



NORTHBRIDGE
REVIEW


NORTHRIDGE

REVIEW

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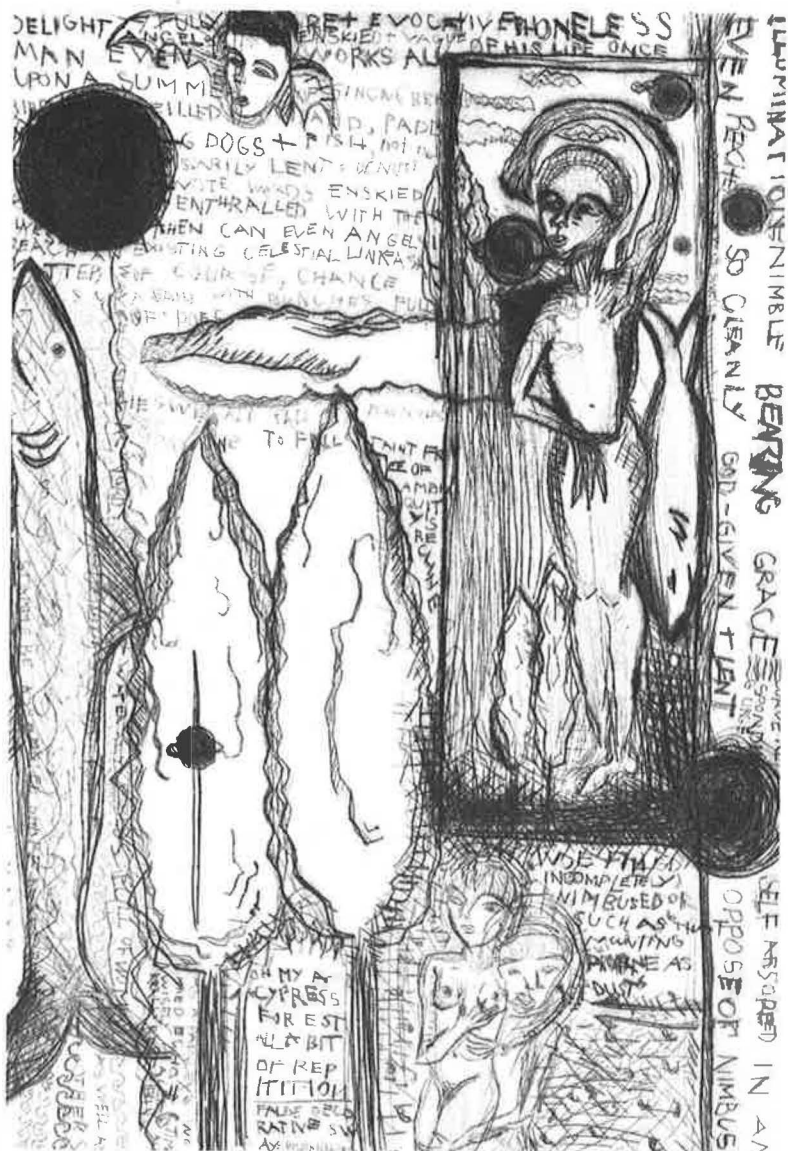
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Dortha Westerbeck

Strike III

Brian Skinner

You're not supposed to think about
Dachau in right field.
Full of ice cream and beer
and potato chips and all,
you ought to keep your eye
on the ball, your cleats
planted firm in the soft
summer grass.

Uncle Ray sits tight
behind his sunglasses and cap;
he saw it all, over there,
that other summer.
He doesn't like to talk about it,
just smokes his cigarettes, keeps
score, laughs.

You're not supposed to ask
someone like him what it felt like
to kill a man. And when the letter comes
with your name on it, I guess
you ought to think of it as just
another winter at Little League
training camp.

With My Family On Memorial Day

for David

Wes Hempel

We sit next to the barbecue, already two grown men
you with a family of your own
and listen to Uncle Frank tell how shrapnel
spread up the back of his legs
He waves a spatula at the smoke and fills his glass
as he talks, white foam spills over the sides
In Dresden the bodies like coals

I think of the only death I ever saw
We lived in a comfortable house then
four rooms behind the railroad tracks
a back porch, a walnut tree
bodies of cars in the yard

First we caught the frog in a potato chip bag
then dropped him into a pot of water
We were boys and your friend Mike said
if the temperature is raised slowly enough
the frog doesn't even notice

When the afternoon is over, you carry Jenny
on your shoulders to the car. Donna pushes
Chris in the stroller. Everyone kisses me goodbye

This is not something we do often. Years creep
in between the days we see each other

Driving home, I think of the voices we listen to
the imperceptible progression
how it starts in the garage with a broken Volkswagon
Dad directing your hand on the wrench
There will always be cars to repair
So you follow him onto the floor of the shop
bend over engines where years of oil
slowly seep into the lines of your skin

At night you drive home to the same neighborhood
where the row of walnut trees, your daughter
in the driveway with a hose, your son lifting
his face from the edge of a bra, and the white head
climbing the sides of your glass
have nothing to do with choices

It is the same life we knew
with nothing but years between
nothing but slowness and gradation

It is not a question of happiness
or repair, the reassembly of a life

We have not returned with killings every night
a child's face ripped from his head
each time we close our eyes
the smoking remains of a man on his knees

We are two boys who yell Jump to a boiling frog
two men who do not know destruction
only this slow comfort, and the summer
gradually rising around us

[Hands Folded . . . Ankles Crossed]

Lynn Tinker

- I In full rooster bellow-forté fashion
Chicken George breaks the morning
well before the softened milky edges of the pre-dawn barn roof
lift out from the mist
still hanging low on the pasture just beyond.

My father snores in the room facing seaward,
out over the stretch of babies' breath,
like fields of clouds, and lupis,
and the spruce grove and rocky ledge, and below to Cope's Cove.
Only in some rolling seafaring dream might George's call,
on farm side, register shrill as the boatswain's whistle
for all hands on deck, or the screech of gulls
hanging, dropping, hanging, in the aft wind
to catch the bait dregs tossed to the curly seafoam in the wake.

Dad's nostrils twitch in his sleep
and in the peace of his seaman's dreams
his cheeks fill with air as the exhale
phuh-flutters past slack lips,
 hands folded on his chest
 ankles crossed
 economy of space.

- II I lie awake.
This visit has shown me rife lines in his edged face,
due softening, that show my face's furrows less
only in number than in kind;
but it's these fathoms between us that fester.
A far reach between us lies undiminished,
our endless armistice ensuring we flounder as so much jetsam,
sovereignly bobbing, afloat, but scarcely, and apart.

III When did we make such a dull wicked truce?
to merely tread water here
or as if pace the farm side's acres aimlessly
wandering the mobius path with some promise
to never meet.

I have enfolded sons in this lap
and breathed their hot heads, their sweaty sticky damp palms,
their vinegar cheeks, their almost necks,
that I might suck them back in to me,
and I can measure the love of a child.

I will see you stumble out of your squeaky bed at morning's light
your eyes as watery as the infant son,
your hair as tousled
your ass crack showing just as dark a slice
above your fallen frayed drawstring at the back.
You are just a grown male,
and we will end this snooze of a romance, father and daughter,
or we may as soon lie back stiffly down
our eyelids thick and heavy, cheeks falling back
slackened jaws relaxing all the better
for drooling into the sodden puddle ever expanding
on the pillow by our ear.

Curve

Craig W. Myers

the way the eye slips across a breast, half-hidden

by dusk, the desert hill smoothed
by sunset and the trail
falling off the Milky Way

or the empty hammock spanning the time between two trees

Shoot 'em Up to the Moon

Stephen Collins

Bang, bang, shoot 'em up, destiny. Bang, bang, shoot 'em up, to the moon. Bang, bang, shoot 'em up, one two three.* If I could only sing, I'd be a singer, singing to pretty Moccasin, with a guitar, under the moon in the breezy warm summer night, if I could only play the guit—

“Daniel, you gonna shoot already?” Pedro says.

“Hey man, I'm concentrating. OK, this is for the win.” I set up at the free-throw line, Pedro and Vinnie under the basket. A cool dampness surrounds us like black water, we three cutting through it like sharks playing our last game of the night. “Vinnie's ass is grass.” I laugh and sink the shot, and Vinnie slaps the side of his head. “Bingo!” I say. “Bend over, son.” Pedro and I smash the basketball into Vinnie's ass, then take a break smoking the last three out of my pack.

“It's always your ass,” Pedro says, pointing to Vinnie.

“I'm short, you know.” Vinnie giggles to himself, just like his sister always does, pretty Moccasin with her starry blue eyes, Moccasin with that dark hair, those lips. I dream of her, of us together, and it's always here at the school. Imagine it, holding, touching, loving her here, laying her in the middle of the yard, the Old Beverly Apartments towering in the distance, many windows open, lighted, a few with fans whirling. Spanish graffiti covers all the walls, blue, red, black spray-painted art. I could get lost in those criss-crossed dull colored lines.

In the dimming orange twilight of August a sliver of moon is just visible, watching. If Moccasin were looking in the sky right now, we'd both be seeing the same thing, we'd both be joined, reflecting our thoughts to each other off the moon. Maybe she'll come into the school yard now, right while I'm thinking of her. I watch the gate as if I expect her to walk in, staring at the neon lights beyond it, red and blue, flashing “Vacancy” and “Donuts.”

Swiftly, as if he could be swift, someone does come in the gate, breathing hard.

“Hey Fish,” Pedro calls to him, “how's your stinky Kimchi?”

(*“Space Man,” Harry Nilsson, RCA Records)

We laugh as our fat Korean friend trots in. His cheeks, thick and doughy, surround his flat nose and suck in two little eyes.

"Knock it off, man," Fish says. "You guys gotta get out o' here."

"What are you talking about, get out o' here?" Pedro says. "I'm not going anywhere."

"No, you got to, man. It's the Diamond Park guys."

"Serious?" I say.

"What are you guys talking about?" Vinnie asks.

"Diamond Park," I say, "they're a gang. You know, always looking for a fight, or kids to bother, steal their mon—"

"They're punks," says Pedro.

"Yeah," says Fish, "Punks with knives and chains and —"

"Fuck 'em," says Pedro. "They're not gonna come in here. There's too many of us; they're cowards. They only come down on you when you're alone."

"I don't care," says Fish. "Let's go anyway."

"You're such a fucking pussy."

"I don't care what you call me, man. They scare me."

"Everything scares you. Your mother scares you, your dog scares you, your —"

"Mirror scares you," I say, and we all laugh. Pedro takes the last drag of his cigarette and twists the butt into the ground with his tennis shoe.

"They come in here and we'll just kick their asses, huh Dan?" he says.

"Fuck yeah. Easy."

"You guys don't know them," says Fish.

"Fuck if I don't," says Pedro. "Just like any other pussy gang. You gotta be a pussy to be in a gang. They'll never fight one on one, always gotta have back-ups."

"You talk big, like you know how to fight."

"Kick your ass. Kick it right now if you want." Pedro stands right in front of Fish breathing down in his face. Fish backs away.

"Give it a rest, you guys," I say.

"Yeah," says Pedro, "I'll give it a rest." Vinnie over by the basket starts laughing. "What's so funny?" Pedro moves closer to him. "What's so fun— Shit! You farted, you asshole. Stinks like hell over here." We are all laughing, staggering around. "What you eat last night, smells like . . . like . . . it's those beans, man. You're always eating those beans." I begin to smell it.

"Oh man," I say, "smells like you're sitting in it." Fish is choking on his laughter, then he stops suddenly. "Smells like diarrhea," I go on. "Smells like refried diar— What? What's the matter, Fish? What's—" At the far gate hopping the fence are five Mexican compadres, cholos as we call them. They have red bandanas wrapped around their foreheads, all except one;

he has a black hairnet taut over his perfectly combed thick dark hair. Their pants are baggy, t-shirts dark and tight.

"It's them, man," Fish says. "Let's run."

"No," says Pedro, "don't be a fucking wuss."

"I'm running."

"No," I say. "They'll just chase you down, then it'll be worse."

So we all stand silent like ice statues slowly melting looking at them walk towards us; the only sound is their laughter and a Mexican TV station blaring from one of the Old Beverly Apartment windows; a Spanish lover sings to his amante bellowing and strumming a guitar . . . then laughter, she is laughing at him . . . quickly angry voices back and forth . . . whimpering, sobs . . . a scream . . . then suddenly many voices, a crowd scene with spics yelling and jeering and—

"It's party time!" yells out the one with the hairnet. A step in front of the others he struts, hips thrust forward, leading them across the asphalt school yard. He is the shortest but has the thickest arms; a red bandana bounces from his back pocket.

