, Jackie left too.

Neither Leon or his wife said anything as they looked at the dusty eagle. Leon was thinking that he would put the hawks outside to weather when he got home. It would snow soon and he would not be able to fly the birds again this season. He would pull up the chaise lounge close to the birds, maybe bring out a six-pack of beer. He was almost startled when his wife took his arm in hers.
REVIEWS

The Death of Jim Loney
James Welch
Harper and Row, Publishers
New York, New York
$8.95, hardbound

The other day a bird flew into my living-room, fluttering in the corners and thumping against the pane of a closed window. Settling finally to the floor, too dazed to move, its image evoked strange fears; the eyes blind, the head twisted unnaturally to one side. As my friend cupped his hands around its body, the dirty-yellow beak gaped open in a terrible and soundless slow-motion. Through the unclean feathers, ruffled and loose at the shoulder, you could see the pink skin. The translucent beak opened and closed in spasmodic helplessness, and feeling no kinship—or perhaps too much—we took the bird to the window and watched it recover in midair.

I thought of that bird while reading James Welch's new book, The Death of Jim Loney. Loney, half-white, half-Indian, and living in Harlem, Montana, also has a bird. His is large and dark and comes to him with the beauty and terror of a vision. His bird is a dream-bird, a black mystery rising out of fire, out of wine and nothingness. Gracefully beating the air with powerful wings, it carries—to a distant place—the hint of immortality. My bird, of course, was nothing like that. A bedraggled sparrow, small and sick and primitive, my bird held no elusive beauty and no mystery but the mystery of unconscious, unredeemed pain. If I thought of it perhaps I was thinking of Loney himself; beating against his life with raw and crippled instinct, "his quick animal glance always alert, yet seeming to see nothing."

But Jim Loney is not really a "half-creature" and if Welch's book uses and inspires such strange symbols, it is because strange symbols are as much a part of the human world as bars and super-markets.
The Death of Jim Loney is about living in this world. It is about mothers and fathers, holidays, and what you do at night. Loney's tragedy is neither mystic nor inevitable, but can be traced to his childhood and his society, to luck, weather and liquor. This does not mean that it can be reduced. Loney tries that himself, to "think of all the little things that added up to a man sitting at a table drinking wine . . . searching for the one event, the one person that would bring everything back and he would see the order in his life." But, in the end, it is not a question of thinking up answers. It is a question of surviving them.

The bartender in Welch's Harlem—a puffy old Santa—knows in his guts that Loney is not "geared for survival." Most people are. Loney's sister has "gotten up and out of a dismal existence" through education, will and the refusal to look back. His lover wakes up "resolutely human." His father remains blithely unconscious, the primal old man, selfish and tricky and gleeful. Welch is not a moralist and no one is heroized for what they do—or what they cannot do. "We're neither of us bad guys; just adversaries, that's all." We watch curiously as Loney strips his life to the bone; to a treeless landscape unprotected from winter wind. We have recognized in ourselves his isolation, his displacement and his inwardness. Yes, we say, that's me too. And we follow him—running in the snow with bare stinging feet. We follow him—our other self, the Indian, the drunk, the man we have always seen and tried to avoid—until we must fall behind, draw back and admit; he is going too far. He is staying out too long.

"Loney stepped forward and squinted through the pale light. The men were not talking to him but that was all right. The rain was not cold."

Welch's prose is simple and clean and packed. We suspect, rightly, that he is also a poet (Riding the Earthboy 40 published in 1971). His details reverberate and from the first page, "The rain was not cold," we are in Loney's world—grateful for small favors. In the simplicity of Welch's language is a bleak laconic humor, an entry into the loneliness we are allowed to taste, to see, to hear, but not to weep over. The Death of Jim Loney is a pessimistic extension of Welch's first novel, Winter in the Blood, a book similar in its obsession with a familial past. In Jim Loney, Welch has taken the narrator of Winter in the Blood as far as he can up a dead-end street. We know what is at
the end of that street. We hear Loney out because we share his questions as to the meaning of certain words; abandon, father, human. We hear him out because of the enormous pleasure in a story told with little pretension and much honesty.

