M. Henri Farman va passer le poteau d'arrivée dans le Grand Prix d'aviation
Le 13 Janvier 1908. Parcours 1 Klm 300 en circuit fermé en 3h 28m.
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Cover design by Betsy Adler;
cover postcard courtesy of Stephen Shrader

FIELD is published twice yearly by Oberlin College.
Subscriptions: $3.00 a year / $5.00 for two years / Single issues $1.50 postpaid.
Subscription orders and manuscripts should be sent to: FIELD, Rice Hall, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio 44074. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.
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THE THREE BLACKSMITHS

The three terrible blacksmiths come where we have buried our dead.

The first works at the bellows — he will not feel the chill of death.

The second forges a halo from a fiery hundred-pound hoop.

The third one wears a skirt and hammers out a glowing child.
WINTER NIGHT

Be disciplined.

Summer
is gone.
Over lumps of earth like coal
a fine ash shivers in the air.
Silence.
The fragile glass of the atmosphere
scratched by a twig’s sharp point:
what a lovely cruelty. A small
silver scrap — maybe a ribbon —
clings fiercely to a bush
for the sake of all the smiles
and all the embraces caught
in the gnarled branches of the world.

Old calloused mountains in the distance!
hands that have grown heavy
that shift from time to time
guarding
the sunset’s fire
the steaming farmhouse
the valley’s round silence
the breath of mosses.

A farmhand is going home. His heavy
body gazes at the ground.
A cracked hoe bounces on his shoulder,
its shaft and iron bleeding.
He is walking home from life itself,
his body and tools
growing heavier and heavier.
Like smoke
from a chimney throwing sparks
night flies up with its stars.

This blue and iron night comes floating
on bells that toll slowly.
My heart stands still, forever,
and something else — not death,
maybe the land — is throbbing.
Together the winter night,
winter sky and winter metal
make a bell.
Earth is the clapper, this hammered earth,
this swaying weight.
Its voice is my heart.

A memory of clanging. Winter struck
the anvil, repairing with iron
the loose door of the sky's great safe
through which fruit, wheat, hay, and light
poured out all summer.

This winter night shines
like thought.

Silent silver darkness
padlocks a moon over the world.

A raven flies across cold space
and silence freezes. Bone, can you
hear the silence?
Molecule
clinking against molecule.
In what showcase can you see such glitter as this?
A branch raises its dagger against the frost.
Waste places send up a hovering black sigh —
a flock of crows in the fog.

Inside this winter night
is a smaller, separate winter night:
a freight train crossing the plains.
Stars revolve and die out
in its column of smoke
infinite in length and
no wider than an arm.

Trapped on the frozen tops of boxcars,
the light of this winter night
scurries like a mouse.

Winter mists the city.
But speeding toward town on flashing rails,
on blue frost, is the light
of this yellow night.

It sets up its workshop in the city,
to hammer the cold steel blade of pain,
light of this rigid night.

Near the edge of the city
light falls from a streetlight
like wet straw.
On a corner, a clattering
trembling overcoat
— a man —
sits huddled like a pile of dirt, but it’s no use. Winter still steps on his toes.

Where a rustyleafed tree leans out from the dark, like an owner pacing his property I measure the winter night.
GLASSMAKERS

Glassmakers light huge fires
and stir their blood and sweat
into the materials
that boil transparent
in their crucibles.
Then, with what’s left of their strength,
they pour the glass into plates
and roll it perfectly smooth.

And when the sun comes up
they carry light to the cities
and to the smallest village huts.

Sometimes they are called laborers,
at other times, poets —
though one is as good as the other.
Slowly they run out of blood
and grow transparent,
large crystal windows to the future
built on you.

translated by John Batki
THROAT

"In many aspects of social and interpersonal behavior wolves seem more akin to us than do our primate relatives."—Chester S. Chard

1.

The moon like a single hourglass grain descends
to some beach below the horizon.
Already we're one day out of Shreeport,
out of gas, out of luck, time's running out:
last night
the moon was almost full;
and against my skull, my cortex bristled.

2.

And you, who won me over
the girl with the flesh-tone miniature ear
radio transmitting my secrets,
the negligee lady whose frosted
gray capillaries snapped in the cold,
and the woman of the soiled placebo
tongue in my mouth; you,
wife, smile and know
how to braid your hair into a cord
for biting while giving birth,
know exactly how to brush your hair
against a man like sweetgrass
towelling an animal; love,
no wonder
you too have been running
for centuries from Shreepot since your great
great great grandmother hung
her head in shame.
"A witch

3.

shall bee dangled Upsyde Down
by the heels untill she Confesseth
All and swear how she hath Blasphemed."
And Mother Marquet, wrinkley bead
and broth physician for two fevered
generations of women in -love and labor-
pain, she who
would only heal, suggested:
how rags crammed in cabin chinks against
The Winter of 1670 might ward off wind
best if stripped from clothes worn
summer-long, and warmed
first by a blot of blood
from each tenant to, in a family
spirit, caulk the spreading community cracks.
She dangled. The mayor pronounced
the sentence. The law ran through his tongue
like a bone; he was cold and quivered; how to say
how they must string her up, in fear
of her doctrine of self
sacrifice.

4.

Tonight, while I can think, I think
of her while watching you sleep beside evergreens.
In your dreams you defy archeology.
Your belly is a hill on the landscape swelling seasonally with -not relics, knobs of ancestral skeletons, chips and scraps from predecessors, but with- the formation of progeny. 
Even now, as I watch, the moon seems to pull you up toward the topmost cones and blossoms. The campfire glow is steady, and warm among the trees like a mammal.

*

She said she but thought like a conifer. "It was Observed how whan she hath been Fed she ate wyth no Discomfarture but Hung in the Dark Forest singing." She would not have known the word but: "peristalsis" fought for her life against their gravity.

*

And surely we can learn from this. "We cut her down. She would not Confesse." And surely we can learn from this. "She left Town the next day for The Wildernesse." And surely we can learn from this "... legend that since the deadly 1670 Blizzard (and scientifically substantiated from 1870 on) the weather of Shreeport winters has not for one day risen above freezing." - Guidebook (1970) Shree Port-Press

*

And surely we must learn to learn from this.
5.

They could not understand survival against their chill might mean a man like me would be found when the door burst down, between his wife's legs lapping the menses.

"Out!"

The alderman, or the officer, but somebody badged and banded waved his prosthetic mouth in his hands repeating as if this was its profession: "Out of Shreeport! Out of our world!"

6.

You say, soon
it will be midnight tonight: full moon.
As I skulk into shadow
I wink the I Will
Be Back wink. You rise
above your full moon
sized belly and nod and wave
and pull your own skin tighter about you.
The gesture condones.
Distance will not separate us.
We have been pelted
by the same stones.

*

Already the old autistic
trees accept me as part of their lore.
Already
the brain breaks through the skull
muzzle and sniffs
two long strands of black air
into its belly
from the far and darker side of the moon
dappled hill.
It is a word beginning.
A pine, all
throat, shouts
needles into the night.
It is a canine language.
It is enough to hold Earth with four grips.

7.

The Shree Coast is famous for its legends.
The Kiss; and The Curse; and The Voice of The Wolf
howling once a month
for its own kind.
THE PLACE

They were talking about the war,
The table still uncleared in front of them.
Across the way, the first window
Of the evening was already lit.
He sat, bowed and quiet,
The old fear coming over him . . .
It grew darker. She got up to take a plate—
Now unpleasantly white—to the kitchen.
Outside in the fields, in the woods:
A bird spoke in proverbs,
The Pope went out to meet Attila,
The ditch was ready for its squad.
HAIR

The doctor arrives to inject the movie star against delirium tremens.
Hands that lay so often calm on the horse's mane are shaking.

His hair hangs down like a skier's hair after a fall.
From a whirlpool, drops of black water fly up
And thousands and thousands of years go by,
like an infinite procession of walnut shells...  

All that hair that fell to the floors of barbershops over thirty years
lives on after death
and those shoelaces, shiny and twisted, that we tossed to the side,
gather in the palace of death,
the roarer comes,
the newly dead kneel, and a tip of the lace sends them on into fire!

