FIELD

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It was not my fault, these animals
who once were lovers

it was not my fault, the snouts
and hooves, the tongues
thickening and rough, the mouths grown over
with teeth and fur

I did not add the shaggy
rugs, the tusked masks,
they happened

I did not say anything, I sat
and watched, they happened
because I did not say anything.

It was not my fault, these animals
who could no longer touch me
through the rinds of their hardening skins,
these animals dying
of thirst because they could not speak

these drying skeletons
that have crashed and litter the ground
under the cliffs, these
wrecked words.
There must be more for you to do
than permit yourself to be shoved
by the wind from coast
to coast to coast, boot on the boat prow
to hold the wooden body
under, soul in control

Ask at my temples
where the moon snakes, tongues of the dark
speak like bones unlocking, leaves falling
of a future you won’t believe in

Ask who keeps the wind
Ask what is sacred

Don’t you get tired of killing
those whose deaths have been predicted
and are therefore dead already?

Don’t you get tired of wanting
to live forever?

Don’t you get tired of saying Onward?
When you look at nothing
what are you looking at?
Whose face floats on the water
dissolving like a paper plate?

It's the first one, remember,
the one you thought you abandoned
along with the furniture.

You returned to her after the other war
and look what happened.
Now you are wondering
whether to do it again.

Meanwhile she sits in her chair
waxing and waning
like an inner tube or a mother,
breathing out, breathing in,

surrounded by bowls, bowls, bowls,
tributes from the suitors
who are having a good time in the kitchen

waiting for her to decide
on the dialogue for this evening
which will be in perfect taste
and will include tea and sex
dispensed graciously both at once.

She's up to something, she's weaving
histories, they are never right,
she has to do them over,
she is weaving her version,

the one you will believe in,
the only one you will hear.
Here are the holy birds, 
grub white, with solid blood 
woobbling on their heads and throats.

They eat seeds and dirt, live in a shack, 
lay eggs, each bursting 
with a yellow sun, divine 
as lunch, squeeze out, 
there is only one word for it, shit, 
which transforms itself to beets 
or peonies, if you prefer.

We too eat 
and grow fat, you aren't content 
with that, you want more, 
you want me to tell you 
the future. That's my job, 
one of them, but I advise you 
don't push your luck.

To know the future 
there must be a death. 
Pass me the axe.

As you can see 
the future is a mess, 
snarled guts all over the yard 
and that snakey orange eye 
staring up from the sticky grass 
round as a target, stopped 
dead, intense as love.
Larry Levis

LINNETS

1.

One morning with a 12-gauge my brother shot what he said was a linnet. He did this at close range where it sang on a flowering almond branch. Anyone could have done the same and shrugged it off, but my brother joked about it for days, describing how nothing remained of it, how he watched for feathers and counted only two gold ones which he slipped behind his ear. He grew uneasy and careless; nothing remained. He wore loud ties and two tone shoes. He sold shoes, he sold soap. Nothing remained. He drove on the roads with a little hole in the air behind him.

2.

But in the high court of linnets he does not get off so easily. He is judged and sentenced to pull me on a rough cart through town. He is further punished since each feather of the dead bird falls around me, not him, and each falls as a separate linnet, and each feather lost from one of these becomes a linnet. While he is condemned to feel nothing ever settle on his shoulders, which are hunched over and still, linnets gather around me. In their singing, they cleanse my ears of all language but that of linnets. My gaze takes on the terrible gaze of song birds. And I find that I too am condemned, and must stitch together, out of glue, loose feathers, droppings, weeds and garbage I find along the street, the original linnet, or, if I fail, be condemned to be pulled in a cart by my brother forever. We are tired of each other, tired of being brothers like this. The backside of his head, close cropped, is what I notice when I look up from work. To fashion the eyes, the gaze, the tongue and trance of a linnet is impossible. The eyelids are impos-
sibly delicate and thin. I am dragged through the striped zoo of the town. One day I throw down the first stillborn linnet, then another, then more. Then one of them begins singing.

3.

As my brother walks through an intersection the noise from hundreds of thin wings, linnet wings, becomes his silence. He shouts in his loud clothes all day. God grows balder.

4.

Whales dry up on beaches by themselves. The large bones in their heads, their silence, Is a way of turning inward.

Elephants die in exile. Their tusks begin curling, begin growing into their skulls.

My father once stopped a stray dog With a 12-gauge, a blast in the spine. But you see them on the roads, trotting through rain.

Cattle are slaughtered routinely. But pigs are intelligent and vicious to the end. Their squeals burn circles.

Mice are running over the freezing snow. Wolverines will destroy kitchens for pleasure. Wolverines are so terrible you must give in.

The waist of a weasel is also lovely. It slips away.

The skies under the turtle’s shell are birdless.
These shadows become carp rising slowly. The black
Trees are green again. The creeks are full
And the wooden bridge trembles.

The suicides slip beneath you, shining.
You think if you watched them long enough
You would become fluent in their ten foreign tongues

Of light and drummed fingers and inbreedings.

5.
Snakes swallow birds, mice, anything warm.
Beaten to death with a length of pipe,
A snake will move for hours afterward, digesting.

In fact their death takes too long.
In their stillness it may be they outlast death.
They are like stones the moment after

A wind passes over.
The tough skin around a snake’s eyes
Is ignorant and eternal.

They are made into belts and wallets.
Their delicate meat can be eaten.
But you can’t be sure.

In the morning another snake lies curled
On the branch just over your head.
Under the saint’s heel in the painting,  
A gopher snake sleeps.  
The saint’s eyes are syphilitic with vision.

He looks the Lord in the face.  
He is like the bridge the laborers shrug at  
As they wade across the water at night.

*  
When LaBonna Stivers brought a 4 foot bullsnake to High Mass, she stroked its lifted throat; she smiled: “Snakes don’t have no minds.”

6.  
You can’t be sure. Your whole family  
May be wiped out by cholera. As the plums Blossom, you may hang yourself.

Or you may love a woman whose low laugh  
Makes her belly shake softly.  
She wants you to stay, and you should have.

*  
Or like your brother, you may go  
Into the almond orchard to kill  
Whatever moves. You may want to go

Against the little psalms and clear gazings  
Of birds, against yourself, a 12-gauge  
Crooked negligently over your shoulder.

You’re tired of summer.  
You want to stop all the singing.  
And everything is singing.
At close range you blow a linnet
Into nothing at all, into the silence
Of stumps, where everyone sits and whittles.

* 

Your brother grows into a stranger.
He walks into town in the rain.
Two gold feathers behind his ear.

He is too indifferent to wave.
He buys all the rain ahead of him,
And sells all the silence behind him.

7. Linnet Taxidermy

I thought when finished
it would break into flight, its beak
a Chinese trumpet over the deepest lakes.
But with each feather it grows colder to the touch.
I attach the wings which wait for the glacier
to slide under them. The viewpoint of ice
is birdless. I close my eyes,
I give up.

* 

I meet my brother in Los Angeles.
I offer him rain
but he clears his throat.
He offers me
the freeway and the sullen huts;
the ring fingers stiffening;
the bitten words.
There are no birds he remembers. He does not remember owning a gun. He remembers nothing of the past.

He is whistling "Kansas City" on Hollywood Boulevard, a bird with half its skull eaten away in the shoebox tucked under his arm.

* *

When the matinee ends, the lights come on and we blink slowly and walk out. It is the hour when the bald usher falls in love.

* *

When we are the night and the rain, the leper on his crutch will spit once, and go on singing.

8. Matinee

Your family stands over your bed like Auks of estrangement. You ask them to look you in the eye, in the flaming aviary. But they float over in dirigibles:

in one of them a girl is undressing; in another you are waking your father.

Your wife lies hurt on the roadside and you must find her. You drive slowly, looking.
They lift higher and higher
over the snow on the Great Plains.
Goodbye, tender blimps.

9. 1973

At the end of winter
the hogs are eating abandoned cars.
We must choose between Jesus and seconal
as we walk under the big, casual spiders whitening
in ice, in tree tops. These great elms rooted in hell
hum so calmly.

My brother marching through Prussia
wears a chrome tie and sings.
Girls smoothing their dresses
become mothers. Trees grow more deeply
into the still farms.

The war ends.
A widow cradles her husband’s
acetylene torch,
the flame turns blue,
a sparrow flies out of the bare elm
and it begins again.

I’m no one’s father.
I whittle a linnet out of wood until
the bus goes completely dark around me.
The farms in their white patients’ smocks join hands.
Only the blind can smell water,
the streams moving a little,
freezing and thawing.
In Illinois one bridge is made entirely of dead linnets. When the river sings under them, their ruffled feathers turn large and black.

10. At the High Meadow

In March the arthritic horses stand in the same place all day.
A piebald mare flicks her ears back.

Ants have already taken over the eyes of the house finch on the sill.

So you think someone is coming, someone already passing the burned mill, someone with news of a city built on snow.

But over the bare table in the morning a glass of water goes blind from staring upward.

For you it’s not so easy.
You begin the long witnessing:
Table. Glass of water. Lone crow circling.

You witness the rain for weeks and there are only the two of you. You divide yourself in two and witness yourself, and it makes no difference.
You think of God dying of anthrax
in a little shed, of a matinee
in which three people sit
with their hands folded and a fourth
coughs. You come down the mountain.

11.

Until one day in a diner in Oakland
you begin dying.
It is peace time.
You have no brother.
You never had a brother.
In the matinees no one sat next to you.
This brother for whom
you have been repairing linnets all your life,
unthankful stuffed little corpses,
hoping they'd perch behind glass in museums that have
been levelled, this brother
who slept under the fig tree
turning its dark glove inside out at noon, is no one;
the strong back you rode while
the quail sang perfect triangles, was no one's.
Your shy father extinct in a single footprint,
your mother a stone growing a cuticle.
It is being suggested that you were never born, that
it never happened in linnet feathers
clinging to the storm fence along the freeway;
in the Sierra Nevadas,
in the long azure of your wife's glance,
in the roads and the standing water,
in the trembling of a spider web gone suddenly still,
it never happened.
This is a good page.
It is blank,
and getting blanker.
My mother and father
are falling asleep over it.
My brother is finishing a cigarette;
he looks at the blank moon.
My sisters walk gravely in circles.
My wife sees through it, through blankness.
My friends stop laughing, they listen
to the wind in a room in Fresno, to the wind
of this page, which is theirs,
which is blank.

They are all tired of reading,
they want to go home,
they won't be waving goodbye.

