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JANUARY

The Christmas tree is down, branches stripped for mulch, ornaments wrapped in their tissue swaddling, and winter stretches out before us Long as the steppes of Siberia, a blizzard of calendar pages Mornings come slowly, the sun reluctant, its pale face scarcely warming We linger at coffee, watch birds at the feeder Their foliage is dull, muted The sky is barely blue We wrap ourselves in layers of wool, withdraw January’s not the season of love Up on the hill, each tree is blackly etched, clean and sharp, whittled down to limb, branch, twig Glass plants cover the windows, feathery fronds blur the thin light And here we are, poised, on the rim of the year, this icy globe turning We’re caught in suspension, our every breath visible The silence between us deepens, blue as the shadows in snow
GARDENING IN A DRY YEAR

The sky is a hard blue bowl,  
unmarrd by even a smear of cloud, a hint of rain  
No promises here  
The long-term forecast shrieks sun, sun, sun  
Seedlings shrivel,  
cucumbers contract on the vines  
The loam, once dark & rich  
as a chocolate torte,  
crumbles to dust  
that sifts in the desultory wind  
Gardening is the language of loss,  
enemies are legion:  
cutworms, slugs, snails, caterpillars;  
tomato hornworms, fat & green,  
studded with wasp eggs;  
rodents & rabbits, fungus & fireblight,  
more than the seven plagues  
What we love and water,  
bless with the sprinkler’s silver spray,  
does not necessarily thrive  
We can fertilize and mulch,  
double-dig and retrench,  
but we’re helpless as wheat  
in a sudden summer storm  
That doesn’t come this year  
As if God has turned His face away  
And the unblinking sun burns steadily down,  
the lacquered blue bowl firmly in place,  
our prayers of intercession dry dust in our mouths,  
dumb as our glib tongues, the desert of our hearts
DIVING IN

Out back, a red wagon full of branches
long dead, darker than rod iron
The cherry tree from which they fell swells
with ivory fungus the size of musk melons
The garden, growing naked with October,
waits for the whole tree to dive in,
from the crippled fingers at the top
to the trunk, cracking like grandfather lips
A clothesline runs from its one strong arm
to a hook on this dying farm house,
the wiring inside turn of the century,
the window frames dropping like empty dirt
My wife shrugs at the place, its crumbling
She shrugs at things that can't get going,
carrots slim as crayons she'll pull up in winter
I worry I walk out at night, test the garden's
warmth with my toe, try to learn how to dive in
NEAR HARPER’S FERRY

"Here you have wilderness—very real," he says
"Not like our tigers of Vietnam, splendid
but so remote, maybe only legends now, off in the mountains
somewhere on the border. Here the wilderness
lives in your own house. The cellar is filled with black
snakes and huge spiders. Every child knows them.
And ghosts of slaves—their bones are lying
on the ridge behind the house. There must be ghosts
Sometimes I feel them"

His own mother’s ghost, released in the spring
from half a world away to travel this far—
he describes her as if she were the land and the whole
history of the Vietnamese people. To help us understand,
he plays a tape of a woman in Saigon chanting the old poems
Hearing those poems is like feeling moonlight
in your arms and fingers, like knowing death is nothing
and time, comprehended, gives us everywhere
and always: even an instant is too long for truth
His mother’s ghost is the singer’s voice
rising and sinking at once, the way mist fills a valley
It doesn’t ask or insist, it doesn’t care
if peace can triumph here in this wilderness
garden of herbs and heartsease,
of rare yellow iris, blue anemones,
red gate, bell, skull.
SOME ORANGE JUICE

An old drunk, probably about the age I am now, broke in our house before I was born, broke in my brother Herb’s room. Herb was small and sick with a fever and not at all frightened by the stranger standing there.

‘Would you like some orange juice?’ He held out the glass of it he had on the bedside table. Then Dad appeared with a baseball bat and led the man off, whose name escapes. No one was hit, or prosecuted.

All that resulted from that bemuddled night was that twisted-iron bars as though for a castle were fastened on all our bedroom windows, and I grew up looking out through those bars at the river, and climbing on them.

I know more now of the blank confusion he felt, the drunk, and I’ve done unconscious things too that have had consequences like the way he affected my view of the outside for years, who wasn’t even born then, and who has just as blind a notion as his of what bad or good could come of some wandering, dumb thought to go and do I don’t quite know what.

Could I offer you some orange juice?
VIGIL NOTES

I didn’t stay up till the end with my mother
the night she died And here’s the shame
from another vigil I didn’t make it completely
through, though shame is all wrong

I told myself I’d go from seven p.m
to seven a.m, tending a fire, to watch and listen,
and I didn’t make it Sometimes after four,
propped up, looking at the fire, resting my eyes,
Suddenly it was six The sun not yet up.
I immediately sat straight and began reading Ramana Maharshi,
hoping for some sort of spiritual hit by dawn,
though knowing the shame for falling asleep
is the same as the satisfaction of keeping a vow

I felt refreshed by those two hours of dreamless doze.
Refreshment is a large service the universe offers,
and gladly accepted

I heard, toward the ragged end of my vigil what I took
as a degrading sign of failure, the toilet left running,
unjiggled, upstairs, the tank with a balky gasket,
that needs coaxing or it won’t re-fill enough
to stop re-filling

I once came back from two weeks away
to hear that desertedness
in an empty house

But now some sweet exhaustion absorbs
the sound with more than forgiveness,
and hears in its continuous emptying
a faithful pouring-listening
that never sleeps
CERTAIN WORDS

certain words are supposed
to make your heart jump
as if it were a trout
on a hot summer day
going after a piece of sky

certain words are supposed
to take you to a better place
than where you are right now

when I hear certain words
I have a hard time responding
they get all gumboed up
in my mind

I don’t get excited
I’m trying to stay
right here
  in these shoes
  these pants
  this old flannel shirt
I wear like fur

when I hear certain words
I see my grandmother in her
1940’s living-room shawl
listening to a stand-up radio
fingering rosary beads

certain words are like trucks
hauling tons of ore from a mine
percentage of gold is very low

seldom seen by drivers & miners
people who use certain words.
ROUND MOUNTAIN, NEVADA

late at night the wind is
a mimic a kind of echo
part of the coyote greater
desert marching band
drum & bugle corps

spooking the only cows
in this part of the world
with sage sweet enough
to eat

& if you're up late
reading the moon's
stone tablet

or trying to figure the
code of dreams a map
out of this place

you can see miners in
pick-ups coming & going

their route a circle
trailer to mountain
mountain to trailer

& if you're still here
in the morning you can
walk a desert cemetery

trailing the cows & wind
you can see plastic flowers
embedded in rusty cans
sprouting from rocky graves

you can look at the dates
see no one stays long enough
to die here
tumbleweeds & plastic flowers
in a falling down fence
sun in its starting gate
ready to race across the valley

& the hundreds of tires
holding down trailer roofs
bull's-eyes
targets
donuts for a hungry wind
WINTER DREAM FROGS COURTING

in early February
    cold Nevada night
everything ice locked
I dream frogs
    courting

a black dog
    with white whiskers
lovingly deposits them
in my bed

the way a cat will
    carry her kittens

then the dog climbs in
beside me & disappears
from the dream

soon the frogs have
chosen sides they call
to each other
    across my body

thru the long winter night
of the dream they sing
    summer songs
of their frog love

just before I wake I know
    (the way you
can only know in dreams)
they want to do it
    however frogs do it

on top of me

I can feel their toe-
nails their moist bodies
climbing my sides
their song becoming one song
as thousands of them
move across the fur
of my chest

where that little boat
my heart
paddles on
ALUMINUM COCKTAILS

We feel that simplicity must be the keynote of a perfectly ordered civilization

Grover Whelan, President of the New York World’s Fair, 1939
(from the 1987 Carnegie Museum exhibit: The Machine Age)

Imagine some ancient tapestry
in a sealed room
whose pattern crumbles easily to dust

when the air blows through the window
at a certain, unprecedented angle
This is your history,

a curious object of reverence
whose sinuous
and heraldic design no longer serves

your present life
which you cast off now
like a tattered shawl passed down

through a long-forgotten line
of female ancestors
Are you listening?

Put on these greyhound shoes
with the pattern of red teeth dancing
in sleek, silver space;

they will speed you to Nirvana,
to enthronement
in this red lacquer chair

with its lightning-bolt arms
where you can pose as a queen or a tortured saint,
your spine an arrow
inscribed with sharp steps
that lead only up.