The twilight has disappeared completely now as they are almost upon us. The flashing red lights from across the street glare through the dark in our faces, our eyes.

"You boys playing some ball," he says. The other four cholos are standing behind him grinning. "Huh? Cat got your tongues?" He snatches the ball from Vinnie's hands. "Nice ball," he says showing it to his compadres. "Is this not a nice ball?" They laugh.

"It's a nice ball, Santos," says one of the cholos.

"It's a pretty ball," says Santos, then he kicks it away, high into the distance, and it bounces far into the corner of the yard. One of the cholos, the tallest one, steps up to me, puts his face in front of mine, a knife glimmering on his belt. His breath smells like rot mixed with Thunderbird. This cholo, who is chewing gum, stops chewing; he lowers his eyes at me, a minute elapses, then slowly his jaws begin to move again working the gum not up and down, but circular, like a bull chewing its cud.

"Me molesta," he says. I hold my breath, stand perfectly still; he shoves my shoulder forcing me back one step. "Me molesta," he says again louder.

"Hey, white boy," Santos says, "do you know what he says to you? He says, you bother him. What are you going to do about it? Huh? Huh, white boy?" Santos looks back at the others. "White boy's chicken. Check his pockets; white boys always got money. Rich bastards." The tall cholo feels my pockets; there is nothing. "Fucking white boy. Where's your money?"

He's about to approach me.

"Hey, Santos, look at that one," one cholo says pointing at

Fish as he inches from the group. "The fat boy's sneaking away!" Suddenly Fish makes a break towards the back gate hobbling in slow motion on stubby legs.

"Go catch him, man," Santos says. "Hurry." Two of them fly after him catching up quickly, one kicking at his heels knocking his feet out from under him. Fish falls down skidding on his stomach; then as he tries to scramble to his feet flip-flopping on the asphalt, the cholo steps on his back, pressing him stiff. "Alright!" Santos says. "Busted! Fat boy's busted."

Twisting his arms behind him, they lead Fish back to Santos, his yellow cheeks scuffed black. "We caught you, fuck face. Not a smart thing to do." Santos smiles showing all his chipped teeth; I exhale faintly; Pedro stands, almost perfectly still.

"Gordo," Santos says baiting him, "what's shaking. Ha, Ha. It's funny, no?" He steps up an inch in front of Fish, Fish looking away from his eyes. "Getting a little set o' titties, fat boy."

"Please, man. Please leave me alone," Fish whimpers, sweating hard.

"Leave you alone? He wants me to leave him alone. Maricon. Chupa mi verga. You don't understand, chink. Fucking faggot." He pushes him back. "You don't talk 'til I tell you, chink."

"Kick his ass, Santos," says a cholo.

"They want me to kick your ass, fat boy. What do you think? . . . What do you think!"

"No, man, please. Just let me go."

"Just let you go! Just let you go, what?" Fish looks up at him, doesn't understand. "What happened to the 'Sir?'"

"Just let me go, sir."

"Good, fat boy. You're learning." He looks to his cholos. "Well?"

"Kick his ass anyway." They are laughing, enjoying it all.

"They still want me to kick your ass, fuck face." Santos steps back and waits; Fish's lips, quivering with drops of bubbling spit, are dark red like overripe tomatoes. His nose is running. "I got an idea." Santos reaches down and pulls out a switch-blade slicing the wind as it pops open. It sparkles neon red.

"Shit," Pedro whispers to me.

"Don't move," I say, as if I have to.

Santos puts the knife under Fish's chin touching the hanging rolled flesh of his neck. Fish swallows as all the cholos smile, waiting.

"How 'bout I cut you a little, maybe leave a little scar on your neck. Would you like that, fat boy?"

"No sir."

"No, I didn't think you would. Then what should I do? Huh? Should I cut your ear off so I can show it to my lady?"

"No sir."

"No sir, no sir, so many no sirs. I got to do something, fat boy. I'm getting restless, you know. What should I do? Huh?"

"Kill him," says a cholo.

"Should I kill you?"

"No."

"No What!"

"No, sir. No sir, Mr. Santos. No sir, please don't, sir."

"Good, fat boy. Maybe I won't kill you. But . . . I don't know. Maybe something else. Maybe there's something else I can do for you." He puts the blade between Fish's legs, pushes up slightly. Fish snuffles, tears forming in his eyes, one slowly gliding down his doughy cheek. He stands very still. "You prob'ly don't use this much anyway."

"Cut it off, Santos," says a cholo.

"How 'bout I cut your dick off? Huh, fat boy?"

"No," Fish whispers.

"No what!" Santos screams with his lips pointed into Fish's ear.

"No, sir."

"I can't hear you!"

"No sir!" Fish is crying as tears roll into his lips and down his nose. Everybody watches him silently as he sobs; then Santos pushes the blade up a little harder.

"Shut up! You fucking wimp." Faintly becoming visible first around the zipper of his pants and then down one leg, a blotch of piss soaks to his knee gradually getting darker. Santos looks down at what Fish has done. "Look at that, man," Santos says. "He's pissing in his pants." He is laughing, laughing hard. All the cholos laugh and scream out their joy; we don't move, look down to the ground. "Fat boy got my fucking knife wet with piss." He wipes his blade on Fish's shoulders, both sides, then staggers back laughing as they all turn heading out. "Oh man, can't top that, can't ever top that again. Did you see that? Gordo needs a diaper."

"Fat boy pissed in his pants," they are all saying to each other as they walk away, satisfied with themselves, leaving us to ourselves. They bust up and stagger around as they go, slapping each other on the back. Then they hop the fence and are gone.

We stand, none of us speak.

The Mexican TV station still blares in the background, the fans still whirl. Car headlights sweep through the yard as the traffic rolls by, turning the far corner. The sliver of moon is higher now, glowing bright among the stars. And bent like a hook.

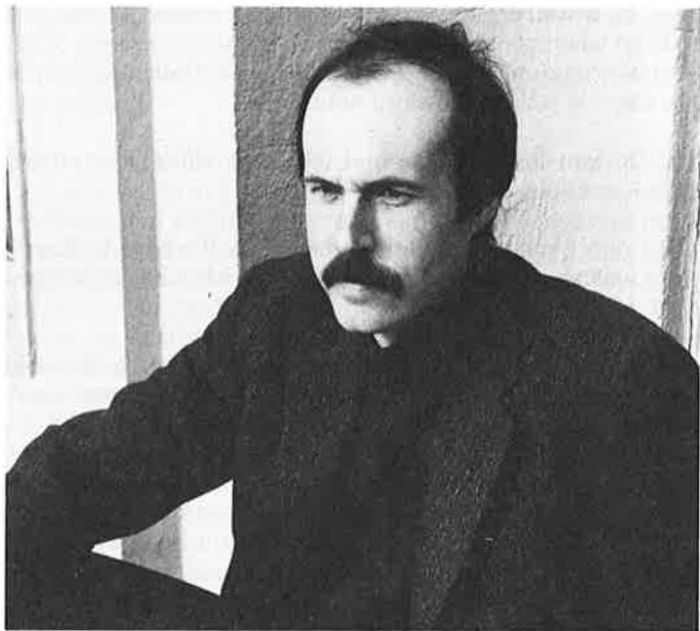
I leave my friends and walk over to the corner of the yard to retrieve the basketball. I imagine Moccasin next to me,

touching my cheek gently with her fingertips. She says, "It's OK, Danny. It's OK. None of it matters because I love you. None of it is important.

"I love you," she says. "I love you."

Kem Nunn: An Interview

Mona Houghton



Kem Nunn is a young writer whose novel, *Tapping the Source*, published in 1984, was nominated for the American Book Award, best first novel. He holds a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of California, Irvine. He has also taught creative writing at that same university. Currently Kem Nunn is working full time on his second novel.

Northridge Review: In *Tapping the Source* you accurately capture a certain Southern California essence. Are you from here?

Kem Nunn: I grew up out in Claremont, but I've been living in Huntington Beach for the last couple of years and in this immediate area, counting off a year in New York, for the last ten years.

NR: You were raised with television and film. Do you think this has affected your writing style?

KN: Everyone has to be affected by the mass media these days. In a way I view it as an updated version of the oral tradition when people sat around and told stories to each other. Television and movies have filled that void. Watching them is one way we pick up on story now.

NR: Do you think movies and television affect your writing style — the visual aspects of it?

KN: I don't know. I get asked that a lot. It's hard to dissect one's writing on that level — in terms of what has influenced what. I like movies, but I like to read too.

NR: In the Los Angeles Times Book Review, Carolyn See said your "parents" include Hammett, Chandler, and James Cain. Did they play a big part in your development as a writer?

KN: I like Chandler and Hammett, and James M. Cain to a lesser degree. But the book that has made a big difference to me is *Dog Soldiers*, by Robert Stone. It's a book that is not squarely in a genre and yet when you read it you can't help but hear the voices of Chandler and Hammett and some of those people kicking around in there. It is a hard boiled novel with a fast paced plot, yet it is a novel of ideas at the same time. When I read *Dog Soldiers* I was impressed by that particular combination. What I am getting at is, *Tapping the Source* does owe something to the Chandler/Hammett genre, in terms of its shape and structure, but, like *Dog Soldiers*, it, too, is a book of ideas. I did not sit down and think — I want to write a mystery in the tradition of Chandler, no, I didn't do that. I was more interested in doing a novel in the slightly nearer tradition of the California hard boiled novels — like *Dog Soldiers* or another book called *Cutter and Bone*, by Newton Thornburg.

NR: Do you have any writing rituals?

KN: I am a believer in sitting down at the same time each day.

NR: Which is what time?

KN: Usually in the late morning. I like to work in the middle of the day.

NR: For hours and hours?

KN: I rarely work for more than two hours at a time. I might sit down late in the day for another one or two hours. It depends. Certain stages of a book lend themselves to longer work periods. Other stages tend to burn you out in an hour.

NR: Did *Tapping the Source* start out as a plot or as a character or characters?

KN: It started out in three different places at once, really. One day I was sitting in Oakley Hall's office and he said he heard something that might interest me, and he went on to tell me a story about these guys and a girl who get caught smuggling drugs across the Mexican border and the guys end up giving the girl to the cops in exchange for their freedom. So, I had this set up in mind. At the same time I ran into this young jailbird of a kid on a construction job I was on. He had just gotten out of jail. He was about seventeen or eighteen years old. Anyway, he had been living at the beach with this middle aged, drug dealing, biker guy who liked to get laid by young girls. The kid's job was to hang out at the pier and pick up girls and bring them back to the apartment. The biker supported him for doing this. If the jailbird kid failed to bring girls home, no matter the reason, the biker would punch him out. So this story was kicking around in my head along with the Mexico connection. Then I started to think about what would happen if the girl who disappeared in Mexico had a brother who found out she'd gone south and had never come back. What would he do about it? I had been looking for a way to write about Southern California and the surfing scene in a way that hadn't been done before. These ideas began to take shape together. So, I guess you could say it was a combination of both plot and character.

NR: What do you think of plot — as a novelist? What role does it play in your writing?

KN: I think of plot as metaphor.

NR: What about style? What is your advice to beginning writers on this subject?

KN: Do it the way it feels right. I don't have any elaborate theories on the subject. I just try to hit something that feels right.

NR: Are you conscious of that *thing* you are trying to hit?

KN: Basically when I write all I am conscious of is a certain rhythm, a certain flow. I've heard other people say much more academic things about how they structure their sentences. I have to admit that I only have a certain rhythm in mind and I work for that rhythm and if it seems like I'm on . . . fine. I don't dissect the language much more than that.

NR: Your title, *Tapping the Source*, promises such romance. Why did you suddenly relate it to drugs? Why did you sully the romantic image?

KN: I like the reverberations I found in the triple meaning. I think within the fictional world of the novel it still has a romantic significance. Ike does fall in love with the ocean and with communing with nature. And then you find out that Hound and Preston attached themselves to the saying because it was an "in" joke, because it had a drug significance. Then there is also the idea kicking around in there somewhere that the source is 'self' in some way, that people choose themselves, for the good or for the bad. This is what Ike finally grasps — this idea of choice.

NR: Hound Adams. There is some truth to his view of the world and of morality, yet he is such a villain. How do you resolve this kind of character?

