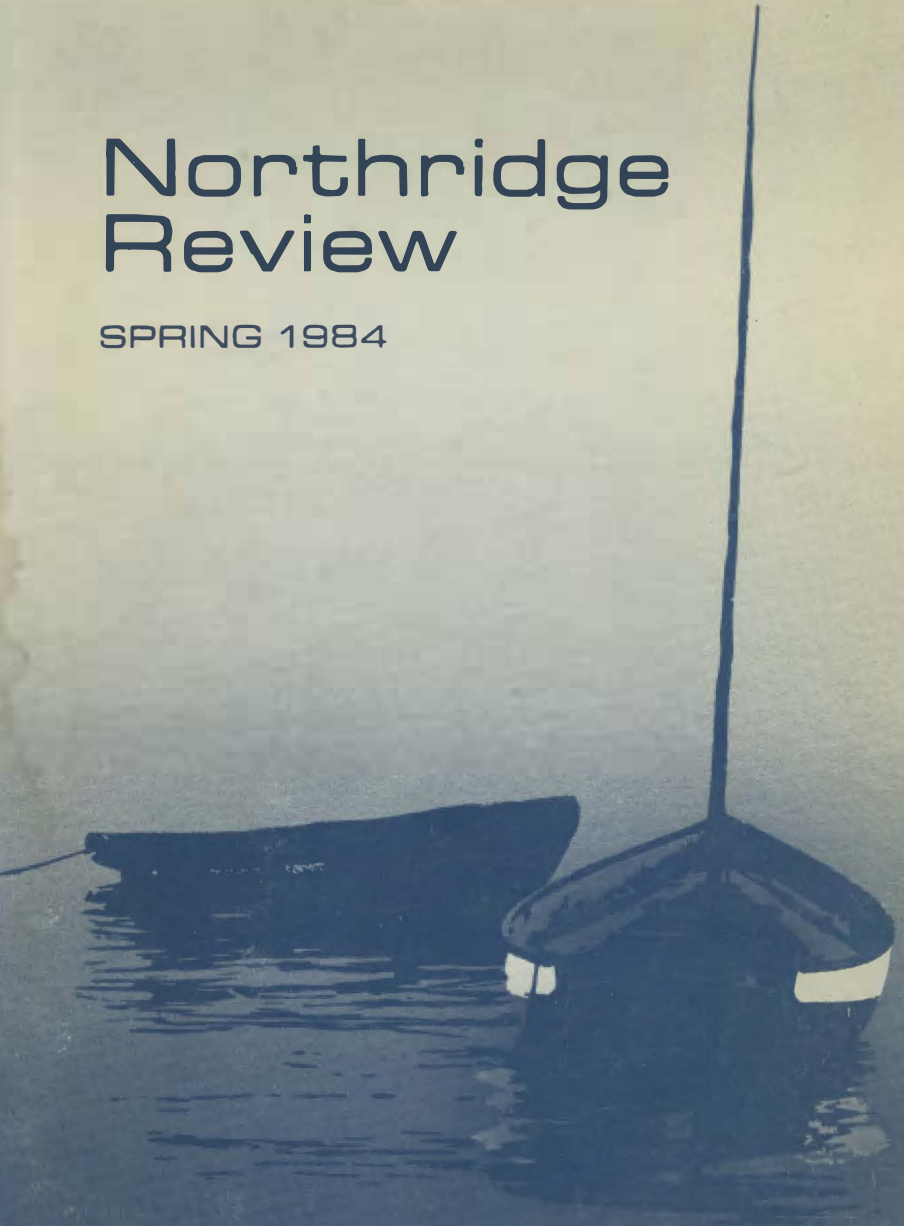
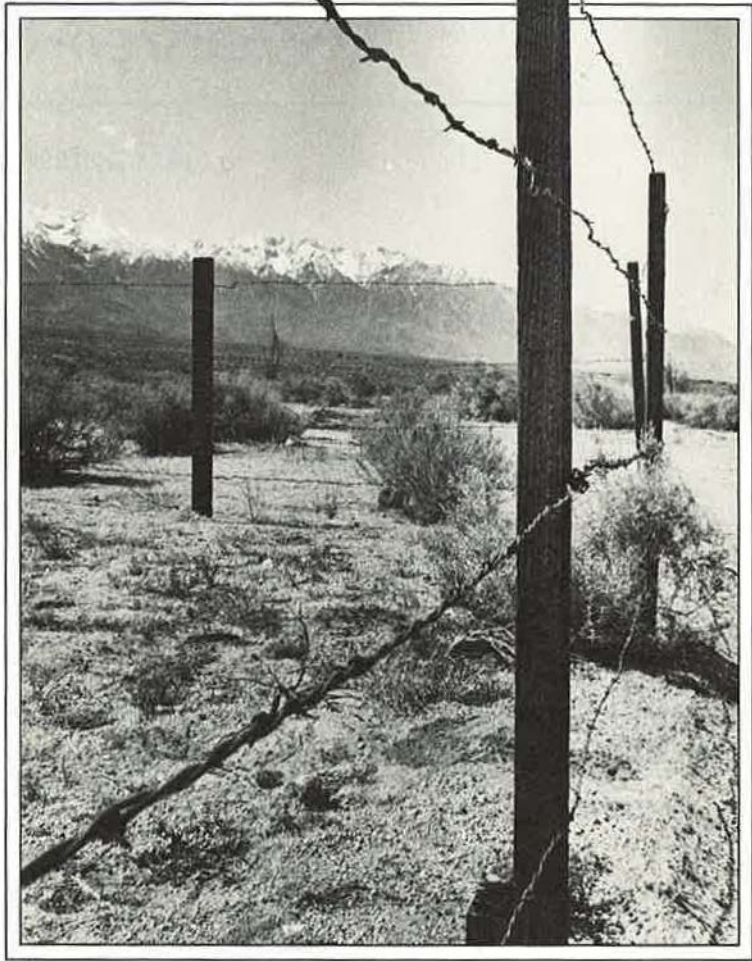


Northridge Review

SPRING 1984





Northridge Review

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Fog

R. J. Coulston

I stood before the edge of the cornfield watching the low fog blow across the brown stalks, obscuring the ends of rows. They seemed to march into the gray fabric of the weather. It was all ruined. The night's freeze had turned the watery stalks to ice just as the ears had begun to ripen. There had been enough to make it pay. But the frost was three or four days early.

The field was unearthly quiet. I stood for hours, I suppose, looking at the fog sweep away the cornfield then reveal the rows again suddenly, surprisingly, momentarily, before swallowing up the field again whole. Beyond the field, I knew, the forest was there. Waiting.

My boots moved heavily. I walked to the house that seemed so far away, and the effort consumed me. I sat then in the kitchen, staring at the black stove squatting on its iron legs, consuming wood in its bowels. I opened the top vent and watched the slowed combustion curl its flaming tongues over the logs, licking hungrily. Steam rose from the kettle.

"How is it?" asked Amy. "The corn—is it all dead?" She stood at the partition between the kitchen and the room we'd named The Cold Room because no heat ever seemed to get to it. She was wrapped in a blanket. I nodded my head and turned away. I could feel her waiting there, wanting to say something, unable to speak.

"What is it?" I asked.

There was silence. Finally, with a rustling movement, she came into the kitchen. I stared at the stove. "Talk to me," I said hollowly.

"Can we still afford it?" she asked.

"Here and now? In this emptiness? Me with no job? No money?"

She was quiet for some time. I thought about the little drawer she'd been filling with baby clothes. She'd taken out one suit with little hearts sewn all over it. "Little hearts," she'd said, a wondrous smile on her face. That was not possible now. There would be no money.

Now, she waited for a few moments, then she walked into The Cold Room and dressed. She came back in dungarees and a heavy coat, pulling on her gloves against the cold. My own coat had grown heavy with sweat from the hot stove. We would have to sell the farm, now. Or the bank would take it. Best to do it right away.

The fog was heavy on the mountain road as we inched our way down to the valley with its banks and graveyards and hospitals and churches. The trees rose straight up out of the fog on either side of the road, soaring into the soft mist, disappearing. The long, cathedral arches over the roads were like hollow tubes, their ends stuffed with cotton.

I almost collided with the station wagon. It sat still, squarely in the middle of the road, obscured by drifting fog, and I got out to see what was wrong, for the family had gathered around it in postures of grief and tension. The man, in a black suit, vest, and tie, was down on his knees, examining the underbelly of the car with regret. He raised his head as I approached, nodded first to me and then at the car.

"Didn't mean to hit him. Dog's under there, and the car went over him. He won't come out. Seems wedged. Just ran in front of the car."

I looked beneath his car and saw a black dog. He was on his side, panting heavily, the gray fog puffing from his mouth and rising in steamy clouds from his wet, black fur.

"O God," I said, feeling sick, suddenly, knowing he was hurt, out of reach.

"He ran right in front. Dove into the car. I *tried* to stop."

"How can we get him out?" the man in black said. His family had gathered like rain clouds. His daughter was crying. His son was grim. His wife looked resigned, but she sadly offered the suggestion he'd be put out of his misery, soon. I looked again. He seemed to be suffering and the thought occurred to me that somehow he'd been the cause of all that fog. I was fascinated by this curious thought, almost hypnotically, until he turned his jet black eyes on me. Fixed me with them. There was an intensity in those eyes, begging: *help me!*

"Come on," I said, softly to him. He immediately rolled on his stomach and crawled toward me, pulling himself with his front paws, clawing the earth, pulling his limp hindquarters after him, struggling from beneath the iron thing that had broken him. He turned several times to snap angrily and to growl at his back legs, lying limp and unresponsive, useless, impotent on the earth. I held his head in my hands, feeling the heat and the strain of his muscles. He whined at me a moment, then turned to growl at his legs, confused that they would not work.

"Open the door of my car," I said, scooping his body into my arms.

"Careful," said the man in black. "He may bite you."

"Shit! I told you to *Open the door.*"

It was growing dark when we arrived at the vet's. I carried the dog in and lifted him onto the table.

"He ran under a car," I said as the vet probed the dog's back with his fingers. Suddenly he stopped and turned away.

"Christ!" he said, and pounded the wall angrily with his hand. "His back's broken. It's nothing but splinters in there." He began to fill a syringe.

When we arrived home, the fog had lifted and a full moon bathed the field in white light. Deer were stealthily

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picking their way through the cornstalks, feeding. I could see the forest now, behind the field.

Amy turned to me. "What shall we call the baby?"

"Joshua," I said.

A Mouse in the Bin

Gary McKinney

Sandy leaned again into the huge steel bin and pulled out another cedar shake. Before he slapped it into the packing frame, he pounded the fat end against one of the sides.

"Move it up there!" he yelled.

"Hey! Up yours, Doherty!" came the reply, ringing off the walls in short metallic echoes.

His sawyer had been dogging it for the last half-hour and Sandy hated working slowly. It got him out of rhythm and if there was anything you had to have in order for this job to be interesting, it was rhythm; and for rhythm, you had to have shakes, and that's what he wasn't getting.

Sandy was a twenty-four year old packer who worked at the Saginaw Shake Company in Raymond, a small logging and fishing town in southwest Washington. He was on the graveyard shift and had been going strong since 11 PM.

He decided to take an unauthorized break and let the shakes back up a little. The foreman, Cecil Pollard, had already made his rounds for this hour, so he pushed aside one of the movable partitions and stepped through.

It was 5:30. The night was giving way to morning and the sky had a bluish-grey color that he liked. He quickly crossed the dirt yard and went behind a large pile of cedar blocks. He stood on one end, put his foot up on it, rested his arm on his knee and took a long look at what was in front of him.

About twenty yards away a thick fog clung tight and low to the Ellis Slough, an arm of the Willapa river. Only its misty edges ventured past the brown clay banks. Black pilings from a long-deteriorated loading dock stuck their tips through the haze like three-day beard stubble. On the far shore, a lone scraggly hemlock, its top bent over like a scolded child, stood among the brown swamp grass and green scotch broom of the tide flat. Further still, he could see the steeple of the Catholic church and the Quonset-hut shape of the high school gym.

The morning dew had slicked back the foliage and made the muddy banks of the river glisten. From downstream, three ducks flew just above the fog, following the river's winding path closely as though they were sentries on patrol. As they drew near the mill, they quacked a warning, but it paid no attention. The high-pitched whine of the fifteen-foot bandsaws, the clanking and clattering of chain-driven conveyors, and the chunk-a-chunk-a monotony of the prime-splitters continued on, as it had all night.

Sandy took a deep breath, exhaled, and walked back to his station, reluctantly slipping back through the partitions. None of the other packers had noticed he was gone, as his was the last bin on this side of the mill. He was glad to see that his sawyer had gotten sufficiently pissed-off to fill it about three-quarters full.

He plunged into the work; leaning, pulling, and slapping with great speed and dexterity. When the frame was filled with shakes (nine high and tip-to-tip), he grabbed the quarter-inch banding tape and pushed it though the small groove on the bottom until it poked out the other side; then, he pulled it over, held the two ends with one hand, and with the other reached for his ratchet. He tightened the tape and secured the bundle with a one-inch staple and crimping tool, slammed the tools back in their place, jerked down the rear gate with a clang, hoisted the ninety-pound load with a short grunt, and did a quick two-step waddle to the pallet. He stacked them there six high, three to a row, 200 to 250 times a night.

Sandy wore traditional packing clothes: leather apron, faded jeans, white nylon gloves, black steel-toed boots, light-blue, pin-striped work shirt, and orange hardhat. He was six foot, 175 pounds, had ear-length brown hair, hazel eyes, and an angular featured face. He didn't stand out from the other men in any physical way, and as far as the company was concerned, he was just another payroll number.

"Hey, Perfesser! Read any good B-BOOKS lately?"

It was Merritt Kover, the forklift driver.

"Just move the pallets, will you?" said Sandy.

That was the difference. Sandy had a liberal arts degree from the University of Washington. In their minds, a man didn't go to college so he could work in a mill. They were suspicious of him.

"What're you still doin' here?" said Merritt. "I heard you was t-takin' a job in the city."

"You heard wrong, Merritt," said Sandy, thinking his mother had probably started the rumor. He turned back to his work.

What are you still doing here, he thought, saying each word slowly in his mind; *damn, I'm getting tired of that question*. His parents wanted to know, his girlfriend wanted to know, and now the son-of-a-bitch forklift driver wanted to know. Well HE didn't know, so how the hell could he tell anyone else? What had started as a summer job two years ago had slowly become everybody's problem.

He was packing fast, challenging himself to catch up by break time. For Sandy, there were two mental states that came with this hard, redundant labor: one, his favorite, was a non-thinking, be-here-now Zen trance; the other, the one he was IN now, was a kind of one-man tennis match with a brick wall, using his thoughts as the ball.

The shakes were reddish-brown today. Maybe that was what he liked. They were always different colors—sometimes yellowish (what the men called 'cream'), sometimes as dark as burnt umber.

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He thought of more reasons, but none came up that would convince his parents or Cecile he wasn't loony:

I like the smell of cedar and cotton.

Sandwiches taste better when your body aches.

Coffee and Camels are a buzz at three AM.

"No, he thought, they couldn't relate to that. How about, "It's fun being where you don't belong but you do anyway." Bonkers, that's what they'd say. Boop-shoobyville. Ship him off. The only things they understood were good wages, steady work, and a place to go everyday; but not blue-collar, not at a mill, and not with a Summa Cum Laude.

Besides, Sandy wasn't there for the money. He was there for the sweat, the ham and cheese with mustard, and the afternoons by himself.

A short whistle blew, signaling the last break. He'd finished. As the saws decrescendoed and conveyor belts came to a temporary halt, he pulled his gloves off and headed for the lunchroom.

