Errata

Page 28
Third triad should read "hardly attempted look"
There should be a stanza break before "Oh take it."

Page 72
The author of "I Pass on the Road . . .," James Baker Hall, was inadvertently omitted.
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Denise Levertov

THE WOMAN

It is the one in homespun
you hunger for
when you are lonesome;

the one in crazy feathers
dragging opal chains in dust
wearies you

wearies herself perhaps
but has to drive on
clattering rattletrap into

fiery skies for trophies,
into the blue that is bluer
because of the lamps,

the silence keener because it is solitude
moving through multitude on the night streets.

But the one in homespun
whom you want is weary
too, wants to sit down

beside you neither silent
nor singing, in quietness. Alas,
they are not two but one,

pierce the flesh of one, the other
halfway across the world, will shriek,
her blood will run. Can you endure
life with two brides, bridegroom?
THE FREEING OF THE DUST

Unwrap the dust from its mummycloths.
Let Ariel learn
a blessing for Caliban
and Caliban drink dew from the lotus
open upon the waters.
Bitter the slow
river water: dew
shall wet his lips with light.
Let the dust
float, the wrappings too
are dust.

Drift upon the stir
of air, of dark
river: ashes of what had lived,
or seeds
of ancient sesame,
or namelessly
pure dust that is all
in all. Bless,
weightless spirit. Drink,
Caliban, push your tongue
heavy into the calyx.
TURNING TO WOMEN

My friends are men. They think their heart a river they can ford. They take no deep breath to go for the bottom, to grab muck. To turn to women I must float my heart on a kindling raft, wade into greasy water, yell and try to cry. This is wind in dead trees.

Women tell me kindly, We are everywhere you go like light reaching around to morning. Forget success. Blow it from a mountain. What you’re after is how to move along your spine, not on the land. There’s nothing out there you’re coming to. You wait to come to your skin like spring water rising. You will touch things that become and die in days, insects, flowers, hundreds.

Only touch makes sense. Strange to touch things underwater. Turning to women makes my stomach feather. I want high ground. The black rock must be obsidian. I scratch my name. Rain can cut it in so deep the rock must crumble to wear it out. I tell men that turning to women may be as simple as water through land.

No, they say, your fear talks, not some white cloud calling. You want to hold your gone mother, kiss away her cunning tears. This slop we barrel to fatten pigs. We take your pouch, notebook and trapping string. Scatter like birds.

You men who move to have children, eat, kill or die — keep your shoulders huge in bear skins.
Dance around your lightning tree, go hounding and back to your big room of heads of cats. You won’t feel why your chests are marked with breasts. I leave my sex in river mud rolling in spring, curl in high trees in the nervousness of small animals, and see how loons and deer live by a different light.

The night comes down floor by floor. My skin is the scared boy of my memory, but I will wait and let all I was go as deep grass lets go light when a wind rushes.
ICEHOUSE BEACH

My father swims by again I can see his mouth come over open sideways his eye come up the other is always under I see the eye always under see it behind my eyes and I run for him on the beach waving the way his arms go in his long swimming

mother goes into the water waits floating on her back she kicks out splashes him he goes by one arm up she’s laughing she’s spinning up the water will she really break into his swimming she knows how far he and the ocean go away how his work is like the water it floats in our house we’re always getting ready

hurry your father’s coming I know how she throws back her hair when she has waited through his work she does little paddles with her hands she’s afraid he’ll think someday she’s just a person living here I can’t go away his head just hair and an eye there

the eye I see is always under she’s wrong she looks for things to be afraid of when there’s just us in the rooms watching the sun come low making up things we’ve done to tell him something when he takes us both and breathes out
THE MIDWAY SAILS FOR VIETNAM

April 10, 1972

For months the big carrier stayed in its berth at Alameda.
Its tower stood straight out my window.

At Christmas the crew twined amber lights up and down the cables.
While we ate and drank we watched the colors flower shyly on the dark bay
and were happy.

This morning it is moving slender as a needle in and out of the clouds' shadows.
The water shines in patches of deep blue and robin's egg blue all around it
while the planes on its deck throw back the sun.

It disappears behind a blowing eucalyptus.
Then it emerges from the leaves and white buds on the other side.
Just before it slides under the Bay Bridge and beyond my vision
a light in its tower blinks a message to someone else who is watching.

Now it is as if I had lost a thing I had desired all my life and had just found.
I cannot say why but when I gaze at the blank blue space where it floated
it is as if all the water in the world were running away down that empty hole,
as if this bay and the ocean and all the oceans were draining and draining away.
Adrienne Rich

POETRY, PERSONALITY AND WHOLENESS:
A RESPONSE TO GALWAY KINNELL

— To the memory of Paul Goodman —

* * *

Galway Kinnell’s essay in FIELD #4 (“Poetry, Personality and Death”) seems to me, like his recent poetry, a truly serious enterprise, an attempt to look at fundamentals that we are all going to have to examine if poetry, or personality itself, is to have any future. Instead of counselling us to try a certain kind of image or poetic structure, he asks us to think about our lives, the full weight of our existence as it is brought to bear on the act of writing. It doesn’t surprise me that this essay comes from the man who wrote The Book of Nightmares. In that book, and in this essay, Kinnell’s struggle with essentials gives me a certain kind of hope.

Yet in reading the essay I have the curious sense of a blind spot floating between the writer and his subject, — an almost-yet-never-quite-touching of a painful lesion that I believe Kinnell and other poets will have to begin probing sooner or later. At almost every point the essay seems to edge away from its true subject, or perhaps I should say, from the point where the curing of the lesion, the solution of the problem, might begin.

Kinnell’s concern is with the “I” or self in poetry as it is being written today.* He traces the movement of certain poets “beyond personality” — that is, beyond mere confession — to a persona (as Dickey in “The Firebombing”) or a kind of abstract, oversimplified “I” (as Robert Bly in “The Busy Man Speaks”). He feels (and I agree with him) that this movement in such poets has been an evasion; that it has neglected the real exploration of self, the real inward work, which would authenticate the “I” rather than set up an ideal “I” or, alternatively,

* Although I paraphrase his argument in responding to it, I hope readers of this piece will return to Kinnell’s essay, which deserves close reading on its own.
a *persona* onto whom the poet can unload anything in himself which he rejects. Kinnell believes, and I believe with him, that we desire a poetry in which the "I" has become all of us, not simply a specific suffering personality, and not an abstraction which is also an evasion of the poet's own specificities.

* * *

Kinnell goes on to try to probe the sources of what he calls "this closed, unshared 'I'" in poetry, "the poet's reluctance to reveal himself in his poems," locating it in "the closed ego of modern man, the neurotic burden which to some degree cripples us all." In his analysis of this ego he has written some accurate and important paragraphs: here he is moving close to the lesion itself. He describes man's approach to nature as to a problem to be solved, a force to be harnessed, rather than as something to be lived with, inwardly and outwardly. He calls science and technology to task for their fatal detachment from what they study, their depersonalization in the name of conquest. In these sentences he describes that split between man and what Paul Goodman has called his "only world," which has given him over to isolation and despair.

It is in poetry that Kinnell sees some hope of an effort toward reintegration — poetry in which the poet would speak to us in his own voice, but having gone "so deeply into himself . . . that he finds he is everyone." And Kinnell lingers over the idea of going that deeply into the self, as a possible risk that "one may just dig up more wretchedness" — also, perhaps, a risk of total solipsism. But even more, I think what is dreaded is a risk of some deeper exposure than had been counted on. And perhaps that is the terror — of finding that one is "everyone", not a *poète maudit* with one's own dark and dazzling guilt; that there has been an enormous failure — not a curse, not a doom, but a failure, a history of bad faith and wilfulness — by that part of the human race which calls itself masculine and which exists sometimes, painfully enough, in the form of
a poet. It is significant that the rest of Kinnell's essay is spent touching on sexuality.

* * *

Kinnell says that man is separated from his animal nature, and cites the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the Victorian myth of this separation and repression. He goes on to say that "many ancient stories tell of the mating of man and animal" but that — the nouns become perplexing here — "It seems always to be a female human and a male animal who mate, never the reverse." (Italics mine.) (He dismisses actual acts of copulation by men with animals as irrelevant to the myth, "since the men use the animals, if not rape them." ) Women mythically mate with animals because "Women — at least in the imaginings of men — reside closer to nature, feel less threatened by it, are more willing to give themselves up to it." We seem here to be peeling those strange onion-layers of the myth, the reading of the myth, and the uses of that reading to explain as primal or natural what may be simply social or political.

Women are less alienated from nature, according to Kinnell, (and this may be true, if only as a result of their historic lack of participation in man's world of struggle and conquest); certainly they are so "in the imaginings of men." But then, in man's imagination, is woman "human" in the generic sense, or is she "nature" — part of that same nature from which man has severed himself through objectification and domination? Obviously, when perceived as a womb, a cunt, a piece of ass, a chick, or in any of the age-old masculine terms, she becomes part of that non-human, natural world from which the male has detached himself, and which he seeks to subdue, to know only for the purpose of using. At the same time, masculine poetry attests that man has also imagined her as an eternal mystery, therefore unknowable as humans are supposed to want to know each other. Masculine ambivalence toward nature consists, on the one hand, in reducing it to the object of his
desires, seeking to possess and dominate it at the cost of real relationship to it; and on the other hand, mythifying and frequently sentimentalizing it, e.g. in terms of the mystery of womanhood, the purity and innocence of childhood. Neither of these attitudes — domination and idealization — leads to that state of being which is named, in The Book of Nightmares, "Tenderness toward existence." The contradiction between these attitudes lies not only beneath the white American's oppression of blacks, as Kinnell has pointed out, but more universally beneath man's historic ill-faith toward woman.

* * *

In the case of the male artist, I can only imagine that the split, the contradiction, is especially painful and especially destructive. On the one hand, woman is Muse, Goddess, Life Force; on the other, she is simply an accessory to his life, whose presence helps make his creation possible in a thousand purely practical ways: she is expected to satisfy his lust, bear children for whom he can have patriarchal feelings, cook his meals, hush up the children when he is working, uproot herself to follow him where his fate may take him, accept his sexual strayings, type his manuscripts, be sympathetic — but not too sympathetic — to his friends, sit as his model — in other words, to make her life an accessory to his own. Now, all of this may be true, in other modes, of the sexual relations of the factory worker or the corporate executive. But it is a contradiction which the artist can continue to evade only at his peril. On the one hand, the male artist is a man with a special relationship to his own femininity (or, as Kinnell says, "the poet knows himself to be of a more feminine disposition than the banker") — a man for whom the split from the natural life has more immediate and obvious dangers than it does for the banker, in terms of his very identity. On the other hand, he has frequently evaded his own femininity, or projected his hatred of it, through an ordinary macho relationship to women.

