Girl and B(u)oy on the Maine Coast.
FIELD

CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND POETICS

NUMBER 11 — FALL 1974

PUBLISHED BY OBERLIN COLLEGE
OBERLIN, OHIO
FIELD gratefully acknowledges support from the Ohio Arts Council and from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines.

Published twice yearly by Oberlin College.

Subscriptions: $3.50 a year / $6.00 for two years / Single issues $1.75 postpaid.

Subscription orders and manuscripts should be sent to: FIELD, Rice Hall, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio 44074. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

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THE VARIANT

A dog eating grass
on a coroner's leash
along the perimeter
of barbed wire.

His impeccable table manners
and the evening's capacity
for lofty detachment
from the extraordinary event.

The grass like a prophet's beard,
thoughtful and graying. Chill
of late autumn in the air.
Distant guard-towers with searchlights
following us all
with malice, regret,
and also absent-mindedly.

The proverbial dry blades
sticking in the throat.

Obviously, what the poor mutt requires
is some old stern stepmother
to tap him on the back
quickly
not caring to hold on.
LIGHT

It has to do with a chair
It has to do with a wall

On the periphery of vision
In the remote corner of a room

Calling no special attention to itself
Engrossed as it were

Obedient only
To the angle of its falling

And the wall submits
And the chair complies

*

Just so someone
Stooped and bareheaded

Would come to knock
Would come to ask for a room to rent

Would then hesitate
For a long time

So that when you next look up
From your book

The street would be empty
The windy threshold
EYES FASTENED WITH PINS

How much death works
no one knows what a long
day it puts in, the little
wife always alone
ironing death's laundry
the beautiful daughters
setting death's supper table
the neighbors playing
pinochle in the backyard
or just sitting on the steps
drinking beer, death
meanwhile in a strange
part of town looking for
no one in particular
someone with a bad cough
but the address somehow wrong
even death can't figure it out
among all the locked doors
and the rain beginning to fall
long windy night ahead
and death with not even a newspaper
to cover his head, with not even
a dime to call the one pining away
undressing slowly so slowly
and stretching naked
on death's side of the bed.
HAPPY END

And then they pressed the melon  
And heard it crack  
And then they ate enough to burst  
And then the bird sang oh so sweetly  
While they sat scratching without malice  
Good I said for just then  
The cripples started dancing on the table  
The night I met a kind of angel  
Do you have a match she said  
As I was unzipping her dress  
Already there were plenty of them  
Who had ascended to the ceiling  
Lovers they were called and they held  
Roses between their teeth while the Spring  
Went on outside the wide open windows  
And even a stick used in childbeating  
Blossomed by a little crooked road  
My hunch told me to follow
Frank Stanford

THE DEAD MAN'S FIDDLE

A long time ago
A stranger rode into town
On a stout white mule.

The same day my brother
Who was mad from birth
Took a notion to swim the river
After a blue luna moth
Taking its own kind of journey.

He must have thought
It was a butterfly.
He spent time in front of trucks
Stroking the radiators.

He was always getting lost,
Climbing bee trees,
And putting up angels in the barn.

I still think he pretended to die,
Because we all pretended to weep.

Some boys shooting marbles
Tended the man's ride for him.
He gave them instructions to bite its ear.

He went into the hotel
And got a room.

His upper lip looked like a hawk
Gliding in the distance,
Coming towards you.
He went into Big Woman's Supper Tent
And came back out
With a slice of cornbread,
Wrapped in a silk paisley scarf,
And a quart bottle of sweetmilk.

When I think of my brother
I think of a white sheet with a hole
Left out on the line overnight,
The fiddle-player drinking milk.

He ate and drank
On the boardinghouse porch.
His pocketwatch opened up like a mussel in the mud.

Evening shined and was quiet
As the blade of a broken-down bulldozer.

But he must have heard something
Drifting over the sharecroppers' dark fields.

The moon was swollen up
Like a mosquito's belly.

That night I found him
Face-down in the river,
I don't know if he was
Drinking or listening.

The white mule had the fiddle
Harnessed to him, like a plow.
THE HOME MOVIE OF THOSE WHO ARE DEAD NOW

Fourteen years ago a Negro
Rode into town on a one-eyed mule
He had a long coat on
It was midnight blue

A woman was telling another woman
With sign language
In the honky-tonk near the river

I went to sleep with a catfish
Under my bed
A dog licked my toes

The chauffeur combing his hair
With a red comb

The bride shading her eyes
Like a run-over hawk’s wing
Imbedded in the macadam

And the host blowing out of the priest’s fingers
At the Morning Worship
Celebrated out in the garden

Mule in the ditch
A man afoot

Boats cutting through pure dark

Nobody hearing the deaf and dumb children
Burning wasps under the bridge
My mother changing a tire
For Martin Luther King's father

White gloves for the pallbearers
Cold drinks for the rest

INSTEAD

Death is a good word.
It often returns
When it is very
Dark outside and hot,
Like a fisherman
Over the limit,
Without pain, sex,
Or melancholy.
Young as I am, I
Hold light for this boat.

When the rest of you
Were being children,
I became a monk
To my own listing
Imagination.
Nights and days floated
Over the whorehouse
Like webs on the lake,
A monastery
Full of noise and girls.
The moon throws the knives.
The poets echo goodbye,
Towing silence too.
Near my house was an
Island, where a horse
Lathered up alone.
Oh, Abednego
He was called, dusky,
Cruel as a poem
To a black gypsy.

Sadness and whisky
Cost more than friends do.
I visit prisons,
Orphanages, joints,
Hoping I’ll see them
Again. Willows, ice,
Minnows, no money.
You’ll have to say it
Soon, you know. To your
Wife, your child, yourself.
In Vietnam I was always afraid of mines: North Vietnamese mines, Vietcong mines, American mines, whole fields marked with warning signs.

A bouncing betty bounces up waist high cuts you in half.
One man’s legs were laid alongside him in the Dustoff, he asked for a chairback, morphine, he screamed he wanted to give his eyes away, his kidneys, his heart . . .

You’re taught to walk at night. Slowly, lift one leg, clear the sides with your arms, clear the back, front, put the leg down, like swimming.
CONVOY

On a convoy from Bong Son to Hue we stop at a Vietnamese graveyard. People set up shelter halves right over the top of gravestones; one rock wall, just in case. It's raining, I smell people.

Two in the morning someone wakes me for guard. I'm out of bed, standing in the cold. The man next to me walks over to talk. A helicopter is parked thirty yards in front of us and in the moon it begins to move! My friend becomes the leader, he wants to fire, I'm afraid of an explosion. He tells me to circle the ship while he covers.

At the window it's dark, no moon. Inside, the pilot, restlessly turning in his sleep and rocking his ship.
HIM, ON THE BICYCLE

There was no light; there was no light at all

In a liftship near Hue,
the door gunner is in a trance.
He’s that driver who falls asleep at the wheel
between Pittsburgh and Cleveland
staring at the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Flares fall,
where the river leaps
I go stiff
I have to think, tropical.

The door gunner says he sees movement and the pilot makes small circles,
four men are running carrying rifles
one man is on a bicycle in the middle of the jungle,

he pulls me out of the ship there’s firing far away,
I’m on the back of the bike holding his hips.
It’s hard pumping for two,
I hop off, push the bike.

I’m brushing past trees,
the man on the bike stops pumping,
he lifts his feet
we don’t waste a stroke,
he steers I push
giving withdrawing,
his hat flies off
I catch it behind my back
put it on, I want to live forever!

Like a blaze
streaming down the trail.
In late September
he starts to feel excited
so he hunts squirrels

some days are so warm
the ones shot in the morning
smell bad
by the time you leave the field.

It’s good practice
“you have to stand down wind
be quiet and watch the trees.”

He can find a squirrel
he can flip his fingernail
on the butt of his gun
make a noise like two or three
fox squirrels cutting on hickories

“and deer are just like squirrel
you just wait and when a buck walks by
you shoot him.”
Richard Shelton

PROPHECY, POETRY, AND THE CAMEL’S NOSE

He called himself a prophet-poet and was employed in the household of a minor king who ruled one of the small eastern provinces at the edge of the desert. We no longer remember the prophet-poet’s name, but we always tell his story to our children, as our fathers told it to us. And while the story is only a legend based on one very old and unreliable document, it is probably true. Certainly it is too bizarre to have been made up.