Now look at the horizon
where everything is always bright
with the ecstatic chromium of endless summer

Pick up your glass
and drink
NOCTURNE

Look how far
we have come: right to the edge
of this still evening
with its blue river
and vanishing trees
As we gaze out over the hills
you say
that the stars of the summer night draw closer,
reaching down to touch us
like some wandering halo sent by heaven
to find its lucky saint;
I say
we are lost forever beneath these stars
that glitter, then turn away
like the words we try to speak
to each other
as the hills grow dark
and the leaves give up
their last radiance

At home the cat sits poised
at the center of the twelve-paned window,
a sun in her glinting zodiac;
she looks at nothing in particular—a shade
pulled down across the alley,
the sudden flicker of a moth whirling in
and then beyond the frame

The moth has flown into a shining web
All things are folding into minor key

You say
that when you turn to note the crescent moon
scything its blue meadows
I'll slip away like smoke
But look:
here I am,
a broken and still singing reed
softly rooted at your feet
as fireflies shift their patterns
in the deeper air
WHAT YOU CAN DO BLINDFOLDED

Reassemble a rifle  Pin the tail
On a donkey  Cross Niagara Falls
On a tightrope or start a trust walk
With a woman whose name you don't know,
Following her to learn handicaps

It might be worthwhile to simulate loss,
But I froze, wouldn't take another step
Because I knew she was the crazed one
Who wanted me dead, who'd followed me
Like Arthur Bremer or Mark Chapman

She had me unbalanced over water,
One groping hand-length from the live wires
Of her revenge  She said "It's all right,
We can wait," and I listened to the blood
In her voice, thinking of darknesses we file

Marine, birthday child, Blondin, hysteri—
I was afraid to ask what I'd written
On myself that she'd read into rage
She wouldn't say "Huh?" or "What?" She'd answer
Slap my hands full of moments, each past part
Of me cleaned, oiled, refitted by heart
ALL SAINTS MORNING

for Al Masark

A lazy, open door Saturday
The sly Chinese waitress quietly
flirts with you in painful English
while the cook chops vegetables for the soup

You flirt with the bacon on your plate
Your bacon—you think—has already flirted
with disaster, has no further
interest in any of this But outside,

over the chimneys,
a black halloween balloon set
free the morning after
sails like the risen Lazarus
into a blue, unsuspecting day

Behind the bar, under spotless glasses,
the rich purple bottles lounge in rows
like squads of fat cops fingering
their nightsticks, waiting to
march you off to lunch
And who’s that walking past
the window on legs you can’t
take your eyes off?

What’s in the air that’s so
helpless and promising? Everyone knows
about spring, but that snappy copper
headed woman’s hair really needs
this hard, November, sidewalk light,
this especially anxious breeze to flutter

in that I don’t mind winter come
get me way Even in November, something
in the blood can’t ever say no,
doesn’t care you can’t say why
WILD BOUQUET by Harry Martinson
Translated, and with an introduction, by William Jay Smith and Leif Sjoberg
BKMK Press, University of Missouri

Harry Martinson looked hard at nature until nature looked hard at him. He gazed, gracefully; gracefully, nature gazed back. Such mutual regarding made these succinctly sensitive poems, small, most of them, little things conveying a largeness far greater than their word-count, an accounting, indeed, to carry the weight of the mystery, not tampering with it, the unspoiled mystery of nature and human nature. Their communion becomes so close at times, Martinson becomes nature and nature takes on his human nature, so close, he knows the speech of butterflies—or a butterfly lets him speak in its secret tongue. You must read "The Butterfly," if only this diaphanous poem, to see the point become image, the image having become Martinson's imagination. As his poems have been skillfully translated from Swedish, he skillfully had translated nature into Swedish—into language. It matters not which one. Fine poems may defy translation, but fine poems also let more than one tongue speak them.

In nature poems, we expect the seasons: we find the four of them in these; in nature poems, we also expect a workout for our senses: the five senses in these poems awaken our sluggish ones. Or our sluggish senses, so battered by being city-pent, to keep from total wipe-out, they turn off, or down, operating on a lower frequency high enough for our safety and their survival. We must go to poetry to have the sacred fire renewed. Or the sixth sense—though we all know, said Max Eastman, we have at least 40 senses—the kinesthetic: "the tones of an inhaled melody." And then, the mixed senses, the synesthetic, as Martinson has it: "The eye helps the ear choose trees." What we don't expect in nature poems—in America, at least—we get in these: the pure nature poem, that kind of nature poem not invaded by the trespassing I, the ego using nature for other ends than its own. Nature never says, for instance, Keep Off The Grass; man, the custodian, makes that intrusion. But nature does say, tell me but don't tell on me, as "The Song of the Meadow" shows.

And yet, not all of them pure nature poems, these show the presence of Martinson as human nature, though not as a trespasser. The presence of imagination, of course, in any nature poem, might seem to be an imposition on, if not an invasion of, privacy. And yet again, certain tempered human natures can let nature be a reading of the human spirit without despoiling either nature or spirit, the way some little kids can pick up bees without harming them, or getting stung. I knew a schoolboy, once, who could talk a squirrel right up his arm to perch on his shoulder. But, you're right, both examples more really show animated nature, not the nature in the stiller quietudes of action, the growth that takes months and hardly shows, Presto, the bare trees leaved.

So in reading Martinson's nature poems, we find ourselves reading the human spirit, human nature. The joy of it, the sorrow, the wit of it, the humor, the wonder of it, the awe, the mystery of it, the transparency—I shall not list all the parallels—these we read, to our wonder, our humor, our joy, but chiefly
to our delight, teasing wisdom Let me offer a few posies from his bouquet, as fresh as his drawings as fresh as his poems, to specify these generalities: "the moth grazes against eternity"; "haystackcloud summers"; "the polished ice-floors arrange a ball"; "a hidden ice-brook with its white fur roof"; "the leaves blink in the trees"; "butterflies fly by means of voluminous oriental shawls"; "the angel of the mud, the waterlily"; "dark-red farm peonies bulged in the rain" but this excerpting the horizontal risks toppling the vertical Open this book to any page, therefore, to find the delight of the horizontal in the charm of the vertical to admire

Leif Sjoberg and William Jay Smith have made 59 more Martinson poems beautifully available in this sensitive translation. Admiring every one of them, I wonder why so few of his poems have previously been made available; Nobel Prize poets usually get the full treatment in America But this collection, at least, generously changes the disregard of Martinson’s nature poems

THE BUTTERFLY

Born to be a butterfly,
my cool flame flutters
on the heavy velvet of the grass
Children chase me
Beyond the mallows and tussocks the sun is setting,
I manage to escape into the night
The moon rises: it is far away I am not afraid.
I listen to its rays.
For their protection my eyes film over
The dew makes my wings stick together
I sit on the nettle

translated by William Jay Smith and Leif Sjoberg
THE SONG OF THE MEADOW

A blossoming meadow can only be described by its butterflies,
only properly sung of by its bees.
Fully to comprehend the flash of a thousand wings
and fully to discern the song of the bees
can only be done by those fairies
who from eternity have trained themselves to listen

translated by William Jay Smith and Leif Syoberg
THE FOREST OF CHILDHOOD

Barefoot from tussock to tussock I ran
seeking the farmer's cows,
and saw how the mirrored firmament turned
in the tarn its cloud-tufted wheel.