Sandy bounded the stairs, entered at the first door, and sat on one of the benches. He took a smoke from his shirt and butted a match to its end. It was a fresh pack and the tobacco was sweet, pungent, almost damp. He inhaled deeply, satisfied, then removed his hat and leaned against the wall.

Maynard Strozyk was at the table, greedily finishing off a piece of apple pie. He'd been married recently, and now brought hand-packed lunches to work instead of ordering out for Dairy Queen burgers like many of the single men did.

"If she fucks as good as she cooks, you're gonna be one happy asshole, Maynard," said Nate Nowgrowski, the deckman.

"Eatcher heart out, Nate."

"Ya had to slap her around yet?"

"No, but I will when I have to."

This was the kind of attitude that had cured Sandy of any blue-collar romanticism. At first, it bothered him alot; but as time passed, he became quite adept at tuning it out, even going to such lengths as listening to Vivaldi on his Walkman tape recorder. That technique had given him some amusing moments, like when the music would synch with the men scratching their balls and spitting tobacco on the sawdust-covered floor, but had worn out its novelty. Now, he just tried to be understanding. They knew what they knew, and he couldn't blame them for all of society's ills. Besides, with them, he always knew where he stood. The intellectuals at school often played the same games and had the same attitudes, only buried under mounds of rationalized twelve-dollar philosophies.

"Hey, Waddell, how'd yer hand git swolled up?"

It was Earl Howard, coming in front of his saw.

"I was in Aberdeen the other night," said the hefty prime-splitter, "and I had to punch some asshole's lights out."

"What for?"

"Said we wasn't gonna be good enough to win the football title again next year."

"Sounds like he needed t' be stomped," said Earl. "Hey! Anybody wanna go cat-shootin' tonight?"

"That's chicken-shit," said Gordon Stark, the millwright.

"Say what?" said Earl.

"Anybody can shoot a cat with a 30-ought-six and a flashlight, Earl. What takes guts is takin' that light off 'n' goin' out to the dump with heavy boots, then blindin' one of them big garbage rats, walkin' right up to it and stompin' its head in."

"You think that's tough?" said Earl. "I done that. Lemme tell ya 'bout the time me 'n' Waddell were out on the Monohon Landin' Road near ol' Ben Felber's farm. We were drunker n' shit, 'n' this ol' cow come up near the road by

where we was parked, just a brayin' and a mooin' 'n' I just got crazy wild 'n' got my huntin' knife out, then jumped the fence 'n' onto that cow's back n' rode 'er'n' stabbed 'ertill she was deader 'n' hell. Ain't it the truth, Waddell?"

"It's a fact."

The men murmured their approval. Sandy almost threw up. Earl was one person he could never get used to. Once, Sandy had opened his lunch box to find a four-inch dragonfly squashed on top of his sandwiches. It wasn't being startled that had bothered him the most. It was the fact that Earl had gone to lengths to kill a beautiful insect for a sick practical joke. He was without conscience, almost pure in his viciousness, and constantly in everyone's face.

"Hey, that's great, Earl," said Gordon. "You're one motherFUCKIN' mean asshole."

"You got that right, Jack," said Earl.

"Gord," said Maynard, "ya got any chew? I'm all out and I love a nice thick chew after apple pie."

"I like a nice thick chew after 'hair' pie," said Earl.

The men broke-up. Sandy got ready to leave.

"Hey, Lube," said Earl. "You ever done any cat-shootin' or rat-stompin'?"

Lube Miller, as usual, said nothing. The only way he ever got involved in these lunchroom gross-out orgies was when Earl started picking on him.

"What's wrong, Lube," said Earl, "rat gotcher tongue?"

The men laughed, Sandy sat straight up, and Lube did what he always did when he caught shit; he hung his head and looked at the floor.

"Christ, Lube," said Earl. "You're never any fuckin' fun. Can't you morons take a fuckin' joke?"

"Leave him alone, Earl," said Sandy.

Earl turned to him with a smirk on his face. "Well, ain't this a sight," he said, "the perfesser 'n' the moron teamin' up."

Sandy rose. "He's not a moron and I'm not a professor."

Lube gave Sandy a quick side-long glance that said 'thanks' as clear as he'd ever heard it spoken.

"Yer standin' purty tall, 'fesser," said Earl. "You ever do anything worth talkin' about?"

"Yeah," said Sandy. "I caught a 14-inch rainbow up on the South Fork last week."

"No shit!"

It was Gordon butting in.

"Yes, sir. I even took a picture so you guys wouldn't think I was lying."

The photo was passed around and Earl, puzzled by Sandy's diversion, retreated to another corner of the room. Sandy looked again at Lube, expecting more approval, but the one glance had been all he would get; now, it was just part of Lube's slicked-down hair. He felt momentarily self-conscious he'd never stand up for himself. The men thought he was retarded, but Sandy knew from his eyes that he was just very withdrawn. Not that he saw much of his eyes—he'd never even heard him talk. In two years, the only real communication between them had been when Sandy had the let's-get-all-the-sawyers-to-throw-their-shakes-in-Sandy's-bin joke played on him. Lube hadn't said a word, but worked through lunch to help him pack out.

The quick double whistle blew, indicating "break over," and the men filed out of the room. There was only an hour left in the shift, and, since it was Friday, this last push be an easy one.

Sandy was having a mild mental tennis match with himself when his trance was broken by shouts from the sawyers above. He looked up into his bin and was surprised to see a small brown mouse gripping onto the end of a shake about half way up. Its snout was twitching, its whiskers moving up and down as quickly as hummingbird wings. It was quivering with fear, suspended and helpless. While he was staring, wondering how it got there and what to do, most of the crew gathered around his station.

"The damn thing was in the trunk of one of the log," said Nate.

"Yeah," said Maynard. "The fucker ran up one of the belts and jumped in the fuckin' bin."

"How d'ya wanna kill it?" said Earl. "Should I get my shotgun, or ya wanna squash it with a board?"

"HEY! Why do you have to KILL it?" said Sandy.

"What's wrong, perfesser," said Earl. "Fraid of a little mouse?"

"Back off, Earl."

"That's twice, fuckface. Looks like you gonna get'cher ass beat."

Suddenly, Lube Miller pushed through the crowd. Moving faster than anyone had ever seen him move before, he climbed the bin and grabbed the mouse. He caught it deftly but gently in cupped hands, jumped from the bin, and bolted past the stunned workers. Before they had a chance to realize what he was doing, he was halfway to the field on the south side of the mill.

"HEY!" yelled Earl. "What the FUCK is that moron doin'?"

Sandy dropped back quickly and stood between the men and Lube. "He's being decent!"

The men protested. "Bring the fuckin' rat back here!" "You goddamn idiot!" But none of them walked past Sandy.

"I'm gonna git that sumbitch!" said Earl, starting after Lube.

"Leave him alone!" said Sandy.

"Fuck you, asshole!"

Sandy shoved Earl back with both hands and crouched.

"Gettin' tough, huh, faggot face?"

Just then, Cecil Pollard walked in on his rounds.

"What are you men doing down here!" he demanded.

There was silence.

"Nothing," Sandy said finally.

It was a short but forceful declaration, and the group dispersed.

As Earl walked away, he turned to Sandy. "I ain't forgot you, smartass."

Their eyes locked. Earl's were pale blue, cold and shallow. Sandy knew he should be scared, but that would come later. Right that instant, he just stared straight back, unyielding and hard. Seconds passed before Earl turned his slightly and spit tobacco close to Sandy's boots. We wiped his mouth with his sleeve, gave another squint-eyed look, and left. Sandy could feel his fingernails dig into his palms. hadn't been in a street fight since the third grade.

He heard whispering beyond the partition, then Cecil saying loudly, "What's the big deal about a dumb goddamn mouse?"

Sandy sucked in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. Lube was returning from the field, his head in its regular downcast position.

"Lube," said Sandy, gently.

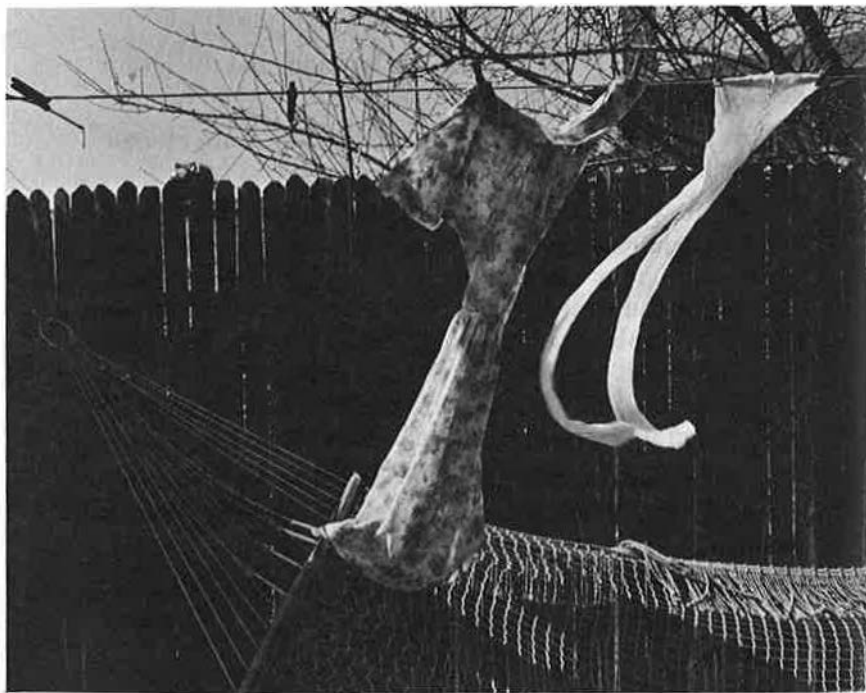
Lube looked at him long enough for Sandy to see that he had very deep brown eyes.

"You did good, Lube. Real good."

Their eyes stayed together for another split-second.

"Thanks," he said. The word came out slowly, almost like he was learning the language for the first time. He looked back down, quickly returning to his shyness. He stepped awkwardly around Sandy and walked back to his station.

Sandy, too, returned to his bin. The shakes were falling in at a pretty good clip. He reached in and grabbed one, then slapped it, **HARD**, into the frame.



Karen Gellert

Follansbee

Nicholas Campbell

From the bank my uncle Emil
and I watch the men working,
the long boats pulling what steel they can downriver,
the water rusty, slow as the steel.

Ohio watches as we watch—
Follansbee, West Virginia, a gray street across a bridge:
Market Street, a link between two states.

Emil says the flaming steel drum
around which the men stand warming their hands,
cold and hard as brass, is called a salamander—
that the work is easier just knowing it is there.

Sometimes we walk to the store
and I listen as he tells me how it was,
how the air was cleaner, how there were fewer mills, more work,
how a friend named 88 is now a barber,
how he plays piano when he isn't cutting hair,
why my uncles Frank and Joe and Red Sperringer moved to Texas,
why my cousin Billy drives a school bus
and lives in a trailer in Wellsburg.

Sometimes we sit on the bank watching the boats
while Emil drinks whiskey,
his fingers standing around the bottle
warming their hands as he remembers how it was—
how the work was easier just knowing it was there.

The Grandfather Story

Nicholas Campbell

He is there
in the little room off the hall
where it is always summer,
where what is left of the corn
after it has been plowed under for winter,
burns in the small black stove between him and the door,
the cobs red as the flowers growing from the grate.

Every weekend we drive from town to visit.
Today he will go only as far as the kitchen; he cannot walk,
though he used to walk to town.

We gather around him
as we gather around the table, the stove,
laugh like excited birds
when he tells us he can ride a bicycle
and rollerskate at the same time.

He has a riddle:
Many lakes around the house!
And we shout, *Windows!*

Sunday afternoon we sit in the little room
and listen to him talk
while he rocks in his big chair,
his hair like pipesmoke, his voice dry as leaves.
Though when he asks us *What color is a bluejay?*
or *How many buffaloes do you get with a nickel?*
He seems as young as father who likes to sit and listen,
Where it is always summer,
Where flowers grow from the grate.

Four Summers

Nicholas Campbell

In summer we used to gather
around the tall gate and watch.
Her black and white coat seemed to us
some whim of weather. When she galloped to the fence
it was as if a little storm had blown up
to the gate to meet us, the grass green around her.

Three summers had gone,
and here we stood again calling her to the gate,
our arms through offering apples.

If we had known then another year would come
and take her away, we would have climbed on her back
and let her fly, the wind in our hands.
But this dream unlike our little storm would not come to us,
let us believe a tall wish.

We would never feel the four strong winds of her legs,
never know sky from the back of a horse,
never know Four Summers could go so fast.

W. S. Merwin in Transition The First Four Books

Ron Pronk

When Merwin's first book of poems, *A Mask for Janus*, was published in 1952, W. H. Auden remarked in the preface that "the profundity and eternal relevance to the human condition of the great myths cannot fail to instill the most immature writer who reflects upon them with that reverence and wonder without which no man can become wise."¹ But this is not so much a comment on Merwin's craftsmanship as it is on the appropriateness of classical mythology to serve as subject matter for a young poet. Merwin's early attention to conventional forms and classical themes no doubt provided him the opportunity to develop a strong voice at an age (twenty-four) when no clear philosophical approach to personal creativity had yet been found.

There is much tension and verbal excitement in this first collection, as can be felt in "Anabasis II":

Thus calmed we lay and hungered east or west
But drifted on what warm meridian,
Grazing the reefs of dying; yet we passed
Through that peripety and afternoon.²

The quatrains of iambic pentameter evidence Merwin's ability to revitalize well-worn forms at a time when most contemporary poets had abandoned these confines in favor of the liberating spontaneity of free verse. But, as well-crafted as these poems are, I cannot help sensing an imper-

1. W.S. Merwin, *A Mask for Janus*, New Haven, 1952, p. viii.

2. W.S. Merwin, *The First Four Books of Poems*, New York, 1975, p. 8.

sonal distance being placed between poem and poet. Merwin's strength in *A Mask for Janus* is the expert and original anchoring of chaotic perceptions to a bed of well-regulated verse forms, yet his exploration into the subtler, deeper levels of consciousness typically sought after by contemporary poets often seems to be thwarted by a conscious manipulation of language. As James Dickey complains:

Merwin has never given enough of himself to his subjects: of the self that somehow lies beyond the writing self. He has always seemed so sure, so utterly sure of what he knew and could tell about them that the strokes out of Heaven, or out of the subjects themselves, has [sic.] never quite managed to hit him between the eyes.³

Dickey recognizes Merwin's mastery of technique, but believes that such "dictatorship" over one's material "obscures and kills what the poet should want to get at: those areas which only he is capable of discovering."⁴

It is not that Merwin's early works are dated. His frequent thematic preoccupations with time and the desire to create order out of the raw chaos of the perceived universe are largely twentieth century issues. But there is an authoritative quality, a spiritual conviction in *A Mask for Janus* which defies contemporary man's search for identity in an overwhelming and impersonal universe. For example, "Dic-tum: For a Masque of Deluge" is written in the demanding tone of a playwright ordering appropriate stage directions:

There must be a vessel.
There must be rummage and shuffling for salvation
Till on that stage and violence, among
Curtains of tempest and shaking sea,
A covered basket, where a child might lie,
Timbered with osiers and floated on a shadow,
Glides adrift, as improbably sailing
As a lotus flower bearing a bull.

The commanding tone does brilliantly affect an intense and purposeful disturbance, expressed at its best in the penultimate stanza:

3. James Dickey, *Babel to Byzantium*. New York, 1968, p. 142.

4. *Ibid*, p. 143.