KN: Well, he's also not much of a thinker. He's this guy who mouths a lot of ideas he's heard, but really has no ideas of his own. He's like a guy who has read a lot of Carlos Castaneda. He is smart enough to know there should be just enough truth in his philosophic mutterings in order for him to be seductive to the people he wants to attract. Yet, when examined, none of it is really accurate. He is always saying people make their own truth, and people choose their own values for good or for evil, which is true up to a point. But then Hound is connected to Milo Trax who in turn is connected to people who kill other people. We all know that isn't right, no matter what you say about good and evil being different sides of the same coin, or

about a person being able to choose his own values. There are certain places where the line is drawn.

NR: Why did you choose to allow Hound to be so appealing?

KN: When you write I think the more you get into characters the more you try to find reasons for liking them yourself. And so I like to think, in spite of Hound's big sin and all that he has become involved in, that there are still vestiges of the man he should have been. That is why Hound is still courageous.

NR: Why is Hound Adams celibate?

KN: I like the moment when Michelle tells Ike she hasn't been getting in on with Hound. Because Ike is still in doubt as to who Hound is, this confuses the issue even further. So, I like it for that reason in terms of the nuts and bolts of putting the story together. And later, there is a hint that Milo and Hound might be homosexuals, which I thought of, on Hound's part anyway, as part of his trying to thwart convention, a Castaneda sort of thing. To become a man of wisdom, you have to unlearn conventional things, and one of the ways you unlearn them is to participate in various rights of passage.

NR: Does Hound believe he is becoming wiser or does he know he is a very evil man?

KN: Hound has really gone crazy. There are times when he believes his own rap. There are other times when he sees himself as real screwed up.

NR: So many sexual issues in the novel are dealt with even-handedly and without judgement — Gordon coming on to his teenage niece, Ike's incestuous tendencies, Ike's total immorality and infidelity — that I must admit I was taken aback by Ike's very callus and puritanical view of the young women he procures for Hound Adams. Why does he view them so harshly?

KN: I think that connects to the 'coming of age' issue in the novel. How to conduct yourself in the world, and more specifically, how to conduct yourself sexually, is one of the things you have to figure out at some point. Ike has come out of a background where he has no experience with people. He's only had his grandmother who preached the puritanical line to him. When he lands in Huntington Beach and there are people in his life for the first time, he has to interact with these people and try and figure out what to make of it all.

NR: But why does he judge the women so harshly?

KN: Well, he eventually judges himself harshly too. Before, he had romanticized sex. All of a sudden he's around these girls who make a joke about the romanticism. Ike finds himself with these people who are screwing one another for all the wrong reasons. He is torn. There used to be something romantic about it and now there isn't.

NR: Ike becomes very jaded in the story. Does he, or can he, redeem himself?

KN: I like to believe in a world where redemption is at least possible. Redemption through love. So the answer is yes. He is a redeemed person. He has come of age.

NR: Why did you stop short of showing us exactly what Hound does with the porno films?

KN: If I had it all to do over again I might even cut some of that out. The idea I was working with, in terms of plot, is Milo's story. I've thought about it since and have come to the conclusion that I wouldn't have Hound making the porno movies. It seems corny to me now.

NR: I didn't think it was corny. It was disconcerting that Ike never reacted to being in them.

KN: Well, you see, I wanted a certain amount of open-endedness in the story, a certain amount of ambiguity in the end of the book. The classic detective novel ends when the detective tells everyone what happened. Basically, I didn't want one character in *Tapping the Source* saying — now here's what happened. Instead, I wanted certain issues to remain unresolved, to let some things stay in the air. My original intention was to leave it more open-ended than it is, but my editor said I had to satisfy reader expectation.

NR: Speaking of reader expectation, does Hound die in the end?

KN: Yes. I figured Preston blew everyone off — a convenient way to end a book.

NR: In your novel the idea of "paying back favors" is a strong theme. Do you think people pay back favors in order to make

themselves feel good or because one must do what must be done, as in Preston's case?

KN: Dick Blackburn, who did a piece on the book for L.A. Style, noticed that the romanticism of the book came out of the western tradition rather than the "Chandleresqueness" of the Californian novel. That was the first time anyone mentioned that but I think it is there. It is some of the source. If Chandler and Hammett were influential in the shape of the novel, then I think some of those Sam Peckinpah films, like *Ride the High Country* and *The Wild Bunch*, also influenced me a lot. The plots in those films revolve around the western tradition of strict codes. You owe someone, you pay them back.

NR: Hound has perverted that.

KN: Yes, overall, but still, he opens the gate for Preston and Ike that night at the ranch because he owes Preston one.

NR: What about Preston?

KN: Preston has pronounced judgement on the whole scene. It is all rotten.

NR: Including himself.

KN: Yeah — including himself.

NR: You are so explicit in your descriptions, at grabbing hold of the action and diving the reader into it headfirst. Why didn't you take your audience through the scene where he Samoans torture Preston?

KN: That is a funny kind of choice you make as a writer. You've got the chance for another action scene, or you have the chance for a dramatic moment. In the case with the Samoans I went for the dramatic moment, hoping it would be a dramatic moment for the reader as well. I wanted the reader to be with Ike when he is in the hospital and he looks down the corridor and he sees Barbara and these bikers and he and the reader both think at the same time — oh no, something terrible has happened. It is a decision. You skip the event so you can have the moment of realization, on the part of the character and the reader.

NR: Did you ever write the scene, just to see it?

KN: No. I pretty much knew how I wanted it to work.

NR: You paint a bleak picture of the 'family.' Does this have to do with your vision of California or of the condition of the American family?

KN: Mine is a bleak vision in general. The family gets sucked into that. I tend to see it as a fallen world, a world without grace. Maybe redemption is possible through love in some way, maybe grace is possible. Maybe it can be realized, but it cannot be taken for granted.

NR: All the kids in your book have been victimized by their parents.

KN: I wasn't consciously thinking of making a statement about family. Rather, I wanted the core of the book to reflect my own vision.

NR: However Barbara, Michelle and Ike all go back to their families, to recuperate, despite the abuse that drove them from these homes.

KN: That is true.

NR: What about evil?

KN: I think there is a fundamentalist point of view — Ike's grandmother is the spokeswoman for it — which identifies certain things as being evil. If you have an incestuous relationship, or even incestuous thoughts, you are evil. For Ike, Hound's vision plays against this because Hound says that's bullshit. If you want to have an incestuous relationship, and you both have a good time with it, then what's wrong with it? And what Ike has to begin to see is that, in this instance, maybe Hound is closer to the truth than the grandmother. But Hound might take some girl out and cut her throat and, because it happened, well, she must have wanted it to. It was her karma. Finally Ike begins to see that people must operate under a situation ethics. For Ike there is his grandmother on one end of the spectrum and Hound at the other.

NR: Where does Preston fit into this scheme?

KN: Preston is between Ike and the grandmother. He is convinced redemption is not possible for himself.

NR: Why does he think that?

KN: Because he cannot forgive himself for the fact that Janet Adams died. He holds himself responsible. He was a golden boy type. He had charisma. But he couldn't live with the fact that someone had died. That was unacceptable to him.

NR: Did he do what his preacher-father would have wanted him to do?

KN: Yeah, essentially. He passed judgement on himself, and his life since then has been an extended suicide.

NR: You have used tattoos repeatedly and symbolically. I'm intrigued by tattoos myself. What do they mean to you?

KN: Preston afflicts himself with tattoos. Ike does it for the same reason. They consciously deface themselves. They have that same meaning to me. I also like the idea that Ike takes his place in a certain echelon of society, among the poor white trash to which he belongs by birth. He claims his birthright by getting a really big, dumb tattoo.

NR: Do you have a tattoo?

KN: No. But I've come close a couple of times in the past, when I'd had too much to drink.

NR: If you did have a tattoo what would it be?

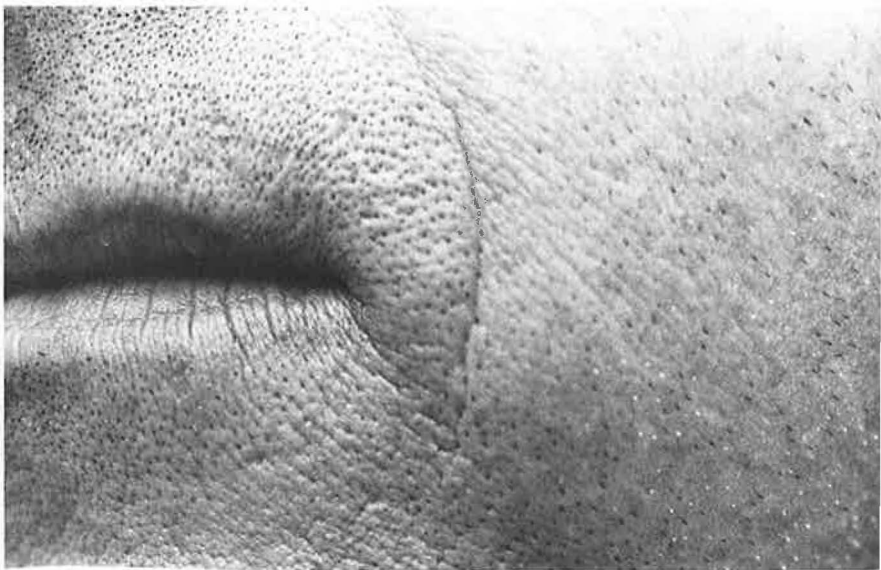
KN: I don't know. At this point I like to think that I would never get one, but if I did, it would be for similar reasons as Ike's.

NR: The climax, in action and plot, is an occult gathering of very rich and amoral people. Are you making a point about decadence?

KN: It was basically a case of trying to figure out what could be really evil. And the idea of people being killed ritualistically seems to me to be the worst.

NR: Was it a comment on wealth or the wealthy at all?

KN: Not really. What I wanted was something terribly bad. The occult seemed believable. I've read things that indicate this sort of thing goes on in those kinds of places.



Milton Per



Milton Perrin

Orange Bags on the Freeway #2

Marlene Pearson

I told my psychiatrist I saw
the orange bags on the freeway again
through my window which I couldn't open.

sure it was stuffy inside. but out there
all those smog-covered people
in their moving cans

like a factory conveyer belt:
were we on our way
to being sealed shut
packaged and shipped out?

would I wake tomorrow morning lined up
on Gemco's grocery shelves?

he lit a cigar and nodded.
he was listening.

I understood the bags I said. two were clinging
to a stick in the ground. one was up tight
against bending bushes. they wanted

to get off that freeway.
to get out of there.

did they tell you that he asked.
no of course not, I laughed
I'm not that stupid. I don't
hear voices.

I read their minds.

Kaffeeklatsch

Bobbie R. Coleman

Did you watch yesterday
on the soaps — I had to miss them
had to take the kids to soccer
Jeez I hate to miss *Ryan's Hope*
I wait all week for . . . anyhow guess who I
saw at the store she's nice but I
wish she'd stop associating
with all those weird people
not like us bikers and actors because —
hey, what's happening on *General Hospital*; who's
doing what to whom and
Michael will you please calm down! — it's really
embarrassing to a right-thinking normal person to
have someone I know be around them
Pass the cream.

Well, if you only miss one day
you really can keep up with the story;
I don't suppose she'll ever grow up, anyhow
Doug and Julie had a fight they're such a nice
couple why can't people be like that in real
life; so you saw her at the store huh she
seems very nice but she never has coffee and
doesn't like soaps; her husband must be . . .
and can you imagine what it must do to her kids
but she never has time for her friends always
pursuing some dream if she's not careful she may
find her family doesn't need her anymore like sands
in the hourglass so go the days of our lives
Michael stop crying or your mother will give
you something to cry for
she really needs to get more involved in her
friends Dammit Michael wet his pants again
we'd calm her down
You got any more Oreos?

I know what you mean — and she lets her
kids argue with her and she's not around them
enough not like us why I'd die before I leave
them alone too much with sitters, I mean, I had
them they're my own precious babies
Michael shut the fuck up
she's not nearly as devoted as she
should be her kids will probably wind up
on dope or sex or something — oh I almost forgot
we're out of beer Hubby would kill me if I didn't
have it waiting for him — they might be perverts
or axe murderers or bleeding
hearts; you know what she should do to help her
restlessness she should have another baby then she
can stay in touch with home and hearth and be really
fulfilled and Michael you little shit stop whining or I'm
gonna bop you one upside the head!

Tiny Slimy Writhing Thing

David Louapre

Hiding behind the gravy boat, between the sweet potatoes and the flower vase, the tiny creature lay writhing, unnoticed. It had crawled unobtrusively out of the sour cream dish and plopped down on the table screaming in pain, though virtually inaudible. It was Christmas Eve, and the Newman family was just sitting down to dinner, unaware of their hideous guest.