In the summer's forests life played,
and evening was deep with thrushes and the heaven high with swallows
Nothing came of all my dreams and deceits,
but memory enlivens my life
and memories are completed dreams

To lingonberry patches deep in
summer's own parish
my dream migrates at times
like a crane in spring

translated by William Jay Smith and Leif Sjoberg
BELOW THE STARS' DISTANT GLOW

Below the stars' distant glow
eternity exposed itself
to the forest's twig-sharp cold
With the thin inscribed line
drawn by a meteor
a sharpened infinity marched in
along the nerve of the nocturnal

translated by William Jay Smith and Leif Sjoberg
The HENHOUSE

The hens, arriving early from the day's pickings,
circle a few times around the henhouse floor
and arrange themselves in the current pecking order.
Only when this is made clear
do they leap up to the roost.
Soon they're all seated in rows around the rooster.
He makes a stab or two at sleeping
but there will be no sleep for a while
The hens fuss and shove.
With peck and cawkle, he must quiet them down.
Then there is a shifting and settling:
one of the hens tries to remember the latest
worm she caught,
but the memory is already fading,
on its way down her crop
Another hen, on the edge of sleep, recalling clearly
the rooster's prowess, rolls her eyes heavenward,
her fluttering eyelids shutting out the world

translated by William Jay Smith and Leif Sjoberg
LATE-BORN SWARMS OF FLYING BEINGS

Late-born swarms of flying beings
make their way under leafless trees
They stop suddenly at places in the lee of the wind
and are seen dancing up and down
where the autumn sun can still warm them
No one can utter their names or their species
before the fall wind thrusts them out of the year
toward homeless seas of air

If each one could be called a word,
then a life-language blows away there on the wind.
Life and Death, the two great squanderers,
play a bold game at night
Uncounted, countless, most of what we see whirls
forever away, permanently dispersed

translated by William Jay Smith and Leif Sjoberg
LEAF-FALL

The tree is forced by the wind to acknowledge its autumn
It disposes in golden yellow on the ground what it has put to
good use in its summer life
Soon all the trees will be forced
to give up the game this year
It has so quickly become fashionable to go naked
The mushroom, whose eye is dazzled,
offers up his erect red bun while it’s still fresh

translated by William Jay Smith and Leif Sjoberg
VERNACULAR

Strive as I might
for the syntax of cities,
the grammar of lit galleries and chapels,
the logic of bookshops, calm parlors
and dim seminars of the erudite,

I am mixed in the morass
of swamp and rootshock, the tangle
of draped moss, the dialect
of wind-swayed spruces where the weather
of pleasure is fierce candor,
where the bauch-ice gleams,

and my tongue takes the shape
of a green thorn for speaking:
I thrill from rib and temple,
from scarred heel to gust-tousled
crown when on the path
I see the rock mouse scuttle
or smell sweet-flag on the wind, when
I breathe the mullein’s
pollen and follow
the river under stars whose glow is
unmuted by earthlights

This is my diction, the strict consonants
of sap-sheathed pine needles, the shifty vowels
of a slope-stream
swollen with April melt’s glee,

nor is it babble I praise,
as the accents of thrush song,
the idiom of sleek mule deer browsing,
the inflection of limb breaking
into leaf, bud, blossom and flame
sing a shape more sacred

than the accents of trade,
the vocabulary of the scholar,
the in turning diatribe of the diplomat
ever elegant on the threshold
of politeness and lie

The areas of syllogism, of the clinic,
of the gazette with its deadlines,
of the ad copy shop with its avarice,
its desire to gull, coddle and sell—

these forbid me to utter clearly,
as they at best are mistranslations
of the spider's silences, the oak's
unheard fall across a shadowed wood,
the suasion of a spiralling vine
The language of urban surge,
of mass and mannered fashion
fails me, withholds the world,
leaves me smelling the dawn rose
through some blanket whose fibers
never rose from soiled root,
never stretched for nurturing sun,

yet speech is still possible
in the reticence of shaggymanes,
the whisper of a lame mare tearing grass,
the rhythm of unexpected wind
trilling through split rock,
carousing through the hemlocks, breaking
the shrill birches, lifting what leaves are ready
to surrender stem and fly, forever the voice
of the wind's reel through nature,
its carol of praise and lamentation,
its generous prosody and raw otacular slang

Even this recitation
of unstudied inflections
charms me back to clover, chickadee
and pickerel, dall sheep, fox and cape hare,
the realm of the rock vole, the thrill
of loosestrife and sumac,
the hymn of plenty's radiant spaces
where I belong
SCOTT WARD, EXPLAINING HISTORY,
GOES ONE UP ON GIBBON

I learned a new Latin word: *cresare*
"(of women) to wiggle the hips during
copulation" God, those Romans had it all—
a language made for elegy, the earth's
known land, women who invented *cresare*-ing
Probably this explains the Fall:
barbarians in wolfskins roaming the far
provinces, ignoring snow, no hearth
for comfort, greasy wenches with teeth
like fangs. No Lares. Then the rumor:
in the white city that brought us war
dwell wenches who move circular
and moan. That was enough
Honed spears and forced marches,
Alaric battering the gates. Pillage, torches,
the end of culture and Diocletian Law
They didn't care for law, art or thought
They conquered what they saw:
neglected Vestals in thrall to Imperial decay,
thin nymphs itching to *cresare*
BLACK HAT & madness

is when
all the
telephones
are used
all the bars
are locked

i walk
down boulevards
w/shoes
too tight—
a smoke
and no one
has a lite
STAYING IN THE EXIT/saturday

"and all the voices have stopped"

there is only one way
out & i have seen it
at nite w/only socks
and a raincoat i have
found it in a cheap
bottle of wine went
all the way didn't stop
for breath just kept
the swallow loud

there is only one way
out & i have used it
stayed longer than i
should have can't feel
my way
back
TWO YOUNG ITALIANS

These men live too much
Grappling each other, thigh pressing thigh,
Fingers cutting skin, they fall to the ground
One body, love and violence in their open eyes,
In their jutting fists which find each other, roughly
Mars and Venus make love in their blood
A knife plunges into flesh
And the silence of one induces the cries of another
There is too much passion in these men,
Life that does not recognize the possibility of some end,
Some thread which slices through the reality
Of red soil, red wine, and red lipped women
And leaves life flowing from an open wound
In a street somewhere with the pigeons and wailing women.
ON VIEWING MONET

His women don’t
get pregnant
The blurs of their
skirts are
slim and tight
and so filmy
they melt at
the touch of
a tongue.
Such rounded cheeks
don’t feel rouge
but their
lips are kissed
in Normandy
and Giverny
every summer
I can’t say
I’m jealous
of their waterlilies or
their afternoon strolls
but my stomach
might just bulge
one of these days
under the strain
of my t-shirt
and I’ll
want to climb
into the frame
and join them
in their flower
garden and flecks
of sun
UNREQUITED AT THE LONGDISTANCE DINER

I would like to be writing
this in a diner
I wandered to in a dream
after our small romance
in a woods You didn’t
follow, but I could
remember the fog
rising around our knoll You say
more there than I want to imagine I forget
quickly, and flowers,
tiny, unclassifiable flowers,
bloom in the shadows of oak
and maple Are there maples
where you live?
Is there fog?
Is there a half-lit
diner that opens at 6 a m
on the outskirts of your town?
THE YOU POEM

This much abused mode turns on these notions: First, the "you" addressed is dead but remains prescient, and can hear what's being spoken here on earth. Usually there's some unfinished business—hatred towards a departed family member; a friend dead by suicide or accident. The "you" is still on planet Earth but is absent—possibly a lover who has split after a lover’s quarrel. These poems become wish-fulfillment expressions ranging from self-pity to ecstasy. In both forms the poet's ego is paramount.

Michael Ryan's "Winter Drought" displays the difficulties inherent in the You Poem. Ryan begins by doing what many of these poets do when writing to someone dead—they assume that the addressee can read or hear the poem, and yet they insist on giving information to "you" that "you" would obviously know. Here Ryan reminds P.K. that he (P.K) first cut his wrists and throat, then, three months "of hospitals and talk" later, "you" stole "your" dad's car and drove it into a bay. The cops found the car 3 days before they discovered your "bloated and frozen" body, bequeathing to "your" friends "a terrible final image." Obviously, while P.K. doesn't require this information, we readers do—and Ryan might have inserted it headnote, freeing him to get on with the issue of his own feelings about the friend.

We soon discover that P.K. was a mere acquaintance—"You were nearly nothing to me—a friend / of a friend, a pushy kid who loved poetry." Yet, Ryan reports, recently, while on a walk he often takes across a wintry field, "you rose abruptly from the undercurrents of memory." The slackness of this line is typical, I fear, of this poem generally—the whole seems "written" and not much "felt" until the close. There is a moment though as Ryan finds his memory "dredged in a steel net" as he approaches the spot where the accident occurred, a spot he'd never seen:

amid boat noise
and ocean stink, your corpse
  twisting as if hurt
when the net broke the surface
then riding toward me, motionless
  pale blue against the water's black

Ryan senses that the You Poem must do more than review information from the past.

Margaret Gibson's excursion into the mode, alas, does not fare well. "Catechism Elegy," a letter to dead parents, is narcissistic ("I's" abound in piles, much as flies and wasps drop on rural midwestern windowsills during
the winter), and filled with pretentious literary turns of phrase: "the rude intent of our silence," "the sting of death hummed in our daily bread," a radiance that ripened," etc. One unhappy image almost dissuades me from continuing—she sees the parents "as deeply as years" (again the fancy literary turn) curving their "parenthesis" around her, demanding answers to questions she imagines they gave her to answer. What are these questions? Generalized personal destiny questions, viz., "Where's your sister?" "Where are you?" "Who are you?" "What have you done?" Again, if the dead folks are sufficiently alert as spirits to understand Gibson's poem/letter to them, they should be smart enough to know the answers to the questions themselves.

