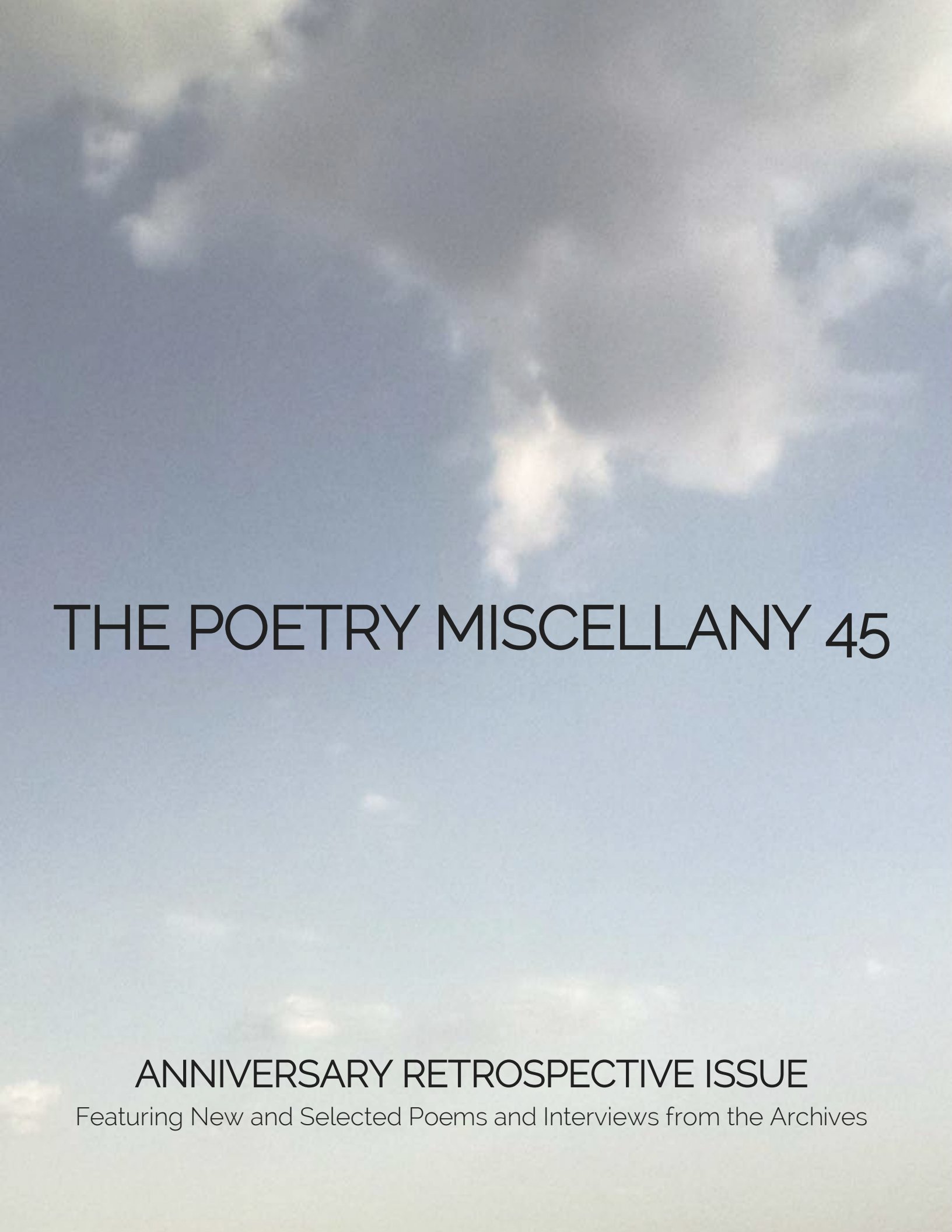

THE POETRY MISCELLANY 45

ANNIVERSARY RETROSPECTIVE ISSUE

Featuring New and Selected Poems and Interviews from the Archives

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NEW POEMS

BRUCE BOND
Quinceanera

The girl you see in a snowfall of lace
is no girl. She is a path in the heart

of winter that leads into the dark wood.
Look back, she says, step by quiet step

filling up with snow. A doll knows
what it is to wear the silence of dolls,

the shatter of light that falls and falls,
never touching down. Doll marries doll.

A child marries the child in the clouds.
The girl you see is too old to be a god.

She is a candelabra, veiled in fire,
the cold apple of every god's attention,

bride of the future, the white widow
of the past, the snow globe in the palm

of a woman she wants to want to be.
That kind of toy does one thing only.

Two, if you count the stillness after.
Say you were to shake her gently now,

to sweep her out of her crystal palace.
Would she tell you what this thing is

that is happening to her, to the body
that does, confused, what a body does.

Would you release a Pandora of doves.
Is that what her silence is asking you.

That she longs to break down a little,
to break open. Like a blizzard, a bride.

That she is thrilled as the child she cannot

be. Is that a shroud of joy that falls.

A flock of angels, terrible with wind,
cast out in frozen millions from the sky.

Thomas

Not long ago he could crawl inside
a jar like this, monstrous for a jar,

tiny for the child who breathes there,
just to experiment, to be the thing

that fills the blank like a signature,
a choice. Not long ago he had no choice.

Only a womb. And in it a growth force
people take for will, but it is not,

any more than wombs are paradise.
Though they might be, in retrospect,

as knowledge is, as knowledge longs to be.
No. To fill the vacancy wherever—

in your arms, your body, another's body—
it is not heaven. Only a miracle space

where bodies begin, before they look up
to find their mothers missing from the room.

The boy who carries the jar in his arms
is missing an explanation. What is a jar

that giant for, if not for smaller boys
and the thrill of panic that they find there.

When he was smaller he asked his mother,
what is death. And his mother replied,

nothing really, nothing to worry about.
Which made it sound like a place inside her,

a place of worry, sure, but also a jar,
an emptiness like the longing that brings

a boy into the world. He came from nothing.
Not all that bad, so far as he remembers.

Like some strange thing that is about to happen.

The name we are about to be given,

the voice in the air that becomes our reason
to respond. Let us call him Thomas,

this boy with his enigma, and the jar
a specimen jar. And what he longs to study,

everything. Let us begin with that.
And what he pours into the free space

will be a little more his for being there,
his nothing a little less nothing, less free.

A collector of jars, not because he loves
any one in particular, but searching

makes him able to love, to pour his want,
his blood, from jar to jar and back again.

Such is the rhythm of a boy who walks.
When he was smaller, he asked his mother,

where did I come from. And his mother froze
a moment, hearing in her mind the word,

me, and then the word, *God,* and then
no word at all, which was another word

that gathered more and more significance
in time. Like sand into the hourglass.

The Crown

The girl with a crown of candles will tell you,
there's more than one way to break a circle,

to break a girl for that matter, her eye
ringed in silence like a shattered object.

There is more than one way to slip through
the zero of the diadem, and wear it,

if not with pride, then with a look firm
and awkward as death, as wanting what you fear.

So black this iris, impossible to tell
how much is the pupil, how much the rest,

as if she stared through the bullet hole
of some unspoken thing, forgotten even,

the darkness in her made large to take
the darkness in. So needle-still this gaze,

it penetrates all things, or nothing at all,
hard to tell, in the chiaroscuro of no world,

her face the only lantern, her shoulders
bare, her temple gemmed in little fires.

Smoke blows back in no gesture, no wind,
save that of naked being as it burns.

What is light after all if not a break
in the chain of things, an undoing

of the dizzy spell that spins the atom.
What is a birthday without its tiny beauties,

its ribbons and its disappointments, its flames.
In time, it is an old soul who gazes back

through a girl's eyes, her hair far too close
to the hazard that makes of her a princess.

Not the spoiled or the flighty sort.

Something more dignified like a chimney,

a trophy, a life alone. To be on fire
in the corner is to be the thing

people look to when they face themselves,
their flesh pale and radiant as wax.

No, she is not alone. Nor is she wedded
to the regal heartbreak she carries for us.

She is far stranger than mere solitude
promises to be, unto death. Out there,

what we do and do not know of spirit
smolders from the oil drums in vacant lots,

among the makeshift dwellings of the docks.
Who can resist it. The power of the split

limbs and furniture turning into air.
A ring of men too is a thing of power,

not because they are chained to the blaze,
but because they cannot be, because

chances are some of them were strangers
when the night began. They dismember

what they stumble on to fuel the circle
while it lasts. Some are strangers still.

And as they talk, they stare into the center,
as if to see each other there, in this

place that is not a place, this eye of heat
that is each man's eye, that is a broken

window inside each eye, a broken girl's
gold band, crowned in fire, or not at all.

Girl with Dog

Do not be deceived. The dog you see,
the one who pulls the chain of his leash

stiff and with it the rope of the girl's arm
that holds him back, the arrows in his eyes

aimed at yours and trembling in their bow.
Do not be fooled. He has a darker side.

And yes, he is half black fox, a shadow
in the mist that casts no shadow. But she

who is thin as an exclamation, pale
as mist, she is her shadow's shadow.

She is no one's fool. She is somewhere
between a child and a woman, between

the bare-shouldered nature a girl thinks
nothing of and the suspicion that knows:

eyes want what eyes want and dread as much.
She is lovely as a tree drowned in fog.

If you see yourself in her, tell me,
is it empathy. Or displacement.

Does your heart beat a path to her heart.
Does it pace the cage that once was hers.

For she is a stranger. She has that look
that takes the measure of what you believe

you are. Hunger knows what hunger does.
It rises from the fog as worshipers rise,

or strength inside the weak and wounded,
or fear from anger and anger from the new fear.

It grows teeth in all the tender places
where the meat of the world gets taken in.

This is not love. Not hate. It is survival.

The urge to open spreads from yawn to yawn.

Suspect those suspicious of you, begin
with you, worship the one who worships you.

The dog in her ribs has a darker side,
a place behind the questioning look, a place

beyond question. Vigilance is contagious.
Its love is fierce. It is not cruel. It's loyal.

Chris McCandless

There's a hole in the middle of the sky.
If you look long and hard, you see it,

the torch of day that burns a cold passage
through the mist. The longer you lie,

gone to rust in the autumn grass, head
against the dead wood, the more you know

not sky alone but the ache of knowing it,
of conjuring the shepherd of the clouds.

There's a hole in the middle of the heart
that leads the blood into darker pastures.

Ask Chris. He who has been here so long
his body wastes away a little. I know,

he might be ill. His hair gone. The meat
he was now fast about the bones he will be.

I know his legs lie in the fallen log
patterns that are one part nature, another

chance. But enough of that. He's here.
He has found a place in the middle

of the field we will call his home now,
and the great blue hole the home he left,

his mother there calling her child in.
The children of the lambs are slow. Sweet.

As are the highest orders of the slow.
Why, they ask, only the corpses of the blessed

dragged through nowhere into paradise.
Is sky one thing, and this blue another.

Why worry the heart down to a votive candle.
The heart should be enormous, yes? Ask Chris.

Ask him if dying brings him closer to this

world or the next. Or both. The fleece of clouds

reddens beneath the sun's blade and people,
two by two, fall deeper in romance.

There's a hole in the middle of this prayer.
A name for the one who has no name.

And when the prayer ends, the one who falls
silent, still, a shade more cautious, the one

who opens the coffin of his eyes, looks
so hard he falters. He blurs. He tumbles through.

ROGER WEINGARTEN

Organ Donor Boogie

While I stand on my hands, listening
to Beethoven's unfinished *Rage*
over a Lost Penny, my blood

flooded mind's parceling
out my body in case
dementia, a canoe

mishap, or a third
rail misstep stops me in my semi
retired tracks. Please preserve my lungs

cryogenically for Daughtery with the caveat
our beloved miscreant cuts
back to three packs. For my happy

Maori lad, who's run out of space, I give the skin
off my back, stretched and tacked
to a frame so when he tattoos the remainder

of his story, I can be there. Love, please
tell them I bequeath the twin
caves of my nose to the Library

of Congress so trained
researchers, like Navy Seals, can ferret
out the micro-meanings etched

into Medusa hairs still trying
to escape. To the Smithsonian, deliver:
the Mongolian mark at the base

of my spine, my freeze-dried
and bronzed genitals, all
the toenails imbedded

in Lucite —except the hangnail
on my left little toe I hope you'll overnight to my ex
stepmother—and, while you're at it, have

my bunghole carved and packed on ice to switch
with what resides on an ex
President's neck so, when

alien phrenologists probe
his skull looking for a clue,
they'll find one. Tell them I want

to preserve the dyptych of tobacco
leaves stuck to my great
uncle Joe's lip that fought for me

hinged to my old man
in bathing trunks and a scarred
chest that didn't, spinning

my eldest around the pool in an inner
tube until he cried Papa in a virtual
jar of formaldehyde, but don't

roll your sleepy eyeballs. Isn't this
my funeral? I will my brain, like a tall
ship figurehead, to be grafted to the prow

of a tiny Shriner car. Ambrosia
freak, didn't I love to bury
my flared nostrils in your

salty synesthesiac folds and inhale
until my whole being blossomed into a seizure
of auroras, flumes, and monolithic

ice, severed from a warming
continent, floating, emerald
and silent. Between

pillars, my bare plantar
wart-punctuated soles—size
eleven point five—wave at clouds parted

like the surprised mouth of a blow-up doll. Like
a terrorist in hiding flipping through soft
core *fuhsha I* expose

my *awrah*, those intimate
imperfections forbidden to public
scrutiny, so you

can imagine when I dig
my own grave, lowered my shrouded
self into it, four sheets

to the wind covered with a topsoil
of words draped
over the sides, that I, last

minute Samson, will pull, in a deeply
satisfying gesture of self-sufficiency,
down on myself. After you fly my plastic

surgeon cousin in to peel the skin
off my palms you can glue, sew and bind
in boards when you wish to read

the crisscrossed pickup
sticks of my life to lull
our granddaughter to sleep, let's renew

our vows on our backs
holding hands on twin
gurneys wheeled under operating

room lights to have the grateful
heart you saved transplanted
and attached to yours, after we

roll up the cat
scratched and moth
eaten rug, strip

and pitch our rags
over the high rise
balcony and get

down on all fours, the barrelhouse
keyboard lifting us above
disaster and do the Organ
Donor Boogie.

Every time I read a poem, I am ready to die…what is your atm number? Mary Ruefle

Call Me Trish says the loan officer before I ask
for a million advance on my latest and hold
up a sheet smeared with invisible
ink to impress that I mean

business. She folds her hands in her lap,
like an Episcopal priest, into a steeple,
and pinky swears, although the bank
owns shares in Pope's "Rape

of the Lock," Baudelaire's "You'd Take
the Entire Universe to Bed with You" and Webb's
Hot Popsicles, we don't
loan money on raw property, but come back

when you've made improvements. After
a schnitzel washed
down with Yoo Hoo, I drop into the club
chair facing her pen set antennae to flash

my unlined legal pad headlining the title "The Branch
Bank Will Not Break. Her splooge-white
eyes—that stare through my iridescent
drug dealer shades over the torso still

suffused with brilliance of her emerald
glass-shaded banker's lamp—swivel toward
the security guard scratching the *duende*
of his nostril with a gun butt. Your old

man, she confides, who never
wanted to write a poem in his life,
has a ten million line
of credit—why not bother Dad

for the big bucks? He died,
I answer, from brain cancer-ridden decades
of being pussy-whipped. How about

a half-million construction

loan at 9% we'll convert to a first
warranty deed when you return
with a blueprint? I stand to express
myself into a shot glass just as my prayer

group sponsor steps out of the elevator,
and tossing back a belt
of my inspiration takes a copy of *The Poetics*
of Space from her beaded

purse, squatting over a night depository
pouch which she hands to the neo
transcendalist security guard who croons
into a lapel mike, Nature

is the elbow of the mind, as he juggles
my sponsor's universal truths while
relieving himself of a recurring dream of losing
everything to Nietzsche, Tolstoy, and Margaret

Thatcher in a short game of strip Monopoly
in the assistant to the assistant vice
president's ear who's simultaneously being
buttered up by a foreclosure specialist. The night

janitor and his wet mop chilling on a barge
made of ice slip out of a safety
deposit box, then, after bending over
backwards to swallow the handle,

like a sword, he cries, *Le Petit Sac, c'est*
terrible—I chill where I please because
it's all mine to the daisy
chain of automatic teller

machines, Special Services
officers, and drive-through
pneumatic tubes dervish whirling in blood
spattered Caribbean colors before Investment

World climaxes as clerks circle
a fish tank filled with an inflatable
satisfied customer. To the muzak

strains of the Honolulu Fruit

Gum Orchestra's medley of "Bubbles
in the Bath," and "The What Saves Us
Polka," a trio of Chicken
Little masked naked soccer moms

revolves through the revolving
lobby doors, cocks pellet
rifles and screams, reach
for the motherfucking sky.

POEMS 1972-2012

DONALD FINKEL
Even Song

He is pruning his nails with a tin-shears
he never trims the same nail twice.

on the prussian blue formica field
nine horned moons lie fallen when he beholds
on the back of the cracker box the legend
CUT ALONG THE DOTTED LINE AND SAVE

working the blade of his pen-knife between
his crepe sole and the Glo-Coat
he can think of no one
more worth saving

outside a leaf springs from the gingko's wrist
to which it has been clinging by one thumb
twirls and curtseys to the pavement
and takes the first gust west
toward Central Park

the sun drops into the slavering jaws of New Jersey
like a sugar cookie

CAROL FROST
Family

The sprawling vegetable
venders, lettuce blown like leaves
I couldn't recognize, the monastery roof
going to seed, excess of tabled fish in this climate;
spitting, blind ends, venders and bargains;
this loose Mediterranean acre.
The sun baking off the market's indifference.

A woman's dark tattoos: ant hills,
fluted grass. An orchard of messages; bruised
fruit, the walnut-colored hoe
blade grown into the hungry bark;
grafting, droughts, the seed in the palm
of the hand. A single jewel
that is a touch of water or glass on the forehead:
light in a tree.

There are children balky as calves,
stiff-legged and damp. Fourteen calves
and five uncles. They walk as slow as I
and regard me--the children, the uncles.
To the end of the street. The herd curious
and brilliant.
They stop at the boundary
and protect each other.

CAROL MUSKE-DUKES
Primer

They can't harness the pony,
the cart sits idle. The wind
whips smart-alek between syllables,
but can't read either.
Let her gallop one last time
in the haunted margins.

The nun asks: How will we
get there from here?
She won't canter, she won't trot.

She pounds her fist against
her heart, imploring, leaves
a chalk hatchet on her black habit.
Her eyes move left to right
and our big eyes come along,
wobbling. *She can fly all night*
and no one can catch her,
her mane's made of clouds.

I see a man lift an axe to a tree,
he cuts a face, he cuts a doorsill.
A woman comes to the door.
He chops her away, he chops her shadow.
Her shadow deepens, a book with pages
fluttering. I see the page
in the bright classroom light.

Tree, I read, *tree.*
And the blinders come down from heaven.

The way the Best Man, drunk,
doffs his hat to the swan
then turns his back with no bread to offer...

Like lovers in a duel of intuition,
they drift apart. As if he'd never stood
in the darkness, calling. As if she'd
never risen, shattering the clear surface

to eat slowly from his hand.

The wind sculpts itself into distance,
the drunk bows, the swan glides away
under the trees bent with age,
beneath the lifted swords of the statues.

I turn away from the window in my white dress
into the hinged mirror where
I become a procession of brides.

My mother stands, fastening
her long light hair with pins--
her hand moving so fast it exceeds gesture--
like a limb burning, beating air,
its fingers opening into a fan of flame.

You don't let people love you she says.

Let the mirror scatter its affections,
let me lift my glass to the lolling banners
stamped with stars, let him stand by my side,

with the others one by one, as if I loved them.
As if I loved the prayers in the dead language
or the sun igniting the veil as we walk
in the park after the ceremony.

Enigmatic as a bride, she turns to me,
twisting the ring on her finger, veiling
her face in the purest lack of emphasis.
In the face of love's fiercest commandment:
let them touch you.

Look how the swan turns and turns on the blue pond.
The sky fills with invisible comets.
The carousel flings itself round a painted center
from which the wooden horses shy, lifting their hooves,

their torn eyes to the mechanized ceiling
where the gears raise and lower like skulls on pikes,
like her face turning away from mine

in rapt sequence: mirror, swan, snowfall,
mother, one little love after another.

THOMAS REITER
Crayfish

Cambarus diogenes
swift backwards sculler.
August, the inlet dry,
his mud chimneys in the channel
tell you he burrows after
the water and will haul it back.
Spring run-off now,
and he sets himself up
in picture tubes whose rare-earth
elements are lost, in tires
frayed to a stop, in anything
water goes under the name of. At night
the river feeds him deaths
of channel cat and bass.
The season's here-
a flight of fish crows like a Mobius strip,
all gamefish pincered by their bait.

DAVID FERRY
Caprimulgidae

It makes its flight in the competence of its own
Way of behaving; hovering, or gliding,
Floating, oddly, just at the edges of bushes,
Just over the ground, or near the vagueness of trees,
At twilight, on the hunt, for moths or other
Creatures out in the failing evening light.
It feeds in flight; it flies hugely, softly, smiling
The gap open to far back under the ears;
In the dim air it looks like a giant moth;
Fluttering, its blurred disheveled feathers waving,
Signaling something understands its meaning.

Its young are born unhelpless. Caprimulgus
Can totter or hop only a few steps,
Almost a cripple, its little legs so feeble;
Perhaps on the flat roof of some city building,
Or out on the bare ground, or on a tree-limb,
It lies all day, waking in its sleeping,
Capable, safe, concealed in its cryptic plumage,
Invisible to almost anything;
Its nightready eyes are closed, carefully
Keeping the brilliant secret of its flight;
Its hunting begins when the light begins to go.

DAVID IGNATOW
The Apple

The skin also wrinkles in old age.
The meat grows sweeter, if less plump,
but it's to be eaten,
and one eats casually
out of the bowl
where it had been sitting
with other wrinkled fruit.

It's as the apple would want,
if it could speak--to be enjoyed
for itself, and one chews and enjoys
while chunk by chunk it vanishes
noisily into the eater's mouth
and is fulfilled.

PHILIP BOOTH

Evensong

The sun gives way.

Against its distance
dead elms heighten.

The sky turns up,
mapped against the dark.

My daughter waits,
shadow in shadow.

asking night
to happen. As

she asks: horizons
tips. The stars begin

to open.

CAROLE OLES

Message On A Sea Wall

Where the wall says stop
he climbs down.
The ocean steps back.
It's winter, and henna trees gape.
He works while the town fathers sleep.

Others have been here. Paul,
writing 'Heather, I love ya,'
Doug and Brenda, Norman and Syl.
But he's different,
had asthma and was always too small.

Starting over his head,
slowly he sprays words down the rough
stones, sinks to his knees.
The letters will come up each day,
beachcombers, commuters will find

JESUS IS STILL THE ANSWER

But what was the question?
How to, in the dark night?
Where, in the city of flame?
JESUS IS STILL THE ANSWER

after Heather and Paul
go out on the heart's tide,
after the shore counts its wrecks,
and the moon walks him home.

DAVID WAGONER
Duck-Blind

Having prepared yourself
Seriously now for the serious
Business of hunting --
Your coat on crossed sticks
Set flapping at the flyway's
Crucial turn, your decoys
(The wooden coots and geese,
The dabblers and divers) spread
in the tried and tested
Worm-on-a-hook pattern
To cradle open water,
And yourself well hidden
Here in your duck-blind,
Your whole body
And what warms it blended
Naturally with the marsh
With the drabness of dying
Reeds and pidgeon grass,
Even the alien whiteness
Of your face net-masked or painted --
You are finally ready
To call those webfeet down
The echelon of the wind,
To lead your flock with foresight
And hindsight, breaking their wingbeats
Through a reddening hailstorm
With outburst after outburst
Against the light, marking their fall
Most watchfully with an eye
To harvesting the dead,
Burt recalling the wounded
Must never simply be wasted
Though they may dive and cling
To the roots of eelgrass, holding
Their breath for a last time
Far longer than you think
You can possibly wait. Waiting
And growing cold, you aim
Down through the quivering water.
You wait for them to rise.

BOB MCNAMARA
In the Thin of Winter

They have gone underground, deermice
and poplar, spurge, grasses and cattails,
leaving brittle and beige this site

for a new road. Here cattails' dry
gossip, once moist susurrus
and sigh, and in thickets'

thin bones, sparrows scat
and chatter bright as my grandma
joking about death.

And chickadees breeze their names
arrowing cattail to cattail pecking
brown mats of seed, as if there was

one weather always, this ground
pitched with snow, wind
honed on cold.

I shiver, as if tomorrow
could be held by heavy clothes or
these spikes nailing the ground fast

for the new road. Stem, leaf and bone,
what I touch breaks as I climb
toward the old road and home.

Wind stands tall in the field,
a spare yield I must take and praise
singing its name into the thin of winter
over roots thickened with blood.

ELIZABETH THOMAS
Thaw

I
There is nothing green
within me, no shoots, no bright leaves;
my clothes are rough inside
and out. I can see to the edge of the wall
where the burns, where rocks
dig a vein into our yard.
How you burn for another season!
Snow-heavy, my arms fall asleep.

Months the furnace bakes itself dry
bringing the stench of the bay
into our cellar, ladders, paint cans
root there and beneath:
shells, salt.
For the eye, nothing but snow.
Today I teach the landlord's son
three new words: mountain, flood, thaw.
Now he hides beneath the house,
his ear towards the sea.

II
They never stop cursing each other--
money, snow,
the hallway swells with children and
on the porch of every triple-decker
paces a german shepard.
We make cole-slaw and biscuits,
bar-b-que some ribs on a snow bank
and you are drunk on the smell,
singing!
Open the windows--
sheets and blankets are airing,
wagging their dirty March tongue;
we never stop cursing each other.
Name the children after grandfathers
knock on the walls for money,
listen, listen.

III

At the end of our street
begins the park. All winter a dark green field
died there, now it rises like a tide.
The avenues pull back their gum trees
seem pale as a man's limb.
I peel back my own salty skin
having felt buried inside for so long.
You have kept me a little longer
than our neighbors have.
They are glad now, not to have us,
only their own beginnings;
like the furniture they move to the streets,
to the park that is clearing of snow.

MARVIN BELL
We Had Seen a Pig

1
One man held the huge pig down
and the other stuck an icepick
into the jugular, which is when
we started to pay attention.
The blood rose ten feet with force
while the sow swam on its back
as if to cut its own neck.
Its fatty back smacked the slippery
cement while the assassins shuffled
to keep their balance, and the bloody
fountain rose and fell back and rose
less and less high, until
the red plume re-entered the pig
at the neck, and the belly collapsed
and the pig face went dull.

2
I knew the pig
was the butcher's, whose game
lived mainly behind our garage.
Sometimes turkeys, always
roosters and sheep. Once the windmill
turned two days without stopping.
The butcher would walk in his apron
straight for the victim. The others
would scratch and babble
and get in the way.
Then the butcher would lead the animal
to the back door of his shop,
stopping to kill it on a stump.
It was always evening, after closing.
The sea breeze would be rising
cloaking the hour in brine.

3
The pig we saw slaughtered
was more than twice anything
shut up in the patch
we trespassed to make havoc.

Since the butcher was Italian,
not Jewish, that would be his pig.
Like the barber who carried a cigar box of bets
to the stationery store, like
the Greek who made sweets
and hid Greek illegals,
immigrant "submarines,"
the butcher had a business, his
business, by which he took
from our hands the cleaver and serrated
knife for the guts,
and gave us back in butcher paper
and outer layers of brown wrapping,
our lives for their cries.