When they are gone,
the page will be crumpled,
thrown into the street.
Around it, sparrows will be feeding
on bits of garbage.
The linnet will be singing.
A man will awaken on his death bed,
not yet cured.

I will not have written these words,
I will be that silence slipping around the bend
in the river, where it curves out of sight among weeds,
the silence in which a car backfires and drives away,
and the father of that silence.
Robert Francis

DECEMBER

Dim afternoon December afternoon
Just before dark, their caps
A Christmas or un-Christmas red
The hunters.

Oh, I tell myself that death
In the woods is far far better
Than doom in the slaughterhouse.
Still, the hunters haunt me.

Does a deer die now or does a hunter
Dim afternoon December afternoon
By cold intent or accident but always
My death?
WHEN I COME

Once more the old year peters out—
all brightness is remembered
brightness.

(When I come, Bob,
it won’t be while just on my way
to going somewhere else.)

A small pine bough with nothing
better to do fingers
a windowpane.

(When I come, Bob —)

Against the wet black glass a single
oval leaf fixed
like a face.
LIKE GHOSTS OF EAGLES

The Indians have mostly gone
but not before they named the rivers
the rivers flow on
and the names of the rivers flow with them
    Susquehanna    Shenandoah

The rivers are now polluted plundered
but not the names of the rivers
cool and inviolate as ever
pure as on the morning of creation
    Tennessee    Tombigbee

If the rivers themselves should ever perish
I think the names will somehow somewhere hover
like ghosts of eagles
those mighty whisperers
    Missouri    Mississippi.
We have no money. We’ve got lots of luggage. Everything we own we carry along with us in suitcases and laced-up sacks. There are five pieces of luggage.

We arrive in a village. The town hall, the church, an inn with a dining room are all close together.

We ask for work. The inn-keeper says, we have our own unemployed. Men, even.

We spend the night at the inn. The room is cheap. It has a cold tile floor. The tiles are marine-blue and decorated with peat-red. The room has a balcony. The balcony overlooks the marketplace. Down there in the street, continual hawking, haggling, nagging, commending; everything grabbed up and sniffed over. At the fruitstands red, yellow, and green pyramids tower up. You can smell coffee. The pan of coffee beans at the roasting stand goes around and around. Skinned lambs are carried by on long spits. Gerda and I pack. We carry our luggage down into the courtyard. While I go up to get a heavy suitcase Gerda guards the bags.

I say, Where were you?
She says, in the kitchen, shelling beans.
I say, meanwhile they’ve stolen our last stitch.
She says, unfortunately not.
I say, the biggest pieces anyway.
She says, we had too much anyhow.
I say, now we have hardly anything.
She says, we’ve come out ahead all around.
I say, I was counting on that stuff.
She says, either you belong somewhere or why have bags at all.

Gerda and the innkeeper have been married a long time now. They’ve adopted me. I live in the room with marine-blue and peat-red tiles, and the balcony, over the marketplace.
Mrs. Ruddigkeit is staying at the Hotel "F... Hof." She follows the bell-boy into the elevator. The bell boy has her luggage. In his right hand he carries two travel bags. In his left, he carries a suitcase and one travel bag. He has the room key hung on a button on the front of his vest. He puts the luggage down in the elevator.

The bell-boy is small, old, and wide. He looks all cried out. His vest is made of sateen. Red in front and black in back. The bell-boy has a crew-cut. He watches Mrs. Ruddigkeit in the elevator mirror.

Mrs. Ruddigkeit has on a light blue deerskin coat. She has boots on. Her boots are beige and come up over the knee. Mrs. Ruddigkeit follows the bell-boy into the room. She says, can I give you a tip, you had such a load to drag up here.

The bell-boy holds out a hand. Mrs. Ruddigkeit looks down at it. The hand is open, slack. It floats in the air. It hovers. It vibrates. It’s stiff. The outstretched hand trembles. The individual fingers are gently separated. The palm, bent in, looks like a crumpled sofa pillow. Mrs. Ruddigkeit forgets herself staring at the hand. She takes it. The bell-boy looks away. She turns the fingers straight, bends them in, pulls on them until there’s a crack. She bends the fingers backwards. The little finger makes a right angle with the back of the hand.

The bell-boy says, they’re calling me down in the lobby. He leaves.

Mrs. Ruddigkeit turns the hand over and over. The skin on the back of it is leather-brown, soft. The hand smells of violets.

translated by Ann Maria Celona
"Men who share the same rooms, soldiers or prisoners, develop a strange alliance as if, having cast off their armor with their clothing, they fraternized every evening . . . in the ancient community of dream and fatigue."

Camus, The Guest

As we strike the earth with our bodies, for we are always falling, and standing up, and falling again, though you call it dancing, or walking, or flying, there is the sound of stone coming to rest in quarries, the last spray of sand, as we knock on earth's sullen, historical face.

If we are men with such manners, we lie down on women and hold a heart length of warm earth, penetrating, a root with a degree, a thin smile, a drinker's nose, and unlaunched hides. You will ask me if we have deserved as much, as men, so long from the mother. Yes, but some of us would hold that pose forever. Stones can leave scars on naked backs, remember, and the backyard tom has a limited voice.

There are times we strike the earth like coastal rain, thin but steady, when colors fade from store fronts, and dawn might as well be dusk, and both night. The black box on the last page of the rural weekly, passing of long cars with lights on, and flags, as though they might become lost in that night they have been chosen to carry, rainwet, with police sanction, to the plain of skulls.
Funereal, we say of that clothing and steady rain, when we hang our names and flags in a dark closet, when the priest turns off the lights below, and the sound of dirt falling reminds us of rain through leaves, or the world’s bedridden breath.

Every few years we need the quick downpour, like rivers on end, seeing the oak stump, hammering the pilings, the car lights shining at the bottom of deep wells. These are our wars. Tonight, if you lie and listen to the soughing rôle of your breath, you may understand why some men take up edged weapons, or stare at ceilings from red bath water.

There are unique colloids of water and oil, but white horses pull a box so light they don’t even lather up, so light even the gasses are colorless. The skin can be read through, and the book of the eyes slides back, unread, into the case. The fingerprint rests a moment on the flower, then sinks into its dizzying spiral. A spring day can be a room kept just the way it was when someone lived, the black wreath blossoming. Though we eat decay with both hands, the bruise is the sweetest part of the apple. Names that burned, that kissed deeply to the brain stem, that owned the Tartar plain from the high fur saddles, weather on stones, coming to rest in quarries.
Richard Hugo

LANDSCAPES

If I painted, I'd paint landscapes. In museums
I stop often at Van Ruysdale, and the wind he painted
high in European oaks gives license to my style.
I move the barn two feet. I curve the hill down
more dramatic. I put a woman on the hill against
the light, calling me to dinner. The wind I paint
is low and runs the grass down dancing to the sea.

In no time I have aged the barn stark gray.
Obviously, my cows hate no one. My wife
across the field stays carved out solid on the sky.
My tossed kiss stings her through the waves of heat
ploughed dirt gives off in August. My tossed worm
drifts beneath the cutbank where I know trout wait.
As long as wind is pouring, my paint keeps farming green.

When wind stops, men come smiling with the mortgage.
They send me the eviction notice, postage due.
My cows are thin and failing. My deaf wife snarls
and claws the chair. The creek turns putrid.
I said fifty years moss on the roof is lovely.
It rots the roof. Oaks ache but cannot stir.
I call Van Ruysdale from my knees on the museum floor.

In uniforms like yours you'll never understand.
Why these questions? The bank was wrong. The farm
is really mine. Even now along these pale green halls
I hear Van Ruysdale's wind. Please know I rearranged things
only slightly, barn and hill. This is real: the home
that warps in August and the man inside who sold it
long ago, forgot he made the deal and will not move.
My father entered the kingdom of roots
his head as still as a stone
(Laid out in black with a white tie
he blinked
and I told no one
except myself over and over)
laid out long and gray

The hands that stroked my head
the voice in the dark asking
he drove the car all the way to the river
where the ships burned
he rang with keys and coins
he knew the animals and their names
touched the nose of the horse
and kicked the German dog away
he brought Ray Astrada from Mexico in his 16th year
scolded him like a boy, gave him beer money
and commanded him to lift and push
he answered to the name father
he left in October without his hat
who my mother later said was not much at love
who answered to the name Father

Father, the world is different in many places
the old Ford Trimotors are gone to scrap
the Teraplane turned to snow
four armies passed over your birthplace
your house is gone
all your tall sisters gone
your fathers
everyone
Roosevelt ran again
you would still be afraid
You would not know me now, I have a son taller than you
I feel the first night winds catch in the almond
   the plum bend
   and I go in afraid of the death you are
I climb the tree in the vacant lot
   and leave the fruit untasted
I stare at the secrets, the small new breasts
   the sparse muff where no one lives
I blink the cold winds in from the sea
   walking with Teddy, my little one
   squeezing his hand I feel his death
I find the glacier and wash my face in Arctic dust
I shit handfuls of earth
I stand in the spring river pissing at stars
I see the diamondback at the end of the path
   hissing and rattling
   and will not shoot

The moon is a slice of hope
   the stars are burned eyes that see
the wind is the breath of the ocean
the death of the fish is the allegory
   you slice it open and spill the entrails
   you remove the spine
the architecture of the breast
   you slap it home
   the oils snap and sizzle
you live in the world
you eat all the unknown deeps
the great sea oaks rise from the roof of hell.
the bears dip their paws in clear streams
   they hug their great matted coats
   and laugh in the voices of girls
a man drops slowly like brandy or glue
In the cities of the world
the streets darken with flies
all the dead fathers fall out of heaven
and begin again
the angel of creation is a sparrow in the roadway
a million ducks out of Ecuador with the names of cities
settle on the wires
storks rise slowly pulling the houses after them
butterflies eat away the eyes of the sun
the last ashes off the fire of the brain
the last leavening of snow
grains of dirt torn from under fingernails and eyes
you drink these

There is the last darkness burning itself to death
there are nine women come in the dawn with pitchers
there is my mother
   a dark child in the schoolyard
   miles from anyone
   she has begun to bleed as her mother did
there is my brother, the first born, the mild one
   his cold breath fogging the bombsight
there is the other in his LTD
   he talks to the phone, he strokes his thighs
   he dismisses me
my mother waits for the horsecart to pass
my mother prays to become fat and wise
   she becomes fat and wise
the cat dies and it rains
the dog groans by the side door
the old hen flies up in a spasm of gold
My woman gets out of bed in the dark and washes her face
she goes to the kitchen before we waken
she picks up a skillet, an egg
(I dream:
  a man sets out on an inner-tube to Paris
  coming back from dying "the ride aint bad a tall")
the kids go off to school without socks
in the rain the worms come out to live
my father opens the telegram under the moon
  Cousin Philip is dead
  my father stands on the porch in his last summer
  he holds back his tears
  he holds back my tears

