

"Patterns" (Multiple Exposure) by Raymond Gouker

Reflector

1976—1977

—*Thank you*

The editors and staff of the *Reflector* would like to extend their appreciation to the editors and staff of *Slate*, without whom we could have never attempted the typesetting of this magazine. We thank you for enabling us to salvage some semblance of our collective and individual sanity.

The *Reflector* is a student magazine funded by the Student Association. *Reflector* welcomes submissions of poetry, short fiction, photography, and art work from any SSC student. All work will receive equal attention and should be sent to *Reflector*, c/o the CUB. Interested students are cordially invited to join the staff next year.

Holy Water

It was not until the fifty-third anniversary of the day the Floral Nuns died that he came. People could not see him come deliberately into the village like a tortoise with the eyes of a rabid hawk because of the festivities of the day. Clouds of firecracker smoke and blue and yellow paper flowers filled the air, obscuring the vision of everyone who might have noticed him.

Invalids and cripples crowded into the plaza to touch the monument to the seventeen brides of Christ who had perished so many years before when their motorbus left the mountain road and tumbled into the now famous Ravine of the Floral Nuns.

The people had crowded down over the embankment when they heard of the crash. Upon reaching the heap of twisted metal, they found the nuns thrown about inside like the carcasses of the sacrificial sheep slaughtered each year to commemorate the death of Jesus Christ. Their habits were torn and twisted up around their bodies to expose thirty-four identical colourless thighs laced with indigo veins that, until that day, were only for the eyes of the Almighty. Their tongues hung from their gaping mouths and their eyes bulged out as if finally sucked from their sockets by the ultimate revelation of an omnipotent deity.

Cast about them in a still settling shower were the blue and yellow mountain flowers they had gathered by hand to make medicine for the people of the village. A fearful plague had descended on the population for having drunk water in which an iguana had urinated, and the nuns had come down from the mountainside on a mission of mercy.

The sight of their contorted bodies blanketed with the colourful petals and a red-black film of semi-clotted celibate blood brought forth the agonizing tears of even the most cynical. Each body looked exactly the same down to the points at which tiny shards and filaments of ragged bone peeked through the clean pink flesh like the relentless mouths of snow-white lampreys. A single image reprinted endlessly like the geometrically perfect patterns on the fleur-de-lys wallpaper the villagers had in their kitchens.

They knew they could not move the bodies until a priest had blessed their souls in Latin and drenched their identical foreheads with holy water. They sent a messenger to find a priest but meanwhile had to keep the rodents away with sticks, and the skin of the seventeen nuns took on the hue and texture of ripe bananas. Into the seething clouds of stench that could be smelled for miles, the plague disappeared. It was the opinion of the population (later confirmed by the priest) that the disease had been sucked into the sweet marrow of their shattered bones. From that time on, there was no sickness and the crops flourished as long as the people celebrated the day the Floral Nuns died as they would the day of any of the holy martyrs.

If he would have come on any other day, they would have noticed him because he walked slowly like an aged tortoise and saw everything through the unblinking eyes of a demented bird of prey. He wore the uniform of a foreign army and the single earring of a gypsy. He coughed up mouthfuls of phlegm each time he spoke as if being punished for breaking a vow of silence imposed on him by an order that had long since vanished. Had he come on any other day he would not have had unlimited power over the people; they would not have followed him blindly like thirsting cattle. As it was, he moved directly into the mayor's mansion that had sat for fifty-three years without living occupants and from its grand balcony (it was learned later) watched the feasting and dancing, standing in his mule skinner's boots filled to their rims with a loneliness only a star could understand. It was not until three days later, when the windows opened and old rugs appeared hung over the banisters, that the villagers realized they had a new mayor.

He took in a cleaning woman and set up housekeeping without disturbing the ghost of the old mayor or those of his family. It was this harmony with those that had been dead so long that won him the allegiance, faith, and eventually the love of the people.

"Anyone that can get along with a family that has been dead for that many years must be a good man. They get so irritable the longer they are dead! I could not have such patience! My husband, bless his hallowed soul, was not dead more than two years when I had to have the priest exorcise him from my house with a solid silver cross and a string of garlic cloves. I hated to do it, but what can you do?"

"Yes, I know what you mean. My son, who died in the defense of his country, became impossible. He demanded I prepare roast goose and fresh vegetables every night, eventhough he knew he could have none, and then wailed as his father and I ate. He was not in the ground six months before he began wandering endlessly from room to room looking for his missing limbs under the furniture and in the chamber pots. For the sake of his father's constitution I felt it my duty...."

"The very fact that the old mayor tolerates him is a blessing on his head. It would be so easy for a man dead that long to drive him out of his mind as well as the house. There can be no question that he was sent to lead us...."

Any doubt that may have remained was dismissed when the priest, without being asked by anyone, came forth and blessed his rule, his life, his soul, and the small plot of vegetables he had planted to the rear of the house.

Without announcement he began to fulfill the obligations of his office. He appeared without warning at the train station— coming, it seemed, from the rest room, buckling his trousers— to welcome a foreign dignitary that no one knew was coming. He held a Court of Chancery in the plaza every week following Sunday Mass, presiding with an authority that had no basis in actual power. He had no secretary to

record his decisions, nor officers to see that they were carried out. He ruled by virtue of the hollow thud he sounded with his fist after each ruling. Bolt upright, he peered out over the wobbly table set before him. When he spoke his voice was raspy like a raven, and between each phrase he was shaken by the violent coughs that brought up thick wads of slimy stuff.

He decided each case with a quiet, self-assured ease that made the plaintiffs feel that he did not properly comprehend the levity of the situation. He handled it adversity as one handles animals: with patience, a quiet voice, and a firm hand. It was said of him that he believed he could calm the universe by simply blowing softly into its nostrils as you would a troublesome horse.

As dusk settled over his court, he folded the feeble legs of the table under and carried it home on his back.

Slowly the love of the people changed to awe and fear of his power. He took on the visage of a man who had realized his own mortality, and his foreign uniform began to hang on him like ill-measured draperies.

He was said to talk not only to the ghosts but also to those not yet born. It was known he could use his influence to decide the gender of unborn children, the outcome of horse races, and the patterns of the constellations but would not do so because it denied the fate that he had become so resigned to.

Plots were begun to depose him, yet there was no action taken. It was unknown how to be rid of a mayor whose appointment they had nothing to do with. They could not work up enough fire among themselves to make any movement against him for the simple reason that he'd done nothing tyrannical. He had not levied taxes or tariffs, he'd asked for no salary, made no ridiculous demands or unfair rulings. They could find nothing to complain about. Their fear became hatred.

On the eve of the fifty-fourth anniversary of the day the Floral Nuns died, the village assembled before his house and shouted for him to come out, to relinquish the hold he had over them, to go away. Their calls rose to a frenzy. They were on the verge of storming the doors when the housekeeper came out and quietly told them that the mayor had left three days before.

Relieved of this burden, they began the celebration of the day the Floral Nuns died by torchlight in the fading dusk. They began roasting huge slabs of meat and broke out the stores of wine and dried fruit. They danced in the darkness, blinded by the smoke of the firecrackers and the snowstorm of the blue and yellow paper flowers.

Lulled by the years of carefree living and plentiful food, it did not seem strange to them that they could not recall why they were dancing. And if anyone noticed it, it did not alarm them that, in the torchlight, an iguana squatted at the rim of the well.

Driving Over Big Flat in January

Up and up on the black road
(vehicle rocking side to side, shuddering
before the fists of the wind,
waiting, confident of ice somewhere
over a slight crest prelude to the last and longer,
or beyond a bend blind with pines):

but sufficient suddenness
to make my ears threaten explosion,
my eyes gushing as a freezing stream over rocks
to endure the hurt.

Then, emergence

(the road turning white with occasional spots
where the black can only be grey,
a legacy left by the indolent road crew):

with its vacant height
acres of fields defying trees
using the wind to shed its snow
in drifts compressed to ice in my path.

Here the clouds are always near.
The sky in falling would make a small thud.
I peer out over hills diminished by up here,

to other encircling heights,
a hazy wall of purple stone and soil
holding up the ends of the arching sky.

I could be God
if my tires were not skidding across the ice
and the hard trees near,
or my ears, refusing to pop,
filling up with pain.

—*Jack H. Palmer*

Discourse on Poetry

In Memory of Marianne Moore

My hands, the palms rubbed raw,
the pain a promise of more
(the fulfillment is inherent---
there will be bubbles of fluid
under the skin tomorrow):

sweaty and craving soap,
I have been out in one
of my imaginary gardens
killing the real toads,
beating them to death
with a possible broomstick.

There is no question of guilt
in the slaying of toads,
only of permanence:

when will the stink begin,
the sweet, stomach-wrenching stench
proclaiming finality?

Or have I been like my children,
giggling, dancing, teasing,
voices tinkling like a chandelier:
avoiding the cracks in a sidewalk
to prevent a plague?

—*Jack H. Palmer*

The Christening

feet propped on the
 silver rail

he speaks of Things
with fingers clenched:

amber drink and amber conversation

“Prophets and poets and SNAKES--”

awe-struck, I watch as

eyes beg and turn away
turn inside out
 to stare at Nothing, while

talk recedes
through the small end of my funnel

amber drone

—*Tom Townsley*

Scaffolding

Early Monday morning the workmen arrived to set up the scaffolding. They parked their white panel truck in front of the house before the sun had barely risen above the rooftops across the street, and they struggled up the steep little yard with armloads of pipes and aluminum siding. Their breath left clouds in the winter air.

Old Mrs. Antonnuci watched from her front window as the rowhouse across the street slowly became encased in the huge cage-like structure. "That house will look much better," she muttered to her dog as she leaned across a tableful of African violets and photographs to stare outside. "I just hope that girl over there appreciates all that John does for his tenants. No matter what kind of people they are." Her gnarled fingers clutched the curtains as she watched.

The workmen scurried around the front yard in paint-stained white jumpsuits. Mr. Graver stopped to watch them as he left for work. He stood next door in his own yard, arms crossed, obviously waiting for the chance to tell the workmen not to drop nails in his yard. He shuffled his feet a bit, coughed elaborately, lit a cigarette, and finally moved on, black metal lunch bucket in hand. The men had not paused once in their work to talk to him; the old woman was impressed by their dedication. She would call her son. She sank into her favorite armchair to rest for a moment before she dialed the number.

"John?" She didn't pause for a response. "Some men just drove up across the street, and they're setting up some scaffolding. They're working real hard...What?...No, I haven't seen her. That girl? What about her? She probably won't even notice how you've fixed up the place. She's not worth it!...You should charge her more rent, John. She shouldn't even have a decent place to live. Not with the kind of woman that she is...Oh, you have to go to work? Well, I'll keep an eye on the men today. And you come over tonight...Oh, you can't?...Have to go?...OK..."

Breathing heavily, Mrs. Antonnuci hung up and sat staring across her narrow living room at the statue of the Virgin on her TV. Why is he so nice to such a girl? No husband--a little baby to care for. Takes the baby away every morning strapped to her back! Poor little thing! John is too good to the likes of her. Brought up to be a Christian, and look who he spends his time with!

Soon Mrs. Antonnuci got up and called to her little dog. She opened the front door and let him out into the yard, where he ran in circles, tail wagging. Across the street, hammers rang as the men finished setting up the tall metal framework. The morning air was cold, so Mrs. Antonnuci closed the storm door and stood inside to watch the dog. She would have to be careful for the children were starting to walk past to

their bus stop and sometimes the dog wouldn't listen to her when she called. The kids never listened to her, either. But today the dog was intent on something in the Barcello's hedge, and Mrs. Antonnuci could relax a bit as the children passed: the girls skipping by in plaid jumpers and navy kneesocks, the boys swinging their book bags, legs flashing in drab parochial uniforms.

"Come on, boy." He had been outside long enough. Mrs. Antonnuci pulled her head in from the cold and glanced across the street in time to see the girl who lived there reach outside and lift a quart of milk from her milkbox. Without so much as a glance at the pile of siding stacked on her doorstep, she closed the door again, hair hanging wet and straight. Ungrateful girl. That house could fall down around her and she wouldn't even notice. That poor baby.

Mrs. Antonnuci was nearly ready to go to market when she noticed the girl venture outside and pause to adjust a nylon papoose that was strapped on her back. The old woman watched from her window as the girl pulled on bulky mittens and stared up at the house. The men were placing long strips of white siding under the eaves. The girl called up to one of them; he scrambled down from his perch and they talked for a few moments. He smiled and pointed to the heavily-bundled little body on the girl's back. She turned so he could admire the baby for a moment, then he climbed back on the scaffolding. The girl waved her mittened hand and started down her front steps. A smile faded slowly as she walked. Her lips moved; obviously she was talking to her baby. Mrs. Antonnuci stared disapprovingly at her jeans, tall boots, and thick navy parka. The baby bounced a bit as the girl walked briskly towards the center of town. Where could that girl work dressed like that? What did she do with her baby while she worked? Did she work? The dog jumped about when she opened the front door and hung a basket on her arm. "Stay, boy," she said as she stepped past him into the cold and carefully locked her door.

It was a fine clear morning, but Mrs. Antonnuci rested several times on her way downtown because the cold air hurt her lungs. She walked very slowly; the market was crowded when she finally arrived. A squat and solemn figure in her black coat and wool bandana, she threaded her way through the busy aisles, muttering to herself. Should have been here when the market opened. Too many people. She pushed through the crowd. It was hot and smelly in front of the seafood counter. A couple of women stood talking in the center of the aisle. Inconsiderate people. A man pushed by and nearly dragged the market basket from Mrs. Antonnuci's arm. Angrily, she grabbed its handle. So hot. Hard to breathe. She struggled against the crowd, a small and insignificant figure. Sit down. Right now. A chair in front of that stand--good. With a gasp, she collapsed into the chair, dropped her basket, loosened her coat and scarf. Breath coming easier now. Leaning back, she closed her

eyes. Rest. The noisy throng was little more than a faraway roar. She smelled spices.

After awhile, she felt well enough to open her eyes. Passersby were staring at her curiously, so she stood up slowly, and finished her market business on slightly unsteady legs. The cold air outside felt wonderful. Mrs. Antonnuci let herself be jostled by others in the doorway of the market as she secured her scarf. She walked home slowly, pausing often to look into shop windows and to rest. Can't let that happen again. Can't get sick and have everyone staring.

As she neared the house, she could hear the workmen's hammers pounding across the street. With disgust, she examined the house, already halfway covered with brilliant white siding. The men hung on the scaffolding like white spiders on an iron web. Mrs. Antonnuci paused for a moment before she climbed the steps to her own house.

