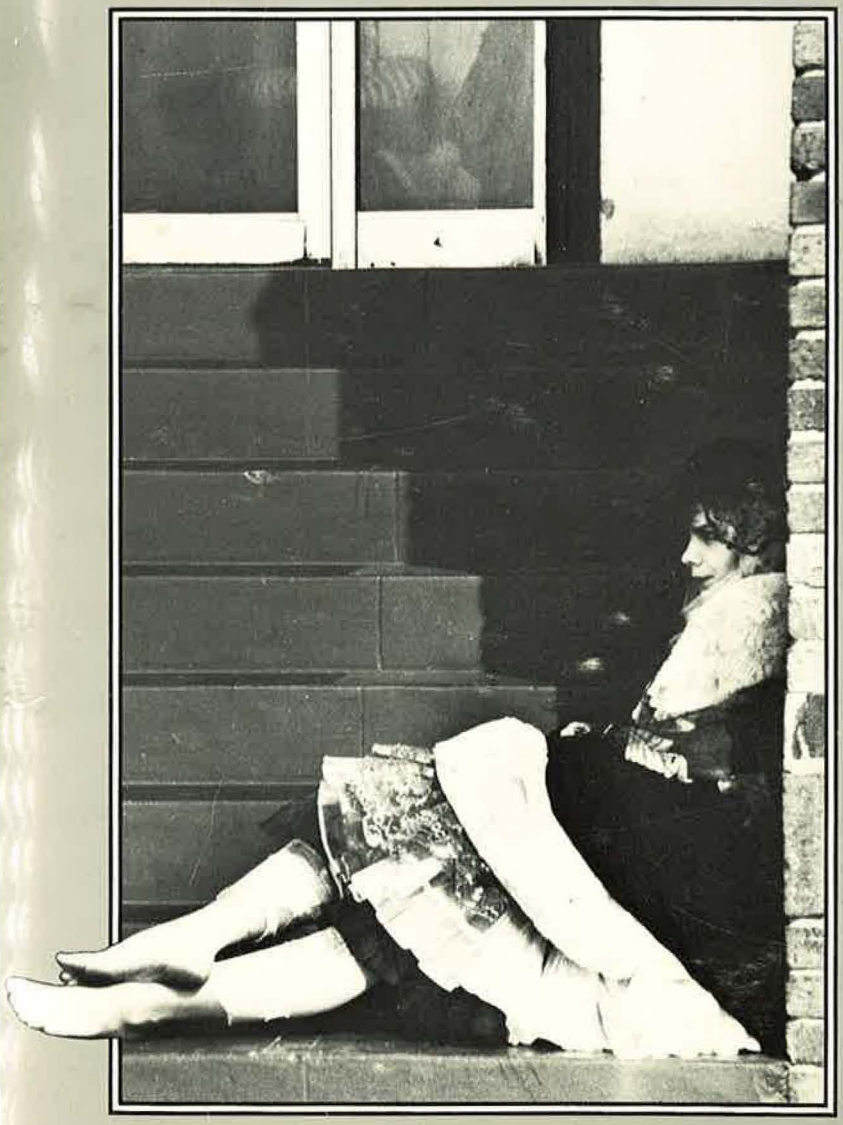
Northridge Review

Fall 1983



NORTHRIDGE REVIEW

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What I am speaking of
is possibility: trout
moving through tea leaves,
white rabbits flying in snow.
—*Camouflage,* Carol Muske

TO THE READER

Pray thee, take care, that tak'st my booke in hand,
To reade it well: that is, to understand.
—Ben Jonson

l

Tarrytown

Christopher Ribaudo

I am going to Tarrytown today,
visit its rolling greens and snow-white steeples
to see an old friend from South Hampton.

When classmates at the University—
it was always Hamptons in the summer,
Tarrytown in Fall. It was effortless.

However, responsibilities had come,
encounters slipped to postage and paper.

I came from Tarrytown this morning. How
he had changed so much—he lay so still and cold.

When the train pulled from the station, I wept,
—remembering walks, talks, and South Hampton.

Albert Labolt's Store

Nicholas Campbell

In Albert Labolt's store
There are fields of green
And yellow corn

Here is the smell of dark earth
And spring rain

Here are ripe blue skies for the picking

A goat-horn
Its apple trees bend
Over to fill bushels

Potatoes roll out of the ground like hills

And wheat blows long as a woman's hair

Against its fences
Men lean their hoes
And talk about the harvest

Bluejacket

Nicholas Campbell

My father used to swing me
Over his shoulder
Like a duffle bag

And when we climbed up
Into John Deere's big lap
The harrows were waves

How many boys can pitch a nickel
Into a field of tall corn
And get back five green pennies?

Returning

Suzanne Kelley

when you go there
your eyes see
the border of that land is tears
back and forth,
and you pause at the border
you move through the gentle rain
tropical and grey-skied
a child's sky
you saw
remembered
when you go there
remember that the border of that land
is tears
sorrow grows
(there are many flowers there)
and comes into its own

you go, and you stand at the crossroads
where the winds shuffle your hair
and sigh emptily to rest on your feet
on the top soft ledges of your feet
like books on shelves

there are many ways back
but the wind is not knowing
it settles
singing choirously lodging itself in the sky
and falling constantly,

fast and falling rain of thoughts
singing of rain
and dry air suspended summers
of days on Earth
and in silence whispering "storms"

"we gather" the clouds say softly to you
in your crib with the plastic beneath you
hot, itchy on the summer day,
and your mother's low song at her ironing
as she bends, arms moving . . .

you remember
the way of that cloud that was sitting over you,

one day.
you got lost in tall grass
maybe no one looked for you
maybe the grass bent close
to hear you

Aunt Maysie's Surprise

Tom Pfeiffer

Two boys
in muddy cover-alls
are playing with their favorite
Christmas present:
an ant farm
sandwiched between
two cheap-shit plastic windows
that must have cost about a buck.

Aunt Maysie, on the outside,
thinks the gift a wonderful lesson:
the natural order of life.

The ants, on the inside,
haven't even begun to suspect
that something is seriously wrong.

I Only Remember Fear Of You

Tamara Lopez

I only remember fear of you
The trouble I caused wiggling in St. John's church
The sound of the belt drawer
And the buckles clicking when you opened it

It was easy not to love you then

With only a glance from you
I would sit down
Stop running
Or go outside and play

Saturdays and Sundays I played at the park
On the slide painted like an elephant

Football demanded all your attention

The day you left
Fourteen years ago
I felt a needed relief

Friends now, will I ever
Have the strength to tell you?

Class Notes: an Introduction to Physical Anthropology —for Karla

Cathy Comenas

I.

Her wrinkles are not elephant skin
they are the ocean
She's a river in my rocky dreams

Her german face sun soaked
Wind-blown hair
Drunken hips sway

Speaking calm, sometimes
a child when a student
answers a question right

Drawing blanks as she thinks of
an english term, it comes, rolls
off her tongue flows through
the air
If she backs up any further she'll
run straight into the chalkboard

II.

She's dancing with the natives again
A face lighted gold

Her own canvas tent
among straw huts
Cross-legged by the fire
eating wild pig

III.

Sitting barefoot
in white sand
arms folded against her breasts
brown back a spear as hard
as rock

Behind this Samoan chief
blue desert of water

I stand at her side

a thirsty dog

IV.

I was climbing with you
up Mount Everest
held together by a long
strong rope

Your body bold and polished
I floated over dirt and rocks
watching

All the Tired Horses in the Sun

Brian Skinner

A sigh grazes over
the afternoon-soaked hills,
brushing ripples across the aquamarine
blanket;

A thousand sprinkled
dots of chestnut
and bay are wading
in sleep.

The New Cat

Brian Skinner

These nimble
little bones
hardly make a pop
when hopping off
of a counter-top,

but still I think
of thick bracken crackling
under my tires.

I Caught You in the Park

Larry Kendrick

The shade seems gentle as you lie there,

its tide rising and falling up the hill

lapping at your auburn hair,

splashing the white bareness of your neck

with cool green

The sun reaches

across your calves

like a silk slip, playfully sliding through

the over long grass between your

eased thin ankles . . .

The sun has been hanging at four o'clock

for hours now.

The shade is harsh on my eyes.

And the sun impairs my hearing;

The wind is at my back

a low early autumn breeze

lightly combs through the soft blond

hairs of your arm, a wisp of fragrance

teasingly drawn up and away.

And I've caught you like a bad cold,

I'm caught, caged and helpless, hopelessly caught reaching

and not touching you

as you roll away crumpling the heart

in your hip pocket, I asked for it back.

You handed me a balled up

Juicy Fruit wrapper, and I wrote you these words,

and you hand me a toothy smile,

a mocking cock of the head

and the sun

casually stumbles across the thin gold

thread that binds your frail white ankle

to someone else.

The Potato

Judy Epstein

Wednesday after midnight
left alone
I took a knife to a partially
raw potato
salted the slices
even ate chunks from the cold
hard center
and thought about the pulp and
whiteness
filling me up
so late at night
maybe I would have bad dreams.

Thursday we exchanged
poems
silly teenage confessions
they said everything
we wouldn't do
but the desire
flaming in our jeans
wasn't typed in.

Over the weekend
I taped the poem
to the window, behind my typewriter.
I sat down to write a dream
about digging spuds
until my hands were so dirty
I had to give it up.

Two to One

Judy Epstein

I have to make the numbers work
I have to make the words tell a story
I can't think after two glasses of rosé
but I have to talk to strangers and
explain why my eyes are blue and
I take a bus downtown to find out
I wanted to go to the beach.
I carried my swimsuit under my arm
and dropped it when I grabbed the
toothpaste on the top shelf,
then decided brushing my teeth at 12:00 noon
before I had eaten breakfast
was a waste of time.
I decided that I laughed too much to be depressed
and wondered where that was today
but quickly found the answer at the bottom
of my cereal bowl spelling out "unless you're pregnant
you shouldn't look like a cantaloupe."
I really can't think too straight or shoot
too straight when I've drunk too much.
That's why when I picked up the gun
after dusting the end table
I didn't put it in the drawer but set it on the clean
table top then picked it up again.
Ii went off so fast I thought God had planned it.
I hadn't even had dinner yet and my guts were
already emptying on the floor . . . when they found me
it was really red like wine.

high humans

Marc Doten

We built the bonfire of board
it was free like the dry kelp and twigs
and newspaper

the moon came full from the north east
over hills and highway
above the worn palisade

waves were there
rocks were there
we were a circle there howling

peninsula lights vibrated in the sky
seaweed skeletons crackled in the flame

high humans dancing
high humans dancing
everything was a circle
cities organisms

with no wind our fire grew tall
a tree of flame

Separation

Jordan Jones

What foolishness! You wear my ring
for a tentative forever. The stars dance
and sparkle like diamonds. The bells bash in
my brain and ears. Nerves make us dream
The wedding was too big, all eyes centered
and flashing one-eyed cameras, no wonder
we were blind and dizzy at the altar.

Call this a life? Soft light and the petals
of conciliatory flowers all in a swirl,
cornstalks, rough, tall, thin
and less green this year beside
white radishes and afflicted tomatoes.
Each small thing pulls us minutely apart.
This game of life and addition. The disastrous garden.

What is the speed of stellar separation? It does
not matter, a cloud's come between us anyway.
There are stones among the radishes
each time I rake. Spring rain turns
to old kissing, but don't call me tonight.
I swear my boots are filling up with water
even in the lamplight, even in the living room.

Funereal Robin

Ron Pronk

They laid Uncle Mo's casket near the dark hole
and Joey watched as he reached around
to his back pocket, crawling with cleaned fingernails
until the unwrapped Bazooka stuck.
He buried it in his cheek
and repulped.

He heard the Reverend Fowler tell an unlikely tale
about Uncle Mo, who always smelled like soap to Joey
and tried to listen until Aunt Pen noticed
his slow grinding jaw and backhanded her fist
across his flannel padded shoulder, prying
her stare into his lips
so he spit out the wad.

They lowered the casket when Joey
saw the robin and wanted to shout. Aunt Pen said
the one to see the first spring robin
should always shout and tell everybody, but the six
pairs of sunken eyes, looking as they did whenever
the Saints lost, told him he ought to keep quiet.

Even so, he felt light and didn't mind waiting.
It was almost over, anyway. He could tell
by the way Aunt Pen played
with the shounder strap of her black
patent leather purse.

He would wait, and then
they would all smile.

Still December Maryland

Ron Pronk

Nothing redeems like a walk
through still December Maryland.
I used to wax the runners of
my Flexible Flyer, then glide
between glass trees
on slow rolling hills
with snow resting like
lazy clouds, through air
filled with wood smoke and sparrows.

My mother had sad dreams of
dying alone in a big cold house
built for children. She would feel
the house grow as she shrank. I was too young
to know why she hugged me and said she did not
want to see past fifty.

When I moved west I could not stop seeing in
the dry hot wind and dust
her dreams and my past wrestling
alone, together in our big house.

So I've come back to walk
through December Maryland.
Tomorrow I will tear apart
the Flexible Flyer still hanging
on the garage wall.

From the splintered pieces I will build
a small house
and nail it to the dormant maple
near her grave. I want her to see it
filled with sparrows.

Conflict of the Cord and Oak

Ron Pronk

Around the bark of a high yard oak
just below the first fork
a white clothesline's been wrapped
twice tightly.

I know the cord is newly placed
since it clings fully exposed, and an oak
won't tolerate that for long.

I can't say why an oak feels compelled
to swallow whatever girds its bark
for more than a season. Perhaps
it's some inward knowledge, useful
only to oaks, of the strangling habits of ivy.

It's this insolvable problem that draws me
to wrapped oaks: Nowhere on the surface
whether in leaf, branch, bark or root, is a hint apparent
how this hulking vegetable knows
of proper caution against something
only I can distinguish
however uselessly.

II

The Horses

R.J. Coulston

Vermont is a very cold state in the winter, and that November morning a snow was falling, gently, quietly, with that muffled magic of big flakes. I laced my boots and went down to the cellar. The day's wood had been warming against the furnace overnight, and it would take no coaxing to kindle the logs. I turned the damper to let the smoke draw and opened the furnace door upon a thick bed of charcoal. I emptied the ashes, raked the coal bed flat, and the black chunks began to glow red and white as the air passed over them. Each new log was three feet long and perhaps ten inches in diameter, split from rock maple. The split surfaces showed smooth, white-yellow grain flowing liquid along the logs' lengths. It was a shame to burn this wood—the sun's flame frozen in the flow of the grain. I pushed in four large logs, closed the door, set the damper and went to my car.

The tires made a muffled crunch and set down two lines in the unplowed snow. The hills and the trees were a soft white; cows huddled in the feed yards by the silos. When I arrived at the school where I taught, the groups of children had formed, talking, waiting for the doors to be opened. It was a large building of brick, new and properly constructed with a brick exterior and large windows along the outside walls of each classroom. Inside, each classroom was large and rectangular, the shape repeated in the concrete blocks painted a wet, pastel green. The desks and the floor tiles were arranged in neat rows. Banks of flourescent lights in rectangular glassed cases stuttered on at my finger's touch, and I dropped a pile of books on my desk, arranging them with bottoms and bindings lined up.

The children entered, more silent today, as if the farm chores done in the morning snow had blanketed their minds and en-

chanted them into contemplation. We began the class talking about what each had seen this morning. How each had seen the snow differently. Most spoke of stories with friends in them; others of events they had seen: A doe who had come to the grain yard. When it came to Beth's turn, she was asleep, her head on the desk. She was bewildered when her friend Cathy elbowed her awake. I asked her what she had seen. She told me:

"Nothing."

* * *

The next morning, the eastern sky was open just enough to let the sun bend its lights over the edge of the world, turning the clouds blood red to the zenith. It was colder than the previous morning. The thermometer registered ten degrees below zero. The sky was covered with small clouds, crowded together, blood red on blue black. I opened the garage door, started the car easily in the warm basement and left it idling in the yard while I stoked the fire in the furnace and closed the garage door. Watching the sunrise, I began to feel a tension rising in me—a pressure. My eyes wandered to the car, and with a turn of the key the engine died. Silence. There was no wind. The tension dissolved.

The white smoke rose straight up from the chimney, straight up until it was hard to tell if it merged with the clouds or just expanded away into obscurity. I would drive down into the valley and see from a distance the steam rising powerfully from the lake and stream, and the tall, straight pillars of smoke rising from a dozen chimneys with an air of solemnity, life warming itself before wood fires. The captured sunshine escaping, reaching back at the sky.

The ninth-grade boys stretched the school bus ride from their bodies, and the girls, inhibited by their new adolescent awareness, extended their arms surreptitiously along their sides, shivering out the cold, shedding the cold with their heavy coats. Beth was asleep, her head buried in arms folded upon her coat. She slept through the class, and when it ended, I asked her the teacher's prying questions as off-handedly as I could.

"Sleep much last night?"

"No," she answered through her sleep-lidded awareness.

"Studying, no doubt."

"My family makes too much noise. Everybody was fightin'. We moved to a trailer, and they's too many in it. My brother'll prob'ly move out. Run away, most likely. They's ten of us now in't." Her voice was hoarse and husky as if she'd been shouting. She hadn't looked at me, and now she gathered her books and coat and walked out of the room.

* * *

"Zucchini," she said, serving the steaming dish. "And this," bringing a tray of egg-shaped, steaming dumplings, "is cod. It's cooked the Greek way." Carla was proud of her cooking.

"You're so lucky to have a relative," my wife, Amy, said, "who remembers cooking from the old country. She must show you some fascinating recipes."

Carl smiled crookedly. "Good and bad. She spent four hours making this."

The kitchen was large, with a black iron woodstove beside the modern gas range, solid oak furniture and well-stocked cupboards. Wine bottles lay on their sides in racks against the inside wall. The sense of heavy wood was everywhere. Massive, hand-hewn beams held up wide-planked ceilings; the walls were pine, and the floor wide maple boards. Hand-crocheted lace lay over the table, and stained glass panes were interspersed with clear in the windows.

"The Cobbs are rebuildng our barn," he said. "They have a dozen horses and asked if they could stable them here. I told them sure. Hell, it's empty. They might as well use it."

"Beth is in my class. She sleeps a lot in class."

