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“Where Heart is the Horse
and Head the Rider,
Poets must be Centaurs”

An Interview with
William Pitt Root
CutBank

Spring/Summer 1984

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The editors are pleased to note two honors recently accorded *Cut Bank* contributors: Rick DeMarinis’s “Gent,” which appeared in *Cut Bank 21*, has been selected for inclusion in *Best American Short Stories 1984* and John Daniel’s poem “The Longing,” which appeared in *Cut Bank 19*, was reprinted in *Pushcart Prize VIII*. 
KNITTING THE SLEEVE OF CARE

Swept to the surface by too much light, I wake with my head in my hands. Cars across the river veer through the green night. Creak of the floor over my bed, beside it the patient shuffle of digits, and overhead, the four feet of the stroke victim’s aluminum cane.

The hounds’ long leap streaks past my window under No Trespassing signs where the current calls the other way, and the red glare of sumac flags a jogger upstream. Better to go down gasping for air, your whole life flashing before you than fall under the wheel of the trucker making up time as he goes.

I am making up ours from channels under my eyelids, insomniac drives, the moonlanes of traffic rising up in the vertical night. Now the highway unravels and lets down the ropes of a swing depending, fragile as thread, from scissoring branches I see through as the bulk of my body travels the track of a comet released from unbearable height. These faraway rumors, these emanations: are they fear or vertigo? Such animal grace dissolves along the borders towards the deep ending we dream at the close of every day.
All things reverberate, said Braque, and they do: some tormented, like spoons by salt, windows by light, whose harsh sail cracks and darkens in an instant. We are these thick selves trying, these opaque vessels, though sometimes our mouths fill with light, saying a few words over, giving a reading of things as if we knew them— We do not know them, so something stitches the unsteady cloth, scours the eye to perceive moon, starling, leaves, faces jewelled with distinct shadow, turning hour by hour through their windless abrasions. Light-pummelled, light-obedient we will go down, astonished to the end by the vision striking the window though it's only the kitchen garden again, cabbages creeping their rows like big, thoughtful snails: and it's only another day to traverse together, collecting in sporadic dews of attention, vibrating to the old stories, spoons listening from the kitchen table, rubbed to all faithful splendor. As one grows older, life and art become one, Braque said.
CHILD SETTING THE TABLE FOR BREAKFAST

It was before morning, before anyone was up, a raw wing brushed him, the child setting foot in the cave of pantry, a light-cord hovering just out of reach, a stool shaking under him like a trestle as he climbed, dragged the plates down one by one, odd and bitter in their embattled porcelain.

He was setting the table for his mother still dreaming under folds of moony linen— how could she know what it was like? He had promised, he could not move. Where was voice, bird? The clock had no face, outdoors trees leaned on each other in a night sweat too thick to dislodge. He saw how it was— no guarantee the world would turn on its big hinge frosted with terror— space beyond space where the sun might be falling even now, in the wrong direction. He whimpered like a lonely animal smelling the death of the planet, nuzzled the window pane beside him, breathing, breathing until a clear patch widened: from the spark of himself, rubbed life, enough to climb down from the stool, take knives and forks from the depths of a cabinet, lay them on the stunned table. Just as a grey lip parted over the lawn, he went to the foot of the stairs and called her.
LOVE

One could make a case that everything falls from the sky, what you find on your front lawn in the morning and later stare at, puzzled over scrambled eggs steaming up into your face, like the laborer having made love to his wife all night arriving at work and staring down into the muddy hole of his construction site.

Since because of gravity things can’t come up from the earth and if they do they’re touched with iridescent rust, the trout from the portholes of the earth, the corn with smut, the atmosphere is a reservoir for our lives, a Graf Zeppelin, a Hindenburg around us. At night orchids fall over our front yards, melting with the first daylight, but if you wake in the middle of it sometimes you hear the bumps, a buffalo rubbing his wet snout along the window, then floating away astonished from you

Like Isaac Newton or Leibnitz both working on calculus at the same time, and when they were done with it, worn out, broke down, the one, scorned by princes, dying an embittered man, the other full of doubt becoming a guard in a gold mine, always alert for the gold to come rushing out past him.
GRANGE

Have sweltered salt, it’s what the meat had lost.
How a rook clung to each china limb;
So lovely, its being winter and all.

Or tight as piglets, as the paternoster
Of their tongues pulling down the milk;
Have sweltered salt, it’s what the meat had lost;

When a girl lost balance the breasts stuck out
Like the straw at her back but more golden.
So lovely, its being winter and all.

With winter’s pointed breasts are those
Who must gather apples from the ground;
Have sweltered salt, it’s what the meat had lost.

And the thousand-taloned orchard bares
That season’s fruit between crooked legs;
So lovely, its being winter and all.

Mighty lovely blackened with chaff, like dolls
We slit the sunflowers from their knees;
Have sweltered salt, it’s what the meat had lost.
So lovely, its being winter and all.
from SOLAR MATTER

45.

Chove, é o deserto, o lume apagado,
que fazer destas mãos, cúmplices do sol?

46.

Olha, já nem sei de meus dedos
róidos de desejo, tocava-te a camisa,
desapertava um botão,
adivinhava-te o peito cor de trigo,
de pombo bravo, dizia eu,
o verão quase no fim,
o vento nos pinheiros, a chuva
pressentia-se nos flancos,
a noite, não tardaria a noite,
eu amava o amor, essa lepra.

49.

Sei onde o trigo ilumina a boca.
Invoco esta razão para me cobrir
com o mais frágil manto do ar.

O sono é assim, permite ao corpo
este abandono, ser no seio da terra
essa alegria só prometida à água.

Digo que estive aqui, e vou agora
a caminho de outro sol mais branco.
from SOLAR MATTER

45.
It rains, this is the desert, the fire gone out,
what to do with these hands, the sun's accomplices?

46.
Look, I don't even know about my fingers anymore,
gnawed with desire, I touched your shirt,
undid a button,
imagined your breast the color of wheat,
or of a wild dove, perhaps,
the summer almost at an end,
the wind in the pines, the rain
foreseen upon your loins,
the night, the night would not linger,
how I loved love, that leper.

49.
I know where wheat illuminates the mouth.
I invoke that thought to cover myself
with the most fragile mantle of air.

Sleep is like that, it allows the body
this abandon, to lie in the breast of the earth,
a joy promised only to water.

I say that I was here, and now I go
the route of another, whiter sun.

Translated by Alexis Levitin
COLD NIGHT THOUGHTS
BESIDE AN EMPTY CAVE

The pond is hammered into one piece.
An owl, darkly buried, carries half the night away like a canyon carries an echo down.

When the final touch is carved on water, intimately the mouse knows the owl, and I am left to the last enterprise of imagination,

the Christ tree enters all the shadows.
I am what the Christ tree is, an upright man at no arms, a swimmer vertical in time, elusive saint,

a descendant of Abel second in the clubbing.
But night and the cold charge live where the rim hangs between sunset and sunrise, halfway into my eyesight,

halfway into the echo night carries in its mouth, a mouse at odds with destiny.
Q. You once wrote that in poetry you consider "emotions primary, ideas secondary." Would you comment on your preference?

ROOT: For starters, it isn't a matter of my preference. That's just how the human creature is built to work. We all respond primarily with emotions, unless that ability is diverted or crippled by trauma. In which case we get catatonics and Republicans. Anna Akmatova's contemporary, Marina Tsvetaeva, put it nicely: "The sole target of all poetry is the heart." Eliot cut finer distinctions when he observed that great poetry can be felt before it is understood. And of course if it isn't felt, we're not likely to bother to understand it. So yes, emotions are
William Pitt Root

primary, ideas secondary. Heart is the horse, head the rider, and ideally poets must be centaurs. In such a poet, the elements of self are wedded. And no one is always a poet in this sense. Theodore Roethke shadow-boxing in his poetry workshop, for instance, was mighty interesting but was not the clarified spirit who wrote “The Far Field” or “Meditation at Oyster River.” In the myths, the centaur is the teacher of heroes, heroes being men who achieve wholeness by performing the tasks which force them to learn what they are made of. And that’s a function poet-centaurs tend to overlook now.

Jack Gilbert once described the poetic talent as the “gift that cannot be refused.” Do you agree with that rather hierarchic view of poetic talent? Can one who isn’t “called” write poetry?

ROOT: Gilbert is, of course, likening the roles of poet and prophet. Jeremiah tried to refuse his role of prophet once, to spare himself further persecution, and soon was crying out that the word of God “was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones.” The great Sioux prophet, Black Elk, had the same experience. It’s a universal phenomenon among those who are called and try to refuse the summons — the charge backs up if blocked.

I will argue that we are all called. By different gods, to be sure. But we are all, nearly all — I will include catatonics but I think right-wingers must be made provisional at best — called. Not to prophesy, not to write poems, but to evolve, to put ourselves into situations where we are most likely to evolve. For some, this is spiritual. For most it is less directly so. Love is such a situation. The desire to learn, to travel, to plunge into whatever mainstreams attract us — these all have the potential to be forcing houses of the spirit on the one hand, or habit on the other. Habit kills, habit drives people nuts. Thoreau’s remark on “lives of quiet desperation” is to the point. Ours, of course, is a secular society. We say “In God we trust” on our money, but we go to doctors and give that money to them. What would a doctor have to say to Jeremiah? “Delusions of grandeur, hears voices.” Or maybe, “Patient displays neurotic symptoms as a result of double-bind.” And such perspectives are neither right or wrong — they’re insufficient.

Everyone needs to express himself, herself. Maybe in poetry, probably not. Break-dancing will do for some. Not to express yourself leads to trouble. Fire in the bones. Here’s a verse by a 10 year
I used to be a door
but my parents slammed me shut.
Now I am a secret room, all lit up,
waiting to be found.

God bless. Whether that young boy finds himself someday through poetry or is found by a lover who helps him open that door with trust doesn't matter. So long as he's found.

One thing we all do is dream. It's the most fundamental creative process of the spirit. Not mind, not id, ego, superego. Spirit. And most of us are abysmally ignorant — through lack of information or wrong information — of the signifying power of our own dreams. Fascinated, but leary. We're afraid it might be Pandora's Box, the can of worms. For which we may thank orthodox Christianity and pop Freudians. Freud laid waste once and for all to the Age of Reason with *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In it, he brought together two of the most profound, and profoundly opposed, phenomena we have: the human spirit and the scientific method. He showed us the horse and rider — with the trainer off-stage somewhere — but it was a horse whose hooves descend into hell.

