Schlitteln - Plaisir d’Hiver
FIELD

CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND POETICS
NUMBER 18 SPRING 1978

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

Published twice yearly by Oberlin College.

Subscriptions: $4.00 a year / $7.00 for two years until JULY 1, 1978. Thereafter we are forced to announce this rate increase: $5.00 a year / $8.00 for two years / Single issues of this past year only, $2.50 postpaid. Back issues 1-9; 11-16: $10.00. Issue 10 is out of print.

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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A man had fallen out of bed, but the floor just wouldn’t support it, and he fell through the kitchen ceiling and the kitchen floor into the cellar . . .

His mother called, what do you think you’re doing?
Falling out of bed, he called from the cellar.
Well, why don’t you do it like a gentleman? Do you have to pull the whole house down? she called.
I’ll try to be more careful next time, he called from the cellar.
Well, I should hope so, she called, because that’s one sure measure of the gentleman, how he falls out of bed.
I said I’d try to be more careful next time, so will you please stop rubbing it in? he called from the cellar.
But you keep doing the same thing, she called, your father for all the times he’s fallen out of bed has never fallen through the floor, not once; a perfect gentleman.
All right, all right, I’ve had a few pieces of bad luck, but does that mean I’m always going to be unlucky? he called from the cellar.
A gentleman makes his luck; a gentleman can sense when things are about to be unlucky and holds to his mattress to keep from falling out of bed, until he can do it in a gentlemanly way, called his mother.
All right, all right, I’ll try, he called from the cellar.
A gentleman doesn’t try, a gentleman does; trying is only the excuse of the failure who tries, but always fails, called his mother.
Okay, okay, don’t rub it in, called her son from the cellar.
Just to say that I will expect more of you next time, which means I still have faith in you, and still think you can fall out of bed like a gentleman; your father used to be a whiz at it, called his mother.
Okay, okay, rub it in, called her son from the cellar . . .
A huge shoe mounts up from the horizon, squealing and grinding forward on small wheels, even as a man sitting to breakfast on his veranda is suddenly engulfed in a great shadow almost the size of the night.

He looks up and sees a huge shoe ponderously mounting out of the earth. Up in the unlaced ankle-part an old woman stands at a helm behind the great tongue curled forward; the thick laces dragging like ships' rope on the ground as the huge thing squeals and grinds forward; children everywhere, they look from the shoelace holes, they crowd about the old woman, even as she pilots this huge shoe over the earth . . .

Soon the huge shoe is descending the opposite horizon, a monstrous snail squealing and grinding into the earth . . .

The man turns to his breakfast again, but sees it's been wounded, the yolk of one of his eggs is bleeding . . .
THE UNFORGIVEN

After a series of indiscretions a man stumbled homeward, thinking, now that I am going down from my misbehavior I am to be forgiven, because how I acted was not the true self, which I am now returning to; and I'm not to be blamed for the past, because I am to be seen as one redeemed in the present . . .

But when he got to the threshold of his house his house said, go away, I am not at home.

Not at home? A house is always at home, where else can it be? said the man.

I am not at home to you, said his house.

And so the man stumbled away into another series of indiscretions, thinking, because my house doesn't forgive me I am given special license to return to an ongoing series of indiscretions . . .
A dog is making its way in a road on its back, shrugging and twisting to make its way forward. Also a man bobbing along on his head and hands; lifting himself on his hands and falling forward on his head. Then an automobile on its roof, its wheels in the air; people inside pushing it forward, inch by inch, with fishing poles. Also an old woman on her back asleep, slowly pushing herself forward with her feet . . .

All this traffic, what does it mean? An athletic event up ahead? Perhaps even a dance . . . ?
THE DOORWAY TRAP

A man came to a full-length mirror, which he took to be a doorway, and saw another man about to enter out from the other side, and as he tried to avoid the other man the other man tried to avoid him, allowing neither of the men to pass.

The first man said, I'm afraid we've been caught in the doorway trap; just as I think to move to the left you move to your right. Right from your point of view is left in my point of view; so is left from your intimacy right in my personalized understanding of the universe. If we would both move to our respective rights then we would both be moved to the respective left of the other, and thus be able to pass out of the doorway trap. But no, our reflexes are too slow; just as you correct the vector of your advance I am correcting mine, and we end up face to face and have to start again. All this because we don't want any contact with the other, which is the secret of our imprisonment, we imprison each other, paradoxically, by trying to avoid the other. I lunge to the left, you lunge to the right, we meet face to face, embarrassed. We try again, trying to outguess the other, and again meet face to face; neither giving way to let the other pass, nor taking a chance and pushing through; darting and lunging like a man and his reflection, coordinated in endless coincidence . . .

And even as the first man was saying all of this, so was the second man, making the coincidence of the doorway trap all the more complete . . .
SNEOSDAL

What a walk. First mile uphill. The road went rock to peat to mud. The final five hundred yards we floundered through lumpy swamp. Whatever we've read in old novels, it's no fun to walk in heather, and we'd have to cut this wind in half to enjoy a kiss on the moor.

We believe him worth it, the legend of this loch: each uisge, waterhorse. Hasn't he kept us in terror all our lives?

This is where he lives, in this eerie black water tucked in behind the creag that rises like a bad past between our faces and all of the afternoon sun. We know his disguises: gentleman of the evening, sheep dog, normal horse. And we know he comes to our village for no reason other than to frighten what we used to call maidens or to kill the mayor we've never been organized enough to elect.

He's not drunk with power. He comes just now and then when least expected, when we enjoy an innocent picnic or go to the store. Sometimes we think we see him and don't. A dog looks wrong in certain light or one horse won't run with the others exhilarated by gales. When we see a man, white tie and tails, given our lives we know that much charm is suspect. We lock our doors when a lone hawk seems to enjoy the storm.

He hasn't come for so long, today we've tracked him to his home. We had a hard time finding you.

We are wet and cold. The blackface sheep resent us. The shepherd won't return our wave. With the world on its way to certain disaster, can't you reappear, rise slimy and majestic out of the loch and snort at least one minor threat to keep us in line?
Or are we out of monsters? Are we now reduced to sensible conclusion like empty water, with no one more interesting than ourselves to fear? We take the long walk back, mud to peat to rock, the last mile easy downhill. Our car has never waited for us this long before. We are embarrassed by what we hold in, the hopeful and hopeless child that wants to cry — we saw him. We saw him. He is really there.
ANNA AKHMATOVA'S
"NORTHERN ELEGIES"

Anna Andreevna Akhmatova, born in Odessa on June 11, 1899, experienced Civil War, Revolution, two World Wars, the loss of two brothers, three marriages (the third unofficial), the birth of one son — Lev Gumilev — in 1912, literary repression, rehabilitation in a new Soviet Russia, and tuberculosis. She witnessed the arrests and re-arrests of her son, of Osip Mandelstam (who died in a concentration camp near Vladivostok in 1938), of her third husband Nikolai Punin, and many others. She was the first woman poet of the twentieth century to declare herself an Acmeist, establishing the Poets' Guild of 1912 with the aid of fellow Acmeists Osip Mandelstam and Nikolai Gumilev, her first husband. She defined language as an artistic tool to be used for the sole purpose of depicting reality as it truly was. Language was to bring humanity to its senses. Throughout a life of turmoil and misery (Socialist Realism did not accept Anna Akhmatova, nor did she accept it), upheaval and change, Anna Akhmatova remained faithful to, and inspired by, language. Dostoevsky, the Bible, Osip Mandelstam, and Blok were her spiritual advisors. She defended Russian culture against the Soviet regime, and, most hauntingly, Akhmatova had the extraordinary capacity to blend historical and personal consciousness. Time was (and is) a continuum, with no beginning, no end, and no permanence.

The Northern Elegies, written between 1943-55, deal with the tragic effect of time upon itself. Different points in time are contrasted on historical, moral, and psychological levels. The Elegies are inspired by nineteenth-century elegiac technique, but the classical tragic monologue, with its themes of separation from a loved one, and death, become something entirely different under Akhmatova's pen. Instead, Akhmatova separates parts of herself from herself. She suspends us in time, blending past and present lives; memory becomes a recreated present which we are allowed to experience, rather than mere elegiac pensiveness.
"Prehistory" blends two subjects, a historical protagonist, Dostoevsky, with a subjective protagonist, Akhmatova. The elegy is a historiography. Akhmatova identifies historical locale while describing time's effect upon it (French and Italian architecture had a profound impact upon Akhmatova's poetic sensibility during the 1910's). The motif of literary creation is foremost in importance. The convict from the city of Omsk is Dostoevsky himself, transcending history by the act of literary creation. Artistic creation defines historical meaning.

In the second elegy Akhmatova describes self-alienation, the result of her break with Nikolai Punin, an art historian and critic, in his youth a close friend of Mayakovsky's and a co-Futurist, her third and unofficial husband. She recalls the year 1929, fifteen years ago to the day, when her romance with Punin began. They spent ten years together. Her house symbolizes the past which haunts her, the temporal perspective.

In the third elegy Akhmatova confronts herself, comparing life as it might have been to life as it is. In the end she accepts herself as she is. The city she "knows" is St. Petersburg. It suggests all the cities she has ever seen. Because of the era Akhmatova is a stranger to herself. A world which has never existed creates itself and in turn acts upon Akhmatova.

The fourth and final elegy deals with time's effect upon memory. Time transcends memory's disintegration and history itself. The abandoned house symbolizes an illusionary outward permanence, contrasted with the disintegration of reality in memory. "Names of towns change," St. Petersburg becomes Leningrad. Both history and personal fate control individual consciousness.

* Notes on "Prehistory":
  Gorohovaya, Znamenye, Smolny — a street, church, monastery respectively.
  Shumilov refers to a funeral chapel firm.
Staraya Russa — a small town near Petersburg where Dostoevsky lived.

Optina — a certain retreat for monks. Tolstoy spent his last ten days there.

Roulette — Dostoevsky was known to play roulette in Baden.

"A woman with translucent eyes" — Akhmatova’s mother, Inna Erazmovna.

Semenovsky — Dostoevsky was sentenced to be hung in Semenovsky parade-ground, but was pardoned at the last minute.

Omsk — the city in which Dostoevsky spent time after his prison term.

**In my analysis of these four elegies I am indebted to Kees Verheul. I am also indebted to Nina Berberova for sharing her personal memories of Akhmatova with me."
Anna Akhmatova

NORTHERN ELEGIES

Everything in sacrifice of your memory
—Pushkin

ONE
Prehistory

I no longer live there . . .
—Pushkin

Dostoevsky's Russia. The moon
Nicked by the belltower.
Taverns do business, the droshkies fly,
Five-story tenements grow
In Gorohovoy, at Znamenya, near Smolny.
Dance classes everywhere, new signboards,
And next to them, beauty salons: "Henriette," "Basile,"
"Andre"
And splendid caskets: "The elder Shymilov."
But the town has scarcely changed.
I'm not alone, others have noticed
That sometimes it looks like
An old-fashioned lithograph,
Not first-rate, but entirely decent,
From, say, the 70's.
Especially during winter, before dawn,
Or in the dusk — then rigid, upright, Leteynii Avenue
Darkens beyond the gate,
Modernism hasn't defaced it,
And across from me live — Nekrasov
And Saltikov . . . a memorial
Plaque for each. How terrible they'd feel
If they saw these plaques! I walk past.
But there are splendid ditches in Staraya Ryssa,
And slightly rotted pavilions in the small back yards,
And window glass so black, black as an icehole,
And it seems such things occurred here,
That it’s better not to look, let’s go.
Not every place understands you,
And opens its secret to you
But I can’t go to Optina again.

The rustle of skirts, checked plaids,
Walnut-framed mirrors,
Amazed by Karenina’s beauty,
And in the narrow corridors that wallpaper
We feasted our eyes on as children,
From under the yellow kerosene lamp,
And that same plush on the easy chairs . . .
Everything slapped together, hastily, somehow . . .
Incomprehensible fathers and forefathers. Estates
Pawned. And in Baden — the roulette.