I have to ask myself whether it is because I am a woman that the idea of the Muse seems so uninteresting to me. Kin-
nell quotes Gary Snyder on the Muse as "anything other that touches you and moves you . . . Breaks through the ego-barrier . . . Man in his sexual nature has found the clearest mirror to be his human lover." I do not know whether the male artist really feels that the mysterious woman he is in bed with is a mirror to him; I doubt that the woman, at her deepest level of consciousness, feels like a mirror. This is idealization and over-simplification; it simply omits too much social reality. However, it is perfectly plausible that the male artist uses and can make use of his "human lover" in this way. For woman in her sexual nature the Muse cannot be the human lover (as man) because it is man and man's world which makes it especially difficult for her as artist. Man may at various times exist for her as teacher, idol, guru, master, all dominating roles; he may also exist as a friend with whom she struggles in all the warmth and friction of her affections; but he is definitely not the Muse (unless indeed, the anti-Muse, the demon lover, like Sylvia Plath's "Daddy.") Emily Dickinson's Muse, if any, was her own soul — the Soul. Edna St. Vincent Millay was no more than a graceful and conventional poet when she addressed her sonnets to some mythified lover; her best work (and least-known) is the sonnet sequence she wrote about a woman in a house in New England, watching over the last illness of a husband she had previously left and now no longer loves: "Sonnets From An Ungrafted Tree." For Emily Brontë, nature itself is the creative energy behind her work; and nature is identified with her nature:

"Often rebuked, yet always back returning
To those first feelings that were born in me . . .

I'll walk where my own nature would be leading:
It vexes me to choose another guide . . ."

As woman's "human lover" man is still the male, with masculine expectations of the role she will fulfill for him, the acces-
sory, "feminine" part she will play — all while she is trying to do an artist's lonely and independent work. Possibly the idea of the Muse is man's way of projecting and objectifying his own feminine principle — along with his negative feelings about that principle (see the quotation from Yeats on the Muse that Kinnell also supplies.)

* * *

"In the tale of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the vicious, animal half of the man escapes the control of the civilized, rational half and destroys it." Then Kinnell proceeds to his own fantasy, which I at first found rather attractive, of the conversion of Dr. Jekyll by Mr. Hyde, so that "they went out cruising together; or (Hyde) . . . came back and seduced him." What Kinnell forgets is that Dr. Jekyll expressed his animality by raping and murdering women. I cannot submit to the idealism which imagines that in this state of affairs Mr. Hyde would "discover the possibility of tender love," whether homosexual or heterosexual. I think I understand what Kinnell is trying to say; what I want to elucidate is that the terms of his thought are out of focus; they neglect a terrible central core to the whole problem.

Kinnell ends by quoting several poems, one of which, a prose-poem by Robert Bly, uses women and children in a conventionally mythic way: woman-sea, source of all life; "the woman I loved in some former life" (I believe Bly more when he describes death as being "like the sound of the motor in an airplane as we fly, the sound so steady and comforting." James Wright's poem, "The Life," is a fine Wright poem in its delineation of "the old loneliness" — but it is precisely beyond that old loneliness that I believe Kinnell is saying we can move, in our poetry and in our lives. (It is the acceptance of that loneliness as being fated or metaphysical rather than a result of the closed-in ego of man, that I believe shadows the poetry of some of the best male poets alive.) In the second of two Lawrence poems quoted ("River Roses") Kinnell sees the true shedding
of personality and the true absorption into universality through sex; his phrase for this (echoing the line, "Let it be as the snake disposes") is: "The wand of cosmic sexuality rules." (Italics mine.) In none of these poems is there any imagination of what a real woman might be feeling.

The problem for Kinnell, I believe (and if I single him out in this essay it is not because I think his blindness is greater but his potential for vision more) — the problem for Kinnell is the problem of the masculine writer — how to break through the veils that his language, his reading of the handed-down myths (and, I am forced to say, his very convenience), have cast over his sight; and what that will cost him. To become truly universal he will have to confront the closed ego of man in its most private and political mode: his confused relationship to his own femininity, and his fear and guilt towards woman.

* * *

The lines from "Song of Myself" which Kinnell quotes ("Loafe with me on the grass . . .") rightly call us back to that poet, that American, who of all his brothers was most able to accept himself in his bisexual wholeness. For him, as for Dickinson, there is no Muse: only his Soul. Whitman's homoerotic poetry does not represent a flight from woman but a recognition of woman, and of the being in himself and in his beloved that is capable of tenderness, vulnerability, mutuality. ("Out of the dimness opposite equals advance.") It is worth noting that Whitman really does accept woman's lust as a good and natural part of her being, rather than as a devouring force or a self-destructive drive. The opening lines of the section quoted are:

"I believe in you, my Soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other."

It is possible (I am thinking in particular of some of the new poems of Kenneth Pitchford) that we are on the brink of
a new bisexuality in poetry written by men, which in claiming its own wholeness would be able to greet wholeness in woman with joy instead of dread. But no such poetry will be made out of theories; it will be born out of personal and collective struggle, and many costly recognitions.

* * *

At the end of his essay Kinnell says, "The death of the self I seek, in poetry and out of poetry, is not a drying-up or a withering. It is a death, yes, but a death out of which one might hope to be reborn more giving, more alive, more open, more related to the natural life." (Italics mine.) Reading these words I am reminded of a notebook in which I wrote down parts of a conversation I had been having with a much younger woman, of great clarity and beauty of mind, a political radical and a feminist, of whom I asked the question, "What do you see becoming of men?" Her answer was, "I have two visions. One: that men will become more open, more concerned with feelings, more gentle, less power-seeking, than they have ever been. The other: that, given new methods of reproduction in the future, the sex will simply die out."

I believe that Galway Kinnell is concerned in his work with a death which is not that dying-out of a self and sex that has ceased to have any vital energy — having misconstrued energy not as Eternal Delight but as Pure Will. I have thought that the sense of doom and resignation to loneliness endemic in much masculine poetry has to do with a sense of huis clos, of having come to the end of a certain kind of perception. What I would like to offer here is a clue to a way onward, a way that will of necessity dredge up much wretchedness, but that will, I believe, be finally transfiguring.
THREE VOICES

A Man: "Jeb is hitting her in the face. I sit there, not doing anything. Her face is open, as if he isn't hurting her. He doesn't look angry. He sits back and they are smiling at each other. He knows her better than I do, there is a life between them I don't know, they know, not the hitting or the smiling. I want to kill Jeb, I don't even get up. I haven't even said what really happened."

A Woman: "I am sitting in the back seat. Another woman we both know (we are all three friends) is sitting in the front seat beside him. He is shouting at her. Hitting her, but that part I haven't told anyone else. You mustn't tell anyone, will you, that part.

"Now she is in the car alone with him. He is driving. She tries to touch his shoulder, she can't, she doesn't know why. He is looking straight ahead, singing, talking to the drivers of the other cars."

A Man: "The books are all wrong. Besides you never read them.
"You are another person.
"I've told you all about it, maybe you don't remember.
"I had a very long, very sad dream I just wanted to see a human face."
THE KNIFE

Thought: Zero. Fell at his feet wanted to eat him right up
would have but
even better
he talked to me.

Did I ask you to?
Were those words a blood-sucking too?

Thought: Now I will have a body again
move differently, easier back to the plan
a little house a woman and a man
crossed against yours my soul will show
glow through my breastbone
back down into the kitchen
yours

Thought: Here I will save you
others have failed, even died, but I
my darling will save you save me
devour me away
up

Woke up:
Thought: I can cry but I can’t wake up
today again don’t answer the door
then did couldn’t look at you talk
couldn’t place the bed in the room, or where the room was
when I closed my eyes
Thought: This is the same old knife my knife
I know it as well as I know my own mouth
it will be lying there on the desk if

I open my eyes I will know the room very well
there will be the little thrown-out globe of blood we
left
and every molecule of every object here will swell
with life. And someone will be at the door.
COMING HOME

My mother sees a face in every lightbulb.
I say bullets.
I say snow and Arctic waves
pounding at our door.
She won’t believe me. She sees a face, her own face.
Smiling.
Her hands reach up.
Ah, the chalkwhite mime to arrange her own shadows.

My father is gone.
His olive bag and marching off to Greenland during the war —
I couldn’t follow him.
No Nazis invaded the island.
No shots fired. He lived in the snow.
His hands were not strong enough.
Only his letters came home.

A child wandering like a shadow a shimmering somewhere between the glacier and the door.
Child, here are two hands.
SOMETIMES I THINK I AM AN ELEMENTAL ANGEL

with all the ignorance that implies,
able to move into others’ beings,
but with too much light, lacking
in pity. It is Ariel’s compleynt,
pinching the barks of dogs to a higher
pitch, sleeping in the pockets of drunkards,
pestering lovers with the diligence of a flea.
The night of the moneylender’s murder, when Geisel
without lantern or moonlight drove back
to his rescued farm by the roundabout way,
I sat on the terret ring of his horse
in absolute glee. I am there when the car
goes off the road and you crawl
out through a window and scream, "Is George
all right?" I am the terrorist at the post,
the Jesuit in his cell, the Vietnamese
child coming toward you with the pulled
grenade.

Compassion would kill me.
FIFTH ELEGY

But tell me
   who are they
these vagabonds
even more transient
   than we are?
   urged on
from childhood
   twisted (for whose sake?)
   by some will
that is never content?
   Instead it keeps
   twisting them
bending them
   slings them and
   swings them
tosses them up
   and catches them —
   they seem
to come down
   from an oiled and
   slipperier air
to land on a carpet
   worn threadbare
   from their constant
leaping and tumbling
   a carpet lost in the cosmos
   stuck there
like a plaster
   as if the suburban
   sky
had somehow
   wounded the earth.
   And barely there
upright showing faintly
the huge capital D
that seems
to stand for
existence presence . . .
the relentless grip
rolls even
the strongest men
round and round
having fun
like Augustus the Strong
spinning
a tin plate
at the table .

Ah and around this
center the rose
of watching
blooming and
dropping its petals
Around this
pestle this
pistil
smitten by its own
blossoming pollen
re-fertilized
to bear
the false fruit
of disgust that they're
never conscious of
the glossiest veneer
lit by the
smirk of disgust .