The dog was barking as she unlocked the door; the phone was ringing. Mrs. Antonnuci tried to hurry and answer it.

"Hello?" Voice was faint. Rest. She sat down.

"Mother? Oh, you are home! Listen, I'm at work. Could you just look across the street and tell me how Sara--uh, how the house--is coming along?" John spoke very quickly.

His mother's dull ache of disgust returned; she again felt short of breath. "Sara? Is that her name? Why are you so concerned about her?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. When John finally spoke, his voice was crisp with impatience. "Mother, I just asked you a question. I won't be able to look in on Sara today because I have to take Maria to the doctor's when I get home from work."

"Maria? Is she sick?" Mrs. Antonnuci pictured the dark-haired little girl lying in bed with flushed face and watering eyes.

"She just has a cold, and Fran is a little bit worried."

"Oh, no! Well, why don't you bring Fran and Maria over here after you go to the doctor's--"

"Listen, Mother, I have to go now." John's voice was sharp. "Is the house looking OK?"

"Y-yes, it's fine."

"Thank you, Mother." More kindly. "Now take care, and I'll see you soon. I'll have a surprise for you."

Mrs. Antonnuci replaced the receiver slowly, trying to control her too-rapidly beating heart. She stared across the small and cluttered room, oblivious to the fact that she still wore her coat, that the dog was scratching at the front door. Mother of God, what is wrong with John? What kind of surprise is he talking about? Poor Fran, stuck at home with a sick child, and all John worries about is the house across the street. So her name is Sara. Divorced or never even married. Tight jeans: one of those "down to earth" people. Free with everything. No good. And Fran: small, dark, from a good old family. A good cook and a

proper mother. John used to be a good boy. Altar boy at the Church. Always bright. Met Fran in high school. What has happened to him? Why won't he visit me? He and Fran used to sit here evenings with Michael and me. The empty recliner beside the TV. Things change.

Suddenly, she picked up the telephone and dialed John's number. The phone rang quite a few times before a breathless voice answered.

"Hello!"

"Fran? How is Maria?"

"Oh, Mother! Well, she's not too good. She has a temperature of 102, and she's real fussy. I've been trying to get her to go to sleep."

"Are you taking her to the doctor's?"

"Well, I've been wanting to take her since yesterday, but John has been so busy that he can't find the time to take us. And, since I can't drive--well, I've been pretty worried." Fran's voice trailed off weakly.

"Well, are you going tonight?" Mrs. Antonnuci tried to cover her uneasiness.

Fran sighed. "John promised that he'd be home early so we could get Maria there before suppertime. I just hope he gets home in decent time for a change. He's worried about that house across the street from you--he's been there almost every evening for the past week because he says that the workmen are having trouble with the siding."

"Trouble? Well, I don't know." Mrs. Antonnuci frowned and twisted the phone cord.

"I don't know. He's been over there a lot trying to get the house in shape--hey, I have to go. I hear Maria crying."

"OK. Have John drop you off tonight. Kiss Maria for me."

Mrs. Antonnuci sat holding the receiver for a few moments before she became aware of the dog, still scratching at the door.

"Oh, OK, boy," she said, and forced herself to get up and put him outside. The workmen were on their lunch hour; the street was quiet. The old woman could see the men eating in the truck. The house was nearly covered now with the new white siding. In the brilliant glare of the midday sun, it looked freshly out of place among the other rowhouses on the street. Sadly, Mrs. Antonnuci studied her old and familiar neighborhood. All for that girl he did it.

Finally, she closed the door and struggled out of her coat. Time to get to work. Slowly, painfully, she shuffled past the china cupboard to her kitchen, where she made herself a sandwich and listened to the news on the radio, but the whole time she thought of Fran. Poor girl, trapped at home. Mrs. Antonnuci let the dog back inside and sank down in front of the TV without bothering to turn it on.

When she woke, the room was completely dark and the phone was ringing. She sat for a moment, aware that her mouth had been open, aware that night had fallen. She tried to stand, but her legs had fallen asleep. The dog was barking; the phone was ringing, ringing.

Mrs. Antonnuci pulled herself up from the armchair. Colors danced before her eyes as she picked up the phone. She could barely breathe.

"H'lo?"

"Mother!" The voice was loud, frenzied. Mrs. Antonnuci frowned in the darkness, unable to speak.

"Mother! It's Fran!"

"Y-yes?"

Fran's voice was disturbingly loud. She rushed on breathlessly. "I'm sorry to bother you, but have you seen John? He promised to be home over an hour ago, and Maria is really bad. In fact, she's burning up, and I'm worried sick. I called work twice and they said that he left an hour ago. Has he stopped in there, Mother? Do you know where he is?"

Mrs. Antonnuci bent over, breathing heavily. The bright dots danced before her eyes; her ears rang. She took a deep breath and stared at the floor. "No, Fran. He isn't here." And without another word, she hung up.

The room was completely dark. Her breathing was a rasping scream in the silence; her hands shook. Nevertheless she stood, steadying herself and struggling to the door. She switched on the porch light.

The cold air helped. Mrs. Antonnuci drank in the almost-erie peacefulness of the street. It was suppertime. Everyone was home from work; cars lined both sides of the street. Lamps glowed in every window. The house across the street, completely covered in white siding, practically shone in the cold winter light of the street lamp. There was a golden glow behind the drapes. The panel truck was gone, as were the scaffolding and all signs of the construction. John's old blue Chevy stood where the truck had been parked all day. Mrs. Antonnuci carefully locked the front door and turned out the porch light.

She woke before the sun had risen and stood at her bedroom window, staring out at the shoddy rowhouses. John's car was still parked in front of the house across the street. The brilliant whiteness of the house stood out in the morning half-light.

The old woman's bony fingers clutched the robe about her as she stood motionless in the center of the bedroom. What is wrong with John? Does Fran know what is going on? The sun rose behind her, filling the room with its pale wintry glow. I'll talk to John. She descended the stairs, opened the basement door, and called to her dog.

During breakfast, a white panel truck pulled up outside, and several workman began carrying stacks of pipes into Mrs. Antonnuci's yard. She peered through her curtains at amazement as the men raced about, assembling the complex framework. Why were they here?

The sight of John's dusty Chevy made her understand-- this was John's surprise. She was getting new siding. She huddled in her kitchen with a cup of coffee as the scaffolding climbed the house. It obscured most of the morning light.

She was uneasy. What is John trying to do? My son. Does he think I won't think of Fran now? Unable to eat, she sat in the kitchen. Eight o'clock: time for the dog to go outside. Trying not to notice the heavy metal web that covered the front of the house she collapsed in her chair. Hard to breathe. She closed her eyes.

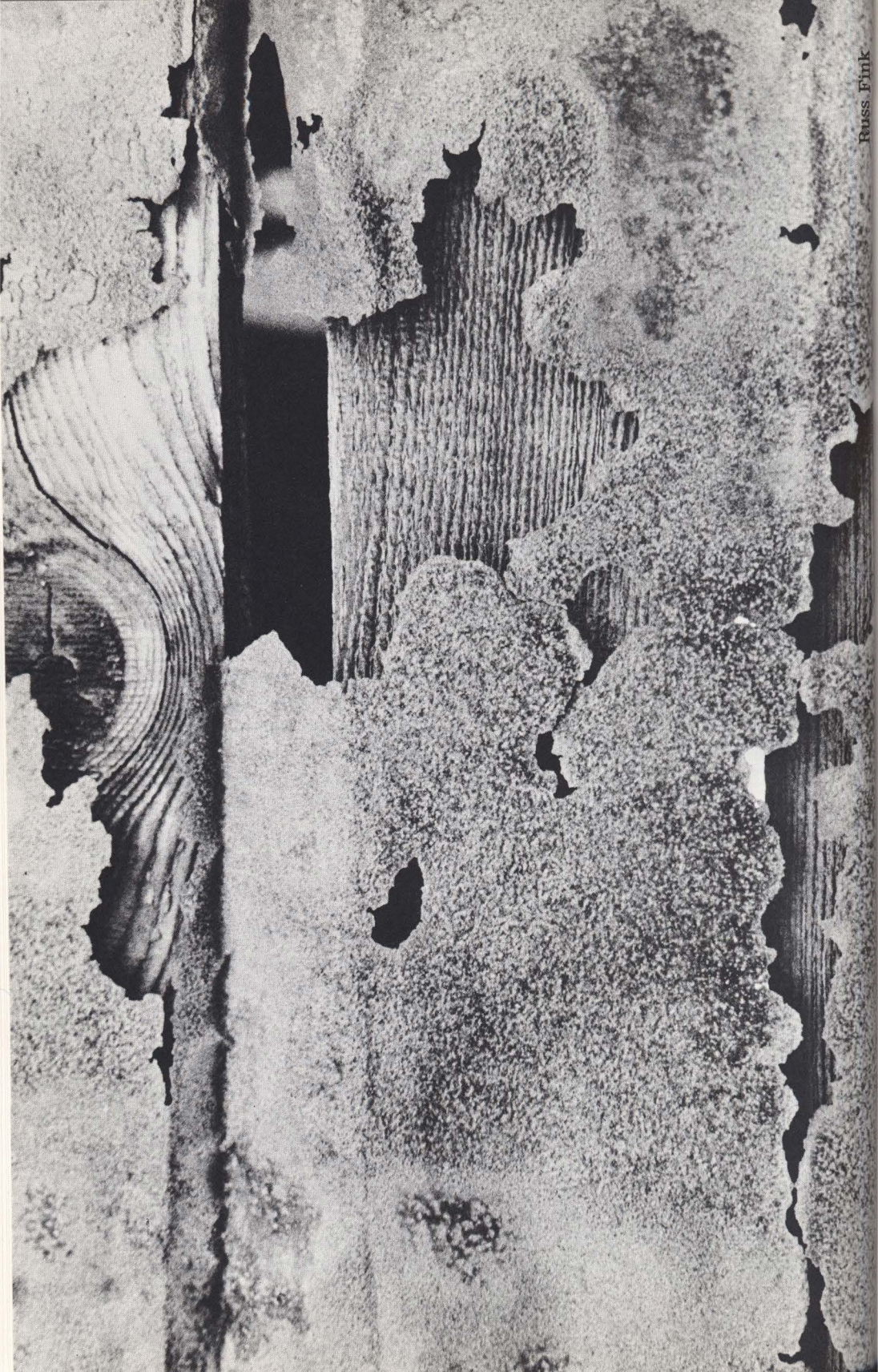
Voices: the old woman heard John. She pushed aside the curtains. He stood in front of the house across the street with Sara. Tall, slim, self-assured, she smiled and held his arm as he called to the workmen.

Must talk to him! Anger burned in Mrs. Antonnuci's chest. She felt weak. Must get my breath back. Stumbling to the door, she clutched the doorknob, tried to gain control. She heard John's car start. Too late. The dog dashed around her legs and barked.

"Be quiet!" She pushed him away and opened the door. Tail wagging, he shot past her legs, jumped over piles of siding, raced madly around the yard. His excited circles grew wider, and, as the old woman watched in horror, a group of school children skipped into view on their way to the bus stop. She opened her mouth to yell to them, but the beating of her heart was like thunder, and spots danced before her eyes. She couldn't make a sound. The dog barked; she couldn't see him, but staggered into the cold after the sound, oblivious to everything else, eyes filling with tears.

The children stopped walking and gaped as the strange old woman staggered toward them, mouth wide open, eyes huge and bright. A pile of pipes lay before her; blindly, she ran towards them. Her legs became entangled; her head hit the pipes with a muffled clang as she fell. She lay face down, motionless. The children's heels rang on the pavement as they fled, the dog following them. The workmen's hammers could be heard the whole way down the block.

—Cathy L. Eberly



A Long Time Ago

A long time ago
when I was a little girl
in a house with two porches
and it was summer
for a long time
I settled on my cot and
watched the trees through
my bedroom window
dancing in the wind--
the man with the funny hat
turns into a fairy maiden
then back again as the crickets
breathe in and out.
I lay me down to sleep
with my hugging old and worn
like the wallpaper falling down from the ceiling
where God stays next to the light bulb.
He comes down to talk to me like a
thousand feathers when I call him.
If I should die before I wake, God
will carry me like a leaf through
my windows, past the trees and
far into the skies.
I really thought this was true
a long time ago
when I was a little girl
in a house with two porches
and it was summer
for a long time.

—*Kim Heffner*

The Golden Box

he was not too alarmed
when his gums grew soft
as he grew older,
but as his teeth began to drop out
one by one;
he became upset-
until he found a way
to save them.
now when people
say he lost his teeth,
he smiles a toothless grin
and tells them they must be crazy
for he knows they're safe
within the golden box
inside of his pocket.

—*Kim Heffner*

Pig Legs

I have pig legs
that are plump and
encased with skin
which is pink and
warm and cloaked with
short follicles
of hair. I saw
legs like mine the
other day in
the Acme. They
were housed in clear
fluid with neighbor-
ing pairs and they
must have shrunk be-
cause they were small-
er than mine. They
looked cold and gray
and very un-
happy. Ever
since that day I
hide my legs with
wool so no one
will know they're pig
legs and take them
away from me.

—*Kim Heffner*

Pretzel Logic

Muriel maneuvered down the crowded street like a roller derby queen weaving her way around the track. The sidewalk travellers stared as she breezed by them, disrupting their daydreams. Some giggled, some gawked, others just plucked their eyebrows. It wasn't often a woman in a baggy trenchcoat cruised down the street on a scooter. Muriel shook the dark bangs out of her eyes and gave the scooter a push. She didn't notice the stares or snickers. She was intent on getting back to the pretzel stand. Pop shouldn't be left alone there for long. He didn't realize the dangers of the new pretzel vending industry. "Not that we're really in any danger," Muriel told herself. "Big Nick couldn't know of my plans to leave him — and the organization." Yet Muriel couldn't be absolutely sure. Big Nick had contacts all over. Sometimes he seemed to know what people were thinking before they knew themselves.

Muriel gave another push which propelled her right into a crouching, sheeted figure.

"Hare Krishna," the figure sputtered, getting up. Several teeth fell on the sidewalk.

Muriel answered by crushing one of the teeth with her foot. She had been selling pretzels in that district for five years and still these guys stopped her.

"Listen, I've about had it with you religious nuts," she said impatiently. "Look what you did; chipped the paint right off my scooter. You can't even tell that that's supposed to be a pretzel anymore."

"Muriel, calm down. It's me, Leo," the figure lisped.