But the hair weeps,
because hair does not long for immense states,
hair does not hate the poor,
hair is merciful,
like the arch of night under which the juvenile singer lolls back drunk...  

The Defense Secretary throws his clothes on the floor, and demands to be killed,
and flocks of birds turn back in the air, the calf is drawn up into the mother's womb,
the scaly tail swirls the muddy water as he turns to leave.
All those men who cannot find the road,
who die coughing particles of black flesh onto neighboring roofs —
nailheads that have been brooding on Burton’s melancholy under Baltimore rowhouses
roll out in the street, underneath tires,
and catch the Secretary of State
as he goes off to threaten the premiers of underdeveloped nations.

All those things borne down by the world,
corpses pulled down by years of death,
veins clogged with flakes of sludge,
mouths from which bats escape at death,
businessmen reborn as black whales sailing under the Arctic ice . . .

But hair is overflowing with excitable children,
it is a hammock on which the sleeper lies,
dizzy with the heat and the earth’s motion,
ecstatic waters, Ordovician hair,
hair that carries the holy, shouting, to the other shore.

In a bureau drawer there are tiny golden pins full of the glory of God
their faces shine with power
like the cheekbones of saints radiant in their beds
or their great toes that light the whole room!

But Prince Phillip becomes irritable, the royal sports car shoots down the narrow roads,
Judy Garland is led hysterical to the Melbourne plane,
The general joins the Jehovah’s Witnesses.
At dawn the Stalinist shoves the papers to the floor, the priest is unable to go on with the Mass, the singer tries to climb out through the porthole, there are broken pieces of wood all around the Jesuit, the log raft breaks up as it nears the falls, the spider runs quickly up the blinding path

Under the ground the earth has hair cathedrals the priest comes down the aisle wearing caterpillar fur in his sermons the toad defeats the knight

The dying man waves his son away. He wants his daughter-in-law to come near so that her hair will fall over his face

The senator’s plane falls in an orchard in Massachusetts, And there are bitter places, knots that leave dark pits in the sawdust, the nick on the hornblade through which the mammoth escapes. . . . .
HOMAGE TO THE NEW WORLD

Surrounded by scientists in a faculty house, the trees wet with hot rain, grass thickening under the trees, welcomers come, ones and twos, gifts of shoehorns, soap, combs, half a subscription to the courier, some news about changing plates, the nearest market, how to pick up the trash, a gallon of milk twice a week, ok?

On the third day here, a friend came in the night to announce a phone call and a message, and heard the shell go in and the rifle cocking, our next-door animal vet neighbor, and cried out, "don't shoot", and walked away to remember the phone and the message, the crickets, and the rifle cocking, grass and hot rain.

I write in the night air of the music of Coltrane, the disc of his voice in this contralto heart, my wife; so what! Kind of Blue, these fatherless whites come to consciousness with a history of the gun—the New World, if misery had a voice, would be a rifle cocking.

for Agnes & Ed Brandabur
BREADED MEAT, BREADED HANDS

The heat of the oven
glazed on the windowed
doors, the percolated lines
of water drizzle down;
she cooks over the heated
fires in a blaze of meat.

The shelled pan-baked peanuts
ground to a paste
pass over the chicken
ripped off by tornadoes.

Raisins of my son’s eyes
garnish the pork loin,
kidneys and beef heart.

In the corner the rock salt
and the crushed snow
churn the coconut
ice cream, vanilla
beans and two half-pints
of cream atop the thundering
washing machine.

Boards thick with sweet potatoes,
the pie crust cooled in the icebox,
dough souring on the stovetop,
the hands of our children
damp with flour and butter
of their burning skins,
and the marks of cooking,
churnings of the heated kitchen.
Yogurt, to cover the cucumbers, sauteed onions, the curd of some cabbaged blood wine, bottled vinegar which tastes like olive oil.

At the hearth of this house, my woman, cutting the bits of guile, the herbs of warmth she has butchered into the pots, the pans of grease that feed this room, and our children, condensed in the opaque room—the hearth of this house is this woman, the strength of the bread in her hands, the meat in her marrow and of her blood.
MY SAINT

The knife dams the beef. Yes, of course. But she hears the dirty stalk; it screams as the picker stoops and chops it. What a fine ear for death-rattles in beans, a Vilna ghetto, a whole field in extremis. What an eye for everything below notice that wouldn’t be found dead at her table.

I don’t mock her. I love remembering her for this. Belita. I see her eating the light curds of cottage cheese, finicky and yakking away. She’s thin from giving everything back before she takes it.

I think I don’t have it in me to be minimal, a carbon molecule. She’s so spidery.

I turn away from myself at times, from all the trash I’ve managed to win to my side, documents, knives, theories of sitting up and beds and certain mountains, all the fat, the goods. When I just start into a planted field, I expect to see her hand on the glass knob, raw milk, her hand, Saint Belita.
The rain smells like pepper.

I am so depressed tonight.
Nothing works.
Paper airplanes do nothing for me.

I don’t care if Hendrix fucked a chicken.

The moss will not talk to me.
I don’t know where I could find a sheep.
I like the train whistle.

I am eating Kraft marshmallows.

Where is Susan? I remember the way
She ate lobster with pliers.
The sauce would splatter. She asked me

to kiss the butter off her cheek.

I went bankrupt that winter buying lobster. 
Tonight Susan is in Katmandu eating lamb.
SAVE YOURSELF THROUGH PURIFICATION

Albert was saving himself through purification. His beard was lathered up, and his eyebrows, and his teeth. The house started shaking, rattling the soap dish into the water.

This was no war with the Portuguese forces. This was no blitzkrieg on the London streets. This was the genuine second coming, and Albert was unbelievably prepared.

But where were the others? He’d talked about community bathing. Where was Cynthia, the lovely girl who promised to marry him when she got back from Boston? (Heaven would mean nothing without Cynthia and the animals.)

But yes, outside the bathroom window stood a fiery nostril of a Horse of the Apocalypse. Albert’s hair foamed up and off he went, to a cleanliness and perfection beyond his dreams.
AFTER I HAVE VOTED

I move the curtain back, 
and something has gone wrong. 
I am in a smoky place, 

an Algerian cafe. 
They turn the spotlight toward me; 
the band begins to play. 

The audience stares back at me. 
They polish off their glasses. 
They ask the waiter, "Who is she?"

He holds his pen 
against his heart. 
He speaks behind his hand. 

There are tea bags swinging 
from their mouths. 
Their teeth are made of brass. 

The jello sighs into the candlelight. 
My eyes turn into stars. 
Ah — the colored spangles on my clothes, 

the violet flashlights and guitars!
ODE TO MY EAR SPECIALIST

The little man in my ear says: Go to Madeira! I go to Madeira. Everything is as blue and white as I’d imagined. He asks: Do you see pink mice? Yes, I say, I really do. And already they’re slipping through the room, attractive, rather large animals, quite tame, almost trained.

The day before yesterday he said: Count the cups in the cabinet! I count. Five. There should have been twelve. One or two perhaps still in the sink, no, only one. Or am I counting wrong? Really, once I count five, once seven, one, two, three —

Facts comfort me. Ha, I say to the little man, but he doesn’t answer interjections. He sits in my left ear, I don’t hear well with it. Nor lately with the right either. Probably a little woman in the right ear, and they meet while I’m asleep. I’ve noticed his excitement recently.

But where do they meet? In Nose-Throat-Land, how one gets abused. I visit my doctor, who is a specialist in these areas. He looks optimistic and has the Swedish method. Skol, he says, but I’ve told you that they shouldn’t wear cotton, and he pulls out the plugs. Fresh air, he says.