Mr. Newman, as always, sat at the head of the table preparing to attack the turkey in front of him. A small stream of saliva seeped from the corner of his mouth. Bill and Enid, both twelve years of age, sat opposite each other launching candied yams back and forth whenever their father looked away. Mrs. Newman was just coming in from the kitchen carrying the bowl of rice she'd burned and a bottle of ketchup, while Ol' Shep crouched outside in the cold, whining.

Everything was ready now, and the Newmans commenced their annual ravenous assault on the seasonal culinary foe before them. Soon the room echoed with the sound of slurps and sticky tongues as the family's ritual of repugnant mastication reached a feverish pitch, everyone oblivious to the writhing creature in their midst until Bill reached for the sour cream.

At first Bill didn't know what to make of it, this tiny thing that wriggled on the tablecloth. It looked sort of like a caterpillar, but wasn't. It was slimy like a slug, but too round. There were no antennas or feet, just a tiny orifice at one end of the body which opened and closed rhythmically as it squirmed.

Bill stared at the creature, silent. No one else noticed. Ol' Shep whined outside.

"God damned mutt," Mr. Newman cursed, a waterfall of peas and milk spewing from his mouth as he spoke. "Someone go out and kick him!"

"I'll do it. I'll do it," Enid shouted, leaping up, only to be pulled back by the strong arm of her mother.

"No you won't young lady. You'll eat your supper." She paused. "It's my turn to kick him anyway."

Mrs. Newman left the table to silence Ol' Shep as Enid raised her middle finger in salute, withdrawing it just ahead of Mr. Newman's scowling glance. From outside, a yelp was heard

and the whining ceased. With a grin on her face, Mrs. Newman returned and sat down again to continue her meal. Enid picked at her braces as she noticed Bill.

"Hey, what're you looking at?"

Bill looked up, then down again. "I'm not sure what it is," he mumbled.

In unison the entire Newman family leaned across the table and hovered over the writhing being.

"What the hell is that!?! " Mr. Newman blurted, spitting his beets.

"I don't know," Bill answered.

Enid moved her face closer. "It looks like a worm."

"Naw, it's not a worm," Bill said. "It doesn't . . . "

"Is it a slug?" asked Mrs. Newman.

"Too round for that," Mr. Newman declared, wiping his chin. "Looks sorta like a caterpillar, but it's too shiny."

"Yeah, it's real shiny," Enid agreed.

"Slimy," Bill corrected.

"Yeah," Mrs. Newman chimed, "it's real slimy. And wriggly. Look at it squirm."

The family crowded closer, clearing the center of the table for an unobstructed view. The little creature writhed steadily under the scrutiny of its new-found captors.

"Where d'ya think it came from?" Bill asked. No one said a word. All eyes were fixed on the unexpected intruder as it rolled slowly on the linen tablecloth. Bill snickered.

"What's so funny?" his mother asked, starting to smile herself.

"I bet if I threw it at the mirror it'd stick," the boy replied, howling with laughter now. Everyone joined in.

"No, no," Mrs. Newman interjected, still smiling, "not the mirror. I don't want to chance breaking it." She handed Bill a fork. "Poke it and see what it does."

Bill took the fork and prodded the squirming being while the family beamed with delight. The creature writhed more rapidly now, and the boy ceased the prodding.

"He didn't like that one bit. Not one bit," Mr. Newman declared, grinning profusely.

"No, he sure didn't," Bill agreed. "Not one bit."

"I have an idea," Mrs. Newman blurted as she grabbed the salt shaker and proceeded to cover the tiny creature with the white granules. Everyone watched as it secreted an oozing green liquid, crying out in pain as the family roared with laughter.

"He sure as hell didn't like that," Mr. Newman bellowed. "Not one single solitary bit!"

"Not one bit," Enid echoed, laughing with her father as he put his hand on her shoulder. The creature writhed prodigiously

now, squirming out of the green, bubbling pool, coming to a halt beside it, pulsating.

"Let's burn it," Enid cackled.

"No, no," Bill pleaded, "not yet. You got any bleach, Mom?"

"I sure do." Mrs. Newman darted off.

Enid picked up a cornholder and pinned the little creature to the table. Mr. Newman sprinkled it with pepper. Bill started to spit on it but was stopped by his dad.

"Not here, son. Let's not get carried away."

Mrs. Newman returned with a cap full of bleach which she carefully poured on the tiny, slimy thing. The family fell silent. The creature lay still for a moment, then screamed out; a scream barely audible, but discernable in the silence.

"You hear that?" Enid asked, cocking her head.

"Yeah," said Bill. "Sounds like it's in pain."

Everyone moved in closer, cupping their ears.

"It's hurtin' all right," Mr. Newman laughed.

"Yeah," his wife agreed, "it's hurtin'. It's hurtin' good!"

"Yeah."

"Real good!"

The dining room erupted in mayhem as shrieks of laughter peeled off into the air. Mr. Newman grabbed his belly as it shook with his giggling, and the children danced about the table with glee, falling to the floor, screaming with festive jubilation.

Meanwhile, the creature went through a series of violent contortions, providing its captors with unending amusement. Each member of the family shook violently with laughter. Faces turned red. Throats became hoarse. Mrs. Newman began to cough.

As if to put an end to the family's jocular torment, Bill picked up his knife and cut the creature in half. The tiny thing twisted and turned, then stopped moving altogether. The Newmans crowded around it again and watched, catching their breath. The creature did not move again.

"Well," Mr. Newman declared after wiping the sweat from his face, "that was the damndest thing I've ever seen."

"My gut hurts," Mrs. Newman said, tears of laughter running down her face.

Bill and Enid still shrieked with delight, but stopped as they realized the show was over. The family fell silent once more, panting as their eyes darted from face to face. Bill poked the tiny creature, hoping to get a response, but it lay still.

"Dang," Bill hissed as he tossed the fork back on the table.

The house was now quiet, except for the sound of Ol' Shep whining outside. In all the commotion, his whining had gone unheard. But now, in the silence, the dog's cries could be heard distinctly, and as each member of the family became aware of

it, each face broke into a fiendish grin. Eyes darted. Heads turned. Mouths opened, and, as if jolted by the same burst of electricity, everyone scrambled for the back door in a frenzied rush.

"It's my turn. It's my turn," Enid screamed as she ran.

"I get him first," Bill cried, right behind his sister.

"We'll all get him," Mrs. Newman shouted, laughing hysterically as she ran, mouth wide open.

"We'll get him good," Mr. Newman shrieked as he lurched for the knob. "We'll get him real good. It'll be the best Christmas Eve ever. Ever!"

"Yeah, ever, ever," Enid echoed with delight.

"Ever."

Okefenokee West

Brian Skinner

slick with suntan oil,
sipping screwdrivers with slow
sharp lips,

the guests of the Hollywood Palms
Motel suck in
the smog and wait.

eyes like well-lubed
engine bolts fix
themselves on still flesh.

the pool-cleaning man keeps
a strong hand
on his pole, and steps
carefully around the corners.

Uncle Rich's Pet Parrot

Cathy Comenas

The leaves were yellow
birds sang in trees
that's when uncle Rich
took Taffy from her perch
on the back porch
he cut her head off
with his camping axe
her screaming kept him up
but the green and red feathers
kept his eyes amazed,
he put Taffy in his backyard tree,
feet wired to a thin gray branch
until she decayed
and fell off her claws

Notes of a Deburrer

for mari

Cathy Comenas

I didn't want to leave her
this morning for work

Face to face with a machine
that turns fingertips into sandpaper
I grind gears clean smooth
until they are mirrors
that's when I see her still naked in bed
warm cream of wheat skin
that I spoon into my mouth
and feel her slide down my stomach
I see her lips swirl in metal
as the machine bites me from dream
blood drips from my finger

Substitute Teacher

Bill Mohr

I liked that movie for one and only one reason. I knew it was my brain that made Frankenstein's monster a sweet person. You have to identify with something in a movie. That brain is what keeps the movie going. Without it, the lightning storm is just another long night at the dog pound down the street. But my brain, which seems to be used only because it's convenient, is actually the lucky choice, or a case of no choice being perfect timing. And I'm not bragging.

A lot of brains, if given a second chance at being a brain, wouldn't know what to do. They'd stare at the first thing they remembered seeing before, trying to put the story back together again. But my brain knew that it was a different game now, different rules, and I was going to have to improvise.

It didn't bother me that my life was on the line the second time around. That's why I had a big advantage at dying so quickly the first time. Most people don't know how to gamble — they panic when they bet. They're guessing. But a brain like mine knows that the secret is whether or not you should trust your first hunch.

My brain knew that Frankenstein's first hunch was a dumb move. He never should've put me in an adult body. A six year old or a three year old, that would've been perfect. There's no way they could've fooled me then. Growing up, I would've known their tricks. For quite a few years, I tried to be a good boy. My father taught me the intricacies of ovens and soon I invented new ways of making bread rise. He wanted me to tell him my secrets, but I didn't love him that much.

Certain things can't be disguised. Or imagined. Each time I see the movie I'm more convinced. Maybe you don't believe me, but I've never met anybody else who thought it was his brain. Hey, and I know a lot of words too. They never give me the lines which show the extent of my vocabulary. Maybe you've noticed that so far I haven't mispronounced a single word. Or stumbled once, even though this audition is a cold reading.

I'm not perfect. I'm not claiming I'm perfect. You ever heard

the expression — no such thing as a stupid question. Welding class, air-conditioning repair class. They encourage you to ask stupid questions so they have something to tell the other teachers eating lunch. And this is true. I know because I taught for a while. A substitute teacher. You know, a warm body. The kids liked me. You can't fool kids. That's what I liked about them. They knew who I was and not one of them ever squealed. I never had a single note from the principal's office: "Will the substitute teacher in room six please leave the smartest student in charge and report to my office immediately." The kids knew and they didn't need to brag about it. So I'm saving my money and when I have enough, I'm going to take some time off, pump iron, repair my motorcycle, and, best of all, learn to play music. You know I hear music but I can't remember it very long. It's not music that has words — it's just melodies and I hear them a few times, but then anything can distract me and I forget it. And I know that I'm not stealing it. It's not somebody else's music. It's something I'm hearing for the first time. From another world I believe. But then again, I've had better luck than you, so I could understand it if you don't believe. This is the way I like it. It's a real melody, not a fake one.

The only important question left is how a brain works — how it identifies what's important and what's not important. And to do that, I have to have a real brain to work with. That's why I brought this brain along with me to show you how much progress we've made in understanding exactly where these connections get made. This is the happiest frontier, the non plus ultra of wilderness. Connections isn't really the exact word I want, just as we're not really certain — the Doctor and I — how each area manages to enjoy — tolerate! — the existence of so many other areas in the brain. It's hard to believe how many solitary obsessions the brain possesses. Right now, for instance, at a spot smaller than the very tip of a cat's claw, is a — how does he put it — a peninsula in the brain that attempts to control every sexual memory of an organism. These memories are not the production of the brain although the brain does use them in the production of other memories.

Now in front is a wad about the size of a rolled-up band-aid and this is the central opinion storage area. This is each brain's opinion of all the brains that this brain has encountered. The rankings from Hall of Fame to Bush League, from the subtly certain to the deceitful. No brain puts itself in last place. Not even a suicide. Most suicides put themselves in first place. That's why they volunteer to stop thinking. That shows Dr. F. fucked up. He used the foot of a suicide. Haven't you noticed how

this foot has been twitching the whole time I've been talking. This foot remembers that the brain said jump. And it was the other foot that moved. A little off-balance and you don't get a second chance.

You can't understand how difficult it is to talk about your own brain this intimately — let alone someone else's. And I am shy. That much is known about me which is true. I can overcome it for brief periods. Sometimes I can teach three or four days in a row. At different schools of course. That's one of the subtle advantages of being a substitute.