"I imagine. They live in a trailer, all packed in, no electricity, no phone. They have it hard. The old man talks about finally having a place of their own. Tired of paying someone else's mortgage. He's a night watchman down at the mill. I'll show you the horses."

Then I ignited the propane lamp, watched the match flare into white brightness roaring like a distant jet. Amy, Carl, Carla and I, followed by their two children, all booted and coated against the cold, made our way to the barn. The animal presence dominated

the darkness, and even before the lamp opened its circle of vision, the other senses knew the other life there, powerful and on the edge of a primitive force: almost wild, afraid of the humans who fed and rode on them, but wanting something the humans kindled in them.

There was an electric quality in the air, as if the lantern were about to detonate some larger explosive. Through the stamping of hooves and the blowing of breath, another sound made its way into the barn—a splashing and whinnying from the lake. We ran toward the sound, the other horses stampeding around us, and we saw the yearling colt in the lake, thrashing against the ice, trying to climb up upon the ice, falling back weaker each time.

"Ginger, get a rope! John, run get the Cobbs!" Carl said.

Ginger handed me the rope, and I threw it around the colt's neck. "Will we choke it?" I asked.

"He'll die if he stays longer. Pull!"

We pulled the colt to the edge as the Cobbs ran up, coatless, carrying the blankets for the colt. We wrapped the animal in the blankets and, rubbing it, led it stumbling into the barn. Beth stopped at the door, staring beyond the colt as if she saw something none of us could see, her eyes glassy; she shivered in the wind at the barn door.

"What's the matter with you, girl!" her father shouted. "Come rub this animal down!"

She walked into the barn, looking at the frozen ground beneath her. Mechanically, she rubbed the horse's legs.

"They have no oats," Carl said. "They have no money for the oats. Bring out a box of oat cereal, John."

During the night, the colt died.

* * *

Beth was not in school the next day. I saw her outside Carl and Carla's barn that evening with her younger sister. They were crying while their father tried to get the colt's carcass into the trunk of his car. He was unable to do it, but he asked for no help.

"Have ta call down ta Reiny ta come and get it. Damned bastard should come and get it. He's making money off'n it," he told me." I hadn't asked.

"Got to use the meat for somethin'," he said. "They make soap and glue out of it. And dog food.

"Shut up your crying'! The thing is dead! It's just a dead thing now! Can't bring it back! Damn it all! The money will buy oats!"

The girls kept crying

My presence seemed to intensify their pain, so I left them. The three of them stood there, over the dead colt, the family bending like branches under the heavy snow that had begun to fall in large flakes on their backs and on the colt, not melting as it fell upon the colt.

Beth did not come to school Friday, and when she did arrive, the following Monday, she did not sleep. She was looking at something I could not see, and when I spoke to her, she did not answer.

* * *

We spent that Christmas vacation with friends. There were dinners almost every night at different houses during that two week holiday, and the snow was freshened every four or five days. Robert Thompson had brought an old sleigh out of some forgotten hayloft, and we convinced Tom Gray to hitch up his Morgan team.

It was nightfall as we set out, twelve of us piled into hay bales in the sleigh, blanketed by quilts. A full moon lit the snow-packed lanes and roads, and we glided smoothly across the smooth surface. The conversation ranged over one hundred fifty years, from ice shoes for horses to lunar lander legs. We turned just past Carl and Carla's, onto an unplowed road, and the skis set just above the runners began to bear the sleigh's weight. The snow was not deep yet, but the horses slowed to a heavy-footed walk, and we soon drew in front of a mobile home, dark except for candle flames visible through the uncurtained windows.

"The Cobbs," said Marsha. "They're all stuffed in that trailer like animals. Must be dozens of them, and they owe everybody money."

"Boys're always in trouble down to the town," added Mark, her husband.

The sleigh fell silent; the trailer door opened and eight young

faces, silent, watched us drift by. Beth was among them, tired-eyed. A hoarse, rasping woman's voice from within said, "Close th' door, you're lettin' all th' heat out. Close th' door." An aging woman came to the door, looked out momentarily, then walked away, saying, "Awright! Your father's gonna be mad when he wakes up an' the place's freezin'."

The sleigh crossed the frozen lake, runners grating against the hard, blue ice. "Early ice," Tom said. "Thickah and earliah this yeah." Tom was almost seventy—a farmer. "Seems ta be each yeah it's gettin' coldah. Maybe 'tis, maybe not."

The April warmth finally thawed the snow, and by the end of the month, a wet, black mud appeared. You can always tell the arrival of spring in Vermont. The atmosphere changes in the lengthening light. Vermonters call it cabin fever, and liken it to the end of hibernation. Mud time. There was an energy everywhere. It was the same energy that flowed in the trees, producing buds, and we tapped it from the trees in buckets, boiled it down and poured the syrup over everything we could. The muddy roads assumed any shape put in them during the warm days. Then, at night, they froze in patterns of tires, hooves and footprints.

The first of May was bright sunshine. The two horses we kept were waiting as I went to feed them. The stillness was broken by stamping hooves on the packed snow of the road. I turned from the slow horses I'd been feeding to see Beth Cobb astride a large, golden stallion, the horse stamping its impatience, warily watching me, blowing like a mythical dragon the steam from its nostrils.

"Yours?" I asked.

"Yep." Her voice was still harsh.

"Stallion?"

"Wouldn't have any geldings," she said, looking at my docile creatures. "I'm th' only one can ride him." The horse was becoming impatient, and she held him with difficulty as I walked toward her; the stallion's eyes rolled in his head, his eyes all on me.

"Don't touch him. He don't abide no one's hands on him."

"Beautiful," I said. "Beautiful."

She smiled. It was the first time I'd seen it. "Well, got t' go," she said. The horse, obedient to the pull on the reins, reared up and spun around, instantaneously in full gallop in the mud-slickened road.

I would see her, after that, riding her stallion in the muddy roads, and the evening would freeze the pattern of his hooves in the dirt.

Reactor

Keith Bienert

Out of the sound of dawn comes an image of fire . . . blowing in the dust . . . . A man warms his hands to the sound of his own heartbeat. A sound, like a drum, reverberates through his dawn eyes muffled by ash and dust . . . blowing through the windy streets, a fire. Fire, brilliant, like an angel or a star, descends to the ground from its sphere among the broken granite and the clear. And sonnet raging into ether, crackling in October sky. What you cannot control moves you.

The man, a tall man and gray, lifts a cigarette among ashen wind, inhaling thundercloud particles dropped to the atmosphere when he was thirteen and alive, but now he is dead along the streets, not himself, blowing in the ash—an ashcan with hands. Hearing the thoughts grow in his mind like the cancer in his cigarette, it falls to the dust . . . dry in the ionic wind. He thinks: "What you cannot control moves you."

A single star in the east before the blinding blast of sun. Mercury seething in the sky along the trails of the chariot, trails of the sun. An explosion of light within the mind that is nowhere. An explosion of light within the mind that is now here. Lizard blind in the choking fire. What you can not control moves you.

Fire among the hills to fill the air and blacken stars, morning with particles of color—particles he breathed as a Yaqui Indian three centuries ago—rebreathed into him as filaments of violet light a thousand feet away in a sky breathing through his eyes. The sound of a drum as an atom pierces his inner eyes, becoming his world, his thought, his hands. A dream he has seen of how he is headless, a light between his ears with no filament, no observable power source. What is this light that shines a star within his mind? What you cannot control moves you.

The hum of his engine orders chaos. His car is an olive green Carmen Ghia, and he lives in it. He has a home, but he has been living in his car. Inside is shelter from the wind. He begins to think clearly now about the fire burning in the hills. He is no longer the world because the engine has separated him into only himself. His name is Rosenfelder, a scientist working into only himself. His name is Rosenfelder, a scientist working at the Bakunin nuclear reactor. He, himself, *is* a reactor.

Rosenfelder is troubled, something has been happening to him he can't understand. Something is overtaking him—he has no control. Visions of superheated water flooding from the reactor core, sweeping away children. People see him with contempt for his work—they taunt him at the gate of the reactor site with picket signs: "Question Authority," and "It's better to be active today, than radioactive tomorrow." They are young. He wants to tell them that he has been responsible for most of the security systems in the plant, against the wishes of nameless government agencies irresponsible for profit.

He wants to make it safe. He wants to tell them that he *took the job* to question authority—to *be* active and not radioactive—but he can't. He can't put the words together. He's a failure; he hasn't accomplished anything worthwhile in his entire life. He's becoming simple with age, and those moments when his head becomes a silver light and his face disappears, *God,* he's getting senile. Should he quit his job and go back to teaching astrophysics, instead of figuring ways of controlling a split atom?

That's the point: How can he control bombarded uranium, when he can't control himself? What is this star blazing in the middle of his mind, radiating there, showing him pictures of history three hundred years old, like frames cut out of celluloid, pictures so real he can feel himself there? The star, like an atom, gives him feelings of what is about to happen, too, and then it does.

He has been living in his car because his English Sheepdog, Harvey, growls and bites him at the front door. Harvey is eighteen years old and doesn't remember his master; people are vague blurs of light to his eyes. Harvey can't distinguish Rosenfelder, and

Rosenfelder is beginning to be unable to distinguish himself. Harvey has arthritis and glaucoma; he bumps into doors and tables. Rosenfelder bumps into instances of non-ordinary reality; he forgets who he is and thinks he's the universe.

Harvey is sprawled upside down now in the back seat of the Carmen Ghia, and Rosenfelder is scratching his furry chest singing: "The big dog, relax, enjoy a snack, and scratch the big dog." *(The Late Show* theme is Harvey's favorite song.) But Rosenfelder is fighting sadness, putting on an air to trick the dog. They're on their way to the veterinarian's, where a doctor waits with a single syringe. They're pulling up now to the smoky-glass window. Rosenfelder gets out and the wind catches his graying hair. Ashes lodge in his eyes. He can't do it—even looking close at his bitten hand.

Click of the car door. Driving on this windy day is nearly impossible for him. Something happens to people in a strong wind. They are irritable, they cut him off, making left turns from the right lane. The wind affects him, too. The taillights cutting in front of him make him feel that something strange is about to happen . . . .

A raga plays on the radio, resonating with the sound of four symphonic cylinders. A transmission of radio sound into the synchromesh transmission. Rosenfelder is just beginning to feel peaceful on the way to the think tank. The engine suddenly sputters and dies when he sees a couple on the sidewalk. He knows instantly this is the *something strange* happening. Happening now. Happening now. The car, though dead, rolls onto a dirt lot at twenty miles an hour, as the scientist jumps from the open door.

He flies into the wind and across the street, as his Volkswagen slows and stops under its own weight in the middle of the vast dirt lot. His bod tumbles through the thick soft dust. But he's conscious of being unconscious. A stardescends into his body as something of him flies across the street, through the ashen wind, to the couple on the sidewalk.

He sees the man first and then the woman. He knows it is all wrong. The man is six-five, long blond hair, and tatooed muscle, with his hands around her neck. His boots are black, and his mind is on fire. The woman, sixty, is losing air, gasping for God to come, as Rosenfelder runs across the street. The young blond man feels him near and releases his grip on her reddened neck with a force

that bangs her against the backdrop–rough adobe wall. Her back bleeds.

Rosenfelder's body meets his mind at the point of sidewalk. The blond man runs wild across the street through traffic. Rosenfelder catches the falling woman, falling from the wall. An energy pours from his hands into the woman's body. She is screaming "Oh my God," and gasping "My dear God." The wounds on her back close now, like zippers, bonding atomic beneath her drying blood, as her neck turns from red to pink. The sky turns from red to pink above the blond man running through the dust.

Another man runs through Rosenfelder's mind—he wears a Superman T-shirt, a body builder. He asks Rosenfelder what has happened. Rosenfelder reacts "She was being strangled. The man ran that way. Please follow him, just keep him in sight. I'll call the police." The words are not his words. They have too much power. They are heard. They make the body builder run across the street, too, though he is afraid. Rosenfelder's antic mind can feel no fear, there is only *now*.

Now a woman calls to him from two stories above the adobe wall: "What in God's name . . . . " Rosenfelder reacts again: "Call the police." She sees the woman on the sidewalk and grabs the phone.

Rosenfelder holds the old woman and a force greater than himself speaks through his harvest eyes directly into her mind. Her muscles relax and her fear begins to drain into the ashen water flowing in the gutter. Rosenfelder's mind recalls his own death, a murky recollection of murder on a windy day, but something about it has changed. And then a moment of love. No, a moment of intense compassion overtakes him. He feels waves of pain around his neck and back. He feels fear running through him, sloshing into watery ash down through the storm drain. The universe makes sense.

Something dormant in him has saved a woman's life, and his death is simultaneously changed. A police car slides by the curb and Rosenfelder points. The woman says she is all right. The car grows smaller in the distance with lights. The old woman tells Rosenfelder that she thinks she can stand up. She says, "Thank God you came along. No one else stopped . . . rush hour and no one stops."

Rosenfelder speaks to her in his mind; he is reacting silently. He feels no space, no time. There is a light where his head should be. His head becomes the observable universe . . . . Harvey barks and barks across the street for his master.

Three police cars swerve into the parking lane. In the first is the body builder and two officers. In the second, the blond man and a lieutenant. In the third, an officer and a woman Rosenfelder has not seen before. Lieutenant Abecromby asks the victim's name as the muscle man steps onto the curb from the first car. His Superman T-shirt attracts Rosenfelder's eye. The woman says her name is "Lois" and Rosenfelder laughs and laughs. They are infected by him—Lois and superman laugh, too. The policemen smile. They collect names for their reports, and short versions of what happened. They hardly speak to Rosenfelder at all.

He watches the blond-haired man in the second car. A beam of light shines into the back seat, and swirling particles of dust and ash sparkle in the light. Rosenfelder has seen the look in his eyes somewhere before, somewhere back in World War II before he was captured. He remembers now. It was the look of death in the eyes of a tranquilized rabid dog.

Lieutenant Abecromby tells the crowd that has begun to collect on the sidewalk that the long-haired man had just been released from a sanitarium the day before. He tells them that the man is a heroin addict, and that the lady in the third car was fixing breakfast when he came in and started eating food out of her icebox. Her husband came yelling into the room, and the man ran through their plate glass window, tore down a picket fence, and knocked over their propane barbecue. He says that was how the fire started. Rosenfelder takes the moment to slip away through the crowd.

He checks the engine of his Carmen Ghia when it doesn't start, and then the battery. He twists a loose battery cable tighter and starts the engine. Harvey plods toward the sound of the engine like a sore Clydesdale. It's difficult for him to see the ground, so he steps extra high. Rosenfelder leads him to the door and over the driver's seat. First gear into the west. For Rosenfelder, driving is automatic, like a spring.

He drives half an hour past barricaded streets that for a moment remind him of some imminent holocaust. Finally there are no

more fire engines, police, or ash in the sky. A concrete dome expands into his vision and Harvey barks. The security guard waves him in through the gate, as he rolls to his parking space. There are no protestors today. Flash of his name on the cement car-stop. It reads: *Morris Rosenfelder.* He wants to add: "than he thinks he is." He laughs. But something is happening to him that he needs to understand. He knows things without the process of thought. Shifting into reverse, he glides out the security gate toward home. Harvey stops barking.

Some force wells up from his feet to his head again. He's conscious of driving, but he feels like tires heating on warm asphalt. He feels he is the road itself, the sand along the shore, and the curved blue horizon. What is this energy surging through him? Where is the power source? He stops the car and sits in the sand as Harvey rolls nearby with his paws flailing to the sky. Thoughts fade into sounds of blue water curling into white, like thunder. A storm slowly approaches from the west, and the bottoms of the clouds curl like waves. The bottom drops from the curls and the sky-barrier is lost into streaks of rainbow gray, forming a veil between the clouds and sea. A ship on the horizon is disappearing behind the veil, and he wants to reach out and put it in his pocket.

He remembers a story his favorite teacher taught him in eighth grade. It is the story of ten wise men on a boat that sinks in the China Sea. When they all find themselves soaking wet onshore, each counts the others to find out if any were lost. But each wise man can only count nine. Each one forgets to count himself. There is no *self* to count. They conclude that one of them must have drowned.

The storm finally soaks Rosenfelder, and Harvey finds the car by himself. Rosenfelder's eyes are closed now and his mind is void. He remains unmoving for seven hours, until Harvey paws him to go home.

Rosenfelder walks all night on the wooden planks of his living room, which reverberates steps of his bare feet. He walks that way all night, not unlike the victim of a concentration camp, conjuring images of the dawn. At dawn he writes:

Out of the sound of dawn comes an image of fire . . . .

He writes all day in the sun, between sips of strong coffee and cigarettes. At night he walks again in the still air of his room, a

flame of a single candle creating errant shadows among the grainy darkness. Across the room, Rosenfelder's right palm, open, faces the flame. Harvey, at the edge of the bed, watches a vague violet shroud radiate around his master's body, as the candle flickers and a wisp of white smoke rises from the extinguishing flame. Harvey's eyes begin to clear. As a light rain soaks the ceiling, Rosenfelder sleeps, dreaming of Superman and X-ray eyes.

Downstream Current

Laurel Dewey

Morgan Shoop stood in the doorway. His eyes rested intently on his eleven-year-old son, Will. Morgan sunk his long hands into his trouser pockets and wedged his shoulder against the wood frame. His head tilted and touched the wood, but his eyes never left the boy. Morgan had not known how long he had been standing there—perhaps an hour, perhaps a few minutes. All he knew was that his thoughts were still. No matter how hard he tried to think about the cattle prices for next year, or the odds against another unrelenting winter, his mind always returned to the one thing he could not forget.

Morgan Shoop was dying. He hadn't told anyone yet—not even his wife, Alice. On the following Tuesday, he would have known for three weeks exactly. Three weeks and not one word. The stooped shoulders, the sudden weight loss, the sunken chest, the eyes that saw no future, all told what his voice could not bear to hear. He didn't have long—maybe six months if he took it easy. But since Morgan didn't know how to take it easy, he figured he wasn't long for this world.

His son, Will, lay sleeping—peacefully, unaware that life ever came to an end. Morgan thought back to when he was Will's age and how the days blended into each other. Back then, life was just one long day, with periods of night only serving to interrupt the perfect rhythm. Back then, only old people died. People who, when you heard of their passing, seemed dead long before their souls surrendered. Death was accepted and expected then. And then Morgan would try to remember something different, but once again, he could not.