No sooner am I home than the little man begins to talk again and to complain about the medical treatment. Moreover, I have to get married, he says, my girlfriend is expecting a baby. What do you think you’re doing, I ask angrily, but he won’t say one more word.
LAURAS

If there is no Laura, there is still her name. She has small ears which are hidden by her curls, that you can be sure of. The color of her hair is uncertain, but red would be surprising. There is less literature about Laura than about William Tell. That's a shame, I could talk better with Laura than with Petrarch, who wanted to repeat everything, only more beautifully. A false artistic principle, but we want that too. What did Eve say, what did Bathsheba say, what did Noah say when he deserted his friends in the rain? Nobody knows, but we want to say it finally. Nobody knows Laura, but let's invent her now. She plays the piano. Since her inner life longs for expression, probably too loudly. Her eye is fixed on a point beyond all pianos — now we're getting somewhere. I dare say she's a captain's widow. Young, but a woman whom suffering has matured. Now we know more. But more beautiful. Laura's getting more and more beautiful. A beauty-mark, a lily neck, a very narrow waist. At once she comes to life and plays the piano. Beset by admirers, she uses up her meager widows' pension. Francesco and Friedrich are her favorites. Francesco stays, later Friedrich turns to a Caroline and a Charlotte. She suffers and outlives both. Died in 1899 in the Tropical Institute of the University of Tübingen. If we know her death, we know everything. Death, my principal, says Friedrich, most powerful czar of all flesh.
WINTER STUDENT AND DAUGHTER-SON

My moles are washed and combed daily. A trained employee takes care of that, a winter student, 30, with her fourteen-year-old hermaphroditic child. In vain I have tried to hire a sodomite; they exist only in psychoanalytic reports and in the Old Testament. I am very pleased with the winter student, in the evenings she learns yoga technique, then in the summer she wants to take the exams in India. That’s strange enough for the moles, they don’t like stewardesses.

The winter student is dependent on demonstrations of love of all kinds. For a quarter of an hour a day I have to tickle the soles of her feet. More, she says. She sleeps entwined with her daughter, often I look in helplessly, and am glad I’m not a master of the Indian techniques. My winter student has blue hair that contrasts well with the mole fur. She is good-natured, but only speaks faulty German. She knows no other language, it’s hereditary. Her son speaks a bit of Tibetan, perhaps from his father. His hair is red with black streaks, I don’t understand anything about the laws of genetics.

Yes, I say to my winter student, she still understands that best. You are beautiful, I say, but that’s already more difficult, she stretches out her feet to me. Several moles come climbing near enthusiastically, the daughter mutters in Tibetan. You have blue hair, I say impressively, and she grabs for the bath soap, most of my sentences don’t interest her.

It’s hard to think about the summer. The moles are getting melancholy, and I don’t know how to cheer them up. Besides, moles depend on demonstrations of love, and I’m not clever enough for that, particularly since there are now over fifty, all unique.

Often I cross my legs, the only thing I understand spontaneously of yoga technique, and meditate. But without results.
SPA

Too cool for the season, too lively for the hour. You hear the time-signal, once again you hear the stones underfoot, then the swamps begin. The road over the pass is blocked by a mule. Mules are rare here, they are military mules.

Through binoculars you recognize the patients in the valley, on the way to their painful appointments at the barracks-yard of a company that has just arrived, mute, a gray negative. Several rice farmers are still breathing underwater, but don’t worry, the machine guns are trained on the most important points. You dear ones, weren’t we in Karlsbad just now, Abano, Reichenhall? Continue your treatments peacefully, we are well-protected, your tasks take place between the lines, between the lines of Chinese poems, time passes so quickly, the season, so short the road to Tinchebray, the lines so narrow.
THE HUGE PERSON

The dormice are sleeping in the preserving jar, tightly packed, five or six dormice, you can’t count them. It’s good they don’t wake up, they like to bite. Our house is like that, full of surprises, a huge person visited us and stayed two years on the bench in the kitchen. For everything he told, he made topographical sketches, that pleased us, we understood him better and the stories lasted longer, up to two years. Now we sketch everything too, and whenever company comes we just show the sketches and play deaf and dumb. The dormice are fixed in topography too, it’s a real atlas, even the curve of the earth is accounted for.

The cellar of the dormice is cool, while outside it’s fine and warm and autumn. Such details of climate I no longer dare to suppress, since the flock of birds was late going through the news-agency. Only the dormice stay downstairs, otherwise we would have to photocopy the topographical originals, but we already have too many deaf and dumb conversations. Only when I walk through the woods alone do I use my voice. Gentlemen, I cry, ladies and gentlemen — they hear me all the way to the riding-school, and the rabbits in the traps lift their heads once again. Every spot near us is worn out, with blackberries, teaching riding and rabbits. Nothing unused.

The huge person — elsewhere also called misery — has vanished as if he’d never existed, a bilocation invented especially for us. But a fruitful apparition. We have learned when we must be silent and when we must shout, it is not a momentary affair but topographical, you learn accidentally or slowly. The dormice are now scampering in the apartment upstairs, I don’t believe they could have taught it to us, they have trouble sleeping, which is something else again, important, of course, but very different.

 translation by David Walker
URGENT MASKS: AN INTRODUCTION TO JOHN ASHERBY'S POETRY

Some movement is reversed and the urgent masks
Speed toward a totally unexpected end
Like clocks out of control. Is this the gesture
That was meant, long ago, the curving in

Of frustrated denials . . .

("Song," The Double Dream of Spring)

. . . But there was no statement
At the beginning. There was only a breathless waste,
A dumb cry shaping everything in projected
After-effects orphaned by playing the part intended for them,
Though one must not forget that the nature of this
Emptiness, these previsions
Was that it could only happen here, on this page held
Too close to be legible, sprouting erasures, except that they
Ended everything in the transparent sphere of what was
Intended only a moment ago, spiralling further out, its
gesture finally dissolving in the weather.

("Clepsydra," Rivers and Mountains)

John Ashbery once took a course of lectures in music by
Henry Cowell at the New School. Cowell remarked that the
intervals in music became wider as music grew more sophisti-
cated. For instance, if you compare "The Volga Boatmen" and
the "Love Duet" from Tristan und Isolde, you see how vastly
wide the intervals have become; and the ear seemingly becomes
accustomed to unaccustomed intervals "as time goes by."" Chromaticism is also apparent in the tone clusters of Cowell
himself, analogous to the striking juxtapositions of Ashbery,
but one can deny expectations with a much wider palette of
possibilities. One cannot really anticipate the next note in
many serial pieces, and this suspense is a fine quality of Ashbery's own work, and a theme:

These decibels
Are a kind of flagellation, an entity of sound
Into which being enters, and is apart.
Their colors on a warm February day
Make for masses of inertia, and hips
Prod out of the violet-seeming into a new kind
Of demand that stumps the absolute because not new
In the sense of the next one in an infinite series
But, as it were, pre-existing or pre-seeming in
Such a way as to contrast funnily with the unexpectedness
And somehow push us all into perdition.

("The Skaters," Rivers and Mountains)

When Ashbery interviewed Henri Michaux for Art News, the French fabricator of imaginary communities spoke of surrealism as une grande permission, in the sense of an army leave. Surrealism tends to be used and abused; for example, Robert Bly tends to exaggerate certain overblown qualities of Spanish surrealism. Ashbery's surrealism is subtler. Raymond Roussel's flat, bland, and objective style, typified by Michel Leiris as "French as one is taught to write it by manuals in lycées," a French that can comically be compared to Larousse, has been a minor if decided influence. Ashbery was a connoisseur of Roussel and began a doctoral dissertation on him, but decided not to go through with it, although characteristically he collected many minute particulars about the eccentric. One associates the modulated parodies of narration in Rivers and Mountains with the labyrinthine parentheses of Roussel's poems and novels. One must remark of this contagion of the parodistic tone, that it seems to lead structurally to a "chinese box" or play-within-a-play. Apart from this parenthetical mania, other idiosyncrasies of the author of Locus Solus did not impinge on the early work of Ashbery, who did not read him thoroughly until the 1950's, which he spent in France. Later Ashbery wisely employs another device of Roussel — specious simile, "the kind that tells one less than you would know if the thing were
stated flatly.” In place of the organic and necessary simile, Ashbery learned from the French master an extravagance of connection that leads one nowhere, as in Koch’s “as useless as a ski in a barge,” though this example is perhaps still too suggestive. “As useless as a ski” would be Ashbery’s paradigmatic revision. Ashbery is also a master of the false summation, the illogical conclusion couched in the jargon of logic, reminding one of the false but rich scholarship of Borges:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: That ostracism, both political and moral, has its place in the twentieth-century scheme of things; That urban chaos is the problem we have been seeing into and seeing into, For the factory, deadpanned by its very existence into a Descending code of values, has moved right across the road from total financial upheaval And caught regression head on . . .