"Leo?" She stared at the face thrust into hers. It had Leo's squinty eyes a Leo's old-fashioned wire-rimmed glasses. She looked at his chin. Yes, there was the scar from the parakeet attack. Muriel remembered that awful day. She had found Leo lying unconscious on the living room rug with beak marks all over his face and arms. Apparently, the bird had turned vicious while watching "Wildlife Kingdom". Leo's family received a telegram from the bird a few weeks later. That was the last they heard from the parakeet.

"Leo, is that really you?" Muriel asked.

"No, I'm just standing in for him. Of course it's me."

"I didn't recognize you without your hair. What are you doing in this area? I thought you worked on 17th and Walnut for the Druids."

"I covered that beat for a while, but I couldn't get into it. I mean, that tree outfit, squirrels kept running up my trunk and storing acorns in my ear. Then I heard that the Krishna people were hurting for experienced help. Several of their key sales personnel defected to the Moon group. I decided to give this a try. The pay is better — and so is the outfit."

"You do look great in a sheet," Muriel chuckled.

"Very funny. So, what's new in the pretzel business? Word on the street is that you might call it quits with Big Nick. Is that true?"

"It's news to me," trying to be nonchalant. Her left ear began to twitch; a sure sign of nervousness. Better get out of here before Leo gets suspicious, she thought, casually brushing her hair in front of her ears.

"I've got to get back to the stand. I'm still moonlighting at "The Naked Ape." Why don't you stop by tonight and we can talk afterwards."

"Sure thing. I haven't seen your act in a long time. Are you still "Stark Reality - the best thing in a G-string?"

"You bet." By now Muriel's ear was twitching wildly and she had to hold down her hair to keep it from bouncing.

"See you tonight then," Leo said.

"O.K."

Muriel quickly took off on her scooter, trying to get her ear under control. But the more she thought about her conversation the worse it twitched. If rumors were already floating on the street, then Big Nick must suspect something, too. How did news always leak out? She had planned on the element of surprise to help her. With that advantage shot out, Muriel knew she would have to move fast. She didn't plan to let Big Nick find her unprepared.

The crowd around her stopped, forcing Muriel to, also. "Damn traffic light," she muttered to the armpit of the man in front of her. Craning her neck, she could see the stand across the street. Pop was chatting and laughing with some customers. If only he wouldn't wear that stupid pretzel suit. She tried to talk him out of it. She even bought him a new suit. But Pop insisted that it was good for business. Well, it may have been good for business thirty years ago, Muriel thought, but today, who wants to buy pretzels from an old man in a moth-eaten pretzel outfit? The mustard was even turning green on it.

Muriel didn't have the heart to throw him off the stand, though. She knew how much he loved selling pretzels. He'd worked that counter for forty years, until Big Nick forced him out and gave the spot to her. Of course, Big Nick had given Pop a good amount of money for the place. Money didn't interest Pop. That was why Muriel let him come and help her for a few hours every day.

The light changed and Muriel steered the scooter across the street.

"How's it going, Pop?"

"Everything's under control. You didn't have to hurry back. Say, what's wrong with your ear?"

"Nothing," she answered shortly, "and I didn't hurry back."

"A ten minute lunch. That's not rushing?" he questioned.

"Cut the chatter, Pop."

"I know why you always rush back here. You think Big Nick might try to take the stand while you're not here."

"Yeah, yeah, sure, Pop," Muriel answered. She'd never get her ear to stop now.

"Don't worry, I still have a few tricks up my sleeve," he said dancing around and punching the air like a boxer. "Just let Big Nick try something. I wouldn't let him push you out of business like he did to me."

"That's nice of you, Pop. Now, could we just sell the pretzels, please," she said in an effort to stop his babbling. It was no use.

"Don't get me wrong. This doesn't mean that I like your way of running business any more than I do Nick's. You've got a little more class, a little more compassion than Big Nick, but your ideas about the pretzel business are still no good. In my day you would both have been pickled in hot mustard and run out of town. All these harebrained schemes for enlarging the business. Look at this stand: popcorn, soda, you can hardly see the pretzels. Next thing you'll be putting in stools and a singer."

Muriel sighed. She had tried to tell Pop that the business had changed. She explained that the pretzel vendors of the city operated as a unit under Big Nick. Each vendor controlled one area and turned the profits into the main office, where accountants tabulated the income. This kind of operation went against all thinking of Pop's time. Pop now began to talk about the old days, his favorite topic.

"When I started out, pretzel selling was an art. Each man developed his own specialty. Mustard Eddy--people came from all over the city just to see Eddy spread that mustard on a pretzel. He had a style all his own," Pop said with awe in his voice.

"My specialty was salt arrangement," Pop continued. "I once arranged the first book of Job in Morse Code on a dozen pretzels. I would only sell them as a unity. It cost me money, but when you deal with art, money doesn't matter." By this time, Muriel could almost repeat the words with him. Next he would launch into an account of the "Big Event."

"Did I ever tell you about the time I gave Marlene Deitrich her own special pretzel? She was in town for the opening of her new picture and I happened to be working in front of the theater where the premiere was being held. When she arrived, all feather and fur, I presented her with a pretzel bearing the name of the picture and the date spelled out in salt. She didn't realize what it said at first, because some of the salt had dropped off when I rushed over to her. But I explained it, and she kissed me. Me, Mac Guerin. I'll never forget what she said. She shook her feathers in my face and cooed, 'Zank you, you wovely man.' Yes, sir, that was a day to remember."

"So I gater," Muriel said, not bothering to hide the sarcasm. Mac didn't notice.

"The point is, I had enough pride in my pretzels to offer one to a famous movie star. Would you be willing to give one of these things to Marlene Dietrich?"

"I don't think her teeth could take it today."

"That's just what I mean," Pop, exasperated. "You kids don't take anything seriously--not even your work. You've lost the sense of the art of pretzels. Mark my words, this branching out will be the death of pretzel vendors."

"We'll have to continue this discussion tomorrow, Pop. Here comes your bus," Muriel said, relieved to be rid of him. Pop crossed the street to the bus stop, trailing cotton mustard. Muriel shouted after him, "If you're going to wear that dumb outfit, at least sew it!"

Muriel reconnected the pretzel stand's blinking lights. That was another thing Pop did which annoyed her. Whenever she left him on the stand, he turned off the colored lights. She sighed. What going to do with that man? Yet, thinking over their conversation, she had to admit that some of what Pop said came close to the truth. This "branching out" was exactly why she wanted to break with Nick. Not that she disagreed with it the way Pop did. As long as it increased profits she would go along with it. So far, all Nick's ideas had helped the organization. But this latest was way off base. She remembered when he first told her this idea of "Martian Salad:"

"We'll take four things that everyone likes: peanut butter, chocolate chips, ketchup, and mustard, roll them up in pretzel dough, and then bake them. It will be a great seller. I used to eat Martian Salad everyday after school. All my friends would come over, too. I haven't had one in years, though," he mused. He went on to explain how cheap it would be to make, and the promotional campaigns they could use. All the while, Muriel was trying to think of a way to tell him that the idea was a loser. When he finished, she said, "Well, I don't know, Nick. Maybe if we were selling to a more youthful market: on the boardwalk or at a college."

Muriel expected a heated argument from Nick but he had been more like a volcanic eruption. She recalled his body quivering with rage, his face obscured by a giant pretzel mobile. Never had he gotten so emotional over business. He had spat insult upon insult at her. Finally, he accused her of being "just another product of the middle class with bourgeois tastebuds." After that, Muriel had stomped out of the apartment, slamming the door behind her. Nick's outburst had been the last straw. It was time for the big adios.

The thought of Nick's reaction to her leaving made Muriel shudder. He wouldn't relinquish his top vendor-lover without a fight. She imagined her body, twisted like a pretzel, baking in a huge oven. It would destroy her new permanent. Muriel resolved not to let that happen to her. She would form her own organization. She knew of several vendors who were dissatisfied with the way Nick ran the business. And tonight she would talk to Leo about getting the support

of the city's religious. They were a powerful group when they pooled their resources. Maybe she could make a deal with them: free pretzels for all their religious retreats, or something like that. It was a start, at least.

By the end of the day, Muriel's stomach felt as twisted as the pretzels she sold. What a relief it would be to get to the club. Stripping wasn't really a job. It helped her unwind. Pop relieved his tension by arranging salt, Muriel by throwing her clothes in the crowd.

She spotted Leo in the audience during her act. He had exchanged his sheet for a doubleknit leisure suit. "Lean Leo" they had called him in high school. He had put on a few pounds. Good, he's picked a table by the door, she thought, discreet but not suspicious. Muriel joined him there after the show.

"Leo, I'm glad you came."

"You sounded as if you needed someone to talk to. Do you want a drink?"

"No, thanks, I've got to watch my weight."

"Something's bothering you. What's up?"

"The rumors you heard about me splitting with Nick are true."

"I can't understand it," Leo said. "You and Nick had a good thing going. Is it another woman? Does Nick want to phase you out for a new girl?"

"No, I wish it were something like that. At least I would have some idea of how to handle the situation. Our disagreement is over business. Nick plans to add a new "delicacy" to the pretzel stands: "Martian Salad."

Leo grimaced. "What is Martian Salad?"

"Ketchup, mustard, peanut butter, and chocolate chips--all the things everyone loves, according to Nick--all rolled into pretzel dough and baked. Frankly, I think the Martians would disown it if they ever heard about it. I know that's what my customers will do."

"Have you talked to Nick about it?"

"I've tried to reason with him but he refuses to listen. I'm just sick of his games. I'm--Leo, what are you doing?"

As she talked, Leo had moved his chair and was opening the door to the alley. Too stunned to move, Muriel watched Big Nick squeeze through the door.

"Leo, how could you? I thought I could trust you!"

"I'm really sorry, Muriel, but Nick promised to get me in with the Mormons. You know that's a deal I can't pass up." By this time, Nick had manipulated the last of his bulk through the door and stood in front of Muriel. Suddenly the club felt like the Sahara in August. She knew that this was it--"high noon"--the big showdown. Muriel prayed that her ear wouldn't start twitching. She looked at Nick, determined not to lose her cool.

"Hello, Nick. I take it this isn't a social call."

"You guessed it, baby," he said, his hair in his nostrils working overtime. "The boys warned me that you would try something like this,

but I couldn't believe them. I wanted to hear it for myself."

"I'm sorry it had to happen this way, Nicko. But I refuse to see my business go down the tubes because of Martian Salad. I tried to tell you it was a dead end idea but you didn't give me a chance."

"What about your feelings for me?"

"Some things surpass even love, Nick."

"You expect me to believe that you would walk out on the best deal you ever had because of Martian Salad and a few insults. No, it is something more than that."

"You always could see through me, Nick," she said. The game was up. "OK. I'll tell you what this is really all about. Lately you've been acting stranger than usual: falling asleep during business meetings, wearing socks with garters. And you've been avoiding me. I haven't slept with you in six months. You prefer arranging salt on the bathroom floor to making love to me. If I didn't know better, I'd think you'd been talking to Pop."

"You're right again, baby." With these words Nick pulled off his double chin. The rest of his face peeled off with it, revealing a mass of wrinkles.

"Pop!" Muriel gasped.

"It pays to have friends from vaudeville who know about makeup," the old man grinned. He patted his overweight body. "This is all padding. That's why I never make love to you."

"I can't grasp this at all," said Muriel, shaking her head. "How long have you been Nick? And where is Nick?"

"You didn't think I'd stand by and watch Nick rake in all the profits from my ideas."

"Your ideas? I thought you hated what Nick was doing, enlarging the business and everything."

"Are you kidding? I was the one who gave Nick those ideas. He used to come by the stand and talk for hours. I've only been saying those things to you so you wouldn't get suspicious."

"About six months ago I went to Nick, to make peace--or that's what he thought," Pop explained. "As a gesture of my good intentions I offered him a pretzel with mustard specially placed by Mustard Eddy. Only I mixed glue in with the mustard. When Big Nick ate it, the mustard stuck in his throat and he suffocated. No one bothered to check the body. They figured he choked on his own fat."

"That's not quite the way it happened, Mac," Leo said. Now he was pulling off his face. This isn't really happening, Muriel thought. Any minute now Allan Funt will walk in and say, "Smile, you're on Candid Camera." She glanced back at Leo, almost afraid to look. Muriel couldn't believe what she saw.

"Nick!" It was Pop's turn to gasp.

"Pop's not the only one with friends in show business," Nick said to Muriel. He turned to Pop. "You should check your corpses a little more

carefully, Mac. Some of us don't die so easy. By the way, my men are coming up behind you, so don't make any funny moves."

Pop swiveled around. Several men had detached themselves from the audience and were heading for him.

"Hold on, just hold on," Muriel commanded. Everyone stopped. "Let me get this straight: Pop, you killed Nick, or thought you did, and then took his place. But Nick didn't really die, he disguised himself as Leo." Both men nodded.

"There's one thing I don't understand. Where is Leo?"

"I arranged for him to work for the Mormons in Utah," Nick said.

"Oh, OK. Continue."

The men covered the last few yards to Pop.

"I hate to kill you, Pop, we're alike you and I, but you're too dangerous to keep around," Nick said.

"Nick, couldn't we make a deal or something?" Pop suggested.

"I remember your last deal. Sorry, Pop. Boys, take care of Pop. Treat him with respect; he's older than you." The boys carried a struggling Pop out to the alley.

"Well, it's just you and me again, babe," said Nick, smiling. "Just like old times."

"You can't relive old times," Muriel answered, grabbing the gun Nick had left on the table. "That's one lesson I learned from Pop. You see, I've started to like the idea of running my own business. You're not going to ruin my big plans."

Nick couldn't hide his astonishment.

"Muriel, remember this is Nick you're talking to. Put that thing down! You know you couldn't kill your Nicko! Besides, you'd miss anyway, and then I'd have to kill you."

The bullet Muriel released went straight to Nick's heart.

"You should have taken those self-defense classes I went to seriously," Muriel said to the corpse.

—Eileen Lucas

You Helped Me

10/19/76

You helped me throw those*
single beds
over the railing
to the pavement below

so that I could set up my double bed
in that big, blue, empty bedroom

You
who helped to pay
for the damage done

at least in
dollars and cents.

The springs were broken
in those singles
when the landlord removed them—
their owner;

They couldn't be used again
and perhaps he was lying
but I knew I'd never need
those beds again.

But you
are an imposter
who tried to soothe me with that double bed.
Then never stayed
to fill your half
the next night.

What's funny is
you say that
you never loved anyone
the way
you love me.
But the fact is
you've never loved anyone
and you might never
be able to do it.
I feel so sorry for you
twisted
on your fold-out couch
secure in your love.

You removed those beds—
the previous springs—
and you somehow thought that that was enough
for us.
You are an imposter,
you shadow,
the man who barely touches his half of the
bed.