At last the sigh of recession: the land
Wells from the water; the beats depart; the man
Whose shocked speech must conjure a landscape
As of some country where the dead years keep
A circle of silence, a drying vista of ruin,
Musters himself, rises, and stumbling after
the dwindling beasts . . .⁵

It is as though Merwin is acting as surveyor, locating a point in the mind where the greatest chaos exists, a juncture, when reached, that becomes a timeless, spaceless "non-position" where reality and life can be viewed on one side juxtaposed with imaginative non-reality and death on the other. Nevertheless, the voice that emerges has a distant, impersonal quality that I feel somewhat compromises the psychic subject matter of the poem. It is remarkable that Merwin was able, at so early an age and with such expertise, to handle the rigorous demands of conventional forms. But the voice is simply not a personal one.

It is to Merwin's credit that he recognized a need for stylistic growth. In his second book, *The Dancing Bears*, Merwin relaxes his form somewhat and the voice becomes earthier, less God-like:

I do not understand the world, father.
By the millpond at the end of the garden
There is a man who slouches listening
To the wheel revolving in the stream, only
There is no wheel there to revolve.⁶

Richard Howard has these remarks to make on Merwin's new voice:

The aspiration to commanding utterance is from the start renounced, decried, and the dandy's posture of supreme defiance, cast up to the indifferent stars, justifies the *made* music [as opposed to the miraculous natural harmonies] of these further poems.⁷

Still, there is a tendency in *The Dancing Bears* to "lean" on classical mythology rather than to supplant a more personally mythical realm. The poems are strong, but they seem

5. W.S. Merwin, *The First Four Books of Poems*, pp. 38, 40.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

7. Richard Howard, *Alone With America*, New York, 1980, p. 424.

to lack immediacy; a quality of slightly removed personal experience still prevails.

Although Merwin's third book, *Green with Beasts*, shows a further development into narrative-like, free verse poems, it is in *The Drunk in the Furnace* that Merwin's own style comes alive. Howard notes "an ungainliness and an intimacy one would thought inaccessible not only to the singer of all those carols and cansos, but even to the connoisseur of numinous landscapes and emblematic weathers."⁸ He sums up the book's predominant theme with the cogent perception that here Merwin's work reflects the "desperate calcination of a man in a death-struggle with his own *realization*, in all the senses that word will bear, of mortality."⁹

The collection of sea poems within "Furnace," especially, possesses a brooding fascination with the role of death in man's life. In "FogHorn" the awareness of mortality is exposed through the metaphor of the warning beacon:

Who tethered its tongue
So that its voice could never come
To speak out in the light of clear day,
Buy only when the shifting blindness
Descends and is acknowledged among us.¹⁰

until the importance of death-awareness is made clear:

We only put it there
To give warning of something we dare not
Ignore, lest we should come upon it
Too suddenly, recognize it too late,
As our cries were swallowed up and all hands lost.¹¹

"The Iceberg" incorporates the symbol of the iceberg to reveal the function of the birth-death-rebirth cycle: "These must dissolve/Before they can again grow apple trees."¹² And nowhere in Merwin's earlier works is the portrayal of that terrible space between life and death expressed with

8. Ibid, p. 431.

9. Ibid, p. 434.

10. W.S. Merwin, *The First Four Books of Poems*, p. 203.

11. Ibid, p. 203.

12. Ibid, p. 202.

greater clarity than in the climactic stanza of "Deception Island":

It is like being suspended in the open
Vast wreck of a stony skull dead for ages.
You cannot believe the crater was ever
Fiery, before it filled with silence, and sea.¹³

"The Frozen Sea" demonstrates a new attitude by angrily indicting man's tendency to miss the simplest of nature's symbols. Here, the God-like voice is entirely absent. The tone is not didactic or overly-authoritative, as indicated by the use of the pronoun "we." The inclusion of self-indictment indicates that Merwin has clearly set his feet in the earth, admitting "the mortal flaw" in himself, laying bare his human fallibility so that the poet self unites empathetically with the collective self of the poem.

The Drunk in the Furnace is Merwin's homecoming. He appears to have found a voice that expresses his themes with undeniable immediacy. It is not surprising, then, that the highly personal family poems that close out his collection are included. This series exposes the hypocritical, lifeless, and rigid atmosphere around which Merwin grew up:

Grandmother, his wife, wearing the true faith
Like an iron nightgown, yet brought to birth
Seven times and raising the family
Through her needle's eye . . .¹⁴

The Drunk in the Furnace clearly took many critics by surprise. Eric Hartley remarks that "as a whole, man is given rather short shrift. For the most part, he has little more than petty, bigoted, and self-serving motives for his actions. . . . If *Green with Beasts* takes the reader toward a heaven, then *The Drunk in the Furnace* takes him into a hell and offers little hope of getting out."¹⁵ I cannot agree with this assessment. It is precisely the portrayal of this realistic "hell" which provides the reader the necessary

13. Ibid, p. 204.

14. Ibid, p. 247.

15. Eric Hartley, *American Poets Since World War II*, V. 5, Ed. Donald J. Greiner, Detroit, 1980, p. 68.

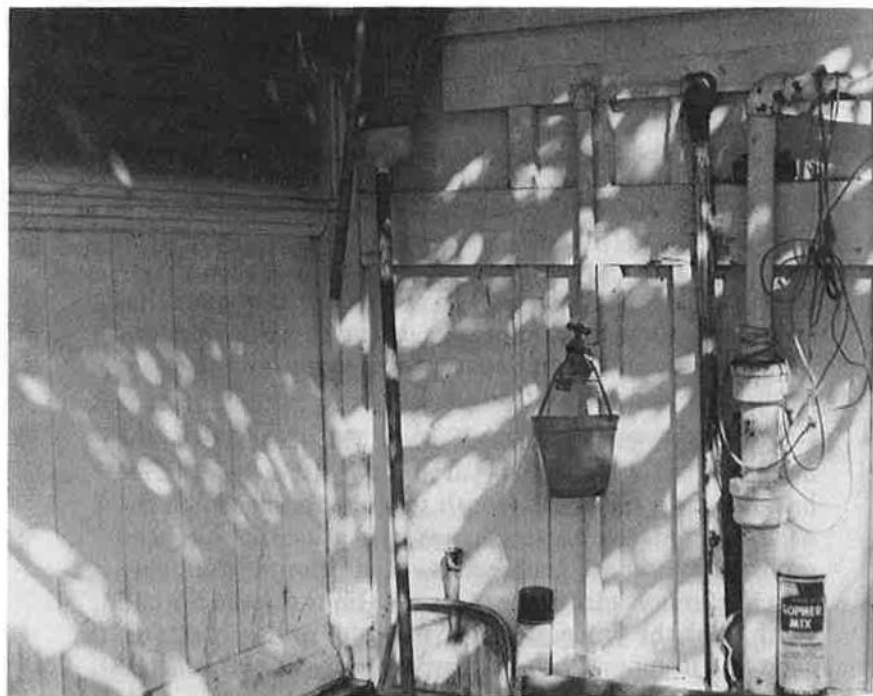
provocation for "getting out." Karl Markoff seems to have his finger more closely placed on the pulse of this collection:

It may be simply a coincidence that the family poems immediately precede the emergence of Merwin as a practitioner of open form; but it is tempting to the theorist to imagine that some sort of liberating process took place in *The Drunk in the Furnace*.¹⁶

The "liberating process" is clearly the replacement of recounted classical myths with a language and voice that strike directly at the source of man's mythmaking desires. The poems are colloquial, approaching narrative, but retain a musical resonance within the lines.

The Drunk in the Furnace draws Merwin nearer to the more subconscious, archetypal world of his later works. He has outgrown his poetic youth to the point at which the need to approach chaotic themes from a distance has been replaced by a more courageous recognition of the poet's own immersion within the razor-thin line between life and death. It is the voice of a poet weary of old convictions, excited and renewed by the impending, less certain confrontations with new, approaching beasts.

16. Karl Markoff, *Crowell's Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry*, New York, 1973, p. 213.



Karen Gellert

afternoon of karma

Christopher Sales

(for lady murasaki)

in heian-ko
where the plum and cherry
blossoms always blossomed
and bored courtiers
send messages
folded
in crimson paper with spider stroke impressions—
it was always autumn and always rain-spattered
and the eaves of the shinden
the mansion's floors
echoed hollowly
the sound of scraping screens.

there were pillow books and memoirs
furiously scribbled
by women in colored silks and sleeves
and the sounds of boredom were audible
as they sat behind the shutters in a rainbow blur.

Walking

Tim Matthews

Where does all that motion go
When your hands are in your pockets?
Bunched into those sad shoulders?
Arms must be loose for swinging.

Put clockwork to use
It's still morning
There's nothing to hold
And the sun is ticking

The Masked Ball

Greg Boyd

Someone in red heels and nails dances past, giggling through the snout of a pig. A wolf bows and whispers in her ear, offers a white-gloved hand. Glasses, nose, and moustache forgets to laugh when he spills a drink on his tight pants. Sequins and cat whiskers wishes she had taken dance lessons and lost weight. The band affects a pirate crew with eye patches. Children peek down from the stairs, mice in white pyjamas, up past their bedtime. Their parents, the Lone Ranger and Tonto, aren't speaking.

Out back a plump Wonder Woman skinny dips in the swimming pool. Frankenstein strips and joins her, uncovering a monstrous secret. A bald Superman passes out by the bushes. Batman and Robin lock themselves in the bathroom. Dracula waits his turn.

Somewhere in the black tub of lights below the hills of Hollywood, the Keystone Cops are cruising.

Where the Flower Lives

Scott Memmer

We can only know that from the unknown, profound desires enter in upon us, and that the fulfilling of these desires is the fulfilling of creation. We know that the rose comes to blossom.

—D. H. Lawrence

Even at the beginning of that summer it was apparent to Steven that something would change. This would be the summer. He couldn't say how he had come upon this knowledge—certainly it hadn't been asked for—but the knowledge came to him somehow, and he, not knowing what else to do with it, but knowing he must do something, took it in. He was fourteen at the time. It had been a placid fourteen years, this growing up in a small Ohio town, this chasing of dreams and fireflies through the twilight of thirteen summers—but now, suddenly, he felt boyhood giving way to the man in him, felt the muscles in his arm harden whenever he helped his father hoe the garden behind their house, and with this sensation of hardening came a fear. A fear of he didn't know what, although he suspected it was of women. For as long as he could remember he both loved and feared women, craved their touch and at the same time wanted to run from them. He loved them; and yet they terrified him. He wanted to know them; and yet he didn't know them. He wanted to know them—heached to know them—he *would* know them. But for now, because of his lack of contact with them, he knew them only secondhand, through vague imaginings and those rare nights when they walked hand in hand with their lovers down the lane, their laughter trilling in the treetops and hiding amid the leaves, then swooping down to gentle Steven in his quiet bed. O, how he thrilled to hear their voices! They were wonderful. He would know them.

Steven had never considered himself handsome. In fact he wasn't. Girls had made fun of him for as long as he could remember—his large ears, his too-large nose, his slightly buck teeth—and this cut him deeply, for as much as his mother told him he was a strapping and handsome boy, he knew himself for what he was: an awkward, gangling adolescent, all elbows, knees and chin. At fourteen he had yet to fill out, and this left him with an impression of himself as hovering uncertainly between toddlerhood and Charles Atlas, leaning, if anywhere, toward the toddler. But this was Steven Hart in the summer of 1967, this was the boy as he knew himself and as others knew him, and the painful awareness of his image as he knew it must appear to others drove him wild with distraction and despair.

He looked at his face in the bathroom mirror. He traced his cheekbones with his index fingers. They were too high—made him look like an Injun. But he wasn't an Injun—there wasn't a drop of Indian blood anywhere in his parentage. Even so, his nose was a little hooked at the end, with a slight hump in the middle, as if it had been broken once or twice (maybe he was an Injun after all). His eyes were deep brown, almost black. His skin was fair, with freckles along the arms and legs. His face, as he looked at it in the mirror that morning, showed not even a hint of a beard—not even any peach fuzz; he hadn't shaved yet, although he'd tried once and cut himself miserably. Some of the black guys in his class had been shaving for more than a year. This upset him.

"Hey, Steve—phone!" his brother's voice said through the bathroom door.

"Coming!"

He washed his hands and stepped out into the hallway. He picked up the phone.

"Hey, Steve!" a voice said.

"Hey, Rich," Steve said.

"Gonna meet me there?"

"I said I would, didn't I?" Steven said.

"Yeah," Rich said. "I just wanted to make sure you weren't gonna wimp out on me."

"I told you I wouldn't."

"I just want to make sure," Richard said.

"I won't," Steven said, a little perturbed, "okay? What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty," Rich said. "Half an hour."

"Well, I'll see you in half an hour," Steven said.

"If you don't wimp out on me," his friend said, laughing, and hung up.

Steven returned the phone to its receiver, swore to himself, and walked into his bedroom. His brother was listening to the Rolling Stones.

"Mick Jagger sounds like he swallowed a bowling ball," Steven said.

"Aw, the Stones are keen!" his brother said.

Steven gathered his things together and made for the door.

"Bob Dylan sings like he has asthma," his brother challenged.

"At least you can understand the words," Steven said, and walked out.

"Hey—close the door!"

"Close it yourself!"

Steven walked into the kitchen, picked up a pencil from the counter, and scribbled a note to his mother. He was leaving to go to the pool. He would be there all day with Richard (he didn't feel a need to mention the girls). Yes, he'd taken the garbage out. No, he had not mowed the lawn as he promised he would—would do it tomorrow. He felt terrible about not mowing the lawn—in fact, he wanted to kill himself. He hoped she still loved him, though he didn't think she did. Regards, Steven.

He folded the note in half, wrote "MOM" across the front of it, laid the pencil down, retrieved his towel and slipped quietly out the back door. He cut across the back yard, hopped the white board fence at the far end, cut through the Barkers' back lot, waved to Mrs. Barker in her kitchen window, and came out onto Mockingbird Lane. His mother wouldn't see him if he went this way.

He paced down the long slope of the hill, feeling the insistent Ohio sun on the back of his neck, listened to the steady flip-flop-flop of his faded blue rubber thongs as they slapped endlessly against his heel, swatted a few pesky gnats, then turned right onto Hillbrook Street and continued down the lane. When he got to the creek at the bottom of the hill he walked onto the bridge and stopped to have a look. Those scientists certainly had cleared up the pollution. A few years ago you couldn't have stopped here for more than thirty seconds—would've been asphyxiated. He spat into the creek, threw his towel over his shoulder, and continued up the other side of the hill.

Girls, girls, girls. He pulled up the steep hill and tried to shove them out of his mind, but they wouldn't go. They never went anywhere you told them to go, they never did anything you told them to do. They talked to much, they organized little enclaves and cliques, they made enemies quickly, they held grudges. But they were lovely, they were so very, very lovely! Steven's face flushed and beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as he cleared the crest of the hill. He could feel himself sweating inside his orange swimtrunks; he could feel himself sweating all over.

He walked over to the crosswalk button and pressed it.

A sleek, silver Chevy, driven by a young brunette in a frilly white blouse, glided by. The brunette's hair trailed in the wind. Steven watched the Chevy float past him and around the bend. Girls everywhere. And all so very, very lovely.

When the light changed he walked swiftly across the street, breaking into a lazy jog on the other side. He jogged

past the red brick, two-story high school, past the half dozen yellow-orange school buses parked around back, then slowed to a rapid walk. He could see the pool up ahead. He walked across the asphalt lot and came to rest on the bike rack near the pool entrance. He was eight minutes early. No Richard. He sat on the bike rack and waited.