Q. *Do you see Freud as a champion of poetry then, in a certain way?*

ROOT: More a champion of critics than poets. More a Frank "Bring-em-back-alive" Buck than a Jane Goodall. He was a brassbound genius riddled with human failings, ambition not least among them. Like most revolutionaries, he was a product of his time. Which was Victorian. Prophet in a bustle. Genius in Vienna. And what came from him as vision soon got processed into theory, by himself, and into doctrine, by his disciples. And into dogma by the next generation. Nowhere does information degrade more quickly than in a consumer culture. Inspirations are made into products — new cars, new ideas — and passed into the marketplace. For instance, Freud's term "scheele" has always been translated in psychoanalytic literature as "mind." Bettleheim says "soul" is closer to what he meant. Quite a difference there. And Bettleheim is performing a function of rejuvenation that is in equal parts that of the true scholar and that of the best poet — he is reclaiming from its degraded state some gold that's gone to lead. A little alchemy.
But if artists have a champion among the giants of psychoanalysis it would more likely be Carl Jung. What Freud discovered terrified and horrified him, understandably, and he quickly sought to control it, call it to order. In those dark monstrous waters of the unconscious, while Freud sought islands of rationality from which to observe the flux and maintain his authority, Jung stripped bare and swam in awe and wonder, bearing witness to the human miracle. I exaggerate the distinction, of course, to make a point. The observer is, perforce, the critic. The witness is the artist. Jung certainly had the objective capacity but also had, more than Freud, an extraordinarily subtle and powerfully intuitive bent. Where Freud's inclination is definitive and reductive, Jung's is expansive — more inclusive, less moralistic in tone. Jung sees that the head of the rider keeps company with the stars, that even those hooves sinking to hell are really roots drawing up vital sustenance.

Q. Are writers, artists, less moral than the rest of us?

ROOT: Less moralistic. Artists and writers wage a constant, delicate, crucial warfare against the danger of creating works which critics and general audiences might too easily reduce to a moral, or immoral, stance. There is often a moral complex at the core of the work, or the impulse to work, but it has to stay hidden to remain effective. Dance of the Seven Veils! Because mystery is to artistic process as water is to living tissue — it may not show but must be present.

Q. In the book of poems you've just completed, SAINT DUNG, has this emphasis on emotion versus idea changed any?

ROOT: Yes, as a matter of fact, it has shifted a bit. The title, by the way, comes from the Spanish saying, “Dung is no saint, but where it falls miracles may follow.” The title is risky — people always say, “What?” — but I like it. Jim Tate said one time he had conceived his title The Oblivion Ha-Ha as an example of two opposites being yoked together. Two sides of his nature. And there's a book called Meat Air . . . . Anyhow, much of my book has to do with people and concerns and dilemmas we tend to shun or cast off—an anorexic, endangered species, the Afghani freedom-fighters, the problem of suicide among poets, and so on. And I approach the situations not only as individual matters but as issues. This affects idiom and imagery as well as subject
matter. A few of the poems try to deal with poetry as a way of knowing, a form of learning. Not so much "poems about poetry" as explorations of the expense and responsibilities entailed by certain approaches to fundamental kinds of awareness. Other poems deal with following out ramifications, of a non-literary sort, into a larger area of life.

Q. You say "non-literary" as if that is especially important to you.

ROOT: It is. Although the literary world is not only valuable and inevitably interesting to a writer — indispensible —, I believe learning is a bit like eating. We eat, every day if we can, but turn our meals into muscle and energy, into activity, which is as it should be. We don't carry our meals around with us, buttonholing people to show them what we eat. For writers, the assimilation of old and new ideas might well follow that pattern. First you get them, you consume them, then you put them to work. But to see bits of this or that current literary fashion displayed in a poem or piece of fiction is, for me, as distasteful and childish as seeing someone trudge along with a porkchop hanging from his mouth. Among the young, it's one thing. Among the mature, quite another.

Q: Do you think that contemporary poets — Robert Hass, Jorie Graham, Robert Pinsky, John Ashbery — emphasize a direction towards the "idea?" And do you think this is going to make poetry more inaccessible to a general public? Is this emphasis desirable?

ROOT: I think that contemporary poets are afraid of the heart, and in part that's a function of the aesthetic pendulum. In people like Roethke and Wright — Wright was the last one to get away with it cleanly — you had the heart being laid bare and explored. Roethke is important technically as well as in terms of the goods he brought. Wright is important because of the distance he could go without falling back on complicated or new techniques. Both were beautiful, wonderful shining examples, but for the period of their idiom, the 50's and 60's, they ransacked the warehouse.

I understand that Daniel Halpern when he was teaching at the New School, would tell his students who turned in poems with natural images to go to the window of the classroom and point out any examples of nature they could see from there. And if they couldn't
point out examples, not to write about them. That’s an extreme example, but indicative. Urban provincialism.

As for the poets you mentioned, I think Jorie Graham is marvelous, at this point in her career primarily an architect, quite a skillful one. How much power she will finally accrue as a poet I have no idea. Robert Hass is a wonderful kind of solvent medium for ideas and feelings. It’s exciting to see someone convincingly work with ideas as he does. What he’s doing is not so much original as it is seen afresh, made to feel new again. Which is important.

Ashbery gives the appearance of being on to larger philosophical issues, large-bore concerns, if you’ll pardon the expression. It seems to me that he writes for an extraordinarily specialized audience of literate esthetes inclined to be moribund, for whom this is impossible and that is impossible once any given issue has been chopped so fine that it can never come back to life. Ashbery chops them fine. Certainly he has intelligence and talent, perhaps even genius, but having sat to read him for an hour, what is one inclined to do but sigh? Because his sophistication is strictly high-tech and his concerns are embedded in complexly textured works few indeed seem fully to grasp, he is often touted as being at the forefront . . . but of what, exactly? And to what end? Introducing Ashbery to a general reader is like grabbing a mule by the ears and trying to get him to look at an orangutan who has learned to use sign language. Now I have nothing against either mules or orangutans. But before I am going to be terribly excited by an orangutan’s use of signs, he will have to have something to say to me. Something more interesting that “I want a banana” or “Life is very very complex.”

To give a more constructive response to a poet of great complexity, let me point to Eliot and say why. Eliot not only diagnosed and dramatized the malaise of the first half of the 20th Century; he also raised up an heroic effort toward a cure. The malaise was cultural, the cure personal, and many of those who felt kinship with the disease refused or were unequipped for the cure and so resented him terribly. But he did his work. It was serious, difficult, and complete. That he was a high priest and not the lay-brother William Carlos Williams would have preferred is, in truth, a description, not a flaw.

One of the problems of poetry, as Wendell Berry has pointed out, is specialization, making smaller and smaller, more particularized and specialized an audience, and then complaining that people don’t listen to us!
Q: Do you think this change of emphasis from emotions to ideas moves in cycles, in response to people like Wright and Roethke, who were able to convey direct bare emotions so well?

ROOT: Sure, there are many kinds of cycles, phases. It's obvious that when one generation has exhausted a set of options, the new generation is likely to try something else. Wright, especially, has many imitators but, as is usually the case, they imitate the style — the flat diction, the seemingly straightforward approach — without catching the three-masted spirit. And that's often true of Roethke's other student, Missoula's own Dick Hugo. In his case, imitators tend to assume not only the diction — anything but flat — but the attitude, or stance. The hard-driving, hard-drinking, tough-talking softie. When Jim Crumley described Dick as that grand old "detective of the heart," he hit pretty close to home. The hard-boiled affect is not difficult to copy, but to know what Dick knew of the human heart did not derive from his style; it produced it. There is no short-cut.

Another kind of development — an interesting one that England, for instance, has no equivalent for — is seen in the work of Whitman, the Beats, Snyder, Wendell Berry, and others. It's the combination of a powerfully emotional response to daily life and also an accommodating vision of community. Communitas, almost. But their works constitute the cores of communities of otherwise unaffiliated people, communities of like souls, ethical and esthetic neighborhoods trying to carve and maintain niches in an otherwise indifferent world. While this process was much more in evidence in the media during the 60's and early 70's it is still very much a presence in numerous parts of the country. The influence of poets like Snyder and Berry is not accurately measured by any literary standard. It is not a literary influence, but an influence achieved through literary means. And I say more power to them.

Q: You're quoted as saying, "An ideal poem would be such that its surface might attract readers while its submarine currents seize, dazzle, baptize, and otherwise astonish their souls before letting them worry back onto the shore, reborn." How does this emphasis on emotion fit in with your conception of what a poem should do to a reader?
ROOT: Ah yes, sweet youth! And I still can’t improve on that statement.

Q: You’ve recently published a poem, “The Unbroken Diamond: A Nightmare to the Majahadeen,” about the war in Afghanistan. What do you feel a poet’s responsibilities are, if any, to take an active political stance?

ROOT: It’s easier to see explicit content in a poet’s work than in, say, a sculptor’s. And yet they’re both people who happen to be artists. So it’s easier to make a more explicit call for political content in poetry. My sense of it is that people ought to be aware of how the world works, locally, nationally, and internationally. What poets are aware of — what we have digested of our ideas, digested into the muscle and fiber of our being — is going to come out in poems, and should. Certainly room should be made for it. In the sixties you had an unfortunate display of very bad political poetry and I remember reviewing an anthology called *Campfires of the Resistance*, by Todd Gitlan. I was politically sympathetic, but I couldn’t say that that was a good anthology. It was a horrible anthology! It was apologist: bad poetry is O.K. as long as the ideas are “good.” That’s no more true than that expert poetry is good even if the ideas are “bad.” You have Yeats and Eliot coming out anti-semitic and so on. We should have as a part of our consciousness a political awareness, and what we are aware of must figure somewhere in what we do with our lives. Artists are freer than mechanics to include that as a part of their function. So, yes, I feel we should be as whole as we possibly can be. Let me emphasize that flexibility, not rigidity, is the hallmark of such wholeness.

Q: For the past twenty years, politically oriented poetry — Vietnam era poetry and the books coming out now about Afghanistan and El Salvador — has come under criticism because it is sensationalistic. How would you answer this charge?

ROOT: It’s not their fault war is what it is. What kind of a charge is that? That’s not a charge, but a description. In warfare, the moment you depart from statistics — which numb — you engage individual sufferings.
Q: Do you think it's fair to criticize poetry for its political stance?

