Painted Bride
Quarterly

Number 43
The Painted Bride Quarterly is grateful for the support of The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and the City of Philadelphia. We are also thankful for the assistance of Gerard Givnish, Gil Ott, and the Painted Bride Arts Center. Also thanks to Bucks County Community College and the Community Women's Education Project.

The Painted Bride Quarterly is distributed free to inmates. Please forward inquiries to The Painted Bride Quarterly.

Member of the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines


Copyright 1991 by Painted Bride Arts Center, Inc.

PBQ assumes no responsibility for submissions received without adequate return postage, packaging, or proper identification labels. Submissions should include a short biographical note with phone number and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. All critical articles should be submitted in MLA style.

The authors and artists published in The Painted Bride Quarterly are solely responsible for the content of their work, and the opinions expressed in those works are not necessarily those of the editors and staff, or of the Painted Bride Arts Center.

Published four times a year. The Painted Bride Quarterly is available by subscription: $16 per year; $28, two years. Libraries and institutions: $20 per year. Subscriptions begin with the next quarterly issue. We cannot guarantee the continuation of your subscription if we are not informed of your new address before you move. Single issues are $5.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Pages</th>
<th>Titles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Silence Beneath the Voices In the Air</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James McKea</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Zydeco Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather Hawker</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Drought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan W. Powers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Animal Rites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maralyn Lois Polak</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>I've Never Said Anything Animal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deirdre O'Connor</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Cloak of Daggers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Kendig</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Double Exposure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Nagler</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Morte ala Dittore Borghese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Borders</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>The End of the World As You Know It</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dion Farquhar</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Freefall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Bukowski</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>met a man on the street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>38</td>
<td>bent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>the World War One Movies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45</td>
<td>the secret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William F. Van Wert</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Postmodernism in Total Recall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael McColl</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Drawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis McKee</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Collateral Damage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael McColl</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Drawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Stroffolini</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>Metaphor as a Cliché From Which We Escape Through Reality: James Tate's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Distance from Loved Ones</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cover art by Michael McColl
HAVING BEEN OUT OF CENTER CITY FOR A TIME, I WAS PLEASANTLY surprised when I happened upon the most recent issue of PBQ, which I have not recently encountered. I was glad to see its quality has remained on the par of issues of years past that I treasured.

The essay by Chris Stroffolino on impressionistic criticism, however, raised too many questions that it didn't answer. My problem begins with his keynote quote by Wallace Stevens:

Certainly [the poet's function] is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves...I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the mind of others. His role in short is to help people live their lives.

If this is their role—to help people live—then it would seem that the poet must address confusion: If people need help in how to live, then they must be confused. If people are not confused, the poets' work would be fruitless. This does not apply to the "elite" that Stroffolino refers to. The elite are the community of cognoscenti in the world, those who already know, those who don't want help. Those who seek this help are generally the poets who expect the maximum out of life and invariably find that they might need some help in attaining all that they desire, if only from other poets. As one modern poet put it, the poet really writes for other poets.

Stroffolino's essay goes on to compare the "hermetic" poetry of Brecht and Lawrence to the less accessible poetry of Stevens and Rilke, which is full of artifice and indecision. The author asks what audiences do these poets address, who should they address, and which of these styles is more relevant to the modern reader of poetry?

His essay, however, fails to satisfy the curiosity of one who expects an answer. An essay is written to inform, enlighten, and persuade. Though the piece admires the directness of Brecht and Lawrence, the "artifice" of the piece leaves out the meat of the argument. In an attempt to work through the knots and "lies" that Stevens bemoans, the essay becomes an artifice with no clear conclusion. If the poetry reader is to keep these notions aloft, as a poet like Stevens—and the author—demands, then I suppose the critic is siding with the purveyors of artifice. But this is only
a matter of taste, not the grand "Defense of Impressionistic Criticism" that the author promises.

My question is this: Is the essay designed to mimic the debate between "hermetic" and "artifici" poetry to ask the reader what he prefers and therefore determine to what audience he necessarily belongs? Or is the critic saying that both are viable roads to the same truths, which all should be able to appreciate and learn from, as a light out of our confusion?

My answer came partly in one sentence, as the author concluded that he feels affective and aesthetic standards complement the appreciation of poetry more than cognitive and didactic standards. But the affective and aesthetic are equally present in the cognitive and didactic. What makes any argument salient and compelling is its affective and aesthetic form. To what level the poet wishes to take that aesthetic is his or her prerogative. The question on the reader's end may be one of action/pleasure. Which spurs you more to change your world: the narrative excesses of Stevens and Rilke or the immediate and demanding insistence of Lawrence and Brecht? Or is didacticism only the product of such profound brevity found in religious texts and Brecht's "STAND UP!": "Stand up, but not for Jesus!/It's a little late for that."? (lines 1-2)

Whatever form an argument takes, those that are most persuasive depend on artifice and aesthetic to a great degree. The difference is only that one is more immediate than the other. The didactic poet forces a choice while the indirect poet proposes the choices. Has the reader been failed by having the critic end where he started? If you make no definitive conclusions, you cannot demand a critical response, as the greatest practitioners of "artifici" understood.

Of course, spelling it out makes it lose its mystery. As the critic quotes Stevens, "Poetry as an imaginative thing consists of more than lies on the surface." That mysterious deception is what Strozzolino himself finds intoxicating. Though the critic finds great comfort in Stevens' poetry, the poet's indecision only reflects the critic's.

Ronald Romanik
Ambler
Silence Beneath the Voices in the Air

The more I listen the less
I hear the old woman who lives upstairs.
She’s crossed my mind before—
how I stood at her door
after three weeks of silence,
no footfalls, no whistling kettle, no late-night thump or
crying out loud
as if the space above me was rented
by mementos, picture frames, a swatch
of doily beneath her cold hand
from which the last note from a longer dead
sister drifted noiselessly
to the floor—a thought which left me
unprepared for her peeping
over half-glasses beneath the door chain,
asking, “Yes, what is it,” through
a waft of soup simmering, of Sundays,
of comfort packing her apartment,
the only thing face up on the floor
the tome she walked out of
to answer the door. She’s still there.
I know it. I’ve run a wire above the roof
so I might hear the voices in the air above her.
But in between there’s nothing.
I listen too hard and the voices
insist the name for silence is dead air.
Zydeco Girls

Beneath a thousand urbanized Catalpa trees with saxophone and accordion noise in the throat of the wind, your eyes blazing like the hottest tabasco sauce, there I said is where the darkest delta runoff meet dangling between the two pumpkins of breasts and the arch of your feet I noticed where the jalapeño pricks of your eyes left the packed macadam and danced zydeco. For the first time really, I took notice of you and your fast-paced poetry life sister crystal city vagina winding down the fast-track pace gallop of your peace mission, verb and hyacinth Pear tree. Eighth-grader with rosehips. Sweet queen of menstruation at thirteen. Cadillac of women. Yours is my tip of the tongue phenomena The hypotenuse of real life.
Drought

The blue haze and long shadows of the morning bake into the hum and click of bright July. The forecast is the same as yesterday’s, last week’s; another day to fry and blur the air crackling the lespedeza in our pasture.

Four years without rain. Still it’s hard to watch our pond shrivel to its center, an open wound in our farm dying in the heat.

A station wagon full of friends from the farm up the road wobbles past us in the sun like our knobby cattle wobbling to the shade. Road maps with penciled circles around blue shapes of water lie on the dash like bibles next to a plastic Jesus, the car a shimmering cubicle of faith.

