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where the big fish lie
Contents

7  NORMAN DUBIE
   For A Fifteenth Century Zen Master

9  M. EARL CRAIG
   Autumn Pastoral
   A Story About Ramirez

13 LISA FISHMAN
    Abundance

15 MICHAEL LANCASTER
    Kiss the Fish

30 JOHN STARKEY
    Yaw

32 KEVIN GOODAN
    Something Like Blood

33 DARA WIER
    I Remember Rilke
    Enough Said

38 MARK LEVINE
    Being Late
    Faces

42 CHRISTOPHER DAVIS
    Introducing Thy Salt Bride
    Mission District Sunrise
47 Visual Arts
Stephen Schultz
Jessica Jacobson
Martin Fromm
Marilyn Bruya
John Patterson, III
Kurt Slauson
Rome Stuckart

59 Gerri Jardine
Reno to Wendover

60 Kevin Canty
Great Falls, 1966

69 James Tate
The Nitrogen Cycle
The Documentary We Were Making

73 Sarah Davis
Camera

74 Christy Beatty
Farther Down

76 Walid Bitar
Our Lady of the Iguanas
Andes From Strangers

80 Carol Deering
An Interview with Richard Hugo (1982)
Ikkyu, a blind girl steps over the red staves
Of a tub. Steam rising from her shoulders and hair,
She walks across a dirt floor to you.
I think you are not her grandfather.
You watch with her a pink man
Who has avoided taxes for two winters—
He is being judged by roosters
And has been chased this far into the countryside. Above
him
Burning sacks of bat shit are arranged
In the purple branches of the thistle trees.
The river is indifferent to him.
And so are we.
You tell your mistress the burning bags of dung
Are like inert Buddhas
Dissolving in a field of merit.
She giggles. A front tooth is loose.
With the river bottom clear as the calculus, her father,
The bargeman, sings through the hungry vapors
Rising now like white snakes behind him.
You told his wife that Lord Buddha made wasps
From yellow stalks of tobacco with a dark spit.
Down in the cold bamboo a starving old woman
Has opened a small pig—
The new moon climbs from its blue glistening viscera.
Or light from infinitely receding sacks of shit.
Ikkyu, what is the difference?
M. Earl Craig

Autumn Pastoral

I remember seeing on God's desk
a water glass.
It was a glass I would like to own—
simple, inconspicuous.
There was no water in the water glass.

God kept tacks and a pipe cleaner
in the glass,
and I remember wanting
to reach for it and then noticing
a small chip on the rim.

My name is Ebony Chandler and I've been thinking
about a particular water glass
on God's desk.
I might've lifted that same glass
to my head at a wedding once.

This simple glass that God owns
has made me think of a white ram
with a lame foot.

The ram will not let me touch him.
My name is Ebony Chandler
and although the wind has knocked my hat off
I will reach for the water glass
just as God sets it down.

(This is not an opera. This is not
like sailing to Corsica.)

I put another tack in God's water glass.
I put a small pebble in God's water glass.
I use the bottom of the glass to trace a circle
in my diary around the words
butter, rodent, supraorbital.
Ramirez was thirty when it struck him: his legs had been broken at birth. It seems they were caught funny on his way into the world, got twisted-up and lost their blood. He never learned to walk, or even crawl. I guess I should mention the submarine he was born into. Almost immediately he was posted in the glass turret. They gave him a swiveling chair; he had remote controls for everything.

But that was years ago. When Ramirez turned thirty he gave them his two-week notice. He’d had enough, was exhausted. He moved to Kansas. When he arrived the first thing they told him was that he’d have to learn to crawl, crawl first before walking. They dressed him in a terry cloth jumper and had him babble and coo from a deep crib. They spanked him vigorously until he gave in and cried. They truly wanted him to walk. They wanted him to coach high school football or run for public office. They didn’t know what they wanted. Ramirez, he wanted to work in a pet store. He wanted to look at the fish in the tanks. This conflict is something they never resolved. Ramirez is almost sixty now. He’s moved back into his turret. I think he let the whole community down the way he just up and left. I have him on the phone now, if you care to tell him something. Ramirez, can you hear us? Hold the receiver to your throat and swallow twice if you’re happy.

But even that happened years ago. As far as I was
concerned the word "Ramirez" had been wiped from our memories. MEMORY: the mental faculty of retaining and recalling events from the past; a unit of a computer that preserves data; persistent modification of behavior resulting from an organism's experience. EXPERIENCE: the apprehension of an object, thought, or emotion through the senses of the mind; active participation in events or activities leading to the accumulation of knowledge or skill; the knowledge or mastery of a skill so derived. MASTER: a person having control over the action of another or others; the captain of a merchant ship; a man who owns a pack of hounds or is a chief officer of a hunt.
Lisa Fishman

Abundance

You say perhaps birch trees
enclose the clearing we have in mind; I say cartwheels
turn over like stars, like the tops of blue houses on fire
or long hair streaming behind birds on their way to nest.
Lately they've been swooping down on peoples' heads
in San Francisco,
desperate for lack of brush or trees.
Have we come yet to the clearing

of odd light that equivocates the past and present, say,
or belief and desire?
If the latter two come down to the same thing, I must
tell you
I rode a silver bicycle today, I bought groceries.
Later in my car I ran over a bird sitting in the road. The
light was green
but I would have stopped had I seen the bird
one second before. Split
this image (the green light) into hours,
days, the beginning

of more hours and days, but stop at the plumb line falling
straight
down the wall from which the mind descends: for
instance and
for instance . . . If we see further
into the past it contradicts desired forward motion—but
who would disbelieve
in claims to see what hasn’t happened yet? Imagine believing

that human hair around the fruit trees would keep salt-tongued deer on the outskirts of the orchard, that they would take the scent of a thing for the thing itself. That summer we had one plum tree left,

so much sweet bark chewed down to almost nothing. We got the hair from beauty shops in town and from the school bus I saw auburn, blonde and brunette tresses matted on the ground. The truth is I did not wonder which women were partly wound around our trees, it was too hot, if you remember—

the heat riding waves of sweltering light all summer and all fall and the asparagus growing wild, growing all the way to seed.
Kiss the Fish

The boy, Jesse, rides in back with the fishing poles, huddling close to the cab to keep out of the wind. Tiny shaved flakes of dry April snow drift slowly, hardly falling, on lazy currents of air; the sun, breaking through the clouds, shines into the canyon and turns the flakes silver. Jesse's father, Walt, drives in the loose gravel at the side of the road to keep off the washboard while his best friend Nick sips a morning beer and watches the creek.

Nick spots movement in the tall grass on the far side of the stream—the white flick of a fawn’s tail—and he's relieved at the chance to break the silence.

"Deer," Nick says. "Two of them. Whitetail."

Walt stops the truck and raps on the glass to get the boy's attention. He gestures toward the deer. Jesse looks in that direction, his face blank, his mouth open. Today is the last of three days of fishing, and Jesse still hasn't caught one.

Walt shouts so the boy can hear him through the glass. He jabs his finger toward the creek, but the boy shakes his head.

"I tell you, Nick, I can't believe him sometimes. Now watch. He'll say he saw them."

Walt rolls down his window and leans his head out. "See those deer?"
"Yeah."
"How many?"
Jesse's mouth hangs open again. He wears his Dodgers cap back on his head, his hair sheared close on the sides with a tuft on top that falls across his forehead. He looks back toward the creek.

"Three," he says.

Walt pulls his head in and gives Nick a look, raised eyebrows and pursed lips, an expression Nick has seen a hundred times in bars when a drunk says something Walt finds asinine. Nick shrugs. What difference does it make if the boy can't spot deer? he thinks. He's tempted to tell Walt to ease off, but he doesn't want to make things worse. Walt pops the clutch and Jesse has to hang on. The deer lift their heads and stare as the truck throws gravel and rumbles away.

Walt has his son for a week this year, spring vacation. He'd called Nick the night before the boy was to arrive, told him he'd finally figured out what he could do for Jesse that the boy's step-father couldn't: teach him to fish. "Not crappie or perch or whatever they catch in California," Walt said. "I'm talking rainbows, German browns."

Once, when Walt was still married to Betty, he and Nick had taken Jesse fishing, but the boy had been distracted by chipmunks and anthills. Didn't have the patience to pursue something he couldn't see. That was five years ago, when Jesse had been a delicate little boy with his mother's features.

"It'll be different this time," Walt had promised. "The boy's got fishing in his blood. He just doesn't know it yet."

A dusting of snow covers the trail down to the water, unmarred by footprints of other fishermen. They put Jesse on the best hole, a smooth stretch of deep water behind a huge boulder. The rocks in this section of the
creek are grey, round, rising from the dark water like the haunches of elephants. On either side of the stream the canyon walls rise sharply, vast talus slopes of grey rock fanning out beneath the evergreens that cling to the ridge-tops.

"Throw it to the end of the pool, then start reeling," Walt says. "If you don't get a strike after five or six casts, move downstream."

Walt walks up the creek to the next hole. Nick heads the opposite direction, the boy between them. Jesse, left alone, throws a couple short casts before a loop tangles his reel. He's pulling on the ball of line when Nick hooks a fish.

"Got one." Nick's pole arcs toward the stream, the tip jerking downward. The trout breaks water trying to shake loose the lure, then makes a short run with the current. Nick reels in steadily, gaining line as the fish tires, bringing it to shore. He removes the hooks and holds the fish so Walt and Jesse can see before he puts it back in the cold water. The fish works its gills, then wriggles out of Nick's hand.

"How big?" Jesse shouts.

"Fourteen, maybe fifteen," Nick answers. "Rainbow."