25
There's the limp 
  wrinkled 
  weight-lifter
an old man who
  now just beats 
  the drum
shrunk in his
  mighty skin 
  as if
it had once
  held two men 
  and the other
already lay
  in the graveyard 
  while this one
survived him
  living on 
  deaf
and sometimes
  a bit dazed in his 
  widowed skin .

But the young one
  the man 
  who might be 
  the son
of a neck
  and a nun 
  tightly and
powerfully filled 
  with muscle and 
  artlessness .
Oh you
all of you
who were given
to be the toy
of some pain
when it was
still young
during one
of its long
convalescences . . .

And you especially
who fall
daily
a hundred times
unripe with the plummet
that only fruit
can know
from that tree
of jointly constructed
motion
(that goes through
spring
summer
autumn
in a few minutes
faster than water)
fall with a
thump
on the grave :
sometimes
in a split-second pause
a loving look
toward your
seldom tender
mother
may start
    to rise up
        in your face:
then it loses itself
    in your body
        whose surface
absorbs it
    that self-conscious
        hardly attempted
and again
    the man claps his hands
        for your leap
and before
    any pain can get
        closer
to your heart
    that is always
        galloping on ahead
there comes
    that burning
        in the soles of your feet
anticipating
    what causes it
        and chasing a few
quick physical tears
    into your eyes
        And still
blindly the
    smile . . .
Oh take it
    angel!
    pluck it
this small-flowered
    healing herb
        and go get
a vase for it
    preserve it!
    Put it with
those joys
    that still aren’t yet
    open to us
praise it
    in a lovely urn
    with a florid
soaring inscription:
    Subrisio
    Saltat.

And then you
    darling you
whom the most
    delicious pleasures
    have leaped
right over
    silently
    Maybe
your frills
    are happy
    for you —
or the green
    metallic silk
    tight across
your hard
    young breasts
    feels that it’s
endlessly pampered
    and in need
    of nothing .
You set out on display
    again and again but
    differently each time
like expensive fruit
    on the trembling
    pans of the balance
in public
    among the shoulders.

Where oh where
    is that place
    — I carry it in my heart —
where for a long time
    they couldn't perform
    but fell
away from each other
    like mating animals
    badly paired
where the weights
    are still
    heavy
where the plates
    still wobble off
    the fruitlessly
    twirling sticks . . .

And suddenly
    in this miserable Nowhere
    suddenly
the unspeakable place
    where the pure
    "Too-little"
incredibly transforms
    itself
    somersaulting
into that
empty
"Too-much"

Where the
many-digited numbers
add up to
something
numberless.

Squares
oh square in Paris
infinite showplace
where the milliner
Madame Lamort
slings and winds
the restless
ways of the world
endless ribbons
finding new loops
for them
frills flowers
cockades
artificial
fruits — all
falsely dyed
for the cheap winter hats
of Destiny.

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Angel: suppose
there's a place we don't
know of, and there
on an indescribable carpet
lovers could show the feats they aren't capable of showing here — the daring high figures of the heart's swings their towers of ecstasy their ladders long since propped against each other where there was never any ground trembling and they could before the surrounding spectators the hushed innumerable dead: wouldn't those dead throw them then their forever hoarded and hidden unknown to us but eternally current coins of happiness at the feet of the pair whose smile was finally truthful there on the finally satisfied carpet?
SIXTH ELEGY

Fig tree
    for a long time
        it's meant a lot to me
how you almost
    completely skip
        blossoming
and press
    your purest secret
        unglorified
ahead of time
    into your
definite fruit
Like the pipe
    of a fountain
        your arching boughs
drive the sap
    down
        drive it up and
        it springs from sleep
hardly awake
    to the joy of its
        sweetest achievement
See: like the god
    into the swan

... But we
we linger, alas
    our honor lies
        in our blooming
and we're
    betrayed
        by the time we enter
the overdue core
    of our ultimate fruit.
Only for a few
the urge to action
  rises so strongly
that they’re
  already standing by
  glowing
in the fullness
  of their hearts
  when the temptation
to bloom
  touches their young
  mouths and eyelids
like soothing
  night air :
heroes  maybe
  and those who are meant
  to disappear early
whose veins
  Death the gardener
  has twisted differently .
They hurtle ahead
  in advance of their own
  smiles
like the team
  of charging horses
  before the conquering king
in the lightly carved
  reliefs
  at Karnak .

The hero is strangely close
  to those who died young
Permanence
doesn’t interest him
  His dawn is his lifetime
  he constantly
takes himself off
    and enters
    the changed constellation
of his fixed risk
    Few could
    find him there
But that dark Fate
    who has nothing
    to say for us
suddenly all
    inspired
    sings him on into
the storm of his
    uproarious world
    I hear
no one
    like him
    All at once
his dimmed note
    carried on rivering air
    sounds through me

Then how I’d like to hide
    from this great longing!
    If I were oh
if I were a boy
    and still had the chance
    still sat
arms propped
    on the future
    and read about Samson
how his mother gave birth
    to nothing and then
    to everything
Wasn’t he hero already
    inside you mother
    didn’t his
imperious choice
    begin there
        within you  ?
Thousands were brewing
    in the womb
        wishing to be him
but look :
    he took hold  he discriminated
    chose and accomplished
And if he ever
    broke pillars apart
    it was when
he burst out of
    the world of your body
    into a narrower world
where he went on
    choosing  accomplishing
        Oh mothers of heroes
sources of such
    torrential rivers !
        You gorges in which
virgins have already
    plunged  weeping
        from the heart's
high rim
    future offerings
        to the son .
For whenever the hero
    stormed through the stations
        of love
each heart that beat
    for his sake
        only lifted him higher
and already turning
    away  he stood at the end
        of the smiles
transformed .

    translated by David Young
Jon Anderson

JOHN CLARE

I know there is a worm in the human heart,
in its wake such emptiness as sleep should require.

Toward dawn, there was an undirected light the color of steel;
the aspens, thin, vaguely parallel strips of slate,
blew across each other in that light.

I went out
having all night suffered my confusion, &
was quieted by this.

But the earth
vegetable rock or water that had been our salvation
is mostly passed now, into the keeping of John Clare,
alive,

whose poetry simplified us — we owe the world our-
selves —
who, dead or sleeping, now reads the detail leaf & stone
passing, until it will finally be memorized & done.

I know the heart can be hard, & from this
misgiving about itself, will make a man merciless.
I know that John Clare's madness nature could not straighten.

If there is a worm in the heart, & chamber it has bitten out,
I will protect that emptiness until it is large enough.
In it will be a light the color of steel
& landscape, into which the traveler might set out.
NO, THAT CAN'T BE

A big piece has been cut out of the fir hedge now (the garden fence), I wonder who did it and why? Does he know how long hedges take to grow? How often you have to trim them so they grow thick and block things off, cut off the view from here to the road, from the road to the garden and the house?

Now there's nothing more to hide, through the opening in the fence people from far off can see the house and the grounds that were once carefully covered by yellow gravel.

Three people are standing there now, looking at the earth and one of them is drawing something with the tip of his toe; three helpless people watching figures of unspeakable fear drawn in the gravel. For years they've been standing there like that, apparently nothing has changed, except for the piece cut out of the fir hedge, so that you can see them standing there.
Dogs are supposed to be walked on a leash, children by the hand, better yet keep them at home, locked up in the house or the garden in dangerous times. Dogs, roaming around outside without their masters, could find things, drag them back to you, proud to bark, show you what they've got and you'd rather not see it, looking at it turns your stomach and your mind from that moment on.

Children, vagabonding around the place like roaming dogs — and what else do you expect them to do, when else, when else examine this place, the quiet spots in the bushes, the nest of the ring snakes in the watery spots near rivers, the mushroom spots in the woods, children who sneak off from the house and the garden, sauntering along the ditch filled with waste water from the tannery or along the tracks, they could get into something —

it wouldn't be just the trains rumbling by that would throw them down or chase them back screaming to the bloodred trench water and from there over the garden fence down the garden path into the house and up the stairs.

Never again will you have to lock those children in, they'll never willingly leave the house again.
from the garden you can see them going past below, the waitresses, the sales girls, arm in arm, and the guys riding bikes through their ranks and laughing, and the brewery workers on motor bikes, cars honking, stopping, and the girls getting in, new people coming past now and other workers, the electricians from the plant, and couples, the high school students, make room for the cars! but they're moving very slowly and drivers call from open windows and the girls wave, a gang of apprentices runs after them, there's a carpenter and his wife, the blacksmith too, everybody's walking along on the way to the woods; the music's begun to play, white smoke's moving over the larches, between the high trunks it really takes on color, you can hear waltzes now, shots and laughter

if you lean over the fence boards you can see and hear everything, sometimes the wind carries the smell of bratwurst over. Way into evening snatches of dance music and cries, laughter, drunken howling get through your bedroom window; the lights of the cars driving home fall in stripes through the dawn, it's very early.

translated by Stuart Friebert
It's snowing in Plouda.  
It's snowing in Blauda too.  
Is it really called Plouda or is it called Blauda?  
Or does Blauda turn into Plouda and then, after a few years, Pludov Blauda?

In summer a train station in the middle of a big cornfield with a sign reading BLUDOV. The smoke from a locomotive drifts toward the horizon where it's eaten by a cloud and changed into a bear, and this bear changes into a coupled mountain that becomes a tower over which the Kratochvíl flies. Round tree tops the same distance apart, two parallel tracks leaving the railway station going south or, who knows, maybe going north. Maybe to Plouda. Why? Are there some houses together in a valley behind the field, so you can't see them from the station, or is the place, a castle, behind the horizon, a half hour's car ride from the tracks? Maybe this train station is Plouda, maybe there's no such place as Plouda.

It isn't summer anymore. It's winter now, the wind drives snow across the field like smoke, from time to time it blinds your view of the landscape which isn't at all plain. The girl with the cello in the dark brown fur wrap who's gotten out at the station walks, the cello under her arm, her coat clings to one side of her body but whips up on the other, she's walking away between the trees. The sign on the train station is illegible in the blowing snow.

Is that really Blauda? 

*translated by Franz Wright*
Werther Nights

To have been a roving, affectionate lover as the storm tossed and turned.

To have thought again
Were there such nights,
such Werther nights?

To have met the cat eye of the watch on the dresser and found its tongue strange.

To have risen in the close dark with the smell of yeast rising and raise the window on the last thin shocks of rain.