Once in childhood the stars held still all night
the moon swelled like a plum but white and silken
the last train from Chicago howled through the ghetto
I came downstairs
my father sat writing in a great black book
a pile of letters
a pile of checks
(he would pay his debts)
the moon would die
the stars jelly
the sea freeze
I would be a boy in worn shoes splashing through rain
There's a certain house still standing in Fürstengrund; it isn't the nicest house in the neighborhood, it isn't even a farm house. More like a cottage, though even that is not quite right for such a small, dilapidated box with its damp brown stains and its tiny windows whose lower ledges touch the hips of the passers-by and whose upper ledges lie along the edge of the steep roof with no drainage pipe. The house was a schnaps distillery at one time. I can't really say what went on in there, I never got in the door. In any case things were a lot wilder there, than here at Frau Engel's: if you stood just outside the windows by noon you could hear the shouting of the drunks. But the panes were so dirty that you couldn't see in except, perhaps, on winter evenings on the way home from gym or Bible class when it was already dark; then you could see the miserable glare from a light bulb, bottles, glasses sitting on red-white beer coasters, faces around the table all lit up. Now and then smoke rings would emerge from the dark hole of somebody's mouth, one after another, they grew larger and transparent, and floated toward the light looking like halos above the heads of the drinkers. You could make out the bridges of noses, the cheek bones, the heavily lidded eyes, half-foreheads, different parts of the faces of people you didn't know, probably farm hands, chauffeurs or truck drivers. Hidden behind the shoulders of some man sitting with his back to the window you got to see the black shadows pushing their way through the half-darkness in which two coals glowed in the vents of the oven and ash doors like wicked eyes, one on top of the other. In the very back a brass moon swung from side to side, you could hear laughter and too loud singing, it was terrifying. A fat womanish person came and went, came and went, holding bottles under her arms and in her hands.
But your own breath kept steaming up the window, so that nothing seemed real anymore, although you tried very hard to recognize something definite. Often the glass reflected your own face, or the face of the guy next to you who wanted to have a look too. And you met your own eyes staring back at you.

Sometimes (if there’s one thing you can count on it’s that it was unnecessary to have been so exorbitantly frightened, you should have realized that), sometimes (well, hardly ever), an immense dog leaped into the window, shook it violently and came close to breaking it. Bright yellow eyes in our eyes, and nothing but a thin pane of glass between our faces and his open mouth, his tongue, and his teeth anxious to tear us to pieces. We screamed and inside they laughed at us.

Or trying to get a better look you accidentally banged on the window: the men shook their fists at us, the inn keeper swore and rose up from the table and that’s the last thing you saw or heard before running with all your might to hide under the ramp in the malt factory yard or around the corner in the hay stack. You couldn’t stop trembling listening to them curse, even come looking for you once in a while. They didn’t look for long, though, it was cold out there and their schnaps was waiting for them inside where it was warm.

Then, if the dog wasn’t still watching the door, you snuck back to the house, partly out of courage and partly out of fear, but saw nothing more because they had hung up grey rags in the windows.

Translated by Franz Wright
WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE

What difference does it make whether you’ve seen them yourself, stiff and cold at the bottom of the railway embankment, or heard about it from somebody who has seen them, or whether you were in the road each day when they were trundled along in a rattling cart pulled by a horse, misshapen bundles wrapped in brown sacks, something to be gotten out of the way, more and more of them now, or whether later on you just heard the rumour about them whispered,

there’s nothing in the whole world you’d rather not have seen, not known about from now on you’re going to start getting numb and not know what to say in the middle of harmless conversations, face to face with lively, happy children, screaming out of hallucinations when you’re sick and again and again during nights with no sleep, nights spent in terror of meeting the dumped corpses.

translated by Franz Wright
SCREAMING

When I scream I have to say why.
Other people don't scream much any more.
I mean just look at them. Men look and stop.

Today I could have said: listen, the voice
going in is too full. Try saying that to someone,
he'll make you analyze it, he'll make you analyze it.
I start thinking influence. Otherwise I'd go to pieces.

You see, he'd say. I'd say things he wants to hear.
We'd go on talking and he'd be nice enough to say
things I want to hear. Mr. - but I'm screaming now.
So hard there are little blue knots on my neck.
Take it easy the man says, easy. And the sun stops
at the window. No, I screamed. My husband isn't
just an architect, he's a gardener too.

Then there was the year he studied soils —
plants need sun and water. No sun today so he
tries water. Water plants he says. I'm so
leached out we go to lunch. Notice how careful
he is to have enough water on the table.

I'm touched. Slowly, I think. Please, slowly.
Lean forward, bump my head. A woman 150 years old says
Be Noah. Scream.
I can’t think when I cry I just cry.
You’re quieter afterwards, there’s
a bridge and water underneath, gambled
away you might say. If you’re there
you can watch the birds picking
little crabs from the sand.

Once there was a man talking to a child
on the bridge: that’s life he said, stuck
out an arm toward the last bit of sun,
the child said yes and the man gave
the child a folder from an airline.
The child said I like you a lot,
the man waved.

You go through the whole alphabet
but you can’t think of people like that.
Oh sometimes friends call or even stop by,
don’t cry they say. Please, not when we’re here.

Their wives are crying at home, I’m sorry
but they are. The men always have some explanation.
It’s water and earth I say. I’m whispering now,
it’s about love. Suddenly they run off. Bye.

translated by Stuart Friebert
YOU’RE QUITE SURE THEN, THAT YOU HAVE GROWN UP?

Here’s a rap for your knuckles, I’d like, Lady of the Ruler to try: teach me scales up strange ladders, C D and make me cry
“You’re an odd thoughty child, but you don’t fool me. I have been worried by experts. Lightly! Lightly! The wrists should think of flowers.” (Bleeding heart. Jump-Up. Hemlock.)
“You are D-I-F-F-E-R-E-N-T from the others. Not P-R-E-T-T-Y.”

“No one is to leave this room without permission. Clear? T. As in Telephone.” (Momma twists the wire, calling Nanny “You’re the only one left that I can talk to. Tell Nanny who drew on the wall with blue crayola?”) Tasted like tunafish and Daddy’s beer. Trees are blurs like green ogre’s ears. D is a long line with a belly. B, double belly. P, a head.

Yes, I said, I said I didn’t do it. The Righteous are rewarded who they are, but Sinners be cast down. Down. Step on a crack and be zapped, like that, without even stopping for dinner. Light up like a lamp, and die. Milkweed juice is also poison. And white lumps in bacon, that will not fry. Slap, and down flies the ruler, from Heaven. D. E. F. The quiet sky.
GOATFOOT, MILKTONGUE, TWINBIRD
the psychic origins of poetic form

When we pursue the psychic origins of our satisfaction with poetic form, we come to the end of the trail. It is deep in the woods, and there is a fire; Twinbird sits quietly, absorbed in the play of flame that leaps and falls; Goatfoot dances by the fire, his eyes reflecting the orange coals, as his lean foot taps the stone. Inside the fire there is a mother and child, made one, the universe of the red coal. This is Milktongue.

1. Some Premises

First, in connection with oppositions:

1. Any quality of poetry can be used for a number of purposes, including opposed purposes. Thus, concentration on technique has often been used to trivialize content, by poets afraid of what they will learn about themselves. But concentration on technique can absorb the attention while unacknowledged material enters the language; so technique can facilitate inspiration.

On the other hand, a poet can subscribe to an antitechnical doctrine of inspiration in a way that simply substitutes one technique for another. Surrealism can become as formulaic as a pastoral elegy.

2. When a poet says he is doing north, look and see if he is not actually doing south. Chances are that his bent is so entirely south that he must swear total allegiance to north in order to include the globe.

3. Energy arises from conflict. Without conflict, no energy. Yin and yang. Dark and light. Pleasure and pain. No synthesis without thesis and antithesis. Conflict of course need not be binary but may include a number of terms.
4. Every present event that moves us deeply connects in our psyches with something (or things) in the past. The analogy is the two pieces of carbon that make an arc light. When they come close enough, the spark leaps across. The one mourning is all mourning; "After the first death, there is no other." This generalization applies to the composition of poems (writing), and to the recomposition of poems (reading).

5. The way out is the same as the way in. To investigate the process of making a poem is not merely an exercise in curiosity or gossip, but an attempt to understand the nature of literature. In the act of reading, the reader undergoes a process—largely without awareness, as the author was largely without intention—which resembles, like a slightly fainter copy of the original, the process of discovery or recovery that the poet went through in his madness or inspiration.

And then, more general:

6. A poem is one man's inside talking to another man's inside. It may also be reasonable man talking to reasonable man, but if it is not inside talking to inside, it is not a poem. This inside speaks through the second language of poetry, the unintended language. Sometimes, as in surrealism, the second language is the only language. It is the ancient prong of carbon in the arc light. We all share more when we are five years old than when we are twenty-five; more at five minutes than at five years. The second language allows poetry to be universal.

7. Lyric poetry, typically, has one goal and one message, which is to urge the condition of inwardness, the 'inside' from which its own structure derives.

2. Form: the Sensual Body

There is the old false distinction between vates and poiein. It is a boring distinction, and I apologise for dragging it out again. I want to use it in its own despite.
The *poiein*, from the Greek verb for making or doing, becomes the poet—the master of craft, the maker of the labyrinth of epic or tragedy or lyric hymn, tale-teller and spell-binder. The *vates* is bound in his own spell. He is the rhapsode Socrates patronizes in *Ion*. In his purest form, he utters what he does not understand at all, be he oracle or André Breton. He is the visionary, divinely inspired, who like Blake may take dictation from voices.

But Blake’s voices returned to dictate revisions. The more intimately we observe any poet who claims extremes of inspiration or of craftsmanship, the more we realize that his claims are a disguise. There is no *poiein* for the same reason that there is no *vates*. The claims may be serious (they may be the compensatory distortion which allows the poet to write at all) and the claims may affect the looks of the poem—a surrealist poem and a neo-classic Imitation of Horace look different—but the distinction becomes trivial when we discover the psychic origins of poetic form.