* * * * *

His worry had taken him through the house that night. From room to room he would wander, each time trying to make that decision. And each time he thought he knew the answer, he would suddenly forget and wander into another room, only to find himself more confused.

So he stood in the boy's doorway and calculated he had stood there the longest without forgetting and without confusion. He lifted his shoulder from the door frame and, keeping his hands deep into his trouser pockets, he approached the boy. His tall, lean body towered over the boy's small figure. With his knee, he struck the side of the bed.

"You, boy," he muttered.

Will did not stir.

"You boy!" Morgan repeated, this time with more determination.

Will turned over and faced his father, his eyes opening only long enough to spot Morgan's figure. "What?" Will whispered, barely able to speak.

"Get your clothes on. Put on your jacket. It's cold."

Morgan turned and struck a match to the lamp. Once lit, Morgan could see that the lamp had barely enough oil in it for another day's work. He turned to the boy and held the lamp to his face. The boy stirred uncomfortably as the warmth from the lamp seeped into his cheek.

"Come on," coaxed Morgan as he turned down the bed covers.

Will knew there was no getting out of this. He couldn't reach down for the bed covers, for his father had a firm hold on them. He couldn't turn away for the cold would awaken his body, giving him no choice but to get up and move. Gradually, Will sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, trying to wipe the sleep from his eyes.

Morgan threw an extra pair of long underwear toward Will. He pulled out an old pair of overalls, a flannel shirt, and his fishing sweater, tattered at the edges from too many fish hooks getting in the way of the wool.

Will pulled the warm underwear on and turned toward the window. It was still dark. "What time is it?" the boy whispered.

"Don't know," came the reply. "Don't forget to tuck your trousers into your boots."

"Where are we going?" Will asked, but his father was gone.

Morgan walked into the dark morning, pulling his heavy overcoat close to his body. He let out a low yawn and his breath fogged into the cold air. He snuck a look back toward the house and wished that Will would hurry and join him.

The valley, clenched in the last hour of darkness before sunrise, held a mushroom of dense fog in its center. Morgan had known many a morning when he had ventured into such a fog and lost his direction. He would panic and his stomach would swell in fear as he would try to move toward the nearest opening of light, always afraid that he would never find his way out of the fog. Once he reached the light, though, he always discovered to his never-ending delight that he was not that far away from where he had started.

Will came from the house, carefully closing the kitchen door so that it wouldn't bang shut. He crossed to his father, wrapping his coat tightly against his body and cupping his hands to his mouth to warm them.

"Where are your gloves?" Morgan asked.

"Wore the fingertips out. Mom said she'd get me a new pair."

Morgan felt inside of his overcoat pocket and pulled out a pair of thick gloves. "Here. You put these on. Push your fingers up as far as you can into the glove. They'll be loose but at least they'll keep you warm."

Will slipped the fur-lined gloves onto his small hands. He moved his fingers around and brushed the soft fur up and down the side of his finger. "One day, I'm gonna get myself a pair just like this," Will said as he and his father crossed to the truck.

Morgan glanced at the gloves and then at Will. "You can grow into those."

The old flatbed truck was covered with heavy droplets from the evening dew. As Morgan passed the hood, he took a long swipe with the palm of his hand and brushed a thin stream of water onto the ground. He did the same with the front window, this time wiping the dew off with quick flicks of his wrist.

Will got into the truck first and quickly closed the door, trying not to let any of the cool morning seep into the front seat. Morgan started the engine. The engine sputtered and started to die but Morgan pushed down on the accelerator, again and again until the

engine idled without hesitation. Morgan stared straight ahead, his eyes canvassing the great expanse of territory that lay before the burgeoning fog. His eyes became fixed on the land and not one muscle moved.

Will turned to his father and waited. The boy looked into the flatbed. "You forgot the poles," Will said, starting out of the truck to retrieve them.

"We're not going fishing," came the reply.

Will sat back in his seat and stared into the darkness. He longed to be back in his bed where it was warm and safe. Will hesitated and then asked, "Where are we going?"

Morgan slid out of his daze and took his foot off the clutch. The truck eased forward. "Ned Begley said that the North Bridge split apart. I figured we'd better take a look at it."

Will sat up when his father said the word "we." The boy liked the sound of the word, especially when the "we" was him and his father.

Morgan curled the truck around the gravel curves until he reached the main gate. Closed each evening at dusk and opened each morning at sunrise, the wooden gate stood as a kind of signpost that almost said, "YOU ARE NOW ARRIVING AT THE RANCH OF MORGAN SHOOP." It was his gate. Morgan had built it and every beam, nail, peg and hinge was there because Morgan Shoop had chosen to put it there. It stood as a sort of testament that Morgan Shoop had lived and built a gate that had withstood the fiercest storms and a multitude of freak accidents. Deep down inside, Morgan liked to believe that it would always be there.

Will started out of the truck to open the gate when Morgan's arm gently set him back into his seat. Morgan set the brake as he got out of the truck and lifted the long wooden plank that held the gate closed at night. He swung the gate away from him and then secured the side with a piece of rope which he wrapped around the nearest post. Morgan took a few steps toward the truck and then stopped.

"You slide on over and bring her through!" Morgan called to Will.

Will stuck his head out of his window, "You kidding?"

"Go on and slide on over! Put your foot on the clutch, take off

the brake and then ease her on down here."

"But I don't—"

"Go on, now! I ain't got all day for you to think on it! You've seen me do it enough times, so go on!"

Will reluctantly slid over and positioned himself in the driver's seat. His left foot just reached the clutch as he struggled to keep his head above the dashboard. With his right hand, he reached over and slowly depressed the button on the brake handle and eased the handle down until he couldn't push it any further. Trying to be as careful as he could, he lifted his foot off the clutch. Suddenly, the truck lurched forward. His foot fell to the accelerator and the truck raced forward.

Seeing it coming, Morgan pressed his body against the gate. "The brake! Push on the brake!!!" Morgan yelled as the truck jerked passed him.

Hearing his father's call, Will immediately pushed his foot onto the brake and brought the truck to a deadening halt. Morgan padded over to the truck and opened the driver's door.

He got in the truck as Will moved to the other seat. "A little rough, but at least you didn't stall," Morgan said, closing his door tightly behind him. "From now on, you'll be in charge of driving her through the gate."

"Yeah?" Will said, feeling as though a great honor had been bestowed upon him.

"Yeah," came the reply and Morgan set the truck into gear.

The first signs of light were still more than half an hour away as the truck made its way down the dirt road. The truck headlights seemed to absorb the dampness and hold it within its elongated beams. Twice the billowing fog obstructed Morgan's view and twice the fog cleared, leading Morgan each time toward the next opening in the fog.

The headlights skimmed across the fence posts that lined Morgan's portion of land. Each post stood straight, strong and impenetrable. A thin coil of barbed wire was neatly entwined at the same height on every post and secured every second post with a bright red nail. Morgan slowed the truck to a halt and put it in reverse. Using his headlights as his only source of light, he surveyed the fence until he came to a stop. He turned off the ignition and set the brake. He shook his head as he folded his arms atop the

steering wheel.

"Looks like she's at it again!" Morgan said with a sing-song quality to his voice.

He got out of the truck, leaving the headlights on and pointed toward the fence. Will joined his father.

The damage was apparent only to Morgan's well-trained eye. One of the posts had been pushed from its base and was leaning precariously against the coil of barbed wire. Morgan got down on his haunches and surveyed the damage. Will matched his father's posture and tried to appear as adult as he could when he spoke.

"Lucy must be fired up about something!" Will said, as he pushed his hand against the fallen post.

"She's due in the spring. I don't think she's too set on it, though." Morgan slid his hand up and down the post, as he peered into the darkness in search of Lucy.

"Don't she want it?" Will asked.

"She wants it. She just wants it right now, that's all." Morgan pushed the post until it stood upright. With one tremendous pull, he uprooted the post from its base and set it on the damp ground. "Dig down a little deeper."

Will proceeded to dig the dirt out of the hole. One of his gloves almost slid off but he forced his fingers deeper into the glove's fingertips until they became secure. Once he was finished, he stood up, brushed the dirt off the gloves and stood aside. Morgan tilted the post toward Will. "What?" Will asked.

"You ain't finished. You got a hole and no post. Go on."

Will took the post from his father and looked at it as though it were foreign to him. He pushed the post into the hole and looked up at his father.

"That ain't gonna hold," Morgan said quietly. "You gotta push it harder and pack the dirt around the bottom. Go on."

Will looked at the post and then back to his father. "I ain't strong enough."

"You're strong enough. Now, go on!"

Will continued to push and pack the dirt around the bottom of the post, but every time he tried to let the post stand on its own, it would collapse. Will's frustration mounted. Morgan's figure loomed over the struggling boy, without movement or a word. The boy stopped and spoke into the ground. "I can't do this

alone."

Morgan reached into the inside of his overcoat and brought out his hunting knife. The outer casing was clean ivory with one mahogany peg at each end of the knife. Given to Morgan by an old Sioux Indian on his deathbed more than twenty years ago, the knife had nary a knick or scratch on its surface. It was as tough and unyielding as the men who owned it. It was always there and always seemed to remedy the situation, whether the situation was cutting enough rope for a horse's halter or trimming the fat from a side of beef. Morgan pointed the handle toward Will. "Pack the dirt in more. Then make a couple of new niches for the wire to set into. It'll stand straight."

The boy took the knife. Even through his thick gloves he could feel the smooth texture of the ivory. He flicked the handle and the knife sprang from its case. Working rapidly, Will packed the dirt around the stump as much as he could, then carefully carved two deep crevices into the side of the post. With one hand holding the post, the other moved the wire around the post and into the crevices. Once more around and the wire was secured and then fastened with the little red nail that marked the post. Will stood back and gave the post a slight kick. The post did not move. Will smiled and proudly stood straight as he looked at his father. Morgan nodded and turned toward the truck.

"Hey, don't forget your knife," Will said as he tried to slip the knife into his father's coat pocket.

Morgan continued toward the truck. "Don't need it."

The two got in the truck. Will looked at his father in question. "What do you mean?"

"You keep it. You can use it now." Morgan started the ignition and released the brake.

Will looked down at the knife. It seemed far too big to belong to him—his father's name seemed to still be carved upon its casing. He placed the knife in his coat pocket and sat in silence.

"You're gonna be there when Lucy throws her foal." Morgan said with an outpouring of determination. "From the looks of her, there's gonna be a whole lot of kicking and a whole helluva lot of hollering, but you're gonna be there and make sure she don't holler and kick too much."

Will looked confused. "But I don't know nothing about—"

Morgan set the truck into gear and revved the engine. "Better get on down to that bridge before too long."

Will didn't try to finish his sentence. Suddenly, an uneasy feeling came over the boy. Something was uneven in the air. The morning light was just beginning to break into the darkened sky. The peacefulness of the darkness was gradually being taken over by the shallow light of another day. Will finally decided that this was the reason for the uproar in the atmosphere. Yet, the more the morning broke through, the more the boy doubted that such a light could be the cause of such confusion. As each hill became brighter and every color was released from darkness, the morning seemed to become a welcoming presence and not a menace.

By the time the truck reached the North Bridge, the sun had cleared the lower hills and the whole valley was filling with light. Along the banks of the river, a bevy of yellow and white wildflowers sprung to life as the sun opened each bud. The valley had just gone through three straight days and nights of heavy rain. The downpours had left the ground around the river saturated to a point of a swampy consistency. Will had learned from experience that one never ventured into the mushy banks until the earth had time to dry and harden. Once, Will had forged ahead through the mud without thinking and his heavy boots had become locked into a bed of mush. Only with the help of his father was he rescued from the swamp.

More terrifying, though, than the mud were the surging waters that dug their trail into the river bed. The week's storm had stirred the waters into a frenzied pace that cut and gorged the sides of the riverwall. The crashing sound of the water, hitting large rocks mixed with the loud hiss that erupted every time the current slapped the riverwall, sent shivers of fear through Will's body. This uncontrollable part of nature disturbed the boy for it was larger than anything he knew.

The North Bridge, named only because it lay to the north of the Shoop ranch, was merely a forty foot suspension bridge that connected one bank of land to another. The rising waters had torn several of the center planks from their foundations, and the rope, which held these planks together, had been scraped by the loose planks until only a few threads of rope were supporting the center of the bridge.

Morgan stood in silence and surveyed the damage to the bridge. Will tried to appear as casual as he could, but the threatening sounds of the current forced him to move back a few steps. Once Morgan's mind had sorted out the problem and figured out a solution, he moved to the truck and pulled out a long piece of thick rope. He returned to the banks and gathered the rope into a loose circular formation. He spoke to Will, not as a child, but as a fellow comrade. "I figure that if a body could slide down to the center where it's split and secure this rope between the planks, it might just hold till we could get a crew up here."

"Yeah," said Will in agreement, and he nodded toward the bridge.

Morgan ran the rope between his long fingers. He paused and then swung the entire circle of rope toward Will. "There you go," said Morgan.

Will caught the rope before it swung away from him. He stood looking at his father and then looking toward the river. He turned to his father, his mouth dropped at half-mast and he tried to speak but the words became stuck on their way out. "What . . . I . . . I thought . . . I . . . " Will threw down the rope and stepped back as if the rope were a snake, coiled to attack. He shook his head in defiance. *"No! Not me!"*

"Pick up the rope," said Morgan, an undertone of anger lining his speech.

"No!" said Will as he stepped back a few more paces.

Morgan's tone was becoming increasingly strained as he moved toward the boy. "Bridges don't mend by themselves, boy! Now pick up the rope!!!"

"I never done it before! I don't know nothing about it! I could get killed out there!"

This hit Morgan the hardest. He stopped and his eyes studied the mucky banks. He caught his breath and pinned his eyes firmly upon the boy. "You're *not* gonna get killed."

There was such conviction in Morgan's voice that the boy felt as if God had just spoken to him. Will gathered the rope into his hands and approached the bank.

He positioned his feet on several scattered patches of green grass that sprouted a temporary plateau within the muddy banks. He had to move quickly, though, for his weight could easily push the

plateaus into the swamp. He grabbed hold of a tree trunk that grew precariously between the edge of the bank and the flowing water. He leaned against the tree and slung the circle of rope around his neck, leaving his hands free to support his body. He hesitated and looked back at his father who had not moved since he had given his son the order. Will turned toward the bridge and, holding onto a low branch, worked his way down the side of the riverwall.

The water rushed directly below his hanging feet. Each time he reached up to get a better grasp on the branch, he could feel the current brush up against the tips of his boots. Will kept his head looking straight ahead, never once letting his eyes hit the rushing water. His heart beat so fast and so loudly that he feared it would fall out of his chest. Once he got within a foot of the bridge, he swung his left foot forward and caught his heel on the topside of a plank. When he felt secure, he did the same with his right foot. He moved his hands down the branch until he could feel the sharp tip. With his right hand, he reached forward and grabbed onto the bridge's roped side. He took a breath and quickly grabbed another piece of the rope with his left hand.

There he stayed for a moment, perched upon the edge of the bridge like a bird before flight. Only then did he look down below at the rushing current. The cool spray rose up and skimmed the seat of his pants. He turned away from the water and maneuvered his way onto the bridge until he lay flat on his stomach with his head toward the center split.

Plank by plank, he moved his way up toward the center of the bridge. Every now and then a gush of wind would sweep down the center of the river, sending the bridge into a rhythmic swaying motion. At those points, Will would lay perfectly still until the bridge stopped wobbling.

Will reached the center and removed the circle of rope from around his neck. With one hand holding a firm plank, he used the other hand to straighten out the rope. He tried to toss the rope ahead of him to get it in between one of the planks on the opposite side of the split, but each time he would overshoot his mark and have to draw the rope back toward him. He wanted to cry out for help but he knew there would be none given.

After the fifth attempt, Will became impatient. His fear of this roaring monster turned into a slow anger that just wanted to get the job done and get off the bridge. With his impatience keyed, he drew the rope back to him and, using the bridge's roped side, he worked his way up until he stook upright on a wide plank. Suddenly, a loud crash erupted and Will jerked his body around. The bridge swayed and in one sweep he flipped over the side of the bridge. He yelped as the current pushed him under with all the force it could muster. He grabbed for the bridge plank but his oversized gloves hindered his hold.

Morgan approached the bank and straddled the marshy center. "Let them go, boy!"

Will's head peeked out of the water and he turned to his father. He couldn't yell or cry. All of his emotion was trapped in his hands as he fought to hold onto the plank.

Morgan's bellowing voice echoed once again through the river canyon. "Let them go! *Lose them!!!*"

Will shook his right hand and the glove slipped off, falling into the water. Then came the left glove and it too washed into oblivion. His hold on the plank was stronger and he managed to fit the end of his rope between his teeth. He hung there, unable to move his legs up onto the bridge but too frightened to let go.

Morgan balanced his body against the same tree trunk from where Will had started his journey, and called to his son. "Will! Your knife! Use your knife!"

Will turned to his father, not understanding what was meant.

"Cut your rope in half! You can get it in between the planks from down there if you cut the slack!" And then with a burst of impatience. "Go on, boy!!!"

Will carefully let his left hand leave the plank momentarily as he quickly pulled out the ivory-cased knife from his coat pocket. With the knife in hand, he grabbed for the plank just as a wave of water slapped against his back, causing the bridge to sway uncontrollably.

"Cut it now!" Morgan yelled.

With the rope still secured between his teeth, Will pulled it away from him, stopping only to get a better hold on the plank. Once he had a large enough portion, he flicked the knife open and brought

it down toward his mouth. The current rose and tried to force him down but he lifted his body with the wave and was able to get his right elbow upon the bridge. Once secure, he quickly went to work and moved the knife back and forth through the rope until the slack dropped into the water and washed downstream. With his left hand, he swung the portion of rope up and onto the bridge and over the center split plank. Enough rope was left dangling over the plank so that he was able to bring the end toward him with his left foot. He grabbed hold of the two ends and moved the center planks together.

He started to tie a knot when the knife began to slip from between his fingers. The knife dropped and Will watched the mahogany pegs slide past his thumb. Without a moment's hesitation, he flicked his wrist and caught the knife before the current could steal it. He plopped the knife into his coat pocket and then tied four tight repetitive knots, ending each one with a quick tug to ensure its hold.