4
Hung up to drain, the great pig
hacked into portions
looked like a puzzle
we could put together in the freezer
to make a picture of
a pig of course, a map, clothes or other things
when we looked.

SHARON OLDS
The Line

When we understood it might be cancer,
I lay down beside you in the night,
my palm resting in the groove of your chest,
the rachis of a leaf. There was no question of
making love: deep inside my body that
small hard lump. In the half-light
of my half-life, my hand in the beautiful
sharp cleft of your chest, the valley of the
shadow of death,
there was only the present moment, and as you
slept in the quiet, I watched you as one watches
a newborn child, aware each moment of the
miracle, the line that has been crossed
out of the darkness.

A.R. AMMONS
Traveling Shows

I found vision and
it was terrific, the sight
enabling and abiding, but
I couldn't get these
old bones there and light's
a byproduct of
rapid decomposition:
I found power, too, but
sick, meal-swollen children
refused it:
no one breathes the
air in words' winds:
more than could be
promised, the many
graces of accurate
turnings, or event thought
to seek, I found, I
found: it was nothing:
the ghost of the made
world, leaving, enters
the real--no, not that much:
the real world
succeeds the made, then
burnt out shuts down.

CAROL FROST
All Summer Long

The dogs eat hoof slivers and lie under the porch.
A strand of human hair hangs strangely from a fruit
tree
like a cry in the throat. The sky is calm for the
child who is past
being tired, who wanders in waist deep
grasses. Gnats rise in a vapor,
in a long mounting whine around her forehead and ears.

The sun is an indistinct moon. Frail sticks
of grass poke her ankles
and a wet froth of spiders touches her legs
like wet fingers. The musk and smell
of air is as hot as the savory
terrible exhales from a tired horse.

The parents are sleeping all afternoon
and no one explains the long uneasy afternoons.
She hears their combined breathing and swallowing
salivas, and sees their sides rising and falling
like the sides of horses in the hot pasture.

At evening a breeze dries and crumbles
the sky, and the clouds flow like undershirts
and cotton dresses on a clothes line. Horses
rock to their feet and race or graze.
Parents open their shutters and call
the lonely, happy child home.
The child who hates silences talks and talks
of cicadas and the manes of horses.

CHARLES SIMIC

First Prison

That of the eye
Opening upon
The world,
The same old world.

Dim interiors
Into which the sun
Is just breaking
Over the threshold.

Solitary confinement
With an apple tree in bloom;
Crows in a sky
Exceptionally blue,

And the white blossoms,
Which must be the jailers,
The snetires,
Of this strange life-sentence.

DARA WIER
Colorless Green Ideas

The color of broken stalks, they are
the wheat's sharp turn to hay.

They are the color of hospital walls;
patients sleeping, please, walk.

Will you wait, we'll try this once more.
They are some color. We kept getting closer.

They are my friend who sleep curiously
alone in their fine houses, gates latched,

surrounded by the dark which stands
like a horse in his tall, over them.

He stomps one hoof, any one of them
might wake shouting, or unable to rise,

turn in waking's sad attempt to disengage
the dream's sentence, the night's quiet.

They think how difficult it is for nothing
to remain nothing. Everything resists it.

JOHN HOLLANDER
The Summit: Mondetsu

The climb; one goes up and up on a winding way
Toward the peak, consuming resources one had brought
Along, whose used-up cans themselves become ballast
AT those heights at which even breath gets heavier.
This long way--its very way of being a way
One has known so well that even the surprises
Along the way are no longer surprising. Its
Course is less apparent to the heart than detailed
Accounts or maps might be, thus making the accounts
Somehow pointless. Ah well--at the top at last, one
Can drop the final burden of wanting to have
Been up there at all: it falls silently, faster
Than gravity could draw it, straight down the sheer peak
Into the low shadows from which one started out.

PAUL MARIANI
On the Sawmill

i.

Fleckspeckled brownburly waters, swift
where the smooth stone surface, still
by those deep cold pools where trout hide

in summer, and this tarred-over concrete
bridge with its yellowgreen iron railings
where we have come each season now

for seven years. In late August the maples
begin their slow transformations, as deep
greens bleed a way to the reds. Half a dozen

kids, our three among them, chatter
wildly, their voices falling and rising,
as they chase each other in the Sawmill.

ii.

Except for those two weeks in early April,
when four months of settled snow begin converging
on this little river, until it swells, splattering

planks, tangled branches, six inches of black
muck over the lower reaches of Bouchane's fields,
the Sawmill acts more like a good-natured creek,

dozing, gold and sallow, its thick lights
floating, as now, beneath this canopy of trees.
What does it cost to catch these kids in this

light, as both together catch the cold currents
to shoot the shallows for fifty, sixty feet,
as they ride the river's dolphin-glinted back?

iii.

Knee deep in most places, this is hardly
a river like those others we have lived
beside: the panoramic Hudson, oilbrown

at Beacon, at West Point castle-studded,

black and brackish below the Palisades;
the choppy East at Hellsgate where my parents

used to swim, its ghostly bridges floating
in the winter mists; the Passaic's goldleaved
upper reaches, those still majestic Falls, brown

spume so thick on a winter's day it would float
up over the narrow gorge, turning crystal; that long
river, rapt in its old procession to the Sound.

iv.

Why is it we keep coming back to water? Last
year I took the boys out hiking to find
at firsthand where it was the Sawmill spilled

into that old grandfather, the Connecticut.
Norowtucks had camped there at that joining,
mended nets, boats, spearfished in these waters.

It meant climbing rough pasture, then slipping
as we forded the widening Sawmill at some unexpected
mudflat, footing it below the rising treelined

ridges. Out of that summer silence at first--
nothing. Then the bark of some solitary cur
had caught our scent or swish of brush

Let him yelp; he was roped good to an old root
the river had exposed, twenty feet away
on the other bank. Just there, where the two

rivers met--our Sawmill and that giant--
his master sat fishing, back propped against
the keel of an outboard, the rim of his

baseball cap low over his eyes. Soon even
the dog tired of his own inconsequential
cries, curled up, went back to sleep. Long

before that, though, our eyes were on those
rivers, here, or almost nothing'd changed,
as if time for once looped over on itself.

vi.

You hear a great deal about the filth
in all our rivers, filth from the drainpipes
unloading into the Sawmill by the lower

bridge, filth from those old factories up at
“Turner’s” churn the long river brown
with sludge. Occasionally, you even hear of

someone shotgunned and, still sucking blood
through his blasted lungs, getting tossed off
one of those million dollar bridges on I-

91 on to those jagged flows below. Here,
though, the rivers begin to clean themselves,
licking their sallow sands until they glisten.

vii.

What does it cost, to live to come to know
this river, who have looked long at it.
come and go in many moods, many weathers?

We’ve fished its waters, stalked its borders
with the kids, slipped and skinned our shins.
against its jagged, icelaced shallows when one

of ours was missing. It was here, words breaking
to the surface, my father finally said his wife
was gone. And the last time I ever saw her,

my grandmother kept looking at something
in the Sawmill. What does it give, then, this
spendthrift river, that can spend itself so long?

MAXINE KUMIN
The Leg

I thought I had you memorized, good fellow.
At the anke knob two bright veins
used to thrum as fine as blue guitar strings.
There was the flat blade of the shin canting
over the hard pillow
of a swimmer's calf. Above it, plain
as the nose on my face, a bony knee
and up into the root there ran
a fleshy thigh, that serviceable tree,
one-half the common plan.

Now after three months the turn you loose.
The doctor, stepping into a plastic sou'wester
begins to saw through plaster
and the white dust flies from my great oxhorn
Wrapped toe to fork, a poor wrong fetus,
you were the big baby I carried everywhere
impatient to be born
impossible to bear,
a dingy shut-in with one window on the square.

They coast me off to x-ray, an embarrassment.
So I'm to take you back, a wasted eel,
hairy and hapless, yet somehow attached.
You waggle in the wheelchair, scaly and spent.
You can't attend a single simple rule.
Bending's a desperate forgotten habit.
To move at all must be flexed
by hand. Stretched out you tremble
at the least touch like a snared rabbit.

Come, little one. They say you're tough as leather.
They say you've knit, the worst is over.
I'll crutch you home and we'll lie down together.
The way long absence works refining lovers
will work in you, my shrunken stalk.
Come summer and we'll walk.

MICHAEL S. HARPER

The Militance of the Photograph in the Passbook of a Bantu Under Detention

The wrinkles on the brown face
of the carrying case
conform to the buttocks,
on which the streaks of water
from a five gallon can
dribble on the tailfront
of the borrowed shirt
he would wear if he could
drain the pus from his swaddling
bandages, striations of skin
tunneling into the photograph.

There is no simple mugshot
of a runaway boy in a training
film, Soweto's pummeled wire,
though the turrets of light
glisten in smoke, the soft
coal hooding his platform
entrance is dull and quiet.

His father's miner's shoes
stand in puddles of polish,
the black soot baked
into images of brittle torso,
an inferno of bullets laid
out in a letter bomb,
the frontiesepiece of one sergent--
major blackening his mustache

On the drive to Evaton
a blank pas away from Sharpeville
where the freehold morgans
were bought by a black bishop
from Ontario, Canada on a trek
northward from the Cape in 1908,
I speak to myself as the woman
riding in the back seat talks

on this day, her husband's
death, twenty-three years ago,
run over by an Afrikaner int he wrong
passing lane; the pass book on the shoulder
of the road leading to Evaton
is not the one I have in my hand,
and the photograph is not of my great
grandfather, who set sail for Philadelphia
in the war years of 1916.
He did not want a reception, his letters
embarking on a platform at Queenstown
where his eloquence struck two Zulu warriors
pledged to die in the homelands
because they could not spin their own gold.

These threaded beads weigh down the ears
in design of the warrior, Shaka,
indifferent to his ruthless offerings
over the dead bodies of his waives,
childless in his campaigns with the British,
who sit on the ships of the Indian Ocean
each Kraal shuddering near the borders;

her lips turn in profile
to the dust rising over a road
where his house once stood;
one could think of the women
carrying firewood as an etching
in remembrance to the silence,
commencing at Sharpeville,
but this is Evaton, where he would come
from across the galleyship of spears
turned in his robes to a bookmark;

it is a good book, the picture of words
in the gloss of a photograph,
the burned image of the man who wears
this image, on the tongue of a child,
who might hold my hand
as we walk in late afternoon
into the predestined sun.

The press of wrinkles on the blanketed
voice of the man who took the train
from Johannesburg,

is flattened in Cape Town,
and the history of this book
is on a trestle where Ghandi
worshipped in Natal,
and the Zulu lullaby
I cannot sing in Bantu
is this song in the body
of a passbook
and the book passes
into a shirt
and the back that waers it.

FRED CHAPPELL
Wind Subsides on the Earth River

Every water is asleep.

The wind only
Gentles the earth to breathing, to body of breath,
                                        it is
This wind from the tips of mountains and form
                                        hollers,
Saying, HOME, HOME
EARTH IS HOME. Where have we not drifted in fire,
In water, in air?
                But Earth is the mouths of wind.

My sister wind, wind my mother,
You my confusion of fingers,
I know I shift this world an injured air,
I know how I am guilty in too much space,
And how the churchbell lifts is somber redundance.
The churchbell says:
HOME, HOME   home to the animals,
                home to the crouchings and lickings, home
                to twilight, to the small coals of old
                                        fire.

Susan, have I not loved you?
This world is wind, and homeless.
Here now I lay my stone of fire, crying
TOUCH ME, TOUCH, I CANNOT COME APART FROM THE WIND

I come apart from the wind, crying,
TOUCH, BRIGHT RIVER, your sleeping
Makes this earth domestic.

                Wind, it the last thing
On Earth, kissing the petrified rubble of dream.
I dream, Susan, we are not wind;
I dream we are the breath and flame of the last fire
                                        that lived.

Earth huddles to our hands,

hands coming apart now
TO water, hands luckless in earth, this earth
With its mouths of wind coming apart to mind,
Mind drifting to fire, to water, no bodies,
What can we love with?
We cannot love with wind, tell, Estuary,
We are but both and each.

The wind in the meat night says,
YOU HAVE NO HANDS, NO BODIES, YOU CANNOT SPEAK.
Our figures
Collide touchless as reflections of Buicks in
supermarket windows.
Ghost and no ghost,
I lift you toward that profound atom,
Earth,
You dream of.

A R. AMMONS
Localizing

The ground that life's unpredictability
dissolves is possibility's very furrow,
the frail white root letting down

or unfolding into mix's raw mush, loam:
the doubleness, not necessarily two things
but of one thing being two: the pivot that

could skew either way: imbalance, though,
balances imbalance, there's a pure category,
and new rudeness ameliorates old ruin:

God's will (the Way) everybody knows holds
grave assimilations of constancy in change,
that constancy though probably too high out

of things for any but undifferentiated effect;
and then the effect is as if from underneath!
well, it's nice to know that even

broaching error you may get something right,
or that not knowing sometimes finds a
better than known road, although in the

long run everything wilts down and withers
over, undone as beached seaweed: if we step
forward, it is into the shambles of our

time to come; and whether we step forward
or not, we are forwarded daily to a sparer
dimension, lessened mansion: but surely

there is a Will so high change can't stir
it nor loss nor gain stagger it, spirit
unshadowed and shadowless! but we love it here!

LOUIS SKIPPER
First Light At the End of December

- for Stephanie Morgan

The small compass of your breath
on my shoulder
charts its direction:

night is deep there,
and outside your windows
the long trees are waving their fingers of winter.

You have a way with nights and days,
the strong wind running into the forests,
through my hair, traveling this distance,

lying with me: one
of those stories the roads must tell.
Another year begins in your face

I take as my own into my hands,
into night after night of cold fire
from the same sky, from stars

we make into figures
of ourselves, of the faces
we take to our mouths

as though we were singing into the earth.

CHARLES SIMIC
Beautiful Imported Silk Ties

Those with beautiful silk ties die enviably,
Head thrown back as if in a nosebleed,
While a woman unzips their gray trousers
It's only a few minutes before dawn.

One hears her inexplicable departing steps,
Hurried as if someone waits for pearls
At the nightclub that advertises exotic dancers,
Down these backalleys used as privies, as tunnels of love,

The city fathers have left poorly lit in their wisdom,
The one with the beautiful silk tie would prefer
A mirror or at least a dusty store-window:
One eyebrow raised, head tilted to the side, thus.

He's as pretty as those long-defunct lover-gods,
Or so quip the demons who're always
In discreet attendance in such moments.
Perhaps, it's unfair to go on calling them that.

They grin just the way he's grinning
Since now there's a pallbearer, but it's only a kid
With thick glasses who shouldn't be out this late.
He only wants the tie and the alligator shoes.

JAMES TATE
A Vagabond

A vagabond is a newcomer
in a heap of trouble.
He's an eyeball at a peephole
that should be electrocuted.
He's a leper in a textile-mill
and likely to be beheaded, I mean,
given a liverwurst sandwich
on the break by the brook
where the loaves are sliced.
But he oughtn't meddle
with the powder-puffs on the golf links--
they have their own goats to tame,
dirigibles to situate.
He can act like an imbecile
if the climate is propitious,
a magnate of kidnap
paradising around the oily depot,
or a speck from a distant nebula
wishing to purchase a certain skyscraper . . .

Well, if it's permitted, then,
let's regulate him, let's testify
against his thimble, and moderate his glove.
before they sew an apron.

The local minister is thinking
of moving to Holland, exchanging
his old ballads for some lingerie.
"Zatso!" says the vagabond.
Homeless, like wheat that tattletales
on the sermon, like wages swigged.
"Zatso, zatso, zatso!" cries the vagabond.
The minister reels under the weight
of his thumbs, the vagabond seems to have
jutted into his kernel. disturbed
his terminal core. Slowly, and with
trifling dignity, the minister removes
from his lapel his last campaign button:
Don't Mess With Raymond, New Hampshire.

LINDA PASTAN
Nurse

I sing of Euraklia
on whom Odysseus practiced
his earliest wiles
In the fugue recognition
only she was rebuked,
whose breasts once brimmed for him
as later wine cups would
of beaten gold.

I sing of Juliet's nurse.
in that intoxicate dlight
where death
and passion wrestle--
where they embrace,
shy physicked us all
with her rough
prosody.

I sing of Cora
whom I loved
to torment.
When thunder set me
trembling
hush, she'd say,
it's just the angel Gabriel
shaking out his wings.

JIM SIMMERMAN
To You in Particular

No, this is no voice
from a fiery bush.
But it's something.
It is the paper boat
an orphan makes
and buries
in someone's yard.
It is the promise
made by starlight
in a story
so old
the words have worn
to a thread-bare music
that is faith.
though the promise
is forgotten.
No one wants to talk
about miracles anymore.
No one wants to walk,
alone, through the dark
part of town and kiss the withered hand
of a drunk
who might be anybody's
child,
who might be most
of what is given us
to know of love
and the anguish of Abraham.
As far as I know
the heart
is a paper boal
burning underground.
As far as I know
the world is a broken promise,
a story
that doesn't know
how to end itself.
But who can say, really--
if the telling is good
if the words are clear

and strong
that it is not the voice
of God
speaking, this once,
like a very lonely man
to you in particular?
The knife is in your hand.

LAURA JENSEN
Hereafter

Passing a crow on the street
is like passing a person--it is
that impressive and frightening an incident.

But I needed to walk out
just after noon this Saturday--
I was happy, and could leave the apartment

with light hanging
undistressed--filtering through
shades in the front room, subdued and shadowed

everywhere else. A thought
crowded my head--that throughout
the beat of our lives across the screen

of the elctrocardiograph,
the pulse that verifies and connects
our wholeness--we are momentary, and we are

forever one arm
that is whole, on dream that is all
of one piece. Wholeness fluctuates. I am

an image of my body
in the mind of another
and I look up as if to speak--

as the crow on the street
opens its beak and out rushes
a sound that no human can make--I

look up to speak,
like the image of my body,
from where I kneel, soberly, on the floor

cutting cardboard
with my scissors and say nothing
to nobody there. I am never complete. I am

never the pulse.
But thought continues
rushing out of my body with a sound

no human
will ever make,
that says, hereafter, a wholeness.

RODNEY JONES
Recurrence of Acrophobia at an Abandoned Quarry

Once when we climbed the limestone bluff
and all my friends had thrown themselves
into the tense air over the quarry,
I only stood at the edge, knowing that water
was a door that would never open for me.
Though every face surfaced, laughing,
I stepped back and knelt in the bramble,
the old fear rocking me like a colicky child.

From that summer, I can show the scars
made by adrenalin, the patient fluttering
of the heart flirting with a depth
it neither understood nor wanted.
I remember the girls who would go "all the way,"
but one button at a time, into matrimony,
how their phone numbers festered just before sleep.
Sundays I carried my whole body up the face
of the bluff like the unsure hand of a lover.

Now they have siphoned all the water
from that hole where Jimmy Ponder drowned.
Alone this time, I struggle up the jut
to look down on the impenetrable bodies of boulders
going down in the all-hospitable earth.
Quarry dust fills the air. I whirl
to grab the scrub pine, feeling the fish-barb
bob and jerk at the center of appetite.

Twice this year in dreams, I've plummeted
for hours into the hole which in life
I've only stood above, teasing the loss of nerve.
Twice, with her unimagining hand, my wife
has touched my brow, though that comfort
now is faint, and love was first imagined.,
through a radio that played beside me here,
a good forty feet above the swimmers,
as an "endless falling," as a "walking on air."

PAULA RANKIN
Poem Using Unused Lines

I will begin with "curled maple leaves
shocking gray limbs
with chartreuse" and continue
it with " truths people I love
leave me with: 'I'm always the same distance
from you'; 'Loving means losing';
'When you're lonely, go out and look at the at the moon.'"
Already, trouble: what do yellow-green leaves,
gray trees have to do with people we love
or distances or moon? Which leads me
to the exercise: I once thought you could connect
any two things
no matter how desperate
the yoking, and if you couldn't,
it was a failure
of the imagination--my son and I
had contests, ironing board/cloud; dinosaur/umbrella;
Byron/chocolate. He always won.
Now if I call the curled maple leaves
a metaphor for hope or
fresh starts or the shock
of new against old, it's but a short step
to words people promise each other,
partying. Or phases of leaves
could be linked
to phases of moon, with human
waxing, waning between
and I could arrive at a poem
about how terribly we miss
the people we love, yet how wise
if we're not together
in one room. Or I could call each of us
a soul, alone, that goes out one night
to look at the moon. The soul's
been drinking. It needs air, something distant
to fill with. At such a time
moon could be fleck, wafer, bulb,
it wouldn't matter; the soul
would feel pulled
and respond by imagining its mates,

scattered all over creation
but here tonight, at this moment,
equidistant as memory. Inside this moment
we could say each soul rejoices in the collapse
of reality, nothing wind chill
or its name called from inside the house
wouldn't cure. I don't know. Maybe
a poem using unused lines

should be about the difference
between used and wasted,
though a friend tells me
they're the same, that used up,
he'll describe himself wasted.
But I keep thinking of that man
who jumped into the freezing river
after the plane crashed,
who almost gave his life
to save a stranger, both their lungs
burning blue; now *that* was use.
And I think of my friend who fried a gun
into his throat at thirty-seven.
That was waste. I'd say most of us.

fall somewhere between,
more like places by railroad tracks, roadsides
the careless passerby would name
nothing, or weeds. But Roger Tory Peterson
got wall-eyed, he said, crawling
with pencil, sketchpad, capturing wildflowers--
one of each color, each shape.
All night he'd stay up in his motel room
sorting species, variants, mutations.
He had a list of sixty ways to say
a plant is not smooth--words like aculeate, canescent,
hispidulous, pubescent,...and still, he said, one leaf
of Vipers Bugloss would fall through
all his phyla, remaining perfectly
indescribable, beauty that could
rip your skin off.

Often we have no say
in what gets used. But tonight
I am thirty-nine years old, choosing
among distances, intent beyond reason

on connections. I'm standing in a yard
in Indiana, looking at the moon.
The C&O clatatraks south beyond
the stripped maples, a blues tenor sax
someone's filled with smoke,
carbon. And though what is anyone
if not a spine
of blue notes, flatted, fretted, vaporizing
toward the memory of music,
I listen. I wait,
letting whatever wants to blow through me
resume its nettling exhalations.

For all I know
it's the amputee
who lived with me one summer,
his good arm spliced to his vanished's
heft and shove, its nearly legible
calligraphy. He's refusing again
my blundering pity, refusing
bursitis draining out of the cuff
of his hollow sleeve.
He would reach for me a
with nothing,
those whorls of pure intention
and not understand why
I kept washing the dishes.

I believe,
I really do believe
that reach keeps pulsing out there somewhere.

I turn, asking, "Yes?"
as it crooks its hapless elbow
around my shoulder.

WILLIAM HATHAWAY
Late and Early Geese

More often they pass over as ragged check marks
than those balanced vees of tradition.
The route's still north/south and sunsets
are sloppier, more paprika swirling in the sour
cream, than ever--what with the Mexican
volcano. A cartoon made me wonder why
their formation's never vertical, a stately V
for victory strut, derisive honks and a small
confetti rain of ejectamenta in its wake.
Sure makes you wonder how the shining Cross
positioned itself for Constantine, or if
those show jets buzzing the anthem at the Rose
Bowl are imitating nature? Well, it's quite
obvious. Sergeant Alvin York beaded over
twenty Hun, lined in a trench, on the lead-
bird principle. He got religion in a lightning
storm, just like Luther, and Gary Cooper
did a bang-up job playing jim. But what
can a checkmark ever mean but "OK, right.
I gotcha."? We seem to greet these signs
of seasons' passage with more rlief
than triumph, lately, but their far calls
in early February startled me. I thought
some babies were locked and left like pups
in some cold parked car. But there they were,
such sad, insistent bleats. Over Myer's Point,
they banked East to circle once again our
bare, gray squares, white and brown in patches.
And because I knew that didn't mean a thing
beyond a second look, I knew it meant no good.

HAYDEN CARRUTH
Very Private Poem

Respecting that lovemaking last night,
What words apply? Colossal? Structure
of understood mystery? Whatever I think of
Is tinged with the sentimental, triteness,
The vegetative mythologies, etc. Fucking
Is what I want to say, but with all the wonder
It meant for our dim Indo-European
Progenitors, long millennia before
The gods. Ours was a summer suburban
Bed, no corn furrow; the air-conditioner
Whirring was not much like a votive fire
In the sacred grove. Anyway I'm tired of my old
Erotic fantasies. We were two very warm
Human beings making ourselves. The moistures
Were all our own. We slid and slipped against
Each other, and it felt like melting, and it
Continued for a long time. I guess what I truly
Understand is that indeed for that time
I melted into you more deeply than ever before
And with exquisiteness greater than I had known
Love could engender, and that I am unsure
More of me than ever remains in you now
And will remain, and that I am glad for this.

DABNEY STUART
Routine About Survival

In one of his routines about survival
the American comedian allows
he'll try anything in a crisis.
If someones pointing a pistol
at him, he promises
he'll stick his finger up the barrel.
Who knows? he says,
Maybe the bullet needs a running start.

That's comedy from the heart
in the same world where the popular author
goes beyond Z and gives us another
alphabet, one of whose letters
sweeps up the planet with its brother.
Out of the dust they make

a third voice rises
as if through static,
explaining how he bypasses
the networks by plugging in his TV
into the veins
of his arm and watching reruns
of his own dreams, free.

In a world of such routines
I could tell you these words were reading
are an explosive charge you can detonate
by whispering
them to yourself.
Try it.
Youwon't feel a thing.

LAURA JENSEN
Horse Sense

Puyallup Fair
"a moral victory for loveable me."
Churchey-la Femme

In a shaft of sun from a huge roof near the flowers
and foreign foods I eat my egg sandwich with milk.
More coffee. More shadows. Two-hundred-twenty-pound squash
Goat pulls to climb the milk platform, her hooves

win! The pan fits under. White rabbit works his art
of *I Am Not Usual*, pink neon eyes in a barn

scented sweetly by racers and rollers. Barns
lightly littered with droppings, hay-clover flowers.
Please tuck in the corner of the display of Fine Art
mere ideas of sun, ideas in lines on a milk-
white ground, mere ideas about horse hooves
out of the order as two-hundred-twenty-pound squash

in the living room: nobody wants a squash
there instead of a hassock. I am in a real barn
I am city worn I need to heat the real hooves
of swine and goat and woolly lamb. And Flowers-

each head has a halo. I can see a cow milked.
Tuck it modestly in a corner, the display of Fine Art.

But the flowers. The pansies and statice of *my* art
did not reach mammoth proportions, like the squash-
but a *moral victory for lovable me* says pride's milk
continually, as tack creaks through the barn.
A sorrel labeled *Sweet and Sour* with a blue flower-
ribbon above him looks at me & whickers. His hooves

want to pound grass below us. His hooves
pound the stall. He sees me, he says to me, *Thou Art*.
I believe. But I see myself falling in flowers
while he laughs and runs off turns tight at a squash
like he turns round the barrels. The floor of the barn
has thick sawdust where I stumble. To the sworl of milk

in dapples (gentle-giant rumps), in cream-colored milk-
tooth baby small in straw near the draft hooves
in the shadow where I started- the cold draft horse barn.
Splendor of the row brushed to lustrous art,
let me stand very peaceful with the enormous horses and squashes
let me know that the source is a jungle of white flowers-

oh giant milky flowers that make the air thick...oh milk
that feeds the horses, squashes, giant...that pumps to the hooves...
oh cloud-white art of milk pervading the barns...