...  

To sum up: We are fond of plotting itineraries And our pyramiding memories, alert as dandelion fuzz . . . ("Decoy," The Double Dream of Spring)  

The rise of capitalism parallels the advance of romanticism And the individual is dominant until the close of the nineteenth century. In our own time, mass practices have sought to submerge the personality By ignoring it, which has caused it to branch out in all directions . . .

...  

And yet it results in a downward motion, or rather a floating one . . . ("Definition of Blue," The Double Dream of Spring)  

Ashbery has properly been called a “business-like and rather peculiar” child of the muse of Rimbaud. Auden also places him, in the rather distant tones of the Introduction to
Some Trees, within the tradition of Rimbaud’s dérèglement de tous les sens. Contrary to expectation, Ashbery denies French poetry as a major influence. He does, however, acknowledge the influence of Pierre Reverdy, whom he read as a "simple poet" accessible to a student with limited French; he later translated some cubist concoctions. He admires the completely relaxed, oxygen-like quality of Reverdy, whose cadences he likens to "breathing in big gulps of fresh air."

Roussel, of course, is a very "prosy" poet and Ashbery too is interested in the poetic possibilities of conventional prose, the prose of newspaper articles. His recent poems in particular function by proceeding from cliché to cliché, in a "seamless web" of banality transformed, by dint of combination and deformation, into a Schwitters-like composition in which the refuse of a degraded quotidian is fused into a new freshness:

It is never too late to mend. When one is in one's late thirties, ordinary things — like a pebble or a glass of water — take on an expressive sheen. One wants to know more about them, and one is in turn lived by them. Young people might not envy this kind of situation, perhaps rightly so, yet there is now interleaving the pages of suffering and indifference to suffering a prismatic space that cannot be seen, only felt as the result of an angularity that must have existed from earliest times and is only now succeeding in making its presence felt through the mists of helpless acceptance of everything else projected on our miserable, dank span of days... The pain that drained the blood from your cheek when you were young and turned you into a whitened spectre before your time is converted back into a source of energy that peoples this world of perceived phenomena with wonder.

("The New Spirit," Three Poems, to be published by Viking)

The use of prose elements in poetry, as in Williams and Pound, is so diffused a technique that it rarely provokes sensations of novelty, but Ashbery's intense employment is an adventure, as interesting as the day Jasper Johns remembers dreaming of
painting the American flag. The prosaic elements in the early Auden influenced Ashbery; the touching qualities of ordinary speech and journalism and old diaries in *The Orators* were precursors. Collage elements for Ashbery's poem "Europe" were taken from a book for girls written at the time of the First World War. The book, entitled *Girl of the Bi-Plane*, which he picked up by accident on the quais of Paris, is one reason for much of the placid plane imagery of "Europe." At the time, Ashbery was "collaging" a great deal as a symptom of an imagined "dead-end" period in his writing, and also due to the fact that living in France he felt cut off from American speech. He often received American magazines and manipulated their contents as a stimulus and pretext for further poetry. The grand collapses often noted in "Europe," its dashes and discontinuities called a "new poetic shorthand" by Koch, are one result of his *collagiste* direction. Though Ashbery's poetry has led most recently to a calm clearness, it began with the presentation of "objects" and "idioms" in explicitly dislocated form.

sweetheart . . . the stamp
ballooning you
vision I thought you
forget, encouraging your vital organs
Telegraph. The rifle — a page folded over.

More upset, wholly meaningless, the willing sheath

("Europe," *The Tennis Court Oath*)

His poetry had something of the "pathos of obscurity" as Lovejoy speaks of it, and the "pathos of incomprehensibility" was very much part of the mystique of such writing, though Ashbery always pointed toward principles of cohesion by discontinuity, if using the concealments of riddles and hints:

She was dying but had time for him —
brick. Men were carrying the very heavy things —
dark purple, like flowers.
Bowl lighted up the score just right

("Europe")
Stein furnishes a specimen source for the opacities of this text. One must with Ashbery discriminate carefully between the non-grammatical, the non-sensical, the semantically inappropriate, and the tabooed. In the manner of a linguist obtaining the "feeling" of the limits of a grammar, Ashbery has developed the theme of "unacceptability," and related it with great wit to allied concepts of absurdité, sottises, bâtises, and l'absurde.

There are a plethora of analogues in the associated arts. At the time Ashbery was writing as art editor for the International Edition of The Herald Tribune, de Kooning, Kline and Pollock with extreme dash and discontinuity were calling attention to the expunging of the copula and the coherent figure, and to the thematic of composition itself. Later the New Realists were to revive Duchamp's abrupt presentation of everyday objects as an introduction to what Ashbery called, in a comment on the New Realists, "the colorful indifferent universe." The self-conscious mid-progress shifts of narrations in Ashbery's collagiste poems are distinctly and masterfully of the age in which Jackson Pollock threw himself on the canvas, a proof and "permission," though Ashbery unexpectedly characterizes himself as more aural than visual, despite his participation in the art world.

The influence of psychoanalysis, permitting a more or less watery relationship with the unconscious and everyday mind, and corollary devices of "dipping into" an almost completely associational stream ("What else is there?") is another common heritage of technique Ashbery shares with the abstract expressionists and surrealists. The Arthur Craven translation, "Elephant Languor," was interesting to Ashbery largely because he felt it resembled certain associational, disjunct narrations that he had already achieved. Ashbery has called attention to more than one neglected poet, and as a matter of fact has considered editing a kind of anthology of Neglected Poets, one that could include Wheelwright, David Schubert, Samuel Greenberg, and F. T. Prince, bizarre cousins or in-laws of Ashbery, all applying the same "syntax of dreams" for dramatistic purposes.

Ashbery's work, begun with kinds of disjecta membra, coalesces at certain periods in big coherent works: "Europe,"
"The Skaters," "The New Spirit," "The System." The development from collage of seemingly despairing fragments to unbroken paragraphs of di Chirico-like prose (Ashbery admits to di Chirico's prose, not painting, as an influence, of which more later) may be likened to the development of one of Ashbery's favorite composers — Busoni. Busoni wrote a piano piece entitled "The Turning Point," and all his later music fittingly seems different from music earlier than that piece. The disjointed and indecisive has the look, at least, of a highly unified music. Ashbery's large compositions achieve this "look" of compositional unity while remaining what Coleridge has called a "multeity." Composition in these works is not random but more a matter of parsimoniously distributing disparate images and tones and parodies than of unifying and harmonizings. Ginsberg found the tone of Pope in "The Skaters," and the mock-heroic here does sometimes bear resemblance to the highly polished surface of "The Rape of the Lock." The highly polished surface in Ashbery, however, is less a social hint than a memento mori of the veneer of a world of manufactured objects and smooth, unbroken concrete. "The Skaters" may be thought of as a radiant porphyry of a variety of rhetoric, including imitations of Whitman, Baudelaire, science text books, William Hung's Tu Fu translations, Theodore Roethke, and John Ashbery. As he has described them, his intentions in respect to "The Skaters" were "to see how many opinions I had about everything." The most alarming feature of this style is the way it keeps upsetting our charming equilibrium and understanding of tone. After a quaint satire on the classic Oriental story of the failing student, Ashbery announces: "The tiresome old man is telling us his life-story." To some, his meditations upon or within meditations of self-laceration add more to the absurdity of the universe than interpret it, but these are finally friendly satires which point to the fact that unity, as we dream of it, is not realizable. One dreams of the perfect language within the fallen universe. Ashbery's deceptive drifts and accumulations of parody always erupt in the dramatic return which surprises and regulates, as in Proust. By his grand multeity in unity, his surprising simultaneity in unity, and a
type of probabilistic unity, he achieves something of the misery and joy of a Jacques Callot baroque. He has always avoided the vanity that, as Señor Borges warned this writer once, derives from purely random techniques. But the spectre of indeterminacy and uncertainty shadows his structural convolutions and involutions, if only in the numerous, self-lacerating dwarfs that appear and disappear throughout his poems.