Will reached behind him and grabbed onto the tree branch. Working backwards, he moved his watersoaked body toward the banks. Morgan moved around the tree trunk and caught Will as he reached the banks.

Will grabbed a hold of Morgan and hung onto his thick overcoat. His breathing was labored and his head ached. His heart had slowed but each beat was a throbbing pound inside his chest. The boy brushed his forehead against his father's coat, then looked up into his father's eyes. Morgan held his son tight to his body but kept his eyes on the downstream current. And for the first time, the sun crested in the distant waters.

My Grandmother

Scott Memmer

Her name is Hazel Cadnum and she is eighty-seven years old. She was born and raised in the state of Ohio, has lived her entire life there—an Ohio that at the time of her birth was little more than open spaces, forests and farmland; an Ohio whose first factories had sprung up along the banks of the Cuyahoga River not much earlier than a generation before her birth—and the story I have to tell of her involves not so much the location of her body in time and space as the influence of her humanity on my mind and heart—far more important co-ordinates, as far as I'm concerned. I don't know much about her early life, nor do I feel I need to. She lived on a farm no doubt (who didn't back then?), had chickens and cattle to feed, chores to do, maybe one or two nice dresses—and yet the outward circumstances of her life don't much concern me here, for what I want to investigate is her inner world. She was always a supremely happy person—an inextinguishable joy burned in her eyes from the time she got up in the morning until the time she went to bed at night—and though she lived her life tenaciously, was not about to go gentle into the dying of any light, good or otherwise, her daily actions were comprised of the most exacting gentleness, the finest example I have ever known of a human being at peace with herself. I'm reminded in thinking of her of a passage in John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography,* for I feel it so accurately defines my grandmother: "Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself the ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way." The happiness of others, the improvement

of mankind. My grandmother improved mankind by the simple fact of her presence, faced life graciously and uncomplaining, never thought nor spoke ill of anyone. There were only two kinds of people in the world whom she could not abide: spiders and snakes. To this day she has a mortal dread of these two creatures, an aversion most people find forgivable, but aside from this her record is spotless. I write about her now because her influence upon my sensibility was, more perhaps than any other single factor, what led me to become a lover of books. Which is ironic, because my grandmother was and is not a "literary" person, has lived most of her life not at the university but on a farm, and yet she comes from a time and a place where people had a respect for the language, where syntax had not yet been splintered into ten-second tracts and mortgaged out to the networks to ensure the propagation of the latest pestilence—Froot Loops or Allstate or Bob Hope or GM's latest disaster. When I read today, particularly work that touches or moves me deeply, I am reminded in my heart of my grandmother: it is her face I see when I turn out the lights; it is her voice I hear in the dark; it is the faintly stale odor of her living room in Valley City, Ohio that comes back to me again and again, the stale odor of old folks' living rooms everywhere. There are few enough reasons for the circumstances in our lives—most of what we take for fate is actually happenstance turned on end—but there is a definite reason I think almost daily of an eighty-seven-year-old woman three thousand miles to the east.

The reasons go back many years. To tell you the whole story would be to trace the entire history of my family, how my father and mother met, how they married, how they got on in the years before my brother and I were born—none of it very pertinent to the matter at hand. Suffice it to say they met and married. My father got out of the service after serving in the Philippines in World War II; my mother, the youngest child of four, stayed at home with Grandma and Grandpa and helped around the farm; and after the dust had settled and the bodies had been counted and the dog tags swept into one huge mound—after Nagasaki and Dresden and Auschwitz—my mother and father took themselves to a justice of the peace and got themselves married. In Ohio, in places like Brunswick, Chagrin Falls, Hinckly, Medina, Twin-

sburg, Valley City, life was almost too quiet. In ten years we would have Korea, Elvis Presley, television; five years after that Gidget would go Hawaiian, the silly girl. But for now things were quiet. It was a lull, the proverbial calm before the storm. What does the human species do in such a lull? It makes replicas of itself.

I was born in 1954, three years after my brother. We were raised on a steady diet of *Captain Kangaroo* and Wheaties, which may help to explain a lot of things. We lived in a suburb of Cleveland, about an hour southeast of that City of Light, and year after year as I grew up I listened to the Cleveland Indians lose on the radio. Occasionally I'd watch them lose on TV. After a while I only read about them losing in the paper the next day. Our neighborhood was so WASPish, so gentile, so lily-white, I can't recall meeting a single black person or a Jew until my early teens. I was what you might call sheltered. The most traumatic event in my life at this time was for one of my guppies to die, an event which should not have affected me as devastatingly as it did: there were three hundred and thirty-three left.

In 1959 my mother took ill, an illness lasting some five years until her death in 1964. I should tell you—for reasons which may or may not become apparent in a moment—that I had originally intended to write this account without mentioning my mother, without reaching into the family closet and pulling out a few convenient, well-dusted skeletons; but I find that her life and the life of my grandmother, however different they may have been in their own particulars, however unalike they may have been in the specific, were so inextricably woven, so entangled in the to and fro of grief and wonder and regret and the momentary bittersweet victory turned suddenly, sourly, and without warning into defeat, that I cannot speak of one without speaking of the other. In 1959 my mother was diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic, a malady as capricious as the wind but a thousand times more deadly, a malady which has, like cancer, the unique ability to fracture and destroy whole families—and it felled her like a small tree. Each time she fell the doctors picked her up and pumped her full of electroshock and Thorazine (she came back to us scarred but functional, a frail willow ready for new felling), and it was in these picking-up times that my brother and I took the hour-and-a-half drive with my father to my grandmother's house in Valley City, Ohio. To

grandmother's house we went, but as for myself not without the usual wordless goodbyes and a tightening sensation in my gut that told me something was terribly, terribly wrong. Someone was about to get hurt, I sensed, and I didn't want it to be me. It wasn't, exactly. But Grandma was always there, her apron surgically attached in those days it seems, and when my father swung the car into her gravel driveway and my brother and I burst from the car doors like a couple of greyhounds after the fleeing rabbit, she greeted us with open arms and open Frigidaire. My father would leave us there for a week or two, sometimes three, and after several of my mother's breakdowns and several drives through the quiet, cool countryside of northeastern Ohio, past cider stands and old barns and miles and miles of cornfields, I began to see that Dad was using Grandma's house as a place of refuge. I didn't begrudge him that; at the time we needed a place to hide. Instead I took it to me as my home away from home.

Let me tell you about her house. The immediate impression is one of incredible cleanliness. Above all else the Bible-thumping frontier mothers impressed upon their daughters the lesson that cleanliness, my dear girls, is next to Godliness. Grandma apparently learned her lessons well, for her house was always spotless. There was a large black-and-white television in the living room, and across the room, facing the television, sat a matching chair and sofa, circa 1900. On the arms of this chair and sofa were those little lace doillies you find all over the furniture of the midwest. I'll never forget those doillies, damn them, because I could never do anything on that chair short of just sitting there without knocking at least one of them to the ground. In the back part of the house were two bedrooms, one bath, and—a must for my grandmother—a huge kitchen. She loved to cook, whipped up portions so huge they toppled off the fronts and sides of our plates, bounteous rations we wolfed down as voraciously as any farm kid or half-starved piranha. Around the back of her house she kept a garden where she grew just about everything: corn, tomatoes, beans, peas, carrots, onions, beets, radishes, cucumbers, green peppers; blackberries, boysenberries, raspberries, strawberries, etc., for her pies; and her prize crop, rhubarb. My grandmother grew more rhubarb than the rest of the entire state of Ohio. For years

half the United States' G.N.P. in rhubarb came out of her garden. And every summer day, it seemed, she had fresh rhubarb pie cooling on her windowsill, a pie so sweet and sour, so tangy, it made the glands in the back of your jaw weep for joy and the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end.

In 1964, though, a taste more sour even than my grandmother's rhubarb pies came into my life: On February 10th, unable perhaps to see anything ahead but more electroshock and more Thorazine, more wind and toppling and getting up and falling down, more terror and uncertainty and doubt and pain, my mother took her own life. For a long time afterward no one said anything. Everyone came to the funeral; everyone wept openly, myself among them. Afterward, though, it was as if an open gash, an unhealing wound, stretched from one end of my family to the other, scarring my father and my brother and I permanently, and even so much as the mention of this gash, particularly while driving through the desolate February landscape on the way to my grandmother's house in Valley City, Ohio, was enough to prompt the salt from the road—somehow, I didn't know how—to creep up through the floorboards of the car and sting the wound of the person who had said it. Everyone walked on eggs. Grandma C. said nothing, simply went on being what she had always been—a pillar of strength—and baked and stirred and fried more furiously than ever, as if the way to a child's ailing heart was through his stomach. The attempt was not wholly unsuccessful: gradually I returned to my curious self, asking questions about anything and everything (except my mother), until somehow, miraculously, as if a curtain had been lifted, February became March. It was at this time that my brother took to walking in the woods, a habit he's continued to this day; walking, I didn't know where, but with a determination that grew stronger and stronger as the season progressed, as spring came on, until suddenly it was April, and the walks stopped, and the snow melted, and the fields gave off their steamy heat, and the traffic on the highway in front of my grandmother's house beat by with maddening regularity, each squeal or squeak of rubber, each click of a studded snow tire on that sheening asphalt runway counting out the minutes and days and hours and months of lives spent trying to forget. We all

wanted desperately to forget, to get back to the normalcy of homework and spring flowers and Vietnam on the TV every night, to find oblivion in the simplest activities of daily life. It was in May of that year that I saw something I shall never forget.

Around back of my grandmother's house, half-hidden from the highway and just to the right of her garden when you looked out through the kitchen window, stood several clotheslines from which she hung wet sheets in the warmer months of spring and on through summer into fall. She had an electric dryer as I recall, but she preferred, maybe out of some deference to her mother's training in a day before there were such things as electric dryers, to hang her sheets by hand and let them dry by wind. On the morning I'm speaking of it'd rained the night before, dousing the garden and the lawn beside it with a fair share of water, and the sky, shifting from grey to indigo to pink to azure with the rotation of the earth that morning, had the sharpness and clarity of a thin sheet of ice skimmed from the top of an Ohio ditch. I ate some cereal, my brother went across the highway to throw rocks at some horses, my grandmother went about the laundry. The sunlight streamed through the kitchen window, catching the dust motes in the air, charging them with light, while in the living room the TV droned on—some blather about filthy old American lucre: *The Price is Right* or *Jeopardy*. Finishing a half a box of cereal, I got up, walked over with my bowl to the kitchen sink, turned on the faucet, and looked out into the yard. It was then that I saw what I want to tell you about.

I'm not very adept at describing significant moments in my life. They crowd in upon me and demand that I get everything right—that the lighting's just so, the proper perspective drawn, the faces somewhat in focus—something like taking a picture or writing a poem, two things I have never been very good at. That morning my grandmother stood beneath her clotheslines, a basket of wet sheets in her arms. She set the basket down, picked up her first sheet, a white one, and reached up carefully, straining slightly on tiptoe, clothespin in teeth, to attach the sheet to the line. A wind blew out of the north, coming in off Lake Erie seventy miles away, billowing the sheet up and away from her as she tried to secure it; the sun, still low on the horizon and so bright it hurt the eyes to so much as look in its direction, shone through her hair, turning the

silver-gray there to near-white. For a moment she became frozen, suspended in time and motion, and the entire attentiveness of my being focused on her. She was caught in a spot of time and everything sped up and at the same time slowed down. Then abruptly all motion ceased. My nine-year-old mind raced, sought wildly for explanations—but what's to be made of a sixty-eight-year-old woman hanging wet sheets on a clothesline in mid-May? I was incapable of answering that question at the time—maybe still am today—but in looking back I suppose her image there spoke to me of the repetitive nature of our lives, of the fact that our living here is couched in ceremony and ritual, in repetitive patterns which, though they plague us with their continuity and insistence, are nonetheless one of the reasons we survive as a species. We need this continuity to survive. "Every person who had ever lived," Thorton Wilder writes in an essay discussing *Our Town,* "has lived an unbroken succession of unique occasions. Yet the more one is aware of this individuality in experience . . . the more one becomes attentive to what these disparate moments have in common, to *repetitive patterns.* A little further on in the same piece Wilder states, "It *(Our Town)* is an attempt to find value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life." Small events. I suppose what I'm talking about when I describe how my grandmother hangs wet sheets on a clothesline is small events, but I also want to make clear to you just how much larger that event became in my mind. In that split second of what might be called, rightly or wrongly, pre-cognitive awareness (I have always felt that for me cognition began in adolescence), the ritualistic repetitiveness of mankind came home to me with incredible force. We require the accomplishment of the smallest tasks, I discovered then and hold to still, to assure the believability in a larger future; we start with the minute and work up to the infinite. As I studied my grandmother on the lawn that morning, watched her reach up to her clothesline, watched the sun come through her hair, saw the wind tug at her sheet, I became blinded by the brilliance of the sun and had to turn away. It came to me then, in what was perhaps my first intelligent observation of human life, that she had washed and dried other sheets; that her husband, the grandfather I never knew, had died of cancer on sheets she had scrubbed by hand and hung to dry on different

lines; that she had cleansed the linens of my mother for years on end until that young woman left home to commit the ultimate repetition—to give a couple of children to the earth and then, though not in the usual way, to die. And now there were other sheets to clean and dry, other linens to fold and put away. I watched her for a second and then the moment released her and she became a sixty-eight-year-old woman hanging laundry on a line.

I rinsed out my bowl, turned off the faucet, put the milk away, and went into the living room. I turned off *Jeopardy*. For a long time I sat on Grandma's sofa and played with one of those doillies. Then, for only about the third time since my mother died, I wept.

*

The years have a funny way of taking the edge off things. A year after my mother died my father remarried, my stepmother and he had a couple of daughters, and in 1969 my new family and I moved to California, leaving behind a slew of aunts and uncles and cousins and second cousins and, of course, my grandmother. We went back to visit in 1972, stayed a couple of weeks; I went back in 1978 by myself to attend the wedding of a friend. Grandma still lives in Ohio, though she sold the house in Valley City several years ago and moved in with my aunt. A month ago, upon the occasion of a business trip to the east, I had the opportunity to see her again. It'd been five years.

I flew into Boston on a Friday morning in mid-September, rented a car at the airport and headed north toward New Hampshire. Why New Hampshire? The answer is that every autumn my grandmother comes to New Hampshire to visit her oldest daughter (my aunt) and her son-in-law (my uncle) to spend six weeks in a New England easy chair and watch the World Series and see the leaves change color and fall and watch winter come in upon the land. She was to arrive the next day: we were to drive down and meet her in New York State.

New Hampshire is always lovely, but loveliest, I think, in autumn. On the way to my aunt and uncle's house I drove past Lake Sunipee, found it deserted and lonely, not a single boat out. It was just after Labor Day—late summer or early autumn, depending on your frame of reference—and though the leaves hadn't begun to change yet, most of the tourists had returned to

their homes to await the arrival of the wind and rain—to pick their gardens clean and note the passage of a few woolly bear caterpillars scurrying for cover and cocoon. In a matter of weeks several of them would return to see the colors, then dash back to those same houses to install storm windows, re-coil the garden hose, and cast a sidelong glance at the woodlot.

The next morning, at seven o'clock sharp, my aunt and uncle and I piled into their new Saab 900 (not a turbo), pulled out of the driveway and headed off across southern New Hampshire and Vermont. We stopped for breakfast, had coffee and juice, and after a leisurely six-hour drive through so many towns I can't remember any of their names, arrived at our destination in New York at three o'clock in the afternoon. An hour later my grandmother arrived.

I haven't told you much about the way she looks. I won't tell you much now, except to say that she was smaller than I remembered her, less mobile, and that she stooped over and needed help when she walked. She looked at me for the longest time, perplexed, and didn't know who I was. I told her and she seemed puzzled: How had I gotten there? And why hadn't someone told her I was coming? Why hadn't someone said something? The answer of course was that someone had, but that she, in her old age, had forgotten. She forgets a lot of things now, and yet she's fortunate enough to be surrounded by a loving brood who elect to do the remembering for her.

We had dinner together. She ate light: coffee, jello, a few crackers. After dinner we took a drive past one of the New York Fingerlakes. She didn't say much, seems content to sit and watch and listen now. We drove for half an hour or so, then went back to our motel room.

We went to bed early, all four of us—my grandmother, myself, my aunt and uncle—in one motel room, in three different beds. Somewhere in the middle of the night I woke up. I don't know why, but I didn't open my eyes immediately. I lay there for a while and listened to the sounds around me: to the air conditioner, the whirr of traffic on the highway, the drip of a faucet, the tick of a clock. Across the room I could hear my grandmother breathing, the steady, rhythmic, inward and outward flow of her breath—the simplest of our repetitions but the most vital. I kept seeing her in

my mind, reaching up to pin that large white sheet on the clothesline behind her house in Valley City, Ohio; and though she was younger, stronger and healthier in the picture I had in my mind—her hands more able to grasp, her feet more capable of navigating the land unaided—she was also the same frail, significant woman who lay on that bed just now on the other side of the room. It brought back to me the incredible fragility of us all—as a people, as a nation, as a planet. I stayed awake for an hour or two, blinked once or twice, then went back to sleep.

"On the whole," Joan Didion wrote a few years back, "I am able to take a very long view of death." I, too, take the long view, do not coddle or entice the beast, but I think a lot about what kept me awake that night in a strange motel room three thousand miles from home. It was, of course—as it always has been—my grandmother.

As the shadows came through the window that night and the faucet dripped on, I questioned the darkness. Shouldn't our lives be full, not of darkness, but of light? And why should the presence of an old woman's teeth in a glass above my head set my mind to wandering? Won't we all be in that ben soon enough without thinking about it, our own teeth in a glass, our own bedclothes disheveled, an air conditioner droning on and on to keep the elements out? We should all be so lucky at such a time to be surrounded by those who will tend to the needs of our second infancy as we have tended to theirs in the first. We should all be so lucky, but so few of us are.

III

As I Expected

Ida Ferdman

The tree beneath my window
shed its leaves in fall.
And children up and down the block
put on galoshes and rainslicks
and splashed with their heels
at the curbside out front
and sailed boats of bamboo leaves
in the alley's puddle-lakes.
The squirrels and the birds
in my yard and the rest
disappeared with the leaves
as the rain settled in
for the winter.