Walt works farther upstream. A few more casts, then he scrambles halfway up the bank where he sits on a rock and takes a beer from his vest. Walt raises the can in a kind of salute, and Nick nods and points at Jesse, whose line is still out of the water, the tangle grown to the size of a fist. Nick rests his pole on the rocks and goes to help the boy.

"Jeez, this stupid reel," Jesse says when Nick takes his rod.

"You have to make sure you don't have a loop when you cast," Nick says. "If you cast with a loop, this is what
“Did that fish fight a lot?” Jesse asks.
“It was okay.”
“Man, I hope I catch one.”
“You will,” Nick says. “You just have to keep at it. And listen to what your dad and I tell you.”

Nick holds one section of line apart from the rest and pulls the lure through a loop. He works at it until the tangle is gone and gives the rod back to Jesse.
“Now, I want you to check it every time you cast to make sure there’s no loop,” Nick says. “You know what I mean?”

Jesse nods. He examines his reel before he casts back into the hole.

Nick looks up the stream at Walt, whose head is tilted back beneath the beer can. If he were Walt, Nick thinks, he’d be giving the boy these lessons himself. If he were Walt, well, he tries to imagine how it would feel to be in Walt’s situation, to have a son you saw once a year, somebody else’s son for fifty-one weeks out of fifty-two. You might tell him to check for loops in his line, but he’d forget by the next time you saw him. You didn’t know when he was small that you’d only have a few years to make your mark, so you didn’t use the time like you could have, and then the boy and his mother are gone, down to California for a fresh start where she finds a new man, a man you’ve never met, who gets to sleep with your wife and raise your son.

Walt hops from rock to rock, coming toward them, his pole in one hand, a beer in the other. He points across the stream toward the steep cliffs of the far canyon wall, the pines and firs clinging to the rocky slope, spires of gray rock rising from the green.
“Hawk,” Walt says, and they watch the black speck
spiral above the cliffs, growing smaller with each revolution.

“How can you tell?” Jesse asks.

“I don’t know. You just can,” Walt says. “Once you’ve seen enough of them.” He raises his beer can, waggles it and takes a drink. “Eagles are bigger.”

“Yeah, and sparrows are smaller,” Nick says. He winks at Jesse and the boy sputters laughter.

“And turkeys wear funny haircuts and get their line tangled,” Walt says.

“And they don’t catch any fish,” Nick says.

“Nope,” Walt says. “Eagles, osprey, now those birds catch fish. Those are cool birds. But turkeys—”

“We eat turkeys,” Nick says.

“And this one’s getting nice and plump.” Walt pokes Jesse in the ribs and holds him until the boy squirms away.

“Knock it off,” Jesse says.

“Knock it off,” mimics Walt. He drops into the pose of a fighter, towering over Jesse even in his crouch. He shuffles his feet, throws absurd punches at the sky, the ground.


Jesse finally laughs. He emulates his father’s stance, raises his fists and dances at the water’s edge. He steps backward each time Walt steps toward him, steps forward whenever Walt steps back.

“I’m gonna beat the crap out of both of you if you don’t settle down,” Nick says. “Are we here to fish or fight?”

“Fish,” Jesse shouts.

“Fish,” Walt says.

“All right, then,” Nick says. “Let’s get in the truck and go.”
The clouds Walt insisted would be burned off by noon bunch thicker now, and the breeze bites stronger. At the next hole, they fish until Jesse breaks his line. Walt helps him tie on a new lure and they climb the bank to the truck and pile their gear in the back. Jesse stands next to the tailgate staring at the ground, swaying slightly, his mouth open.

“Getting cold, Jess?” Nick asks.

“Kind of.”

“Here.” Nick tosses him a pair of wool gloves. “Put these on.”

The boy’s lip shivers as he pulls on the gloves.

“Why don’t you ride up front for a while,” Nick says. Jesse climbs in and scoots next to his dad. It’s tight with the three of them inside, Walt hunched over the wheel, Jesse in the middle, Nick’s arm stretched behind the boy’s neck.

“About time you caught a fish, don’t you think?” Nick’s voice is gruff, teasing. Jesse doesn’t answer, but he grins like he’s trying to think of something smart to say.

“So, you gonna kiss that fish when you catch it?” Nick asks.

He stares at the boy until Jesse smiles.

“No.”

“What do you mean, ‘No’? It’s a rule, man. You gotta kiss your first fish of the season. Didn’t you see me kiss that first one I caught the other day?”

“No.” Jesse can’t keep from laughing.

“Right before I turned him loose. I gave him a big smack on the lips. Right, Walt?”

“Everybody knows you have to kiss the first fish.”

“You didn’t kiss yours, Dad.”

“What do you mean? Hell yes, I did. Anyway, if you
don't get your act together soon, you won't have to worry about it. You're in Montana now, son. If you can't catch a fish here, I don't know what's left. Where else can we go? Alaska?"

Walt laughs after he says this, and Jesse laughs along. "Seems like there were more fish to catch when I was a kid," Walt says. "I remember the first time my dad took me stream fishing, on Manastash Creek."

Nick has heard this story before.

"Dad had already filled his limit, so he started throwing fish across the stream for me to thread onto my stringer. He'd lob a brook trout onto the bank and I'd try to block its path to the water. I was down on my knees, smothering the fish against the deep grass with both hands. Just as I'd get one under control, another would come sailing over the water. I'd see a dark shape against the sun one second, then a fish would land flip-flopping on the bank. He was catching them as fast as I could string them. We took home two limits, fried them up with some butter and onions. Now everything's catch and release."

Walt stops as if the story needs no more explanation. "How many did you catch that day?" Jesse asks.

"I don't know," Walt says. "It doesn't matter how many I caught. The point is there were more fish back then. Fishing was different."

They let Jesse off to fish a hole where the creek curves, tell him they'll drive the truck to the next wide spot. Nick watches through the rear window as Jesse, standing at the side of the road, reaches to unhook the lure from his rod.

"Oh, no," Nick says, laughing.

"What?"

"Take a look."
Walt stares into the rearview mirror, shakes his head and starts laughing too. The fingers of Jesse's right glove are hooked fast to the lure, treble barbs sunk into wool. Jesse tries to free the hooks without first removing his other glove, and soon both gloved hands are hooked to the lure at the end of the pole. “Jesus Christ,” Walt says, stopping the truck. “I’d better go give him a hand. Why don’t you get out here and fish your way back. At least one of us ought to have a line in the water.”

Nick picks his way down the bank. He drags his lure through a deep hole at the edge of the stream, but his mind isn’t on fish. It’s strange, Nick thinks, how one thing leads to another and you wind up in places you could never have predicted. Once, years ago, when Walt and Nick and Betty were drinking after Jesse was in bed, it must have been the winter before Betty left, the conversation turned serious, and Walt made a solemn proclamation that if he and Betty were to die in a car crash, he’d want no one but Nick to take care of Jesse.

“Jesus, Walt,” Betty had said. “Thanks for bringing everybody down. Why’d you have to say something like that?”

“We need to think ahead,” he said. “You never know what might happen.”

“And what if Nick doesn’t want to be a daddy?” Betty said. “You ever stop to think about that?”

“You’d take him, wouldn’t you Nicky?” Walt said. Nick hesitated just long enough to make them all feel awkward before he said, “Of course I would!”

That was the last time the subject came up.

If things had worked out differently, Nick thinks, he might have been the one to marry Betty. When he and Walt used to stop at the restaurant for breakfast on their way out of town to go fishing or hunting, they’d sit at
the counter, dipping toast in their egg yolks, and each
time Betty refilled their cups one of them would say
something nice to her, competing a little, and she’d
smile and linger a moment, rearrange the salt and
pepper shakers, wipe down the counter. Afterwards,
Nick and Walt would say how they’d like to get to know
Betty, and how Betty sure seemed like a nice girl. But
Walt asked her out first, simple as that. And Nick never
did anything to interfere. Women came and went in
Nick’s life, but nothing serious, nothing permanent.

Nick quits the hole without a strike and heads back
for the truck. He hopes Walt wasn’t too sarcastic with
the boy, half expects to see tears in Jesse’s eyes. But Jesse
lies stretched out on the seat like he’s taking a nap, and
Walt leans against the side of the truck.

“Here,” Walt says, “I owe you some gloves. Had to cut
them loose.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Nick says. “They were getting
old anyway.”

Jesse gets out of the cab and apologizes to Nick.

“Sorry I ruined your gloves, Nick,” he says.

“No problem,” Nick says. “It’s okay.” And he pats
Jesse’s shoulder, twice, awkwardly.

The next time they stop, Nick lingers at the truck
while Walt and Jesse disappear toward the stream. He
gets a beer from the cooler, drinks a third of it, and stuffs
two more in his vest. It feels good to be alone a few
minutes.

Nick started this business about kissing the fish the
first morning they went out. It was just something silly
to say, something to lighten the mood. It’s good for Jesse
to see Walt being silly, he thinks. Outside of watching
his language a little, Nick has tried to act as if Jesse
weren’t there, telling stupid jokes, singing songs with
lyrics based on road signs.

He made up the rule about kissing the fish to tease the boy, but the more he thinks about it, the more he likes the idea. He remembers a story he once read about a boy who goes bear hunting for the first time, and after the boy kills a bear the seasoned hunters smear its blood on the boy's face. For reasons he's not sure of, Nick wants some sort of ritual for Jesse's first trout. He wants the boy to remember it forever. He wants to be part of it himself.