To have taken off twenty years and stood them in the corner like a prosthesis.

To have looked up the muttering tunnel in the clouds at the sane medallion of the moon.
WHERE AN OLD HAND HAS TOUCHED

Do you know an old field, where clocks turn in barn boards and nails clot in timber? Can you see a tunnel in trees, and a clearing, far off there, where the sun breaks into leaves?

Wherever an old hand has touched, you turn a sign to the wall, for it says salt and gray moss and something is beginning to forget.

Wherever an old father rocks, whenever only a bark comes back from the coon night, what is it swings the tire behind the shed?

The class reunion tries to keep the school house from sinking. The earth is up to the windows.

Out in the stubble past the diamond, wind turns its blind, dreaming head, around, around.
OUTBURST FROM A LITTLE FACE

Mother is not enough.
Father's in the roof altitudes.
I'm tired of seeing my little face
warped in shoe leather.
I'm afraid of menstrual towels,
the bicker of the ceiling.

Let me out of this dwarf.
I want my full voice.
I don't want to be the submarine
sliding the pillow behind the sofa.
I want this thing in my diaper
to hang heavy and gnarled
as the steaming grain of the table leg.
I'm tired of sitting on my lap
to reach the cereal.
If you can sing it loud,  
you can help me throw grain  
at those old chickens.  
You can read continents  
in the cracked plaster,  
carry in green wood  
for the range. If you sing  
well enough, help me glue  
teeth back on that piano.  
Let's put Lysol water  
on our pimples and join  
the Saturday promenade.  
I believe you can carry a tune,  
so help me get 1935 off  
my father's back; he's bending.  
Wait till the sun shines Nellie  
and with our backs to the courthouse  
we'll sing that Poland has fallen.  
Goodbye dear I'll be back in a year.  
What a job for a virgin.
AN OLD MAN’S SON

There was an old man who had a kite for a son, which he would let up into the air attached to a string, when he had need to be alone.

. . . And, would watch this high bloom of himself, as something distant that will be close again . . .

THE NEARSIGHTED RICH MAN

A rich nearsighted man has all the windows in his house ground to his optical prescription.
ONE WONDERS

A woman had put on an apron. But put it on too high, and tied it around her neck, so that she is choking.

She had come into the kitchen to cook the dog’s dinner. She had descended the stairs and walked into the kitchen.

She had been upstairs when she saw the sun wounded, bleeding in the West; and said, it is the dog’s dinner-time.

She had been asleep, and had awakened and looked into a newspaper, because it is there that father sits looking. What is it that father looks at?

But earlier she had gotten into bed because the dog had bitten her.

Father had said, that dog will surely bite you; and he continued looking into his newspaper.

Then the dog bit her, and she went upstairs and got into bed.

Then she looked into a newspaper to find out why the dog had bitten her.

Now, unfortunately, she is on the kitchen floor being choked by apron strings.

Father is looking at his newspaper.
She is on the kitchen floor.
The dog is hungry.
One wonders what will happen.
OUT OF WHACK

A king had dropped his crown — Oh quite by accident, he screamed, for it likely foretells the fall of the king’s pants, scattering his genital jewelry into the eyes of lusting peasants.

The crown was broken. His wife, the female king, cried, it’s my crown which you broke.

Oh really? he screamed, I must have put it on by accident; I thought it was too small. Good thing it wasn’t mine; yours is just a silly old girl’s crown. Now you’ll have to go down to the kitchen and clean pots.

No no, I will wear the king’s crown, which makes me the king, she screamed.

Oh no, that’s only for the king to wear. The king wears the king’s crown. Other than that is a perversion, you lesbian, he screamed.

You’re the queer, wearing a lady’s crown, you transvestite, screamed the queen.

But you see, I instinctively threw it off, because underneath my wayward delight is the true instinct, he screamed.

Too late, too late, because I am wearing the king’s crown: and, in that we are married, and, in that the wearer of the king’s crown is automatically the king, you are now my queen, who broke her crown like a typically silly woman, who doesn’t quite realize the value of things, screamed the queen.

I will not play this naughty game, he screamed, and I will have you beheaded if you cannot come to terms with your disquiet.

I shall have you beheaded if you cannot come to terms with your disquiet, she screamed.

No no, I shall have you beheaded if you cannot come to terms with your disquiet, he screamed.

How dare you? It is I that has people beheaded when they cannot come to terms with their disquiet, she screamed.
I shall most certainly require that you be beheaded if you refuse to come to terms with your disquiet, he screamed.
Quiet, she screamed.
Silence, he screamed.

A page boy came and said, sirs, shall I bring your mouth-plugs now?
Of course, screamed the king and queen, are you blind, can’t you see that our mouths have gone completely out of whack?
THE MODERN HUNTER

Nowadays the hunter puts his grandma on his back like a papoose . . . Well, more like a cocoon filled with a decaying caterpillar, which emerges an angel when the cocoon is itself cocooned in a coffin.

Till then the modern hunter goes to the wood while being viewed on a T.V. camera; which he carries on his back because of the camera’s varicose veins.

The modern hunter goes to the wood burdened with his civilization; an old cathedral hoisted on his back . . .

What is the modern hunter hunting? A quiet place to masturbate? . . . Of course; save for the old grandma, whom the modern hunter takes to the wood to oversee that he sleeps with his hands outside of his covers.
Gary Gildner

AROUND THE HORN

New Year's Eve

Eddie’s on the mound
bearing down,
& I’m at shortstop, spitting in my pocket!
— We’re the twelve-and-under champs so cocky in our jocks
it hurts . . .

God damn it Jack
that skinny kid at second’s white
from drowning. Butch
in right
caught polio — they drove a nail deep
into his quick good knee
to slow the bone,

& Eddie packs a gun for blacks . . .

A little compensation, Captain,
half the field tilts . . .

Where’s my girl who squirmed
in roomie’s Buick
over Easter break?

My sister snug in rabbit?
— while beaming me wore Father’s watch!

It’s midnight
& I won’t grow up —
I’m Teacher’s blended pet,
crooked & cold . . .
I need sweet Judy’s coat of arms, her baby breasts . . .

That midget grinning in the hole is dead.
A CONVERSATION WITH KENNETH KOCH

Three years ago Kenneth Koch and I conducted a taped interview in my rooms at Clare College, Cambridge, England, on the nature of his work. Considering the astonishing variety of his published and unpublished pieces — lyrics that resemble French poetry more than they do anything in English, comic epics in ottava rima with a rather clear narrative, and his recent work, including the still unfinished novel, The Red Robins — and attempting to deal with some of the stylistic elements that bind and separate these works proved to be a rather difficult task. Consequently, I think the best way to present the interview is to offer a scenario of excerpts from Koch's responses.

I began by asking Koch about the influence of the French language and the influence of any specific French poets. One may think of Koch's freshness and immediacy as the kind of empiricism which F.S.C. Northrop has identified with the advantages of an impressionistic method.

Koch: When I first went to France I was 25 years old. I knew French but not very well. I read a lot of French poetry and enjoyed reading it, even though I didn't entirely understand it. And I was interested in this quality that a work of literature could have — that it could be exciting and at the same time slightly incomprehensible. I wanted to get this kind of quality into my own work, the excitement and mystery of a language that is not entirely understood but suggests a great deal.

Though Koch's is an art "unmixed with theory," his experience of Italy and of Ariosto seems to have changed him greatly. I questioned him about the development of his tesselated narratives.
KOCH: My being in Italy had a lot to do with my writing of Ko. For one thing it gave me a good chance to do something I’d wanted to do for a long time, which was to read Ariosto. I lived in a little villino outside Florence near the viale Michelangelo, and every morning I’d wake up and go sit in the pretty little garden that went with the house. It was the beginning of Spring [late February], and I’d drink coffee there and read Ariosto. Just a few stanzas of Orlando Furioso would be enough to set me off, and then I’d write as many stanzas as I could of Ko, which was in the same meter. Don Juan, which I think is one of the greatest poems I’ve read, is in ottava rima too, but I didn’t want to be influenced by Byron. I was afraid of being overwhelmed by him.

What I found in Ariosto was a poetry that was all action. There’s almost no reflection in the whole of Orlando Furioso. It’s one action after another, as in certain early Mack Sennett comedies; I love that quality.

Another thing about Florence that inspired me was just living there. Every morning after I’d worked for a few hours, or sometimes before I worked, I would take a walk, and it was the most beautiful nature I’d ever seen. The fruit trees began to blossom in March, I think it was, and there were new flowers every day or every other day. I remember that when I was writing Ko I began to feel that I wanted to put into it every pleasure that I’d ever experienced — the taste of plums, the smell of certain hallways, the way the hill looked behind my house when I was a child, the way snow looks through a window. I remember once when I was walking outside my house and smelled something coming from another house; I didn’t know what it was, but it reminded me faintly of the smell of the roller coaster in the Cincinnati amusement park, and I felt a little crushed that I hadn’t gotten that pleasure into the poem yet.

What I was trying to do in Ko in a way was to write about the earthly paradise. I found suggestions of such a place in certain paintings that were in Florence and in other places in
Italy. I think there may be something about Tuscany, especially in the springtime, that makes it easier to be clear and direct. What’s given is so pleasant. The art around one, nature, everything is so beautiful that it seems foolish to be ambiguous, a pleasure to be straightforward.

Since Koch has been particularly successful as a teacher, I questioned him about his own development, mentors, and some of the origins of his style.

KOCH: I began to write poetry when I was five, and I remember the pleasure I got from writing certain poems when I was five; it was similar to the pleasure I get from writing poems now. The first good poems I wrote [when I was 17 or 18], or the first poems I wrote that interest me now, were a result of two things. One was reading USA by John Dos Passos, more particularly the "stream of consciousness" passages in the book. I started to write stream of consciousness of my own, that is, writing down whatever came into my mind. The things I wrote tended to be very sexy and sadistic. I had a very good teacher in high school at the time — I was either a junior or senior. Her name was Katherine Lappa, and she was interested in my writing. I showed her these sexy and sadistic things I wrote, afraid that no adult would like them, but she said 'That's fine.' Once I felt free about what I was feeling and writing, I began to be influenced by a number of poets. I remember being particularly influenced by e. e. cummings, by Kenneth Patchen, and by a Baudelaire prose poem I translated. I also read a lot of William Carlos Williams and was very influenced by him. Williams has been a big influence on my work, partly because he wrote about things I saw all the time when I was a child and adolescent. He wrote about the beauty of a vacant lot, the pieces of a broken green bottle. The suburban world he wrote about in New Jersey was very much like what I saw all the time in Cincinnati. It made me very happy that somebody could write poetry about that.
The subject of painting and the major turbulence of abstract expressionism arose. Koch, Ashbery, and O'Hara may be regarded as innovators in language on the same scale as Willem deKooning and Franz Kline in painting, although the critical literature had tended to ignore or degrade these innovations in a mostly arbitrary fashion.

