CutBank

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Note: Both "Gent" and "The Jade Marie" are excerpted from Rick DeMarinis's novel, The Burning Women of Far Cry.
WORDS

Only a photograph or a mirror
can say nothing like the world. Words
open their big mouths,
stick their noses in the whole
business. They pick up one child
and leave the rest crying.
They pick on that child
until the little thing
worries itself to death.
That’s the way it is in the grand prix
of your head, it can’t think
of everything, of nothing, so it picks up
the best or the worst
and drives it around fast
in the car all night.
Words only call names
and the sun, alone with everything,
rises to dirty language.
Don’t you see this poem
sticking its fat fingers
into something infinitely smooth.
ON HEARING HARKENESS TOWER

When you asked
I couldn’t say
something beautiful.
Beauty requires distance

like the scent
of the ground in noon-light,
spirits letting go
from the cold.

It is also the scent
of a childhood museum,
the mineral room
or the room of dinosaurs

that have turned into minerals.
The world has a beautiful sound
as in the air above
a small industrial city

with a college.
Its bells carry
over walks and piles
of shoveled crystal.

For me, there are two places
that for a moment
come together,
the one from childhood

that is lost
and the one that goes unnoticed
since the present
has no meaning.
I can say the body
has two surfaces,
the one that listens for flattery
and the other

even words cannot go
deep enough to touch.
When it gets dark.
the ground freezes again.

The city has had
its momentary thaw.
There’s always a bell
that our bodies

listen to in sleep.
It makes its own kind of love,
its sweet talk
in the stillest hours.
FARMHOUSE ON THE ALGARVE

Memory ferries us there over red water,
past low lit cities afloat and one ghostly stretch
of airport to the dirt road. The road leads
through the open vineyards, which are red.

The farmhouse is where we rush to a halt,
our presence like white walls in the dark,
the rooms swept out. There's the kindness
with which we rinse each other's shoulders with water

we draw from the cistern. What water remains
we pour out under the marigolds and pepper plants
and the rest under the almond tree since presence too
is poured out a little at a time to become,

in part, what we attend. That's why in memory we stay.
That's why we lie down so easily with those we loved.
FIVE ROOMS

To put it in a different perspective
exchanging one's house is a form
of ransom.
—House Beautiful

I sit before him and he leans down
From his tartan chair, Uncle George Levy
With two white wings of hair stiff-combed
From the temples. He shows us tricks
With cards and dice, and once he caressed
The feist Dixie, so the kids like him.
The three-room apartment on Academy Street
Is full of knick-knacks and a wife from Chicago
Who gives me ginger ale and peppers
So hot they make me sick, but I don't let on.
I crow in the kitchen with the dish-towel roosters
While Aunt Gaye Levy's white prune thumb
Dents the meat loaf, slips into the milk.
She talks to herself, and instead of stockings,
Wears leg make-up in shades of clay.
I find streaks of it on the pale slipcovers,
Flat paste with a peculiar smell.
I'm not the kind of child who breaks things.
For my reward Uncle George takes down
A pewter lamp in miniature,
And it's mine to keep. I don't rub it
Till I'm alone, lightly at first, in easy fear
Of what I'm really too old to believe in.
I find a book on Mother's bedside table
With words in it I must look up. Still
I'm never told enough. For weeks
I think that "penis" rhymes with "Venice."
The characters, Renee and Chad,
Combine in ways I can't imagine,
But setting is something I understand.
In the shrubs by Chad's window
I'm a criminal, wiping the fog
Of my breath from the glass
As if I could name what I see in there.
They're close, but the window's between us.
The two hands' motion, one
Around the curtain pulley, one spread flat
On a slack hip, is downward.
Renee turns a lamp to the wall,
Snaps it off. The room, a shallow box,
Is made secure, but to me as I linger
At the chapter's end, the quiet's a threat.
There's something outside with me
They're deaf to, and something in there
I haven't been told. If it's love
In the room with Renee and Chad,
They'll be invaded. The walls won't stand.
From this side even I can see
Their room is dark and close to the ground.
Rena pays me to watch the kids
While she goes out and her husband stays,
Playing poker. All the men
Have ponytails, and one I like
Wears a leather pouch with fringe.
He cheats to be seen — he tucks the cards
In his cap and sleeves — and soon
They're all bristling with aces, all
The men, and laughing.
Donnelle, home from a ballet lesson,
Whirls to my lap and sticks out
Her lip, with its shining inch-long wart.
Steven twists the head from G.I. Joe
And the baby, J.C., rolls his solemn eyes.
He still can't talk. His thumb
Is spatulate from sucking.
I stand outside the poker game.
Now I wish they'd stop the dealing
And turn to me, but they don't look up;
Rena walks in, with grocery bags;
They don't look up. The stack of chips
Before the one I liked is tallest.
Lucky for us, I leave without speaking.
The question before me, as it was then,
Is security, and where to find it,
And how I find it differently from you,
And how it always adds up to escape.
I think we’re born to bare ourselves,
But I know no one can stand it.
There’s a story I used to tell
And laugh about, that I don’t find
So funny now. A party on the west side,
some generic home in the ticky-tack.
And the blast of water in the bathroom sink.
The conversation’s at a standstill.
An abandoned bourbon colors the carpet
In the shape of a lolling tongue.
I open the bathroom to check the tap
In time to see Pete slide the razor
Safely across his wrist.
There’s not much blood. A compress could save him.
His wife, whom he loves, laughs in the bedroom—
Our coats are there too, in heaps on the floor—
But he doesn’t look up.
It’s worse for him to be caught at this.
What I do to help is apologize and back away.
His privacy, I say to myself.
Let someone else deny him that.
There are rooms to which I still retreat
Because danger is not enough to lure me out.
I make my bed on the hardwood floor,
and a silverfish crosses the book as I read.
From the way it rushes its fringe of legs,
I know it shares my love for shelter.
My stupid fear of the silverfish—
Some childhood legend, they drink from your eyes
As you sleep. It's quick enough to get away
Just once. I catch it with a second try, and oh,
It's easy to end that life. It's not that simple
To be rid of me, but not so hard
It can't be done. It will be done,
While I'm indoors, surrounded by the walls
I've built for death to blow down.
The long eye of my room looks down, with me
At center its slender pupil, where light comes in
And nothing stays out. It's raining
And a man walks unprotected, his t-shirt wet
And stretched down his back. It could be me
Out there, with the man in the rain.
It could be the threat is the same indoors.
In the morning the father readies himself for work
and the tall skinny girl
who is twenty-five hides
in the basement pretending
she has a job. After the father
leaves she rises from the basement
and has coffee with the mother.
They talk about their favorite
movie stars and how they would travel
to California if they were rich.
When the father dies they take
the money and visit restaurants
where the stars eat, and they squeal
together when a favorite one shows up
for lunch or dinner. After they spend
the money, the tall skinny girl
starts to act oddly. At thirty
she begins to ask questions.
"Why is this the morning?" "Why
does God always live in the dark?"
The mother picks at the loose threads
of her faded terry cloth robe
and sighs, "Oh, Marilyn . . ."
They grow old together. At fifty
the girl is gaunt and still crazy,
daydreaming she is in the basement,
waiting to emerge to coffee
and morning sun. One day she begins
to wail and in bed softly keens
to the mother, whose whole length she pulls
into her long cupped body. She strokes
the mother's neck and purrs, "Sweetheart,
dearest" as if the mother had always known
it would end like this and would
tell her why, oh why were the weeds
in the yard clamoring at the back door.
WORKING FOR WAGES

for Geof Hewitt

Sorry pass! True decrease in family fortune
to feel a Pinch there in the pocket,
so close to the family jewels.
This time it isn't Love's confusion
with a full moon pulling blood
to turgid crisis. It's the Big One:
Money—a true Chekovian theme.

Fear, Hubris, Avarice, Envy—Yeah,
Yeah, Yeah, all these and more apply.
We've all read the same "texts,"
watched the same films in the same
stale darkness. Come on, get off
your high horse; you know those
sticky floors, stink of sperm
and popcorn. And sure, our common
culture is great solace, but after
eight days of steady rain I awoke
to a bleak Fact. This hand,
which I would write like Whitman
with, is hammered to a house
I cannot sell—nailed to the single
board free of dry-rot.

How did the wise Russian doctor
worm such dignity out of Real Estate?
It must be more than word choice,
that cant I teach as "diction."
No "techniques" can save me now,
I'm coming clean. I have worked
for wages instead of salvation.
Instead of verse, I have recited
my bibliography like a sonorous
chant of the Gaelic Dead. Oh, coarse jangle! I have thrown down my deeds before the college dean like money bags on meadhall oak. While rain soaked thick the boards of this old house and sun was sucking the last sap, I schemed and bartered.

Now the wind whispers to me through spaces weather left. "Fresh air, fresh air," it gasps. It is a low and saddened voice, but still free and still urgent with an unregretted choice.
IT IS TOO LATE, OR I AM TOO TIRED, AGAIN

It is too late, or I am too tired, again, to write a poem
but all day long out driving in my truck I watched
for things that might make a poem

I saw
a long line of cars with headlights on
drove more
saw
a dead robin, *turdus migratorius*
on its back on the pavement by the cemetery
not long after the long line of cars were through
but I said to myself, no,
that's not it

ran into a bird
and I wasn't even going fast
then another
thump! right after the first one
and I said no, that's not it
that is not the poem

then later I was not watching well enough
daydreaming, who knows about what
some junk, some worthless crap from my life
when a boy only a few years younger than my boy
only a little older than my girl
raced out on a tricycle beside me
but he turned,
he saved himself, I did not do it
if it had been up to me in that instance
I would have killed him
and I was only going 5 or 8 miles an hour
but I said no
that's not it either
but I kept watching and working
it was over a hundred today
and I saw a garter snake in the road
do a 180 degree turnaround in the air
when it sensed my coming
and I saw several bullsnakes
at different times

I think I missed them

I saw a late newborn black angus calf still in its sheath
lying in the back of a red pickup, the calf-puller lying beside it
the rancher said it just took too long
while the dogs sniffed at the animal smell
and I said no, that’s not it

the work day went by routinely
a few little screw-ups, nothing major
Steve happened by the house just as I was leaving from lunch break at 3
and took the rest of my resi’s
since he was almost out of work
and I had a solid four hours left
that was unusual for him to catch me at home
but I said no, that’s not it
that’s not the poem either
even though he took an hour’s worth of work off me
and I’ll get off early for once
(but when I got back to the center
I had to work another hour and a half
because Loren’s on vacation
so Karen needs help on the night side
but I said no, that’s not it either)
and sometime during the day as I was turning a corner
a butterfly flew into the cab
through the open right door
and flew across the cab in front of me
and out of the door on my side
it scared hell out of me
I first saw it in my peripheral vision
I thought it was a car
then when I realized it wasn't a car
I thought it was a bee or wasp
which I am allergic to and wary of
but it was neither and I felt kind of glad
that a butterfly flew through my car and was alive
and that I wasn't having an accident or getting stung
but I said no, that not it

and later I saw a ground squirrel dart across the road
like the afterthought of movement
and at one ranch a dragonfly
flew into the cab and looked around
and flew out (I remembered then a couple of days ago
when Mark told me he saw a dragonfly in the garden
and was so excited he made a simile: they have eyes like pilot's
glasses!)
but I said no, that's not it either

but I finally got off work and came home and hoed the beans
and gave up looking anymore
while I went and bought some beer
and came back home and started this
so Debbie and the kids came home right in the middle of it
and I said no, that's not it

and I laid on my side on the floor for a while, later,
my eyes closed resting in the dark,
thinking about what I had written
what I was trying to write
I remembered how the wind began to blow furiously
raising the dust up on the road like ghosts
I drove through, (I couldn’t see so well)
but I drove through the clouds of dirt anyway, ancient stuff,
like driving through the pervasive dead
but I said no, no,
leave me alone, that’s not it

lying on the floor, half asleep, drunk, exhausted,
my heart hammering at my ribs its unhealthy beer-sugar high
and I said no, that’s not it

Mark can’t sleep, he’s on the couch
(he’s taken to sleeping there lately)
he says daddy I’m scared I’m scared
so I hug him, I kiss him, tell him how much we love him,
still he says I’m scared I’m scared
so I lie to him there is nothing to be scared about
HARVESTING

We begin by loving excessively
no plan in mind, no elegance.

There are parts we must tear away
lush and ambiguous

like the piles of abandoned hay
scattered around the fenceposts.

What is left, works. The rakes
touch and whirl and we follow

feeling out the steps
of a stately and beautiful dance.

We are not saddened
by a cow nudging against the fence,
or a tree straining at the edge
of pavement. In their naivete

in their impetuousness
they too ask for definition.

See how the grass grows stronger
after it is cut, how the heart

rallies under the bone. We celebrate
and turn together in our usefulness.

Inside the chest is the sound
of a waltz warming up.

The caterpillar or the seed
crouched in eagerness

to become something brighter.
ANATOMY OF THE (OVER)LOVED

When someone lifts a hand
to your mouth
you should know
what is in it, a heart
shaped stone or a tiny
umbrella turned upside down:
a birdbath full of flowers.

In Holland people wear wooden shoes
and they know when
they are being followed.
They know
how to read the map
of the palm, how to plan
hunger around moments
of clarity.
They know if, in a hand,
there is something edible
something female
the neck
is edible.

Dear Person, take this string
and run with it
and swallow it. This hand
is a cloud of emotion
an anchor of the heart,
it sinks into something aqua
it tears into something tender.
A year after my father shot himself my mother married a two-faced hardware salesman named Roger Trewly. In public, Roger Trewly smiled as if someone holding a gun on him had said, "Look natural, Roger." At home, though, he was usually cross and sullen and would rarely answer civilly if spoken to. He was a crack salesman and was once awarded a plaque engraved with the words: *Ace of Hand Held Tools*. There is a photograph that records the event. He is standing with the owner of the store, Mr. Fenwick, in front of a display of braces-and-bits, hammers, rip saws, and planes. Both men are smiling, but the difference in their smiles has stuck in my mind through the years. Mr. Fenwick is smiling like a man who has just been found naked in the girl's gym and isn't at all humiliated by it. There's a ferocious gleam in his eyes challenging anyone to file a complaint. He looks like a well-to-do madman, capable of anything, absolutely sure of everything. Roger Trewly is smiling as though he's just spilled boiling coffee in his lap at the church social. His face shines with desperate sweat and his begging eyes are fixed on Mr. Fenwick. If you cover the lower half of Roger Trewly's face with your thumb, you will see that his small, pale eyes have no smile in them at all. They have a puzzled, frightened cast, wide with adrenalin. They are the eyes of a man who has understood nothing of the world in his
thirty-five years. That anxious, kowtowing smile tries to hide this terrifying vertigo, but I don’t think Roger Trewly fooled very many people. Mr. Fenwick, steely-eyed and successful, looks as though nothing had ever fooled him. When my father, who was a war hero, shot himself through the heart with his deer rifle, everyone was shocked. But when Roger Trewly jumped off the Mill Avenue bridge into the heavy rapids of the Far Cry River, no one in town was surprised, least of all my mother. “I saw it,” she said. “I saw it coming.”

Mother was only thirty-two years old the spring that Roger Trewly drowned himself, but four years of living with a terror-struck two-faced man had taken the bloom off her spirit. She didn’t have gray hair yet, she didn’t have wrinkled skin, she had not become bent or shaky or forgetful, but she acted like an older woman with not a whole lot left to live for. If you weren’t a child, and could see things for what they were, you would have called her beautiful in spite of the lines and hollows of weariness that masked her true face. She was a petite, almost tiny woman with high, youthful breasts and her hair was the color of polished mahogany. She kept it long and she brushed it until it crackled with a suggestion of dark fire. She had large, widely spaced eyes, the gray-specked green of imperfect emeralds, and a smile that made you want to jump up and do chores. My father, who was a large, powerful man, called her “doll” or “midge.” He loved to pick her up in his strong arms and whirl her through the house whistling or singing, like a happy giant whose dreams had come true at last.

“Ma, you’re so pretty!” my sister, LaDonna, said one bright summer afternoon in 1952. This was a little over a year after Roger Trewly killed himself. Mother was dressed up for the first time since the funeral. “Look, Jack!” LaDonna said, pulling me into mother’s bedroom. “She looks like a princess!”
It was true. She was beautiful in her dark blue dress and white, high-heeled shoes and little “pillbox” hat. Her face had recovered its sharp-edged prettiness. She looked young and exotic. Her perfume struck me like a shocking announcement. We both put our arms around her and hugged her tight. “Princess! Princess!” we yelled, imprisoning her in our linked arms. I’d turned twelve years old that spring and shouldn’t have been carrying on like that, but I was as overwhelmed by her as LaDonna was. She had come out of herself at last, like a butterfly out of its winter cocoon, and we clung to her as if we knew there was a real danger of her flying way from us. But she pried off our greedy arms and said, “Don’t! You’ll wrinkle me! I’m only going out on a date!”

She went out into the living room where the man was waiting. I hadn’t realized that a stranger had entered the house. His name was Gent Mundy, the owner of Mundy’s Old Times Creamery. LaDonna and I stood in front of mother like a double shield between her and this man, but we were only a nuisance and she sent us outside to play. And when Gent Mundy asked her to marry him several weeks later, we accepted the news like the condemned victims of a rigged jury.

Gent lived in a large, slate-gray house next to his creamery on the main east-west street of Far Cry. We were all invited there to have dinner with him. After cookies and coffee in the living room, he gave us a tour.

“This would be your room, Jackie,” he said to me. ‘My’ room was on the second floor. It had a large dormer window that looked out on the parking lot of the creamery where all the milk trucks were kept when they were not making deliveries. The room was about twice as big as the one I had at home, and the walls had been freshly painted light blue. There was a ‘new’ smell in the room, and I realized then that all the furniture still had price tags on it.

Next he showed us the room he and mother would have. It was half again as big as my room, and the bed in it had a bright pink canopy. Mother sat on the bed and bounced lightly up and down twice. “This is something,” she said, the thin light of greed sharpening her eyes. Gent sat next to her and the bed wheezed. The depression he made in the bed forced her to sag against him. She looked like a child next to
his bulk.

"I think she's warming up to the idea, kids," he said, winking nervously. He was bald, and the top of his head was turning pink in mottled patches. It looked like a map of Mars, the rosy, unknown continents floating in a white, fleshy sea. Gent Mundy was a tall man. He had a heavy torso, but his legs were painfully thin, almost spindly. His chest sloped out into a full, belt-straining stomach. His large head made his shoulders seem abnormally narrow. He had alert, pale blue eyes and a wide, friendly mouth that was fixed in a permanent half-smile, a smile warned off suddenly, as though by a cautionary second thought. He was an odd looking man, but he was friendly and alive and open to everything that was going on around him. He wasn't powerful and wild like my father, but he wasn't two-faced and careful like Roger Trewly, either.

He was especially attentive to mother. If she sighed, he would put his arm around her small waist as if to boost her morale. If she touched her nose before sneezing, he would quickly have his handkerchief ready. If she looked bored or disinterested, he would smoothly change to a livelier subject of conversation. If she began to rant at length about some ordinary injustice, he'd listen carefully to every word, and then, to prove he shared her concern, he'd repeat verbatim certain things she had said.

Some deep and fragile longing made him fall colossally in love with her. I almost winced to see it, even though I didn't understand what I was seeing or why it moved me to wince.

He made something of her name, Jade, and of her size. "Tiny perfect jewel," he once called her. "Jade, Jade, how I'd like to set you in gold and wear you on my finger!" When he said things like this, his eyes would get vague with tears.

LaDonna's prospective room was next to mine. Instead of fresh paint on the walls, it had new wallpaper—fields of miniature daisies against a light green background. "I had this done especially for you, honey," he told her, his voice low and secretive, as if it were a private matter between just the two of them.