He sat there for two minutes until he saw Richard's short, stocky form coming across the baseball field next to the Police Station. Richard was the exact opposite of Steven—all muscles, bluster and braggadocio. He kicked up dust as he came. About halfway across the baseball field he bent over, picked up a rock, stood, and flung it at a stray dog. The dog yelped and bolted. Richard's face broke into a grin, and he waved to Steven. He started to trot.

It was getting hotter. Steven could feel a trickle of sweat wend its way down his backbone; his shirt was getting wet with it. That pool would feel great right about now.

"How's it going, Shakespeare?" Steven said.

"Aren't you hot?" Steven said.

"The ladies think so," Richard said. "Where are they?"

"Haven't seen them yet."

"That's women," Rich said; "always late."

Just then a blue Ford Fairlane pulled up, stopped and the three girls got out. The woman who was driving—Cathy's mother—turned the ignition off, got out, and opened the trunk with her key. The girls removed their things. Cathy's mother had to borrow one of the girl's towels to shut the trunk—it was that hot.

"Hey, Rich," Cathy said. "Hey, Steve."

"Hey, Cath."

Cathy twitch-bottomed up the sidewalk, the slap of her thongs echoing off the school buses, and turned to wave to her mother. A girl named Miranda followed her up the sidewalk. Steven knew Miranda from school; she was a petite girl, with freckles and light brown hair. The third girl was someone Steven didn't know, but she looked a lot like the brunette who had been driving the silver Chevy.

"Hi-ya, Miranda," Steve said.

"Hey, Steve."

"This is my cousin—Roberta," Cathy said. "Roberta—Richard, Steve."

"Pretty hot out," Steven said to Roberta.

"Ain't it, though?" Robert said.

The five of them flip-flopped up the sidewalk to the pool entrance. Three minutes to ten. Steven sat on the railing next to the entrance.

"I wish they'd open the goddammed thing early," Rich said.

Steven said nothing. He sat on the railing and watched Roberta. The way she moved was different than the other girls. Something about her—something about the way she carried herself—was different than Miranda and Cathy. She possessed an ease of motion he'd rarely seen in girls his own age. Whenever she brushed the hair away from her face, or turned her head, or swatted absently at a gnat, he felt his entire body go rigid with attention. It was like watching a ballerina. Everything about her—the delicacy of her hands, the suddenness of her smile—suggested worlds of tenderness and grace of which Steven could only dream. He wanted to reach out and touch her; he wanted to extend his hand and feel her skin, the smoothness of it, the brownness of it. He wanted to—

"One more minute," Richard said disgustedly.

He wanted to know her somehow, to know something in her that he didn't know in himself, and by knowing that part of her, he felt, he would know once and for all what up to that point had only been imagined. He exhaled. He felt the trickle of sweat wend its slow path down his backbone, felt it increase its flow and soak the back of his shirt. The sun was hot on his back. He smelled the grass beneath him, pungent and newly-cut, the clipped dandelion stems lying haphazardly about the lawn like the candles of a birthday cake, their yellow flowers scattered about like flame. He looked up and saw Roberta toss her long brown hair over

her shoulder, followed the curve of her neck and breasts and abdomen, until his eyes came to rest on the pale ivory of her inner thigh. It was lovely there. His eyes rested on the paleness, the whiteness, until Roberta swung her head around, quite by accident, and caught his eyes suddenly in her own, caught them and held them. Steven felt helpless, powerless. White-hot shame flashed through him and his knees started to shake. Roberta held his gaze, would not let it go. He smelled the dewy grass beneath him, and the dandelion stems, stronger now, more pungent, their fragrance rising, catching his nostrils, mingling now with the talcum softness of Roberta's colonge; and his face burned. Finally she released him, letting him go like a kestrel from a tether, but not before she smiled mischievously and tossed her head back ever so gently, her hair flowing down behind her like the freed tethers of a kestrel. And not before Steven looked once and caught the mirth and favor in her eyes.

The gate opened and everyone except Roberta showed their season passes to the girl in the booth; Roberta had to pay separately. They walked around to the deep end of the pool, setting their things on the deck near the diving boards. Everyone stripped and immediately dove in.

The afternoon passed quickly. They alternated their time between swimming and sunning. Richard put his arms around Cathy once and kissed her on the ear. Steven kept half an eye on Roberta. Miranda was alone.

About four o'clock Steven and Roberta were swimming together by themselves in the deep end of the pool; everyone else was on the deck sunning themselves. The two of them paddled over to the side and rested their heads against the deck, their bodies underwater. It was the first time they had been alone all day.

"Water's kind of chilly," Steven said, shivering.

"Not so bad," Roberta said.

"Your lips are blue," Steven said.

"Yours are pink," Roberta said, laughing, "like flowers." She leaned toward him, stroking his chin with her hand, and kissed him tenderly. "I like flowers."

Steven felt his body go all rigid on him. He put his arm around Roberta's waist, and pulled her toward him.

"My!" she said, "you *must* be a flower—you're blossoming all over!"

"Am I?"

"Yes," she said. "All over. Petal by petal." With that she giggled, broke free of him, and dove off into the deep end. She surfaced a few seconds later and dog paddled back to him, stopping just out of arm's reach. "I want you to know," she said, "that I saw what you were looking at this morning—and I liked it." She laughed, blew him a chlorine kiss, and dove off again.

Later, at day's end, as the girls were loading their things into the blue Fairlane, Roberta gave Steven her phone number, and the directions, by bicycle, to her parents' house. She told him to come soon. She said she knew a place where they could go and tell secrets to one another. No one ever went there, she said.

Steven thrilled to hear it! But then he had to hold his towel in front of him to hide the small lump in his trousers.

He did not sleep well that night. He tossed and turned on his upper bunk, and finally, after three hours of fitful slumber, awoke, and could not get back to sleep. He climbed out of bed and padded into the living room. For a while he sat on the sofa and ran his fingers through his hair, then stood and walked over to the picture window and looked outside. It was three in the morning. Everything was quiet. Nothing, not even a leaf, stirred. There was a full moon. Steven's house, his street, his hand as he rested it on the windowsill—all of them paled under the blanched light of the moon. He watched a squirrel scurry across his front lawn: it, too, was whitened with moonlight. It occurred to him then that the paleness of the moon was the same color as the inside of Roberta's thigh, and that everything he had ever known or loved—his neighborhood, his home, his heart and even his hands—had taken on that same colorless tint of white, not actually the negation of all color, but

the absence of all colors except one. The whiteness surrounded him. His breathing concentrated itself and his entire body tightened. Something swelled in him, something wanted to burst, but it was a moment or two before Steven realized that it was Desire swelling in him, it was Desire wanting to burst, and not the sort of desire he had been accustomed to as a boy. This desire was different—stronger, more powerful, containing in it the anger of oceans and the howl of the wind. There was something in this desire which could not be denied. He felt a warmth flow through him, a warmth as continual as blood and seasons, and suddenly he didn't feel so awkward; suddenly he felt almost handsome. His hands began to tremble, his face began to glow. Everything had turned white.

He looked out into the street and tried to remember what Roberta had said. What had she said? That he was a flower. Yes, a flower. But what kind of flower? There were so many. What kind of flower?

Maybe he would never know. Maybe she would take him to the secret place, and they would tell their secrets to one another, and after it was over—maybe even then he wouldn't know. But he had to find out, he had to know. For he knew this much already: something stirred in him, something that made the flowers themselves stir, that made bees and wasps stir, and which nudged all of nature.

What kind of flower? He wished Roberta was there so he could ask her. But she was not, so he turned slowly from the window, seeing the whiteness of the room and his world, and felt himself blossoming.

Chinese Wishing Well

Virginia Webster

I remember the morning I was stung
by her first push against my womb.
Pulling at the ripe strands of rice
nestled in the mud blanketed paddy,
I dropped a grain out of my nut brown hand
and watched it plob into the water.

Only one, the government says.

I saw the world shrink into myself
bright glare of sky bouncing
from ground into my eyes and
squeezing into the black hurt of birth.

It must be a boy, my husband says.

He watched the old woman
take me from the fields.

He thought I could choose our child
the way I pick lilies from the swamp meadow,
the way I dance with petals in my hair.

It is for the best, the old women say.

There is a well in the field
that has long since dried.
It is a thin mouth into the earth
where children throw pebbles
into its long throat,
giggling at the echoes escaping
so long after the fall.

NORTHRIDGE REVIEW

I watched him that night
as he took her there.
I saw a silhouette against the stars
and an infant pressed to his chest.
What I felt is like the
hollow innards of a reed pipe
silent for lack of the player
who turns air into music.
He took my only note
and held her over the hungry well.
He dropped her like a shiny pebble.
Her sound seemed that of
a crane winding its long neck
into the setting sun.
It will be a boy next time, he says.
And when my legs open to him,
the song of the player
who plucks with butting haunches,
I hold my breath
waiting for the next note to form
and fearing the sound it will make.
The echo of the crane lingers
listening to what they say.

Always on Afternoons

Dolores McLaughlin

Always on afternoons, graham crackers and milk
at the kitchen table.
the windows are open
a spray of water from the sprinklers
a film of moisture on the window sills.

always the smell of freshly cut grass
on Friday afternoons.
no curtains at these windows
this alcove in the kitchen where we eat.
Nothing to hide any part of the yard from us.

The apple trees sit surrounded
by flagstone after flagstone.
It wasn't always like this.

Every spring the camera and ladder come out
and every year we sit each on a step
and have our picture taken.
Philip is so high that he has a hat of apple blossoms.
The bird bath is filled and robins and sparrows
dive in the out.
Water beads fall from their wings as they flap away.

NORTHRIDGE REVIEW

Croquet in the summer heat
knocking your ball against your opponent's out and away
little wire hoops stuck in the grass
tan balls with green, yellow blue and red stripes
being smacked by tan mallets
with green, yellow blue and red stripes.

Autumn and the wind blows
leaves skim across the yard
touching down tossed about landing in the corner
against the white wooden fence.

Every winter by brother Hugh putting out nuts
for the squirrels.
Dark dots against the snow
The bird bath filled with snow and
our stale bread.



Alan Arkawy

T. Corraghessan Boyle is the author of the critically acclaimed novel, *Water Music*, and a second novel, *Budding Prospects*. Boyle has also published a collection of short stories, *The Descent of Man*. Boyle's fiction has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Antaeus*, and *The Georgia Review*. Boyle is working on a third novel, tentatively titled *World's End*, and a second collection of short stores, *Greasy Lake and Other Stories*.

Boyle is a professor of English at the University of Southern California, where he teaches creative writing. He lives in Woodland Hills, California, with his wife and children.

I Dated Jane Austen first appeared in *The Georgia Review*, and is reprinted here by permission of the author. The interview that follows was conducted as part of the 1984 *Writes of Spring* program, a series of readings and workshops with noted Southern California writers of poetry and fiction. The *Writes of Spring* was sponsored by the CSUN English Department and funded by a grant from the CSUN Foundation.

Because a substantial portion of the Boyle interview deals with his novel *Water Music*, a prefatory note is appropriate here: *Water Music* is based on a work of non-fiction by Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior of West Africa*. Park, a Scotsman, spent the latter years of his life

[1794-1805] exploring the people and geography of the Niger River. *Travels in the Interior* . . . chronicles those explorations in journalistic form. In *Water Music*, however, Boyle uses Mungo Park's text as a point of departure from which to create a work of fiction. As Boyle states: "The whole concept of *Water Music* is built around the imaginative process. If I had wanted to reproduce reality, I would have written Mungo Park's biography. . . . Instead, I chose to imagine what happened or what I would like to have happened."

I Dated Jane Austen

T. Coraghessan Boyle

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Her hands were cold. She held them out for me as I stepped into the parlor. "Mr. Boyle," announced the maid, and Jane was rising to greet me, her cold white hands like an offering. I took them, said my good evenings, and nodded at each of the pairs of eyes ranged round the room. There were brothers, smallish and large of head, whose names I didn't quite catch; there was her father, the Reverend, and her sister, the spinster. They stared at me like sharks on the verge of a feeding frenzy. I was wearing my pink boots, "Great Disasters" T-shirt, and my Tiki medallion. My shoulders slumped under the scrutiny. My wit evaporated.

"Have a seat, son," said the Reverend, and I backed onto a settee between two brothers. Jane retreated to an armchair on the far side of the room. Cassandra, the spinster, plucked up her knitting. One of the brothers signed. I could see it coming, with the certainty and illogic of an aboriginal courtship rite: a round of polite chit-chat.

The Reverend cleared his throat. "So what do you think of Mrs. Radcliffe's new book?"

I balanced a glass of sherry on my knee. The Reverend, Cassandra, and the brothers revolved tiny spoons around the rims of teacups. Jane nibbled at a croissant and focused her huge unblinking eyes on the side of my face. One of the brothers had just made a devastating witticism at the expense of the *Lyrical Ballads* and was still tittering over it. Somewhere cats were purring and clocks ticking. I glanced

at my watch: only seventeen minutes since I'd stepped in the door.

I stood. "Well, Reverend," I said, "I think it's time Jane and I hit the road."

He looked up at the doomed Hindenburg blazing across my chest and smacked his lips. "But you've only just arrived."

There really wasn't much room for Cassandra in the Alfa Romeo, but the Reverend and his troop of sons insisted that she come along. She hefted her skirts, wedged herself into the rear compartment, and flared her parasol, while Jane pulled a white cap down over her curls and attempted a joke about Phaetons and the winds of Aeolus. The Reverend stood at the curb and watched my fingers as I helped Jane fasten her seat belt, and then we were off with a crunch of gravel and a billow of exhaust.

The film was Italian, in black and white, full of social acuity and steamy sex. I sat between the two sisters with a bucket of buttered popcorn. Jane's lips were parted and her eyes glowed. I offered her some popcorn. "I do not think that I care for any just now, thank you," she said. Cassandra sat stiff and erect, tireless and silent, like a mileage marker beside a country lane. She was not interested in popcorn either.

The story concerned the seduction of a long-legged village girl by a mustachioed adventurer who afterward refuses to marry her on the grounds that she is impure. The girl, swollen with child, bursts in upon the nuptials of her seducer and the daughter of a wealthy merchant, and demands her due. She is turned out into the street. But late that night, as the newlyweds thrash about in the bridal bed—

It was at this point that Jane took hold of my arm and whispered that she wanted to leave. What could I do? I fumbled for her wrap, people hissed at us, great nude thighs slashed across the screen, and we headed for the glowing EXIT sign.

I proposed a club. "Oh, do let's walk!" Jane said. "The air is so frightfully delicious after that close, odious theatre—don't you think?" Pigeons flapped and cooed. A panhandler leaned against the fender of a car and drooled into the gutter. I took Jane's arm. Cassandra took mine.

At *The Mooncalf* we had our wrists stamped with luminescent ink and then found a table near the dance floor. The waitress' fingernails were green daggers. She wore a butch haircut and three-inch heels. Jane wanted punch, Cassandra tea. I ordered three margaritas.

The band was recreating the fall of the Third Reich amid clouds of green smoke and flashing lights. We gazed out at the dancers in their jumpsuits and platform shoes as they bumped bums, heads, and genitals in time to the music. I thought of Catherine Morland at Bath and decided to ask Jane for a dance. I leaned across the table. "Want to dance?" I shouted.

"Beg your pardon?" Jane said, leaning over her margarita.

"Dance," I shouted, miming the action of holding her in my arms.

"No, I'm very sorry," she said. "I'm afraid not."

Cassandra tapped my arm. "I'd love to," she giggled.