Their children smile from the backseat like a church choir, hold their hands out the windows to wave goodbye, skin stretched tightly over bones like tiny sails filled with blood and light.
In late afternoon the roads out
shine like gold, shimmering veins of
light that might take us anywhere,
to rain falling thick on corn
green and eight feet tall, to gray
sky fractured wetly in the window.

Tonight in the heat
we'll lie awake in our bed,
keep our bodies from touching,
as the fingernail moon
falls on our farm to
rattle and scratch through
the bones of our fields.
Animal Rites
—for Gary

"A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy."
Ingrid Newkirk, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

That was the winter I wouldn’t wear wool.
When the shears pierced into the sheep’s flesh,
it was a matter of suffering,
the man in question insisted.
(Oh, there was always a man in question.)
I wasn’t so sure, but I had thrown open
my heart and my closets to this fellow,
a crazed law professor who’d call me midnights
in his torrential flight-of-ideas state of mania,
to cascade words at me, over the void,
a lavage of language, a Niagara Falls of rhetoric.

That was the winter I wouldn’t wear wool.
All he wanted was to eliminate suffering,
he would say, suffering was suffering.
Yet he was curiously indifferent to my feelings,
making wonderful promises one day, forgetting them the next.
Sure, my friend Margaret pointed out sagely,
he won’t wear leather but he abuses women.
What could I say? I who murdered my dog
so I could have sex at the shore.
Leather was bad enough.
"I had no idea," I murmured weakly,
nauseated by the notion that wearing animal skins
was a manifestation of murder — "no idea
that I was an accomplice."
Indeed, my most horrible childhood memory
was a book of Nazi atrocity photos
a relative of my mother’s had smuggled
to New Jersey—the pile of empty wedding rings
shucked like bad dreams,
mountains of human bones. Soap made from the prosperous.  
“Bubby was a lampshade,” my little brother would taunt, 
tormenting me relentlessly, until I sobbed.

That was the winter I wouldn’t wear wool.  
Yet my complicity was addictive.  
While no one watched, I stole  
a sparerib from the Oriental salad bar,  
and popped it in my mouth,  
savoring the ambrosial grease  
as I recalled Charles Lamb’s essay,  
“The Origin of Roast Pork,”  
how a Chinese boy made the accidental discovery  
after a barn fire, when, rooting through black hay, he  
burned his hand and popped his fingers into his mouth.  
Thus he became awed at the charred succulence.  
This began his career as a barn-burner,  
because that was his notion of how you made roast pig,  
wasn’t it?  
That was the winter I wouldn’t wear wool.
I’ve Never Said Anything Animal

All of a sudden I pretend he’s gone
and think of a man, years ago,
who once to lunch brought flowers
in a brown paper bag.
I hemmed my thanks and hawed
and hoofed the ground like an animal
ready to run.

What delicate shoes
I’d heeled myself in, what deadening
human manners, slow but certain
there’d be no loss...

I really appreciate...
    how lovely...
    the flowers...

What does one say?
I’ve never said anything animal
in my life. I’ve never said
come to me now, or don’t go away,

or go —
Cloak of Daggers

When I say I wear a cloak of daggers, I mean picture it as an archaic invention, a strange lamé.

My coat of mail, my not quite mesh of not quite feathers glints like eyes,

*my eyes, my many,*
everywhere upon me but looking to the ground.

They are too many to open and close with ease. They tire me like too much talk

whose point is to be pointless, public chatter. My eyes are little mouths whose tongues have been fitted

against me, blades that will not cut. Listen to them clinking stiffly. Listen to them rest: magnanimous, silent.
Double Exposure

This face is a lifeboat, and that one, carpeted. These eyes could be mine: agate rimmed with lashes, optic nerve rooted to rock, iris round salt, the tears that come out of it. When we look enough years, piling the visions up, we can’t tell when was what or when. It’s not aperature: ours is nearly the elephant’s size, those almonds set in gray. Who photographed the lion? is the modern question of courage. Who printed it? of art. Who’s superimposed upon is all of us who carry lives like a theater playing all five films at once.
Morte ala Dittore Borghese (Rome, 1990)

the usual night-gather of death threats. And symbols, of course. Fewer

neo-swastikas now, more circled crosses (crosshairs, that is) which

overlay Anarchist A's that overlay hammer and sickles (from long practice

drawn in a single gesture) that overlay fascist bolts that overlay symbols

none alive know. On Rome's walls, paint falling away, plaster falling

away, brick-to-dust (the fabric of the city, stage muslin now), no neon-colored

scrawls (cerise and "alert orange" spray paint) but brush black and

red complimenting the carefully chosen earth tones of custom and ordinance.
The End of the World As You Know It

You are somewhere in New Hampshire, sitting in front of a video display terminal, reading about a group of women who claim their unborn children were injured by the light emitted by these machines. You are sitting in front of the very same model named in the lawsuit. This does not concern you. There is no chance that you could be pregnant.

A Vermont man has survived five dislodgings of his heart valve. You write:

HE TAKES A LICKING, BUT KEEPS ON TICKING

and you are typing in the necessary commands when the phone rings. "Times-Dispatch," you answer, fingers still on the keyboard. A gravelly male voice says, "You might wanna send somebody down to Campbell's Farm. We got a squarsh here as big as a baseball bat and a potater that sure does look like a dog's face." You picture this man as one of the porkpie-capped farmers of the town where you and Daniel used to live in Delaware. It had one main thoroughfare, lined with fruit stands, the vegetable of the week misspelled on crude wood signs: Potatoe. Green beens. Tomato's. Farmer Campbell, you know, will not look particularly like he's from New Hampshire, or Delaware, or even Indiana. Farmers have a universal look.

When you were a reporter, you would have put this man on hold until he hung up. Now that you are an editor, you dutifully take the address, vaguely wondering what breed of dog his potato most closely resembles. You wish you knew these reporters better so you could snicker at whoever gets the assignment.

Your attitude hasn't always been this positive. Two weeks into this job, you decided you hated being an editor. That
was 10 days ago. You’ve concluded that there’s nothing you can do about it now. You signed a year’s lease. The weekly where you worked in Delaware has hired for your job a fresh-scrubbed post-teen, just out of college and eager to toil in a smoky, windowless room for poverty-level wages. You just put a downpayment on a Volkswagen Jetta, mint green with a matching interior and a great stereo. You have commitments.

At night, indulge in the kind of math that never interested you before: figure out that you are making 2.73 times more per week now than you were in Delaware. Figure out how much money you’ll have if you save $25 every week until you turn 30. It seems like a lot of money. Tire of math and rename the cats, whom you and Daniel called Yin and Yang. Call them Bert and Ernie, Black and White, Kit and Kat, anything that doesn’t remind you of clove cigarettes and collegiate philosophy. They will not answer to any of these names.

Imagine the kinds of things Daniel would say about the Jetta: “Green to match your money,” maybe, or he might just shake his head, make that face of his, like a child who’s been forced to swallow cod liver oil. Call Daniel’s mother for the sixth time since he left three months ago. She says she has no idea where he is; you know she is lying. She never did like you. Consider telling her you might be pregnant, but if she doesn’t think Daniel would want to know....Hang up the phone before you embarrass yourself.

During the day, the news is paraded in front of you in glowing green letters. You must jump at the commands of the chief copy editor, a tyrant who times your lunches.

“Thirty-two minutes Taylor,” he has been known to call out. “Am I losing my mind, or did a half-hour just grow?”
The tyrant uses only last names. His is Bates. He is almost completely bald, with a large, egg-shaped head, two charcoal smudges of eyes and a short, thick body. He wears a plain gold wedding band. It makes you shudder. You imagine his name is Norman. Or maybe Attila.