Now, however, Nick is beginning to lose faith. It's possible, he thinks, that Jesse won't catch one. For three days they've put him on all the best holes, done everything short of casting the boy's line, but somehow Jesse screws it up: he makes too big a splash with the lure, he snags a branch and scares the fish away. Nick is beginning to understand why Walt loses patience sometimes, why he rides the boy so hard. If only Jesse would land a nice fish. One fish. Then Walt wouldn't badger him and the kid could relax a little and enjoy himself.

And if he doesn't, well, life will go on, but it'll be just one more thing getting between Walt and Jesse. Walt pressures the boy, Nick thinks, expects too much from a twelve year old. But who is he to criticize? He's not the boy's father.

Nick tilts his beer straight up and drinks too fast, the cold hurting his temples. His stomach suddenly feels bloated and for a moment he's afraid he might be sick, but the feeling passes.

Nick sees Walt sitting with his back against a tree, facing the creek, and slowly picks his way down the slope toward his friend.

"Beer?" Nick says, handing Walt a can.
“Thanks. I probably shouldn’t, but what the hell.” They look down the stream forty yards where Jesse systematically throws out his lure, then retrieves it, time after time.

“You’ve got to hand it to him,” Nick says. “The little bastard is sticking with it. He hasn’t given up yet.”

“Yeah. I would have thought he’d lose interest by now. Guess this is a little different from the kind of fishing they do in California.”

“Crappie,” Nick says and laughs.

“Christ.” Walt shakes his head.

Walt is staring at his beer can when Nick says, “Look.” Jesse’s rod is bent toward the water. The boy starts shouting.

“Dad. Dad. I’ve got one.”

“Jesus Christ,” Walt says, and he runs through the trees to help the boy land the fish.

“Keep your tip up,” Walt shouts as he runs. “Don’t give him any slack.”

Jesse is laughing and holding the pole straight up, its tip curving down, when the men arrive.


When the fish breaks water close to shore, Walt charges into the stream, up to his knees in the current. He squats between the fish and the deeper water and gets both hands down to make sure the fish can’t get away. Still laughing, Jesse holds the rod tip up. Walt scoops the fish with both hands and presses it against the bank, holding it there until the fish quits slapping its tail against the rocks. He takes out the hooks and holds the fish for his son to see.

“What is it?” Jesse takes the fish from him.


Jesse holds the fish, its skin spotted red and yellow, its black eyes shining, gills working the air.

"Okay, Jess," Walt says. "Give it a kiss."

Jesse looks at the glistening fish.

"No way."

"C'mon" Walt shouts, towering over the boy. "Kiss it."

"Huh-uh," Jesse says, but now he's grinning. Walt starts to chant.

"Kiss the fish. Kiss the fish."

Nick joins in. Their voices are deep, loud, bouncing off the rocky canyon walls.

"Kiss the fish. Kiss the fish. Kiss the fish."

Jesse raises the trout to his face. He kisses the fish just above its mouth.

"Yeah!" Walt and Nick shout.

"Yes! Yes! All right!"

Jesse puts the fish back into the shallow water and holds it against the current as he's watched Walt and Nick do. It works its gills but doesn't move. Finally, the fish wiggles out of his hand, disappearing quickly as a morning dream into the deeper water.

After Jesse's first fish, Nick and Walt quit giving him advice about where to fish and what to do. They stop the truck, grab their poles, and head for the water, leaving Jesse to find his own spot. Still, before either of the men has a strike, Jesse hooks another fish and lands this one without help.

"That's two for me today," Jesse says when they're back at the truck. "How many have you caught, Nick?"

"Two," Nick says.

"How about you, Dad? How many have you caught today?"

"The day's not over yet, smart ass," Walt says.
"So I've caught two, and Nick's caught two, and you haven't caught any. All I need is to catch one more. Then I'll have more than both of you."

"Jeez, the kid catches a fish and he turns into Joe Sportsman," Nick says.

"Two fish," Jesse says.

"Excuse me."

"Hey, Dad," Jesse says. "If you catch a fish today, don't forget to kiss it."

Walt stares at the boy, doesn't say anything.

The sun disappears behind a cloud. Gusts sweep through the canyon and scuff the smooth water on the deep holes. They're getting close to the end of the road, and it's wearing into late afternoon. When they stop the truck, Jesse races ahead to get the best spot. Walt and Nick finish their beers before they follow.

"Well, he caught a fish," Nick says. "He even kissed the son-of-a-bitch. I still can't believe that. That was great."

"Yeah. Except now he thinks he's hot shit."

"He's having fun," Nick says. "He's a kid."

"Yeah. I can just see it now. He'll get back home and they'll gather around the swimming pool and Jesse will re-enact the great battle. Betty'll say how proud she is and Dick the dad will pat him on the head and slip him a twenty."

Nick matches Walt's stare. The boy will be gone in a couple days, but Walt will be there all year long. Nick doesn't say anything.

By the time Walt and Nick reach the water, Jesse is already fishing. He throws his lure to the middle of the stream, looks over his shoulder while he reels.

"Hey, dad," he says. "If I catch another one, I'll let you kiss it." He stands on a rock at the edge of the water,
his head still turned toward Walt, his smile a reckless gleam.

Jesse’s rod tip jerks.

“Hey!” he says. He brings the small fish in quickly, dragging it across the top of the water. He manages to remove the hooks and holds the fish up to his father.

“Here you go,” he says, smiling, his eyes laughing at his joke.

Walt stares at the boy, then reaches for the fish. He grasps it with one hand and raises it to his face, his expression perfectly calm. He brings the fish toward his mouth slowly, as though preparing for a luxurious kiss, his eyes locked onto his son’s. Then he opens wide and chomps down, biting through the backbone, tearing off the head. Walt bares his teeth and blood runs out his mouth. The fish body wriggles, bleeding in Walt’s hand until it slips to the rocks, flopping. Walt spits the head toward the boy and it lands at his feet. Jesse looks from the fish head to his father, and the blood drains from the boy’s face along with his smile. Tears well in his eyes. For a moment the only sound is water slapping rocks. They’re all frozen in place. Then Jesse turns to the stream and vomits. Bent over, gagging, he starts to sob.

Nick steps forward and grabs Walt’s arm but Walt throws him off and moves toward the boy, takes Jesse by the shoulders and straightens him. Tears stream down Jesse’s cheeks. His body shakes and his mouth is twisted with retching and fear. Blood drips off Walt’s chin. He holds the boy at arm’s length, looks at his face. Nick is afraid Walt will do something stupid, that he’ll hurt the boy, but something tells him to stay out of this, that whatever happens is between father and son. Nick doesn’t move. He watches as Walt pulls Jesse to his chest and holds him there. Jesse’s Dodgers cap falls to the
ground and the boy struggles to break out of his father’s arms. Walt tries to speak, but he’s crying now himself, and his words are a moan, a guttural plea. He presses his bloody mouth against the top of Jesse’s head.

Nick lowers his eyes to the ground and thinks about slipping off quietly, so Walt won’t notice. He takes a couple steps away from the stream and stops. Nick realizes he doesn’t want to leave. He moves forward and plucks Jesse’s cap from the wet rocks at the edge of the rushing water. The boy has quit struggling against his father’s embrace and the two of them stand locked together, rocking slowly, Walt speaking low and fast into the boy’s bloodstained hair, Jesse’s shoulders shuddering each time he breathes. They don’t look at Nick, who stands still for a moment and fingers the cap before he picks up his fishing pole and walks to the truck alone.
John Starkey

Yaw

Leo listens to Gretchen chatter about a room full of nuns rehearsing church tunes in the room adjacent to hers.
The blender mixes a tankful of frozen daiquiris. On stage a woman sings “You’d Be So Nice To Come Home To.” Leo taps the beat on the window as Gretchen, in black tights and leather boots, turns the neon sign on and off.
The racing green convertible pulls up. Leo hesitates, then gets in.
The convertible slashes a path down some seaway road. He pushes his head back, lets the wind ruffle his hair.

The car phone rings. His mother asks where he’s been. She waits next to his father’s hospital bed. Before he can say he’s on his way, the convertible pulls onto the ferry, headed for the Island.

The car phone rings. Gretchen asks where he’s been. She waits
in the motel bar. The band plays "Flight Of The Bumblebee."
The woman sings "Summertime."
The cooler sounds like a blender, the beer tap rings like a telephone.
The rum bottle pours like a request from Leo's mother to come and to come quickly. The racing green convertible waits in the Steamship Authority parking lot. Leo doesn't hesitate, parades down some steely seaway strip.
A hearse disguised as a police car pulls him over, four nuns wheel his father's coffin to the driver's side window and sing "Yahweh."
The driver closes the top.
Something Like Blood

The day begins
& it's too nice for words.
My mother touched my hand.
If I had a lover, she'd be here.
I think the fish are calling
but it's the wind not whispering through trees
but across the neck of a bloated horse
tangled in stray barbed wire.
Willows grab my line & send the message
I was never wanted here. I was told one time
my father could whip the life back into rocks.
I kiss the horse and cry.
The other bank is posted with bottles
I never left— but want to. The sun sets
like a welt across the ass
& if I had a lover
she'd leave me. I tell myself I will act
man enough for mother to kiss me
when I come home with nothing but my hands.
I Remember Rilke

I remember Rilke sopping wet, sprawled out as usual all over his lilac bed, newfangled breezes firing up his freezing rooms, crumbs of sesame drugs loose in his killer hair. Like 91% of the rest of us he lied about the time he spent alone. He spent most of his time on the telephone. And the rest in pursuit of a spider he’d run across at supper, striding up his butter knife. He was one handsome devil, all tensile muscle built for rapid travel. He never once said please or hesitated to crawl into dinner plates. Such a relief to see a grown, living spider, astride a trivet, declaiming against minutiae, by simple virtue of his bearing, the unrequired champion
of infinity, enjoying himself at the table, encouraging Rilke to commit to memory his adoration of a certain shade of violet. Without apology, without so much as a nod toward regret, he ambled up a woman's arm and turned like a friendly bracelet around her sensible wrist. I don't truly remember much more about Rilke.
Enough Said

The stray cat had no tail.
The tooth didn't seem to matter.