Gent was forty-eight years old and had never been married. "I think I have a lot to offer you," he said, after the tour. We returned to the living room and sat down uneasily in the large, overstuffed chairs. Gent made some fresh coffee and poured each of us a cup. I picked up a National Geographic and thumbed through it. LaDonna picked up the silver cream pitcher. She brought it close to her face to study it. Mother held her steaming cup of coffee several inches from her lips,
blowing thoughtfully. Careful lines appeared on her forehead. A tall clock ticked patiently in the polished hallway. A black woman with low-slung breasts and dusty feet was talking to a white man in a sun helmet. I turned the page to an article about funeral customs in Sumatra. Gent was sweating now, and he mopped his head with his napkin. "Well, no," he said, as if agreeing to some unspoken criticism. "I'm no Casanova, I grant you that. I'm no Tyrone Power, that's for sure! But I am moderately well off. I can provide handsomely for all three of you. The milk business . . ." and here he seemed to be stumped for the precise words. A dreamy look came over his face and he smiled at the perplexity of the thing in his mind. " . . . is, is a good business." His face reddened, and his forehead was lacquered again with sweat.

Mother put the cup to her lips and drew a little hissing sound from it that made all three of us lean toward her. We were poor. Mother had a little pension, but it barely put food on the table and paid the rent. My father was out of work when he shot himself, and Roger Trewly, even though he was the 'Ace of Hand Held Tools,' never made enough to keep up with the bills.

Mother set the cup down and said something. Her back was straight and some untameable pride made the small muscles around her mouth rigid.

"What was that, Jade?" Gent said, leaning closer to her. "What was that your wonderful mother said, kids?"

LaDonna stood up. "It was yes," she said sternly. "Our wonderful mother said yes, she will be happy to marry you, Mr. Mundy."

LaDonna was like that. She saw things for what they were and she spoke her mind easily, and often with a sharp tongue. Though she was only eleven years old at the time, she had her future planned. She was going to be a scientist. She had no doubts about this. Her hero was Albert Einstein. A picture of the long-hair genius hung on her bedroom wall. She claimed to understand the general drift of his writings, if not all the math involved. She said that Einstein knew everything he would ever know when he was sixteen, he just hadn't found the words to put it in. She had an aggressive curiosity about nearly everything, and an ice-cold, relentless intelligence to back it
up. I always thought she was something special, one of the world's truly unique people, but her detached brilliance sometimes worried me.

When she was seven she made a jigsaw puzzle out of a frog, a salamander, and a cat-killed flicker. She spread out their innards on the backyard picnic table, trying to match them, organ for organ. The big and small differences fascinated her. Mother threw a fit when she saw the slimy, sun-pungent mess and called her Little Miss Frankenstein. But LaDonna was also affectionate and full of ordinary eleven-year-old ideas.

So, when LaDonna said yes for Mother, it was with such crisp authority that Gent clapped his hands together and said, "Oh, Jade, you don't know how happy you've made me! You'll never regret this, I promise!"

LaDonna and I liked Gent, though he was overly neat and too concerned with cleanliness. One day, while visiting our house, he began to fidget. We were all sitting at the kitchen table waiting for Mother to take a box cake out of the oven. Finally Gent pushed away from the table and found himself an apron. "I'll clean up a little while we're waiting," he said. He began to sponge-clean the sink and the counter next to it. Then he went after the greasy stove-top with Ajax and a hard-bristle brush. When he finished that, he knelt down and searched the floor for dust balls. There were no dust balls. Dust that found its way into the kitchen got mixed almost instantly with the haze of grease that covered everything. Mother wasn't a very good cook and preferred to fry most of our food. When she cooked for us, grease hung in the air like fog. Gent ran a finger along the base of the counter. He stood up then, a gummy gray wad stuck to his uplifted finger, his half-smile bravely in place.

"Christ on a crutch, Gent," mother said. "You don't have to do that." She stood up and tried to yank loose his apron ties. But Gent danced nimbly out of reach.

"No, no, Jade," he said. "Honestly, I don't mind at all. In fact, I like to tidy up. I've been a bachelor for nearly half a century!" He scraped and scrubbed until the whole kitchen gleamed. Mother watched him from her place at the table. She lit a cigarette and blew smoke noisily through her teeth. After Gent finished mopping the kitchen floor, he found the vacuum cleaner and went to work on the living room carpet.

"No, no!" he yelled over the sucking roar, as if someone was trying to change his mind. "Let me do it! I don't mind a bit!"
He was wearing a suit. The apron had pink and white checks, with a ruffled trim. He had thrown his green, hand-painted tie over his left shoulder as if to keep it out of the way of the machine.

Mother got up and went outside. I watched her through the kitchen window. She crossed the backyard slowly and sat down at the picnic table. She lit another cigarette and stared into the hedge at the end of our property. A neighborhood cat jumped up on the table next to her, its vertical tail quivering, but Mother swept it away with a quick flash of her arm.

The night before Gent and Mother were to be married, Gent gave me a present. It was a dark blue suit with powerful gray stripes running through it. He also gave me a stiff, blue-white shirt and a shiny red tie with a picture of a trout painted on it. The trout had a red and white lure in its mouth. Big drops of water flew off its head like sweat.

“Christ God!” Mother said when she saw me in my new outfit. “Look at you, Jackie! It's the president of the First National Bank himself!” She was honestly taken by my appearance. She pressed both hands flat against her stomach and laughed nervously. I went into her bedroom and looked at myself in the full-length mirror. I raised an eyebrow and frowned and curled my lips, one side of my mouth up, the other side down. I didn't look bad. I felt I looked handsome in that ugly gangster way. “Say your prayers, sucker,” I snarled, imitating Edward G. Robinson.

Gent fixed us dinner that day. Mother had allowed the kitchen to get grimy again, but Gent cleaned it before he started cooking. He was a good cook. He made a standing rib roast, scalloped potatoes, and three kinds of vegetables blanketed in a rich yellow sauce. I wore my blue suit to the table. LaDonna had received a new dress for the occasion. Gent was very generous to us. I had found a ten dollar bill in the inside coat pocket of the suit, and LaDonna had found a five pinned to her skirts. I ate dinner like a steel robot, but still managed to get salad dressing on my tie and yellow sauce on my coat sleeve.

The wedding took place in a minister's back office. It was stuffy and hot in there, and my blue suit made me feel sick, so I slipped out the door just as the minister was getting up a head of steam on the
subject of the good marriage and how easily it can jump the tracks and wreck itself in the rocky ravine of neglect. Good grooming, for instance, said the minister. Married folks tend to let themselves go as they gradually become familiar with one another. I saw Gent wink at mother when the minister said this, for Gent was nothing if not neat. And then, said the minister, there are the catfooted evils of spite, inattention, and the always misguided sense of independence. Amen, Doc, said Gent, under his breath.

I felt better out in the street. It was a cool day in early autumn. I walked to the closest drug store and bought a pack of cigarettes. The clerk didn’t blink an eye. I guess I looked smoking-age in my blue suit, shirt and tie. I also bought a cigarette lighter that had the shape of a leaping fish. It looked pretty much like the trout that was jumping on my tie. The idea of my tie and cigarette lighter matching each other appealed to me.

I walked back to the church learning how to inhale. The smoke made me dizzy in an agreeable way. I knocked the ash off my cigarette several times so that I could use my fish-shaped lighter to light up again. Lighting up needed a style, and I studied myself in store windows trying to perfect one. When I reached the church, I sat down on the front steps and lit up again. Some kids ran by pointing at me and yelling “I’m gonna te-ell, I’, gonna te-ell,” but I blew some smoke at them and laughed suavely at their childishness.

After the wedding we went for a drive in the country in Gent’s Buick Roadmaster, a black four-door sedan the size of a hearse. Gent parked next to an abandoned railroad depot. Mother and Gent walked down the old weedy rail-bed, and LaDonna and I explored the decaying brick depot. I actually found a set of ancient water-stained tickets that would have taken someone all the way to Chicago.

The windows of the depot were broken out and the floor was littered with a dank mulch of shattered glass and slimy leaves. I lit up a cigarette. LaDonna watched me with slowly widening eyes. I acted as though smoking was a trifle boring, as though smoking for us veterans was something to be endured fatalistically, like old wounds that would never quite heal.

I gave LaDonna a drag. Her brave curiosity wouldn’t let her refuse. She drew a lungful of smoke. I could see that she wanted to choke it out, but she wouldn’t let herself. “Give me one,” she said, the words grating on her parched vocal cords. I gave her one and lit it for her. She inhaled again and blew the smoke furiously out her nose, her
teeth grinding together in a tough smile.

"L.S./M.F.T.,” I said, imitating the radio commercial.

“What?”

“Lucky strike means fine tobacco,” I said.

She looked at the white cylinder in her hand. “Tastes like burning rubber,” she said.

We walked out onto the crumbling platform where people from another generation caught trains for Chicago. We could see Mother and Gent hugging down the rail-bed in the shade of an old rusted-out water tower. They kissed. Gent in his dark brown suit looked like a top-heavy bear. He was so much taller than mother that he had to lean down and hunch his back as he gathered her in his arms. The kiss was long and awkward and Mother dropped her purse into the weeds. She tried to lean away from him to retrieve it, but Gent held her fast in his desperate arms, his legs spread for power. It looked like a bear had caught up with a Sunday picnicker. I took out my fish lighter and watched them through the orange flame.

My suit and tie made me look older, and smoking made me feel older. Feeling older widened my interests. I took a bunch of Gent’s magazines up to my room once. I got them out of his office, which was a large panelled room next to the kitchen. Some of the magazines had full-color pictures of women wearing skimpy bathing suits. Others were of a more general interest. I read an article about the home life of stone age people. There were some drawings to go along with the article. The drawings showed short stubby women with furry tits tending a fire. They had faces only a zoo keeper could love. In the hazy distance, a group of short men without foreheads were carrying a huge wooly carcass of some kind. The caption under this drawing said: “The Backbone of Domestic Harmony is the Successful Hunt.”

I set the magazine aside and looked at the pictures of the women in bathing suits. These were modern women—long-legged, smooth, with faces that were angelic and yet available. They seemed to radiate heat. The stone age men in the other magazine would have murdered entire forests full of woolly animals for a smile from one of those faces.
I'd been lying on top of my bed in my pajamas, but now I felt too restless and warm to go to sleep. I got up and put on my suit. I watched myself smoke cigarettes for a while in the mirror above my dresser. I looked good, I was developing style. I wished my neck wasn't so skinny. I cinched my red tie, drawing the loose shirt collar tighter around my throat.

It was late, but I went into their room anyway. I guess I wanted some adult company. I snapped on the overhead light. There was a great rolling commotion in the canopied bed. I sat down in the chair next to mother's vanity and lit a cigarette.

"Say, listen to this," I said, flipping open the magazine I had brought with me. "This story is about a day in the life of a linoleum cutter. It tells about this Stanley Wallach. He cuts linoleum twelve hours a day in Perth, Australia, and hopes to save enough money in twenty years to buy his own island. He's going to call it New Perth and crown himself king. King Stanley the First."

"Jackie," Mother said, sitting up in bed. "You shouldn't come barging into a bedroom like that. You're old enough to know better."

I felt suave in my suit. I put out my cigarette just so I could light another one. I wanted them to see my style. Gent was sitting on the edge of the bed, his back to me, his large pale head in his hands. He was in his shorts. I blew a recently perfected smoke ring toward them, winking.

"When did you start smoking?" Mother asked.

But I only crossed my legs and laughed in a sophisticated way, sort of tossing my head back and winking again, this time at the ceiling. I felt clever. I felt that I more or less had an adult's grasp of things.

"And there's this family," I continued, "who talk backasswards to each other, if you can swallow it. No one but themselves can get what they're saying. It's like a foreign country right in the middle of the neighborhood."

"Jack, old boy," said Gent, getting heavily to his feet. The lump in his long shorts swung as he stepped around the big bed. His bulky stomach rolled above his thin white legs. "Jack, you really ought to tap on a door before storming in like that."

I thought for a few seconds, then said, "Sklof, taht tuoba yrros."

"What?" Gent said.

"That's how they must do it," I said. "Talking backasswards."

Mother took a deep breath. It looked like she was about to smile. "Jackie ..." she said.
I blew a fat doughnut straight up into the ceiling. “Okay, okay,” I chuckled. “I can take a hint.” I winked at them. Smoking had also given me a stylish chuckle, a husky little bark that trailed off into a world-weary wheeze. I stood up and yawned. I stubbed out my cigarette in their ashtray. “Guess I’ll hit the old sackeroo,” I said. “See you people in the morning.”

I strolled slowly out of their room, as if the reluctance was theirs, not mine.

Money and a nice big house made all the difference to Mother. She now looked young and happy again. She had a lively bounce to her walk and she wore make-up every day. She bought herself a new dress on the first of every month and her collection of shoes outgrew her closet. She looked beautiful in the morning in her red silk duster and blue mules and she looked beautiful in the afternoon in her expensive dresses.

Gent was proud to have such a good-looking young woman for his wife and he made no secret of it. Her small size thrilled him, just as it had my father. But where my father would pick her up and dance her through the house, Gent seemed almost afraid to touch her, as if she were made of rare porcelain.

He would take us for Sunday car rides in the Roadmaster just to show her off to the town. Mother would sit in the front seat next to Gent with her skirts hiked up for comfort, and LaDonna and I would sit in the back, reading the comic section. The Roadmaster had a radio, and Mother would search the dial for music as we idled in second gear through the streets of Far Cry.

The town on the north side of the river was usually smoky because of the teepee-shaped chip burners the lumber mills used to get rid of waste. On the south side, the air had a sulphurous sting to it because of the paper mill. On Sundays, though, the air on both sides of the river was not so bad. We’d drive down the tree-lined streets of the north side, and then, if we felt like it, we’d cross the Mill Avenue bridge and cruise the wider, treeless streets of the south side. Sometimes Gent would pull over and park and we’d listen to the radio for a while. People on the sidewalks, looking into the car, would smile and nod as if to approve our way of killing Sunday.

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Mother had a baby by Gent Mundy. It was a big baby and the delivery was an ordeal. It gave her milkleg and she had to stay in bed for nearly a month after she got home from the hospital. The head of the baby was so large that for a time the doctor thought it would not be able to pass through the birth canal. And when it did pass, it tore her badly. Gent felt terrible about this. I saw him once kneeling at her bedside, crying loudly, his face in his hands. But Mother healed quickly and soon the big, happy-dispositioned baby became the central attraction at our house.

They named him Spencer Ted. Spencer Ted looked like Gent, and Gent couldn't get over it. "The Mundy heir," he'd say, amazed. If I was in earshot, he'd get flustered and add, "No offense to you, Jack." But it didn't matter to me since no boy of thirteen cares much about inheriting a creamery. "My precious strapping fellow," Gent would coo to the big, round-headed baby, and if either LaDonna or I were nearby, he'd insist, "But, say, I love you kids too, just as if you were my own!"

All this didn't matter to LaDonna or me. We liked Gent because he was easy-going and generous. He gave us practically anything we wanted. LaDonna hinted for a microscope of her own, and Gent went right down to the Sears outlet and ordered an expensive binocular microscope complete with lab kit. I barely complained one day about having to ride my old, rusty Iver-Johnson bike, and the next afternoon after school I found a beautiful new Schwinn on the front porch, complete with basket, headlight, foxtails, and horn.

It didn't matter to me or LaDonna that Gent loved Spencer Ted best because we loved the new baby, too. He was happy as a cabbage and cute in an odd sort of way. All babies are more or less cute, but Spencer Ted's cuteness wasn't baby-cuteness. It was the cuteness of joke postcards, where unlikely combinations are relied on to produce a humorous effect. Like a fish wearing a saddle and a cowboy in the saddle twirling a rope, or a poodle smoking a pipe and reading the newspaper. With Spencer Ted, it was a fringe of red hair around his ears, which made him look like an old scholar, and a round, tomato-red nose, which made him look like a seasoned drinker. He had deep-set, coal-black eyes that missed nothing, and radiantly pink ears that bloomed under his fringe of hair like roses.
Spencer Ted seemed as pleased with the brand new world as Gent was with his brand new heir. Often LaDonna and I would take Spencer Ted out for a walk in his stroller, and when we did this, LaDonna liked to pretend that we were his parents. It was a game that tickled her, and she would say things such as, "We must find a suitable nurse for our darling little man, dear." She would speak in a stagey voice and people near us would wink and chuckle, for we were only children ourselves.

Sometimes we would sit down on a park bench and LaDonna would hold Spencer Ted in her lap. Being held in a lap was a signal for him and he would begin turning his big round head impatiently, looking for a full breast. This made LaDonna nervous and she would give him his pacifier which only gentled him for a few seconds. He would spit the pacifier out, arch his back angrily, and then grind his soft, drunkard's face into LaDonna's milkless ribs.

"Mamma spank!" LaDonna once said, embarrassed by Spencer Ted's aggressive search for satisfaction, and Spencer Ted, arrested by her sharp, scolding voice, studied her like an old scholar studying an obscure text, his black eyes wide with alarm. LaDonna immediately regretted her tone. "Oh no, Spencey," she said. "Mamma would never spank you."

We always went to Grassy Lake on the Fourth of July. Grassy Lake was a recreational area for the people of Far Cry. There was a beach and several boat-launching ramps. In the late fall, old men would fish off the ramps with cane poles, but in the summer there were only bathers and boats at the lake.

Spencer Ted was almost one year old by the Fourth of July, and we took him up to the lake thinking that he'd be thrilled with the fast boats, the long expanse of deep blue water, and the evening fireworks. But he was cranky and balked at everything we tried to interest him in. He sat under the beach umbrella with Gent, fussy and critical, while LaDonna and I made sand castles and Mother swam.

I didn't know Mother could swim, but she swam like a young girl out to the diving platform which was about fifty yards from shore. LaDonna and I watched her, amazed. When she reached the platform, she pulled herself easily out of the water and stood on the
planks, shimmering with wet light. She took off her bathing cap, releasing her long shining hair. Then she found a sunny spot and lay down on her back.

The arch of her ribs, her nicely muscled legs, the graceful reach of her relaxed arms, and the mass of dark glossy hair pillowing her head and shoulders, made all of us gaze out across the water like the stranded victims of a shipwreck afflicted with thirst-caused visions. It was like a spell. Finally Gent said, in dreamy baby-talk, "Thaz you booly-full Mamma, Spencey," and Spencer Ted, recognizing at last the impassable gulf between him and Mother, released a ragged forlorn sob.

LaDonna and I turned our attention back to our sand castles. They weren't very elaborate and we didn't mind wrecking them as soon as we got them built. We erected a city full of sloppy skyscrapers. "Let's A-bomb it," LaDonna said.

I was the B-29, arms out, rumbling through the hot sky, radio chatter of the crewmen alive in my head, sighting in on the muddy skyline of our city. Then, as I approached it, I picked up speed, bomb bay doors open, crew tense, and I released the bomb, Fat Boy. I had to be Fat Boy then, and I fell on the city, back first, squashing it flat and LaDonna made the A-bomb noise, the rolling boom and bleak sigh of the high sweeping wind.

We did this several times, and then I dove into the lake to wash off the mud. I swam out toward the diving platform, thinking to join Mother, but when I looked up I saw that there was a man standing behind her. He was big and heavily muscled. He had black hair, bright as freshly laid tar. He lifted his arms and flexed. The biceps jumped impossibly tall with cords of angry veins, violet under the oiled skin. Then he put his hands on his hips and drew in his stomach until his rib cage arched over the unnatural hollow like an amphitheater. His thighs from his kneecaps to hips were thick with bands of visible muscle. He moved from one pose to another, finally relaxing, hands on hips at a cocky angle, a swashbuckler's smile on his tanned face. Mother glittered like booty at his feet. But she acted as though she didn't see him, or even know he was there.

I swam back to shore, and joined Gent and Spencer Ted under the umbrella. LaDonna was building another city. This one was futuristic, with tall spires and cylinders and oddly concave walls. I got a half dollar from Gent and bought a package of firecrackers—"ladyfingers"—and a package of "whistlers." I thought we could blow this city up with ordinary explosives, one building at a time. Gent and
Spencer Ted took a nap. Gent was lying flat on his back with a towel over his face and Spencer Ted was tucked in the crook of his arm. I was afraid the "whistlers" might wake them, but they didn’t.