KOCH: I came back to New York from Paris in 1951. I went to California where I was a teaching assistant for a year. I didn't do much to develop the abstract or When-the-Sun-Tries-to-Go-on-style until 1952. I came back to New York then and met Frank O'Hara again. He was a tremendous influence on my work — his spontaneity, the way he could sit down in the middle of a crowded room and write a poem with no affectation at all. It was from Frank that I got the idea of collaborating with other poets also. And from Frank I learned that the silliest idea that is really in one's own head is worth more than the most brilliant idea that is really somebody else's.

From 1952 on, in New York, John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara and I saw a lot of each other. We used to show each other poems all the time; we also saw a lot of Larry Rivers and Jane Freilicher; we were always hanging around, looking at paintings and reading each other's poems and sometimes collaborating on works. In my poetry then I was trying to get a very hard, concrete, and shining quality in language. What I wrote was often unsyntactical and, in a way, "irrational." There seemed to me something in any word in the language — like the word "floor," "book," "table," "cheek," or "hand" — which would be weakened if I put it in any expected context.

We proceeded to discuss the evolution of Koch's more "understandable" style, one which developed from the earlier dérèglement to substantial clarity.
KOCH: First of all, I fell in love. I guess I had the technique all built up from writing a long poem in a sort of glittery, bright, unsyntactical language, and I found that the emotion I was feeling was so strong that I couldn't help but make sense, in a different way. Poems in Thank You like "Spring," "To You," and "In Love with You" were written out of this feeling. The next thing was that I got interested in narrative poetry. I got married, and I went to France again, lived in Paris and then in Rome for a while. A couple of things got me interested in writing simple, narrative poetry. One was a remark that Frank O'Hara had made. He was telling me about a novel called The Circus by Frank Scully. I was sort of a snob about literature when I met Frank; he was more sophisticated. I asked him if the novel was good, and he said 'Yes. It's very quiet and modest and direct and clear and simple.' I'd never thought those were good things; I'd thought novels — literature — had to be deep and complex to be good.

My wife and I went to the theatre in London to see a production of Peter Pan. It was a children's production, but very moving. Its simplicity, even its "dumbness," seemed an important part of what was good about it.

And then I had always liked the old miracle and morality plays in which no word has any ambiguity at all. I don't like ambiguity. I suppose it's all right if the ambiguous things a work means are interesting and exciting, but often they're not. In the miracle plays you get something like "I am Mary fair and clear./ I will do a dance now here"; "I am Jesus baby child./ I am little, sweet and mild." The words can't mean anything but that one thing they mean, and there's something beautiful about that. Each word is like a little pink or white chiclet. "I am Mary Queen of life./ Joseph took me for his wife."

In narrative poems like "The Circus" and "Geography" I wanted to avoid all symbolism and all kinds of obvious significance in the story. I didn't want them to be like "The Secret Sharer" or "The Heart of Darkness," or Joyce's stories.
wanted them to be very simple-minded stories, the way I wanted the words to be just words almost in "When the Sun Tries to Go On." I wanted the incidents in my narrative poems to be just incidents, to have the same kind of clarity and simplicity.

The next subject concerned Koch's plays, polemics, and "drab" poems. The influence of Raymond Roussel toward a certain homogeneity or two-dimensionalism of texture was discussed.

KOCH: My earliest plays, like "Pericles," "The Merry Stones," and "Guinevere" [which I wrote while I was writing "When the Sun Tries to Go On"], are pretty difficult to understand. I wanted to get that poem's kind of brightness and hardness of language and a kind of brightness of action on stage.

I have much the same feeling about the theatre as I do about poetry: I don't want it to be smothered or drowned in meaning and syntax, but to present pure experiences. The best play I ever saw was Tamburlaine Parts One and Two when it was done in New York by the English Shakespeare Company. It was extraordinary. I like the big, strong, epic effect in the theatre a lot more than plays in which people sit around carping at each other. I like the idea of bringing the whole world onto the stage. I like doing that in my poems, too, bringing in everything. In poems like "The Pleasures of Peace," "Faces," and "Sleeping with Women," I felt a desire to bring in everything, not just the pleasures, but everything. Of course, you really can't put everything in because then there's no end to the poem; it becomes identical with the English language in all its possible combinations. But I like to give the impression of totality, of endlessness in as short a form as I can.

At the same time that I changed from an abstract to a narrative style in my poetry, I also wrote very clear plays like "Bertha" and "George Washington Crossing the Delaware,"
which to a certain extent are parodies of heroic drama; but I don’t mean them mainly as parodies.

Parody gets into my other work as well. I’ve written some poems that are just parodies of Frost, Pound, William Carlos Williams. There are a number of lines in Ko that are parodies of other poets. And throughout my work there are echoes of other poets whom I’m making fun of. Parody is a quick way to get the atmosphere and style of a particular writer, and of his way of looking at the world. If you can get just one line that sounds like Gerard Manley Hopkins in a poem of 200 lines, in this one line you can get a reference to the whole Hopkinsonian way of writing and seeing things.

I wrote “Fresh Air” in 1956 or 1957. The literary magazines in America and England were controlled by academic and conservative poets. I thought I was a good poet, and I knew John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara were, and it was extremely difficult for any of us to publish anything. Meanwhile there was all this terrible, structured, elegant, mildly ironic drivel being published. And then there was an article by Donald Hall published in New World Writing called “The Silver Age in American Poetry,” in which he claimed it was such a wonderful age in American poetry because all of this stuff was being written. It was hard to take. I wrote “Fresh Air” out of feelings of rage and excitement. I was pretty sure that Ashbery, O’Hara, and I would win, but I was mad at what was happening just then.

Although “Fresh Air” was an attack on academic poetry, I also wanted it to be a celebration of good poetry. It’s also lyrical and about love, the whole love affair of the narrator with the art student who is ‘fresh air,’ who is a sort of muse. I don’t think I’ve ever written a purely satirical poem. When they’re satirical or funny, my main intention for my poems is that they be lyrical. For example, in “The Pleasures of Peace” I meant to make fun of professional “peace poets,” though my main desire was to write a poem which, instead of talking about war, would show how good peace is.
"The Railway Stationery" was inspired by a poem of Raymond Roussell about someone who starts writing a letter on hotel stationery. It's a long poem, somewhere between 20 and 50 pages, and you never do find out about the letter. It's all a description of the picture in the upper left hand corner of the stationery. In "The Railway Stationery" and in "Departure from Hydra" I was trying to be dry, even a little drab. I was feeling depressed. I felt tired of what seemed to me the gaudiness of some things I had been writing. I was depressed when I wrote that poem, but it made me very happy to write it, to find that, even there in that sort of real stupidity, obvious thought, and putting down every detail, I could make something.

I like opera because you can celebrate anything. You can open the window and say: "The window is open. The sun is shining. My hand is on the window, and I love you." And somehow the music can make that beautiful enough.

One of the central and abiding metaphors of Koch's art has been, as with Frank O'Hara's work, the energy of art-making itself. A collaboration that dealt strikingly with this theme was his "Construction of Boston" with its funny factuality and vibrant immediacy reminiscent of Bohr's "restless universe."

KOCH: "The Construction of Boston" was a play that I did with Nikki de Saint-Phalle, Jean Tinguely and Robert Rauschenberg. The artists built the city of Boston on stage, and I wrote a kind of heroic Shakespearean text in blank verse and rhyme [which two characters recited] about the city's history. Working on this play was exhilarating, somewhat the way opera is — things were big and simple and spectacular, and a lot was going on. The collaboration part is something I like very much.
Working with artists turns out to be a surprising source of ideas.

We returned to the specific French sources of Koch's aesthetic, its cubism, its crescendoes and cornucopias that derive from Apollinaire largely and from Koch's irrepressible and unique desire to celebrate.

KOCH: I remember my excitement when I first read Apollinaire, the way he goes on without any punctuation, without strong metrical beat, and the way his lines flow into each other. I found that immensely exciting. Nothing stops. Everything just goes into everything else, different places and times are simultaneously there, and everything seems larger and richer and stronger for it.

I was very moved by Max Jacob, particularly his prose poems in Cornet a des. Those poems of Jacob are dream-like, lyrical, and at the same time very funny. From Jacob I learned the possibility of being funny and lyrical at the same time, and that meant a lot to me. Reverdy is another French poet I read a lot. And Char. I also liked Paul Eluard very much, though it's difficult to be influenced by him, he's so pure and cool. It's like a chef being influenced by a glass of water. One other French poet who affected me very much is Rimbaud. Reading him is bound to change what one thinks about everybody's poetry. I feel that way about Lorca, too. When I get to thinking, "Well, my poetry's fine, and a lot of what I'm reading in magazines is fine," then I happen to come across a poem by Lorca, such as "Landscape of the Urinating Multitudes" all is changed. There's a little bit of great poetry in the world which is astonishingly beautiful. And, finally, I suppose I think that is the only poetry that matters, poetry that is, in Frank O'Hara's phrase, a "reminder of immortal energy."
Danny L. Rendleman

THE METAPHOR

The metaphor sings in the closet like a drunken tenor. He sobs into the scarves and collars, brokenhearted over a lost love whose name escapes him.

He puts his hand into the cage only to find the bird flown; finds the wind-chime stilled in March. He squats in the foyer with an engraved sword; he is ignorant of the meaning; he strokes the scabbard lovingly, developing a headache.

The metaphor parts his hair in the middle. More on that later.

The metaphor has a twin in Seattle, lumber and paper mills. They’re identical except for the moustache and one is white and one is black.

In Seattle the sea lodges in the mind like a scrawny woman. A jealous scrawny woman. The metaphor hasn’t written his sister in years.

On Thursdays the metaphor wears a pork-pie hat; beneath it his part simmers like rain on the porch. He grows an inch on week-ends; no one knows what to say or the trouble he’s seen. Shoots pool in the Golden Canary Lounge where the waitress wears baby powder on her belly.