Jane removed her cap and fingered out her curls as Cassandra and I got up from the table. She grinned and waved as we receded into the crowd. Over the heads of the dancers I watched her sniff suspiciously at her drink and then sit back to ogle the crowd with her black satiric eyes.

Then I turned to Cassandra. She curtsied, grabbed me in a fox-trot sort of way and began to promenade round the floor. For so small a woman (her nose kept poking at the moribund Titanic listing across my lower rib cage), I was amazed at her energy. We pranced through the hustlers and bumpers like kiddies round a Maypole. I was even beginning to enjoy myself when I glanced over at our table and saw that a man in fierce black sideburns and mustache had joined Jane. He was dressed in a ruffled shirt, antique tie,

and coattails that hung to the floor as he sat. At that moment a fellow terpsichorean flung his partner into the air, caught her by wrist and ankle, and twirled her like a toreador's cape. When I looked up again Jane was sitting alone, her eyes fixed on mine through the welter of heads.

The band concluded with a crunching metallic shriek, and Cassandra and I made our way back to the table. "Who was that?" I asked Jane.

"Who was who?"

"That mustachioed murderer's apprentice you were sitting with."

"Oh," she said. "Him."

I realized that Cassandra was still clutching my hand.

"Just an acquaintance."

As we pulled into the drive at Steventon, I observed a horse tethered to one of the palings. The horse lifted its tail, then dropped it. Jane seemed suddenly animated. She made a clucking sound and called to the horse by name. The horse flicked its ears. I asked if she liked horses. "Hm?" she said, already looking off toward the silhouettes that played across the parlor curtains. "Oh yes, yes. Very much so," she said, and then she released the seat belt, flung back the door and tripped up the stairs into the house. I killed the engine and stepped out into the dark drive. Crickets sawed their legs together in the bushes. Cassandra held out her hand.

Cassandra led me into the parlor where I was startled to see the mustachioed ne'er-do-well from *The Mooncalf*. He held a teacup in his hand. His boots shone as if they'd been razor-stopped. He was talking with Jane.

"Well, well," said the Reverend, stepping out of the shadows. "Enjoy yourselves?"

"Oh, immensely, father," said Cassandra.

Jane was grinning at me again. "Mr. Boyle," she said. "Have you met Mr. Crawford?" The brothers, with their fine

bones and disproportionate heads, gathered round. Crawford's sideburns reached nearly to the line of his jaw. His mustache was smooth and black. I held out my hand. He shifted the teacup and gave me a firm handshake. "Delighted," he said.

We found seats (Crawford shoved in next to Jane on the love seat; I wound up on the settee between Cassandra and a brother in naval uniform), and the maid served tea and cakes. Something was wrong—of that I was sure. The brothers were not their usual witty selves, the Reverend floundered in the midst of a critique of Coleridge's cult of artifice, Cassandra dropped a stitch. In the corner, Crawford was holding a whispered colloquy with Jane. Her cheeks, which tended toward the flaccid, were now positively bloated, and flushed with color. It was then that it came to me. "Crawford," I said, getting to my feet. "Henry Crawford?"

He sprang up like a gunfighter summoned to the OK Corral. "That's right," he leered. His eyes were deep and cold as crevasses. He looked pretty formidable—until I realized that he couldn't have been more than five-three or -four, give or take an inch for his heels.

Suddenly I had hold of his elbow. The Tiki medallion trembled at my throat. "I'd like a word with you outside," I said. "In the garden."

The brothers were on their feet. The Reverend spilled his tea. Crawford jerked his arm out of my grasp and stalked through the door that gave onto the garden. Nightsounds grated in my ears, the brothers murmured at my back, and Jane, as I pulled the door closed, grinned at me as if I'd just told the joke of the century.

Crawford was waiting for me in the ragged shadows of the trees, turned to face me like a bayed animal. I felt a surge of power. I wanted to call him a son of a bitch, but in keeping with the times, I settled for cad. "You cad," I said, shoving him back a step, "how dare you come sniffing around here after what you did to Maria Bertram in *Mansfield Park*? It's people like you—corrupt, arbitrary, ego-centric—that foment all the lust and heartbreak of the world and challenge the very possibility of happy endings."

"Hah!" he said. Then he stepped forward and the moon fell across his face. His eyes were like the birth of evil. In his hand, a riding glove. He slapped my face with it. "Tomorrow morning, at dawn," he hissed. "Beneath the bridge."

"Okay, wiseguy," I said, "okay," but I could feel the Titanic sinking into my belt.

A moment later the night was filled with the clatter of hoofs.

I was greeted by silence in the parlor. They stared at me, sated, as I stepped through the door. Except for Casadna, who mooned at me from behind her knitting, and Jane, who was bent over a notebook, scribbling away like a court recorder. The Reverend cleared his throat and Jane looked up. She scratched off another line or two and then rose to show me out. She led me through the parlor and down the hall to the front entrance. We paused at the door.

"I've had a memorable evening," she said, and then glanced back to where Casandra had appeared at the parlor door. "Do come again." And then she held out her hands.

Her hands were cold.

T. C. Boyle: An Interview

Northridge Review: When did your interest in writing begin?

Boyle: My interest in writing began after I first read Goethe, at about the age of four (*laughs*). No, really, I started writing short stories as an undergraduate—I was a junior or senior. I had been a music major, then switched to history, and then finally to history and English. Encouraged to continue my writing, I did so, although I wrote very little the first two years. I did publish a couple of short stories in *The North American Review*. This encouraged me too. Although I did not see myself as a writer, the idea was somewhere in the back of my mind. It eventually led me to the University of Iowa. At the time, the University of Iowa was the only college I knew that had a writing program, so I submitted three short stories, one of which is included in my first collection of short stories, *The Descent of Man*. Iowa accepted me as a graduate student on the basis of those submissions.

NR: In an interview published in *The Los Angeles Times*, you said that you have published even your earliest stories.

Boyle: Well, I didn't drag out every short story I had ever written, but I made an effort to publish the ones I believed in, the ones I thought were good stories.

NR: Was it difficult to find a publisher for those first short stories?

Boyle: I was lucky. I sent out stories for only about six months when I received an acceptance, as I said, from *The North American Review*. But, yes, it's true—at first it's hard to get your stories published. Editors don't know who you are, they don't know your name, they're busy, and they don't pay much attention to unknown writers. But as you become better known, it's easier. Acceptance is more frequent.

NR: You began writing as an undergraduate in New York. When did you begin work on your first novel, *Water Music*, and how did you approach the writing of the novel?

Boyle: I began writing *Water Music* while I was still a graduate student at the University of Iowa. At the time, I had only written short stories. I had never written a novel and I wanted to see if I could do it. So I used the Mungo Park story, *Travels in the Interior of West Africa*, which forms the core of my novel, and used his story to graft on the rest of my story—the fictional part. The initial idea came to me after I had read about Mungo Park, who was a big hero in Scotland, and I wanted to explore that. The structure of the story determined who the other characters would be.

NR: In *Water Music* there is a chapter called "Explorer's Notes." Were those actual notes or were they fabrications?

Boyle: The notes were my invention. It's all part of the theme contained in the epigraph at the beginning of the novel. [Editor's Note: *The epigraph to Water Music is from a poem by W.S. Merwin, entitled "The Old Boast," and reads, "Listen natives of a dry place/from the harpist fingers/rain."*] Water music is what moves the natives in the poem. The natives are transformed by the music. They are made to believe that it is raining. In *Water Music*, the characters are transported, transformed, in the same way. The reader is also changed by the music of the water images. Handel's *Water Music* plays here as well. The whole idea of the novel revolves around the idea that it is the imagination which allows us to become something else, something new.

NR: In *The Los Angeles Times*, you were quoted as having said "I like to imagine rather than reproduce reality . . ."

Boyle: Did I say that?

NR: That's what it said!

Boyle: I'll stand by that (*laughs*).

NR: Is what we've discussed about this transportation—this transformation by means of the imagination—what you meant by that statement?

Boyle: Absolutely. The whole concept of *Water Music*, as I have said, is built around the imaginative process. If I had wanted to reproduce reality, I would have written Mungo Park's biography. I would have dug up his bones, labeled them, and merely written his history. Instead, I chose to imagine what happened or what I would like to have happened.

NR: In the chapter of *Water Music* called "All the King's Men," Johnson, Mungo's factotum, is somewhat disgruntled by a passage Mungo reads from his notebook, most of which is a distortion of the truth. Did you include this chapter as commentary? In other words, Mungo is supposed to be a myth-breaker, as Johnson says, a recorder of reality. What was your intention here?

Boyle: That whole passage is a comment on fiction itself. History, too, is subject to distortion, which may figure in its recording.

NR: You have written a new novel, to be released in May by Viking Press, titled *Budding Prospects*. Tell us something about the novel and how it came to be written.

Boyle: *Budding Prospects* is about a failed pot plantation in Northern California. It's a story about trying to make it in America—the pioneer spirit. The three central characters believe all they have to do is work hard, regardless of the illegality of the venture, and they'll get rich. The story is based on a true account about some guys who lived in San Francisco. They got some seeds and went out and broke their backs for nine months. They essentially got nothing out of it. What started out to be a business venture to make \$200,000 ended as a fiasco in which they earned only about four or five thousand dollars. They spent nine months in

terror, paranoid, living in a hovel with no electricity, and this was all they had to show for their experience.

NR: In *The Times* you said that *Budding Prospects* is a different kind of novel for you. What did you mean? How is *Budding Prospects* different from *Water Music*?

Boyle: After *Water Music*, I was looking for something: I wanted to write a story that would read fast rather than demand the reader to ruminate, which is the case in *Water Music*. I also wanted something that would address a problem I've always had with characters. That is, instead of writing a book oriented towards the imagination, I wanted to write a novel dealing with a more conventional approach to characterization. *Budding Prospects* was an experiment.

NR: What are you working on now?

Boyle: I'm working on a novel titled *World's End*.

NR: In *The Times* you said that this new novel will be more like *Water Music* than is *Budding Prospects*. In what way is *World's End* similar to *Water Music* and in what way is it dissimilar?

Boyle: Like *Water Music*, *World's End* deals with history. I didn't want to write another strictly historical piece, although I was tempted. *World's End* begins in the present and backtracks to the Dutch colonization of New York. Actually, though, most of the novel is set in time from about 1949 to 1988.

NR: What is the novel about?

Boyle: It's a story of betrayal, which involves not only the protagonist but also parallels a similar betrayal involving his father and an ancestor. All three characters share in the betrayal.

NR: Where did you get the title for the novel?

Boyle: *World's End* is the deepest part of the Hudson River—

NR: Wait a minute—*Water Music* was a novel about the exploration of the Niger River, and *World's End* has its river—is there a trend developing here?

Boyle: (*laughs*) No, no, I don't think so. I think this will be the last novel about a river, although I will admit I am fascinated by them.

NR: How much research do you do when you're preparing to write a novel like *Water Music* or *World's End*?

Boyle: Well, I'm not a scholar and I really don't like research for its own sake, but I do enough reading of background materials to get ideas generated, and then I fill in when I find a need to. When I want to know something, I'll drag out a book and learn about it. For *World's End*, I sat down and started reading for about two months. I did this every day. Then I got itchy to begin writing. So, a couple of weeks ago, I began writing again. There are a lot of things I still need to know, but I'll do the research when the need arises.

NR: You were raised in Peekskill, New York. Is Peekskill on the Hudson and is this story somewhat autobiographical?

Boyle: Yes, it's my attempt to do what Thomas Wolfe did. I wanted to write a story about *home*.

NR: Did your research take you home? Did you find it necessary to return to Peekskill?

Boyle: No I didn't find it necessary to go back home, although I did, for about four months last year (*laughs*). The excuse was research—and I guess I did research the novel. I visited some historical sites and visited libraries where I read some little known, unpublished, manuscripts, but most of my time was spent having fun—visiting old friends and writing short stories for the *Greasy Lake* collection.

NR: Which is due out next spring?

Boyle: Yes, that's right.

NR: What writers have you been influenced by?

Boyle: I would say the Absurdist playwrights of the fifties and sixties and the Existentialist writers of our day. I read such literature when I was just beginning to develop an interest in writing. Through these early readings, the whole

idea of absurdity found its way into my work in terms of comic thrust and in terms of the incongruous conjunctions that I sometimes make. Then there's John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Robert Cooper, Donald Barthelme, and, more recently, some of the more surrealist writers. I think these influences show themselves in *Water Music* and will show themselves again in my new novel, *World's End*. I like stuff that's free-flowing, mythical, and absurd.

NR: What do you see in the future for Tom Boyle? In what direction do you see yourself going?

Boyle: I'd like to do another short novel, a story which will deal with form. I want to shape a novel—experiment. I want the story to fit the form the way Marquez invents a new form in each of his books. For example, I have an idea for a novel similar to Marquez' *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, in that the novel will be amenable to form. And I think it will probably follow *World's End*.

NR: Why fiction and not poetry for Tom Boyle?

Boyle: When I began writing, I didn't really understand poetry as well as I understood fiction. When I was at the University of Iowa working on my Ph.D., I read every poet who was anybody. But I had some bad teachers in high school—bad English teachers. Or maybe I just had a bad attitude, I don't know. (*Pauses*) But I couldn't grasp what poetry was all about. I remember one teacher in particular who would read the classics of English literature, which I later learned to love, in the most pompous tone. I was a horny adolescent and all I wanted to do was get out of school and go crazy and have fun. Then, as an undergraduate, I wound up in a writer's workshop with eight or nine people. I was the only fiction writer. The others were writing this turgid, mystical, *crazy* stuff—I couldn't make any sense of it. I guess I gravitated toward fiction as a result, and never really tried my hand at poetry, except to write incidental poetry within works of fiction.

NR: Where does one draw the line between prose and poetry? Surely one can easily call the fiction of, say,

Flannery O'Connor, *poetic*, and then there are Sherwood Anderson, Thomas Wolfe, and now Alice Walker, to name a few. Where does one draw the line? Do you make such distinctions?

Boyle: It's what you call it, really. If I call it a novel, that's what I want it to be. You can call it whatever you *like*. Take, for example, the new books by Robert Cooper and Russell Edson. Cooper is setting up short stories with jambled lines and Edson is writing these little prose stories that he calls poems. If you looked at either of them without knowing what each writer calls his work, you'd reverse the labels. It all depends upon your definition of a work. These distinctions don't really bother me.

NR: How often do you write?

Boyle: Everyday, in the morning. I wrote today. I usually begin about eight o'clock and work until about one. Then, as I get more and more involved with a story, I put in longer hours, especially if I'm nearing the end of a piece. I used to write at night, but I found I kept putting it off. I was up until about four or five in the morning and I was exhausted by the time I began writing. Writing in the morning allows me to write some before breakfast. Then, by the time I've finished eating, I've already gone through half a scene. After one o'clock, I knock off and can do what I want for the rest of the day.

NR: Does your writing schedule conflict with your teaching?

Boyle: Well, most of the days I'm teaching, I don't write. I teach about 55 afternoons a year. I don't write on these days because, if I do, by the time I get to class I'm burned out. Actually, I like the break. I like to get out of the house.

NR: The "Writes of Spring" is, in part, the reason you're here and the reason this interview is taking place. What do you think about writing workshops?

Boyle: I was not a good workshop student, but I think workshops can be a valuable experience. The essence of a writers' workshop is to help the student writer learn what

effect he is having on the reader. The workshop is a sort of instant publication. Hearing others talk about your work can help the writer.

A workshop goes bad when a student objects to criticism, when he has an axe to grind, perhaps about some comment. The workshop can only work if the writer can learn to listen without entering into the discussion. We're not interested in what the writer has to say. The personality of the teacher is also important—the way the teacher approaches the work.