And a woman with translucent eyes
(A blue so deep you can’t help but remember the sea),
A rare name and a small white hand,
And a kindness I somehow inherited from her, —
Useless gift to my cruel life . . .

The country’s feverish, but the convict from Omsk
Understood everything, erased his past.
Now he’s going to mix up everything
And raise himself like a kind of spectre
Before this primeval chaos. Midnight strikes.
The pen squeaks, and many of the pages
Stink of Semenovsky parade-ground.

So this is when we decided to be born,
And timing it perfectly
So as not to miss anything in the novel
Show, took leave of non-existence.
TWO

So here's that autumn landscape
I was afraid of all my life:
And the sky — a glowing abyss,
And the noises of town — heard as if
From another world, infinitely strange.
As though everything I fought within myself,
Fought all my life, was given a separate
Existence in these blind walls, that black garden . . .
Just now, over my shoulder,
I caught my old house watching me
With its squinting evil eye,
Its unforgettable window.
Fifteen years — pretending to be
Fifteen granite centuries,
But I was like granite myself:
Now beg, suffer, call me
The Sea Queen. It doesn't matter. No need to . . .
But I should have told myself:
This happens all the time,
And not just to me — others too, —
And even worse. No, not worse — better.
And my own voice — this, I think, was
The most horrifying part — spoke out of the darkness:
"Fifteen years ago today what a song you sang,
Called for the skies,
And swarms of stars,
And swarms of water
To praise the solemn meeting
With the one you left today . . .

So here's your silver anniversary:
Invite the guests, show off, celebrate."
THREE

This cruel era
Turned me like a river.
Life was switched on me, flowed
In a different riverbed,
By another course,
And I don't know my own banks.
O, how many shows I missed,
While the curtain rose
And fell without me. How many friends
I never met once.
O, how many silhouettes of cities
Could draw tears from my eyes,
And I'm the only one on earth who knows the city
And will find it, fumbling, in my sleep . . .
And how many poems I didn't write,
And their secret chorus circles me
And, maybe, at some point,
Will strangle me . . .
Beginnings and endings are known to me,
And the afterlife, and something
I don't need to remember now.
And some woman took over
My single place,
Bears my legal name,
Having left me a nickname, with which
Very likely, I did all I could.
I won't even have my own grave to lie in . . .

.......

And yet if I could glance in from somewhere or other
On the life I'm living now,
I'd know what envy means.

Leningrad, 1944
Memories have three eras.
The first feels like yesterday.
A blessed dome of memories
Shades the soul, the body luxuriates.
Laughter hasn’t died away, tears still flow,
The inkspot hasn’t been wiped off the table yet —
And like an imprint on the heart, the kiss
Is singular, valedictory, unforgettable . . .
But this doesn’t last long . . .
The dome’s disappeared, instead
Somewhere in the godforsaken suburbs
There’s a secluded house,
Where it’s cold in winter, hot in summer,
Where a spider lives, and dust covers everything,
Where passionate letters decay,
Portraits change on the sly,
Like people who visit graves
And come home to soap their hands
And shake a superficial teardrop
Off their tired eyelids, sighing heavily . . .
But the clock ticks, one spring replaces itself
With another, the sky turns pink,
Names of cities change,
And there’s no one left who saw it,
No one to cry with, no one to remember with,
And the shadows we no longer summon,
Walk slowly away from us,
Because their return would be terrifying,
And once awake, we see we even forgot
The way to that secluded house,
And gasping with anger and shame,
We run there but’(the way dreams go)
Everything’s different: people, things, walls,
And no one knows us — we’re strangers.
We ended up at the wrong place . . . My God!
And this is the worst part:
We recognize we can’t fit that past
Into the borders of our lives,
It’s almost as alien to us,
As to our next door neighbor,
And we wouldn’t recognize the dead,
And those we had to part with
Got along splendidly without us — everything
Was for the best . . .
IT WAS FRIGHTFUL . . .

It was frightful, living in that house.
Nothing, not even the ancestral hearth,
My child’s small cradle,
The fact that we were both young
And full of plans,
Lessened this feeling of terror.
And I learned to laugh at it
And I used to leave a droplet of wine
And a breadcrumb for the one
Who scratched like a dog at the door, at night,
Or glanced in the low, little window,
Just when we’d grown silent
Trying not to notice what was going on
In the looking glass,
Where someone’s leaden walk
Made the steps of the dark staircase squeal,
Begging for mercy.
And smiling oddly, you used to say:
“Who are ‘they’ lugging down the staircase?”

Now you’re there, where they know everything. Tell me —
What lived in that house besides us?

1945

translated by Liza Tucker
THE COMPOSER'S WINTER DREAM:

Vivid and heavy, he strolls through dark brick kitchens
Within the great house of Esterházy:
A deaf servant's candle
Is tipped toward bakers who are quarreling about
The green kindling! The wassail is
Being made by pouring beer and sherry from dusty bottles

Over thirty baked apples in a large bowl: into
The wassail, young girls empty their aprons of
Cinnamon, ground mace and allspice berries. A cook adds
Egg whites and brandy. The giant, glass snifters
On a silver tray are taken from the kitchens by two maids.
The anxious pianist eats just the edges of a fig

Stuffed with Devonshire cream. In the sinks the gall bladders
Of geese are soaking in cold, salted water.
Walking in the storm, this evening, he passed
Children in rags, singing carols; they were roped together
In the drifting snow outside the palace gate.
He knew he would remember those boys' faces . . .

There's a procession into the kitchens: larger boys, each
With a heavy shoe of coal. The pianist sits and looks
Hard at a long black sausage. He will not eat
Before playing the new sonata. Beside him
The table sags with hams, kidney pies and two shoulders
Of lamb. A hand rings a bell in the parlour!

He hurriedly eats a warm biscuit with molasses, swallows
Some sherry. No longer able to hide, he walks
Straight into the large room that blinds him with light.
He sits before the piano still thinking of the hulled berries,
The red persimmons, and the dark pecan-blisters that
Are a favorite of the butler's. The simple sonata which
He is playing has little
to do with what he's feeling: something larger
Where a viola builds, in air, an infinite staircase.
An oboe joins the viola, they struggle
For a more florid harmony.
But the silent violins now emerge,

And like the big wing of a bird, smother everything
In a darkness from which only a single horn escapes —
Successively but in strict imitation of the viola
That feels effaced by the composer's dream . . .
But he is not dreaming,
The composer is finishing two performances simultaneously!

He is back in the dark kitchens, sulking and counting
His few florins — they have paid him
With a snuff-box that was pressed
With two diamonds, in Holland!
This century discovers quinine.
And the sketchbooks of a mad, sad musician

Who threw a lantern at his landlord who was standing beside
A critic. He screamed: here, take a snuff-box, I've filled
It with the dander of dragons! He apologized
The next morning, instructing the landlord to take
This stuff (Da 1st Der Wisch) to a publisher,
And sell it! You'll have your velvet garters, Pig!

The composer is deaf, loud and feverish . . . he went
To the countryside in a wet sedan-chair.
He said to himself: for the piper, seventy ducats! He'd curse
While running his fingers through his tousled hair, he made
The poor viola climb the stairs.
He desired loquats, loquats with small pears!
Ludwig, there are Spring-bears under the pepper trees!
The picnic by the stone house . . . the minnows
Could have been sunlight striking fissures
In the stream; Ludwig, where your feet are
In the cold stream
Everything is horizontal like the land and living.

The stream sang, "In the beginning was the word
And without the word
Was not anything made that was made . . .
But let us believe in the word, Ludwig,
For it is like the sea grasses
Of which the giant snails eat in the evening."

But then

The dream turns to autumn; the tinctures he
Swallows are doing nothing for him, and he shows
The physicians his spoon which has dissolved
In the mixtures the chemist has given him!
After the sonata was heard; the standing for applause
Over, he walked out where it was snowing.

It had been dark early that evening. It's here that the
Dream becomes shocking: he sees a doctor
In white sleeves
Who is sawing at the temporal bones of his ears. There is
A bag of dampened plaster for the death mask. And
Though he is dead, a pool of urine runs to the

Middle of the sickroom. A huge brass urinal is on the floor, it is
The shape of his ears rusting on gauze. The doctors
Drink stale wassail. They frown over the dead Beethoven.
Outside,
The same March storm that swept through Vienna just an hour before
Has turned in its tracks like the black, caged panther
On exhibit in the Esterházy's candlelit ballroom. The storm
crosses
Over Vienna once more:
lightning strikes the Opera House,
Flames leaping into the adjacent stables; someone had known,

As the thunder dropped flower-boxes off window sills,
someone *must*
Have known that, at any moment, the violins would emerge,
would emerge in a struggle
with the loud, combatant horns . . .
Behind the Tree the hands of Eve and Adam almost meet.
Only a single thick rope of serpent divides them.
Adam holds his other hand on his heart in fear as Eve stretches out her other hand across the front of the Tree to offer him knowledge.
The apple the serpent holds in its mouth and the twin apples of her breasts are all exact replicas of the apple she holds.
Four prehensile, elegant, practical feet stand among roots.
Above the heads of man and woman and serpent, dense leaves and a crown of apples hide the font and its bas-relief stories — the sky's dome upturned, an unknown cosmos.
THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

"... all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths: that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt." — Lev. XXIII, 42-43

no Chicago like this
the blacked-out Scouts give themselves
to as they cinch tents to the three

elms inside the fenced lot we call
Elastic Acre, cramped by 3 flr walkups:
sons of the sons of Polish Jews
born to Chaldeans, or to an Egypt

that squeezed them
out between the stitches broken
in bulgar sacks, manna
of La Fortuna grits & mealy worms.
the forest they make up
twig by twig is less wild than the city
they will to forget.
their last knots are done

by flashlite, the fire lit
out of an ignorance learned from books.
if their songs blur
as I sing them so that the forty years
their fathers wandered fit
my forty years thrown
Moses-size across their tents though

the light inside
is small, their songs still surprise God
in them, still loosen the mouth
from biting . . . but better this flesh,
this bite which outlines flesh,
than the food of heaven,
the peeled herbs, locusts, or any
popcorn allegory of the wilderness.
INFINITIVES

first speech — no begots, but
born of itself, starts:
the baby crawling the yard also
crawls "bird," "stick,"
or "tree." to be is to be raised
from mother flesh plural,
to love distinction but be some part

of travail that summers
in an older body. Sara's grandmother
speaks as she walks
the sunburned orchard holding Sara:
these are the limits
& so is the way you repeat

them. you
drink this truculence; if you don't
choke you are healed.
sometimes it is only for a season
the eye must be a halo
for discolored April & you hold

back speech the way small carp
clog the irrigation
pump as it pants raising slough

water.
MILE HILL

December; the trees chafing.
instead of a hole
at the horizon the focused light
of a welder's torch: the sun

& the iridescent this-world fuse.
6 days drive, Calif to the cramped Iowa farms. by the roadside we stretch
as I explain where my family
grew. below,
small preserved Dubuque bristles
in '90s plain-face
brick across the uneven hills,
circles where the river does

south to slough water.
Sara picks up
snow; molds it to her small hand,
tinges it with her pink

flesh: concomitant beauty
the bloodspot on the egg
we are on our knees
everyday to find on the ground
what we'd lost to the sky.
GOING HOME

Axe on my shoulder, I trudge
on home, cold and possessed,
how quiet this winter is
and I’d like to hang the tiredness —
a gray piece of lead —
right up there in the branches
and not think about it,
throw my hat up high, whistle
when I enter your room.

And the memory of summer —
sometime — comes back,
your light hair, the slope of the rye,
poppies and a curved mouth . . .

Axe on my shoulder, I keep moving.
The mountain’s transformed, a heavy sack of flour,
snowsky’s falling, will snow it in.
Lampsorrow, when I get home.
POOR PROSPECTS FOR DRINKERS

The potatoes are in the basket,  
the onions are braided and swinging,  
but they've had too much hail in Beaujolais,  
Burgundy's under frost.