The metaphor’s eyelids close like mandarin oranges. He sleeps with the wind safely grinning at the glass; the wind is a bald salesman in an undershirt weary of his wife. The metaphor snores like the wife, like the wind, the sea. He dreams of numbers on hotel doors.

He dies in late summer. It was that or the crop. Or the horse that isn’t quite ready. Or stopping the stone rolling. The stone rolling, his epitaph.
TONGUE

The tongue like a prince
stands up

ready for anything
nipple dick ice-cream

the little cosmos
of a speck in the eye

his work is cut out for him
his manual goes on for reams

the how-to the unexpected
pleasures the why

and wherefore long hours
and over-time

liberal in church
leftist at the polls

he's no fool knows
what he wants and gets it

at night he mates
in an ivory bed

in a wet red room
lit by silver and gold

tasting what's offered
not a good word to his name
MILK & HONEY

The word *drowse*
asleep in the mouth

The behind of an ear lobe
waiting like a flame

Rural wires buzzing
like an honest mistake

The slip of water over
something vaguely reptile

Wet thighs
dry thighs the one & the other

A brown soap bowl
old as noon

A cat’s ear
carved carefully from amethyst

The rude calendar
refusing to move

Iowa as maternal
as a pool table

The lost gold pen
at an accident

The cool bong of tennis
at seven in Michigan’s June
A warm-hearted fool sculpting soap in his room

The best intentions lolloping like one-word poems
NEEDING BINOCULARS

To fondle the womanly neighbors, sunburned in paisley, hair the color of barley or bears, children scattered out of their bellies like a broken necklace, squalling out of Kool-aid mouths

To see the children grilled on a spit like capons on the linoleum lawns, chihuahuas nervous as castanets

To know the tree's sentiments and longings where it stands ankle-deep in wax, reflected like a lover, its leaves so much gibberish of green, its birds pinging the floor like empty cartridges when it sneezes

To attend on the familiar that is far, the comfort of the moon only feet closer instead of miles, like a long-ago friend who chews with his mouth open, the sky shining like a million sheriffs
HERE IN THE EAR

First, what we want, paint peeling from a garage with an initial on it, juicy grass escaping chaff, leopards losing their spots, finally, washing ash-trays, her new dress flapping on the clothesline or falling to the floor like obsolete wings that carried her above Sao Tome ê Principe momentarily and Sangre de Cristo eternally, clouds in her mouth, the universe a shampoo in the hair she will leave souvenirs of on my pillow.

Then, what we don’t, daily cleaning of bayonets, the doing away with past cats in a concrete room, their large and tiny cries like soiled balloons, a wah-wah guitar that is like the head of a coral snake that is like the sun in her period, a body count, the little squeal of pale beige crabs in the bowl or the howl of large white crabs exploded by Hemingway in a climate so warm the pores have no time to close.

And last, indifferent though we are, the knuckle-ball of storm mounting the horizon, that old white horse wobbly by its grave, the dictionary of trees silent, at a loss, penciled-in calendars biding their time, some worthy Japanese gentlemen discussing Picasso or Braque near the watershed or the corncrib, the child of one of them divining with the stomach of a sheep, a limb of peach, the Archer wheeling south with an empty quiver.
THE PENINSULA IS OPEN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS A DAY

for Norman Dubie

I’m speaking of your heart:
late November — your father’s dog gone mad,
shoots ahead on the cracked lake — you aim,
his legs trail out like filament.
You want to take
a loaf of snow in your hands, press snow
to his shagged throat . . .
it’s a trail clear to the horizon: impossible
to follow. As you skate away,
he’s a gray skater down and frozen.

Now on walks, his warm jaws close
on your elbow. He’s
your father, marching into the snow and
you remember your father gray, how he tucks in
the cuffs of his trousers and offers
you his face.

Think of the crack between curtain and window,
how you can squeeze through
to the three-day whiteout, the hunched peninsula.
And it’s the terrible water rumbling
that wakes you.
The low ceiling floats — you, under its ice
until your father comes back romantic:

the shape with soft edges
you thought gone into years of Spring thaw.
The shape sealed in the ice
between water and air, that watches you
on your metal skates: part of a storybook
as you slide over his face.
WAYS

Gratefully,
with family around;
held to known hands:
the old way.

* 

In a motel bathroom,
able unable to get to
the phone.

* 

While sirens flash,
watching blood channel;
trapped in the bite
of acetylene torches.

* 

Fog and a mountain:
the warning lights pulse.
A belt in the gut.
All of you.

* 

Feeling for handholds
on a sheer face,
cheek to cold stone.

* 

The pain,
weighing tons,
shifting.

* 

In prison,
the end of a sentence.
A red flannel shirt, jogging, against traffic.

Running uphill through old films, under orders.

Hearing the whistle that notes a trajectory.

Tubes at both ends; paying for it. Not even the nurses can smile.


Drunk, a halfhour before sunrise. Unable, for once, not to reach for the gun.
*  
Still listening for music.  
A band at the corner:  
turning maybe this way.  
Or that.  
*  
Barely come out  
of your doctor's brick office:  
counting, already,  
on how friends will figure.  
Figuring, newly,  
the ways old friends managed.  
Managing courage:  
weeks of more tests.
I PASS ON THE ROAD, SEE MYSELF IN A COUNTRY GRAVEYARD

*for Walker R. Hall 1901-1970*

Three chairs abandoned in the field
Imply a table, suggesting that I write this.
My father is dying. I love my life.

I no longer know the names of things.
I’m falling, with a smile.
There are no mistakes in love.

I am my own lover, finally.
I teach Bach or baseball.
It makes no difference.

My father is dying.
My son and I will drive
A thousand miles when it happens.
GURNEY NORMAN, KENTUCKY COAL FIELD ORPHAN, IS GURNEY STRONGER THAN HISTORY, OR WHAT?

There he is in the lookout on top of the mountain! Binoculars, books, typewriter, and taperecorder. Surrounding him on the walls are envelopes, thousands of envelopes, one for each day he's lived. When he recollects he writes his recollection down and puts it in its proper place. He might be the only man alive who remembers that day in 1944 when Max Terhune and his talking dummy performed in the ballpark in Pennington Gap, Virginia. Gurney's frail father left early on a Greyhound for the VA hospital, his belongings in a paper sack. Gurney's mother, hiding behind doors, was insane. His paranoid uncle kept him up at night with a gun. His granny bought a souped-up Chevy with Grandad's cataract money. Listen to them rocker arms, she said, You can't trust nobody about nothing no more! Betrayal, loneliness, and loss, church boarding schools with faggot coaches, hemorrhages on the kitchen floor, kinfOLks fighting, failure, guilt, abandonment, madness, kinfOLks sick and helpless, deaths in institutions; there were shootings, and finally the strip miners came, poisoned the wells and tore the very mountains down. And yet, returning from his grandfather's funeral, Gurney brought a suitcase full of moonpies, had a moonpie and Dr. Pepper party, then dropped acid on blast off for Apollo 11 at six the next morning. The trick, he says, is to live in the present, not the past or the future. The trick, I believe, is to live like Gurney, in all three! He says that all is as good as it could be, and when he says that, who am I to say it isn't true? I think that Gurney is the three gay-eyed Chinamen climbing the mountain in the great Yeats poem! Praise Gurney, he's King of the Mountain!
Sind das die Gärten des Todes?
Steigen die schwarzen Wasser?
Verwest das Bunte der Vögel?
Die Lippen fragen.
Die Lippen beten,
beten beständig Versäumnisse.

Zerfällt die Zeit?
Wann ist die Zeit zerfallen?
Endet die Zeit?
Einmal Zeit haben.
Zeit nehmen und gehen,
(so für sich hin, Herr Goethe)
entlang den lautschreiigen Rändern.

“Wenn ich nun
keine Zeit mehr für die Zeit
habe, was dann?”
fragt mein Sohn.
THEN WHAT

Those are the gardens of death?
The black waters rising?
The colors of the birds’ decay?
Your lips ask.
Your lips pray,
pray for delays,
again and again.

Time falling to pieces?
When did time do that?
Time ending?
What if you had
time sometime.
Take some and move
(minding your own business, Mr. Goethe)
along the screaming borders.

“What if I don’t
have time for time,
what then?”
my son asks.

translated by Stuart Friebert
THE ENTRY

When he has been walking for so many years why is his sack so heavy? And in those woods which he thought he knew so well. But he is older, and lost. The paths have gone. He does not know where he is at all. At last he comes out on a rise above a railroad track. Down there between the banks the snow is still drifted. It is spring, but the snow is still deep there. More spring snow may fall tonight. A train comes by, southbound. Passengers look at him. Some point him out. He looks at himself. The train has gone. He walks on, along the tracks, northward, until he sees a station ahead of him. The ties, from which the snow has melted, look like a flight of stairs going neither up nor down. He does not even know what he has in his sack.
It is never easy to make sound judgments about the art of one’s own era. The typical sources of difficulty are well known. When we add to them the variety and energy of contemporary American poetry, the problem is greatly compounded. How do we sort out good from bad, phony from authentic, original from derivative?

Why not leave it to the work of time? That is, of course, one solution. A hundred years, even fifty, will show us which poems and poets were best. And the impulse to turn away from judgment is surely connected with the laudable fact that American poetry has taught itself to accept wider horizons. It has shaken off the schizophrenia of the Fifties (either Wilbur or Ginsberg), and opened itself to many new and invigorating influences, putting Auden to one side and ending his temporary domination. One result has been an air of generosity and community among poets in the last decade that does them credit.

But the healthy variety I spoke of is best served in its own time by sound judgment and sensible standards. The new tolerance needs a counterbalancing force, and we cannot expect the poets to provide it. They have agreed, in effect, to disagree. Each is bound to believe in his or her own work, preferring it to that of others and fashioning friendships and allegiances accordingly. That is to be expected. It is the editors and critics who ought to counteract the circles of friendship and promotion formed by workshops, common influences, and mutual admiration. Yet to glance through most magazines and anthologies, or to search for sound criticism, is to realize that editorial discrimination scarcely exists, and that what little criticism there is is marked by ineptitude and irresponsibility. The magazines either resort to backscratching and bias, or, when they aspire to some catholicity, combine prestige with unreadability because their editorial policies lack real conviction, consisting merely of
old-fashioned tastes which try to coexist uneasily with a feeble response to "trends."