His duties as a prophet were to foretell the sex of each of the king’s unborn children and the outcome of any battle in which the king might wish to engage. As a poet, he was expected to provide a poem for each wedding in the royal family and for other ceremonies and feast days. But his prophecies were always inaccurate, and his poetry was of such little merit that it loses nothing in translation.

In fact, his long poems were so painfully tedious to listeners that the king finally established a decree making it unlawful to read poetry in public, a decree which was received by the people with such overwhelming approval that the prohibition spread to neighboring countries where it has remained in effect to this day. And although it is not for this reason we still remember the prophet-poet, other men have been honored by history for accomplishing less.

Eventually, because of an erroneous prophecy, the king became engaged in a disastrous war with a wild tribe of barbarians to the north. The king’s forces were overcome, and the victorious barbarians, whose imaginations were developed only in the areas of violence and torture, entered the palace. Hearing the screams of the captives from his hiding place in the privy, the prophet-poet decided to relinquish his position as factotum to the king. He slipped behind the palisades and escaped on a one-eyed camel — straight into the desert.
It was rumored that beyond the desert lay the sea, and today we know this is true, but in those days no one knew what lay beyond the desert because no one had ever crossed it. And so, having abandoned himself to the desert, the prophet-poet had little hope of survival. Shortly after midday when his small supply of water was gone, he put a pebble in his mouth to allay his thirst. That night when the camel would go no farther, the exhausted traveller dismounted and fell on the ground, remembering only to spit out the pebble so he would not strangle on it in his sleep.

When he woke in the morning, he discovered the camel drinking at a small stream flowing from the sand near where the pebble had fallen. After quenching his thirst from the stream and eating some of the bread and cheese he carried with him, he felt much better and began to consider all the possible and impossible combinations of chance or mischance by which this miracle had occurred. He could come to no conclusion except that the pebble, with which he had been so intimately associated on the previous day, was in some way responsible for the presence of the stream, that it had somehow attracted the water. Then with the boldness and logic characteristic of saints and idiots, he popped the pebble back into his mouth, filled his small water skin, mounted his camel, and started off again farther into the desert.

And it happened exactly as he had expected, as if he were, after all, a true prophet. Each night he dropped the pebble on the ground, and each morning when he woke he found a small stream seeping from the desert floor nearby. He was so pleased that every morning he rode on with great cheer, reciting one or the other of his long poems, the sound of which was only slightly improved by the fact that he carried the precious pebble always in his mouth.

After many days he came to the sea and was rescued by a ship which took him to a distant land. What became of the one-eyed camel we do not know; but we know that the prophet-
poet lived in exile long enough to write a thirty-two volume poem called "The Journey of the Pebble," and that a copy of this poem eventually found its way back to the desert he had crossed.

For within a few weeks of his journey, others also ventured into the desert out of necessities no less desperate than his had been, and soon a group of them discovered the small stream at the spot where he had spent the first night. Then the second stream was discovered, and the third. Within a few years it was known that there were many streams in the desert, each spaced one day's journey from the other, and that the traveller who went from one to the next would be following an erratic line, sometimes veering to the north and sometimes to the south, but leading inevitably to the sea.

Fugitives who escaped from the war-torn eastern provinces settled near these streams and planted date groves and olive trees. The oases they created became small communities which supplied food and shelter to merchant caravans from many lands, for this was the only route to and from the coast. And gradually the small communities prospered and became cities. The streams were expanded and directed into systems of canals which furnished water for miles of farmlands, vineyards, and groves. Nor have the people of these cities ever engaged in war, since it has always been obvious that each city is merely a link in a chain stretching across the desert from the inland provinces to the sea, and that if trade between any two of the cities should fail, the chain would be broken and they would all perish.

It is not beyond the bounds of modesty to say that we who live in the Cities of the Pebble are blessed above others. Not only have we been permitted to live in peace, but we have learned much from the travellers who follow the road past our doors. In order to trade, we have learned many languages, and our schools are often models for schools in other lands. Our craftsmen and artists are famous throughout the world. We
have developed cotton of the finest quality known to man, and
our fabric dyes, made from certain desert plants which grow
nowhere else, are quite literally worth their weight in gold.

And we do not consider it a blot on our record that we
have produced no great prophets or poets. Prophets sometimes
visit our cities but never stay very long since no one pays the
slightest attention to them. They soon decide that if they are
going to be without honor anyway, they might as well go home.
As for poets, our law which does not permit poetry to be read
aloud in public is probably the reason why so few of our citi-
zens attempt to follow that vocation. And those poets who
pass through our cities, upon finding they will not be able to
perform before audiences, usually leave quickly.

We accept the name "Cities of the Pebble" as the conse-
quence of poetic error and because it has been handed down
for many generations. But we, who have lived all our lives
surrounded by the desert, know that a camel — even a one-
eyed camel — can smell water many miles away. And we
know that if given his head in the desert, a camel will lead the
traveller to a place, and there are such places, where water lies
very near the surface, although it cannot be detected by men.
We also know that a camel will dig with his strong toes all
night if necessary to reach the underground stream which his
infallible nose has told him is there. So we believe in neither
prophecy nor poetry, but place our trust in our own hard work
and the noses of our camels.
Annie Dillard

THE SIGN OF YOUR FATHER

The New Testament Apocrypha consists of many varied documents, some quite fragmentary. Scholars have copied, translated, and, so far as possible, reconstructed the probable texts. The passages which follow are selected and arranged from the Wilson English translation edition of the Schneemelcher edition.

I

(The grain of wheat) . . .
place shut in. . .
it was laid beneath and invisible. . .
its wealth imponderable?
And as they were in perplexity
at his strange question, Jesus
on his way came (to the) bank
of the (riv)er Jordan,
stretched out (hi)s right
hand, (fill)ed it with. . .
and sowed. . .on the. . .
And then. . .water. . .And. . .
before (their eyes),
brought fruit. . .much. . .
to the jo(y?) . . .

Jesus said: "Become passers-by."

He said: "Lord, there are many around the cistern, but nobody in the cistern."

And we said to him, "O Lord, are you speaking again in parables to us?" And he said to us, "Do not be grieved. . ."
(His) disciples ask him (and say): How should we fast and how should we pray and how . . . . . . . . . and what should we observe (of the traditions?) Jesus says . . . . . . . . . do not . . . . . . . . . truth . . . . . . . . . hidden . . . . . .

"This saying has been handed down in a particularly sorry condition."

(through thee), Father. Thou wilt make (all) subject to me. Amen. Through whom will (the last) enemy be destroyed? Through (Christ). Amen. Through whom is the sting of death (destroyed)? (Through the) Only-begotten. Amen. To whom belongs (the) dominion?

They all wondered and were afraid. The Redeemer (σωτήρ) smiled and spake to them: Of what are you thinking, or (ἡ) about what are you at a loss (ἀπορεῖν), or (ἡ) what are you seeking?

If they ask you: "What is the sign of your Father in you?" you say to them: "It is a movement and a rest (ἀνάπαυσι)."
CONIFERS

"Conifers are never climbers or runners, and rarely bushy. They are absolute trees."

Climbers

Shall a conifer climb a child,
an egg-collector, a bear?
Or lift a root to crotch and heave,
climbing itself? I can’t climb:
but water shoots in me,
prayer, from rock to air.

Runners

The sky is falling! The British
are coming! Where are you, love?
I stand, panting,
too excited to move.

Bushy

That’s the temptation, laying low. I could splat
and needle slow, porcupining
for a grubstake, close,
the way a hateweed grows. No.

Absolute trees

I’ll go
this way. I could freeze
at this height, mute—
or raise
a leafy sway: absolute praise.
WHO KILLED CHRIST?