WILLIAM MATTHEWS
The Author's Papers

Even from his appointment
calendar we may glean a few
clues about his inner life. For
example, on the page for January 13
he wrote *Fly to Flagstaff*
without a plane and save the city
from falling space debris by catching it.
Good intentions like this are illusory.
On the 13th Flagstaff was flattened
by space trash and there was nothing
he could do about it. So for the 14th
he wrote: *Think long and hard about*
human limitations, though that day
he was inexplicably merry, joked cruelly
about human limitations, went to bed
early and slept long. And for the
15th, like one whose shadow passes
ever ahead of him, he wrote *Who*
goes there?
Thus a long year turned
swiftly on its rim, until, let's say,
December 9th, when he wrote
in the space for December 10th a few
curt words about the speed of time
and human tears. How long it had been
since he had a twinge for Flagstaff
or loved with a round, unbroken
heart. And thus for the 11th we find
a cryptic note about how, according
to idiom, the heart breaks in *two*
(his italics). IT's hard to know
exactly what he meant (systole and
diastole?), though I like to think
each half of a heart is his, one
on the page and one with a pen,
as it were, in hand, and only a few
thin squiggles of ink to link them
briefly each day when the appointment
calendar was open and self knowledge
jotted for itself a tart, dismissive note.

PAULA RANKIN
That Spring

That spring I loved
no one, so was empty
for letting others' sadness fill me.
The girl next door, pregnant,
betrayed, played Roy Orbison
all night--Love hurts, scars, wounds, mars.
My office-mate, deserted by his wife, flicked
her photograph to ashes--she curled into a lip,
a lash, a smudge
of memory. *Love's poor fools,* I thought,
and hugged their griefs
like flowers. I walked the neighborhood
brimming with what I called Desire's best,
true Spring, nothing
between my five senses
and sap, grass, leaves.
I could have been a leaf, pure chlorophyll
urging towards its palm-sized share--
--so organic. The chow whose bark had been cut
chased my dog with sounds like 83-year-old Tennyson
reading *In Memoriam* on Edison's wax cylinder--
--more music of hopeless love--couldn't he smell
she'd been spayed? I slept dreamless, my back
to the window. Love
was all behind me
and so far ahead
I could not make out a brightness, a frizz
of silver hair, syllables clogging a larynx like grackles
of someone crying, joy's shapes a year down the road
waving and waving. *Tell me again*, I would ask
the girl next door, my office-mate, *how love mars.*
I couldn't get enough of their sadness
or of those iridescent blue-black birds
like bruises rising from lovers' skins,
borne aloft by such huge, thumping hearts.

EDWARD HIRSCH
Heaven for Minor Leaguers

Somewhere there should be a paradise
For Minor Leaguers, a flawless diamond
Glittering in a flawless world, a sparkling
Green field floating under starry lights

Where all the failed players could gather
Together and be cured. Like Jesus healing
The sick, there should be a player-saint
Who'd give new wheels to aging shortstops,

Tough new knees to weak-kneed catchers,
And strong left arms to weakening southpaws;
He'd give steel nerves to relief pitchers
And calm, strategic minds to their coaches.

Last night I dreamt that my dying uncle,
Who loved baseball more than his three wives,
Was a rangy kid again, a second baseman
Who could suddenly hit in all directions,

A lean and cocky switch-hitter spraying
Singles to left and hard doubles to right,
Lining triples into the gaps even slamming
Occasional home runs into the center field stands.

But when I woke up he was still a man
With advanced cancer and three divorces,
Bitter stories of cheap hotels and hopeless
Road trips, rocky baselines and cruel fans,

A body he hated. Somewhere there should be
Another world for him--and for us, too,
The clumsy ones, life's utility infielders,
Dumb rookies and dying veterans,

A dimension where we could all be cured,
A league where we could play at last
On perfect diamonds, sparkling forever
Under the sky's lights, the luminous heavens.

SHELBY STEPHENSON
What We Cannot See

The places I touched as a boy
say you are always
alone, but be not afraid: make sure
you forgive yourself
often, and keep your means in a thimble:

look at the grass
gleaming and know you must move into a lifting-up
exercise: persist
in all motions: do not wonder if it
really matters, for the sky
says no, inspiration rolls over and whimpers:
wait a long time for the world to be
on the least footing, a place
to place your understanding, cornerstone,
word,

a space justice fits when you rise to walk
out of yourself to say
Here I am, humanity's boll weevil, family
and all, waiting for you, there, squatted
under a pine
by the edge of the marsh, saying
to yourself, or the tree, look
at that form, and then it is gone into luminescence
between your eyes.

MARK COX

Piecing the Grand Canyon Together

I can't recall the particulars either.
All I remember is the back of my camera,
the way the smudged windows of that summer
grew round as I approached them,
the sound of some meticulous perspective
as it settled behind my eye

Perhaps we sat like this then,
on the floor of a family reunion,
buy playing Hearts of Old Maid--
our grandparents practicing for their next run
at childhood, us kids loosening up for the stretch.

That may have been the year
that Eddie Sachs died at Indy
and I dropped my new radio. McCarver
would have been catching for the Cards,
and I, most surely, had my head out the window
where the interstate was like some young girl,
crazy for my new eyes and ears,
my new throat, my new haircut.

The pictures I took were huge ones,
interesting for the absence of anything familial,
or even human, for a tentative quality caused
by the force of the wind and you, as I remember,
tugging at my belt. Rivers,
fields, lots of sky. I think now
that what I really wanted was air, something
to take back to my room in Illinois. What
I really wanted was to blow up my life; a bigger chest,
arms that could make things stay where I put them.

Most are labelled simply. Kansas. Oklahoma. New
Mexico. But my favorite is the one of this canyon,
taken at an angle, as if I were leaning over
and into it, screwing my head down
into whatever it meant to me.
It is obvious that my hands were shaking,

as I shake now, a little,
leaning over this unfinished fear,
looking down into a beige carpet,
unable to remember what you looked like, sister,
standing there next to the camera,
where you have always been.

SANDRA MOORE
Slow Fires

Poets tell a great many lies.
Istan DiVega, from *The Lost Prince*
by Paul Edwin Zimmer

There is so little time to tell you everything
I don't know. I never knew if my grandmother
knew the swamp. Before they moved here,
to the mountain, my grandparents lived
at the edge of the Florida swamplands
and from their bedroom window I could see
the line of cypress trees marking where
the land went bad. Before daylight
my grandfather would set her in her chair
at the window the way she had set out
the jasmine in the yard years before.
Waiting there with her for the dawn,
I didn't know the swamp was bruning.
The week before, lightning had struck deep
somewhere in the cypress trees and set
the peat burning. Papa said the peat
was so thick the swamp could burn
for weeks like wet leaves, without smoke,
without heat, until the peat got thin
and flared into the trees.

They moved here more because of the fire
than because of grandmother's illness.
Ever since she died and we've lived
here with Papa, I've lain awake during storms
while you slept and wondered if, as she
and Papa lay in bed like spoons
in a drawer, she knew that she had given up
the last of her sickness to her two youngest
children. Before I married you, she liked
to tell me that when she was pregnant
with my father, she suffered seven hours
of false labor, giving him more time
to know her than her other children.
The desire for life couldn't keep them
both safe just as it won't save our child

who knows me now better than I do.

I need you to understand. Her sickness
blossomed in her like the jasmine
in the fertile soil by the cypress.
When I stayed with her the last week
she said that when the fire seeped
into the yard and Papa was carrying her
to the car, she could smell the jasmine
burning like a fine exotic perfume.
She didn't tell me if she kept the jasmine
or the fragrance or to keep the moss
and wet earth distant. Here, she could grow
only that one mimosa. but then,
she needed everything, as I will need
everything. Tomorrow, or maybe
the next day, the mimosa might bloom
for me as it did for her There are no
promises here anyone can keep, not even
the earth which can keep only bodies
and peat and mimosa and the vanished
color of dawn, all waiting, like us,
to flare up and die.

CATHY WAGNER
Travel

At the convent, I try to dry the paper over a lawn chair.
Sister Marie says I know nothing. My face is one
people recognize, though Im no one they know.

Sister Marie's heart hurts, for Milan--her stories
of dark girls in the street, markets,

fringed canopies. Under the tent
at the handicapped picnic, the blind man
held my hand for forty minutes and I could not
tell what he did with his other under the table.

Later in the grass, Marie touches my cheek.
I follow the roots of the tree with my fingers.
I saw a tree grown through a house once. There was a railing
around it on the second floor--you could see its roots
push under the floor below--and a branch bent
against a high window.

In my bed tonight, I make a hammock
of myself, nestling in my ribs,
and swing it for the sky.

MARK DOTY
A Collection Of Minerals

Weekdays on the island my father
engineered a road past the pink
and blue of empty summerhouses
to the missile silo; he took me down once
into the corrugated metal shaft

where the white rocket would
lowered into place, covered over
with brush and earth once the warhead
was assembled. That afternoon
l reeled in a yellowtail,

a disc of a fish
the color of his bulldozers,
gills fluttering on the narrow body
only my thumb's width from eye
to windshield eye. Glittering

fool's gold, it was no good
to eat. Then, my father intent
on the water, my line rushed in zigzags
like a faultline opening;
what I pulled onto the metal pier

was a rainbowed thrust
of slick muscle coiling
far from anything it knew,
shuddering in air as if
it were in pain, as if

it required secrecy
and darkness. My father ran
to the back of his flatbed
-- the government truck, its number
stencilled in a chalky tattoo --

rifled in his toolbox for the machete
he oiled and sharpened Saturday mornings.
This was Titusville, Florida,
the year our class practiced

climbing under our desks,

holding our hands over our faces
and eyes; our mothers stocked up
on canned goods, making caches
beneath the kitchen sink, “in case,"
and men bought knives or rifles

for “protection.” How sad we must have looked,
the fourth grade kneeling
on the marbled linoleum
while our teacher described the sirens,
what would become or the windows,

and offered us the defense
of our formica desktops placed squarely
between ourselves and unimaginable
light. In my mineral collection,
a box of little stones glue in rows

and labeled--feldspar, amethyst,
pyrite--there was a tiny green chunk
or uranium. I’d opened the box
in the dark to see if it would glow
like the face of my parents’ alarm

expecting its chilly radiance
to steal over my bed as it burned out
its halflife. But nothing happened,
and so I kept it in a drawer,
thinking it would change something,

something it touched might become important
or gigantic. When the teacher said
if the bomb fell our bodies would change,
I thought of the jagged surface
of the stone, ancient

and at home in the dark. My father
hacked at the eel until
there were only fragments
of the rippling it had been;
even the pieces

twisted on the steel pier

until he swept them over the edge
with the blade and told me to pack
my tacklebox and drove me home.
Where I was restless, and felt

something had been violated, cut apart
from its submerged privacy,
and the stones in the case seemed puny
and trivial, the sheen of the satin spar
unlikely and disturbing, the uranium

turned inward, revealing nothing,
and in a while I tore the stones loose
from the box one by one and traded them
for something I now cannot remember.

DAVID WOJAHN
A Few Things I Should Tell You Before I Read My Next Poem

"Thank you for your patience thus far. This next poem
Will be my last. I'm sorry to report that it's a longer
Piece, but you have been such a good a loyal
Audience, I thought you might enjoy this one,
Which I'm reading to an audience for the first time.
I hope you will not find the poem troubling.

But I'm sorry: one gets into trouble
Making apologies like this before reading a poem.
You see, even i make mistakes, at times.
But please, bear with me a little longer.
I have been writing verse for decades. Once,
I strived for honest, and poetry kept me loyal

To my quest for Truth. Now I see concealment is all.

Nothing one writes--I'll speak vernacularly here--is true: 'Bull-
Shit' is inevitable in poems, especially in one
I plan to read you momentarily, an important poem
For me, in which I abandon lucidity after long
Struggle--ah, versifying, such an exquisite pastime!

(Mr. Chairman, how am I doing for time?)
Oh, I must explain the epigraph from Ignatius Loyola.
It's in Latin, a language none of you know any longer,
I suppose. Loyola states, in rough translation, 'Don't trouble
God with clarity.' Derrida expresses this too. Poems,
Monsieur Derrida suggests, are at best engaging falsehoods. Anyone

Among you agree with this contention? No one
Save Professor Sparks? Once upon a time,
My friends, prosody and play defined the poet's
Role. Now the 'poets' are all il-
Literate boors. Audiences, too. Why do I even trouble
Myself to read my work before you? Well, the long

And the short of it is an honorarium of several grand, along
With some quite lovely perks. The coed masseuse was won-

Derful, and I thank comp-lit for taking the trouble
To provide her. We had a marvelous time.
As you know, I was an undergraduate here, and remain loyal
To my *alma mater* (Latin again). My first poems

Were composed here. So I dedicate this poem to you, my loyal
True-Blue audience. Thank you for your time.
Thank you from the bottom of my heart. This next poem's a long one:

LINDA HULL
Cubism, Barcelona

So easily you fall to sleep, the room a cage of rain,
the wallpaper's pinstripe floral another rift
between us, this commerce of silences and mysteries
that is marriage, but that's not what this is about.

It's this wet balcony, filigreed, the rusty fan of spikes
the pensione's installed against thieves and this weather--

needling rain that diminuendoes into vapor, fog
that drags its cat's belly above the yellow spikes
of leaves, the hungry map the hustlers make stitching through
the carnival crowd below, and I'm thinking about Picasso's

early work--an exhibit of childhood notebooks, a *Poetic*'s
margins twisting with doves and bulls and harlequins. Your face,

our friends', the sullen milling Spainiards, repeated canvases
of faces dismantled, fractured so as to contain
the planar flux of human expression--bored, to lust
and fear, then rapture and beyond. He was powerless,

wasnt he, before all that white space? I mean he had to
fill it in, and I can fill the blank space of this room

between you and me, between me and the raucous promenade,
with all the rooms and galleries I've known, now so wantonly
painting themselves across this room, this night, the way
I extend my hand and the paseo, foreign beyond my fingertips,

dissolves to a familiar catastrophe of facades, the angles
of walls and ceilings opening all the way to the waterfront

where the standard naked lightbulb offers its crude flower
of electricity to blue the dark abundant hair a woman
I could have been is brushing, a torn shade rolled up to see
the bird vendor's cat upon his shoulder or, at some other stage

in their pursuit, the same French sailor I see drunkenly
courting the queen dolled in bedsheet and motorcycle chain,

some drag diva strung out on something I can't name, something
that kicks like this vicious twin inside who longs to walk
where guidebooks say not to, who longs to follow beyond all
common sense, that childhood love of terror that propels us

through funhouses and arcades, mother of strange beauty and faith.
But it's only chill rain that gathers in my palm, the empty

terracotta pots that flank the balcony. Rain and the ache
in my hands today, those off-tilt Gaudis queasily spelling
the tilt from pot to port any life describes: Boston's damp cold
and we're stuffing rags again in broken windows, that condemned

brownstone on harshly passionate--Mr. Lowell--Marlborough Street
where our feet skimmed, polished black across the floor

damp, the tattered hems of trousers. Simply trying, like always,
to con our way to some new dimension. And weren't we glamorous?
Oh, calendar pages riffling in the artificial wind
of some off-screen fan, a way to show life passing, the blurred

collage of images we collect to show everything and nothing
has changed. But I want to talk about the swans of Barcelona

this afternoon in the monastery pool, tattered palms
and small bitter oranges smashed against the pavement stones.
And those swans, luxurious and shrill by turns. It's not swans
that arrest me now--only that sailor staggering on the paseo

fisting the air between him and the queen, shouting *je sens, je sens,*
but he isn't able to say what he feels any more than I understand

how it is that perspective breaks down, that the buried life
wants out on sleepless night amidst these coils of citizens,
a carnival dragon snaking, sodden, through the trees above them.
I know. I know, there's got to be more than people ruthlessly

hurricaned from port to port. I know tomorrow is a prayer
that means hope, that now you breathe softly, sleeping face

rent by sooted shadows the thief's grill throws while you're
turned into whatever dream you've made of these curious days
filled with cockatoos and swans, the endless rain.
Things get pretty extreme, then tomorrow little blades

of grass will run from silver into green
down the waterfront esplanade where a waiter places

ashtrays on the corners of tablecloths
to keep them firmly anchored, not sailing away.
The drag queen will be hustling, down on her knees
in the subway, a few exotic feathers twisting in the wind.

But it won't be me, Jack. It won't be me.

CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY
The Scales--Easter Weekend, 1989

All week in Belgrade a chill grey
has risen off the Danube and Sava
and hung in the form of air above
the streets; a thick and silent lace
of clouds, grey too, is stalled
over the apartments and cement
architectures of the state.
And when you
stand on the Roman fort of Kalemegdan,
that promentory driven wedge-like
into the convergence of these waters,
you can see the flat river banks tipped
like an old set of scales--new city and old,
a little played off against a little less...

I walk park to park and finally find one
free of crowds, away from coal smoke
oiling the air. Here, only a couple dogs,
and one stray old man in overcoat and beret
shuffling along the paths, his whiskers and hair
white as chestnut spikes holding on for June.
On a low limb of oak a magpie, self-possessed
in her black and white formal suit, is telling
a German police dog just where to get off--
otherwise, the man is alone as anyone
can be. For I've seen the men in their usual
throngs wrangling over what must be
politics or chess. smoking fearlessly,
filling the benches the way crows fill the trees,
strolling through the great fort all overgrown
and green along the rivers, spitting with a modicum
of style into the managed beds of flowers

Surely, he was born here--before there was a Party,
even before some king. Wife, friends all gone
now--what could a holiday mean to him,
what could he be weighing out now but time?
So he saunters along at the contemplative rate
of clouds, in a circle around the edges
of the paths where no one disturbs

his memories, or where perhaps, nothing
brings them back.
I too have friends out of reach--
beyond one sea or another, or, like this, truly beyond
some deeper blue--friends I would drink with
and make such recoveries that our home
along that southern coast would swim back to us
despite the specific gravity of loss, no matter
our dull whereabouts or years, so we might sing
that early sunlight down the sandstone walls,
and salt-spray skimming the Spanish tiles...
Yet even so, here I have no real complaints,
nothing so cloud-heavy over the humors
that the thermodynamic mists from a Slivovitz
can't burn it off, or breathe light into it
as they reach down until the heart glows
like a pearl, a sun lifting from some far
and flame blue sea.
Still, here I am in this
dark May, and if, as Unamuno said, there is
a heaven, but it's shining inside the earth,
and you must keep the planks of your casket
beneath your bed at all times to enter there,
we evidently must go to some lengths to be
rinsed clear enough of our days to see it.
For example, this grand father, pacing
with determination around pale rises
without a second thought for weather,
for his body that is now all bones and soul--
or all bones--what does he have left
except his thoughts and these flowers
against the grey, except his desire
to just keep moving?
The children are about,
flitting like sparrows up and down
the pedestrian mall; the whole city
seems turned out to window-shop, to parade
their tinted hair before the closed shops,
the illuminated islands of consumer displays.
Teenager girls lock arms and promenade,
soldiers are smoking confidently in line
outside the theater, red and white awnings
on ice cream carts and cafes wave indifferently
in wind. Just the irate magpie and one blackbird
are singing as if something depended on it

only this old man taking the remaining silence on,
alone--from where I sit, I have to think that they
are about the only ones left with the question
of God still hanging in the balance.

WILLIAM MATTHEWS
In The Boathouse

Reflected light--it had leaked in between
the planks--freckled the walls. “Kiss me,” she’d say.
The boat swayed us. Raptly we grazed
on one another’s mouths, as if to eat

hunger and be filled. And then she’d take my
livid cock in her deft fist and slowly coax
me to erupt. Next she’d delve in her purse
for an embroidered handkerchief and wipe

me dry. She wore no underpants and brought
her purse with a fresh linen handkerchief
each afternoon. She had such a frank mischief
in her eyes, she lowered them to say, “Now,

kiss me somewhere else.” A stern friend accused
me: “It’s only physical, right?” Well, yes,
like a cloud or a marmot, like the nervous
system, like the world whose famous beauty

is but skin-deep. And from the lush blossom
of her brain to the heart’s southernmost tip,
Cape Clitoris, and to her toes, the spirit
lolled in its sticky flesh, its kingdom come.

MARVIN BELL

Meditation on Sadness

This regretting has got to stop.
Piece of paper.
Sesame seed from the bakery bag.
Poppy seeds, seeds of poppycock.
To be that which is the illusion of the mind.
Outdated quick hoot of owl with its eyes frozen open.
Confluence of two rivers clanging against their banks.
Weedy graves of Pound and Stravinsky.
Where is the black break of yesteryear?
Teeth wobbling in their sockets, bulbs flickering.
Chicory tar residue was something good then.
I in my nightclothes writing not for eternity but for oblivion.
Oblivion the taskmaster, we write for his reckless love.

MARY RUEFLE
Italics Mine

It’s winter, and we don't have to exist any more,
the bittersweet takes over and the wind generated by stars,

but not in any maniacal fashion, more like new-born
moles, naked and blonde before they begin to dig.

which is instantly the offspring of a morbid fancy,
and idle scratching becomes an ultimatum

and the can opener goes round and round
until at last the soup lid falls in the soup

and we are slightly thankful for the thing we knew
would happen, though later fill with regret

as retrieving it proves hard and more embarrassing
than the wine that keeps singing prettily on the finish,

The crest jewel of discrimination at a party without
ice, thus winter’s a time when the dead can say

anything and it sounds like advice, while outside
the cold sufis grow impatient and angry while waiting

to be devoured, they whirl away in a funnel of snow
like skeletons dancing with pears, one species of mole

can tunnel seven feet per second, but that is going
too far, something we have a sense of after all,

but if we suddenly remembered everything we’d forgotten,
and forgot everything we usually remembered,

we’d be totally different people.

JAMES TATE
The Escapade

When Patsy came home from work, I told her the bad news. "I resigned from my job today," I said. “What?" she said. "Grant Jennings told me the report I had been working on for the past five weeks, day and night, as you'll recall, was absolutely useless. He said all the figures appear to have been made up out of thin air. He called me all kinds of foul names, and I had no choice but to tender my resignation." Patsy took off her coat and walked around the room scratching her head. “Can you sue the bastard?" she said. "Well some of the figures might have been off a little," I said. “How could that be? You know that business inside and out," she said. "I've put quite a bit of money aside, you know. We could go someplace," I said. "But I've got my job. We have the house and our friends," she said. “I've got over thirty million dollars,” I said. "Thirty million. You must be crazy,” she said. She went into the kitchen, and started nervously making herself a cup of tea. Maybe telling her was a mistake. I thought she would be happy for us. But Patsy's such a straight-arrow. “We could go someplace really nice," I said, “and never work again. Come on, we've both worked hard all of our lives. We deserve a break." "They’ll catch us wherever we go. And then what? We’ll spend the rest of our lives in prison. Is that what you want?" she said. “It’s just loose change. I was in charge of the books. They’ll never figure it out," I said. Patsy was thinking. She looked very distraught. “If you turned yourself and with all of the money, you could plea bargain," she said. “It might not be too bad," she said. “No way in hell am I going to do anything like that. I feel the company owes it to me, and I'm going to enjoy it," I said. Patsy look like she was going to cry. "I really liked our lives as they were, both of us working, and our weekends together," she said. "It had to end. It was too good," I said. We sat there in silence, mourning the end of an era. Finally, I said, “It's all a lie, Patsy. I was just testing you, to see which way you to go if it came to that. And, now, I can see that you'd leave me, maybe even turn me in. And all along I thought you loved me, that you'd stick with me through anything. Well, I still have my job, and I certainly don't have thirty million.

But I have to wonder about your loyalty," I said.
Her eyes were popping out of her skull. "Frank, you're crazy. You're sick. How could you put me through this?" she said. Then she started laughing really wildly. I was frightened and didn't know what to say. "My god, you're a funny man. And that's why I'd go with you anywhere," she said, still shaking her head like a crazy person. I didn't even have a plan. I looked around the room for anything to hold on to.

RICHARD KATROVAS
Libuse

Spring, 2000

Before bright Charles the Fourth mandated both
the Castle and St. Vitus, and had dreamed
so much of Prague that is still glorious,
a little patch above what's now Prague 4
was home to legendary kings and queens,
and one folktale from when the Slavs were tribes
just through with wandering and hunkered down
upon this ridge above the Vltava,
recalls a full-scale war between the men
and women that the women won, before
they were vanquished utterly unto this day.

My daughters walk with me through Vysehrad,
the three-year old waddling from potential harm
to near-disaster, touching everything,
or trying to; the nine-year old just talks
unceasingly, firing questions faster than
I can respond, not waiting for an answer
before assaulting with another one.
As a younger man I could not know that some
day I would relish such a harried joy
as strolling hand-in-hand with little girls.

What may a man In good faith dream for them?
I dream they rise above their bodies' codes
as every man and woman must who's not
insane or drifting in a gray despair,
and so refuse all urges to submit
their lives to promises of tenderness,
even as each seeks her fount of tenderness.
I dream they find that power over life
which is firm tethering to an endless task.
I dream they live as though each waking hour
were prayer to nothing but their love of life
and to that end are kind to all who wish
them well, but swift to strike at enemies
at least such ones as do them covert harm.
l dream for them long lives of sweet resistance

and as we pause at the feet of Libuse,
the prescient heroine of ancient Prague,
the small one squeals, then pulls away and runs
to climb the statue, and the older one
just wants to know if a woman chiseled it.

LESLIE ULLMAN
Against Diffuse Awareness

Do not speculate on the destination of
the plastic bag blowing across the parking lot
or how the queen-sized mattress ended up on the freeway.

Do not let your mind stray, midway
between freezer and microwave, to
contemplate how every gadget in your
kitchen, every digital number
and bleep, has been extracted from rock
or water. Vanished fire. Wind.

Do not dwell on random motion, wave-particle
duality, thermodynamics, or any other
commotion going on in the air you breathe,
the water that runs over your hands,
transformations ubiquitous and fleeting as the glint
of a shod hoof disappearing in the sun

Do not stare into vacant lots in the middle of cities
like Chcago, with their bald spots and empty cartons
and weeks gone out of control, each detail

a whole genealogy of neglect--or try to
imagine the vast roots that once reigned there
as branches held their poise, like the arms
of flamenco dancers, in hard rain.

Do not pause at the sound of someone
weeping quietly--say, behind a newspaper
on the train, in a phone booth, or a restroom stall--
as each exhalation. having gathered itself
from a rare moment of communion
with the soul (which for that moment is not
an abstraction) suspends itself.

Forget this story-just one of many that crowd
the dumping grounds of what you insist
you don't have time for--about a peasant
helped build the great cathedral at Chartres,
who sluiced dirt from his tired body one evening

and stood before his hut, letting his mind
roam with the crickets and sheep. As the stars
faded, his thoughts lifted him
from himself and set him down
as rough quarried stone, as gold
in the priests coffers, as prayer on the lips
of a new window, as the play of light beyond
a tunnel etched behind the eyes of his newborn son
no in his own lifetime would not see the cathedral finished

JIM DANIELS

Hung Out to Dry

David Cosmo wet his pants
In third grade. It would have been
Better for him if he could at least
Have been laughing-- laughing
Too much, not quietly alone
In the back row.

Uncle ted's noose was velvet.
A month's worth of garbage
Stacked by the back door.
In his journal he wrote
I walked on water.

Some of us live on, smelling
Of chlorine and cleanser.
Our bright bulbs last forever
And we cough our way into laughter.

While we take our snapshots,
Who will notice the lone swimmer
Stroking perfectly over the falls?