After the city was wrecked, I watched Mother swim. She stroked the water like a professional channel swimmer, but she wasn’t swimming back to us. She was swimming parallel to shore, away from the platform. The muscle-man with the black hair was in the water too. He didn’t swim as gracefully as Mother. The water churned around him and his black hair whipped from side to side. Even so, he swam much faster than Mother and was soon even with her. They tumbled water for a while, about one yard apart. I thought I could hear them talking. Then they swam back to the platform, side by side. He tried to match his stroke to hers, but it wasn’t easy for him. While she looked smooth and natural, he looked drugged.

He climbed out of the water first, then helped Mother. He pretended that she was too heavy for him and that she was pulling him off balance. He summersaulted over her into the water with a gigantic splash. Mother climbed up onto the platform, laughing. He joined her and then did a handstand. He began to walk around the perimeter of the platform on his hands while Mother shook out her hair. Mother leaned sharply to one side and then to the other, combing her hair with her fingers, while the muscle-man walked on his hands. It looked like some kind of crazy dance.

Gent and Spencer Ted were awake now and looking out across the water at Mother. Spencer Ted’s bald head looked like a smaller version of Gent’s. Spencer Ted lifted his fat white arm and pointed toward the diving platform. He moaned crankily and blew a fat spit bubble.

It was nearly evening. Soon the fireworks would begin.
RUDY AUTIO

Rudy Autio, born in Butte, Montana, has taught at the University of Montana for twenty-six years. He’s best known for his innovative work in clay, and his Retrospective exhibition—which includes many of his unique ceramic pieces—is currently making its way across the U.S. While his works arise out of, and speak of, Montana, they also address broader concerns. As James G. Todd concluded in his introduction to the Retrospective, “The human struggle to find balance between order and freedom appears universal, and perhaps, finally, it is Autio’s special emphasis on the tension between these two forces that is the hallmark and importance of his art.”
We drove up to Grassy Lake to meet a man named Carl Bowers. Gent was excited about something, I could see that, but his excitement had a tinge of gloom to it. Now and then the gloom would show through. One moment he seemed overjoyed, the next moment clouded over with doubt.

It was a boat. Carl Bowers was selling his sixteen foot cabin cruiser. "Damn!" Gent said as we drove down to the boat ramp where Bowers was waiting for us. "I’ve always wanted a boat like that!"

We got out of the car and approached Bowers. The boat was on a trailer down on the launching ramp, ready to go. Gent and Bowers shook hands. It was a solemn moment. Bowers looked as if he was about to cry. Gent took out his check book and wrote out a check for Bowers on the hood of the Roadmaster. Bowers squinted at the check and then stuffed it into his shirt pocket. "She’s all yours," he said.

Bowers put the boat into the water for us, backing the trailer that carried it down the ramp. Some old men who had been fishing off the ramp had to move out of the way and they weren’t too happy about picking up their gear and standing off to one side. Gent was at the helm and I sat on a seat in the stern of the boat as Bowers backed us into the water. When the boat was mostly in the water, Bowers set the handbrake of his truck and climbed out. He shoved us the rest of the
way in, then unhooked the trailer from his truck and drove away. Gent waved at him but Bowers never looked back. "I practically stole this little beauty from him, Jack," he said, in a guilty whisper.

Carl Bowers's wife, Gent said, had cancer, and Bowers had been forced to raise cash as quickly as possible to cover some medical expenses. He put his boat up for sale in the wrong season, and Gent's low bid proved to be the highest. "I got it for a song," Gent said, gleeful now, as we idled out toward the middle of the lake.

The light was December light — you sensed that darkness was never far away — but the warm air was June. I sat in the stern, trolling, wearing only a tee shirt and jeans, and Gent fished off the side in shirtsleeves. "You know what I'm going to call her?" he said.

"What?"

"The 'Jade Marie.' How does that strike you?"

"How come you're going to call her that?" I said.

I saw his face then and knew I'd made a mistake. I hadn't meant to question the logic of his choice of names, I just didn't remember that Mother's middle name was Marie. To make up for my mistake I said, "How come 'Marie'? What's the 'Marie' for, Gent?"

He brightened. "Well, that's your Ma's middle name, Jack. You didn't know that? It's a lovely middle name, don't you think?"

I nodded.

"I love how it fits her first name. Jade, then, Marie. Jade Marie. It has music to it. Jade Marie. Jade Marie. I could write a song around that name. Dum da dee, dum da dee. Jack, it's a lullaby of a name." He fingered an invisible sax as he hummed.

He smiled his long half-smile and reeled in. "I'm going to take a little snooze in the cabin," he said. "You enjoy yourself."

He climbed into the small cabin and shut the weathered door, leaving me all alone on the deck. I reeled in and put my pole up. The fish weren't hitting. The unseasonable heat had sent them down to the bottom and it would have taken dynamite to bring them up. I sat on the bench seat in front of the wheel and throttle. "Jade Marie," I whispered. "Jade Marie." It was true — the sound of it could make a cobra tie itself into a granny knot and shit pretzels. "Jade Marie, Jade Marie," I said, pressing the starter button.

The lake was glassy calm and black. I cruised to the far northern end of it where a few stony islands jutted up like the rough knees of
submerged giants. There were shallow channels between the islands where the water was pale green and clear. I cut the engine back to a slow idle. Schools of dolly varden dozed on the sandy bottom.

Once through the channels, I entered a swampy bay. I switched the engine off and baited my hook. On my first cast I got a strike. It was a good-size fish, but it had practically no fight in it. I dragged it toward the boat. Even when it was right next to the boat and could see me reaching down for it, it didn’t try to escape. I dipped the net down under it and scooped it in. It was a good five-pounder. Then I saw what it was. A squaw fish, a dingy bottom-crawling sucker, yellow bellied and useless. I slipped it off the hook and flipped it back into the water. The big squaw fish gave one lazy shove of its tail and drifted a few yards away from the boat. It lay there, only a few inches under the water, half on its side, as if its one moment in the atmosphere had caused it to forget that it was a fish. I had the feeling that it was looking at me, mildly curious. It hung in the pale green water like a yellow stain.

The boat began to rock. I looked up, expecting weather, but there was no cloud, no wind, just the unmoving December air. I opened the cabin door and looked in. Gent, in his underwear, was sitting on a bunk, retching. He was holding a bottle of bourbon by the neck.

“You want to do that over the side, Gent?” I asked.

He looked at me, his eyes flat and fishy, no recognition in them. He stopped retching and took a long drink. Then he capped the bottle, set it down, and curled up on the bunk.

I closed the door. The squaw fish was still there. I thought maybe that it had died. Its blunt nose was facing the boat and its big transparent lips were almost out of the water. I threw the rest of my night-crawlers at it and the fish, as if this was just what it had been waiting for, opened its mouth in a delicate yawn.

“Names,” Gent said, lying across the bow. He was pasting letters to the hull. They were the peel-and-stick-on letters you can buy in any hardware store. He was naming the boat Jade Marie. We were near a steep, stony shore, the sun a blinding flare of light in the western hills. “Names,” he repeated, grunting with discomfort. “They tell the story, Jack,”

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Rick DeMarinis
He sat up and took a deep, noisy breath. He was still in his underwear and very drunk. “Jade Marie,” he sang. “Jade me, Marie, oh, she laid me, Marie, for free, for free.” He rolled to his knees and crawled back toward me, dragging his bottle with him. “The job’s done,” he said. “The little bitch-boat is monickered.”

He climbed down into the cabin and came back out carrying his revolver. My heart jumped. I’d searched again for the gun that morning, thinking that I would hide it from him, but it was gone from its usual place behind the encyclopedia. “Names,” he said darkly, drawing a bead on a bleached stump on the shore. “They . . . (bang!) . . . tell . . . (bang!) . . . a (bang! bang! bang!) story,” he said, shooting. He fired the last shot and then refilled the gun with bullets from a carton. He put the gun down on the seat and took a short drink of bourbon. “You take Franklin,” he said. “There’s a name you can trust. I never knew a goddamned Franklin I couldn’t count on. A Franklin, Jack, will always give you a full dollar’s worth, no matter what he’s selling.”

He went on for a long while about names. He said that anyone could tell an awful lot about someone just by knowing the name they had grown up under. A name is like a severe birthmark, he said. You can’t grow up ignoring it. It affects the way you think about yourself. No ‘Uriah’ for instance, could ever really think of himself as a happy-go-lucky slapdash roustabout. A boy named Uriah must always think of himself as a careful old man, beyond the toys and whims of childhood. You just never mind that old crap about what’s in a name and a rose by any other label would still knock your eyes out. No, no, no. It just isn’t so. The name itself is the key. Call a rose a ‘hemorrhoid berry’ and watch if anybody sniffs it. So this Franklin fellow — forget the slant of his jib and the cast of his eyes — this Franklin fellow will not be satisfied until he’s got the job done.

It didn’t make much sense to me, this drunken theorizing about names, but I had the feeling that it didn’t matter to him one way or the other. I mean, I didn’t really believe that he was talking about what he appeared to be talking about. The words were just pouring out of him like a bright cataract from a grim hill. The cataract and the hill had nothing to do with one another. I was old enough at the time to understand that such a thing might be possible and so I let him ramble on without commenting or nit-picking. I might have said, “You mean that there was never a worthless Franklin in the history of the world or that some Uriah didn’t drink and screw himself into an early grave?” but I didn’t. But I was also young enough to think that there
might be a grain of truth in what he was saying, even though I felt that none if it meant very much to him.

Something moved among the large stones on the shore, an animal of some kind. It was a big-horn sheep. Three of them, in fact, moving slowly among a cluster of stones. They stopped and stared at us, curious. Gent sighted on one of them but didn’t pull the trigger. Instead, he put the gun down and leaned over toward me. He cupped his hand on the back of my ears, and the big-horn sheep trotted off into some scrub pine. Gent chuckled. “Your Ma and I,” he said, “we’re having some troubles.”

I nodded. He picked up his bottle and took a drink, then offered it to me. I took several swallows. Gent looked at me, somewhat amazed. “A seasoned tippler,” he said. “You’d better watch that, Jack. It can get away from you.”

He was no one to talk, but there was no point in saying this. “It tastes like gasoline anyway,” I said, and it wasn’t a lie. Gin, bourbon, scotch — all foul and fiery and no one, I believed, would ever touch any of them if it weren’t for the splendid effect they had on the mind.

“Part of the problem,” Gent continued, “between your Ma and me is...”

“The saxophone.” I knew his hobby, the sax, irritated her.

“What? The sax? No, Jack, not the sax! Where did you get an idea like that? No, it’s the fact that I’m around the house too much. My office is in my home, my business is in my home and the nature of my work gives me a great deal of free time. My sax playing hasn’t got anything to do with it.” He drank, passed the bottle to me, I drank. “Now the point is, a woman cannot stand to watch a man taking his ease in his own home. It makes her anxious. It isn’t her fault, mind you. This is something that’s been bred into the female of the species down through the ages. They can’t help themselves. See, tens of thousands of years ago, the man who relaxed around the campfire was as good as dead, and so was his family. Women got to thinking of a lounging man as a direct threat to their welfare — no matter that the larder is full and the checking account is flush. We’re speaking of the primitive level, here, the thing that dwells underneath good sense and obvious circumstances. I have a very good business that practically runs itself. There’s nothing in Far Cry by way of competition. As far as the folks of Far Cry are concerned, I am a relatively rich man. So, much of my time is my own. Oh, I do some cooking, and some household chores, but even so, if your Ma sees me lounging on the
divan reading one of my magazines, that age-old primitive anxiety surges up in her and she becomes peevish and out of sorts.” He took another drink, passed me the bottle. I held it for a few seconds, then took a sip. I passed it back to him and he took a sip. He gave it to me, and I gave it back, and he recapped it. I waited for him to continue, but he didn’t.

That’s it? I wanted to say. That’s what you think is wrong with Ma?

“What are you grinning at, Jack?” he said.

I rubbed the grin off my face with both hands. “Nothing,” I said. “You think I’m off the mark, is that it?”

I shrugged, fought the stupid grin twitching in my numb face. I grabbed the bottle and took a fierce pull. The sun was gone and the air was tinged with smoky blue as the long shadows of the hills swept the lake.

“She does things, I know that,” he said softly. “But it’s her way of telling me that she’s being let down, Jack. I suppose it’s true. I’ve been a bachelor too long. I guess I’ve let her down.”

“No you haven’t,” I said.

He looked at me sharply. “No, I guess I haven’t,” he said. He helped himself to a lengthy session with the bottle. He picked up the gun and sighted down the bow at nothing. He fired it and a piece of the boat flew into the lake.

“You hit the boat!” I said. I crawled up on the bow to see what damage had been done.

“The Jade Marie is nothing if not durable, Jack,” he said, taking a bead at something off the stern. He fired two shots, this time missing the boat. He had an ugly look on his face. An angry sadness turned the corners of his mouth severely down. His derelict eyes saw nothing but betrayal and defeat though the darkening lake and surrounding landscape reminded me of a picture-postcard I once saw that had the caption: “God’s Majestic Handiwork Unsullied by Man.”

He climbed back down into the cabin, taking the bottle and the gun with him. “Leave the gun here, Gent,” I said. He looked back at me from the doorway of the cabin. “I just want to do some shooting,” I said, trying to smile. He handed me the gun, grip first, then a box of shells.

But I didn’t do any shooting. I started the engine and headed back to our ramp, throttle open.
I gunned the engine and aimed at the ramp. When the Jade Marie hit the foot of the ramp, I switched the engine off. I woke Gent and pulled him out of the cabin. I climbed out of the boat and then helped Gent. Before he climbed down, he tossed two boxes of bullets up the ramp. He was as drunk as I’d ever seen him. He staggered as he stepped onto the ramp, almost pitching over into the water. He was still in his underwear, but he held the gun tightly in his right hand.

I walked up to the car, thinking to back it down to the trailer. I wondered if Gent knew how to winch the boat onto the trailer, but then realized that it didn’t make any difference if he knew how to or not since the Roadmaster hadn’t been equipped with a trailer hitch. There was no way to haul the Jade Marie home. This exasperated me and I turned to walk back down to the boat ramp, but as I turned I heard the gun go off. Gent had shoved the boat off the ramp and it was drifting about a dozen yards away. He was sitting on the wet concrete slab and firing rounds at the little cabin cruiser.

“Gent! Gent!” I yelled, running up to him. “What are you doing that for?”

“I’m sending her down, Jack,” he said, reloading the cylinder. “I’m sinking the Jade Marie.” He was speaking calmly, in the same tone of voice he would use to explain the temperature gauges on the pasteurizer.

I stepped back and watched him raise the gun and sight down the barrel. He fired and a hole the size of a quarter appeared near the bow, on the water-line. “Ho!” he yelled, pleased with his marksmanship.

I said, a bit lamely, “What about your clothes? Your clothes are in the cabin.”

But he didn’t seem to hear me. He fired again.

“What about Carl Bowers then?” I said, feeling the whisky come on me strong. “What about his wife? If it wasn’t for her he wouldn’t have had to sell you his boat.”

But he didn’t hear the tortured logic of all this and continued to drill quarter-size holes into the hull of the Jade Marie, near and under the water-line. There was only one valid logic at work: It was his boat, and he wanted to sink it.

He opened the other box of shells. The Jade Marie was beginning to list slightly. The impact of the large caliber slugs was driving it farther and farther out into the lake. The moon was up off the hills, bone white and full. “Sink bitch,” Gent said calmly.
It was the worst thing you could do to a boat like that. It was such a pretty thing, a true ornament for a majestic, unsullied lake. It had a beautiful shape, clean white and perfect blue with a snappy orange flag flying off the stern.

There was an old man fishing off the shore, about a hundred feet from the ramp. He was not looking at us. It must have taken quite an effort to do that. I walked up to the car. I sat in the front seat, behind the wheel. In the rear-view mirror I could see the bow of the Jade Marie was under water and the stern was in the air. I got out of the car to watch it go.

But it didn't go. It hung suspended between life and death. Gent was standing now, watching it, the gun at his side. I walked down to him.

"I'm out of bullets," he said.
"Let's go home," I said.
"Look," he said. "She won't go down. There's enough holes in her to sink two boats, but not this Jade Marie of mine. What do you make of it, Jack?" He was grinning, like a man hopelessly amused at the perversity of the world.

I took the empty gun out of his hand. "Let's go," I said. He had planned the whole thing and it made me snap at him. The boat rolled over suddenly, but did not sink. Whatever had been done, it had been done to me too. "Goddamn it," I said.

Gent looked at me as if for the first time ever. I looked at him in the same way. We may have been right. I threw the gun into the lake as hard as I could. It bounced off the upside-down boat.
Harry Humes lives in the country near Allentown, Pa., with an extraordinary woman named Nancy, who shares his fondness for Brittany spaniels and cats and long walks in the mountains. He enjoys bicycling, fishing for trout, hunting ruffed grouse, and in the evenings, carving song birds and whales out of wood. He also enjoys the seasonal rhythms of his Pennsylvanina Dutch neighbors as they go about tending their fields.

He edits a small magazine called Yarrow, a Journal of Poetry, that is published out of the English Department of Kutztown University. His first book, Winter Weeds, was the 1983 Devins Award for Poetry winner and was published in the spring of 1983 by the University of Missouri Press. He also has a chapbook called Robbing the Pillars coming out in February or March of 1984 from Adastra Press in Easthampton, Massachusetts.
LISTENING TO ONE THING AT A TIME

Say it is evening and a neighbor's hardwoods
float on the mosquito mist rising from the fields,
or morning and a woman sits on a bed
in a black dress twisting her fingers around and around
and talking of white blossoms,
say it is the air picking up speed
and the season unfolding like a shape you almost miss.
Maybe the woman is now by a table
studying the red-winged blackbirds
calling above the hickory and mint.
Say there is a road north with foxglove and lobelia,
that it's only the whistling
behind the crockery of late afternoon
or just before dawn that causes her to pause
and for a moment remember a single sound
like ice sliding into Baffin Bay,
the green note of memory this blue day
singing through a grain of dust.
WINTER STORM WATCH

In this afternoon of dark December
coming too quickly past the blaze-orange coats
of hunters, I watch first flakes of a storm
that’s tracked us for days. Vivaldi
the one-eyed cat moves past table and rocker
like a last measure; my small daughter
breathes easily, safely through her nap.

It is almost like old crockery, the light
that slips behind locust and holly trees.
Pheasants flare briefly in the orchard,
a branch crackles, snow begins to hiss and smolder
across winter wheat.

The shadows in this room remind me
of places where something has drifted
too sweetly from face to face,
or how I have often waked before dawn
for no good reason and wandered
from bedroom to kitchen,
listening to walls and water pipes,
stood near doorway and studied skin rising
and falling, the dark that turned away
almost like a face, and then, restless,
gone back to bed to dream of women
in linen blouses.

Everywhere now, by rose-hip berries
and frozen stream, the small silences gather.
By morning they will be whiter, deeper,
called-out to by a single name.
There's more to it than driving a road
and seeing the stumps like dark pins in a map,
and then the way I stop and walk out
to the wooden boat rotting on its chain.
More to it than the horseshoe sunk in clay
and the way suddenly I want to hear something
over the water, to have its great fish
swim close to shore, the way I want to be out there
by the stumps with the light on me like bark,
and turning one over and finding a message
about hard weather or love,
or what happened one soft evening in a back cove,
a man and a boy fishing,
and then a woman on shore waving them in.
And later by a dark window the smell of wild chives,
a single splash out on the water.
THE WOMAN WHO CALLED WHALES ACROSS THE FIELDS

You hear her first one evening in August, *click click click* over the fields, stone house, the tin roof of the barn. Then for months there's nothing, just the changing air, roadside filling with asters and primrose, the slow overtaking of water by ice. You sit all day at the round wooden table listening for her between snowfalls.

Then it is April near chickweed, an afternoon of hepatica and celandine, and off by the pond, yes, a sound like rocks clicked off each other under water. You follow it through light that looks all wrong over the dirt road. And then there are clouds like belly pleats, sounds across the watercress like jug music, and in the morning the alfalfa pushed down, an old shawl on the fence, the kitchen quiet.