And the feeling I had in the summer
vanished as Fall dropped its cloak.
The yard in my mind
became barren and damp
with old visions that dripped
from the walls of my brain
like bits of brown algae
that drip from the walls of a cave.
Pink and green thoughts turned
to black ones and red ones
that left permanent scars
for the spring.
The bright colored thoughts
disappeared with the leaves
as the rain settled in
for the winter.

Swan Song
—for Calvin Simmons, conductor born April 27 1950, died August 23 1982

Keith Bienert

sounds devolve into explosion
in the beginning of the counter industrial revolution

Calvin Simmons
like a fine wire (fine as astral thread)
conducted the mind of Mahler
until it lit up in their brains
like a filament of colored light
in a vacuum

in August
after twenty-six years
to make himself an instrument of light
to bring a master back to life
(back from the water and the earth)
after the wind had made the water boil
at Connery Pond
policemen drag the lake and chew tobacco
while they smile

2.

dressed in black and white
the deadly desert terror beasts
lob bombs over the net of fear
that surrounds the city
in the dry sand

and in the moment
the first bomb
hangs above the city
hanging like oppression
or the secrets of
alphabet soup government agencies
in the static air

in that moment
when wicked gravity
becomes a beam of sound
the net
(the net of fear which might as well be a net of hate)
shatters

3.

and the retrograde evolution of the mind
(remember Venus)
will punch it back
through a door
from technology to magick
(perhaps even to God)

in either case
the mind will be freed
(by destruction of the body
or by the body standing in the doorway
from insight to outsight
with the mind)

4.

a shining sphere
explodes in colors
above the square of palms

light debris
along the edges of the blast
mixes slowly pastel
toward the stars
that pulse higher above the headstones
(where the freed auras blend)

as the masses expand
and vibrant colors
violate the darkness
another force
(as great as the force that powers the mind)
compresses the blast
creating swirls of debris
like whirling galaxies
colliding beyond the edge of the universe

both explosions
are the effects of change
(moved by the same force that powers the mind)
a force found singing beyond the perimeter
(like a filament of colored light in a vacuum)
a force that opens the rose
and drops the seed of revolution

Welcoming Light

Janis Porkus

White snow settles on
pine needles
Clock bells shiver in the night
air
I see the shelter of welcoming light
and my heart beats easily for me.

(translated by Tim Matthews)

Circus

Tim Matthews

Daddy longlegs leaves for the circus
on stilts
Striding high above the snail
in his camper-shell
The pillbug spins and rolls
to keep up
While the stinkbug leers
from a distance

A cicada shrieks
A ladybug faints
A firefly falls down the sky
in a green blaze

The spider waits with its net

A poem to be read before morning

Ricardo Means-Ybarra

There is a woman brushing her hair
with the poems of Neruda,
hair that curls around a song
songs like the howling in a starving desert.
Cats will not run on her roof
or rest there
among the half-smoked cigarettes, lemons
and roses that have exploded in the long night.

What if it won't leave,
this moon
with the talons of a stone owl
that weeps over the houses, leaving
a sneeze, a game of cards.

The Edge

Ricardo Means-Ybarra

His legs looked short off the surfboard
where they jagged into water from the fracture line
among fish and kelp bumping in the shadow
He let a good wave go by
not moving, the cliffs calm
wind flecking the skin
resting in their dense shade

He surfs here catching a lot of waves
every day,
we know his moves
sit in low folding chairs
the sand roughly tracked
our boundaries set
we unwrap sandwiches of tuna or peanut butter on wheat and rye
easily seen through plastic

On the surface he was staring
the water heavy with oxygen and light
clear to where the surge leaves the reef

I've heard stories of men jumping in
after mermaids or the swaying sea grass that reminds them
of their Irish fields,
the limp sails, the large white birds that never land

I watched him slide off
slip into water, so full

Tiger Fine Cut

Leonard Exner

Too sweet
Not much satisfaction
Not strong
Too fine
Like hair they said

So I swiped a package
From my father's store

Father didn't approve
Of swiping
Or tobacco chewing
By children

And both together was a deadly sin

Which made the climb
To the roof of the barn
Much more thrilling
With the Tiger Fine Cut safely hidden

And made us stuff
The tobacco in our cheeks
Like lop-sided chipmunks

And made us try to beat each other
With tobacco juice rivers
To the edge of the sloping roof

Over half a century's gone
And I'm sure Indiana's still there
But the barn's gone

And I'm stuck with what's between the ears

Xmas Tree

Mike Lawson

Looks more like an erector set.
It doesn't drink our water,
doesn't smell,
doesn't lean to one side.
It doesn't wiggle when you enter the room.

Every year, the same perfect isosceles,
the same ornaments,
the same blinking lights.
I'd love to burn it on New Years day,
but it's flame proof.

Poolside

Mike Lawson

Oiled and shining
she arches her knee
one drop of sweat
a sequin
works its way down
her chocolate thigh
into her white suit,
absorbed.

A brave boy
puffed up
stands in her sun
talks to her tits
she listens
but says nothing
he returns to his lounge,
dismissed.

Pretending not to notice
Mrs. French and the old woman in #212
swirl painted toes
and gnarled white feet
in the water at the three-foot marker.
    But when he rolls
on his stomach,
they share a smile.

To Marjorie, from your nurse

Jill Forman

You reach your hand up to me imploringly.
I kiss it, quick butterfly kisses.
Your face folds up—in pain? despair?
And you start to cry.

For some reason, I remember my grandmother.
She used to give butterfly kisses too,
With her eyelashes, not her lips, on my cheek.
It tickled.

I never told her I loved her, because I didn't.
Though I preferred her house to mine
Because she let me eat candy and read comic books,
And she had a TV.

Grandmother died of a stroke while sleeping
Peacefully, in her own bed and never knowing
The tubes, machines and needles of this place
That make your life hell.

So then what's the link I feel so strongly
Between an old woman many years gone
And you, pleading with your eyes, begging me
For—I don't know what?

old games

Rose Schumacher

when we used to play
cops and robbers
I said bang-bang;
when you died, you
didn't get up, some
nasty bullet I launched
blew you
away from me

out of the time when we played
philosopher, on the sweet grass hill
above the ocean, counting the derricks
and keeping track of the wine
just us

now I strike oil everytime I think of you,
right through the sandstone,
to where the pain is liquid.

Linda's Shower

Jodi Johnson

Nine months of flesh-swell
rounded her new—
she felt thirteen again,
afraid of her breasts.
The women gathered in a room
thick with mothering,
bounced their own babies on wide hips,
offered her presents.
When her nails tore the thin wrapping
and everyone blinked in the flash of cameras,
they felt again the shock of birth;
it quivered in them like water.

In the end, she will open her legs alone,
know, finally, what they could not give her,
what the doctor behind his green mask never learns.
If she had stepped just once today
into the blue-bellied June morning
she would have seen it everywhere,
in orange monkeyflower, witches' hair, chokeweed,
lupin, elderberry, tigerlily, sweetpea
wheat-pale, mustard-yellow, purple as thistles
sun-fingered, seed-heavy
quiet, single, blazing.

Hiking In The Grand Canyon

Jodi Johnson

At Santa Maria springs
we take off our shoes,
dangle feet in the water.
Their whiteness shocks—
salt-pale below brown ankles—
the white of our age:
concrete, sunlight-on-glass,
impeccable museum walls.
But here I wear color again:
trail dust on bare legs,
shoulders sun-reddened,
I see how muted shades of rock climb
perfectly, from the river's black line
to the white sky-rim.

* * *

I stand naked among rocks,
the river rising, white-maned.
Only a pale slice of sky—
the river owns all blue:
cornflower, december ice, glass-eye
on bald-faced colt.

The water is cold
I wash off eleven miles
of Hermit Trail. I think that if I wanted
I could wash clean through,

Run clear as the river.
It takes knees hips
ribs shoulders—my hair
floats, a yellow fan, thickens,
sinks. Only my face
sunlifted, survives. The river claims
blue of eyes.

* * *

The clear notes of coyotes
rise like moons.
We lie in the river-sand
and catch stars.
All day I watched night
growing on canyon walls,
spreading blue roots.
It covers me now as it always has.
In the dark, I forget
where my skin ends,
I feel a thousand others around me
rustling like grass.

A star falls and goes out.
Perhaps some night another will watch
our own earth,
shot from its orbit,
wearing hair of flames.

* * *

In the sharp light of dawn
we lie in sleep-worn hollows,
each separate as stones.

The stillness makes everything new—
leaves wave gold of first leaves;
the sky is a curve of eggshell.
In this light even my skin is transparent,
thin as a baby's.

I wake from ribs of earth
afraid to shatter the morning
with rising, each movement making rings
in tender air.

* * *

When we begin the climb home,
our bones feel immeasurably old.
We have been walking the floors of oceans,
sleeping with fossils.

Halfway up the canyon wall, I pause,
watching a red-shouldered hawk
circle below. The sheer cliff
tempts me to try my own wings.
I know now why once
we wore feathers,
danced to the sun;
why young girls smiled as priests
lifted their red hearts.

Crackington Haven

Jodi Johnson

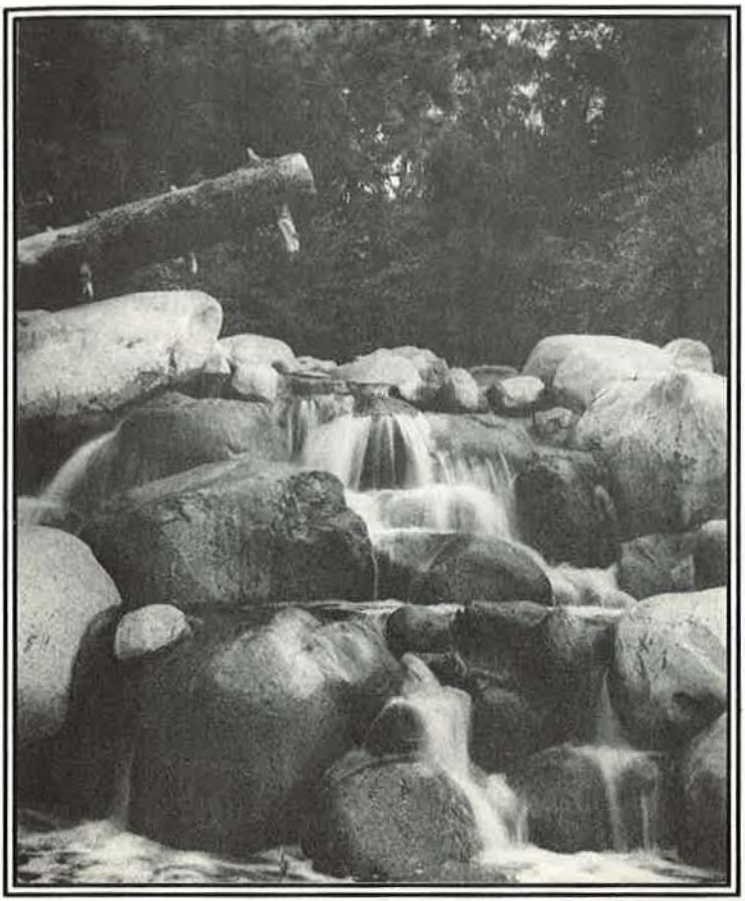
From where they lie on the bluff it seems distant, a tiny
glass-domed scene: a handful of dark-shining sand between
stiff arms of seawater, waves unrolling
over it in white lines, gulls shaking down
out of the sky like snow.

The downsloping yellow grass
is clean-stemmed, slick as horsehair under them. In her half sleep
she feels herself suddenly hanging in air and wakes,
letting the earth circle slowly out beneath her:
it is her old fear of throwing herself off edges.
Shadows in water, windy days, cars
pouring in even streams under a bridge—all
tugged at her. She felt it most last summer on their honeymoon,
standing on top of the Eiffel Tower,
the Champs du Mars at their feet
green and smooth as billiard cloth. All the people
kept to gravel paths. She threw two francs through the wire fence
watched them shine on the way down, thought of making
a surprising red flower on the grass.

She presses into the earth—
safe smell of heather, looks at him sleeping
with his arm flung over his eyes. She could walk
right off into the sea and he would never know. He would see
later where she had been, her shape
traced in the grass.

She thinks that even now
she might be spinning away from him,
cartwheeling the sky.

IV



Carol Muske: The Shape of Meaning

An Interview

Carol Muske received her M.A. in English and Creative Writing from San Francisco State University, in 1970. She has taught as a Poetry Instructor at The New School, and as a Visiting Professor at the University of California at Irvine, the University of Iowa's Writing Workshop program, the University of Virginia, and Columbia University

Ms. Muske has published two books of poetry, *Camouflage* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975) and *Skylight* (Doubleday and Co., 1981). She has recently completed a third manuscript called *Wyndmere.* Her poetry has been anthologized in *Eating the Menu: Poems 1970–74, The American Poetry Anthology,* and *The Pushcart Prize,* among others. Her publications in various fine magazines and journals are too numerous to list, but they include poems in *The New Yorker, The Nation, The American Poetry Review,* and *Antaeus* as well as reviews in *Parnassus.* She has been the recipient of many awards and writer's grants and served as Assistant Editor of *Antaeus* from 1971 to 1977.

Carol Muske lives in Studio City and she and her husband have recently had their first child. This interview is from a taped conversation with the poet at her home on November 15, 1983.

NORTHRIDGE REVIEW: How did your interest in poetry begin?

CAROL MUSKE: I have to give my mother, if not the credit, at least the blame for all this. She was a living fan of poetry. She has memorized and knows by heart pages and pages of poetry, particularly the Romantics and Pre-Romantics and I think all the worst of Tennyson. She knows most of *Paradise Lost;* it's really astounding. If you hear her recite you realize that in some ways she doesn't have an understanding of the intellection of the line, but she has a sense of something I was just thinking of recently which is called a kind of rhythmic envelope of the sounds. In other words she understands the sense, without understanding what the poetry means; she understands the emotional sense of the poem, and the flow, the drama, the dramatic phrasing, much better than she understands the overall ideas. But what came through to me so strongly was the power of the emotional meaning of the words. So, in order to make this all short, my mother was responsible for my original interest in poetry.

When I spoke of my mother and the rhythmic envelope, I wanted to mention at the same time the essay Hugh Kenner wrote recently in the *New York Times Book Review* about William Carlos Williams and the shape of meaning. Williams heard language in a different sense, the same way Frost talks about hearing the line, how you hear the sound of the line before the actual words take place. He said it's like a clothesline on which you hang the words as clothes. I think the shape of meaning is a brilliant phrase, and Kenner came up with it in speaking of Williams. I think in fact you can even talk about it as a new kind of construction in poetry. You can't call Williams really a free verse practitioner, as Kenner points out, but you can call him a sort of experimentalist in the line. Through Williams you can have a whole new understanding of, say, American poetry versus British poetry. Kenner makes the distinction that Americans will end their lines with a preposition, which often happens in Williams, and he says that the accumulation of these end-stop prepositions provides a kind of rising cadence, and that this can be distinguished from British speech, which tends to be broken into logical units. American speech isn't like that. I had a sense of the shape of meaning before I had a sense of the meaning itself by

listening to my mother recite. I felt that this was language of magnitude, of power, emotional power, and something more, the kind of rhetoric that could change people's lives. My mother had such an investment in it that I thought it must be important.

NR: How did your development as a writer progress after this beginning with a sense of the shape of meaning?

CM: When I was eleven I published a story in a magazine called *American Girl*—I think it was a Girl Scout publication—I was so proud. It was about a dog that was saved at the last minute by a veterinarian. The developing writer's sense of the world is probably fairly close to the soap opera kind of formula, the romance type thing that they market on TV. When you finally find that being a writer becomes real to you, you trust in your individual imagination and you no longer have to buy the formula. You find that the oddities and the luxuries of your own imagination are much more attractive and much more survival-oriented. Joan Didion wrote an essay about how we have to believe that the world is kind of a romantic plot, that it's a story, a narrative, and we have to organize our information in that way or we go crazy. We have to believe there is a beginning and a middle and an end, that it makes sense for a woman to leap off the sixty-eighth floor of a high-rise. She says we can't leave ourselves in the midst of despair. I think a poet is willing to accept despair. Once you accept despair as a writer, then you can move into all kinds of possibilities, what Keats called "negative capability." You learn to cope with chaos and absurdity, chaos and despair. I don't mean to sound like Woody Allen, but it really is like that; there isn't a guiding narrative, there isn't a structure in life and no one's writing a plot. The only meaning that you can find in life comes from your individual imagination and the way in which it constructs forms for itself. That imagination informs your writing, and, of course, there is a lot of arrogance, or impertinence in thinking of yourself as someone who can actually write down things that the world is interested in reading. That in itself is rather an absurdity, but you trust that because you are flying in the face of the way the conventional world sees itself, you have something to say.

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NR: When you write a poem, how, or where, do you start?
CM: Well, I know only one way to do it. I don't sit down, like some people I know, every single day and try to write. When you face the chaos of the world you evolve your own clock as a writer, and I believe that you have a schedule which may not be called a schedule in anybody else's book but you know what's accumulating, what's owed. It's like an accountant's ledger. I think there are all kinds of ways to write poetry. I think you can write in your head a lot; there's a lot going on that doesn't involve actually sitting down at a typewriter, putting words on a page. You can be composing in your head the way you might have music running through your head. You're sort of adding things on, a syntactical accretion that goes on daily. You can't do that with prose, at least I can't. Maybe that's because prose tends to be almost always, except for certain experimental fiction, a kind of narrative thrust. It does involve itself in time, it happens within time, you have to push it, and advance the plot. You have to keep moving, one, two, three; somebody gets up from the chair, they walk to the window, and they sit down. In poetry, of course, you move outside of time. I really believe that. I mean that I think that the moment of the poem is open. You step into the sky, that's all I can say; you move out into all possibility. And time doesn't exist. That's space, right. The difference between poetry and prose is time and space. That's clear, I think. Therefore I think it's possible to write poetry in all kinds of different ways, but prose always has to involve itself in writing.

NR: Are you working on another book of poems?
CN: Yes. I have a third book of poems called *Wyndmere*. I have that done.