—*Tina Bashline*

Your Voice

10/21/76

Your voice
that campfire of girl scouts
seducing
with light and heat

It warms
my eyelids
—the glow
those slow-motion flames.

Matches
are imitations
day-to-day reminders;

Lovers work in heat tones.
Only intuitions of feelings to play upon;
a lighter with adjustable height.

Touched lightly
spent quickly,
mechanically held—
a while longer.

As a lover you enter my room
ringed with candles
that can't be lit.
You set me
on fire instead

And can not put me out when you leave.

—*Tina Bashline*

Running Free

As the morning dawns crisp and fresh,
You begin running down the beach.
The ocean beside you gleams like an endless
 mirror of freedom.
The unending waves wash away the footprints
 you left behind seconds before.
You're running only for yourself this time,
So your pace is slow and unhurried.
As you stop for a moment, gulls come to
 beg for the bread in your hands.
Looking out over the sparkling blue water,
Your thoughts slowly drift from the present.
You think of many things while standing
 there;
Are your thoughts ever of me?
You turn suddenly and your thoughts come
 back to the present.
Realizing that it's time to go, you take
 a last look out over the water
And begin running again.

—*Patricia Foster*

*Two Men At A Table**

As we pass through the gallery, our attention is drawn to a painting, bright yet sinister, of two men at a table. Although it is late and our feet are tired from too much walking, we pause to examine this work and its effect upon us.

The men in the painting are dressed in dark suits and ties; they are proper, even conservative. One of them, seated in the left-hand side of the picture, wears a look of hopelessness coupled with fear. His face is gaunt with high, prominent cheekbones; his eyes show signs of fear and resignation; they are the eyes of a fish, blankly staring, while his mouth forms a helpless, almost pleading 'O,' as if that same fish had been cast casually ashore, left to a fate it did not want to comprehend.

The man sits rigidly in his chair—a puppet locked in a battle of opposing wills. His right hand clutches the wooden arm rest; it is tense, the knuckles bone-white. His left hand, however, rests, lifeless, on the table, a common wooden table of medium size. It has four legs and is like many tables we have seen.

The room itself is somewhat unusual. First, it is small: the table and five chairs fill it to capacity. It is apparent that the two men feel a sense of confinement; perhaps they have been placed here against their wills. We cannot tell.

The room is suffused in light, having the same effect as a stained glass window. The walls are a muted green, the floor tiles that shade of purple we associate with "sacrificial wine." The suggestiveness of all this is heightened by a painting within this painting, hanging on the wall directly facing us, a painting of Christ on the verge of death, lying naked with vicious, red slashes across His body. Although the painting is large, nearly as wide as the room, neither man seems aware of it. Nor are they aware of the other paintings that surround them: behind the man with the fish eyes hangs a picture which the artist (one cannot ignore the presence, whims, and dictates of the artist in our study) seems to have deliberately blurred, made vague to the point that its subject is no longer discernable. It is ethereal, ready to melt into nothingness.

On the right side of the room, behind the man we have yet to study, hangs a portrait that is sharp and succinct. The man it portrays stares evilly from the shadows; his eyes are dark, narrow slits beneath opaque lids; his beard is groomed to a point. There is a wide scar on his forehead, and his brow is thick, protruding. It seems to us that his face is alive, gazing from the canvas at what takes place in the room.

We turn our attention again to the man on the left and see that his expression has not changed. His right hand still clutches the arm rest (we see, for the first time, that his is the only chair that even has arm rests). The left hand still rests on the table: inches away from the index

finger lies a sharp, silver letter opener. Beside it lies a piece of stationery. We wonder about the letter opener and the role it has to play; we are only mildly curious about the stationery. One thing is certain: the fish eyes alone will not satiate our curiosity; we must turn our attention, at last, to the second man, the man on the right, hoping that through him we can trace the factors that give this painting its sense of appeal.

Immediately, upon examination, we see that here is no static, hopeless character like the first. This man has risen from his chair (indeed, there are two chairs behind him; we cannot be certain from which he has sprung) and is leaning into the center of the painting, hands propped on the table, left palm open, facing inward, imploringly. The look on his face is one of anger: his eyebrows arch violently and his lip is curled, as if in contempt.

"You are a fool!" he cries, leaning further to sneer in the face of his associate. "Do you think you can possibly go on living this way forever? Do you think it is worthwhile—even feasible? You thought you had an explanation for everything, didn't you? But enough questions—you see the impossibility of the situation. You know, intuitively at least, that there is one way out, and even that is uncertain; that is why you are afraid. As if it does you any good! You've read this letter hundreds of times; it's all you—we—have to rely on, mere written word, more tangible than the spoken word, but no more reliable. Still, you refuse to comply, even for my sake. I am powerless to fulfill it myself, or I would you can rest assured; I am powerless to lay a hand on your wretched throat."

The other man makes no verbal response, although his lower lip begins to tremble. He is thin, gaunt; there are shadows beneath his eyes which we hadn't noticed before. His index finger extends itself, almost of its own accord, barely grazes the silver letter opener, and pulls back as if the metal had been red hot. All of this does not go unobserved by the man on the right.

"You see! You see! Doubt holds you back, while certainty compels you to move forward. It's only a matter of time until you must give in; why don't you just do it now and save a lot of trouble? Then we will both be free of your wretched company! I can't abide you much longer; you really are quite repulsive; you know that, too, so why do you refuse to obey? If it's just to torment me, you won't succeed. Ha! No, it is I who will torment you, for as long as it takes you to surrender. I won't ever let you sleep, ever let you forget what it is you must do. Never, do you understand? So why don't you just do it now? It would be so easy...."

His voice becomes soft, persuasive. He pauses to let his words take effect.

The man on the left is visibly moved by his associate's speech; tears brim in his eyes; again he stretches a tentative finger in the direction of the letter opener. As the hand draws near, beads of sweat begin to form

on his tormented brow. A low, animal cry escapes his throat.

"Yes, yes! That's it!" his associate exclaims; then realizing that his fervor might negate his progress, he assumes a cool stance and speaks in a nasal tone, peering disdainfully through half-closed lids at the creature before him.

"You're doing the right thing, you know," he soothes. "When it's over, your martyrdom will not go unrecorded. People will appreciate what you have done. Imagine, your name passed down for generations! It's the only worthwhile thing you can do...."

He reaches down and turns the stationery so that it is in plain view of his doubtful associate.

"You see! It is decreed! The only way for salvation, for freedom, is for you to—"

Here, the man on the left raises his hand for silence. He rises from his seat slowly, ceremoniously, the silver letter opener clutched in his hand. Holding it at arm's length, sharp end pointed inward, he murmurs:

"It is not I who is the fool, but you. You have made assumptions that are vague, based on nothing beyond this letter which, as you may remember, was here before your term of confinement began. Your only concern, since your arrival, has been to escape at any cost, with no regard for me, no idea of just what it is you are trying to evade. You asked no questions about the reasons you were brought here; you have not seriously questioned the authority of this document. Nevertheless, I shall fulfill its commands, which you have most insidiously imposed upon me, but not without telling you this: it was I who authored that letter, the letter in which you place such faith. It is I, too, who knows the secret of escape from this room."

With that, he plunges the letter opener into his heart. Color drains from his face as he crumbles to the floor, thin, dark blood soaking into his shirt, then dropping to blend incongruously with the tile.

—Tom Townsley

* a painting by Erich Heckel

Miss March's Birthday

-February 14, 1977

Hey Miss March, how you feeling today,
Are you still flying high in the sky?
Still singing around, turning me up-side-down,
I know you're never gonna cry.

Say Miss March, are your friends still there,
Are you still bouncing 'round in the sky?
Kissing a cloud, singing out loud,
Just like the wind zooming by.

And you smile Miss March, lighting up my eyes,
Like I hope when you listen to the song.
You're nineteen and seem like a dream,
Forever in the image of my mind.

So I say today, hope you're feeling okay,
And nothings gonna bring you on down.

—G.S. Mahon III

Burning Bridges

-January 31, 1977

Seeing purple and blue and images hazed
Closing my eyes to blinding sunlight
Slowing waking out of this dream
Leaving warm shelter for blight
In restless, burning time
And as I fly along through the sky
I set the bridges afire...burning bridges
I lost the meaning when I woke up dreaming
It isn't very fair--I cry
So I keep on running and screaming...
...through the rain scared
Hazy images of purple and blue stare out at me
Keep staring through a malestrom of light
So I keep on flying out of fright
Ans set the bridges...burning bridges

—G.S. Mahon III

Strange Notion

That box there on the shelf?
I asked mama many times to explain it;
it's ornamentation, it's colors,
the texture of the wood.
She would only shrug and say,
"It's one of your father's strange notions."
Now, I didn't know what a strange notion was
but, in my mind, I conjured up such a horrible monster
that could never fit in so small a box.
And I was afraid.
I guess that's why I hated my father in a way.
He left her with this- thing-when he died.

Years passed and I grew older and braver.
I no longer feared the strange notion, but became
mystified by it.
I asked mama, "Could I hold it?"
"No," she'd say, "strange notions such as these
are best kept shelved."
And I obeyed her.

But, one day she died.
I was lost for days.
While stumbling through the house,
I came upon the strange notion.
Lifting it from the shelf,
I examined it more closely.
A small key beckoned me to turn it,
and as I did, the lid popped open
and tinkling music filled the air.
A music box,
finished too late
to be the first one made.

—Beth A Russler

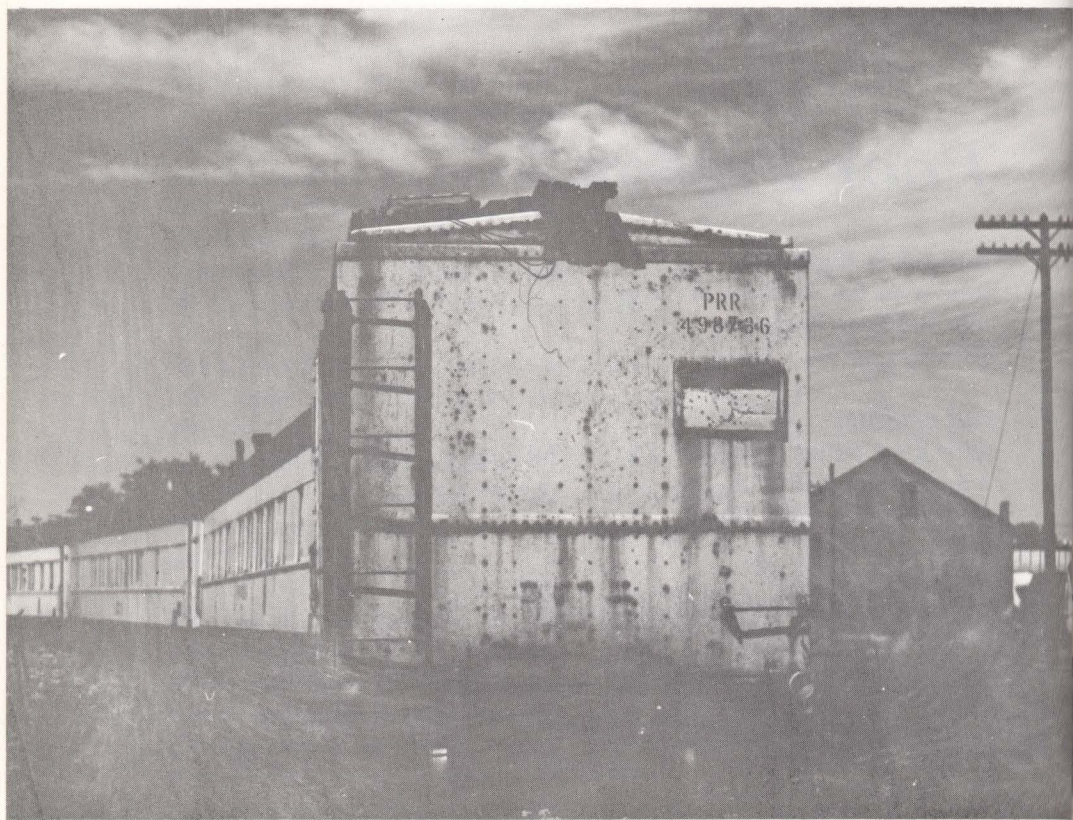
Poor Pigeon

stopped in flight,
forever in the darkness of a night
that holds no hope for
returning to day. Quiet,

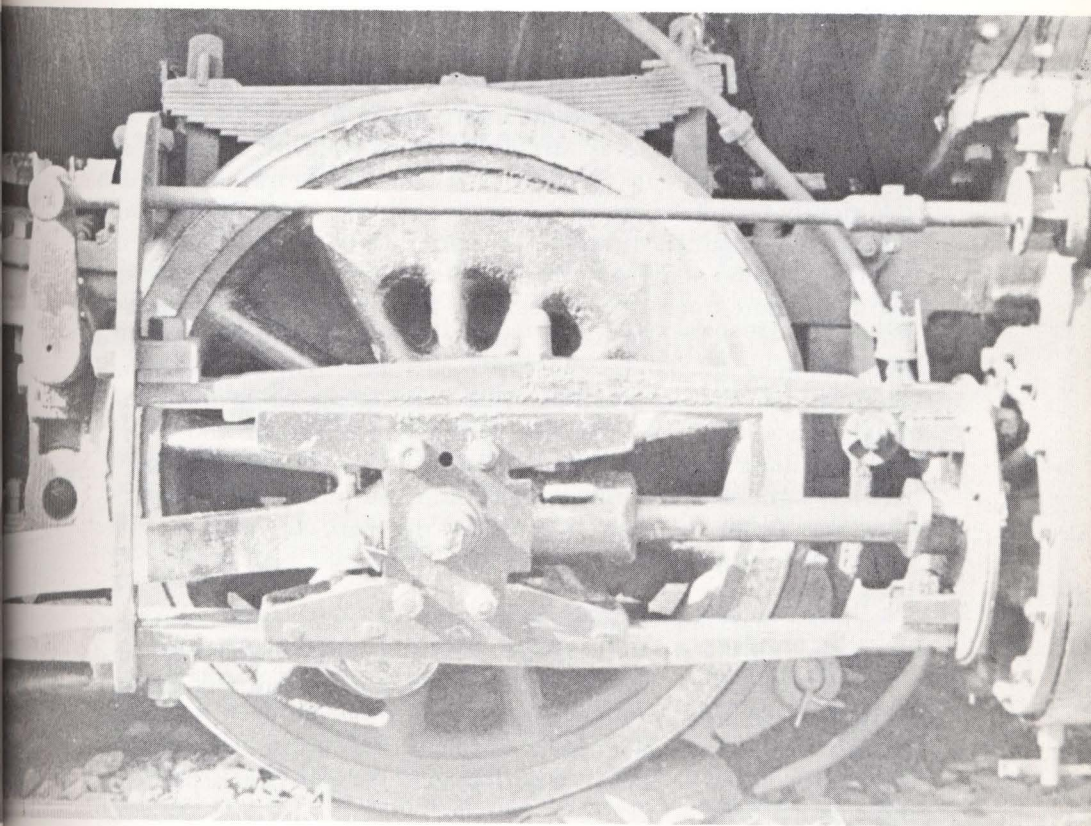
still reaching
with bone wings, unable to fly, to sing.
A man has placed you
to stand awkwardly fragile

with white, bare
bones. A creator's handiwork repaired
for study, for show.
Poor pigeon, thrust unto death.