For weeks after, you walk back to that place where windows have been nailed shut, and remember the sound as though up through a small boat's ribs, that thin oily film across trees and horizon.

And how as you closed the front gate, there were those sounds, as though someone were twisting rubber bands across the end of a long braid just before sleep.
SEASCAPE WITH ITALIAN BICYCLE CAP

After three or four days, the island seems to grow beyond its seven miles, and I'll begin to have a hard time remembering what its name means in Indian. There'll be a trawler working the horizon and suddenly close to my right forearm will be the deep green silences of wild grape vines in the old orchard back home. Or as the pelicans fly past, one of them will rear back on its wings, beak pointed straight down at the water, and then plunge heavily yet buoyantly into the sea, with a last second turning of its body before entering, as if far back in the solid brain it knew exactly the principle of the auger. Maybe the woman will be bobbing offshore on the yellow raft and waving excitedly as I feed cheese crackers to the gulls. Sometimes the noise it makes, especially when the wind comes from the northwest, is like the collapsing sound of a coil-spring toy progressing stupidly down step after step. Still, I study the rigs of the campers or watch until I am dizzy the roll of the _Blue Raider_ coming in, its mate fileting flounder or blue. Or my eyes return to the white breasts of the nude girl lying by the wooden storm fence. I try not to think of anything, but as I am letting some sand sift through my fingers, I think of a photograph, circa 1947, of my sister and the man she would marry. They are leaning against a metal railing and behind them is the Pagoda that sits on a hill above the mills and outlet stores of a Pennsylvania city. Suddenly, it's as if the light forcing its way under the small white peak of my Italian bicycle cap needs only a few more inches of salt air or memory to turn what's left of the week into a sudden explosion of small black flies that bite deeper and deeper and eventually force us off the sand and back along the causeway and clam flats where the Louisiana heron muddy the water with their comic open-winged feeding dance.
No, not the lake with its white sails
and cliffs and how it shines for miles
above its deep gorge, but first the cry
of the red-tailed hawk above the timothy
and then as though fetched up from the moment
just after a black and tan dog has turned
behind the mulberry tree, this:

a mule and wagon
and their slow procession up a wooded hill,
and the house below, the door off its hinges,
sheets and pillows neatly piled on the bed.
And then a shadow that pulls like plow points
across gallberry bush and dog fennel.
Yes, like the clearest of water, the voices
on the hill, Oh Ancient of Days, Ancient of Days.
THE DROUGHT WALKERS

They move like shallow breathing
past riverbeds and dull-eyed deer
they stop to listen near old turtle shells
their fish belly hands touch brown yarrow
the wind burns across wrist and tongue
even as they kneel with children by forked sticks
hoping to be asked about sorrow
of jawbone and socket the way they have become
dull histories

One will whisper of lizards
the absence of dogs behind them what happened
to the hearts of the women

At evening they lie down
lighter than ashes their eyes gather moonlight
brittle as old snakeskins slowly stars cross
the sky slowly they count the hours
until first light trickles down mountains
and they rise by blackbirds
their hearts are the gray ends of rivers
boxes of dust hear them Christ hear them
near moss and empty barns
these small drying things of the world
JOY DeSTEFANO

THREE DRAWINGS AND A WOODCUT

1. Our Baby
2. Nostromo
3. Hinckley
4. Untitled
SEA DIAMONDS

He came here either
because the fishing was good
or this late at night in late summer
no one else did.
It was two months
since the crib death of his daughter,
and he came here
because he could not imagine coming here,
with the same thoughts, for years.
Or he came because
he had read about people
finding in the rocks of the jetty
natural diamonds, polished by the sea.
Most nights he stood on the jetty's end
and cast out, far,
his body twisting like a gesture of denial.
When he couldn't tell the waves
from the sweat on his collar
he withdrew to the beach and cast again.
But this night he stayed on the jetty.
He thought he saw,
in a rock's cemented crevice,
a sparkling.
Legs heavy with high water,
he climbed out to sea,
and when he came to the spot
a wave bucked him, then revealed the rock.
He grabbed not loose diamonds but fast quartz.
Now he came to the reason for his coming:
he remembered his wife's cry,
the room, the mobile above the crib,
but for all he wished to forget,
he could not remember
trying to revive his daughter.
At this moment if the waves had not
knocked him off balance he would have
fallen to his knees anyway.
IMMER ZU BENENNEN

Immer zu benennen:
den Baum, den Vogel im Flug,
den rötlichen Fels, wo der Strom
zieht, grün, und den Fisch
im weissen Rauch, wenn es dunkelt
über die Wälder herab.

Zeichen, Farben, es ist
ein Spiel, ich bin bedenklich,
es möchte nicht enden
gerecht.

Und wer lehrt mich,
was ich vergass: der Steine
Schlaf, den Schlaf
der Vögel im flug, der Bäume
Schlaf, im Dunkel
geht ihre Rede—?

Wäre da ein Gott
und im Fleisch,
und könnte mich rufen, ich würd
umhergehn, ich würd
warten ein wenig.

Johannes Bobrowski
Always to be named:
the trees, the bird in flight,
the reddish rock where the river
moves, green, and the fish
in white smoke, when it darkens
over the forest.

Symbols, colors, it is
a game I think
may not finish
fairly.

And who can teach me
what I have forgotten: the sleep
of stones, the sleep
of birds in flight, the sleep
of trees, their speech
moves in darkness.

Were there a God
and in the flesh,
and he could call me, I would
walk around, I would
wait a little.

translated by Paul Morris
MONHEGAN ISLAND, MAINE 1918

No ships have passed but the wind
hard in from the Atlantic
searches out each cave and crevice
where light refuses to go.
Here, by these rock cliffs
pounded to raw stone
I set my easle up again.
Midday and I have
only sketched in the sky,
its undiluted blue.
Still I am content
to let coarse rock remain,
to let Manhattan slip
like driftwood out of sight.
Only the grass is moved by wind.
On Monhegan at last
my canvas fills,
the ease of my fingers
mixing rock and weathered grass.
For miles the ocean
cleared of barges, pleasure boats
that stray north of Gloucester.
I stare out like
some tourist in the Louvre.
There is no point in being romantic
about this island, the summer
that swallows me
in its drafts and warm air.
I paint, that's all. Wind
has no color, only the bend
of trees, rocks hissing in sun.
In fall I'll return
to New York, my blasted studio
where city buildings
dilate on canvas. But not now, not with the full noon sun about to step down and claim the whole island.
PRACTICE

The world arrived
so carefully packed
in time,
in time to open,
it could have been
God's parachute.
We booby-trapped it.
God, you will remember
from the Old Testament,
was a terrorist.
Now he's a generalization.
We've taken to scaring ourselves.
We scare the ozone layer.
But today, still spinning
around the world's axis,
which is imaginary,
I was permitted to walk home
again through writhing spring.
Leafy things and flowers
in earnest,
ignoring fear.
If it was anything
it was a garden.
Then, by the gymnasium
I saw a girl
in a green leotard with long sleeves.
She wasn't just any girl,
she was a dancer,
which is to say only
she didn't regret
her body.
She moved in it
and it moved.
She spun herself around.
She wasn't dancing, exactly,
more like she was practicing a dance,
getting the moves right,
which moved me
even more.

Sure I wanted her,
but I stood quietly
as she practiced dancing
alone, without music,
and then I continued on.
It wouldn't have been a good thing
to interrupt that solitude
identical with her body,
or risk frightening her
with speech.
THE TEACHING ASSISTANT TO HIS SECOND-SEMESTER COMPOSITION CLASS

If you were to tell me
about your first kiss
or the first time you got drunk
or the night you learned
your oldest brother had been killed
in Vietnam

and if you believed I really want to hear

you would remember her name
was Sally Mae Rankin
and you were fourteen
the night you slipped
out of the church social,
and how standing on the back steps
in the dark
you took off her glasses,
then had to hold them,
closed your eyes,
felt your heart
trying to crawl out your ears,
and brushed her lips

remember
speeding down back roads near Anton,
eyes peeled for red lights,
hearing the brown bottles crash
against rocks in the bar-ditch,
feeling your eyes tilt thirty degrees,
feet tight in your boots

or crying and throwing up,
then dreaming about mosquitoes
feasting through torn khaki

80
in a rice paddy
brown with water-buffalo shit,
and waking,
the way June bugs
crinkled blind
into the porch light;
how two weeks later
riding on a bus past the downtown Penney's,
you saw a display for winter clothes.

then we could sit over coffee or a beer
and know what a crime it is
to waste words
like "Hollywood makes many movies each year,
and not everyone will like every movie."
There are two senses only: right and left
and what is poured between them. Mindful hands
that are kept open in a dream of cupping. One attentive
to its touching by deletion, one that trembles
with the details of amnesia. And what you remember
about water is the way the cold is spelled
across each hand, the letters wet. You learned
the word, the depth-obsessive other
word for water: a specific silence ten blues deep
with cool hands finally surfacing.
You learned the word for water by caressing
all that you could pour between two senses. It runs
into many words. Imagine swans
who come to water, how they bring their swimming
with them. The surface is eventful with reflections,
while the orange feet beneath it
send entire landscapes shoreward in their lazing circles.
And the whirling that implies a shore by repetition,
one wave passed into the same hand over, an arrival
handed dry. There is a painter leaning deep
into his easel: mirror submerging both
its faces. Self-portrait of a man asleep
and picture of what has been looked at calmly:
sky, a left hand wind that blows against the right
and places motion in among the trees across the water.
And the painter's in there, brush held to the sky, one side
dipped high in the direction
of the cold that we call wind.
EMENDING THE FIRST REPORT

I. Eighty-three and Other Things It Was Not

It was neither my contempt
for phantoms of excellence
nor my praise for all
that whirls outside myself,
nor the mathematical coincidence
of my grandmother's eighty-third year
with my eighty-three degree summer porch
and its tarantula
stationed at foundation's crack.
It was neither lack of love
nor the old love-lust-guilt confusion,
nor Billy Burroughs' allusive tongue
rimming the corpse's crotch
who screams in his long sleep
like that starving spider.
And no, this newsprint was not meant to shock
the tenderness of your true self
nor blacken the tips of my honest fingers.
It was neither serious
nor Garden nor God nor Jesus
nor Matter nor Devil
nor wren nor robin
retrogressing into one.
It was not longing for long roads
to loved one waiting
like birds for evening on the Amazon,
neither calm locations
nor uprooted revisions
nor labia of tomatoes
nor stream of consciousness
melting its milky snow
nor romantic numbness
in your grey girl's eye.
It was not the prophets
nor foregone grandmothers
nor will it ever be us.
It was neither nauseous
nor did it have Nastassia’s face.
And it will never conclude,
but there was a consensus
that it leads to the kind
indifference of ignorance.

II. Offspring

It’s 5 p.m. and 95° in Vincent, Ohio,
and that’s exactly what it is. Sweating,
an old man sits on his porch, tapping the rhythm

with his cane, while mating sparrows match it
in the clematis surrounding him. As I run past
on the gravel road, I’m trying to be serious

about centering myself. Luckily,
I lose interest, watching dragonflies
swirl hungrily in the dust.

I will hazard a guess at fate, Moira,
that our genitals will never join again.
We collided. We did not meet.

An impatient cadillac roars up from behind.
With “LORD” on its license, it swerves
around me, slinging dust into my lungs.
Screaming for Jesus on a megaphone, 
the evangelist rattles pollen off the corn 
filling the sky with allergic blood.

I breathe the powdered bones of my ancestors. 
But in my groin, a child is waiting — I will drink 
creme de cassis and soda, eat lily buds

and raspberries for supper, in training not to try 
too hard, nor rank myself above the Lepidoptera. 
Some decadence and conception, Monarchs fill the air.
This may take some coaxing, but see it: the rows of tulips blindfolded by late season snow, the pines standing for a country of lakes that mean hard winters, meaning more than that.

I struggled up scents of huskings. The legs of women turned to fat to bear the weight they carried. Today even the dreams punish, turn a decade up from textbooks, pungencies men died of, the lounge whores like sad school-girls at a pep-rally. Afternoons I might be manning a steamshovel or forklift, I listen to music I missed then. Some word catches mood, some levity of flatpicked steel. Clouds smear across thousands of miles and ten years.

My blood sorts out that tempting memorabilia. I go out into the city, into an afternoon of jackhammers, of roofers tapping down new shingles. I want what their hands mean, building their days toward evenings love comes home to. Not this x-ing of purchases
off lists that blank forever
on me, these waitresses, cashiers,
their names on plastic nameplates
pinned to their breast pockets,
these eyes I explain myself to
over daiquiris and after,

that set me
along a too familiar route.
INERTIA AND WHAT EMERGES

Like a man married so many years
he fears single beds
broods in twilight
watches curtains dampen with rain

window gaping and mute
cigarette hissing
he wants the touch of
something impeccable from his past

he wants the feel of a rake in his hand
scent of smoldering leaves
his wife crossing the yard from
shade to sun

the afternoon beneficent and still
his wife lacing woolen arms behind his neck
smelling of soil, talc, perspiration
the aromas of his plausible life

He feels the hollowness begin at dusk
another bad imitation of home
lovers embracing beneath his window
so enamored of the generous world

he wants to bang the window and warn them
sees his marriage dissolve in each
tender weaving of limbs
throws every switch he can find

lights, television, microwave
feeds ice cubes to his blender
just for the noise
finally throws up his hands
having known all along
the limits of brute faith and bombast
slams the apartment door behind him
taking three stairs at a time to

street level where he pauses to breathe
sees a woman crossing the street from
shade to sun
gust of wind lifting her hair

who takes him by surprise and
smiles for no reason,
like a man married so many years
he can surrender his wife to the world

and blame no one
like a man who believes for this moment
stepping through the doorway
there is grace and vision and in his life.
ALL AUTUMN

All autumn, in the graveyard, the dead
don’t rise:
not one of then upturns the dying grass,

but the oak leaves keep falling
until the paths are all full,
covered and dark,
as if there’s no way out of the graveyard.

* 

I wish the dead would stay visible
a long time,
like burned-out stars
shining in little spikes among the living.

I wish God would let them die
a little at a time, like stars,
and burn their way back to His darkness,

like a black coal with its razor-cut of fire.

At least we could think they resemble us
before they disappear in the deep black of the dirt
or the sky.
At least they could wait here beside us

like a row of bare oak trees in the dusk.
Our school had a way of chewing up music teachers, and Mrs. Shannon was no exception. Everyone knew she was destined to last a year, two at most, and we treated her accordingly. She must have known it too; there was something harassed and defensive about her from the first. She was a tall, rawboned woman in her forties or fifties, a handsome woman who had auburn hair that she wore up in a twist. I think I hated her on sight. She was alone in the community, a southern Anglican among German Lutherans, Irish Catholics, and a petty aristocracy of blue-nosed Methodists. Whoever Mr. Shannon had been, he was long gone before Palemon got hold of her. As far as anyone knew, the only creature in the world to love her was a balding, neurotic, neutered golden retriever named Willis.

Mrs. Shannon rented a little stucco house not far from the school, and Willis lived in the back yard on a chain. He had the use of an elaborate doghouse, the whim of some retired farmer long a ghost, that was a replica of the house his mistress lived in; it had little windows with glass in them (knocked out with stones soon after Willis moved in) and a piece of sewer tile sticking out of the roof that was supposed to be a chimney.

Willis might've been all right, but his small domain lay next to the alley that several of us used to walk to school. He was a nervous dog,
and so he had to bark; he was on a heavy chain, there was clearly on
harm in him, and there were rocks in the alley's gravel, but even after
he knew better he continued to challenge us each time we passed his
way. Not that we were cowards exactly; we would've stoned a vicious
dog, or a brave dog to viciousness if it had been Mrs. Shannon's.

It was Mrs. Shannon's job to try to make us sing, and ours to
thwart her as much as possible. She drilled the high school choir early
in the morning (in winter, next door to where the band was
practicing), and after school was over in the afternoon she dealt with
Glee Club or Triple Trio or, in season, tried to get the cast ready for
the Christmas program or the annual operetta. During the day she
haunted the grade school rooms, a gaunt and somewhat alarming
specter of culture. We'd had an understanding with previous music
teachers: if allowed to sing as a group, secure and anonymous, we
would boom out "Filla me roo reoo re ay, a-workin' on the railway"
or whatever other nonsense was required, but if asked to perform
individually we would blush, squirm, giggle, and generally clam up.
Mrs. Shannon showed a reckless disregard for this convention of
class warfare; she wanted us to sing harmony, and so she had to find
out who could carry a tune and who couldn't. This was precisely the
information our system was designed to protect, and a stalemate
resulted, a Lebanese truce punctuated by shelling across the border.
Her weapons were scowls and trips to the principal's office; ours were
truculence and spitwads.

My own personal vendetta with Mrs. Shannon began one period
when she caught me drumming. What I was doing was vibrating a
pencil in time with some phonograph music she was playing that day;
I think it was dixieland marches. Occasionally, whether from
desperation or apathy, she brought in the phonograph and played
records to us for an hour. We were bored on principle, but we liked it
better than her. I would hold the pencil point down and strum the
eraser end, and the resulting buzz would be amplified nicely by the
hollow desk; it was an inconspicuous movement and the sound had a
ventriloquial property. Occasionally she would rise from her seat in
front and stalk the room, a hawkish look in her hazel eye, and I would
stop until she returned to her place. I thought I was annoying her
handsomely.

Finally she stood up abruptly during one of my performances and
snapped out, in drill-sergeant tones, "Who's doing that?" Of course
no one volunteered the information, but some spineless canary in the
class must have flicked an eye my way. In a moment she was standing
by my desk, where I was frozen, pencil poised, nonplused by my predicament. If I'd had the composure to laugh I would've retained control of the situation, but I tried a stone face instead; a telltale blush crept over me, and suddenly it was I, not Mrs. Shannon, who was the butt of laughter. I learned what every dictator knows, that loyalty inspired by terror is transient. Instead of an outright laugh I broke down in a foolish giggle, and her conquest was complete. The flush of blood had brought tears to my eyes, and I was on the verge of one of my fits of fury, but her look disarmed me. She was smiling, examining me with a sort of intent curiosity.

"That's very good, you know, what you're doing," she said. "Not everyone can do that."

I gave the red eraser a few more flicks, and looked up warily, waiting for a reaction.

"Yes. Well; see me after school today. In the music building. I'll be giving a voice lesson, just follow your ears."

I could've gotten away with not going, but that afternoon I climbed the steps of the old gray building that housed Music, Home Ec, and Vocational Agriculture, feeling a mixture of curiosity, defiance, and fear. I found my way to Mrs. Shannon's office, suffering the hostile stares of high school and junior high students on whose territory I was intruding. She was giving a voice lesson, sure enough; I waited for a lull in the racket and knocked on the door.

It was opened by Geraldine Schaller, a big-bosomed sophomore who had been my sitter in times past. Mrs. Shannon sat at a battered upright piano, looking straight across at me. She was as tall sitting down as Geraldine was standing.

"Hello," she said. "Oh, it's you." She got up from the bench, smoothing her skirt and steadying the music in front of her. "Miss Schaller, I shall return to you once I deal with this offender. What's your name?"

It was me she meant, and so I told her, meeting her direct and amused gaze as best I could. I would've added my rank and serial number if I'd had them.

"Well, Joseph," she said. "I've thought of a punishment which I'm sure you'll agree is very suitable. Come and take your medicine."

She led the way down a corridor to the room that was used for choir practice. It was a large, empty, echoing room with plaster walls and a hardwood floor, containing another upright piano and a half circle of rickety platforms on which there were music stands. In the
empty space between the piano and the platforms there stood a simple trap layout, two snares, bass drum and cymbal. She walked directly to it.

"Come here," she said. "Sit."

I sat down on a piano stool in front of the drums, and she handed me a pair of sticks. I held them woodenly in one hand, as though they were a scepter or a club.