Ever since the plover  
have settled down in swarms,  
I call out to my friends:  
Dry times are coming!

A doll for every child,  
enough oats for the stubborn mule,  
chalk and stone for us  
— enough for a game of Heaven and Hell . . .

and a taste of vinegar on the tongue.
SUNG LANDSCAPE

In their schoolroom the village children are singing a folksong. An ink-spattered forest grows from their desks, a lonely clearing, a slope covered by blueberries. Later, in arithmetic, the potato field they can count on is outside the window as always while an artificial star circles the earth.

UNDER APPLETREES

The nettles overgrew our fences
The lime trees smelled the way they always have
Now apples are ripening for their fall
In the green sanitarium a babble of tongues
Maybe a barn will burn down
Off in the pond a child drown unheard
Wrapped in tulle and smoke the beekeeper laughs
In the green sanitarium a babble of tongues
What do the apples remind us of?
And the quarry will wear down too.
BEYOND RJEKA

This field, whose is it
and who's fenced it in
and why?

This barbed wire, doubled
and tripled,
grass growing on the other side
belongs to the earth
and whose earth is this?

Some sheep grazing —
I just don't know,
I don't understand Croatian —
No shepherd, no dog
just sheep grazing
here and there.

translated by Stuart Friebert
SHEEP CLOUDS

Wake on the train and they tell you what you didn’t see

In the mist at daybreak row of socks hanging over the vegetable garden

Once you leave you have a name you can’t remember

Already at the thought of the late spring the window is open

Mist fades in the sun sheep lean into the wall shirt breathes at a window

In the spring evening a crow calls and I come back from the years

The cornflowers keep painting the faded air

Long twilight before midsummer all the clouds are moon

Old branch alive alive moored in the darkening sky sound of the stream
The moth brings
the map
of both sides

Just before dawn
the nightingale
starts something new

Midsummer stars fade
the oriole echoes
the nightingale

When it says
goodbye
say thank you

Deep in cloud
a day with summer flowers
and small bells ringing

Starts too near
ever to
arrive

Late in summer
the birds draw
closer together

In a summer of mist
through the evening
a road of mist

Hay in and a cow sick
the unwatched television
flickers on his face
What is an itch
that nobody should speak
well of it

Sun sinks on red pastures
and a dog barks
at the sound of a closing door

Oh the sun sets in the oaks
and the white lady
calls to the mice of the fields

Stars of August what
are you
doing

Moon setting
in the oak tree
wakes one blackbird

Bright September
the shadow of the old walnut tree
has no age

On the reflections of the freight cars
after the frost
water lilies
From your eyes I thought
you could almost say
what it was you were thinking
And so could I       We could almost move
But that voice, speaking out our names —
And the way our hands
held there in the yellow air      And the way the sun
shone right through us
Done with us

Then
the plain astonishment — the air
broken open:       just ourselves
sitting, talking; like always;
the kitchen window
propped open by the same
blue-gray dictionary.
August.  Rain.  A Tuesday.

Then, absence.  The open room
suspended       The long street
gone off        quiet, dark.
The ocean floor.  Slow
shapes glide by

Then, day
keeps beginning again: the same
stubborn pulse against our throats:
Listening for a human voice
our names
DECEMBER 21ST

How will I think of you
"God-with-us"
a name: a word

and trees paths stars this earth
how will I think of them

and the dead I love and all absent friends
here-with-me

and table: hand: white coffee mug:
a northern still life:

and you
without a body

quietness

and the infant’s red-brown mouth a star
at the star of the girl’s nipple . . .
In FIELD 15 we published two essays, by Marvin Bell and X. J. Kennedy, from the then unpublished 50 CONTEMPORARY POETS: THE CREATIVE PROCESS (ed. Alberta Turner, David McKay, 1977). This collection investigated contemporary poetics by asking each poet to examine one of his or her recent poems and talk about its origins and growth. In this issue we offer four essays, by Marvin Bell, William Stafford, Jane Cooper, and Albert Goldbarth, from another collection-in-progress, POETS TEACHING. This book approaches contemporary poetics from a different and, we believe, a still-unexplored angle by asking thirty-two poets who teach in writing programs and writers' conferences just how each would help develop three student poems.
Let me make the necessary disclaimers, and then get on with it. Here are the disclaimers: (1) I teach writing in large measure by teaching reading; (2) When I discuss a student poem, it is partly in relation to other poems at hand and to the overall context of that student's writing, experience and language; (3) In class, I teach as much as possible by example and descriptive praise, which requires good work for discussion; (4) Dialogue is required for getting straight the terms, and for finding out what the student did that was intentional and what was lucky, what was understood and what was merely accepted, what was programmed and what was intuitive.

Disclaimers aside (Don't anyone, please, take this essay to represent how I teach!), I'll do my best. Of course, none of these three poems about mothers is very good. They are full of attempts to write "poetry." No matter how much these writers have read or written, they are beginners. They do not write poetry so much as they imitate what they happen to think poetry is. Hence, harsh criticism is beside the point. But here's some of what could be said, poem by poem.

-o-

MY MOTHER DYES MY FATHER'S HAIR

My mother dyes my father's hair, a crown of thinning fringe, once white turns red, dye like blood runs down the blue sink at midnight.

He bathes like a fury — thrashing in the sea of her hot rage. Her nails fork his skull, gnashing skin into ripples of white waves.

White feathers, blooming scarlet, rim the mound of smooth skin, a crest the sea sun once burnt bright, the color of a rooster's comb.
This is a ritual, a sacrifice,  
a witness to her lost womb,  
for he shall strut a red plume,  
a fruit plucked from her hands.

In impotence of age outraged:  
the barren October maple  
explodes the feeling in  
a few perfect russet leaves.  

Z.K.

If the student can take some kidding, I’d suggest this poem be re-titled THE BLUE SINK AT MIDNIGHT, and directed by Alfred Hitchcock. (And if the student cannot take kidding, that’s important to know too.) The new title is portentous and melodramatic, just like the poem. That is, once that dye in stanza one is likened to blood, we are long gone from conscious observation. It’s no wonder that Father bathes in “the sea of her hot rage” in stanza two, and that Mother has lost her womb by stanza four. Anything can happen!

Enough kidding. Do you know why we like the ending of the poem, why we feel relief at the appearance of a maple tree in October? — Because it is the first piece of careful eyesight in the poem. Everything before has been “created” in the service of writing poetry, in the service of raising the event out of the ordinary — indeed, into the realm of ritual, sacrifice, myth! But it won’t work. It takes a lot of narrative, circumstance and character to make a myth.

The error here is symptomatic of thinking of poetry as vision and universal art rather than as observation and personal expression. Stanza one is mostly descriptive but, even there, the poet is anxious to make things bigger, more important: the dye is “like blood.” Thus, in stanza two, a little liquid in the sink has become a sea of hot rage, Mother’s dyeing of Father’s hair has become mutilation, and everybody is furious. From there the metaphors of sea and feathers are given their head(s). The intention seems to be to deliver a large argument: that Mother is frustrated and angered by the loss of youth and sexuality (Is Father, like the maple in autumn,
impotent?), and is taking revenge on poor Father’s scalp even as she tries to make him (look) younger. That’s an idea, I suppose, even a story. The language, however, overwhelms the possibility of believable narrative with unbelievable melodrama.

The best verb in the poem is “explores” in the penultimate line. The best of the objects are that maple tree and its “few perfect russet leaves.” The worst word is “fruit,” five lines from the end, because its use means either that hair and feathers are fruit (not intended) or that Father is (definitely not intended).

If we are to learn something of Mother’s motives in dyeing Father’s hair, or of the relationship of Father and Mother to each other and to aging, let it come from fierce observation. The attempt here to give the event significance through metaphor is clearly willful and rhetorical, thus reminding us of Yeats’ definition of rhetoric: the will doing the work of the imagination. I hasten to add that “imagination” means a special way of seeing, not of inventing.

As for the poet’s erratic attempts at meter and rhyme, it’s a fine sign that she is interested. However, she would best be taught about meter and rhyme by discussing it in relation to better examples.

Of course I could make this poem better — by re-wording, replacing, re-ordering. But what would be the point? I am very much opposed to teaching poetry writing by making bad student poems slightly better. That way lies a commitment to the mediocre, a goal of adequacy. In my own mind, I am interested only in the student’s relationship to high standards. In other words, I am interested in how well the student will read and write ten or twenty years from now. To teach writing by “fixing up” student poems is a mistake: it lowers standards, creates a flood of miniatures, endorses the limits of adolescence, deprives the student of what genuine excitement there is in reading or writing first-rate poetry, and short-circuits true learning — which depends on the student’s own efforts. If a poem is genuinely good, minor repairs are
another matter but should still, I believe, be offered with some reluctance.

In this case, revision means writing the next poem. I might, depending on the student, suggest another way of looking at things. For example, I might wonder aloud in front of the student about which is the more blood-like and suggestive: dye said to be “like blood,” or red dye shown to be running seemingly out of the father’s head into the sink. I might make a distinction between those things which exist in fact, can be shown and, if observed more closely, might be telling (hair, head, dye, Mother’s nails) and those which are made up so as to force the meaning upon us (blood, the sea of Mother’s rage). If I did that, it would not be in the service of improving this poem but in the expectation of a much better poem next time. I can already tell that this student is intelligent. Next time, therefore, I might discuss with her the relationship of things and language to ideas in poetry. Next time, not now.

-o-

MOTHER’S SONG OF STRANGERS

The mother like a fine-toothed comb,
the rich chocolate hair, the four steps
from her vanity to the bathroom mirror.
Mother plays her hair like a
violin. Children come to hear her.
Father plays her hair in lust.

Mother is a beautiful horse. No one
can ride her. She wears her hair
like a gown and gallops the village.
At night mother plays her hair
to sleep.

Three bold men, like night
come and sleep with her.
Mother lies with the'goats and the sheep.
Mother opens the door to her womb
that speaks no secrets, only sings
in a high, thin voice
like gold wire: her song of strangers,
her song of the gifts they bring,
of being wanted by all men,

of taking her own life away from them,
for herself.

P.M.

This poem also sounds like poetry, which is too bad, although, unlike the previous poem, it is not lost to bad metaphors. No, it is lost to bad narrative. The melodrama that hurts this poem occurs in the form of Mother galloping, Mother sleeping with "three bold men," Mother lying with the goats and the sheep, Mother opening the door to her womb (Ladies and Gentlemen, the infant Jesus). See, I can kid this guy, too.

And he ought to be able to take such kidding, because there are two very nice passages in the poem, plus a few nice miscellaneous phrasings. The first of the good parts is lines four through six. The comparison of Mother's hair to a violin is far better, obviously, than the earlier comparison of Mother to a fine-toothed comb. Moreover, the two sentences that follow derive from the comparison, and this, friends, is one of the secrets of poetry: things can follow. That is, we see in our time much poetry but few poems. Everyone, it seems, can write infinite numbers of lines of poetry, but few can write a poem. The way the three sentences which end the first stanza of this poem derive, one from the other, makes me feel that perhaps this student will be able to write a poem.

I don't want to linger on the middle of the poem. It would seem that Mother has become a horse (with a violin for a tail?, or does the end of a stanza mean that what was said in one stanza does not have to be true in the next stanza?). Rather, I want to mention the other fine passage in this poem: the last four and a half lines. I think that, somewhere, there is a poem which begins with likening Mother's hair to a musical instrument and ends with the song she tries to keep for herself. The various "bold men" and animals in the middle of
this poem are (to change them instantly the way the poem does Mom's hair) red herrings. And the first three lines of the poem are obsessive, interesting for the possibility of another poem but not germane to this one.

Like the previous poem, this poem has an argument to make. But, as in the previous poem, the argument yanks about the content, rather than deriving from it. But not in the two passages I have mentioned, which are beautiful.

-o-

"All ugly scarred people . . ."