On the other hand, Lynn Emanuel creates an original You Poem while still hewing to that tacky convention of telling "you" what "you" would already know. I assume that the person addressed is Emanuel's mother who as a girl was taken by her adventurist rake of a father to California. She loved the progress of the train over the landscape, "that trail of noise and darkness / Hauling itself across the horizon, / Moths spiraling in the big lamps." She loved "the oily couplings and the women's round hats / Haunting all the windows." The father liked "fast black minks," and on the occasions he left her behind in hotels, she observed his women parading before windows, drinking, naked. She "discovered lust," and knew that some day she would be "on its agenda"

Like the woman who drank and walked naked through the house
In her black hat, the one you used to watch
Through a stammer in the drapes
In that small town of cold hotels, you were the girl in the dress.
Red as a house burning down.

Another successful poem in the mode is Marge Piercy's "Burying Blues for Janis." for Piercy does not waste time addressing news to Joplin she would already know. The poem is crammed with energy, conveying to Joplin her incredible impact on one fan:

Your voice always whacked me right on the funny bone
of the great-hearted suffering bitch fantasy
that ruled me like a huge copper moon with its phases

Joplin's "downtrodden juicy longdrawn female blues" fired Piercy's distaste for the "rat race of men" and her own unwillingness to follow through Joplin's ostensible message for female behavior:

You embodied the beautiful blowzy gum of passivity,
woman on her back of the world endlessly hopelessly raggedly
offering a brave front to be fucked
That willingness to hang on the meathook and call it love
Ray Carver in "Your Dog Dies" addresses "you" as a means of stepping off to the side of his own pain in handling the demise of the family canine, his daughter's favorite pet. The distancing provided by the second person pronoun, and the presence of a dumb, numb tone, almost of a Dick and Jane simplicity, both produce irony, undercutting as they do the poet's distress:

it gets run over by a van
you find it at the side of the road
and bury it
you feel bad about it
you feel bad personally

"You" buried the creature in the woods. "deep, deep" Your poem is so good "you" are almost happy the dog died. Winsome You try a new poem, one about writing a poem about the death of a dog. You seem to get carried away, until you are interrupted by a woman screaming "your name, your first name,/ both syllables, / and your heart stops" You keep on writing, and she continues screaming: "you wonder how long this can go on"

John Hollander with his usual elegance of form and phrase employs "you" in a generic sense to write a 16 liner (four quatrains) on "you's" departure, a departure either real or imagined. In "A View Out the Window" (Southwest Review Summer 86), the departure occurs without glitter or fanfare, with no clinging "pearl of cloudy promise" for the future. Is the sailing simply temporary, to a "warmer port," i.e., as on a holiday, or is the sailing a permanent rupture, on "a great unreturning ship"? The image, probably imagined by the speaker through his window, turns "dull pigeon-gray" rather than white, as "your steamer" dissolves, smeared against the horizon.
NEIGHBORS

Just between you and me, what
Could anyone do with a man
Like he was, may he rest in peace
And all of us too some day;

Never saw him drunk, I grant
You that, but never saw him sober
Either, but I saw him with a jug
Pouring something into the cistern,

And that was the week before
Half the hogs died, and it was
His word against mine, also when
The henhouse burned, his against mine,

And when all three blueticks got
Their eyes put out, his against mine,
But there won't be any more
Words now, accidents will happen,

They say that foul play was
Always a possibility, indeed
Was a necessity in this instance,
Just between you and me
PERENNIAL

It was the last chore  
I did in the autumn garden  
Just before first snow:  
Grubbing the mint out  

All of it, this time  
I burned it, root and leaf  
And stem of it,  
Turning the leaf-smoke sweet  

Now at the other end  
Of winter, kneeling  
On flagstones just beginning  
To hold the warmth,  

I have a few things to say  
To the mint: first up  
As usual, even in places  
Where it never grew before
AT THE PROVIDENCE ZEN CENTER

1
a monk walks slowly
past us, following his breath
   in the starry night

2
chips scatter!
   he whacks away
   at his unfinished Buddha

3
straining to see
the blue heron’s return—
   splash! a frog leaps in

4
meditating—
a black fly leisurely breakfasts
   on my nose

5
put down your broom!
this hairy humpbacked spider
   was also your mother

6.
a couple
passes through the temple gates
   followed by swirling leaves

7
a parked car
racing its engine; an incense stick
drops ash

8
spring winds:
so much depends
   on what i can’t see
9
near some birches
a woman brushes her white hair
  first day of spring

10
fee-bee, fee-bee
the song the chickadees sang
  the day my wife left

11
first freeze:
a leaf fallen onto thin ice
  near a round stone

12
a fly
buzzes round the window
  icy winds

13
i plant a potted
  Christmas tree by the temple gate
and leave
SALT MARSH

A terrapin climbs over sand
with one eye skyward

Two glossy ibises fly slowly over

We look for darkness now, the way
we looked for light before

Wings in the shallows
are dark as waves

We believe the birds
are unable to wade
through spring without us
We believe impossible things

The edge of the sea,
so close we can hear it,
is telling its old lies
PERSISTENT HEAT

Stand up! You have only yourself to gain!
Audre Lorde

We are swimming beneath the sharks in your backyard
I wipe the sweat from your forehead
Feel the Bible scar of your grandma’s backhand slam
Brooding behind the cotton gin
Seboulisa
You move me in tumbleweeds through dream
Wandering in your lab coat
With red cash box, snake bite kit, and double axe
Scrying ‘Don’t Speak False Promises
The searing plumes of volcanoes’

We are swimming beneath the sharks in your backyard
Our rage sparks incandescence
Talking Baad and trampling waves
Hey possum
If you’re not movin’ you’re not livin’
Wind-river River-wind
Sing the slow curve of the moonsnail
Rivering alto flute
‘What I don’t have in magic I got in Baad’
The fifth moon arousing
Who sill take a stand?
LANGUAGE LESSON

Amant, I could not summon the word
amant, after leaving the classroom,
where Chantal read Verlaine in French
(her voice seemed to come from waves of the sea),
"J'ai peur d'un baiser/Comme d'une abeille,"
and still later while driving through town,
all of the windows open,
Preludes by Chopin on the radio,
lawns streaked with pink and white dogwood
and azalea, wisteria climbing,
wrapping its vines around the highest limbs
of trees, then letting spill
in purple tresses its racemes

That evening, in the same classroom,
Gerald Stern read his poems,
and driving home later,
following a sliver of moon in a deep sky,
again I hear the poem
that made our faces, opening like flowers,
curl in at the edges:
how his people were made into soap
If he can go on loving his "wild god,"
-serving with poems, the least I
can do is once more reach for the word,
the page, with or without music.
THE NEED TO SING

After news of radiation from Chernobyl
and the silence in our livingroom,
we sit under the dome of the gazebo,
where resonant frequency
resembles F on the flute
I always want to hear how tea pours,
the plash, the first bubbles in the empty cup,
and watch the steam rise
We sip, the pines stir,
purple irises tap against wood,
a mockingbird imitates titmouse and phoebe
Someone has re-entered the house;
on the turntable, a trumpet,
pure as the edge of a knife,
Handel's "Eternal Source of Light Divine,"
and a soprano begins to sing

Suddenly I remember a void in Annie Hall
and the emerging face of Diane Keaton:
color of peaches, framed with long brown hair
She begins to sing to a piano,
which we cannot see The first notes
come when the two lovers kiss:
Music emanates from their bodies,
bridges the darkness between the two scenes
"Seems like old times, having you to walk with"
The voice wobbles, rises up over a memory
of tears, swells in timbre,
until it is of a sweetness almost insupportable,
like a craving for strawberries, or sex
"Seems like old times, having you to talk with"
As long as she sings, we can look
at the darkness around her: room with no walls,
dim light touching the heads of her listeners,
who do not know they fear the end of the music,
or the slight pause before the next scene
if there is a next scene,
or song.
TOXIC WASTE

'Nam
was a radioactive war
No nuclear bombs
were dropped
Years later
some GI's put guns
to temple
or mouth
or aimed at others
some
rotted away internally
dying in orange light
many
went mad like rabid dogs
beneath the artillery
of memory
giiger counters
go off the scale
when 'Nam vets enter the room
ten thousand baths
never reach bone marrow
where toxic waste
of war lives
in the maze of tunnels
that never see
the sun
OCEANIC ELEGY
for P M S

1
When the sea opens up
    to tell some
Or one of its watery secrets
Out of trembling depths
Your memory will come to me
    soft salt, spray and mist
Amid a sunset of evaporated metals

Over the ocean's face
    my solitude takes flight
Winged, solitary maneuvers of gulls
Fleshless in their anxiety

2
Therefore
To put in the poem openly
    effortlessly
"This is just one sea, it is you"
To know unequivocally that I love you
To know these things,
    is to know
The instruments of torture
To clutch the wind
To grab an armful
    of
    falling
    water

3
Evenings
I pull up the sea
    over my body.
And the stars themselves are shiny
    like the sea turning
Like the sea
    talking to the moon
As if that sad conversation
    in indeterminate tones
Spoke of this liquid madness,
this anxiety over you
Mine has slept,
wet-haired on stone
With all the force of a sleeping woman
And even the voracious sea slugs that eat
spheres of light
From taciturn light houses
from ships' beacons
Digesting the radiant brightness
become confused
With the sea's churning.