The square is as high and as wide
as a man with his arms outstretched.
The Hebrew letter is blasphemous
to a Christian world. In a Christian world,
the blasphemous Hebrew letter
is the name of God, and the name of God
is like unto the name of the Father,

Father. Every man will be a tree,
may become a shaft stars rain down.
"He-who-labored" came unto me
and I gave him rest: in seeds, pools and poems,
I pardoned the water for no man
can swim in the channel, I let the father
assume all the shapes of the tides,

and I stood against the forsaken beaches
and cried to say something to insult you.
Now the children are scared of the beast-face
at the window, and the window fears cold,
unless I miss my guess, the plants too
have their feelings, the animals don't worship,
so I stand here looking out for no one.
FOLLOWING

Your eye at the glass proves snow
falling now for an unseen hour.
Depth is all. We waited for Christmas.
Two Island ducks would stuff us.
We'd nap it off. Then scavenge the birds.
One done wishbone would not suffice,
nor one wish, granted, fill us.

The rain that rose and fell, rose until
it changed to hail: those stones were large,
injurious, but we thought "marbles."
As in a pantry one thought of spicedrops,
and thought, too, the kchunk of the pump
a linking of water to water. One wanted to.
When I was there when you were there,

I wanted to. I also could fancy
that if one thing were like another
your being there was like your not being there,
if I paid attention. It was hard to follow.
Our house was a playhouse. You were my father.
The scattershot of ice, the chain-making of a pump,
were the rising sounds of your falling, better thought-of.
GARLIC

to my father

Russian penicillin — that was the magic of garlic, a party and cure. Sure, you’ll wrestle the flowers for fixings, tap roots and saw branch for the ooze of health, but you’ll never get better. I say you’re living a life of leisure, if life is life and leisure leisure.

The heart’s half a prophet; it hurts with the crabapple floating on top, it aches just to know of the ocean — the Old Country split off from the New — and the acts of scissors inside you. The heart of the East European, poor boiler, is always born broken.

The sore heart weighs too much for its own good. And Jewish health is like snow in March, sometimes April. The brothers who took their medicine with you (garlic!) are dead now too. The herb that beat back fever and sore went home to its family: the lilies.
O barn reality! I saw you swimming clear across the cornfields of Iowa, the loveliness and loneliness of you deeper than the shadows of photographs.

It is a human desire! To lie down in the damp fall on that black soil is a human desire. To want to leave the nuisance of the bed: its small deaths.

It can't just be done. We are born into a life of avoidance, to the sun and the tiny seeds of grains, to the growth of the children.

A man who wakes early works in a field. Time's what he knows of the end of time. And he has something to do and what's to die from — who's close to many, closer to one.
THE HEART

Sleepless, elbows on the window-frame, 
gaze fixed on the doves shuffling 
over the roofs in the morning cold. 
It could be the 19th century or the late 18th. 
It is today. 
Among vital organs the heart 
can't claim special attention 
— but the heart does keep him awake. 
A different order, a new grammar 
would hardly change things: 
the rusty nail, 
the creaking gate, 
the memory of a fresh leaf he held in his hand 
and crumbled away like a tram ticket. 
Why? 
The heart is not modern. 
But the heart does keep him awake.
THE OARS

Inherited a boat but didn’t have oars.
Picked out two knot-free pieces
put them in the attic to dry.
Then the earth-crust split,
electric devils mobbed up,
electric spiders and all sorts.
After thirty years the crust closed.
Shook hands with nurse and said thanks.
Shook hands with doctor and said thanks.
He wished me bon voyage.
Saw forest groves, saw red tractors
laboriously clawing their way over yellow fields.
Their numbers astonished me.
The gate to my father’s house was newly painted.
Shook hands with brother and bowed.
Shook hands with sister-in-law and bowed.
Carried the two boards down from the attic
and carved myself a pair of oars.
What I lacked then was a boat.
I sat down on the warped jetty
and counted through my years.
Tossed them to the screaming terns
who flew off with them over the reeds
and dropped them, one by one,
uneatable bits.
THE HORSE

Thunder rumbles and tumbles out
over the forests of Hälsingland
shedding a flash here, there,
in passing killing a dappled horse
no stable-boy rides any more
and no-one remembers
and no-one mourns — but the well
in which it dipped its warm muzzle
and stirred round the stars
that were fastened in eternity
high above the forests of Hälsingland.

translated by Robin Fulton
MOLES

The young of the mole
are born in the skull of a mayor.
They learn footfall
and rain. In the Season
of Falling Pinecones, they gather
in churches of ribs,
whining and puking.
When one of the old moles dies,
the young push him out of his tunnel
and set him afloat on the light.
This is the way we find them
out in the garden,
their little oars
pulled up and drying.
HOUSES AT THE EDGE OF TOWN: NEBRASKA

These are the houses of farmers
retired from their fields;
white houses, freshly folded
and springing open again
like legal papers. These are houses
drawn up on the shore of the fields,
their nets still wet,
the fishermen sleeping curled in the bows.
See how the gardens
wade into the edge of the hayfield,
the cucumbers crawling out under the lilacs
to lie in the sun.
BIRTHDAY

Somebody deep in my bones
is lacing his shoes with a hook.
It’s an hour before dawn
in that nursing home.
There is nothing to do but get dressed
and sit in the darkness.
Up the hall, in the brightly-lit skull,
the young pastor is writing his poem.
Conrad Hilberry

HUNGER

The goat hungers. Everything that lies in his way, he devours. He crams into himself a universe of grass, shrubs, debris, and yesterday's goats.

Yet everything remains. Coming over the shoulder of the hill, you see the uncut grass, the sumac, discarded shirts and cereal boxes, just as they were, and tethered in place, the goat — innumerable goats, all chewing.
RED

Let us report the fact only: against the blues, greys, greens, occurs this patch of red. It is not woven cotton, nudged to shadow by a collar bone and the shifting sand of a breast. There will be no buttoning or unbuttoning — and there has been none. This red never sat on the steps reflecting on the want-ads and is not now poised above a bicycle, about to ride, as the day cools, to Almena Corners and Blocker's Pond.

This red must be perceived as simply as we perceive the spot of sun below a burning glass. But wait. Smoke circles the instant. It cannot hold. Driven by its own light, the red burns through.
A DIALOGUE CONCERNING THE QUESTION WHETHER A TENNIS BALL MAY BE SAID TO HANKER FOR THE OTHER SIDE OF THE NET

A. Now, for example, when the ball lays its ear to the strings of the racket, the moment comes whole. Satisfied in the round completion of muscle, sun, and rubber, it wishes itself gone so that the woman across the net may run back, watch the lob float down, and drop her brown shoulder for the slam.

B. Let's keep things straight. You foresee the arch of muscles in the far court. The moment doesn't care. Feeling is a weed sending runners through the roots of the grass. Seized at the center, it may be pulled in one stroke, leaving the facts: the net, the wood, the woman whose footwork you admire are particles in motion.

A. The grain of the wood is desire. If you begin extracting, an instant flattens to splotches of color on cardboard. Never longing for the stretch of a body or a ball singing as the strings taught it, the dead present could create nothing. Uncaused, uncausing, it would have no reason to perish into a new time.
AN OCCASION

Mailbox. Streetlight. Hedge shears gape
on the lawn. Treva Pulaski rounds the corner roped
to her Irish setter. A screen door hangs on. A woman
in a red shirt curls over her handlebars heading
for Blocker's Pond. Each object, preoccupied,
dresses its own plumes.

Suddenly
they rise together from the grass and the mulberry
tree. The grass, the tree itself, rise. Innumerable
birds swirl to the wings, the tail, the streaked
breast of a giant bird which wheels once in the sky,
it's huge unison catching the purple light, then
diminishes, shrinks to the past, drops
as a single bird into a loud tree.
HOW WINTER COMES IN A SENTENCE

I don’t mind that birds leave
in mid-conversation,
that the level of field
drops three feet overnight

and crops flood the market
about the same time my cold toes
seem to disappear
back up my feet like the fingers

of gloves emptied too fast of their inhabitants
as before any disaster
when some cocklebur
of an old woman can’t bear to part with

her home even if it means
holding onto the last chimney
after everything else has gone
underground: rather, it’s her defiance

that disarms me or why the red berries
of a certain shrubbery (not holly)
don’t follow their rightful leaves down,
why they cling to discomfort

beside the dried hydrangea
blooming brown and heavy
on stripped stems
as the dirt closes for winter.
Kim Stafford

ORCAS ISLAND

It is surrounded by water because it is an island.