Bill Mohr: An Interview

Jordan Jones
Jeannette Svoboda



Bill Mohr was born in 1947 in Norfolk, Virginia. He grew up there as well as in Hawaii and San Diego. He moved to Los Angeles in 1968 and acted with several theatre companies, including the Burbage Theatre Ensemble. He has worked as a California Arts Council Artist-in-Residence in the San Gabriel Valley and also taught creative writing classes for L.A. Theatre Works at the prison in Chino. He is currently rewriting a one-act play, *Slow Spin Out*, about a group of prisoners who are about to be released. After editing the first two issues of *Bachy* magazine, he started Momentum Press and has published *Momentum* magazine and over two dozen books by twenty-two writers. He has also published two anthologies, *The Streets Inside: Ten Los Angeles Poets* (1978) and "*Poetry Loves Poetry:*" *An Anthology of Los Angeles Poets* (1985), which contains almost four hundred poems by sixty-two poets. His work has appeared in several other anthologies, including *Poets West* (Perivale Press), *Young American Poets*, a Japanese anthology edited by Bob Kuntz, and *The Southern California Literary Anthology*. His first book of poems, *hidden proofs*, was published by Bombshelter Press in 1982. His second collection, *PENETRALIA*, was published by Momentum Press in 1984. He is working on a new manuscript, *barely holding distant things apart*. He lives in Ocean Park with his wife, Cathay Gleeson.

Northridge Review: We wanted to start by talking about your editing.

Bill Mohr: Everybody always does. I'm notorious for hating interviews that begin with talking about editing, to tell you the truth, because editing isn't the main reason I do poetry. And yet obviously that's the thing that has the most public recognition.

NR: You've just published this book "*Poetry Loves Poetry*." Would you tell us how you went about selecting the poets and poems for the book and about any difficulties you might have had in getting it together?

BM: I've been editing in Los Angeles for about fifteen years now. I was the first editor of *Bachy* magazine, which was published by Papa Bach's Bookstore. I edited the first two issues of that and then I began my own poetry magazine, *Momentum*, in 1974, and edited ten issues of that. Then I started publishing books in 1975. So I've known poets in this town for a long time. It wasn't as if I just decided I was going to do a project and then had to start digging up poets or going to readings. I had a pretty good sense of who I was going to select from the start. I would say that I knew the work of at least three-fourths of the poets. I even knew individual poems that I wanted. I asked those poets to pass on the word, and I did get manuscripts from other people, I did include work sent to me from people I had never met. For example, Allison Townsend; her work was recommended by Holly Prado. I liked it, so I included it.

NR: Was it different from editing *The Streets Inside*, in that it kind of ballooned on you?

BM: That's exactly what happened. As I worked on the project, to a certain extent, it got out of control. But that's only a reflection on how much poetry is occurring in this city. Relatively speaking, *The Streets Inside* was fairly easy to put together. There are just so many poets working in this city, all of whom consider themselves to be just as good as XYZ. One of the things I like about "*Poetry Loves Poetry*" is I think it's not just any one particular group. If you look at the Beyond Baroque Reading Series right now, it's roughly organized around two magazines, *Temblor* and *Sulphur*. But there are a lot of different kinds of groups that are represented in the book, and without actually breaking it up into any formal divisions. It segues from one to another. There's a chunk of Bukowski/Locklin/Koertge and then it goes off into another group.

NR: Exene Cervenka and John Doe would be another group.

BM: Yeah, right. David James and Dave Alvin would be in that group too, the “punk” poets, in real quotes because they’re certainly not punk poets. But they come from a musical background. One of the reasons the book got so big is simply because I felt I had to include these different groups.

NR: Why did you stop publishing *Momentum*? Was it so that you could work on publishing books?

BM: The magazine wasn’t selling at all. A lot of poets liked it, but When you publish an individual’s book of poems, it’s not just a question of initial sales. As that poet’s reputation builds, two or three years later that book will still sell. Whereas, there is nothing deader than a three-year-old magazine, except to someone who is really into it. I think a magazine is a good way to tutor yourself about poetry and there’s no better way to learn something than by doing it. It’s hands-on experience as opposed to sitting in your room and reading poems and writing poems.

NR: It’s more objective because you’re forced to decide?

BM: Yeah. You quickly realize that it’s not just a matter of taste. I can take a poem and show you in almost a scientific way why it works or doesn’t work, how it could be made better Most of the poems in this book tell stories in one way or another. Although there’s much that I admire in the recent Language-Centered Movement, I’m not even sure I’m a poet anymore. What I call myself is a narrationist. I’m a Born-Again Narrationist. I really believe in the power of narrative. That doesn’t necessarily mean plot, I want to make that distinction. This book is about stories. I think poetry loves stories as much as it loves poetry.

NR: You said during your interview on KPFK that the poets in the anthology aren’t academics, that most of them don’t make a living teaching. How do you think their activities in publishing, running workshops, acting, and being in rock bands has affected their writing? Has it made it more narrative?

BM: That’s a good question. I tried to disclaim in the Introduction this sort of Hollywood aspect in terms of how the poets make a living. It’s not so much that they haven’t taught for most of their lives, it’s that working other jobs has given them

experience that gives them something to draw on when they turn to the blank piece of paper. Jim Krusoe teaches at Northridge, but if he made out a resume you'd find out all kinds of other jobs that he's done. Teaching is a very interesting experience, but it can also be very limiting, just as any job can be if that's the only one you do all your life. Unless you're lucky, like Williams. Of course, being a doctor you meet a lot of different people, and I think that was Williams' secret. What makes the poetry narrative is a curiosity about the world and just simply observing what you see. I don't know that being in the University or not being in the University makes that much difference. David James is one of the "punk" poets in the anthology, yet he teaches at Occidental. There's no such thing as a set definition: this poet teaches in a University and writes this way, or this one sings in a rock band and writes this way.

NR: In the Introduction you categorize these L.A. poets as being in the Self-Portrait School of Existential Romanticism. Would you like to explain that label?

BM: Largely it's that the work is autobiographical, just as Whitman's or Williams' work is autobiographical. The term autobiographical has gotten a very bad rap because of the emotional extremism of the Confessional School. The poets in here aren't confessional. Nevertheless, they use their own lives as material for the subject matter of the poems. No one would denigrate Rembrandt's self-portraits and say, "But it's only a self-portrait," in the way that they'll say to a poet, "Well, you're only writing about your life."

NR: The difference between self-portraiture and confessional poetry is, I think, that the writers of these self-portraits have more of a sense of humor about what they're dealing with . . .

BM: A distance, yes.

NR: And they also add fiction to their lives.

BM: Right. That's a great part of it, so that the whole time "autobiographical" is in quotes. The autobiographical material is used to create a persona, to which a lot of fictional material is added. And of course the distinction blurs between what really happened to the writer and what was made up . . . So the Existentialism part? It's sort of grade-school Sartre: "Existence precedes essence." I don't think any of the poets here choose any particular form when they start out to write a poem. You use the subject matter of the poem and form grows as the

poem grows. It isn't predetermined, and that's very romantic. I think that essentially Existentialism is a Romantic philosophy. If we were able to move two thousand years ahead of ourselves, we'd look back and see that the whole period from Blake and Wordsworth probably well into the next century is basically a Romantic period. Terms like Modernism and Post-Modernism will be meaningless.

NR: You also talked on the radio show about the difference between the New York Poets and the California Poets and their concepts of craft. How would you define the craft that these Los Angeles poets are using?

BM: I think the craft we use is a dramatic craft. What we're concerned with is how to get a story rolling and how to make a listener pay attention. Gerry Stern has said that technique is that which makes a reader pay attention. You can talk all you want about meter and metaphor and symbol but real craft in writing is making the reader pay attention. That's the whole point of it and that's the end result. I'm not interested in being called a poet anymore precisely because so many poets have gotten lost in this sense of craft for craft's sake. I think that a good poem is one in which you get the sense that the poet *had* to write this poem, absolutely had to write it, was compelled to write it.

NR: Given the large amount of readings in L.A. and the performance poetry, do you think that these affect the poetry that people are writing? Do they make it more dramatic, more immediate, more accessible?

BM: Why don't you be hostile witnesses and complain about the lack of craft of L.A. poets? Certainly the East Coast would say that we lack a sense of formal control over the poems, that there's not enough sense of stanzas and the line breaks are sloppy.

NR: O.K. Let's look at the other side. What are L.A. poets trying to do? And does it have something to do with a conversational tone? With Wanda Coleman or Exene Cervenka you have a different kind of craft. The poems come off very well when they are read. It's a craft that wants to be narrative, wants to be effective when it's heard or read on a surface level as well as reading into it.

BM: The East Coast poets' criticism of us would be that it works better out loud than on the page. But, God knows, I don't

think their work holds up well on the page even though they mostly write for the page. I've seen many poems which if you ran them off on a mimeograph machine and handed them out to a bunch of people those people wouldn't be impressed. Whereas, if you picked up a poem like "Howl," I don't care if it's mimeographed or not, the language is so charged that you're going to pay attention to it. I suppose a lot of our performance poetry does go back to Ginsberg, the quintessential Romantic. Who also has one of the great voices of the Twentieth Century. Everybody always raves on about Reagan's voice; he doesn't hold a candle to Ginsberg.

NR: Why did you get started in poetry and what's kept you going?

BM: The question is, do I really want to review an old story? The original impulse behind my writing is having questions and hoping that by putting words together I could find some answers. It was also just a raw, uninhibited, almost sexual pleasure in the sound of words. The world exploded for me one spring when I was about nineteen years old. Some kind of delayed adolescent time bomb went off and I actually saw flowers for the first time and the world lit up. I wanted to capture this experience and words were what I felt most comfortable with.

NR: Who were the poets who interested you as you were beginning?

BM: I read everybody I could get my hands on. I was very fortunate in that I had a teacher at San Diego State, Glover Davis, who dittoed off a list of poets with the titles of their books. I went through a library and worked my way down the list. It had everyone on it from James Tate to Weldon Kees to Philip Levine. Everybody I read I decided for the next two months I was going to imitate. John Berryman was a wonderful poet to read, but a terrible influence on me. I tried to write dream songs for a year and a half. It was very detrimental to my own writing and yet what I did pick up is an ear for all kinds of different rhythms and word combinations. I feel that that has continued to serve me. A lot of rhythmic possibilities aren't being explored in the English language right now. The thing that I like about the Language-Centered School is that they have gone back and said, "What is the basic unit of thought in speech? It's a sentence." And what is a sentence? It turns out that there are several hundred definitions of what a sentence is. What I want to segue into here is, how much can be contained

in a single sentence? One of the things that fascinates me about some poets, poets as diverse as Theodore Roethke and Paul Blackburn, is that a lot of their best poems are single sentences. Even Roethke's poem "Big Wind" which is actually two sentences, you can tell that he wanted it to be a single sentence. I have been thinking about this question for a long time and I think a sentence is our experience of eternity. I mean that literally, in that when we come to the end of a sentence, which could have wound on for a hell of a long time, we are able to instantaneously understand the complete sentence. In a sentence you have the past, the present, and the future all existent within the initial capital letter and the final punctuation mark. That is why we were able to understand sentences, because time does not exist in a sentence. And eternity is where time doesn't exist, so there you are. It's not that simple and yet I do feel I'm onto something. When you read a good story and say, "I felt like I was in another world," that's because you are in another world: you have left time. Your consciousness has transcended the temporal. Language still fascinates me because it is, as Charles Olson said, "the intersection of an eternal event with a temporal one." When Dickinson says poetry takes the top of her head off, that's what she means. But it's the sentence that does that. Robert Bly criticizes Whitman, saying he doesn't have caesuras in his lines; that's because Whitman is working with sentences. The line is less musical because it isn't a line, it's a sentence. Ginsberg certainly picked up on this.

NR: Ginsberg talked about that being a breath, but really it's a thought-grouping that you could call a sentence?

BM: Right. The term "breath" gets a little tricky and I think it would be easier to call it a long sentence. He's talking about breathing but that's only an esoteric way of talking about something that's fundamental, like sentences.

NR: How do you do your work? Do you have certain conditions or techniques which help you write and how much do you revise?

BM: I have an illusion that I don't do much revision, and yet I have stacks of paper in my room which show many different drafts of poems. The best poems I've written are often first takes. My poem "Vallejo" is almost word for word as I wrote it. I try to make every poem different. Each poem is written under different conditions. There is a prose piece I wrote called "Substitute Teacher" that I began about 11:15 one night last spring and finished about 2:15 in the morning. I just kept writing

it and the further I got the more uncertain I was, and yet I was laughing like crazy. I revised it somewhat, deleting things, but the material I kept was revised very little.

NR: Do you think these poems which worked as “first-takes” are due to inspiration? As a student, the first thing you learn is how to work. You cannot depend on inspiration to get you moving.