4
To say you scratch my dreams
To say your breath envelops me
Is to feel myself drifting
in a grief stricken ocean.
You are the island my shipwrecked dreams seek
A harbor from a storm-wrecked sea
from a sky in terror.
And I remain imprisoned
in this vast thing
This sea that's you.
This sea that plays
Oceanographic orchestrations
through the bones of its fishes
Your leaving left behind
The empty fluid resonance we find
in the interior of conch shells
Where echoes are skeletal debris of sea foam
Where are you now?
When waves slap down while going away
The last words of the sea
when they seem to mourn your absence
As I lament, the other side of you
lost somewhere in paradise
BREACH

1
If you were to leave now
Everything that has
Light will change

I am lying awake in
This upstairs room.
Shadows of leaves across the ceiling

The sun is behind the trees
Waiting patiently
When I take a deep breath

On the brink of a deep revelation
As if something could be saved

Laughing, you reached to tousle my hair
Said it's better this way
Tomorrow we'll go with the current

But the pain wouldn't rinse
It has eaten everything
Going through the eye, threading through my wrist
Along strange words like a dream
In another time zone
Rising and falling at will
Floating like a windy cloud

2
At twilight
Above the trees
Two loons disappear and resurface
In an austere arrangement

Like a swimmer passing over the river
A child's blue crayon memory
Through the thicket of childhood
Of a room
Left from a gentler century
When everything, The keys to old lost valises,
The accordion wheezing
As simple as the world A giant hand
Pulling us back to the splintered corridors

Like an afterthought
I fly in the flock of these presences
I fly in this house and its memories

So they may leap softly, the wooden horses of childhood
Galloping in the inarticulate wind
Right into darkness

3
And I think of your absence
It is dark in the bedroom
The winter trees reach out
Towards the landscape

The leaves are blowing over
The gray forest dreaming

For this is a time when
Even the heart, with its pretensions to red,
Is a brilliant arc of smiles. Ignorant of the years

The emptiness
That moves gracefully in front of the seasons

Some days you were there
A source of sunlight
In the gray forest,

To burn the webs from the trees
To light the green globes

To forget the ash, that has already
Washed and washed
The still alive flesh
Your idiot hunger left
4
Would any of us be born into the world?
Seems the risk of all living,
I remember how you, long ago
Yes
Would turn me into fire

Dusk is falling,
The light changes, comes into
This upstairs room

Outside the window, a crow
Has taken over the bare oak

The sunsets grow longer
Night falls
Into a record of astonishing events
And the moon casts
Such fragile stems of light
They sing against you
Against the pain, like a well-honed instrument
With the silence of
Wind curting through grass
J. T. BARBARESE

J.T. Barbarese’s work expresses a particular view of the ordinary, the mundane, the postmodern: “Awareness shrink-wrapped over concept.” He conflates the concrete with the conceptual. His voice is caustic, skeptical, clear-sighted, tough, decent; it struggles towards that which it can still embrace as “strange and wonderful.” He sees, for example, the river under the Passyunk Avenue Bridge “where the sunlight trapped in the (oil) slicks mugs back at the night.” But his colloquialism is accommodated by forms like the sestina, and his interest in sound is part of this interest in form “We used to set up a cardboard box on the ground./ The box was Camelot. The ground was blacktop.”

And an iconography develops out of the inner landscape of his work, what one might describe as an urban landscape educated by a longing for the imagined. There are multitudes of birds, for example, “—as for the starlings/ they seem to condense/ right out of the dusk” or “Then the starlings/ tossed into the sundown like fistfuls of pepper/ usurped the distance.” One notices the peculiarity of his vision, his images. His eye sees “the sewer’s current that quietly made/ pleats in the waters,” or it can assert “the trees squirm like eels in the wind.” Anyone in Philadelphia who has heard Barbarese read “Ronny Smash’s America” recognizes the urgency of the colloquial which is typical of his voice: comic, resolute, impassioned. “But what do they think I am, an angel?/ Do these people who eat Jesus Christ every day/ eat a regular meal?”
THE SUNBEAM
  for Jesse

As light planes over
the flat of a leaf
touched by its heat
it abruptly comes to
out of vegetable coma
in plant darkness
so day gains on night
from the outside in

*

For a few minutes more
it groped the floor
a leg-high and thickening
thumbprint of light
so I started to write
into this gloom

fifteen-by-twenty
once a day, my life breaks

*

The heat-maddened dust
falls down the shaft
empties upon
empty hands
as day gains on me
will you gather me in
so slowly retreats
you must believe this
TESTAMENT

"It isn't easy to disbelieve:
Time runs happy up to Him
Who waits to shake His tambourine
Of life at all who now advance
And have no choice. A light unseen
Beats brightly on the Book of Earth
We letter it. And you are left
In the gulf my savior moves across
Becoming God's amazing Him,
Leaving you doomed in the dark abyss".

Just look at this: the autumn sky,
And the city's skyline launched into
Dawn's old anticipations
Think of the clouds that you thumbed on
A bedroom window once:
How you wrote the world's book right
By wiping off the kitchen's steam
A couple of stars was the text.

Now skylines thrown at heaven
Poke at upper memory
Where something is pulling the sky up
By the buildings that strap the cities down
To me on the earth-blessed earth,
Dreaming dawns bloodied with surprises,
With wails in the distance as minutemen
Grow more erect than summer corn
And whisper dispraise down the lanes
To me, locked in the dark keep
Of your old anticipations.

My cat still paws a rubber band
To get at what's inside the loop
Where his paw already is. He sleeps
Whole days through and dreams of me,
His God, and of pencilled prey,
Of pulling an object from my hand
Because I hold it; then he sleeps,
A small loaf curled in the sunlight
Sundown is a firebreak, then,

Beyond the Passyunk Avenue Bridge
And junk-towns like Smashie's that smoke
The air the color of iron at war
The cracking towers of ARCO spell
The Night Is High The Light Is Out
On the floodplains smeared with oil rainbows,
And under the bridge, on the wet banks
Creatures with only seconds left
Read the same thing backwards
I wheel through the plainspoken towns'

Towers and firebreaks back to where
Some cat in Lou's Diner on James Street,
In Lancaster, Pennsylvania, October of '75,
Sleeps and dreams His God moves through
The store with a rag in each hand
Asleep, the cat stirs at foreign sounds.
And my fallen change wakes him
But his small love is unforgiving,
And he falls back to sleep by the grill

"Ye of little faith should be
Herded together, then dealt with "

But Lou is dead, and so is his wife,
And Jimmy Hutton, nearly ten years,
Riordan's flesh is onionskin,
And Margie Crane is thinner than light,
And the unforgiving stars return
Like traffic lights to time such deaths,
And overhead is the threatened child
Who dreams the sky up every day
DOWN TOWN RONNY SMASH

"Downtown, find a corner,
People hang around and talk
Talking is a way of holding
What you know up to the light,
People to their word Downtown,
You hold a paper like a tent
So guys you know can't hurt you or
So you can see the hard truth Now
A blue moon is a signal that
Something's goofy; right now

Circulating in and out
Of phonebooths, betting parlors, the bars,
Shooting galleries, from the Vet
North to South Street, people say
Some great communicator's come
To free our sleepless asses from
The tyranny of slumber by
Blowing a hole out of the sky
To let the sun shine all the time;