As a reporter, you thought editors were evil incarnate. They gave you stupid assignments, like: Interview Gertrude Hartsteiner Fenton on her 90th birthday. You were a prisoner of Mrs. Fenton’s anecdotes for three hours, the musty smell of her scrapbooks churning tidal pools of acid in your stomach. Soon Mrs. Fenton’s words were pounding through your head like conquering soldiers, her clock ticking off the seconds. Or was it her heart? She had a pacemaker, she said, would you like to see the scar? As a copy editor, you don’t get to hand out such assignments. Instead, you read finished stories. Once for content. Twice for grammar. Thrice for spelling. A final scan for factual errors. You make no changes in style. This job belongs to other editors, the ones who spend several hours each afternoon in confidential meetings where, you suspect, they pull a bottle of gin from a filing cabinet drawer and get good and tanked.

The only part of the job you enjoy is headline writing. You have crafted it into high art.

A truck carrying 650 pounds of tomatoes crashes on a busy highway, killing two motorists who plowed into the truck after they were blinded by tomato guts. You write:

**TOMATO TRAGEDY: 650 POUNDS OF VINE-RIPENED TERROR**

Congratulate yourself on your restraint. You considered:

**ATTACK OF THE KILLER TOMATOES**
Attila hands you your 30-day evaluation, a single sheet of paper with two sentences typed on it: Ms. Taylor’s work habits are, for the most part, satisfactory. She must learn to restrain herself from writing cutesy, tabloid-style headlines.

You type a reply on a computer terminal: Go tailgate a tomato truck, capitalist pig. Erase it quickly, recognizing that the last two words are Daniel’s.

You are spending weekend days in your nightgown. On Sundays you pick up each of the cats in turn, holding it to your shoulder as you would a baby, dancing with it to music that does not remind you of Daniel. This limits your choices.

Call Daniel’s mother again. Imagine you hear him whispering over her shoulder, breathing into the upstairs receiver, flushing the toilet. Hang up and wonder when you will meet the man of your dreams, dreams you had long before Daniel. The man with the Delft china blue eyes, the weekly sender of roses, the one who likes that small roll of flesh at your belly and those hips from which flank steaks, thick and juicy, could be carved.

Think back to the last fight you had with Daniel, when you called him lazy, told him you were tired of supporting him, that you wanted him to stop baking bread and to finish school after six years, to get some sort of degree, a job. He called you a yuppie, told you the bourgeoisie was stripping you of your values, asked you if you’d registered Republican. A fight like many others you’d had in recent months, except you woke up the next morning and Daniel was gone.

You were strong. You went to work, wrote a story about the town’s tax rate going up, wrote an advance for the upcoming Easter egg hunt. You read the newspaper from front to back that day, every story. There was an earthquake some-
where, a small plane crash (less than 50 dead), a woman who shot to death her brain-damaged child. With each page, you told yourself: See, this is worse. This is worse. It’s not the end of the world.

Another airplane has landed at the wrong airport. You key in:

\textbf{IF IT’S TUESDAY, THIS MUST BE WARWICK} wondering if this is a cutesy or tabloid-style headline. Decide it is both, but leave it anyway.

Later in the morning you are editing a sensitively written story on child abuse laws. It is done just the way you would have done it. You are impressed, and give it a restrained, dignified headline.

The reporter’s name is Douglas somebody. A stupid name, though Doug...Doug has possibilities. A Doug could have Delft china blue eyes. He could send roses, or violets, cook dinner, leave haikus on your pillow.

You and Doug will move in together. You will get jobs on the \textit{Globe} or the \textit{Post}, or work for a wire service, in France, Japan, Honduras. You will write books together. Daniel will read them.

You ask another copy editor, a cheerful though tired-looking fortyish man who has on his desk lucite-framed pictures of his three kids and several lopsided clay ashtrays engraved “Daddy,” to point out Douglas what’s-his-name. Daddy looks at you in a paternal, mischievous way. If you were a man, he’d probably wink at you and punch you lightly in the arm. Instead, he points with a sheepish grin to an empty desk.
"He sits there," Daddy says, "I guess he's out on assignment. Nice guy," he adds, his eyes twinkling like a dime store Santa Claus. They are blue, more the color of an appliance or bathroom tile than Delft china.

You peek at Douglas' desk for the next two hours. Finally a man, maybe three, five years older than you comes in, a notebook in one hand, a jumbo cup of coffee from Donuts, Donuts, Donuts! in the other. You peer across the sea of computer lighthouses at the tyrant, Attila, whose fingers are hitting the keyboard in frenzied, caffeinated spurts. You will go to the bathroom, taking the long way, past Douglas' desk.

You stop. The reporter looks up at you, smiles. His eyes are green, not emerald or the mint green of your new Jetta but a silky olive, with faint laugh lines at the corners. His teeth are straight, not too white but white enough. He has a ring of coffee-milk around his lips. This, you know, is the kind of man you've been waiting for.

"Douglas," you say, "my name's Jessica and I edited your story on the child abuse laws and I just wanted to tell you what a great piece it was, really, it's the best thing I've read since I've been here..." The reporter is shaking his head.

"I'm not Douglas," he says finally, his eyes crinkling. "Douglas sits next to me. He's off today. He'll be in tomorrow."

You flush. Your nose reddens like an alcoholic's, you know because it always happens, it's the only place you blush. Stammer something about the bathroom, crawl there, it takes years, flush the toilet for ten minutes while you wait for your nose to return to its normal color. Daniel used to call you Rudolph when your nose turned red like that.
It happened the first time Daniel took you out, finally, after spending most of your freshman year of college flapping your arms and standing on your head to get him to notice you. He took you to see *Dr. Strangelove*, one of those films that everyone had seen but you hadn’t. You were interested, but after 10 minutes Daniel had moved his arm around the back of your chair, it was lightly touching your shoulder and all kinds of chemical reactions were going off inside, the movie seemed to be in German or maybe Swahili and you just gave up and sank into the spin, spinning like a pinwheel. The cars, shops, people on the streets of your tiny college town were spiralling around the two of you as you walked out of the theater, and Daniel was asking you specific questions about the movie, ones you couldn’t fake your way through. It was getting harder to walk, and you finally just blurted, “Look, I was having a really hard time concentrating on the movie, okay?” It came out exasperated and bewildered and you knew your nose was red and you thought Daniel would label you dopey and never want to see you again, but then he was kissing you, right on the street, and soon your roommate was making excuses about where you were when your mother called Saturday mornings.

Now you are watching the water twirl down the toilet. It is comforting to know that it always spins the same way in your hemisphere.

On the way back to your desk, the reporter who sits next to Douglas stops you. “By the way,” he smiles, shaking your hand, “my name’s Chris.” You notice he’s wearing a wedding band.

When you walk in the next day, a man with straight brown hair and Walkman earphones on his head is sitting at Douglas’ desk. His eyes are a murky brown; fecal matter
comes to mind, or is that from a story you read yesterday on harbor pollution. The reporter who did that story called it “fetal matter.” Even Attila laughed at that.

The man with the murky brown eyes has mild acne scars at his cheeks, not hideous, just deep enough to notice. You watch his fingers at the keyboard. They are thick and short, not the fingers of a pianist or an open-heart surgeon but those of a politician, a bookie, a used car salesman. He must be Douglas. It is your luck.

When deadline is over you see Chris talking to him. There are several glances in your direction. They are conspiring. You hate them both. Later they ask you to lunch. You accept, and head out with four other reporters, two of them women. The group chooses a fast-food place after you explain that you have only 30 minutes, not a second more, for lunch.

“I know how Bates is,” one woman, who turns out to be the fashion and food features reporter, smiles sympathetically. “My husband is a copy editor.” Yes, she has three children. Yes, they make lopsided clay ashtrays for their Daddy. My oh my, isn’t it a small world?