I cannot let this review slip by without showing my gratitude and admiration for the characters of Rhea Davis and Kate Loney. In a culture still afflicted with the worst of Hemingway, Welch neither romanticizes alcohol nor indulges in the taxonomy of women as a separate species. The trend that began in his first novel continues in the second; women are people with jobs and problems and diverse personalities. They make up about half the population. They think much like everyone else. They are interested in the opposite sex and are interesting in return. Etc. Welch can enter the mind of a female character because he does not regard it as alien territory. His obsessions are personal and humane and seek relationship, not separation; extension, rather than narcissism.

Sharman Apt

*I Want To Say Listen*
Tom Crawford
Ironwood Press
Tucson, Arizona
$2.50, paper

*I Want To Say Listen* is a collection of poems that affects the reader subtly. There is a calmness in the work that is settling, even when the content isn't. These twenty poems show Crawford's love of nature and the set of images he derives from it is used across the board in his
work.

Many of the poems contain birds, fish, trees, wood, water, sky. They occupy a similar place in the work that nature does in Chinese and Japanese poetry. Crawford imbues the poems with a calmness and love of the things he writes about that is reminiscent of the strong, spiritual poems of Kenji Miyazawa. Like Miyazawa, Crawford has no choice but to go to nature for imagery, and he finds his metaphors there as well.

This involvement with nature is balanced with several other things in the work. One is Crawford’s stoicism and resignation to (or belief in) the continuity and inevitability of events. Nature is more constant than man. Another thing is his tendency to construct another world, that of darkness, dream, and allusion to personal myth. He takes everything from the real world he needs, but leaves behind all the things he feels caused him to escape. The opening poem is called “Enormous Sleep,” and establishes immediately the anesthetic qualities of darkness, sleep, and dreams . . .

My growing up
is trying to put old senses to sleep

And the last lines confirm the comfort of this place . . .

I want to stay in my bed
and wait for night
coming down the hall
like an old nurse with the needle

If this night world is numbing, it is also a place where the mind can genuinely get rest. “Night Fishing” talks of “it so very dark/ I had to feel my way out to the river/ and send out line on memory.” Then, after the fish has struck . . .

I had to follow the line
with both hands
to find the flapping trout
cold and slippery in my grip
For awhile I’d forgotten my father left again

For Crawford, this groping is the writing of the poem as well as the unsureness of the life many people lead. We see, in “Night Fishing,” how remembering is sometimes forgetting, the poem an exorcism and
healing thing.

In "Bird Lore" Crawford advises the artist that his job is not always safe from criticism by non-sympaticos, and the narrator responds to his detractors by magically drawing birds out as witnesses that art and nature are parallel—therefore, "get off my back because I've got important friends."

There is a strong appreciation of life in the poems in the sense that no matter how painful things get, at least they continue, and the sense of humor that reinforces the work strengthens this notion. When Crawford talks of the joys of working with wood we find he loves it more than we expect . . .

From "Prettier Than Ever"

I tell you about the work on the boat
the new depth finder
how it's going in right over the wheel
as soon as I find the right screws

or from "Things I learned about carpentry and couldn't wait to tell"

It's not the shellacking that gets me
though there's something heavenly there
but the opening of the wood now
that I won't even let my wife see
and the thing coming together again
keeps the fingers so busy there's no time to think
about the cold garage
only the smell of it
and the brass screws going in under me
butting up the joints
where I stall
at every turn now,
Jesus!
He would have understood this and the joys
Of counter-sinking
and the putting in of plugs

Finally, there is, in the affirmation of the natural cycle and the sense of life moving on basically unstoppable, a kind of weariness that surfaces that has to do with growing old and tired of the patience life demands. Perhaps this is the other reason for the nurse with the needle and the peaceful dark world where poetry is made and things
are constructed calmly and clearly. In the last poem, "Everything Must Go," Crawford repeatedly says he "understands everything must go," and it is not necessarily with no fuss . . .

and I understand that everything must go
when the trees begin to drop their branches
like tired arms
and fall to the ground
before they are even struck,

... . . .

and when the windows explode
against the flying weight of splintered bone
and bodiless wings
that wound me through the covers,

... . . .

and when the house begins to move
then stumbles
like a dying bear

... . . .