"Like this." She deftly took my hands and placed them over one of the snares, with the sticks balanced. "You have to hold them so they're free to bounce. You'll get the hang of it. What kind of music do you like best?"

"I don't know," I said. "Elvis Presley." I wasn't sure I liked Elvis, in fact I was partial to Rosemary Clooney; but I thought it'd be a good bet to annoy her.

She laughed. "Thought you'd say that," she said. "Today you'll have to settle for Louis Armstrong, anyway, because that's what I've got on the tape player." She walked over to a gray suitcase-shaped machine that was sitting by the wall, and bent down and punched a button; a preliminary hum came out as the tubes warmed up.

"Make some noise," she said, "I want to hear you. When the tape runs out you can go."

As she'd anticipated, I enjoyed my "punishment." After that, for a while, a truce developed; risking my classmates' ridicule, I began to cooperate more in class, even to the point of singing out loud by myself on one or two occasions; and I was allowed to practice on the drum set three days a week. Grade school football did not exist then; it was too wet for baseball in the vacant lots, too cold for fishing for bullheads in the gravel pit. I continued my after-school drumming. I had begun to fancy myself, was learning to read music and surreptitiously working on rock-and-roll licks. When Mrs. Shannon offered me a part in the Christmas concert, I was so pleased I could barely maintain my sullenness.

"Maybe," I mumbled. "I'll ask my Dad."

My father had his own problems. On my account he'd done what he wouldn't do for my mother: he'd given up over-the-road trucking and made a kind of transition to truck-line owner, so that he could spend most nights at home. Still, he was dispatcher, personnel manager, accountant, bill collector, mechanic, and, in spite of his best intentions, part-time driver. He was glad to see me take an interest in something besides vandalism to fill in the hours between school and supper. I was too wild and thought I was too grown-up for a sitter,
and too young to entertain myself without getting into trouble. I practiced in the evenings, too, on a rubber pad; I was quick to dispose of my homework, and TV hadn’t yet come to Palemon. Eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and rolls took me to bedtime, and in my sleep I sat in the spotlight, leading the band.

My big part in the Christmas program was more mundane. The choir was going to sing that song America knows so well from listening to supermarket Muzak from Thanksgiving through December: “Come, they told me, prrr-um-pum-pum pum.” I would sit in front with my traps, showing the citizens of Dune County something of the prodigious cultural potential that lay hidden in their midst. I practiced my part to perfection, even adding a few little touches of my own, forgetting entirely to hide my anxiousness to please Mrs. Shannon, who gave me what time her frazzled holiday schedule would permit. I grew so preoccupied that I even let up on my constituents; I forgot to beat up Skipper Sorenson two weeks running. For their part, my classmates were envious of the attention I was getting, and began to vie with one another in music class to display their excellence as pubescent warblers.

A week of rehearsals with the choir went all right—none of the high school students spoke to me, nor I to them; Mrs. Shannon was wild-eyed and hoarse, and smelled of gin—and at last the big night came. The wooden folding chairs were got out from their compartments under the stage, and the gym became an auditorium. Angels, Wise Men, and Sheep had been made out of cardboard and stood on either side of the stage, and above everything a spotlight shone on an aluminum foil star. As the crowd assembled and the auditorium became filled with the sound of coats rustling, men and women talking, and children coughing, Mrs. Shannon and I stood together behind the curtain, stricken with stage fright, our teeth chattering in unison. The choir was down the hall, getting into their robes; Miss Phipps, the community’s general-purpose accompanist, was hovering near the piano bench. It was too late to get out of town.

Mrs. Shannon was trembling visibly. She was also snockered. There was a run in one of her nylons that she wanted to examine, but she was wearing high heels, and when she picked up her foot to look at her calf she wobbled and nearly fell down. I looked up at her in awe; she was almost six feet tall, and very elegant.

“Oh, damn,” she said to me. “Would you look and tell me how bad that is? I just can’t quite see it.”
I peered behind her. There was a run, all right.
"It's not too bad," I said. "No one will notice. You look swell, Mrs. Shannon."
"Oh, damn," she said. "Is it OK, really?"
"Sure," I said. "Besides, the piano will be in front of you."
"Oh, damn," she said.
We both performed magnificently. Mrs. Shannon only stumbled a little going onstage, and she conducted with passion and authority. I played my part better than ever, and remembered to pound loud enough so those in the back could hear me. After everything was over, I was asked to come back out and sit at the drums for a photograph. A lot of adults wanted to pat me on the shoulder or shake my hand, and a lot of kids gave me the fish eye. I made a fist and showed it to Skipper Sorenson. My dad came up to congratulate Mrs. Shannon, and winked at me.
"A fine program," he said to her. "I'm proud of my boy, too. You're the first teacher he's got along with since kindergarten." He leaned closer to her and spoke confidentially. "Let me buy you a drink sometime."
"I beg your pardon, sir," she said icily.
He winked at me again and squeezed my arm, and we went home.
Christmas holidays began the next day, and Dad and I celebrated by taking a load of canner cows to Sioux City. He loved getting away from the office, and I loved riding shotgun, sitting high in the thundering rig and watching a day of roads and traffic unfold below us. The truck was a venerable Diamond T, not an efficient cabover but with a hood that stretched eight feet in front of the cab, sheltering a huge six-cylinder diesel that by itself weighed as much as a car. What it lacked in power it made up for with a glamorous bone-shaking bellow; it left a throb in you at the end of the day that became part of your core, a physical memory.
There were sandwiches, cookies, a thermos of coffee that was half milk for my benefit, and a can in case I had to pee. We wore heavy clothes as if we were going ice fishing, including overshoes and mittens; Dad wore his insulated coveralls and I had on my blue parka and an extra oversized pair of pants. The day was white, sky and ground; the second growth on the hay flats was a rich yellow-brown against gray ice and white drifts. Light snow was falling, and wisps of it blew across the highway, curling up and chasing the cars we met or passed.
There was the drive over narrow roads to the ranch where we loaded up; there were the red-faced men shouting and whistling, poking the walleyed, shitting, pissing, snotblasting old grannies through the squeaking boards of the corral and chute. There was Dad with his electric prod, making the last trembling and kicking cow jump up into the truck, poking another one in the nose that wanted to jump out over him, getting the sliding door down at last, and gravely counting them through the slats, getting signatures on the ticket. There was the long, long ride east, the important stop at the weigh station, the excitement of being in as big and busy a town as Sioux City, the stockyards with hundreds of pens and trucks from all over waiting in line. There was the unloading, the old cows jumping out the door at full speed, now covered with manure and some of them scraped and bleeding; there was Dad again, going back into the trailer and making the last two wild ones come bellowing out. There was the big meal at the truck stop, all the tough and tired men with red eyes and black oil in their pores who talked too loud and ate as if they didn't care what it was. And there was crawling into the sleeper on the way home, covering up in the man-smelling tobacco-colored blankets, with the mighty lullaby of combustion in my ears.

The next day was the day before Christmas. My father got me up early and we went to the Milestone for breakfast.

The Milestone was a truck stop on the east edge of town. It was also a gathering-place for farmers and businessmen, my father's peers. These were the important men of the community, men who supplied tools and feed and lumber, who built houses, who raised or bought and sold or freighted grain and cattle. Most of them had known one another for years; some had been friends of my father's when he was in school. Sharing his time with these men was something special to me. I'd sit next to him in the corner of a booth or at the counter, trying to make myself small, listening shyly and eagerly to the big talk and the rough talk, talk about work and money and politics mixed in with talk that I didn't quite understand but that seemed to be directed more toward the waitresses than toward one another. Maybe a man would come in, big and grizzled and coveralled, stomping snow off his overshoes, nod at my Dad, and then catch sight of me and boom, "Hey, who's that you got with ya? That your second driver today?" Then I would make a tight grin and study the counter, my ears aglow
with pleasure; Dad would say, "Nah, just a hitchhiker. Thought he looked hungry so I brought him in for a meal," and it would be all right.

On this particular morning, though, it was different. It was quiet when we came in, and it seemed the men were looking at me. Finally one I didn't care for, skinny Lon Dives, piped up in his high voice, "Look who's coming in the door; it's the Little Drummer Boy. Good morning, Little Drummer Boy!"

I must've turned pale. I fought off an impulse to reach for my father's hand.

Dives was one of those people who can't help twisting the knife. "What's the matter, Little Drummer Boy? Can't you say 'good morning'? Cat got your tongue?"

Paralyzed, I looked at my father. He gazed back at me steadily, his eyes warm and sad. It was a look I knew; it was up to me to do something. But my mouth had gone dry as cotton.

Suddenly I walked over to Lon's table, and before I knew what I was doing I had picked up his coffee spoon and was holding it like a drumstick, trying to reach his head. He fended me off easily, but the approving laughter of the men told me I'd done the right thing. I put the spoon down and bounced into the booth across from my Dad; I felt the glow of their approval, but underneath it all my heart was uneasy. I had always been an adjunct of my father, invisible beyond a bit of mild teasing. What had I done to cause them to see me differently? If this was the fame I'd dreamed of I didn't want it. The men resumed their usual talk of crops and weather; I looked around surreptitiously. Something was different. Whatever I'd done, I couldn't help it now.

After breakfast, Dad dropped me off downtown. I still had to get him a gift for Christmas, and I also had the vague idea that I would get something for Mrs. Shannon. That would be a tricky proposition; I went to the Western Auto Store first.

The Western Auto Store did sell automotive accessories—you could get a hood ornament there with a chrome goddess on it, winged and naked but with her vital details blurred, or one that had the face of an Indian in amber plastic and a bulb inside so that it glowed when the lights were on—but its main business was sporting goods. I had been visiting the store frequently in the past few weeks and had my
choices narrowed to an enclosed spinning reel, an auto compass, and a good pocket knife. I knew my father was fussy about knives and would only bother with a good one; but the best kind in the display case were too expensive, and the rest of no better steel than the one I carried. The spinning reel was much cheaper than a good knife, but such a gift would be construed as a suggestion that he take me fishing more often. That left the auto compass.

It was a gray egg-shaped object three or four inches in height, mounted on a bracket that swiveled. It was made mostly of metal, and heavy to handle; the top third of the egg was glass or hard plastic, and beneath this hard amnion there swam a flattened gray hemisphere. It floated at the bottom of a bubble in a thin, clear fluid, so that it rode level even when the thing was tilted. On it were written the points of the compass, and the corresponding numerical headings from 0 to 360 degrees. When I twisted my hand or turned my body so that the outside bracket pointed in a new direction, the gray hemisphere inside slowly rotated until it took its old fixed orientation, even while it bumped and wobbled in the shaken fluid. It was magical.

Then I noticed something. I took it to the man who ran the store.

"Look. It’s backwards; the N points south all the time."

He was a small, dapper, red-faced man, always clean-shaven except for a little clipped moustache, and he had tattoos on his forearms. He didn’t like boys much; he suspected us of supplying ourselves with hooks and sinkers, bobbers and BB’s at his expense. He took the compass from me and his red face got redder. He turned the thing several ways, scowling at it. Finally he put it down.

"It’s all right,” he said. “You’ll just have to turn the swivel around.”

“What if it won’t turn?”

“It’s all right,” he repeated adamantly. “Look, I’ll sell it to you a dollar off. Wholesale. If you can’t make it work right I’ll let you bring it back. How’s that?” He gave me an angry piercing look, as if it were a matter of life and death and I was wasting precious time.

“Um—okay,” I said. “Could you please gift-wrap it for me?”

“Not at that price,” he said, his moustache bristling like a caterpillar. “I’ll give you some paper and you can take it home and do it yourself.”

My bargain left me three dollars to spend on Mrs. Shannon. I walked the half block to Main Street and turned left to go to the dime store, but then thought better of it and crossed the street to McDonald’s. I approached the jewelry case and began studying its contents; I noticed a pair of sapphire earrings identical to those I’d
picked out for my mother a couple of weeks before. At the time I'd chosen the ones I'd sent, they'd been the only ones like them in the case. Now there were also a pair with green settings that had the same shape. I was hurt and angry; anybody's mother could be wearing earrings like that.

Disconsolate, I looked around. There were belts, purses, shoes, scarves, gloves, caps; farther away, on one side of the store there was women's clothing and on the other side men's. Off by the overlapps a farmer was mulling over the boys' plaid shirts. The remainder of the customers were women, clicking hangers on the blouse rack, testing the fabric of skirts, having whispered conversations with the saleswomen. I moved off to examine a jaunty tam; apparently it went with a knit muffler. The price was out of my range.

I was ready to leave again, unnoticed as I'd come in, when a display of silk scarves caught my eye. One of them was a chestnut color, a good match for Mrs. Shannon's hair and eyes. I went over to it, reaching to touch the translucent cloth. It was voluptuous, smooth and incredibly light. The scarves each hung by one corner on a circular rack; I blew lightly on them and watched the subtle colors flow against one another. I passed my hand under the tips of them, feeling the silk slide delicately across my fingers. Then I stood with my fists in my coat pockets, waiting for someone to catch sight of me. Finally a white-haired, crane-like woman began tacking toward me across the aisles. It was Cordee Skinner, who came from north of Hanes and had known my father for centuries.

"Well, well," she bugled, pointing her sharp nose down at me and peering through her glasses. "Here's our Little Drummer Boy!"

Her artless condescension affected me as much as Lon Dives's meanness, and I shrank as if I'd been slapped. She was a kind soul and possessed neither tact nor malice; she saw my feelings were hurt but was at a loss to know why. She continued to scrutinize me as if I were the first embarrassed boy she'd seen.

"Well," she said finally, "that was a nice program the other day. A nice program. What can I do for you?"

"How much are these?" I managed, indicating the scarves with my eyes and elbow.

"Those Eyetalian scarves? That what you mean? I think those are two ninety-eight, unless they've been marked down. Have you got a girl friend?"

I squirmed inwardly under her gaze, pinned like a frog under a heron's foot.
"Have you?" she insisted, grinning. "Wait'll I tell your Dad Joe's got a girl friend. Ho, ho, ho!" She laughed heartily in her trumpet voice while I stared miserably at the floor. Cordee loved children, had none of her own and was a torment to other people's.

"Well, whoever she is, I bet she'd love one of those scarves. Won't do much to keep her ears warm, but these young girls, they don't worry about cold ears. That paisley one there is sure pretty. See that one? Sort of green and pink? That's the one I'd like."

"This one," I said, removing my hand from my coat pocket and pointing. "The brown."

"Brown's not for little girls," she said. "You want something brighter, blue or yellow or green. That brown, that's a grownup's color. Too grown up for me anyhow."

I turned even redder and set my jaw. "I want the brown one," I said. "Can you wrap it for me, please? I can't do it very good."

"If that's the one," she said. "Sure I'll wrap it. You want it wrapped in brown paper too? Ho, ho! I said, you want it wrapped in brown paper too?"

It was a rhetorical question and didn't particularly call for a reply. She took the scarf toward the rear of the store and soon came back with it boxed thin, wrapped in reindeer-covered paper and decorated with a red bow.

"There you are, young fellow," she said, "best I could do."

I handed her my three dollars and closed my hand over the two pennies change. As I left the store with my package, she called out after me: "Merry Christmas, Little Drummer Boy!"

That afternoon, after I'd fixed myself a bowl of soup and a peanut butter sandwich, I screwed up my courage and walked over to Mrs. Shannon's. It was a warm day for December; ridges of old dirty snow lined the streets and a few of the lawns still had the remains of drifts, but mostly the town was brown. The parked cars were dirty halfway up their sides, and the sun shone feebly through a layer of clouds. This was the "January thaw," come a month early. All the snow was melted off the roofs, and the ice off the uneven sidewalks. I turned in front of the little stucco house, climbed the two cement steps and rang the doorbell. In the back yard, Willis barked hysterically.

I knew Mrs. Shannon was home, because her yellow Rambler was parked in the driveway. After a while I rang the bell again, and knocked on the door too in case the bell wasn't working. I was turning to leave when I heard footsteps inside the house.
Finally the door opened a crack. “Oh, id’s you,” a muffled voice said, and she opened it farther. “You cad cub id, I’b got da flu.”

I barely recognized the person who stood before me. Her hair hung in damp strings around her shoulders; her face, crumpled in around the mouth, was an inch shorter than I’d seen it before. She stood barefoot in a yellow rag of a robe, sluttish and bony, and looked sullenly down at me, waiting for me to say what I wanted.

“Here,” I said, holding up the reindeer-wrapped package. “For you.” I tried a smile, but the shock of her appearance was working against me.

“Frub your pareds?”

“From me,” I said. “Merry Christmas, Mrs. Shannon.”

She looked at it suspiciously, and some of the sullenness left her face. “Wy thag you, Joseph,” she said. “Thag you bery buch. Dice of you to thig of be.”

We stood looking at one another. Finally, she said, “I’b sorry, I cad talk dow. I’b really quide ill,” and started to close the door. Then she opened it again part way.

“Joseph,” she said, “sub wud’s bed throwing sdowballs at Willis. Cad you get theb to stop? I’d be gradeul.”

“I’ll try, Mrs. Shannon,” I said. She closed the door; I heard her sneeze and then start to cough. I turned and went down the walk, stunned. Whatever I’d expected, it sure hadn’t been that. My elegant Mrs. Shannon, looking like an old canner cow, sallow and sagging and disturbingly female.

I kicked a chunk of snow down the sidewalk until it was gone. Somehow I’d expected more; three dollars would’ve bought twenty king-sized Cokes, fifteen ice cream bars, twelve packages of BB’s, or three boxes of .22 shells. To earn three dollars I’d have to shovel six sidewalks. If it ever snowed again.

As I passed the mouth of the alley that divided Mrs. Shannon’s block, I heard Willis barking. There was a garage facing the alley next to her yard, and behind that garage, concealed from her back window, a boy about my age was packing snowballs. He wore a bright blue-and-orange stocking cap and a coat that was like mine except for being faded green rather than faded blue. It was Skipper Sorenson. I started down the alley, walking as quietly as possible. When he looked up, I had him cornered between the garage and Mrs. Shannon’s fence. He hefted a snowball and glanced over his shoulder to see whether he could beat me to the fence corner and get off down the alley. He couldn’t.
“Hi,” I said.
“Hi,” he said.
“What are you doing?”
“Nothing.”
“You’re throwing snowballs at that dog.”
“So?”
“Don’t do that.”
“Who says?”
“I says. Give me that snowball.”
He backed away from me and put the snowball behind him. It wasn’t far from being cocked to throw.
“Give it to me,” I said, moving a step closer.
“Eat shit.”
“What?”
“You heard me. Eat dog shit . . .”
Throwing the snowball then was a mistake, because it spoiled his chance to run. It whizzed harmlessly across my back just before my shoulder caught him in the stomach. Then we were down, wrestling in the hard, wet, gravelly snowbank behind the garage. In a second or two I was sitting astride him, my left hand pushing his head back, my right one reaching for a handful of gritty snow. His arms flailed for me but couldn’t reach; he tried to knee me in the back but couldn’t do any damage.
“You want to eat some dog shit?” I asked. “Maybe I can find some. Maybe there’s dog piss in this snow.”
“Son of a bitch,” he panted, throwing snow up at me. He was already starting to cry. I slammed the handful of snow down on the area of his nose and mouth, and started grinding it in. He began to thrash and kick and howl, and a little blood from his nose began coloring the brown slush between my fingers. I reached for another handful; he’d given up, and lay there crying helplessly.
“What did you say to me?” I held another handful, poised.
“Eat shit,” he blubbered. “Little Drummer Boy.”
I tossed the snow aside and punched his face; Wham! It was me starting to cry now.
“What?”
“Little Drummer Boy!”
Wham!
“Little Drummer Boy!”
Wham! Wham!
“Little Drummer Boy!”
I was punching him steadily now with both hands, as hard as I could hit; his face streamed with blood, and my knuckles were gouged from hitting his teeth. He went limp under the rain of blows, and I wore myself out on him. Finally all I could do was sit there and cry, gasping for breath and cursing him.

"Chickenshit! Little cocksucker!" His only response was to wail brokenheartedly, so I let him up at last, getting wearily to my feet. "Run along, little chickenshit," I told him. "Run home and tell your mama all about it, crybaby."