Charles Wright

Blackbird dead on the road
raised one wing for the wind
i was walking

with a scar
on my strongest arm
i came here myself

When wind blows sand  blink
heron with its feet in the ditch
jumped up  flew off

the horizon

makes me alone
heart is the only voice
this is one way to keep from being cold

Find a dark place and close your mouth
there is a roof here
i come in where the door hung
once  brambles come in
at a crack in the wall
i take off my hat

Snow has nowhere else to go
falls here  wind brings it
i scrape straw to cover me
in a corner

In cold weather be cold
I

Sun drops below the elms.
Moon comes along
and freezes the wheels of the street.
In her room my mother shakes out
her road of dark colors
and knits the first step.

My window faces the funeral home.
When the exhaust fan
starts to hum
something is flying, something
is leaving at the level of the trees.

II

I enter a street
where the sun is falling.
I look over my shoulder
and follow a thread that was my coat.
At its end is a vacant room
and a little bench of sleep.

I sit down quietly.
A few others arrive,
their eyelashes shining like crystals.
One coughs in a cloud of incense.
One closes his silver telescope.

A lost town circles overhead in the dark.
The houses hang out their lanterns.
On a blue bike
I race the shadows of the trees.
LATE HOUR

The lamp
and the white paper
and the hour when words end
like many roads
before the same darkened house.

And what waits there
is an open door, and a bed
with its lap full of mirrors
and its little star
of blood.
The women say: "it looks like rain." The clouds burst, they all go inside and open the linen closet so they'll feel secure. A chore that has its place in the scheme of things: counting the sheets. On stormy days they give each other comfort: "Madame," one of them says, "we can't get hit, there's the lightning rod on the school, and the one on the bank, and the cathedral. Oh, maybe if we lived a mile away, out in the open, but not here!" If a gale blows up while someone's visiting, they tell her as she leaves: "You're not serious, you can't go home in this mess, it's impossible." So she stays, and her sweet face goes white for the fragile instant the sky lights up.
Schoolchildren holding hands pose for a photographer from the postcard company. Just then a bell tolls a passing: suffering has run its course through a proud body. For nights on end a cramped room lit up, went dark, then lit up again, a torn book lay there on a table. While the children, near a grey monument, stare at the lens, one branch of a rosebush quakes; it will be blurred in the negative, but they will show up clearly in their bulky clothes. Their faces have a modest look, suspicious — already cruel, the village misanthrope might say.
The middle-aged teacher lets his small son sit on his knees and push his head from left to right, from right to left. The child, tired of the game, stops. But the father keeps on swaying his head, says: “Well, it’s all over, it’ll always work like this.” The fearstricken child cries out “No” to break the spell. Then the man stops, makes everything return to normal: chairs, sideboard, floral patterns on the curtains, a half cup of coffee gone cold and greasy which he will finish only to knead a small ball of bread between thumb and index finger. In the garden, shrubs will be twisted by a sudden wind that’s like an illustration of his life.
A woman makes her slow way across her vast property, her garden full of pear trees pruned in cone shapes, espaliered nectarine trees. The rotting wood of rabbit hutches grows covered with ashy blue lichen. A grownup won't scrape them off, but the single child playing there will. With one glance the woman takes in everything useful. On one path a paw print intrigues her since she can't figure out what kind of animal traced it. Was it a fox or some other wild animal? In a low voice she says, just for herself, "I don't know what it possibly could have been." The hour being struck in unison by three different clocks keeps her going toward the house with twenty windows, six of which are glazed red by the sunset.
In houses you approach carefully there are stairs you have to climb, once the door's open, before you get to the one room that's lived in. From the hall, the woman who's calling inquires, "Are you there?" And the woman who's up there alone answers, "Yes, I'm waiting for you. Come up." The visitor takes off her clogs so she won't track in dirt. The wooden stairs will groan under her weight. That's what it's like to go out in society: you have to observe fine points of etiquette. When the two women are sitting face to face, they speak guardedly and their shadows almost touch on the dead white walls. A vegetable aridity takes hold of the space around them: wicker breadbaskets, last summer's nuts, yellowed bunches of beans hung up to go to seed. Nothing surprising.

translated by Mary Feeney and William Matthews
THIS POEM CAME TO ME AS IN A POEM

My house settles. The heave of winter. The shrinking of summer. And gravity. The walls crack. Our word is fix. To repaint the walls, I need more paint. gallons. thick. heavy. The house gains more weight. The walls crack again. I won’t do this again.

I lift my house off the ground. I place three posts under three corners. For the fourth, I ran out of tree. But there is front left, rear left, and rear right. Once, the children ran into front right. They were looking for chalk and forgot themselves. The house began to tip; they darted back. A necessary lesson. The word is one at a time.

When my baby began to be born I ran to front right. My babies are born speaking. In tongues: a word salad. With this last baby, I pull back my legs for the procession: My thighs are the hornmen, my calves are the horsemen, my feet are the banners. He is born singing. I raise him high. The house tilts.
BOTH

The circus took its two-headed cow, took it to a river. Each head chewed on a lush river bank and solved the problem until the river dried. The cow forgot how to long and let the mud cake around its feet.

The circus took its two-headed cow, painted a fence on each side of its body. The cow became a fence, the heads became the longing, the ground became the greener. Each head dreamed of a fence to dream at.

The cow erased the fence on its body, erased the fence and moved to another. One head dreamed a green dream. One head bent, ate and received wisdom in the form of a peaceful yet furrowed brow. The dreamer painted a fence on its side of its body.
Franz Wright

DRINKING BACK

From where I am
I can hear the rain in the telephone
And the voices of nuns singing
In a green church in Brugge three years ago.

I can still see the hill,
The limestone fragment of an angel,
Its mouth which has healed with
The illegible names in the cemetery,

With the braillelike names of dead people.
The names of children, suicides, and the rest —
The names of people
Buried with their watches running...

They are not sleeping, don’t lie.

But it’s true that once
Every year of their death
It is spring.
BLOOD

My blood sits upright in a chair
its only thought, breath.

Though I walk around empty,
disconsolate,
somebody's still breathing in me.

Mute, deaf and blind
yes, — but someone
is still breathing
in me: the blood

which rustles and sleeps.
The suicide in me
(I mean the murderer.)
The dreamer, the unborn —.

But when I cut myself
I have to say:
this is my blood shed
for no one in particular.

If I get a nosebleed
I lie down on the cot, lie
there still, suspended
between the ceiling and floor,

as though the bleeding
had nothing to do with me;
as though I'd been in an accident
but died one second before the collision. . .
In a hospital room
I have to turn my face
from the bright needle;
I see it, nevertheless,

and I see the blood,

and I see the test tube
in which my nurse carries it
obliviously, like the candle
in a sleepwalker's hand.
QUIETING OF MARY AT THE RESURRECTION

What they felt at that moment: isn’t it sweeter than any other secret and at the same time earthly: the moment he met her, relieved, still a little pale from the grave: every part of his body risen. Met her first! It would be impossible to say how much it healed them. Yes, they were healing, that’s all. Without even having to touch each other very hard. For hardly a second he laid his almost eternal hand on her woman’s shoulder. And quietly like the trees when spring comes, together from then on they began this season of their final intimacy...
Then the belly of the horse we rode bloated.
We walked alongside. The swelling eased. We rode again,
rode slowly. The horse rolled,
died underneath us and when we came down
the only way out was all the way down.

I sit by the body of the horse,
sit very hard, wrap my arms
around my knees and try to hug it in, but nights
are gristle. Spit them out in bed.
Who can love a man who can't sleep?

You had to burn me out.
Weeks pack now like gutter leaves.
I work at feeling less, sludging the gutter
I scrub out with my teeth. I hear teeth.
Everywhere my head has teeth.

I must get to water.
Air comes cold off the water,
the night water, the bright ice moving.
Birds skim the ice beaks down. I lick my lips.
The ice is so thin it breathes.