I speak of the psychic origins of poetic *form*. Psychologists have written convincingly of the origins of the *material* of arts, in wish-fulfillment and in the universality of myth. We need not go over ideas of the poet as daydreamer, or of the collective unconsciousness. Ernst Kris’s “regression in the service of the ego” names an event but does not explain how it comes about. But one bit of Freud’s essay on the poet as daydreamer has been a clue in this search. At the end of his intelligent, snappy paper, Freud says that he lacks time now to deal with form, but that he suspects that formal pleasure is related to fore-pleasure. Then he ducks through the curtain and disappears. Suppose we consider the implications of his parting shot. Fore-pleasure develops out of the sensuality of the whole body which the infant experiences in the pleasure of the crib and of the breast. The connection between forepleasure and infancy is the motion from rationality to metaphor.
But to begin our search for the psychic origins of poetic form, we must first think of what is usually meant by the word "form," and then we must look for the reality. So often form is looked upon only as the fulfillment of metrical expectations. Meter is nothing but a loose set of probabilities; it is a trick easily learned; anyone can learn to arrange one-hundred-and-forty syllables so that the even syllables are louder than the odd ones, and every tenth syllable rhymes: the object will be a sonnet. But only when you have forgotten the requirements of meter do you begin to write poetry in it. The resolutions of form which ultimately provide the wholeness of a poem—resolutions of syntax, metaphor, diction, and sound—are minute and subtle and vary from poem to poem. They vary from sonnet to sonnet, or, equally and not more greatly, from sonnet to free verse lyric.

Meter is no more seriously binding than the frame we put around a picture. But the form of free verse is as binding and as liberating as the form of a rondeau. Free verse is simply less predictable. Yeats said that the finished poem made a sound like the click of the lid on a perfectly made box. One-hundred-and-forty syllables, organized into a sonnet, do not necessarily make a click; the same number of syllables, dispersed in asymmetric lines of free verse, will click like a lid if the poem is good. In the sonnet and in the free verse poem, the poet improvises toward that click, and achieves his resolution in unpredictable ways. The rhymes and line-lengths of the sonnet are too gross to contribute greatly to that sense of resolution. The click is our sense of lyric form. This pleasure in resolution is Twinbird.

The wholeness and identity of the completed poem, the poem as object in time, the sensual body of the poem—this wholeness depends upon a complex of unpredictable fulfillments. The satisfying resolutions in a sonnet are more subtle than rhyme and meter, and less predictable. The body of
sound grows in resolutions like assonance and alliteration, and in near-misses of both; or in the alternations, the going-away and coming-back, of fast and slow, long and short, high and low. The poet—free verse or meter, whatever—may start with lines full of long vowels, glide on diphthong sounds like "eye" and "ay" for instance, move to quick alternative lines of short vowels and clipped consonants, and return in a coda to the long vowels "eye" and "ay." The assonance is shaped like a saucer.

The requirements of fixity are complex, and the conscious mind seldom deals with them. Any poet who has written metrically can write arithmetically correct iambic pentameter as fast as his hand can move. In improvising towards the click, the poet is mostly aware of what sounds right and what does not. When something persists in not sounding right, the poet can examine it bit by bit—can analyze it—in the attempt to consult his knowledge and apply it.

This knowledge is habitual. It is usually not visible to the poet, but it is available for consultation. When you learn something so well that you forget it, you can begin to do it. You dance best when you forget that you are dancing. Athletics—a tennis stroke, swimming, a receiver catching a football—is full of examples of actions done as if by instinct, which are actually learned procedure, studied and practiced until they become "second nature." So it is with poetry. The literary form of poems is created largely by learning—in collaboration with the unconscious by a process I will talk about later. Possible resolutions of metaphor, diction, and sound are coded into memory from our reading of other poets, occasionally from our reading of criticism, from our talk with other poets, and from our revisions of our own work, with the conscious analysis that this revision sometimes entails. New resolutions are combinations of parts of old ones, making new what may later be combined again and made new again.
When the experienced reader takes a poem in, his sense of fixity comes also from memory. He too has the codes in his head. The new poem fulfills the old habits of expectation in some unexpected way. The reader does not know why—unless he bothers to analyze; then probably not fully—he is pleased by the sensual body of the poem. He does not need to know why, unless he must write about it. The pleasure is sufficient. Since the poet's madness is the reader's madness, the resolution of the mad material is the reader's resolution as well as the poet's. The way in is the same as the way out.

Whatever else we may say of a poem we admire, it exists as a sensual body. It is beautiful and pleasant, manifest content aside, like a worn stone that is good to touch, or like a shape of flowers arranged or accidental. This sensual body reaches us through our mouths, which are warm in the love of vowels held together, and in the muscles of our legs which as in dance tap the motion and pause of linear and syntactic structure. These pleasures are Milktongue and Goatfoot.

There is a non-intellectual beauty in the moving together of words in phrases—"the music of diction"—and in resolution of image and metaphor. The sophisticated reader of poetry responds quickly to the sensual body of a poem, before he interrogates the poem at all. The pleasure we feel, reading a poem, is our assurance of its integrity. (So Pound said that technique is the test of sincerity.) We will glance through a poem rapidly and if it is a skillful fake we will feel repelled. If the poem is alive and honest, we will feel assent in our quickening pulse—though it might take us some time to explain what we were reacting to.

The soi-disant vates feels that he speaks from the unconscious (or with the voice of the God), and the poiein that he makes all these wholenesses of shape on purpose. Both of them disguise the truth. All poets are poiein and vates. The poiein comes from memory of reading, and the vates from memory of infancy. The sensual body of the poem derives from memory of reading most obviously, but ultimately it leads us back further—to the most primitive psychic origins of poetic form.
3. Conflict Makes Energy

People frequently notice that poetry concerns itself with unpleasant subjects: death, deprivation, loneliness, despair, if love then the death of love, and abandonment. Of course there are happy poems, but in English poetry there are few which are happy through and through—and those few tend to be light, short, pleasant, and forgettable. Most memorable happy poems have a portion of blackness in them. Over all—Keats, Blake, Donne, Yeats, Eliot, Shakespeare, Wordsworth—there is more dark than light, more elegy than celebration. There is no great poem in our language which is simply happy.

Noticing these facts, we reach for explanations: maybe to be happy is to be a simpleton; maybe poets are morbid; maybe life is darker than it is light; maybe when you are happy you are too busy being happy to write poems about it and when you are sad, you write poems in order to do something. There may be half-truths in these common ideas, but the real explanation lies in the structure of a poem; and, I suggest, in the structure of human reality.

Energy arises from conflict.

A) The sensual body of a poem is a pleasure separate from any message the poem may contain.

B) If the poem contains a message which is pleasurable (a word I have just substituted for “happy”), then the two pleasures walk agreeably together for a few feet, and collapse into a smiling lethargy. The happy poem sleeps in the sun.

C) If the message of the poem, on the whole, is terrifying—that They flee from me, that one time did me seek; that I am sick, I must die; that On Margate Sands/I can connect/Nothing with nothing; that Things fall apart, the center will not hold—then pain of message and pleasure of body copulate in a glorious conflict-dance of energy. This alternation of pleasure and pain is so swift as to seem simultaneous, to be simultaneous in the complexity both of creation and reception, a fused circle of yin and yang, a oneness in diversity.
The pain is clear to anyone. The pleasure is clear (dear) to anyone who loves poems. If we acknowledge the pleasure of the sensual body of the poem, we can see why painful poems are best: conflict makes energy and resolves our suffering into ambivalent living tissue. If human nature is necessarily ambivalent, then the structure of the energetic poem resembles the structure of human nature.

The sensual body, in poems, is not simply a compensation for the pain of the message. It is considerably more important, and more central to the nature of poetry. When we pursue the psychic origins of our satisfaction with poetic form, we come to the end of the trail. It is deep in the woods, and there is a fire; Twinbird sits quietly, absorbed in the play of flame that leaps and falls; Goatfoot dances by the fire, his eyes reflecting the orange coals, as his lean foot taps the stone. Inside the fire there is a mother and child, made one, the universe of the red coal. This is Milktongue.

4. Goatfoot, Milktongue, Twinbird

Once at a conference on creativity, a young linguist presented a model of language. Xeroxed in outline, it was beautiful like a concrete poem. I looked for language as used in poems and looked a long time. Finally I found it, under "autistic utterance," with the note that this utterance might later be refined into lyric poetry. It reminded me of another conference I had attended a year or two earlier. A psychoanalyst delivered a paper on deriving biographical information about an author from his fiction. He distributed mimeographed copies of his paper, which his secretary had typed from his obscure handwriting; he began his remarks by presenting a list of errata. The first correction was, "For 'autistic,' read 'artistic' throughout."
The newborn infant cries, he sucks at the air until he finds the nipple. At first he finds his hand to suck by accident—fingers, thumb; then he learns to repeat that pleasure. Another mouth-pleasure is the autistic babble, the "goo-goo," the small cooing and purring and bubbling. These are sounds of pleasure; they are without message, except that a parent interprets them as "happy": pleasure is happy. Wittgenstein once said that we could sing the song with expression or without expression; very well, he said, let us have the expression without the song. (He was being ironic; I am not.) The baby's autistic murmur is the expression without the song. His small tongue curls around the sounds, the way his tongue warms with the tiny thread of milk that he pulls from his mother. This is Milktongue, and in poetry it is the deep and primitive pleasure of vowels in the mouth, of assonance and of holds on adjacent long vowels; of consonance, mmmm, and alliteration. It is Dylan Thomas and the curlew cry; it is That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea; it is Then, in a wailful choir, the small gnats mourn.

As Milktongue mouths the noises it curls around, the rest of his body plays in pleasure also. His fists open and close spasmodically. His small bowed legs, no good for walking, contract and expand in a rhythmic beat. He has begun the dance, his muscles move like his heartbeat, and Goatfoot improvises his circle around the fire. His whole body throbs and thrills with pleasure. The first parts of his body which he notices are his hands; then his feet. The strange birds fly at his head, waver, and pause. After a while he perceives that there are two of them. They begin to act when he wishes them to act, and since the mental creates the physical, Twinbird is the first magic he performs. He examines these independent/dependent twin birds. They are exactly alike. And they are exactly unalike, mirror images of each other, the perfection of opposite-same.
As the infant grows, the noises split off partly into messages. "Mmm" can be milk and mother. "Da-da" belongs to another huge shape. He crawls and his muscles become useful to move him toward the toy and the soda cracker. Twinbird flies more and more at his will, as Milktongue speaks, and Goatfoot crawls. But still he rolls on his back and his legs beat in the air. Still, the sister hands flutter at his face. Still, the noises without message fill the happy time of waking before hunger, and the softening down, milktongue full, into sleep. The growing child skips rope, hops, dances to a music outside intelligence, rhymes to the hopscotch or jump rope, and listens to the sounds his parents please him with:

Pease porridge hot
Pease porridge cold
Pease porridge in-the-pot
Five days old.