I don't mind
because now even the moon is falling
and I understand that everything must go

Quinton Duval
The process of discovery comes naturally to children. I remember stumbling with a flashlight in my grandmother's basement and finding a large cardboard carton filled with smaller boxes. Printed on the front of each box was the picture of an animal, a country scene, or perhaps a copy of a famous painting. I recall vividly an African safari, zebras running toward Kilimanjaro, and the portrait of a mysterious lady dipping her knees into the surf. Inside the boxes were various shapes, everyone different; a strange boot that looked like a small map of Italy, a half moon, the profile of a soldier. It seemed like there was no limit. My imagination took wing. Then, somehow the pieces came together. Each, an integral part of a much larger puzzle that seems as marvelous today. Bruce Weigl's poems strike me this way. The pieces, the images of the poems, are as varied and unique as any jigsaw puzzle. And as unlikely as it seems, the pieces always fit together, the puzzle always comes out right.

Weigl's best poems are musical and linguistically playful. One such poem is "Sailing To Bien Hoa":

In my dream of the hydroplane
I'm sailing to Bien Hoa
the shrapnel in my thighs
like tiny glaciers.
I remember a flower,
a kite, a mannikin playing the guitar,
a yellow fish eating a bird, a truck
floating in urine, a rat carrying a banjo,
a fool counting the cards, a monkey praying,
a procession of whales, and far off
two children eating rice,
speaking French—
I'm sure of the children,
their damp flutes,
the long line of their vowels.
Aside from the obvious assonance, consonance, alliteration, you can see the poet’s craft where the short a’s of “sailing” and “shrapnel” are roughed up against the long a’s of “hydroplane” and “glaciers.” Other linkages, however, don’t work when the poet reaches out of his colloquial range into an alien formalism:

He moved it finally from the locked closet
to the bedroom
to the garage again
where he hung it on the wall
until I climbed and pulled it down.

These lines feel forced and clumsy because the connection is never really made; the words fall short of their intention. They are out of context.

In Bruce Weigl’s poems the moon has no more value than the birds. One might suppose that his seemingly haphazard placement of images occurs indiscriminately, but actually there is a purpose, a design—the poet is grappling for a handful of detachment, making an honest attempt to understand the world in the world’s terms. Weigl does not attempt interpretation, instead he travels headlong into the realms of imagination, memory.

Weigl’s poems are daring, but not fearless. In “The Man Who Made Me Love Him,” we sense the poet’s willingness to assume the role of a child and receive the world with a vision of wonder that seems reverent, even moral:

All I know about this man
is that he played the trumpet
from his bedroom window.
Evenings we could hear him
trying to play something
while we laughed at the din
and called him names.

I want to sing about this
but all I know
is that it was near dark
so I missed the way home
and stopped to rest in the churchyard
where gold carp lolled in the holy pond.
I was seven and the man who played the trumpet
took me to the roundhouse
where he said the hobos slept,
and though I knew the tracks
and the woods surrounding them,
I didn’t know that secret.

He made me take him into my mouth,
my face rose and fell with his hips
and the sun cut through boxcars
waiting to be emptied.

There’s an unmistakable irony in the mocking tone, in the sing-song patter of these lines. We begin to suspect that there is something beneath the playfulness, that the poet is playing with something as real as matches, something that will ignite and burn. This is the vehicle (I dare call it naiveté) that leads to discovery, that leads to the poem itself.

_A Romance_, Bruce Weigl’s first full length collection of poems, is one of remarkable richness and depth. His poems are powerful, unpredictable, full of tension. Always there is a distinctive voice, notably different from other voices, taking risk after risk, breaking all the rules, combining the sublime with the exotic, the strange with the commonplace.

_Thomas Mitchell_
It is difficult to speak briefly of Robert Hass’ latest collection of poems, *Praise*. They are such considered poems and their concerns are so intricately woven that one feels almost destructive in isolating certain aspects to talk about. It’s like going after fine silk with a machete. Yet there are threads of concern running through the poems in *Praise* that deserve to be looked at. The book is, I think, one of the best to come out in a long while.

These are poems of fear:

> Ah, love, this is fear. This is fear and syllables . . .
> (“Sunrise”)

of loss:

> All the new thinking is about loss.
> In this way it resembles all the old thinking.
> The idea, for example, that each particular erases the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk of that black birch is, by his presence, some tragic falling away from a first world of undivided light. Or the other notion that because there is in this world no one thing to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds, a word is elegy to what it signifies. . . .
> (“Meditation at Lagunitas”)

of wonder and discovery. In “Meditation of Lagunitas” the very act of talking about loss conjures up a memory in the narrator’s mind:

> There was a woman
> I made love to and I remembered how, holding her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,
> I felt a violent wonder at her presence like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat, muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish called *pumpkin seed*.  