The disinterest of the writer is important. The writer has to be disinterested or he will get defensive. One has to try to imagine himself in a room, as though he is behind a glass wall listening to people talk about his work. If the workshop student assumes this attitude and doesn't say, "you're wrong!" when something is said, then he may learn something. The writer doesn't have to agree with anybody. He may think the whole group is wrong. However, the next morning, when he's in the shower, he may think, "Well, twenty-five people sincerely didn't know what I was talking about, so maybe I was a *little* obscure." This is all criticism can do for anyone: it makes the writer aware of how the work affects readers and how the work can be changed, if he feels it needs changing.

NR: Readings are also a big part of the "Writes of Spring" program. Do you enjoy reading from your works?

Boyle: Oh, yes. Readings are a way of getting the word out.

NR: Earlier today you said that you see yourself as a sort of cultural messiah—

Boyle: A messiah! There are probably *many* messiahs (*laughs*).

NR: What if the public decides it would prefer to attend a rock concert rather than to listen to Tom Boyle read?

Boyle: Literature is alive when it's read. This is why I like to read. However, literature is still alive even if the public

decides it would rather go to a concert. Whatever has currency should be pursued. If someone wants to listen to music instead of Tom Boyle, fine.

NR: I understand you were once part of a rock band. Is that true?

Boyle: Yes. My last band broke up just two years ago.

NR: You don't draw lines, do you?

Boyle: No. I do what I want. I do what makes me happy. I only draw lines between what's good and what's bad.

Seahouses

Jodi Johnson

She walked after dinner towards the harbor,
the light of Farne Island lighthouse
beating like a heart against the slow evening.
Where the town grew from red stone over the beach
she saw darkness rising. The houses sank into it
brick by brick. She imagined the halls inside
swimming in blue shadow. One at a time
lights went on in windows. She thought:
behind one a woman is setting forks
carefully beside brown plates, in another a man
sits on a bed, sewing buttons on his shirt.

As a young girl, she had gone clamdigging,
hanging a lamp on a pole and standing on her own
white island. She turned over mud with a pitchfork
to pluck clams from their safe sleep.
Later, the open shells pleased her,
the pale lining glowing in her hand. She believed then
that if someone could force open the tight door in her ribs,
she would shine too.

But now, watching the dark pour over the houses,
she feels it soak into rooms in her spine—
she is filled with small nights. She knows how difficult it is
for people in white windows to know anything of each other,
in hard-edged light.

Sudden bright flashes from the lighthouse
bend briefly over the sea's roof.
They remind her of lightning. She counts
the long black pauses.

Death by Drowning

Richard Zimmerman

Gladys sits by the phone
and listens to the olive
soak up her martini.

Outside, the sycamores lay
shadows on the lawn.
Inside, the glass casts
shadows on the table.

Gladys eases herself into her drink
and grabs hold of the green float.

Her phone rings
but no one's home
except Gladys
and the olive
with its pimento;
all three slowly sinking in the glass.

She tries to grasp the rim
but the sides are too steep.
The phone keeps ringing
the olive yawns
its pimiento escapes
only to drown
along with Gladys
in the bottom of the glass.

#1

Ricardo Means-Ybarra

When I squeeze you, I worry about
your thin chest
so delicate, as if made of
hollow bones, meant only to keep
your heart from beating through.

And I like to kiss
the valley between your breasts
that, like a small bowl,
could hold a little sip of water
or maybe stop a cherry from running
down onto your neck.

#2

Ricardo Means-Ybarra

At daybreak I go to the mirror—
no need for light.
I just touch the switch anyway, and brush my hair.
Should I shave?
I don't know, maybe if I could talk to you
about this loneliness.

Rainwater fills a metal cup on the deck outside the room
its rust grows on the thick grains of redwood.
I see your hair spread out on the bed
with no pillow, the sheets pulled from
the corners, breasts like sleeping
kittens. Your eyes closed
and still you call my name.

I stare at my dark outline,
feel lips the rough texture of my face.
I know I should shave.
Admit it, the morning confuses you.

A Professional Woman Loves Her Body

Ricardo Means-Ybarra

She folds long fingers carefully
over a flat belly,
feel for softness,
loosens her dress to touch hips, thighs
on her 30 year old body.
Poppies shake on the table;
she notices the refrigerator hums—
the apartment is not lonely.
She has remained here too long.

That night during sex
she wants him to play with a watermelon.
He comes into coolness, crisp red meat.
She remembers a biology class in junior high—
all females carry from birth
a limited number of eggs.
She cleans up the melon seeds
wraps them in newspaper
and sends her love home.

She calls her mother
to tell her she will move to France,
quit the firm, the profitable career.
She wants to hear again about her habits
as a child, a little girl.
Later, she waters plants in the unglazed pots,
slips in three melon seeds,
worries about their dryness,
the urgent rush of ready earth.

Little Fingers

Roger Gibson

"Mike and Ellen Harkman are strong people," others have said. But we don't feel strong. Ellen may be strong, but I just plug away. And my story is not a guideline to those facing life-and-death decisions—they know there can be no guidelines. They also know that the "why" may never be answered; but the "fears" must be.

The blinds snapped open, staggering me with a stab of white sunlight, and I covered my face, talking through my hands. "What you're saying . . ." I paused, taking a breath, wanting to word it carefully. "What you're saying is that I have to choose whether to let my daughter live as an invalid, or to let her die."

The surgeon gazed out the window for a long time. Finally he sighed. "I wouldn't word it quite that way, Mr. Harkman, but that's what it comes to. I must have your permission for surgery."

"The nerves'll *never* grow to their destination?"

"No."

Then there's no way she'll *ever* be whole?"

"Not with present technology."

There was a moment of silence and I began picking at the plastic edge of the table, which wasn't easy with sore, bloody fingernails that I had spent all night chewing. I stared at the back of his damned golf sweater, wondering if I was keeping the good doctor from his game.

I remembered very little of the tons of medical jargon that had been piled on me in the previous hours, since the baby was born; but I could remember them telling me that her nerves were like wires that were too short, and didn't connect the brain to certain parts of the body, so those parts won't work—and, had the problem been higher on the spine, more parts of the body wouldn't have worked.

The doctor must have been reading my mind when he turned to face me. "The opening was fairly low, but I'm afraid your daughter will never walk or have any feeling in her lower legs, nor will she be able to control her bowels or bladder. We hope she won't have any other problems."

During a long silence I kept picking at the plastic, and finally a piece slivered loose that I could really make noise with.

"What did you call this—uh-defect?" I asked, not looking up.

"Spina bifida."

"I've never heard of it."

"I know," he said, turning back to the window. "Unfortunately, most people haven't—not until their baby is born with it—and it's the second most common birth defect. It occurs at the rate of about one in a thousand births. Some places in the world more, and some places less."

The conference room fell silent again, except for the snapping sound of the plastic. My face tightened as I thought about what it would mean to my wife and me, but I was determined not to cry. I was going to approach the problem logically, and make an adult decision.

"I didn't even want to be in the delivery room," I said for no apparent reason. "I get nauseous watching doctor shows on TV. They were teasing me because of it. But then we talked about Vietnam and helicopters—the OB and me. He used to ride 'em and I used to fix 'em. Well, anyway, I went in, and when the baby was born I even raised the camera to take a picture. But then I saw that—that—THING on her back and I didn't take it. Ellen was crying when I looked

down. She couldn't see the baby, but somehow she knew something was wrong."

When I looked up for a moment the surgeon was studying me closely over tented fingers.

Then I saw it all again. I couldn't stop it. Like a dream, it came back again and again. For the hundredth, maybe the thousandth time, I saw the black and green mass on the baby's back as the doctor held her up at the moment of birth. Again, I heard him say, "It's a beautiful little girl." Again, I heard him add, "But—there is a problem." And again, I felt the white-knuckled grip of my wife's hand while she cried.

I glanced up from my trance and he was still studying me, so I went on, not caring whether he wanted to hear it or not. "Ellen was joking that we hadn't practiced Caesarean in the natural child birth classes, and we were all laughing. We only knew the baby was breech. We didn't know anything serious was wrong. I remember someone saying how it was supposed to be such a happy occasion."

I stopped talking for a minute, but kept snapping the plastic. "A couple of hours later they took the baby down here to Children's because it's better equipped, and—well, here we are. Now what?"

He stood to look out the window again. "I need your decision before I can do anything. There will probably be two operations involved." He whirled around as I look up. "You did know that, didn't you?"

"No," I muttered, continuing to snap the plastic, only harder.

"The first one only closes the opening over the spine. But in more than seventy percent of spina bifida cases the brain fluid circulation is interrupted—that's hydrocephalus—and we have to install a small valve and tube on the side of the skull to shunt the fluid to the abdomen. It's all under the skin. Nothing shows."

I said nothing.

"I know it's hard. You've had a lot dumped on you in a short time."

"No, shit!" I sneered to the floor.

"You must have a thousand questions."

"How long do I have to decide?" I kept snapping the plastic.

"Three or four days. I'd like to do the first operation right away. Today, if you want. The sooner you decide, the better for her. Without the operations she may live only a few weeks or a few months. But she will die. Infection is the usual reason."

I was silent again.

"Do you have any other questions?" he asked.

"None that you can answer."

"I can try."

"Why her and not me?" The piece of plastic broke off in my hand and we both stared at it. "I have to go think."

"Don't take the whole burden on yourself," he said quietly. "Talk it over with your wife. Don't hesitate to call with any questions."

I rushed into the hall and around the corner. The elevator wasn't where I thought it was. I rounded another corner and another—no elevator. "How do you get out of this damned place?" I shouted at a stranger.

At home I walked through an empty house and stopped at the door of the baby's room. My wife had furnished it, planning and arranging it with care. She had carefully arranged the colorful toys and stuffed animals, giggling at the havoc our child would bring to their order.

But the brightness had gone from the colors, and the animals seemed lifeless. The joy and dreams they once represented faded with the afternoon light. I took a bear from the chest and sat with it on the floor.

"My wife can't help. They've got her all doped up. How can I make that decision?" I asked the bear. "Right now, life

is too much for me, and all my parts work. If I let them operate and save her, she'll have an impossible life. Kids will tease her, a boy she likes will run from her; and she'll blame me. And I'll hate every minute of it."

"But if you let her die—can you live with that?" asked the bear.

"She'll be happier in Heaven."

"But can you live with that?"

"How can I live with watching her struggle through minor tasks? She won't be able to walk or even control going to the bathroom. She'll never be able to leave home. How can I support her in retirement? Someday I want to live for myself. What if I don't want to be around her? I've never been comfortable around handicapped people. What if I can't love her?"

"But can you live with yourself if you let her die?" That damn bear was persistent.

"Someday she'll be particularly upset about something that she's not able to do, and tell me I should have let her die. That, I couldn't live with."

"Yes you could."

"No. It'd be easier, on everyone, if I let her go now."

"But can you live with that?"

"I DON'T KNOW!" I screamed, throwing the bear into the hall. Then I cried.

It was well after dark by the time I drove to Ellen's hospital. The sedatives made her speech slow and thick-tongued. She didn't say how she was, or ask about, just about the baby. "No," I replied. "I haven't seen the baby, yet. No, they don't know all the problems, yet. Yes, I'm on my way down there now. Yes, I have film for the camera." I just couldn't tell her that she might never see her daughter.

I didn't want to see the baby. I knew that seeing it would hurt, and that I would probably cry again. I was afraid, but somehow I kept driving.

The car was crowded. "They" were watching me: my parents, my friends, the doctors, the nurses, all the ministers I'd ever had, all the congregations I'd ever been a part of, people I'd never met, and, of course, God. I was supposed to want the baby to live no matter what the cost, emotional or dollar, no matter what the hardship. "It will mean a life of catheter tubes, medicines, wheelchairs, frustration, and inconvenience," I whined.

"You are lucky, it could be much worse," they pitied.

"It isn't fair that it happened, at all. What'd she do to deserve this?"

I knew that "they" mustn't matter, but I persistently asked myself what "they" would think. I felt guilty even considering letting her die, but at that moment—with Ellen in one hospital, the baby in another, a life of indifference behind me, and one of demands ahead—I thought that to be the logical solution.

Children's Hospital is quiet at night. Except for cleaning people and an occasional television, the only sounds are snoring parents sleeping on cots, couches, or in a myriad of contortions on chairs. Nurses talk in hushed voices and their shoes squeak down well-waxed corridors.

I asked for directions to the ward where the baby would be. A nurse asked if I was Michael Harkman, and when I said I wasn't sure anymore, she smiled and said the doctor would like to see me before I went up.

The doctor asked if I had any questions, and I asked the same ones I'd asked the surgeon that morning, hoping for better answers—but I didn't get them

"Why?" I said, finally. "What'd we do wrong?"

"During the fourth to sixth week of pregnancy, there is a malfunction in fetal development resulting in an incomplete closure of the vertebrae around the spinal cord. The spinal cord and its surrounding sheath, the meninges, protrude out through the opening to form a sac on the baby's back. Some of the nerves turn out into the sac and stop growing, therefore never reaching their destination."

I was sure it had been a perfectly understandable explanation, but considering it was late and the kind of day I'd had, I was sorry I'd asked.

"What causes it?" he asked, himself, then shrugged. "It may be caused by the environment, maybe the mother's diet, or it may be drug related. The fact is we just don't know what causes it. It's just a genetic disorder," he said matter-of-factly.

I said nothing, but there was no table to pick at so I plucked at the stuffing through a hole in the arm of the chair. I couldn't accept them not knowing the cause. And I knew that, once I got them to tell me the truth, the solution would be close behind. At least, it had always worked that way fixing helicopters.

"Sometimes two certain people just can't produce a perfect set of genes," he continued. "It's nobody's fault. You can't take the blame on yourselves."

"Who do I blame?" I muttered, glaring at him. "God? Do I accuse God of crippling little girls?" He gave me a very pained smile.

There wasn't much else to say then, so the nurse said she would show me to the baby. "Does the baby have a name yet? We're tired of calling her Baby Girl Harkman," she smiled.

"I don't know. It's been so hectic and all."

"I understand. Well, when you have one, let us know. It just seems to help them somehow. And she's such a sweet little thing." We walked down the hall and into the ward, a brightly lit place, even in the middle of night.

"Baby Girl Harkman is over there," she said, pointing to one of the small plastic incubators.

The steady beep-beep-beep of the monitor confirmed the baby's rapid, staccato breathing, and a second monitor registered her heartbeat with tic-tic-tic. Tubes and wires were attached to her in a tangled maze. Bandages covered her from her chest to her tiny bottom, dwarfing her tiny features with their bulk.

I stared without moving until the nurse called across the room, "You can open it and touch her if you want."

Reaching through the armhole I touched my daughter for the first time. I stroked a soft, pudgy cheek and she shuddered, causing the beeps and tics momentary confusion. I laid my finger in her tiny hand, and five little fingers closed around it—and my heart. She tucked her fist-full-of-Daddy under her chin, and it seemed I could hear her say, "This is mine and I won't let go."

My stomach heaved with sobs and my vision blurred with tears. "No!" a tiny voice screamed from within. "You can't cry now. She needs to feel your strength and your love. She's more alone than you are." Swallowing hard I blinked back the tears. Those little fingers still clutched me.

The nurse brought a stool and I sat and studied my little girl. "Her name is Jennifer," I murmured to the nurse. "She's got my eyelashes and dimples and her mother's nose and mouth."

I just watched her for awhile and occasionally her nose would twitch or her mouth would pucker, or her eyelids would crack open, ever so slightly, and a hint of dark blue eyes would peek out; then seemingly satisfied—or bored—they would close again.