BM: I think that’s very true. Jim Krusoe quotes some other writer as saying, “A poet is a writer who doesn’t write every day.” The truth is that poets are very lazy writers and we don’t write every day. But if you depend entirely on inspiration you will stop writing because you haven’t built up any habits. I think it’s good to go for awhile and try to write something every day and then to go for awhile and just see what happens So how do I work? I haven’t been writing much in the last two years, actually. I was working for the California Arts Council as an artist-in-residence, a situation which became politically untenable when I submitted the poems to be published in a booklet as part of my residency. They said, “You can’t put these two or three poems in the booklet because of their political content.” Not because of four-letter words, just their political content. At that point there was no choice, I had to resign. The ironic thing is that the California Arts Council makes a pretense of providing artists with time to work on their art, and the truth is that I wrote less as an artist-in-residence than at any other time in my life.

NR: Was it the pressure they put on you?

BM: It was just that there is too much work to be done, teaching third and fourth graders to write poems. Talk about Existential Romanticism . . . This is a project worthy of Sisyphus. “Sisyphus, you can let go of the rock for awhile.” “Ah, thank God, boss.” “Uh, we want you to teach kids to write poems, third and fourth graders.” “I want the rock. Gimme the rock back.” It feels like that sometimes . . . “Please, kid, write something.” “I can’t think of anything to write. I have no dreams and I have no memories. What are you going to do about it, poet?”

NR: In your poems such as “The Will to Live,” “Mantra for the Evacuation of Santa Monica,” and “The Big World and The Small World,” what I hear is a political voice that doesn’t negate the human, isn’t just full of vituperative attacks. You have the personal and the political existing side by side and I

was wondering if you thought there was a place for the political in poetry, if it is handled this way?

BM: I grew up during the time of the Vietnam War and I was involved in a lot of protests. I also wrote political poetry. My first public reading in Los Angeles was at a resistance house, in fact. The thing I finally have arrived at, that I like about my political poems, is that they aren't simply about politics, they are about daily life. There is a woman writer, and I can't remember her name right now, but she says one of the five elements of literature is "dailiness." That is something I have been concerned with in my own writing. In almost a Zen Buddhist way, the most ordinary gesture or the most ordinary perception can contain the possibility for immense insight. In my political poems I simply can't leave this out. That's why there is a children's story about a whale in a political poem about nuclear war. In that "Will to Live" poem, the whaler, who's about to shoot this whale, says to Santa Claus, "This is the first whale I've seen in a week." What I like about that line is that it is my implication that Santa Claus could say, but doesn't, "Listen, asshole, the reason you haven't seen a whale in a week is because jerks like you have been killing all the whales." I don't want to beat it over the head in an obvious way. I am trying to lure the reader with an interesting story, so you're not listening to yet another poet drone on about the political situation, which just bores the shit out of me.

NR: Back to what you were saying earlier about imitation. Would you say to young writers, "Read, don't imitate, just read?"

BM: I don't think it's worth it to imitate other writers. It is important to find out as quickly as possible what it is you were put here on earth to say. The sooner you can get to that, the better. There's no predicting when it's going to happen, so you have to . . . just get to work, I guess. When I wrote "Substitute Teacher" I had no idea I was going to write that piece that day when I woke up. Suddenly, at eleven o'clock at night, I get this idea about a guy who identifies with the brain that's put into the monster in the Frankenstein movies. Of course, a man who has this kind of obsession/identification is someone who can only make a living as a substitute teacher, going from school to school . . . Why continue writing is a big question. I'm going to be thirty-eight this year and if someone had said to me, "You'll be thirty-eight and nothing's gonna happen, Bill. You're still gonna be typesetting and taking home eight hundred dollars a month. You'll have no publisher and no one interested in

publishing your work," it would have been much more difficult to get through times when I had hope. (Laughs.) There were times when I was young that I never thought my work would be where it is at this particular point in my life. All you have to do is look at Whitman, who had to publish his own work, or Williams, who in his late forties had to pay for the publication of his work. If it's that way for Williams, well, why should it be any different for us? Or for anybody who's doing work that will endure, as opposed to work that's currently fashionable or acceptable.

NR: Well, what are the accomplishments, what are the values of writing?

BM: It is worthy to write. My belief in the value of it comes from the fact that my grandfather was born in Holland and that he wrote, but never did publish, a journal about what it was like to grow up in a Dutch village late in the last century. When he died, my mother looked for that book but never found it. In a hundred years from now someone may ask, "What was it like to be a kid in Holland in 1895?" I think that that's what we're leaving behind, a record of what it was like to be alive.



Distance

Jordan Jones

1.

You, weaving a boat out of reeds
it is heavy with your longing but strangely buoyant.

2.

We give names to the secrets
that separate us like a sword.

3.

If I shove recollections ahead of me like a prow
can I cross these dark seas back to you?
Will I know other women as I began with you
from the myth outward to the skin?

Cigar

Jordan Jones

Thick, brown
wet rounded end
of an abandoned cigar

and the smoke
clinging to the memory.

chickens, in two parts

Mike Burns

1.

each morning
before the frost is gone
I rise, dress, and toss the tennis ball
off the back porch
Barney, 75 pounds of retriever,
chases through fallen oranges, tangerines
brings it back
his lolling tongue speckled with dirt, dried leaves.

in the tool shed out back
thirty chicks scurry beneath warm lights
their new feathers
in this second week
begin to cover the red and yellow down.

this morning
I woke to a broken routine
the frost was gone, no sun had risen, rain was falling
in scattered flurries
and one chick had died
long before dawn
its body stiff and cold.

I tossed it into the barranca
falling away into the pepper trees and ferns
behind the coop.
some wild animal will complete the cycle.

that was the sixth I'd lost
in this short two weeks
but there is only a slight hesitation
as I count the remaining chicks
count the eggs they will lay
the golden drumsticks
we will barbecue in the fall.

2.

the final post of the new coop
stands in the ground
its knees anchored with concrete
sweet arms, their fresh cut lengths of douglas fir
stretch out, tip to tip
finding the next post.

a tin cup in my right hand
the coffee grown luke-warm
I stand in the fading light,
watch Dan drive one more nail and imagine:

the wire mesh
hanging as a gossamer thin sheet
between cat and chicken,
counting the eggs
golden brown roundness
gathered up in the straw basket.

a squawk from the shed
reminds me, look over the new chicks.
finding a white leghorn
held tender in Barney's mouth,
I leave egg counts
for another day.

planting time

Mike Burns

late summer heat, damp and heavy
blisters the leaves
in a stand of eucalyptus
and heat waves rise from the farmer's dirt road
giant Caterpillar tractors
crawl with malice
across the fields of winter beans
and Roma tomatoes
pushing, with great belches of smoke
soot black against the sky,
their engines snarl at the hillside
relentless pushing pushing

rich, fertile soil
warm as it sifts through fingers
fields of grain, delicate legumes
turned end for end
buried beneath concrete and steel
of another factory, shopping center, house
the indigestible houses sprouted from baby-boom seedlings

the heat pulls back
its heavy August quilt
and the valley eases into the comfort
of twilight; the naked wood-frame-skeletons
stand like whispering shadows in the wind.

*

Jeannette Svoboda

I walk in the yard
thorns, stickers, cacti, then you
still, with your sharp frown

Northridge Review Questionnaire

1. Do you have certain habits which help you write or methods of communication which you find more effective than others?

No.

Denise Levertov
Poet, author of *Candles in Babylon*.

Court Despair.

Wallace Graves
Fiction writer, author of *Trixie*.

The consistent habit of writing every morning, as a first thing — before brushing teeth, before breakfast — wherever I am, is one I wish I had — I *recommend* it to myself. "Method of Communication" belongs to the advertizing industry.

May Swenson
Poet, author of *Iconographs*.

In common with other poets, I prefer to write in my own "space," a little upstairs room that looks out over the winding dirt road below. I like to warm up to write by answering a couple of letters from friends. But I *can* write elsewhere; I have begun many a poem on the back of a boarding pass en route to a reading or workshop, & I always pack work along to pick at in the empty hours in motel rooms. I prefer a typewriter & now have a very small electronic one that will run on batteries!

Maxine Kumin
Poet, author of
Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief.

Writing a poem or two warms me up/gets me started when I'm reluctant to work at other forms. Music to suit my mood provides a conduit. And if I am particularly "uptight," a hot cup of coffee and a couple of "hits off a joint" really stoke the old coals.

Wanda Coleman
Poet, author of *Mad Dog Black Lady*.

The most important factor in writing, given some liter-

acy, is discipline. You have to shut yourself away from family and friends and things you'd rather be doing and do it.

Jack Smith

Columnist, author of *Cats, Dogs, and Other Strangers at My Door*.

2. Do you think writing can be taught? How have you learned what you know as a writer?

I think writing can be taught, but only to other writers. Students come into my writing workshop without a clue and I can't teach them squat. Other writers, though, might just need a little nudge or another point of view so in that way I can teach them. I've learned what I know as a writer by making mistakes in my writing; if I were a carpenter, I wouldn't have a finger left.

Ron Koertge

Poet, author of *Life on the Edge of the Continent: Selected Poems*.

a) To talented people certain things about writing can be taught. b) By reading and writing.

Denise Levertov

Workshops were important when I started writing. I took several poetry workshops with Ann Stanford when I was a student at CSUN, as well as Independent Study sessions. This was a great help: an opportunity to show my work to a "real" writer, one I admired. I think it's important to have idols and to read a lot of poetry. Cultivating friendships with other writers is important too, or has been for me.

David Trinidad

Poet, author of *Monday, Monday*.

The craft/function/execution of writing can be taught. The art of writing (like the art of anything) seems to be a gift/habitation/compulsion/obsession.

Wanda Coleman

Writing can't be "taught" but a workshop, seminar or classroom can provide a nurturing environment for beginning writers. Ciardi once said that the teacher is "a hired sympathy" and I agree. My own beginnings in workshops have convinced me of the worth of group criticism and response.

Maxine Kumin

3. Who do you consider to be your audience? Are you reaching most of the people who would be interested in your work?

My audience is anyone who believes he can learn about himself by watching a trained dog perform at a circus. As for reaching the people interested, I would say, "When the writer is ready, the people will appear."

Wallace Graves

Too much concern for the demands of a general audience leads to popular art forms, popular culture, and fads low in content. On the other hand, a lack of audience awareness often leads to work that is self-serving, murky and self-involved, to work that often excludes even a sophisticated audience because it is grounded in personal rather than universal symbols. Many very good poets and writers seem obsessed with the craft of writing, as if this provided a real alternative to writing for everyone or just for oneself. So we have lots of poets and writers writing for other poets and writers. The great writers know the trick: they take the same stale sit-com gag, change it enough to make it seem original — but not so much that the audience no longer recognizes in it something universal — and present the old dud wrapped in wonderful, artful language. Shakespeare knew how. I don't. So I write for myself, or rather the part of myself that's beyond fooling.

Greg Boyd

Poet and editor of
Asylum magazine.

- a) Anybody who reads my work or comes to hear me.
- b) No writer can know that — besides, there is the possibility of posterity, always an unknown.

Denise Levertov

I'm my best audience. As far as reaching people, since poetry attracts a very small minority of the people who read, how can "most of the people" be reached? Anyway, my poetry is so simple and easy to read that anybody I reach is pretty much interested. Who ever "figured out" a Ron Koertge poem.

Ron Koertge

4. What distinguishes your writing from that of others and makes it valuable?

I've invented some new "forms" — or rather, I've let the poems, in the making, lead me into invention. I don't worry about being valuable. I prize individuality, and hope to avoid being influenced by others.

May Swenson

If my writing is valuable it is because I try to make it

clear, and because I write about life as we live it.

Jack Smith

My craftspersonship as well as my vision/voice and unique dogged stubbornness.

Wanda Coleman

Not for the writer to say.

Denise Levertov

I'm always pretty much me; that's distinguishing (in the fingerprint sense) and valuable because I'm gifted in a single area — writing. It's fun to be around (or to read around) someone with talent. I have a fairly light heart and my poems often make people laugh. Surely that's valuable.

Ron Koertge

5. Could you comment on your works-in-progress or anything you have recently finished?

I have a new collection of poems just published by Viking (I think they are keeping it a secret) called *THE LONG APPROACH*. The jacket says that these poems deal with increasingly public themes, and I guess that is so. My vision seems to be rather more apocalyptic as I grow older; the world seems more troubled, our chances slimmer. But I hope some of the darkness is redeemed by wit. Ripeness may be all, as Lear says, but humor saves us alive. I also have a collection of country essays waiting in the wings, and I hope very much to go back to writing some short stories. There is a balance in moving from genre to genre for me.

Maxine Kumin

I am interested in Pop Culture, especially subject matter from the 60's. Girl groups, comic book characters, television and films, etc. I recently wrote a piece in the voice of Barbie (the doll).