Or himself learns:

Bah, bah, black sheep
Have you any wool;
Yes, sir, yes, sir,
Three bags full.
One for my master,
One for my dame
And one for the little boy
That lives down the lane.

The mouth-pleasure, the muscle-pleasure, the pleasure of match-unmatch.

But "Shades of the prison house begin to close/Upon the growing boy." Civilized humans try gradually to cut away the autistic component in their speech. Goatfoot survives in the dance, Twinbird in rhyme and resolution of dance and noise. Milktongue hides itself more. It ties us to the mother so obviously that men are ashamed of it. Tribal society was unashamed and worshipped Milktongue in religion and in history.
Among the outcast in the modern world, Milktongue sometimes endures in language, as it does in the American black world, and in the world of poor Southern whites. In Ireland where the mother (and the Virgin) are still central, Milktongue remains in swearing and in the love of sweet speech. Probably, in most of the modern world, Milktongue exists only in smoking, eating, and drinking; and in oral sexuality.

But Milktongue and Goatfoot and Twinbird have always lived in the lyric poem, for poet and for reader. They are the ancestors, and they remain the psychic origins of poetic form, primitive both personally (back to the crib) and historically (back to the fire in front of the cave). They keep pure the sensual pleasure that is the dark secret shape of the poem. We need an intermediary to deal with them, for a clear reason: Goatfoot and Milktongue and Twinbird, like other figures that inhabit the forest, are wholly illiterate. They live before words.

They approach the edge of the clearing, able to come close because the Priestess has no eyes to frighten them with. The Priestess, built of the memory of old pleasures, only knows how to select and order. The Priestess does not know what she says, but she knows that she says it in dactylic hexameter. Goatfoot and Milktongue and Twinbird leave gifts at the edge of the forest. The Priestess picks up the gifts, and turns to the light, and speaks words that carry the dark mysterious memory of the forest and the pleasure.

The poet writing, and the reader reading, lulled by Goatfoot and Milktongue and Twinbird into the oldest world, become able to think as the infant thinks, with transformation and omnipotence and magic. The form of the poem, because it exists separately from messages, can act as trigger or catalyst or enzyme to activate not messages but types of mental behavior. Coleridge spoke of meter as effecting the willing suspension of disbelief. They are the three memories of the body—not
only meter; and they are powerful magic—not only suspension of disbelief. The form of the poem unlocks the mind to old pleasures. Pleasure leaves the mind vulnerable to the content of experience before we have intellectualized the experience and made it acceptable to the civilized consciousness. The form allows the mind to encounter real experience, and so the real message is permitted to speak—but only because the figures in the forest, untouched by messages, have danced and crooned and shaped.

The release of power and sweetness! Milktongue also remembers hunger, and the cry without answer. Goatfoot remembers falling, and the ache that bent the night. Twinbird remembers the loss of the brother, so long he believed in abandonment forever. From the earliest times, poetry has existed in order to retrieve, to find again, and to release. In the man who writes the poem, in the reader who lives it again, in the ideas, the wit, the images, the doctrines, the exhortations, the laments and the cries of joy, the lost forest struggles to be born again inside the words. The life of urge and instinct, that rages and coos, kicks and frolics, as it chooses only without choosing—this life is the life the poem grows from, and leans toward.
Conrad Hilberry

HARRY HOUDINI

the Hippodrome, January 7, 1918

Jennie clumped on stage,
Ten thousand pounds they say
And you can well believe it,
Great lumpy elephant standing
In those four wash buckets
Of feet. They opened
The cabinet, front and back,
And turned it to show us:
Empty right through.
Jennie walked around, then in.
Houdini raised his arms
Like a preacher
And fired his pistol.
When they drew the curtain,
Nothing. Ten thousand pounds
Vanished. Blue ribbon around her neck,
Alarm-clock wrist watch
On her left hind leg,
Gone.

I felt the Lord moving in me
The way He moved in Jennie
His hand on my shoulder.
I shouted, "Praise God.
He is taking off my flesh.
I am like to fly. Praise the Lord."
My body vanishing, the flesh melting
Upward into the air.
But Houdini stopped it. "Go back
To your body," he said. "It is not yet
Judgment Day. Go back to your body,
Madame." And fired the foolish pistol again.
He couldn't stand a real miracle.
So I went back. Flesh in its sack of skin
Slung from my shoulders. Jennie was gone,
Ten thousand pounds, but he wouldn't let me
Shed my sackful.

The room went heavy.
Arms, buttocks, breasts hung
Fat as sausages across the chairs.
We had been too long this way, so I wanted to shape my mind another way. But how could I reshape my thinking without using the very mind I proposed to repudiate to do so? "External forces," I told myself, were the only hope. The only sure, pure way to change one’s mind is by surprising it at random. I thought: I’ll open a dictionary at random. The word I select will be the key. So, looking as if I were about to do another thing, looking casual, as if I were about to scratch myself, hang a picture on the wall, or throw another log on the fireplace, I sidled over to the dictionary on its pedestal in the corner and, after turning my back to it, hanging around with aimless suspiciousness for a couple of minutes, whistling, turning my back to it entirely, etc., I suddenly spun around and flipped it open with a little flick of my finger. I found The Word: and for some time now I’ve been trying to think of a way in which I could make my ideas more like “Aardvark.”

*  
But what is Aardvark anyway? Ideally the term is not what it means, but what it does. It is not an animal, it’s a principle. It means that instead of naively depending on my wretched mind for the next thought, I’ll hope the next thing it learns will be by being imposed upon arbitrarily. Aardvark: arbitrary. Close enough. Now I must listen to its cries sounding throughout the night.

*  
The advent of Aardvark: . . . No, it’s a creature quite unlike a mole. Aardvark surpasses being any creature, it is merely Aardvark, without metaphor, without decoration. He refuses connotation, he is almost pure denotation. Just feel the smoothness of his fur!
Aardvark the post-poetic architect is trying to change my mind. From my loftiest formal principles it hangs a scaffold; and soon it is swarming with workers. With the aid of some pornographic pictures which it projects against the dome, it accelerates my love; it renovates my hopes my gnawing them off the wall; and as for my famous literary sensibility—my beloved formal columns—it climbs out all over the pilasters, carrying pails of plaster. Egg and dart disappear. It denies the spiritual side of things, it lifts the spirit. Now the entire structure is shaped like Aardvark. But there are still a few spaces left undone, perhaps some germ in Aardvark's muzzle left untouched.

* The presence of Aardvark's presence is necessary since so far thinking appears not to be portable. To put your mind in a different place, it is fortunately or unfortunately not possible to hire a limousine.

* Mole was Encyclopaedia poetry: Aardvark (who fortunately or unfortunately does not exist outside of these pages) is dictionary poetry.

* So, no, no: I will not here describe so much as a flea in Aardvark's fur! It was mole who was the animal. Aardvark goes beyond being even a creature, he is merely Aardvark. There is nothing to experiment with, no moving parts, nothing to interpret. I want to focus on this single word, which is no word, simply pure Idea. The prettiness of poetry—even the harshest poetry—I can see Aardvark grinding it between his jaws. No wonder Wallace Stevens had to be gaudy! After all, to suspect the imagination in verse requires at least some slight proof of it, in order to have a thing to oppose. But that is too much, or too little, for those of us who have seen Aardvark creeping on down the line.
This morning my beloved cat Alice wakes me up, its white whiskers mingling with my grey, then its pink nose upon my forehead, meowing wildly. Alice wants to be Aardvark, and so she is, if I can only accomplish the imaginative act of permitting it.

* 

Once I was the son of Persephone, who says she is Queen of Earth. Now I am the child of Aardvark. No shit! Dismembered, disremembered, Persephone lies in back of a hedge beside the house, filled with forty-seven bullet holes, clawed into unrecognition by the black toenails of that bad-ass Aardvark. Now a wave of laughter echoes among the night-cries. Persephone, Mole, disappear back into the encyclopaedia again, a lovely pink and white hand, a filthy soil-covered paw, left behind as a bookmark, perhaps for past or future use.
NINTH ELEGY

Why, if it’s possible
to spend our little
span of existence
as laurel
slightly darker
than all the other greens
with tiny waves
on each leaf’s rim
(like a wind’s smile)
— why then
still insist
on being human
and shrinking from fate
long for it too? . . .

Oh, not because happiness
— that part of approaching ruin
that rushes ahead of it —
is real.
Not out of curiosity
not to exercise the heart
that would have been fine
in the laurel . . .
But just because to be here
means so much
and because
everything here
all this disappearing stuff
seems to need us
to concern us
in some strange way
we, who disappear
even faster!
It’s one time
for each thing
    and only one.
    Once and no more.
And the same for us:
    once.
    Then never again.
But this once having been
    even though only once
    having been on earth
seems as though
    it can't be undone.

And so we push ourselves
    wanting to master it
    wanting to hold it all
in our own two hands
    in the overloaded gaze
    and the dumbstruck heart.
Trying to become it.
    To give it to someone?
    No, we'd like most
to keep it all ourselves
    forever . . .
    Ah, but what
can we take across
    to the other realm
    when we leave?
Not our perception
    learned here so slowly
    and nothing
that's happened here.
    Not one thing.
    So that means we take pain.
Take, above all
    the heaviness of existing
    take the long
experience of love
    take(truly unsayable things).
But later
    under the stars
    why bother?
They are better
    at the unsayable.
    After all, isn’t what
the wanderer brings back
    from the mountain slopes
    to the valley
not a handful of earth
    that no one could say
    but rather a word
hard-won, pure,
    the yellow and blue
gentian?
Are we on this earth to say:
    House
    Bridge
Fountain
    Jug
    Gate
    Fruit-tree
    Window
at best:
    Column . . .
    Tower . . . ?
but to say these words
    you understand
    with an intensity
the things themselves
    never dreamed they’d express.
    Isn’t the earth’s
hidden strategy
    when she so slyly
    urges two lovers on
that each and every thing
    should be transformed
    by the delight
of sharing their feelings?