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Most of all, these are poems of the “mensural polyphony” of desire. In fact, desire is at the center of these poems, the pivot on which “...we turn to each other and turn to each other/in the mother air of what we want.” (Sunrise) Desire creates our feeling of loss: “Longing, we say, because desire is full/of endless distances.” (“Meditation...”); and our fears:

Ah, love, this is fear. This is fear and syllables
and the beginnings of beauty. We have walked the city,
a flayed animal signifying death, a hybrid god
who sings in the desolation of filth and money
a song the heart is heavy to receive. We mourn
otherwise. Otherwise the ranked monochromes,
the death-teeth of that horizon, survive us
as we survive pleasure. What a small hope.
What a fierce small privacy of consolation.
What a dazzle of petals for the poor meat.
(“Sunrise”)

But desire is just as intimately connected to the sense of wonder and discovery. In “To a Reader” Hass says, “Having slept in wet meadows,/ I am not through desiring.” And in “Winter Morning in Charlottesville” he observes, “How sexual/ this morning is the otherwise/ quite plain/ white-crowned sparrow’s/ plumed head!”

Desire is, to Hass, even more primal than these experiences. It is, at its most basic, simply motion:

She is first seen dancing which is a figure
nor for art or prayer or the arousal of desire
but for action simply... Though she draws us
to her, like a harbor or a rivermouth she sends us away.
(“The Origin of Cities”)

It is the primary impulse from which all action arises:

She dances, the ships go forth,
slaves and peasants labor in the fields, maimed soldiers
ape monkeys for coins outside the wineshops,
the craftsmen work in bronze and gold, accounts
are kept carefully, what goes out, what returns.
(“The Origin of Cities”)

This sense of desire, though, is not so much Freud’s notion of sex as the source of psychic energy; rather it is more as George Seferis says in one of his diaries: “In essence, the poet has one theme: his live body.”
Desire brings us to our animal selves:

Blind, with eyes like stars, like astral flowers,
from the purblind mating sickness of the beasts
we rise, trout-shaken, in the gaping air,
ine terror, the scarlet sun-flash
leaping from the pond’s imagination
of a deadly sea. Fish, mole,
we are the small stunned creatures
inside these human resurrections . . .
(“Sunrise”)

The object of desire may be something as simple and flippant as a
“Yellow Bicycle”:

_Her song to the yellow bicycle:_
The boats on the bay
have nothing on you,
my swan, my sleek one!

Or it might be

. . . the huge dark of sex, the sharp sweet light,
light if it were water raveling, rancor,
tenderness like rain.
(“Santa Lucia”)

In the end, though, desire has less to do with sex than with the
quotidian, the commonplace:

_I think the erotic
is not sexual, only when you’re lucky._
That’s where the path forks. It’s not the riddle
of desire that interests me; it is the riddle
of good hands, chervil in a windowbox,
the white page of a book, someone says
I’m tired, someone turning on the light.
(“Santa Lucia”)

_“The first fact of the world is that it repeats itself,” says Hass in a
recent article in _Antaeus_ on form.¹ Our first sense of form, of shape to
the world comes from experiencing as an infant the wonder and
repetition of “. . . footsteps, a face, the smell of hair and tobacco, the
cooing of syllables.” (330) From this repetition comes the discovery_
that things repeat themselves, a promise of shapeliness to the world. Though most adults seem to lose it, the power of repetition is still fresh in children, as in the magic of setting the table:

That is mastery: spoon, knife, folded napkins, fork; glasses all around. The place for the plate is wholly imagined. Mother sits here and father sits there and this is your place and this is mine. ("The Beginning of September")

The promise of orderliness in the world, the repetition of days—that is what desire, in a sense, represents; the power of wonder:

... days that are the good flesh continuing.
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings, saying blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.
("Meditation . . .")

Repetition, however, is not always benevolent; it can easily lead to the mundane:

These are the dog days, unvaried except by accident. . . .

* * *

... the stunned days,
faceless, droning in the juice of rotten quince, the flies, the heat.
("Songs to Survive the Summer")

For Hass the quotidian is two-edged. It is, on the one hand, numbing:

... someone somewhere had set the old words to the old tune: we live by easy habit and it doesn't hurt.
("Old Dominion")

The dullness of thoughtless repetition is ultimately death:

... every thing touched casually, lovers, the images
of saviors, books, the coin
I carried in my pocket
till it shone, it is

all things lustered
by the steady thoughtlessness
of human use.