David Trinidad

I'm writing a long narrative poem in which I leave home to live in a Banyan tree. I become a monkey, and my companion is a cockatoo. It's a playful serious poem which speculates on (and finds) the purpose of life. (Now that I've talked about it, I may not be able to finish it.)

May Swenson

I've begun writing short fiction again, attempting to imbue this form with the same sort of intensity found in my poetry. I think I've got it — finally. And this

satisfies me like a sonofabitch.

Wanda Coleman

A writer's comments on his own work are fix-it jobs — futile efforts to repair an edifice which didn't come out right the first time. Silence is grandly underestimated in our society.

Wallace Graves



Milton Perrin

Don't Worry — We'll Fix It.

Heidi York

“**T**ake that off!”

I thought I'd yelled loud enough to knock the dress right off him, but Brady was lost somewhere in “ballerina land” and ignored me. He was wearing my new strapless blue sundress with matching pumps and doing the dance of the wood nymphs, or whatever it was, in front of the full length mirrors attached to my closet doors. I moved in a little closer and cleared my throat.

“Take that off — NOW!”

“Aw c'mon Sheila! I'm not hurting anything.”

“Sure. Nothing but my ego . . .”

I stomped over to the bed and flopped down on it. I mean honestly! It's bad enough having a brother who wears my clothes all the time — does he have to look better in them than I do too?

“Look kid, if you want to wear dresses so badly, why don't you buy your own?”

“Oh sure! And what would Mom say, huh?”

“Why don't you ask her and find out for yourself!”

Brady was doing his best to look tough but it's hard to feel threatened by a skinny guy in a blue dress. Besides, we've been having this same argument for the last two years, ever since Brady got interested in wearing women's clothes. At first I thought it was just another phase, but when he started wearing my bras to school under his sweat shirts, I knew this was serious business. Last year he told me he was gay. Mom doesn't know any of this, and I think Brady should tell her.

“I can't tell Mom, Sheila!” he moaned. “She'll get weird and do something awful.”

“How do you know?”

“Women's intuition.”

“Just take off the damn dress!” I yelled, “and get out of my room!”

“Fine!”

Brady unzipped the dress and let it fall into a puddle around his ankles. He stood, with his hands on his hips, at the foot of my bed.

“Happy now?”

When I sat up to bash him over the head with a pillow and saw what he was wearing, I buried my face in the blankets and started to laugh. Upon the slim, alabaster, and otherwise naked body of my baby brother, was a pair of the skimpiest black satin panties I'd ever seen.

"And just what's so funny?"

"Where in the world did you get those things?"

"Oh these!" he said smiling. "Don't you just love 'em?"

"God no! They're ridiculous."

"You're just jealous."

"No I'm not! They're—"

"They're Mom's."

If I hadn't heard the front door open, I think I would've wet my pants — I was laughing so hard — but Mom was home and I had to control myself. Brady turned into a blithering idiot. He stood waving his arms around like a drowning man for a few panicked seconds before diving head first under the bed.

"Sheila? Brady?"

"In my room, Mom!"

By the time Mom poked her head inside my door, I had composed myself again. The bags under her eyes looked more like suitcases today. Her face was pinched and tired.

"Isn't Brady in here too? I thought I heard him laughing."

"Nope," I said, jumping up to give her a kiss and steer her back out into the hall so Brady could make his escape. "He's not home yet. You want me to get you a cup of tea or something, Mom?"

"No thanks honey. I've got to change my clothes. We're meeting your father for dinner tonight, remember?"

I nodded my head a couple of times and dropped my mother off at her door like a taxi or something. I hate covering up for Brady all the time. It makes me feel bad hiding things from Mom.

"Oh and Sheila," Mom yelled from inside her room as I started down the hall to give Brady a piece of my mind, "wear a bra tonight, okay?"

"Sure Mom."

I'd love to wear a bra every once in a while, but Brady has them all! I stomped into his room and shut the door behind me.

"Phew!" he whispered, "that was a close one."

"No kidding! And I'm getting pretty tired of covering for you all the time. You'd better tell Mom the truth or—"

"She's got enough problems without a fairy queen for a son."

"What do you mean 'without' one? She's got one. You're making excuses."

"What Mom doesn't know isn't going to hurt me."

Finally, I gave up and went to change my clothes.

After twenty-two years of marriage, my parents, Jake and Ester Epstein, decided to separate for a while. My father moved into the back room of the delicatessen the two of them own. He says he likes it there because it's so quiet all the time. My mother thinks he's boring. My father thinks my mother's pushy. Four days a week Mom helps out at the deli, and a couple nights a week the whole family eats dinner there.

"Here Brady, have some more potato salad," Mom said for the third time in ten minutes.

"No thanks, Ma. I'm full."

"Did you hear that Jake? He says he's full — Ha!"

"I heard."

"Eat something baby. You're too skinny." Mom glared at Pop while she tried to scoop some salad onto Brady's plate. Pop stared out the window and I stared at him.

"Really Ma! I'm stuffed," Brady said and pulled his plate away.

"Stuffed? You're a scarecrow! No wonder you don't have any girlfriends."

"I don't think that's why . . ." Pop mumbled.

"What did you say, Jake?"

"I said leave him alone."

"That's not what you said. Sheila, what did your father say?"

"I don't know, I wasn't—"

"Yes you were. Pass your brother the potato salad."

"Mother please! I'm not hungry."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"Then eat!"

"No."

"Then go home." Mom took Brady's plate away and glared at my father. I knew they were going to have a fight so I decided to go home too. As soon as we got outside, I started my own fight.

"Pop knows doesn't he Brady?"

"Knows what?" Brady said, widening the space between us by taking bigger steps.

It was a beautiful night. Warm. The street lights were just starting to flood the sidewalk with yellow. Brady peeked inside his shirt. I couldn't really see but I bet he was wearing my pink lace bra with the tiny rose in the center.

"Knows that you're a—"

"A what!"

"You know what you are."

"That's right. And I know what you are too. You're a bitch!"

"Fag!"

"Bitch!"

"If you could tell Pop why can't you tell Mom?"

"Just leave me alone!"

We walked the next few blocks in silence. The moon looked like a big toenail clipping in the sky, a sliver of white on the blue-black carpet of night. I watched Brady prancing along in front of me for a while and tried to think of something else to talk about but, I'm a lot like Mom. I'm stubborn.

"You should tell her Brady. She—"

"She'll never understand, Sheila. She'll get all crazy and then—"

"It'll be worse if she catches you wearing her underwear."

"Leave me alone!"

Brady took off running. I trudged home feeling terrible inside. I wish I could fix everything for him and make everything all right.

An hour or so after Brady and I had barricaded ourselves in our respective rooms, the uncomfortable silence was blasted to pieces when Mom came bursting into the house, slamming the door so hard that it flew back open again.

"Brady!" she screamed, slamming the door again, "get in here!"

I heard Brady creeping down the hall, staying close to the wall. His knees must've felt like jello.

"I want a straight answer . . ." she warned him and then took a deep breath. She let it out slowly. "Are you . . . are you gay?"

I snuck out into the hall to get a better look. Brady was kicking at the carpet, wishing he could crawl under it.

"You mean like happy?" he said.

"You know what I mean!"

"Okay! Yes. I'm gay."

And then there was silence. Once the truth was out, Brady seemed to grow taller. Mom was shrinking. She shook her head.

"Oh baby . . . why couldn't you have told me sooner? We could've fixed it by now. Your father says it can't be fixed but I know better, I know—"

"You can't fix it, Ma! I am what I am and what I am is—"

"Confused! You're just confused. We'll fix it."

Mom patted Brady on the head like a good little puppy or something. She looked like she was going to cry.

"Go to bed now baby . . .," she whispered. "Everything will be just fine. You'll see."

Brady turned away from her and ran down the hall, almost knocking me down on the way to his room. Mom stood alone in the middle of the living room staring at something I couldn't see. Brady slammed his door. I heard him pacing around in there for a long time.

When I came into the kitchen the next morning, Mom was chuckling into her oatmeal, looking very pleased with herself. I sat down at the table and started buttering a piece of toast. Brady shuffled in a few minutes later.

"I fixed it!" Mom announced.

"That's nice Ma . . ." Brady said, plunking into his chair and laying his head down sleepily on the table. He yawned a circle of fog onto the cool formica. Mom patted him on the head.

"Brady baby, you have a date tonight."

"A what!" Brady was awake now.

"A date with Phyllis Walston's beautiful daughter, Tina."

"Why?"

"Because she's beautiful that's why!" Mom was yelling now too. "And I know in my heart that a date with a beautiful girl with somewhat loose morals . . ."

"Mother, a date with the Happy Hooker and all of her friends wouldn't change me! I'm as gay as a day in May and I'm—"

"NO! You're just confused. It's perfectly normal for a young man your age to be confused. Trust me baby, I know what I'm doing."

Brady scanned Mom's face for a way out, a weak spot, but it was set firmly in the cement of righteousness.

After Mom had left for the deli, Brady came swishing into my room in a blaze of purple. He was decked out in Mom's floor length crepe kaftan, a streak of bright pink lipstick completing the ensemble.

"You look nice," I said.

"Well, I feel like shit."

"I'm sorry Brady." I didn't know what else to say.

"I told you she'd get weird. Now I have a date with some girl."

The way he said the word "girl" reminded me of someone eating soap.

"So what are you going to do?"

"What can I do? Once Mom makes up her mind—"

"I know. She won't change it."

"She's not going to change me either."

"I know that too," I said patting him on the knee.

Poor Brady. He didn't even cheer up when I told him he could keep my pink bra with the tiny rose in the center.

Later on, when he left for his date, with Mom bouncing behind him like the proud mother of the bride, chatting and laughing and patting him on the head, Brady gave me a look that said, "I have not yet begun to fight." He stood like a soldier on his way to the front lines. I felt sorry for Phyllis Walston's beautiful daughter, Tina.

We followed him to the car and waved him on to victory. Each of us with a different kind of victory in mind. Then we went back inside the house to wait for his return.

Brady got home around midnight and Mom was waiting up for him in the front room. I was up too, but I was peeking from my room.

"How'd it go, baby?"

"We had a nice time I guess," Brady said, kicking at the carpet.

"Do you like her?"

"She's okay."

"Did you ask her out again?" Mom asked, sounding like an attorney questioning a witness.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't want to."

"And why didn't you want to?"

"Because I'm gay!"

Mom, who had been pulling at a loose thread on the couch cover, wrapped the thread around her index finger so tightly that the finger turned red and then blue. She waited until her finger turned to white before speaking.

"You mean like happy?" she said softly.

"You know what I mean Mom."

Brady bent down and gave Mom a kiss on the top of her down-turned head. He left her alone to think and walked down the hall to my room to tell me all about the date.

"Well?" I said.

"Well," he said peeking down the front of his shirt and smiling, "it wasn't so bad. It was kind of pleasant really."

"Did you kiss her?"

"Yup."

"Did you like it?"

"Yup."

"You mean you've . . . you mean Mom was right. You were just confused."

"When Tina and I kissed—"

"Yes?"

"When we pressed our lips together something truly beautiful happened to me."

"Yes?"

"Some of her lipstick rubbed off on me and I found out that 'Egyptian pink' is definitely my color!"

Brady handed me a tube of pink lipstick and walked over to my closet. He took out my black bolero jacket with the fake pearl buttons and slipped it on over his shirt.

"Take that off!" I yelled, throwing the lipstick at him.
"Aw c'mon Sheila!" he said, "I'm not hurting anything."

A Critical Review of Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero*.

Stephen Collins

Less Than Zero
by Bret Easton Ellis
published by
Simon & Schuster & Co., 1985

I'm asked if I want review this book on the best seller list, *Less Than Zero*, a first novel by Bret Easton Ellis; it's supposed to be about the affluent Los Angeles scene complete with drugs, sex, glittering parties and the alienation of America's contemporary youth. Sounds like something with which I'm not totally unfamiliar having lived in the inner city. The subject matter also presumably depicts the setting of Southern California in an interesting fashion. So I say, "OK, no problem." Right? But get this, Ellis is only twenty years old, a student at Bennington College in Vermont, born and raised on L.A.'s wealthy west side.

You can't blame me for being skeptical; here's this kid from Beverly Hills, his name alone reeks of money, Bret Easton Ellis; his father packs a hefty wallet and buys him anything, could even get a book published for him maybe. Maybe. I'm speculating of course, but come on, he's only twenty. He can't possibly be any good. How many Truman Capotes can you expect in one century? Besides all that, this kind of thing just cools the cockles of my predominantly green heart; I'm talking envy here, you know, jealousy, the emerald cyclops.