Then, I hear, the spring moon
Will go pale blue and Jesus Christ
In a flak-jacket and packing a snub-nosed
Thirty-eight will plug the hole
With the souls of all the damned;
Then we'll lay us back to sleep
While SAC cleans up the Reds
It'll be Super Sunday, then,
Ball games, pinball, block parties, poker,
We will know the truth before
The Greek  But what I want to know is
Who’s this we? Can’t mean me
We’s politician for
We just invaded El Salvador.
Your taxes just went up, I’m sending
Fifty sailboats to the moon
To check out the solar wind.
Listen Leave me on my roof.
The city’s all up tight below

But the moon looks loose, rising
A junkie’s tied up by one foot
To a hydrant by his sister Here
You can smoke, you can check it out, you can talk—
I love it all; just like it is,
The Expressways knotted like a bow
And Uptown set there like it’s just been
Giftwrapped for some guy like me
Who takes it like it is"
THE MIDDLE CLASS ENTER HEAVEN

How the four corners of our unmortgaged lawn
fit into the snugness of Somerset Avenue

how the gifted firstborn trains his gifted firstborn
without getting up

how he snaps his finger
and his folks look up

from the pup who pursues
the firstborn's firstborn

and think those corners! our corners! How snug
they fit in what they fit into!

Our album before us:
the old young and the new young

look up out of wallet-size windows and doors
in ranks three-deep, with the edges true,

like tongues into locks tucked into corners
and the corners! the locks! the doors!

How everything fits in our unaging album

and how the neighboring albums frame neighborly faces
that one day we'll join on the obit pages

like mahjong tiles how house upon house piles up
whole blocks frame their trapped and streets gather in

their trapped like a shared concern!
From this unchipped skyline

not a thing will be taken
except for the sun that shall drop
like Christ from His Cross into Ventnor Bay
and get up tomorrow

we hope let God spare!
And that old man next door, Jack Gingrich,

is he really dead? How many years now?
How much did he leave her? O but O

how his garage door swings hard in the wind
just like him!

How its hinges, like hands torn from hankees,
wave back—just like her!
SOUTH STREET

Walking up and down this street
Narrow as a boxcar, lit
Every thirty feet or so
By street lights bent toward the street
Like open faucets, we are now
The Many and we celebrate
How a few have managed us
Through powerless celebrity
To manic shopping Do visions age
as people do—badly or well?

All over South Street, we are now
This broken woman on the stoop:
She lectures to the vapor lights
And their bent hats, cocked slightly, tip
As though to listen better She
Seems cut out of a sheet of it
Every thirty feet light paints
A figure in a vestibule
That gestures stiffly out, as though

Rough hands rubbed its outline through
From street level, looking up
Toward Front Street and the dark river,
Through the steel biceps that keep
The Franklin Bridge flexed eastward, I
See some light behind the dark—
Night sky patched with morning
Yet it's too early, or too late
For lights to wear the darkness out

All the little things left out
Fifteen years ago, or more,
Stunned into rockhard artifice
When we grew up, stand like sullen
Punks in the flicker of pondwater
That's burning too These our stores
Densely smile forth They know
The prole is the sum of his arts, and so
South Street is its shops; they know
The revolutionary lore
Of sunrise, how the dawn walls in
The Morning Star that sponsors change
And always has; they know it’s late
And just how late, and how these lights
Go off when morning gropes the street
In panic, and that panic makes
Inevitable the day when they

And we will not be helpless
ECLIPSE

That I might wish it away,
on time or not,
will it gone and let the sun
talk the day into being  But falling light
spits on the stems of the handrails  Men look
    at their feet,

kids lie flat on the purply grasses,
day turning into dusk wakes the child

inside me  Earth, she cries, you are grown older
    shingled,

Sun, you are setting inside me,  daylight
why are you bitten back, houses

why all your bricks turning black?
And when will I ever be younger than this?

God hides back of the clouds, like a flower
    shut in a book
Katey’s snout sniffs at the darkness

the sun will shock into color  Soon now
Any second  It can’t last much longer
GOD

The town unfolds like a map from the air;  
time itself must unfold like this

from God's vantage from where he looks up  
at the undersides of the galaxies

shiny as cams or valve seats,  
bearings for the drive shaft

he moves when he runs his eyes up and down,  
if he exists If he does, does he ask

himself as he reconceives day after day  
and dismisses one after the other

what I dream in my dreams of God?  
Long wide street, dark sycamores thrust

like bushings at sunrise, the moon making wide turns  
toward the vigilant, sinking dark as it grows into vision

In between patches of plowed land, blocks  
like dice that a bad god dropped And a road,

twisted left like the dice's track  
spilling from the place where the sun goes down

under the world to go looking for God  
while it's us, it's this, it's me that he looks for
LETTER TO SEATTLE

My resolve was to send you everything
The letters unfinished;
the irrational emotional ones
ending: Goddamnit, why aren't you here,
and such

The words you were never supposed to know
The poems only for me, though they were written for you
Everything forced blindly
into the envelope; addressed and stamped before hand
Every word that I was afraid to say
in any other way than writing

How pathetic it seems
I'll burn it all and send a postcard from Philadelphia,
trying to sound familiar
LA BAMBA

for Michael, whom I slept with

We had a party at our house
once, when my father was away.
All our friends in the world
were there, eight or nine children,
including Steven Malley and Karen Smith,
the fun couple of our block
There were games and dirty jokes,
songs we all knew the words to,
and my mother, who came down
every fifteen minutes
with soda and popcorn
When Steven asked Karen to dance
and she said yes,
he asked if we could turn on
the record player
But Michael and I owned no records,
and the only one in our mother’s collection
with anything near
a rock and roll beat
was TRINI LOPEZ: LIVE AT THE COPA!
I loved that record
It had “Lemon Tree” on it,
“I Want to Live in America,”
and my favorite, “La Bamba”
As I listened to it for what had to be
the hundredth time,
Steven went to his house
and returned with a stack of 45’s:
The Monkees, The Supremes, The Lovin’ Spoonful
He and Karen did the twist
on the cement floor of our basement
while Michael and I
flailed our arms,
twirled till we almost
collapsed
ROOT CELLAR
	onight I sleep with my face toward
    an open window
    you drift into my room,
it's your smell—I wake up half
expecting you to be standing there
hovering over my head. but my room
is empty as usual, my cat sleeps
on his corner of the bed, I look
quickly to the night stand to check
the time and to see if I've left one
of your books there, one that has
taken on the odor of your cellar room

it's raining tonight and it's the damp
earth I smell
    it reminds me of my father's
root cellar in New England where he stores
vegetables for the winter

    he dug potatoes
as a boy in Maine—I too grew up close
to the land where I haunted the woods
that surrounded our property—for it's
quiet, there were cushions of humus
and evergreen needles, there I would read
for hours undisturbed:

    thinking everyone lived like that,
tonight nothing sustains me, nourishes
my desire
DREAMS

like a cat
behind
a screen window
watching birds
outside dreams
are trapped
inside almost
tasting feathers
LINDA MANN

for my daughter

The warmth of your small feet
Spreading across my palm.
I held you, at less than a year,
Balanced on a single hand
Fearless, you didn’t know enough
To be afraid The same hand would
Pull you from the ground,
Angry that you fell and hurt yourself
Yank you to your feet,
Spin you around—as
Beneath tangled hairs, sweat soaked,
At the base of your neck,
A drop of blood appeared
It was red, bright red,
Fresh from the vein scarlet;
As red as the apple
Stitched to the front of your dress
Your mother tried, but
Could not protect you from me;
She could not even protect herself
And still you called me, ‘‘Daddy’’
I fear one day to be left alone
In a hospital bed at seventy-five—
Alone, except for the sound of the
Nurse’s shoes on stainless tile;
For the smell of my own urine, leaking
Thru the broken seal of an ill-fitted catheter
As our hands touch, I want you to love me,
But do I expect too much?
Is your fear of me too real?
Is there no hope for an aging father;
No impetus generated by our blood,
No supernatural force,
No chorus, not even a single voice within us
Singing family, family?
WHAT BECAME OF IRVING

This particular neighborhood clung to the side of a hill, and seemed always on the verge of sliding into the smoke stacks of Scullin Steel. If you dropped a coin, it would roll for blocks. Money that fast was scarce, and we all scrounged, but none so intently as Irving. He spent each summer day rooting through the tall grass and thick weeds of Franz Park. Searching for empty bottles Pepsi and Whistle Orange Dad's Root Beer 3-V Cola. He stalked them with the patience of an entomologist, knew their habitat, their colors, their deposit at the corner store. His pockets jingled with their bounty. But Irving's purpose was eccentric. Near every day he used his cash to buy a bag of cookies, Oreo cookies. He'd take these Oreos to a hilltop where you could see far beyond the steel mill. Past the treetops of the suburbs. He'd open the bag, and after licking out the cream center, sail the black wafers one by one into the valley below.