ROOT: Sure. If you take a political stance you're going to have to take flack for it. With my poem on Afghanistan I ran into some interesting, fine points of politics. Nobody seems to care much about Afghanistan. It's not local: they're a foreign group of people. When I was sending it out I got favorable responses from the *New York Review of Books* and *The New Yorker*, and *The Atlantic*, and all, but nobody wanted to publish it because of its length, supposedly. I had a sense it was also because of the politics. I sent it around to some people, and Denise Levertov's response in particular was intriguing. She sent two or three letters in two or three days. Clearly she was bothered by something. Her first letter said she liked the poem but was uneasy about giving "political" endorsements. She was concerned about being accused of being anti-communist. This is what we are ashamed of now? It doesn't seem like the most despicable position in the world to take. But that meant she would be perceived as pro-Reagan. So she was caught in a dilemma. She finally worked her way out of it by saying that the poem was against oppression in all forms and against violence caused by oppression in the oppressed. She wrote a blurb to that effect, which I appreciated very much.

I was shaken, though, by the ramifications involved in taking a stance over such a simple thing as twentieth century warfare against people who are practically living in a medieval era in terms of their defenses. I see the Afghanistan conflict as being in part not only a repeat of Vietnam, but a repeat of the Western expansion against the Indians, against native peoples in their native lands, people who have lived highly cultured, nontechnological lives. In some cases they were firing at helicopter gunships with slingshots! It's absurd. This is such a clear-cut issue that to get involved with politics in this way is like an elephant being hamstrung by a gnat.

Q: How do you feel about some of your poems being read over Radio Free Europe?

ROOT: Wonderful. It excited me very much to find that out. I didn't find out until eight years after it happened. For copyright reasons an author is never informed when this is done. They can't ask your permission.

I found out from Howard Norman, whose grandmother had done
the translations. He told me a little about how poems are distributed in Russia, partly through the Samizdat underground network, partly through Radio Free Europe. They have transcribers in communities who presumably tape and then transcribe the poems. Then the poems will be distributed, for instance, through butcher shops. You would go into a butcher shop, order a coded cut of meat, and get your cut of meat wrapped in poems. Amazing.

Q: As a Poet-in-the-Schools in ten different states, we know you worked with children up to the age of 85. What did you learn from them?

ROOT: I learned a lot. When Kenneth Koch's book, Rose Where Did You Get That Red?, was reviewed in 1971 in the New York Times Review of Books, I got a sense of what he was doing, and I was amazed. The poems he got from the children were sometimes very striking in a primitive sense — color-crayon genius stuff, but wonderful. I was teaching at that time at Amherst College in Massachusetts with a highly sophisticated group of students, and I remember despairing: I could never do anything like that. Nor would I try, because I knew I couldn't. As fate would have it, within two months I was getting off a plane in Tucson where I thought I was going to be giving a series of readings at colleges, and Neil Claremon, my contact, said, "Well, tomorrow morning at this time you'll be talking to 4th grade Navajo students." And I said, WHY?"

For me it was a renewal. I probably wouldn't have been teaching college much longer. The energies involved in the college classroom were so remote from the sources of poetry that it was drying me up. Going back and working with children, where you mention the word poetry and they start to scream with glee, was rejuvenating. To find that kind of genius in third and fourth graders — real genius — opened my eyes indeed, and reminded me of how deep the roots of poetry are, of how deep they must and should be. I had to rearrange my approach to poetry in the college classroom as well, to involve some of these more fundamental, elemental things.

Q: Has teaching workshops at the college level affected your writing?

ROOT: It encourages self-consciousness. There's no way it can't. You have to talk about techniques as if it's something that can be
removed from the living body of poetry. You find the temptation is to deal with the poems as if you were a forensic specialist, instead of a dance partner. We are living bodies, moving beings, and you can’t talk about meter as if you could strip the nervous system from the human body, from the body of poetry, and deal with it in isolation. Still, to teach it you must do this. For students it’s rough enough. They go through two, three years of this, but for the teacher it’s not two, three years. If you teach regularly, however long it is, that repetition can get to be quite deadening. You can begin to believe it.

Q: Does the workshop system create a type of poem, a “workshop” poem, and do you think this is leading poetry down a confining path?

ROOT: Several factors. E. E. Cummings once said a bad poem isn’t awful, it’s mediocre. Workshops by their very nature tend to eliminate the awful and encourage the mediocre, the kinds of poems that can get favorable, quick responses in the classrooms, or at least won’t draw down the wrath of God and fifteen graduate students by being awful. So there’s a matter of courage involved for the student. That’s the student’s responsibility — to run the risk of writing a bad poem so that some day he could write a great poem.

The “awful” poem may take a great risk and fail to pull it off. But the necessity of risk, to avoid mediocrity and to approach something in a manner more original, is essential. In a workshop it is possible to play it safe; in poetry, that is not a possibility except among the second and third-rate.

Q: Is it a threat somewhat? Or do you think that the student will ultimately transcend any kind of education that might confine him?

ROOT: Well, some students can transcend anything — even an education. But, of course, the perils and hazards for a young writer, student or no, probably consist more in the seductions of comfort than in the threats of hardship. In writing workshops, we may make it appear too easy. For those two years or so that a young writer is in an MFA program, it’s far too easy for him or her to imagine that success in the workshop is a proof of success, period. It’s not. The hard fact is that most good student writers disappear into anonymity. And there are always good writers coming up out of nowhere, too, who attend no workshops and manage somehow to get it on their own.
One alternative to a workshop is a master-apprentice situation, which is an old one. I don’t know what transpired between Marvell and Milton, when Marvell was Milton’s secretary. Or between Beckett and Joyce. Or Pound and Yeats. But it was one-to-one. It wasn’t public, and I suspect those criticisms were much harsher than what came down in a classroom, and were taken much more seriously because it was one-to-one.

*Q:* What do you think about politics in academia?

**ROOT:** It’s the left hand shaking the left hand. Everybody who teaches deals with that frustration. What I dislike is when I find myself drawn into it more than I mean to be. But if you want the brass ring, I suppose you have to ride the plaster horse. You certainly don’t have to *like* it.

*Q:* You’ve been a bouncer in a bar, a teamster, a shipyard worker, and a teacher — I was wondering how the jobs divorced from academia affected your work?

**ROOT:** Originally they were just ways of surviving. Philip Levine said he was involved in that inevitable succession of “stupid jobs.” I don’t feel that way. I worked my way through college and found quickly that it was like, oh . . . Jacques Costeau has a marvelous passage in *The Silent World* where he describes his first vision of the underwater world. Standing off the shore of Italy wearing a pair of goggles and standing up to eye-level in water, he is looking through the goggles’ upper half at the bathers on the shore, through the bottom half at the underwater life at his feet. He is just stunned, shocked and amazed. In college doing blue collar work in the shipyards was the underwater for me, and the bathers on the shore were the teachers. I’ve been a kind of cultural commuter probably my whole life, trying to write poems that would be comprehensible to truckdrivers or whatever, and writing them so that the most highly literate reader would have some feeling for them as well. I won’t pretend it always works. Nor is that the only kind of poetry I write.

*Q:* In *Coot*, did you start out with the intention of writing a series?

**ROOT:** I began in a terminal state of boredom in Galveston, Texas.
One night after I'd been there about six months I was longing for company when this figure of Coot came into my mind. I was thinking about ski developments in Colorado and the effects that they had on the old codgers around there. I'd also worked in a gold and copper mine in Arizona, 2500 feet underground, and during the whole period I worked there it had been in my mind how different the romantic version of the prospector was from the actual contemporary miner, the drone. In the gold mine the people who worked there had these enormous lunch baskets, I mean big ones, and it took me awhile to figure out that they were smuggling gold in their lunch buckets. So I got myself a big one, but I didn't know enough about what to take; so I took what looked like gold and wound up with about 18 pounds of iron pyrite. Out of this I derived a little bit of wisdom in the form of a short poem called "The Old Prospector":

All gold is fool's gold,
If you're so smart
how come you're rich?

That little three line poem is the nugget from which the Coot poems sprang a year later. And I wrote it as one long poem. It didn't work at all until I broke it up.

Q: Was writing the Coot Series liberating or constraining?

ROOT: Very liberating. It was the first time humor ever appeared in my poems. One complaint about my poems up to that point was about a lack of humor. I knew that was true. I would give readings and people would laugh at what I said between the poems, but the poems had none of that in them.

A couple of years ago I heard Sir Laurens van der Post make a point I found fascinating and instructive. He was addressing a question regarding essential differences between aboriginal peoples — the Kalahari Bushmen, in particular — and so-called Modern Man. He said that Western Culture had made the radical error of striving for perfection rather than wholeness, and that the lesson of wholeness was something we could still learn from aboriginal peoples wherever they still exist. Now others may've made that point, certainly it seems simple enough, but it struck me like lightning. It threw light on many facets of my life, but in poetry I realized I had been striving for "perfect" poems, and I had thought humor — that too too human element — had no place in perfect works of "high
seriousness.” That embarrasses me, but it was true. And Coot was my breakthrough.

Q: Do you think that rigidity is in a lot of workshop poems?

ROOT: I think humor is often absent, yes. For pretty much the same reasons. We feel that to be taken seriously we must take ourselves seriously. That’s a lesson it may take maturity to unlearn.

Q: Do you have any superstitions or habits that help you write or get back to writing after a dry spell?

ROOT: Sure. They’re nobody’s business but my own.

Q: You’ve named Lorca, Whitman, Blake, Neruda, Roethke among others as influences on your work. What did you learn from them?

ROOT: They’re people whose spirits rose off the page in a way that for me was extremely arresting, and that’s what I wanted to have happen with my work. That’s the sense in which I felt influenced by them.

Q: Was Roethke inspirational for the “Reckoning” section in your second book, STRIKING THE DARK AIR FOR MUSIC?

ROOT: I don’t think so. The Reckoning poems began about the time my first book actually was published. I sat down and read and liked the book. I didn’t want to repeat it for my second book. The poems in my first book were retrospective, looking back on childhood or on experiences that had occurred some time before I sat down to write the poems. I had to deal with why that was the case. I knew, but I needed to look more closely, and I did that through poems.

Those poems look confessional at a glance. For me, they weren’t. They were indeed “about my life,” but while that condition satisfies Rosenthal’s definition of “confessional poetry,” it doesn’t satisfy mine. You confess what you are ashamed of, and do so to your god or to your better self; in poetry, the practice is more a matter of bragging in public about how bad you are. Sexton, Berryman. No god, no better self, just the mirror and the New York Times Review Of Books.
My sequence begins in confession but progresses to healing actions and concludes in celebration. Show me a “confessional poet” of whom that is true. Only two reviewers noticed that. One appeared in a newspaper in Jackson, Mississippi, and the other was never published but the author sent it to me much later. Despite good words from Louis Simpson and Richard Howard, neither of whom really seemed to’ve read the book closely though they liked what they thought they saw, Striking the Dark Air for Music got ignored in the shuffle. I still think it may be one of my best books. When I read Rilke’s line “You must change your life,” it hit me like a mallet, like an irreversible, irretrievable judgment. And rather than stay in my misery, writing loathsome whining confessional poems — which are spiritual checks one has no intention of ever cashing—, I made my confession, did my penance, and changed my life. As best I knew how. It was far from perfect — and far from wrong for me.