All ugly scarred people
see an angel inside of themselves.
Reaching for it,
feathersoft light,
they toss to stars and rocking fairy-boats
soft mirrored pieces of their souls.

I know because my mother told me,
when I was three or four.
I love my mother.
I used to pull her big, floppy strawberry beret
over my ears and my china-blond hair.
She took a picture of me in that hat.
I would sit lopsided on our steps.

When she was dying,
like all ugly scarred people,
she found her angel too
and screamed and screamed so everyone would know.

B.B.

If the first poem under discussion imitated a half-understood notion of hard-working metaphor, and the second imitated a half-understood notion of symbolic narrative, this poem imitates (but just for a short while) a misunderstood notion of poetic language. I'm pointing to lines three through six, which are false language in the service of a decent idea. It's a hell of a problem, in fact, because it's there in this poem
that the poet must say something that means "soul" and something else that means something like a combination of "heaven" and "longing." But the language she chooses is too soft, too sentimental, too sweet.

The best part of this poem is its third stanza, which I like very much. It's a crude poem, this one, unimaginative in making sentences, a minimal report, a simple syllogism, not at all decorous. But it remains close to a genuine feeling, it is about something that matters, and it lets the details plus one trick of point-of-view speak for themselves. It is certainly true that the poem comes out sounding like that of a young person. It has neither adult grace nor a chance at profundity. But it is close to the bone, and its limitations should not be turned against it.

In that way, it is probably not a poem on which much teaching should be based. A little appreciation of its good parts will suffice. And on to the next poem. I wouldn't want to encourage the poet to adopt this child-like tone too often, or ever again. If she insisted on writing poems spoken by children, I would point her to poems spoken by children whose language knows more than they do: for example, Randall Jarrell's "The Truth." For now, let her be told that the language contributes little to this poem, but that it is a poem nonetheless.

-o-

In actual practice, I would never say all of these criticisms in this way to a student. It is always a question of what the student can hear. As for humor, it's true that, given some prior groundwork in the interest of mutual trust, I sometimes make light fun of a poem where it is nonsensical or pretentious. As an old ad used to argue, medicine doesn't have to taste bad to be good.

Still, medicine is medicine, and should be used with discretion. It is important to remind both student and teacher
that there are no rules in the writing of poetry (except those that derive from the actual progress of the poem), and that the teacher can be wrong. I myself am often wrong. Perhaps here.
THE MINUET:
SIDLING AROUND STUDENT POEMS

My first impulse, when confronted with a student's writing, is to become steadfastly evasive until some signal from the student indicates a direction where the student is ready to go. I want to become the follower in this dance, partly because of some principles about what can be truly helpful in such an interchange, and partly because I have learned that the area between us is full of booby traps: the writer may have many kinds of predispositions, hang-ups, quirks, needs, bonuses. How the student comes toward me across that area is a crucially important beginning for whatever dancing there is going to be.

The first move is the student's move, not mine. Of course, even handing me the writing is a move, and I am ready to give a slight twitch in return — slight, for a reason. And now I must try to formulate something about that reason. I assume that a writing — a poem, say — is sort of like an iceberg, with only a small part of its real self visible. If I am to be helpful, I need all the signals I can get, about the deeper drifts, the potentials, the alternatives actually ready to function for the main person involved — the student. Not my life, my knowledge, my insight, but the student's whole life and potential are the main focus in our encounter. And I have to converge. Or so I see the process.

The balance I need, early in the encounter, induces from me only minimum commitments. If I charge into the poem, I might either take it over or alienate the writer; I might wildly mis-read some main current in its actual or potential development; and I might enhance rather than decrease that dominance implied by teacher-student conferring. Surely our direction is to be toward the writer's own taking over of the writing. My ideal response becomes something like "Uh-huh ... oh ... where? ... ummm." And ideally the writer begins to tell, assert, maybe question on particulars. On particulars I can hazard a human response. But I must rid
myself of the burden of being the person who makes those decisions that must be made by the writer.

A PORTRAIT OF THE DAY

morning, afternoon, and evening
A portrait of the day should be simple.

green morning, brown afternoon, and black evening
A portrait of the day should be simple.

With morning's green, afternoon's brown, and evening's black, A portrait of the day should be very simple.

With morning's green painted on the edges of the day, afternoon's brown set in the foreground, and evening's black dispersed across the colors, a portrait of the day, with a suitable frame, should be very simple.

With morning's green painted around the edges of the day, creating the impression of sunlight through curtained windows and clothes on hardwood floors, afternoon's brown set in the foreground, intermixing on the edges with green, turning the morning face to brownsad afternoon, and evening's black dispersed across the colors, reminding the observer that the absence of light will prevail, a portrait of the day, with a suitable frame to complement its wild design, should be very simple.

With morning's green painted around the edges of the day, creating an impression of sunlight through curtained windows and clothes on hardwood floors, that digresses into hues of minutes and hours, through lacquered halls and coffee, through artbooks and palettes searching for colors and symbols, afternoon's brown set in the foreground, intermixing on the edges with green, turning the morning face to brownsad afternoon, trying to find the spot where green ends and brown begins, following in the footsteps of one who went before, through tea and conversation, throwing flowers at a singer's feet, beginning to see that this job is not so easy, and evening's black dispersed across the colors reminding the observer that the absence of light will prevail, that sees the day changing in degrees like the colors of the spectrum from radiating green to blackdeath, a portrait of the day, with a
suitable frame, carved in a way that would complement such a wild piece, that would firmly transfx the images of a day upon the wall for all to see, should be very simple.

B.S.

Still, once the minuet steps have begun, what positive moves can be made in consultation with a student? How would the dance continue, on a poem like "a portrait . . ."?

I ask myself — and might even ask the writer — what main current or attraction led forward through the writing of this poem. What successive closures were making the writing process satisfying? How could the writer sense that something was developing? These questions occur to me on this poem because I see quickly that it is a sequence of patterns with increments that carry forward, part by part. A glance at the longer and longer sections of the poem will reveal this kind of pattern. And a look at the wording confirms what is happening; one of the satisfactions for the writer must have been the working out of a glimpse that showed something simple and then simply developed by means of repeated accretions of wording. For me, the search for satisfactions that carry a writer forward is an important search: I feel that one of my most valid functions is to induce the inner guides and securities that will sustain the artist through those independent, lonely encounters with the material. I remind myself that this one poem may not be the best focus for my efforts, that the development of the writer's appetite, confidence, inventiveness, flexibility — these are much more important than whether this poem ever gets off the ground.

So I hang back from quibbling about obvious oddities that might snag my attention — capitals or not, periods or not, line breaks that are acrobatic. But I am ready to raise questions about small things, if such questioning proves to be the easiest way for me to remain mobile and harmless but still engaged, in our interchanges.

In this poem I would be ambitious to explore outward: Why does it not continue — get even longer? Why does it not start from an even more simple beginning stanza? Could the
continuity of the art element throughout (portrait, colors, palettes, etc.) be more intensified? Somehow, could there be more lightning-flickers of realization that would hint at a background validating the enigmatic “should be” of the refrain?

But I would explore such questions only if the writer showed an interest. If I could, I would keep from having any good ideas of my own. Finally, I would indicate that I follow the gesture of the poem down the page as the sections widen and deepen. I would try to lean away from evaluation. And would probably suggest we turn to further poems.

WINDOW — WE DO NOT SEE

Window — we do not see
shivers for wind;
push the molding away
then clutch the latch
in case it really happens.

A stone could hit;
you believe in this:
the chance
to break light like the windows of Chartres.

A cold morning might draw children
to play with thimbles against the frost cover,
or rain to make us remember.

You find in dreams
that eyes come close
and hands touch.
Condensed drops of light
hold this breath
from the image darkness reflects.
We pull curtains before the possibility.
You will never know.

B.S.

It happens that I know the writer of this poem well. For this reason, and in order to take up a variety of approaches,
I will juggle into a new approach. But the general stance indicated for the preceding poem might very well characterize most of the moves in relation to this poem — slow approach, readiness to retreat, interest in the first moves made by the writer.

I am attracted (though I don’t want the writer to know anything about my evaluative feelings) by a certain combination of elements in this poem — its centering definitely around “window,” but its readiness to rove oddly out into fairly wild connections — stones, rain, thimbles, dreams. As a reader, I am ready for the demands put upon me by the swerve into the last line — “You will never know.” But I cherish the opportunity to stay stupid a long time as I stare at the lines in the company of the writer. Somewhere in all this sequence there may lurk some organizing principles that mean more to the writer than anything so far put into the poem. I do not want to get in the way of something ready to happen in the still-evolving life of this poem.

Tugging at me are impulses to free main parts that want to become important in constructions that at first hide amid chance elements in what seems like a preliminary draft. I think that often a poem can shake down from amid nouns and verbs cluttering along in its early drafts. I would like the student to do the shaking, and the recognizing that may follow. If I rush in, I may distort the main drift. My effort is to find out, while staying clear during developments, what is important to the student.

But even though unspoken, between the student and me, there begins to accumulate a kind of ideal revision in my own mind. The student would never encounter this, but to indicate something of the background from which remarks would come I’ll hazard the ghost poem hiding between us:

WINDOW

We do not see it,

it shivers for wind —
clutch the latch, lest
it really happen —

That a stone hit. We believe in this:
chance, light breaking
like the windows of Chartres.

Or a cold morning might bring
children, thimbles against frost. Or rain
to make us remember.

We find it in dreams —
eyes come close, hands touch, drops of light
hold our breath.

It's an image darkness reflects. We pull curtains
before that possibility
we will never know.

I want to make the lines help. But mostly I want to find
out what the student leans toward in any survey of the poem.
And I do not want to make it a "good" poem. Nor say it is
good — or bad. Together, we want to find out what it is.

BROTHER AND SISTER

No one was there
when I became your brother.
Just you and me and our mouths
wrapped around some scream,
some sign of first breath
or recognition.
It was so cold then. And yet
we didn’t seek the house or
any shelter by the roadway,
but slid farther in our grip
hoping each white star that tore
from the blackness beyond
was the right one.
Now, years later, there is some great coldness, some shiver in my blood that makes me seek the place where fire burns and forgets its ash. And in that flame I dream my way back to the storm and find the snow I've always known. Fresh, infallible, I gaze over the absolute distance that separates us perfectly.

Perfect distance it is . . . the perfect distance of love.

M.P.

All the evasions, noncommittal stances, readinesses to be led that characterize my encounter with the preceding poems would be part of my usual approaches to a poem like "Brother and Sister." But some other elements might also be present.

One is a twinge of envy. I would cultivate that twinge, let it teach me that I should read students' poems with at least as much attention as I gladly give when I read Keats. Have I been adequate in my reading of earlier poems? Have I allowed myself to hover about the poems rather than plunging into them, as language among friends invites us to do? I savor my envy, and prepare to let it gleam through if anything like an evaluative interchange should happen at the end of considering this poem.

Who is this student with the definite, driving, deft first sentence? How does it happen that so many of the lines break at places so helpful for keeping me leaning forward into the unfolding of a steadily-implied richness of feeling? This poem elicits quite a bit of my allegiance, as I take the ride it gives. And maybe by reading it myself, aloud between us, or listening to the student read it aloud, I permit myself some tremendous signal of approval, like a raised eyebrow, or a leaning forward at certain places. My role is an easy one, if I am permitted to take it — I want to learn what guided the writer, what not-yet-written-in portions there might be in this poem. I am interested in the choices the writer feels as the lines progress. Maybe this poem shouldn't
be any better — it might turn into a fabrication not fully enough engaged with this writer’s continuing motivations. I stay careful.

And there are some regrets, not just regrets about technique (I think — I’m not even sure what this is, or what fallings-off from technique might mean in this poem), but regrets about what seem to me possibly relapses from faith on the part of the writer. Maybe this writer is being corrupted already by success — why “dream” — why not just “find”? why “always known” — why not just “known”? why “absolute distance” — why not just “distance”? And “the perfect distance of love” strikes me as a dangerous last line, a sell-out.