(“Songs to Survive the Summer”)

On the other hand, there remains in Hass the child’s ability to extract
wonder from the mundane, to discover magic in the “... thwack ... thwack of tennis balls being hit ...” ("Old Dominion") and

... to emerge, where the juniper
is simply juniper and there is the smell
of new shingle, a power saw outside
and inside a woman in the bath,
a scent of lemon and a drift of song,
a heartfelt imitation of Bessie Smith.

(“Transparent Garments”)

The ability to embrace the given.
Part of the magic of these poems is Hass’ skill at turning repetition
into ritual, the mundane into the sacred:

Here are some things to pray to in San Francisco: the bay, the mountain,
the goddess of the city; remembrance, forgetting, sudden pleasure, loss;
sunrise and sunset; salt; the tutelary gods of Chinese, Japanese, Russian,
Basque, French, Italian and Mexican cooking; the solitude of coffee houses
and museums; the virgin, mother and window moons; hilliness, vistas; John
McClaren; Saint Francis; the Mother of Sorrows; the rhythm of any life still
whole through three generations ...

(“The Beginning of September”)

Praise, not only as a stance against fear, as the opening
epigram suggests:

We asked the captain what course
of action he proposed to take toward
a beast so large, terrifying, and
unpredictable. He hesitated to
answer, and then said judiciously:
“I think I shall praise it.”

but also as a way of embracing the mundane:
A different order of religious awe:
agon & meat, everything plain afterwards.
(“Santa Lucia”)

Crucial to Hass’ sense of wonder is his feeling for the
importance of art and language. He believes that “. . . art (is)
as humanly necessary as bread.” (332) “Survival is the art
around here” he says in “Not Going to New York: A Letter.”
In another poem he suggests that art, though it may be
symbolic, is also very real:

The gate
with the three snakes is burning,
symbolically, which doesn’t mean
the flames can’t hurt you.
(“Like Three Fair Branches from One Root
Deriv’d”)

Art has the power to help us overcome loss and fear:

Then I am cast down
into the terror of childhood,
into the mirror and the greasy knives,
the dark
woodpile under the fig trees
in the dark.

It is only
the malice of voices, the old horror
that is nothing, parents
quarreling, somebody
drunk.

I don’t know how we survive it.
On this sunny morning
in my life as an adult, I am looking
at one clear pure peach
in a painting by Georgia O’Keeffe.
It is all the fullness that there is
in light . . .

A moment ago I felt so sick
and so cold
I could hardly move.
(“Child Naming Flowers”)

Literature too is a stay against fear. In “Songs to Survive the
Summer,” the narrator and his daughter
... hide together

in her books . . .

*   *   *

And when she finally is asleep

I try out Chekov's tenderness to see what it can save.

However, art and literature do us harm as well. The woman speaking in "Santa Lucia" dislikes the sexual objectification she finds in some art. She prefers instead the purity of the commonplace:

Walking in the galleries at the Louvre,
I was, each moment, naked and possessed.
Tourists gorged on goosenecked Florentine girls by Pallaiuolo. He sees me like a painter.
I hear his words for me: white, gold.
I'd rather walk the city in the rain.
Dog shit, traffic accidents. Whatever god there is dismembered in his Chevy.

Though literature and art are at times soothing, they aren't saving. They involve a certain loss as well:

The love of books is for children who glimpse in them a life to come, but I have come to that life and feel uneasy with the love of books . . .

*   *   *

There is no other world. ("Songs to Survive the Summer")

The characters in literature
... cannot save me any more
than I, weeping
over Great Russian Short Stories in summer,
under the fatted figs,
saved you. Besides

it is winter there.
They are trying out
a new recipe for onion soup.
(“Songs . . .”) 

Yes, the characters in literature and the imagery in art are real, but they too have their "separate fidelities." Alone, they can't save us any more than desire or the mundane or the sacred.

The crux of the matter in Hass' work seems to be the power of words. Many of the poems in this collection are about language, the power of articulation to evoke fear, wonder, loss and discovery. These poems are, in a sense, talismans against the fear and loss. Words are all we really have and are as important to our existence as our body: "There are moments when the body is as numinous/ as words . . ." ("Meditation . . .") Speech intrinsically connects us to both fear and beauty: "Ah, love, this is fear. This is fear and syllables/ and the beginnings of beauty." ("Sunrise") Though "... a word is elegy to what it signifies" ("Meditation . . ."), "... the word (also) originates its species . . ." ("Winter Morning in Charlottesville").