The situation is curiously similar with criticism. At one extreme are the poets, hustling their friends or indulging themselves in commentary that is stimulating but so opinionated or eccentric as to be sharply limited in value. At the other are the few professional critics who deal with contemporary poetry and who undertake discussions that are generally plodding, banal, and out of touch with the life of the language and possibilities of the imagination. It is a paradox worth pondering that America contains more people who have devoted their lives to studying, teaching, and writing about literature than any other era one can think of; at the same time probably no era has been so lacking in sensible and discriminating criticism of its own literature. Part of the blame must lie in the area of education, where teachers of literature — especially in the graduate schools — devote their lives to literature only as a phenomenon of the past. They are afraid to engage their minds and imaginations with it as a living entity, and they tend to constrain their students to the same lifeless patterns.

My purpose here is not to write a jeremiad on education or literary editing, however. Nor can I claim, having briefly diagnosed an illness, to undertake an instant cure. I do think, though, that an effort to try to describe, clearly and carefully and a little bit at a time, the basis of excellence in contemporary poetry, is worthwhile.

I propose to begin that task here by juxtaposing two poems, one by William Stafford and one by James Dickey. One may well be a source for the other; Dickey quoted the Stafford poem admiringly in a review at one time, and later, it seems safe to venture, was inspired by it in a poem of his own. But the point here is not to indulge in source-hunting or to suggest that the relation of one poem to the other by influence is an adequate basis for judgment. It is too easy, as Roethke's fine essay "How to Write Like Somebody Else," points out, to dismiss something as derivative. Indeed, the term needs careful
definition. In this case, I am going to assume that it makes no difference which poem came first or whether there is any question of borrowing. My interest in bringing the two poems together lies in their different treatments of similar subjects, and in the fact that one poem can be identified as good and the other as inadequate by means of study and discussion that have no reference to other poems, personalities, or questions of literary reputation. If this is true, then the problem of identifying excellence is not so severe as it might seem, for my approach suggests that careful reading, along with a trust in one’s own responses and an honesty about those responses are reliable, if not infallible, guides to making sound judgments about contemporary poetry.

Here are the poems:

CEREMONY

On the third finger of my left hand
under the bank of the Ninnescah
a muskrat whirled and bit to the bone.
The mangled hand made the water red.

That was something the ocean would remember:
I saw me in the current, flowing through the land,
rolling, touching roots, the world incarnadined,
and the river richer by a kind of marriage.

While in the woods an owl started quavering
with drops like tears I raised my arm.
Under the bank a muskrat was trembling
with meaning my hand would wear forever.

In that river my blood flowed on.

William Stafford, West of Your City (1960)
THE POISONED MAN

When the rattlesnake bit, I lay
In a dream of the country, and dreamed
Day after day of the river,

Where I sat with a jackknife and quickly
Opened my sole to the water.
Blood shed for the sake of one’s life

Takes on the hid shape of the channel,
Disappearing under logs and through boulders.
The freezing river poured on

And, as it took hold of my blood,
Leapt up round the rocks and boiled over.
I felt that my heart’s blood could flow

Unendingly out of the mountain,
Splitting bedrock apart upon redness,
And the current of life at my instep

Give deathlessly as a spring.
Some leaves fell from trees and whirled under.
I saw my struck bloodstream assume,

Inside the cold path of the river,
The inmost routes of a serpent
Through grass, through branches and leaves.

When I rose, the live oaks were ashen
And the wild grass was dead without flame.
Through the blasted cornfield I hobbled,
My foot tied up in my shirt,  
And met my old wife in the garden,  
Where she reached for a withering apple.

I lay in the country and dreamed  
Of the substance and course of the river  
While the different colors of fever

Like quilt patches flickered upon me.  
At last I arose, with the poison  
Gone out of the seam of the scar,

And brought my wife eastward and weeping,  
Through the copper fields springing alive  
With the promise of harvest for no one.

James Dickey, *Helmets* (1964)

Even typing the two poems, as I drafted this essay, showed me a difference. The Stafford poem was a pleasure to put on paper because of the sense of rightness and balance that pervades it; its length is perfect because it says what it has to say and clears out. The Dickey poem, on the other hand, seemed to drag on; I kept glancing ahead to see how far I had to go. I think the secret truth about poems like "The Poisoned Man" is that we accord them respect when we run across them in places like *The New Yorker* (where it first appeared) while we cannot in fact accord them interest or admiration. Maybe if magazine editors and anthologists had to type or set for the printer the poems they sometimes select by happy skimming or by automatic response to reputation, we could begin to move toward a higher standard.

Anyone who teaches poetry might like to undertake the experiment of asking a class to discuss and evaluate these poems. From such a discussion would emerge, I predict, the valuable
lesson (not often found in textbooks of New Critical, or any other, persuasion) that the presence of characteristic literary devices — symbolism, mythic references, use of a persona — is no guarantee that literature has been achieved: on the contrary, in Dickey’s poem the heavy use of such devices (the garden and apple allusions, the too-familiar wasteland pattern) becomes rhetorical in the bad sense, signalling the absence of the kind of authentic grounding in experience and consciousness the shorter poem has. One had to tread carefully here; students might leap to the easy conclusion that because they are inclined to believe that Stafford really was bitten by a muskrat (despite the strategic choice of finger) and to doubt seriously whether Dickey’s poisoned man and rattlesnake have any existence outside their poem, excellence has somehow to do with realism versus fantasy. But it’s scarcely that simple. Indeed, it’s just possible that Dickey was bitten and didn’t know how to treat the experience except by a lot of “literary” falsification, while Stafford, unscathed, had the skill and imagination to make a fiction plausible. Similarly, we cannot say that one poem succeeds because the poet seems to speak directly, in his own voice and from his own experience, while the other fails by erecting a persona, the poisoned man, to tell us the story. It is rather a question of authenticity of voice; the voice in Stafford’s poem, whether his own or an invention for the needs of the poem, is believable and natural, while the voice in Dickey’s poem seems forced, speaking not out of urgency or insight but in response to demands of the author for a certain “poetic” ambiance and sequence. Students who thought from these examples that a persona tended to falsify a poem as a general rule, could be disabused by studying a poem that used persona successfully — one of Jarrell’s or Roethke’s — in conjunction with one of those “confessional” poems in which the poet succeeds only in convincing us that his or her life is capable of boring us to tears.

The mention of confessional poetry points toward another crucial difference between these poems: the humility from which the Stafford poem springs as opposed to the essential
egomania of the Dickey poem. It's interesting, I think, that the speaker in the Stafford poem is wry about his effect on his environment as he bleeds into the river. "The world incarnadined," and the responsive calling of the owl show us how easily the personal converts to the universal, but we sense the speaker's awareness that this is illusory. In fact, the "kind of marriage" in the sharing of meaning between hand, muskrat, and river moves away from the distinctly personal. The "my" at the end of the poem has lost its possessive ring, and the final image glimpses that loss of self associated with visionary experience and with much great poetry. The movement of "The Poisoned Man" is quite the opposite. The speaker's "dream" becomes the reality of the poem, allowing him to see his experience as crucial to, and more important than, the world it is part of; his universe is homocentric, his poisoning is the poisoning of everything, he is Adam and the wounded fisher-king of the wasteland. Dickey does hedge at times. Picking up, perhaps, on Stafford's "I saw me in the current," his speaker "dreams," only "feels" that his heart's blood has great power, and is generally feverish. But there seems to be little irony at work in the poem. We are asked to take the enormity of the man's interaction with his environment seriously, and the ending is grandiose and apocalyptically downbeat. It is partly a question of tone: Stafford's is complex but controlled, while Dickey's skids around yet is relatively single-minded.

One might go on to further speculation about the two poets from this difference. Stafford's poems are characteristically self-effacing, and to good effect again and again, while Dickey pursues what we might call the poetry of the swollen ego pretty relentlessly. What interests me about this particular difference between the poems, however, is not what it may illustrate about the poets, but its possibility as a way of discriminating among all sorts of poems, and perhaps as an indication of the fundamental weakness of what is called "confessional" poetry. Let me suggest that there are two basic directions in which the current of a poem may flow: toward the ego and its
concerns, or away from the individual self and toward the existence of things beyond it, be they other people, animals, plants, stones or water. In the first case the ego ingests and incorporates the world, colonizing, as it were, rattlesnakes and rivers; the world becomes the self. In the second, the opposite happens; the outward flow, the "negative capability" that obliterates self-concern, allows the self to become the world. It's easy to see how the two experiences can appear to be identical: world equals self on the one hand, self equals world on the other. Isn't that saying the same thing? But the difference is surely crucial. One kind of poem is selfish, receding into a childish and fearful ignorance. The other is selfless, moving toward maturity, acceptance, understanding. If this difference is valid, then it helps to explain the unease one feels with poetry in which the concerns and demands of the self are exalted, even idealized. It looks like poetry, but it is an inversion, even a parody, of the real thing. The difference is greatly apparent between poets like Anne Sexton and Gary Snyder. Evidently, it is also present, in a subtler form, between poets like Stafford and Dickey. I invite the reader to test it on other examples.

In addition to these fundamental differences, a discussion of "Ceremony" and "The Poisoned Man" could explore a number of details. The two poems provide an object lesson in meter versus true rhythm. Dickey characteristically relies on his rocking-horse anapests, occasionally lapsing into prose, as in the sixth line, where "blood" and "shed" deserve equal emphasis but where our ears, constrained by the first five lines, give "blood" short shrift in order to be able to continue at the gallop. The eighth line carries a similar stumble. The Stafford poem ties itself to no "system" except an average of four stresses to the line, but its range includes the deliberate flatness of the fourth line, where "mangled hand" and "wáter réd" have a slowing and numbing quality, the easy colloquial movement of the fifth, where Stafford characteristically converts cliché to his own superb use, and the graceful symmetry of the eighth, where the alliteration points up the balance.
Then too, there is the question of diction. Dickey's seems to me to suffer from a kind of verbal hypertension. This tactic consists of introducing plenty of strong verbs, whether they belong or not, plus adjectives and adverbs, often verb-derived, to whip up a spurious sense of energy and stretched perspectives. Thus, when the blood hits the "freezing" river in "The Poisoned Man" it leaps up and boils over, while the speaker feels that his blood could "flow/Unendingly" and "deathlessly," splitting bedrock in the process. It is all very dramatic, and Stafford's quiet "made the water red" and "flowing . . . rolling . . . touching roots" may seem tame by comparison. But each word in "Ceremony" is judiciously chosen and subtly deployed, in a way that will bear scrutiny far more effectively than the diction of "The Poisoned Man."