—*Beth A Russler*



photos by Mike Grouse



Grandfather's Funeral

Grandfather died in mid-November. His housekeeper, Mrs. Colby, was the last person to see him alive. She had taken him the small brandy he had always nursed before retiring for the evening. It was a nightly ritual for the old fellow-- he would sit in bed, propped up by half a dozen soft, feather-down pillows, reading from the cracked and yellowing pages of the latest acquisition to his massive library. There would come a feeble tap at the door-- a mere formality (but, then, Grandfather was fond of formality)--and he would bid the visitor to enter his chamber. The visitor, of course, was Mrs. Colby, a gray-haired, stooped little woman of indeterminate age, bearing the small silver tray upon which the nightly brandy balanced. "Your brandy, Sir," Mrs. Colby would say, and Grandfather, lifting his eyes from his book, would suffer the wrinkled features of his face to register the same series of emotions it had registered more times than either he or Mrs. Colby could remember. First, a scowl at the intrusion; this, replaced by a spark of pleased recognition as the brandy came into focus; and, finally, a warm smile and heart-felt "Thank you, Mrs. Colby," as she placed the tray on the night table at the head of the bed. She would then turn, and without another word, retire to her own quarters for the evening. Her last sight of Grandfather, as she pulled shut the heavy oaken door, was always the same-- a contented old man, cozy and comfortable, sipping at his brandy and turning the page of his book.

So it was that cold November night, with one exceptional occurrence-- sometime during the early hours of the morning, Grandfather died.

To all appearances, substantiated by medical testimony, Grandfather had passed with remarkable ease from this world to the next. As is often the case with the very old, who close their eyes to sleep and never again awake, he suffered not a whit. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of those he left behind.

The process of burying Grandfather-- that it, of actually placing him in the good earth-- was an unpleasant and trying business, involving more mental alacrity than his distraught surviving relations could, with comfort, muster. The Burial Director, as the little tag on his lapel claimed him to be, was a gaunt, pale man named Beasley, who, despite every effort to make easier for the family the myriad details required interring the deceased, was, through no conscious fault of his own, more a source of horror than of comfort. This Mr. Beasley was almost ghoulish in his appearance and bearing. Whether this was attributable to the close contact with the dead which his occupation of necessity entailed, or, perhaps, to some disorder of one or more of his bodily

systems, it is of little matter. He was, at any rate, a terrifying individual, with his deep sunken eyes and hollow cheeks, his stark white complexion and bright red lips. Some members of the family--and not, it should be said, merely those of the gentler sex--found his visage so unsettling, that they refused, outright, to have any direct, personal communication with him. In most instances, it was old Mrs. Colby who was sent to relay to the grim Director some message of import, or to carry back such information as the timid mourners sought. Mrs. Colby, faithful as always to her duty, ran these errands without complaint, though she did on one such occasion offer the following observation: "That horrible Mr. Beasley is in his proper field," she said, her eyes wide with revelation. "Why, he has less color in his cheek than the dear departed. I know! The lid was open, and I compared!"

Thus, owing greatly to the old housekeeper's courage and tireless legwork, all of the legal papers and documents came to be signed. It is a morbid affair, this business of death--the pen is as instrumental as the spade in laying to rest the clay of the departed. Be that as it may, Grandfather was, in due course, buried; though amid such ceremony as would, no doubt, have caused him, could he have been there under other circumstances, to huff and bluster on about the needless pomp surrounding the most basic human functions. The old fellow had always held a healthy disdain for rituals--excepting, of course, the nightly brandy--and was inclined to think of them as manifestations of a certain weakness in that part of the human constitution which governs individuality. However, Great Aunt Gizzy, his sister and confidant, was most insistent that Grandfather's last exit should, in her words, "echo the elegance of his life."

From Great Aunt Gizzy's point of view then, and that of all who attended, the funeral was a huge success. The little hillside graveyard, which boasts among its tenants one President, two Admirals, and a Nobel Prize winner, was, on that calm, cold November morning, host to as august an assemblage as one is likely to find anywhere. Beneath a broad, brown-leaved oak they stood--the financier and the politician, the General and the Monsignor, the influential and the creative--all come from those walks of life in which power, that rawest commodity of success, is the prime mover. They stood in a silence of seeming tranquility which, frankly, was altogether out of keeping with the natures that made them what they were. Their bowed heads bespoke a humbleness not to be discerned in the ordinary practice of their daily occupations--in truth, there ran through those assembled a shared shudder born of the realization of a common fate. For who could temper the arrogance of the might, but He to whom even the mighty bow, when their time is come. Death is the great leveler.

Ah, but to dwell on that subject, of which, among the funereal participants, Grandfather alone was in any way expert, would be to cast

too dark a shadow over an otherwise pleasant enough occasion. Flowers, gorgeous in the range of their color and breathtaking in their profusion, were placed about the hillside and around the family plot, creating, as each bloom caught the clear morning rays, an atmosphere of beauty and of peace. What a contrast presented itself to the eye--the black habiliment of the mourners; the somber aspect of their collective countenance; and these so surrounded by the gaiety and lustre of the countless blossoms! The contrast was, of course, a most welcome one, for the tenor of the moment was such that it required some uplifting force--some brighter vision--to restrain, or, perhaps, distract the memories of the living from too close a communion with the dead. And so there were flowers.

As a gentle breeze, just sprung up, no doubt, from the sea, stirred the dry leaves overhead, there rose, as if to mingle with the sudden sea wind, a soft and mournful singing--a death hymn. Beneath the bare boughs of a nearby elm, all draped in sable robes, there stood a small choir, whose sweet and melancholy tone, a euphony of loss and woe, echoed the sentiments of all present. Now, indeed, was the time for tears. How often it is--and how strange--that music provides the accompaniment, if not, as may well be the case, the impetus, for the truest and least hypocritical occasions of human expression. Witness the merry march of little children to the beating of a drum. Watch, with a discrete eye, the lovers who find themselves in the strains of a bittersweet melody. Exhult with your fellow man in the resounding glory of the moving chorus, "Alleluia, Alleluia!" And see upon the cheeks of many who stand beneath the broad, old oak, tears which only the hymn of death could find and bring to be shed.

When the singing stopped, the stiffening sea breeze had to content itself with bearing along, in place of the lovely voices of the choir, the muffled sobs and sniffles of the more vocal of the grief-stricken, for, sadly, these were all that could be heard. At precisely this uncomfortable point in the proceedings--perhaps because it was such--a tall, thin, dark figure proceeded from his position on the outer fringe of the assemblage, through the main body of the gathering, to a spot directly in front of Grandfather's exquisite casket. He stood for many moments in complete silence, his eyes closed tight, his chin upon his breast, in the midst of what appeared to be a deep and consuming meditation.

"Dearly Beloved," he began; and so suddenly that more than a few mourners visibly leapt in fright to hear the silence so shattered. "We are gathered here, on this hallowed hillside, on this chilly November morning, to pay our last respects--to say our final farewells--to our dear departed brother, Hector."

A word here concerning Grandfather's nomenclature--he despised it. From a very tender age, through all the years of what, by any standard, was a life of considerable length, he steadfastly contended that it did not at all suit his artistic temperament, his poetic persuasion. "Hector," he

would say, "is too harsh, too completely unpleasant. It grates and scrapes. Try to imagine, if you can, the sound produced by dragging an empty, metal file cabinet over a rough concrete pavement. Do you hear that horrible noise? It says, 'Hector...Hector!'" Of course, Grandfather was hardly the type of individual to grumble on at any great length, or with anything approaching regularity, about something which was, on the surface of it, anyway, but a trifling misfortune. However, operating, for a moment, on the principle that life is, as some wise men have opined, but a rocky road, at best, and one beset with any number of pitfalls; and, further, that man, by the very weakness of his nature, is rather inclined to trip over such rocks as present themselves, or to step, as often as not, into the pits, have we not fuel enough for some interesting, if inconclusive, conjecture concerning Grandfather's hated name? Is too great a stretch of the imagination required to fancy that name, in the above context, as the tripping rock or looming pit? In the final analysis, of course, what havoc "Hector" wreaked on Grandfather is matter of speculation and little else. Suffice it to say, that once Grandfather had reached that point in his life at which he came to control his own destiny, no one was ever known to call him by his given name, save in ignorance of the stricture concerning its use.

Thus, when the good father uttered the phrase, "our dear departed brother, Hector," all heads snapped up, and a number of audible gasps were heard. The priest would never have called Grandfather that to his face, while he was alive and likely to explode, so perhaps there were those present to whom the thought occurred that to do so now indicated a certain lack of decorum. Taking into consideration the part that Grandfather was playing in this solemn ceremony, it seemed a matter of simple respect to accord the old fellow, in death, the same deference concerning his name that he had been accustomed to receive while alive. It should be mentioned, however, in the interest of fairness to the good priest, that Grandfather had never really settled upon a name he considered completely unsuitable, changing them with confusing frequency, often several times a week. Age, and its accompanying wisdom, had, eventually, checked this singular habit, and for the last thirty-five years of his life, he had been known by only two appellations: "Grandfather," to all of his relations, and "Mr. Lawrence" to everyone else. This situation presented the priest with only two alternatives which would, apparently, have been acceptable to the ears that would never hear them. First, "our dear departed brother, Grandfather," which has a distinctly unsettling quality in its strange combination of consanguine terms. And, secondly, "our dear departed brother, Mr. Lawrence," which, by dint of its peculiar juxtaposition of the warm and human associations of brotherhood with the connotated formality of "Mr.--" was not much better. The other option, which was at first summarily rejected for reasons already discussed, was that which the

priest finally settled upon. The principle of "lesser evils" provided the man of God with his answer.

During the uncomfortable pause which followed the priest's first words, no lightning streaked from an angry sky, nor did the cold earth quake. Grandfather's coffin remained intact, evincing not the slightest tremble. The good priest was not unconscious of the absence of such signs of celestial discontent, and, gathering strength from what he interpreted as obvious acceptance in high places of his decision concerning the name, he proceeded:

"We have all lost a dear friend...some have lost a loving patriarch...earth has lost a man of substance and compassion. And how sad we all look! There are tears in some eyes. But can't you see that our sadness is for ourselves...for our loss. Brother Hector has gone to a place so calm and beautiful, that could he speak to us right now, he would tell us to rejoice in the fulfillment of God's promise!" Here, the priest threw up his arms and turned around in a complete circle, his face radiating a smile so brilliant that it threatened to outshine the sun itself.

From the gathered mourners, a few weak smiles, mere shadows of the expression attempted, were returned. The assemblage was, obviously, prepared to relinquish its attitude of grief and suffering. The priest had conferred some days earlier with Great Aunt Gizzy, and had been convinced by that charming old lady that Grandfather, having cultivated an intense dislike for rituals--particularly, those of a depressing nature--would have positively disdained to have his very own funeral succumb to the morbid solemnity inherent in such ceremonies. Thus, the priest had designed to word his message in such a way as to lift the occasion from one of grief to one of celebration. In the general lack of response to his opening words, the priest apparently recognized the need for some different approach, for when he continued, the talk no longer concerned Grandfather's present happy position, but, instead, addressed itself to that same rocky, pit-strewn road alluded to earlier in the narrative. Grandfather, claimed the man of the cloth, had traveled that road for ninety-two years.

"Ninety-two years," he began, again. "That sounds like a long time, doesn't it, friends? And a long time it is. It begins to seem an incredibly long time when we stop to consider that every single day of those ninety-two years was an on-going test of brother Hector's faith and fortitude. Each day saw its temptations, and each day brother Hector was faced with the decisions that continue to challenge the moral fiber of we who must continue to bear our earthly burdens. But don't you see the happy ending? Don't you perceive the lesson we can learn from men like our dear departed brother, Hector? It all ends, my dear friends! The suffering and pain, the constant trial of our daily temptations--these vanish the second God calls us. And the reward we gain for our perseverance in this troubled life is nothing less than an eternity of peace and tranquility. Brother Hector is there, friends...he's waiting for you!"

This last statement, phrased and delivered as though an unquestionable certainty, elicited from the crowd a collective "Ahhh!" Presumably the good father's fervor was at last striking a chord in the bosoms of the mourners. The priest seized the reins of control which now presented themselves, and attempted a hasty and triumphant conclusion. "Hector is waiting," he reiterated, his eyes darting from face to face, and finding, happily, something akin to blossoming joy, where before only gloom had seen expression. "Let the life he lived be a model for each of us. He was a man of wealth and power, but he remained, throughout his days, the humble servant of Our Heavenly Father!"

At this there was heard, from here and there among those gathered, a giggle, a snort, and, indeed, a few distinct chuckles. The good priest sensed that something was amiss--that he had lost the reins, so to speak--but he was much too involved, subjectively, in his sermon, to see that he had gone a bit too far in his depiction of Grandfather as a "humble servant." As everyone present knew quite well--the priest included--Grandfather had been no more inclined to humility than Julius Caesar, Ghengis Khan, or any other powerful man cut from the cloth of pride and bearing. The mental image, then, of the old fellow down on bended knee, in a posture of subservient homage--even to the Creator of all things in the universe--was so incongruous to the memory of the man, so patently absurd, that smiles lit up faces throughout the crowd, and snorts and chuckles bounced upon the lively morning breeze.