He clambered out of the snow, still sobbing, and began to trot off down the alley. But when he'd gone a few steps, got a little start on me, he turned.

"Little Drummer Boy," he wailed back at me defiantly, and then ran for his life. I picked up a piece of two-by-four that was propped against the garage door and followed, but I was out of breath and he was a fast runner. I flung the chunk of wood at his back and stood looking after him, my teeth clenched, weeping in anger. All the time we were fighting, Willis had been going bananas, barking his head off. Now I noticed him.

"Shut up, Willis," I said. I began slogging back down the alley toward home, stomping Skipper's cap into the mud on my way. Willis kept barking. I felt wet and cold.

"I hate you, Willis," I said. "I'm going to get you, son of a bitch."

When I got home the mail had arrived, including the Dune County Thunderhead. There was also a letter from my mother, which I put aside until Dad got home. The Thunderhead at least was community property; I unfolded it eagerly, looking for my photograph. It was on the front page, underneath one of the entire chorus with Mrs. Shannon smiling nervously by the piano. I sat erect, my drumsticks held professionally, giving the camera my best steely-eyed smile. Then the caption under the photo caught my eye. "Little Drummer Boy Makes Big Hit" was what it said.

I spun in shock from pride to despair. It was the kind of thing you don't live down. I'd be the Little Drummer Boy forever.

That evening at supper Dad was quiet. Later, when we were doing the dishes, I found out what was on his mind.

"Matt Sorenson called," he said. "Told me he'd gotten a call from his wife. Seems you sent Skipper home without his cap."
I rubbed a plate with the towel and waited.

"I guess she was pretty upset," he went on. "I guess you must've beat her boy up pretty bad. Want to tell me your side of it?"

"He was calling me names," I said. I put the plate in the rack and he handed me another.

"Well, you know, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones...'. Sure there wasn't more to it than that? You and Skip have had fights before, but this one must have been something special."

The flowers on the chipped plate became blurry; there was a lump in my throat so that I could hardly talk.

... in the paper ...

"What about the paper? Oh." He took the plate from me and gave me another one. "That picture."

I rubbed the plate blindly for a while.

"Here," he said. "Dry the other side of it." He took the plate and handed me some silverware.

"That 'Drummer Boy' business, that'll blow over in a while," he said. "Till it does, I suppose you'll have to put up with it. You can't very well whip everybody in town, now, can you? Think you can whip Lon Dives?"

"No," I said. "He's a grownup. You can whip him."

"Son, get this straight. I won't fight your battles for you. I couldn't, anyway. This is something you'll have to work out yourself."

I finished the handful of silverware and he gave me more pieces. I dried them carefully, one at a time.

"Best thing to do when they call you that," he said, "is to act like it doesn't matter to you. Act like you're proud of it. Most important is, if you like playing those drums, don't let their calling you the Drummer Boy stop you. That's the way to really get 'em; if they make fun of you for doing something better than they can, do it even better yet, and laugh at 'em. They'll stop teasing you."

"And if they don't," he added, "at least you'll have something out of it besides sore fists and a bad temper. The dishes are done. I brought home some Mogen David. Do you want to have a drink with me?"

"Sure," I said, drying my hands and hanging the towel over the back of a chair.

Christmas Eve was when we opened presents. The Sunday before, we'd gone out and cut a little red cedar on the hills above the Niobrara
and decorated it with strings of popcorn and cranberries; there were
the relatives’ gifts, the customary ones, a box of homemade candy
from one of Dad’s aunts, a tin of Christmas cookies packed in
popcorn from some of my mother’s family in Lincoln who hadn’t
crossed us off their list. From Uncle Bertie in St. Louis there was a
wooden Pluto, strung together with strings so that when you pressed
a large button on his base he collapsed and lay down. There was a
tinwhistle from an older girl cousin, and a pair of mittens sent by
someone on behalf of my dim-witted grandmother.

Dad gave me a plaid shirt and a wide leather belt with my name on
the back of it, and there was a fishing reel like the one I’d been looking
at only a couple of grades better. Finally, there was a large box from
my mother, postmarked Seattle, with a letter taped to it. I opened the
letter first, but it was just a card with a little note scribbled at the
bottom. The box inside the box was wrapped beautifully in metallic
green paper; it contained a lot of stuff, socks and underwear, a
handsome pair of slacks that were too short, a model airplane, some
difficult jigsaw puzzles, a carving of a fat Chinese man with his hands
over his head, cuff links, a bottle of cologne, a book about Eskimos, a
large photograph of a B-47 in flight (she worked for a while as a
secretary at Boeing)—a lot of stuff, but nothing that made my heart
pound or caught my fancy. I had wished most of all for a photograph
of her, but there wasn’t one. When I had unpacked the last item, I
looked up and found my father staring at me, his eyes shining
strangely.

He saved the box I’d gotten him that morning for last, and as he
opened it I watched breathlessly for his reaction. Of course he made a
fuss for my benefit, fumbling with the wrapping I’d taped together
and wondering out loud what it could be; I was old enough to
recognize this as drama but young enough to appreciate it. When the
box came finally open and he saw the compass, he seemed genuinely
pleased.

“I’ll be damned,” he said, smiling. “Been wanting one of these.”
I blushed, delighted to my toes.

“This is a good one,” he said. “Where’d you get it?”
I squirmed a little and went over next to him to help him look at it.
“Western Auto Store,” I said. “It’s backwards.”
“What?” he said.
“It’s backwards. Look, the N points south all the time. But he said
you can turn the mount around.”
He looked at it from the top and then held it out in front of him. “Let’s see now,” he said, and got up and turned so his arm was pointing to the north. Then he knelt down to show me. “Here,” he said. “Look. When you’re going north, you’re looking at the south side of the compass. See that? There’s your N. It’s all right the way it is.”

“Hunh.” I said, surprised. I grinned at him. “He sold it to me for a dollar off,” I said.

He grinned back. “He did? So, you snookered old Jensen out of a dollar!” He put his hand on my shoulder as he got to his feet. “Tell me something, are you really that smart?”

I laughed. “No,” I said.

He laughed too. “Didn’t think so,” he said. “How about another half a glass of wine? I don’t suppose it’ll kill you.”

I followed him to the kitchen and sat down while he got the round squat bottle out of the refrigerator. The “half glass” was tiny, an orange juice glass about a third full; he poured one two-thirds full for himself, and put the wine back.

“If your mother was here,” he said reflectively, “we’d’ve had the whole bottle by now.”

I sat watching him for a while. He was gazing down at the wine absent-mindedly. He looked sort of tired.

“Dad,” I said, “can I read the letter? The one you got today?”

“I guess I’d rather you didn’t,” he said. “It’s personal.” He seemed to gather himself, and got up to go get the envelope. “There’s a part that’s for you, though; I guess I can read it to you.”

He sat down again and unfolded it. It was a long one, three pages typed. He cleared his throat.

“Tell Joey hello for me, and that I love him very much and wish him a merry Christmas. I’m sorry I can’t be there. Here it rains all the time and the only snow is on the tops of the mountains.’ Then she goes on to thank you for the earrings and says they’re very nice and she wears them to work every day. Finally at the end she sends her love again. That good enough?”

“I guess so,” I said. “She didn’t send a picture?”

“No,” he said. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “do you want to read the card she sent me?”

“No,” he said. “that’s between you and her. Thanks, though.”

Pretty soon Dad went to bed; I was left sitting up with the gifts. I turned on the radio, keeping it down low, and played with the dial, trying to get a station that wasn’t playing Christmas music. The only
ones that weren’t were the Mexican stations, and that kind of music didn’t interest me much. I tried the short-wave bands, but it seemed to be Christmas all over the world. I shut it off and watched the red light fade from the dial.

Back in the kitchen, I poured myself another juice glass of wine. I liked the opaque stuff, liked the warm feeling from the alcohol in my mouth and throat. It was sweet like cough syrup, only not so burning.

After a while I heard my father snoring. I tiptoed in his room; his shirt hung on a chair, the letter from my mother in the pocket. I lifted it out carefully and took it back to the kitchen, intending to reread the part my mother had addressed to me. But when I opened the letter I couldn’t find it. He’d been looking on the second page, but it wasn’t there, not was it on the first or third. I ended by reading the whole thing. It was a strange communication, not so much a letter as a tirade; she’d blasted him for three solid pages. Old bitterness, things I didn’t understand her blaming him for, like her not being able to buy clothes in Palemon, him coming home smelling of diesel fuel and never mowing the lawn, me getting in fights and refusing to eat broccoli. The facts were trivial; it was the anger crackling from line to line that gave it a kind of wholeness, a weird vitality. There was nothing at all addressed to me except a postscript: “Tell Joey that I thank him for the earrings. I see that his taste is similar to yours.” What Dad had “read” to me he had made up.

I put the letter down at my father’s place and drifted back to the front room. There was the Thunderhead with my picture; I’d planned to cut it out, omitting the caption, and send it to her. Now I hated the whole idea. “Little Drummer Boy”—suppose she called me that. It was the kind of thing she’d say sometimes.

I stared blankly at the photograph and it came back to me, how scared I’d been and how proud. Only now I remembered the way people had looked at me afterward. Especially the other kids; Skipper had found a sore spot and soon they’d all know it. And school would start again in just two weeks.

I put on my parka and slipped outside. The night air was crisp, a skin of ice was forming on the day’s puddles. At first I stood looking up and down the dark street, nothing in mind. Then the chill started to creep in through my coat. If I was going to stay outdoors I had to do something; I decided to pay a call on Willis.
The liquid inside the Clorox jug swished, whispering in time with an imaginary jazz cadence as I marched along a quiet street, counting my steps, three pints or so lawnmower gas bumping against my leg. It would be a mission of status and revenge. Mrs. Shannon would be rattled, Willis would be terrorized; those of my peers who guessed (and I would make sure certain of them did) would be restored in their respect for me, for my capacity for immediate and drastic action. In my coat pocket I fingered the waterproof cylinder I always carried, made by shoving empty shotgun shells of different gauges together; it contained kitchen matches. The night was dark and calm, frost sparkled under the scattered and feeble streetlights.

The skin of mud on the alley had hardened so that it was possible to approach quietly. There was no need; Willis was an old dog, and slept soundly, dreaming of a world of kind children or, better yet, of none. There was a gate in the low fence, but I was tall enough to step over it.

The doghouse was lighted on three sides by crusty snow. The fourth quarter, from the front around to the gate, was bare and dark. Willis's chain looped from a stake at one corner of the doghouse outward toward the lighted kitchen window, and then back. The night was quiet. A few blocks off, out on the highway, a truck began tromboning up through the gears.

As I crept up to the doghouse I could hear the slight glassy sound of the dry frozen grass under my feet. There was a faint metallic noise as I took the cap off the jug, and a hiss as gasoline ran onto the dry rotten shingles. I held it carefully in both hands, at arm's length, making sure in the dark that none of it got on my clothing. When I had doused the roof I backed away, still holding the jug at arm's length, now just an inch from the ground as I quietly made a trail from the dog house to the alley. I put the cap back on the jug and stepped over the gate, wincing as it creaked. Inside the doghouse, Willis sighed and shifted; I breathed shallowly, my heart knocking fast.

The light in the kitchen window burned on, and the stars looked down steadily. Out on the street a car went by, turned into a driveway. Cars doors slammed; there was laughter, a man voice, a woman's. A house door opened and closed, and the voices were cut off. I placed the jug at a safe distance and returned to the gate.

Silence.

There was a "pok" as the container of matches was opened. A good match was selected, one with plenty of white on the tip. There was a quick, light, metallic rasp as the match struck on the zipper of a parka and thrown outward in a single motion.
WHOOOH! A sound like a giant cushioned door being closed firmly.

One always underestimates gasoline. I jumped back. My face and the backs of my hands felt singed, and the fuzz around my parka’s hood smelled like burnt plastic. I knew it was time to run, but I didn’t want to miss seeing Willis come barreling out of his doghouse, yelping in terror, maybe even breaking his chain. I stood by the corner of the garage, waiting more and more anxiously. The shingles of the doomed roof began to crackle.

“Willis,” I whispered, then louder: “Willis! Come out, your house is on fire.”

A twenty-foot column of light danced above the doghouse; Mrs. Shannon’s back yard was as bright as day. Incredibly, nothing else happened. No doors slammed, no neighbors’ lights came on. No panicked dog came scrambling out onto the snow.

“Damn you, Willis!” I climbed the gate again; I was going to run up and kick the wall of the doghouse, but I found it was impossible to get close enough. The roof itself was blazing now, the root of the column moving down, the light wood making it hotter and brighter than before.

“Willis! Hey, Willis! You dumb shit, get out of there!”

I moved quickly around toward the front of the doghouse and tried to peer inside. The interior was dark, but I could see the beginning of a trickle of smoke curling around the top edge of the opening.

“Willis Willis! Here, boy! Here, good dog!”

I was answered by a sound that made the hair stand up on my head. It was soft and low, something between a snarl and a moan; there was a mortal despair in it that I had not met with in my young life. For a moment I was struck still by it, paralyzed. I looked down in shame, and my eye caught the chain at my feet. I picked it up and took up the slack.

“Willis, you’ve got to come out!” A thick gray tongue of smoke was curling around the lip of the door; the column of fire above the doghouse was shorter, reddish now and full of sparks. I pulled on the chain and it came slowly out, maybe a foot and a half. Then there was a scratching sound from inside and it stopped, even went back a little. I was leaning as much weight on it as my hands could bear, but it wasn’t enough. I eased off and moved closer, aware of the intense heat on my face; I sat down and braced my feet, and leaned forward and wrapped the chain a couple of times around my left forearm outside the coat. Then I took my left wrist in my right hand and leaned back.
hard, putting my back and legs into it. The chain came out a foot or so while Willis jerked like a hooked fish. Then it stopped and held. I put all I had into it, my endurance against his. It wasn't enough; for all his cowardice, he was a big strong dog. The pain in my left arm brought tears to my eyes.

There was a lesser "whooh!" as the smoke inside the doghouse took fire; now the interior was a dark whirling glow, with bright flame rolling out the top of the door. I stood up and backed off, uncoiling the chain from my arm but still holding it. A light hissing sound came now, along with the same growl I'd heard before. I expected Willis to come bursting out and maybe kill me, but he didn't. I waited a couple of seconds and began pulling again, barehanded, leaning far forward, slipping on the frozen ground. Crying "Willis! Willis!" in my high boy's voice, I leaned and jerked on it while the sparks roared upward and the door became an oval of flame. My shadow danced in front of me now as lights came from the direction of the house. A pair of long white arms reached around me from behind, down alongside my own; strangely, instead of helping me to pull, they took my own hands gently and as the weight came on me from behind gently removed the dog chain from my clenched grip. As I turned, a dark figure moved past me, dragging something along the ground. It was an old man struggling with a fire extinguisher.

The town cop, as always, arrived late. He found Mrs. Shannon, drunk and in her nightgown, standing in her back yard, facing the ashes and the hollow stucco shell. She held me tightly in her arms. I howled against her bony chest, and would not be comforted; for I had felt Willis's dying quiver on the other end of the chain.
In 1977, after extensive, but generalized research into the needs of the regional literary community, the Western States Arts Foundation developed a survey questionnaire designed to uncover more specific and individually relevant needs. The questionnaire was sent to writers, small presses, little magazines, and the arts agencies in the ten western states. Results were, in some cases, expected: writers cited a need for increased publishing, reading and residency opportunities, as well as increased fellowships and reviews of their work. Presses and magazines cited the need for better marketing and distribution systems, in addition to more substantial funding.

In other cases, the results were less expected, and consequently more revealing. For instance, as Pat Simmons, program director for the Montana Arts Council, reported in a memo to council members: “While state arts agencies are all doing something in the area of literature, it is pitifully small, constituting an average of 3.5% of their programmatic budgets.” In addition, nearly three-quarters of that 3.5% were committed to Artist in the Schools programs. In Montana, the share of literature funding devoted to the Poets in the Schools program amounted to 96%. Other programs and needs were virtually ignored.

Discouraging as the figures are, the years following 1977 have produced decidedly good news. Foremost among the actions taken in response to the survey was Montana’s First Book Award competition, which was proposed to the Arts Council by Pat Simmons early in the fall of 1978. Subsequently approved and funded, the competition began in 1979. June 1 was designated as the deadline for submission of manuscripts, and a policy of selecting known Montana writers, or writers with Montana “connections,” as judges was established.

To date, five books have been published as a result of the First Book Award competition, including two manuscripts selected in 1979. The most recent selection, Small Mercies, by Elizabeth Weber, is due from Owl Creek Press, with luck, before Christmas.

By all accounts, the future of the First Book Award is bright. In addition, the Arts Council has in the works a proposal designed to better promote and distribute the work of regional writers. The mail-order project will have as its home the Yellowstone Arts Center in Billings. It is hoped this project will serve as a model for other states in their promotional and distribution efforts.

To further brighten Montana’s literary prospects, the Arts Council has approved the establishment of fellowships for writers, contingent upon funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, for the near but not immediate future. With the solidly emerging tradition of the First Book Award as a base for their efforts, the Arts Council has gone a long way towards making up for past neglect, which is good news not only for Montana writers, but also for readers in any locale interested in literature of quality.
1979: Blind Horses by Ed Lahey
Judge: James Welch, Rick DeMarinis
Arctcraft Printers, Butte, Montana: 1979

"Instead of I like it
someone said
the Chamber of Commerce slogan
should have read
'Butte is my town,
let's face it'
which I couldn't."

(Letter to the Editor)

Certain poems need to be written. They spring from characters, places and moments the poet can't forget, however distant the experience. For Ed Lahey, Butte is one of those places, where characters, events, and a way of life are dying for a voice, for someone who can discover that voice and make it heard. Much had been written about Butte, its glory days as the richest hole on earth, its celebrity status in the early days of American labor, its undeniable uniqueness among Montana towns. But I'd be willing to bet that very little of what's been written evokes the feel and sense of the Butte Ed Lahey knows, the Butte of working-class miners, welders and wives, and the lives they've lived in the long shadow of sacrifice and tragedy. Much of the book's tone is elegaic. Still more is urgent, full of hard, single-syllable words and driving rhythms, the diction and cadence of natural voices struggling towards eloquence.

Lahey's primary concern is the fleshing out of the Butte, and in many ways the Montana, too many people think they know. His first poem addresses the relationship between men and the ground they work. The mine itself is the main character:

"Deep in mined-out waste
carbide lamps illuminate mold
black damp in a caved-in raise.
Shattered quartzite seams
crack inside the mountain
where quick men move
(in calculated haste) . . ."

(The Orphan Girl Prospect)

Later, Lahey expands on the opposition of men and earth:

"Underground we fought the earth together,
For the hell of it, and Peacock copper."

(Contract Miners)

"The Kelly Men worked
in the open stope,
barred down rock
from a bald head raise
to the gopher crews
who mucked around
the goddam clock.

The coughed up soot
but silica stuck,
as widow-makers howled
when the Ingersoll moaned
and the starter steel struck
the hornblende stone."

(Contributor’s Note)

The best the miners can hope for is an uneasy stand-off, and perhaps enough
warning of impending danger to get out of the way. Unfortunately, the terms of the
mountain are less generous. Out of nowhere, the machinery can remove a hand, or the
tunnel you’re working can collapse on itself:

“The nightmare of caved-in timber
broken head board, a stull,
cracked like a tooth
in a stone fist, 3600 feet
below the surface . . .”

(Touch Laughter)

Those who lived that life, lived with the constant threat, were changed. Some were
never healthy again, or whole. Some had a hard time finding anything concrete they
could trust. As a result, the lives Lahey gives us are often filled with rage, violence, and
regret: rage and regret that through memory we can only hope to preserve something
that is already lost; violence that erupts as suddenly among men as it does from the
mountain and the mine.