That this is true seems less important now than the impression I've come to hold of Irving: not eating those white centers, but cleaning the black wafers, filing them down with his tongue.
DISCIPLE

A woman I knew became a nurse, but that was sometime after she told me she had a piece of Jack Kerouac’s fingernail (his middle finger) that she had bought from a guy in New York who was married to one of Kerouac’s old girl friends. This guy was selling off all his wife’s love letters and mementos to get money for some Grand Funk concert he just had to see, but without his wife knowing it. This didn’t bother the woman who would become a nurse because she thought it was cruel of the wife to keep all that stuff around the house now that she was married—even if this street vendor husband was a loser. A real weasel, she said. She, the future nurse, kept the fingernail wrapped in tissue in a brown envelope locked in a metal box—the kind of box they sell in dime stores for important papers like deeds and wills or loan agreements. She had written on the envelope, “Cuticle end of Jack Kerouac’s left middle fingernail Purchased N Y, 9/15/71.” She told me that when she got to be very old she was going to wrap the box in a dozen trash bags and bury it deep in the ground. Anonymously. So that centuries from now mystery would shroud its discovery.
WANDERING IN THE CAGE

languid conjecture in hours of moil, trapped in the shadows
of the father.
sidewalks outside of cafes are lonely
through the days

my cat looks at me and is not sure what I am and
I look back and am pleased to feel
the same
about him

reading 2 editions of a famous magazine of 40 years
ago, the writing that I felt was bad then,
I still feel
is
that way

and none of the writers have lasted

sometimes there is a strange justice
working
somewhere

sometimes
not

grammar school was the first awakening of a long hell
to come:
meeting other beings as horrible as my
parents

something I never thought
possible

when I won the medal for Manual of Arms in the
ROTC
I wasn't interested in
winning
I wasn't much interested in anything, even the girls seemed a bad game
to chase: all too much for all too little

at night before sleeping I often considered what I would do, what I would be:
bank robber, drunk, beggar, idiot, common laborer

I settled on idiot and common laborer; it seemed more comfortable than any of the alternatives

the best thing about near-starvation and hunger is that when you finally eat it is such a beautiful and delicious and magic thing

people who eat 3 meals a day throughout life have never really tasted food . .

people are strange: they are constantly angered by trivial things, but on major matters like totally wasting their lives, they hardly bother to notice

on writers: I found out that most of them swam together there were schools, establishments, theories groups gathered and fought each other there were literary politics there was game-playing and bitterness
I always thought writing was a
solitary profession

still do

animals never worry about
Heaven or Hell

neither do
I

maybe that's why
we
get along

when lonely people come around
I can soon understand why
other people leave them
alone

and that which would be a
blessing to
me

is a horror to them

poor poor Celine
he only wrote one book
forget the others
but what a book it was:
Voyage au bout de la nuit
it took everything out of
him
it left him a hopscotch
odd-ball
skittering through the
fogs of
eventuality
the United States is a very strange
place: it reached its apex in
1970
and since then
for every year passed
it has regressed
3 years,
until now
in 1987
is 1936
in the way of
doing things

you don't have to go to the movies
to see a horror
show

and in 5 more years
nobody will ever be
allowed to write a poem
like this
one

there is a madhouse near the postoffice
where I mail my works
out

I never park in front of the postoffice,
I park in front of the madhouse
and walk down

I walk past the madhouse.

some of the lesser mad are allowed
out on the porch.
they sit like
pigeons

I feel a brotherhood with
them
but I don't sit with them
I walk down and drop my works
in the special slot

I am supposed to know what I am
doing

I walk back, look at them and
don’t look at
them

I get in my car and drive
off

I am allowed to drive a
car

I drive it all the way back to my
house

I drive my car up the driveway,
thinking,
what am I doing?

I get out of my car
and one of my 5 cats walks up to
me, he is a very fine
fellow

I reach down and touch
him.

then I feel all right.

I am exactly what I am supposed to
be
LABOR DAY BLACKOUT

The buzz came fast
white wine
in the hot sun of August
will do it every time
I had every intention
of getting smashed
it was my first thought
when I awoke that morning
before I opened my eyes
before I brushed my teeth
before I ate breakfast
why break the pattern
and the years of
a blurred Labor Day?

I vaguely remember
my mother calling
long distance
my daughter calling
for some needed advice
(which I gave to her
half-crocked)
which led to an unwanted argument
and I thought
I’d ordered in a pie
and stuffed myself
with half-mushroom
half-pepperoni pizza
with you
at the kitchen table
naked and buzzed
buzzed and naked

Another summer
gone .
days of low-key bullshit
around the pool
days of sunny skies
another Jerry Lewis telethon
another blackout
on another Labor Day
HOW TO PHOTOGRAPH TELEPHONE POLES

Line them up, these amputees —
A classic lesson in perspective.
Trees without flower or bud or hair
Whose seed nevermind grow marvelously
Along the overseas highway down to
The last Florida key  Steady!
As the wind kicks up, the sea
Flips over, the tall masts gather
In the rear-view mirror, an unholy
Black armada, bobbing  Freeze them

As they rush the windshield hallooing
With the aplomb of palms
Shoot the message-bearer
And still they come, like infantry stepping
Over islands, walking on water
LIFELINES

clotheslines are
    the historians
    of 10th Avenue
    charting vital statistics
as they rise and fall

I study them
like a fortuneteller
    reading palms
wondering what veil
    is lifted
when each hour
    is less mysterious
    but a greater burden
and all you want
at the end of the day
is to look up
    at stars
and not know
    their names
THERE WAS TOO MUCH TO HOLD

in memory of my father

you are a shell
the night
  presses to its ear
  then drops
  when you refuse to answer
and
I am a postcard
you mailed to yourself
so you could find
  your way
  home

your bones
once luckier than dice
are splinters
  in me
yet I debate these words
as if I could find you
  hiding in their wreckage

our needs were so meager
that everything got away
  while we decided
  what to keep
not even your wallet
  is left now
no photographs
  or books
only memories of rented rooms
and your love
for cars
LIGHTNING BUGS

they don't exist
    here
where August disappears
    before it's recognized
but in Ohio
fireflies were
    the nightlights of summer
when I was climbing trees

I climb scaffolds of hell
and the ocean
    is never further
than the next glass
    of Talisker
and when my granddaughter
asks if a skeleton
    draped with a white coat
is a doctor
I wonder if bones
    are biographies
    or blueprints
and if their cinders
are the fireflies
I once caught
SNAKE MEAT

The flag rushes like a horse
on a wooden bridge
& the Arkansas lifts white caps
from the shallow river

The prairie hisses through the trees—
A snake held up on a stick,
carried to the edge of the yard
& tossed mid-field
Gale winds, you would tell me
Lights that jump in a squall

When I don’t hear from you
I read the same letter
again & again—
the way I go over a recipe to see what
went wrong

I look in the drawer
that devours your mail
like dust pitched at the window
by a boy in the yard after supper
Someday, when the wind’s calmer,
your words will stay on my plate,
no longer shoved by brutal trees
as though the earth would spin off
its handle
FRENCH HOTEL MYSTERY

At the foot of the upset bed
and thus holding center stage. Oh
The chambermaid has left the sheets and pillows
piled in unartistic disarray—and gone
The floors are swept, the bathroom cleaned,
just the bedding heaped—tired, ruined tents,
soft sculpture on a pained and naked mattress

She’s gone to meet a lover, sweet-mouthed bookie,
angrily pacing a downtown corner—she can’t
trust her bent bike and will run all the way.
Or is it wild Gaston on the floor above, o.
a handsome guest, or any pair of cuffs passing by?
Nothing should block her well-developed desire
Has she had an attack? Say no. Or been called
home—her boy, Peeping Pierre, has been caught
Her mama’s died—old and evil, but her mother
Her husband’s run away—she shouldn’t herself
have patted Long-Blondie-Locks next door