The priest almost panicked--visions of fiasco flashed before him. But although the present atmosphere was not exactly that which he had hoped to create--peace and tranquility were closer to its original goal--there was a certain undeniable and welcome relief in their laughter. Having found its voice in the unlikely picture of a humble Grandfather, it continued to pop up--a snicker here, a giggle there--amid a steady stream of tears from the eyes of those who fought a valiant but losing struggle to keep from yielding to the delicious urge to join in. So tenaciously do some individuals cling to the immediacy of their deepest emotions--grief, for example--that only with great reluctance will their surrender to attitudes of comparative levity take place. It is, therefore, an indication of just how ridiculous the priest's little portrait of humility was, that, in a matter of moments, the entire congregation was all but swept away on a wave of contagious mirth. Just how contagious, is, perhaps, best illustrated by the fact that the priest, reflecting, shoulder-deep in the rising tide of jollity, upon his statement, burst into loud and uncontrollable laughter.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, he turned to the mourners--who were, in turn, wiping their eyes--and managed, with great difficulty, to gasp, "Will each of you please come to the casket now and place your rose upon it. Pause while doing so, if you wish, and address your thoughts to some parting prayer for brother Hector."

And so to the casket came each mourner, bearing his rose and his prayer. This procedure had a calming effect on the assemblage. First, the family approached, led by Great Aunt Gizzy. Where one might have expected to behold faces streaked with tears of grief, there appeared, instead, faces veritably beaming with the light of memories both trivial and momentous--memories of the Grandfather was not--the preposterous figure of humility--they consequently saw, so much more clearly, what Grandfather had been. And now, each mourner, family and friend, basked in that recognition--felt warmed by it--and took heart in the possession of personal recollections. The tears that were seen, upon the cheeks of sons and daughters, grandchildren and their children, brother and sister, sprang not from the deep black well wherein death and despair bide their grim and patient time, but from that warm and vital region of the heart and mind where love insures the immortality of memory.

The small choir, which had remained in silence beneath the autumnal elm, began to sing a soft and beautiful hymn which concerned itself with the utter peace and joy that is the reward of the faithful. Thus, in this optimistic air, the family and friends dropped their roses upon the box and said goodbye to Grandfather. This final act of the burial ceremony took some time, for the crowd was a large one. All the while, the priest stood by the casket and watched each person approach. He felt successful and fulfilled. The brilliant sun; the clear blue sky; the flowers the singing of the choir; and, most importantly, the almost lighthearted attitude of the mourners: all of these elements merged to create a mood which was far more pleasant than that usually associated with the last rites. Great Aunt Gizzy had turned from her brother's casket with a smile on her face, and, when, passing the priest, nodded her head in a gesture that signified approval and satisfaction.

As a banker from New York would say later, when everyone had gathered at the house: "Mr. Lawrence would have been most satisfied with the affair, I should say. He did so enjoy it when things took a unique turn. If you know what I mean."

There was not much lingering at the casket, and when the mourners departed, they did so as a group, led by the priest and Great Aunt Gizzy. In a few minutes time, the graveyard was empty, save for myself. I had walked to the nearby elm when it became apparent that the congregation was about to leave, and stood leaning against the great tree, watching the procession wind down the hillside and pass through the small iron gate of the stone wall at the bottom. They crossed a narrow, green-brown field like a black cloud or shapeless shadow, following a footpath into a small woods. Here I lost sight of them, and, remaining where I was, watched the spot where they had disappeared into the trees. Shortly, from beyond the woods, there rose the sound of starting automobiles--the initial roar of the motors subsiding to the even hum of moving vehicles--the hum gradually diminishing until it

was lost on the morning breeze.

I walked the short distance from elm to oak, and stopped at the head of the casket. The box itself was suspended on heavy canvas straps above the deep, dark hole, and a pile of rich, fresh earth waited to cover it over. Reaching into an inside pocket of my overcoat, I withdrew a pint of Martel Cordon Bleu. From another pocket, I procured a stack of small paper cups, and proceeded to fill one with the potent spirits. This being accomplished, I raised my cup and said, "I propose a toast to Grandfather!"

"May I join you, sir," came a voice close behind me.

"Why certainly, Mrs. Colby," I replied, turning to face the old housekeeper, whose voice I had recognized instantly. "This was Grandfather's favorite brand," I said, and then realized that she knew the label better than anyone. I quickly poured another cup and handed it to the little woman.

"I've always wanted a taste of this, you know," Mrs. Colby said, her eyes still filled with the dream-like look of reminiscence. "I brought your grandfather his brandy every night for twenty-nine years, and never once sneaked a nip, though the temptation was great. Especially on those cold winter nights."

The warm smile with which Mrs. Colby delivered this confidence washed over me, easing me effortlessly into the world of my own memories.

"Our toast, Mrs. Colby," I said, blinking at images from the past, recollections concerning Grandfather that crowded, one upon another, into my mind. We raised our cups together, and I spoke the words soft as a whisper: "Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep-- he hath awakened from the dream of life." I drained my cup in a gulp, and Mrs. Colby followed suit.

"Very nice words, sir," said the old housekeeper.

I nodded. "Shelley, Mrs. Colby. Grandfather was particularly fond of Shelley. They were both romantics, you know."

I placed the bottle of brandy on the casket, and covered it with the roses of the late mourners. Then Mrs. Colby and I made our way down the hill. As we came through the gate, we passed two strong-looking fellows dressed in the clothes of working men and carrying heavy spades. We turned and watched them start to climb the hill making their way, this way and that, among the tombstones. Suddenly, something occurred to me and I called to them, "Ho, there! There's a nearly full pint of brandy on top of the casket-- under the roses!"

The fellows had turned around and were looking down at Mrs. Colby and I. "Under the roses," I shouted again. "Help yourselves, won't you!" The two men looked at each other as if amazed at this unprecedented stroke of good fortune, then, smiling, waved to us, and proceeded on their way up the hill.

As we crossed the sunny field, following the path to the woods, Mrs. Colby touched my hand and said, "Mr. Lawrence would have liked that, sir. Your giving those men the brandy, I mean."

With that happy thought, we entered the woods, and soon the little hillside graveyard was far behind us.

—*Ron Brown*

Today...As Always

When I opened my eyes
This morning
I saw the open door
And, reaching over
To where you had been
I found nothing.

This is all right, of course.
I can understand
That you must leave me.
You need some time
Alone with yourself
To look in the mirror,
Your blue-eyed reflection
Smiling back at you
With adoration.

Once--I remember,
I asked to borrow your mirror.
I did not understand
Why your reflection
Stayed there after you
Had stepped aside.
Fascinated, I took the mirror
Outside into the sunlight.
Your reflection was still there.
Isn't that odd?

"Not at all," you said,
As, with loving hands,
You put it back on the wall.
You winked at each other.
"We have our secrets."

—*Kay Biely*

Poem For My Brother, Scott

ONE

A tunnel.
No sign of light
At either end.
No visible beginning;
No visible end.

I sit beside your bed.
Believing there is a god
Because I need him.

The noiseless dripping
Of your I.V. bottle
Permeates my senses
With your suffering.

And I suffer, too,
Do I love you
Enough
That I could accept
Your pain
To relieve you.

TWO

The pansies sit
In their basket
On the window sill.
They jeer at you--
We are whole, We are alive.

They look at
Your cut face,
The blood-spotted sheets,
Your expression of pain
And laugh.

But the laugh
Is not nearly
As shrill as mine.

THREE

The four walls
Enclose us.
You in the bed,
Me in my chair,

Watching
Waiting
To see what new form
The pain can take.

Your colorless face
Your distorted body
Find a mirror
In my eyes.

FOUR

The shadows have fallen.
You are still for the time.

Beside you,
The madonna rests her weary eyes.
She wakes feeling guilty
For the moment of relief
Knowing it won't come
To you.

She smiles at me
Over your silent body.

Reassuring.

FIVE

Russell
The old man
In the other bed,

A ceaseless flow of blood
Through a tube in his throat.

I look at him without feeling.
All my compassion--
Spent--
On you

SIX

I thought you were asleep,
But you wince and struggle
For a position
To relieve your pain.

Your patron saint
Becomes a devil
As she cries,
“Why don’t you
Pull yourself up?”

Out of love.

(Then she kisses your cheek
And covers your casts
With the sheets
And her unspilled tears.)

CODA

As you recover,
You look to the window sill.
The pansies wilt
In flower’s atrophy.

Your turn for mockery,
But you decline.

—*Kay Biely*

All My Plants Are Dying

The people I know
(No, do not condense this)
Come into my room
And water my plants.
Then they stand back and wait
For the resurrection.

Looking through half-closed eyes,
I sit on my bed
And watch these people
And my plants.
We wait together.
The people say,

“I will be back tomorrow
To water your plants.”
They turn and walk through the door
As the cheering crowds outside
Kiss their feet and yell,
“Our Savior!”

I sit on my bed
As I have sat for months.
I look at my plants;
They look at me.
My plants are dying
From too much water.

—*Kay Biely*

Cahoots

Benny's bar was alive. I'd never seen it so crowded. Stools are pretty easy to get on any other night but it was so damn cold out even the dining room was jammed. Everybody was trying to get warm, I guess. I was on my usual stool right across from the Motorola, drinking my usual glass of beer. I finished it in no time and placed my glass on the edge of the bar. "Hey Benny, when you get time..."

"Be right with you, Mick." I waited. A little while later my glass was full and the bill in front of me turned into a pile of change. That beer didn't last long either. It was so smoky my throat stayed dry. Marie, the waitress, was run ragged but she took the time to say "Hiya Mick, where's the wife? Special on clams tonight and if I smell one more clam..." and she dissolved into the crowd. I needed another beer.

"Hey Benny boy, Marie's gonna make a fortune in tips tonight." But he was too busy to be sociable and just grabbed my glass.

"You need a beer, Mick?"

I sipped it for a while and lip-read the Alan Ladd movie. It was right in the middle of the big scene with Veronica Lake when I heard a familiar voice: "Uncle Mickey!" I turned past the TV, past the flags and past the jukebox. There stood Charly with a girl in a black coat and I called them over but I couldn't yell over the crowd, so I just waved. But they fought their way over to my stool as I emptied my glass. "What's doin' Charly, you come in t' get warm? Here," I said, "sit down--" forgetting there were no stools.

"I got an idea, Uncle Mick," whispered Charly. Then I felt him brush my back. I turned and saw his arms around two guys' necks and heard some friendly laughter. Then I watched the two guys leave. Charly called "Ca'mere Angel. I got us seats." She sat real pretty on the stool between me and Charly. "No problem, Uncle Mick. I just told them there was these two blondes standin' by their Dodge." He started to laugh. "They probably came here in a cab."

Angel laughed, too. "Your nephew is so funny sometimes."

"Angel" I repeated "that's a real pretty name."

"It's short for Angelina. Angelina Booth." And she smiled.

"Well Angelboots if you think Charly's funny you shoulda known his old man!" I slipped my arm around her shoulder. "One time overseas me and him were takin' a bedcheck at the hospital -a ha ha- and this one poor soul had the ugliest sore I ever saw, right here, on his cheek. So I asked him, you know, what happened? -ha ha- and he said he had a tumor underneath it, see -ha ha ha- Charly's old man turned to the next bed and said 'Well what's eatin' you?'"

Charly started to choke from laughing so hard and I had tears in my eyes. But Angel wasn't. "You know Uncle Mick that story gets funnier every time I hear it."

Angelboots looked at him, kind of surprised. "Do you mean you heard that before?"

"Yeah, ain't it a riot?"

"Ca'mon Angelboots" I said, "loosen up." And I freed my arm to drink my beer.

"I'd like a drink if you two are finished."

"We finished Uncle Mick?"

"Hell no! We're just startin'." I tried to get Benny's attention. In no time there were three glasses of beer in front of us. Me and Charly raced for a glass but Angelboots just sat there like she was dead.

"What's the trouble, Angel" Charly asked, "you waitin' for some pretzels or somethin'?"

"I want a Pink Lady, no lemon." And she paused. "I hate beer."

"You hear that Uncle Mick? Zsa Zsa, here, hates beer. That's one more we can split." And we both started to laugh.

I was getting dizzy watching Benny run behind the bar, but my eyes finally caught up with him. "Hey Benny could you get Angelboots, here a Pink Lady, no ice?"

"Lemon." Her head never turned.

"Put some lemon in that, will ya Benny?"

"No lemon. I hate lemon."

Charly was laughing at me I think or maybe at her. I wasn't sure. "Don't worry about it, Uncle Mick. What Angel likes, Angel likes and what Angel doesn't like, Angel hates. She likes Pink Lemons."

"Ladies!"

"Where?" Charly scanned the crowd.

I took a sip of my beer thinking 'God he's funny but I better try to be sociable to Angelboots.' So I broke the silence. "Why don't we get a pot of clams. There's a special--"

"Great Uncle Mick! Sounds like a good idea."

"No clams. I--"

"You hate clams. I shoulda known." She only blinked and sipped her drink but I was mad. "What the hell do you like?" I leaned in front of her. "What the hell does she like for Chrissakes?"

Charly was laughing. "I think she likes crabs." He laughed louder. "She told me she had them once a couple of years ago." And he doubled over. I didn't get the joke but Angelboots did because she disappeared.

"Where'd she go Charly?"

"Probably to the toilet to let off some steam."

"I hope it ain't that cold in there." We both laughed out loud. I placed our glasses on the edge of the bar.

But Charly said "No thanks Uncle Mick. I'll have to be takin' Angel home. She's probably very mad--"

"Why Charly?"

But Charly didn't say anything and since I couldn't see Alan Ladd anymore I asked Charly to take me home, too.

Well it was so cold out that my nose ran and we were sitting in Charly's car right in front of Benny's waiting for the defroster to work and for Angelboots to come out.

"What the hell's keeping her, Uncle Mick! She comin' yet?"

"I don't know, Charly. I can't see too good." The window was frosty white so I rolled it down. I saw her black coat from the waist down. "Christ" I said to Charly, "she's standin' right next to the car!" Then I turned towards the cold. "What the hell you waitin' for?" Just then the passenger door swung open and Angelboots slipped in with her big collar up around her face. We were blocks away from Benny's before anybody spoke and it was Charly who started.

"I know you're mad but you didn't have to make us wait so long."

"It wasn't out of spite. I saw somebody in there I know."

"Where'd you look, under a table or in the men's room?"

"Somebody I know just offered me a drink."

"What did you offer him?"

"Oh Charly" she whispered, "I-I told you I've changed."

By this time we were pretty far from the center of town. She didn't talk much all night and she wasn't saying much now. She was a pretty girl, a little taller than Charly and about twenty-five. She looked Italian or maybe Spanish but she had the Frenchest eyes I've ever seen. She reminded me of the girls we saw during the war. The girls during the war? I suddenly understood Charly's crab joke and why Angelboots got mad and why she said she changed. "Hey Charly you just passed my house."

"Sorry Uncle Mick. I'll turn around in a minute." But he kept driving further away from town. "You know, Uncle Mick, Angel got strange magic powers?"

"What the hell you talkin' about, Charly?"