    Threshold:
what it means
    to two lovers
    that they too
should be wearing down
    an old doorsill
    a bit more
after the many before them
    and before the many to come
    . . . lightly.

*Here* is the time
    for the *sayable*
    here is its home.
Speak, bear witness.
    More than ever
    things fall away from us
livable things
    and what crowds them out
    and replaces them
is an event
    for which there’s no image.
    An event
under crusts
    that will tear open
    easily
just as soon
    as it outgrows them
    and its interests
call for new limits.
    Between the hammer strokes
    our hearts survive

like the tongue
    that between the teeth
    and in spite of everything

goes on praising.

Praise the world
    to the angel
    not the unsayable

you can’t impress him
    with sumptuous feelings —
    in the universe

where he feels things
    so fully
    you’re just a novice.

Show him, then,
    some simple thing
    shaped by its passage

through generations
    that lives as a belonging
    near the hand, in the gaze.

Tell him of Things.
    He’ll stand more astonished
    than you did

beside the rope-maker
    in Rome, or the potter
    by the Nile.

Show him how happy
    a thing can be
    how blameless and ours

how even the wail of sorrow
    can settle purely
    into its own form

and serve as a thing
    or die into a thing
    to a realm where even
the violin can’t recall it.
   And these things
   that take their life
from impermanence
   they understand
   that you’re praising them:
perishing, they trust
   to us — the most
   perishable of all —
for their preservation.
   They want us to change them
   completely
inside our invisible hearts
   into — oh endlessly —
   into ourselves!
Whoever we might
   turn out to be
   at the end.

Earth, isn’t this
   what you want:
   rising up
inside us *invisibly*
   once more?
   Isn’t it your dream
to be invisible someday?
   Earth! invisible!
   what is it
you urgently ask for
   if not transformation?
   Earth, my love
I will do it.
   Believe me
   your springtimes
are no longer needed
to win me — one
just one, is already
too much for my blood.
I have been yours
unable to say so
for a long time now.
You were right
always
and affable Death
is your own
holy notion.
Look, I'm living.
On what?
Neither my childhood
nor my future
is growing smaller . . .
It's Being
in excess
wells up
in my heart.
TENTH ELEGY

That someday
   at the close of this
      fierce vision
I might sing praise
   and jubilation to
      assenting angels.
That the heart's
   clear-striking hammers
      might not falter
from landing on
   slack or doubtful
      or snapping strings.
That my face, streaming
   might make me
      more radiant
that this homely weeping
   might bloom.
      Oh you nights
that I grieved through
   how much you will
      mean to me then.
Disconsolate sisters
   why didn't I kneel
      to accept you
more fully
   and lose myself more
      in your loosened hair?
How we squander our sorrows
   gazing beyond them
      into the sad
wastes of duration
   to see if maybe
      they have a limit.
But they are
  our winter foliage
  our dark evergreens
one of the seasons
  of our secret year
— and not only a season
they are situation,
  settlement, lair,
  soil, home.

It’s true, though:
  how strange are the back streets
  of Pain City
where, in the false silence
  created from too much noise
  there swaggers out
the slop that’s cast
  from the mould of emptiness
  the gilded hubbub
the bursting monument.
  Oh how an angel
  would stamp out their
Consolation Market
  leaving no trace
— the church beside it too
bought ready-made
  as swept and shut tight
  and disappointed
as a post office
  on Sunday.
  Out further, though
there are always
  the rippling edges of the Fair.
  Freedom’s swing-rides!
Zeal’s divers and jugglers!
  And tarted-up Good Luck’s
  lifelike shooting range
where the tin targets
    ring and flop over
    when a better shot hits them.
From cheer to chance
    he lurches on
    since booths
to please all curiosities
    babble and drum
    and tout their wares.
Special Attraction for Adults:
    How Money Reproduces
    Anatomically Valid
Not Just Entertainment
    Money's Own Genitals
    Nothing Left Out
The Act Itself
    It's Educational
    and It Helps
Make You Potent . . . . .
    Oh, but just outside
    beyond the last
billboard plastered
    with ads for "Deathless"
    that bitter beer
that tastes sweet
    to its drinkers
    as long as they keep chewing
fresh distractions —
    just behind that billboard
    right there
everything's real.
    Children play there
    and lovers embrace
off to one side
    so seriously
    in the sparse grass
where dogs do doggy things.
   The young man is drawn
     further — maybe he’s fallen
in love with a young Lament . . .
   He follows her into the meadows
     she says:
It’s a long way.
   We live out there . . .
     Where?
And the young man follows.
   Roused by the way she moves.
     Her shoulder, her neck —
maybe she comes from
   a splendid race.
     But he leaves her
goes back, turning
to wave . . . What’s the use?
     She’s just a Lament.

Only those who’ve died young
   in their first state
     of timeless calm
— their weaning —
   follow her lovingly.
     She waits for young girls
and befriends them.
   Gently she shows them
     what she wears.
Pearls of pain
   and the fine-spun
     veils of Patience.
With young men
   she walks along
     in silence.
But there where they live
  in the valley
  one of the older Laments
answers the youth
  when he questions her:
    We were once
she says,
  a great race
  we Laments.
Our fathers
  worked the mines up there
  in the mountain-range
sometimes among men
  you'll find a polished
  lump of primeval Pain
or the petrified slag
  of Anger from
  an old volcano.
Yes, that came from up there.
  We used to be rich.

And she leads him lightly
  through the broad
  landscape of Lamentation
shows him the columns of temples
  or the ruins of castles
  from which the Lords of Lament
once ruled the land wisely.
  Shows him the tall tear trees
  and the fields of sadness in bloom
(what the living know only
  as tender foliage)
  shows him the herds of grief
pasturing
  and sometimes
  a bird startles
and writes
  as it flies flatly
       through their field of vision
the image of its
  solitary cry.
       In the evening
she leads him to the graves
  of the ancients
       of the race of Laments
the sibyls
  and the lords of warning.
       But when night comes
they go more slowly
  and soon there looms ahead
       in the moonlight
the sepulcher
  that watches over everything.
       Twin brother
to the one on the Nile
  the tall Sphinx
       the silent chamber’s
countenance.
       And they marvel
that has silently
  at the regal head
and forever
       set the human face
to be weighed
  on the scale
       of the stars.

His sight, still dizzy
  from early death
       can’t grasp it.
But hers
frightens the owl
from behind the rim
of the crown.
And the bird
brushing with slow
downstrokes
along the cheek
— the one
with the roundest curve —
inscribes faintly
on the new sense of hearing
that follows death
an indescribable outline
as if on the doubly opened
page of a book.

And higher up, the stars.
New ones.
Stars of the Painlands.
Slowly, the Lament
tells him their names:
"Here — look:
the Rider
the Staff
and that dense constellation
they call the Fruitgarland.
Then further up
toward the Pole:
the Cradle, the Path
the Burning Book
the Puppet, the Window.
But in the southern sky
pure as within the palm
of a consecrated hand
the clear, shining M
that stands for the Mothers . . . ."
But the dead man
    must go on
    and silently
the older Lament
    takes him as far as the gorge
    where the spring
the source of Joy
    shimmers in moonlight.
    She names it with reverence
saying:
    "In the world of men
    this is a life-bearing stream."

They stand
    at the foot
    of the mountain
and there
    she embraces him
    crying.

Alone, he goes off climbing
    into the mountains
    of primal Pain.
And not even
    his footstep
    rings from this soundless fate.

Yet if these
    endlessly dead
    awakened a simile for us
look, they might point
    to the catkins
    hanging from empty hazeltrees
or else they might mean the rain
that falls on the dark earth
in spring.

And we
who always think
of happiness rising
would feel the emotion
that almost startles us
when a happy thing falls.

*translated by David Young*
Cows they had, many, like heavy clouds drifting in the meadow.

But they didn't have the wheelbarrow that they thought they had been promised. They had studied catalogs and prayed; but no wheel barrow.

So at last they tied wheels to the front hooves of a cow and had a couple of stout gentlemen lift the hind legs and wheel the cow about the farm.

Although they admitted the cow made a very poor wheelbarrow, a make-do at best, still, they had done long enough without a wheelbarrow not to really need one, and could now relax in decorative values, for, as they said, time has long decayed utility from actual need.

The other cows look around at this new farm equipment; then turning they drift out like heavy clouds into the meadow.
IN THE FOREST

I was combing some long hair coming out of a tree. I had noticed the comb on the ground by the roots; the long hair coming out of the tree. The hair and comb seemed to belong together. Not so much that the hair needed combing, but perhaps that reassurance of the comb drawn through it.

I stood in the gloom and silence that many forests have in the pages of fiction, combing the thick womanly hair, the mammal-warm hair, even as the evening slowly took the forest into night.
HAIRS: AN ANATOMICAL STORY