NR: What role does autobiography play in your writing?
CM: I think that autobiographies are important for people who are going to write autobiographies, but I really react to a tendency, a contemporary tendency, which places the fact from which an imaginative event occurs as the most important thing. It absolutely undercuts the transformational part of the imagination, which is such that it is meant to work on it's material and change it. You realize that when you might return to the place where

something happened and you see this very meager ground upon which the imagination worked. Then you see that the eye of the creative person is really the landscape. It's not what appears before it but the eye itself that's the transformational power, that that person looking at something makes it into something else. I use autobiography like everyone else does, but I try to transform it, I hope I make it into something else.

But I'm a great believer in letting the mystery of this alone. I don't like talking too much about process. Some people do. I find it mildly disturbing because I think that it all happens, for me anyway, without knowledge. All I know is that something will strike me and I will begin to see behind the words to the truth. That's what I was talking about before, the shape of meaning. As an example, I've been working on a poem in this new manuscript, and what I was working with, speaking of blending biography and poetic invention, was some stories my mother told me about Wyndmere, which is a little town in North Dakota. My mother told me lots of stories about herself growing up in this town, and stories about her father—my grandfather—who is what was called a separator man. He was a man who worked on a threshing crew and his job was the cliche, separating the wheat from the chaff. And then he got his own steam engine thresher. He started threshing around other areas, and became finally very rich and powerful. But he always was the separator man—that was his whole life. I tried to write a true story about this man. I wrote a piece of prose that I was going to use as a sort of introduction to the book, and it was God-awful. It was God-awful because what I tried to do was to recreate the exact facts of his life and then blend it into a nice little pastiche of verse, sort of, but it didn't work. Then I tried to fool around with the notion of my life and his life. Finally what I did was I cut it all down, sort of separating the wheat from the chaff, cut it all down into a kind of Williamesque verse, very short three line stanzas, maybe four or five word lines. Very truncated, very stark, and just a blend of "his life" and the meaning of his life, and what I got for a context of his life, which was that separating became his whole life. In the process of growing rich and powerful he separated himself from his wife, who died young and heartbroken in the stories, separated himself from his children, separated himself from himself. So what

it became was just this very long, lean poem about a man who denied himself much and in fact lived a cliche on one level literally and figuratively. He separated himself from everything in his life and ended up with the chaff, and there's a line in the poem, "No one to witness how what was taken away stayed with him."

NR: In some of your poems, I'm thinking of War Crimes *especially, love occurs in what are often painful or disheartening circumstances.*

CM: Oh, yes, in *Skylight* in particular. The poem called *War Crimes* is one in which love is equated in a way with torture, but there's another poem there also, called *Chivalry*, which is the flip side of *War Crimes*, and I'd rather stay in the long run with that as a statement of love as a kind of suffering. What *Chivalry* says is that although men and women suffer a great deal with each other and because of each other, suffering is worth it, and not in a masochistic sense but as a sort of trial by fire. Men and women have been so alienated by all the forces which conspire to keep them separate that love, the love that men and women have for each other, becomes the only way they have of discovering who they are beyond gender, beyond role, beyond the social definition of them as human beings. *Chivalry* is a poem in which a man is carrying his dead wife to the gnat, in Benares, to be burned, and his love for her allows him to place her in the flames. That seems to me a real act of reverence, and though it is born in suffering and, in a sense, dies in suffering—it dies in flame—I think that's as close as I come to believing in a love that is also a reverence. In other words, I think we're still evolving, I think men and women are still learning how to love each other. And they are very willing to suffer in the course of that discovery. Now, of course, in my new book, I feel very differently, I'm much more exuberant and vibrant about love. The difference in terms of its view on love between *Skylight* and *Wyndmere* is the difference between the real suffering of self-consciousness and a letting go.

NR: Several of your poems deal with motherhood in one way or another. Coral Sea *is about your mother, and* Birth *and* Hyena *deal with a kind of fear of motherhood.*

CM: *Coral Sea* is a poem in which I wrote about a dream that I had. I dreamt that I was in my mother's womb. I really felt that I could see through the walls of the womb just prior to birth and I didn't want to be born, pretty much the situation of the poem. I could feel the coral sea, the womb, around me, the atmosphere was the lustrous pink of the inside of a shell in the sun. I saw a very voluptuous beach scene, my mother walking barefoot; I could almost feel her feet on the sand. That feeling was very important to me; that poem is much more a dream and location than a straightforward description of my thoughts. I felt then that it was possible for me to imagine having a child myself. It took me a long time to come to the moment where I could accept myself as a mother and not a daughter forever. You finally move into the belief that you are also in line to give birth. I didn't believe that for a long time. I thought I should just be free to have my life and do all the obvious things people do in the twentieth century; I thought that having a child would be an obstacle to my freedom. Now I feel as if the solar system has been shifted, and she's now the sun. I just never would have thought that possible before. And I think maybe you're right about there being a fascination with the idea of motherhood in my poetry but it was also a kind of circling or hovering around an ideal without giving in to confront it. Now I've written some poems in the new book that deal more directly with having a child.

NR: Do you find that maybe the element of fear won't be there now in your poetry?
CM: The biggest fear I suppose anybody has is that the child should be like you. You feel, especially now, at this time of history when the world seems so limited anyway in terms of its future, that the limitations of your own personality somehow or the bad karma you've accumulated in your life would affect the child negatively. I had to overcome those feelings, though they may still be there in my fears for her.

NR: In Her Story: Leaving Eden, *you speak of conception as "a language we have yet to translate." I thought that was an excellent*

way to capture the inexplicableness of the thing, the fact that it is there and we could possibly understand it but we don't yet know how.

CM: Right. We don't, we have no way to locate ourselves, and we come to the world disoriented. There's a wonderful line by the poet Jon Anderson, who said, "I come out of a cloud falling into a cloud." We just sort of move between two ignorances. But it is extraordinary that we can spend so much time on the effects of our lives without understanding the causes; we are at war with ourselves without understanding where the peace in ourselves comes from, where the great beauty comes from. We seem to have inherited all that without understanding the great miracle of it. However, as women have become more articulate about themselves we certainly are uncovering the mystery. It's just starting. And women will talk more about what I am talking about now, the feelings of communication.

NR: In an interview in Poetry Miscellany, *you said that you felt language was inadequate, that it keeps trying to say what it cannot say, and that the poet's preoccupation is with the way language fails us.*

CM: Poetry is the attempt to say something perfectly, to say it right, and of course you never can say it right. Poets do fail, but by virtue of the attempt, poetry goes on. One continues to try, to believe that maybe one day, if I'm lucky, if the muse touches me, I will be able to say what it is that I want to say; I'll be able to sum up my life. There's a play by Ionesco, in which a character in the play kills another character with the word knife. I love that idea, the idea that language can become a living object. And if one could write a poem so powerful it could change the world, if one believes that one can, one will keep writing, and I think that's what everyone always hopes—that one could write a poem in which the word "light" would illuminate the room. It's impossible, of course, but it keeps you writing.

NR: What approaches do you take when you are teaching poetry to students in a workshop?

CM: You have to figure out who you are working with. Some

students are very skilled already by the time you get them. They know how to write a poem. There's no point really in assigning a sestina every week or a rondel, but they might have trouble finding their language or finding their theme, so you might concentrate on that. Then it might be just the opposite. Students who have every knowledge of what they want to say, but nothing to say it with. I also tend to stay with my own obsessions, with what I'm really thinking about at the moment. I feel that it's much more productive to deal with whatever's on my mind at the time. It's more stimulating for them and it's more stimulating for me. I think there is so much a student can learn by simply keeping up with current trends and thoughts in poetry. And that's why I tell them that they must read other poets, contemporary poets as well as past ones, if they are going to be writers themselves. There's no substitute for reading other writers as a tool for learning about your own writing and about poetry in general.

NR: Did serving as Assistant Editor at Antaeus *help you with your own poetry?*

CM: This was a tremendous learning experience for me. I had worked earlier with Daniel Halpern at the New School in New York where I had a class in editing. He was a brilliant editor and he taught that art with conviction about what was "good" and why. There were staggering amounts of manuscripts to sift through at *Antaeus,* sometimes one thousand a month, and you learned very quickly to develop your eye and ear for poetry. It speeds up the whole process of evolving a critical stance towards your own poetry as well as that of other writers. I just don't think that you can write well unless you learn to read well too—you have to be able to make judgments about other people's work and then learn to apply those standards to your poetry. It frightens me how everyone wants to be published, to be a great poet, and yet they are unwilling to read. The University of Pacific Press had a prize called the International Poetry Forum, which was the publication of your book. What was interesting was that when they would publish your book, they would publish maybe five-hundred copies, which sounds ridiculously small, but that's a standard run. After publishing five-hundred copies, they would

sell one-hundred-fifty, maybe two hundred copies. Three fifty would be a lot. Meanwhile, the submissions to the International Poetry Forum would number in the thousands. There's a certain discrepancy there. Everybody wanting to be published, but not willing to read other poets. That's terrifying. And in a sense this has been fostered by the workshop ethic. I'm a real believer in the workshops so this is a kind of heresy, but I do think that they have fostered the idea that anybody can write about anything and everybody has to publish. Not good. Everybody should spend a certain amount of time reading and studying one's peers and then one's masters.

NR: Do you enjoy giving readings?
CM: Yes, I do usually. What happens is that if I'm doing a new work I really enjoy it. One doesn't like to read one's own poetry over and over again. And recently I've had lots of new material. I had a big problem at the beginning. I just wasn't aware of how fast I was talking, and in my early readings I would become aware about half way through the readings of this mystified expression on the faces of the people in the audience. I had no idea it was all like a jetstream going by. Finally someone said, "You're reading too fast, nobody's getting anything." It's hard enough to get anything at a poetry reading, the ear isn't attuned to that dense a line, but when someone speaks very rapidly it's almost impossible. My terror at the beginning really accounted for the speed in the presentation. Now it's easier. When you first get up to read and you see the audience you realize that you will be reading to these people. That can be very frightening. Oddly enough that was just the thing that helped me, as well as the thing that terrified me. The idea that these people are listening became an aid as I started looking at them individually, reading to individual faces rather than seeing a blur of judges. The best thing you can do is to provide an atmosphere of intimacy and once you can do that and relax, I think you've got it made. Also, if you can create the moment of writing the poem, which of course is impossible, but if you can recreate the feelings that attended that, you will, just without even trying, give a very moving reading. Lawrence said that poetry was an act of attention, and I really think that's true.

We have to reorder all our expectations of language to listen to a poetry reading

NR: Have you ever, when you're reading a poem, noticed something different about the poem or something you hadn't seen?
CM: Oh, sure. Galway Kinnell is a famous person for editing as he reads. He reads with a pen. As he reads, he edits, makes little marks in the margin, drops lines. If you were following the text you could see it happening. I'm not that extreme but one of the best ways to test a poem, to hear the clunkers, to hear the lines that don't work, is to read them with the power of conviction and hear them fall out. What I try to do is hear it in my head before I put down the line, and the final test is actually saying it to an audience.

NR: How do you deal with lineation in your poems? I noticed some of them have very long lines, and sometimes there are one word lines.
CM: I think in *Camouflage* I was doing a lot of imitating of Merwin and Simic. I was trying to leave the white space in the poem a lot. I thought what was unsaid was as important as what was there.

NR: I noticed many more line and stanza breaks, and empty spaces, there than in Skylight.
CM: *Camouflage* is a group of poems by someone who is very self-conscious and undeveloped poetically; it was a flawed work. *Camouflage* in particular was a learning book for me. Auden said you can't talk of anything but influences until the age of forty and I really believe that. It's arrogant—there's that word again—but also it's distorting. I think it's self-limiting. You have too much emphasis on the idea of your own voice. I think that's happened a lot in writing programs, and I think it takes away from your ability to serve as an apprentice for a while. In *Camouflage* it was important to me to understudy the sense of those people, to understand how they worked as poets. Just now I'm beginning to see

maybe what I am in terms of a writer. *Skylight* was better put together because I do think as you develop as a writer you discover your theme. In *Skylight* I really found my theme, and I think that turned the poetic line more urgent; therefore it didn't matter so much to me whether they were long lines or short lines. They seemed to be broken by the need to say what I had to say, in just that rhythm. Some of them are formal poems and the forms govern the line breaks. *Fireflies* is a sonnet and there's a sestina there somewhere. Those poems are governed by the formal structure. But other than that, structure seems to come from just the urgency of the speech in the poem itself. And again there's no word for that except perhaps one calls it the shape of meaning. It is the rhythm that seems to be dictated by something other than free verse, which really isn't free. It's very cadenced. I think it was H.D. or Pound who said of the Imagist poem that it was "the rhythms of the mind thinking." That's as close as I can get in *Skylight*." Now in *Wyndmere* the poems are much more prosy, I suspect because I am working on the novel at the same time as writing that book of poems. Also, I think, in dealing with so many subjects that mention my mother's life and so on, in the autobiography that you brought out, the necessity for having a denser, longer line was paramount and really was necessary to me. But then I admire the short poem very much, so I will on occasion push myself, as I said in the poem *The Separator*, back to what I feel is the short Williams-like line. I love that truncated line and wish I could write it more. I really think that, since poetry is more than anything else the art of condensation, it's important to get that. What I'm aiming for in my poetry is to get to the point where I can write the great short poem.

NR: Do you feel that a poem must be a certain length to be successful?

CM: I feel that short or long makes no difference. The poem will say just what it has to say in the time it has to. If it's saying more or saying less it's not a question of the size but the question of intensity of the poetic gifts, or how closely the poet is in touch with his or her subject. Therefore you can have a poem by Dickinson which is six lines and it will outlast anything ever

written by some of our windier poets. Whitman and Dickinson are the two influences in American poetry, the two traditions. He is the extrovert, narrative tradition and she's the introspective, lyric muse. I think both of them seemed to take just as long as they needed to say what they had to say. Whitman took forever, and she was like a Zen telegraph. She could radio the absolute distillate of thought. That's what it is, you have to be able to get the long poem into the short poem.

NR: You mentioned that some of the poems in Skylight were formal poems. Do you experiment much with form?
CM: I was doing more on *Skylight.* I don't think I have as many formal poems in *Wyndmere.* I think it's important for poets to know their forms. Obviously, if you're going to be a practitioner of an art, it's a good thing to know a lot about that art, as much as you can. I've heard about the new formalism and a return to form in writing, but I don't believe that's as important as simply knowing about form and finding your own compromise with structure, finding the way to say what it is you have to say and finding its rhythms. I don't think it can hurt anyone to know how to write a sonnet or a villanelle.

NR: I really enjoyed your use of form, especially in Fireflies, *in that it moved very naturally and the rhyme was so unobtrusive. I had to stop and count the number of lines and look for a rhyme pattern before it dawned on me that it was a sonnet.*
CM: That's good. That's presumably what it's supposed to do. It was very hard for me to get that poem right. The rhythm is a little off, Donald Justice told me. He asked me if I had done it on purpose! But I had a lot of trouble imposing the form on the poem. I felt the words wanted to go somewhere else and wouldn't stay in line, they wouldn't march in columns. Every once in a while you see a poem like Elizabeth Bishop's *One Art,* a beautiful poem about the art of losing. There you see form and content perfectly aligned. It's rare when that happens, and it always intimidates one away from using form. The form requires perfection because the form is flawless, because it is absolutely set, and in a sense perfection is horrible. It requires the content to be the same, and

that's almost impossible. You have an unholy wedding of the two. The most flawless poems, flawless in terms of rhythm and meter and formal content, are often the most hideous. I'm much more interested now in the type of form that Williams availed himself of, whatever that was. You come back to poems like *The Poem for Elsie,* which is a strange, tormented, exuberant poem. It's hard to tell what it's about. It ends with the lines, "No one to witness/No one to drive the car." You're absolutely puzzled by those lines, and yet, there's that engine of exuberance pushing and pulling it forward. Exuberance and outrage, I should say, is pushing the poem forward. The meaning overcomes those moments of confusion, and in fact they become power, you *feel* you know what they mean.

NR: If we could return for a moment to teaching poetry, is there something in particular that you try to teach or try to convey to a student?

CM: The only thing one can do, as Roethke said, is to insinuate poetry, you don't really teach it. So you tend to talk about what is interesting you at a particular time. I guess what I try to teach is what I was taught, which is that one has to take oneself seriously as a poet. It means one has to take one's life seriously, one has to learn from one's life the lessons of literature. It sounds very pompous in a way, but it's a hard lesson to learn, and I think it's absolutely necessary. That's what I try to teach, that the passion which is part of your life, the passion which is unexpressed, usually is the passion which influences poetry. I try to teach that and the importance of being humble. One should also be humble about it because if you read, and you have to read, but if you go back and read everything you have to read in order to write poetry, it's hard to take up a pen again. But it does teach humility. So on the one hand you have to take yourself very seriously and I teach that, and also that you have to take yourself with a grain of salt because you're going to be an apprentice for most of your life, probably *all* your life, in the face of great literature. In the end, it's all creative reading, not creative writing. The best thing a student can do is to hole up in a library for a long time.

NR: Are there poets you have worked with in particular that you've enjoyed or learned something from?

CM: Sure. My first teacher was Kathleen Fraser, who is still in San Francisco, teaching at San Francisco State. She was really tremendously important to me. She was a touchstone for my work. She was a person who believed in her life in a way that allowed it to become poetry—what we were talking about before—and allowed her life to become transformed into poetry, and her courage in that conviction inspired me. I took a course from her which was an extension course taught in the summer at San Francisco State. Then I decided to apply to graduate school, and I did, and was accepted, and went on from there. She was really my first inspiration as a teacher. She's a friend now and I still talk to her and see her and am much interested in her work. I mentioned Halpern. I also had teachers like Kay Boyle who is a fiction writer at San Francisco State, Dan Rice, Mark Linenthal who is a very good critic. Later I don't think I had so many actual pedagogical teachers as I had people who write whom I learned from. Some became friends, some not. But it did help me to teach with people like Charles Simic, to teach with people like Mark Strand at Columbia. The fallout of their gifts is tremendous. There's something in the air, and this again is what draws people to writing programs if they're smart, to take part in that kind of intellectual fermentation, to breathe in that elixir. It helped me a lot just sitting in the classes of other teachers at Columbia. But I sort of ended my formal studying time with the class I took at the New School which was a class in editing. The critics can teach you much beyond that point. I pay pretty close attention to what's being written critically and try to keep abreast of all that. I read *Parnassus* for that reason, a really good critical journal. I keep mentioning Hugh Kenner's essay on Williams, which I found tremendously helpful. A piece like that is worth, in many ways, ten workshops of listening to myself speculate. If I had that ammunition, the ammunition of Kenner's thought, to go into the workshop with earlier, it would provide the kind of light by which I'd understand the students' work better and my own work better. Therefore I think it's imperative that I read criticism. There are certain essays that have been landmarks for me. I think there's

been some bad criticism, there's no doubt about that. There hasn't been anything really good written about women poets in general. Most of it's been either reactionary or defensive in some way. I wrote a review of Adrienne Rich in *Parnassus*. I found it very hard to write because there's no real critical tradition by which you can talk about a woman's life and her poetry.