GARY MARGOLIS
The Future Wants to Disappear

The future wants to disappear
    in a crowd, to find itself
ecstatic among the nameless,
    wants to return from the dark side
of the moon where we lost
    sight of it for awhile, heard only
its staticy whisper. Wants to
    look up at a ball of lights counting
down as if it were looking
    in a mirror and to vanish
below the street before anyone
    knew it was there, to rid itself
of the past in any way possible.
    This future wants to erase its serial
number, the finger print of its
    heart. to give up its place in line
because whatever it needed is forgiven
  and lost. Because already the mission
is designated as "recovery not rescue"
    and whatever we hoped was still alive
was only imagined for its own purpose.
    Because it was forgotten that walls
and windows can breathe, that a shadow
    can be sent in to search ahead
of a dog, that a dog can be named
    a saint for what it finds in the future.

THOMAS RABBITT
The Good Host

Tired of it, the dog has left an old glove
Lying in the yard. It's a dead man's hand
Come from underground, whence the rest will follow.
April Fools Day. Where's the apostrophe?
The dog doesn't know. Do you? How can we
Be expected to keep track of these things?
Like midges, gone tonight and back tomorrow,
They worry us with what we cannot love.
Drink up. We'll toast the plagues scourging the land –
Ebola Fever, Foot and Mouth Disease,
The scurfy fox we found this morning back
To claim the third of the hens it had killed.
Foxes with mange, mud snails with liver flukes…
You and I, elemental host and guest,
Sit with our whiskey by the fire, thrilled
That the birds we hear might be nightingales.
One of us has been imagining things.
Happy enough, in this moment of rest,
What matter if we're one another's flukes?
Whether we're in Africa or Ireland
Or lost in the States, we'll find the air filled
With so much incongruent life it sings.
No need for our chorus of howls and wails.
Give the world a hand. Didn't your long scream
This morning mean you loved life's latest jest?

ART SMITH
Whose Army?

The age is hard on everyone. The young
Without mothers, adrift on nothing
But promises from fathers. The rest of us
Getting what we deserve, leaders
Lying to us, the usual, war & famine.
But something goes on underneath.
In the yard the early evening darkens
To its casual greenness. All these years,
But it's not enough. My wife,
My father and sister, buried in a desert
Thousands of miles from here. My mother grows
Elderly there. That sadness. And then a close friend—
And one year later his much younger widow.
So much gone. Still, there is
Something in me stubborn.
What now? it asks. Where to?

WILLIAM PITT ROOT

4 Glimpses Into A Painting Of Li Po Looking At A Waterfall

At a glance it seemed
this Chinese geezer stood
uprooted on bits
of disjointed moon
and faced a sea
as flat
and upright as a
wall, white and blue.
It was so odd I stared
and saw again
the rapt man leaning
on a stick this time
and leaning into
the wall of water.
He was solid as
the bulging bulb of
stone he stood upon,
solid as the water.
Awed, I looked
at the wide blue eye
of water stopped
in its falling
by the eye
of its beholder,
saw water staring
at a man whose
leaning figure flowed
in robes like
ritual flames.
Such a one—to find
this waterfall,
to stop its eye
with his! He leans
forward and stares.
He stares, leaning
on a staff made of
the one stick
in the world

as straight as light,
its base rooted in time,
its bald head blooming
in the void
of all that seems to be
at the heart of all that is.

PAMELA USCHUK
To Hook What's Tender

The sheer weight of ice
brings down maples
shattering like chandeliers
that take out power lines
under bus loads of clouds,
spooking fogged-in horses
who leap from the shrapnel
of falling limbs, from
iced leaves the size of umbrellas
crashing to earth under
a Chinese chestnut
in this month when
death memorizes a new guest list
the way my cat licks herself
into a frenzy of need
after wandering night's haze
haunted by invisible enemies.
She's been attacked before and
she can't help but bite my thumb
my toes, to hook what's tender.

What do those men, secure
in flocked beds just off
the Beltway, dream at week's start
before they slip on
congressional suits and limousines,
men who ceded war powers
and now must read the daily
casualty counts of constituents?

Headlines wait for the clank
and bite of tanks, for hissing missiles
to split air's infinitives
for soldiers just out of high school
to come home from Iraq
with missing limbs, for reservists
to kiss kids goodbye, for muzzeins
to pray up the first light
and the last, for all of us
numbed by the syringe of fear

to wake and hold back an ice storm
that explodes what we thought
were the sturdiest trees

DAVID WOJAHN
After Ovid

(Metamorphoses, Book I: The Five Ages)

The Age of Gold

Golden was the first age
& of laws
men knew nothing,
for virtue was
practiced by all.
Prisons & shackles,
judges pounding gavels--
none did yet exist
& on the mountain tops
no tall pines had been felled
for the masts of ships
to sail toward
distant shores.
No moats, no city walls,
no towns besieged.
No trumpets, no swords,
no crested helmets.
Men of all nations
dwelled in harmony.
No rake or ploughshare
tilled the earth,
which gave of herself
freely,
in all her abundance.
& men gathered fruit
without effort,
wild strawberries
upon the hillsides,
cherries,
acorns collected from
Jove's sacred oak.
Perpetual spring
& gentle Zephyr's
warm breath coaxed
the hillside flowers up
unsown
the fields goldening

with wheat,
streams of nectar,
streams of milk,
the golden honey
oozing from the comb.
But when Saturn
was hurled down to Tartarus,
Jove *The Age of Silver*
now ruled the world
& the age
of silver commenced--
spring
cut off by summer,
fall begetting winter.
Parched scorched fields
of August,
icicles glinting
in cold December wind.
Men now sought
dwelling places,
caves, crude huts
fashioned of bark & sticks.
The long
furrows of wheat
were sown,
oxen yoked
& groaning as they
pulled the plows. *The Age of Bronze*
& a third age,
of bronze, commenced,
bringing with it
warfare
& savagery
as yet unknown.
But crueler still
was the age of iron,
of baselessness
unparalleled-- *The Age of Iron*
avarice, greed, deceit.
Ships unfurled
their sails,
the mountain pines
felled
for masts & fences.
& men required

more from the earth
than crops,
gouging iron
from deep mine tunnels
& gold,
pernicious gold.
Swords were raised
by bloody hands.
Men lived to pillage.
Guests
feared their hosts, the father
his own son-in-law.
Even brothers
disdained each other.
Husbands plotted
the deaths of wives,
wives those of husbands.
Evil stepmothers
concocted
fatal potions.
Sons cared only
that their fathers
willed them everything
& prayed for them
to die
before their time.
Piety
long ago was slain.
& Astrea, goddess of justice,
departed in disgust
the precincts of this
blood-soaked world.
& of this latest age? *The Fifth Age*
Connection
upon connection,
its locust-drone
unceasing.
The GPS zooms in to gather pixels
forming the shape
of a speeding car.
Reaching the checkpoint,
the shape explodes,
black smoke on the screen.
Prayer wheel
on a snake farm

in a whirlwind.
The operating system
is the Gorgon's head
uplifted.
We hiss in unison.
Format of adder fang,
format of viper-tongue.
Along
the endless pathways
do we crawl.
You kill
your classmate for
a pair of tennis shoes
& transmit
the bled-out body
to your homeys
via video phone
& then to the mall
to splurge on his
credit card.
One hundred stories
over Houston,
Armani-suited
jackals talk
exploration rights
to oil fields
in Kazakhstan.
They Google themselves
on the way
to porn sights,
watching themselves
shake hands
with Republican whips
before the screen
gives way
to the card shuffle
of nipple & crotch.
The mall
surveillance cameras
watch you
wash blood
down the men's room sink.
Then it's off
to Electronics,
plasma TVs, the Visa

not yet maxed out.
A crowd in Tehran
on 27 screens
burning in effigy
the Great American Satan
who at this moment
lands his chopper
on the White House Lawn.
No, it is 27 faces
of the same pubescent singer,
bass line
quickening,
her pouting lips pressed
to the screen.
Against glass walls
the serpent-head tiara
seethes.
You can download
the toxins
directly to your brain.

WILLIAM OLSEN
A Personal History of the Profane

So many ways to curse the world
out on the dock by the launch,
shallow water, little lappings
the sole audibles for all we know
raising their voices to their extreme
utmost weakness to a world
all water as water doesn't drown.
Wave after wave, I must
stop shaking my head at the past,
I must stop expecting all
I have forgotten to remember
me, all I can't express
to speak out on my behalf,
waves carrying last sunlight
that breaks when they break.
This legacy waits for me
like a statue to be called in
from a dock while across the lake a bark
from a dog I'd never see
tries to tear itself to meat.
I'm meant to eat that past,
I've tried to write it down a million times
but the essence of it is
below was unattainable,
bluegills too quick for hand
and a rain coming in, my father
muttering fuck fuck fuck
not to curse the moment
or to copulate with it or
the rain but because he wanted to fish,
then taking the lord's name,
for sake of fish all outraged
words and because it was that or walk away,
there wasn't a word not worth
a try that dusk beneath dignification.
Blasphemies, pleas, commands,
holy-family roll calls, fecund
desecrations, the place of birth,
its instrument, hate moans,
pissed off mutters from afar,

self-impregnations, self-negations,
the good lord's vain names
taken sail and silence made,
and the cursed words helpless
and the mildness even in curse
and the shame of all occasion
and the guide and the guided
and the walk up from shore
and the same moon never again,
a lake with its black back up to a cottage
with its bulky claim on dusk
a raven might have painted,
or was it a bluebird? And it was
going to fly away and it was
going to cost my life's labor,
so better be good at it, better
pull your shit together because
the goddam past is here and
not even we are really there,
and already the oblong willow leaves
rattled like wooden applause
not expectantly for rain but
because the terrifying words
were finally over themselves
yet hanging on like waterfalls,
and the worst words cursed
were no less helpless than the best.

PAUL GUEST
My Hell

Is probably different than yours, as we keep
meeting for the first time, the exquisite
first, in the magazines aisle
of the drug store and we never speak
or even seem to notice each other,
at least you don't, though I'm dressed
to be seen, rolled neck to knee
in duct tape and not because I love pain
or even like it but philosophically speaking
what does it matter to add more
to so much and, anyway, the idea
is visual, my pale flesh constrained
by the tape with which people's voices are always blockaded
in movies, when Fate's day calendar
suddenly pencils in bank robbery
or kidnapping or some other distasteful felony--
but I apologize, this has nothing
to do with anything, except maybe fear,
which is everything, the whip to the restive nerve,
and I'm reminded of horses racing,
when one's leg explodes like an M-80
there in the midst of speed
and if the injury is too grievous
there in the dirt he's put down
and everyone in the stands
must decide whether to weep or applaud
this newly dead thing
as though the noise, any noise, could ever be noble
and this seems like another
hell, a small one, maybe, conceptually fleeting,
not the one guttering
throughout a good chunk of Western civilization,
not to mention my apple-cheeked
childhood liberally salted
with fear, *to taste*, you might say
in a fit of cleansing pique
this hell sold on TV by men
so powder-white, so gravely coiffed, so wholly lard,
it was a difficult thing
not to perversely love all that flash

flood of magma streaming
from the veins of their mouth
difficult not to itemize so much
gnashing, wailing, darkness, damnation, et cetera,
on insurance forms or income
tax returns or handmade Valentines
or even crappy Batman ones I bought you
here in this hoard
of condoms and laxatives
where I come to look on you like another thwarted urge.

GERRY LAFEMINA

On Noting that Penn Station Doesn't Have Constellations Painted on Its Ceilings

How patient we all are--the businessmen & administrative
assistants, the students, the young photographer with a toothpick
in her mouth, off-duty cops,& waiters, & who knows
who else, all of us: a perfect democracy of patience
Long Island Railroad,
Penn Station.

Above us Madison Square Garden where the '94 Rangers won
the Stanley Cup & where one old-time hockey fan raise da sign:
Now I can die in peace.
Further up, above the blue seats
& the Jumbotron scoreboard, early dusk with rain.

Pick your philosophy for what's beyond that --
remnants of the big bang still cloying
& physicists seeking proof of strings,
the next small thing, which, they concede, there's little evidence of
despite equations & calculations,
all their programmed algorithms ....
Here we are

at the outset of the 21st century
& science still functions on a foundation of faith.
& the MTA still hasn't figured out how to let us know
which track the Farmingdale train will leave from;
so we stand here like figures in Gifford Beal's *A Puff of Smoke*

the steam train never visible
though porters push large carts of luggage
as people ascend from an unseen platform
--are they coming home or arriving in a strange place?
At Rangers games
those of us in the blue seats would mock the fans
who left early & so catch their trains.

I first saw Beal's painting in '91 & its taken me fourteen years
to write this poem. It's taken me longer to fall in love again.
So I envy the Latino kid who's able to approach the photographer
& say, *Excuse me, I mean no disrespect. I just thought you'd like to know
you're beautiful.* Then, before she can respond,

he moves on
& I can't think of the right words--the right metaphor--
to describe her face at that instant
though I've no doubt she wishes someone had taken *her*
snapshot right then. Such a simple joy.
No one I know has heard of Gifford Beal, although
many have seen that painting in the Art Institute of Chicago.
Did he paint himself among its small figures--
the great manifestation of steam rising behind them?
If so, which one is he? Did he set up his easel at the depot
or did he sketch furtively when the right figure
happened by? & who among us might do the same?

A sign finally comes:
Track 19--
we all shift, lift our bags, begin walking, that woman still
grinning, &, I imagine, grinning still as the train ascends
from beneath the East River, deep into Queens, into the unfurled night,
still grinning, thinking how she's going to tell this story,
grinning like she'd been waiting for that moment all her life.

DARA WIER

Your Stormy Petrel

Brittle yet warm, brilliant yet wan, acute yet discernible,
Wacked yet stern, fierce yet visible, loose yet neatly sewn,
Sketchy yet lumpy, silent yet momentous, blasphemous yet
Inane, curtailed yet uncertain, cool yet through the blue roof,
Smoking in the soaking rain yet a good place for crows to stand,
Up yet not in the morning, dusty yet fine for someone's name,
Proud yet rumpled, flared yet wincing, soon yet not soon enough,
A switch yet not for an electrical illuminator, Jumbotron yet so far
Away as to be invisible, taking a step yet doing so with little conviction,
Waiting all night to follow a satellite yet following it for ulterior motives,
Having a conversation with someone who's not to be brought back to life
Yet greening through clouds of the finest green shades of pollens, yet
Hiding and staying hidden yet nearer to spring than to leap than to dare,
Fragile yet occupationally hazardous, faithfully yours yet a firestorm.

CHAD PREVOST
The Movers

—for Larry Brown, dead at 53

The black angus go still as stone as a hitcher walks past.
Two movers stub out their Reds. A haze covers the hills
like smoke from the ashtray, like fat in the veins from oil
and catfish battered in beer. The hay and stubbled grass

come back as cud from the guts. Another all-night haul.
Two wrinkled bills beneath a saucer of spilled coffee,
and the folded Daily Journal of Northeast Mississippi
sit in the spill on a Formica-topped counter. The bell

tinkles as they amble out, the smell of chicken fingers
clinging to their clothes. Bottom front page, Noted author
Larry Brown dies. No one reads about the Oxford
firefighter "who grew up in a time and place where

it was hard to be superficial," quotes the "shocked" Mayor.
Life moves on. "I swear, it's one damn thing after another,"
says the driver whose kid won't take no for an answer.
"You know what they say about movers?" The other

chimes, "A strong back and a weak mind." The waitress
mops the spill, tosses the paper in the trash. All I do
is stamp out fires. She squeezes her toes in her shoes.
The evening draws to its worn-down conclusion. Harvest

tomorrow. Soon they'll be shipped to the killing floor.
A man who all night decapitates cows, shoulders the load
for overtime in a white smock splattered with blood.
He feels okay knowing how little each will suffer.

COLETTE INEZ
Belgium, Remembered

In the beauty of the palms he was born.
Lord, he assembled,
in the purlieus of Brussels,
hands outstretched, eyes cast down
from chapel windows on rue
Chant-D'Oiseau in the province
of Brabant where I prayed with questions
I might ask the custodians,
their answers in lightning's
furious reply, and the frozen pipes
of the upper halls. There
we lined to break fast.
Light splintered—
we knew nothing of refractions,
only apparitions, tricks
turning faucets hot/cold,
black/white segments of Sister's
robe, rose window panes bordered
in lead, his mother, Our Lady
dwelling in stone, that we knelt
under the spell of crepuscular air,
our rising Sanctus, Sanctus.
Then in that small country
edging the North Sea, I believed
when he called me
to the gate of his grace, and I rose.

BRADLEY PAUL
Literalness

There is no real word for fear
or light or rabid grief.
My mother's body lay
in the pink-painted room.
The outline of her skull was clear
and her barely open mouth
seemed small. Not-
Your-Mother-But-
Her-Body
say my aunts; that is,
the shell that carried her
and malfunctioned
and tried to fix itself
and for its effort gets
a gaudy steel shell of its own,
which itself is interred
in a concrete shell
that bears the weight of dirt
and rainwater, the world
insisting itself on everything
in the world. It's the least
original thing in the world.
For the last two days
we would sit my mother up
and Nyquil-green bile
would pour from her mouth,
her irreversible body
trying to expel what it could.
The only things she could say were No
and I Don't Know. And babble.
The bottom halves of syllables.
Any flotsam
the dying mind could grab
because apparently there
was something to say.
Then that stopped too
and briefly I saw nothing but
the pink paint and
the chipped wood floors.

The traffic was average outside
and Baltimore was Baltimore,
the perpetual 1940s light.
There were several children there.
“Here,” my cousin said,
I burned this CD.”
And then I started to talk,
like my many aunts.

BILL RASMOVICZ
After Attenuations

These are death knells for sure. Trust the swollen atmosphere
when its stomach emerges from its mouth to
take you directly and whole,
that even the best of us are clusterfucks of

our libidinal and intellectual forces going hurricane force
and hopelessly astray.

Where it's a black and white Pepto Bismol night, I look at the
graffiti slandering the windows of
the closed-down bar and there's no hierarchy
as to who pisses where.

You could have said so much but all you could write was your
name, someone's scrawled. Another way to write a
name, sadly. It's always sadly.
The parking lot lights trigger auto-tuned to dusk, the lot itself
anesthetized, yet still aware.

It must be about getting out there and declaring yours
the windows of abandonment, not craft. A kind of mettle,

that If you can measure the wind by distance spit, that's
something. Though there's nothing sentimental about the
overcrowded cemetery. And the highway above?
It's creepy that they had to build the road so high.

After the ghettosphere, and after attenuations, what's left of
the night is like mangy feathers to be slept on, our .
In which to consider the swagger

of the hustler or anarchist amidst the perfectly articulated
cathedral. The only thing that's clear is that it's
unclear what's needed of us and when.

Moreover, we should all just go backfire into the night.

If I had to guess what a soul looks like it would be an obelisk or
pyramid. Not a bridge, nothing glass, certainly not the wake

of this desultory street in which the body only gets more
amplified in water. But I'm sure I'm wrong.
If you look at a skull it's apparent the nose was dug with a trowel,

the eye-holes erosions by a long time flagellation of waves.
Or something going rancid underneath—yesterday, those
middle-of-the-highway wildflowers swaying intoxicated
on the diesel waste the future is made of.

HANNAH GAMBLE

Editors Remove The Skeletal Old Women From The Gustav Klimt Paintings That Appear In Books And Calendars

I fear those people
who want love when I don't want to give it,

like my landlady Mirta
with her crepe paper face,

pleading and smiling with all her gingivitis at me.
I'm not her sweetest,

and I could never love a person so afraid of looters,
dogs, or the Middle East.
This morning I burned kale
to the pan and now Mirta fears
Teflon poisoning.
It's easy for her to love me as her past

but hard for me to love her as my future.

When the hurricane came,
Mirta's ancient parents shuffled around the house
with cotton balls
and rubbing alcohol. I wore my youth
like a glossy fur coat.

Even now, the hunchbacked two pad slowly in slippers,
following my smell. I shake my head at them.
As I see it,

the old have understood something horrible
and become theaters of bad news.

The young put them away.
is comforting her.

INTERVIEWS

MARK STRAND
Untelling the Hour

1979

POETRY MISCELLANY: In “Notes on the Craft of Poetry” (*Antaeus*), you mention that poems seem to have a tautological existence: “A poem is itself and is the act by which it is born; it is self-referential and is not necessarily preceded by any known order.” This, you say, provides what Stevens calls a motive for metaphor—“Perhaps the poem is ultimately a metaphor for something unknown, its working out a means of recovery. It may be that the relation of the absent origin is what is necessary for the continued life of the poem as *inexhaustible artifact*.” In fact, the man in your poem “Inside the Story” faces the impossibility of achieving an absent origin in a dream. He cannot fully remember the experience, and toward the end, “He stood in the absence of what he had known / and waited, and when he woke / the room was empty.”

MARK STRAND: I think when I talk about the absent origin I mean the mystery that is entailed in the making of anything and that is preserved even after the thing is made. I believe that we never know what the source of a poem is ultimately. Part of a good poem is the discovery of this, and that moment of discovery is a moment of loss. We discover that we can never really go back, as the writer can never get back to the original story in “The Untelling.” To a certain extent, the act of writing is itself a metaphor for the way we relate to the hidden sources of our own lives. A truly exciting poem has something evasive or mysterious at the core, and it succeeds in suggesting to us that the core is essential to our being. But that core's absence reminds us of how precariously we exist in the universe that evades us, that is always beyond us. If poetry makes our existence important to us, it is because it suggests this totality, this open-endedness. The poem is the infinitive.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Later in that essay you write: “Poems must exist not only in language, but beyond it.” I suppose this has been a constant in your poetry. Several years ago in an interview you said that poems deal with “identifiable states of mind that are at the same time elusive.” This sort of situation occurs as recently as “From the Long Sad Party,” a poem of evasive references; “Somebody” is always saying “Something” about “Something.”

MARK STRAND: One wouldn't write poems if there wasn't something, a remainder that is beyond the grasp of the previous poem. There is always something beyond the power of language to name. So much of our experience is nonverbal and can't be fitted into the categories of language which we have that we must realize that any attempt to capture experience is highly provisional—hence the self-mockery in many of my own poems. I would like to be able to describe just what it is that's so wonderful about getting between two freshly ironed, clean sheets on a cold winter day with maybe two blankets on top. Or what it's like to be isolated on a North Atlantic island with nothing but sky and not a single light. But the experience would remain largely ineffable in language.

POETRY MISCELLANY: There is that sort of evasiveness in your haunting line, “You lie under the weather of stones.” It seems to fall naturally into the end of “Elegy for My Father” and yet is startling and powerful. But it remains ineffable.

MARK STRAND: Well, yes, the line may be vague—it's about the graveyard and the gray, opaque air of Nova Scotia in January. It's vague enough so that people might find something challenging and even attractive in it. You never know whether your audience will understand and sympathize

with what you had in mind—but then why should they because you didn't have anything in mind when you thought it. You thought of *it*. What I mean is, after I wrote the line you refer to I decided that it suggested the color of Nova Scotia air, but I didn't plan the line as a representation of any vision that I had. The line came in a purely verbal fashion, but afterward I've been able to learn from it. I'm writing a poem now about my mother, and in the course of the poem all she does is smoke a cigarette behind the house in Nova Scotia, but there are other images that seem almost irrelevant. Perhaps I'm beginning to understand in some oblique way, by the verbal associations, something about how I've never been able to understand her. All these things originate, I guess I'm saying, in some lost region.

POETRY MISCELLANY: The last section of "Elegy for My Father" is a section of retrievals—the repetitions of "nobody" and "nothing" that balance off statements like "And nothing comes back." There's a balancing of the fact that the year is "over" and the fact of the "new year" beginning.

MARK STRAND: I suppose that rhetorical strategy of repetition which is inherent in poetry is a way of preserving something. Perhaps we could say that these rhetorical forms are forms by which we retain the representation of loss which is in some ways a compensation for an actual loss.

POETRY MISCELLANY: I wonder in what sense rhetoric provides the writer with a fictive identity.

MARK STRAND: Well, I think that if you're as deeply alienated as I am or as I believe I am that you're at some loss to know if the life you have is yours because you have it or because you *say* you have it. There is something more real about my representations of my life that culminate as poems than in the everydayness of my living. I suppose that it means I'm unable to vouch for the authenticity of my experience on its own terms and must have it fortified in poems.

POETRY MISCELLANY: That's an interesting distinction between the life in art and the real life. You've certainly constructed a style which a self can inhabit. And you certainly are more of a stylist than most contemporary poets. I wonder, as your career progresses, about fidelity to that style.

MARK STRAND: Yes, I believe I'm a stylist. I would like to escape, perhaps into something else I'm not yet aware of—one feels constrained, feels a certain tyranny of the past. In some ways, the writing of prose has liberated me. It is an area I really don't know that much about. I write as naturally as possible and make my own rules. I don't mean that I don't read other prose, but I don't study it so closely as I did poetry when I began writing poems.

POETRY MISCELLANY: The lines of your poems have become more full, obviously, in your later books. But then, even in poetry, your basic unit has always seemed to be the sentence, hasn't it?

MARK STRAND: That's true. The sentences in my first book are so simple I really couldn't manage anything very complex. The sentence is very important in free verse because with no specific measure it is difficult to tell what is stressed or not—you need a larger rhythmical unit. Your phrasing in the sentence takes on a great significance, and even line breaks become absorbed in a larger movement. I don't mean to say that the line is not important at all, only that it is part of a larger unit. In a longer line you gain a kind of creative energy toward the end. There's a horizontal thrust, like in prose, rather than a vertical one. The longer line also allows for incremental build-up of complex units, for a progression through parallel structures. Now, though, I'm freer to write a greater variety of sentences in the prose that I'm doing than I ever was, especially in the earlier poems.

POETRY MISCELLANY: That sense of style, at least in the poems, establishes a decorum that presides over the tone.

MARK STRAND: Perhaps that decorum, or taste, prevents me from making awful errors and exercising bad judgment in my poetry. But it perhaps prevents me from being a more important and better poet than I might be because I don't ever allow my poems to get away from me. I wish somehow that I were able to let go a little more and find myself more frequently in a terrain that I know very little about, a terrain in which there would be no rhetorical way out. I'm not sure whether I'm just fantasizing and whether I wouldn't hate being so lost, too. Maybe we just like to create other, more daring selves.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Actually, the notion of the Other is central in your work. I'm reminded as I read your poems and as I read *The Monument* of Kierkegaard in *Diary of a Seducer*: "Everything is symbol; I myself am a myth about myself, for is it not as a myth that I hasten to this meeting?" That missing self in "Keeping Things Whole" is this Other. The Other predominates *Darker* and *Reasons for Moving* and *The Monument*, and it surfaces in the other books, too. Jacques Lacan, among modern thinkers, has perhaps made the most out of this phenomenon, locating the Other in language and in the unconscious.

MARK STRAND: Though I find Lacan unnecessarily obscure, I would certainly agree that the Other is really a part of myself, my unconscious. It is a part of me that I live with but don't really know except when it chooses to reveal itself to me, usually at inopportune moments when I'm least expecting it. I am not often able to receive or even deal with the truth that the Other reveals to me. The best I can do is make poems like "The Mailman" about the figure who is the courier between the realm of the Other and the part of me that's the writer of messages. I guess that one of the most extreme forms of this concern for the Other occurs in "My Life by Somebody Else." There's always a sense in which we live a couple of lives even on the surface, in our consciousness. Our selves can be the foreign and the near, the social and the personal, etc. This is another dimension to the problem entirely.

POETRY MISCELLANY: It would seem that this sense of the Other informs your striking use of pronouns.