I reached through the other armhole with a free hand and gently pinched her toes. "She'll never walk. She'll have no feeling in her legs," the doctors had said. *Never walk, no feeling*, the words echoed through my mind. I pinched her toes harder, watching her face for a reaction. There was none. I pinched again, still harder, and yet harder, until I feared I might break them. *Cry, damn it! Cry!* I screamed in silent anguish, but only the monotonous cadence of the monitors replied. Those little fingers maintained their grip.

I patted her bottom for a while, then caressed her cheek. "Your mama will be here as soon as the doctors let her out of the hospital. We love you very much." The little fingers held tight.

I told the sleeping Jennifer about her mom and dad, grandmas and grandpas, aunts and uncles, and cousins—as

many as I could remember. I told her about her great-grandpa who, at eighty-five years of age, was in Bermuda chasing women that weekend. At that, she half smiled.

"You're going to be like him," I realized. "He is tenacious and independent, and you're going to make it because you are going to be like him. You'll need his determination and his perseverance—we all will, but we'll find it. You'll be what you want to be."

The hours passed quickly. I talked incessantly, knowing she understood every word. But at last, reluctantly, I freed my finger from her grip and left the hospital.

Driving down a dark, deserted boulevard, not sure of my destination, I acknowledged an ancient promise. "I know you'll be with us. But can't you exchange my legs for hers? They're a convenience to me now, but to a child they're essential."

He did not answer.

"I don't understand. Why her and not me?" and I cried.

"It isn't fair, you know." I wanted to make sure He knew.

Griffith Park Tableau

Ron Pronk

The leaves stumble
like small children over her shoes. The woman
thrusts pictures at the boy, probably her grandson balancing
on the bench, bobbing
with the elm settled sparrow.

She must need to tell stories. Her spent hands
twist like itchy pallbearers. He
needs rows of sickled grass, I think. Tobacco
hanging in barns.
His eyes follow the leaves.

The edges of the city are curling, rocking
on a ragged grey
green bench.

The Withered Hand of August

Ron Pronk

The withered hand of August
is gripping my throat. Desert air
scavenges the city.
This day is too long.

Pete Soileau, Don Winkleman, I can hardly see
your faces in the light. I wonder if
you ever recall what I
cannot forget—
how elastic and green a twelve year old world appears;
how our naked torpedo bodies loved to startle
the still river; how it felt
to knead the thick clay bank
between our toes.

At night, when the alley dogs bay
the hand loosens
the air hums emptiness
and I breathe too deeply.

I see what stirs the dogs and draws them
to darkness; something
like the heat of this withered hand
gripping with things that have passed
untouched.

The Earth Rose Painting

Ron Pronk

The earth rose painting
in sun wrinkled air

Mountains of petals

Cauliflower on flushed canvas
in pointillist fog

Still December Maryland

Ron Pronk

Winner of the 1983-1984 Rachael Sherwood Poetry Prize

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.

NORTHRIDGE REVIEW

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.

The Intruder

Michael Newell

writing this i feel a chill.
i say it's the night air. i say it's the fan.
i avoid the door.
i'm grateful the dog sleeps and senses nothing.
i leave all the cottage lights on. . .

a creaking late at night
i cautiously went to the door, looked out
at the darkened porch. he stood there,
bushy-bearded, hollow-eyed, shoulder-length hair spilling
across reddened cheeks and nose, staring at me.
i started to scream. . .
then recognized my reflection. i tried to laugh
and went back to bed.

sirens fill the night, Carol shouts
in her sleep, the broom crashes
to the floor, and ants trek
across the ceiling.

i came here a refugee
from cities, but outside is something
i brought with me. when i touch Carol
she shivers and reaches for cover.

Towns On Hills

Michael Newell

i know the feel of towns on hills
sad as fairy tales.

i've felt their air before:
wind wrapping autumn streets in leaves,
people crossing red lights haloed and sweating
in chill Puget fog.

in a hillside deserted park,
a windblown rain-rusted merry-go-round;
my father runs pushing four sons a daughter
in shadow of Catholic Church.

i forget why i'm here, that tomorrow i leave:
sixteen hours back by Greyhound to L.A.

longing for hook-handed man across the aisle
with red-white-and-blue-tattoo
to put out his cigarette
so i can sleep.

Early Summer Day

Michael Newell

a dog sits in a breeze. smells and sounds
float through her body, fur rippling.

the steady sun presses eyelids shut, deepens
the center of the valley, whole families
swallowed unresisting.

overhead a bamboo kite
rests between clouds.

shade from my door drapes me. movement
seems ponderous. suddenly i am sprayed
by an unseen sprinkler.
my hands twist slowly, water-seeking tendrils.
my body lengthens through the yard.



Donald Wingert

IN SPRING, 1984, The Learning Community sponsored a symposium, "Reflections on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," which featured lectures and discussions focusing on themes and issues in George Orwell's *1984*. The symposium was funded by the Student Projects Committee of the CSUN Foundation. As part of the symposium, CSUN students were invited to enter an essay contest in which themes or issues suggested by *1984* were to be investigated. The winning essay, *Why Hasn't Newspeak Caught On?*, was written by John Mandelberg, who received a cash prize of \$100, presented to him on April 9th, 1984, at the University Art Gallery Opening.

Why Hasn't Newspeak Caught On?

John Mandelberg

CO BESOSO PASOJE PTOROS
CO ES ON HAMA PASOJE BOAÑ.

Stefan George, "Urspruenge"
("Origins")

A! Elbereth Gilthoniel!
silivren penna míriel
o menel aglar elenath,
Gilthoniel, A! Elbereth!

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of
The King*

Oldthinkers unbellyfeel Ingsoc.
George Orwell, 1984

Like the German mystical poet Stefan George and the renowned author of posthumous best-sellers J.R.R. Tolkien, George Orwell created a language; and in eight months or so, the fictional context of his language will lie, like theirs, in the past. Stefan George used his childhood secret language in his German poems to express something (we don't know exactly what); he did not, so far as I know, write a grammar or dictionary for it. Tolkien and Orwell, however, both included a detailed appendix to explain their languages and to give numerous examples of words and phrases. Orwell did not provide a separate runic alphabet for dwarves; but he did seem to attach great importance to Newspeak.

Some iconoclasts have suggested that Tolkien wrote his tales mostly as an excuse to talk about his languages. This outrageous slur might be better applied to Orwell. It is easy to feel that of all the evil, brutal tendencies in the contemporary world that stirred him to the angry despair of 1984, only authoritarian lies and truth-twisting angered him more than what he considered to be the debasing of the English language; to which, he believed, the lying was intimately related. He created Newspeak as a satirical attack upon the debasing of language.

In 1984, Newspeak's purpose is to restrict the range of thought and to make dissenting thought impossible. It would accomplish this by decreasing the vocabulary, narrowing the range of words, destroying distinctions between parts of speech, creating euphemisms for political indoctrination, and regularizing word length and stress, so as to encourage "a gabbling style of speech, at once staccato and monotonous." These were the trends that Orwell thought he saw in the English language of his own day. In the appendix to 1984, he writes:

Even in the early decades of the twentieth century, telescoped words and phrases had been one of the characteristic features of political language; and it had been noticed that the tendency to use abbreviations of this kind was most marked in totalitarian countries and totalitarian organizations. Examples were such words as *Nazi*, *Gestapo*, *Comintern*, *Inprecorr*, *Agitprop*.

In his earlier essay, "Politics and the English Language," Orwell not only ridicules hackneyed metaphors, Latinate pretension, borrowings from foreign languages, and mindless political posturing, but even attacks the use of the "de-" and "-ize" formations and of the passive voice. He urges the reader to "let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about," and eventually admits the course of his thinking:

Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures or sensations.

What else didn't Orwell like? From 1984:

"Smith!" yelled a voice from the telescreen.
"6079 Smith W! Hands out of pockets in the cells!"

times 17.3.84 bb speech malreported africa rectify
times 19.12.83 forecasts 3 YP 4th quarter 83
misprints verify current issue

"It was only an 'opeless fancy,
It passed like an Ipril dye,
But a look an' a word an' the dreams they stirred
They 'ave stolen my 'eart awey!"

The use of identifying numbers; numerical dates; abbreviations of phrases; "telegraph"-style word constructions without formal sentence structure; naive verse; and dialect. All of these things were part of the debasing of language, for which Newspeak was the warning projection. But come on! Are these things really all that bad? Were they that bad even in 1948?

How does Orwell differ from all of these snooty mid-brow ex-anchormen who write books sneering at people who begin their sentences with "Hopefully?" Orwell links the debasing of language with political degradation and authoritarianism. But is such a link justified? Certainly politicians seem to bend their words when they bend the truth, commercial advertising gives witless obnoxiousness a grotesque power of penetration, and dictatorships throughout the world seem to twist their languages into terrible deformities. But this is hardly the fault of prefixes and hackneyed metaphors. Would Orwell's phrase "times 17.3.84 bb speech malreported africa rectify" be any nicer if it read, "In The Times report of March 17, 1984 AD, Big Brother's speech on Africa was improperly transcribed; please rectify this error"? On the other hand, is everyone who wrote 3-17-84 for that date in this very month guilty of some sort of offense against language? I would think not.

Are we further degraded when we have to take a number while waiting in line at the bakery? And, in what to me is a key point, why does the "prole" woman singing the song quoted above sing in dialect? Winston Smith also

probably pronounced many words differently than they are spelled; but *he* did not speak in dialect. Orwell wants to say that the "prole" woman is different from the rest of us; that her pronunciation is *wrong*.

Orwell was, in short, a grouch about contemporary changes in language: a very insightful grouch, even a brilliant grouch, but a grouch nonetheless.

What has actually happened to language up to 1984? The political realm offers many examples of "doublethink," a word which has itself become a useful part of the English language. But examples of Newspeak, which would have to involve the creation of new words that restrict thought, are less plentiful. The most well known one is probably "Vietnamization." But "Vietnamization" has acquired a certain descriptive meaning that goes beyond its intentions; it refers to a historical event, and we now have a *word* for what happened, rich in ironic connotations. When looking at the vast range of politically-molded language throughout history, the few examples of deliberate word-malformation are almost insignificant. Orwell uses the Declaration of Independence as an example of something that could not be translated into Newspeak; but the Declaration too was a political document, full of manipulative language. Have we forgotten this clause?

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare is an indistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

Surely political manipulation of languages far antedates the Byzantine historian Anna Comnena, who, writing in the 1140's in her *Alexiad*, spoke thus of Pope Gregory VII:

To begin with, (the Pope) outraged (the envoys of Henry IV of Germany) savagely, then cut their hair and beards, the one with scissors, the other with a razor, and finally he did something else to them which was quite improper, going beyond the insolent behavior one expects from barbarians, and then sent them away. I would have given a name to the outrage, but as a woman and a princess modesty forbade me. What was done on his orders was not only unworthy of a

high priest, but of any man who bears the name of Christian. Even the barbarian's intention, let alone the act itself, filled me with disgust; if I had described it in detail, reedpen and paper would have been defiled.

The fact that politically-manipulated English is now more easily spread around by television and the technology-aided press hardly means that it has supplanted other forms of expression or that people's minds are more corrupted by it than in the past. I recently recorded on cassette tape the extraordinary audio spectacle of a crowd of campaign supporters for a presidential candidate chanting a slogan from a Wendy's hamburger ad. A phrase had been invented, it had acquired new and vibrant meaning, it was being used with relish; the process was silly, and perhaps degrading, but no more so than it has always been.

Some would feel that Orwell's warnings are more pertinent in the area of word-formation and misuse, not necessarily political. Almost every literate person has some complaint about the way other people use words. I particularly dislike the use of "tragic" by the local TV news people to mean "fatal." But most of this griping is merely fussy priggishness by those who feel threatened by the creative use of words. One self-righteous newspaper columnist after another has denounced a sentence like "Hopefully, it won't rain tomorrow" as nonsense. But the speaker of this sentence knows very well what is being expressed; and this is the best way of expressing it. "Hopefully" has a meaning and a function in expression that cannot presently be replaced by any other word. Many of those abbreviations that Orwell despised have become useful words. Why should anyone say "video cassette recorder" when it is easier to say "VCR," when "VCR" has a pleasant feel on the tongue, and when people know what it means?

Oh, there is grumbling about "prioritize" and "time-frame" and the whole bureaucratic style of pompous jargon, but is this really a threat to our minds? Do these words restrict our range of thought? Perhaps the more serious threat to English comes not from new words introduced from jargon, but from the stifling of vocabulary in ordinary

speech. Anyone who has ridden on a bus with high school students recently could believe that the commonly-held vocabulary has shrunk alarmingly, and that filler words like "really" and "I dunno" have expanded like sponges to fill the holes in expression. But this shrinkage, if it is indeed occurring, is not accompanied by what Orwell feared: a narrowing of range. On the contrary, simple words seem to acquire more and more overlays of meaning, so that "get" and "cool" and "real" seem to float in a fluffy cloud of their own possibilities. This may seem to cause a monotony in expression, but, on the other hand, the density of words helps to create a laconic richness in our ordinary speech.

Furthermore, as an antidote to vocabulary shrinkage, we have the energy of slang, as brand-new as ever. A year after Moon Zappa's "Valley Girl" has faded from the radio, Patrick Goldstein, writing in *The Los Angeles Times*' "Calendar" section of March 25, 1984, reports:

"You have to wear your colors," explained Tom (Sir Ice-man) Guzman-Sanchez, the 25-year-old leader of Chain Reaction, a local dance gang that doubles as a power-funk band. "It's your badge—to show who you are and that you're down (cool). When people see that, it either makes them *chill out* (chicken out) or *break* on you (challenge you to a dance showdown) . . . You can't walk away from a *throwdown* (dance challenge) . . . Someone will challenge you by pointing at you when they're dancing or by *mouthing* at you (making rude remarks about your ability)."

We need not ask what Orwell would say to this; but does this young dancer's exuberant use of words somehow threaten freedom of thought, or democratic institutions, or the sacred realm of Shakespeare? It certainly does not. Like Tolkien's or George's, this is a harmless, happy mini-language, arisen from the joy of making sounds.

Orwell was enraged and full of despair because of the world's political situation, but to blame the misuse of language for that was to blame the messenger for the bad news. Our English language is, in 1984, what it has always been: the flexible, indivisible skin of our thoughts, the fabric of our outer life that knits us to our cities, to our inventions

and our traditions. It swallows up all words, all creations, all corruptions, and it puts them each in a place that seems to have been prepared. Every word that people speak has a purpose, as do their silences and their gestures, and even the most debased language can glow with the strivings for expression of the people who use it.

The following is a poem by Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, which appears in *Wormwood Review* #86, published in 1982. It is written in the flattened vocabulary of ordinary speech, a style which Orwell might consider "gabbling . . . staccato and monotonous." To me, it is eloquent, both in its own imagery and in the new possibilities of contemporary speech:

MESSENGER

José painted a blue
angel
on the side of the labor
camp building
used to go out there and
sit and think
after work in the fields
One evening
the angel spoke to him
José
Leave this place tonight

We don't need to invent a new language; in 1984, we are still working on the one we have. Does anyone believe that the English language already has expressed all the complexity of life, and that its mission has already been fulfilled?

Wenatchee

Susan Martin

My father
left an old brass trumpet
in the basement on Yakima Street.

I found it there
the summer I met Uncle Art.
He said I could have that trumpet.
He smelled like old sweaters
and the dust we stirred
walking down the gravel alley.

Uncle Art liked to hold my hand
and talk about his navy days,
the old Bremerton shipyards.
Hanky
drove us to Leavenworth,
a Bavarian town,
where all I wanted
was the pearl-handled jack-knife
made in Taiwan
to take, to remember
and Uncle Art knew.