I felt comfortable being mistaken.
I felt at ease.

Your cardinal is one thousand times
more handsome than mine.

Having seen your cardinal
I find mine downright gruesome,
not homely, mind you, anguished.
Soon we'll be vacuuming our cars,
soon we'll be standing up, walking
around, just like whipped cream,
just like normal. My cardinal's mate.
is not all that pretty herself.

She's got a brighter look about her
than the petunias.

Of course she's eating
and they are not, not quite.

Pretty soon we're going to find
whatever it is we're looking for.
A fine excess of sentimentality is what cemeteries are for.

People should visit them more often. Last night after everyone was gone to sleep I put on some music and talked to myself. I suppose there's a name for my condition.

Our friend, Jeanne, likes to tell about her friend who tries to impress everyone by plunging his egg-battered hand into boiling oil.

Sorry, Jeanne, that doesn't wash. I wash on Wednesdays and that's traditional. From hatch to flight baby birds spend somewhere, between directory assistance, between hanging on hold, between, oh, this is a ballpark estimate, fifteen to twenty days, depending on weather conditions and availability of food, if they are robins, species differ.

That's a good question. What do you think it means?
It means in summer everyone relaxes when they aren’t answering questions and working or running errands or planning trips.

Some things are more rewarding than others. That’s a fact.

It’s comforting to have a butterfly fieldguide; the word *survive* is over-used, trivialized. You can’t be too careful. Yesterday I saw a baby squirrel running over the road, up on the re-invented phone line.

At first I thought: how dangerous. Suppose it turns out all my second thoughts are best? God forbid, there’d be one long thought.
Mark Levine

Being Late

It seemed rather late to get started. Those who were expecting us would be gone by now and would not be returning. We had our chances. But we were in no hurry. The animals, if animals they could be called, would not be disturbed by the sun, and those of us who made it this far had hoarded protective garments. We had no illusions; we no longer bothered looking up to check the sky. The abandoned milk truck in which we huddled still smelled like milk.

We tried to recall the past with nostalgia, the months in the forest when we ate what we killed. We had fuel back then, we were always on the move, scraping lush moss from beneath fallen trees. The vacant towns hadn’t all been looted. Once we found a ham that had been buried in the snow. And here and there we still found damp corners, beneath bed frames or staircases, damp corners that smelled like people.

I like to take notes. It passes the time. I wish the girl would stop dancing, stop making that dizzying noise with her feet. Her brother spends too much time drawing outlines in the dirt. I don’t think they get it. There’s much to do, and no time to explain. I say to the girl “I’m too busy to explain”
and she stops moving and kneels by her brother. The boy is good. The outlines he draws look like bodies, without any illusions, and he fills in the outlines with colored glass, leaving the faces blank.

Later I hand out pink cards with today’s prayer. We stand in a clearing and sing it. Then we try again. It took me all day and most of yesterday to come up with it.

It’s beautiful.

And we mean it. How could we not? How could we not mean it, and remain here, standing beneath the obscene sun with so little room for error?

With so little time left?
Mark Levine

Faces

We can't make the faces go away.
The bodies—the bodies are not such a problem.
We pull them apart with chemicals and stretch them out
along the cracked surface of the old freeway.
Even the noises the bodies make, which come mainly from the chest and hands and sometimes from the side of the head, even the noises can be pushed into the background where they won't keep us up.
We use iron pokers for this.

But the faces. First we slice them off with shears. Some are fed to the guards. Some prisoners are made to wear the faces, and a few choke on the blood.
We boil some into a white paste to make paper.
We burn some. Some are stitched with bright thread into the masks we wear at our meetings.
But there are always more. More faces, limp and slippery.

Once there was a face I couldn't make go away. Its story is a sad story.
When I paced at night, making my rounds, planting my footprint in the trace of my old footprint, I thought about the face. Thinking did nothing.
I was afraid to get caught. But fear didn't work.
Neither did hunger or sex.
I was afraid when the face was gone.
I was afraid when it reappeared.
The drawings I made with my pencils
on the floor beneath my bed were a good
effort. The face became clear and abstract.
It looked like the empty outline of a face.

Was I trying to hurt myself? I did hurt myself.
I was brought before a panel. Explanations were
required.
When I finished talking they sent me out again.

Then, in a pale room surrounded by other such rooms,
I made love and did not look at the face.
I was looking away from the face.
I committed a forbidden act
and I met with the Master in his private theater
and I was not contrite. I stared at him.
It hurt to stare. I said Fix me.
I wish it hurt more.
Introducing Thy Salt Bride

Last night, to change waste into bright clay, I gulped a whole bottle of green food dye.

Having faked a deadly illness just to stay home I guzzle up a tumbler of red wine. Come sunset, the kitchen ceiling's white fluorescent glowing seems the soul's half-tasted vanilla in my wet roof.

Should last night's boiled beef stink of death, the stainless cauldron sunk in suds? Cheap greasy soap clouds bury fumes down deep into my nervous little endings, my damp tissue.

Wild rats scampering in circles in white walls, I guess I chose not to add red. Giggling,

I rub green all over my pink bedspread, down into my feather-flabby pillow, skull-impressed:

I smear shit prints across flaming plateglass, dreams feeling deep into our avocado grove's black shadows: look out: two ghosts glow, their limbs white crooked bones in the placenta of green leaves:
I'm that fool kneeling in moist rot, a cold snake chilling one palm pressing skin down into the grave, my left hand's talons curled around our Savior's purse, His serpent enlarging, stuffing this maw. Can't His glare pierce this soft skull, spy His meat lit inside my tongue revolving this way, sliding, twisting all around Him, forth, back? Dare I look up into my eyes?

Please press a palm down on my hair to show pleasure. I pull back palm and fingers from white heat, my mouth empty. I strip down, show my tingling flesh, shove my brown tan up against the surface of our eye, paint its salt sweat around across the burning globe, trapped in this filament body I have no choice but to keep lit a few more nights, that you may try.
Christopher Davis

Mission District
Sunrise

Cruising alone down a brown, oil-stained alley. Using a pawn shop display window's fingertip-smudged surface.

On a dry tongue, dew tastes of rust. Exhaust smells sweet. Smell the caramel Swisher Sweets smoke held for years, turned to acrid piss behind the amber layer of Fadeguard, blistered Mylar insides, charred leaves peeling back from heat, falling in, dead skin cells flake across the faded felt's gray shore. There seems no use for used Selectrics, ruby slippers, backlit holographic snakeskin boots, empty, haunting the earth-amber shadows sinking toward me as noon peaks. The plateglass drowns in murk and glare.

Wouldn't forehead skin feel soft? An emerald lawn, reflected from behind my oil-blurred shoulder, simmering closer
in the heat—that's my vision: two pink strokes, the boy shirtless, stiff on his spine, lids closed, hands in prayer on his still chest, and she above, hovering savior leaning over, concentrating on red nails, spine hard to get, her solid one-piece swimsuit a red cell he can't unzip. Propped on elbows, trembling, kneeling up, bald head rising, sway-
ing near her lap, stare still cut off, please stare through me. Reflected here, across the asphalt street stained red, a passing windshield glints. A diamond earring in your lobe.
Visual Arts

Stephen Schultz
Jessica Jacobson
Martin Fromm
Marilyn Bruya
John Patterson, III
Kurt Slauson
Rome Stuckart
Stephen Schultz

Stephen Schultz lives in North Idaho and teaches part time at the University of Iowa. Recent exhibitions have been in Los Angeles and Atlanta.

"These paintings are an amalgam of autobiography and archetype—of current event, history and myth. My intent is that the narrative speak of a specific moment while at the same time addressing a more generalized concept of the human condition. The light is dramatic, even exaggerated. The paintings don't attempt to be a window on to the real world, but describe a step into another world, much in the way a play rather than reflecting life, amplifies it. The paintings are large—the images more than life size in the interest of physical access and confrontation. The paint is dense, dry and luminous—the result of layers of small brush strokes and spattering."

—Stephen Schultz, 1993

Jessica Jacobson

A graduate of University of Montana, Missoula, Jessica Jacobson lives with a nice man and four cats in the woods north and left of center near Kalispell. She is most content when her hands are busy.

"We all build barriers in reaction to certain events to protect ourselves. The armor is symbolic of these defenses; the undergarment is scarred within but the lace pattern without expresses hope; the helmet explodes from the inside out to show that some threats are self-manufactured; the breast plate is for the hangers-on; and the masks is just one of the many disguises we might wear to be in the world. This project is made of white stoneware with synthetic fibres. The glazes are low-fire metallics."

—Jessica Jacobson, 1993
Oil on canvas, 80" x 120".
JESSICA JACOBSON, untitled, 1993.
Ceramic, lifesize.
MARTIN FROMM, untitled, 1989.
black & white photograph, 16" x 20"
Marilyn Bruya, Grizzly Hackle (before), 1993
Color photograph, 4" x 6".