Some of Lahey’s characters become threats to themselves, like the nameless man in
“The Fell of Dark” who, in a classic fit of lunatic rage, tries to stand his ground against
the dark, the mountain and the snow, shakes his fist and is struck down. The speaker of
the poem makes clear that whatever killed the man came from inside, “From the timber
of his rage.” But it’s no secret what drove him to the point of self-annihilation.

Other characters become threats to each other. In “Stone Before the Crumpled
Horn,” Indigo, the Mexican, and McGuire, the Irishman, face off one night in the East
Park Plaza bar — Indigo wielding a stropped razor, McGuire the jagged neck of a
bottle — for no other reason than they’re both ready to explode. In “A Different
Price,” the threat is less obvious and dramatic, but just as deadly. After Haggarty loses
his hand to a bull gear, the company reinstates him to the position of hoister,
responsible for the pulley-driven elevators that carry men in and out of the mine:

“Last week his ghost hand
missed a grip
dropped six men
a thousand feet.”
These are the terms of Lahey's Butte, hard and unalterable. Some men walk away:

"leave the worked out stopes,
trudge back to safer jobs,
collect a union wage."

(The Orphan Girl Prospect)

Those who stay — "other fools, maybe wise," who "laugh and wait" — are never the same. Nor are their families or friends. The man struck down by the mountain and himself in "The Fell of Dark" leaves a woman behind:

"Left in the cabin alone,
his woman said to the wind,
'He took all of the risks.'
And the cold night whispered
and poked at her chimney
with fingers sharp as a thief's."

How then do people live these lives and survive? Lahey reveals one possibility in "Contributor's Note," the book's final poem:

"I burned images black
on the hanging wall
with a spitter's lamp,
drank brackish water
from a tin can cup
and grew hands hard
with knotted knuckles . . .

Lost in a drift of teeth
I dreamed a lot."

The speaker of "My Three-Act Dream" imagines "his green-eyed girl with the apple breasts," who "shakes out stars like laundered linen . . . She rubs the ache . . . lifts me from the wings of pitch black stopes, up raises of the night and free of the working earth."

The men dream and imagine a life that will be worth its risks. Women imagine, in "The Cloud Chaser," a man who will bring them news from the sky, "a taste of the rain," rather than grime and soot from the mine. Still, it is only through female characters that Lahey suggests the men can be saved. Two poems directly address this possibility. In "Tough Laughter," a wife searches a caved-in mine for her lost husband. She finds him too late. However, in "Stone Before The Crumpled Horn," the "Spanish girl with no pants," who "danced like black gunpowder in a dream," diffuses the explosion between Indigo and McGuire, the two men who faced off in the East Park Plaza bar.

Hard as the terms of this life are, Lahey's characters find moments of hope and celebration. They learn to live with this legacy of menace and loss. In doing so, they introduce themes that reappear in individual guises throughout the First Book series, themes that are Montanan in origin and influence, but are not limited by their locale.
What emerges from *Blind Horses* is a voice Butte can hang onto, a voice that is honest, revealing and committed.

Which is not to say that *Blind Horses* is flawless. Those poems with predominantly aesthetic or metaphorical concerns are the least successful: “Dialogue of Poet and Painter,” “Poete Maudit,” “The Wound in the Heel.” Also, of the six books in the series, *Blind Horses* certainly has the least flattering cover, and many more typographical errors than should have gone unnoticed. Nevertheless, despite or because of its rough edges, the book succeeds where it matters most, in the honest rendering of a town and a way of life the rest of the world either condescends to, or ignores. At his best, Lahey speaks in the clear, experienced voice of a man who’s survived his past, who’s found ways to live in a dangerous world, whose poems emerge form an urgent need to be heard.

1979: *The Taxidermist’s Daughter* by Nancy Schoenberger
Judges: James Welch, Rick DeMarinis
Calliope Press, Missoula: 1980

“When I have no more complaints
I’ll follow the example
of this yellow leaf moth
practicing invisibility
on the flowered curtain.
She is sure, solitary,
utterly still, not unlike
that cockroach barely breathing
beneath withering morning glories,
his unwholesome back glinting
in porch light.

Another August night I pause
outside the bug-riddled circle
of human light, watching Uncle Benny
share a beer with father. They talk
over hard times, shake heads over
the factory’s mysterious fire.”

(Another August Night in 1958)

From the outset of *The Taxidermist’s Daughter*, the second selection in 1979, from the opening lines of “Move On,” the first of its nineteen poems, you can sense a restlessness in the voice, an impatience, on the part of the speaker, with the world’s and her own imperfections. In “Move On,” a woman remembers her brother, at seventeen, as one of those who don’t age. She sees the open garage, brightly lit, and “tools laid out on asphalt, the gaping hood.” She remembers how the garage door opened, how her brother stepped through, and “All else ages.” From this moment on, things are changed:

“In dreams
her brother talks
with his hands. He wants
to be held. He tries
but cannot step out
of the car,
of the April
night, as all else
ages and moves on.”

Her brother is left behind and she only watches, as if he had fallen from a raft and struggled ashore, and she can only keep floating, helpless to retrieve him. Schoenberger’s focus here is tight. Her interest is not the big picture, but these subtle, telling details, the moment she remembers her brother drifting away.

As a result, certain points of information are withheld. It is not clear from the poem, for example, how this distance manifested itself later on, if the separation was indeed unalterable. Nor is it clear how much of the poem’s realization is hindsight. What’s important is that Schoenberger places this observation of change and loss in a voice that is old enough to apprehend the circumstance, but young enough not to recognize it, a voice that holds out for the way things are supposed to be.

To a large degree, this is the voice that dominates “Beasts and Children,” the first of the book’s three sections, a voice that embraces dream and magic, a young girl who longs to be more perfect and pleasing than she is. In “Another August Night in 1958,” she envies a “yellow leaf moth,” because it is “sure, solitary, utterly still,” much like the animals in her father’s loft in “The Taxidermist’s Daughter.” Standing off the porch, “outside the bug-riddled circle of human light,” watching her father and uncle talk, the daughter senses something alive in the world that she can’t see for all the darkness:

> “Then I know the night
is not ours — the cicada
whirring maniacally
in the mimosa,
the creepers
lifting moonward
their astonished faces.”

She can hear even the slightest sound: “the beanstalk rumbles in its socket.” The world is poised, then nothing happens. She remains certain of what she felt, but she knows she won’t be able to tell anyone what she’s discovered: “Soon I’ll come bursting in, claim the paternal knee, hands filled with useless magic.”

Schoenberger reveals similar feelings in the title poem, “The Taxidermist’s Daughter.” As a girl, the poem’s speaker watched her father immersed in his work, the animals that gathered “in the pine loft above the house . . . asking for new life.” Her father was a kind of magician, a man who could make the squirrel “fly again in the showcase.” She wanted to help, to be part of the magic, the “new life:”

> “All those years I wanted to say
choose me as you bent down
to put the last touch
to the beautiful wood duck.”
In the first section, the speaker longs for an engagement with the world that she can't have. Credit Schoenberger's skill as a poet for addressing this not-unheard-of situation with assurance and conviction. All the while she dreams and imagines a less troubled existence, the speaker is beginning to realize its impossibility. She's seen enough flaws in herself and others, in the way the world works, that by the end of the section innocence has been lost, and you realize the change was happening all along: in "Near Philly," which begins, "Recall the fallen days"; in "The Beast's Palace," which begins, "Always beside the bedstead on the porcelain table: the red rose which was my undoing"; and most stunningly in "The Taxidermist's Daughter," where Schoenberger writes, "Nights the gray squirrel rattles the roof, rubs the glass where his stuffed mate swoons in the final leap." This is the image that comes closest to defining the moment innocence was lost, the stark juxtaposition of real life and its artifice, the moment when the speaker nearly realizes what it is that keeps her father so distant, why he's unable to let her in.

The second section, called "Widow," opens with the poem, "This is Missoula," and the lines, "The world is nearly itself when the black trees hug the spow." These lines introduce six poems that concern themselves with the aftermath of innocence and magic lost, and the ways in which people learn to live without childhood escapes. The constant, shifting distance she sees between herself and others, once regarded as imperfection, is now a fact. Experience and reflection have made that clear, just as they made clear the fancifulness of her dreams. But experience and reflection have yet to offer any compensation. There's no longer any doubt that something's missing, only doubt as to how to fill the absence. The speaker of "The New Wife" can't believe how differently she's treated now that the big event, the wedding, is over. She's beginning already to feel the signs of age. She has nightmares of a life resigned to making everyone else happy. And there seems to be no one there to ease this rude transition in adulthood, where she no longer even hopes to be special, no escape from her new life.

"Widow" tells, chronologically, the other end of the story. Its speaker addresses her widowhood in terms of loyalty. So much of her life happened before she met her husband, and certainly the rest will happen without him. How much, then, does she owe to his memory? Not an easy question. Whatever her answer, she recognizes the need to be loyal to her own memory, and to her own life:

"I'm in my black dress, the gloves
to the wrist, the dark orchid
at my throat, as if otherwise
it would break. I've left

one life and entered another
in the wrong hour . . ."

Schoenberger examines the choices these women have, whether it be disbelief, denial, understanding or acceptance. She reveals, beneath the individual lives, a common strain of dissatisfaction with how circumstances have worked out, uncovering a hardness that is seen as both necessary and regrettable:

"Somewhere azaleas burn on
in ignorance, as when
she held me on the chaise lounge."
Losses that might once have become exaggerations are seen in a sober, down to earth light:

"... So I have
given you up. It is September. Soon
the world goes underground,
deep in her white hood."

Where do you go from here? The third section, entitled "Musselshell Woman," begins on a note of assurance: "These streets are as blue as shale, as a heron's wing." Credit again Schoenberger's skill as a poet for revealing, in a simple, two-fold comparison, the changes the voice has undergone, how the speaker is now able to see blue in both shale and heron's wing and not worry that one needs to be more blue or beautiful. Connections, between sky and earth at least, are beginning to emerge from the fragmented world in section two. This emergence is most directly stated in "Cedar":

"... Now
that rain is my neighbor, I want
to unfold down the slow
comfortable path.
The bud at the base of my brain
begins to open."

Much of the third section is spent reassembling broken pieces. "From the Tree," a childhood poem distinctly different from those in the first section, contains none of the restlessness of the earlier poems, or the nagging awareness that something is missing. Whatever it was is still missing. Experience and reflection have only clarified the absence.

The two poems that follow "From the Tree" finally ask the question that's been lurking behind Schoenberger's sense of accumulated distance and loss. Once you lose your faith, your ability to trust, how do you resurrect it? Where do you turn? "At Boar's Head" ends with these lines:

"The screen door closes
on mother ironing. At Boar's Head
the ocean is patient
and guiltless. Already
evening closes its doors, the sea in her dark
origin."

"Near Painted Rock" pushes the closures and negations one step further:

"The river's a mirror. Look past
your yard, the road stares you down.
You're empty-handed now.
No lake, no dream, no home.
The sky shuts down."

Many poets would have ended things there, one last slam of the door just to let you know any signs of optimism are not to be trusted. Nancy Schoenberger, however, includes two more poems that radically alter the book's direction.
“Musselshell Woman” is the story of a daughter who followed her father west until they finally arrived in Montana: “We came to the Musselshell emptyhanded: three children, two horses,” which, oddly enough, is the same situation we found in “Near Painted Rock”: emptyhanded. What makes the difference is the last stanza. After surviving the rest of her years on the “leached white” ground, the Musselshell Woman’s story ends like this:

“... Nights
her children rise from the axe’s work
in the moon’s blue smoke. On the wide elbow
of the Musselshell they dance. That woman, one
with moon and wind, beyond all human ways
won back her life.”

Reading Schoenberger’s last poem, “In Earth’s New Dark,” the strategy of the three sections becomes clear. From the fallen days of “Near Philly” and “The Taxidermist’s Daughter,” to the fragmentation and chaos of emotions in “Widow” and “The New Wife,” to the triumph of endurance in “Musselshell Woman,” Schoenberger has traced a classic path in the growth of awareness, from innocence to loss of faith to the assertion of will. In doing so, she’s also explored the role of the imagination in daily life, from childhood source of pure escape and wishfulness to a way of sustaining beauty and optimism within the process of loss that age becomes. The personal celebration of “In Earth’s New Dark” is well-deserved:

“Alone these days, as though I were
male, beast, or child
I mark these changes: how the seed
in her furred home nudges
soil, her green
unscarred and gleaming;
how pale wheat gives up and utters
take us, as though I’d come
to lie in earth’s new dark
rejoicing, with any lover.”

1980: Janus Peeking by Craig Churry
Judges: William Kittredge, Naomi Lazard
Calliopea Press, Santa Rosa, California: 1981

Craig Churry begins his chapbook-length poem, Janus Peeking, with these lines:

“Even more than the time in the kitchen
I need to say this to you.

I need to grab you by the shirt
In the eyes, straight in the face
Tell you how the flashlight filled with dirt,
Tossed into the bushes has just seen the dead.”
Two pages later he writes:

“If you do not know this land of sleep
Stark and frozen come with me
Inside the whale breast, coyote bone,
White ring in the tree trunk.
There are craters of the moon I leave behind;
Craters I take with me when I wake.”

As both of these passages suggest, Janus Peeking is, among other things, about writing, about the imagination and why this unconventional book-length poem was written: an announcement or an invocation. Which is appropriate, considering that in relation to the other books in the series, Janus Peeking conforms least to the expected treatments of form and theme. Add to that a list of concerns that includes the uses of language, experience, memory and invention, all explicit concerns of poetry, and you might being to think no good can come of all this writing about writing. In most cases, such suspicions would be well-founded. However, in Janus Peeking, Churry avoids the problems of audience and accessibility by establishing a firm base for the poem in convincing experience, in memories and emotions he cares about, giving readers the common ground they need, a context in which to understand the issues and the ideas. From this base, Churry can indulge the voice he’s chosen, a point of view that allows him the freedom to roam, to be unpredictable, to adjust his stance and perspective. Janus, a Latin solar deity, presided over the beginnings and the ends of everything. He had two faces, one for the rising sun, one for sunset.

In Janus Peeking, Churry is doing just that, peeking. He’s showing the reader glimpses of the world available to someone with near-omniscience. Certain passages show the poet focusing in on the fine details of his world, a world full of lives and circumstances in transition:

“It was a house stitched together
From the insides
With tendrils of spidery fern
And ivy.

A wick shook clean from the fiery
Iris beneath its ribcage,
Two threadbare cats
Weaving insane the red-green light.”

Later in the poem he writes:

“We built a house out of barrels,
Draped the bent window
With mice and the flathandle
Backs of scoops for the furnace,
Slabbed a thin coat of peeling
Rust above the door . . .”

Other passages show the poet stepping to assess his situation, achieving distance and perspective:
"When you live among both worlds
You must be careful how hungry
You speak with your fingers."

The idea of circumstances in transition is a central concern of Janus Peeking. As the brief explanation reads on the outside back cover, Janus "is commonly represented with two heads because every door looks two ways." Thematically, several pairs of ideas are seen in transition throughout the book, very near their points of inversion. The distinction between dream and reality is frequently blurred, which allows for many intriguing, often arresting images:

"We spoke a dead language
When we arrived,
Poured our lungs into tin pails
And tossed what breath was saved
Back to the sea . . .

Our names were shaved
Into pure white robes.
Our tremendous wings grew inward
Like the two end tines
Of a fluttering pitchfork."

Memory and invention react similarly to each other. Certain passages have both the appearance and sound of recalled experience: "Remember as boys we would play all day Captain Commandos with straw in our socks?" Other passages present memory and invention as indistinguishable:

"What I had not seen as a face
In the fountain Rond de Chaines
Was not my uncle from the Netherlands
No one's heard from in six years . . .

It was not the pigeon under the eaves
Heaving balloons."

Perhaps the most significant pair of ideas Churry examines near their point of inversion is language and experience, as they alternate in determining image, rhythm and sound. Early in the book, Churry writes:

"We carry our lives
off the farm, slung over
our shoulders in empty feed sacks

Far into night sleep
Gathers its wooden spoons."

Though it's not an expected, or usual image, "sleep gathers its wooden spoons" emerges from the almost narrative tone of the first three lines, which are certainly rooted in experience, real or imagined. The rhythm of the lines is unhurried. The language demands no special attention. Experience is the key, the main concern.
Other lines and passages shift the balance of concern to language, and the primary determinant of image, rhythm, and sound is this: that the line sounds good, or that it strives for a desired mood or effect: "Old rabbits leap the icy man-pot!", or:

"All they had to do
Was smell my breath

When I told them that
The difference between
The blue and all the
Blue I could hold in my
Arms was the size

of my stomach
A garden hose the inner
Lining that was tied

In a knot

Early in the book, Churry captures the range of image his voice contains. He shows us, in the progression of three images, the transformation of image from one determined by language and internal concerns, to one in which language and experience play equal roles, to an image determined primarily by experience, where the language serves the accessibility of the image:

"Letting myself go
I have forgotten something,
Out there

Something that resembles
A teeth handkerchief

Something that reminds me
The flesh around barbed wire
Is onion . . .

There is something else:

How the flies carry on
When I leave the room."

Unlike the other books in the series, Janus Peeking is not organized as a collection of individual poems (or poems and fictions). This is Churry's most conspicuous application of the idea of circumstances in transition, in the form of the book itself. There are no page numbers, no table of contents. However, the poem seems to fall easily into thematic sections, most often determined by the point of view, most often distinguished by natural pauses between pages. Also, in the last half of the book, several thematic sections are named that stand well on their own, and have been published separately: "wild rice," "uncovering the mine shaft," "my cousin who dies quick in the night," "biting the pomme de terre," "home for lunch."
The unspoken question in the form of Janus Peeking is one of conclusions: do all the images, themes and disparate parts add up to the single long poem this book claims to be? Yes and no. If you mean does the book conform to the expected, traditional, no loose ends standards: no. However, if you mean is the work ultimately determined by certain images and themes organic to the poem, is it successful in exploring what appears to be its overall scheme: yes.

We should also consider that Churry's apparent concern, in Janus Peeking, was not a poem as finished, polished artifact, but a work that addresses the process through which we arrive at poetry, how we give shape to the blurred and ambiguous areas of experience that defy easy categorization, easy expression. Memory, after all, is frequently altered by time and invention. Dreams and reality don't always stay where they belong.

In the end, Churry's voice and imagination hold the book together, his constant connections of idea and detail just to let you know he hasn't left the rest of us behind:

"It is raining on both
Sides of the house now.
By noon the birds will have
Bitten through the dark
Underwing of the staircase,
And an odor like mutton
From the trees buffeting
The hallway. We have carefully
Selected our places under
The table, armed with salt
For the wound and toothpick.
The noon whistle a swallow,
A feather screaming from the toaster."

1981: A Radiant Map of the World by Rick Newby
Judges: A. B. Guthrie Jr., William Pitt Root

"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."

So begins A Radiant Map of the World, Rick Newby's collection of sixteen poems and fictions that distinguishes itself, in terms of form and theme, as the most ambitious book in the series. We are given traditionally crafted poems — lyric, narrative, elegy — poems that verge on prose, and brief, not so traditional fictions that verge on poetry. Interspersed among these various recognizable forms are excerpts from historical journals, found (literally) correspondence, newspaper stories, excerpts from The
Books of Charles Fort; Johann Most, Terrorist of the Word, by Max Nomad; and The Biography of Alice B. Toklas.

Newby's subjects range from the plight of farmers settling eastern Montana in the late 1800's, to the documented desire of Gertrude Stein to visit Helena, Montana, where "no one is stout," to the hospital ruminations of Samuel Beckett, recovering from a knife attack in which one of his lungs was pierced. Along the way, Newby visits the lives of Emma Goldman, Vincent Van Gogh, and Malcolm Lowry, author of Under the Volcano. Other characters — John Curnutt, Minnie Miller — are not nearly so well-known. But whatever the scale or status of a character's life, Newby locates revealing details and situations, presenting them in such a fashion that we see characters in personal and oddly affecting moments.

Ultimately, it is Newby's voice that provides the glue for this epic cast. From the opening lines of "Manifesto," the book's first poem, we're presented with a voice that is both generous and assured, a voice that recalls Whitman or Joyce in the range and depth of its concerns.