But I remember my twinge of envy. Maybe my old teacher-balance is gone. Sustained by my confusion, I lean back into the safer — and more helpful — position: “What do you think?”

I might even get back into so good a balance I can be helpful and valid and honest and indirect: “Come on, cheer me up — I know you’ve got them — show me some of your bad poems.”
N’s poems were always long and lavish. Her specialty seemed to be weaving permutations of two or three initiating images through the body of a sixty-line poem, feeling free, with this understructure in mind, to indulge herself along the way in any number of rich, seemingly free-associative, verbal felicities. This made for dense going. When the density was at its most supportive of the understructure’s tone, and at its most skyrockety brilliant, the proper critical response was: largesse. At its worst, of course, this dense verbal thicket lost the reader, sometimes even infuriated: he suspected a path, but had to spend time beating in circles through the gaudiest swirls of flora.

This latter response was the class members’ most typical. Their own attempts at writing were for the most part brief finely-drawn portraits or short tamely-surreal sketches that tried for l’image juste and then knew when to clear off the page. Often these were promising examples of craft in some of the obvious virtues: compression, clarity. Class members at times seemed to feel they were working toward, and out of, a shared aesthetic. And their poems normally provided easy access to constructive critical commentary, and solid ground for ensuing discussion: one could zero in on line 4 of X’s 16-line portrait of Aunt Matilda with all the assurance of Aunt M. herself retouching a faulty line in her makeup.

My own response to these tight poems, if they were already strong, might be in suggestions for future expansion. Full criticism, I’d remind a class, can continue from a word-by-word, idea-by-idea, vivisection of the dittoed poem on hand, to include ways of using a fine-finished poem as a first step: can other pieces extend from it in linear fashion? (here I might bring in examples from a good poetry sequence — say Norman Dubie’s The Alehouse Sonnets) or can it become one of a number of segments that circle about, and so by implication define, some central concern, as the hole, the real focus, in a donut takes shape only from its chewy surround-
ing? (and to help make lucid that confectionary analogy I might bring in, say, one of Jim Harrison's suites, maybe "War Suite" from his *Locations*). Or, 'natch, should the author leave well enough alone? Does the poem, despite its technical ease, really sound earned and urgent — the necessary drive behind Blake's cosmos or Sexton's early self-psychohelp — or does it have that ground-out-for-a-grade feel? how? why? huh? And so we'd go on, sharpening.

But N's work created different and, for this group, special, problems — not a wordsmith's version of shaping one topiary tree but of giving direction to the entire garden. Often the class grumbled and often it was correct: too much helter skelter, too little tension over vast spaces. Sometimes, though, that grumbling seemed unwarranted, infrequently even strangely hostile. I came to believe the class had little experience in approaching N's inclusive kind of writing; that her work upset some of my students' too-inflexible beliefs about the well-written workshop poem; and even that there existed a subconscious jealousy of the bounty in N's uneven output.

My job sometimes came to be a defending of her work, likely through a demonstration of N's aesthetics as realized in the writing of "professional poets" — so few young classroom poets begin with an intense personal vision and voice, at least in a standard undergraduate class, and I believe strongly in providing outside examples (have, despite the classification "creative workshop," in many situations asked for formal critical papers). Whitman could show the class the power of cataloguing, of sweep, yet still exhibit to N. the power of control; or Wakoski's darting certain figures in and out the serpentine length of one poem, or Koch's cornucopian yet careful outreaching... Here were two poems on the same theme, but how did Yehuda Amichai's exquisitely pared-down image differ from Jarrell's more leisurely treatment...

So things went. Sometimes I'd "win," sometimes "lose." The chemistry of the writing workshop makes, need I say it?, for a volatile alembic. What may be necessary advice for one poem or one student, can be intrusive, even negative, for the
whole group. The most bizarre isotopes form. I'd repeat the ground rules (read the work ahead of time and make notes; be excruciatingly honest — but in a constructive way — and always exemplify generalizations with specific reference to the text), then sit back to guide discussion as unobtrusively as possible . . . And of course I'd obtrude. The class usually continued to turn thumbs down and noses up, I continued to be half-impressed. N. was, after all, very young, younger than most in this junior-senior class, and it was I believe her first university workshop. All in all I enjoyed her flawed rococo murals more than some students' near-perfect miniatures, and I trusted her poems' self-knowledge. They seemed confusing but never confused.

If the group and I continued to be so at odds, it might make for a difficult rendering of an objective amalgam of opinion at N.'s end-of-semester conference with me. And so I was glad when the class responded to this early draft:

GRANDFATHER'S FUNERAL

I seek the white sky to blanket my passion.
Standing out against the marshmallow of winter day, from nearby,
something shining.
No shadows were thrown on the sparkle.

I bow like a shell hunter and peer wondrously into eyes,
eyes not unlike my own, dangerous,
dipped in the sepia of ancient photographs,
a still and doll like vision contained in a two by three,
of a grandfather you and a grandmother me,
drawing in their minds forever a connection between themselves,
humming in three parts the song of themselves,
the cookie,
the wine,
and the fruit.
If I am with you,
I will build a bridge of spectrum wealth into the uncertainty of your winter age,
like the bleak landscapes admit bluntly their lie
when they show color surprises, sometimes,
in sunsets.
It is a strong bridge, and you can walk upon it.

Numbing cold teases to bite feelings,
by slapping faces until they curse and forget.
The years are coming,
as the snow before me,
smooth and without prints,
not even the wipe of lost lowflying wings
make a mark there.

Some cry, running head on into the ice,
trying to crack the future with useless hammers
of salt and juice.
Some shine,
but most are magnets, hungry for the pure metal
in the human core.

N. read it aloud. They followed on their worksheets. I requested an initial gut-level response, some ooh or nyaah presumably free of academic finesse. And the class appeared pleased with this new effort. Despite its too many marks of the novice, "Grandfather's Funeral" indicated to us, in the context of her earlier work, N's willingness to provide a clearer-cut set of rungs by which to travel down the page. While not in response to a specific assignment (which I will occasionally make in a lower-level class if students' muses seem blind to certain options in language), Nancy had (perhaps) kept class opinion in mind. Now the room began with honest interest to answer my questions on the poem — before I asked them!

Let's start big: what's the poem's strategy? Well, maybe something like attracting the reader's conscious attention with a few images that disappear and then reappear in various modulations (like the vision of hidden metal/color) while slowly, under all that, an emotional base (the grandfather-grand-

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daughter relationship) begins to clarify and speak to the reader's subliminal attention. (Then someone might disagree, or say yes I agree but doesn't the blatant title work against such a plan . . . and we'd be off.)

Let's get smaller: which specific sections stick in your head long after you put down the page? Well, the places where description is most physical, like those low wings marking snow; or where the language takes on a crazy music ("the cookie, / the wine, / and the fruit"). (Then all of the corollary questions: which of those highlights, even if strongly done, are just surface beguilement, and not integral to the argument and emotional cohesion? which sections are the weakest, too lax, too trite — and come on, why do I think "the marshmallow of / winter day" hits a tone that jangles wrong? etc. . . .)

Finally, let's get smallest: which words are just an atom too far off? where in the lineation, the rhythms, the punctuation, do we need to do fine-tuning? pick, pick, pick . . . I say x, someone disagrees with x, someone else dusts off y and z . . .

Plus all those other minute discussions touched off by N's poem: does it always skirt sentimentality? what is sentimentality? is the lush onrush too self-indulgent? what's wrong with self-indulgence, though? does the tone ever slip from sincerity? if parts should be excised, is there another context that can save them? blah blah . . .

I will generally encourage a discussion to begin with the poem's strengths, and only later zero fiercely in on its weaknesses. And there were weaknesses aplenty here: hackneyed phrasing, wordy gushes, ideas expressed through correlatives that seemed far too tangential to the poem's main flow to make sense. But below the poem's awkward faces, something in its muscle, in that muscle's curious moves, encouraged my faith. — Yes, the small assured litany of "the cookie, / the wine, / and the fruit." The introductory music just above that, rhyming three and me, then interlineally repeating three while themselves ends two successive lines. The way the over-long, overripe, over-selfconscious first sentence of stanza 3 gives way to a single, simple, sincere line of prose sensibility
— a knowing and convincing slam shut of that stanza. Touches like those, through the whole piece, touched me.

For the most part the room, including myself, was in agreement. We saw some promise, but wanted a pithier piece, with fewer of the poem's strong visual moments bearing more of the poem's thematic weight. I probably reminded N. to attempt a balance between openmindedness to community response and her own full-speed-ahead conviction in her writing. Perhaps she could treat the poem in front of us as rough notes for a future project — a kind of artist's sketch book? A few weeks later the class received a fifth version:

GRANDFATHER'S FUNERAL

Walking the beach for shells,  
I bent down to smooth the lightly drawn stripes  
that black feathers had wiped in the sand.

I found a piece of fruit there,  
that wine had strained and dried into a face.  
Not unlike the way I think of my grandfather's face,  
when all the arms were bearing him.

They carried him.  
They carried the weight of his rest.  
Black wings, the arms lowered him.  
They rolled a soft print on me with the back of his heavy head.

I find much to like here, especially the ease with which the poet-grandfather relationship extends from the image of stanza 1, and is then enriched (truly supported, as the corpse is borne) by a return of that imagery in stanza 3. That ordering brings a canny intelligence and a clarity to an emotional fullness that might otherwise have slopped over into schmaltz. There's something right in the physical vividness and implicative quality of that wine-dried face on the fruit; in the grammatical incompleteness of "Not unlike . . . ," making it compelling for the ear; in the heavy, mimetic repetition of the carried lines, yes, mimetic of so much in both the heart and
the narrative; in the way that carried sound is itself carried over from bearing in the stanza above; in the resonance of "the weight of his rest"; in the increasing line count of the stanzas as they approach that final idea of weightiness; in the light touch (remember "the lightly drawn stripes") that blends the funeral scene with the earlier shell hunt. I could go on . . .

The suggestions I have are to let the muscle work even more cleanly, don't let us in on the joints' every creak. In line 3, strike that. In line 4, I found. That again, in line 5. The poem seems to want that unclutter. I would point out interesting speculation in the poem's first draft that is missing from its last (I think the first version was, inside its plethora of verbal zip, more meditative), and suggest it appear in some future poem. And I would simply make sure the poet was intending all the connotation of her becoming the beach's sand, or at least some form of the ground, in the poem's last sentence (the two are separate in stanza 1), and not merely contriving that association for a neat tying-together of strands.

But the poem works. I think its doors click shut surely and its windows give us the view that takes breath.
ON THE MAKING OF THREE POEMS

First of all, let me say that I don’t think it’s the criticism of any one poem that makes the workshop experience valuable for a student. Rather, it’s the slow working through of poems week after week, the attempt on the part of the teacher (and the whole class) patiently to discover the student’s strengths, point them out, help her or him to build on them yet not to be limited by them. For this reason I think this kind of analysis is only partially illuminating. In teaching, it’s the direction of a student’s writing that counts, and the life-giving energy: how a series of poems adds up, what it promises. Without this sense, criticism is apt to get picky — and I’m afraid that is somewhat the problem of the paragraphs that follow.

STUMBLING AROUND IN THE WOODS: Draft 1

In this forest that’s so quiet it’s almost green, someone is making so much racket I get tremendously annoyed — until I discover it’s me, stumbling.

Look — in a party filled with only your best, most personal friends you trip four times in five minutes. And everyone there knows you’re on the wagon.

The chairs fall over before I walk into the room. It must be preparation. I’d just like to know who tipped them off.

All I want is for the wind to shut up a minute; to hold its breath long enough so I can barely catch what this tiny pinecone is trying.
to tell me. I know
it must be important,
because all the seventy-
nine brown tongues are
stiff with fatigue.

And all that moss growing
only on the north side
of the trees must have
something to say; managing
as it does without a
compass or stars.