"Well if you're ridin' along and slip her a couple of bucks, she can make you turn into a motel." Charly started laughing but he wasn't smiling.

"Stop it, Charly," Angel said with her head down.

"Stop what-- the car?" He grinned at me in the mirror.

"No, I meant--"

But Charly wasn't listening as he pulled off the road. "Get out!" By God she got out and Charly turned the car around. "Wave to her, Uncle Mick."

"Be glad to, Charly." So I rolled the window down and leaned out. "So long Angelboots. We hate you!" And we both started to laugh.

"Hey Uncle Mick, is she wavin' back?"

"I can't tell, Charly. All I can see is her breath." And we laughed harder.

Aftermath

When you told me how they hurt you
I wanted to destroy the world,
take aim and fire,
send them all to Hell.

Instead I walked for miles in the rain
along the rails, across the creek, and back
before I slipped and fell into myself.

That's the last I remember,
until I opened my eyes
staring the future in the face,
and wondering where we'll go from here.

—*Khrist Bender*

Three Poems

Lovely temptress of the eye
When touched will fly
like the swallow.

—*Khrist Bender*

Within this shell a thousand lives unfold;
An egg's eternal tale today retold.

—*Khrist Bender*

A foggy night
The church bell strikes
A killdeer calls
in restless flight.

—*Khrist Bender*

She cried once,
when we talked for hours
on the green-carpeted stairs.
I could never understand her,
except that once,
though I've since forgot.

I love her in a way,
you know how friends are.
(She's very pretty with her
wheat-field-sunset hair.)

I wish I could just take her hand
and tell her,

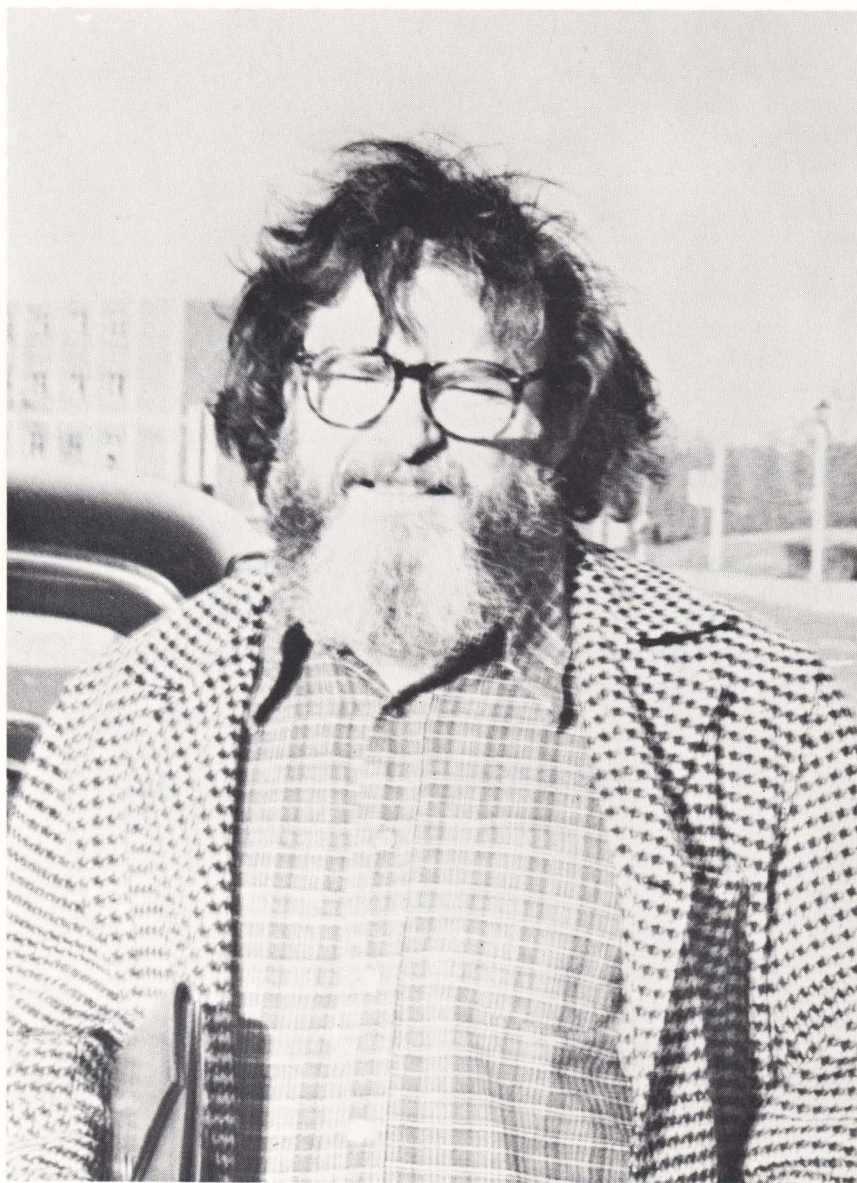
 "It's not so bad,
 the sun will rise tomorrow
 and if we wait,
 the coltsfoot will bloom
 next spring."

—*Christ Bender*

Lovers

Half-drowned in vicid sleep
Two bodies intertwine
Pressing each to the other
Straining at the bonds of reality
As they awaken in a dream.

—*Khrist Bender*



John Herrmann, novelist and short story writer

Reflector Interview with John Herrmann

Recently the *Reflector* staff had the opportunity and pleasure of interviewing John Herrmann, writer-in-residence at Cedar Crest College. Herrmann's stories have appeared in *North American Review* and *Esquire* and he has published two novels.

Reflector: Want a beer?

Herrmann: Definitely!

R: When John Barth read here, he stated that one question usually put to him pertains to a list of books he felt students should be reading. We wondered if you had such a list, both of authors contemporary and...dead.

H: Or contemporary dead authors?

R: Something like that.

H: I have a couple of books I like very much that you can't get along without reading if you're going to be a novelist. Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is an absolutely magnificent story that tells us where we are as far as Western civilization goes. But as for offering a specific list, I think it is something very personal. I'll offer some books that work for me: I don't think you have to read Vonnegut for a class, but you'd be silly if you're a writer not to just to know what's going on. I wonder if you mean for education as a writer, or just to know what's going on today?

R: More along the lines of education.

H: *Catch-22* is a very important book. So many books are important. Really, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is the book that I'm pushing because I don't think that enough people know about it. It's been out since '58 and it seems incredibly modern and crucial to us.

R: Don't you think there should be some basic list that you should go through to find what's personal to you, your literary "family," so to speak?

H: When I was at San Francisco, the English department turned out a reading list. Every professor wrote down the books he thought were indispensable. After taking out the duplications, it was somewhere around forty pages single-spaced!

It has a lot to do with where you are in your education, what you have to do. I think survey courses are very good. I think Faulkner is definitely important. I'm moved by some French writers; I like Beckett very much. I like Camus. I wouldn't presume to tell you what to read although I do think you should see a few plays.

R: People have said for some time that the novel is dead, but in

actuality, it isn't. Bookstores are filled with thousands of novels; the novel lives on. But there seems to be no market for short stories. Do you think the short story is slowly disappearing?

H: Well, it seems as though there isn't very much interest in it, I don't think it's dead at all. You don't look to the "slicks" for much in the way of short stories, but you do look to small collections and literary magazines. There isn't a lot of room for fiction but I just wonder how much there ever was. It's just that we had a batch of magazines like *Saturday Evening Post* and *Esquire* that published the major writers and new writers. But, still I think there are lots of little collections of short stories coming out equivalent to the small collections of poems. They just don't print too many.

R: You said something this afternoon that maybe we shouldn't hold you to. You said that if you read Vonnegut you don't have to read Kafka. We were wondering what you meant by that.

H: Did I say that? That came back to me, huh?

R: Yeah, do you really think that's true?

H: No.

R: Do you really think they're at all similar?

H: Yeah, I think so. Kafka's the better writer, of course, but I guess what I meant was that I keep battling people who do not have a sense of humor, people who think that when you, as Dali did in a film called *The Andalusian Dog*, strop a razor and open up an eye and then slit that eye and a bag of gunk comes out, that you're sick and gross and you mean just to say that.... They don't see the humor in it. Or his statement that he loves to find crippled beggars and beat them practically senseless with his walking stick. I find that tremendously humorous, you know....

I've read Kafka, and I...see the humor in it. That's all I can say. If you can't see it, then you're very literal-minded. If you read Vonnegut and understand it, then you get the same kind of humor there. That's what I meant: not that Vonnegut replaces Kafka; I don't think that writers do that to each other...that's why we shouldn't be as competitive as we are.

Further on the thing of 'if you read Vonnegut, then you don't have to read Kafka,'--it's kind of a silly statement, I'm sorry I made it--but that if you read Vonnegut you'll eventually come back and read Kafka. I think they are connected in some way, and also with Heller in *Catch-22*. In his book *Something Happened*, which is not that good maybe, the same kind of humor is evident.

R: Robert Lowell has been quoted as saying that prose is less cut off from life than is poetry. We thought maybe you'd like to comment on that.

H: Well, maybe they're thinking of realistic stories. Neither of them finally come anywhere close to reality because they are part of a man's or a woman's mind and fantasies. And besides, it's hinting. Prose is exactly like poetry in that you're not saying what you're saying but

you're saying *this* first. And then it's like a trampoline; the ideas bounce around. It's not just the story itself, but what occurs to you as you read that story. So I don't know...that's not reality. It's a high order of gamesmanship--a very important kind of death-struggle to stay alive as a human being.

R: Do you find that teaching interferes with your writing? Or vice versa?

H: Yes. Everything interferes with the writing--it seems to come last. Everyone makes demands on you, and the important thing is to get the milk and the cat food because if you don't have the cat food, the cats will go hungry and you can't live in a house with hungry cats. So, if you're going to write, you have to write after you get the cat food, right? By the time you get the cat food, you don't give a shit about the writing, or if you do, the cats won't eat that kind of food, so you gotta run out again...plus you have to get a paper and that's down that way, then you have to fill the car up with gas, and while you're doing that, you realize you have to cash a check, and on the way back, you see somebody who says, 'why don't I stop over later and get that book I loaned you?', and Jesus, the day is gone. You know?

As far as teaching goes, it probably interferes less than a husband or a wife or a dog or the cat food or the bank or the telephone or the need to get away. You all know what I'm talking about.

R: Many writers prefer factory-type jobs because they can put work out of their minds when it's time to write. Or does teaching stimulate your writing?

H: I worked in a factory, and I wrote then. I couldn't stand my life; it was ugly. I lasted seven months. I wrote in the mornings just to get back at them. It wasn't very good, but I've survived that time. In a funny way, maybe teaching does support writing in that the people around you are good people to talk to and will occasionally read you or at least if they don't, they take you seriously. They think you are about something that's important, where in the factory, they'll just think you're queer, strange in that sense--not gay...maybe gay too, I don't know.

I think it'd be easier to make a living as a writer now than as a teacher. Getting a job as a teacher is tough.

R: Do you have a schedule? How much time do you spend a day writing?

H: All the time I can. I won't go more than four hours in a day.

R: And in a given amount of time, how much serious material do you get down on paper? Or does it vary?

H: Yes, it does vary. I think I'd really be happy to do two pages a day, and I've heard a lot of writers say that. I'm not happy; I would like to do a novel a day. But if I do ten pages a day, I'll have to take the next day off. I'll be shot--not energy--but I didn't leave enough of it in there to cook--the vision of it--I did too much. And so, if I do a couple of pages a day, or perhaps more when on vacation, it's a teaser and you keep on going.

I think, though, that may be the middle-aged writer talking. I think when you're younger it's much more urgent to get it all down in a hurry and so it's not as much effort and you don't shoot it all in five or six or even ten pages a day or a whole story. You know about the Hemingway thing? He wrote four of his biggest stories in one day--thought he was going crazy.

R: We have one last question that John Barth said he always wondered why no one ever asked him and that is: 'Do you write with a pen or a pencil?'

H: He really said that? That's really an absurd question...but maybe it really isn't if you think about it. I use these two fountain pens I got in Germany, the type students receive from their families when they enter the Gymnasium. I get a real sense of power with them, it's like dipping your thumb in the pot of ink and writing with that. Yeah, maybe that's not such a strange question after all.

R: Well, thank you and I guess we'd better be going or we'll be late for your reading.

H: Why don't I stay here and you tell me how it went later?

Art/Architecture

You lay on me
like the first thin layer
of autumn snow
-you lay-

Like the dew of early morning
tears splashed on the grass
but like the sun
you burn me;
Melting the snow
driving away the dew
no layers of tears or snow

-how heavy you lay-

In the museum
where I looked at
Roman artifacts
how near you were then
how tenderly you layed
sensuous curvature of marble
and bronze
decadence of form, of
art, you

Layers and layers of you
upon me
a masterfully sculptured conflict
twisting marble, the
Pain of your arrow-sharp eyes
no layers
of polished stone and marble-
just you

-how heavy you lay-

On me; a
Sensual causality
for being what may seem statued art
No emotion or dying -just you

I lay on you
like boiling seas and untamed
passion explodes upon you
layers and layers of
Mortured me. Plastered,
cemented between each
ridge of you, so you
are to me, not
Roman artifacts to feel without touching,
to know but not to cherish
Just you, Layered.

—*Cynthia Williams*

Dog-Chasing Tail

Nothing struck me as
noteworthy, today
Except - the nothing
No one disturbed me
as much as the voice
I heard from within
Disheartening sounds from
within
Neither the comforting
touch of a smile
Nor the lasting touch
of a hand
could disturb this nothing
challenged within
Notice the scratch of my
pen - leading
in circles...
the dog-chasing tail
Alongside the master holds
a leash: watching
With suspense as teeth
grip the tail
End of my day...
And the slow descent into
dreams. Avoiding
the night when emptiness,
the nothing are
A limitless reality
No one to cling to as
I toss off my sheets
Only the Master oldly
bending to untie
the leash.

—*Cynthia Williams*

Smile

Crystal fine cut mouth
socketed with bleached bone
that grind and glisten.
So pure the gash they chew
in me. The hole is regular
not mauled with bits of flesh
and vein.

This insatiable hunger is
hidden by a soft fleshy smile
that drools for our demise.
A cavity that is never full.
It gnaws at our privates to
gorge itself sick.

These teeth that glow advertising
their grip on me.
They lock in bared power defying me
while the brain is drilled and
capped.

—*Jim Noel*

Piss Poor

Two days away
planes slipping through the ozone
Speed
Reved jets

It's not as tho we all can't have it
It's not as tho They really do!