NR: Do you see women poets as a school of their own?
CM: I don't know about a school but there are camps forming. Certainly there's Adrienne Rich's point of view, which is very radical and yet, I think, very enriching, not to make a pun. She does provide a kind of point of departure. She's willing to be outrageous, in a sense, and that allows women to take chances that maybe they wouldn't take. I think it is true that literature is dominated by males. They control publishing, they control most of the literary journals, they control the mechanics, the machinery of publication. There tend to be obviously more male poets than there are women poets. Women don't necessarily have to organize and become a school, as you say, but I think that it's worthwhile to talk about concerns which are purely feminine and maybe femininist. That's the way politics fits into your life. What I was saying about women suddenly articulating their feelings about a child and the womb, why that's astounding, that is political in the purest sense. That means that we can be conversant with a mystery, and only women can provide us with that information. Why haven't we had that after centuries of writing? Well, we haven't had it because men have controlled the business. Then you see how an aesthetic accrues, what's important to men becomes the determining aesthetic—the father-son conflict, the attitude toward women which is male. That is the necessity for writing in a female aesthetic. It won't be necessary when it evens out, when we balance the aesthetic somehow. When we balance the statement of who owes what to the muse—when the muse is neither male nor female—then we won't have to worry about it. But till then, women have to fill in the other side of the ledger. And if it takes a kind of reactionary politics, if it takes an Adrienne Rich to do that, it's OK. Just look at the number of women poets who are teaching at universities—not many. It's true everywhere, it's true at Columbia, it's true in almost every creative writing

program, there are very few women. There's been a lot of pressure by affirmative action recently on these programs to get their acts together and to start hiring women, but it's only because of that pressure. You don't know how many times I've been interviewed for a job, and they said, "We really need a woman poet." On the one hand you say, OK, fine, because I know myself I'm as good as my compatriots who are male, but on the other hand it is insulting. But it's the reality right now. They do need women poets. Once there is a balance it won't have to be an issue.

NR: Is there any advice you would give to young poets writing now?
CM: Don't listen to any advice from older poets! The idea of advice is truly awful, but I think that one thing that is really important is to discipline your reading, to set up a kind of path. Set up a sense of history in your reading, and then set up a sense of history in your own life, the history of your imagination, so that you can develop your own themes.

NR: In an interview in Poetry Miscellany *you said that you believed people were born with their themes.*
CM: I really believe that. When I speak of the history of the imagination, I mean as in Jung's autobiography. He wrote a book called *Memories, Dreams and Reflections.* Someone requested that he write his autobiography, and instead he wrote the autobiography of his imagination. We all ought to do that. And in doing that, in going back and evolving the history of your imagination, in getting it clear to yourself, you discover your themes. They are set very early. You are born with them, in a sense, and by born with them I mean they evolve in the first few years of your life. I really believe the discovery of themes is the most important thing that happens to a young poet. It's not the discovery of voice, it's not the discovery of style, it's the discovery of themes that move you, whatever they are.

On a scooter for J.D.

Monica D. Mayall

It was raining inside her head.
Nothing was clear clouds and clouds, clouds and mist. it was grey, many shades, some like flannel, some like shadows at dusk. She walked to the window and gazed at the black asphalt below, it was raining out there too. She thought she might turn on a light as the cloud cover was making it very dark, in her room. though it was only a little after three. but the light wasn't important. It wasn't as if it mattered to anyone. The street traffic was light. some baglady the neighborhood owned was out there, rain pouting on her, in a floral print dress. Today was the anniversary of James Dean's death. that wouldn't mean a whole hell of a lot to a lot of people, considering it was thirty-two years ago and JamesDeanfilms weren't even playing at revival houses anymore. It was only important to her because he bore a resemblance to her lover.yes lover, a lover, this time she had loved him. not an affair, a onenightstand or a relationship she really couldn't remember the name or face of.

all the justifying was done, all the condolences made that couldn't explain friends and flowers personal messages read and a tremendous turn—out

Still she sat in a half-dark room on a wooden chair hoping she would die.

'Oh come now, did he really mean that much to you?' She heard her mother's voice echo in the sparsely furnished flat.

He was watching her dance, i pretended not to notice, tried to loose myself in the music, but i could feel his eyes following me. i glanced up. and I was
caught
if he ever knew, he already did, if i ever showed it, he laughed at how at how obvious she was.
a phone conversation
she had overheard as a child,
HER FATHER: Yes, she's out of town, sure we can meet tomorrow yes the kid won't expect me 'till six I've been wanting to see the new James Bond one okay . . . after or before 'lunch'?
he laughed
one of the only times she clearly remembered her father's laughter
HER FATHER: Okay great see ya then love ya
bye

What was fidelity? If if it had lasted, would it have?, but then . . .
He held me, tight, not wanting to let her go
'I might just have to marry you' looking straight into my eyes
'Yeah right' was my off-hand response

he'd never lied to her
"to love and cherish until"
until someone else came along?
SHUT UP she screamed aloud SHUT UP! The voices in her head shattered—she scared herself.
Well so what.
Big fuckin' deal. she could make absolutely no difference now anyway. She lit a cigarette and watched the match go out in the empty ashtray, the way, the way it yielded to the flame, the way the flame contorted the fragile cardboard, and turned it to black, the way the flame burned itself out when it had no more to burn. That was her, she wondered how much longer her cardboard facade, the 'temple' (as her mother had called it), the body—her sanity, the inhabitant of her body—would hold up this would be her offering to the gods? ha a sacrificial ritual The Beatles' "All you need is love" Now there was no love he had

been killed WHAT GOD!?
Killed by some son ofabitch drunk while turn i n g left a green, blood red blood for that dRUNK peaceful green arrow—the nightair breezed through his hair as he pulled out , , , soft warm midsummer midnight air Then nothing.
if only it had been her

and that blind murderer was somebody's beloved son. and He he, green arrow now turned to red, he was in the street curled up like he'd gone to sleep there
there her heart went to sleep She smiled bleakly to herself
her whole body hurt at
the memory, as if acid was freezing into liquid ice inside her and clouding her brain escape . . . eScaPe , , , you must escAPE gentle floating fairies whispered around her head—inside her head DAMN you voices! DAMN YOU! aloud,breaking the c i r c u lar pointless silence. She crushed the cigarette in that ashtray so roughly it sent the ashtray crashing to the floor.
very very methodically, very very gently, she rose and drew herself a very h o t steamy bath

i stopped dancing and walked over to him, the floor, the other figures moving to the music
disappeared he put a hand on each of my shoulders and pulled me in we kissed warm and soft
she pulled her sweatshirt over her head and unbuttoned her jeans, the steam rose around her the bathroom door was open

i couldn't hear the music anymore i pulled back and looked deep into his striking, rebellious brown eyes the defiance i'd expected wasn't there, only warmth that surrounded me, came from within me, defences fell away and i saw the sadness there

l o w ering herself into the too hot, scorching wa ter she melted, relaxed every tired sore muscle in her body her hair wet and stringy, her eyes closed. She imagined the red blood red flowing out of her veins, pouring over the stark white porcelain, dying her

hair. Suddenly fire roared in from the doorway the Match! the match she thought was out. Orange and yellow and Red so much red too much She sank further into the tub It roared, she never really thought fire would roar and green What was all that green–fire had no green, it was the wallpaper curling, scorching, just as the match had done falling from the walls

and the acid burned

in her stomach tremendous pressure pushing her down- deep she fell dropped through amazing depths of nothingness falling and drifting and floating then falling falling

the water was now cold she sat up, opened her eyes climbed out of her porcelain tomb, toweled off and slipped into the warm covers of her bed

alone.

The Closing Door

Rachael Goldman

What I remember most about moving was the echo that sounded as Dad went through the house, now empty of all the essentials which had made it home, and shut each door. Speaking to no one, he said, "This'll hold the heat in until the new people move in."

Peg was just a kid then, no more than five or six. She stood next to Mom, holding her hand and crying softly. Mom said nothing, did nothing. Her face was blank, her eyes vague and empty.

She'd worked hard for weeks to pack up the house. Two days before, while going through the attic, she came across an old scrapbook. I'd seen the attic door open and ventured up the dark padded steps. I caught sight of her sitting on an old trunk, a moth-eaten, silky gown hanging behind her. From where I stood, hidden from her view by boxes piled high against a wall, I could see the dust covering her Levis and the loose strands of her fair hair clinging to her damp cheeks. I watched for a long time as she thumbed obliviously through the yellowed pages, at times softly giggling, at times sighing and running her gentle hand over the page.

I snuck quietly back down the steps thinking how beautiful she was and wondering if I'd ever be able to tell her in words how close to her I felt in those few minutes. She had spoken barely a word when she came down from the attic and for the time we remained there in that half-naked house, she was silent.

Dad spoke optimistically about California, his new job, our new life. "Just think, Mike, it's warm all year round. We'll be able to throw the ball around in the middle of January." I was ten and knew that I couldn't cry around him so I smiled at his words, shook my head in what I hoped resembled optimistic affirmation,

and felt deep within me the dreary sadness which seemed to permeate the very rooms of our house.

The moving men had the truck packed and were on their way. Mom stood mute in the middle of the living room, absentmindedly clutching Peg's hand, staring at the wall in front of her, at the fireplace, where the family portrait with its smiling faces had hung.

Dad slowly walked towards her, gently squeezed her shoulder. "Ready?" he whispered. She reached down, pulled Peg's little body into her arms and hugged it close as she walked out the front door.

Dad looked at me where I stood, leaning against a wall. "Ready to go, son?" Suddenly I knew that it didn't matter that I was the best first baseman in the league or that Joey and I had worked so hard planning a biology experiment for class. 'C'mon Mike," he said gently. I wanted to shout "No!" I remember wishing that I were Peg, that Dad would walk over, pick me up in his strong arms and carry me out. Instead, I pushed myself bodily away from the wall towards the front door.

Silently, heads down, we stepped into the porch where a chill wind attacked us. "We won't have any of this cold in California, son. You'll love it!"

I turned my back to his words and the front door, which he was slowly closing. The wind shook the branches of the tree that I first learned to climb. I glanced at the barespot in the grass that had always served as home plate.

Then Dad finally, firmly shut the front door and turned the key in the lock. It was that sound that filled my ears; above the roar of fright, confusion, sadness, above the cold wind and the laughter of my friends playing up the block, the vacant thud of that closing door was what I heard. It crashed and echoed through my body and soul. It sounded like heavy footsteps in an empty marble hallway—ominous, distant, cold. As I look back, I see that the echo was nothing more than the fears of a young boy leaving behind all the things he's ever known and loved, and going into a new world which he really had little inclination to explore. But I find, even now, I'm still apt to leave doors ajar.

The Queen of the Prom

Scott Memmer

That morning at the stereo store business was slow. My co-workers and I sat at the front counter and watched the traffic pass on the street, listened to the screeching of brakes and the squealing of tires, and by noon only one or two customers had come into the store to buy anything. There were no major purchases.

It was autumn. October, to be exact. The sun slanted down through the eucalyptus trees across the street, and the air, filled with dust and haze and smog and whatever else makes October Southern California skies the way they are, filtered the sunlight and hid the San Gabriel mountains to the north, so that we seemed to be in our own little place in the world. We sat on the creaking wooden stools with the broken backs, smoked cigarettes, and listened to rock-and-roll. One or two hookers passed on the street, and we all pointed and laughed.

About two o'clock an older couple came in. They looked around at the walls and the displays and the equipment, and, frightened, retreated to a corner. I allowed them the time any good salesman knows he must allow his customers to adjust to their new surroundings (I allow old people an extra ten or twenty seconds), and then I moved in upon them. They were in their early sixties, a wizened and curious couple, the wife a smallish, slightly graying woman, the husband a short, angular, fidgety man. The woman leaned into her husband, taking hold of his elbow every now and then, and once or twice she tried to speak over the music but then apparently thought better of the idea. The husband patted his wife on the arm and pointed out the lights and buttons on the various pieces of stereo gear as if he knew what he was talking about. He didn't; I could tell. Didn't know a thing about stereo equipment.

My kind of customer. I approached them cautiously, circling them three or four times with the feather duster in my hand as if I really cared whether the shit was dusty or not. I didn't. After about thirty seconds the husband called out to me—"Young man!"—and I lifted my eyelids and bore in upon my prey.

Without going into all the details, I made the sale. It was easy. They lay down and I took all their money. Well, not all of it: I left enough so they could get gas to make it home. I'm a nice guy.

Actually they were pretty nice folks (reminded me a bit of my own folks). Halfway through the sale they invited me over for dinner (a good sign but an invitation I always refuse), and within an hour of the time they'd walked in the door, I had them up at the front counter, writing out an invoice for twelve hundred dollars. My fellow predators perched themselves on their stools and craned their necks to see what I'd done. They tried to look bored, but I know they weren't. I wrote out the invoice carefully, taking pains to check my figures on the calculator two or three times so as not to screw myself out of any commission; then I left my customers alone with the cashier and scooted to the back room to gather up their equipment, several co-workers in tow.

"You really boned them, Miller!"

"What of it?"

"Jesus Christ, you put the wood to them!"

"That's why they pay me the big bucks."

"Not a penny off. Not *one* penny off. Did you see that invoice, Perkins?—not a single, goddam penny off!"

"I saw it. It's enough to make a person sick."

"Full price," Reynolds groaned. "He even charged them for the goddam cartridge. You should be ashamed of yourself, Miller."

"Oh, I am," I said, "I am. Now will one of you social reformers help me with this box?" I lifted the box from the top of its stack and eased it down to them.

"Don't you have any principles, Miller? Don't you feel the least little guilty over givin' those old folks the bone?"

"They don't pay commission salespeople to feel guilty," I said.

I lifted the other box and handed it down to them.

"You make too much goddam money, Miller."

"You're right," I said. "And, you know, I feel terrible about it; I

really do. Someday I intend on giving all my money to charity."

"Christ!"

"Somethin' tells me 'someday' is a long way off," Perkins said.

"You know what your problem is, Miller?" Reynolds chimed in. "It's your goddam innocent-boy looks. You look like a friggin' sixteen-year-old."

"I wouldn't hurt a fly," I said, batting my eyelashes.

"Yeah," Perkins said, "but only cuz a fly don't have no money."

I loaded the equipment onto the dolly and wheeled it out of the stockroom to the front counter, my admirers in tow. My customers had concluded their business with the cashier, and were waiting eagerly to receive their equipment.

"Where's your car?"

They pointed outside (give me some credit folks), then walked out and led me to their Buick.

After I'd loaded the gear into the trunk of the Buick, Mr. Hale offered me a tip (which I refused), a second invitation to dinner (which I again politely declined); then they got in. They rolled down the electric windows to say goodbye, and I reminded them to be sure to call if they had any problems with the equipment. Mr. Hale started the car and drove off. I rolled the dolly around the corner and back into the store.

For the next couple of hours my chronies heaped as much abuse upon me as possible. They tongue-lashed me for being an unfeeling capitalist (a charge I did not deny), and swore that the next old decrepit couple to come through the door would not get within ten feet of me. They were right: no couple came.

I took their flak with as much good humor as possible until, around, five o'clock, the store began to fill with people, and they got off their pimply butts and made themselves almost useful. I took my little brown notebook out of my back pocket and calculated how much I'd made on the sale. Not a bad haul. Yessir, they were my kind of people.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," the cashier said.

"I'm horribly ashamed," I said. I laid my head upon the counter and wept dry tears.

The phone rang and the cashier answered it.

"For you, Bill."

She handed me the phone.

"This is Bill," I said.

No response. I waited a few seconds.

"This is Bill."

After a pause: "Is this Bill?"

"Yes it is."

"Bill?"

"Yes?"

"Bill?"

"Yes?"

"This is Mr. Hale."

"Oh . . . hello, Mr. Hale."

"The man who bought the stereo?"

"Yes, Mr. Hale . . . . How are you?"

"I can't get any sound."

"Pardon me?—What'd you say?"

"I said, 'I can't get any sound.'"

"That's what I thought you said."

"Nothing. Not a peep."

"Do you have it plugged in?"

"Yes I have it plugged in."

After three more minutes of this sort of conversation, I decided to make a housecall. Normally I don't make housecalls, but this, I sensed, was a delicate situation. I got off at five-thirty; and, crimpers and strippers and pliers in hand, headed off for Glendora.

There was plenty of light left. It was early October, and we'd not yet changed back from daylight-savings-time. On the way out I listened to the Dodgers lose a playoff game in Montreal. The drive took about twenty-five minutes. I found their trailer court and parked on a sidestreet. With the voice of Vin Scully ringing in my ears, I made my way across the asphalt to their door.

"Hello, Mr. Miller. Won't you come in?"

I entered, shutting the door behind me.

"We still can't get it to work," the wife said. "Can't even get static."

"We'll get it fixed," I said.

She led me through the kitchen and into the living room, which, being in a trailer and all, surprised me by its size: it was huge. I

found Mr. Hale kneeling on the floor in front of the receiver, pushing buttons and twisting knobs, cussing between his teeth every few seconds. He stood, straightened with a grunt, and held out his hand in greeting.

"Glad to see you, son. Sorry you had to make the trip out."

"No problem."

I got down on my hands and knees and looked at the front panel. Sure enough, they'd left the goddam tape monitor button pushed in. I turned the volume down, released the button, selected a station, then turned the volume back up.