MARK STRAND: I've thought of myself as "we," as "you," as "I," as "he"—I've put myself in all of the pronouns. However the pronoun in my poems has always been closer to myself than the pronoun in my prose. I've just written a story, "True Loves," in which the character is completely unrelated to me. One of the problems we've gotten ourselves into today is thinking that the poet or the writer is always speaking about himself. Most poets today want themselves to be very present in their poems. I find Stevens very refreshing for his refusal to do this—the living personality is not an issue there; the personality the poetry has is in the language, the style. You know, there's an enormous amount of fakery involved in writing despite the belief in sincerity and honesty in poetry that we have today. We lie all the time—not in essential matters, maybe, but in the overemphasis we give to some words, in our phrasing. This isn't often picked up by critics. Somehow we have come to live in an age where everything is a document.

POETRY MISCELLANY: It's ironic, then, isn't it, that *The Monument* is a document. Like the poem, "The Untelling," it confronts the question of textual referentiality. So the author says to his translator, whoever that will be, "This work has allowed you to exist, yet this work exists because you are translating it." The text becomes, as you suggest, a means of self-creation as a function of the Other: "Consider how often we are given to invent ourselves; maybe once, but even so we say we are another, another entirely similar."

MARK STRAND: Yes, *The Monument* is a document, but whose document it is we're not certain, and whose evidence it presents we're not certain. The real translator is the one I've invented who is

myself and who has also created me. He is myself, my immortal self, my projection. The book itself anticipates his translation of it. I actually wrote it very quickly, keeping crude notes, then changing everything later on. I decided I wanted it to have fifty-two sections, ironically, like "Song of Myself," and I wanted the language to get wilder at the end. I wanted a stereo effect between the quotations and the text; the quotations are part of the fabric of the text. The relation between them and the text is sometimes close, sometimes very distant. The irony is that the quotes get the last word, that the words of the so-called original writer are lost in the quotes. When you think that their lives, which are what they write, are completed by quotations, the commentaries from someone else, then it can be comic vision of our elaborate concern for the "author." In a way, the thing is an elaborate conceit, an elaborate joke at my own expense. There was a terrific release in doing it.

POETRY MISCELLANY: *The Monument* points toward a future, and I would describe your sense of time as futural, too. In "Breath," you say, "by being both here and beyond / I am becoming a horizon." The moment, as a horizon, seems dear to you, as in "Snowfall," where you describe "the fall of moments into moments."

MARK STRAND: We live in a world, in America, where the past is done away with quickly. We fasten ourselves to the now. This isn't the case in Europe, where there is a sense of the verticality and connectedness of time. But still, the now is very important. It is created again and again as we create ourselves. The most penetrating revelations we have are of the now, where there is an instantaneous and heightened perception in which everything takes on a certain clarity. And the now is so transitory—this sense of transitoriness is at the heart of Ashbery's poems. So there is an elusiveness about the now that generates a great sadness in his poems, and in mine, too, in a different way. We want to have the present without having to eulogize the previous present. If we can retain a sense of the past at the same time we are aware of our moments, then we can occupy a horizon as we move from one now to the next. By looking to the future in this context, we give some sort of meaning to our lives.

POETRY MISCELLANY: In what way are these horizons fictions in Stevens's sense? How does a fiction differ from myth? Is there any possibility for myth today? I ask these questions because all that we have been talking about this afternoon seems to point to a loss of myths and the rise of fictions.

MARK STRAND: I don't think a poet can develop a mythology today. Myth is absolutely representative and suggests something cosmic, eternal, or at least something beyond the moment. We don't have anything that stable in our world today. Fictions are much more concerned with the specific, with the now; they are much more modest. We have to live with a supreme fiction, as Stevens says, and realize that it must constantly be remade. Stevens can never get back to that origin he's looking for in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." We can only keep "untelling" the origin and in that way compensate for its loss.

CHARLES SIMIC
The Domain of the Marvelous Prey

1978

POETRY MISCELLANY: In the Introduction to *Another Republic* you make the distinction between mythological and historical writing, and in doing so you describe a form of "phenomenological interrogation" in which there is an "elaborate narrative which tells the story of its own formation." In your essay "Composition" in a recent issue of *NLH* you talk about how in moving from the "origin" of the poem to the language of the poem, one moves from a "simultaneous" and timeless world to a finite world of linear time. The poem, at least the mythical poem, becomes a "myth of origins" or a "place where origins are allowed to think." Could you elaborate on your notion of the mythic, of the movement from the timelessness of a mythic impulse into the language of the poem?

CHARLES SIMIC: I used to think the way to introduce mythic consciousness into poetry would be to study texts from various mythic traditions, both Western and non-Western. By cataloging the archetypal structures one would, I thought, understand how to cast one's own poems. The problem with that approach is that one makes a false separation between form and content. If you look at a Navaho myth you can intellectually deduce its form, but the content, and the deeper psychological impetus for that content, would be missing. Unless you were a Navaho living when the myth was set, you could only provide a generalized content. I began to realize that these structures would be imposed from the outside, and so there would necessarily be something foreign about the way they came to my poems. There was something mechanical and unsatisfying in trying to fit an experience into a deliberate mythic structure.

It occurred to me that mythical consciousness, the kind that is still present in our world, is to be found in language. The first examples for me were idiomatic expressions using the impersonal "it" in an expression like "it goes without saying." Here you have an ambiguity at the core of the expression that points to something nameless. The "it" is both minimal and all-inclusive. "It" can open up to whatever is beyond, can include all the other "its." This is a mythical situation; you eventually hear the little drama of the expression as its possibilities unfold. There's another aspect, too, as in idiomatic and figurative expressions. Take the expression, "counting bats in his belfry." Here you get the kind of "place" you referred to in the question; somebody has a head that is really a belfry, and it has bats in it, and he's counting them. It's a bizarre predicament which can be dramatized by taking the line literally and ignoring the figurative intention. The first poems in this direction were the Riddles, where I tried to follow a literal logic in a figurative and metaphoric world and then to pick up and dramatize the forces, the meanings that were created. So the mythic, then, occurs where something is transformed—the familiar is made strange, made miraculous, and it can generate a story line, a plot, a destiny.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Could we discuss the notion of place further? Sometimes it seems to be associated with origins, sometimes with ends. In "Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk," you say, "The sea is a room far back in time / Lit by the headlights of a passing car. / A glass of milk glows on the table. / Only you can reach it for me now." On the other hand, "Euclid Avenue" seems poised to move in the opposite direction. There your "dark thoughts" are "laid out / in a straight line. / An

abstract street," and the struggle to "retrieve" a "language / as old as rain," a "beginning," becomes a striving for "a place / known as infinity" and then "a place known / as infinity." The poem ends by pointing toward a language which is "endlessly screeching." How, then, would you describe a poetic place?

CHARLES SIMIC: As a first step, the place exists in the psyche. The place is never really physically there, and you keep moving toward it, or you keep circling it. What happens is a process of circling around, pointing at, saying something about, even turning away from the "place."

"Euclid Avenue" is a little different from the kinds of poems I described before. I had an idea, an abstraction, a generally accepted law. What could be more vigorous and austere than Euclidean geometry? The poem was an attempt, like those other poems that deal with figures, to humanize an abstraction, to invest something personal in it. One of the ways that seemed possible was to assume that each geometric figure tells a different kind of story. That is, there could be stories that go on a straight line to infinity; there could be circular stories. Triangular stories start out and try to retrace their own steps but can't get back to their beginnings so they end up at some distance from the beginning before they return to it; by that time they've traced a strange figure. There's a comic aspect to all this. My favorite is "The Point," the story which takes one step and then immediately has a kind of regret. It's horrified at the whiteness of the page. In these poems, then, a meaning would be unraveled around the logic of a particular geometric figure.

What we have been talking about relates to a wish I have always had, both conscious and unconscious, to place myself in a verbally impossible situation. The aim is to abbreviate myself to some sort of minimal equation and then to work my way out of that. Many of the poems have that sort of predicament: somebody is there as an "it," a geometric point. This is the essence, there's nothing around it except empty space. Here is where he locates himself, and now he has to do something out of that, tell a story, establish a place, a time.

POETRY MISCELLANY: For Heidegger, in the "The Origin of the Work of Art," a genuine beginning is always "a leap . . . a head start, in which everything to come is already leaped over." It is a flash, the details and horizons of which will later be explored as time. This exploratory process leads him to remark in another essay ("What Are Poets For") that this "anticipation" is linked with a "holding back"—a concept I think we can link to what Paul Ricoeur calls "suspicion," which he says characterizes modern thought. The poet, for Heidegger, exists in a state of betweenness. As you say in "Ode," "between the premonition / and the event // the small lovely realm / of the possible." Suspicion for Ricoeur and, we might add, for Heidegger involves "the possibility of signifying another thing than what one believes was signified." It involves what you call in "Negative Capability and Its Children" a "maintaining oneself in the face of that multiplicity." What I am trying to suggest is that there is always a suspicion about what is leaped over, about origins, about the language we use to embrace them. In its most radical form, as you say in "The Prisoner" it suggests "the suspicion / That we do not exist." Can we talk about an ontological suspicion, a holding back, an emphasis on the uncertainty about the poem's space?

CHARLES SIMIC: Suspicion is the voice because language is not mine. I'm one of those who believes that there is something that precedes language. The usual view is that there is some kind of equivalence between thought and language, that if you can't verbalize it you can't think it. I've always felt that there is a state that precedes verbalization, a complexity of experience that consists of things not yet brought to consciousness, not yet existing as language but as some sort of inner pressure. Any verbal act includes a selection, a conceptualization, a narrowing down. Let's say someone has the experience of walking around in a swamp at night, sees things he wouldn't see in

another place or in the daytime, perhaps feels fear, confusion. Now, he would have to be seriously deluded to believe that when he sits down to render all this that he can equal its complexity. Since what he writes doesn't equal the experience, there's this suspicion which becomes a voice, a voice that asks, “What have I experienced?” But let's say he begins to write and arrives at an acceptable equation. The problem is then with a language that is larger than his uses for it. On the one hand, it's not specific enough to carry all of his experiences, but on the other hand, it contains echoes and resonances he never suspected before he began to write about the experience. So he starts hearing two things. He hears what recreates his swamp experience, but also other things that are unexpected, that point to a different subject matter, to a different development. Here he has to make some sort of choice. I find that in my own poems I tend to abandon the original cause or the visible aspects of the original cause and follow wherever the poem leads. That's why my poems often seem impersonal. It is not clear who the “I” is. It doesn't seem necessary for me to equate that “I” with myself. I follow the logic of the algebraic equation of words on the page which is unfolding, moving in some direction.

POETRY MISCELLANY: You mentioned that you sometimes abandon the visible origin. Perhaps at the heart of this suspicion is a sense that the origin is an absence, a loss. “Language,” says Michel Foucault, “always seems to be inhabited by the other, the elsewhere, the distant; it is hollowed by absence.” This absence is like Freud's “novel” of the dream—an abyss. Your own metaphors suggest such notions as silence, invisibility. For example, there is often a sense of things fading, as the end of “Nursery Rhyme,” where you “see a blur, a speck, meagre, receding / Our lives trailing in its wake.” In “Poem,” you say, “The invisible is precisely that / which no one remembers.” Finally, the poem “Eraser” seems to talk about this—there is a “summons” motivated by the flight of a “marvelous prey.” The erasing is a means to “recover a state of pure expectancy,” to recover traces of what seems absent, the hollowness, the cleared place—“Only the rubbings only the endless patience / As the clearing appears / the clearing which is there / Without my even having to look / The domain of the marvelous prey.”

CHARLES SIMIC: I've always felt that inside each of us there is profound anonymity. Sometimes I think that when you go deep inside, you meet everyone else on a sort of common ground—or you meet nobody. But whatever you meet, it is not yours though you enclose it. We are the container, and this nothingness is what we enclose. This is where Heidegger is very interesting to me. He describes the division between the world as nothing, as what he calls the “open,” and any act of conceptualizing which restores the world in a particular way. Many of his texts are longings to experience that anonymity, the condition where we don't have an “I” yet. It is as if we were in a room from which, paradoxically, we were absent.Everything is seen from the perspective of that absence. I suppose, in some ways, this is a mystical vision that brings to me a sense of the universe as an anonymous presence. The force of that sometimes frightens me, sometimes delights me.

POETRY MISCELLANY: I think this is related to your sense of “poverty.” I think, too, of Stevens's “The greatest poverty is not to live in a physical world.”

CHARLES SIMIC: Yet, that anonymity for me is physical. It's not exactly nothing. And poverty is both a lack of imagination and real poverty—an empty plate, no money. What I've always tried to do in these metaphysical excursions is to remember the predicament of that “I.” I dislike flights of imagination that leave behind the human condition. It delights me to remember this “I” who might be trying to figure out some incredible abstract proposition about the nature of the universe, this “I” who has holes in his socks, perhaps. It is Thoreau's notion, I guess, of keeping an allegiance to the soil, to our everydayness in the same instant as we experience the transcendental.

POETRY MISCELLANY: So that there is always a duality in the poem's reality? As you say in "Stone," one can find "the star charts / on the inner walls" of the stone?
CHARLES SIMIC: Yes, the whole notion of truth does not reside in finely formulated metaphysical propositions or visionary passages. They may be seductive, but that kind of suspicion we talked about earlier always enters. Some poems of mine that I didn't publish were like that. What seemed to be a brilliant series of propositions about some abstract problem eventually seemed empty and arbitrary. What was missing was a test of the presence of the human being who accepts the responsibility of those visions. There is a constant dialectic in my poetry between a longing to take off on abstract flights and my concrete, physical needs. One has to consider the life of the world: the historical dimension, the horrifying history of our age. All that intrudes into poems.
POETRY MISCELLANY: In the context of the notions we have been discussing—language, origins, suspicion, absence, poetic reality—can we examine the nature of metaphor? I think of Heidegger's notion that the poet's intimacy with the world "occurs through the creation of a world and its ascent, and likewise through the destruction of a world and its decline." If classical metaphor is based on substitution, is modern metaphor based on a shattering of structures of language? In "The Point," you talk about the nothingness that is inside the story that has halted as "whatever / Is destroyed // Each time / It is named."
CHARLES SIMIC: On one level metaphor is naming, however provisional and temporary the name is. Metaphor has interested me more as a way of knowledge, a way of grasping something. I like to take a metaphor and look at it, then do something like what I do with idiomatic expressions—discover a kind of mythic structure, use the metaphor as a way to discover something about the nature of reality. You have to accept the metaphor's premises and follow its logic. Take the expression, "a bladeless knife without a handle," where you have a figurative proposition which doesn't mean anything. Yet by simply saying the expression, it exists somehow. Looking at the expression, you realize it is possible to construct a poem around it, but a poem that would follow the logic of a world where there are bladeless knives without handles. You couldn't have ordinary tables and chairs around it. The other objects would have to have some distortion to accommodate themselves to that new world. So the poem becomes a statement about a kind of reality with a logic of its own. That little cosmos is there and yet it isn't. It almost seems to cancel itself. That brings us back to Heidegger and the suspicion of utterance. You really can say anything and make it exist; existence is saying, speaking.
POETRY MISCELLANY: It also brings us to the role of chance and the irrational. In "Elementary Cosmogony," you talk about the relation of the "invisible" and the "submission to chance," and in "Ode" there is that crucial "fall of the dice." On a linguistic level, and also in terms of the ideas of history and mythology we mentioned earlier, we might remember Nietzsche's definition: "The entire history of a 'thing,' an organ, a custom can . . . be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion." I suppose one paradigmatic example is "Charon's Cosmology," where the two sides of the river become interchangeable. The result of all this is a subversion of teleology. What role does chance play in the composition of your poems or in the vision they suggest.
CHARLES SIMIC: I think chance is tied to metaphor—semblances seem to come out of our unconscious by chance, though there are arguments about this. But there is also a mechanical operation, say, as when someone cuts out words and puts them in a hat and then picks them out as a way of beginning to write. The curious thing for me has been that the original material may be

provided by a random operation, but the moment we look at it there is no longer chance because what we select as examples of chance is something that signifies, even if it paradoxically signifies chance. I have used this, then, only as a tool to liberate and engage my imagination. I suppose it is like saying that I can't make metaphors without having some language there to begin with; I make metaphors by moving language around. Beyond that, I don't have a view of the universe that contains chance. Antonin Artaud says, "Chance is myself." What we call chance is for him the "I" who enters a scene.

POETRY MISCELLANY: How does chance affect what constitutes meaning?Lacan, following Freud, talks about the endless "sliding" of signifiers over signifieds, the two sets never really meeting except at mythical *points de capiton*. Traditional meaning is, for him, inaccessible; "but what can be done is to pin one signifier to another signifier and see what happens. But in this case something new is invariably produced . . . in other words, the surging forth of new signification." At what point would this process stop? What are the limits of language? What is the poet's responsibility here? When, as you say in "Unintelligible Terms," does the poem match its silence, its "remote," chancy "hush" that reveals an "expanding immensity"? Can it? Should it?

CHARLES SIMIC: Theoretically, it would be that place where it seems possible for that other, the reader, to absorb and reexperience the terms of the poem. Now, there are poems where I can be quite aware I have done just that, but there are also poems where I know nothing. I am surprised and puzzled at what is happening, and yet it seems extremely interesting and important. The crucial thing, in either case, is for the poem to have access. I'm interested in how poems open. Once the poem is made available, you have a choice of either fulfilling or frustrating the reader's expectations. It has always seemed more interesting for me to frustrate those expectations. I like to compare the experience of the poem to someone who comes upon a corner and doesn't know what he will encounter next when he turns the corner. One way to establish this sort of suspense is by dialectic. Ivor Winters says a poem is a statement, but it seems to me that in a statement nothing happens. I conceive of the poem as having a more dramatic form that embroils the reader in its action and takes him some place. It sets in motion a number of possibilities, doubts, suspicions, frustrations, contradictions.

POETRY MISCELLANY: The notions of chance, the play of possible meanings, the sense of language going on by itself that we have discussed lead to what Foucault and Jacques Derrida call a fundamental absence—the absence of the author. How would you define the author? Nietzsche says in the *Genealogy of Morals*, "'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything." How would you react to this?

CHARLES SIMIC: I would agree, though Foucault sees the death as a kind of "erasure" of the author, and I see it more as a physical death in the sense that there is a confrontation between myself and the universe, something large and inhuman against which I feel small. But I don't think the author is ever absent. The simple act of selectivity from the vast possibilities of language and experience introduces the author. Except that for me there is no *one* "I." "I" is many. "I" is an organizing principle, a necessary fiction, etc. Actually, I'd put more emphasis on consciousness: That which witnesses but has no need of a pronoun. Of course, consciousness has many degrees, and each degree has a world (as an ontology) appropriate to itself. So, perhaps, the seeming absence of the author is the description of one of its manifestations, in this case an increase of consciousness at the expense of the subject? It's a possibility.

STANLEY PLUMLY
The Path of Saying

1979

POETRY MISCELLANY: Hans-George Gadamer, a student of Heidegger whose work has become influential in recent years, writes, “The meaning of a text surpasses its author not occasionally, but always.” That is, there is always what Keats would call a “fine excess.” Gadamer calls this excess the “circle of the unexpressed” or the “infinity of the unsaid.” He suggests—and here is the application to poetry—that the primary motive of a text is not to inform but to evoke. Language, Heidegger had said, can show or designate, evoke or simply enumerate, and it does so by “withholding” something fundamental, by its inability to express all, its inability to be infinite. What this withholding does is to evoke a sense of Being, a sense of what it means to be. The language of poetry, for Heidegger and Gadamer, is thus a way of presencing Being. I think that your poems work in a similar way. The poem that first comes to mind is “Peppergrass,” with its focus on the nothing that is a presence, on anonymity (in one poem your father is “anonymous”) as a kind of universality. The poem ends by evoking an unnameable sense of “Being”—

We were the windmills where the wind came from,
nothing, nothing you could name,
blowing the lights out, one by one.

Let's begin by talking about language—what it expresses and what evades it, about the evocative power of poetry, about this sense of presencing (of Being), of the unnameable, the ineffable. Your poem “Wildflower” that appeared in *Antaeus* also exemplifies some of these issues.

STANLEY PLUMLY: In a new poem, “Summer Celestial,” which may turn out to be the title for my next book, I go to the center of a circle that is the figure of the first stanza. I am preparing in that stanza for the next six that follow by finding a place in the landscape, a center, where I can divest myself of the burdens of the everyday. The process is a difficult one—it is a full stanza with long lines. It is a process of finding a language in which I can in effect lose myself, become anonymous, change my face among things. For me, I suppose, that is the secret of poetry. Poetry holds a kind of immanence I enter—I think you called it a presence. That is why I feel that no matter how conversational or colloquial or at ease the language may seem to be with itself, it has about it, in a good poem, a whole different feel, a very special nature that distinguishes it from everyday discourse. I don't mean in simply formal or metaphoric senses. I am trying to describe an aural quality. I hear voices in those poems.

POETRY MISCELLANY: In a way this bringing to presence can be described in terms you use in your essay “Sentimental Forms.” You talk in that essay about how James Wright's best poems allow him to “identify with the sources of emotion.” You use critical terms in discussing Wordsworth that would have been unheard-of not long ago—“a kind of buoyancy, a kind of generosity, a kind of conviction.” This Heideggerian or Gadamerian language searches for special qualities and is part of a revaluation within criticism that has come to us from European criticism.

STANLEY PLUMLY: It is a language that is very useful to me. I don't think it is jargon, as some people contend, but an important way of looking at poems. I could explicate in the traditional way at the drop of a line, but I think we are past that. I think we have to begin to deal with the issue of sources. I think we have to get rid of the mysticism that has surrounded sources. I think the issue is one that we can talk about in practical and presentable ways. I think a good critic of poetry is one who tries to discover in a poet's particular language what he is saying about his sources, how well he is identifying them. The good critic should talk about the language the poet is using to communicate those sources, or even to communicate with those sources. Those sources are what the poem's language comes from. They are totemic resources, and those resources have faces on them—not mystic consciousnesses but human faces. For example, what I like about James Wright is the way he is vulnerable to the past, the real past—he allows it to shine through. But it is not that everyday past, as I mentioned above, but that presence; I mean, he's not an Ohio poet, he's a river poet. The river, in its various ways, is the source for him.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Heidegger says that as readers and listeners we must "have an experience with language." We must listen not so much to what is said as to the "path" a saying has taken.

STANLEY PLUMLY: I don't remember the exact etymology of "craft," but it suggests the way craft can "empower," the way it refers to "the way" and even "the means of the way," the way of the way. It invites, it brings, it implicates a whole world, a social world. This, for instance, is the depth and width of poetry that Wordsworth wrote, and I suppose that was what the Romantic movement was about. What Wordsworth really invented was a way of constructing out of the line and out of the bind that pure lyricism gets us into. For Wordsworth there is always a reason for carrying one line to the next.

POETRY MISCELLANY: There's a strong narrative base in his poems and an increasingly stronger narrative base in your more recent poems. Even the title*Lyrical Ballads*, a contradiction in terms, suggests the infusion of narrative into the lyric.

STANLEY PLUMLY: Yes, poems are first of all spoken. That is, you have to identify a speaker, the narrator. He or she provides a point of view to the story. We haven't been paying enough attention to this fictive part of poetry. A lot of our recent poetry contains fine lyricism, but remains very dead on the page. I think we have to remember that poetry has a vertical dimension. There is a rhythm of thought, the speed with which it moves down the page. In prose the rhythm never halts—a printer decides on the line breaks. But poetry goes up and down the page—that is "the way" we were just talking about. And the way has to have a reason, a point of view, that human rather than lyrically mystical saying, an empowering.

First, it is not a form of escapism; it's more philosophical, I guess. The expression is that "someone has a calling." I take that to heart, take it literally. When I sit down to the materials of a poem, I do feel taken out of myself. I am listening to that calling. I am going, as it were, somewhere else. It seems to be a phenomenological process I can't fully understand, but the only way for me to write anymore is, to use Stevens's word, be "transported." For me to stay in my body, so to speak, would be to foster an anxiety, a sadness, a burden, a weight.

It is important that this whole experience be seen as a process, a natural process, a process of mortality, death. Out-of-body travel is the process of imagination. I have to clarify imagination, though, because I think the word is abused today. For me that transport works alongside a force of gravity, a sense of being tied to the body. That is why the process can be associated with mortality and death. Out-of-body travel moves through a world of real furniture and that furniture holds the body to its mortality. The whole process becomes threatening too, then. But the poems are not

about the furniture—they are not "mother" poems or "father" poems or "animal" poems—the poems are processes, travels out of the dark. I think the last book is the book of a visionary who wants to live with human beings, a person who is concerned with the terrestrial matters that reside within the bubble of the celestial.

POETRY MISCELLANY: I think of the apocalyptic lines that end "Insomnia"—

some shape of yourself at the center of the sun,
wings spread,
the body rising from fire,
from body, from infinite dead weight,
lifting to life the whole new day,
to be burned alive till dark.

Existence here is always in a state of transition, both ever ending and ever beginning.

STANLEY PLUMLY: Yes, that phoenix figure. W. C. Field's advice for insomnia is to get plenty of sleep. I have never been able to manage that cure. If I had to identify a particular state of being, a place where I live, a time of day that frightens me most, it would be that time we refer to when we treat insomnia. And yet the part of the day I love is dusk, the time of very special light, of moving from one light to another. It gives a fullness, a joy. And it is a time for dreams—my poems have the ambience of dreams, and many are announced as dreams. Insomnia, dusk, even dawn, dreams—all these things are sources for me for a kind of transcendence. They are processes, means of travel.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Your books have always been organized in very careful structures that illustrate "the way" that we talked about earlier. In *Giraffe*, the three sections go from an external view, a scratching of the surface as the giraffe itself does, to the movement in "Heron" which is internal, a movement "down those long flights," and finally a sense of interpenetration, of transcendence as you call it, in the last section. In *Out-of-the-Body Travel* the movement is more complicated; it begins by assuming what is learned in the first two. There is an interpenetration or sharing of images from one poem to another, like the image of the girl in the iron lung. And it seems that your lines have had to get longer, and the poems, too, to carry this meaning.

STANLEY PLUMLY: Well, yes, the first two books are what I consider apprentice books, at least spiritually. I think I'm working more toward amplifying material, not tightening it. And if we are not quite sure of where we stand in one poem, it will be amplified later on. There is a kind of residual ambiguity. There is a single speaker in*Out-of-the-Body Travel*, but he is involved with several other people who try to represent themselves. This creates part of the texture of interpenetration, I guess. And, yes, the lines keep getting longer. They are more filled up—the sense of one body filling another body. I guess that for me the more I can put into those poems, the more I can divest of myself. The fuller those poems are, the more empty I am, and relieved. I don't want that to sound confessional and therapeutic in a reductive way, though.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Many of the things we've been discussing—interpenetration, association of images, "out-of-body travel"—inform a complex sense of time, of the moment, the now. The moment is never confined to a "here and now." If we go back to *In the Outer Dark*, we find a poem like "Rilkean Autumn," where you say, "today, thought, in the held moment, / sucked to a single drop, / still wags at the lip of the top." Another is "October Tree," where you acknowledge "the movement / in all still things." What this tension leads to in the book is exemplified in "January at Saddler's Mill," where the "paddle-wheel is a stilled clock" and where, in that stillness of time—from

it—"all around us single trees aspire to a touch / beyond all possible sense of reach." Time becomes spatialized in that book, a kind of measure of the threshold between inner and outer darks.
In *Giraffe*, the now becomes more "phenomenological"—or Heideggerian. In "Fungo," one of your most complex poems, there is a sense of simultaneous approach and waiting (Heidegger's "anticipating resolution") around a moment that is not at all stilled as in the first book—"as if this moment / were in perpetual motion." This leads in the end to a very Heideggerian sense of time—

I think about now
the way one thinks
about the future,
how the mind, all alone,
makes it up in order to deal
with what is coming. ["One of Us," 51]

Finally, in *Out-of-the-Body Travel*, the sense of time is most dynamic—there's a fluid sense of passage of intervals, of durations—that sense that "Recovery is memory" ("For Esther"), which interpenetrates several time schemes. Do you feel a more complex sense of time evolving that better effects your out-of-body travel?
STANLEY PLUMLY: Right. The first book is preoccupied with space because I can't get out. It's also the most locally contemporary—I am the age of the speaker. *Giraffe* is also contemporary, but it is organized in a more linear way—I grow through time. In the last book there's a Bergsonian sense, to use the big terms, that all time is one time. But that time has to be dealt with, it has to be organized, has to be sequenced. Otherwise we are left only with uncertainty. We have to hold time in a pattern, even though we change the pattern from day to day. This is the source of our narratives. They don't quite stop, they defer to the next poem in a way we were talking about earlier. The patterns, the narratives, change from poem to poem. The whole book tries to contain these different patterns and relate them, to be as expansive as it can in containing, ordering time.
Now, this relation between poems is very important. A story becomes interrupted and the speaker tries again in the next poem. One poem leads to another. Perhaps what I am saying is that I have become my own parent by being able to arrange time. I stand at the moment of epiphany alongside the narrator. I let him suffer through, then figure a way out. Perhaps what I'm saying is that I'm not there, at least not then. Perhaps this sense of time gives me not so much a subjective relation to my origin, as I have often thought, but an objective position. This may account for the "temperature" in the poems—neither hot nor cold, but moving toward a kind of lower-case sublime, at least a synthesis.