I wanted to hate this book so bad, I just had to read it. So I went bopping down to my local B. Dalton's figuring I'd dish out a few bucks and pick up a paperback. But it's not out in paperback yet; it's \$15.95 hard cover, seventeen bucks with tax. Seventeen dollars for a book barely two hundred pages long by an unknown author. Dishing out the dough for this thing, I can remember such a profound desire, a thirst even, to take a bite out of this book and rip it relentlessly to shreds.

I know, I know, enough; get to the punchline already. Just another case of . . . "I used to hate it, 'til I ate it." Well, not exactly, but something like that. Ellis has created a work that ultimately has power and deserves attention, yet with curious choices of style and form, he forces his readers to struggle along page after page as if wading through shallow quick sand. The

book has tons of pointless dialogue delivered by characters perpetually in a drug stupor, a flat, dry tone, interchangeable scenes portraying a gluttonous life style, and virtually no plot. The big crisis in the first half of the book seems to be that our narrator, Clay, doesn't have a tan. All the characters seem to wear sun-glasses indoors, at night, and sometimes even outside when the sun is shining. One also has to put up with the stereotyped Southern California lingo, like for sure, Babes, you know, coming from characters with names like Rip, Spin, Kim, Blair and Cliff, and somehow I get the feeling that Buffy and Reginald are waiting for them all at some coffee shop on Rodeo.

Why has Ellis adopted such a style? Because he is incapable of writing any other way? Or more likely, is he attempting to match form with content? Taking a step back and looking at this work as an integrated whole, Ellis' stylistic techniques amazingly click together becoming not only justified but down right appropriate in relation to his theme. I contend that Ellis has consciously selected a gritty flat complexion for this work in order to mirror a particular life style. His use of a colorless setting, a sleepy plot, and inert characterization depicts the warped life of Southern California youth propelled into a world of hedonistic absurdity where indifference reigns and emotional connections are impossible. Nevertheless, this style raises questions that need to be addressed. Is the book engaging enough with a strong narrative drive? Will the reader resent treading through muck? In short, can Ellis make the form work?

A well done traditional plot, like a top-notch chili burger, should plead to be eaten, the reader hungrily chewing and chomping words, devouring pages, with just a bit of indigestion left over to remember it by. The plot of *Less Than Zero* hits you in the jaw like novacaine. As the book opens, we immediately meet Clay, an eighteen year old freshman at a New Hampshire college, who returns home to Los Angeles for Christmas vacation with his classmate Daniel. (There does seem to be an eerie similarity between narrator and author.) A quick calculation proves that he's been away from home for about three or four months, evidently a long time in this guy's life. On his way home from LAX, he swiftly informs his audience in a fatigued voice that, "People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles," and that, "Nothing else seems to matter." This merge motif reoccurs almost blatantly throughout the book directly representing the lack of emotional connection indicative of this L.A. scene. The rest of the plot consists of Clay and his friends moving from party to drug dealer to party to loitering in nightclubs to bedding each other to party to drug dealer to party. . . .

We have a plot here that doesn't move, doesn't change

because the life portrayed here doesn't change, is stagnant. Clay for most of the book shows indifference to what's happening, floating along with this game of life yet not really engaging in it. There is no meaning in any of this action, and as a result, pointless dialogue becomes the norm. For example, in this sequence between Clay and Blair, our narrator's ex-girlfriend, we get a lot of talk with no apparent purpose:

"Did you feel the earthquake?" she asks.
"What?"
"Did you feel the earthquake this morning?"
"An earthquake?"
"Yes."
"This morning?"
"Yeah."
"No, I didn't."
Pause. "I thought maybe you had."

Stimulating conversation. Reading this, one may rub his chin and say, "Huh?" But once the story has been read, one may slap the side of his head and say, "Yeah." A little exaggerated perhaps, but this form seems to work, here showing specifically the distant relationship between Clay and Blair. With this type of structure repeated enough, lack of deep felt communication on the whole is demonstrated as well.

Another example, this time with Clay and his pal, Trent, a blond haired model with a perfect tan:

Trent looks at me and says, "You don't make any sense, you know that?"
"I make sense."
"No, dude. You're ridiculous."
"Why don't I make sense?"
"Because you just don't."
"That doesn't make sense."
"Maybe it doesn't."
"Jesus."
"You're a fool, Clay," Trent laughs.
"No, I'm not," I tell him, laughing back.
"Yeah, I think you are. In fact, I'm totally sure of it."
"Are you?"

The reader ends up totally sure that none of this makes sense. This banter between friends goes on for a while longer until all casual sense has vanished. The meaning, if it was ever there, gets lost in the shuffle. But this scene is so absurd, it's funny. The reader finds himself laughing, maybe nervously, during

even times of horror throughout this book. There does seem to be a certain power in this listless comic horror indicating a sense of intention on the part of Ellis.

Paralleling this dialogue structure, the meaning can also get lost in the sentence structure of this novel. At times when Ellis goes into a stream-of-consciousness-type delivery, he strings together several compound sentences as when Clay says:

People knock on the door and I lean against it, don't do any of the coke, and cry for around five minutes and then I leave and walk back into the club and it's dark and crowded and nobody can see that my face is all swollen and my eyes are red and I sit down next to the drunken blond girl and she and Blair are talking about S.A.T. scores.

This sentence brings out the delirium of the crowd and conveys this nightclub atmosphere to a tee, and the writing itself is frank and gritty and indifferent like the people around Clay and one gets the feeling from this type of structure that Clay has more than a few things scurrying around in his head and sentences of this type can go on and on and on forever and sometimes when they're lined up one after another the effect can be quite annoying, like this. But let's not miss the point. The emotional impact of, "and cry for around five minutes," gets buried in the structure. What is really important in a sentence like this doesn't come across. Nothing seems to matter to Clay so that's what we get on the page. The bottom line seems to be that emotion, any kind of genuine feeling, goes unrecognized in this society, gets lost in a lost of trivialities.

People don't merge.

Ellis often conspicuously repeats motifs like this one.

He sets them off in individual paragraphs.

Sometimes this may be too obvious.

Yet, somehow it works, has emotional impact.

Ellis seems to lose this emotional impact, however, in his characterizations, because all of his younger characters have the same make up. They're rich kids with parents who stuff money into outstretched palms thinking that's enough. Parents, who would rather buy their children anything than deal with their problems or feelings. These kids in turn become emotional cripples knowing nothing about struggle and survival in life, and thus they turn to drugs because they can't deal with an empty reality. With drugs, primarily cocaine and heroin, they leave this realm of existence so completely that they have no idea what this world is about. It seems to be a total escape, yet in the background lurks a powerful rage and severe suffering.

Thus we see the emotional significance that Ellis loses in lack of character distinction, he gains in creating a profound feeling of group despair.

Evidence of the rage and despair can be seen in every character. Rip, Clay's drug dealer, has a penthouse in Westwood, plenty of money, drugs and friends, yet he keeps a twelve-year-old girl hand-cuffed to his bed and molests her repeatedly with whomever will join in. Muriel, a beautiful young woman with apparently a wonderful personality, is anorexic and publicly shoots up heroin at a party. Clay has the money, the brains, and evidently the good looks to go far, but through his inaction inflicts a sort of torture on Julian, a friend who turns to homosexual prostitution to cover a drug debt. The problems are there, yet none of the characters can admit this to themselves, none of them, until Clay has finally seen enough. He has had enough cocaine, enough of his friends, and enough of his downward spiral. He sobers up and can finally see this reality as it is.

Ellis chooses to show us the traumatic events leading up to Clay's turnaround by lining up pivotal action scenes, one after the other, told in the same fatigued voice as the rest of the book, with little significance. The book is a bad dream, and the nightmare only gets worse as Clay's four week vacation treads on. Clay says, "And as the elevator descends passing the second floor, and the first floor, going even farther down, I realize that money doesn't matter. That all that does is that I want to see the worst." We see Julian, haggard and frayed, engaging in humiliating pain as Clay watches. We see Clay along with his dissolute friends make fun of and manipulate a dead body in some back alley. We see Rip molest a child and shoot heroin into her veins. Clay needs to see the bottom of the barrel in almost a shock treatment before he can make the ascent back to reality. Once he's that close to the basement, he has to go the distance. Unfortunately, what should be an emotionally packed series of events comes across flat and unfelt.

What Ellis does do well is to create such an unappealing narrator in Clay and still keep us sympathetic. This becomes especially necessary when Clay finally confesses out loud, "I don't want to care. If I care about things, it'll just be worse, it'll just be another thing to worry about. It's less painful if I don't care." The reader sees concretely what Ellis has embedded in his characterization, that Clay is aware of what's happening around him and that he's the only salvageable character in the book. Clay leaves Los Angeles and goes back to school on the East coast, but his classmate Daniel decides he wants to stay. The fact that Clay leaves and Daniel stays is pivotal, showing how Daniel becomes a victim while Clay rejoins society.

Clay leaves the Los Angeles area, a setting that Ellis chose to depict in dull flat terms, one of the most questionable choices of style discussed so far. Why, when Southern California is actually a place of sunshine and overabundant vegetation, paint a picture of this area so sparsely with almost anorexic characteristics paralleling those of the character Muriel? Southern California represents more than a setting.

Think back in time through our United States history before this country graced North America and remember that the original 13 colonies were settled by a good number of people who weren't satisfied in Europe. California was in turn settled by those unhappy on the East coast. This area is thus the land of the unsatisfied, filled with people unwilling to commit themselves to anything. Is it that too many of us refuse to narrow the scope of possibilities, that we want too much thoughtless mobility? Probably. Ellis seems to suggest yes. Here in L.A. freedom is supreme and social controls hardly exist. People will do and can do anything especially if money is prevalent, and this just makes so many things meaningless. Ellis' character, Clay, escapes all this by leaving; the price to pay for freedom is evidently too high.

There is a lot more to this book than may be readily apparent in a mere surface reading. Minor nonsensical details make sense if understood in relation to the whole work. Such as the sunglasses everyone seems to wear in odd places for no reason; perhaps these characters are hiding from the world, themselves. Or Clay's lack of a tan; maybe his pale skin separates him from the group, makes him an outsider.

Ellis does seem to have a method to his madness. Though the book has its share of problems, some of them severe, the work shows a certain amount of courage on the part of our author because he took a chance on a concept and came close to a powerful first work. Ellis, to a degree, succeeds in matching form with content and makes a relevant statement. The risk he has taken, especially with a first novel, makes the effort worthwhile and ultimately an accomplishment.

After Dinner Drinks

Bonnie Weinstein

My bloated belly pops
gin and pineapple juice don't
mix something that'll make elephants
drunk so I can laugh in bed tonight
I don't want to be alone pour
ice down to make it cold
kisses are a waste — I need this drink
all of it like a good little girl
think you can handle me and not break
the ice is melting dammit can't you
do something right for a change
of pace — lets move it a step faster
further apart is better

I wake up
to find black pumps standing
guilty next to a fallen cushion
half empty glasses
with all the ice
melted



John McKinley

the language of the universe

is
mathematics.

poetry is not the language
of
the masses.

could jesus have gotten it all wrong by accident?

born in the dead of winter
died in the greenness of spring
he came for the people who
think a spondee is a bottom-
dwelling sea creature and a
trochee a part of the throat
and a dactyl
isn't that a flying dinosaur?

jesus didn't want to be the one
to bring poetry to the masses.
he gave us mckuen to do that.

Northridge Review is the literary magazine of California State University, Northridge. Published each semester, it contains poems, short fiction, essays, drama, and reviews by students and alumni. This issue includes the works of:

Mike Burns
Bobbie R. Coleman
Stephen Collins
Cathy Comenas
Wes Hempel
Mona Houghton
Jordan Jones
David Louapre

John McKinley
Craig W. Myers
Marlene Pearson
Brian Skinner
Jeannette Svoboda
Lynn Tinker
Bonnie Weinstein
Heidi York

The **Northridge Review** is also pleased to present two interviews; one is with the poet, editor and publisher, **Bill Mohr**, author of *hidden proofs* and editor/publisher of "Poetry Loves Poetry:" *An Anthology of Los Angeles Poets*. The other interview is with the fiction writer, **Kem Nunn**, who wrote *Tapping the Source*, a highly acclaimed first novel. We are also introducing the **Northridge Review Questionnaire**, to which several noted writers responded, some of whom are: **Denise Levertov**, **Maxine Kumin**, and **Wanda Coleman**.