Ashbery called my attention recently to a discussion of reticence by the poet Margaret Atwood in FIELD #4. "I don't want to know how I write poetry. Poetry is dangerous. I believe most poets will go to any lengths to conceal their own reluctant scanty insight both from others and from themselves. Paying attention to how you do it is like stopping in the middle of any other totally involving and pleasurable activity . . . to observe yourself suspended in the fatally suspended inner mirror." Ashbery has been most extreme in his reluctance to pad his poetry with what he calls the "stuff of explanation," just as he has been reluctant to be anything but a "practical" or "anecdotal" critic of the arts. He has, however, for one of his central topoi the one called for by F. S. C. Northrop in his discussion of the future of poetry — the breakdown of causality in the nineteenth century sense. His discontinuities tend to throw us most clearly in the middle of the century of the Uncertainty Principle; one in which Whitehead called for the expunging of copula for a clearer style. The montages of Pound's cinematic Oriental translations are part of this lucid tradition of juxtaposition. Most of the best passages of Ashbery's poetry, moreover, like Stevens', deal with the practitioner's point of view and praktik, however veiled. His poetry, though not vulgarly explanatory, is in the manner of the "action" painters a criticism of poetry itself as much as of life. A dice-playing God does indeed reign over the "sly Eros" of Ashbery's kingdom.

Ashbery's first book, Some Trees, is already filled with revitalizations of forms that had become connotatively encrusted. His sestina, "The Painter," an early example of such revitalization (1948), is influenced by Elizabeth Bishop. Her sestina in North and South employed certain common end-words such as "coffee" and "balcony" that charmed Ashbery, and certainly
the meticulously comical, soft-voiced rhetoric shows the rapport between them. Ashbery has elsewhere spoken of his love of Bishop's more recent "Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," a properly Pierre Meynardesque title which culminates in the — for Ashbery — inexhaustibly numinous line, "And looked and looked our infant sight away." The copula of "and" and its *mysterium* in repetition is part of the theme of Bishop's poem, and of Ashbery's poetry in general. The sestina form, therefore, with its arbitrary and sometimes comically stiff canon is a fitting "receptacle" for the play of discontinuity and copula. Ashbery's sestinas, as opposed to the more coherent ones of Auden and Pound, make much of a purposeful barrage of the unusual mid-progress shifts and blurred drama. Another example of disjointed and spiky writing within rigid form is the eclogue published in *Turandot*:

```
Cuddie: I need not raise my hand  
Colin: She burns the flying peoples  
Cuddie: To hear its old advice  
Colin: And spear my heart's two beasts  
Cuddie: Or cover with its mauves  
Colin: And I depart unhurt
```

("Eclogue")

This poem was written after a bleak period of unproductiveness in 1951, when he was in publishing. He was somewhat awakened, he relates, by a concert of John Cage's music. This music, more than anything then happening in painting, shook him and seemed to give once more the permission to find a form in the fertile formlessness into which he had wandered. There is a kind of simultaneous irony or depth to Ashbery's work, as if a critic paused to announce that he was invalidating all his critical statements including the present one he was making, and yet continued. His simultaneity is also that of chamber music, in which the "narration" of four voices can seem, as in Haydn, to re-create the comic possibilities of a domestic quarrel over the dish-towel. His domesticity and Firbankian penchant for gossip can be seen further enlarged in his collaborative venture, *A Nest of Ninnies*, which received the comically negative
critique of Auden that it was one of the few contemporary novels that lacked sex. His pantoum, in Some Trees, inspired by the one in Ravel’s “Trio,” is another example of a witty use of an arbitrary and musical form. Again, it is music, not the rhyming dictionary (though see his “Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox” for some canny couplets), that inspires Ashbery’s poetry. He is averse to “melodious poetry,” though not to melody itself; he is most interested in sound as it joins and soon flies apart from the meaning of the words, a disjunction reminiscent of the practice of Webern of setting a poem with a meager amount of imitative music. Busoni’s music appeals to Ashbery in the sense that the notes, in his judgment, seem to imply that they could be “any notes and they just happen to sound this way.” They have a “built-in arbitrariness that is not aleatory.” Opposed to the pedanticism of Reger and the synthetic cubism of Schoenberg, the music of Busoni seems to Ashbery to enjoy the double status of generating a new grammar and then commenting on it.

Although Ashbery’s own intellectual music is associated journalistically with O’Hara and Koch, and there were and are certain useful reasons to link them, the discrimination of their differences is equally useful. They were at first pragmatically and conspiratorially joined against poets of a different aesthetic (e.g. Wilbur). They also share a common traditio of French surrealism, a taste for Russian poets of revolution, and a somewhat similar procedure by montage, yet the characteristic Ashbery tone is not that of either, though we cannot be detained here by such considerations. Suffice it to say that Helen Vendler’s characterization (in the New York Times) of the poets of the so-called New York School as “cheerful and Chaucerian” does not stand alongside the meditations of Ashbery, no matter how much he may be seen to lack the transcendental quality.

As for “the melancholy subject of Poetic Influence,” Ashbery has indeed digested the influences of both Stevens and Whitman. He particularly loved the long poems of Stevens, on which he wrote a paper for F. O. Mathiessen at Harvard. His ubiquitous third-person narrator may very well have been derived from Stevens as a way of “entering” the poem, as in
“Esthétique du Mal.” The dreamlike imagery of “He,” however, does indeed derive from a veritable dream; some have been envious of Ashbery’s dreams, and one is reminded of Eliot’s dictum on Freud and the Vita Nuova that those who expect much from their dreamlife will receive it. Much of the clumsy appropriateness of dreams is imitated in Ashbery’s poems, though the flat lyrical catalogues of “Grand Abacus” derive from the long lines of Whitman, Ashbery being more spellbound by Whitman’s technical virtuosity than by the spontaneous image of the bard mumbling in his beard. Ashbery’s mavelous catalogues, like that of musical instruments in “The Skaters,” also derive from Webern’s “Cantata,” where things “go bumping and rumbling for a time after you thought they were going to stop.” One also associates certain elements of Ashbery’s catalogue raisonné with prose, and Cage’s noisiness:

True, melodious tolling does go on in that awful pandemonium.

Certain resonances are not utterly displeasing to the terrified eardrum.

Some paroxysms are dinning of tambourine, others suggest piano room or organ loft

For the most dissonant night charms us, even after death.

This, after all, may be happiness: tuba notes awash on the great flood, ruptures of xylophone, violins, limpets, grace-notes, the musical instrument called serpent, viola da gambas, aeolian harps, clavicles, pinball machines, electric drills, que sais-je encore!

(“The Skaters”)

As Ashbery says, “Cage taught me the relevance of what’s there, like the noise now of those planes overhead”; however, he would hardly imagine the sole strategy of his poetry to be the capture of a probabilistic everyday, no matter how prehensile the poet. His poetry sees the everyday in its relation to the supreme moment, the in-between moment, the pedestrian moments, “and one cannot really overlook any of them.” Ashbery’s divinely drab modulations and equitably and imperturbably distributed polarizations between these instants have led
one critic to the delusion that this is "a poetry without anxiety," but it is actually more intense than decorative, and, while rococo in parts, it has much of the Laforguian quick shifts of pose. It is not merely a deliquescence into an exercice de style along the lines of Raymond Queneau. It is a less whimsical palette of possibilities.