Q: Thinking of Roethke’s “Lost Son” sequence, in particular, do you think confessional poetry ever transcends the individual concerns and problems of the poet?

ROOT: Yes, in the sense that I’m talking about, because it led to change, real change and growth in Roethke. The poems in his “Lost Son” and my poems in “Reckoning” bear no resemblance technically, but in the deeper sense you’re bringing up, there is a resemblance. He wasn’t parading around. That was life and death stuff. You can tell when somebody is messing around; you can tell when somebody is reading to a mirror, or when they’re reading to their own god, if they have one. Roethke had a god.

Q: And Lowell?

ROOT: Lowell didn’t stay a confessional poet. Lowell had icons, but not gods. And that’s why he wasn’t finally a better poet than he was. He certainly had the genius, but not the faith.

Q: Were Blake or Lorca inspirational for the Song sequence in Striking the Dark Air for Music? Were you thinking of “deep song” and duende?

ROOT: Ever since I ran across Lorca’s plays and later his poems,
they've been a deep part of everything I think. In that sense, yes. The poems of reckoning and the songs of that same book were often written alternately. I would write a reckoning and that would give me the freedom to write a song. The songs were songs in the sense of praise, celebration and free energy, energy released. The reckonings were all focused laser energy, dealing with outlining guilt of one kind or another, not just a sense of guilt.

Q: You've translated some of Pablo Neruda's "Odes." Where does translation fit in with your work, in terms of your development and your style? Do you place importance on translation?

ROOT: It's all translation. Gary Snyder says when he translates Japanese ideally what he does is to digest the poem entirely and then re-create it in himself. He writes the re-creation without looking at language, looking rather at the experience the original poem pointed to. I wouldn't pretend that's what I do, nor do I necessarily think that it is the best way, but it's an interesting and extreme position that is illuminating.

When you're writing a poem about your own experience you're translating a whole series of very complex sensations and ideas and cross-associations and so on. You also do that when you're writing a story. And when you take photographs you're translating images from a very complex medium into a very limited medium, black and white for myself, where the shades of gray are very important. In translating Neruda or whoever else it might be, you try to make an equivalent. It's not just a paraphrase, it's an equivalent, and an equivalent isn't an identical reproduction at all. That, I think, is ideal translation.

Q: This also brings to mind Lowell's translations, which he called "imitations."

ROOT: Right. Lowell was fond of artifice. He had no shame about artifice and the function that it had, the valuable function. He had almost a medieval view of artifice. Now we look at "artifice" and "artificial" as bad, but in a classical sense they're not bad at all. They're the tools of a trade.

Q: How have myths and the idea of myth found a place in your poetry and why are they important to you?
ROOT: Did you say mitts or myths? A myth is an insulating vessel you use to keep from being destroyed by contact with a source of great power. That’s what myths are — good myths, real myths. Whether they are from Northwest Indians or Kalahari Bushmen, or Australian Aborigines, they are the most fundamental, shaped spiritual energies a human being can come in contact with, short of angels. By the time they reach written-down form, the insulation is rather thick around the volcanic substance, but the magma is still there.

Children’s stories, Grimms’ stories, Hans Christian Anderson and so on, are frequently adapted from what in earlier periods were teaching tales. The Sufis in particular contributed heavily to stories we get through the French and Danish and German folktales: looking for gold, looking for gems, looking for the perfect wife, stories of a kind that can be interpreted religiously — in the deep, not in the formal sense of religion — as a pursuit of enlightenment, pursuit of a sense of harmony with the universe, earthly paradise. If you are Jungian or Freudian and you’re looking at Snow White searching for the perfect prince, you might see that as an attempt to join the anima with the animus in an individual. But when you’ve removed yourself from the center of the action by analyzing it in this method, it’s most helpful if you can then re-enter the muck and mire and dreck of the stuff itself, put the story back together and make the corpse live, get up and walk, dance — and you must dance with it.

Q: Have you ever tried to write your own myth?

ROOT: The source of individual myth is dream, and I’ve had dreams of a kind that are mythic, in the sense that they apply well beyond my personality. “Fireclock” was one poem in which I tried to deal with one of a pair of dreams, the other of which I’ve dealt with — in a very brief fashion — in a poem called “Song of Emergency.” But not in any adequate fashion. That’s something I want to get done, because it was an important dream.

Q: Your poem “Do You Know the Country Around Here” is a persona poem, in the voice of an Indian. How have your experiences with Indians shaped the poem? What persona were you thinking of when you wrote the poem?
ROOT: Myself, hitchhiking through California, being dropped off near Healdsburg and going to an all night cafe. It was two o’clock, the bars had just let out, everybody sitting in there was drunk. The only empty seat was by an Indian who offered to buy me coffee. I didn’t need the money for coffee, but he needed to give it so I took it. He talked for hours. Because I was a hitchhiker he viewed me as a kindred spirit of a kind, “a nomad,” up to a point. The story in the poem is one of many he told me.

Afterwards, I walked a mile or so up to a turnoff point where I needed to get a ride, sat in the dark and scribbled the basic core of that poem — which I couldn’t read until the next day because there was no light to see by. That had seemed to me the moment in our talk when he had really nailed me to the wall. We’d been friendly up to a point, then he began telling this story as a friend to a friend, but the nature of the story was such that it became accusatory, and something in me responded powerfully.

Q: You’re very concerned about ecology and wilderness. Where did this interest come from?

ROOT: It comes from everyplace I’ve been and loved and seen changed. I grew up near the Everglades where my father had farms. I loved nothing more than being out there. I was like a dog you take into the woods. My ears went up, my tail curled, and I knew I was home. It’s mostly gone now, the Everglades I knew. Drained for air fields and oil exploration and land development. My former hometown, a small one then, is officially the fastest growing town in Florida I was appalled to learn last year. The farm where my father had trouble keeping gators out of the irrigation ditches and cougars out of the way of the farm-dogs is now a Junior College. With a parking shortage.

Childhood experiences are probably the strongest, in many ways the most formative, and if the child is fortunate enough to be around wilderness of any kind he will develop a sense of proportion about existence and significance which man is not at the center of. As the earth is not at the center of our galaxy. There are grander things out there, and to know that as a child is to know it always. And I’m grateful for that. If I didn’t have that sense of things, despair would be more attractive than it is.

I went to the farms every Saturday, and to church every Sunday of
my childhood, and where I got my sense of reverence was knee-deep in swamp-water looking at alligators and flamingoes, hearing the owls at night, seeing the way a doe bent her neck to drink from a pond, watching utterly awe-struck as a cottonmouth swam by or a rattlesnake buzzed in the saw-grass, seeing the brown pelicans fly in formation overhead along the Gulf, studying the horizon at the beach before I ever set foot in the water to be sure there were some porpoises out there to fend off the sharks. My sense of creatures wasn't that they were friendly but that they were just, gave fair warning, defended their own, and that there was in a wild creature a magical quality I respected beyond anything else I might imagine. That place, those beings were important to me, and without them what was stirred in me would never have been touched. And I would be a poorer being. Without the external wilderness to stir and order the interior wilderness of the heart, a human being cannot be fully human, fully awakened.

Q: And do people figure in there anywhere for you?

ROOT: Creatures had, for me, a vitality and perfected grace I seldom saw in humans. With some important exceptions. The Seminoles who came to town in their native dress, to shop, quite utterly awed me. And the Cubans and Puerto Ricans who worked on my father's farms, and who spoke little or no English but who carried on physically with such eloquence that I had little trouble understanding what they were about — these people seemed to me, as a boy, infinitely more alive and enviable than did the white adults and kids I knew. Their lives were at once more serious and more joyful. These childhood contacts probably have a lot to do with my interest in native peoples. And working people, too. People whose connection with the basic aspects of life is still strong. Rilke's fascination with caged animals, Levine's interest in the old working class of his Detroit childhood, Roethke's love first of the greenhouse and then of the wilderness, Lorca's love of Gypsies — examples of writers who hunger for such connections are endless.

That's one of the things that first attracted me to Roethke's work. When I was reading through the "Lost Son" poems I got a sense of a man for whom all the elements of Greek drama are reenacting themselves in a vegetal, amphibian universe, and it utterly astounded me that he could draw such refined perceptions from the non-human.
It made me aware of something that I had not been much aware of in myself — that that's how I felt too.

Q: Do you have any overall concerns with your poetry?

ROOT: I'm very much interested in how people live in the world, and how it feels to live this or that way. In some of my poems I'll give voice to characters I don't like much, but I'll try and give them a fair shake. I'll have no great philosophical justification for doing it but it feels right. I want to allow a chorus rather than limiting it to whatever my voice might be. That's something I've gotten from Lorca and Roethke and Frost. Lowell in "Imitations" is sending his voice out to other voices, and that's one of the things I like about translations. I wouldn't want to translate somebody I didn't like. Can't imagine doing that.

Q: What do you think about East Coast dominance of the poetry scene?

ROOT: Well, it certainly exists as a condition, and therefore the Western writer has to look to the West for his validation. There is no establishment to offer that validation. When I went back east to North Carolina for graduate school I was very fond of Stafford already and, of course, Roethke. Roethke was known, but Stafford wasn't. At that time — this is '65 — he had just won a National Book Award, and they still hadn't heard of him. Finally, I foisted Travelling Through The Dark on one of my professors who said, "This man seems to write poetry as though he had a battle with it," which left me, well, you know. Stafford is clearly one of the fine poets. Dick Hugo, until he went back to Iowa and began accelerating his connections with the East through various means, was too often regarded as an interesting, idiosyncratic voice. Then suddenly in the last years of his life, thank God, he began to get the national recognition that he deserved. That such bowing to the East might be necessary even for Hugo, is sad.

Q: Since the success of Hugo and Stafford, is it easier for Western writers to make it in the East? Is the East more open-minded towards Western poetry now?
ROOT: Not necessarily. To give you an example, Marge Piercy read at a college in Virginia just before I went back there several years ago, and complained bitterly about the room she had been given. She was told William Stafford had just read there and it suited him fine. She replied, but "I am a name poet."