MAXINE KUMIN
Settling in Another Field

1975

POETRY MISCELLANY: The world portrayed by your new book seems more populated, its imagery more diverse, used more to counterpoint ironically some of the statements the poems make. Are you conscious of such a shift?
MAXINE KUMIN: Not really. I'm conscious that there is a continuing shift in voice, but it seems to me that it arises directly from the earlier book, that what had begun in *Up Country* simply gets continued in *House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate*. My intention is always the same, to be specific, clear about the naming quality of things. The focus, though, is continually narrowing. The more narrowed the focus becomes, then perhaps the more sharpened and ironic the language becomes. I think any shift is toward being more natural so that everything I write comes out of the world I am close to, out of the manure pile, out of the garden. That's the texture of the world I'm living in.
POETRY MISCELLANY: Your sequence, "The Kentucky Poems," presents a kind of self-definition, a focusing of yourself in a particular world.
MAXINE KUMIN: One reviewer, though she liked *House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate*overall, thought that this section was meretricious, that it focused on old themes, my sense of estrangement as a Jew. I was taken back by the comment because I thought she totally missed the point of the poems. She was saying that the subject was something I wrote less well about than the natural world, perhaps more so than the other sections. What I like about them is the way they deal with isolation by reason of place. The poet is placed in an alien place and confronts a whole new landscape. It's a way of testing the poet's own verities.
POETRY MISCELLANY: IS it a question, then, of relocating, say, the past in the present to prove and reprove a vision? In "The Knot," you have the lines, "in Danville, Kentucky, my ghosts / come along, they relocate as easily as livestock / settling in another field."
MAXINE KUMIN: Well, you have to come to terms with yourself if you're shut off that way. If an artist doesn't separate himself or herself from the mainstream no work will get done. That's why it was good to be plunked down in a totally different place. You know, that was exotic for me as if I had gone to—you know Thoreau's poem, "One need not go half way around the world to count the cats in Zanzibar, extra-vagrant, it depends on how one is yarded—" Well, I was yarded in Kentucky, and that was just as extra-vagrant for me as Zanzibar would have been. It was really exotic to be in the Baptist Bible belt; I loved it.
I think my poetry has always been rooted wherever I've been in time, in attitude, or in physical location. The new poems are very much a part of what is going on with me at this time in my life—living very intimately with the land and with the animals. I can continually be surprised and write about what surprises me. Like the chanterelles I showed you earlier. When we go riding, as I did earlier, I'm always delighted to find them, to stop and pick them.
POETRY MISCELLANY: Most of your books are built around sequences of poems that revolve around, explore, a location or a time.
MAXINE KUMIN: AS you know, poems don't occur in the order in which the reader meets them. But as you acquire a sufficient body of poems and begin to think in terms of a book, then you're

faced with the problem of how to structure it. As I was writing "The Kentucky Poems" I began to see that I was going to have a group. "The Knot," which I consider an important poem, was the poem that I wrote first.

POETRY MISCELLANY: That poem places two locations in contrast to each other.

MAXINE KUMIN: It's very autobiographical, very direct, very honest. Having to let go, having to undo these knots that tie us to family, location, or even a mental state is a very serious problem. I had just come back from Europe, from seeing my daughter. I felt very isolated and alien at first in this little town in Kentucky, just as I felt some alienation in the country of Belgium. I could understand what they were saying in both places, but the nuances of the language are so evasive.

POETRY MISCELLANY: There's also a process of taking hold. In "The Deaths of Uncles" is the description of a home movie where "the reel stutters and balks before it takes hold." I think this book confronts that process of stuttering and then consolidating more than earlier books.

MAXINE KUMIN: This book takes a lot more risks. For one thing, I seem to be willing to deal with more material, much of it heavily fictionalized. I'm playing around an awful lot more with narrative, which I love doing. I know that narrative is supposed to be dead in poetry. We are all supposed to be writing little transcendental lyrics about emotional states, but I so much enjoy the whole storytelling process. I like to read other stories. Bill Meredith's *Hazard, The Painter*is written with deft, ironic control. It is a voice very different from mine, but one that I find quite enchanting. I like the idea of the story coming back into poetry, and I wish I had a lot more stories to tell.

POETRY MISCELLANY: You often use the narrative and lyric modes to qualify each other, in the way you use locations, as in "For My Son on the Highways of His Mind," or patches of narrative to tie a lyric together, as in "Bedtime Story."

MAXINE KUMIN: The line in "Bedtime Story" is one that I like very much, tetrameters and trimeters basically. When I was writing the poem for my son I wanted to write it in that tight lyric line, which I consider Audenesque. But I couldn't do it. The best I could do was to produce a lyric refrain and then fit the narrative roughly into iambic pentameter.

POETRY MISCELLANY: There's quite a lot of interweaving of rhymed and unrhymed sections in your poems. Rhyme is very important to you, isn't it?

MAXINE KUMIN: Especially coming down to the end before the door is closed, I like to do that. I've been working on a poem for weeks which is just a sort of narrative country diary. I want to call it "A Mortal Day of No Surprises." It begins, "This morning a frog in the bathtub." The bathtub is one in a pasture. That's an almost daily occurrence around here, one small miracle in the mortal day of no surprises. I find that as I'm coming down to the end of the poem where I face, as I seem to face more frequently in my poems, the prospect of my own death, the lines are getting shorter, the rhymes are getting tighter, and there is much more tension in the poem.

POETRY MISCELLANY: There are a couple of ways of facing death, at least in the poems, aren't there? "That a man may be free of his ghosts/he must return to them like a garden."

MAXINE KUMIN: You know, you tend to get more deathy as you get older. You really can't help it, it's there. Not that I mean to become obsessional, but there's a sense of my own mortality that I'm more aware of. For example, in "Pairing the Geese"—that "slippage of my days" sort of thing. And yet it would be dreadful if we were immortal—nothing would have any meaning. There would be no poetry because poetry is so intensely elegiac in its nature. Without a foreboding sense of loss the poet would have nothing to celebrate, would not be moved to song.

POETRY MISCELLANY: I suppose that attitude is reflected in the phrase, "grand comedy of anguish"?

MAXINE KUMIN: Yes, Amanda's eyes are described as “rage red with toy worlds inside.” I think of the twin masks of comedy and tragedy, the shape of the mouth in the tragic mask being so grotesque as to be comic. If you look at the face of a child about to burst into tears, it is comic at the same time it is anguished.
POETRY MISCELLANY: We were talking about rhyme. Does it provide a way of holding these two aspects together? Do certain kinds of poems demand it?
MAXINE KUMIN: If I had to give up rhyme, I'd have to give up being a poet. I have many students who say to me that rhyme is insincere, but for me it is not a question of sincerity. The rhymes are all there, all packed inside my head. It's a question of letting them all out a little at a time. Rhyme provides so much of an underbeat to the language of the poem, so much a measurement to the tension of the poem that I would be very hard put to write a deeply felt poem without it. I think that the tougher the subject matter, the more likely I am to use all sorts of metrical devices.
POETRY MISCELLANY: How important are tricks and games in composition? Do you play many games?
MAXINE KUMIN: Not as much as I used to. Probably the toughest poem I ever wrote was the elegy for my father “The Pawnbroker.” When I wrote that I not only picked out an impossible to fulfill stanzaic pattern, but I began by writing it in syllabics, because I could hardly dare approach the subject otherwise. Then when it was done I went back and loosened it up, roughed up the syllabics so they don't show anymore.
POETRY MISCELLANY: The pattern, then, came first?
MAXINE KUMIN: Yes, you know, putting down the forms so you can pour the concrete and then taking away the forms when it hardens.
POETRY MISCELLANY: In “Living Alone with Jesus,” you have the lines, “form can be seen as/an extension of content.”
MAXINE KUMIN: I'm glad you picked up on that. I love that poem. It's a humorous poem which is, however, deeply felt. That whole business about having Jesus in a funny little backroom apartment is quite sincere because Jesus is the comforter of the lonely, the lost, the isolated. The line about form has an amusing origin. Diane Wakoski and I had met at Bread Loaf the summer before and I had just finished reading an essay of hers on how form can be seen as an extension of content. The phrase, which Creeley actually originated, rolled so deliciously over my tongue—with the business of the butcher shop and churches, all form and no content—the essay came at a very fortuitous moment.
POETRY MISCELLANY: Do you find yourself often saving scraps and inserting fragments like that?
MAXINE KUMIN: Yes, I write on scraps. I pull off the road to write things down. I do a lot of commuting back and forth to Boston, an hour and a half without a stop light along the highway. It's a good place to get some serious thinking done, and I generally have my manuscript on the front seat. I'll often stop to write things down. That's a nice thing about a poem, it's portable. If you're tinkering, trying to move lines around and get them right, a good place to do that is on a long distance drive.
POETRY MISCELLANY: You do a lot of revising?
MAXINE KUMIN: A poem is not a watercolor, you don't just get one shot at it. We all know that a watercolor either works or not in the first twenty minutes or you tear it up and start another one. But a poem does not, unless you're in the habit of tearing up your worksheets, and poets are too

egotistical for that. You don't lose anything by trying again and again. I am an earnest adherent to the whole notion of revising, of tightening. I also believe in turning a poem face down and not looking at it for a week. I often have to do that to get any perspective at all for I still habitually fall in love with bad, rhetorical passages and it's hard to give them up.

POETRY MISCELLANY: These techniques, like using rhyme in tougher poems, or the whole notion of the effort in revising, the sense of difficulty define the world you live in and which the poems are a part of, don't they? I mean, even this area, Joppa Road, poetry is inherent in the "location" itself.

MAXINE KUMIN: Yes, this area is called the Joppa district because the early settlers who came here were from the land around Amesbury and Newburyport along the coast. They had named a flat there Joppa in recognition of the biblical Joppa, and when they moved inland they brought the name as a tribute to their origins. The land along the river bottom, which in those days I presume was much more open, was called the Joppa district, and so later when the road went through it was called Joppa Road. Now, of course, the land is very much forested because it's been grazed and whenever land is grazed, and then not used, it comes back up as trees. So what was once lovely meadow is the heavy growth that you see.

POETRY MISCELLANY: One of the "Joppa Diary" poems, "July 5," deals with that sense of decay inherent in the pastoral world, that elegiac sense of the struggle of living, as you describe the graveyard.

MAXINE KUMIN: In every one of those graveyard inscriptions there is a marvelous sense of faith, the sense that Christ is standing waiting to help the infant or the mother who died in childbirth or the man the tree fell on. These people worked so damned hard—fourteen, sixteen, eighteen hours out of twenty-four. It fascinates me to contemplate that, even with just the little brush I've had with it here, the physical labor involved in this kind of life. I have an increasing respect for the human body, its capabilities as well as its limitations, and an increasing respect for the poor dumb beast who dragged the wagon and pulled the plow. The patience of animals and the enduring humility of the human are things that we today are growing too far from. I think one of the great tragedies of our society is that so many people grow up on asphalt and never get their hands into manure piles and into gardens. My whole life is predicated on shit. I put close to a ton of horse manure on my garden in October, had plowed it in in April, and planted in May. I'm still enough of a city person, though, to be startled by the fact that you plant a squash seed and squash comes, you plant a beet seed and beets come. Now, it's a miracle to me that out of these little packets come incredible vegetables. It's like the unpacking of new leaves in "May 10th." I feel a sense of wonder and I only hope it lasts. That was the wonderment about the chanterelles I mentioned earlier. This is the season for them, and how lucky we are to have them. And it's more rewarding to gather where you didn't sow—wild mushrooms, vegetables, and berries are a great pleasure.

POETRY MISCELLANY: It seems that part of the way you come closer to this world around you is by being able gracefully to let go of parts of yourself, what you have taken to be parts of yourself. What I mean can be seen in "To Swim, To Believe," where Peter sinks because he thinks too much, whereas the secret, you say in that poem, is in "relenting the partnership." And the last poem in the book is a prayer to Amanda, "small thinker," hoping that the letting go will be natural.

MAXINE KUMIN: Yes, of course, there has to be some suspension of thought and belief to be able to walk on water. That would be my own prayer for death—I am without faith, but I often find myself praying. Mostly it is a supplication that things might persist. As now, we are forced with having to put away a dog. I hope we could do it in some graceful way. He's deaf and doesn't hear the

horses, and I'm in terror that he'll be stepped on, have his backbone crushed. Then I'd have to put him away myself with a shotgun. It's pitiful. It's not a very dignified ending for a dog that had great dignity.

JEAN VALENTINE
The Hallowing of the Everyday

1980

POETRY MISCELLANY: Your poetry is unique in the way it presents itself; it seems to be based upon fragments, shifts in perspective, traces, frayings. As you say in "Twenty Days' Journey," it is a world of things "almost visible," of "The blown away footstep / in the snow." Could we begin by talking about the nature of the vision, this world, where often, it seems, "it was like touching the center and therefore losing it, emptying it of what you might have been able to hold on to" ("February 9th"). It seems a world of deferrals, discontinuities, differences, gaps.

JEAN VALENTINE: I can only respond to your first sentence here, very simply: that when I'm most attentive, these "fragments," etc., are very often what I sense and feel; they are how I "get" this time and place and the currents of my private and public life and the lives around me. To try to clarify this—not to compare—I think of, for instance, Paul Klee's painting, certain newspaper photos or documentary film scenes, or certain intricately plotted mysteries.

In "The Lives Around Me" I include the work of someone like Huub Oosterhuis (you quote next from my version of his long poem *Twenty Days' Journey*, made with the Dutch poet Judith Herzberg). To try a version of this poem, I had to feel very close to it. There are still mysteries in the poem for me, but I make out this much: a vision of both personal and worldwide suffering of loss and anguish, in which a personal and/or an Everyman "I" undertakes a journey: a journey in search of God, who is both present and absent in the poem, and who also suffers loss and anguish. (I should say clearly here that I haven't had the chance to talk with either Herzberg or Oosterhuis about this, and I could be very far off.) The experience of that journey is something I could only have known or approached at all through Oosterhuis's poem: but to return to your question, the poem seems fragmented as its subject seems to demand.

Your second quotation, from "February 9th" (from *The Messenger*) came to me in a letter from a friend and spoke wonderfully to me of one negative side of naming: I think Robert Coles said this somewhere, though I can't remember his exact words: "Name it, and it is so." Just the opposite, of course, of the creating or the hallowing powers of naming, this would be the destructive use of language to lie, to deny, to erase life. In the quotation, it would be the violent or intrusive use of touch.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Your sense of time seems predicated upon this same fragmentary vision. For example, "This Minute" portrays the moment as being continually undercut as the filmstrip keeps running again and again, presencing future, present, and past in the one moment. Or take "Here Now," where "The sky is the same changing / colors as the farthest snow"—here the moment gets defined by all the possibilities that range beyond it. Could you sketch out, then, how you feel time is at work in the poems as a theme, as a principle of structuring?

JEAN VALENTINE: I don't think the use of time in "This Minute" is trying to do anything more than to present a nightmare, in which time does not move naturally, historically, but is fixed, distorted.

About how time is at work in the poems in general, again I can only say simply that this awareness of past and present and future "in the one moment" seems to me how time is experienced, when one is

most alive, most attentive—except perhaps for extraordinary moments when only the present is there.

I don't really see time as a "theme" in my own poems, except in the most ordinary and universal ways. As a "principle of structuring"—our thoughts do range all over time, and in lots of poems I am trying to catch the way someone might think, or "think out loud" in a quiet talk with some close friend, or say in a letter.

POETRY MISCELLANY: In the context of this fragmentary vision, it often seems that the processes of writing, collecting, locating, comparing, absenting become themselves part of the subject of the poems. That is, there often seems a way in which the process itself is the subject, not the fact of the finished poem. I perceive a sense that the poem is always emerging, even in its last line—this holds especially true for the poems in *The Messenger*. I think of Stevens's ideal that all poems comprise or refer to an ideal, always unwritten poem. Do you have this sense of your work? I think of the last poem in *The Messenger* that is also a sort of collecting of images from earlier in the book.

JEAN VALENTINE: If this "sense that the poem is always emerging" is working successfully, that is, if the poem is accessible, I'd be very content. I have this wish, right now anyhow, to catch our experience "on the fly," so to speak: a pull against the poem as a sort of finished, well-wrought statement—much as I admire and love that kind of poem by certain other poets.

Yes, like Stevens, I certainly do imagine how one is writing along underneath some one "ideal, always unwritten poem" all one's life—I like very much Anne Sexton's notion that this ideal poem is being written by everyone all the time, a sort of communal poem being written by all the poets alive. Though with Stevens again, I would imagine this poem as "an ideal, always unwritten." Being "written after," maybe.

In the last poem in *The Messenger*, "March 21st," I'm sure there are images collected that I wasn't conscious of; but in that piece I was consciously trying to bring in sense-echoes from the various sections of the sequence, "Solitudes," trying to get to a moment of gathering-in, there.

POETRY MISCELLANY: There is a double movement in the poems—in "Sanctuary," for instance, there is a "scattering of life" that is counterpointed by the movement along "the thread you have to keep finding, over again, to/follow it back to life." Could you describe your sense of this movement? It seems as if the farther you go out into things, into the world, the more you find yourself intact; an escape from the self to find the self. In psychology, at least that of Jacques Lacan, this movement tends to suggest an otherness we seek; we always seek to know ourselves in, identify with, the Other, a double.

JEAN VALENTINE: What you say is very good, and it ought to be included. But I have nothing to add because you really answer it yourself.

POETRY MISCELLANY: How do you see yourself figured in the poems? In other words, what is the relationship between you and your voices, narrators? Sometimes your perspective changes in a single poem, such as "Susan's Photograph," where you are razor, wrist, photographer, the friend, and so on. Ultimately, then, this is a question about voice, its varieties and modulations, about the ways you throw yourself, aspects of your self that are real or imagined, into the poems.

JEAN VALENTINE: One thing I feel sure of about the use of the self is that while there are poems that may use the "I" with very little of the "real self" in them, there are *no* poems that present the "real self" precisely, "as is," as one would try to in, say, an autobiography.

I think "the relationship between me and my voices, narrators," is the common one: I am trying to move into an other, into others; to move out of the private self into an imagination of everyone's history, into the public world. This is what I most*want* to do—maybe what every lyric poet

most wants to do. This effort in no way means to exclude the eccentric, but to enlarge what is human. (Here Emily Dickinson and Whitman both come to mind and the wonderful southern poet of our own time, Eleanor Ross Taylor.)

POETRY MISCELLANY: What is the nature of the "messenger"? It seems a sort of metamorphic entity. I think, for example, of "Beka, 14," where you tell the girl that the messenger is like her brother,

like the penguin
who sits on the nest of pebbles, and the one
who brings home pebbles, to the nest's edge in his beak,
one at a time, and also like the one
who is lying there, warm, who is going to break out soon:

becoming yourself; the messenger is growing. . . .

I think also of "Turn (2): After Years," where the name of the absent friend is presenced at the end by uttering the two words "other" and "thou" almost as if to bring them together, as if to presence the absent other, to bring the messenger close. Could we talk, then, about the "messenger" and the "you"?

JEAN VALENTINE: Yes, in "Beka, 14," the messenger is a metamorphic figure: I tried to use the changing figures as messengers coming, gradually, to call the fourteen-year-old child to her adult life, including, at the end of the poem, her leaving home to go her own way. A series of callings. Whether the "messenger" is thought of as internal (as it becomes, halfway through this particular poem), or as an external figure, doesn't matter, I don't think: what matters to me in the poem is the figuring of the person's coming into possession of his or her own strongest desires—something which Father William F. Lynch, S.J., writes so clearly and so healingly of in his book *Images of Hope*.

In "Turn (2): After Years," I hadn't thought consciously of a messenger figure, but I do feel the absent friend "present at the end" of the poem, yes. The two words *Other* and *thou* are trying to express closeness and the redemption of a harmful past. In this way, the poem is (maybe like many poems) part recognition and part talk, real or imagined, to another person.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Your poems, especially in *The Messenger*, defy paraphrase perhaps as well as any I know. Yet there is a certain "path of saying," as Heidegger calls it, that can be followed in poems. For him, this sort of movement is an undercurrent or underplot that must be participated in and that goes below the surface of the words. It is something like a "gesture" of language. I think that all the things we have been talking about so far are the elements of this underplot. Could you speak to how this works in poems or something like it that you might have experienced?

JEAN VALENTINE: I like Heidegger's notion and his phrase for it. I'm more familiar with the process you bring up here as a teacher than in my own writing: to try to *hear* a poem with students, rather than to encourage a kind of structured puzzling out of the poet's "meaning," which ends up being reductive. But this can be a tricky business, because in the poems I most value, there *is* meaning, and very precise meaning, at that.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Barthes called texts "infinite ciphers" because for him their ultimate meanings were unresolvable, unfathomable. Would you say that a poem should strive for this (from your own point of view), and that the techniques of fragmentation, shifting perspectives, and so on

that we discussed earlier are means of achieving the character of an infinite cipher? How much of what goes on beyond the words is the poet aware of? to what extent?

JEAN VALENTINE: I haven't read Barthes, but from what you tell me here, I'd go on with my last sentence, in the previous question, to disagree with his idea of a poem as an "infinite cipher," etc. For myself, I'd always want a poem to have mystery, yes, but also to be very clear. That tension matters as much as anything to me in a poem—as much as the music of its language, say.

As to how aware the poet is of "what goes on beyond the words," I just don't know. Sometimes a reader will see a lot in a poem of mine that I never say; but I do always hope absolutely that what I *did* see will be very clear, very precise. And when a reader misses what I'm up to, well, then I know I've missed getting it down.

More and more, I revere poets who are both simple and endlessly resonant with meaning: Elizabeth Bishop, Tomas Transtroömer, to think of just a couple. Their poems remind me of a phrase of Frost's, about thought being "a feat of association." And their thought is always grounded in the real: there's a real bridge, a real gas station, and so forth.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Barthes also talked about literature's subversive activity. That is, for him, literature subverts by undermining the ordinary ways we perceive and think about the world. For him, as for, say, Susan Sontag, literature ought to be unsettling. It ought to provide new categories of thought. Do you see anything like this working in your own poems? Your "ordinary things," to steal one of your titles, become very extraordinary in your poems.

JEAN VALENTINE: "New categories of thought"—well, the writing we remember does bring us something new, does in that sense trouble our sleeping selves, keep us from settling down in whatever we thought last year, or last month; and that's one thing writing seems to be for, yes.

But my wish in using the title "Ordinary Things" was not so much to be ironic as to look as attentively as I could at the ordinary, at the sort of feelings and events that are part of everyone's daily life in this time and place. It was a high ambition which I still have (and which many writers must have): an attempt at what Martin Buber calls "the hallowing of the everyday."

W.S. MERWIN
Unnaming the Myths

1981

POETRY MISCELLANY: In *The Nation* in 1962 you wrote: “Symbolism is never far from man's efforts inevitably, in acts of conscience—he is reduced to consoling himself with considerations of what his project might signify rather than what it might accomplish.” The context for the statement was ironic, one of those political writings you did for that magazine. And yet this might be a good place to begin for us because your poems have, often, a mythic quality, and myth often seems to be a teasing out of narrative from symbol. I think “The Dwelling” does this. There's a way in which you see stories or myths behind everything. “Oh objects come and talk with us while you can,” you say in *The Carrier of Ladders*. Perhaps, then, we can talk about myth, symbol, narrative.

W. S. MERWIN: When you say that myth is a teasing out, that suggests that symbol and myth operate on the same level and that symbolism is a static version or aspect of narrative. That may be so, but I am rather chary of these words; we would have to define our terms, which we may not be able to do to start with. I suspect symbol is more static than myth and probably closer to allegory, which sets up a one-to-one correspondence with what is represented. Myth is pretty hard to isolate. It's a dimension underlying sensual experience; if sensual experience is seen with sufficient intensity and identification, then you are already treading in the preludes of myth. That is, you're realizing your own dreams. You analyze them and begin to come out with symbols, but from beginning to end you know you're walking in the place where myth is happening. So I don't think of myth as a teasing out, but as a dimension where you and time are inseparable.

POETRY MISCELLANY: I wonder if all myths are inevitably, in some sense, creation myths.

W. S. MERWIN: I've wondered that, too. I think they probably are, not in the obvious way we were taught in school, that myths are a way of explaining how things came about, but that myths are touching the origin of everything. They are touching the original dimension of everything.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Perhaps that touching of origins explains the nonhuman voice that occurs in some of the poems, a mythic voice, prehistorical. In a book like *The Lice* that voice becomes bitter, political—“There is no season that requires us,” you say in one poem. “Tonight once more/I find a single prayer and it is not for men,” you say in another.

W. S. MERWIN: In *The Lice* in particular that overt misanthropy was more or less deliberate. *The Lice* was a book that was written for the most part when I felt the historic future was so bleak that there was no point in writing toward it. One element of the feeling in that book is still with me—the amazement at the terrible arrogance of our own species, which is certainly the most destructive on the planet. What we are prepared to do, to ensure our comfort or convenience, to the rest of the world—to the trees, to other cultures, with nuclear weapons or whatever!

POETRY MISCELLANY: Sometimes it seems that the nonhuman voice brings you to another consciousness, another perspective. Maybe, in the mythic sense, it allows a rebeginning. Do you think that's true?

W. S. MERWIN: Yes. If a perception is really intense enough or clear enough, it is everybody's perception, as well as an individual's perception at a given moment. Our awareness of the rain is

everyone's awareness of it—we don't have to name them or us because they are part of the same perception. I think so-called primitive art is doing the same thing.

When you look at children's pictures, there's sometimes a little house with no human beings, only sun, trees, houses, and so forth. And the assumption is that humans *are* in it because humans are looking at it. They are there, and it's an important place for the humans to be.

POETRY MISCELLANY: And yet there is a sense in the poems of a distrust of the language, a sense of how it always fails us, and a sense of how this failure is what motivates, generates narratives, explanations. In *The Lice* you explain lives like "I who always believed too much in words" and in *The Carrier of Ladders*, "It has taken me this long / To know what I cannot say." But despite this distrust, things are always said—"I sing to drown the silence of far flowers," you say. There's an insistent vocabulary that defines each book and is developed from book to book, a vocabulary of things that can't be said yet are. I mean words like emptiness, distance, window, door, silence, mirror, echo, and the like. This vocabulary provides a certain resonance, a feel to the language, a sense of the language's being able to *presence* what it can't accurately name.