Ponds on top fall through
as windward the ice presses to the shore.
Big sheets, crackling apart,
seem to rush the bank. The ice is giving itself away.
I have tried to give myself away.
THE NOTE

Gone to Store, back and forth between the center of the table and the green dish, always the same store, always soda crackers, thin vanilla frosting, softly softly she received her cancer, could never color hard enough, Press harder, gramma, I'll go over it twice, she said, went to Norway twice, the hard mountains, left my grampa twice, moving to the store and back, and church and back, leaving him a note she wrote months before he knew.
CLOSET

You should be lipsticked, red going black, peacocks in the thirties, don’t think it’s cruelty, Susanna, Susanna, I’ve got my eye on you, pluck, pluck, pluck, intellect.

His veils get up and dance with him, hips past forty, emerald green, taking leisure, chickenskin and spices stuffed, a centerpiece, he rolls his forehead, banana leaves, shall I get a cloth, teeth streaming, tongue a banner, shall I?

Don’t glaze, I know you by the way you knife your fruit, luncheons, hotels, prosody, your lips.
BOWLS

The first thing was always powdered sugar, I licked it, she let me think her silly, she washed it, I judge the ones who wash at once, sheets and sugar, bland and white, they had a cherry tree with a branch of apples, the bowls were beige, got them entry to the kitchen, being in buildings when my mother can’t or isn’t, pitting cherries good and sour, getting $10 for Easter, a card from home, I raise my left hand for a question: Did she ever get daddy on the phone? Guilt, sentiment, or something wrong? O wrap her in a tablecloth, take her to the tower to make up for the Depression, to the woods to make up for the cream, now all her bowls are from my hands, soft and big, my good good baby-o, won’t you sleep?
MOLE

All I saw was wet clay, some roots knotted when I turned the rock over. No earth honeycomb, no labyrinth for underground lovers.

From a childhood book: "Moles do not come out of the ground unless they are compelled by hunger or chased out by enemies." So he was jack-be-nimble rocketing up, his nose pink as in pictures of moles. Whirling, he danced the fury dance on the hide of a stone.

Clearly, he hated the air: maple leaves, the sky's flickering, red white yellow green tulips — a universe should be brown all over.

But he was a miner and knew where the vein went. Hugging soil to his shoulders, he sank on the spin of his furious feet down, down like a pail in a well, like the sun which plunges again and again to a blind idyll.
Eyes were not enough for them, charged with life they distilled the forms of hunters from winter snows, from phials of light: trees houses rivers, from tufts of sleep, the reaping machines in the sun, they knew the world, chess combinations, stars, the way the winds go, their currents, the obvious transgressions, they feared the plague, the scars of syphilis, loneliness of thunderbolts and more: the furies of the hidden world, oh they knew where it was, in the alembic of sleep, of sleeplessness, the sex machine. Knew the greatest evil was hunger, used faith like a homeopathic cure. Insects couldn’t touch them, they cried and laughed under a single skin. Then they ran, hobbling, blind, swaddled in wool and bandages, slobbering megaeras, begging, their bones trembling, shopkeepers, artisans, tapping out melodies that were drowned in the screams of the crowd, ran to Life, carnival and frenetic.

How high over the city, from which tower or cranny on the roofs did they spy the rush of demonized flesh, rushing toward the horizon of their own eyes? Which fate did they think about, playing their ferocious geometries and painting them earth colors and choosing so well: father mother son brother friend for the final Show, the mind’s eternal orgy, the Triumph of Death!
What with these great interstellar voyages, it’s clear even to the layman that by now available space is almost gone and that language, what’s left of it (thanks to our dear old mass communication systems), is crowding the margins, inarticulate, boned, reduced to an iron wire, useful at best for an ironic mobile.

An inventory: that’s about as much as we can do before we lose everything. Let’s take stock of what we’ve got, a finicky catalogue of the heaped stuff waiting to be moved. No time for emotions, curiosity, nostalgia with its box of snapshots, ah how we’ve changed.

Let’s stick on detailed labels, dates, precise descriptions, the proper usage: the voices are hardest, viscous as spiderwebs. It’s mechanical work and not even the mind can escape, except into nothing. Going home evenings, stopped in front of the Travel Bureau, gazing around among the jets and the liners weighing anchor for desert islands, skyscrapers, groups at reduced rates, we sample the vertigo of those heights we hang from on our way to cocktails. It’s only a moment, it doesn’t deceive us. We might recall it in bed, between one little yawn and another, reading Calderón.

Translated by Stuart Frieber and Vinio Rossi
SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE LINE

In my book of genesis, poetry is the orphan of silence. Maternal silence. That in everyone which belongs to the universe. The mother’s voice calls its name over the roofs of the world. Whoever hears it, turns toward his ancestral home.

A moment of recognition. Timeless present which has no language. Whoever senses himself existing has no need to say much. Perhaps lyric poetry is nothing but the memory of that instant of consciousness. Clearly, at that point, something comes into being. Using that intelligence one begins the search for words that would equal the memory. A labor no less difficult, no less phantasmagoric than alchemy. But then, of course, the condition of the lyric is the belief in the impossible.

From that point on, I’m guided by a need for simplicity. A belief that the matter may be resolved by an utterance which is essential and archetypal. Simplicity is really another way of naming that attention that reveals what is close at hand. The obvious but overlooked and the miraculous being one and the same thing. “Under one’s nose” as the idiom would have it. And so, sooner or later, I’m given a word or a phrase I can live with.

To see the word for what it is, one needs the line, and later the larger field of the stanza or whatever you care to call it. For me the sense of the line is the most instinctive aspect of the entire process of writing. The content imposes a time scale: I have to say x in x amount of time. The other considerations are dramatic and visual. I want the line to stop in such a way that its break and the accompanying pause may bring out the image and the resonance of the words to the fullest.

As one plays with words, as one makes them interact, the connotative aspect of each word becomes apparent. Incompleteness which demands fulfillment. Metaphorical possibilities which enlist time and space as forces, which create expectations. The organizational principle is the intonation, the living voice. The damn thing has to speak to someone.
To be truthful, it took me years to realize even this much. It's difficult to speak of it with precision, since one is describing an intricate psychic activity which has to do with the nature of time, both as its timeless instant and as its temporal extension. The causality, whatever of it is visible, is only a part of the story. What one meets more often are the innumerable paradoxes — the astonishment of finding oneself living in two worlds at once.

In the end, I'm always at the beginning. Silence — an endless mythical condition. I think of explorers setting over an unknown ocean, the distant light they see at the horizon in a direction where there's no known land. I love beginnings. I honor that lit window which is there and not there.
from CARBON

I

OLD INTRICATE LIVES

Now the sun burns in the trees
lifting the branches of the firs.
They loosen their thick white hair
and it slides off glistening.

He has to say
his name when he calls
as if the voice belonged
to someone I didn’t know.

If he had a gun
he would know how to use it.
The man in the Sam Brown belt
from World War Two.

I should unbuckle him
undo the button tenderly
over his throat
but the hair is grey on his chest

and he’s not my child.
His voice settles around my neck.
I look out at the smooth body
of snow. Huge dogs

are tracking it
with their blind paws.
Tonight in the Chinese restaurant
the small boy
under his plastic fireman’s hat
I’m going to say to him
hi George how are you
and he’ll say to me how
do you know my name
is George?

All of those years
together and
how do you know
who’s there?
A DOMESTIC COMEDY

Act One

Father: (he keeps speaking to his dead wife) My darling.

Husband: What do you think of the corn blight situation?

Father: It's not as bad as they thought it was going to be.

Silence.

Husband: Do we need flood insurance?

Wife: Flood insurance!

Husband: Flood insurance.

Wife: What do we need flood insurance for?

Father: I don't think we need flood insurance.