Certain of the poems, "Clepsydra" for instance, combine along with a drabness a quasi-religious tone and some almost impenetrable details of landscape. Ashbery admits to having the Valéry-esque experience not of a vague rhythm but a vague vision previous to a poem. "Clepsydra" was favorably foreseen as a "big slab, with no stanza breaks and like a marble slab down which a little water trickles." The tone-feeling of the poems is not equally stony, as a lot of exalting of the prosaic goes on. He utilizes a repetition of "after all" as a replica of a hack journalistic digression in:

It had reduced that other world,
The round one of the telescope, to a kind of very fine powder or dust
So small that space could not remember it.
Thereafter any signs of feeling were cut short by
The comfort and security, a certain elegance even,
Like the fittings of a ship, that are after all
The most normal things in the world. Yes, perhaps, but
the words "after all" are important for understanding
the almost
Exaggerated strictness . . .

He also refines a kind of legalistic diction, as in: "And it was in vain that tears blotted the contract now, because/It had been freely drawn up and consented to as insurance . . ." One thinks of the sweet transpositions of legal diction in Renaissance argumenta. Surely, here too is a poetry ready to be accused of yoking disparate tones and images with difficulty together, but the Johnsonian criticism tends to falter under the steady and sensible pressure of such thoughtful and feeling lines as Ashbery's, in which the strange connections and obscure jargons are, after all, quite beautiful.
Though classic parody has a target, these modulated parodies do not quite break their lance against ignorance or excess. They are targetless parodies which attempt to annihilate the idea of parody, since parody is, for Ashbery, almost an indecent idea. He is interested in flattening out all parodistic devices, using multiple and shifting targets of parody to blur the Bergsonian function of intimidating the inelastic target. Ashbery successfully reinstates the poetic qualities of all possible sources — journalism, degraded ditties, bad poetry, etc. — by implying that there is no such thing as *the poetic*. His poems are not ready-mades, as in the tradition of Duchamp, and he feels little kinship with Duchamp, who was a supremely glamorous negation of everything. Ashbery negates so that we can go on to what is left. The urinal of Duchamp is a witty negation of art, but Ashbery is trying to enunciate that negation among many (thus the fragments of ready-made poetry within his poetry). He finds too many supreme culminations and duplicate negations of everything Duchamp did in today’s art and literature. There are now certainly some duplicate negations of Ashbery. His newest work, *The System*, is couched in the clichés of devotional and pseudo-devotional writing. One may be depressed by reading the fine print in the 11th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, with long prose passages in eight point type, and feel as if one is drowning in a sea of unintelligible print — and yet that this is one’s favorite ocean, just as drowning is said to be delicious when one stops struggling. Ashbery reproduces that delicious sensation. His poetry starts with a sensation, as does Valéry’s, and ends with “a riot of perfumes.”

One must also mention that new ways of writing were opened for Ashbery by *Hebdomeros* of di Chirico, another instance of what he regards as neglected work of high quality. Ashbery was admittedly moved by the interminable digressions and flourishes of di Chirico’s prose, which tends to burst out in terribly long sentences that go on for pages, and which are novels of one character. The skene may change several times in di Chirico’s sentences, as in Ashbery’s, and the course of this sentence is as a cinematic flow, under which the writer is pushing further and further ahead, though camouflaged by one of
those "urgent masks," which may be, for example, Sir Thomas Browne.

John Ashbery's work is much concerned with, and has a true solicitude for, "the bitter impression of absence," and this poetry that speaks of the "fundamental absence" of our day should certainly be more sufficiently celebrated. With their fluorescent imagery, disjunction, collages, two-dimensionalisms, innovations in traditional forms and "simultaneous" use of an aggregate of styles, John Ashbery's poems today constitute a revitalization in American poetry. He is not merely a prestidigitator of devices, but a poet of the stature of Wallace Stevens.
THE MAGICIAN'S DREAM OF SAFETY

this is the storm you have hoped for.
the field darkens, stops talking
to itself

I remember the time
we walked here
tasting water quiet as light
green blades pushed away our footprints
our minds forgot the bones of clocks, covers
that tightened at the end of each day

at 3:00 they will put you in a large jar
lower you into
the river.
you will Return
Alive
your posters said so.
you memorized the warm sounds of hands.

around this rock is your heaven
of broken glass

bad luck is
everywhere
you tell me
night will come like a noise in a dream
a twisting of stars

the last edge of light I see
you at the corner
of the woods
blood oozing through your shirt pocket
while you cut
the feet off a rabbit

W.W. II MINE, STILL IN THE PACIFIC

it is the eye of a drowning
sailor glaring for
a ship

eaten by waves
rusty nerves
waiting

for messages
from the water

nodding

it can almost see
the crews on the bottom
calm as a photograph
MY PHOTOGRAPH

Fifty thousand crack troops
prepare to dash
over a cliff.
Who am I in this picture?
I’m the dogface
in the third wave,
near the huge boulder
that seems to be giving off
a hideous light.

HOW TO FIND LOVE

Walk deep into a sandstorm.
Prepare a net
and hold it above your head
for about one minute.
Lower the net. In it
there will be a hard fist of dust.
Carefully pry it out
with a bayonet. Now you
can go home.
SOME ORAL STANZAS

Her shoulder is in your mouth.

A very thin lozenge of butter
is about to fly
into your mouth.

In your mouth
the heart of a chicken is dissolving.

In your mouth
there is a factory of cave paintings.

You believe
an empty, refrigerated boxcar
is parked in your mouth.

A blind animal,
perhaps a lavish insect,
begs to live in your mouth.

Her shoulder is in your mouth.
FIVE MEN I KNOW

One has fallen drunk
across the instrument panel of my life.
I can’t read the dials.
I don’t know how much energy I have.

Another one dreams
he is reading the *Duino Elegies* aloud,
in German, at a racetrack in Florida.
In his dream
the flamingoes are drained of their color
and collapse.

A third one lives in a gaunt library,
more like a blue tunnel, sinking.
He also dreams: O to be a lieutenant!
When he is not reading
he is asleep,
dreaming: to be a lieutenant, O a leader
of insipid platoons!

The next one woke up
and half his house was gone.
Half his desk, his chair, his table,
half of everything was gone.
A small pile of snow
was crowding him, on what was left of the bed.

The last one is being chased by a man
with a hammer. The man running
wears a body-cast.
He has been wearing it for centuries.
The man with the hammer
wants to remove it.
My father, his mouth full of nails,  
is building my mother’s dream house.

My mother is listing the grief  
it cost her, & pointing out how smooth  
the woodwork is. To her brothers:  
well, the blacks are taking over—  
& her cousins passing through from Santa Monica  
swear the church is kissing ass. Ah,

a dream house draws the line on many fronts.  
(St. Monica, if I remember, wed thou thee  
a pagan, no? & brought him in the fold.  
& when he died thou set  
to work on sonny boy, old dissolute Augustine, right?  
Any food in there for thought?)

Meanwhile, time to pour  
the basement floor,

& the Ready Mix man plops  
his concrete through the future  
rec room window, Lord   
it isn’t wet enough to spread!
Just lays there like a load some giant chicken dropped. My father, mixing figures,
says all hell will hit the fan
if our fannies do not move
& sets my little brother on it with the hose
while we grab hoes & shovels, Lord
I liked that part & afterwards
the lump all smooth
we drank our beer & pop
& mopped our sweat,
& talked about What Next.
The future meant:
cut the lumber square,
make the nails go straight
& things will hold.
I loved that logic, saw him prove it—
then he said we're done
& covered up the last nail's head
with wood paste;
everything was smooth.
I moved around a lot
when I left home, making stories up.
In one block-buster there's a lady says:
"You taste like roofing nails, father."
And: “You’re growing shorter!”
Terrific dialogue but not much plot.

Like building dream houses—
no one knows what you mean.
WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN

for Elise Young

1.

Trying to tell you how
the anatomy of the park
through stained panes, the way
guerillas are advancing
through minefields, the trash
burning endlessly in the dump
to return to heaven like a stain —
everything outside our skins is an image
of this affliction:
stones on my table, carried by hand
from scenes I trusted
souvenirs of what I once described
as happiness
everything outside my skin
speaks of the fault that sends me limping
even the scars of my decisions
even the sun-blaze in the mica-vein
even you, fellow-creature, sister
sitting across from me, dark with love,
working like me to pick apart
working with me to remake
this trailing knitted thing, this cloth of darkness,
this woman's garment, trying to save the skein.