Hairs are epidermic phenomena. Hairs are threads, horny cells, consisting of pith, shell, coloring matter. This was known at the time. It was also known that the hairs of the head may have a life-span of four years. He let them grow and vowed to himself he would never have them cut any more. He decided to concern himself exclusively with his hair from now on, and for this purpose he holed up in a garret. Every day his mother brought him apples, a bowl of soup, three hard rolls, and a bottle of Coke. This was how she fed him, without any quarrel between them, for he was her one and only son. She also hoped his "exile" for the sake of his hair would finally tie him to her home. A few days earlier he had returned from Nepal, where his friend and traveling companion had perished as a blood donor. But this wasn't mentioned any more. The family doctor had said that trips to Nepal were a plague just like those children's crusades of earlier times. There was no remedy for them. He had suggested that the mother try the loving approach. Being the ex-wife of a mathematician working for an insurance company, she hoped, by obeying him, to be able to exterminate the virus that had caused her son's disease, or at least to immobilize it. So she brought him his food as though he were a patient, she brushed the rug on which he sat, she put a blanket over his shoulders. Her maxim was not to deny him anything. Denying him something or other would drive him out of my house. He wanted to have a regulation trash can because climbing up the stairs tired him too much. She brought him the trash can, he painted it with beautiful flower ornaments. And when it was full, she came, carried it downstairs, emptied it, and cleaned it thoroughly. At noon he lit up small fumigating sticks to get rid of his own stench. He stuck the sticks into an apple, he let
seven sticks burn down. Meanwhile he fell asleep, still seated, his legs spread apart, his knees pulled against his chin. It was the same posture she faced when she came in to give him a good-night kiss; there he was, sitting, with his head bent forward. She kissed his hair. He seemed to feel nothing. She passed her hand over his head; this touch was all she needed to find her own sleep. In the daytime he made drawings on wrapping paper with colored felt tips. He drew bulbs, papillae, layer of shells and piths, and capillary vessels of hairs. Also bristly hairs like mustaches of cats; and sebaceous glands. He painted his feet: a sun-like center on the instep radiated gaudy lines. One day he showed his mother his chest. He had painted on it something resembling a helmet, with three eyes, she thought. No, those are not eyes, those are cells, he explained. It is a multi-cellular glandulous hair. His mother praised his work. She had always wished to have for a son a cell specialist or somebody like that. She would have been glad to provide him with books on biology. But he declined. I don't read any more. That's over and done. She felt it was enough for him to do some meditating, and so she stopped urging him to read books. On the other hand, he loved music. She had installed a stereo system for him. Well, what wouldn't a mother do for her child! He listened above all to Indic music. During the first days of his life in his cell he had played the flute, for hours on end. Now this, too, was over and done, he declared. He had nibbled on his flute; originally he had wanted to eat it, but then had given up the idea. He gave up everything. This was his wisdom, and his mother understood it. One evening she had brought him something special: a Siamese apple, two fruits grown together, on one stem. He bit into it, and she thought he was delighted. So she dared to ask him when he would move down into her living quarters again. She said she couldn't stand being alone any longer. He suggested
that she spend her evenings with him up here. But no conversations, please! Speaking, too, was a thing of the past. After all, people spoke only in order not to feel lonely, didn’t they? Yet those who were able to keep each other company without speaking were actually not lonely. And he lit up those seven fumigating sticks that he had stuck into the bitten Siamese apple. It’s like being in church, she said. Yes, he said. Then he laid a piece of thin paper in front of him on the rug, sprinkled some tobacco on the paper and also some mysterious crumbs which he had taken out of a silver box; he rolled all of it into a cigarette, inserted a mouthpiece made of cardboard, glued a strip of paper around it, lit it and gave it to his mother. She put it into her mouth and began to smoke. What’s this? she asked. A trumpet for children, he said. And now she visited him evening after evening, and mother and son blew "children’s trumpets" and got high on them. They no longer needed any words. His forehead was overgrown with hair. Occasionally she parted his strands in order to see his eyes. His eyes had large pupils and seemed to look nowhere in particular. As was ascertained later in the course of an investigation, it was on November 15 that she lit a "child’s trumpet" for him, with trembling hands. He kept inhaling smoke. His head fell back. The matchbox in his mother’s hand went up in flames. His hair caught fire. He was sitting there, letting it burn. She was sitting there, letting him burn. There was a smell of burned horn: at this moment you could indeed smell the scientifically established fact that hairs are horny cells. She embraced him. And since she was wearing a dress made of synthetic fibers, she, too, caught fire. Perhaps she would have explained that she was a burning sacrificial victim of her obedience. But since she had been burned to ashes while embracing her son, no verbal message came from her any more.

translated by Peter Spycher
LISTENING FOR THE MAILMAN

1. Here, here,
   yes,
in this room.
   No, no,
   not
in that.
   Here, here,
   yes,
in this room.
   No, no,
   not
in that.

2. They listened to music in the garden. The music came from a radio inside. It came out through the windows and into the garden. It might have come from across the lake. They would sit in the garden and listen to music. When they were done, it was dark. That was the evening.

3. They are in Connecticut.

3. (again). Four sounds: a clock, a refrigerator, the sawing of wood, a chair being dragged across the floor upstairs. Four sounds. Two are from my room. Three continue. One has stopped. It could be the clock, it could be the refrigerator, it could be the saw, it could be the chair.
4. This is the stillness of listening for the mailman. The mailman hasn't come yet. The sunlight is everywhere. When the mailman comes metal boxes will sigh. He will touch metal boxes with a rattle of keys. The doors of the boxes are heavy and slow. The mailman stoops beneath the weight of his bag. Nothing hurries. The sunlight is everywhere.

5. As long as you do not open the envelope, There still remains hope. The perfect rhyme sleeps in the unread book.

6. I saw B. in the street yesterday. She didn't recognize me after so many years. I wanted to follow her to know where she was going. I followed her to the traffic light and then got scared. I would like to follow an absolute stranger. I would like to follow a stranger all day. Would he notice me? If he noticed me, what would he say? Sometimes I would like to be invisible. Sometimes I would like to change my name so that whenever someone who knew me said hello, I could say, "Sorry, you must mean somebody else."

7. This is the mailman now. The mailman is here. Someone plays scales on an upstairs piano. The piano is in the room with a chair. It is a room I hear but never see.

8. To open this letter is to bite into fruit.

10. I leave a gap. I continue. This was the morning.
11. Here, here,
yes,
in this room.

No, no,
not
in that.

Here, here,
yes,
in this room.

No, no,
not
in that.
FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON LINE AND THE POETIC VOICE

When I first began writing verses I was apt to let my lines run on to the end of the thought, as in a sentence. This made lines very long at times. Later, as a result of reading and influence, I learned to break the lines in some pattern, visual or other, and to make some effective use of the phrase as the language is spoken, or as I speak it myself. And all this has been very largely a matter of instinct. To write in more traditional measures, according to a determined number of stresses, though I found early that I could write that way, did not interest me. Verse was to be free, but not too free, and somewhere in the process I could find my own order and certainty. But it’s worth noting that W. C. Williams wrote me once twenty years ago that “instinct is not enough for the master of his craft, free verse is not enough.” And we know how much energy he devoted to finding a “measure” he could pass on.

I don’t know where my sense of the line comes from, but it isn’t fixed, it changes. Many lines in Winter News have a kind of bitten-off quality:

On the road of the self-contained traveler I stood like one to whom the great announcements are made.

If I look at this critically today, the line breaks can strike me as arbitrary. Why didn’t I write them out more naturally, according to the phrasing?

On the road of the self-contained traveler
I stood like one
to whom the great announcements are made.
But somehow the short lines are better. The hard-bitten compression suits the material, the substance; it suited my life. And once written, the poem intends to stay fiercely in its form; it resists change. I don’t understand this, it’s mysterious like everything else that is important in poetry.

The decision to break lines at this or that point, to arrange them in whatever form or pattern, comes from the direction of the energy or impulse of the poet. This energy, this emotional charge, is going to change, to swerve, to rise and fall, to hurry and then relax from time to time, from poem to poem, or from moment to moment. Changes of line have a lot to do with changes in the poet’s life; it’s an internal affair as well as an outward, or technical, decision to write this way or that. And if you find yourself becoming restricted by your own style, then you must change it. But first you must change your life.

More recently it appears I’m allowing my lines to run on more easily and naturally according to their phrases and pauses; my impulses aren’t the same today, at this hour:

My chair by the handmade window,  
the stilled heart come home  
through smoke and falling leaves

For what it’s worth, I find three stresses in each of those lines. And so much for the biography.

A verse line written to strict measure, or number, as I think the ancients used to have it, made good sense when a certain number of accents or syllables were built into it as a matter of custom, or there was supposed to be a certain frequency of sound at the end of the line in response to the art of song. But as Simpson⁴ seems to be saying, there aren’t any rules these days. We might be better off if we had them, but we’re stuck
with the impulse, with intuition. Or is this what we've always been left with? Short lines, long lines, so many syllables, feet to a line, lines to a stanza, trimeter, quatrain? Call it free or accentual, the choice is the poet's and if she or he hasn't sound instinct, so much the worse.

A poem is a composition of words in space and in time. It is the structuring of thought and emotion. Ideally a line of poetry carries its justification as sound; we read it, hear it in a certain way. So much depends upon a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens. Would that sentence, that bit of descriptive comment attract universal attention embedded in a paragraph? Not likely. As Joseph Conrad said: "A work that aspires... to the condition of art, must seek to carry its justification in every line." Lack of a firm sense of the line is a handicap. Is this why the prose poem is so much in evidence these days? There you don't have to justify your lines, just make the paragraph and let it go.

What this may come down to is a strong sense of voice. It is the voice of the poet, no two alike, that determines the line, the rhythm, structure, everything. Once heard, the voice creates the environment of thought and feeling which we come to accept and believe in as an unmistakable mark of the poet's work. The voice refined becomes the poet's style. Unfortunately, the voice is one thing that can't be taught or learned in any school or class, nor can it be counterfeited. It is discovered in the act of living and working, and nourished until it becomes as much a part of the person as an arm or a leg. When a poet writes badly, it may be because he has become false to his voice, loses his sense of it temporarily, and writes in another not his own. This is what literary influence does to a young writer. But influence from another writer or another literature can also help a poet identify and establish his own voice. Witness Dante's influence on Eliot, for example. Possession of the voice is an integral part of the gift of poetry.
Jim Wright is right. The young poets of this time need a criticism and they haven't yet produced one. Something may be brewing. The criticism, if it comes, ought to include an attempt to deal with what I sense as a major problem in our poetry, and that is the extent to which poetry is becoming merely a verbal event, separated from the reality of the life around us. And I think Wright is just in his remark about the rejection of the past. We don't live merely in the present. There is a past, and there is and will be a future. Out of nothing comes nothing. Maybe we need faith more than anything else.

Beyond all this fiddling, I think Carruth had something of value buried in his remarks. Most contemporary verse in English lacks memory value, musicality, it isn't repeatable. It relies on the image and on statement, and not much else. This is not just a matter of memorable sound, nor of rhythm, of course, but of sustained impulse, of emotion and intensity, and of substance. It has something to do with the connection, or the lack of it, of the poet with his time and his people. And it has also something to do with the relevance of the activity of poetry itself in our time. Stevens gave some thought to this once:

If people are going to become dependent on poetry for any of the fundamental satisfactions, poetry must have an increasing intellectual scope and power. This is a time for the highest poetry. We never understood the world less than we do now nor, as we understand it, liked it less. We never wanted to understand it more or needed to like it more. These are the intense compulsions that challenge the poet as the appreciative creator of values and beliefs.

I have not touched on form which, though significant, is not vital today as substance is. When one is an inherent part of the other, form too is vital.

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT LINES

In Jerusalem today I read about Micha Ulman’s conceptual art, the Israeli exhibit at Sao Paulo’s biennale. He dug holes in Jewish and Arab villages and then filled them in with earth from the other village. “An Exchange of Earth,” he called it, photographing the holes as diamonds, people watching them.