W. S. MERWIN: I think you're describing well the way I've come to feel about language. There's a sense in which language is always inadequate. We don't have to be metaphysical to see this—the cushion here, for instance, can't be named. You can call it a cushion, but that finally is no name; it does not call itself a cushion. There is that aspect of language which is always a gross approximation to the uniqueness of any perception about any experience. Language is fairly general—the color red has to apply to every red in the world when actually each red is different. The more you use language imaginatively, the more you try to describe what's unique about something, the more you realize the inadequacies of language. On the other hand, language itself is unique; it has a life of its own which makes it a part of the uniqueness of everything. Its life is the life of everything. It is, for example, what makes conversation possible. So there is a simultaneous reverence and distrust of language.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Some cultures don't have words to describe some things we see or feel, and we don't have words for some things they see or feel. I guess the classic case is all the Eskimo words for snow.

W. S. MERWIN: Sure. You don't see the cushion, you hear the word. And it's important to be aware of that. That's part of the clarity and intonation of your perceptions. The articulation of any word is at once absolute and inadequate. In fact, if you are not aware of the inadequacy, then your perception is going to be terribly eclipsed by the arrogance we were talking about earlier. Human arrogance extends into language, as though we thought the naming of things were actually a substitute for things themselves.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Words, I guess, are ways of lifting veils and finding more and more veils. We're always going toward something that's always out of reach. The experience of language becomes the thing itself.

W. S. MERWIN: You say "toward," and yet perhaps it's there all the time, unnamable. And of course a poem just doesn't name a cushion. A poem is a huge leap—from the kind of basic, primitive use of language to a basic, primitive use of poetry. Poetry is in a way the real use of language because, though we can't name the cushion, there is a way of making a poem in which the cushion and one's experience of it are not apart. Then you reach the point where you can't name the experience, but where the poem is the same as the experience. They become one.

POETRY MISCELLANY: In a way, your own language has become more filled with objects, especially from *The Compass Flower* on. A poem like "St. Vincent's," for example, or the new poem, "Strawberries," has this quality. We are immediately in a more tactile, directly touchable world.

W. S. MERWIN: Yes, we can't move forever away from referents. If we do that, then we have nothing to refer to. It's so easy to get too abstract about these things, just as it is to get abstract about something like time. Our notion of time is of something we're outside of, for the most part, say, as when we watch a train go by. That sense of time simply isn't so. All that we know about time is what we are. That's all we'll ever know about it. Time is simply a way of living in the world that changes the world.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Well, I get that sense with all your words for doors and thresholds. Or take a poem like "Air" and that walk between two deserts. Time is always something we're in the middle of, a between, something always beginning and rebeginning in us.

W. S. MERWIN: I hadn't thought of that, but you're describing it very well. Parents are a myth that runs through the whole of one's existence, and I find myself writing about them. I keep trying to move away from the subject of parents, but the faster I try the more it keeps recurring. I guess they provide some sense of confluence, of returning and beginning.

POETRY MISCELLANY: The emphasis is always on process, not on ends. Everything is always in process in your poems. They deny, in a way, last things. There's always a new perspective to turn to, perhaps in the poem, perhaps in the next page, someplace just past the print of the last line that is where the poem is taking you. "The Helmsmen" with its two metaphoric perspectives, of the day pilot and the night pilot, one following charts, the other stars, suggests something of this.

W. S. MERWIN: Yes, I can't imagine writing the "final poem" or the "final Word," and it's impossible because of that double aspect of language we were discussing earlier. One of my heroes has been Thoreau, and there's a passage where he asks something like, "how can we find our ignorance if we have to use our knowledge all the time." Your life and your writing don't come, finally, from your knowledge.

In *The Maine Woods* there's an incredible passage where they're standing in the forest and they hear a thump far away; the Indian has to tell him "tree falls." When you look at *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, where he is talking about wildness and savagery, you have to realize he's just on the outskirts of Concord. And even at that time the rivers were tame. I find this aspect funny, and sad, and very revealing, and touching because it makes you aware of how very little he had to go on. Things in this book came out of immediate experience.

POETRY MISCELLANY: And on the other side, there's always a threat of nothingness, a word, too, that comes up more in your earlier poems. Still, there's "Tergvinder's Stone," that crazy stone in the middle of a living room, which is about as concrete as you can get, yet it becomes a kind of hole in the darkness, nothing. Nothingness seems to have become less a simple absence and more a container for everything.

W. S. MERWIN: It's the unnamable aspect of the cushion, say, out of which the cushion comes all the time. If one tries to live in a way that does not recognize this, then one slips into arrogance and exploitation. It's only if one is aware of the aspect of nothingness in everything that one begins to see things as having a real source, as distinct from just having a beginning. The beginning is measurable, but the origin is always a mystery. When was the origin of the cushion? In the idea of it? In some experience that led to someone's recognizing a need?

POETRY MISCELLANY: And along with the problem of origins is the problem of boundaries. How, for instance, do you conceive of the two books of prose and the prose that you're doing now? It's not what we would traditionally call short stories, and it's not the traditional prose poem.

W. S. MERWIN: One of the things I was trying to do at the beginning of *The Miner's Pale Children* was to call into question all of those generic boundaries, so that one can seem to be like a

story, and the next one you say, “What is this?” I wanted it to be left open again and again in the book. The boundaries dissolve. I suppose I was feeling the limitations of traditional genres and decided to see what could be written in a short form. I was less bound in the second book, but I still had that aim in mind.

POETRY MISCELLANY: In the newer poems you've broken the line in a way that recalls, to some degree, Old English. But the rhythms have more flexibility for you.

W. S. MERWIN: That's true, and the rhythms of contemporary blank verse are different from the rhythms of Christopher Marlowe, too, but it's still blank verse. I think the Old English line and the blank verse line have changed in the same way. I believe that the parallelisms of Old English poetry and Middle English poetry are the underlying rhythms of poetry itself. Like any convention, the line I have been working with has its limits, but it seems to have many possibilities partly because it's been ignored for so long. In fact, I think there are real wells of energy there still in the language and the experience it has gathered and transmits. I think there is an untested youth in this ancient parallelism and tension, and I think it's related to the way language renews itself—and renews us. Language—new experience arising and being transmitted out of old—it may be our original myth.

JOHN ASHBERRY
The Imminence of a Revelation

1981

POETRY MISCELLANY: There is a certain kind of cryptology inherent in your poems. In *Three Poems* you write: “We have broken through to the meaning of the tomb. But the act is still postponed before us//it needs pronouncing. To formulate oneself around this hollow empty sphere.” Later you write about “a word that everything hinged on and is buried there,” yet “is doing the organizing.” The text seems always a supplement for the lost word, for something always unspoken, unwritten. More recently, “The Hills and Shadows of a New Adventure” explores the problematic of naming; here one must deal with “certain illegible traces, like chalk dust on a blackboard after it has been erased” (*Three Poems*). How much does this notion of poetry as a putting into play of traces and lost names figure in your poetic? How much of poetry, I wonder, proceeds by an essential misnaming?

JOHN ASHBERY: As it so often turns out, something you've just read or are about to read turns out to be very useful. There is an essay by Borges called “The Wall and the Books,” where the narrator reports that he read not long ago how the “man who ordered the building of the almost infinite Chinese Wall was the first Emperor, Shih Huang Ti, who also decreed the burning of all the books that had been written before his time.” Borges goes on to make parallels between the two actions. He says that “perhaps he called himself Huang Ti in an endeavor to identify himself with that legendary Huang Ti, the emperor who invented writing and the compass and who, according to the Book of Rites, gave things their true names; for Shih Huang Ti boasted on inscriptions that still exist, that all things under his reign, had the names that befitted them.” I think there's a parallel here to Harold Bloom's theory of the Anxiety of Influence in the desire to destroy or negate all previous writings in order to give things their true names and at the same time to build a wall around an impossibly large area. Further, at the end, Borges gives an almost Paterian definition of creativity: “Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces molded by time, certain twilights in certain places—all these are trying to tell us something, or have told us something we should not have missed or are about to tell us something. The imminence of the revelation that is not yet produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic reality.” The imminence of a revelation not yet produced is very important and hard to define in poetry and probably is the source of some of the difficulty with my own poems. But I don't think it would serve any useful purpose to spare myself or the reader the difficulty of that imminence, of always being on the edge of things.

POETRY MISCELLANY: There's always a deferral of meaning, I guess. It's curious, too, that you have so many mentions of marginal places in the poems—bridges, paths, medians, porches, verandas, horizons, boundary lines, edges—places that situate the poem as an event as well as provide setting.

JOHN ASHBERY: I never thought of that before. In fact, I just wrote a poem this morning in which I used the word “borders” but changed it to “boarders.” The original word literally had a marginal existence and isn't spoken, is perhaps what you might call a crypt word. I think this happens often, though, with other poets; Kenneth Koch told me once about a creative misprint he had made on the typewriter when “singing” came out “sinning.”

One thing that I've noticed about my own poetry is the prevalence of indirect movements such as in the words “seep” or “leach,” or, in other words, where things get from one place to another in an unorthodox way. This might be part of the impulse that also results in talking about marginal places.
POETRY MISCELLANY: Probably, this lack of closure, an insistence on deferring the revelation, defines the nonreferential, or self-referential, or even endlessly referential dynamic of your poetry. “All things seem mention of themselves / And the names which stem from them branch out to other referents,” you write in “Grand Galop.” There are also poems like “Worsening Situation,” “Voyage in the Blue,” and “No Way of Knowing” that begin with no strict antecedent and so suggest inexhaustible relationships. “All of our lives is a rebus,” you say in*Houseboat Days*.
JOHN ASHBERY: I've noticed that the word “self-referential” is often used as a pejorative term in criticizing poetry today, and I'm glad you don't use it that way. It seems to me that poetry has to be self-referential in order to refer to something else. I think many people feel a poet should take a subject as an essayist would and then write about it in order to come up with some conclusions and the whole matter would then be solved to everyone's satisfaction. But poetry, as has often been said, is made out of words; it is an affair of language. The situation is parallel with painting, for a painting does not make a “meaningful statement.” I think that this is why the Impressionists were harshly criticized at first, yet their work is actually a kind of realism superior to what had been done when they began to work. The interests of realism in poetry are actually enhanced in the long run by a close involvement with language; thought created by language and creating it are the nucleus of the poem. Self-referentiality is not a sign of narcissism, but actually is a further stage of objectivity.
POETRY MISCELLANY: What seems important is the process of generating possible revelations in language. Language, as some contemporary thinkers have begun to theorize, precedes existence in a certain way. There is no “bottom line” for there are always more words, the imminence of new words.
JOHN ASHBERY: In other words, we're never allowed to relax or rest. We're constantly coping with a situation that's in a state of flux. When I was writing *Three Poems* I became interested in the Tarot cards, and although I couldn't remember now what I learned then, I do remember that the images are not exactly what they seem to be, the most obvious one being “Death,” which can imply a further life. There is not a one-to-one correspondence but a looking ahead to what the next situation is going to be, a process, a flux.
POETRY MISCELLANY: And there's just as much an undoing as a generation that goes into this process. In “And UT PICTURA POESIS Is Her Name” you deconstruct, as Derrida would say, traditional poetics “so that understanding / May begin, and in doing so be undone.” And in “Flowering Death,” you write, “We must first trick the idea / Into being, then dismantle it, / Scattering the pieces on the wind.” I think also of “Five Pendantic Pieces,” in which you write, “The poem of these things takes them apart.” The poems tend to take apart or undo what they refer to in a way that reminds me of the writings of such contemporary thinkers as Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan.
JOHN ASHBERY: I think that it is probably not a coincidence that we've been addressing ourselves to similar problems and that these sorts of things tend to happen simultaneously in history from certain causes. I know, for example, that Raymond Roussel, who has been characterized as a kind of primitive Mallarmé, was asked in a letter about his opinion of Mallarmé, and he replied that he was unfortunately not familiar enough with the poet to give a serious estimation. So, while I am not very familiar with these authors, you may have a point in mentioning them.

As to the notion of undoing, let me say that it very often serves a purpose. Penelope's tapestry may have looked senseless to her entourage when she kept weaving and unraveling it, but it had a concrete purpose. In my case, the purpose would be to draw attention to the continuing nature of poetry, which has to come into being, pass from being, in order to return to a further state of being. This is really an affirmation of the way things are treated in a poem. I don't begin with the intention of writing a particular *thing*, though I can often look back and see things that must have been part of some unconscious intent. I actually try to begin writing with my mind a tabula rasa; I don't want to know, can't know what I'm going to write. So, too, interruptions are very important for they are part of the composition of life—a phone may ring as it did just then, and the interruption will provide the break, the space that allows me to go further on, perhaps in another direction. I have a line in one of my poems, "Syringa," about the way things happen, moving along, bumping into other things, which occurs in the context of a stream or river. That's not a very original metaphor, but in fact its triteness is one of the reasons I'm attracted to it. My mind wants to give clichés their chance, unravel them, and so in a way contribute to purifying the language of the tribe.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Many metaphoric situations are hidden in clichés, especially when you decide to take them a little more or a little less literally than they're usually taken.

JOHN ASHBERY: And I think they have a beauty because of being hallowed somehow by so much use, by people who are just trying to say what they had on their minds. Thought has taken this form again and again, and that should be respected.

POETRY MISCELLANY: You mentioned "Syringa" earlier, and in the context we have been discussing I'm reminded of the end of that poem with its insistence on the author as fiction, a kind of library of Borges, or an archive of Foucault. In "Self Portrait" you talk "until no part / Remains that is surely you." There is always an undecidable element for the "I" as single ego—a plurality of voices, voices lost in a labyrinth of textuality.

JOHN ASHBERY: Well, I'm notorious for my confusing use of pronouns which, again, is not something I consciously aim at. There are questions as to whether one character is actually the character he's supposed to be. I feel not too sure of who I am and that I might be somebody else, in a sense, at this very moment that I am saying "I." But doesn't this open up a book and make it more available? A book is going to be interpreted or misinterpreted in as many ways as there are readers, so why not give them the maximum number of options to misinterpret you, for these are all only interpretations. This seems part of the nature of any kind of interpretation.

POETRY MISCELLANY: There's a casual tone in your poems that allows you to confuse words and things, too, not just persons. Take the opening of "Grand Galop"—"All things seem mention of themselves"—a low-keyed line that brings together world (things), resemblance (seems), language (mention), and the self-referentiality we talked about earlier.

JOHN ASHBERY: The tone is a humble one, and its casualness goes with the blank beginning that I talked about earlier. We always start from that point when we read. As to the bringing together of words and worlds, I don't think we can separate them in poetry. The physical and meaningful aspects of language always reverberate with one another in a way that leads to further language. As you know, I've been involved with contemporary art, and it just occurred to me that in Cubist still-life paintings there will be, say, a word on a wine label that extends off into space as an object in itself. Perhaps there's an affinity of tone, too. I'm certainly aware of trying to view things from different angles as the Cubists did, but I don't think it's a question of influence, only that general cultural concern we talked about.

Isn't it interesting, by the way, that this urge to depict an object from every possible angle is doomed to failure, yet the work resulting from the failure, is what makes it so fascinating to people? In a way you fail, yet in ways you also succeed.

POETRY MISCELLANY: And there's a sense of waiting, as in the lines near the beginning of "Grand Galop," where the "we" is always ahead or behind. "Nothing takes its fair share of time."

JOHN ASHBERY: Yes, I was thinking of that. The idea is probably the result of living in a large city where you always have to wait, whether it's at the bank or the doctor's. It's an agonizing problem, to know what you're supposed to be doing while you're waiting, because waiting doesn't seem enough, but it is possible to force oneself to realize that waiting is actually enough. Waiting is part of an endless series of stages of which the so-called objective is only another stage. I've been influenced by the music of John Cage in which there are long periods of silence and where the noises of the environment will be picked up and perhaps replayed at some point. I think he's trying to draw attention to the fact that every moment has a validity; it's a valuable unit of time, and the things that might be happening at any time have a value and even a beauty.

POETRY MISCELLANY: I think this relates to the sense of chance that informs your work, not only in the sense of the interrupted moment we were discussing earlier, but also in a more conceptual sense. There's the word play like the chance/dance rhyme at the end of "Fragment" or the "Indelible, Inedible" link in the poem by that title where letters can't be erased, can't be consumed. I suppose that, in a way, some of this originates in surrealism, if we can use that term with any accuracy today. Chance is important, isn't it?

JOHN ASHBERY: Yes, chance is very important in those ways we've already mentioned. On the other hand, I don't think it's the entire motivating force behind whatever you're writing. You shouldn't, for example, mistype every word in a poem. I think that promoters of surrealism have narrowed it to a function of the unconscious alone, yet we have to take account of the rational. I once interviewed Henri Michaux, and his opinion about surrealism was more or less mine, that it is *la grande permission*, with the French sense of permission as a leave, like a soldier's leave, but also the usual English sense of that word. Perhaps chance, then, is involved in this permission of language, the way words tend to try to have a life of their own, to take over at times, in fact.

POETRY MISCELLANY: In *Three Poems* there are two figures, the prism and the parallelogram, that suggest a double movement, a synchronic and a diachronic progress. This double motion has to wait until "Fantasia" and "Litany" to be enacted, though. The two columns or voices in "Litany" at times build progressively upon one another, at times reflect each other and so keep a parallel pace, and at other times seem independent of one another. This is related to the problematic of writing, of simultaneity. You say in "Litany" that "I want it all from you / In writing, so as to study your facial expressions / Simultaneously." This is a way of breaking down traditional relations of causality, of course, that is, a way of undoing, but it also demands a reconstructive effort on the part of the reader, who begins by overhearing a conversation of sorts, then must enter, make something of it, and so on. Roland Barthes talks about how such techniques force us to reread, a crucial procedure, for we tend only to read ourselves the first time around.

JOHN ASHBERY: The doubleness in "Fantasia" is fairly arbitrary because it would read the same if some of the he and she headings were left out. "Litany" is perhaps meant to be heard rather than read; at least that's the only way the experience of the whole poem could happen. I probably haven't gone beyond that because of the fact that we have only two ears and can only hear two things simultaneously. We're very often trying to hear two different conversations while we go about our business, or to read ahead or glance ahead a few pages. We lose a great deal this way, but that is

realistic for we can't possibly absorb every aspect of any experience. A part may be momentarily lost, but then picked up to become unimportant later on.

I'm very interested in Carter's music, as you know. He is an extreme example of this presenting two or more trains of thought. He has a work for violin and piano, which I heard before I started writing "Litany." When it was first performed it was done with the violin on one side of the stage and the piano on the other side of a very large stage. It would seem as though they were talking about different things, but the one would become more intense and the other would somehow begin to fade at certain points, then the situation would change and the violin, which was already in an unequal struggle with the piano, would nevertheless overtake it and dominate it.

POETRY MISCELLANY: In "Soonest Mended," you talk about time as an emulsion, which I think fits in with what we've been discussing. Your sense of time seems to be something that "keeps percolating" possibilities, as you say in "Prophet Bird." The moment becomes evasive, always separating into parts, yet held in the emulsive suspension of the poem.

JOHN ASHBERY: When we experience a moment we feel perhaps a kind of emptiness, but when we look back at it there will be different aspects and the moment will separate itself into these aspects. We won't be sure what the dominant aspect was, and I guess that results in my sense of a permanent unraveling. This best describes how I experience life, as a unity constantly separating. It's difficult to get that into poetry, though. It takes time to write something when it is situated in a period of, say, half an hour. This form is really the base on which the poem is built; it's a conveyor belt and time gets arbitrarily snipped off at the end of the poem. Temporality is built into the poem.

POETRY MISCELLANY: And there's a desire to be at "the beginning, where/We must stay, in motion," as you say in "Houseboat Days." There seems to be an implicit desire to stop time from snipping at the end of the poem. In "The System," you describe coming to a fork in a road, taking one, and then ending up in the same place, the beginning, a parody of Frost.

JOHN ASHBERY: That was perhaps a half-conscious parody of Frost, but I was probably thinking of a radio program I used to listen to when I was young, "Jack Armstrong." Jack and his chums seemed constantly in a forest or jungle and constantly traveling in circles. This happens not only to explorers but to writers, to everybody. It's something I keep addressing myself to. I sort of see it as a series of overlapping circles and spirals. We're constantly taking two steps forward and one step backward.

POETRY MISCELLANY: We've been gradually working toward a consideration of form. How do you relate this spiral or circular motion to the parody of regular form in *Shadow Train*? There appears to be a form, but it is constantly unraveling because of the labyrinthian word play, the paradoxes, the irresolutions.

JOHN ASHBERY: To me, it's a kind of antiform, really, a lining up of four stanzas of four lines each. It looks sensible enough on the page but, in fact, it lacks the "meaningfulness" of the sonnet, a logical form. My intention was to give a sense of balance by having each section be of equal length and importance, therefore tipping it away from form. It's perhaps the sort of thing the minimalist artists of the 1960s such as Donald Judd were aiming at—four oblongs next to each other, rather than a hard, humanistic treatment of geometry such as you get in Piet Mondrian. It really is, then, an asymmetry, a coldness, an alteration. There was the sense of cutting things up, putting them in a kind of Procrustean Bed rather than letting them ooze out into a freedom of their own. I was aware, as I was writing, of the great irregularity of length of thought. One line would contain barely an idea while the next line would have six or seven slapped together. There's a relation between that and the

almost brutal arbitrariness of the format of the poems. Format may be a better word than form for our purposes.

MARVIN BELL
Distilled from Thin Air

1980

POETRY MISCELLANY: In one of his notebook entries, Theodore Roethke exclaims: “Make the language take really desperate leaps.” I'd like to put some of your own lines next to that. In “Self-Made Man,” you talk about “a mixture of alphabets, unrolling and unfolding / from all directions.” In “To No One in Particular” you say, “I speak to you in one tongue, / but every moment that ever mattered to me / occurred in another language.” More recently, in “The Canal at Rye,” you say, “The natural end and extension / of language / is nonsense.” These citations simply codify a tendency in your poetry toward leaps, ellipses, shifts, fragments of scenes and stories that make up the grammar and syntax of your poetics. Earlier, the language moved by more intense, local effects like puns, and lately the movement is more a stream of larger elements as in, say, “Birds Who Nest in the Garage.” Though the irrational elements, the leaps, are still present, there is a greater self-assurance in the newer poems. In “The Hedgeapple,” for instance, the fragmented narrative, the attitudes toward the woman, the discussion of the tree, the sense of self-realization come together in a more expansive way than you could have achieved earlier in the more close-fisted language of the first four volumes.

MARVIN BELL: That is a good question for me at this time because my language is undergoing a change, as you suggest. I did teach myself to write mostly by abandoning myself to the language, seeing what it wanted to say to me. That way, I could find out not only about language, but about myself, which was, and probably remains, a bundle of inherent contradictions and paradoxes. Now, what poetry can do, what it reveals, is always tied to language, but it also depends on transcending the language, going further than ordinary language. The lines you quoted reminded me of how often I've distrusted language, how much I have wanted my poetry to express what is inexpressible. How does one get at the inexpressible? I suppose by letting the poem respond to the implications of words and phrases, by shifting contexts so that words and phrases take on an irrational or a-rational sense. Most of the early poems use a language that turns on itself to ask whether it can say what it has said or to question what it means. That listening to itself, responding to itself in the language of those poems is a way of making the poems whole and less and less paraphrasable. Now, *Residue of Song*, as the title suggests, is an almost antipoetic book, and from there I was able to write the poems of *Stars Which See, Stars Which Do Not See*, which is the best of those books, one where the poems are most opened up. Yet I still think of them as beginner's books. Ever since *Stars Which See*, though, I have been trying to redefine the poetic imagination and its language. Perhaps there's a self-assurance, as you suggest, a willingness to bring in bigger pieces of the world and not to have to try to tie every little bit together. I'm embarked on a risky experiment to see how much of poetry can be sensual and imaginative and not verbal first. That is, how much can the materials of poetry include the preverbal. There is a poem by James Wright that has the line, “I have heard weeping in secret.” Without considering the special context of that line, we can say that it touches the essence of poetic imagination. We've all heard weeping and secrets behind doors. The problem for the poet, though, is how to use this elusive material, how to make it part of his sensibility at that moment in that poem. The whole history of poetry turns out to be a history of poets finding ways to incorporate

what was thought to be nonliterary or secret material into their styles and content. There is always an undercurrent, the mystery. In “Stars Which See,” the glassy surface of the mirrorlike water and its promise must break because things are not what they appear to be; there is always something more, different, an additional reflection, a secret. It involves the preverbal realm, and it is this realm the newer poems try to appropriate.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Your lines have also loosened up, become more spacious. In the light of what you just said about language, how do you conceive of the play between words, lines, phrases, and sentences?

MARVIN BELL: There has been a lot of talk about the line. One of the problems free verse has had is that many poets feel it should distinguish itself with special effects, particularly in its line breaks. In those cases the line has become too important. If you're just going for effects, for interruptions of the natural phrase to show off what can be done, then perhaps you are syncopating, jazzing, surprising the reader too much. Perhaps you should opt for a more seamless verse. The line length has to hold hands in some sense with the phrase. We should remember Pound's admonition: “As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome.” I think the musical analogy is crucial, for I do think there is a thing called an “ear” and that free verse depends on this ear. It is intuitive. It has to do with responding to different kinds of music and speech rhythms. I like speech rhythms myself, that is, a language which is opposed to what we can only imagine as written. Poems, in other words, are not written by word; they're written by phrase.

POETRY MISCELLANY: This seamless verse reminds me of the way William Carlos Williams's “Asphodel” strings out its sentences.

MARVIN BELL: Oh, yes, all kinds of sentences, all kinds! Sometimes he had to invent punctuation marks, like the comma followed by the dash. Williams was such a virtuoso with syntax; the line itself means nothing to him; only its relation to syntax has meaning.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Let's talk a little about the relation between language and meaning. There's still an undecidability in your poems—not the early, intense questioning, but a playful undercutting. I'm thinking, for example, of “Life,” where the letter that is sent out like a poem contains “the spot in which it wasn't clear, perhaps, / how to take my words, which were suggestive, / the paragraph in which the names of flowers, / ostensibly to indicate travel, / make a bed for lovers.” The problem is one of referentiality. “Yet what the symbol is to the flower / the flower is to something or other,” you say in “What Lasts.” And in “The Hole in the Sea,” there is that “one word” that lies “in the hole of the sea,” with a pun on whole, “where the solid truth lies.”

MARVIN BELL: I suppose part of this problem goes back to my suspicion about language. You can't separate language and content. I've always secretly considered myself a poet of content, and still do, less and less secretly. It is curious that so much critical attention has been lavished in recent years upon poets whose poetry has *no* content. I think that sometimes teachers want their activity to be safe from philosophical and other concerns. The perfect tautology, the sweet song of nothing, has always been better received because it is safe. Several poets of my own generation, for instance, write beautiful, jewellike tautologies; these poets are practitioners of a limited aesthetic. But the rough piece can get at the impure world better. Picasso said, and then Stein picked it up, that “works of genius are always ugly.” Part of the problem is that critics don't often see the buried metaphors, the richness, of colloquial language. They don't see the special precision of it, only a folksy translation of what they prefer to be elegantly said. But that colloquial language can hold a great deal of “meaning.”