Even the rich have to piss in public
only between flights tho
the absolute equilizer of man and power
which bar has them topless honies

But the Bitch
in heat still scratches at the door
in noisy panic
in public view

—*Jim Noel*

Window Seat

Purple Pyrex tube
framed against traveling clouds
moving along surreal,
album cover, blue 3D
sky

The view is clouded tho
By the window in which
we see it

Consider the perspective
of a fat old dog
Whose only Rush
is
Going out on the chain
to
travel a mere 4 feet and
Deficate

—*Jim Noel*

Com Hider, Love, To Me!

In that portion of the cycle there is darkness, complete and unyielding. Through my body a coldness settles each time I feel it engulf me. Slowly the giant wheel of synthetic flame scour out the secret cobwebs that hide around and in me and I am enlightened. During this time of the cycle I can examine myself in the hot red light. I lay naked, waiting. My stomach is flatter now than when I stand. My legs are tense and to pass the time I bunch and relax the tangled muscles in time with the syrupy music from below. Soon I begin to recognize when it will become dark again and welcome it.

&

Fergus Matte could not shake the feeling that in the course of his journey he was passing his goal. The idea of having to return was distasteful to him; he intended to remain at the end for he could no longer overcome the linear nature of continuing in his mind.

He turned silently from the window and peered into the morosely dark cavern in which he rode. The others seemed strangely contented as if they were assured of safe passage to their future. They were cattle from which even the sound of mournful lowing had died. Even though he had chosen his own destination, having no control over the speed or course of travel maddened him.

Watching the others disillusioned as much as frustrated him, and he returned, without the remnants of his former hope, to the window. He had realized that his destination was one of penultimate decadence; had chosen it for that reason. But he could not accept the crumbling that he witnessed through the glass. He would have been far more comfortable with the total collapse of what he sought, for then it would be over and he could slowly grow accustomed to it. But now he found himself in a constantly shifting and complicating turmoil for which there was no concrete cipher. Each time he felt that the ugliness could not continue further; that it was quivering with its own foreshadowing of explosive potential, it went another step. For a startled moment he thought he would die of an implosion of the senses. He pressed his knees tightly against the back of the seat in front of him and let his feverish cheek fall wearily against the cold pane of glass.

&

I have become somehow more complacent during the dark periods. Because of this they seem shorter than the light ones, although I know them to be exactly equal in spacing and duration. My sense come alive in the blackness like independent nocturnal animals, each scampering about in search of its own specialized food. What they collect and digest is too diverse for me to sort and comprehend; I satisfy myself with simply

the accumulation and trust their tastes. I can hear her in the next room now as I could not before. My sight is the only problem. My eyes have slowly evolved so that they can become accustomed to the blackness by the height of the cycle. I have become able to see in total darkness. But soon thereafter the illumination begins again and I must adapt my eyes to the new situation. Soon they become accomplished at adjustment and I am capable of seeing in any light if given ample time. I will be able to see her when she comes.

&

The slow, frantic dance across the window of the bus enthralled him. Raindrops collected in the corner, vibrating in expectation as if they instinctively knew their path. Slowly, as deliberate as those that had gone before them, they began to gyrate across the pane, helpless, driven on by the gusts that whistled around them.

Their path was diagonal yet wandering and seeming without pattern or course. In chaotic revelry they devoured those smaller than themselves and gained speed in the consumption. With each absorption there was a fresh orgasm of vibration and madness. The slower and the smaller were gathered up like scraps of meat and carried along as fuel.

Torrents of new dancers gathered in the corner, awaiting the call to dance. The tired wavered pathetically before being whisked away by the wind and the lurching rhythm of the bus.

The faithful, the victorious, fat with the spoils of the dance squirmed triumphantly into the farthest corner and pressed anxiously into it, seeking the rewards of those that had survived the dance.

Panic filled them as they realized they were trapped. The vibrations increased as they clung to the smooth glass and the wind splattered their bloated bodies into space.

Fergus looked away. The primitive ugliness now clung to the bus and threatened to infiltrate its shell. He knew he must be getting closer. The others began to gather their belongings and fidget as if smelling the end.

The air brakes started their wheeze and he looked back to the outside. They were coming slowly to a stop. He got shakily to his feet and wove his way to the front. The uneasy feeling that the driver would say something to him came upon him as it always did when he disembarked from buses. As usual, it was unfounded.

The rain had stopped and the tropic sun assaulted his eyes as he stepped onto the asphalt of the parking lot. A long banner done in unmuted primary colours hung before the doorway:

*Welcome To Where The Venice Of America
And The Blue Atlantic Meet!
Ft. Lauderdale, Florida*

&

Like a throbbing vein of power, Highway A1A, locally known as Atlantic Boulevard, separated the zones for their mutual protection. To the east was the ocean. In the darkness the evenly spaced palm trees, narrow beach and deep blue water seemed almost silent. The swells petulantly threw themselves forward but stopped short of actually breaking inward upon their own surface. They came tentatively forward and obediently offered themselves up to the sand and the pebbles as they had for centuries. The moon made an attempt to supplement their lacking. Without the pure, colourless light they might have been obliterated from being, ignored and forgotten by all but a few of the faithful.

To the west was the city, as far removed from the ocean as humanly possible. Bright neon lights gave a sense of meaning to those below them. The people wandered hungrily up and down the streets peering at themselves in the windows. On the corners stood tall Puerto Ricans in silk shirts of purple and metallic magenta, open to the waist. From their mouths came the songs of their homeland in the clear powerful tones that eclipsed the loud street music and brought to them the spoils of the troubadour.

They slung their arms leisurely over the shoulders of bone-white girls in short skirts and highly lacquered columns of flame-hued and colourless hair. The lighting made it proper for they had done the steps before in the spinning, blinking haze of colour. In the daylight their feet would be clumsy and they would find it as difficult to move as the ocean did at night.

Both sides of the highway made a point of ignoring each other although they could see them across the alternating current of automobiles. It was a silently fought war for which each twenty-four hour cycle meant the loss and victory of two battles. Incredibly intricate and symmetrical, they carefully infiltrated the boundaries of one another without the slightest sound of warning. They knew the delicate nuances of the dance through practice, infinite memory, and the careful study of the backward glancing eyes of time.

&

Fergus found himself preoccupied with looking through the peephole in the door of his motel room. He stood, his tie crumpled in his hand, his right eye pressed to the tiny aperture. Two small children splashed themselves in the kidney-shaped pool in the courtyard. Another long row of pink stucco rooms peered back at him. He didn't care what he saw. He sought not to view anything in particular but reveled in the act of seeing through the glass. The small round world it displayed was tripartite. Only the center of the lens yielded a world he recognized as

resembling his own. The outer edges, to the left and right, were as distorted as his memory and insights. The past as well as the future. He had failed.

Fergus had been chosen as an oracle, seer, and healer at an early age. His father had recognized the potential in his son through his own gifts; he was a professional hangman, douser, and the only non-Jewish preparer of kosher meats in Ogden, Utah. Through the sensitive instincts and reverence of sacred tradition that his professions demanded, he was able to discern the nature of his son's pre-ordained vocations. He based his belief on the fact that Fergus Matte had the eyes of a goat.

He began to refine the boy's talents through arduous training sessions in which Fergus was expected to find hidden objects, guess the denomination of playing cards, and predict the outcome of illegal cockfights.

The day the elder Matte died he drew the boy up onto the hospital bed and stared into the goat's eyes. "Boy, I know it's been hard on you but when you got a calling it's a mortal sin to ignore it.

"Remember, the good Lord made the eyes of a cat like they is so's he can see around the curve in his future. That's why a cat's so cold. Don't have the luxury of those animals with circular pupils: an unsure future. Every day of his life a cat lives with his death and that's why God give him nine of 'em, to make up for it. When a cat reaches the point in his eye he dies and then he starts over again, 'round the corner so to speak.

"Now, in the goat God done the in between thing. The goat is the only animal with rectangular pupils. An' you got the eyes of a goat so's you can see the future an' yet never be burdened with your own death... at least not 'til near the end." Tears welled up in his eyes. "You got four little crimps you can't see beyond until you get to 'em. You can overcome the grip of time and help your fella man by seein' into the very pits of the darkest dark there is. It's your duty boy an' I know I can count on you to never shirk it, I know that!" His voice reached upward into a feeble falsetto. "I know that!"

Fergus Matte carried this speech along with two other pieces of advice his father told him never to forget. Number one: "Remember, don't bother tryin' to make others understand your calling. Trying to communicate a mystical experience is like throwin' a potato chip at a movin' target. It's the next thing to impossible to hit it, and even if you do, it don't matter." And number two: "Don't never trust a service station that deals in carpeting."

&

My eyes are still the only problem. They are confused and have begun to complain to my other organs that they cannot understand what is wrong. I am calm inside yet all my senses are becoming frantic. They

know something is wrong. The eyes are losing control of their ability to adapt to the lighting. They no longer allow me to see clearly for as I attempt to focus they begin to adapt again. They seem to think that their function is to adapt, as they have become so excellent at it. They are no longer concerned with seeing. They are starting to adapt before there is any call to do so.

&

Fergus laid on the bed; his rumpled suit laid on the floor. His eyes watched the flies that blindly grappled on the ceiling.

His duty was almost over. He had gone around the three corners his father had told him about and he knew himself to be a failure. The music slowly began to wind down and for the first time he could not rejuvenate it.

It had become dark outside and the management had turned on a pink and green neon palm tree. The flickering colours filtered through the venetian blinds, dancing quickly across the wall. They got to the mirror before the blinked and the room was dark for a moment before they reappeared. He had only to wait now. He knew he could no longer move; that his future eliminated any necessity for him to feign a struggle. He preferred to accept the edict and slowly sink into a past he had not yet experienced. Up til now he had lived without a past, immersed in retaining a distant present and attaining an ephemeral future. He had lived in the perilous vacuum between man and immortality, residing there as a fraud. Now he gave himself over to the fate of oracles who had not spoken, seers who had not seen, and healers whose touch brought no relief: to follow those who had believed in him and forsaken their souls in absolute faith. He must descend mindlessly into the fires of Hell through the Sphincter of the Earth.

&

I sense she has come into the room before I can actually see her. There is something salty and metallic in my mouth like warm blood. I smell my own cold sweat as it flows, bitter, into the air. Slowly I make out her shape. When the light part of the cycle comes again, her naked body is red and black at the foot of the bed. She is unflawed; pure as colourless flame. She looks at me without expression. Slowly she reaches out toward me but her arms go up above her head and she raises up unto her toes. Apparently without effort she begins to slowly turn. The cycle seems to speed up for the first time. Dark. Light. Black. Red. She spins faster. Her long colourless hair flows behind her. Slowly she loses form, a whirling dreidel of flesh. Only her eyes remain motionless to me. As fast as she spins, they seem to be always visible. Tiny pin lines of red creep across their surface as the blood vessels burst. I cannot look away as the tendrils of harsh smoke fill the room. The sclera of her eyes are

scarlet red. The acrid smell of burning flesh and hair makes my senses reel. I can no longer see her; only the tiny drops of blood being flung in a dotted swiss pattern over the walls tell me where her eyes are. I stare into them, suspended out of time, as the dance goes on.

—*George LeRoy Rhinehart*



After School

The children scamper up the street
In gayety and chant their song;
And twenty times they will repeat,
"You don't belong, you don't belong!"
Alone one blurts, "You think you're strong."
The group runs off in mock retreat:
The children scamper up the street
In gayety and chant their song.

So much like sheep they sometimes bleat
While standing, waiting as a throng,
Since lights soon change, they must compete
Across the street and not be wrong:
The children scamper up the street
In gayety and chant their song.

—*Deb O'Donnell*

Placenta

Though lumpy,
over-stuffed, misshapen
and long since disregarded, the
“fancy pillow” as it was named then,
remained in the attic after all these years.
Stored on a shelf all covered with dust,
it reminded me of one
summer, when we used it
 for third base.

It was once
bright pink trimmed in pretty
cream-colored lace, the casing
stitched in an unorthodox fashion
that made the pillow pucker in places; the
rest puffed out like a hot air balloon.
But now the pink is murky
brown, the lace a tattered
 piece of film

like a shirt,
worn too often, worn through.
Its cord, twisted, gnarled, hangs
lifeless, like...an umbilical cord.
Odd as it might have seemed then, there would come a
time when dependency on the old
“fancy pillow” would cease, just
like an infant’s on the
 Placenta.

—*Deb O'Donnell*

Le soir qui tombe
Evening Falls

Sunset cloudless, no pollution glow
Cut-out orange circle pasted suspents dead center over
a pale grassy-blue foothill landscape where
a feudal fortress presides.
Trees, alone or in clumps of three, five, seven or
twenty wait like Birnam Forest to Dunsinane.
A faint paler blue line, thin, stretches vertically
just below the paper sun.

I watch on my seat's edge in a room
of heavy, rich, warm browns
Dumbfrozen.
Shattered as of by sound,
the window pieces fell upright,
two-sided triangles propped up
against the window sill
on the window sill
on the hard black floor;
a jig saw puzzle to its front box cover,
the sun broken, the fortress cracked, and the trees split.

Sharp stillness.
The assembled glass would reflect
the scene to the moment
But wait...
Isn't the sun on the glass just a bit higher
above that pale blue line than the real paper sun?

—*Deb O'Donnell*

The Light

The mood is usually unprecipitated, but suddenly I find myself in the cafe, sitting in an anonymously dark corner, wondering if my intensity of spirit is real or feigned. From this point of refuge I can observe the common people and their common characteristics, or, if that becomes too tedious, observe myself. It is dark where I sit--a point in my favor, there's no question-- but oftentimes this darkness serves only to heighten the light streaming down on the others. How they play in it, like children in a pool! The sound of their laughter--but never the meaning nor the essence of it-- penetrates this wall of shadow, echoes, rebounds. I rest, chin in hand, run my fingers along weary eyelids.

There is a candle on my table; sometimes it is burning when I arrive. No one ever lights it for me. The candle was probably lit for a previous guest, although never once have I seen a person here, at this spot, when I came in. Still, I know that they have been here: besides the candle, there are crumbs on the table, shredded napkins on the floor. Signs of disorder are evident. I take the seat, brush away the crumbs, but never extinguish the light, despite the peace it would give me; it was lit for another, and it is not in my place to smother it. Instead, I watch the wax run down its sides like molten lava before shivering and hardening in the cold air. Funny that it should be so cold. Several times I have seen the flame flicker and almost die, almost drown in its own wax. I become absorbed in its plight...

My contemplations are always shattered by the waitress, who approaches from nowhere and crushes the wick between her fingertips. I receive a look of maternal scorn. "It's not for you," she says, and as if the statement provided her with infinite relief, she smiles and disappears in the darkness.

—Tom Townsley