More importantly, since this world is the only one there is, words help affirm the mundane. In "Weeds," one of the loveliest poems in the book, Hass demonstrates this quality of words:

Horse is Lorca's word, fierce as wind,
or melancholy, gorgeous, Andalusian:
white horse grazing near the river dust;
and parsnip is hopeless,
second cousin to the rhubarb
which is already second cousin
to an apple pie. Marrying the words
to the coarse white umbels sprouting
on the first of May is history
but conveys nothing; it is not the veined
body of Queen Anne's lace
I found, bored, in a spring classroom
from which I walked hands tingling
for the breasts that are meadows in New Jersey
in 1933; it is thick, shaggier, and the name
is absurd. It speaks of durable
unimaginative pleasures: reading Balzac,
fixing the window sash, rising
to a clean kitchen, the fact
that the car starts & driving to work
through hills where the roadside thickens
with the green ungainly stalks,
the bracts and bright white flowerets
of horse-parsnips.

"Words are abstract," Hass says in "The Beginning of September,"
"but words are abstract is a dance, car crash, heart's delight." The
power of words for Hass lies in the shifting polyphony between sound
and sense, between what words mean and what they evoke. Poetry
arises from "... decay and a created/ radiance (which) lies hidden
inside words... (and) memory/ folds them into living." ("Not Going
to New York: A Letter") Utterance and memory—that is the power of
poetry. As he says of Pasternak, who is in the process of translating a
phrase from his native Russian:

He would have noticed the articles as a native speaker wouldn't:
a bird, the haunch; and understood a little what persists
when, eyes half-closed, lattice shadow on his face,
he muttered the phrase in the dark vowels of his mother tongue.
("Not Going to New York: A Letter")

Yet, "there are limits to the imagination." (Heroic Simile) There are
the "painted boundaries." ("Old Dominion") The imagination can
only do so much, as he suggests in talking of the two woodsmen in
"Heroic Simile":

I don't know
whether they're Japanese or Mycenean
and there's nothing I can do.
The path from here to that village
is not translated.

Limits must be set, form must be established:

The squalor of mind
is formlessness,
informis,
the Romans said of ugliness,  
it has no form . . .  
("Songs . . .")

"It's all in shapeliness, give your fears a shape." ("Songs . . ")
Here, perhaps, is Hass' greatest achievement in this collection: the incredible range of material he manages to shape into coherent form. There are epigraphs, epigrams, anecdotes, dittys, prose pieces, haikus, recipes and passages lifted from Chekov. He is, as he says in his Antaeus essay, "... making form against all odds." (373) Some poems are held together by association, others by repetition of key phrases, the unravelling of a central image or by a baroque-like layering of themes. These poems are

. . . stories,
songs, . . .
curiously shaped; they are the frailest stay against our fears.  
("Songs . . .")

We must, Hass contends, "... find forms the imagination can inhabit . . ." (337) Hass has succeeded abundantly.
There is still much to say about Hass' poems. I have yet to cleave and hold up sections concerned with food, urbanity, self-consciousness, morality. But before I put away my machete, let me lop off one last piece, this as an example of the humor that runs throughout Hass' work. It is the epigraph that opens the book's second section:

It's funny, isn't it, Karamazov, all this grief and pancakes afterward . . .

Don Schofield

1Hass, Robert. "One Body: Some Notes on Form." In Antaeus, No. 30/31, p. 329. Further references will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses following the quote.
RALPH BEER operates a fourth-generation cattle ranch at Jackson Creek, Montana. He is completing his MFA at the University of Montana.

LINDA BIERDS lives in Seattle, Washington. She has poems forthcoming in Concerning Poetry, Poetry Now, and elsewhere.

KATHY CALLAWAY, a former editor of CutBank with an MFA from the University of Montana, is now living and working (we hope) in New York City. She is dearly missed.

PATRICIA CLARK is from Tacoma, Washington. She is in the MFA program at the University of Montana and teaches composition.

CARL CLATTERBUCK lives in Missoula, Montana. He has recently published in Cavalier.

SUSAN DAVIS grew up in Slough House, California and is a graduate of Sacramento State College.

STEPHEN DUNN is currently living in New Jersey. His books include Looking for Holes in the Ceiling and Of Lust and Good Usage.