A resident of Montana since 1982, Marilyn Bruya is a professor of art and head of the painting program at the University of Montana, Missoula. She currently teaches Art/Ecology/Technology, a seminar exploring possible ways artists might envision connections to one's place.
"The idea for the real Montana billboard series, Not from here . . . from here, came from numerous classroom discussions about advertising what is really here, which is the landscape behind the billboards. It started as an homage to Magritte, Montana-style. But text on various billboards suggested animal imagery, so part of the series is an homage to animals who also call this a home."

—Marilyn Bruya, 1993
Color photograph, 4" x 6".
Kurt Slauson, *Again, Prometheus*, 1992
Watercolor on paper, 11" x 14"
Rome Stuckart, Chrysalis, 1992
Oil on canvas, 80" X 70"
Kurt Slauson

Overleaf: Again, Prometheus

Kurt Slauson is working on an M.A. in Literature at the University of Montana, Missoula, and has been painting his poems for three years.

"William Blake and Kenneth Patchen have been influences for my work, but my style comes mainly from having my childhood brain utterly saturated with cartoons, of which I am still an avid viewer. I like to think of my images as theaters for the poems—my hope is that they do not strictly interpret or represent the texts, but rather open up possibilities of dialogue between text/image/reader. In the event that I am a bad poet, I am inspired by the possibility that people might still like my images, whose existence I owe to laughter and breathing."

—Kurt Slauson, 1993

Rome Stuckart

Opposite: Chrysalis

Rome Stuckart has been living and painting in North Idaho since 1987. She was recently awarded a Guggenheim and an NEA Fellowship.

"Landscape implies a vista; views seen at a distance, nature observed from the outside. These paintings deal with the forest of the interior; being within the woods, involved with and surrounded by nature. The earliest Idaho woods paintings were large enough to enable the viewer entry on a physical level. These paintings describe an environment, an enveloping space. They gradually changed to a closer focus on smaller incidents occurring within that larger forest. The paintings are built up from impressions and from imagination—by intuition rather than on-site work. My interest is not as much in the specific space of event, but in the subjective psychological associations that it triggers. The most recent work has made a significant shift from a particular reference or representation (where objects and events are nameable, i.e.; a broken limb, flowing water etc. . . .) to a process orientated approach. The paintings evolve from within themselves. There is more of a marriage between concept and method—the process of painting mimicking rather than describing the process of nature (life) as energy, change, movement, transformation revealing an inherent, underlying interconnectedness. This work, though not directly referential, is nevertheless informed by nature."

—Rome Stuckart, 1993
I am in a motel room in Reno.
I am taking it apart.
I have some tools but the motel is very sticky.
Plaster drops from the ceiling in wet clumps.
Outside the Truckee River is dried up.
I build a bridge next to it out of old plaster
and pieces of the motel.
From the top span I can see the curve of the earth
and on it a town made of yellowed newspapers.
Along the highway messages are written with stones.
A watertower retreats across the horizon.
Not even the rev of the motorcycle changes.
The casino is full of children,
shoulders bent to slot machines that pay
in marbles. Blackjack tables are abandoned,
the giftshop emptied of bibles and brothel guides.
In the chapel the last couple drowns in rice.
It spills out the door and sticks to my shoes.
On the salt flats I tip over.
The motorcycle spins on the throttle and pegs,
digs a hole and runs out of gas.
My new claim yields marbles, a rosary, and rice.
I wear a towel and display my hands.
Needles and nurse’s aides and little bottles of his own blood: Evan’s been in the hospital for tests three times already, and he’s going back next week. Why won’t they tell him? None of the doctors will say the word cancer in his presence anymore, and his son has used his summer vacation to drive his little family from California. Billy never visits except at Christmas. His kindness is sinister.

The second day after their arrival, Evan talks Billy into an excursion to Glacier Park, though he knows Billy is tired of driving. Kath, Billy’s wife, refuses to go. Evan should give up but he can’t stand to be around the house with them: they argue, they watch Johnny Carson with the volume way up. And their son: Tim was once his little shining star but now, eleven years old, he is suddenly fat and sullen, a television addict. On the highway, he slouches in the backseat, sideways with a comic book, the Incredible Slob Man, according to Evan. Billy fiddles with the radio, jumping without warning from station to station, though it’s a mystery how he can hear anything at all over the stuttering roar of the motor. The wind carries a faint stink of burning diesel.

“This car smells funny to me,” Evan shouts over the engine. “Are you sure there’s nothing wrong with it?”

“This is a perfectly good car. There’s nothing wrong with this car.”

“Well, I do smell something.”

“It’s the refineries,” Billy says, though they’re already
miles out of town, and the refineries are miles in the other direction. Evan decides to drop it: better to die here than in the hospital, better quickly than slowly, a fast fiery wreck.

It's hot: the sun shines bright and hard from a ceramic blue sky, empty of clouds. A simplified landscape, blue above, sunburnt tan and green below, the dusty black asphalt cutting a curve through the hills, two-lane all the way. They putter along at a steady fifty-eight miles an hour, getting passed by everyone. Semi-trucks loom like houses in the rear-view mirrors, waiting for their opportunity, and when they pass the car shakes like a sick puppy in the side-blast.

At noon exactly — he checks his watch — Billy reaches back into the cooler and opens his first cold beer of the day and his sense of release seems to fill the car. Now there will be a few good hours. Tim leans across the seatback, as the mountains break the horizon, and together he and Evan plot their day on a map of the park. The beautiful names: Kintla Peak, Many Glacier, Granite Park, Saint Mary's. Better here, Evan thinks, in a place I know. He sees himself sleeping in the dirt of the forest floor, the first soft snows of winter curling over him.

Billy scowls at the windshield. "What about the police?"
"Well, they're just watching. You know, behind billboards and all."
"I've never seen a cop behind a billboard in my life," Billy says, "and if we were driving any slower, we'd be going backwards."
Tim is suddenly alert; he leans into the space between the front seats and says, "Let's get a Mustang."
"A gas hog like that — what would we do with it? You just drive from one gas station to the other."

"We could go fast," Tim says. "We could beat all the other cars."

An Indian chief in costume and head-dress greets them from the porch of the train station in East Glacier, and for a dollar he lets them take a picture. Evan hands his Instamatic to Billy and stands on one side of the Indian Chief with Tim on the other. Billy fusses with the camera, though there's nothing to adjust. They stand there posing: the fat boy squinting into the sun, the Indian with the grim face of a retired policeman, the weak old man. As Billy goes to snap the lens, a gust of wind comes along and blows Evan's jacket up into his face, surprising him. Evan wants Billy to take another picture, sure he'll look terrible, but Billy's afraid the Indian will want another dollar.

They drive slowly across the Continental Divide, the VW banging and chuffing, cars piling up behind them, working their horns. Half the cars that pass them give Billy the finger, which Evan pretends not to see. The sun shines brightly on the gray rock of the mountains, granite peaks rising out of the forests; like cities, Evan thinks, or the outskirts of heaven. The air is thin, the meadows brilliant Irish green. Evan remembers believing in heaven as a child, thinking this was what it looked like, only warm, inviting.

"Are there bears out there?" Tim asks.

His father waves toward the hills with his open can of beer. "Grizzly bears," he says. "They come down out of the hills every once in a while and eat somebody, don't they?"

"Oh, I suppose," Evan says, abstracted.

"Came down and got one girl right out of her sleeping
bag last summer, killed her and then dragged her off into the woods about a hundred yards and ate her leg all the way off."

"All right," Tim says.

"Billy," Evan warns his son, "I don't want you scaring him."

"Are there snakes?" Tim asks.

"Rattlers," Billy says. "Big ones."

Boy talk, Evan thinks, the way it ought to be; and for a moment he almost believes in Billy, he wants to believe, wants to think that he will come unstuck and start to move forward again. Billy teaches fourth-grade science in Stockton, California, fifteen hundred miles away; he drinks too much, he isn't particularly kind to Tim, he isn't happy. He reaches into the back seat and opens another beer, his fourth, Evan can't help counting. He wants to think that it isn't too late for his son. Too late, too late, too late, the road rushes by and all the beautiful meadows and the tall peaks and the deep black forests are swept past them in a rush of wind as Evan stares, trying to bring it inside himself. He knows that this is what they will tell him, when they finally tell him: too late, if we could have caught it earlier . . . Give me strength, he prays, and grant me mercy. Already the sun has changed directions, starting its long slant down into the west, where eight or nine hours from now it will set; two o'clock, and nothing since breakfast.

"I thought we might stop at the lodge," he says. "My treat."

"What lodge?"

"There's one at Lake MacDonald," he says, measuring his words. He won't want to stop, he drives in a sort of blissful trance, always forward. "I used to go there with your mother, many years ago."
“Sure,” Billy says, “whatever you feel like.”

This quick acquiescence isn’t like him, always pressing onward, believing that if he drives far enough and fast enough, happiness will be waiting for him around some curve. In Billy’s easy deferral, Evan hears another evidence that he is dying. The word startles him, even as a thought. He wonders what it will be like to say it out loud: I have cancer, I am not going to recover, I am dying. Far below the edge of the road, a lake lies calm and glittering in the sun, nestled into the granite roots of the mountains. What should he have done? This is only scenery, after all, something to look at. But Evan can’t help feeling that here is a thing he should have paid attention to.

The lodge is full, tourists from France and Iowa and New York City, teenagers in Bermuda shorts and plaid shirts flirting on the porch, threatening each other with buckets of cold lake-water. There is an Indian chief here, too, or at least a placard explaining who he is and the prices of various things. This Indian Chief is apparently on break. The view of the lake is very beautiful, they all comment on it, yet Evan has seen this picture on calendars and postcards and memories, so familiar that the truth of it comes as a slight shock, a reproach. The cold, indifferent beauty of this place seems like a memory of everything he hasn’t done.