Curtain
WARNINGS

He had been talking about
the management of risk
Bank of America

mothers and fathers under the mattress
and the bed not made
the flowered sheets turned back
for getting into

warnings before you turn out
the light check your gas mask
get a burglar alarm
don’t leave your hose on the street
for someone to trip on

have you seen your dentist lately?

fumbling toward sex
like old men
who repeat the same story
forgetting
repeat it again

if you untie that balloon
it’s going to go up
and you’ll never get it down
TORN BLANKET

We can't figure out
how to fasten the new seat belts

we sit there for hours
in the front seat

trying to put the two ends together
there seems to be nothing

to catch on
or they don't fit

*

Listen I want to explain
there's no nightingale
in our pillows

what strains in our throats
is our own blood

excesses I'm given to
lately

it's the impurities
that color the stone
that ultimate blue-white diamond
did you hear that did you
hear even a diamond breaks
with one hard blow

you only have to find
the line of weakness
* 

Keep trying to tell him
what women have not done
to men

but none of it's true

rings we hang on to
as a child drags his torn blanket

his father my father

things
like hot coffee spilling
one never forgets:

"if she spits
in my face should I say
it's rain?"
A DOMESTIC COMEDY

Act Two

Wife: Why do dogs pant?

Husband: They have no sweat glands. They have to regulate their body temperatures through the tongue.

Father: Through the pores.

Husband: The pores of the tongue.

Father: And the pores of the feet.

Husband: Yes.

Father: The soles of the feet. The pores of the soles of the feet. The sores of the poles of the feet.

Curtain
WHO ARE WE

Children
with children
they mustn’t find out

in the doorway
standing on the Bokharan rug
deep red
running against the whole
immaculate house father
holds up the inventory
“now that you’ve come you can decide
if there’s anything else
you want

a dollar they’ll give us
only a dollar for that bunch
of trays”

he’s been figuring
how much everything’s worth
for weeks since the house was sold
walking from room to room
with the yellow pad making
his lists my mother’s
accretion of things he forgets
and calls merchandise figuring
what it will bring

like love for her
chocolate
she never got filled with
buying and buying
china
and cut glass

*

I saw how
she locked herself
out of the house
trimming dead roses
spraying poison on the ants

each time she crossed the porch
she heard the wood rot

red ants red roses
crawling
over her feet

the door slammed back of her
before she remembered
she couldn’t get in

*

Objects she gathered
like corpses gathered as objects
neatly placed

headstones
like hands cut off at the knuckles
and the sky fitting between them
and her voice saying you
can’t fly
She'll ask four questions at the gate of heaven:

have you done your work honestly or were you out all night stealing pickles?

did you marry and produce children or did you squander your love on shifty foreigners?

did you study and learn something each day or did you lose your card index?

have you made the world a better place to live or did you take off your blouse to make trouble?
A DOMESTIC COMEDY

Act Three

Husband: It says here Switzerland is the most affluent country in the world. We’re in sixth place behind Sweden France and Norway.

Wife: What’s the second?

Husband: Belgium.

Father: What about . . .

Husband: There’s only fifteen. Fifteen affluent countries. After that they don’t give any.

Silence.

Father: My darling.

Husband: I see where China is looking for mineral resources.

Father: They have enormous resources.

Husband: Yes.

Wife: What’s the fifteenth?

Final curtain.
Old intricate lives

we are so delicately stitched

peritoneum
three layers of muscle
subcutaneous tissue
skin

    each layer
sutured tightly
over the wounds

would you undo that?

The perfect small cancers
growing
in perfect

    small
bodies
of laboratory mice

quicker than birds
when we reach out to them

their panic

even in the clean
wood shavings
from Part III

THE MEETING

The pipes froze
there's no more
water in the house
use the outdoors they say

I go
through trees
the wet leaves thick
under my feet
small pouches of snow
strange on the California ground

finding a place to squat
ridiculous woman
my ass

    speckled
with cold

*  
But then the bronze girl shining
over herself her thumb
pressed in the soft flesh of her waist
the long curve of her neck
and shoulder following the smooth line
down to her elbow her left hand
turning around her calf she is all
rhythm bending to her foot feeling
the run of her blood
under the skin the glow
of her back highlight of the small
rise at the spine's base deep
shade where her buttocks begin
So that I hide from old friends and the museum is full

So that I meet him easy the fine rain powders my skin it will slide off like hair-thin petals milkweed falling through air

rain the foreground in motion and my face taking it like a freshness of earth turned over

wet on my eyelids and the window I look through into his lighted room
SECOND HONEYMOON: SOME THOUGHTS ON TRANSLATION

Suppose we begin with Joseph Brodsky. This distinguished Russian poet, recently arrived in our midst, has twice aired his views on translation in The New York Review of Books. In a review of the Hayward and Kunitz translations of Akhmatova (August 9, 1973) he wrote:

For most American poets, translating from Russian is nothing but an "ego trip." [There follows an attack on "free verse" and a suggestion that modern American poets don't possess enough technique to handle rhyme and meter] . . . Translation is not original creation — that is what one must remember. In translation some loss is inevitable. But a great deal can be preserved too. One can preserve the meter, one can preserve the rhymes.

Akhmatova's forms, he argues, have a spiritual as well as a technical meaning; to change them is thus a kind of sacrilege. He has some kind words for Kunitz and Hayward, finally, but the above quotations characterize his general tone. On February 7, 1974, he returned to the attack, this time in a review of Mandelstam translations by, among others, Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin. Again, the general outlines of his position are unmistakable:

Meters in verse are kinds of spiritual magnitudes for which nothing can be substituted. They cannot even be replaced by each other, and especially not by free verse. . . Form too is noble, for it is hallowed and illumined by time. It is the vessel in which meaning is cast; they need each other and sanctify each other reciprocally — it is an association of soul and body. Break the vessel and the liquid will run out. What was done to Mandelstam by Merwin, and to an even greater extent by Raffel, is the product of profound moral and cultural ignorance.
These statements are pretty silly, but I knew as I read them that scores of academics were nodding their heads in agreement. That is why I should like to make them my starting point. It is tempting to discuss Brodsky's literary manners, but I will only note in passing that he is no less presumptuous than the translators whose motives and skills he treats so severely. In his case the presumption lies in his assurance that he can gauge the effectiveness of Russian translations as poems in English. The ideal critic of translation would surely be master of both languages, and that Brodsky lacks these credentials is indicated by his insensitivity to the real excellence in the translations by Kunitz and Merwin, and by the fact that he himself needs translators to get his views before us (both reviews were translated from the Russian). When he uses phrases like "self-assured, insufferable stylistic provincialism," it is rather like spitting into the wind.

It is also interesting to speculate why The New York Review of Books should wish to promote such views, though I suspect the answer lies simply in their infatuation with names and their apparently passive editorial policies (one sometimes feels that if you are famous enough you can be boring at almost any length in their pages). But what interests me here is not such incidental issues; it is, rather, the theoretical position from which Brodsky argues. It is seldom so dogmatically stated, but it is widely held, and it lies behind the practice of more translators than Brodsky suspects. I am going to argue that it is precisely the attitude the translator must avoid; it is not the only risk translation runs, but it is a very large one, and I would dread reading translations by a Brodsky far more than those by Merwin or Kunitz or any number of contemporary poets who have given their time and imaginative energy to this peculiar art.

For it is an art. Translating lyric poetry, like writing it, is done against enormous odds. Its illusions and exhilarations are similar, and its rewards are singular and immeasurable. A
lyric poet engaged in translation is intent on capturing in the language he cares most about a prize object that is supposed to be the private property of another language. "It will do you no harm, Latin," he says, "if I take this lyric of Catullus and try to bestow it as a gift on my own language, which suddenly seems to me impoverished without it; you will still have Catullus when I am through, quite undamaged, and something new, not otherwise possible, will have come into existence." Surely we can give a measure of sympathy to the smugglers at whom Brodsky shakes such a righteous fist.

I suggest an analogy between translation and what is more readily acknowledged as creative activity not so much to vindicate the translator (if you want a good vindication read George Steiner's preface to The Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation, recently retitled Poem Into Poem), as to shed light on the process of translation at its best, and on the possible criteria that might be advanced for success or excellence. Listen for a moment to Günter Eich:

I write poems to orient myself in reality. . Only through writing do things take on reality for me . . Writing is not only a profession but a decision to see the world as language. Real language is a falling together of the word and the object. Our task is to translate from the language that is around us but not "given." We are translating without the original text. The most successful translation is the one that gets closest to the original and reaches the highest degree of reality.