Incidentally, I got a letter a couple of days ago which will bring me face to face with the Eastern establishment for the first time in many a year. It was an invitation to go read for the Academy of American poets at the Guggenheim. They are having a Northwest poets thing and John Haines, Tess Gallagher, and Carolyn Kizer, who is still counted as a Northwest poet, and Bill Stafford will be there, too. We'll all be up there spewing pine needles at them.
ODA A LA TRISTEZA

Tristeza, escarabajo
de siete, patas rotas,
huevo de telaraña,
rata d’escalabrada
esqueleto de perra:
Aquí no entras.
No pasas.
Andate.
Vuelve
al sur con tu paraguas,
vuelve
al norte con tus dientes de culebra.
Aquí vive un poeta.
La tristeza no puede
entrar por estas puertas.
Por las ventanas
entra el aire del mundo,
las rojas rosas nuevas,
las banderas bordadas
del pueblo y sus victorias.
No puedes.
Aquí no entras.
Sacude
tus alas de murciélago,
yo pisaré las plumas
que caen de tu manto,
yo barreré los trozos
de tu cadáver hacia
las cuatro puntas del viento,
yo te torceré el cuello,
te cusoeré los ojos,
cortaré tu mortaja
y enterraré, tus huesos roedores
bajo la primavera de un manzano.
ODE TO GLOOM

Gloom, you scarab
of seven-legged defeat,
you cobweb's egg,
despicable misfortune,
skeleton of a bitch:
Don't come in here.
Don't bother to stop.
Walk right on by.
Go
south with your umbrella.
Here lives a poet.
Gloom can't
trudge through these doors.
Through these windows
blows the air of the world,
the roses fresh and red,
the waving flags
of the people and their victories.
Not you.
Don't come in here.
Shake
your bat's wings,
trample the plumes
that fall from your cloak,
swEEP the pieces
of your corpse toward
the four corners of the wind,
wrng your neck,
stitch your eyes shut,
cut out your shroud
and bury yourself, Gloom,
sink your rat bones
deep under the brilliance of an apple.

Translated by William Pitt Root
OMENS

Some nights in the pasture
silence falls ahead of the snow.
There’s something I can’t put my finger on,
but it’s the same way I know a child is buried
under an old farmhouse with her doll
when I close her bedroom window
and am afraid to turn around.
It’s a feeling I first had early one winter on the raft
moments before the whole lake froze.
With my foot I pushed the boat towards shore,
the oars crossed inside
like two thin arms dripping water on the wooden floor.
I did not know this was a sign
for my mother’s drowning that spring
though for weeks I saw her stand up to row against the wind
in my dreams.

These omens are never clear.
Like the pillow of feathers ripped open,
left hanging on a nail for the cold rain.
Or the white hens that have taken flight
like bats around the darkening yard,
the single rooster suddenly mute and testing his ruffled neck.
CORRIDORS

Neither reminiscent of the sun's light
Through a maple leaf, nor of dense green
Lawns on dewy mornings, the corridors that
Veined St. Mary's Elementary were unlike

Any green a god would have a hand in.
Pale, dusty, cobwebbed, cracked,
And mottled with a decade's worth
Of children's fingerprints, the walls

Rejected sound and soul. The merest
Whisper bounded through the halls like wind,
And nuns at their most cat-like still clacked
Heels on linoleum so hard our knees bruised

When we genuflected. Certainly our prayers
Could rise no higher than the ceiling
Where they lingered, possibly forever,
Like accumulating layers of smoke.

This explained why God seemed not to hear them.
During class, only spiders crawled the hallway.
Coats and caps hung shapelessly from pegs
And waited, imitations of our souls

Someday in purgatory. Either Catholic time
Was longer than time paced by measures other
Than infinity, or the sister turned the clock
Back while we sang, eyes shut in terror

Or in devotion for a Father who would blast
Us down to hell if He didn't love us
For occasional perfections, our voices
Squeezing toward Him through tight shingles.
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 steps 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 in his life.
FOR THE FALLEN ESPECIALLY
MARGUERITE & PEPE

It is a struggle
but not like yours Chelito, not like yours
where precious breath escapes from “La Oscura” the dark place
where roadblocks squeeze life adding years
or taking on a whim, where Candelaria is a grave of lifeless living
where the thought “we might be next” flits from soul to soul
as you cling to your womans breast on your broken down bed her
hands
soft on your rump your children whimpering in sleep on the far side
of the tiny room
how you love your woman your campesina & she you & you your
children, your
children you
it is all you have “we might be next” cling tighter campesino clinging
tighter
yes, it is a struggle Chelito, it is a struggle
but not like yours;
in my coca-cola get whatcha can it’s cool society, i can hide behind my
doors,
behind the wall, even prison walls where the daggers sting goes
unnoticed
where i write my trash, my prison poems claiming SOLIDARITY
with the CAUSE
What do i know Chelito, i do not feel what is behind your eyes nor
smell your
blood upon my sheets
i am a fool Chelito, i cannot taste the stench of your brothers terror in
my
food
romantic fool i only think of you down there, down in Salvador
what dreams have you seen Chelito
in the streets of your sandstone village with
your eyes bleeding black sand down
empty wells
blood painting visions, flies dancing in your mouth dancing
upon your bloated belly
what dreams have you seen Chelito
whisper libertad scream LIBERTAD tell me
tell me libertad paz libertad
so i can stand fearless
while your face
twirls
transparent in the sun around
the point
of the soldiers
blade.
OUR QUESTIONS ABOUT TIME CLEARED

and I could see the sum of you
each of your red hairs changing in my mind—
first Aurora, then Macedonia, now women
scraping ice from an old car
cold snapping its jaws round their necks
claiming their faces. They throw snow
and pull things tight in my mind, one
shakes a glove, a heavy question, wet snow
falls to the curb, to her tracks. How
can I look forward and away from the ice
in my mind? I take more than my share
of an orange lying split between us.

Skin and flesh, you say, transparent food.
I hold a slice to your face, sweet and good
in the light. Citrus, think of apprehension,
death, truth, mundane truth asking day and day

and every day about sun, oranges, freezing rain clinging
to the blind windshield waiting to be cleared.
As you scrape, I can see your breath blowing white
rhythms, the mastery of time in your step,
the women under your coat waiting cold and fresh.
OVER VITEBSK, CHAGALL, 1914

Rumbling by with open doors
a box car emptied of everything
moves out of the country, and with it
we head oh, east of early memory
to a green snow time of warming hallways
and confident roads. There
an old man with a cane and a bundle
fills half the winter sky, no more a slave
to gravity, and relieved.
Relieved the way a corpse is relieved
by the cool weight of coins from seeing
this quiet slush of evening,
church walls and shed roofs
in March. Nearly nothing
can meet the eye while plenty
goes on behind doors and closed shutters:
smell of fresh bread leaking out
to the street, child in a yellow kitchen
far from a gray-green sky
swinging her legs in a yellow high chair
and yelling in pure
relief at the gaping oven door,
smell and heat hurling out in a headlong leaving.
CARP

If we come up sputtering like the ducks
we fed old bread, their tail feathers
translucent as the eyes of carp,
will we find the rhubarb’s
fanned out leaves, its stalks thick
like wrists that twisted hollyhocks,
the patch of rag
a swallow used to build its nest.

Or if we dive and bob like gulls
pecking edges off the Platte,
could we still find the rocks
whose faces reveal breathing ferns,
crawling bugs, ancestral carp.
Would we find roses or flawless elms,
cherries by the river where
rats lunge on robins’ eggs.

Once we raised bantams in the yard,
bees, and squash so big
you couldn’t hold one in your hand.
Imagine yellow roses,
lilacs taller than the house.
We remember without cutworms or disease,
more gentle than spurge
quaking in summer squalls.
Oh how the carp
lurched in butcher paper,

grandma slitting its belly on the porch,
mud draining. Now we say we stood there motionless,

the puddle collecting on the floor,
its body twitching,

bravely erasing this scene from supper
as the room twirled around us,

real cries unrecorded as discarded scales
while the carp’s gills filled with air.
THE WEDDING

Meloned-out five months and more,  
my sister carries her pride, wedges  
it through the shuffling corridor  
as petty bureaucrats peer over paper hedges  
on dismal wooden desks, the hand-me-down  
relics from the British Raj:  
brass embossers, rubber stamps, pious frowns.

Khadi-clad, the groom trails behind  
my mother with her Persian eyes;  
my father flings the bitter rind  
of an orange into a congregation of flies.  
I bring two garlands heavy with jasmine,  
and a ring the bearer resurrected  
from a drawer at the last moment.

My sister’s destination isn’t this place  
where endless forms are signed,  
and resignation repeats itself in every face.  
She’s looking for what she’ll never find:  
a man remade by formal acts,  
unwavering as a signature,  
a man unwedded to the past.

We encircle the snoring clerk.  
My mother’s sari sweeps his floor  
and he awakens angrily, his chin jerks.  
My office is my temple, he roars.  
No one even snickers.  
Our bodies barricade his shouts,  
I see one garland begin to wither.
At last the clerk stammers out his task.
My sister's wedding over,
we kiss her over-flushed face and pat
the groom hastily on the shoulder.
He got what he wanted: a violin, a quest.
She, with her belly swelling in the heat,
has laid another part of herself to rest.
GRINDING COBALT AND VERMILION

_The artist does not confront the world, but infinity. It is just that our ideas of infinity are changing._

—Rufino Tamayo

Mongo Santamaria isn’t Mozart, but you paint to him, a Basque beret and moccasins tapping, conga beating exact as a heart through your life, as Rothko did to his time’s masters. It matters that we saw them, that room in San Francisco of his already darkening plains of color. That you pressed my arm, led me to the pulse the paintings moved from as blood and breath move, surrounding a body.

Who spoke to us after him, perhaps an unknown woman in a cottonwood canyon, drawing with cattlemarkers. Hidden in the chalk cliffs above the turquois and abstract lake in our dream of Montana, she is just on the edge of our minds.

If only for planting the gardens at Giverny he painted, perhaps it is Monet molding the clay banks of the pond, improving his vision, the manipulated explosion of poppies.

Grinding cobalt and vermilion, you of another century, in a land with violent history, stain otter on shields of rawhide, search for the key to DeStahl. One grandmother’s blood a mystery, your skin darkens each year as chokecherries, nearing equinox, smoke in the sun.
Cottonwood I will compare the honeyed scent of any western river to where it does not graze wild and beyond reach. Scent of sage, crushed between your two fingers, sacred as these heritages, rise as rosemary, at my touch, rises from your hair.
Bain Robinson

TRAINS/DEPARTURE TIME

I've walked the one remaining rail,  
heard the narrow gauge engine's whistle  
echoed off the bunch grass canyon walls  
as the empty ore cars pushed up  
and rode the brake back down.  
How the sound fused with rock, pick,  
voice and water,  
harness and slip scoop in dirt and stone.