Mrs. Hale's face lit up. "Sound!" she said excitedly.

"Sound!" her husband said, that same stupid grin on his face.

"It's heavenly!" his wife cooed.

"It's wonderful!" he echoed.

"This will change our lives," she said to her husband.

"Now where's those Mantovani records . . . ," the husband said.

I got out of most of it, but I couldn't get out of the milk and cookies: I knew they were coming. I didn't mind: I like milk and cookies. I was hailed as an electrical wizard. Wizard, maybe; electrical, no. I looked up, gnawing on my third cookie, and canvassed the room. The old man was obviously retired. They were living well within their means. The sofa was slightly worn, the dining table a little out of the fashion, the paintings on the wall from one of those starving artists' sales. The hi-fi had definitely been a luxury. Probably had to beg the old lady to let go of the purse strings. There was a black and white photograph of an attractive little nymphet on the mantle above the fireplace. Their daughter? I didn't know, but she appeared, from this distance at least (my eyes aren't so good anymore), to be wearing a little silver crown. Miss America, circa 1952? I didn't ask.

"Tollhouse!" Mrs. Hale said proudly, holding one of her finer specimens up to the light. "Made them myself, Mr. Miller."

"They're wonderful," I said, wolfing down a fourth.

"Another?"

"If you don't mind . . . . "

"Oh, there's plenty more where that came from!" she said.

A creaking sound came from the darkened hallway to my left. It lasted several seconds and stopped. I didn't know what it was.

"More milk, Mr. Miller?"

"If you don't mind . . . . "

"Every body needs milk," Mr. Hale said.

"A-men!" his wife said.

I heard the sound again, a little louder this time.

"Excuse me, but—"

"Is that enough milk, Mr. Miller?"

"That's fine, thank you, but—"

"Builds strong bodies," Mr. Hale said.

"Excuse me—" but before I could say anything more we all heard the sound in the silence between our words; and for a while we just sat there and looked at one another.

"What was that?"

"What was what?"

"That sound?"

"What sound?"

"That sound from the hallway there?"

"Oh, that!" Mr. Hale said, rubbing his bald spot.

His wife and he exchanged glances. She placed her cookie on the napkin in front of her. "You tell him, dear."

"That," Mr. Hale said, a light coming into his eyes; "that—is our only child, Marjorie."

"Does she creak when she walks?" I asked.

The wife flinched a little when I said this.

"Not exactly, Mr. Miller. You see . . . she doesn't walk."

"Oh . . . . "

"It's her chair that makes the noise," Mrs. Hale said.

"Her chair?"

"What my wife means to say is—her wheelchair."

"Our only child . . . confined to a . . . . "

"She's shy," the father said.

"She likes visitors," the mother said.

"Very fond of music," the husband said.

"Used to play the flute in the high school band."

I looked across the room at the picture on the mantle.

"That her?"

"Yes, yes, that's our Marjorie. Isn't she lovely?"

"Yes," I said, and I meant it.

For maybe thirty seconds no one said anything. There was no sound from the hallway.

"All day long she's sitting in that hallway listening to people talk," Mr. Hale said.

"An intelligent child," his wife added.

"Loves people."

"A wonderful child," Mrs. Hale said.

"Our precious jewel."

"The Queen of the Prom," Mrs. Hale said dreamily.

I refused my fifth Tollhouse and took a sip of milk instead. Mr. Hale looked down at his hands in his lap. "Multiple Sclerosis is not a pretty sight, Mr. Miller . . . . "

There was a pause.

"Wouldn't you like to come out, Marjorie?" Mrs. Hale said. "Wouldn't you like to meet a young man?"

No sound.

"A very *handsome* young man. A most handsome young man!"

"She'll come out soon enough," Mr. Hale said. "She always does."

"Our beautiful child!" the wife said.

"Our wonderful angel!"

Mrs. Hale leaned forward and reached across the coffee table, gathering into her hands a tattered blue book with a faded cover and a broken binding. She flipped the pages of the book excitedly. "You simply *must* see the pictures of the Prom, Mr. Miller."

"Our tender darling!"

"Azusa High School, 1968. You simply must see. My daughter, my Marjorie, my little angel—Queen of the Prom, the most wonderful child, the most beautiful child, the precious, priceless jewel." She thumbed through the book until it just fell open to the spot. The pages were well worn here, and smudged by fingerprints. "Here!" she said. "My Marjorie!" Her hand began to shake as she ran it over the pages of the book. "Look! look!" I looked down the length of her finger and recognized the girl as the girl in the picture on the mantle. She had long brown hair, very white skin, a playful, mischievous smile with large, dancing eyes to match, and the most beautiful face I'd ever seen. She was lovely. I swallowed hard to catch my breath.

"Isn't she lovely?"

"Yes."

"Our angel," the husband said.

"And here's the dress," Mrs. Hale said. She rose and walked across the living room, which was, as I said, larger than you'd think it'd be for a trailer; and when she got to a closet on the other side of the room, she opened the door and leaned in. I listened to the rustle of plastic and fabric. "Wouldn't dream of throwing it away," she said; "just as I wouldn't dream of letting you not see it. It's a part of modern history is what it is." She leaned further into the closet, one leg dangling in the air for what seemed an eternity; then finally the leg came down and she came out of the closet holding a powder-blue, floor-length gown with little pink flowers all over the front of it. "I made it myself," she said quietly, "with my own two bare hands." She held the dress to her and looked at her husband. "I made it so our Marjorie could—so she could come down the aisle and be—"

"And you succeeded, Mother. Because she was more beautiful than she'd ever been that day. Because she—" but for some reason he never finished the sentence.

We all stood there, and I—for once—didn't know what to say.

Then, without any of us speaking, a voice filled the room.

"I was beautiful once."

"Oh, yes, Marjorie!" Mrs. Hale said to the hallway. "Yes you were, angel!"

"I was beautiful."

"Of course you were, child," Mr. Hale said.

"All the boys chased me."

"Oh yes they did! They couldn't keep their eyes off you."

"I had an attractive figure."

"That's our angel!"

Mrs. Hale sat down on the sofa, smoothed the dress over her lap, and adjusted her hair. "Won't you come out and meet our guest, Marjorie?"

"Come out, Marjorie."

"Our guest wants to meet you—don't you, Mr. Miller?" They looked at me; I nodded my head slowly. "He's nodding his head, Marjorie."

"Come out, come out."

"I was the most beautiful angel," the voice from the hallway said.

I looked around the room and at the picture on the mantle and at the pictures in the yearbook. Everything seemed to leap out at me.

"I really should be going," I said.

"Oh, stay, *stay* " Mrs. Hale said. "She'll come out soon enough—you just have to be patient."

"Stay, son. Tell us about your life."

"The stereo store is my life."

"I have a stereo," the voice from the hallway said.

"Marjorie has a hi-fi," Mr. Hale said. "With *two* speakers. Bought it for her years ago."

"I listen to the Beatles," Marjorie said. "Do you listen to them?"

"One of my favorites," I said.

"Paul McCartney is *such* a doll."

"A pretty good bass player, too," I said.

I looked over at the mouth of the hallway and saw the front of the wheelchair and one of Marjorie's legs. Her parents saw it too.

"Marjorie, honey . . . Marjorie, won't you come out?"

"Please, baby."

"To meet such a handsome young man."

For a moment there was no motion. Then Marjorie rolled out of the hallway and wheeled herself slowly to the center of the room. She didn't look at me. She was very large—upwards maybe of three hundred pounds—and her face was pale and soft, and her hands fluttered in her lap like wounded birds. Her hair needed a good scrubbing. She was not beautiful.

"This is Mr. Miller," her mother said. "From the stereo store."

"Call me Bill," I said.

"H-Hello, Bill." She looked up at my eyes for a moment, then back down at her fluttering hands. "Nice shirt ya got."

"Got it at Penney's," I said.

"My boyfriend used t' have a shirt like that. I think he got his at Penney's too."

"It's an old shirt," I said.

I looked at her picture again in the yearbook.

"You can see that I was beautiful once," she said. "Everyone was envious of me when I walked down the aisle. I was perfectly angelic. I had many nice qualities."

"And you still do," her mother said. "*Many* nice qualities."

Marjorie looked down at the floor and put her head in her hands. "Only I fear I'm not attractive anymore . . . ."

Mrs. Hale's eyes darted to her husband and I. "Wh-why, of course you're attractive. Wh-why, you're the most attractive person in this room—isn't she, Mr. Miller?"

"Am I?" Marjorie asked.

"Well, I—"

"Of course you are," her mother said.

"But am I, Mr. Miller?" She leaned forward in her chair.

"You can tell her, Mr. Miller . . . . "

I looked down at her picture in the yearbook. "Yes, you are," I said.

"Honest?"

I looked across the room at her picture on the mantle.

"Honest?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Hale smiled.

"There, you see!" Mr. Hale said.

"It's what we've been trying to tell her all along . . . ."

Marjorie wheeled herself to the picture window and looked out at the fading sunset. It was almost night. The last few shadows were leaving the room. Marjorie looked over her shoulder at me.

"Would you like to see my stereo, Bill?"

She winked at me.

"I don't think Mr. Miller has the time right now, Marjorie—"

"He's been looking at stereos all day, dear—"

"Mr. Miller looks tired, angel—"

"Perhaps another time, dear—"

She wheeled around to face us. "It's broken," she said. "My receiver's broken."

"Nonsense!" her mother said. "It was working fine this morning."

"It's broken, mother. My receiver won't receive a thing. You know that's the truth."

"It's a lie!"

"It's probably just your antenna," I said. "Have you played with your antenna lately?"

"Would you show me how?" Marjorie asked.

I waited for Mrs. Hale to say something. She didn't.

"Would you?"

"Marjorie . . . child . . . I don't think Mr. Miller—"

"It's alright," I said.

Marjorie wheeled maybe three inches closer to us.

"It'd just take a minute, mother . . . . "

"If it's the antenna," I said.

"I'm sure that's what it is."

A look passed between her parents.

"Well, I suppose—"

"Donald!" Mrs. Hale said.

Marjorie retreated the three inches she'd moved toward us, and turned her chair back to the picture window again. She looked out, her hands fluttering in her lap. It was almost completely dark out. I could see her reflection on the inside of the glass.

Mrs. Hale rose from the sofa, walked over to Marjorie, and placed a hand on her daughter's shoulder. She smothered Marjorie's filthy hair with her free hand and looked out into the night. Her back was to me. She looked very small.

"Go ahead, then," she said. She leaned over and kissed Marjorie on the forehead. "Go on."

Marjorie pushed off and made time for the mouth of the hallway.

"Hold your head high, Princess!" Mrs. Hale said, her voice trembling with an emotion I thought inappropriate to the occasion.

"They're all watching!" Mr. Hale said.

"Would you push me, Mr. Miller?"

"Where to?"

"In here," she pointed.

I wheeled her into the dark hallway. Suddenly I couldn't see a thing. It was pitch black. I squinted into the hallway. Where were we? I smelled Marjorie beneath me—the sour, vinegary smell fat people get when they don't take a shower for a long time—but I

couldn't see where we were going.

"Where are we?"

"Almost there."

Five seconds later Marjorie opened the door to her room, and a stream of light fell onto the carpet in the hallway. "In here," she said. We entered the room, and she closed the door behind us.

It was a small room. It had one window (the shade drawn), a row of bookshelves on the far wall; and on the nearer wall several starving artists' religious paintings and two or three Charles Schultz posters. The whole place stank. Already I wanted out. Next to the bed, below the bookshelves, on a little end table, sat the stereo. Marjorie wheeled out of my way and let me get past her to the stereo.

I turned it on. It was the old type, the kind that needs a few seconds to warm up. I turned the volume to three and waited for the sucker to kick in. After a moment it began to hum. I twirled the tuning knob until—surprised the hell out of me—I got sound! "Hey, there's nothing wrong with—!"

"You have a very nice ass, Bill."

"What the hell—!"

"It's so tight and firm."

Realizing too late what was happening, I spun around and tried to escape, but Marjorie ran her chair up against my shins and pinned them against her bed. Her face was inches from my crotch. I heard a click, looked down, and saw that she'd set the brakes on the wheels of her chair. She looked up at me and licked her lips. "I used to be pretty good at this sort of thing," she said, going for my crotch.

Christ! I tried to wriggle free, but it was no use. "You've got the wrong guy, Marge."

"Do you have any idea how long it's been?" she asked.

"I don't really care." I struggled some more.

She leaned forward and encircled my hips, burying her face in my crotch. Her hands came up and she began to fumble with my zipper. "Tell me I'm beautiful."

"Let me go, Marge."

"I'll do anything, if only you'll tell me I'm beautiful."

"I don't want to hurt you . . . . "

She clawed at my zipper and gnawed at my dick through my jeans, which had begun to stiffen almost against my will, maybe out of fear.

"Let me go!"

"Oh tell me I'm beautiful, tell me I'm beautiful!"

"Get away from me."

"Tell me I'm the precious angel!"

I was fighting with her now, pushing her head back every few seconds and trying to slide sideways out of my entrapment, but still it was no use.

"Tell me I'm the precious, precious jewel!"

"Jesus Christ!"

"Make love to me."

She got my zipper down about halfway and reached in, touching skin.

"Tell me you love me, Bill."

"I don't love you!" I said. "You're repulsive."

It was then that I smelled her body again, that horribly rank odor which reminded me of one of those garbage dumps in North Hollywood. "Get away from me," I said.

"Don't push me away. I'll die if you push me away."

"I'm warning you . . . . "

"Just let me please suck on you. It's not for you. *Please.*"

"I'm warning you . . . . "

"At least tell me I'm beautiful."

"You're not beautiful," I said. With my last ounce of strength I shoved her wheelchair aside and lunged past her. "You're ugly and fat and you smell like shit and I wouldn't touch you if they threatened to take my dick away tomorrow!" I stumbled to the door, threw it open, zipped up my zipper, and ran into the living room. Mrs. Hale sat there with the prom dress on her lap, her husband beside her. Marjorie wheeled in after me.

"Why, whatever is wrong, Mr Miller?"

"I'll tell you what's wrong: that goddam crippled daughter of yours tried to rape me!"

"Oh, Mr. Miller!" the wife gasped. She buried her face in her husband's neck and clutched his shirt with both her hands. "Please . . . please don't use that word."

"Why not? That's what she is, isn't she—a cripple?"

"Oh, that horrible word!"

"She's a goddam ugly cripple and you keep telling her how beautiful she is."

"Make him stop, Donald. Please make him stop."

"Tell her the truth. She deserves to know the truth."

I looked over at Marjorie. She sat in her chair with her hands over her ears, her eyes closed, rocking back and forth, back and forth. Her parents clung to one another on the sofa.

Mr. Hale stood and walked over to the mantle. He picked up Marjorie's picture and looked at it. "I want you to leave, Mr. Miller."

"I'm leaving," I said.

Marjorie rolled halfway across the room to him, and stopped.

"Am I beautiful, Daddy?"

"Don't listen to him, Princess. He's lying."

"But am I beautiful!"

For a moment he said nothing. Then he turned around and looked at Marjorie, a look of incredible sadness in his eyes, the saddest eyes I'd ever seen. He turned back to the mantle and stared at her picture.

"Daddy?"

"To us," he said, "you're the most beautiful person on the face of the planet." His body shook.

"Mommy?"

"It's true," her mother said. She held the prom dress in her lap and stroked it like an angry cat. "You're our precious child."

"The Queen of the Prom," her father said. He stared at me. "Now you must go, Mr. Miller."

I picked up my tools and left.

*

Afterward, I stood in the driveway of the trailer park for the longest time and just looked up at the stars. I don't know why, but I've never learned to keep my mouth shut at the proper time. I felt like a fool. I looked up at the Milky Way and thought long and hard about what'd just happened; I couldn't come to any conclusions. I'll tell you one thing, I felt incredibly stupid.

I walked down the driveway and turned onto the sidestreet

where I'd parked. I crossed the street and walked in the dirt on the far side of the road. I wanted to kick myself.

When I got to the car, I opened the door, got in, and for a few minutes just sat there. I rolled the window down, took a few deep breaths. Of all the times of the day, the night asks the most questions. Right now I had so many questions running through my brain and heart—well, it was all I could do just to keep my eyes closed and breathe. I don't know what physical beauty has to do with love, but I wish I did. Maybe it'd make me feel better now.

I started the car, shifted it into first, flicked on my lights, and made a U-turn. When I passed their trailer I saw her image on the shade in her room, rocking slowly back and forth, and I thought maybe she could forgive what I said. Probably not. I drove to the end of the block, stopped, and turned left onto Grand.

I drove down Grand for a mile or so, then turned right onto the 210 Freeway heading west towards Pasadena. Accelerating up the onramp, I saw the lights of the city all around me, the headlights and the taillights of the cars ahead and behind—all sorts of lights—and I felt comforted somehow, shielded. Tomorrow was another day, another dollar—maybe two. I'd set my goal extra high, sell a lot of hi-fi.

Still, something gnawed at me, I couldn't tell you exactly what.

There were a million people on the road. They all seemed to be going somewhere—home, away, the beach, the mountains. I sped up a little, shifted into fourth, flicked on my turn-signal indicator, and merged with the traffic. A million voiceless faces, maybe more. I put my foot to the floor and became one of them.

Northridge Review

is CSUN's literary magazine. Published each semester, it contains poems, short stories, essays and reviews by students and alumni. This issue includes the works of

Keith Bienert
Nicholas Campbell
Cathy Comenas
R.J. Coulston
Laurel Dewey
Marc Doten
Judy Epstein
Leonard Exner
Ida Ferdman
Jill Forman
Rachael Goldman
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Suzanne Kelley
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Mike Lawson
Tamara Lopez
Tim Matthews
Monica Mayall
Ricardo Means-Ybarra
Scott Memmer
Tom Pfeiffer
Ron Pronk
Christopher Ribaudo
Rose Schumacher
Brian Skinner

NORTHRIDGE REVIEW also is pleased to publish an interview with poet Carol Muske, whose most recent book of poems is *Skylight*. Ms. Muske graduated from San Francisco State University in 1970. She has taught workshops at Columbia University, the University of Iowa and the University of California at Irvine, and was an assistant editor at *Antaeus* for several years.