Eich uses translation as a metaphor for poetry. In doing the reverse, I'm suggesting that among the various motives that can be advanced for translating poetry, the one that means the most to me and seems most consistent with the activity as I know it, is the one that Eich advances: the achievement of 'real' language, a merging of the word and the object. The fact that the translator is working with an original text, an already achieved
poem where word and object fuse, is scarcely the irony it might seem at first glance, for the decision to see the world as language that Eich speaks of means in his case one language, German, just as it does in my case English. American English. And word-object marriage licenses do not cross linguistic borders. The whole romance, courtship, and marriage must occur again, almost as exciting for being a recurrence and a renewal, a sort of second honeymoon. To translate a poem is to undertake to prove that it is not just a language formation, but a reality, not a marriage license but a marriage. To translate, then, is to affirm and celebrate, even as one winces at the risks.

I'm quite aware that to say that translating poetry is a great deal like creating it is not the same as saying that poets automatically make good translators. Creativity requires discipline, and the problem is just what kind of discipline translation needs. I can go a long way with Brodsky in indignation at sloppiness and irresponsibility among contemporary translators. In fact, I can provide an example from Mandelstam, a poet I revere every bit as much as Brodsky does. Many readers will be familiar with the "adaptation," published in Poets On Street Corners, by Robert Lowell of one of Mandelstam's most famous lyrics:

In the name of the higher tribes of the future, in the name of their foreboding nobility, I have had to give up my drinking cup at the family feast, my joy too, then my honor.

This cutthroat wolf century has jumped on my shoulders, but I don't wear the hide of a wolf — no, tuck me like a cap in the sleeve of a sheepskin shipped to the steppes.

I do not want to eat the small dirt of the coward, or wait for the bones to crack on the wheel I want to run with the shiny blue foxes moving like dancers in the night.
There the Siberian river is glass,
there the fir tree touches a star,
because I don't have the hide of a wolf
or slaver in the wolf-trap’s steel jaw.

A moving poem, partly because Mandelstam is having to say,
"Arrest me, send me to Siberia. I cannot survive in your state,"
and his 'request' was granted. When the act of writing a poem
can cost the poet his life, the importance of poetry is unmistakable,
and the poet becomes a figure of courage and heroic resistance.
I was wary of this 'adaptation,' however, knowing Lowell's habits, even before I read Vladimir Nabokov's discussion of it (NYR, Dec. 4, 1969). Nabokov begins by providing a literal version:

For the sake of the resonant valor of ages to come,
for the sake of a high race of men,
I forfeited a bowl at my fathers' feast,
and merriment, and my honor.

On my shoulders there pounces the wolfhound age,
but no wolf by blood am I;
better, like a fur cap, thrust me into the sleeve,
of the warmly fur-coated Siberian steppes.

— so that I may not see the coward, the bit of soft muck,
the bloody bones on the wheel,
so that all night the blue-fox furs may blaze
for me in their pristine beauty.

Lead me into the night where the Enisey flows,
and the pine reaches up to the star,
because no wolf by blood am I,
and injustice has twisted my mouth.

Even without Nabokov's sardonic guidance, the reader can immediately perceive some of Lowell's strange transformations: a wolfhound has become a wolf, being a wolf by blood has become dressing up in a wolf-skin, the river has frozen, and the
Involuntary snarl of disgust at injustice has been magically transformed into a wolf-trap. But let me quote Nabokov on two central images:

L. 8: actually "of the Siberian prairie’s hot fur coat," zharkoy shubi’ sibirskih stepey. The rich heavy pelisse, to which Russia’s Wild East is likened by the poet (this being the very blazon of its faunal opulence) is demoted by the adaptor to a "sheepskin" which is "shipped to the steppes" with the poet in its sleeve. Besides being absurd in itself, this singular importation totally destroys the imagery of the composition. And a poet’s imagery is a sacred, unassailable thing.

Lines 11-12: the magnificent metaphor of l. 8 now culminates in a vision of the arctic starlight overhead, emblemized by the splendor of gray-blue furs, with a suggestion of astronomical heraldry (cf. Vulpecula, a constellation). Instead of that the adaptor has "I want to run with the shiny blue foxes moving like dancers in the night," which is not so much a pretty piece of pseudo-Russian fairytale as a foxtrot in Disneyland.

The points about imagery are extremely telling. The original poem is beautifully organized around the image, one might say the texture, of fur. Mandelstam is a deeply sensuous poet, passionately concerned with physical being and with the smallest details of sensation — in this case the warmth, softness, and possible protectiveness of fur. The poet is like a small animal, hunted as if he were a dangerous wolf by the century he has the misfortune to live in. His instinct is to go to ground — a kind of hibernation-death in Siberia — where nature can take him back with comforting transformations: the starlight as soft and beautiful as blue fox fur, the soft pine (not the accidentally punning and much stiffer tree of Lowell’s version) brushing a star — the same kind of contact, the poet released from the snarl that has begun to twist his mouth and make him incapable
of pronouncing the true words of the poem. Like a fur cap thrust into a fur coat, he’ll be bundled into the good arctic earth that implies his extinction.

I am sorry Lowell didn’t get that into the poem. Without it his ‘adaptation’ is superficial and melodramatic, reaching for easy effects that Mandelstam would never have settled for. But the problem, surely, is one of content rather than form. I am never very easy with the form-content distinction, but if we use it to begin a consideration of Lowell’s version, we can see that he has in fact followed the formal characteristics of Mandelstam’s poem fairly faithfully. The Russian original has a rhyme scheme, and Lowell’s does not, but otherwise both poems are four quatrains, and their lines correspond closely in terms of syntax, length, and order. In this respect, then, Lowell has been surprisingly orthodox. He does not seem to have felt that he might make his English version more effective by experimenting a little with a different line length or stanza size, special rhythms, enjambment, or any of the techniques that can be used to give a poem effective movement and a life and character of its own. And this despite the fact that his faithfulness to Mandelstam’s external form sometimes leads him into clumsy effects, such as the cumbersome line, “I do not want to eat the small dirt of the coward,” which sounds to my ear like a lot of other translations I have read where sense (of a sort) crosses over but grace and precision stay behind. Lowell seems in fact to have used a formula, consciously or not, whereby he held to the form as far as possible (conceding on the difficult issue of replicating the rhyme scheme) and played fast and loose with the content. He is not, in other words, as different as we might have thought from that host of translators who have labored in the past to make translations that duplicate the formal characteristics of their originals, and produced monstrosities: bath-tubs that talk, tricycles that swim, people with their heads on backward. These are the translators who, approaching a Rilke sonnet, seem bent, as Harold Rosenberg once said, on giving us a sonnet in which Rilke will come and go, if he is lucky
enough to appear at all, when what the English language needs is not one more bloody sonnet, but Rilke, as vital and potent and moving as he is in German, where the fact that he was writing a sonnet was perhaps the most incidental aspect of his achievement.