STUMBLING AROUND IN THE WOODS: Draft 2

All I want is for the wind
to shut up a minute;
to hold its breath long
enough so that I can
finally catch what this
tiny pinecone is trying
to tell me. I know
it must be important,
because its seventy-
nine brown tongues
are stiff with fatigue.

And all that moss
growing on the north
side of the trees must
be important, too;
managing as it does,
quietly, without
a compass or stars.

In this forest that's so quiet
it's almost green, someone
is making so much racket that I
get tremendously annoyed — until
I discover it's me, stumbling
in the underbrush, over roots.
All I want is for the wind
to shut up a minute;
to hold its breath long
enough so I can finally
catch what this tiny
pinecone is trying
to tell me. I know
it must be important
because its seventy-nine
brown tongues
are stiff with fatigue.

And that doe pawing
the ground by a bush must
be important, too;
managing, as she does,
quietly, on fragile,
fawn-colored hooves.

In this forest that's so quiet
it's almost green, someone
is making so much racket I
get tremendously annoyed — until
I discover it's me, stumbling,
in the underbrush, over roots.

"Stumbling around in the Woods" could have gone either way — toward the self or toward stillness. On the whole, I, like her teacher, would have encouraged her to cut out the party and concentrate on the trees, since there's a risk of self-consciousness in the first-draft stumbling into the room — a perilous cuteness . . . The decision to start the second draft with the original fourth stanza ("All I want is for the wind"), and end with the first stanza and the actual stumbling in the forest, then seems the best part of the revision process. I like not getting to the "I" of the poem till the very end. I like looking outward at the woods, staying still to listen, first. However, I wouldn't myself have traded the stanza about the
moss (stanza 2 in draft 2) for the stanza about the doe. Two images I enjoy are the "seventy-nine/ brown tongues (of the pinecone) / stiff with fatigue" and the moss "growing on the north/ side of the trees/ . . . managing as it does/ quietly, without/ a compass or stars." The doe throws me off, for the intense quiet that makes the "I" of the poem so aware of her own stumbling seems interrupted by the presence of another animal, by "pawing," however delicate.

Finally, here are several notes on the last draft of the poem: I would cut "tiny" before "pinecone," which seems coy, and I wonder whether "pinecone is trying to say" might not be better than "tell me," since I'd prefer to keep the speaker off-stage till the end of the poem. In the doe stanza, again I jib at "fawn-colored hooves." I like the addition of the last line after "stumbling." I wonder what exactly is meant by "In the forest it's so quiet/ it's almost green"? This didn't bother me for the first 65 or so readings, but once I asked the question, it kept recurring. Is this a woods in, say, March? Ah, now I see one reason why I miss that moss. The sequence of brown pinecones and then the (unspoken) color of moss (surely made more mysterious by "stars" — the idea that this landscape is perhaps being seen by night) led me easily to "almost green" in earlier drafts, but now, with the doe, that subliminal sequence is destroyed and I'm in danger of becoming too literal.

I like the poem. I suppose I would have urged it along in slightly different ways. But that is the benefit of having serious students work with more than one teacher. In the end, it leaves them truly free. Both R.H. and D.B. (whose poem follows) have studied with several different poets, and so they have learned the healthiest of all lessons for an artist: There's no such thing as authority. And, after a certain point, amicably, one develops one's own style.

In fact, I like all these poems, which is one reason — despite my first disclaimer — why it's a pleasure to write about them. The poor poem in a workshop is almost never the one about which there is specific question but rather the poem
about which there is nothing much to say — the poem that hasn’t come into being enough yet to make it sensible to talk of words or music or imagery. The worst part of workshop practice is that it tends to isolate technique. What’s important to remember is that the poem always grows out of some total experience; only when the experience is there to respect can one begin to ask whether it should be clarified, carried further, etc., etc.

ANATOMY OF AN EMBRACE: Draft 1

There’s the thumbnail of love, sometimes the entire strong hand. This is followed by the arm up to the shoulder, and the nape.

Yes, the small hair-sprinkled nape is also there. Call it the mid-point because with this classical movement, there’s a second part, too.

The second shoulder descends like an angel into the second arm punctuated by an elbow and wrist. And the final hand falls into the first. The complete embrace is in your grasp. Proceed. Proceed.

ANATOMY OF AN EMBRACE: Draft 2

There’s the thumbnail of love, sometimes the entire strong hand. This is followed by the arm up to the shoulder, and the nape.

Yes, the small hair-sprinkled nape is also there. Call it the mid-point because with this classical movement, there’s a second part, too.

The other shoulder descends, an arc down the arm, punctuated by elbow and wrist. And this hand
falls into the first. The complete embrace is in your grasp. Proceed. Proceed.

D.B.

One thing I admire about this poet's work is its musical firmness and variety. In "Anatomy of an Embrace," each line stays in place and yet is not quite predictable; at the same time, there's a fine fluency from beginning to end of the poem. The only place I trip — in both drafts — is at the last line in stanza 2: "There's a second part, too." I feel some heaviness in the end-stopped "too," but it's "part" that keeps bothering me. "Classical movement" in fact suggests a piece of music. Isn't "part" a rather blunt but also vague word, which seems grammatically to go with "movement" but which signals instead, confusingly, another part of the body? Anyway, the only further revision I'd suggest for this generally tight and accomplished poem would be the elimination of that one line. I think line 7 could read (I'm not quite sure about this) "because from this classical movement," and then line 9 could follow directly, without a capital ("the other shoulder descends, an arc"), and the curve of the poem would be complete. (This might also result in three stanzas of four lines each) . . . My favorite image is "small hair-sprinkled nape." The repetition of "nape," that quirky, minutely observed "hair-sprinkled," which is like nothing else in the poem, make this the high point, literally, from which the two halves of the poem depend. I'm glad the angel was canned — partly because it got in the way of the nape. But given "embrace" as the subject, I wonder if I'd have had the guts (meaning lack of sentimentality?) to see so clearly that the angel had to go. Still, for all its positive connotations, this is a witty, even a sly poem. The two hands of one person end by embracing each other. "The complete embrace is in your grasp." Tch!. How then can you "Proceed. Proceed"? But you must. We must. And the poem opens out again, leaving the poet with the final grin.

Rather arbitrarily, I decided to consider these three
poems in reverse order according to the ages of the poets. R.H. was a junior at Sarah Lawrence when she wrote "Stumbling around in the Woods," D.B. a sophomore when he wrote "Anatomy of an Embrace," and K.H. a freshman when she wrote "Five Women in a Café" for a workshop of mine. A reminder of humility; we all need to tell ourselves that no matter how much may happen in a writing workshop, some students come to us already clearly talented and with voices of their own. In this case, I’ve chosen a poem of K.H.’s I consider not yet finished, but other poems of hers, written the same spring, reached a point where I couldn’t add very much by further criticism. This doesn’t mean, of course, that she won’t continue to grow. . . . One of the imponderables in teaching writing, by the way, is that it’s impossible to tell who will go on and, specifically, who is an early and who a late maturer.

FIVE WOMEN IN A CAFÉ: Draft 1

Late summer. Late evening.
It is warm, the night will drag on.

The buzzing of the fan which
had been annoying continues half-forgotten.
   Each one listens to her own breathing
to the silences between her words, words, words.
The glasses are empty. The ice melts quick enough.
I’m hot. I’m tired. I’m so hot. Let’s go.

Nothing had gone right; they missed the first act,
the bakery closed early. There’s so little to say.
   The youngest one, in a white dress, reaches across
the table, knocking over a glass of melted ice.
There is one moment, that moment before the eager
hands reach out to steady, sustain, return.

FIVE WOMEN IN A CAFÉ: Draft 2

Late summer. Late evening.
It is warm, the night will drag on.
The buzzing of the fan fades, half-forgotten.
   Each one listens to her own breathing
to the silences between her words, words, words.
The glasses are empty. The ice melts quick enough.
   I'm hot. I'm tired. I'm so hot. Let's go.

Nothing had gone right; they missed the first act,
the bakery closed early. There's so little to say.
   The youngest one, in a white dress, reaches across
the table, knocking over a glass of melted ice.

The pool of water spreads unimpeded towards
the table edge. They sit and stare and hold their breaths.
   Hands reach to steady, sustain, withhold.
   Apologizing, the girl in white. Blushing, she wants
to contain the night, wrap it, place it inside her dress.

Late summer. Late evening.
It is warm, the night will drag on.

"Five Women in a Café" certainly has its own voice, its own
stamp, from the beginning. The beat of repetition and sup-
pressed protest ("I'm hot. I'm tired. I'm so hot. Let's go.")
is there from the first line. The poem seems to move quite in-
evitably up to the point where the glass is knocked over and
the ice water spills across the table. At the same time, there
is invention ("they missed the first act,/ the bakery closed
early"). How much we know, how much we don't know about
these five women! How adept is the movement from outside
to inside — the murmured or perhaps not even spoken words
— and then back again.

In the first draft, I felt the last two lines were inadequate
to deal with the tension that had been built up and the poem
became suddenly impersonal (to "steady, sustain" whom?
to "return" what?) and even a bit pretentious ("There is one
moment"). I like the second draft better, though I still don't
feel it has solved all the poem's problems. For one thing, it
always seems easy to end a poem by repeating the beginning — the oldest way to end a poem, or a song, in the world. In the fourth stanza, I find the word “unimpeded” too heavy for the situation, as in a different way so is “hold their breaths.” I’m not sure the new “withhold” is clear. But I like “Apolo-gizing, the girl in white. Blushing, she wants/ to contain the night, wrap it, place it inside her dress.” What an odd metaphor that is — and yet it convinces me, from the truth of some disproportionate adolescent shyness that we’ve all shared. I wish the sliding of the water across the table could be a little more worked on — and then that the poem could be still fuller. The fact is, enough has been created for me here so that I want to know more. Where should the poem end? The new draft has brought it to the point where the tension is between the “youngest one” and the other women. What does that mean? But how interesting it all is. . . . Surely this is one secret: that the poem should be interesting, that it can be interesting even in the way a story is. I want just to add that, once again, musically this is a confident poem. And the visual pattern across the page is handsome, especially in draft 2. This poet is a dancer, and I always feel an element of dramatic performance in her work, even when it is sometimes elliptical and, for that reason, still obscure.

One last word, which hasn’t to do with the three poems. Obviously, all three poets I’ve discussed are gifted and serious, and they all think, justifiably, of going on. But what about the student in a workshop who doesn’t necessarily want to be a writer? Well, why not? It seems to me writing courses, at least on the undergraduate level, should always have room for the unsure, the experimenters, for amateurs who (in the old meaning of the word amateur) are simply lovers of poetry or fiction or plays. I learned a lot about how to look at a painting from having studied with a good painting teacher from the age of 10 to the age of 16. Yet I’ll never be a painter, and it was clear quite soon that I wouldn’t be. While I believe the best teachers of writing are themselves practicing writers — for who else keeps up with the genuinely new? — the students can be anybody, can come from any
place. To become a writer is finally a matter of character, as well as luck and a passion for the medium. But it is surely not the worst part of anyone’s education to be left with a lifelong hunger for good writing, to be able to read with that special joy and concentration that come from sensing — no, actively seeing — how the thing was made.
THE WOMAN WHO COULD NOT LIVE WITH HER FAULTY HEART

I do not mean the symbol of love, a candy shape to decorate cakes with, the heart that is supposed to belong or break;

I mean this lump of muscle that contracts like a flayed biceps, purple-blue, with its skin of suet, its skin of gristle, this isolate, this caved hermit, unshelled turtle, this one lungful of blood, no happy plateful.

All hearts float in their own deep oceans of no light, wetblack and glimmering, their four mouths gulping like fish. Hearts are said to pound: this is to be expected, the heart’s regular struggle against being drowned.

But most hearts say, I want, I want, I want, I want. My heart is more duplicitous, though no twin as I once thought. It says, I want, I don’t want, I want, and then a pause. It forces me to listen,

and at night it is the infra-red third eye that remains open while the other two are sleeping but refuses to say what it has seen.
It is a constant pestering
in my ears, a caught moth, limping drum,
a child's fist beating
itself against the bedsprings:
I want, I don't want.
How can one live with such a heart?