Throughout the book, Newby returns to the theme of individual endurance. Be it Emma Goldman or J. E. Finch, Newby's primary interest is fleshing out the patterns that isolate and connect individuals.

Work and the land drive some characters beyond the point of stoicism to a grave indifference that matches the blankness of sky and wheat. The two photographs of a mother and daughter, cited in "A Photographic Essay in Three Parts," exemplify that progression. In the first, the mother and daughter are pictured scowling at the camera, determined, distrustful of the plentiful fields waving behind them. In the second, taken years later, they are "older now, thinner, their eyes dulled and too large for the bony faces. Locusts ankle deep and gnawing the leather from their boots." All that remains of their work and perseverance, of the bountiful years, is a "patch of yellowed stubble along the south fence."

Earlier in the essay, through the use of reports in the Belt Mountain Miner (Barker, MT), Newby relates the story of a man for whom the isolation of a cattleman's life proved too much. He quotes the letter John Curnutt left for a friend prior to his "Mysterious Disappearance: 'When you read this I will be far away. Don't try to find me . . . I have been more dead than alive. I am going where no one will see me anymore. Take everything I have on earth . . . I once thought I could be happy, but now I know that I can't.'"

Another letter follows shortly in the essay, this one written by the previously unknown J. E. Finch to the then-Governor Erickson. "I am an old man, 70 years old. I and my old wife at the present have one baking of flour left and one pound of coffee. We have no credit and no work. Our 400 acres of crop is utterly destroyed . . . In a short time the Bank will take our stock and other creditors our Machinery. We have lived here 20 years and I have paid $3500 in taxes since I have been in Montana and this is the end. What can you or anyone do about it?" As it turned out, Mr. Finch might as well have written a letter to God.

Newby presents the stories of Curnutt and Finch without romanticizing their lives. Appropriate to the inclusion of newspaper accounts, these stories of financial and spiritual bankruptcy are reported with objectivity, emphasizing the stark realities of life outside the ready-made community, where endurance and determination are prized above all other human virtues. Like Ed Lahey and Nancy Schoenberger before him, Newby has found a strain of essential truth in the lives of Montanans, in the recognition of human limitations as a guard against the alluring deception of the
wishful imagination. Despite the fact that his writing displays very few of the overt, tell-tale signs of “Western” writing, in *A Radiant Map of the World*, Rick Newby touches very close to the heart of Montana: to the generosity and suspicion of its people, the stoic crankiness that is the legacy of ancestors who arrived here expecting more than they got, who felt betrayed and had no one but themselves to blame, who frequently aged to resemble the land they had mined or farmed. Newby conveys, with empathy and authenticity, the isolation and defeat, the tug-of-war between despair and resolve.

Once he establishes the terms of his world, Newby proceeds to explore how characters go about living with them. Similar to Nancy Schoenberger’s *The Taxidermist’s Daughter*, Newby’s book acknowledges the dangers of expectations, then goes on to discover beauty, grace, celebration and hope amidst discouraging realities. Again like Schoenberger, Newby arrives at these discoveries through an imaginative sense that is not wishful or fanciful, but rooted in the very realities that threaten its disappearance. What finally distinguishes *A Radiant Map of the World* from the books that precede it is Newby’s combined use of art and human love to stake his optimistic claim.

The title piece, an effective marriage of the long poem and journal styles, best exemplifies his claim. Very simply, “A Radiant Map of the World” concerns itself with the speaker’s emergence and development as a writer. In addition, throughout the piece, Newby addresses, in some of the most eloquent and affectionate language I’ve read, the pleasures of love and sex.

Of writing, Newby says: “I began to write, out of necessity or desire . . . Here in this mountain fastness, I take notes . . . For winter is my time of writing. Out of my spring and summer foraging and my fall gathering together, my writing comes. Hard-earned, difficult. The final flush of a great pleasure.”

Of love and sex he writes:

“We sip chilled white wine, we return to our books, the humming typewriter, we are alone, but not lonely, in this cabin at the end of the road.”

“My companion walks naked from the bathroom. Morning showers: beads of moisture on her flat belly, her slender thighs, the breasts I take into my palms — so cold — and roll, nipples harder than agates. She crouches to me, her wet hair plastered back, red and thick, accenting features sharp as the razor I never use. Good Morning. Her fingers curl into my beard.”

Later, in the poem “Letter to Oregon from Montana,” Newby again extols the pleasures and the power of renewal he finds in physical intimacy:

“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.”
By book’s end, it has become clear that in Newby’s world, this earthy, intimate beauty exists because of those hard facts that stand in opposition, not in spite of them. Like Schoenberger, Newby’s celebrations become a matter of conscious will and choice, revealed by a lush, generous imagination, and a voice whose grace often masks its essential strength:

“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.”

1982: *Birds That Stay* by Susan Watson
Judges: Ripley Schemm, Earl Ganz
Arrow Graphics, Missoula: 1982

In *Birds That Stay*, her collection of twenty-three poems, Susan Watson sticks close to home. In fact, home may well be the book’s pivotal concern. Throughout her poems, Watson longs for the physical and emotional haven a home can be. In “Flowers,” Watson writes:

“And they will heal like a mother who decorates her Victorian home with bright zinnia and chrysanthemum after she has worked with the dirt growing what is beautiful and green.”

“Little Gifts” reiterates the theme:

“In this cold Victorian house, somewhere an absolute calm wants to breathe. When it did, I could crawl inside, wait for this storm to die.”

Home is also the setting for several of the poems: “Feeling Chinese,” “Hydrated Quartz Is Called Moonstone,” “Autumn Equinox,” “Accepting Poison,” “After the French Movie,” “Little Gifts.” Each of these poems addresses the idea of home in individual ways. In “Feeling Chinese,” and “Hydrated Quartz Is Called Moonstone,” home is the still point in the midst of a whirling flux that allows the speaker time to bathe, reflect, prepare for the inevitable venturing back outside. In “Autumn Equinox,” home is a place where you retreat to nurse aches and ills. “Little Gifts” expands the notion of home so that it becomes a metaphor for another of Watson’s central concerns, the distinction and interaction between the internal and the external worlds:
“Downstairs a woman is crying while her husband watches television. Thick voices break through my floor when I would blanket my body in another winter, quilts with clear symmetrical pattern, and the white pills you brought back from Butte.”

Throughout *Birds That Stay*, the external world, most often seen as the literal out of doors, is revealed as a place of beauty, wonder and size; also a place of violent weather, potential tragedy and constant risk. The problem inherent in the relationship between the two worlds is how to participate in the wonder, witness the beauty, and minimize the risk.

As the title suggests, Watson is not a tourist. Having chosen Montana both as a home and a frequent subject for her poems, she discards the idea of leaving when the weather turns bad. More than once, she stresses the distinction between those rootless souls that leave at the first signs of discomfort, and those who dig in.

Home, of course, implies family, and family further implies the relationship between men and women. For Watson, this relationship poses greater threats to personal well-being than an entire winter of blizzards and icy roads. Although she asserts, in “There Is No Spring Here,” that deceit is strong in both Montana weather and the human tongue, it is the human phenomenon of love that leaves the lasting scars. The desire for home and family can cause one to seek love and permanence in situations much too fragile to last. More often than not, Watson’s poems explore the dissipation of intimacy:

“In an empty bed, sheets recall bodies, lovers making believe or making love. I can hear your bird sounds rising to a pitch that reminds me of panic. Here is your scent, thin black hair, odd sock you left. You are leaving. All the reasons you carve careful as a poem, do not utter anything else.”

What finally matters in *Birds That Stay* is that we persist. Despite lovers who never loved her, despite a man that buys “a truck for my son who wants someone to play trucks with,” despite fate and the often indifferent elements, despite rage and domestic violence, persistence and faith are essential. And in those moments when the speaker feels the whole weight of the world, feels completely alone in the rearing of her son, and suspects romantic love is too rife with deception to ever trust, there is always the intimacy of plants and earth, birds and sky, mother and son. There are the rituals of gardening and cooking, the cultivating of vision. These are all expressions of love, of the connections between internal and external, sky and earth, human and animals.

Once she establishes this pattern of complementary notions in opposition, Watson is free to explore the possibilities of synthesis. Children, in the context of the book, are the ideal embodiment of synthesis, or at least the speaker’s hopes for synthesis, for common ground:

“You pick up the litter of toys, pick up a body of bones and white skin, guard over your child’s rhythmic breathing, imagine his beautiful dream of leaf-eating dinosaur,
cloud butterfly, and dragon; then work
into another morning: steaming the harvest
for December, preparing the tea an old woman
told you would fix everything that is inside dying."

Most importantly, Watson finds hope for reconciliation of her often fragmented
surroundings in the vigilance with which one attends to the world. In "Birds," Watson
writes, "This is love: we let birds understand our reverence for all they have become in
their lonely flight." And in "Flowers," the poem that closes the book, Watson finds
sustenance in the lessons of flowers, lessons that evoke, simultaneously, several of
Watson's concerns:

"Then, as you drift to the lullaby,
they explain their mystery,
their ancient flower secret: how to close
how to open, open then close, and open again."

*Birds That Stay* is an attractively designed and written book. At her best, Watson
uses the objects and rituals of home to reveal essential understandings and truths. Many poems do just that. However, there is a curious, lingering distance in several of
the poems that prevents both author and reader from becoming fully engaged. Oddly
enough, in a book overflowing with organic and botanical imagery, I wanted more,
more immediate and arresting details, more real dirt under the fingernails.

*Birds That Stay* has its moments, for which Watson deserves praise. It is a book that
not only speaks well for what she has already written, but also for what she has yet to
write.

1983: *Small Mercies* by Elizabeth Weber
Judges: James Crumley, Madeline DeFrees
Owl Creek Press, Missoula (forthcoming)

As the sixth and most recent selection in the First Book Award series, *Small Mercies*
brings us brilliantly up to date on the condition of the emerging Montana literature. In
the twenty-five poems she's collected in this volume, Elizabeth Weber displays both a
high degree of craftsmanship and a commitment to meaningful content. Most
impressive, however, is her voice, certainly as substantial and eloquent as you're likely
to see in a first book.

Much of *Small Mercies'* tone is somber. "All Gone," the book's first poem, opens
with these lines:

"Most times, wind forgets this hill, the lilac
calm in the shade of basswood. The laundry,
limp on the line, starches in the August sun.
In the doze of noon, where sparrows
flee to the next county, a barn
dies of inertia, and roads mislay direction.
Each day, I take my hoe and hack
at the long furrows with corn in between.
Each day, the world gives me back my name."
From the outset, we are presented with unvarnished and uneasy circumstances. Though landscape is one of the book’s major themes and concerns, Weber never lapses into the facile romanticism that characterizes much of landscape poetry. In this regard, the influence of Richard Hugo is apparent, as it is in nearly all of the First Book Award selections. It is certainly to the credit of the writers involved, particularly Elizabeth Weber, that Hugo’s presence never goes beyond influence — or, perhaps, inspiration — never threatens the poems with the mark of imitation. That Weber has forged her own personal, internalized relationship with the landscape is testimony to her skill as a poet and the integrity of her voice.

The book’s opening poem also introduces many of the specifics of Weber’s world:

“Last week a neighbor ran his daughter
down with a tractor, thinking her a rock.
The night breezes carry his wails, and his wife
carries his troubles. I stare at the way
the lines in my palms tell my fate, and hope
for rain to soothe the alfalfa.”

In the stanza that follows, Weber addresses the death of someone much closer to her:

“... So it must have been
for my grandmother who left me this place
and went to the grave clinging
to my hand and a belief in eternal
happiness. No peace was in her gray eyes, no
light cracked through the windows
when the air rushed from her broken mouth.

I went out. The hills in the west
exploded. The fields emptied
with the cry of locusts.”

The speaker of this poem not only grieves for her grandmother and the nameless daughter, she grieves for herself. This is a position many poets would be reluctant to take, and one that no doubt sacrifices a certain amount of altruism and purity of heart, in turn risking the reader’s sympathies. Weber’s risk pays off. What emerges from her admission is the ring of honesty and vulnerability. Whether it comes at the freak hands of a tractor, or the slow grip of age, death is tragic, irrevocable, and wrong. And despite the myriad human ways of deflecting the impact of death, Weber chooses to face it head on, knowing in the end there is no final understanding or reconciliation. There are the facts, and there is how we live with them.

In the book’s fourth poem, “In the Outfield,” Weber speaks of another death close to her, that of her brother, this time in the form of direct address:

“The sniper went to the heart:
He pulled the trigger.
It was all he could do.
The thin beat you heard was just that—
blood that stops in a second
and turns black in the air.”
Again we see the poet internalizing the death:

"Dear Bill, the monarchs swarmed
without you this September.
Goldenrods blazed.
All I could do was stand
in the outfield and watch them
explode in the sky."

What distinguishes "In the Outfield" from "All Gone," and other poems in the book that deal with the loss and emptiness of death, is Weber's urgent and doomed attempt to understand its cause:

"Across the street
one light is left
in a restaurant. A girl
rub the counter so mold
won't grow. I watch her
like a sniper. She cleans
everything once
and her heart is like mine.
One shot and she would fall
like the cloth she holds.
The light goes out—no light,
no girl, no heart.

I don't know how
it was that day.
Perhaps the sniper sat
while the world throbbed into place.
Perhaps, brother,
butterflies, swarmed in your eyes."

All this talk of death might lead one to believe that Weber is assuming some variant on the tragic, poetic pose, which is always a danger when one chooses to write about such things. Weber is fully aware of the danger. Her poems may well deal often with the tragic, but there are no poses in Small Mercies, no false or dishonest notes. Nor is it Weber's intention to paint an unrelieved picture of despair. Rather, she is interested in avoiding deceptively easy answers and reconciliations. Small Mercies is rooted in the firm belief that we must look at the world's and our own circumstances honestly, with a critical and unflinching eye. If, after a good hard look, we can still hear the rumblings of hope, can still find reasons for optimism in the world as it is, then maybe we've stumbled across the real thing: hope that can sustain us. In any case, such hope is not easily discovered. Like Nancy Schoenberger and Rick Newby before her, Weber expresses a belief that optimism in the modern world is not bestowed, but earned.

As the book develops, you can begin to understand the appropriateness of its title, and the Tennessee Williams quotation that inspired the title, and which Weber uses as an epigram:

"Life is full of little mercies
like that, not big mercies, but
comfortable little mercies. And so we are able to keep on going."

(from Summer and Smoke)

In "Sachertorte," Weber again addresses the issue of how individuals respond to the hard lives and circumstances that surround them:

"Perhaps this land is too bright, hills, grass, towns and people washed to nothing, and we come back to where we started, not caring if little Arturio's father gets drunk and beats him, or Sabriana has syphilis, because, after all, this is what the world is."

Later in the poem she suggests one of the book's small mercies, its brief respites:

"And this sadness you drag along like a cat is not sadness. It is perhaps that your blood craves something sweet, a Sachertorte, a kind word, here or there. We strain towards something we can name, that light that springs from the fountain, until fields waving madly disappear with this thin sorrow that keeps us."

As Rick Newby did in A Radiant Map of the World, Weber discovers cause for celebration in sensuality and the act of love. In "Remedy," desire makes its way through the world, finally blessing a woman "who breathes so chairs won't hear, who doesn't believe in the wheel that hums in her . . ." Weber wishes this woman engagement and fulfillment, and in the process shows how generous and loving the voice in these poems can be:

"May a thousand tongues swarm over that chest, a migration of swans wheel in an October sky, wings beating clear air. May fish stir between those thighs, flicking tails as they go. May the hinges of the skull open, become sky and all the stars at night . . ."

There is much to admire in Small Mercies. These are poems to return to and be nourished by, poems that continually risk the poet's inner self, continually address matters of emotional consequence. As yet, the book has not gone to print. It is certainly one to watch for, especially considering that Weber's book emphasizes the possibility an honest voice always holds out, that the poems themselves become acts of courage and faith.
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BOB ROSS grew up in a small town in Nebraska, and, after nearly forty years he's still not hip.
BOOKS RECEIVED

All That Autumn, poems by Eileen Silver-Lillywhite, Ithaca House, 108 N. Plain St., Ithaca, NY 14850, $5.00.

Counting the aerie escalator’s steps, poems by Scott Preston, Wind Vein Press, Box 462, Ketchum, ID 83340.


Lullabies from Cochiti, poems by Marine Robert Warden, Seven Buffaloes Press, P.O. Box 249, Big Timber, MT 59011, $3.00.

Nail Down My Corner: Fourteen Poets, Hieronymous Tuesday Press, Berkeley, CA.


Poems & Stories, poems by Richard Blessing, Dragon Gate, Inc., 508 Lincoln St., Port Townsend, WA 98368, $6.00

The Pushcart Prize VIII: Best of the Small Presses, edited by Bill Henderson, Pushcart Press, P.O. Box 380, Wainscott, NY 11975, $23.95.

The Rainshadow, poems by Mike O’Connor, Empty Bowl, P.O. Box 646, Port Townsend, WA 98368, $6.95.


Spring Catch, poems by Greg Keeler, A Confluence Chapbook, Lewis-Clark St. College, Lewiston, ID 83501, $4.50.

The Straits, poems by Michael Daley, Empty Bowl, P.O. Box 646, Port Townsend, WA 98368, $5.00.

Stream, poems by Robert Herz, L’Epervier Press, 762 Hayes No. 15, Seattle, WA 98109, $4.95.

Swan Songs, poems by Bev Junker, Laurie Fairchild, Margaret Hayes, Nebraska Review Chapbook No. 13, Fairbury Campus, Southeast Community College, Fairbury, NE 68352, $1.00.

The Tether, poems by Lorrie Goldensohn, L’Epervier Press, 762 Hayes No. 15, Seattle, WA 98109, $4.95.

Tundra Songs: A Cycle of Poems for Alaska, Tim McNulty, Empty Bowl, P.O. Box 646, Port Townsend, WA 98368.

Tunes for Bears to Dance To, poems by Ronald Wallace, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, $5.95.

Us, poems by Ralph Burns, Cleveland State University Poetry Center, Cleveland, OH 44115, $4.50.


Western Writers Series: James Welch, by Peter Wild; Sophus K. Winther, by Barbara Howard Meldrum; Struthers Burt, by Raymond C. Phillips, Jr.; Preston Jones, by Mark Busby; Boise State University, Department of English, Boise, ID 83725, $2.00/each.
MAGAZINES RECEIVED

The Agni Review, No. 18, P.O. Box 229, Cambridge, MA 02238. $3.50/Copy.
The Beloit Poetry Journal, Fall & Summer 83, Robert H. Glauber, Ed., Box 2, Beloit, WI 53511. $1.50/copy.
Carolina Quarterly, Fall 1983, Mark Manganan, Ed., Univ. of N. Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27514. $4/copy.
Hawaii Review, Fall 82 and Spring 83, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822. $3/copy.
The Iowa Review, Spring 82, David Hamilton, Ed., 308 EPB, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242. $4/copy.
Kayak 62 Magazine, Summer 83, Beyond Baroque Foundation, P.O. Box 806, Venice, CA 90291. $1/copy.
Mr. Cogito, Vol. VI, No. 1, Fall 82, Davies & Gogol, Eds., Box 627, Pacific Univ., Forest Grove, OR 97116.
North American Review, June 83, Robley Wilson, Jr., Ed., Univ. of No. Iowa, 1222 W. 27th St., Cedar Falls, IA 50614. $2.50/copy.
Poetry East, Summer 83, Richard Jones and Kate Daniels, Eds., Star Route 1, Box 50, Earlyville, VA 22936. $10/year.

Trestle Creek Review, No. 1, 82-83, Craig Johnson, Ed., c/o Fay Wright, Dept. of English, North Idaho College, Coeur D'Alene, ID 83814. $3.50/copy.

Willow Springs, Spring 83, Bill O'Daly, Ed., PUB P.O. Box 1063, East. Wash. University, Cheney, WA 99004. $4/copy.

Western Humanities Review, Summer 83, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112. $4/copy.
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