An exchange of what? Last year a friend told me, “Poetry is my life.” He’d been making a mess of both. I wanted to say, “But is your life poetry?”

Fill up your poems with life. Which village do you want? It’s the same dirt.

Thinking of this while tractors move and drills cut into the rock across the road. Loud. The road I’m living on is called Neve Sha’anah, place of tranquillity.

Why do we have to keep shifting earth? And what will we dig up next? Whatever violates the mind. Whole populations exchanged. Filling the holes.

Poetry works against this. Poetry doesn’t give us form to break against. Holes to fill. Or lines to walk out on. It tries to find what’s really there or really not there. And live with it.

Well, lines. We write in the rhythm of our breath, our pulse. Simpson calls it impulse. The pulse inside. It’s something physical. And yet. And yet. Who stops to think how he breathes? Or where the next breath’s coming from? After the first gasp, entering the light, we go on breathing. And yet. There’s more to life than breathing.
Williams: It isn’t what he says that counts as a work of art, it’s what he makes . . .

Renoir, almost blind at the end, with brushes strapped to his crippled wrists, still painting, but only the smallest section at a time, his vision slivering. “Turn the head of the bird,” he said, touching the paint to canvas, before he died.

Each line the view from these walled-in eyes of a small thing. But turn it, line after line. (Breath after breath.) It flickers. More than the act of turning it, each separate part, more than its sum. The whole head of the bird.
THREE AMBROSIA FRAGMENTS

The typical ambrosiac: a bedraggled sense of history, refuses to understand the word "gravity" or the word "elsewhere".

* * *

Something blue moving in the woods. Not a man with a blue coat, can’t be a freezing deer. . . I can’t think of anything that large and blue in a forest. Large and blue and moving. Ambrosian? Ambrosian.

* * *

We’re the real Ambrosia Singers! —And your forehead is my harp. —And I’m going to change this line into light for you.
Ilse Aichinger

USING SAD HOURS

Let those fellows
rest in the fields,
in the haze that rises
because nothing gives you light.
Trails to the grottos in the hills
are closed now,
the roots gone from the ground,
the children gone.
These wreath makers are the last
ones left,
they burn oil,
you can talk to them.
OUT OF THE COUNTRY

Books from foreign libraries,
pigeons grown strong.
We could leave
if it were just a matter
of places,
with their raspberry bushes,
their cloths
folding in the wind,
they're changing noiselessly behind us
we're standing
on the warm backs
of gardens, stony
or sandy.

MOUNTAIN EDGE

So what would I do
if there weren't hunters, my dreams
climbing down
the backside of the mountain
in morning shadows.

translated by Cynthia Hogue
WINTER ANSWER

The world's made of stuff
that demands a hard look:
no more eyes
to see the white fields,
no ears to hear the birds
whirring in branches.
Grandmother, where are your lips
to taste the grasses,
and who'll smell the sky's end for us,
whose cheeks rubbed raw
on the walls in town today?
Isn't it dark, this forest
we've gotten into?
No, grandmother, it's not dark.
I know, I've lived at its edge a long time
with the children,
and it's not even a forest.

translated by David Young
A SOCK

How can a sock come to have so much importance? Here is a sock at a camp by the river—it will disintegrate until someone finds a few shreds of wool and calls them antiquity.

On the top shelf of the showcase at the Cataldo Mission were a few of Father Ravalli's possessions—some books, rosary, and three pairs of socks. On the shelf below, the skull of an obscure Spanish priest found buried under the altar.

And in the bush where I discovered two cow jaw bones was a sock. A white sock in a sage bush. Stubborn as an old patch of snow, over the wind-twisted wood, the squat acme of the sage.
FROM ANACONDA

1

From the copper that pinches my ear to the dry animal with the letter A on it in white.

2

Smoke, high shimmering black slag heaps, the pink fish meat of the opened mountain: and the riches still hidden, still unexpressed.
MOSS

Old trees, grass-stained sheep,
And the moss foams up their sides,
Though not the side the tree dreams of lying on.

The soft barbs form a chain net or fence,
A bice-tinted grandmother
Knitting me a mohair sweater,

Go up until they find that cirque
(Wash basin or shearer's sheep bath)
The great xylem tors divide upward from.

To be moss is to be not far
From anything, ushering like homespun
The ultraviolet rays onto the body of the world,

Winning like fleeces at a fair
A prize next only to dark Percherons
In the earthy steam of the barn, the steamy earth.
ILSE AICHINGER is a distinguished Austrian poet and novelist. She has also written radio plays. Among her major awards: Prize of the Group 47; Prize of the Bavarian Academy of the Arts. She was married to Günter Eich, who died last December. Together they did their part to save the German language. German texts of the poems printed here are readily available in her recent books (S. Fischer Verlag/ Frankfurt) One of her translators, Cynthia Hogue, is a recent graduate of Oberlin and a poet in her own right.

JACK ANDERSON lives and works in New York. He had work in FIELD #8. He has received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for 1973-74.


MICHAEL BENEDIKT is the author of three books of poems: The Body; Sky; and Mole Notes (prose poems). All by Wesleyan University Press. He’s finishing a manuscript entitled Persephone’s Telephone, sections of which have appeared in Field, The Dragonfly, Falcon, The Unmuzzled Ox and Lillabulero. The text here is from a new manuscript, Night Cries, sections of which have appeared in The American Poetry Review. His anthology of prose poetry, with a critical discussion of its development, is due next year. He writes of the text here: “All we are doing here is attempting to subvert two genres: that of notes on poetry, and that of poetry. I forget where, but I remember saying in print that notes on poetry ought to be in a form like poetry, or forget it. I mean to make the difficulty of naming what I’m doing genuine — but it’s only in the interest of expanding the definition of poetry, best as one can.”

RUSSELL EDSON’S books include, most recently, The Clam Theater (Wesleyan) and The Childhood of an Equestrian (Harper & Row). Dip back for two others: The Very Thing That Happens (New Directions) and What A Man Can See (The Jargon Society).


JOHN HAINES helps us continue the symposium on the line that Sandra McPherson began in FIELD #8. He spent last winter as Writer-in-Residence at the University of Alaska. He’ll be at the University of Washington soon, in what is unofficially called the Roethke Chair. He’s putting together a small collection of poems and working on some prose.
DONALD HALL will issue selected, recent poems in England sometime this year. Books in print include The Alligator Bride and The Yellow Room. His big task, for the moment, is a biography of Charles Laughton, due in ’74 or early ’75. (Elsa Lanchester said recently on a talk show: "I’m working with a fine writer"). . . ) We hope readers of his piece will take it up as an extension of our symposium, and we invite everyone to submit thoughts.

CONRAD HILBERRY has done a big batch of poems that "glance variously at Whitehead’s metaphysics," and we hope to see some of them in FIELD soon. His second book, Rust, has just been accepted by Ohio University Press.

RICHARD HUGO'S latest book was recently released by Norton: The Lady In Kicking Horse Reservoir. We're looking forward to an interview with him in Madrona soon.

SHIRLEY KAUFMAN will spend the spring semester teaching at the University of Massachusetts. The rest of the time she lives and works in Israel. Her latest collection, Gold Country, is now available from the University of Pittsburgh Press.

RUTH MOON KEMPER has taught writing at Flagler College in Florida. She has published three books: The White Guitar (Olivant); Carnival at Seaside (South & West); and Porpoise in the Beer (Olivant). She has also written short stories, and a novel is being serialized in Wied.

PHILIP LEVINE'S "1933" is the title poem of a new book due from Atheneum in January, 1974.

LARRY LEVIS' first book, Wrecking Crew (U. of Pittsburgh Press) won the 1971 U.S. Award of the International Poetry Forum. He is currently at work on a second collection, with aid from a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. He is studying in the Modern Letters Program at the University of Iowa, and teaching part-time there.

THOMAS LUX is working on a new book, The Body of the Dreamer. This fall he is teaching at Columbia College in Chicago.

SANDRA McPHERSON'S latest book, Radiation, is due shortly from Ecco Press (Viking). She adds this note to her piece in FIELD #8 on the line: "When I wrote 'Does the space a poem takes transmit a mood, a density, intensity, a reach? Do groups of three lines suggest a triangle, whatever that suggests? Do seven-line stanzas seem solid, complete?' etc., I had not read what I ran across last night in Nadezhda Mandelstam's Hope Against Hope: "Osip Mandelstam was always concerned about the number of lines and verses in a poem, or the number of chapters in a piece of prose. He was angry when I said I was surprised he thought this important. My lack of understanding struck him as nihilism and ignorance. It was not for nothing, he said, that some numbers — three and seven, for example — had magic significance for people; numbers were also a part of our culture, a gift which had been handed down to us.
In Voronezh M. began to compose poems of seven, nine, ten and eleven lines. Seven- and nine-line stanzas also began to appear as parts of longer poems. He had a feeling that some new form was coming to him: 'Just think what they mean, these fourteen-line groups. And there must be some significance in these seven- and nine-line stanzas. They keep cropping up all the time.' There was no mysticism about this, it was seen simply as an index of harmony."

HERBERT MEIER is a Swiss writer who has written poems, plays, novels and stories. Among other prizes, he holds The City of Bremen Literary Award and The Conrad Ferdinand Meyer Prize. His piece printed here recently appeared in a collection of short stories: Anatomische Geschichten. Peter Spycher, his translator, teaches at Oberlin, has published translations of poetry, articles on literary subjects, and is the author of a recent study of Dürrenmatt (Huber/Switzerland).

HELGA M. NOVAK is a German writer who has published poetry and prose extensively. Her books include Aufenthalt in einem irren Haus and Geselliges Beisammen-sein, from which the pieces printed here are taken. Recently she was a guest Writer-in-Residence at Oberlin. Her translator, Ann Maria Celona, a recent graduate of Oberlin, has been translating German poetry and prose for some time.

ERICA PEDRETTI should be known by now to our readers. We could not resist taking two more pieces from her book, harmloses bitte (Suhrkamp). A new book is due soon. Her translator, Franz Wright, has translated widely from the German and will soon be getting together a collection of Pedretti's work.

RAINER MARIA RILKE'S Duino Elegies conclude with this issue. The ten Elegies, in a revised version, will be published by The Barn Dream Press early in 1974.

BETTINA SCHMEIDEL is an Austrian artist and poet who recently spent a year in California, where she worked in the Women's Movement. While she has since returned to Berlin to write, we understand she is on her way back to California, and at work on her first collection.