“I call him Norman,” Douglas says, “for Norman Bates, from Psycho, get it?”

Several discussions are going on at the same time. Listen to each in turn. Avoid the one that yields the line, “It’s so important to channel your frustrations in positive ways...” and the one on the Red Sox. Contribute heavily to the discussion on Nicaragua (Daniel would be so proud of you). Step briefly into a woman’s concerns about her dying plant; tell her her South American Foo-Foo should do better if she mists it twice a day and keeps it in the bathroom. You know this because Daniel majored in horticulture one semester. The woman smiles gratefully.
Suddenly they are all talking about Charlene Chanteuse, the disco singer who sounds, to you, like a gargling eunuch. Daniel once called her a "platinum princess in pasties." Even your eight-year-old niece is sick of her. These people think she's great. You are conspicuously quiet.

"What kind of music do you like, Jessie?" Chris asks.

You hate Jessie. You have not given him permission to call you Jessie. Only Daniel got away with calling you Jessie.

"Jessica," you correct. These people are getting on your nerves. Name your three favorite bands: the Phallic Potatoes, the Birth Defects, Realistic Dada. The last is really your favorite, but you added the other two for shock value.

There are no looks of surprise, only much jostling of elbows, glances directed at Douglas. Finally he murmurs, "I like Realistic Dada," with an aw, shucks, cut-it-out look on his face.

You look at your watch. It's been 23 minutes. "God," you say, "I've been here 33 minutes, gotta go, nice to meet you all, see you later."

Hours later, editing a story on sewer improvements, you hit the keys angrily, the computer burping little electronic burps with each mistake. How dare that pockmarked excuse for a Doug like Realistic Dada. They are your band, yours alone; Daniel never understood them. The lead singer has authentic Delft china blue eyes, though you suspect he has never sent roses to anyone and probably wouldn't put up with your flesh mounds. He sings about water a lot. You tell people it has religious or sexual significance, though you're not really sure what that means.
A week after the lunch Douglas is at your desk, saying he has two tickets to see the Pastoral Monkeys in Boston. Do you like them? Would you like to go? You don’t like them that much, and you have things to do. The cats need a flea dip. The apartment needs vacuuming. Your album collection needs to be alphabetized.

You tell him you’d love to go. He smiles. His teeth are yellow.

The band that opens for the Pastoral Monkeys is awful, a moussed-and-gelled collection of high-schoolers who have to look at their guitars to change chords. Still, you try to dance, hoping Douglas will not follow you to the dance floor. He doesn’t; he just watches you. You can’t read his face. Maybe he’s an axe murderer, a pantyhose strangler, some psychotic butcher who’s noticed that extra meat you have, those steaks just waiting to be cut free.

Maybe he wants to sleep with you.

The opening band finishes and you must make conversation. Douglas starts to tell you how the Phallic Potatoes got their name. “The guys in the band were at this restaurant one night, and one of them ordered a baked potato...” Stop him in mid-sentence, tell him you know, you read Rolling Stone too.

He continues to say he met Realistic Dada once, but he still doesn’t know what all the water stuff means. Say you don’t believe he met them. Say you know what the water stuff means. “What?” he asks, eyeing you casually. Tell him it has religious significance.

He laughs. “You’re full of it,” he says, affectionately. You feel naked.
You quiz Douglas on politics. He thinks Che Guavara was the guy who boycotted grapes. How can he be so ignorant and still be a reporter? Roll your eyes, as if at Daniel. At least, you tell yourself, Douglas has a job.

Later he wants to come into your apartment. You know it's to pull out those pantyhose, draw that butcher knife, grounds round you in your own Cuisinart. Or to disrobe. Tell him you're tired, you'll see him at work Monday. Kiss him on the cheek like a pat on the head to dismiss him.

Soon Douglas is calling you every night, talking for an hour, sometimes two. He can be funny. When you are together, you know he wants you, yes, in the Biblical sense, wants to peel off your clothes and leave them scattered like breadcrumbs throughout the apartment. Wants to do things you've done only with Daniel. You like the attention, like having someone to talk to besides the cats, like not having enough free time to harass Daniel's mother.

One night he says he wants to go to Montreal for the weekend. How about it? You laugh, tell him you have no money, you have Jetta payments, you just bought a VCR, a real space age job on which you can only play tapes because you haven't figured out how to work the timer. He says he'll pay for your part of the trip. You shake your head, say no. He sulks across the living room to master the VCR, to impress you by teaching you how to work your own device. Try to smooth it over. Say: "That things impossible, Doug. You need an engineering degree to figure it out."

"Don't call me Doug," he grumbles, pouring over the manual and flipping switches. "I hate Doug."

You talk about Daniel sometimes. You tell Douglas how you spent your freshman year ditching afternoon classes to listen
to this disheveled guy practice polemics in front of the Student Union. You thought he was going to save the world. You wanted to help.

You say your breaking up was an inevitable parting of the ways, a mutual agreement, the kind of thing that happens to people who fall in love at 18 and stay together too long. You feel your nose redden, yet you don't know what the truth would be.

Douglas talks of an old girlfriend, Sandy. They were together three years, but when you ask how long ago it was that they broke up, he is vague. Sandy is a hairstylist. You want to make a joke about this, but you sense he would not laugh. You picture her with one of those 70s Farrah Fawcett hairdos, Liza Minnelli eyelashes and cherry-red fingernails. Tight designer jeans, spike heels. She is tacky. There would be no contest, should you choose to enter.

Three months later, he is still calling you every night. He starts to look different. Better, somehow. You now think of molten copper, of Hershey's kisses, when you look in his eyes. Ask him three times if he got a haircut. Each time he shakes his head no, stares quizzically at you.

One day you are editing a story about a senile selectman who asked the rest of the board to resign because one of the other selectmen said "Bless you" when the old man sneezed, and his hearing aid picked up "the F word." You are trying to concentrate, but find you can think about nothing but sex. You invite Douglas over for dinner that night; he looks thrilled. You make several trips to the bathroom that afternoon, smile wickedly at yourself in the mirror.

After wine and lasagne, there is the social fumbling, but eventually you have sex. You are not sure you enjoyed it. Douglas is nothing like Daniel; not worse, but different. You
are left feeling maple syrup sticky, vaguely sad. Douglas falls asleep immediately, like the husband in a TV sitcom.

You keep trying, and it starts to get better. He doesn’t bring you roses, but he does cook you dinner sometimes, and you love his jokes. You call all your friends long-distance, tell them you’re seeing someone. You describe him as sexy. His eyes are pecans, tiger’s eye jewels.

A few weeks later Realistic Dada comes to Boston. Douglas is excited when he gets the tickets, but the week before the concert he is acting anxious. He doesn’t call you for three nights in a row. You ask him several times what’s wrong; he shakes his head.

You try to hold his hand at the concert, as you and Daniel always did, but he keeps dropping yours. You will not let him ruin this. Dance away from him and stare at the man with the china blue eyes, who looks like a scarecrow, a rake in clothes three sizes too big. Examine every word he sings for hidden meaning. Find none.

Later in your apartment, Douglas is on top of you; he is remote, his eyes vacant. He could be washing the dishes, changing the cat litter, writing a story about a Kiwanis Club bike-a-thon. You start to think of Daniel; stop yourself. Think instead of the blue-eyed musician, the way you’d have thought of such a man through 50 minutes of high school algebra, killing time.