After a few minutes’ wait in the lobby — wrought-iron furniture and Western prints — the three of them are seated in the back of the big dining room, the picture windows at the far end shining with the famous view, like brilliant Kodachromes. The room is loud with the clatter of glass and china and conversation in different languages. Billy, staring at something across the room, indifferently orders a hamburger and a bottle
of beer; Evan asks for a bowl of soup and a glass of water, and Tim orders a large Coke and a meat loaf sandwich.

"Hit the can," Billy says. "Be right back."

Alone, Evan and his grandson stare out the windows, as if something were about to happen. He asks the boy, "Don't you love Montana?"

"Sure," Tim says, eyes left, eyes right, anywhere but meeting his.

"Don't you feel closer to God up here?" he asks, knowing he was going too far; but he wants to give the boy something, wants to shake him out of his complacent misery. In a little while, he'll be all that's left of Evan — a frightening thought. He says, "I sometimes feel like I'm sitting in God's lap when I'm up here, it's all so clean and pretty."

"We don't go to church anymore," Tim says, eyes left, eyes right.

"You don't have to go to church to believe in God," Evan says. "You don't even have to believe. You can just close your eyes and get that feeling of something all around you." He lets his gaze drift off the boy, out the window, where the mountains are shining in the sun like music, like an opera, he imagines. He says, "There's something special about the mountains, don't you think? Something spiritual. You can see things so much more clearly."

"Dad says you're getting sick."

Tim is staring at him with avid interest, abnormal, as if Evan were a pornographic picture.

"He said I'm not supposed to talk to you about it," Tim says. "He said it's a secret."

Evan's secret. He stares out the window, hoping to find the feeling of a moment before. But there is the view and here he is and they don't have anything to do
with each other. Scenery will not solve any of his problems; and at that moment the waitress comes and sets their plates of disgusting food on the table. Evan can’t even look at his but Tim digs in.

“What else did your father say?” Evan asks angrily. “What other little secrets did he tell you?”

Tim misses the anger; he pauses between bites to think of what to tell him. Without wiping his mouth, he says, “One of the doctors thinks you’re making it up.”

One of the doctors, Evan thinks — only one. The rest think I’m gone. But then the thought breaks on him: what if I am? What if this is only pretend? What if I’m so unreliable that no one should pay attention to me? He thought of his wife, an argument after a bridge game at a neighbor’s house: you don’t even know what you want, she said, and it’s always the weak ones who screw things up. Shelley had only said the words once but Evan could still hear them.

“What else did he say?” asks Evan.

“Say about what?” Billy asks. He’s returned the wrong way, unseen, unsuspected. Tim tries to disappear, without moving, as if he sat still enough he’d change color and blend in with the chair, the tablecloth, his meatloaf sandwich.

But Evan’s still upset, a diffuse, floating anger. “We were talking about my illness,” he says. “We were talking about how I’m apparently making it all up to get attention.”

“That’s so inconsiderate,” Billy says, with a kind of dreamlike wonder. He takes Tim by the arm and hauls him to his feet, crumbs and meatloaf spilling onto the floor, and slaps him hard across the mouth.

“That’s just so inconsiderate,” he says again. “That just shows a total lack of consideration for the feelings of
The slap seems to still be sounding in the corners of the room, all conversation hushed, all eyes on their table as the red welt starts to blossom around the boy's mouth.

"Excuse me," Evan says, in the silence.

He rises, folds his napkin next to his disgusting soup and leaves the table as the boy starts to weep. The other diners stare as he passes. Don't look at me, he thinks. I did the best I could, always, the best I could.

"Are you all right?" asks the Indian Chief. "Would you like to sit down?"

Evan shakes his head; then changes his mind. "Yes," he says abstractly. "Yes, I think I would like to sit down."

The Indian Chief leads Evan to a slatted Adirondack chair and helps him down, the feathers of his headdress tickling his neck. "A glass of water?" he asks.

"Yes, thank you."

But it's only Evan's mouth that's speaking. Inside he's lit with panic, trying to forget that roomful of people, staring at him, staring at Billy, at Tim. The eyes of other people.

He feels the feather-tips against his neck again.

"You want some aspirin or something?" the Indian Chief asks, handing him a paper cup of water. "You don't look so hot."

Evan says, "They're going to run over that cooler."

"What?"

"Over there." He points: a family is backing a boat into the water, lowering the trailer down the ramp, but the rear wheels of their station wagon are aimed at their picnic lunch. They're a good-looking family, the mom is anyway, and the three kids — all blonde, all having a wonderful time. Evan can't really see the dad, who's driving.
“Hey,” says the Indian Chief. “Hey, look out!” They grin at him, and wave.
“No, the cooler,” says the Indian Chief. “You’re going to run right into it.”
The family grins again, a little less happily this time, and then the mother calls out a few sentences in a language Evan doesn’t understand — Swedish maybe, or German, something with a lot of consonants. Nevertheless her words sound gay to Evan, sounds of greeting, of light-hearted banter.
Just as she is finished saying them, the tires plow into the lunch, shoving the cooler across the asphalt with a horrible grinding sound. The blonde family all break out in peals of foreign-sounding laughter.
“Dumb son of a bitch,” the Indian Chief says.
Evan sips his water. The wind breaks the surface of the lake into coarse ripples, dispelling the reflection of the mountains, but the sun still shines warmly on the water, on the granite peaks, on the weathered brown logs of the porch and on Evan’s arms. The mountains are beautiful but, now that nothing else is left, this beauty is terrifying to him, everything he doesn’t know, everything he hasn’t done. Evan feels enormously tired, afraid to start. He closes his eyes and struggles to open them again. He scans the sky: hours of daylight left, and then the long drive home.
“Tourists,” Evan says softly. “They’re just tourists. They don’t know any better.”
Before the break-up of my country
I was content to lie under the kitchen sink
and gnaw on busted pipes.
There was a nest of mice
with whom I could exchange recipes.
When the military planes flew
too low over my house
I would stagger out into the yard
and sprinkle Tabasco sauce
on their dreamy vapor trails.
My head was full of larks
lost in a sing-along.

A Snake person walked out of the forest
and just stared at me.
"O Snake man," I said,
"have you seen my little brother?"

"My name," he finally replied,
"is Mr. Ashby. Please address me
by that name or I will embarrass you
by telling you a beautiful story."

"You’ll always be Snake man to me,
inclined though you may be
to tell beautiful stories
behind the guise of a pseudonym,
because that’s your nature."
You are a wily apparition, no doubt, conjured by my own crumbling defenses.”

Mr. Ashby cleared his throat and smiled: “Baby’s tears began to flow from baby’s blue eyes. The baby’s slippers were starting to walk on their own. It was a false baby with false baby’s breath....”

“That would be my brother,” I sighed. “O thank you, thank you, thank you.”
The children ate battered fish wedges and then started to swim around a kind of island which turned out to be the Dowager Empress of China. Several of them were spitting up and turned pale and soon faded from view rendering the study incomplete and fathomless. No one was even allowed to speak their names for more than a thousand years. And then one fine morning the Dowager herself, sipping tea, recalled those cockamamie days, and it made her smile to see those battered fish wedges again, barely able to swim, and yet surprisingly fit and handsome. They were ready to talk about what history had misunderstood, how some of those little folk had turned out much better than anyone could have expected, establishing the Dixon Ticonderoga pencil factory in 1388 or some such year, and going on to become deans of industry and raising enormous families in the remote Pacific wilderness. A pencil wrote all this down on its own. It followed her everywhere for days and it never stopped taking notes.
One day when she was very old
she walked to the edge of her balcony
and bit the head off of a passing butterfly.
A lost tribe woke under a picnic table,
indicating that a sequel was still possible.
Camera

After the tragedy, I slept in the basement and watched the daily trickle of water come from the upper rooms. Rachel and the baby slept in the first room. The empty parrot cage in the hallway was the only thing with enough of a gleam in the house to keep the baby quiet. The cook was the one employee besides me who had stayed on and she hummed as she walked downstairs. I could hear her black dress working itself over her legs. She brought me a steak if she felt like it. She brought me a cold glass of milk. When the water heater was going hot, I would take off my coveralls and wade through the shallow basement flood barefoot. If I climbed several boxes in the corner, I could see out a small window to the grey yard where the brothers worked days, hammering the stakes one by one into the freezing ground. When the fence was built, I could no longer see where it had happened. Then they stopped bringing me food.
I'm considering burning the house.

You probably have the town on your mind.

You're afraid there's no end to me, the possibilities.

If I change my face, will you stay?

When will our agendas meet? And where? Over *cafe au lait* on a street? At my house, still smoking?

Farther down it was father who drowned. Sucked in the last of his own promises:

Silk robe from the war.

Can I wear it without thinking? Can I remember the name?
I will say who I am without hurting:

A miracle.
The light in my eyes.

Smoke still sifting
if you look long enough.
Our Lady of the Iguanas

"...and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof."—Gen. 2:19

The iguana doesn’t know it tastes like chicken, doesn’t know I imagine it circling my palapa, flapping its wings like a bat—I know iguanas can’t fly, but I need their hostility to work myself up for the terror solo.

I ate an iguana not so long ago. There’s blood on my hands. I’ve been burying sand in my head (my sandbag)—it weighs me down with ideas: “pin monarchs and beetles and flies to the ground,” it says, “they’re your surrogate retinas. Focus the sun onto them—they’ll smoke, they’ll burn...

I’ve learned all too well to treat every animal as it would treat me if it moved in a pack, for what is a lady but a pack of memories jostling one another in a tight compartment?