Brodsky would of course disagree with that last statement. Yet if we return to our original analogy, where translation is matched with the creative process, we can find support for giving external form a low priority. For the freedom a poet feels when he is writing is a freedom about form — he may choose the formal characteristics into which he translates his feelings and experiences and ideas — at the same time that he feels an obligation to be as faithful as possible to the feelings themselves, to the experience on which he draws. He wants to capture something exactly, and he will use any formal and technical means available to him. If he is trying to characterize his sadness, for example, he will not say that he is happy for the sake of meter or rhyme scheme or any other “formal” consideration; he will sacrifice “form” for the demands of “content” every time, unless he has mistaken means for ends and believes that form and technique themselves constitute poetry, in which case he has problems too severe and pathetic for me to consider here. My business is to observe that the translator would do well to follow the lead of the poet, and to treat what he is translating with the respect that a poet has for his subject, a respect that does not include preconceptions about form. To be told that you must translate a sonnet from one language into a sonnet in your own language is like being told that you must choose the form of a poem before you know its subject — and that is turning the creative process around; as Robert Francis observed about writing sestinas, it is rather like stuffing a cat. And the results are likely to be feeble, mannered, mechanical, and dull. If translators were to give themselves the same freedoms that good poets have, and hold themselves to the same disciplines, we would have a great many fewer stuffed cats around posing as effective translations.
Perhaps it begins to be clear that besides finding myself diametrically opposed to Mr. Brodsky’s ideas about priorities in translation, I think he is working from simplistic notions about poetic form. The artificial division between content and form tends to disappear when we can rid ourselves of unnecessarily narrow definitions of the latter, based on external and quantifiable features, the syllables and rhymes and feet and stanzas that you can name and count. Surely there is another aspect of form in poetry, less definable perhaps, but ultimately of greater importance. That is the poem’s use of familiar configurations of experience in a way that emphasizes their form, the formal possibilities that inhere in them, their order and outline. I think that the animal-fur-burrow-warmth-arctic night-softness-wildness cluster of associations in the Mandelstam poem helps to provide what we might call its true coherence, its inner form, the shaping of experience that gives it its power to speak to our own imaginations.

But I will give a more familiar example. Yeats, as we all know, spent a great deal of his life pursuing the interests of spiritualism, which meant going to seances and trafficking with mediums. I remember noticing some time ago how he had put his intimate knowledge of seances to good use in what I think is one of his most interesting plays, “The Words Upon the Windowpane” but it was only quite recently that I realized with a sort of start that he had used that knowledge all his life as a means of giving form to his poems. Again and again, Yeats’s poems are built around the basic situation of a man summoning and conjuring — calling up the dead, the figures of imagination and the supernatural, in order to give them a message, ask them a question, or meditate on their nature and meaning. Here is a clear instance, it seems to me, of a poet drawing on experience to find a form, a ritual, an ordering device that would make poetry possible
and give it true coherence. And if we are to speak intelligently about the form of poems like "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," "The Tower," "All Souls’ Night," and "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," then we must speak not only of their stanza forms, rhyme schemes, and sectional divisions, but of this kind of form as well. I don’t know whether it is much discussed by the critics, but it is important to the translator because it is an aspect of the form of the poem that is translatable; that is, it does not inhere so much in the language as in the experience from which the poet has abstracted it in order to give it a verbal character of its own. If we remember that a translation of a poem must begin again, and that new words must be found, then we should admit that new words imply new sounds and new rhythms, and, quite possibly, new form. But the translator will presumably seek all those things in the interest of recreating the pre-verbal aspect of the poem — its configurations of experience at the threshold of their transformation into formal expressive language. That, I think, is just what Lowell failed to do with the Mandelstam poem; and like it or not, Brodsky’s theory has too much in common with Lowell’s practice. It also has too little imagination about the way that good poems get written and effective translations made.

Pages of illustration should of course follow. It would be necessary to show that there is no reason to claim that the translator must alter the "form" (in Brodsky’s sense) of the original. And it would surely be useful to consider examples of Chinese translation, where the differences between the two languages are so pronounced and obvious that attempts to reproduce "form" faithfully are misguided in a way that should be unmistakable to anyone. I trust it is clear, even in the absence of examples, that I am not arguing for careless and irresponsible translation; the habits I recommend are far more
demanding than attempts to reproduce rhyme and meter. I am simply arguing against an attitude toward translation so restrictive and pedantic as to close out altogether the possibility of great translations. The translators Brodsky castigates may indeed be inadequate (though as I say I find much to admire in the work of Merwin and Kunitz), but if they are it is not because Russian meters and rhymes and stanza forms are missing; it is because, in being creative, they have not been creative enough.
CONTRIBUTORS

As we go to press, we discover that we have no contributor’s note for Swedish poet WERNER ASPENSTRÖM, so rather than try to manufacture one, we’ll just admit that all we know is that he was born in 1918, and that his distinguished literary career has included work in fiction and drama, as well as poetry. His translator, the Scottish poet ROBIN FULTON has a new book of poems, Tree-Lines, from New Rivers Press.

The poems by MARVIN BELL in this issue are from his new collection, Residue of Song, just out from Atheneum. He writes that he and his family will be leaving the country for a while in January.

ANNIE DILLARD’s collection of poems, Tickets for a Prayer Wheel (Missouri), came out last spring, as did Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (Harper’s Magazine Press), a prose work. She is a contributing editor for Harper’s magazine.

PETER EVERWINE is the author of In the House of Light and Collecting the Animals (Atheneum). He is currently teaching at California State University in Fresno.

JEAN FOLLAIN was born in Canisy, a tiny village in Normandy, in 1903. He was killed by a car in Paris in 1971. Follain wrote both prose and verse throughout his literary life. A selection of his verse poems, translated by W. S. Merwin, has appeared from Atheneum under the title Transparencies of the World. The prose poems in this issue are from Tout Instant (Gallimard, 1957). Like all his prose poems, they are untitled. About his translators: MARY FEENEY lives in Paris, and has a pamphlet forthcoming from Lillabulero Press; WILLIAM MATTHEWS is currently teaching at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Stone Press has just published a tiny book of his one-line poems, An Oar in the Old Water. Matthews writes: “Mary Feeney and I have worked so closely on our translations we can’t remember, or imagine why we’d want to, which of us did what. Mme. Follain has helped us generously, though any mistakes we may have made are our own responsibility. She has saved us from many. The poems are very difficult to translate. In Follain nuances are delicate, ambiguous, crucial; their effects are daring and large. We think he is one of the crucial French poets.”

LINDA GREGERSON lives in Baltimore. She acts in a theatre company called Kraken, and is teaching at University of Maryland, Baltimore. These are her first published poems.

MARY GUNST has published poems in Granite and Lillabulero; she lives in Northwood Narrows, New Hampshire.

Ohio University Press has just published Rust, CONRAD HILBERRY’s new book of poems. It contains several poems first published in FIELD. The group of poems in this issue, he writes, might well have been titled “Four for Alfred North Whitehead.”

SHIRLEY KAUFMAN now makes her home in Israel. Her most recent collection is Gold (Pittsburgh). The selection in this issue is from a new
manuscript, *Carbon*, now ready for publication.

TED KOOSER lives in Lincoln, Nebraska. A new collection of his poems, *A Local Habitation and a Name*, is just out from Solo Press.

LINDA ORR spent the summer in France, where she attended a colloquium on French literature. She is presently teaching French at Swarthmore.

The poem by RAINER MARIA RILKE in this issue is the twelfth in a little cycle of poems, *Das Marien-Leben*, which Rilke began in the autumn of 1900 and completed at Duino in 1912.

ALFREDO RIZZARDI, Italian poet, critic, and translator, is Professor of English and American Literature at the University of Bologna. He has just started a magazine, CONTESTI, whose first issue is devoted to Pound’s work (“there is also,” he adds, “the missing canto”). Its range will be British-American-Italian letters. “We have the usual difficulties with money, but I hope to resist.”

We thought that PETER SEARS was in Princeton, at Princeton Day School, but there is reason to believe he’s in Oregon, and our hunch is that he’s teaching at Reed.

This note verbatim: “RICHARD SHELTON lives in the desert mountains west of Tucson, Arizona, with his beautiful wife and brilliant son. Most recent books are: *Of All the Dirty Words* (Pitt), *Calendar* (Baleen Press, Phoenix), and *Among the Stones* (Monuments Press, Pittsburgh).”

CHARLES SIMIC lives and teaches in New Hampshire. His latest book (Braziller) is *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk.*

KIM STAFFORD studies and teaches in Eugene, Oregon.

“FRANK STANFORD lives and works in Arkansas.”

JOAN SWIFT has moved from California to the Pacific Northeast (Edmonds, Washington). She has a collection of poems ready for publication.

BRUCE WEIGL, an Oberlin graduate, is now studying at the University of New Hampshire.

FRANZ WRIGHT, a poet and translator who has contributed to *FIELD* several times before, is currently living in Oberlin.

DAVID YOUNG’s essay on translation was first given, in a somewhat different form, as a lecture at the University of California at Irvine. He has just returned from a year’s leave from teaching and editing, spent in London.