Afterward you lock yourself in the bathroom for 20 minutes with the water running so Douglas doesn’t know you are crying. You emerge and ask him again what is wrong. He says he’s tired. Send him home immediately, wrap yourself in blankets and call the cats to bed with you. Only one will come. Cuddle him tightly, saying: "Kitty, kitty-face, you’re the only man in my life."
The next day at work Douglas is charming, more charming
than he’s ever been. He takes you to lunch, apologizes, says
he’s had a lot on his mind. You watch him working later;
he looks cute typing with his Walkman on, pausing briefly
to drum on the keyboard. You will give him another chance,
and agree to see him Friday night.

He doesn’t get his chance. You don’t hear from him for the
next two days, and he calls in sick Thursday and Friday.
There is no answer at his apartment. At 7:30 Friday night,
a half-hour after he was supposed to pick you up, he calls.

Sandy has been calling him, he says after much stammering.
They have spent the past few days together.

Oh. You are nonchalant, numb. Your nose feels hot.

Yeah, he whispers, yep, and there is just the vacuum of the
phone, a slight crackle in your ear.

“Are you getting back together?” Why is he making you
ask?

“I’m sorry,” he says quietly. “I’m sorry. Don’t hate me,
okay?”

You hate him for everything. For groveling, for chasing you
down, chipping at your resistance, then tearing, like the wrap-
ning off a gift he discovered he didn’t want. You hate him
for no roses. For not being Daniel, never having been Daniel.

You want to speak, but there is nothing to say. You can’t
make him feel any worse than he already does. You don’t
want him to feel any better. You hang up quietly.
Wander around the living room for a few minutes, then sit cross-legged on the floor and leaf through today’s paper. It was a good day for the rest of the world; Nobel prizes were awarded, and an arms reduction treaty was signed. No plane crashes, no mass murders, no bloody coups.

Call your mother and, when you hear her voice, sob inarticulately into the receiver. She says, “Do you have your period, Jessie?” Tell her you’ve gone through early menopause, one of the cats has tapeworm, and shout: “You know I hate Jessie!” Bang down the receiver.

Dial three times and hang up, but finally call Daniel’s mother. When she answers, you don’t identify yourself. “Just tell me where he is,” you say, croaking each word in a deep voice like some unnamed source. To your amazement, she drops the phone, picks it up, rattles off a series of digits. “Did you get that?” she asks. “No,” you sob, and fumble for a pen. “Okay,” you say softly, and jot down the number in the margin of the newspaper. “Now please don’t call me anymore,” she says. “I don’t want to be in the middle of this.” And she hangs up.

You locate the phone book, look up the area code Daniel’s mother gave you. He is in California, as far away from you as he could get. He doesn’t even want to share your ocean. You won’t call him; you just wanted to know where he was, that he had not been harmed by hurricanes, earthquakes, crashing meteors or other forces of nature. Perhaps none of these things is worse than what happened between you and Daniel. Perhaps his leaving you was the end of the world. The world as you know it. You must learn to like this new, post-Daniel world, as you learned to like broccoli, the Sex Pistols, paintings of watches suspended in the air, dripping like runny pancakes. It could take years.
Put on your favorite album and stare at the cover, at the man with the Delft china eyes. Listen 13 times to a song about rain, forcing the needle back by hand each time. Cry. Understand, finally, what the water means. Turn it up until the floor shakes; curl up in the bass lines, snake through the drums, ride the melody.

Soon the music comes to you in fits, like a radio station you can’t quite tune in. You are within the music, one of its parts. You are, perhaps, underwater.

Hold your breath and sink, as you would into a pool. Drift slowly to the deep end, a place where you have always been able to sleep.
Freefall

I ride the subway
staring at the page
pink stone towns
shepherds' yurts
frosted mountains,
your cities
to the south:
Leninakan
Spitak
Kirovakan.
A sudden swaying
side to side

before the crashing
noise and rising screams.
Three temblor shocks
two hundred seconds
whole sides of buildings
arced and billowed out.
Stunned, we watched
our walls drift
off like sails,
and then the floor
gave way and scooped
the room, funneled to

a giant cone through
which I slid, dropped down
with stones, rubble,
metal, pylons poured
and pounded
to the ground.
I morselled, shredded
into dust and dirt
from fallen factories,  
schools, and homes.  
Pebbles filled my mouth  
no room for words

or pleas, and black  
dark pinned me down.  
My foot had lost a  
shoe and pointed rocks  
crept between my toes,  
a hand gripped  
a four-by-four  
clamped across my chest  
whose rise and fall  
assured me  
I was still alive  
but buried in

a city built  
from twisted bodies,  
sand, and shards.  
Patient, I proved  
a random girder  
riven there with lots  
of time to think.  
No errands, lovers,  
lists of things to do.  
My head slowed down  
a cheek caressed,  
pressed up against,

a cool smooth  
sheet of glass.  
I settled in  
beneath the scraps  
of brick and floor,  
pain swaddled me
against the cold.
I heard a muffled
world come babbling
close, then fade away
till inching up
through open borders:

crates of clothing
T.V. crews, laser
scan technologies,
men shouting sounds,
carted their machines,
but why
the barking dogs?
Feeling frozen like
a fossil, flat,
embedded
in a leaf,
I sighed and wished

that they would go
away and leave me
to the molded
niche I fit so well.
But loud cranes
shook my nest
and dogs bayed
like fiends.
They found me curled
up around
the wreckage,
grown into a beam

but chiseled out
a tiny space
to slip me from.
I drifted up
into their arms,
a weed pulled gently
yielding up its root.
I caught the light
like water, pushing
out in circles
from where I’d sank.
They spoke American

the men and dogs
so light they floated
by like movie scenes,
floodlit brightness
slashed the night,
my eyes pumped tears,
but smiling back,
“yup, we’ve got
another one —
alive.” My stretcher
bumped by rubble
in the freezing rain,

campfires ringing
wreckage, gleamed plaster-
dusted, down-clad
foreign rescue teams.
So mobile now
I almost swam
away, another sea
of rushing faces,
then a red cross,
marked a big brown tent,
where even language
rippled over me

began to sing,
I gleaned, in French.
A woman with
a needle found
a vein. A rush so
liquid at last, and
warm. I closed
my eyes and floated
free to firmer ground
where fields
of poppies waved
to welcome me.
met a man on the street

who said, "you’ve kept me going for two years, it’s really amazing to meet you."

"thank you," I answered, "but who’s going to keep me going?"

I’ve asked this question before and all I ever get back is a gentle smile.

but it’s a good question.

they have no idea that I consider suicide several times a week.

they’ve read some of my books and that’s enough for them.

but I only write that crap, I can’t read it.
bent

near the belly of the sun,
undone by the lambs,
the red bottle’s babble,
tight shoes,
right turns,
the gibbeting ladies,
the macho farts,
the rusty bells,
all the alarms,
all the hospitals,
the jails,
I’ve gone mad here
measuring the death of
time, now
as white light runs past
like a dog,
where did it go?
where did it all go?

one more drink, Pedro,
one more
and we’ll get the hell
out of
here.
now

I sit here on a 2nd floor
hunched in yellow
pajamas
still pretending to be
a writer.
some damned gall,
70,
my brain cells eaten
away by the
booze.
rows of books
behind me,
I scratch my thinning
hair
and search for the
word.

for decades now
I have infuriated the
ladies,
the critics,
the university
suck-toads.

they will all soon have
their time to
celebrate.

"terribly overrated ..."

"gross..."