And if I could climb rungs into the cab  
and ride down out of the hills  
feeling steam test the gauges.  
I could get off in town,  
cross the yard to the station house  
and stand on Main Street with my hat  
tipped back, jacket slung on my shoulder  
in the small town Johnny Carrol  
built to scale, placed on a plywood board,  
outgrew, and left behind at our house.  
It was a town never named:  
glass windows in tiny wooden sashes  
set in perfectly plumb walls carefully painted;  
street lights pooling the board sidewalks  
in the darkness; a steam express,  
its green coaches lit and rocking.

Here, today, five valleys feed this one  
their streams, creeks, and rivers,  
their twin rails of track  
bringing ore to smelt,  
timber to be cut and planed.  
Here, in the roundhouse center  
of these spur lines and rivers  
are fourteen diesels  
coupled to an oil and grease idle;
their hydraulics, computer linked, flex together, 
relax as one, speak in exhalation. 
The closest commuter stop now
is one hundred miles north over the mountains
and the train runs twice a week. 
This yard makes the freights up after dark;
the box car thunder,
the diesels working back and forth
in their low vibration
remain subliminal and sweet.
RONDO-BURLESKE is going back in overages, Bee Jay” he says and I know just what he’d be thinking to himself. “‘Please have little Bee Jay Wheeler come to the personnel manager’s office’” Vic had to read it out loud, read it out loud word for word off the invoice he was holding up off the counter to everybody sitting there at the pick-up desk (including two or three drivers from jobbers out of town) and then look up at me to say: “Makes you sound like a storybook character, Jay. ‘Little Bee Jay Wheeler.’” And they laughed — I’m sure that most all of them laughed — they had to laugh “with” me as I went away, went away with my truck and the one damn wheel that won’t touch the floor that Frank says you just got to live with, him being somebody that’s got to wheel a truck around every day all day (“Go to five and you won’t be wheeling around little trucks any more, little Wheeler” he says to me.) I know just what the guy would be thinking as I took off with my truck rattling, echoing off the ashy concrete slab underfoot and moving aside them whispering cobwebs hanging down up overhead to hit the dusty metal ceiling and then come back down through holes in the welded iron floor where the eyes of people in sections upstairs can wink down at you, and you got to guess they’re smiling one of them rotten smiles of theirs too
with the wink because the floor breaks faces up into so many dim little pieces. (Stare at one place long enough and everything starts to move towards you . . . ) Once upon a time (he'd be saying to himself) once upon a time little Bee Jay Wheeler was working in section four (Bill I'd like you to meet Jay Wheeler. Jay — Bill Somethingorotherman. This is where we keep your paint, keep your paint, keep your paint. This is where we keep your paint so neatly on the shelves. Until come college kid driving truck for his dad for the summer up and drops a gallon and explodes a mess of lacquer thinner at the foot of the steps out back of the cage where everybody's walking, and it's Frank to the rescue with fuller's earth and no harm done. Until little Bee Jay Wheeler stumbles into his very own overloaded stalling truck and has to get Frank out of his easy chair waaaay up front of the warehouse. Having to listen to all the applause Frank's four good buddies in section five got to give to me and Frank as I go leading him back to the mess I made — and only Frank is doing the smiling and the waving back at them . . . I say he was working along in section four in paint in the back of the warehouse and only doing what was expected of him when he was paged over the intercom, Victor Partsgopher speaking. When he'd waddled his small self back to the parts counter — pushing Mister Hobbledytruck all the way — Victor Partsgopher read the note some secretteller had printed out on a section-four invoice under the part number and part description (Let the electric brain do the thinking for you too.) Read it out loud in front of everybody wasting their good time shitting there smoking their cigarettes and usually somebody else's one after the other, and drinking their coffee-flavored styrofoam took out from the diner up the street because drivers were not allowed past the parts counter (now it's a cage the size of a closet with a blank invoice taped up to one of the uprights supporting the chicken wire saying Home Sweet Home — right next to the swinging electric clock with that stub of a second hand spinning in free air and right over them black hands crawling underneath it damned invisible, woodworms under the floors of home because a warehouse is forever, failed prototype for a special economy clock with no need for a bezel because the hands spun around too fast for the dust to settle on them) and these few good men and true were stuck in that cage because of new regulations imposed to slow down thievery from inside — as if a speed limit sign would slow down any one of them on land sea or air where they got to cup their hands to keep the breeze from blowing out their matches.
Until the door slams shut — in the wind from outside or from Vic's bellowing mouth, paperwork under whitening hand — door that only opens one way. Vic and Dave and Steve and a driver or two from a jobber that don't pick up too often and don't know the guys too good who'll stand stiff in the open doorway behind the locals till another local crowds in the cage and bellows a big "Hi!" to Vic like the two of them ain't seen each other for years and asks Vic if he wouldn't mind doing something for him and Vic says "Chore" he will, or the driver will stand there stiff till Vic says something — and then the poor guy starts the Big Hurry-up and Wait by picking at his fingernails, and Vic starts by taking his cigarettes from his shirt pocket and removing one cigarette from the pack and putting the pack back in his pocket while putting the one cigarette in his mouth in one smooth unhurried motion up and down and side to side, clapping his pants pockets for matches and feeling along the counter and looking left and right for the matches he's got to have till somebody says "Here" and gives him a light, Vic telling the poor nail-picking fellow he's going to have to wait a minute before Big Vic can walk the maybe fifty feet to the conveyor to get his parts for him — impossible thing to do without the smoke pouring out of him like smoke pours off of slicks on a big block jumping from a start (But at four o'clock exactly won't you hear Big Vic squeal his chary four-fifty-four right out of here of course.) These gentlemen of the jury having not one good thing to say about nothing except for drinking (what they was drinking all weekend long and with who they was drinking it with and how they forgot what they was drinking and with who they was drinking it with and left the guy with no ride home to momma and exactly who they left with and how they got home or whose couch they woke up on, not remembering for the life of them how they got there) and which one of their buddies's barmaidens they'd borrowed for the evening while he was preoccupied with something else — in a hospital room maybe, watching the father who was the man that took him for his son laying stiff in a bed and dying without a sound or a motion in him. (Remember how the eyes did not even close? Do you think they go dark or just empty out of everything . . . do the eyes of people close who come back from the dead? Remember how you had to reach around that death mask to close them? after sneaking him that last smoke of his life? Because I was not the one to touch Jim dead, of all times.) This Vic would yank the invoice back from Bee Jay's curious fingers just as he was reaching to read it himself, and
read it out loud in front of everybody sitting there with a vee in their name: “Please have little Bee Jay Wheeler come to the personnel manager’s office,” and say “Makes you sound like a storybook character, Jay” — without me ever giving him the right or no reason to begin with to call me by my first name for short but no worse than just plain Wheeler which Frank the personnel manager will not stop calling me because once I think somebody said he substitute-teached gym class of an odd morning up at F-M (take a look at the boobs drooping out of his tee shirt some day) and does it surprise you at all he’s always been doing somebody else’s job (I’d like to know just what his job is for once if it ain’t coralling young boys in the naked flesh into them hot quick wild showers after gym that for years have stood dry.) And there they are — mugs lined up mouths open in a laugh but it’s the kind of echoing laugh people laugh (echoing down in an empty house) the laugh those kind of people laugh when they really don’t like you (or figure they don’t like you because they see nobody else don’t like you — neither) but they still think they got to be civil so they pretend to be laughing with you instead of laughing at you? but how can they be laughing with you when you ain’t doing no laughing yourself?

When they laugh they might as well be laughing at the only place in town I could find, the only place in my town I could afford on what they start you out on here (come January I’ll be raising my castle to meet a lot of them other ones, boy) — a couple two or three rooms over the Downstairs Attic down on front street. I come home, I open up a can of SpaghettiOs into a pan on the stove with my groaning can opener (to give old Misses Farley a smirk to set the used clocks by before she closes up at night) and I sit there waiting for the weather and the odd movie or two as the stuff goes cold in a dish on my knees. Reach up for the light, pull the covers up around my ears and say my prayers. I say them for wheezing Jay and for old half-Catholic Jay only. I don’t care that you can’t pray for yourself Here. Who else is going to pray for you? Talk is cheap — talk is made pretty cheap any more, they don’t make talk like they used to — talk is cheap I say and it ends quicker than you can finish it. I mean usually I fall asleep in the middle of it and wake up next morning with its taste still in my mouth. Have you ever noticed how after somebody has ate (lunch say), how they’ll come back from lunch at ten after one (back to the warehouse let’s say) and they got to say something right up close to you, say something they think you’re going to take like you’re their best
buddy, something like “Heard the one about the old maid getting her life insurance physical?” (I overheard Frank one day telling this one to old Vic his blood brother at the parts counter, only catching the punchline) “I wouldn’t worry too much about it’ the doctor says. ‘Gets any bigger I’ll just remove it!’ ” and their breath will taste like an old penny? like thousands of people have been rubbing their dirty fingers on the guy’s tongue all morning? and now the guy’s decided to turn around and breathe it in your face and get it all over your tongue the easy way? Always after they’ve breathed in your face your mouth tastes just like theirs smelled a minute ago — only now you can’t taste it any more. Unless you walk outside to let the air get to your tongue (and you’d be a fool to think you’d find fresh air right outside of the warehouse with every blower coughing out bathroom stinks and cigar smoke and paint fumes) and you can’t be seen so much as sticking your head out an emergency door in the back in the middle of a busy afternoon or busy morning even and just to tell the difference. Mister Goldwatch doesn’t like that. Mister Goldwatch likes to see you looking busy. All you can do is try to remember how it tasted when you could still taste the odor of that mouth.