2.

The fact of being separate
enters your livelihood like a piece of furniture
— a chest of seventeenth-century wood
from somewhere in the North.
It has a huge lock shaped like a woman’s head but the key has not been found. In the compartments are other keys to lost doors, an eye of glass. Slowly you begin to add things of your own. The chest contains the room. You come and go reflected in its panels your presence is made actual. You give up keeping track of anniversaries you begin to write in your diaries more honestly than ever.

3.

The lovely landscape of southern Ohio betrayed by strip-mining, the thick gold band on the adulterer’s finger the blurred whispers of the offshore pirate station the miseries older men discover in themselves when the wounds of childhood have scarred over are causes for hesitation. Here in the matrix of need and anger, the disproof of all we thought possible failures of medication doubts of each others’ existence — tell it over and over, the words get thick with unmeaning — yet never have we been closer to the truth of the lies we were living, listen to me: the faithfulness I can imagine would be a weed flowering in tar, a blue energy piercing the massed atoms of a bedrock disbelief.
FIRST ELEGY

If I cried out
who would hear me
up there among
the angelic
orders? and
suppose one did
and suddenly
took me to his heart
I would shrivel
next to his
greater life
Beauty is
only the first
touch of terror
we can still bear
and it awes us so much
because it so coolly
disdains
to destroy us
Every single
angel
is terrible!
And since that’s
the case I
choke back
my own
dark birDCALL my
sobbing
Oh who
can we turn to in
this need?
Not angels
not people
and the cunning
animals
realize at once
that we aren’t
especially
at home
in the deciphered world
What’s
left? Maybe
some tree
on a hillside
one that you’d see
every day
or the streets of the
past
and the perverse
loyalty of
some habit
that pleased us and then
moved in
for good
Oh and the
night the
night when the wind
full of outer
space gnaws at our
lifted faces
she’d wait for
anyone, that
much desired
mildly disappointing lady
whom the solitary
heart
encounters so
    painfully
        Is she easier
on lovers?
    Ah       they only
        pull up the covers
around
    their own
        shared fate!
You still don't
    know?      Throw
        armfuls of emptiness
out to the spaces
    we breathe in
        maybe the birds
will sense
    the expanded air
        flying more fervently

Sure, spring depended on
    you
        Many stars
lined up
    hoping you'd notice
        A wave rose
toward you
    out of the past
        or a violin
made itself
    available
        as you passed
an open window
    These were instructions
        your mission
But could you
  manage it?
  Weren’t you always
distracted
  waiting for something
  as if all this
was announcing
  a lover’s arrival?
  (Where could you
keep her
  as long as those
  huge strange thoughts
are coming and
  going and
  staying the night!)
But sing, when
  you must, of great
  lovers: their fame
lasts a long time
  but it needs to be made
  immortal
Those you almost
  envied the unrequited
  whom you found
more loving
  than the gratified and
  content Begin
again and
  again the praise
  you can never fully express
Think of it:
  the hero survives
  Even his ruin
is only another
  excuse to continue —
  a final birth
But nature exhausted
takes lovers back
    into herself
as if she couldn't
    accomplish that kind of
vitality
twice

Have you thought of
Gaspara Stampa

hard enough?
dwelt on her
    so that a girl
whose lover
comes to avoid her
    can feel
from that tremendous
    example of love
    'Make me like her'? 
Shouldn't
    these ancient
sufferings of ours
finally start
    to bear fruit? Isn't
    it time that in love
we freed ourselves
    from the loved one and
    shivering endured
as the arrow endures the string
    collecting
    itself
    to be more than itself
    as it springs?
To stay
is to be nowhere.
Voices      voices
Listen my heart
    as only the saints
have listened
    for a gigantic
call that lifts them
right off the
    ground       but they
    go on kneeling
impossibly
    taking no notice
            that's how completely
they're listeners
    not that you
    could bear hearing
God's voice
    no such thing
            But listen to that soft
blowing      that
    endless report that grows
    out of silence
It rustles
    toward you from those
    who died young
When you went
    into churches in
    Naples and Rome
didn't their fates
    speak softly
    to you?
Or else an inscription
    hit deep       a divine
    annunciation
like that
    tablet in
    Santa Maria Formosa
not long ago

What do they want of me?

I must softly erase

the sense of injustice

that sometimes slows down their spirits' pure movements.

Of course it is odd
to live no more on the earth
to abandon customs you've just begun to get used to
not to give meaning to roses and other such promising things in terms of a human future
to be held no more by hands that can never relax for fear they will drop you and even to put your own name to one side like a broken toy Strange
to wish wishes no longer Strange
to see things
    that seemed to
    belong together
floating in every
direction    It’s very hard
to be dead
and you try to
retrieve things till
slowly you start
to get whiffs of
eternity
    But the living
are wrong
    in the sharp
distinctions they make
Angels    it seems
don’t always know
    if they’re moving
among the living
    or dead
    The drift of eternity
drags all the ages
    through both of those spheres
    and its sound
rises over
    them both

Those
    who are taken away
    too soon
finally need us
    no longer
    you can be weaned
from the things
    of this world
    as gently
as a child outgrows
the breast
of its mother
But we who have
need of those
huge mysteries
out of whose
wells of sadness
we sometimes draw up
rejoicing
and progress
how could we exist
without them?
Is that old tale pointless
that says
music began in the
midst of the mourning
for Linos
piercing the
arid and frozen and
in that stunned
space where an almost
godlike youth
had suddenly
stopped existing
touched emptiness
with those vibrations
that solace us
help us
delight us now?
SECOND ELEGY

Every angel
is terrible and still
alas
I serenade you
you almost deadly
birds of the soul
knowing
about you
Where are the days of Tobias
when one of these
brightest creatures
stood at the simple front door
disguised a little
for the trip and not
so frightening anymore
(a young man
like the one who looked
out at him curiously)
If the dangerous
archangel took
one step now
down toward us
from behind the stars
our heartbeat rising
like thunder would
kill us
Who are you?

Those who got lucky early
creation's
spoiled darlings
a chain of mountains
peaks and ridges
red in the morning light
of all creation
    the blossoming godhead’s
    pollen
interlockings of light
    corridors  stair-
    cases  thrones
pockets of essence
    ecstasy shields
    tumultuous
storms of exaltation
    then  suddenly
    separate
mirrors
    drawing the beauty
    that streamed away
from them
    back to their own
    faces again

For we  as we feel
    evaporate
    oh we
breathe ourselves out
    and away
    emberglow to emberglow
we give off a fainter smell
    It’s true that
    someone may say to us
‘You’re in my blood
    this room
    the spring
is filling with you’
    what good is that?
    he can’t keep us
we vanish inside him
    around him
    And the beautiful
oh who can hold them
   back? It's endless:
   appearance shines
from their faces
   disappearing like dew
   rising from morning grass
we breathe away
   what's ours
   like steam from a
hot dish oh
smile where are you
   going? oh lifted glance
new
   warm
   receding wave of the heart
woe is me? it's
   all of us
   Does the outer space
into which we dissolve
   taste of us
   at all? Do the angels
absorb only what's
   theirs what streamed
   away from them
or do they get
   sometimes as if by
   mistake a little of our
being too?
   are we mixed
   into their features
as slightly
   as that vague look
   in the faces
of pregnant women?
   In their swirling
   return to themselves
they don't notice it (how could they notice it?)