"an aberration..."
my hands sink into the
keyboard
of my
Macintosh
it's the same old
game,
the same old crap
and con
that scraped me
off the streets and
park benches,
the same simple
line
I learned in those
cheap rooms,
I can't let
go,
sitting here
on this 2nd floor
hunched in yellow
pajamas
still pretending to be
a writer.

the gods smile down,
the gods smile down,
the gods smile down.
the World War One Movies

were best, I mean those aviators drank at the bar every night, fighting over the one or two blondes, and it was all worth it because in the dawn they might die going after those Fokkers with their Spads, I mean, they just lined up along that bar and slugged them down.

us kids loved those movies, those men weren’t like our fathers, those men laughed and fought and had these slinky blondes in long tight dresses.

each dawn was hell, up they’d go in their Spads, pulling on their goggles, giving a wave, and that long white scarf flowing out behind them, they grinned and went off into the blue.

and here came the Germans high above the clouds. they’d spot the Spads, the leader would give the signal and they’d dive downward in a roar, coming through the clouds, their machineguns sputtering loudly and the Spads would see them but not before one of the guys would get hit and roar down in flames— the guy with the sense of humor, the guy who had made everybody laugh at the bar— there he’d go, his hands rising above the flames, then oil across his goggles, he’d wiggle trying to free himself to parachute out but it was always too late— you’d see the Spad crash into a hill exploding into a huge mass of flame.
the dogfight was a real spectacle, like the hero
would get a guy on his tail and have to pull
an Immelman to get him off.
then he'd be on the other guy's tail
and the spurt of bullets would rip through
the German, his mouth would open to a
spurt of blood and his plane would head
toward the earth in a WHINING roar.

the dogfights were exciting and lasted a
long time but the Germans always lost
and one or two of their remaining planes
would limp off and that would be it.

then the Spads would begin their
journey back to the airfield.
this was always very dramatic because
one or two of them would be very
crippled, just being nursed back, often
the pilot hit by 3 or 4 bullets but
determined to bring the plane back
in and land it safely.

the ground crew would always be
waiting and they would count the Spads
as they came back in: one, two... 6, 7,
8.... but there had been ten....
the ground crew would always be
badly shaken.
the crippled planes would come in first,
followed by the
others.

it was a very sad time.

but that night the remaining pilots would
be back at the bar with the slinky blondes,
even the aviators who had been shot were there.
y they had their arms in slings, their heads bandaged but they were drinking and making the slinky blondes laugh.

outside the movie theaters they actually had parts of a Spad, a huge wing, a propeller, and at night there was a big searchlight probing the skies, you could see it for miles.

all of us boys loved those World War One movies
and we built our own balsa wood model airplanes, Spads and Fokkers.
most kits cost 25 cents
which was a lot of money in the 1930's but somehow almost every kid had his own plane.

we were in a hurry to grow up.
we all wanted to be fighter pilots,
we wanted those slinky blondes, we wanted to lean against that bar and gulp down a straight whiskey like nothing had happened.

we had dogfights with our model planes and they
sometimes developed into
fist fights.
we fought until we were
bloody and
torn.
we fought for our
honor.

our fathers watched us
and
yawned.
the secret

don’t worry, nobody has the beautiful lady, not really, and nobody has the strange and hidden power, nobody is exceptional or wonderful or magic, they only seem to be. it’s all a trick, an in, a con, don’t buy it, don’t believe it. the world is packed with billions of people whose lives and deaths are useless and when one of these jumps up and the light of history shines upon them, forget it, it’s not what it seems, it’s just another act to fool the fools again.

there are no strong men, there are no beautiful women. at least, you can die knowing this and you will have the only possible victory.
Postmodernism in Total Recall

Postmodernism is such a pervasive term these days that it's no longer possible to know if it's being used as a compliment or an insult. Maybe that's just the point. The use of the term has come to depend less on its relative correctness and more on its pervasiveness, the way it disrespects boundaries, the way it blankets that which it covers. The theoretical writings of Frederic Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Peter Wollen and others are certainly useful for describing postmodernist strategies in film as they are deployed in Repo Man, After Hours, Paris, Texas, Choose Me, Raising Arizona and others. But now what to do with a film like Total Recall?

Authorship becomes both a real and a moot question. A by-product of our postmodernist times has been the reinstigation of the old star system, this time not based on photographic possibilities or acting talent, but rather on recognition factors, economic formulae, marquee value, box office clout. Arnold Schwarzenegger has always dominated the films he has been in, from Conan the Barbarian and Pumping Iron to the Terminator, Predator, and Running Man. Everyone "recognizes" these films as Schwarzenegger films (even when they can't spell his name or understand his accent) and not as belonging to the various directors of those films, an obvious erosion of the auteur theory, in which directors were assigned praise or blame for films, and which dominated film study from 1959 until about 1972. Even as the horror and science fiction genres, and their various hybrid forms and cannibalizations of other genres, have come to dominate American film, particularly because of the special effects possibilities they offer (the Lucas-Spielberg effect), and even as the science of science fiction has become increasingly separated from all the other sciences and reduced to advances in film technology itself (the model here was Lucas' THX 1138, in which the "science" was film holography), so too the auteurism
of director-dominance has been relegated to foreign films and independent films.

So, the question: is Total Recall a Paul Verhoeven film (important only to "recall" Verhoeven as director of Robo Cop) or an Arnold Schwarzenegger film (important only to "recall" his previous efforts)? The real question is subsumed by the rhetorical question. In other words, the postmodernist point is moot. To ask the question at all is only to answer it outside the film in terms of an interesting collision of marketing, for the June 2, 1990 release of the film coincided with the re-release of the original Robo Cop, which had been timed to stir up interest for the June 22, 1990 release of Robo Cop II, the sequel not directed by Verhoeven. In fact, then, the current Verhoeven was competing with the old Verhoeven with two films released on the same day, and his current effort then competed all summer with the monster he spawned. An extra-cinematic case of schizoid embolism.

Internally, Total Recall is just as divided, for the "recall" of the title is partial to the point of being abbreviated, and it has nothing to do with real memory, either as mental process or as film citation. Total Recall represents postmodernism's excess, not as a crisis or endgame or limit-situation, but as a laxity, a detour, a shift in director-star-spectator relations. It recalls most of the blockbuster science fiction films of recent years (Scanners, Star Wars, Outland, Blade Runner, Alien, and Robo Cop., to name a few), but it recalls them as vague footnotes, not as rival or regenerative texts. Total Recall stands in relation to its predecessors as an encyclopedia stands to real cognition, as a dictionary stands in relation to fiction, so that finally you can't take anything here seriously, which becomes the point of the exercise, not the drawback. It is both blood-filled and bloodless at the same time. The only way to tell dream from waking is death (characters who die disappear), until the end, when all evolution, from the Big Bang to the oxygen-breathing creatures we have become, is accelerated/compressed/collapsed into one apocalyptic moment, where lots of glass shatters (every
set self-destructs), but no one dies. The out-there of Mars becomes the back-then of Genesis, and all “otherness” of the planets (Mars, Saturn, Venusville) is reduced to the terminology of tourism, postmodernism’s flattened landscape, the image of an image, a seemingly endless array of simulacra.

These simulacra, which form the media interface of Total Recall (for lack of a narrative), are all borrowed without regard for taste or value in the way of blank parody (no sympathy for the original), signalled by Jameson as one of the definitions of postmodernism. The sometimes biting TV news from Robo Cop is here throwaway news, white noise. ESPN’s World Series takes place in Tokyo. People go through X-ray machines to get on the subway, where TV monitors, whose sole function is advertising, have replaced billboards and poster art. Quaid’s Earth wife (a plant to fit his implanted memories) takes tennis lessons from a hologram (THX 1138). Quaid gets to select a composite woman by computer (Weird Science), but the choices are limited to athletic or sleazy, and Schwarzenegger’s Quaid proves to be a more arrested adolescent than the boys from Weird Science. The billboards are all neon operations lifted from other films: Fuji Film from Blade Runner, Coca-Cola from Superman II. The simulacra on Mars are even more impoverished than those on Earth and make one nostalgic for those on Earth. The Marlboro billboard is here called Montana, the zodiac is reduced to soda pop in the Zodiac Lounge, USA Today is simply Mars Today (nobody reads), and the Mars Hilton is not even a parody, but an ad, a shameless reminder of the ubiquitous Hiltons.