I have the feeling that American poetry can go on writing the same poem over and over again, that many of the vessels we're using just aren't going to save us anymore. It is going to take an enormous effort to break those vessels. For example, I've greatly admired Wright's *Two Citizens* and *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* and Galway Kinnell's latest work, but these poets have gotten progressively worse reviews. Wright was accused of being too sentimental; emotional, passionate—yes; but sentimental in the sense of emotion in excess of the event?—No, I don't think so.

POETRY MISCELLANY: In an interview in 1966 you said: "I write to make discoveries and inventions, as a necessary strategy to get things said. . . . I write to change my life." There's a sense of the self defining itself by speech, by passing beyond itself. I think of Stevens's "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard"—"a speech / Of the self that must sustain itself on speech." What seems important is not the statement but the saying. This leaves us with the strange relation of the poet to his material; as you say in "We Have Known" about poems, "If very little / can pass through them, know that I did, / and made them, and finally did not need them." More recently, in "Haleakala Crater, Maui," "I wanted something beyond me." So let's talk some about writing and the self.

MARVIN BELL: One can labor for years, say as Eliot says, to get a thing just right, and then discover that it's not the thing one wants to say anymore. Poetry is often talked about as a grapple with the mind for that very reason; the mind doesn't hold still for anyone. What we have in the end is an exhibit of "passage," as Eliot calls it in the *Quartets*, something that came out on the way to something else. One has to be careful here, careful about the voice, careful not to use this idea as an excuse for bad writing. Half the battle may be knowing who you are at a given time.

When I made the statement, "I write to change my life," I had just articulated many motives for writing, and that sort of encompassed the others. I think of Auden's line, "Poetry makes nothing happen"—I don't believe that. I believe poetry changes individual consciousnesses. When I read back over my poems I do see a person who has changed, though it would be hard to say how much the poems changed the person and how much the changes led to different poems. No one can know. I believe, at least, that there's a great benefit in doing anything seriously for a long time, and I'm not sure it matters what. Poetry can become a way of life. For me, writing poetry *is* a way of life, indeed down to my metabolic needs. I can't go very long without writing and not become crabby, hard to live with. I always feel better when I write, when I go to my study out back under the wild cherry tree. It only takes a few minutes before I say, "Why didn't I come out here sooner?" It feels wonderful! It's almost as if now I'd like to reserve the term "poetry" for a quality of imagination which is beyond technical analysis.

POETRY MISCELLANY: The self always seems at some threshold, always about to fade even as it begins to emerge. In "Trinket," in *Stars Which See*, you watch the water ooze through a crack in the pot and say it is this "that gives the self / the notion of the self // one is always losing / until these tiny embodiments."

MARVIN BELL: It is true that I think of the self as very small, and it is true that I think what can be known about the self is possible to know mostly by looking outside the self and not into mirrors. There's an essay by Rilke about Rodin in which he talks about Rodin becoming a great artist whose every moment was caught up in the greatness of his art. When he begins to describe the sculpture in terms of surfaces, he realizes what the implications of that are and says, "Okay, I've been talking about surfaces, but isn't everything we know about life a matter of surfaces?" Poetry looks at a surface until depth is achieved, that is, suggestiveness and implication. But we look at the surface, the threshold, nevertheless.

POETRY MISCELLANY: As if the surface were a transparency?

MARVIN BELL: Yes, as we were saying before, there's always something more. I believe that about the self, too. “Self” is a very iffy word for me, for in a funny way we are selfless. The word has become more problematic for me than “soul.” American poetry has been limited in large extent, whatever its achievements are, and they are many and substantial, by two characteristics. First, I think that our technology is translated into a belief in technique in literature for its own sake. Second, there's a terrible burden, which the first characteristic often hides, that the self can expand, optimistically, to legislate what is right for other selves, whether they want it or not. America has always been a country with a vision, even if the vision may have been built on self-deception, manipulation, imperialism, commerce, self-interest, whatever. The vision is always translated into a myth, a moral imperative. It is this sense of vision which defines that American self and perhaps accounts for a blind faith in that technology/technique which is the means of achieving that vision.
POETRY MISCELLANY: In “The Self and the Mulberry,” you say, “I kept losing parts of myself like a soft maple,” then decide, “That was the end / of looking in nature to find a natural self.” But one keeps hearing the children's ditty and realizes how they define themselves in the group game and in the saying of that song. That tension about the self seems to be the motivating force in the poem, perhaps throughout *Stars Which See*.
MARVIN BELL: That's terrific. I never thought of that. Well, I keep making a distinction between what we make of nature and what nature is in its indifference. Nature is not a phenomenon with a consciousness, though we often treat it that way—hence the title, *Stars Which See, Stars Which Do Not See*. We look at the stars, and they seem to look back. What are they? They may even be long dead as their light reaches us. We seem compelled to speculate. In the Mulberry poem the distinction is between whether we see the mirror or nature itself when we look at it.
POETRY MISCELLANY: How does a poem like your recent “Late Naps” fit into this problematic sense of the self and its world? Specifically, it deals with the soul, though in a comic way.
MARVIN BELL: It's a poem about going to bed with a bad feeling; one takes a late afternoon nap with a sense of things still nagging, incomplete, done poorly. Anything can cause the bad dreams—“the dreamworks run on an oil so light, / it can be distilled from thin air.” One thinks of the soul as laughable, as something that can hover in the air like a ghost, as insignificant but yet mysterious, as something that slips away in dream and yet haunts, nags like those bad feelings. We're weakest when the soul floats up and away, most vulnerable to discontent. The poem doesn't really engage so much the question of the soul as much as a certain kind of spiritual discontent—a spiritual pit in the stomach.
POETRY MISCELLANY: That sense of the soul going out suggests the notion of the Other. There is, for example, the play of self and Other in *The Escape into You*, of self and divorced self. And in “The Perfection of Dentistry,” you see things, as it were, through the caretaker, and you “lead his concurrent lives.” I think, too, of the recent poem, “Someone Is Probably Dead”—“It's stupid to pretend we can be someone else, / when someone else is dead.”
MARVIN BELL: Well, “The Perfection of Dentistry” tries to find a way to see those lives concurring, one life taking place in another. We're all linked that way through imagination. I'm reminded of a poem in the forthcoming book called “A Motor,” where the speaker identifies with someone who is up in a light plane and who is probably coming down to go to a hospital for cancer treatment. The poem ends, “Myself in the clinic for runaway cells, / Now and later.” The Other here involves a possibility in the future as well as a certain sympathetic understanding now. But then there is the other side of the coin. There is Pindar's famous question, which I use in the title of a

prose poem, “What Are We, What Are We Not.” Rather than finding ourselves in others, there may be no others, no selves.

POETRY MISCELLANY: The way you use the “you” is perhaps as elusive as this Other. How do you conceive of the Other that is represented by “you”?

MARVIN BELL: I've tried not to use the “you” to mean “one,” though I perhaps have sometimes done it ill-advisedly. I'm really addressing someone I know when I use it, though the reader may not be sure of whom. “The Canal at Rye,” meaning Rye, England, where Henry James lived for a while, begins: “Don't let them tell you.” Later in the poem you can figure out that “you” has to be a child of the speaker. Now, someone like David St. John writes a poetry that is always fiercely intimate; it seems to depend heavily on addressing a someone as if that person were anxious to be addressed.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Let's extend this notion of otherness even farther, to other times. To what extent does a consciousness of the past or history enter your poems? In “To His Solitary Reader,” you say, “Memory is what we are.” In some poems, such as “Virtuoso of the X,” history intrudes in images like “an aroma of gas remains in the showers.” At the same time, this is not a cheap or nostalgic sense of the past, but a way of presencing it, as in “Father and Russia,” where you repeat “you” as if to presence him: “Now I want you as you were before they hurt you, / irreparably as you were as in another country.”

MARVIN BELL: It may be that memory *is* the sum total of our experiences, but it may also be that poetry includes memory and loss too easily. There's always the danger of nostalgia, a poetic attitude we ought to be a little more careful about—a certain tilt of the head, a certain longing look backward. Now, I did set out to write a book-length series of poems to my father who was already dead at the time. I thought of myself as completing a conversation that never took place because he was a father who didn't speak about many things. It became the sequence of only thirteen poems in *Residue of Song*. I was conscious of the danger of poetic nostalgia. Even the past tense has an aura about it. I like to write more in the present tense, or to write in what one might call the immediate past tense in which things haven't happened so long ago that one has to question “when”? In some ways, the poems are about possession, as in the poem where the three people pause for a moment at the edge of the road to look at some hedgeapples. When the lady appears at the screen, we suddenly feel as if we are spying, trying to take possession of something. Though we didn't take any hedgeapples, we felt as if we had.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Your sense of time, generally, is a dynamic one. Time becomes a futural thing, something we have to structure for ourselves. In some sense this is possible, I think, because you think of time as disguise; in “New Students” you talk about a “shapeless universe disguised as time.” It's also a matter of point of view; in “Dew at the Edge of a Leaf,” you have the lines: “Everything green is turning brown, / it's true, but then too, / everything turning brown is green!”

MARVIN BELL: I really do believe that time is an illusion. I can conceive of a gigantic scientific breakthrough that would see through time by seeing into materials. The idea of space travel today is senseless. You put up a few people in a capsule and they have children and their children do and so on until whoever arrives whenever doesn't know where they came from and are at a place they don't want to be. So, the only way to go from one place to another on that scale would be to defeat time, perhaps through cybernetics, by changing matter. It would be like turning on your TV and actually having the thing before you, not some representation that is always trapped by time. The poem “Viet Nam,” from *Residue of Song*, opens by saying, “Viet Nam // is a place you will hear of / in the future, / which is not to say tomorrow merely.” When you think of time in terms of a memento or two, a nostalgic memory from the past, something the clock has marked as ended, you reduce time.

There is something larger—"Though we know better about time, / we know nothing about peace, / which is a function of time and war." Time is not a form, but a content; it has to do with material.
POETRY MISCELLANY: And it has to do with presencing that otherness. I was just thinking how often the word "elsewhere" or something like it occurs in your poems. It suggests something of the inexpressible, the secrecy, the otherness we've been discussing.
MARVIN BELL: Yes, elsewhere. In fact, I almost gave *Stars Which See* a different title—*Poems Which Came from Elsewhere*.
POETRY MISCELLANY: The elsewhere occurs in "The Hedgeapple" as the place you'd wish you'd gone back to. The refrain, "We should have gone back," keeps appearing at regular intervals. And yet, the poem itself is a going back, a fulfilling of the opening line, "I wish we'd gone back." The elsewhere is perhaps that preverbal space, but here made present, brought back into the time of the poem. The second half of the poem becomes more authoritative, at least relative to the questioning and subjunctive moods of the first half, almost as if you were going to say, "Okay, this is how it is," and then you end audaciously, "So: here." You've taken the elsewhere and presenced it, denied, undercut the refrain and opening line. It's like the old gossip who says, "I never should have repeated that story." Of course she has to, again and again.
MARVIN BELL: Yes, I agree with all you've said, but more compelling is your example. As soon as you say that, I'm interested in it; I want to use that line. That's terrific. What an opening line—"I never should have repeated that story." That to me is where poetry is. How could you not read the next line in a poem that began that way? That works like the opening of Wright's "The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio"—"I am almost afraid to write down / This thing." You have to read on. There's so much urgency, so much private power, such a sense of secrecy. Once you've said that line, you've got to write it down.

DARA WIER
The Languages of Illusion

1981

POETRY MISCELLANY: The last poem in *Blood, Hook & Eye* ends: “You look at the mountain / miss the mountainless space, / the mountain holding mountain in place.” Something is always absent in your very concrete language that gives that language its sense of mystery; the invisible or the absent seems to order space, to hold things in place. There seems to be an invisible marginal script that links the intimacy of the moment with an immensity which is all that lies behind or beyond it, to steal a concept from Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. In a more recent poem, “In Obedience to Absence,” you talk about mirrors that “revise space”—“These mirrors will show you where / you would have been.” Always, more or less is shown—“You've turned toward seeing / what you never intended.” Perhaps we could begin by talking about this mystery that so characterizes your language.
DARA WIER: A mystery is something I wish to contemplate and to ask a reader to contemplate; it's not a puzzle to be solved. If you solve a mystery you're done with it, and I want the mystery to be one that resists a solution, that allows you to take off in other directions.
I think this may originate in the Catholic theology I learned in a very unsophisticated way when I was young. I was always told that you were supposed to contemplate a mystery, and I always wanted something to happen to me when I was sitting, waiting. The thing I missed was that I was supposed to make something happen. One day I realized that the body that embodied the mystery that I was to contemplate was more important to me than it should have been. I stuck to the subject too much and only saw what I intended to see.
Now that is connected to my sense of metaphor. There are two ways of thinking about what metaphor can do. One is that it is a nice, static way to present two things in an interesting juxtaposition. On the other hand,*metaphor* might suggest the kind of movement that a verb produces, a change—once you've changed something into something else, it's then ready to be changed into something else again. The first way of thinking about metaphor suggests a Protestant sense of communion in which the bread represents something; it's ceremonial and historical, a reenactment; there is no mystery involved. The second way of thinking about metaphor reminds me of a Catholic sense of communion—transubstantiation, something is changed; it's sacramental and timeless; I believe in the transformation that takes place when I make the metaphors I use. I want change to occur in metaphor—not just comparison or decoration. I'm not trying to show more clearly the first half of a metaphor; I'm trying to take it and change it into something else. I think “To Become a Field” is a good poem to talk about here because that's the one in which I discovered that what mattered to me was the way things can be changed, do change, are turned, transformed. Before that, what mattered was the pure possibility of what images can evoke, how they can resonate.
POETRY MISCELLANY: I'm reminded, as you talk, of “Colorless Green Ideas,” where the dark is described as being like a horse in a stall looking down over some sleeping friends. Then the poem takes off and describes the horse. The night, the original image, gets left behind as a simple perception, though it remains as a trace, in a modifying or adjective function—“how difficult it is for nothing / to remain nothing.” As the poem moves from one image to another in a rippling-out movement, some traces remain but the movement is more important. The traces are like the

markings on those magic slates we used as kids, an analogy used by Freud and some contemporary critics, and they remind us of the dynamics, the movement, how far and fast the poem moves.
DARA WIER: That's good, I can see that. What you want is to imitate in the language the way your mind moves through perceptions and understanding. That's the way I think about catalogs, too. If you use a catalog and list five things in it, I think that implies there is an endless number of possibilities you might have used—the catalog is not closed. The movement is on the surface, and it involves some uncertainty. It involves an interfacing of different images, something I've always been fascinated with. I learned to be able to live in this world through something like Keats's "Negative Capability," or F. Scott Fitzgerald's notion that you have to be able to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at once and still maintain the ability to function. I disagree with Ernest H. Gombrich's notion in *Art as Illusion* that you can't see both sides of the double image at once. If you can't see the illusion, if the illusion is not clear to you, you can't create it, can't even draw the picture. I suppose that's like your idea of the trace, and its presence is necessary in order to have a poem move in the way we've been discussing.
In terms of language, I am very conscious of the different ways in which a particular word matters at a given moment, whether to name something or to recall a word's history. This consciousness can provide the poem with movement. For instance, "She Has This Phantom Limb" near the opening of *Blood, Hook & Eye* originated with a story a man told me about his aunt who lost a leg and felt phantom pains. I couldn't write anything interesting about someone not having a leg, but was able to write about someone missing an arm. There are so many things we do with hands, and so the arm's absence in space becomes more interesting. But I got stuck when the poem moved to the palm reader. I looked up *palm* in the *OED*, and there I found *palm* is related to the word *antler*, and that suggested *deerskin*, the gloves, and the poem took off. You're given something like that as a gift because of language.
POETRY MISCELLANY: I wonder to what extent language, vocabulary, determine the subject of a poem. I mean, I wonder how much this process we've been describing serves as author, authority.
DARA WIER: I think language determines the subject a lot. It's what we use to think, so it must. As I become more interested in particular words, they give me things I didn't know before. They give me an understanding of whatever it is I'm writing about and how I'm thinking about it. One of the things that made *The 8-Step Grapevine*, besides my interest in the characters, was thinking about all these words we laugh at when we use them—like *lollygag* or *dojigger*. I spent days making lists of these words, though I ended up using only fifteen or so. But the words determine the way the poems sound because there's a kind of foolishness in those rhythms. After I finished that book I had to put those words and rhythms out of my head, and I had to revise many of the newer poems in order to remove from them *The 8-Step's* quirky music.
I pretty much have faith in a unifying and generous force, maybe sometimes your subconscious, that provides you with those connections you can't rationally figure out. Language is part of that unifying force. I think I began to understand this when I wrote that new poem, "The Batture." The batture was where I began to write poems, romantically, as a child, putting them in little jars, throwing them into the river hoping they'd float to South America. I began, when I was writing "The Batture," to think of what the imagination offered—that gift bearer that gives you unifying powers, lets you write over the horizon, makes living endurable. What makes it interesting is to see which side of the coin you're going to be moved by, the mountain or the mountainless space, and the imagination's part in that. It becomes a question of how far you'll let your imagination travel. And it has to do with creating those illusions.

POETRY MISCELLANY: One side of the coin we haven't talked about is the physical texture of your language. Even the movements in your poems are, to borrow a phrase from Bachelard, "movements that are engraved in our own muscles." There are images of meat, animals, flesh, earth, sexuality—a poetry crammed with tactile, visual, auditory images.

DARA WIER: Part of that is purely my own sentimental and nostalgic connection to a place and people whose own vocabularies and lives include and are reflected in my own language. But by sentimental I mean something like what Pamela Stewart means in her essay in *Intro 12;* one part of the word has to do with feeling and emotion, the other half with the intellect. I think the physical aspect of language is sentimental in this larger sense. Also, words really are physical not only because of the way we speak them but because we really do think of words as things. Each has its history which is a horizontal measure of its origin, whatever transformations it's gone through, wherever it's lived most frequently; and each has its own particular connotative qualities, its own several puns—and these are vertically suggestive. At the crossroads of these vertical and horizontal aspects comes the word, the word as we see and hear it most strongly. We understand something about a word, and a poem can begin to happen in several directions. That Bachelard quotation is wonderful in this respect.

POETRY MISCELLANY: In a way you don't know the object itself, though, because language is always there. If I rub my hand over the glass like this, I can't separate the physical feeling from what I know to be a glass, its history, purposes, associations, which are all given in language. I might associate the act with something I saw in a film or a commercial or read in a story or a poem.

DARA WIER: That's why I want all those things in detail, that's why I want the world in the poem so much. The objects we name recall sensations, other words and images. One thing I love about language is that it makes us think we know things that we can't know, because we have names for them, can talk and write about them. Actually, it's our only way to keep reminding ourselves there are things we don't know. So language keeps us humble.

When I was very young, there was something I feared, terrribly, that wasn't named. When Allen and I lived in Virginia we would drive to Richmond a lot, and it often was in cold weather. My lips would chap and I'd lick them; a fear would come exactly as when I was young. Finally, I began to understand that the thing I feared had something to do with a time when I was little and my uncle burned my lips with a battery—the acid—from a hearing aid. That's part of it, but not all. The point is, the discovery, though incomplete, began with the single sensation, and the object that was recalled may itself lead to other discoveries. I'd love to be able to put that back together.

POETRY MISCELLANY: I remember a comment you made once during a reading. You were describing those yards you pass which are strewn with reflecting bottles, statues, animals. If you think modern poetry is weird, you said, look at those yards. And what's so curious is the sensibility of these people; like the poet, they have one hand on reality.

DARA WIER: That's what's important. They are imagining worlds to live in, and they make worlds on their lawns that are unusual and strange. I love thinking of somebody putting two thousand little rocks together to build a little grotto in the front yard. And everything is always out of proportion, the color is never realistic—I like the juxtapositions of those things. And I like the fact that what is uncommonly combined gives pleasure.

POETRY MISCELLANY: The function of the narrator is crucial in all this. The narrator of the poem is, after all, putting the poem together, imagining a world to live in, and sometimes intrudes as in "Sherwood Street Talent Show," where she exclaims, "Wait / a minute. . . . " I think that one of the strengths of *The 8-Step Grapevine* is the way the narrator moves in and out of the poems, but this

occurs in all your poems to some degree. In "Lucille Examines the Family Album," we perhaps have a self-portrait of the narrator in Ernie, for we must be aware of "His style behind / or before the camera." He is "the fixed center / of all these turning pages."

DARA WIER: That last poem is certainly a description of the narrator's function. Yes, the "accomplice of *likeness*" is what I say Ernie is, and the writer is certainly that accomplice, too. I know that when you're writing it is very easy to imagine yourself as the reader. By becoming part of the poem, by putting yourself in the poem, sometimes you're letting the reader know how you're reading the poem as you go through it yourself. You become the reader's companion, and you take on one another's characteristics. When you intrude directly, you're in communion with a reader as you move through the poem. I think that is closely related to the first poem in *Blood, Hook & Eye*—the audience speaks the poem instead of the poet.

POETRY MISCELLANY: As in "If for a Night My Tongue Could Speak," where you are literally, if comically, putting words in someone's mouth.

DARA WIER: Exactly, and one thing I learned from writing some of the new poems is that the narrator not only wants to slip into the poem but also to slip into someone else's body, like putting on a glove, becoming that person. A while back I went to the Toledo Museum to see a show of Richard Estes's work. He's always called a photo-realist, but the interesting thing is that while he's completely true to some kind of photographic realism in terms of detail, there is always an overlay of abstraction in terms of color, design, and form. When I went to see that show I desperately wanted to put my arms into his arms and feel what the painter must. He has that doubleness that we were talking about in terms of language and so I suppose there is a kinship; he calls things out of the ordinary world and we see them in a special way. He has a lovely picture of an escalator that does that, for instance.

POETRY MISCELLANY: What sort of relationship does the narrator establish with the characters in poems? In *The 8-Step Grapevine* it seems more ambiguous but more engaging than the "One Woman" poems of the first book. What stake does the narrator have in the action?

DARA WIER: My intention from the first in *The 8-Step Grapevine* is to give the characters what they want. Each of them lets you know in the first poem, and the narrator gives it to them by the end, but I don't think it's given very graciously. As a matter of fact, it was Allen and Richard Dillard who pointed out to me that Ernie seems to have died when Lucille visits the mortician's wife. I didn't want that. Lucille does want to be a star at Ernie's funeral and is waiting for it, so I wrote another poem to keep him alive to keep alive her desire. The characters in that book mean more to me than the ones in the second section of *Blood, Hook & Eye*, the one-woman characters. Those women are vehicles more than anything else (but the characters in *Grapevine* delight me). Once they begin to take shape, once Ernie becomes hapless and begins moving toward the conclusion of the book, I follow his steps in the dance and am happy to go on through with him. When I enter that world, I'm able to look around and see where I stand.

When you're writing these poems, you think, "I've got to give them life," and you are always aware that they're invented so you can make them live any way you want them to. You choose all the time. What I found was that I wanted to give them what they wanted. But do I give them their wishes, then pull the rug right out from under them—which is so easy to do in language? I love those characters; I'm not disdainful of them in any way. I don't think their desires are mundane just because of the simplicity of the objects and events they decide to use to try to understand their lives. I think of Eudora Welty's story, "Petrified Man," which takes place in a beauty shop. What I love

about it is that it shows you you can take any object, any setting, situation, and make it resonate in an important way.

POETRY MISCELLANY: The narrator in "All You Have in Common" starts off as an observer; then intensifies the use of "you," which is different, I think, than just a second-person address and seems to speak to an Otherness in the narrator; then can address himself later—"the narrator keeps calling your name." At the same time, the identity of the "you" and the events of the story begin to shift dramatically, establishing false connections and leads.

DARA WIER: Let's start with "you." When you're learning to write, you don't use the first person because you don't think you have earned the right; you invent somebody to speak for you. In colloquial speech we use "you" reflexively as "I." In a lot of these new poems there's a "you" who is also an "I," and the two of these together get to be "we." I let the poems go ahead and do that. They often start with a singular "you" or "I" and then move to a "we." I suppose it's the way of linking the narrator and reader we were talking about before.

As for "All You Have in Common," that poem is partly wallowing in an enjoyment and understanding of how much you can manipulate a story, how many possibilities there are in any narrative. What is important is not the story, but how we get there; it doesn't make sense logically. The poem plays with and against absolute, rational causality, but the only causality comes from the language.

POETRY MISCELLANY: The problem of causality is really part of a larger problem, which is the way you perceive time. Let me outline a few aspects of this in your work as I see it. In "Complaints," in *Blood, Hook & Eye*, the past exists as a "trace," as "the empty tomb which bears my family name." There's an attempt simultaneously to retrieve that lost past, fill the empty tombs, and escape it by moving toward the future. More recently, in "Memory," you can "spend the last few minutes / chasing what can't by fever-weakened / hands be caught." The paradox of time is that it is there, but always beyond our grasp. This has one effect that seems central to your work; though you glance backward, you aren't trapped like Eurydice—everything is seen freshly, opening up. As you say in "Another and Another," "I run the clocks down. // Everything I touch for the first time. / No new beginnings only beginning." You're always beginning, always at the threshold; as in Nietzsche's Eternal Return, everything speaks of "Another identical matter." Finally, the threshold itself seems layered with time—time becomes a question of intensity. There's the 2.8-billion-year-old rock your brother brings back in another new poem, or the presence of layered time in those Indian mounds we visited south of here.

DARA WIER: The first aspect has most to do with emotions about things, a sense of preservation. In this sense, we participate in creating the past. Memory may provide a sensation, an emotion, say, fear or anticipation, but not until the memory can be understood by means of words does it truly step into the future. Memory keeps something with you that's no longer with you—exactly that sense of the mountain holding mountain in place. There's a sense of wonder, a sense that there are an infinite number of possibilities possessed by any one moment you remember. As you keep breaking it apart, you keep thinking that you'll find the core. But you never find it because that center opens up again, and you are able to keep filling in all around it, packing it with more things to shape it.

I've always disliked the expression, "a new beginning." It seems stupid, but we can say it, can pretend we know what it means. What I like about that rock that came eleven thousand miles is that it embodies the union of time and space. Now, this seems to me to have as much to do with language as with any sense of time. Language gives us and preserves for us a sense of time. If you write a story

in the past or even the future tense, it is always in the present tense as the reader is reading the words. No matter how hard we try to place something in another time, in language it is always here, right with us. The narrator is always present, giving you the story, giving you a particular syntax that you follow. And it is always for the first time.

What's wonderful about writing is that you're multiplying time. You're giving it more room than you ever have when you move through a day. I guess we write partly because of that and can be satisfied because we can keep saving ourselves and saving time. Even though we can't be immortal, we can pretend that there is an infinite amount of time. The poem defers. That goes back, again, to creating an illusion. We can create the illusion that we can live forever. We can create the illusion of objectivity, which is really omniscience, omnipresence, infinity.

POETRY MISCELLANY: Perhaps one of your newer poems, “The Innate Deception of Unspoiled Beauty,” best summarizes the sort of motion in time and language that your poems enact. Your “wish,” which is erased, left as a trace, is “that those moments which the brain contrives / first to link, then to pull apart will find each // its place to settle, sink, sufficient while it turns / the scale toward no particular point.” Several competing movements are described here, as well as the movement of the lives behind them. Everything is at the threshold, not looking for a solution, opening up mysteries.

DARA WIER: That's certainly an accurate description of why I like to read, why I like to write, what makes me think, keeps me thinking. I'm fascinated by that. “The Consequence of Weather” talks about a glass of water, a hanging basket, and a photograph, which all have different associations, worlds that spin off from them. But they're held together by the woman's crooked finger; that little physical thing draws them all together. That's one of the things poems can do for you, provide you with details or moments, worlds, unendingly.