Out the sides of my eyes like fumes my sight circles my walkman strapped on bikini—
tight like my head is tits and balls and ass—people call me Tiresias. Look:

my Xanadu sores, and pleasure dome scabs glow in the dark.

My Adam's apple ripples when I whistle, tenors whistle, when Luftwaffe pilots crash landing in the video vicinity that is my racial memory whistle.

Feeding me is cheap; my mouth is microwave.

I keep my brushcut sharp enough to shave legs with—it's a 10 billion legged world. There are times a brushcut is useful. I like cuts.

The Goths spoke of angels. I speak of cuts. I cut myself to be more like I'll be—

after I cut myself. I could scream.
Andes From Strangers

Andes from strangers—
I bite them, it's true—

the Andes, not the strangers—

strangers are too small because distant like stars...

the Andes taste good;
I hug them...I slide

off like lingerie;
they wear me, the peaks.

Neither hero nor whore,
I play the slip.

If only I was part mango,
I'd quit,

say "man that I am,
mango that I am...
the man I am can eat
the mango I am..."
no way I'll starve—
I don't need this gig.”

But it's clear I'm no mango—
see-through, in fact.

Was I in Mango Bimbos?
"You're too tall," they said:

"you're the confused mountaineer
who believes he's a bra."

“Oh, am I?” I said.

“Surely,” they said.

They bought me a Ferrari.

They bought me a clothesline—
then came the maids to hang me,
as it turned out,
on the chorus line.

My first paying part:
I was one of the panties.
A writer of essays, novels, and poetry, Richard Hugo taught at the University of Montana in Missoula, where he directed the creative writing program. He is the author of, among other works: Death of the Kapowsin Tavern; The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir; What Thou Lovest Well, Remains American; 31 Letters and 13 Dreams; The Road Ends at Tahola; Selected Poems; and The Right Madness on Skye: Poems (poetry); The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing (essays); and Death and the Good Life (novel). This interview was conducted in 1982, shortly before Hugo's death. It was originally published in Art Notes magazine.

Carol Deering: I heard you say at the reading that you grew up in Seattle.

Richard Hugo: Yes, that's right. In a community right on the southern edge of Seattle, a place called White Center.

CD But your poems have a wide-open spaces feeling to them...

RH Well, I think you're probably commenting on the more recent work. You see, of my first three books, two were almost entirely Pacific Northwest poems that cen-
tered in places, rivers and lakes and so forth, in the Seattle area. Then my third book grew out of Italian and Yugoslavian settings. Now those three books are out of print. A few of the poems of the first three books are included in the Selected Poems, and I think you'll find mostly Seattle-area poems in the first two books. But the oldest book I have in print is The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir, in which Montana is the setting, so it is more wide-open spaces, that's right.

CD In The Triggering Town, you mentioned taking creative writing in high school. Have you been writing consistently since then?

RH Yes, I'd been writing even before that, as a matter of fact. It seems like when I was in grammar school that I was putting words on paper. I started very early. I mean, I guess when you're putting words on paper, you're writing. So I can say I was writing when I was nine or ten years old.

CD Has your poetry gone through stages that you recognize?

RH No, it hasn't. As a matter of fact, I think reviewers and critics generally agree that I haven't changed very much over the years, that it seemed like there was a certain kind of poem that I wrote. I settled on that early and never varied much from it. This leads to somewhat of a monotony in my work, I think, if it's read at any sustained length of time. But I think that's true of some poets who have a far better claim to being worthy than I do.

CD Do you ever experience writer's block?

RH Yes. And, as a matter of fact, in the last year and a half, I've slowed down a great deal by comparison. That is to say, I had a very sizzling almost ten years, about nine years,
which is probably the longest hot streak I've ever had as a poet and probably ever will have. Yeah, I get it, and writer's block essentially just means that you're not able to take the stance. Usually what really happens is you don't really want to write. You've lost the impulse, and the impulse to write is sort of like a faith. You have to get the faith back.

CD So, you don't use any tricks to try to get out of . . .

RH Well, there are certain things you can do. That is to say, there are certain stances or voices you can write in in the poem. One thing I tell students sometimes, when they ask me about writer's block, is to become a Nazi. That is to say, I tell them to write in the imperative voice, because everyone has the streak. All people, I think, have that streak in them. Consequently, you'd start ordering someone around, tell someone to do something. Even one of my favorite love poems is written like that. It starts out, "Look, my love, on the wall, and here, at this Eastern picture." So you see, actually it's kind of a command. "Watch this." "Look at that." "Do this." Sometimes you can write your way around a block or through a block, doing that.

CD In 31 Letters and 13 Dreams, were those real letters and real dreams?

RH Oh, no! (Laughter)

CD Do dreams play a role in your writing?

RH Yeah, somewhat. Let me qualify that. Two of the dreams of the 13 Dreams were real dreams. Small parts of two other dream poems were from dreams, and all the rest were made up. The letter poems were not written as letters; they were written as poems, all of them.
CD Do you carry on a poem correspondence with anyone?

RH No.

CD Okay. Do you ever show anyone your work in progress?

RH No, I don't.

CD Do you work on more than one poem at a time, or do you stick with one until it's finished?

RH I nearly always stick with one until it's finished. Sometimes I violate that principle, but not very often.

CD Can you get a good perspective of what you're writing, or do you have to put it aside for awhile?

RH Well, when I'm "on", I can work fairly fast, and I can get a poem, I would say, in five or six drafts. Perhaps in four or five days, I can finish a poem, working, say, three to four hours a day on the poem. This is when I'm really going and sailing. Right now, I can't hit that pace at all. I'm stuck on poems. I'm writing somewhat differently and using different psychological techniques than I used to. For one thing, I'm fictionalizing more what I write about, fictionalizing the base of the poems, instead of writing out of actual experience.

CD Do you think that's what most poets or writers do—start out with real experience?

RH Well, I think it was true for a long time, ever since Wordsworth, at least. But that's changing now. And I think it's changing with the generation of poets that comes just after me. I think that there's a tendency now for some of the young poets to fictionalize events some-
times in the past, in a rather remote past, that is to say, a past that occurred before the poet was born. In one book I picked for the Yale Series of Younger Poets, one of the poems is written as if the author understands and completely comprehends and has digested the experience behind the poem, but in fact the experience behind the poem would have happened around World War I, and obviously, he wasn’t even born yet. So, what he did was fictionalize an event, and then somehow in the writing of the poem the event became real enough to sustain the poem.

CD Ray Bradbury once said in a Writer’s Digest interview, “What (a writer has) to do is be this kind of hysterical, emotional, vibrant creature who lives at the top of his lungs for a lifetime and then corrects around the edges so that he doesn’t go insane.” Do you see the creative writer as different from other people?

RH Well, I don’t know that I see him as different. That’s an interesting statement of Bradbury’s. It’s idealistic. That is to say, obviously, no-one has that much stamina. (Laughter) Everyone has to relax once in a while. If all writers were like that, they’d all be institutionalized. But I know what he means. I think what he’s saying is that you have to operate at the limits of your own personal powers at the time you’re writing or preparing to write. But, of course, no writer writes all the time. You have to stop and go to the supermarket and get food and sometimes you have to get drunk, or, in my case, go fishing. Or go watch a baseball game.

CD How do you know when to stop tampering with a poem?

RH Oh, I don’t know about that. Paul Valéry said that a poem is never finished, it’s just abandoned. I think there
comes a time when you either think, "Well, if I keep on, this is going to become an even better poem than it is." And then sometimes you feel, "No matter what I do, this is never going to get any better." So, it's like you lose your interest.

CD I see. Are you a good judge of your work?

RH I probably am, now. I have a pretty good sense of what poems of mind are good, although on some poems of my earlier work I'm far more fallible, I think, than on more recent work. Up until about ten years ago, maybe a little more, I wouldn't have trusted my own judgment on my work too much. And I think it's a rather dangerous thing for a writer to do. It's really up to others to say, to readers and people who are interested in your work. It's really not up to you. In fact, your own evaluation of your work is quite meaningless, when you come right down to it.

CD Back to The Triggering Town. You mentioned four current writers, three of them poets, whose work stimulates you to write. Who are they?

RH Oh, I remember saying that. Well, I think Bill Stafford and Phil Levine, and a young poet named Dave Smith. I asked Dave Smith about that one time, and I said, "How come you inspire me?" He said, "It's because I steal from you!" (Laughter)

CD What is the Wylie Street Writers' Association?

RH Oh, that's just a joke. On Wylie Street the Blackfeet Indian poet and novelist James Welch lives three doors from me, he and his wife. His wife is a colleague of mine. Ah, then my wife and I live on Wylie Street. And across the street Rick and Carol DeMarinis live, and they're writers. Rick has published three novels and a novella with
a couple of short stories in book form. So we just call ourselves the Wylie Street Writer's Association because we all happen to live on Wylie Street.

CD  Robert Bly has said that he needs to write in isolation. Do you work best this way, or can you write anywhere?

RH  I can write anywhere, but I think probably I am in isolation when I'm doing it anyway. Bly is right, actually; you do do it in isolation, but isolation has more than one form. I think he means actual physical isolation. I believe he has a great amount of property that his father gave him, and that in some area that is just his to know about there's a shack or cabin or something where he goes to write, and where no one can disturb him. There are no telephones or anything like that.

CD  But can you make your own isolation?

RH  Well, I could write in a public library or I write at home sometimes with things going on around me.

CD  How do you write? Do poems flow, or is it hard work?