Everyone is divorced from real feelings, which is to say flesh-and-blood relationships. The most pointed example of this is the brief moment of media sex exchanged between Richter and Lori. She blows him a kiss from a TV monitor, and he responds by fondling/pawing/scratching the screen. Does anyone miss Alphaville or Fahrenheit 451? How about The Day the Earth Stood Still or even the original Invasion of the Body Snatchers?
Remarkably, tourism here is not unlike the way it is actually practiced in the Disney World experience, where "history" is rewritten to eliminate all the vicissitudes of the past (no slavery or civil wars or other evidence of the shame and vibrancy/violence of real history). In Total Recall, there is no memory other than implanted memory, which doesn’t remember so much as it reacts in a Pavlovian way to stimulus. Then again, Arnold Schwarzenegger is not a remembering kind of guy. Forget Resnais or any real reworking of memory on film. Schwarzenegger pales by comparison next to any of the replicants in Blade Runner, even Leon. And if there is no palpable past to be had, there is no future either, since all the psychics in Total Recall are deformed (the explanation given is not their relationship to time, which would have been interesting, but bad domes and radiation exposure). Cuato, the leader of the resistance movement on Mars, turns out to be a baby-sized appendage to the stomach of the full-grown George (allusion to Alien and to Master-Blaster from Thunderball), and at his death, Cuato shares with Quaid this piece of existentialist pap: "You are what you do. A man is defined by his actions, not his memories." Cuato thus serves up the film’s total denial of memory and offers a justification for the action-oriented picture that Schwarzenegger embodies, the descriptive word “action” having been elevated to a noun synonymous with a genre, one that competes with traditional narratives, one that allows for abridgments and non sequiturs, one that features an avalanche of show to cover up the void of tell.

Tripartite time (its feature of relationality, past-present-future) is banished in favor of an eternal present that feeds on the “highs” of the moment, even though they are never experienced directly, but rather drug-induced, image-laden, generations (in the photographic sense of the term) removed from the original experience. Quaid gets the idea for his original “trip” from a TV monitor in the subway advertising Recall Incorporated. The ad is rhymed, but finally even the pretense of a jingle gives way to the reduction of repetition: “Recall. Recall. Recall.” The repetition is less interesting than
the need to repeat, the cultural obsession with sequels, each one more excessive than its predecessor. But in a film in which memories are denigrated, the past is only pretext to the present action, and the future is a represented freak show of deformities, it should not surprise us that Quaid does not even have imagination enough, logic enough, free play of the mind enough to come up with the real trip to Mars after the botched Recall trip. He must see it first on the subway TV monitor in the form of an ad: “Experience space travel the old-fashioned way.” Characters so dependent upon the image for cues, who lack any real agency because they possess no real time, are the real freak show of deformity, because they are twice-removed from any “natural state”: people supplanting by robots supplanting by people more robotic than the robots.

In the same way, narrative is supplanting by media interface, which gives way to a narrative more image-laden than any of the grids and screens in Baudrillard. Tourism here seeks first to avoid the vicissitudes of real travel (“lost luggage, lousy weather, crooked taxi drivers”), only to avoid the vicissitudes of self in the form of the Ego Trip (“Take a vacation from yourself”), with its choice of alternate (even though stock) identities. Narrative collapses the same way, so that the plot, given in advance, is a stock plot: “You get the girl, kill the bad guys, and save the entire planet.”

Arnold Schwarzenegger seems at ease parodying himself, playing for laughs instead of muscling his way through a hostile plot and environment. But his ease works against him. What made Schwarzenegger’s earlier films interesting was the way that those plots played against him, deflected his performance, used him as a foil. In Terminator, Linda Hamilton’s performance and the time travel overshadowed his performance. In Predator, the jungle and the alien overshadow him. In The Running Man, Richard Dawson and the game overshadow him. But in Total Recall, there is no deflection, and he is frankly too much with us, toothy grin and Uzi.
I want to comment on two of the jokes in Total Recall, because they are emblematic of the way in which postmodernism glosses over objectionable content (it's always ironic, after all) and denies the spectator/critic firm footing for objection (since such an objection is always seen as too sincere, especially in relation to irony's deflection). The first joke takes place on the escalator, when Quaid uses the body of a man in front of him as a shield. The man is presumably an innocent bystander (innocence not amounting to much here, since his only identity is that of a prop). The man's body is riddled with bullets from the assassins of Richter at the top of the escalator. Safely shielded, Quaid shoots all his would-be assassins, and, if the scene ended here, the audience reaction would be one of shock or horror or revulsion. But Quaid then turns the man's body around to shield him from Richter and his men at the bottom of the escalator. Literal overkill. By now, most people in the audience are laughing. When the interminable escalator finally reaches the top, the body as shield/prop is discarded, only to be stepped on by Richter, with a resultant ooze of guts. Postmodernism's excess creates a three-staged joke: first horror, then release/humor through exaggeration, then a kind of camp horror beyond the punch line.

The second joke is sexist, as in fact everything pertaining to women in this film is sexist. I refer here to Mary, the woman in Venusville with three breasts. The camera angle is crucial to this joke. We see Mary first from the side, one breast exposed in close-up, eliciting a presumably prurient interest in a male audience. The second stage involves the camera showing Mary frontally, with three breasts exposed, eliciting a cheap sight-gag humor and involving a simultaneous rejection of her as sexual other by both Quaid and the audience. The third stage occurs when Quaid goes upstairs with the more anatomically correct Milena, while Benny, the black cabbie, kisses Mary's three breasts. The deflection from sexism to racism completes the so-called gag.
Why no outcry at such offense? I contend that the answer lies in postmodernism’s excess/nostalgia. *Total Recall* is the first post-Cold War film about Mars, which since the early 1950’s has been a code-name for communism in Hollywood. The “red planet” all those years was Russia; the otherness of aliens was communism. So now what’s new is what’s old, a whiplash flashback to Eisenhower’s yesteryears. Perestroika and Glasnost have been crudely translated by many Americans to mean the death of communism and the victory of capitalism. Mars, then, no longer the red menace, can be appropriated to Earth. Thus, contrary to expectations, nuclear meltdown here is good, the Hilton has tamed Mars, and the villain can say to Milena: “You’re gonna be respectful, compliant, and appreciative, just like a woman should be.” A line like that hearkens nostalgically back to the early Cold War years, to a time when Women’s Liberation would have been dismissed as a communist plot. And just because a film presents itself as pure entertainment or summer fantasy does not mean it is devoid of ideology. And fantasy should not preempt ideological objection, especially when that fantasy turns to crass commercialism.

The self-reflexive has become a commonplace of postmodernism, but it can go two ways. The ending of Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, for example, uses self-reflexivity to turn on the spectator and enliven the story of Christ in a way that not even the original novel could have anticipated. The controversial fantasy of Jesus on the cross (what if he had given in to a life with a wife and children) is ironically expressed in painterly tableaux, which are visually familiar to us from churches and museums, even if the content is not. But then when Christ comes out of the fantasy, embraces his death with a kind of frenzied ecstasy and closes his eyes, what he sees and what we see is not the divine or some light at the end of the tunnel or any other familiar stock tableau, but film leader and sprocket holes, an ending that is as provocative and shocking as it is contemporary and convincing.
Compare that ending to the ending of *Total Recall*, where the dead red clay of a Martian mountain turns blue with oxygen and sky, becoming the Paramount logo, a self-reflexivity that neither provokes nor convinces.