Lovers
if they could understand
might say marvelous things
in the night air
For it seems that all things try
to conceal us
See, the trees are and the houses
we live in
still hold their own
It's just we who pass everything by
like air being traded for air
and all things agree
to keep quiet about us maybe half
out of shame
and half from a hope they can't express

Lovers finding each other enough I ask you
about us You hold each other Does that settle it?
See it sometimes happens that my hands grow conscious
of each other
    or that my
        used face
shelters itself
    within them
        That gives me a slight
sensation
    But who'd claim from that
        to exist?
You though
    who grow by
        each other's
ecstasy
    till drowning
        you beg
'no more!'
    you who in
        your own hands
become more abundant
    like grapes
        of great vintages
fading at times
    but only because
        the other completely
takes over
    I ask you about us
        I know
that touch is a
    blessing for you
        because the caress lasts
because what you cover
    so tenderly
        does not
disappear
    because you can sense there
        some kind of pure
duration
  Somehow eternity
    almost seems possible
as you embrace
  And yet
    when you've got past
the fear in that first
  exchange of looks
    the mooning at the window
and that first walk
  together in the garden
    one time
lovers  are you
  still the same?
    when you lift each other
to your lips
  mouth to mouth
    drink to drink
oh how oddly
  the drinker
    seems
to be
  separate
    from his act

Weren't you astonished
  by the discretion
    of human gesture
on Attic grave steles?
  Didn't love and parting
    sit so lightly
on shoulders
  they seemed
    to be made of a substance
unknown to us?
  Recall how
    the hands
rest
without any pressure
although there is great
strength in the torsos
Those figures
spoke
a language of self-mastery:
we’ve come
to this point
this is us
touching this way
the gods may
urge something stronger
upon us but that
is the gods’ affair

If only we too
could discover an orchard
some pure contained
human narrow
strip of land
between river and rock
For our own
heart rises
past us and we can’t
follow it any more
by gazing
at pictures that soothe us
or at godlike bodies
in which it restrains itself
through size

translated by David Young
FOR KATHARINE, 1952-1961

I

Your flesh has melted, I suppose,
To Indiana clay. Only your bones
Attend that deep box. Graceful
They must be, even now.

II

Dead as many years
As you lived. If a child
Grows back down, a year
For a year, you are a hard
Birth to be taken in,
A conception, and nothing.

III

Katharine, we die.
One of your grandfathers dead,
The other wishing he might be.
Some of us grow down
While we live.

What? Am I telling you
About death?

This is what I know:
You visited the neighbors'
Cats. In the park, you
Climbed down rocks
To fern and twisting
Water. Once we camped
By a soggy little lake, drove
Home in the rain, late,  
Singing, the lights of the towns  
Blurred and wonderful in the wet  
Pavement. We planted  
Corn, do you remember?  
And in August felt  
The full ears, husked  
Them, broke the sweet  
Kernels with our teeth.  

You grew so easily  
There seemed no other way.  
Your voice held out  
Its hands, palms up.  

This motion, this poise—  
Broken to wet bones in a box.  

IV  

On this day of your death,  
We love. The steep  
Water of your making  
Is still green—  
And will be, will be.  
The fern, the falls,  
The keeping on.  

September 1970
DECEMBER 1970

1

Fourteen days ago, the sun lost
His footing and fell in a drainage
Ditch. I can show you the place—a stubble
Field near Schoolcraft.
Today
Sleet peppers him from above and cornstalks
And marsh grass give him a cold
Finger from below. He might as well
Roll up in the bullrushes
And wait it out.

This morning a hawk
Flew low behind the house,
His hooks out, dragging the dark air,
Hunting the right life for himself.

2

Nothing was settled
In summer, when
Children played kickball
And chimney swifts tumbled
And dipped in the last light.
A boy drew long roots of air
Into his harmonica, tasting
Them, packing them with his hands.
When he blew,
A tree big as the street
Trembled
Out of his mouth.

3

I can follow a scent in this weather.
My eyes narrow to points,
Feet and hands turn leather.
I know where I’m going for once.
I run a knife from the chin
To the crotch and ease
Back the hairy skin.
I stuff a deep freeze.

In Indochina, the hawks
Go in low and sure,
Cutting the roads, cutting
The bodies of bicyclers
Who weave slowly south.
Reconnaissance planes look
Everywhere with their
Long eyes.

When I think of summer
I think of falling
Water and the salt
Of my body washing away.

I can tell you what it is
To be lost
In the mountains: reticence
Of trees and the hard
Rush of water.

Deeper and deeper in,
The stream taking you
A strange way. Feet
In the water,
You step against
The edge of dark.
Afraid. The gentle
Teeth of the fern
Have eaten your
Going back.
You ask the way at each
Turning and are answered
Birch, basswood,
Water over a rock.

This is lawyers' weather.
A dog digs for cold bones.
Rock salt runs a fever
Cutting down to the stones.

Certainty has a price:
We notarize our wives.
Sweet Mother of Christ
Let the sun rise.
HOME POEM FOR SYLVIA

What a country chose me! These asters, celosia, brown upon the porch.

If you want me, ask, says the flow of a field, pillows warming underneath.

My country has a high forehead, the bloody matted grass around a trap, the bone.

All vowel—Sun's syrup on a lip. Tonight I still taste the dark spiral of trees of the night before.

The red door of the valley, polished hoe and a rake, earth smack against brick, the green comes down.

Medallion sun, breezes in a pocket, the moon sends lessons, one on one, Sylvia, arguments of damp.
LOVE AMONG THE ORANGES

There we stood howling
at the edge of town;
the small farms were sleeping,
mice and frogs in the grass.

In the big house
by the orange grove,
fire and drunkenness,
fierce, monotonous music.

But we were not going to go in;
there was something else
in the night, in the wind
that ruffled our fur,

in the shape of oranges
swaying in the moonlight,
falling around us
with a big, plump sound.
CONTRIBUTORS

ROBERT BLY'S latest publication is Twenty Poems of Tomas Transströmer, from The Seventies Press.

The selection of GÜNTER EICH'S prose poems is drawn from two volumes: Maulwürfe (1968) and Ein Tiberer in Meinem Büro (1970), both published by Suhrkamp Verlag.

GARY GILDNER'S second collection, Digging for Indians, has just been published by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH lives and teaches in Chicago. His poems have appeared in a number of periodicals.

JOHN HAINES' recent collection, The Stone Harp (Wesleyan), will soon be followed by Twenty Poems (Unicorn Press). He is at work on a fourth volume and on a book of prose about his years in Alaska.

MICHAEL S. HARPER's second book, History Is Your Own Heartbeat, containing the long poem "Ruth's Blues," first published in FIELD #3, came out earlier this year from the University of Illinois Press.

CONRAD HILBERRY is teaching this year at Berea College in Kentucky.

LAURA JENSEN recently picked her first ear of corn on the Olympic Peninsula.

ATTILA JOZSEF (1905-1937), the Hungarian poet who was associated with the Surrealists in Paris (1926-27) and whose poetry has had a particular impact in Hungary and France, was a Marxist who was apparently expelled from the Communist party for attempting to synthesize Marx and Freud. His translator, JOHN BATKI, just won the 1972 O. Henry Prize for his story, "Strange-Dreaming Charlie, Cow-Eyed Charlie," from The New Yorker.

THOMAS LUX, editor of The Barn Dream Press, will have a new book, Memory's Handgrenade, published by Pym-Randall Press in February. He is currently in Iowa City.

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ADRIENNE RICH has published six books of poetry, of which the most recent is The Will to Change (Norton, 1971). She lives in New York and teaches writing in the Open Admissions program at City College.

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RAINER MARIA RILKE'S first two Duino Elegies were written at Schloss Duino, near Trieste, in the winter of 1911-12, some ten years before the completion of the whole poem. The translation offered here — part of a projected translation of all ten Elegies — reflects the strong current interest in the Elegies among contemporary American poets, and, perhaps, the need for a translation in the contemporary idiom. The translator's debt to William Carlos Williams should be obvious.

CHARLES SIMIC'S latest book is Dismantling the Silence (Braziller, 1971). He now lives and teaches in Hayward, California, from which he writes, "Thank God for summer and the Pacific Ocean."

DAVID SHAPIRO'S essay on JOHN ASHERBY is based on extensive conversations with the poet. Shapiro's third book of poems, A Man Holding An Acoustic Panel, will be published by Dutton this fall.