Long ago I gave up singing
to it, it will never be satisfied or lulled.
One night I will say to it:
Heart, be still,
and it will.
THE WOMAN MAKES PEACE
WITH HER FAULTY HEART

It wasn't your crippled rhythm
I could not forgive, or your dark red
skinless head of a vulture

but the things you hid:
five words and my lost
gold ring, the fine blue cup
you said was broken,
that stack of faces, grey
and folded, you claimed
we'd both forgotten,
the other hearts you ate,
and all that time you hid
from me, saying it never happened.

There was that, and the way
you would not be captured,
sly featherless bird, fat raptor
singing your raucous punctured song
with your talons and your greedy eye,
lurking high in the molten sunset
sky behind my left cloth breast
to pounce on strangers.

How many times have I told you:
The civilized world is a zoo,
not a jungle, stay in your cage.
And then the shouts
of blood, the rage as you threw yourself
against my ribs.

As for me, I would have strangled you
gladly with both hands,
squeezed you closed, also
your yelps of joy.
Life goes more smoothly without a heart,
without that shiftless emblem,
that flyblown lion, magpie, cannibal
eagle, scorpion with its metallic tricks
of hate, that vulgar magic,
that organ the size and colour
of a scalded rat,
that singed phoenix.

But you’ve shoved me this far,
old pump, and we’re hooked
together like conspirators, which
we are, and just as distrustful.
We know that, barring accidents,
one of us will finally
betray the other; when that happens,
it’s me for the urn, you for the jar.
Until then, it’s an uneasy truce,
and honour between criminals.
NASTURTIIUM

Nasturtium, with all its colours from old moon to cut vein, flower of deprivation, does best in poor soil, can be eaten, adds blood to the salad.

I can choose to enter this room, or not to enter. Outside, pile of sand, pile of stones, thistles pushing between them, cement blocks, two discarded mattresses, mounds of red clay.

The dead stand in the wheatfield, unseen by all but one girl; her clothing blows in the east wind, theirs does not.

Inside, there is nothing to speak of: a table, a chair. The room does nothing, but like a cave it magnifies.

The woman up the road foretells the weather from signs known only to her, before an accident can smell blood on the stairs. Should this be cured?

On the floor, caked mud, ashes left from the winter.
Matches, a candle
in a holder shaped like a fish.

This is the room where I live
most truly, or cease to live.

Nasturtium is the flower
of prophecy; or not,
as you choose.
DUST

Milkweed silk
rolls itself into shining eggs,
hides in the warm corners,
the cracks under the stairs,
hatching more dust

which sifts down
through the afternoon sun-lit air, over lightbulbs, ashtrays,
bottles, browning
the curtains, each mote
a muffled shout: I am!

By washing you admit you're dirty,
thus goes one theory.

The dust could be celebrated,
or at least dealt with.
Dust can be beautiful:
think of the seeds of thistles,

think of the happy hours we spent
drawing pictures on the lax windows
of the last motel.

But it's entropy
I'm talking about,
the slow decay, ebb of the body
that starts with the teeth and ends
with nothing.
You know what all flesh is,
and what is the heart
but a little
wet dust and rusted iron?
Love, I could hold you
in the palm of my hand,
if it weren’t for the water.

(Nevertheless, against the dry summer weather and the odds, I sweep and sweep, and a great wind of dust blows through the house.

Suddenly it’s the future.)
THE DEAD AND THE TRUE

In the damp house, the little
that is dry seems even drier:
in the bedrooms on the first floor
the wooden floorboards, almost white,
unwaxed and a bit
distant, below in the billiard
room, the ivory skittles
set in a cross . . . (Sooner or later I return
to see the house of friends
where a son is about to be born
— it happened two days later — and we waited
in the evening for the storm to bring
a little fresh air down to Milan. Pallid,
all along the walls, their faces like pimps
or hypocrites
Lombardian forefathers
went over the count of the eggs
and cheese: using their shrewdness and huge quantities
of goose quills. You would laugh at them,
disgusted. But down deep what if it’s right
that way? Better than our real ones, people
distracted, melancholy
because of more subtle flaws capable of behaving like
bourgeois even in death — or scouring
Africa, like grampa — who knows
that will not be the sort of forefathers
our son will feign having, laughing
at them, turning his back on them
the way no one has ever been able to).
PONTIUS P.

In the depths
of a horrible country that has no winter, rector
of hotheads, judge of disputes
without rhyme or reason
— what else can the most malign of the
fathers want? Only in dreams he brings me back
to the engraved green of meadows, the pleasures of a time
that does not return: putting a horse through the trot
all alone,
the delicate rustic exploits,
the dress coats that strangle the fox
beyond the last hedge.

Reality
is the squalor of voyages, the ill-digested career,
recommendations that serve no purpose
or arrive too late; it's having, instead
of the gray, early-morning stagnant pool, filled
with indolent game,
this dirty basin I wash my hands in.

translated by Vinio Rossi
It was the night the vase
slowly went to pieces, shifting
the way grain slides in the cupboard
between the rat's paws. That night
grampa went out into the garden as always
to finish his Virginia. In Bergamo
it's cold in the trees now. He thought
about drought and hail, lost harvests,
about the end of the world: a sure thing now
after so many disasters and uncertainties
of the seasons. Perhaps he thought about
what happened later: the farmers,
frightened by the crisis and needing
money, crowded around the tellers' windows
to close their accounts. A bank
for small businesses
— commercial or agricultural —
won't put up a fight if all at once
savings dry up. That happened
afterward. That night, in that darkness,
the vase ended up dust, simply consumed itself
along its slender cracks, as through
a confused clepsydra.
CHRISTMAS MORNING

The scullions of the prince, friend of my friends, come out early into the square that’s covered with snow in their white aprons, beating their teeth from the cold, call out and wave casseroles to the people passing by, who are so thin they almost disappear: a chestnut vendor, a soldier, someone playing bagpipes, two chimney sweeps . . . get them to file quickly through the huge wet gate of the palace, then down to the suffocating kitchens — help serve in the little chapel — and this is unspeakably profane — a roast duck on a pavement of ice.
I know: but who has the courage
to take them for pigs? If I think of them
one by one: the first, a poor slob
of a gardener or cook, come
from God knows where
to tell a story of witches —
perhaps dreamt, perhaps invented, certainly
not true; the second, to write on sheets,
practically scraps, with twisted letters,
a true denunciation. Someone
to whom nothing matters, who just
wants to go off to sleep
till tomorrow; the third, a cop
with cigar and bowler
ready to box the ears of any suspect
or bring him a drink of water
in a paper cup; all of them, even
the colonial judge, an upright man,
corrupt,
with his abstract wig of pastry tubes,
all of them, even the guards in high stockings,
khaki jackets, caps with visors,
tying him to that stake in the desert —
there we go —, looking at them one by one,
who's got the courage to jump them? And then again,
as Gide says through that little boy talking of Christ,
il fallait bien qu'on le cloue pour qu'il tienne.
AFTERNOON MOVIES

Nearly always at this hour
people arrive who are somewhat special (making
a good impression). Some sit down
but then keep changing their seats,
some remain standing at the back of the hall, sniffing,
sniffing out the rare passages, the little girl,
half-imbecile, the lady who enters alone,
the lame girl . . . Well, what
can one do? I watch them to learn
which story is theirs, who hunts them. When
the lights come on, one thinks how
the heart must wring looking for
safety a little farther off, how to sink
into the darkness which will return in a minute.

translated by Vinio Rossi and Stuart Friebert
William Stafford

SCHOOL DAYS

1.

After the test they sent an expert questioner to our school: "Who is this kid Bohr?" When Bohr came in he asked the expert, "Who are you?" and for a long time they looked at each other, and Bohr said, "Thanks, I thought so." Then they talked about why the test was given. Afterwards they shook hands, and Bohr walked slowly away. He turned and called out, "You passed."

2.

Enough sleet had pasted over the window by three o'clock so we couldn't tell if it was dark — and our pony would be out there in the little shed waiting to take us home. Teacher banked the stove with an extra log. That was the storm of 1934. For two days we waited, singing and praying, and I guess it worked, even though the snow drifted over the roof. But the pony was dead when they dug us out.

3.

At a tiny desk inside my desk, a doll bends over a book. In the book is a feather found at the beach, from a dead gull. While Miss Leonard reads "The Highwayman," I bend over my book and cry, and fly all alone through the night toward being the person I am.
SHELLS

Some time after you’re forty
when you say you’d like to forget
you mean you wish
you remembered where you
ate dinner or what you were
reading or the name of the place
you stayed in near the Ponte Vecchio.

You know you’ve seen
that face in the crowd
the eyes look after you
mildly out of another life
but where?

The sky flashes with light
as if a great pit opened behind
the hills boiling with fire
but then the rain comes
and you can’t be sure.

And on the beach today
picking up shells
as they lay bleaching along the dunes
she pressed one to her ear
and said she heard music
but when she passed it to you
it was gone.
LAWRENCE AT TAOS

And . . . out of eternity, a thread separates itself on the blackness, a horizontal thread that fumes a little . . .

—"The Ship of Death"

1

She said a white cloud followed them up the hill and hovered above the crazy androgynous phoenix with its plump white breasts like lids of sugar bowls.

Both of them noticed it and told each other later. So I didn’t just make it up she said. It looked like the soft underside of an egret’s wing.

When they had stood a long time over his ashes the cloud turned into smoke or steam or shimmeriness, that was the word she wanted, and was gone.

2

In Taos we eat sopapillia with honey butter at La Cosina and pay one dollar to see the obscene paintings, banned in London, by the author of Lady Chatterley’s Lover.

They fly back into paradise as he kept running through
the gates of the wrong gardens.
He went to Mexico and almost died.
Back to the ranch. But didn’t stay.

When Frieda returned to Taos
with his ashes, she forgot them
on the train. They had to
flag the train down at the next stop
to get them back again.

3

Someone keeps looking in the window,
stealing Brett’s paintings off the wall,
the drawings she made of him.
The sun’s too bright. That’s why
her eyes are covered with milk.

She has to be lifted, heavy
lumps of her, into the chair.
She turns up her hearing aid.
Ah Lawrence. Telling us how
she touched him to make him calm.

And she goes on about the cabin
and the horses dragging the wood in,
photographs of her quite
beautiful and slender next to a tree
or in a doorway, watching him.
A lizard runs over Frieda’s tomb,
his green tail longer than the rest
of his body. There are fresh
pine boughs on the ground.
And a visitors’ book

full of ecstatic letters
to the dead. Someone pasted
a poem in the little chapel
over two roses in a bottle.
So many women in love,

their souls like small eggs
spilling out of their shells.
From here the sky is stretched
so taut at the horizon
we can’t see the thread.
Robert Bly

RILKE'S BOOK OF HOURS

Rilke's poetry does not move through his life in an undivided arc, but breaks up into "books," six collections with different aims. Each book is separated from the last by an appearance of his will, which looks over what he has done, and then decides what would be the direction "most difficult among those not impossible."

He began writing well very early; some of his early poems are included in Mrs. Norton's book. One or two poems, such as the poem on the smell of burning in the Czech potato fields have a powerful interior pull of feeling that resembles the early poems of Hart Crane.

In 1899 he took a trip to Russia, and his interior life suddenly opened from the potato fields and the narrow streets of Prague to the huge prairies of Russia. It was an experience of space, immense, resonant, abundant, beyond human scale, involving the future. His unconscious associated that space with God, and it became apparent to him for the first time that human beings today are capable of experiencing the space we call "God," just as a traveller can experience Russia if he leaves his house and travels east.

Sometimes a man stands up during supper and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking, because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.

And his children say blessing on him as if he had died.

And another man, who remains inside his own house, stays there, inside the dishes and in the glasses, so that his children have to go far out into the world toward that same church, which he forgot.