I can’t forget how Frank’s breath tasted. When I come in his office he stood right up like he always stands right up (and I ain’t seen the man stand up like that for nobody else even after deciding I’d make it a point every time I got to go up front to slow down my truck to quiet down the one rattly wheel down and look in his office through the big picture window just as somebody’s walking in to see him from behind the shelves) and Frank shakes my hand — he always has to shake my hand like he’s meeting me for the very first time (and I can’t remember now whether or not he shook my hand the first time I met the guy, come to see if they had any openings, if they happened to be hiring at the beginning of summer — because it wasn’t like somebody was standing there introducing us.) I had come to the man to acquire a job which of course you know from the last thing I wrote you during break, upstairs under the slow-whirling fans, sitting on a pallet up away from Somebody’s squirrelly eyes looking down from cafeteria haven ground floor — because the highest nest is fifty yards away from here. And like with everything else since I left home (left the house I should say?) I had to go looking by myself and like Jim like a father would say supposedly used to say (you said — you still say it?) he said you live through everything by yourself no matter who and especially when you’re laying there in your deathbed and you can’t
speak because you can't even move your mouth under that damn mask except to part your lips to take a drag, and there you lay Jim the one good father he had, taking your last few minutes above ground and breathing your last precious breaths of this blessed air and do you mind if I don't talk about this no longer because I can't reread what I'm writing my hand is so nervous (I know it because I can feel my heart beating against my wind) and I don't want you to think after all this time I'm nothing but some morbid bastard spending every last minute of daylight thinking about the way Jim went, thinking how the father and mother we never even got to see live died. (It don't matter if you know they ain't dead by now.) I don't.

What I spend my time thinking about is what Jim left to me. No I mean what reason I give him to leave me nothing. I always had to smoke behind his back — and crushed my last butt out in Community General's parking lot. I can't remember when I didn't smoke. I even dream about smoking as a kid when Jim would take me out to the garage to show me Big Engine. I always got a cigarette burning in my mouth when I dream about Jim carrying me out there on his shoulders, Jim reaching up to light his own cigarette off of mine. Don't even mention nothing about this to Nobody I'm asking you (as if I got to ask you) but why is it I could never take breathing car exhaust in the garage and the gas station bays like Jim could or Anybody else could, Clinton could? I'd blow a noseful of black slick into my handkerchief every time I would sneeze, always in front of a customer, pumping her gas — black that should have been what was left of you after lighting up one last time at the pumps, having filled yourself up with the fire to come. Black Jim used to mumble (I can understand him even now) he couldn't get out in the wash, and where was your mother (Jean I knew he meant) when you needed her. Besides that I smelled of gasoline and cigarettes to everybody else but myself except for maybe you and Jim and Ununcle Willy his twin stranger (Ma I mean Jean was gone by the time Jim put me to work, wasn't she) — smelled of it even after the empty station had sat for sale for a month with Willy waiting for the next up-and-coming young gas station manager to take the thing off his hands and replace it with a signatured monthly keep. It had to be the smell of me Jim knew too good kept me from having to say something to him about it, kept him from saying anything to me about what I was to him. It was like he knew already — him old enough and sensible enough to know
what your smell meant you for — knew I wouldn’t be much good to
him. And so what was the sense of only passing the station on to one
half of a corporation now that Willy was leaving the business for
good? And what was the sense. Jim sniffed me out soon for not
working on cars, and he was right — Jesus how could he be so right in
what he saw. His clouding eyes had everything he saw in them back
then. They was old, they must have gotten that film that got on them
some time before Clinton come along. It must have been he couldn’t
see them tracks Clinton was always confusing up with somebody
else’s, Jim in and out of the house with Clinton so often — even
calling him Benjy instead of Hammer in spite of what everybody else
called him including you and me in front of Jim when Clinton wasn’t
there (and when Clinton was there then why the hell wouldn’t the real
Clinton stand up? and where in hell did he come up with Clinton from
anyway?) Anyway Jim felt sorry for Clinton you could see (Jim must
have been some kind of person to feel sorry for Hammer Clinton —
who didn’t ask for nobody’s sorrow — and what greater love could
there be than that) since even his own folks didn’t want him, and I can
see why not. Stealing the Cobra Jim give us special for our sixteenth
birthday (your sixteenth birthday Jim figured it had to be) and
stealing her with us along for the ride he told us he just had to take her
for, squealing her tires and putting her into spins on these back dirt
roads with us clenching the grit between our teeth and him opening
her up down the Oran-Delphi strip and going low down through
Delphi and going like a shot up Wormwood Hill and spinning her
around right in the middle of Gooseville Corners of all places to get
yourself and your brothers killed and burning right by the house
again before you could remind yourself of what the hill and the town
and the strip had looked like and cruising cool as a cat shit down the
Cazenovia Road and down into town, laying on the horn button and
giving the finger to people that knew us to look at us, winking at
anybody that cared to look back at him, and driving us home as slow
as the car could tolerate it — AND worst of all telling Jim we’d
offered him the wheel and how he done his best to be careful with her
her first time out of the parlor. I remember that night before I can
remember anything, trying to remember something — you standing
there in the driveway in the dusk shivering telling Jim everything
Clinton had done and no more than what spoke for itself, Clinton
saying “I know you, Jeff. I seen you going in the garage to check in on
her every morning and I know how chary you like to keep her. You’re
just a little bit wary with her yet too is all. I know how you feel,” and
Jim saying “Let’s not hear nothing more about it.” It wasn’t because of calm words you didn’t believe them, Jim. It was because of a kid with his head in his hands not old enough to even have a smell about him yet, screaming what Clinton had done and more than could speak with any sense about it. Which only convinced you he wasn’t old enough and sensible enough anyway to have his say without losing his head. The truth is I couldn’t do what Clinton could do already when Jim took him in. He didn’t have to bring him up or teach him nothing or wipe his ass for him, none of that shit — he could just enjoy him like a son, enjoy him like a son already a grown man for him. I wasn’t what Jim expected I’d be I know, Jim knew it soon as I got a smell about me. And if I could have sniffed myself out a little earlier than I did I could have told him I wasn’t right for him and saved him all that shit, I could have saved him the wait to see all that time what I’d be good for, I could have saved him the wait for another Wheeler and one he didn’t need Jean to go get with him and one he didn’t have to bring up and wait to see what he’d be good for for and one that could work with him without waiting for him, I could have left before the station was starting to go under so it wouldn’t look like I was waiting like a looter waits for the business to go dark — like Willy twin cosignatory waited for the damned looter-in-law to come and clean Jim out for good so he could clean up. I left in the middle of Jim’s last night is what I done, the kid waited around longer than he should have, Jim, and you knew it. And you kept your mouth shut about it till the night you could not stay around Here no longer. Them pure white unworried-looking people tightening the plugs and adjusting the hoses and wires Jim couldn’t even feel let alone give a name for and a use for. I’ll tell you what they was there for. They was there so you and me could watch him die wheeze by fucking wheeze instead of hearing just a few final coughs from the next room in the middle of the night and seeing him laying in bed in peace next morning. Remember what them people up on that Indian hill asked us as we was coming out the room? as that lunatic orderly reached in the room to switch off the lights and leave the gray light slanting down on Jim behind a door creeping shut? asking us if they could do anything for us and if they could to just speak up? I wanted to say You can do one thing for us yes. You can take that fucking gas mask off of Jim’s face and shove it up the end that don’t breathe but you got to say what you got to say, don’t you. When Frank Personnel Manager of
Robert Neveldine

the warehouse asked me that morning what I could do for him I says "Cars is all I know." And he says "You adverse to section four?" And I says "Four six or eight" but he just says "It'll be eight Monday morning when we see you. Don't get showing your smiling face around here no earlier or it won't be smiling much longer. If you're late you make it up Saturday morning. No overtime." And he slid out to jobber service without so much as a So where are we going drinking Friday night. And there they all were in there the whole bunch of them again this morning. Frank having popped me the question one more time — mouths open in a good laugh, me tasting fingers that have handled pennies on my tongue.

I have been afraid in the middle of the night to wake up in bed alone (and please try to keep this to yourself) I've been afraid to be alone in bed in the dark since I was a kid and woke up once in the middle of the night and couldn't stop swallowing. You remember that? Why do I even got to ask you you ask me. Well that ain't the end of it, and there ain't no end to it till the very end of it. I wake up now and I can't barely catch a breath, and I can't swallow to save my life. Somebody squeezing me around the chest it's like, somebody sitting on my chest to make me stop breathing in and out. I got to get up and out of bed and open a window, praying the air's dry and cool even when I know that it's not, even after I've sweated under the sheets or heard the rain rain on the roof. I gulp down a tall glass of cold water from the bottle of it I keep in the fridgerator, and then I feel better enough to get back into bed. I lay there imagining it's going to come on me again and then it might come one me again ot it might not — I never can know. But when it's past the point where I can't remember even trying to remember what the sensation was like exactly, when I try to even force it on myself so I can fight it this time and lose to it once and for all then I know that it's over with for the night. Somebody squeezing you from behind or sitting on top of you — that don't get it, neither one of them. I can't tell you exactly what it's like if you never been through it. I won't even try to no more just because you ain't never mentioned it and probably don't know nothing about it. It's them paint fumes I got to tell you about — they're killing me every time I got to go in the paint room. They got this little room in the back of the warehouse where the lights are enclosed in gas-proof boxes that take five minutes to come on full so you can see what you've pulled, and blowers blowing out the fumes night and day you'd never see till they was exploding off your cigarette into your face. That can't happen to
me — red labels or no yellow signs. I have not touched one cigarette since Jim and Willy finally went their separate ways for real, and now Frank says there ain’t nothing to worry about. But I seen jobber drivers staggering out of the warehouse with their boxes tipping in their arms because they ain’t gotten used to that special warehouse atmosphere like we have. Frank just laughs and says they ought to work a real job for a change and see what it’s like, his breath tasting forever of loose change in my mouth. I say stumble out to your truck and smile leaving.