We ate aplets and cotlets
in Cashmere
and watched them being made.
We took pictures of the hot copper vats
and the apple blossoms
painted on the factory wall.

I lived a Wenatchee summer
learning that bats sound like rain
flapping at night from catalpa trees,
finding
that I come from a place
with green stone porches
and big strong hands.

Something was wrong
when old sweaters suddenly
smelled like wooden drawers.
Something had been lost.

Bad Art

Cathy Comenas

My eyes find you
at a close distance
I'm safe here
shaking in my shoes
an earthquake

Smell you everywhere
don't know the name of your perfume
I'd buy it, spray you all through
my atmosphere

I'm ready to sell myself
at cost to you
you won't buy me in fear

I'd sit in the closet
collecting dust like some
bad art

The Night Bashers

Brian Skinner

The street hisses
with the chorus of sprinklers
incessant.

Porches sit silent,
lawnchair people
still or sleeping,
television whispers seeping
through aluminum
screen doors unheard.

On the parched afternoon
asphalt the glass
glistens, skidmarks
and beer stains fading.

Sequestered quiet
behind tight shades,
they paint
their faces, polish
their chains, and wait
as the day
is sucked up
slowly by shadow.

The Termite Man

Mona Houghton

Laura pulled into the driveway. A truck covered with large red insects blocked her parking place. The tires screeched as her car came to a stop.

Laura hopped out of the car. She said, "Sorry I'm late," to the man standing next to the garage.

"Everyone's entitled to five minutes grace," the man said.

Laura couldn't tell if he was angry or not. She had been running at least fifteen minutes behind for months.

He introduced himself and offered his hand.

Laura took it and told him her name and then said, "Pleased to meet you," before letting go.

The dry palm felt confident but the blue eyes avoided any direct contact. Three deep wrinkles laddered up the puffy forehead. An abrupt crewcut stood on top of the last crease.

"I did my diagram while I waited," said the man.

With his feet planted firmly on the ground he turned and picked up a clipboard up off the garden wall. The brown jeans hung low on his hips. A t-shirted roll tipped over his belt.

Laura said, "There're two houses. This one and a small one in the back."

He flashed the clipboard in her direction. The drawing included both buildings and the garage.

"So, how does it look?" Laura said.

The man said, "It's a wood house, and it's old."

Fred had said almost the same words when Laura had argued against having the termite inspection at all.

The man pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "Is there an electric eye?"

"No."

They both moved toward the center of the closed garage.

"Do you have a bad back? I'll get it," Laura said.

He grabbed the handle. "My back's fine," said the termite man. He hoisted the garage door open.

It was cool inside and after the heat of the noon sun, the hairs on the termite man's arms stood up.

He went to work immediately. He flashed his light into the nooks of the exposed framing and searched for dry rot with an ice pick.

Laura hesitated and then said, "I'm going to tag along if you don't mind."

His shoulders tightened. Laura wasn't about to be put off.

As they moved along the walls she tried not to crowd him; her eyes followed the beam of light, not knowing what to see.

Midway down the north side of the garage the termite man turned to her. He worked hard at suppressing a smile. "Want to see what we look for?"

Laura said, "There are termites?"

He backtracked to the back wall and shined his light at a wood intersection. "See," he said. "See?"

He glanced over his shoulder. Laura frowned, looking for signs of life.

"See?" He wiggled the light. "See that?"

"The sawdust?" said Laura.

"Yeah."

Laura felt relieved. No one worried about sawdust.

The man pointed the light into Laura's face. "That's termite droppings, that's what that is." He turned his back on her, went on with his search along the east wall.

The termite man smiled as he walked into the sunlight. He took a Thermos out of the glove compartment of the truck and asked Laura for some sugar.

He put three teaspoons into the coffee and lit a cigarette while he stirred and said, "Do you work?"

"Yes, I'm a doctor."

"A doctor doctor?" he said.

Laura nodded. "Mostly research though," she said.

The termite man blew the stream over the edge of his cup and watched it drift through the air. He looked at Laura. "What kind?" he asked.

"What kind?" Laura said.

He said, "What do you research?"

"Cancer. Cancer research."

The termite man laughed. "Have you figured it out yet?"

"We're working on it."

After tossing half of his coffee onto the ground under the orange tree he stood up and walked over to the truck.

He blew a smoke ring and said, "Thanks for the sugar."

Laura wondered if he enjoyed the coffee as she watched him put on a pair of filthy overalls over his clothes. The termite man ran the zipper up from his crotch to his chin.

"You coming with me into the basement too?" he said. He dropped his cigarette. He mashed it out.

Laura jumped down off the garden wall. "Of course."

At the basement door he undid the latch and pushed. It stuck. Laura came close to his side and kicked the bottom board. She could smell his cologne.

Laura shoved the door open. It scraped to a stop against the hard dirt and Laura stepped back and said, "After you," to the termite man.

He looked at her like a man looking at a woman. "All right, Doctor," the termite man said before he stooped and entered.

After adjusting his knee pads, the man continued the inspection on all fours. Laura followed in a crouch.

Wondering how it measured up to others, Laura said, "It's a nice basement," and felt foolish afterwards.

He tapped his flashlight against one of the cement piers and said, "This is a good little house. Well built."

"My husband and I are buying it. We've rented the place for years."

The warm breeze blowing through the screened vents felt good, smelled of fresh mowed grass and dry lumber. The termite man crawled along the southern perimeter and checked the two by fours resting on the foundation.

After a while he said, "buying a house. . ." and moved the light up the vertical support beams. "You thinking of getting to work on a family too?"

We've been doing that for a while," Laura said into the dark.

The light ran along the floor joists. Back and forth. "My first wife had a hard time that way. Far as I know she never did have a kid."

Something silky broke against Laura's face. She jerked back, bouncing her head against the floor above. "Ouch. Dammit," she said.

The termite man flashed his light in her direction. "You okay?"

She wiped the spider web off her face.

"Be careful," he said, crawling along, on the lookout for termite droppings.

"Do you have children now?" Laura asked.

"Me?" The termite man paused and shook his head. "Never wanted any in the first place."

His belly moved closer to the ground as the basement gradually became a crawl space.

"Why not?" said Laura, now on her knees.

"It just never made sense to me. Who needs them anyway?"

Fred said that, too, when Laura cried with the full moon. Laura couldn't follow any further without getting on her belly, commando style. She sat hunched over and kept her eyes on the beam of light.

Fred accused her of wanting a baby because she dealt in death.

Laura tried to think of herself as dealing in life and she told herself having a baby celebrated living.

But death did nag at her, or it had lately, ever since Joseph. Joseph had been a terminal patient, but he wasn't when he died.

"Kind of a shame to waste all that education, isn't it?" said the voice behind the light.

Laura said, "Waste?"

"You don't have to be a doctor to raise a kid."

"You don't have to be anything to have a child," Laura said.

"No offense, no offense," said the termite man.

Laura said, "No offense taken."

You women, you're so touchy these days."

"Men aren't much better," said Laura.

The light jerked across the floor boards overhead as the termite man wiggled back and forth under them, working his way to the rear of the house.

"You've got a point," he said, using a pier to pull himself forward.

Laura watched the termite man struggle along the north wall, suspecting the space measured less than the eighteen inches required by code.

She said, "Aren't you married now?"

"After four times I gave it up." The termite man chuckled. "I'm back with my second wife."

Laura said, "So you found out number two was the best?"

"She's the only one who'll have me," he said.

"Are you hard to get along with?"

The termite man squirmed his way under the extra bedroom and said, "I used to be."

"And now?" Laura said.

"Once the old peter bone calms down it's easier," said the voice.

It took Laura a second to get it.

"Here we go. Here we go," said the man before Laura could be embarrassed. "I knew the suckers'd be in here somewhere."

Laura said, "Termites?"

He scooted over so that she could see the beam of light dance on the two by fours which held up the extra bedroom. "Right here, a whole slew of them."

Laura stopped looking.

His light found Laura's bent head. He went on, "He went on, "Heylady, don't worry. They aren't in the walls. We don't have to tent the place."

She squinted into the beam of light. "I saw the 60 Minutes about Chlordane," Laura said.

"So did I," he said.

He watched her for a while. he said, "We don't use Chlordane. We treat with Lindane."

Treat, what a lovely euphemism, Laura thought. She said, "I'm an oncologist — a cancer doctor. I'm no fool."

Suddenly the termite man began to zig zag his way toward Laura. "You think I am? Huh?" His back scraped against the floor joists.

"What's wrong? What are you talking about?" Laura asked, trying to back away.

He said, "How do you think guys like me feel? We've been using the stuff for twenty-five years."

He stopped moving as quickly as he had started.

"I'm sorry," she said.

The sweat glistened on his forehead. He rested his chin on the back of his hand. "A few years ago all I ever worried about was having a heart attack way back in a basement like this."

Yeah," Laura said.

"Got so bad I stopped going out in the field." He laughed. "Then when the big news came out I figured, what the hell."

Using his elbows, the man pulled himself forward until there was enough room for his knees to fit under his chest. "I hated being in the office all day, anyway," he said.

He crawled past Laura toward the basement door.

By the time Laua stumbled out into the light the termite man had changed his dirty overalls for a pair of clean ones.

They stood facing one another in the kitchen. The inside of the house and the attic had passed the inspection.

"Two spots. It's not bad for a place this old," said the termite man.

Laura shrugged.

"You have to take care of it or you'll be in big trouble later on," he said.

"Should we do the back house now?" Laura said.

"Why not?" He cleared his throat. "Lady, somehow you've got me feeling bad about all this. You called and asked for the damn inspection."

Laura tried to catch his eye. "It wasn't my idea."

"Well it sure wasn't mine," said the termite man.

"I'll get the key," Laura said.

John, the tenant, had given it to her that morning and she'd left it on the hall table. Laura walked away from the termite man and said, "I'll be right back."

The man was leafing through Fred's gardening book when Laura came back into the kitchen.

He looked over his shoulder at her as he closed the book and put it down. He said "Interesting," and started for the sliding glass door across the room.

"Are you a gardener, too?" Larua said.

I like to putter in the yard, but I don't..."

Laura thought she saw his hand reach for the handle.

"...qualify that as gar..."

The shards of glass fell on him as he walked through the old plate glass window.

The termite man turned. The section of glass sticking into his left shoulder at the base of his neck fell back onto the ground. Blood squirted. Bone showed in the gash on his upper right arm. Red lines widened on his face and hands. He took two steps before falling to his knees. The wound in his thigh gushed blood.

Before calling the ambulance Laura wrapped tourniquets where she could.

She hurried back to the termite man and covered him with a blanket and held his head in her lap and waited.

Laura listened hard for the siren and wondered why she was crying. Joseph dead. The termite man bleeding. Vacant wombs.

She had cultured monoclonal antibodies for Joseph. His cancer had been gone for three weeks. Dr. Stewart called it miraculous.

Joseph had choked to death on a piece of sushi two blocks from the hospital.

Laura laughed through the tears and wondered what happened to the termite man's heart attack.



Jerome Tellio

Leave-taking: A Scene

Scott Memmer

Setting: the empty living room of a vacant house

LAURA (*Off*)

Okay! Give us a honk on your horn when you're ready!

(*LAURA enters from left, closes door behind her*)

LAURA (*Continued*)

Five minutes, Ma. They're puttin' the last few things on the truck right now.

MOTHER

Alright . . . alright . . . I can't get over how bare this room looks, Laura— can you believe it? You'd think after forty years, with all the livin' gone on here, it wouldn't look so empty. But look at it—frayed carpet, dusty windows—look at it!

LAURA

I can hear your voice echoin' off the walls, Ma. It's strange—like you're talkin' from far away.

MOTHER

Well, maybe I *am* talkin' from far away. And maybe I shouldn't 'a sold this place in such a hurry like you told me.

LAURA

What's done is done. Get your things together: five minutes.

MOTHER

In a second, in a second.

(Pause. She crosses slowly to window.)

I remember the day your father stood at this window here and looked out over the field—the day we bought this place. It was winter—corn stalks pokin' up through the snow—a day like today. "Nice view," he says. "Look, Viola," he says to me, "you can see the river from here!"

LAURA

(Bitterly)

You can't see the river anymore. Not with all those condominiums goin' up across the way.

MOTHER

No, but you can *feel* it still, Laura . . . under your skin, in your veins. You can feel it—and it's the feelin' that counts.

LAURA

Well, I'm glad to be going all the same, feelin's or no. Ever since Pa died we ain't been able to keep this place up, the two of us alone.

MOTHER

(Still looking out)

Seen the Andersons today?

LAURA

Said my goodbyes yesterday. Send you their best.

MOTHER

Alice over her cold yet?

LAURA

Just about.

(Pause)

MOTHER

(Turning from window)

This old house . . . How does a woman leave a home she's lived in for forty years? How does she turn away from the place her children were born, the place her husband died? What's the way to do that?

LAURA

I don't know. I don't think there is a way, come down to it. You just kind of say goodbye.

MOTHER

"Just kind of say goodbye . . ." You make it sound so simple, Laura, so easy! Anyone should be able to do it, shouldn't they? Shouldn't they?

LAURA

I'm not sure.

MOTHER

Anyone except me. But everytime I put my hand on that doorknob to go I hear some sound from twenty or thirty years ago playin' through my head like a broken record—your brother and you fightin', the wind rustlin' through the willows out there, your father snorin' up a storm in the back bedroom. And I smell things, too, Laura: springtime, summer, leaves, lakes, autumn . . . Forty years of seasons and sweat!

(Pause)

It all kind of runs together after a while, doesn't it? It all kind of—

(A truck horn sounds offstage)

LAURA

There's the horn, Mama. It's time to go.

MOTHER

Not yet. Not just yet.

LAURA

I promised the men I wouldn't keep them waitin'. It's freezin' out there!

MOTHER

(Going to window)

One last look at the river before I go. One last look.

LAURA

But you can't see the river, Ma. The condos are—

NORTHRIDGE REVIEW

MOTHER

I can see it! I can see it, though I were dead!

LAURA

Mama—

MOTHER

Don't tell me what I can and can't see!

(Pause)

LAURA

Alright.

(Pause)

Alright.

(The horn sounds again)

There's the horn again. Can we go now?

MOTHER

In a minute.

LAURA

Get your things together. It's cold out.

MOTHER

Alright.

(She buttons her jacket and gets her purse)

LAURA

Are you ready?

MOTHER

I—I don't know. I think so.

(LAURA takes hold of her MOTHER'S arm)

LAURA

Here we go!

(They walk toward the door)

MOTHER

Laura?

LAURA

Yes?

MOTHER

I'm cold;

LAURA

I know, Mama. I told you it was cold.

(They walk)

MOTHER

Laura?

LAURA


Yes?

MOTHER

Don't let go of me.

LAURA

I wouldn't.



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

Greg Boyd

Nicholas Campbell

Cathy Comenas

R.J. Coulston

Roger Gibson

Mona Houghton

Jodi Johnson

John Mandelberg

Susan Martin

Tim Matthews

Gary McKinney

Dolores McLaughlin

Ricardo Means-Ybarra

Scott Memmer

Michael Newell

Ron Pronk

Christopher Sales

Brian Skinner

Virginia Webster

Richard Zimmerman

NORTHRIDGE REVIEW is also pleased to publish an interview with novelist T. Corraghessan Boyle, whose best-known book is the popular *Water Music*. His fiction has appeared in such publications as *The Paris Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Antaeus*, and *The Georgia Review*. He is a professor at USC, where he teaches creative writing. Boyle lives in Woodland Hills, California with his wife and children.