He was still young when he wrote the Book for the Hours of Prayer, and there is not much distinguishing among shapes that appear in that space. It's clear that sometimes the "you" he speaks to is God, sometimes his own interior woman,
sometimes his interior "guide," sometimes his unconscious. But all of them can be understood as his "inner life," what Eckhart had called "Innigkeit," inwardness. Rilke realizes in this book that he can have feelings, but also a life that flows on from an inner source.

Because One Man wanted so much to have you, I know that we can all want you.

_Book for the Hours of Prayer_ includes three parts, written at different times. The first part is "The Book of Life like a Monk's." Most of the poems were written shortly after the return from Russia. The second part, "The Book of Pilgrimage," was written two years later while he was living at an artist's colony near Bremen. The third part, "The Book of Poverty and Death," he wrote in seven days while on a trip to Italy, again after a pause of about seven years. He then waited until 1905 to publish _Book for the Hours of Prayer_. Though little known in English, it was during his lifetime his most intensely read book in German.
I have a lot of brothers in the South. Laurels stand there in monastery gardens. I know in what a human way they imagine the Madonna, and I think often of young Titians through whom God walks burning.

Yet no matter how deeply I go down into myself my God is dark, and like a webbing made of a hundred roots, that drinks without a sound. I know that my trunk rose from His warmth, but that’s all, because my branches hardly move at all near the ground, and just wave a little in the wind.
You see, I want a lot.
Perhaps I want everything:
the darkness that comes with every infinite fall
and the shivering blaze of every step up.

So many live on and want nothing,
and are raised to the rank of prince
by the slippery ease of their light judgments.

But what you love to see are faces
that do work and feel thirst.

You love most of all those who need you
as they need a crowbar or a hoe.

You have not grown old, and it is not too late
to dive into your increasing depths
where life calmly gives out its own secret.
I can hardly believe that this tiny death, 
over whose head we look every day we wake, 
is still such a threat to us and so much trouble.

I really can’t take his growls seriously. 
I am still in my body, I have time to build, 
my blood will be red long after the rose is gone.

My grasp of things is deeper than the clever games 
he finds it fun to play with our fears. 
I am the solid world 
from which he slipped and fell.

He is like 
those monks in cloisters that walk round and round — 
one feels a fear when they approach — 
one doesn’t know — is it the same one every time, 
are there two, are there ten, a thousand monks, more? 
All one knows is the strange yellow hand, 
which is reaching out so naked and so close . . . 
there it is — 
as if it came out of your own clothes.
The kings of the world are growing old, and they shall have no inheritors. Their sons died while they were boys, and their neurasthenic daughters abandoned the sick crown to the mob.

The mob breaks it into tiny bits of gold. The Lord of the World, master of the age, melts them in fire into machines, which do his orders with low growls; but luck is not on their side.

The ore feels homesick. It wants to abandon the minting houses and the wheels that offer it such a meager life. And out of factories and payroll boxes it wants to go back into the veins of the thrown-open mountain, which will close again behind it.
It's possible I am pushing through solid rock in flintlike layers, as the ore lies, alone; I am such a long way in I see no way through, and no space: everything is close to my face, and everything close to my face is stone.

I don't have much knowledge yet in grief — so this massive darkness makes me small. You be the master: make yourself fierce, break in: then your great transforming will happen to me, and my great grief cry will happen to you.

*translated by Robert Bly*
Sandra McPherson

DEPENDENCE ON FLOWERS

To us
vegetal rags
    it has fallen
to wrap pain,
    to infuse
water, the teas, tinctures,
or just stain
    the light across the room,
to deck long boxes
    but also to make the box
of a room a green sphere.
In letters I find
    sketchy botanical drawings,
news perhaps we had not seen,
    the Joshua tree’s big waxy bunches.
On postcards the long German
    names. Frühlingserwachen,
a red and gold butterfly with a man’s
    head flies, arms of antennae
to clasp the flower face.
Scowling crocuses’ feet are wedged
    in their stem-pipes.
Blumenstrauss, under the
    whipped back of a streaked tulip,
osmotic carnations,
    a lizard curves,
a queen conch swallows the tongue of the iris,
    rods and cones on the vase,
    reds on the lizard’s back.
Straws. Vines in death
    do not lose their wall.
They do break.
Peonies, we store spiders
    in our mouths, moths,
    we are all tongue-tied.
"Also the ocotillo,"
    she wrote,
many springtimes ago,
the last of her freedom perhaps,
    "with their orange-red flowers."
Then as an invalid
    always paintable
beside a series of fresh bouquets
such as are painted
    by themselves.
I

In September in the lava mountains, the lake lava made falls emptier, 
goest to its center and stays there. There’s nobody much around, 
garter snakes and deer droppings. Volcanos curve low enough to be green to the top, old enough. 
I am walking around the fire of the sunlight.

II

Since everyone must have a story to tell by a fire, listen, this is the story of the time I stroked the deer’s nose: for in Seattle a third of my life ago a butcher wanted to give a gift while I was in his shop. 
He handed me a deer’s nose in wrappers and an ear. 
He wanted to be like a matador.

III

I took them back to work where the blueprint girl had been fired before vacation and a pregnant file clerk lost her desk overlooking the blue canal to a new man, and I passed them on. 
I wanted to see if our boss was afraid of noses and ears, with what fear the hunter and the deer quarrel and the butcher feels tenderness.
IV

Mostly deaf, David,
tense from listening,
shatters obsidian.
He strikes silently, as cotyledons break the earth
and speak. In his hands over the rubble
of leaves, antlers, smoky mountain-glass, another
arrowhead arrives, window into a deer.

V

Blindness moves over the face, over the emptiness.
A percussion of fractures and flukes beats from the self-
portrait of the great man.
More and more lines, or rather all one line, with no
detachment.
A maze, this head of Borges, this arrowhead.
Switchbacks, spray of pine at the temples, a fierce whistling
of a line.
It says AYGLE WOOD at the bottom as if he can be found
there,
his age explained.

VI

In September when the lake goes into its center,
straining to see the ground for what it is
I turn up Indians' old chips.
It's not too easy, they've been filmed by a clay milk
except for a black and zig-zag ledge like a shrimp's sandvein
down their middle. That gives them up.
That hackle on one side, that curvature perfectly smooth
and flowing
swelling on the other.
Everything begins, says Borges, with a pattern.
VII

And following it you follow washed out footprints where the Klamath squatted like a factory whose sooty windows fell open as he worked. He struck and struck, deaf to his own ringing. He listened instead to the creek feeding in, so low it makes twice the noise over its stones in autumn as in spring.

VIII

Like being deaf to the awful bell of a clock, I look at the chips and hear those blows. All that is missing! — the eyes, the flow of low sound into the ear, the gift of a nose, the dark of meaning in the molten words, the face, the faces you imagine close to you, the polyhedral core only your foot can find once a life on a walk in deep woods. When you find it, you know what it felt. You know. You don’t have to imagine.
THE OWNERSHIP OF THE NIGHT

1.

After five years,
I'm in the kitchen of my parents' house
Again, hearing the aging refrigerator
Go on with its music,
And watching an insect die on the table
By turning in circles.
My face reflected in the window at night
Is paler, duller, even in summer.
And each year
I dislike sleeping a little more,
And all the hours spent
Inside something as black
As my own skull . . .
I watch
This fruit moth flutter.
Now it's stopped.

2.

Once,
Celebrating a good year for Muscatel,
My parents got away to Pismo Beach,
Shuttered and cold in the off season.
When I stare out at its surf at night,
It could be a girl in a black and white slip,
It could be nothing.
But I no longer believe this is where
America ends. I know
It continues as oil, or sorrow, or a tiny
Island with palm trees lining
The sun-baked, crumbling
Asphalt of its air strip.
A large snake sleeps in the middle of it,  
And it is not necessary to think of war,  
Or the isolation of any father  
Alone on a raft in the Pacific  
At night, or how deep the water can get  
Beneath him . . .  
Not when I can think of the look of distance  
That must have spread  
Over my parents' faces as they  
Conceived me here,  
And each fell back, alone,  
As the waves glinted, and fell back.

3.

This evening my thoughts  
Build one white bridge after another  
Into the twilight, and now the tiny couple  
In the distance,  
In the picture I have of them there,  
This woman pregnant after a war,  
And this man who whistles with a dog at his heels,  
And who thinks all this is his country,  
Cross over them without  
Looking back, without waving.  
Already, in the orchards behind them,  
The solitary hives are things;  
They have the dignity of things,  
A gray, precise look,  
While the new wasps swarm sullenly out of them,  
And the trees hold up cold blossoms,  
And, in the distance, the sky  
Does not mind the one bird in it,
Which by now is only a frail brush stroke
On a canvas in which everything is muted and Real. The way laughter is real
When it ends, suddenly, between two strangers,
And you step quickly past them, into the night.
CONTRIBUTORS

ANNA AKHMATOVA’s “Northern Elegies” are described in the headnote by her translator, LIZA TUCKER, a recent graduate of Oberlin who is currently living and working in New York City.

MARGARET ATWOOD is well known for her collections of poetry, especially Power Politics and You Are Happy, and for her novels, especially Surfacing and Lady Oracle. A collection of her short stories, Dancing Girls, has just come out, both books from McClelland and Stewart, Toronto.

As this issue went to press, we learned that MARVIN BELL’s latest collection, Stars Which See, Stars Which Do Not See (Atheneum), had been nominated for the National Book Award.

The translations of RAINER BRAMBACH in this issue are from his recent volume of new and selected poems, Wirf eine Münze auf (Toss a Coin), from Diogenes Verlag in Zurich. He lives and works in Basel.

JANE COOPER teaches writing at Sarah Lawrence. She is the author of Maps and Windows and The Weather of Six Mornings.

NORMAN DUBIE’s next collection, The City of the Olesha Fruit, will appear early next year from Doubleday.

RUSSELL EDSON is the author, most recently, of The Intuitive Journey and Other Works (Harper and Row), and The Reason Why the Closet-Man is Never Sad (Wesleyan). He is a frequent contributor to FIELD.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH’s most recent collection is Comings Back (Doubleday). He teaches at the University of Texas in Austin, “where I ply the trade so nobly discussed in my essay.”

RICHARD HUGO is just back in the U.S. after spending the best part of a year in Scotland. He is the new editor of the Yale Younger Poets Series.

SHIRLEY KAUFMAN lives and works in Israel, and has been a frequent contributor to FIELD.

The baptismal font described in DENISE LEVERTOV’s poem is one of the few works in marble by the great English carver, Grinling Gibbons. It is in St. James’s, Piccadilly, a church by Christopher Wren.

LARRY LEVIS is the author of The Afterlife, the 1976 Lamont Poetry Selection. He teaches at
the University of Missouri, where he has helped found a new literary magazine, The Missouri Review.

SANDRA McPHERSON's third collection of poems, The Year of Our Birth, has just appeared from Ecco Press.

W. S. MERWIN's recent books are Houses and Travellers (Atheneum), Sanskrit Love Poems, translated with J. M. Masson (Columbia), and Iphigenia in Aulis, translated with George Dimock (Oxford).

GIOVANNI RABONI, noted Italian poet, lives and works as an editor in Milan. Among his collections are Le Case della Vettra (1966), and Cadenza d'Inganno (1975).

The translations from RAINER MARIA RILKE's Book of Hours by ROBERT BLY in this issue will appear in a volume of selected poems of Rilke, translated by Bly, to be published by Harper and Row. Bly writes that a new play of his, "The Thorn Bush Cock Giant," has recently had performances in Columbus and Milwaukee.

DENNIS SCHMITZ is the author of Goodwill, Inc. (Ecco) and a frequent contributor to FIELD.

A volume of new and selected poems by WILLIAM STAFFORD, Stories That Could Be True, ap-
Dear Sir,

I found this in my father's attic.

What a letter! It's surprising to see what can be found.

Hate on to you.

P.S.

Charles C.H. 1475
220 Shipherd Circle
David Yening

C. Cay term.exclu werd est re:erve de n adress.