Too late to check with the concierge,
I sleep on the floor this night, not out of sloth,
but so I won’t touch the bedding—vital evidence
In the morning, unhinged, an exacting critic with
clashing theories, I skip my meetings and wait
If she returns I must be first to know
The story (which one?) has mounted me
like a clumsy but gratefully eager lover

Stroke of nine she’s back, her face a fleshy mask
We stare at each other over a deep gulf of
dramatic images, literary types and dirty linen,
my face a study in Hercule Poirot,
her body a will-o’-the-wisp
We stand close—tall and short and distraught
‘Monsieur,’ she says
I can’t wait
MODEL APPLE

The yellow apple, model fruit,
sits on my desk endowed with
arched stem, dark crotch, and replete with
silver-whiteness streaking from the rim,
shadows crowding like soft dust—
an ideal, incongruous subject bordered by
stapler, answering machine, personal computer
and multi-colored, dripless ball-point pens

All around—a still plane, a perfect flatness.
The apple sits in quiet, canting gently to the side
as apples do when plucked and laid to rest
in preparation for their next big event—
next biggest, that is, after the singing glory
of blossoms, arms flung to the wind,
the ripening of stretched-tight skins
and fat firming of pulp

Telephone, stapler, pens and IBM,
mobile attention-getters,
all now come to spastic life,
progressing the world to history.
The apple sits in puffed grace and waits
It remembers Cezanne
CONTORTIONIST

With your right hand, reach between your legs, around the back of your left leg, and grab your right knee. Now reach behind your left leg with your left hand and grab your right elbow, which lies between your legs. Put your head into the hole between your crotch and your clutched right elbow. Lift your left leg up as far as it will go and hold it with your left hand too. Now somehow, somehow, put your right leg on top of your shoulders and bend it down so that you can grab it with your right hand, the one holding your left knee. Two hundred times a day the contortionist blossoms, for practice, into variations of this arrangement. The body is a wondrous thing.
SUNDAY DUSK

for JMM

Sunday dusk in summer’s fine pre-season.
Honeysuckle and charcoal thicken the breeze
An oil lamp burns a little island
in the darkening yard, anhd cold La Batt,
dulls, slug by slug, my sense of drought
No one will die tonight
I have had enough of death this year—
old teachers; young students; a one-time lover;
my great friend, so worn out at last
she could not keep her undies dry;
my father, his shins honed to sword blades
as he withered on the bed, afraid to sleep
And with each death, a creeping dryness,
turning blood to sand

But here’s the world, poised like a diver
on the leaking brink of summer
Three fat moths, winged cigar butts,
nudge the globe. A single bat
squeaks his angular, impossible flight,
faceting the sky above me Nighthawks peel
the vertical air to its deep blue flesh
Surviving drought takes irrigation:
steady Gene Shay easing the airwaves;
rag-time rumbling from a steel-stringed Lo Prinzi;
Tom Rush’s rare voice, like a hard gargoyle of gin;
you, on the fringe of lamplight, watering the yard
ALL-STAR

for AMM in his tenth summer

During the anthem, cap covering your heart
in a gesture you have never shown,
you face the flag in center, taller than all
but one along the line from first to home,
and with a thickness through the shoulders
you've gained in just the last few minutes
I am caught off base and out of time
by this sudden size and style

At the ump's loud "Play ball," you settle
under your cap, tilting your head
back into it, like a big leaguer,
and the angle of your chin declares your intent:
"I can play this game. Let's do it."

By god, if you don't: creaming one to the gap
in right-center for a triple, scooping throws
from the dirt at first, as though you knew
the ball's mind and changed it
With the game on the line,
they call you in to pitch
How did you learn to stride
like this, with self-possession in your step?

When you take the ball, kick back,
and sling it, without a hitch,
hard overhand for strikes,
I feel a major twinge of something in my guts,
a giddy slippage as you mow them down:
strike three, strike three, strike three
Here among strange mates, at this strange field,
I see you as I never have before: strong and fleet,
a Boy, with gristle in his walk,
slicing away from me, heart covered more and more,
into the dark outfield of the next decade,
like a screaming liner I can never glove
IN SAN JOSE DE LOS REMATES
*Nicaragua
*July 1986

Alberto and Ramon believe
their father is an angel
Eight and ten, they scramble
after pigs and dogs and chickens
in the village square.

When Alberto and Ramon were born,
this village had no clinic, no
school, no running water, and a
statue of Somoza in the square.

The Revolution changed all that

But now the clinic has no drugs
because the drugs are needed
by the army, and the school
will not be open in the fall
because the teacher has been
called to fight the Contras

Last year, a group of Contras took
a detour through this village;
when they left, the father
of Alberto and Ramon
was dead. He died
defending the nurses at the clinic

If the war continues long enough,
Alberto and Ramon will have to fight

I can see you with your fingers
in your ears:
"Take your lies and go away!
We don’t want these nightmares!"

But I’ll give them to you anyway
because you’re giving ours to these
two boys who’ve never done you
any harm, who only want to live
ADOQUINAS

Masaya, Nicaragua
July 22nd, 1986

"For years," the old man says, "I
never thought I'd see the day
Somoza would be gone. But God
helps those who help themselves
Somoza helped us, too
Oh, yes. That's the best part.
After the earthquake, Somoza decreed
all the streets and roads
be paved with adoquinas. Somoza
owned the adoquina factory
He made a fortune
selling adoquinas to himself
So after we had finally
had enough, we tore the streets
and roads apart and used
Somoza's adoquinas for our barricades
These we used to stop Somoza's
armored cars. We did this here,
in Masaya, in this very street.
Then our fighters killed Somoza's
Guardsmen with their homemade bombs
We had nothing, but we won
And I'll tell you why: look
at the belltower." He points
to the church across the street
"You think those holes are bulletholes,
but they're the wounds of Christ
I've even seen them bleed."
SUSAN'S THING

Susan wants to sneeze louder
She sneezed and told me so
"I want to sneeze louder," she said

She didn't say why
But I've just got to know
So I'm trying to think

Maybe she needs more attention

Maybe someone told her
She should sneeze louder—
Maybe her Confirmation sponsor

Or maybe just for the heck of it

Or there's something big
Like a building or a meal
Hiding in the back of her head
And it's all she can do to get rid of it, poor girl

THE BUG'S GOOD ATTITUDE

A bug has a good attitude
I split one in half
with an axe "It's okay," he said

"Many animals can regenerate missing parts," he said
"Yes," I said, "but are you one of them?"
SONNET

Each shoosh of tire and road
represents

one life story
up to page 16 or so

that I have not read

Driving home, or to work
the late shift

each car sounds like pages
turning rapidly

in the hands of a god
or a disinterested reader

asleep

whose lips move
but make no sound
SONNET

That blob of green is "tree"
And over there, that darker stuff

is "pine," a special kind
I can identify Other than that

they are all the same
Although I always wanted to be able

to say "this is birch,"
good for reprimanding children

or "that one's ash," patron saint
of tree houses and camp fires

But for now, they are just "tree":
the anonymous providers

that guard my house
and haunt the woods I walk in
SONNET

Dislanguage me
with scissors, with picks
& shovels. Unman
the hands & delicate steering
that holds six-foot one
of me upright

without speech
Leave the tongue to wag
& burn the body in sleep
like a Hindu bride Make no bones

until every last thum
and flicker is ash,
and the ashes are ash again
The crime is hidden and the wind speaks for itself
Contributors
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Anthony Manousos is currently living in Torrance, California.
Al Masarik is the editor of Swamp Root, a poetry magazine. His latest collection of poetry is *Excuses to be Outside* (Duck Down Press)

Harry Martinson (1904-1978) shared the Nobel Prize for Literature with Eyvind Johnson in 1974. He is best known for his autobiography, *Flowering Nettle* (1936); for his nature poems; and for *Aniara* (1956), a poetic sequence comprising 103 cantos, about a giant space ship off course. *Aniara* has been made into an opera as well as a rock opera.

Joseph Meredith directs the Writing Center at LaSalle University in Philadelphia. Recent poems have appeared in *Four Quarters* and *The Threepenny Review*

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William Jay Smith is the author of seven volumes of poetry, and has translated books of poetry from the Hungarian, Italian, French, and Swedish. He has been Poetry Consultant of the Library of Congress, and is a member of the Institute of Arts and Letters. He resides in New York City.

Leif Sjoberg is a professor of Scandinavian Studies and Comparative Literature in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literature at Stony Brook, New York. With Stephen Klass he has just completed the arduous task of translating Martinson’s *Aniara*, to be published in 1989.

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