A comparative study of form in the two poems offers another instructive contrast. Both the lines and the quatrains in "Ceremony" are genuine units, dividing the experience of the poem into meaningful segments of insight, reinforcing the movement of meaning from chance accident to the sense of ceremony that is somehow concentrated in the final, isolated line. Dickey's triplets, on the other hand, while they provide a look of order and control, seem, especially by comparison to Stafford's, perfunctory and even arbitrary.

The value of the class discussion I have imagined might well be the teacher's as much as anyone's. For Dickey's poem is precisely the sort that takes teachers in. They realize that they can "teach" it by pointing out its "devices," which frees them from the task of evaluating it. They have learned to identify literature by plugging in certain categories. Cut loose from certifiable classics, they tend to lack real discrimination. Students are often wiser in these matters — having fewer preconceptions — than their teachers. They'll be quick to sense, I predict, that Dickey's poem is pretentious, manufactured, and lacking in interest. If asked to consider it next to the Stafford poem, having something fresh and genuinely resonant to com-
pare with, they'll arrive at a sound judgment with ease and rapidity.

Is there a principle or two to be derived from this double example? Some readers will think I am writing to pillory Dickey and praise Stafford, but that is not the case. Dickey has written better poems than "The Poisoned Man," Stafford has fallen short of "Ceremony." It may be true that the examples I have chosen show some of Dickey's characteristic weaknesses and highlight Stafford's strengths, but that line of investigation would require a much more detailed discussion of both poets. My purpose has been to use these examples to look for some kind of rule or standard, derived from their juxtaposition and the lesson of the clear difference between their levels of achievement, that a reader might take along to other poets and quite different poems.

Perhaps it is simply the lesson that Poetry is not poetry. Put it another way: a poem may be loaded with techniques and conventions we have been taught to think of respectfully as belonging with great poems, and all for nothing. If the result is boring, we ought to be willing to say so. I am not talking about snap judgments. If we find our minds wandering, our glance drawn to the window as we read, we ought to ask why. The answer may be that we have hold of a poet whose world is not easy to enter or comprehend — a Stevens, a Montale, a Pound — and who will reward patience. But it may also be that we know quite well what the poet is doing and we are not truly involved or interested. He or she is going through the motions, and so are we. I used to be upset with myself when I could not get interested in contemporary poems I had seen vigorously praised, or volumes that had won large national awards. Not any more. Boring is boring. Pretentious is pretentious. A reader can perform the test of time by means of patience, honesty, and discrimination.

Put it yet another way: good poetry just can't be manufactured. My feeling about Stafford's poem is that its best moments surprised him, while I also feel sure that Dickey had
the idea for his poem and wrote it out accordingly, mixing in myth and meter as if writing a poem were like following a recipe. Whether my sense of the matter exactly corresponds to the creative process in both cases doesn’t really matter; it’s the fact that the poems manage to convey those separate impressions that makes one succeed and the other fail. And the failure of Dickey’s is especially ironic in light of its pretense to the visionary. Epigrams and satires and propaganda poems may perhaps be written to order, but there is just no way, American know-how and technological confidence notwithstanding, to manufacture the visionary. “The Poisoned Man,” with its bloated cargo of visionary apparatus, sinks down to depths that illumination can never penetrate; “Ceremony,” lightweight and unassuming, soars up into daylight. It has the kind of vision and perspective we hope for from poetry and seldom get.

I offer, then, four precepts. 1. The reader’s experience of the poem, the degree of interest and the depth of involvement, is still the best guide to the identification of true excellence. 2. A good poem is not a bundle of devices that add up to literature, but an unerring trajectory into insight, where excellence has no inherent relation to length, use of “technique,” complexity of situation, or literary reputation. 3. The creative process can’t be an assembly line, especially where the lyric and the visionary are involved; a good poem transcends its author’s intention and understanding, while a bad poem is under its overconfident author’s control, alas, at every point. 4. Poetry which indulges the self in its greed and obsessiveness is inimical to the true spirit of poetry, which seeks self-transcendence.

These notions are so simple that I would be embarrassed to present them if I did not see them violated daily by publishers, editors, critics, and teachers. I know too that some readers will wish I had chosen a less obvious example, as for example, two poems by the same poet. That, I would agree, ought to be the next step, and it would perhaps prove to be a more crucial one. But let those who think the Stafford-Dickey example
too basic or obvious glance through the leading magazines that feature poetry or inspect one of the familiar anthologies; or let them talk to the average college English teacher.

Literary theorists may shake their heads too, at the vagueness of my precepts, their failure to cover every case, their risky suppositions about inspiration. Of course they are inadequate. But let this demonstration of a few basic principles be a beginning, a first exploration. I will abandon my formulations in favor of rules enunciated by the theorists when I know those theorists can deal adequately with the task of discriminating successfully among contemporary poems. As for my readers, they will have to determine whether my pronouncements, extrapolated and used in practice, have any validity. If they help at all to distinguish between the bite of the muskrat and the bite of the rattlesnake, I’ll be pleased.
CONTRIBUTORS

JON ANDERSON is teaching this year at Ohio University in Athens. He has published two books of poetry, Looking for Jonathan and Death & Friends, both with Pittsburgh.

PHILIP BOOTH has published four collections, most recently Margins (New and Selected Poems), all with Viking Press.

RUSSELL EDSON is the author of two new books: The Childhood of an Equestrian, just out from Harper & Row, and The Clam Theater, due this winter from Wesleyan. "Both books," he writes, "contain materials similar in form to the things to be used in FIELD; that is to say, prose, or that unfortunate term, 'prose poems.'"

Digging for Indians, GARY GILDNER'S second collection, was published by Pittsburgh. His work has appeared regularly in FIELD.

"Say that I'm a photographer, writer, and teacher," writes JAMES BAKER HALL adding that he is currently working on a monograph of the photographs of the late Ralph Eugene Meatyard.

DENISE LEVERTOV'S newest book is Footprints, due this fall from New Directions. She lives in Boston, where she and her husband, Mitchell Goodman, are active with the organization Resist.

ELIZABETH LIBBEY is currently a member of the graduate poetry workshop at the University of Iowa. Her poems have appeared in Poetry Northwest and December. She is 25 years old.

W. S. MERWIN's next book, Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment, is scheduled for publication by Atheneum in January.

The translations of ERICA PEDRETTI in this issue are taken from her collection of short prose texts, harmloses bitte (Suhrkamp, 1970). She studied art in Zürich, and has lived and worked in Berlin and New York. Presently she makes her home in Celerina. Her other translator, Franz Wright, is a student at Oberlin College.

DANNY L. RENDLEMAN'S first book, Signals to the Blind, came out this summer from Ithaca House.

"My essay," writes ADRIENNE RICH, "is a very close dialogue with Galway's, and in order to deal with this fact I've quoted a good deal from his, or rather paraphrased. I hope this will make it possible for readers to get the general argument of my essay without having read his, although I would hope it would send them back to his, which I think is one of the most interesting and relevant pieces of critical writing to come out anywhere in a long time."

The Elegies by RAINER MARIA RILKE in this issue continue a serialization which will conclude in FIELD #9. The entire sequence will eventually be published by The Barn Dream Press.
PETER SEARS has published poems in a number of small magazines. He is teaching this year at Princeton Day School and spent part of the summer organizing a writers' group in the Princeton area.

DAVID SHAPIRO'S conversation with KENNETH KOCH, like his article on John Ashbery ("Urgent Masks," FIELD #5), is scheduled to appear in a collection of essays by and about contemporary poets edited by Al Poulin and published by Dutton.

LYNN SHOEMAKER is now living and writing in Ithaca, New York, where he has just finished putting together his first book-length manuscript of poetry, called Coming Home.

ROLF-RAFAEL SCHRÖER is alive and well in Düsseldorf. In addition to composing and writing a lot, he's organizing poetry readings in pubs in just the right neighborhoods.

JOAN SWIFT'S first book, This Element, was published by Alan Swallow. She lives in Oakland, California.

JEAN VALENTINE lives in New York City with her two daughters. Her most recent book is Pilgrims (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969). She teaches at Hunter and, one day a week, travels to Yale to conduct a poetry workshop at Pierson College.

We have temporarily mislaid our correspondence with R. G. VLIEIT, but can report that this is his second appearance in FIELD; he was represented in #2 by a fine poem, "Emily Dickinson."

JOHN WOODS has published five books of poetry, the most recent and comprehensive of which is Turning to Look Back: Poems, 1955-1970 (Indiana University Press). He teaches at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo.
Do You Own the Other Six Fields?

If not, complete your set by ordering from our limited supply of available back issues. FIELD #1, $3 a copy; FIELD #2-6, $1.50 a copy.

FIELD #1  Essay: Denise Levertov's "Work and Inspiration: Inviting the Muse"

Translations: Salinas by Merwin, Brambach by Young, Krolow and Eich by Friebert, Tranströmer by Bly (with an introductory note by Bly)

Poems: Bill Aarnes, Jon Anderson, Marvin Bell, Wendell Berry, Bill Faber, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Robert Francis, John Haines, Donald Hall, Louis Hammer, Dennis Schmitz, Stephen Shrader, Louis Simpson, Robin Skelton, Gary Snyder, William Stafford

FIELD #2  Essays: William Stafford's "A Way of Writing," Robert Bly's "Some Notes on Donald Hall"

Translations: Andrade and Rodriguez by Silver, Elmentedhaler and Schröer by Friebert, Kao K'i by Rexroth


Translations: Popa by Simic (with a note by Simic), Eich by Young and Bradley, Krolow by Bradley and Cunningham

Poems: Bruce Andrews, Marvin Bell, Paul Callahan, Robert Creeley, Robert Francis,

FIELD #4  Essays: Margaret Atwood’s "Poetic Process?" Galway Kinnell’s "Poetry, Personality, and Death"
Translations: Tranströmer by Walker, Herbert by Friebert, Alberti by Strand

FIELD #5  Essay: David Shapiro’s "Urgent Masks: An Introduction to John Ashbery’s Poetry"
Translations: Jozsef by Batki, Eich by Walker, Rilke by Young

FIELD #6  Prose Text: Peter Bichsel’s "Grammar of a Departure"
Translations: Domin by Boehm and Young, Rilke by Young, Péret by Benedikt, Krolow by Friebert, Vallejo by Smith (with a note by Smith)
Poems: Michael Benedikt, Andrew Carrigan, Gary Gildner, Shirley Kaufman, Thomas Lux, Sandra McPherson, Danny Rendleman, Dennis Schmitz, Richard Shelton, Charles Simic, Mark Strand