QUINTON DUVAL lives in Sacramento, California and teaches at Solano College. His work has appeared in several magazines.

GARY FINCKE is an English teacher and summertime tennis professional. His collection of poems, False Bottom, will be out early in 1980.

STUART FRIEBERT is the Director of Creative Writing at Oberlin College and the editor of Field. His most recent book is titled Uncertain Health.

DAVID GHITELMAN lives in New York City.

MARCIA GOLDSBY lives in Portland, Oregon with her husband and children. She has had poems published in Portland Review, Slackwater Review and Snapdragon.

DEBORAH GOODMAN is an MFA graduate from Wichita State University. She is currently a lecturer in Composition at Wichita State, as well as project director in adult education for the Wichita Public Schools.

CANDACE GREENBURG presently lives and works in Missoula, Montana. She is studying under Richard Hugo.

ANNE GREGORY, the artist for this issue, is a professional artist living in Sacramento, California. She is a graduate student at the University of Iowa in Fine Arts.

NAOMI LAZARD is the author of Ordinances, The Moonlit Upper Deckerina and Cry of the Peacocks. She is currently a poet-in-residence at the University of Montana.

JULIA MISHKIN lives and works in New York City. Her work has appeared in The Paris Review, The Virginia Quarterly, The Nation and others.

THOMAS MITCHELL has poems forthcoming in The New England Review.

RICK NEWBY lives in Helena, Montana. He is co-editor of the magazine Scratchgravel Hills.

MARK RUBIN was one of The Nation/Discovery winners for 1978. His work has appeared in Antaeus, The Nation and elsewhere. We are reprinting his two poems.
“Again” and “Stepping Out” from *Cut Bank II* because of typographical errors in the original printing. We offer our apologies.

JEFF SCHIFF lives in El Paso, Texas.

ALEDA SHIRLEY is a poet-in-residence for the Special Arts Project, Louisville, Kentucky and a guest editor of the *Louisville Review’s* Special Children Issue, Fall, 1979.

PAMELA RICE is from Dallas, Texas and is currently a student in the MFA program at the University of Montana.

PETER RUSSELL is completing his MFA at the University of Montana. This is his first published story.

DANIEL E. SHAPIRO is completing his MFA at the University of Montana.

GARY THOMPSON recently received a grant from the NEA. He teaches at California State University in Chico.

WALTER PAVLICH grew up in Oregon and currently lives in Missoula. He has poems forthcoming in *The Greensboro Review*.

PAUL ZARZYSKI lives for bareback broncs and poetry. He writes and rodeos out of Missoula where he teaches technical writing part-time at the University of Montana Forestry School.

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**BOOKS RECEIVED**

*A Romance*, Bruce Weigl, poems, University of Pittsburgh Press, $3.95.

*alleluia chorus*, Lois Moyles, poems, Woolmer/Brotherson LTD, $3.95.

*Brass Knuckles*, Stuart Dybek, poems, University of Pittsburgh Press, $3.95.

*Ebstein On Reflection*, Alan L. Steinberg, poems, Idaho State Univ. Press.

*The End of the World*, Ralph Adamo, poems, Lost Roads Press, $2.00.

*Fantasia in A Minor*, Agnes Haviland D’Ottavio, poems, Soap Box Press.

*Ferry All the Way Up*, Katherine Kane, poems, Cosmopress.

*Golden Harvest*, Gilbert Hay, poems and prose, Doubleday, $8.95.

*Handbook of Ornament*, Michael Poage, poems, Black Stone Press.


*Leather Butterfly*, Constance Kendall, poems, Soap Box Press, $3.00.

*Losing Orange*, Hilda Wry, poems, Soap Box Press, $2.50.

*The “M” Papers*, R. L. Bachand, poems, Soap Box Press, $2.50.

*Morning Notes to a Nighttime Diary*, James Reed, poems, Bits Chapbook.

*Night Herding Song*, Gerald Hausman, poems, Copper Canyon Press, $4.00.

*no hiding place*, Warren Woessner, poems, Spoon River Poetry Press, $3.00.

*Oblique Light*, Lynn Emanuel, poems, Slow Loris Press, $4.00.

*Of Singles and Doubles*, Rosalie Moore, poems, Woolmer/Brotherson LTD, $3.95.

*The Piano Beneath the Skin*, George Hitchcock, poems, Copper Canyon Press, $3.50.