What Frank wanted to ask me was if I wanted to work in section five instead of four with the pipes and mufflers and the cases of oil and antifreeze and the heavy chassis parts. I think he was just trying to flatter me with that Wheeler nonsense again — that I could heft and lug anything anybody in section five now could lift and carry. But he calls me Bee Jay at the end of it this time: “. . . Bee Jay?” like I was a little kid by the way he says it. He was trying to say like I was just a kid still compared to him and Vic and his yokel locals and the big boys in section five, and the way he was going to say it was to call me Bee Jay. Little Bee Jay Wheeler is what them pissy broads got started up in the Bubble Chamber of the whorehouse they call it for their big fat rear ends from sitting down on the job all day long, from having five kids and a daddy that’s just as hard to buy in the pants for as you are. Sometimes even when they page me over the Piss-Alley system they’ll say “Would little Bee Jay Wheeler please go to a box please. Little Bee Jay Wheeler,” repeating the name like they always feel they have to when somebody’s being paged (so’s everbody else’s cocked-up ear can come back down relieved). And fighting over who’s going to page me because of it! I can see it out in the warehouse, I can hear it through the box before it even starts talking next to me. (I wonder how long they fought over who’d print out that impolite invoice today for all ears to hear and all eyes to see but mine? because my eyes was looking at what they was doing and not down the gutter where they knew enough to expect it’d be flowing with their piss.) I told Frank in not one uncertain term I did not get along with the guys in section five and I did not care to work alongside of them day out and day in and listen to all the crap they got to give me the whole time. (I didn’t say the thing about listening to their crap. Frank seemed to smell it without me saying it.) I think Frank is just trying to do the guys in five a favor by giving then a whipping boy, somebody to pick on so the job of loading up delivery trucks full of greasy and oily and dusty and
clumsy and heavy pipes and mufflers and cases of oil and antifreeze and crankshafts and driveshafts — to make their filthy jobs seem to go faster between punching in and dropping everything (clang!) for lunch and wandering (usually rushing) back (on Friday after cashing their checks which they was too busy to do during break) and punching out seem to go faster. My job in the meantime would seem to last an entire week every day — with every four o'clock buzzer like the beginning of one more weekend much too short, a whole week of work in every day of getting picked on, the same long wait for time free. “You’d be moving up a number” Frank says to me. Can you believe it? You’d believe it if you knew how chummy Frank is with the guys in section five — the section he’s got to walk through to get to the cage from his office, dodging somebody spreading the heavy green dust they spread there for sweeping up the dust with, dodging away in the shelves from the bell of the forklift and smiling up at the driver twisted around to watch out for him, dodging a smiling boy in the aisle with his pen and his invoices in hand and his stickers dangling off of him with Frank’s momentary hand on the guy’s back — with them guys and Vic and company is he ever chummy. I wouldn’t be surprised if even he (even the personnel manager of all angelic people) if he was the one that wrote them words over the urinal in the john. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was him who wrote them words over the urinal on the end towards the corner Frank knows I always like to use because it seems like every time I go to take a simple piss there he is combing what’s left of his hair like he’s twenty years younger than he really is again — and of course while I’m standing there waiting for myself to let go (and it always takes me longer when somebody else is there) he’s combing his hair longer than his pretty face even wants him to. And I know he’s looking at me in the mirror, and I know he’s got to be looking at me in the mirror when he says “Section five, Wheeler?” and I says “Go fuck yourself, Frank” like one of his buddies in section five would say to somebody that hired them — and Frank just laughs, not looking at me no more, and leaves. “Bee Jay — Bee Jay Lives Up To His Name” let’s say it says. “And at Jobber Cost.” It’s still up there to make a fool out of the guy that wrote it. I won’t say what it says because you can imagine for yourself what it says and I for one are not about to dignify it by so much as repeating it. (People bare more in the bathroom than their backsides — they deliver all the little raspberries they been holding back on back order behind them puckering cheeks of theirs.) It’s something more like
what some of them boys in the back of the warehouse must do on their lunch hours together, leaving all in one squealing car for God knows exactly where. It's something they got to be doing with each other going out together without their wives along if you ask me, with their unattached unworried buddies having nothing to lose. Take Vic. The guy's married if you can believe it. You wouldn't know it if you didn't know it. You don't know him like I know him. He still acts if you ask me like one of his unattached twenty-year-old buddies proud of the fact they can do the simplest thing in the world of raising a bottle to their mouth and swallowing what's inside of it. It must be the talking about it that makes you what you are — you got to talk about it right, talk it up right or you ain't no good. "He gets eager when he gets liquored up" and "You ain't shitting me, man." "Alcohol just puts me to sleep" and "That's what your wife tells us, old boy." And you got to laugh and at just the right time and not too loud and not too long. That's probably why they enjoy calling me Bee Jay so much. I don't laugh for breath number one at none of their extramarital jokes.

I unloaded my quarts and gallons and masking tapes and squeegees onto the parts counter off of my truck, and Vic takes them one by one and puts them down in a tray under the bench where he has to bend way over — "Oooooh" he says — to reach it. "Looks like all of your numbers is going back in overages, Bee Jay." I could have said could I help it if other people had better things to do with their time than do their jobs and do their jobe right. Then he read the damn note out loud off the damn invoice. I looked him in the eyes, turned right around, and took my little empty truck and rattled away without saying one damn thing. I could have told you just what he was thinking though. "Did I say something wrong?" he says out behind me before he knows I'm out of earshot and they all do just what you'd think they'd do. And it's like they're laughing at me going back to a lousy couple of rooms or so at four o'clock, getting home just in time to open up one more can of Spaghettiots and put it on the stove to heat up while I'm waiting for the weather to come on. Tomorrow's outlook calls for partly cloudy skies, clearing towards afternoon and becoming partly sunny — with the high in the mid eighties. Low tonight around seventy. Friday calls for continued sunny with scattered showers, winds calm and the high around eighty-five. Chance of precipitation is near ninety percent through Sunday. But only Bee Jay knows what to expect for the morning because he's the
only one to see what's coming under the covers of darkness. (No sun will fool me tomorrow.) And sit there watching my black and white movies with the dish going cold on my knees, with them blurry old movies where somebody turns around in the last five minutes and says "Jay, we're going to get you a new truck and put you up front in Section Number One with the ignition parts" as the snowy picture falls and falls and falls. (Frank would have said no anyway — I know he would.) And reach up for my light and pull up the covers, saying Oh God, I thank You so very much for the many whippings I have received today. Do not forgive me for more than a minute for keeping quiet and only doing what's expected of me. Scare me to death at night while other people are sleeping peaceful unalone so that I may wake up tomorrow and feel so much scareder of getting scared that I can't even say nothing back when they tell me what to do. Separate me from my father and mother forever why don't You and separate and kill off the ones that took me in and kill them slow, bleed them to death little by little from the inside, and at separate times. Jesus fucking Christ! fucking Mary and Joseph that never done it to bring you into the world for all I can tell, fuck me and save me from Here and come close to outdoing your Old Man as possible, show me that you care — especially in the hour of me not being able to breathe again if you like it that way. Amen that the last thought to fall asleep with is that nobody else can't hear that forecast, nobody else can't hear that movie, nobody else can't hear you praying — even when they're standing next to you, even when you're bumping heads. Because if anybody was to find this but you and pick this up and read it just coming home at night would be worse than having to get up every morning to go to work, to get up to a warehouse full of oily eyes and filthy mouths. Every night, every weekend couldn't go fast enough, I couldn't get the window open fast enough! if somebody like Frank heard everything you heard and everything you said and read everything you buried in the trash barrel and then they'd all have something to
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ROBERT NEVELDINE was born, raised, and educated in central New York — a region he has taken on the terrible responsibility of immortalizing. Driving truck for his father for the past seven summers has provided him with the experience necessary for writing “Thomas.”

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PETER WILD is currently writing a study of John Haines. A new collection of poems, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, is just out.
MAGAZINES RECEIVED


_Agni Review_, No. 19, Sharon Dunn, Ed., P.O. Box 229, Cambridge, MA 02238. $3.50/copy.

_Another Chicago Magazine_, No. 7, Lee Webster et al, Eds., Box 11223, Chicago, IL 60611. $2.50/copy.


_The Chariton Review_, Spring 1984, Jim Barnes, Ed., Division of Language and Literature, Northeast Missouri State University, Kirksville, MO 63501. $2/issue.


_Field_, Fall 1983, Stuart Frieber, David Young, Eds., Rice Hall, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH 44074. $3.50/copy.


_Iowa Review_, Spring 1983, David Hamilton, Ed., 308 EPB, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242.

_Ironwood_, No. 23, Michael Cuddihy, Ed., Box 40907, Tucson AZ 85717.

_Kayak_ 63, George Hitchcock, Ed., 325 Ocean View Ave., Santa Cruz, CA 95062. $2/copy.


_Mississippi Review_, Fall 1983, Frederick Barthelme, Ed., The Center for Writers, Southern Station, Box 5144, Hattiesburg, MS 39406. $5/copy.


_Mr. Cogito_, Fall 1983, Robert A. Davies, John M. Gogol, Eds., Pacific University, Forest Grove, OR 97116. $1/copy.
Pequod, Nos. 16 and 17, David Paradis, Ed., 536 Hill St., San Francisco, CA 14114. $8/copy.
Poetry East, Fall 1983, Richard Jones, Kate Daniels, Eds., Star Route 1, Box 50, Earlysville, VA 22936. $3.50/copy.
Puerto del Sol, Spring 1984, Kevin McIlvoy, Ed., New Mexico State University, Box 3E, Las Cruces, NM 88003. $3/copy.
Quarterly West, Fall/Winter 1983/84, Wyn Cooper, Robert Shapard, Eds., 317 Olpin Union, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112. $3.50/copy.
Tar River Poetry, Fall 1983, Peter Makuck, Ed., East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27834. $2.50/copy.
Willow Springs, Fall 1983, Bill O'Daly, Ed., Eastern Washington University, Cheney, WA 99004. $4/copy.
BOOKS RECEIVED

_Fishing the Backwater_, poems, Jack Driscoll, Ithaca House.
_The Illinois Suite_, poems, Marine Robert Warden, Spoon River Poetry Press, Peoria, IL 61655. $2.50.
_The Invisible Wedding_, poems, Richard Robbins, University of Missouri Press.
_Tail Arse Charlie_, poems, John Millet, South Head Press, The Market Place, Berrima, New South Wales, 2577 Australia.
_T. Roosevelt tracks the last buffalo_, poems, Laurel Speer, Rhiannon Press, 1105 Bradley Ave., Eau Claire, WI 54701.
_Waiting for the Spring Freshet_, poems, Paul Corrigan, Blackberry, P.O. Box 186, Brunswick, ME 04011. $3.
_Westerns_, poems, Richard Dankleff, Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, OR.
CutBank 20:
A CELEBRATION OF DICK HUGO

Poems, an essay, and a diary of a reading circuit by Dick Hugo; a poem by William Stafford; an essay by William W. Bevis; portraits of Hugo by Rick DeMarinis, Paul Zarzyski, Dennice Scanlon, and others; artwork by Jim Todd and Don Bunse.

CutBank 21:
TENTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Two stories by Rick DeMarinis, including "Gent," selected for inclusion in Best American Short Stories 1984; cover art by Rudy Autio; "Feature Poet" Harry Humes; Montana First Book Award winners reviewed by Scott Davidson; plus poems, stories, and artwork by James Galvin, Bob Ross, Frannie Lindsay, William Hathaway, James Gurley, Joy DeStefano, and many others.

Both issues still available for $4.00 each (postpaid), or get both issues for $7.00 (postpaid). 40% discount on orders of ten or more. Send check or money order to: CutBank, c/o Department of English, University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812.
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