RH  Well, it's both. Sometimes they come easily, and sometimes it's hard work. I think one thing about writing that a lot of people don't understand is that there isn't any difference. That is to say, you can work hard on ten poems and none of them ever quite comes off, and you spend, maybe months on them. And then all of a sudden you sit down and one very good poem, one of your better poems, comes quite easily, and you think, "Well, if it comes this easy, why doesn't it happen all the time?" Well, the hard work you did on those other poems accounts for that. That is to say, the hard work you do on one poem is the work you do on all poems. So poems don't come easily to people who don't work hard. You've got to get to work. So, the
work often seems wasted because the results aren't imme-
diate, or there doesn't seem to be a causal relationship
between the hard work and what you finally end up with.
But the relationships between poems are much closer than
I think people imagine.

CD Do you keep a journal?

RH No.

CD You've already said you go through about five or six
drafts. So you revise in a separate process rather than a
poem's just coming to you all at one sitting?

RH Well, I try to get a first draft down if I can, so I'll have
a complete whole to work with. And then I can go back
and start revising.

CD I see. Does a title ever come to you before the poem
does?

RH Yeah, sometimes. But I caution beginners not to let
that happen.

CD Why is that?

RH Well, usually the title tends to dictate the limits of
the poem, I think, to a young writer; so they'll put down
the title "Autumn Rain" and then they think they've got
to keep talking about autumn rain. And when they run out
of things to say about autumn rain, why then they'll repeat
themselves or start discussing their own meaning and so
forth, when the real problem, of course, is that the title
told them this is what the poem is about and they believed
it. But maybe that isn't what the poem wants to be about.
So sometimes, if you wait until the poem is over before you
title it, you'll avoid getting trapped.
CD I've heard mention of a poetic review called Anonymity. Do you think poems should be published without the poets' name?

RH Oh, I don't think so anymore. I mean, I don't know why anyone would do that. That goes back to the experimentations of the wonderful critic I.A. Richards in the '20's. One day, he just decided to put a bunch of poems in front of students, without names on them, and he asked the students to criticize these poems. And he ran headlong into something I don't know if he'd expected or not. He found that if these students studying literature at Cambridge (or Oxford? I guess it was Cambridge) didn't know who had written the poem, they could not judge it. And he realized that criticism had gone a long way downhill, that they weren't teaching people to criticize through the text anymore. This was one of the beginnings of what was called the New Criticism, deep and close textual analysis. And then for many years, once this experiment was conducted, a lot of professors started giving anonymous poems to the students. This tested the students' ability to criticize poems, and so students suddenly were very embarrassed. That is to say, they were suddenly criticizing poems by Wordsworth, not knowing it, you see, and by Coleridge. In fact, one of I.A. Richards' students, it seems to me, passed very harsh judgement on Gerard Manley Hopkins' "The Windhover," which, of course, is considered one of the great poems in the English language. But it would be a poem where, had a person never seen it before (and remember, this happened in the early '20's; Hopkins had only been in print about four years at the time because his poems weren't published until thirty years after his death), it would be the kind of poem that I can imagine making a mistake on. It's a very difficult poem; it's an unusual poem; the language is strange in it. I happen to know it's a great poem because Theodore Roethke told me
it was a great poem, but I'm not sure I'm a good enough critic to have recognized a poem that difficult and unusual as a good poem. I'm pretty good on more conventional work. I mean, I can usually tell if a poet knows what he's doing.

CD I read that you've written a novel— a detective story!

RH Yes, that's right. It's been published, and it's been doing fairly well, and I'm working on another one.

CD Oh! What prompted you to write fiction?

RH Well, I've always loved mysteries, and I had wanted to write a mystery for years, about thirty years. When I was in Scotland and had a lot of extra time, in '77 and '78, in addition to writing poems, I just started to write the mystery novel.

CD Do you have to think differently to . . . ?

RH Oh, yes. Oh, yes! In fact, it helps if you don't think at all! (Laughter)

CD Would you ever write a play?

RH I tried to write a play down in Little Rock about a year and a half or two years ago. That is the most difficult of all forms of writing, I find, and I didn't do well at all. In fact, I would say that is something I will never be able to do. I did give up on it. There was a play writing teacher at Montana who urged me to try to write a play, but it's too hard. One of the problems I've found is, I keep worrying about the technical problems. I had certain things I wanted to happen, and he told me, "Never worry about the technical problems. Those are the director's problems. " And he told me about one play where there's
just a simple stage direction it it. All it says is “The universe destructs.” That’s all it says. And somehow the director has to decide how to completely destroy the universe, you see, on the stage! And he says, “Don’t worry about these things. They’re not your problems.” But, my God, when you’re writing the play, they certainly do become problems; they’re very hard to ignore.

CD  Well, how do you teach creative writing?

RH  Well, I think The Triggering Town sort of tells you how I go about it with the younger people, that is to say, freshman and sophomores. I tend to teach them to concentrate on sounds and rhythms and properties of the language, and solving superficial formal problems in writing a poem, and then hope the substance leaks into the poem.

CD  In the creative writing department, what different classes do you offer?

RH  At Montana, we have beginning creative writing, beginning fiction writing, and beginning poetry writing, which you can take once each time for credit. If you’re majoring in creative writing, these classes actually don’t count toward your degree except as an overall elective. Then we have intermediate fiction writing and intermediate poetry writing, which you can take three times for credit. The same thing with advanced, and then we have the graduate workshops. So, we have it on all levels. Fiction and poetry. I would like to get, maybe, some translation workshop going in conjunction with the foreign language department; and someday, if you could get someone to teach it, I’d like to see offered an MFA in creative writing for writing essays. I would like to see the essay form revived and concentrated on. I think it’s a wonderful form. I’ve written a lot of essays, and I think one
of them is all right. (Laughter) It's very hard, too. Of course, whatever you don't do much of, you always think of as hard.

CD Do you really believe, "If you want to communicate, use the telephone"?

RH Well, I hate the word communicate. That's why I said that, because it's a word that grows out of a sort of technology. The odd thing is, people communicated better before they started to use the word "communicate". It's almost as if the use of the word itself has stopped us from doing it. I think the same thing is going on now in the problems of writing. I think once you talk about "the acquisition of writing skills," you've already blown it. Instead of teaching someone how to write, I think our language leads us away from the very thing we want to do, often. We're using affected and overblown language— "the acquisition of writing skills"—good God! When you use language like that, who the hell wants any writing skills, you know? I mean, let me go to a movie or something.

CD Do you have any advice you'd especially give to beginning writers?

RH No, not really. I mean, the impulse to write, I think, is a curious thing and somehow is invested in some people and not in others. There's very little one can do about that. I mean, it's either there deep enough to sustain itself forever or it isn't, and I think it's nothing anybody ought to worry about. I just think, you know, just keep working— it's a very discouraging, very difficult thing to do— and I think, just don't let the discouragement and the difficulties stop you for too long at any one time. That's all I would tell young writers: it's hard, it's hard for everybody, and just hang in there. It's just an endurance
contest, is all. It's almost like anything, I think, in that respect. Don't look for great, overnight success. That's very rare.

CD  Well, thank you very much.

RH  Well, my pleasure, Carol.

(May 7, 1982)
Contributors' Notes

Walid Bitar was born in Beirut and currently lives in Toronto. His recent book of poems, Two Guys on Holy Land, was published last year by Wesleyan University Press.

Kevin Canby received a BA from the University of Montana, an MA from the University of Florida and an MFA from the University of Arizona. He lives in Missoula again and loves it. Doubleday will publish his short story collection, A Stranger In This World (including “Great Falls 1966”), in August of this year, as well as his novel, Resurrection County, in 1995. He’s married to Lucy Capehart, a photographer. They have two children: Turner, age 4, and Nora, age 8 months.

Mike Craig was born and raised. He was selected as America’s Best in 1893. Since then he has been steadily at work on a haiku entitled, “If Love is a Gazebo, and Other Recipes.”

Christopher Davis’s first book, The Tyrant of the Past and the Slave of the Future, won the 1988 AWP Award. His second collection is called The Patriot.

Sarah Davis grew up in Philadelphia and received her BA from Cornell University. She is currently working toward an MFA in poetry at the University of Montana.

Carol Deering lives in Riverton, Wyoming and is the Director of Library Services at Central Wyoming College.

Norman Dubie teaches Creative Writing at Arizona State University in Tempe. His works include The Alehouse.
Poems, Selected New Poems, Groom Falconer and, most recently, Radio Sky. He's won numerous awards, including Fellowships from the NEA and the Ingram Merrill and Guggenheim Foundations.

Lisa Fishman lives in Salt Lake City and has had poems published or forthcoming in the Antioch Review, Prairie Schooner, Poetry Northwest, The Wallace Stevens Journal, Alaska Quarterly Review, Indiana Review, and this year's Robert's Writing Award Annual.

Kevin Goodan is an undergraduate at the University of Montana.

Gerri Jardine was born in 1957 in New London, CT. where she once worked as a charterboat captain and deckhand. She moved to Missoula, MT. two years ago after finding herself out of luck in Nevada. Things are looking up now, though her best stuff is still in storage just north of Reno.

Mike Lancaster lives and works in Missoula, MT.

Mark Levine's book Debt is available from William Morrow. He has recently been named a Whiting Fellow and a Hodder Fellow, and he is basically a pretty decent fellow.

John Starkey currently teaches English Language and Literature at the University of the Azores. He's a graduate from the Creative Writing Program at the University of Montana.

James Tate grew up in Kansas City, Missouri. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, he is the author of The Lost Pilot, Distance from Loved Ones and Selected Poems, among other works.
Dara Wier's most recent book is *Blue for the Plough* (Carnegie-Mellon).
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