*Paper Boy*, David Huddle, poems, University of Pittsburgh Press, $3.95.
Perdut, Neil Lehrman, poems, Dryad Press, $3.95.
Retaining Well, Barry Seiler, poems, L'Epervier Press, $3.75.
The Sinking of Clay City, Robert Wrigley, poems, Copper Canyon Press, $4.00.
Time Music, Gerald Dorset, poems, Soap Box Press.
Trunk and Thicket, Robert Morgan, poems, L'Epervier Press, $3.75.
Uncertain Health, Stuart Friebert, poems, Woolmer/Brotherson LTD, $3.95.
Virtue can take shape as Anapest, Hal Eskesen, poems, Soap Box Press.
Wakefulness, Bruse Renner, poems, L'Epervier Press.

MAGAZINES RECEIVED

de the agni review (vol.10, no.11) Sharon Dunn and Askold Melnychuk, eds., P.O. Box 359, Cambridge, MA $4/year.
Alembic (no 3) David Dayton, ed., 1744 Slaterville Road, Ithaca, NY 14850.
de the ark river review (vol.4, no.3) Jonathon Katz and Anthony Sobin, eds., Box 14, W.S.U., Wichita, KS 67208.
The Beloit Poetry Journal (spring/summer 1979) Robert Glauber et. al., eds., Box 2, Beloit, WI 53511, $1/copy.
dbe beyond baroque (791 & 792) R.H. Deutsch, ed., Beyond Baroque Foundation, P.O. Box 806, Venice CA 90291.
Bits (July/79) Dennis Dooley et. al., eds., Dept. of English, Case Western Reserve Univ., Cleveland, OK 44106.
de Carolina Quarterly (vol.31, no.2) Dorothy Combs Hill, ed., Greenlaw Hall 066-A, Univ. of NC, Chapel Hill, NC 27514. $6/year.
Chariton Review (vol.5, no.1) Jim Barnes, ed., Northeast Missouri State Univ., Kirksville, MI 63501. $2/copy.
de Conneticut Quarterly (vol.1, no.2) Fred Sokol, ed., Asnuntuck Comm. Coll. Press, P.O. Box 68, Enfield, CT 16082. $2/copy.
de fiction international (10/11) Joe David Bellamy, ed., St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY 13617. $5.
de The Iowa Review (vol. 10, no. 1) David Hamilton and Frederick Woodard, eds., 308 EPB, Univ. of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52241. $2/copy.
de Kudzu (Spring/79) Jim and Harriet Peterson, ed., P.O. Box 865, Cayce, SC 19033. $1/copy.

Pequod (vol.3, no.1) David Paradis et. al., eds., P.O. Box 491, Forest Knolls, CA 94933. $5/copy.

Pieces I (July/79) Gary Lee Stonum, et. al., eds., Dept of English, Case Western Reserve Univ., Cleveland, OH 6082. $2/copy.

The Pikesstaff Forum (Winter/79) James Scrimgeour and Robert D. Sutherland, eds., P.O. Box 127, Normal, IL 61761.

Poetry Now (Issues 21-23) E.V. Griffith, ed., 3118 K. Street, Eureka, CA 95501. $1.50/copy.

Porch (Spring/ Summer-Fall 79) James V. Cervantes, ed., Dept of English, Ariz. State University, Tempe, AZ 85281. $2/copy.

Portland Review (Spring/79) Mark Jones, ed., Portland State Univ., P.O. Box 751, Portland, OR 97207. $3.95/copy.

Product 1 (vol.15, no.1) Pamela L. Wall and James M. Gaston., eds., Southern Station, Box 5144, Univ. of S, Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS 39401.

Silverfish Review (no.1) Rodger Moody and Rom dall Roorda, eds., Box 3541, Eugene, OR 97403.

Skywriting 9 (Fall/79) Martin Grossman, ed., 511 Campbell Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49007. $2.50/copy.


Stand (vol. 20, Nos 3 & 4) Jan Silken et. al., eds., Jim Kates, c/o 16 Forest Street, Norwell, MA.


Three Rivers (13/14) Gerald Castanzo, ed., P.O. Box 21, Carnegie-Mellon Univ., Pittsburgh, PA 15213. $1.50/copy.


Whetstone (Spring/79) Michael Bowden, ed., Rural Route 1, Box 220, St. David, AZ 85630. $2/copy.


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