I recently heard a paper at a film conference which described the changes in film pornography due to the widespread use of VCRs. One of the points of that paper was that all pretense to narrative, to scripted scenes and high production values, was now gone, and current film pornography did away with scripts, got right to the action, presented skits instead of scenes, replaced narrative with stimulus-response. This point can be applied by way of summation for *Total Recall* as well, for narrative is quickly dispensed with in favor of a succession of skits, a scaffolding of sets, images over ideas, and a kind of escalating thrill-ride, geared to sledgehammer the spectator into submission, into one knee-jerk response after another. The problem, of course, is as old as Aristotle’s theories of rising action. What *Total Recall* gives us is one peripeteia after another, until finally there is no satisfactory last one, one which would satisfy and subsume all the others. In this way, *Total Recall* has much more in common with *Lethal Weapon II* than it does with *Blade Runner*. By the end of its first week in release, *Total Recall* had recouped 25 million dollars of the 70 million it had cost to make it, and nobody’s the wiser.
Collateral Damage


_Just For Laughs._ Poems by W. D. Ehrhart. Vietnam Generation Inc. & Burning Cities Press, 10301 Procter Street, Silver Spring, MD 20901, 1990. 84 pp. $10.00/paper

Reviewed by Louis McKee

"History has to live with what was here..."
—Robert Lowell

In the Sixties I went through high school and college, through long hair and a scruffy beard, through the uniform jeans, recreational drugs, and raucous rock 'n' roll. I went through the Vietnam War—in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, a mouthy kid with a backpack full of answers, morality, righteousness, and common sense. I turned my draft card in to a communal fire at St. John's Church. I wore a button on my denim jacket, a badge really, a black omega on white background, a symbol of resistance. Everything then was a symbol, a gesture. I got "Clean for Gene", and heckled Robert Kennedy on Broad Street one day because he was jumping so late into the electorate waters that McCarthy had worked at so long and hard to stir up waves. The first
poetry reading I ever attended, if you don’t count Dylan at Town Hall, featured Ginsburg and Bly and a dozen others of the University of Pennsylvania—Poets Reading Against the War. Then, there were the buses to Washington for the marches. I was spared the unpleasantness of an Asian holiday by chance: first, a college deferment; later, the lottery.

Meanwhile, my friends and relatives were sent off to places like Norfolk, Quantico, Biloxi, and San Diego, places that seemed no more than a stone throw from Da Nang, Hue, Bac Ha, and Khe Sanh—odd names we’d come to know well, seeing them as often as we did over the shoulder of Walter Cronkite on the “Evening News.” Some of my friends wanted to go: there were lots of discussions of duty, of honor. Then there were simpler motives—curiosity, wonder, boredom.

When things finally came undone, when the nightmare wind stilled, I guess I gloated some, thought “I told you so,” but it wasn’t something you said out loud. You didn’t have to. My friends came home. I was lucky. Some of my neighbors, some classmates—they didn’t. The people I had been close to, though, came home—a bit worse for the wear, wiser, maybe, sometimes tougher, sometimes more quiet. When we talked about it, as we did often enough, they were full of stories of bravado, of daring, and of the hundreds of distractions and amusements one could only find distracting and amusing when in a distant, foreign land where the singular reality was “sadness.” More often than not, what we talked about was something—anything—other than the war.

The first ones to tell me what ‘Nam was really like were Tim O’Brien, Philip Caputo, Michael Herr, and the others who found their way out of the jungle mess with a pen and paper. The journalism was good, solid reporting, but it is the stories I remember most. And they didn’t come right away—I’m thinking of If I Die in a Combat Zone and Going After Cacciato, of A Rumor of War, of Dispatches. And I remember being bowled over by Obscenities, a volume of poems
by Michael Casey which brought him a Yale Younger Poet award. Years after the fall of Saigon, the “sense” of Vietnam was finally dawning on me.

Before the fictions and memoirs had gotten to me, there were the poems—this was the age of the mimeo revolution, a time when small presses and little magazines flourished. And war was on everyone’s mind. Then, there were the early anthologies, mirrors for America to look into. All gone now, hard to come by: Robert Bly and David Ray edited A Poetry Reading Against the Vietnam War (The Sixties Press, 1966); Walter Lowenfels edited Where Is Vietnam? (Anchor Books, 1967); Jan Barry, Basil Paquet, and Larry Rottman edited Winning Hearts and Minds (1st Casualty Press/McGraw Hill, 1972); and Ehrhart, himself, teamed up with Jan Barry to edit Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam (East River Anthology, 1976). Of course, this isn’t the whole story—not by far.

The Chinese have a telling curse: “May you live in interesting times.” I once heard W. D. Ehrhart say that he had been blessed in a dubious way, being put in a particular place at a particular time, given fairly good recall, and made somewhat articulate to boot. Ehrhart is not the only one: there are seventy-five contributors to Carrying the Darkness, “combat soldiers and draft resisters, living-room observers and full-time activists,” and no doubt this is only a fraction of what it might have been.

There are only a handful of poems by the likes of Bly and Levertov — none at all by Ginsberg or Ferlinghetti. Ehrhart explains this away in his introduction: limited space, and the fact that the work of some poets is readily available. As true as this might be, their absence is noticeable.

There are, however, many of the poets we’ve come to associate with the war: John Balaban, D. F. Brown, Yusef
Komuayakaa, Walter McDonald, Bruce Weigl, and so on. Then, there are the other, older more established poets who spoke out: Robert Dana, George Hitchcock, James Laughlin, Thomas McGrath, Joel Oppenheimer, Richard Shelton, William Stafford, and more.

The poets with reputation were "on the lines" themselves. Hayden Carruth tells about it: "On Being Asked To Write a Poem Against the War in Vietnam".

Well I have and in fact
more than one and I'll
tell you this too

I wrote one against
Algeria that nightmare
and another against

Korea and another
against the one
I was in

and I don't remember
how many against
the three

when I was a boy
Abyssinia Spain and
Harlan County

and not one
breath was restored
to one

shattered throat
mans womans or childs
no not one

one
but death went on and on
never looking aside

except now and then like a child
with a furtive half-smile
to make sure I was noticing.

The futility is noted—and by many of the others as well. Those furtive glances passed both ways, though: the poet was noticed too. Auden’s complaint that “poetry makes nothing happen” may well be true, but poets seem to worry the hell out of folks—Plato banished them from his Republic, and things haven’t changed much since, as numerous Caesars, Generalisimos and Presidentes have had them exiled, censored, silenced, and murdered.

Ferlinghetti has warned us that the poet is walking around with a bomb in his pocket. The people have learned to keep their distance. “For a long day and a night we read the names....” Thomas McGrath tells us of a vigil kept where tens of thousands of dead brothers were recalled.

The citizens go on about their business.
By night sleepers condense in the houses grown cloudy with dreams.
By day a few come to hear us and leave, shaking their heads.
Or cursing. On Sunday the moral animal prays in his church.

From the first hours “in country,” full of naivete and wide-eyed wonder, to the painful reality and horrors of the fight, it is the words of the soldiers that are most searing, most lasting. Bryan Alec Floyd speaks to us in the voices of others, in monologues that assure the men of their place: “Lance Corporal Purdue Grace, U.S.M.C.,” for example. He takes a few minutes to talk with the new replacements, the young and green boys who are making it possible for him to head on home. “They knew he had made it through his tour/without getting a cold much less a wound.”

One of the braver replacements told him they were all terrified.
The Lance Corporal told them, “To be scared is okay. I’ve seen lots of men change their pants more than once a day, they were so scared. But don’t expect sympathy.
Sympathy is a sad word found in the dictionary somewhere between scab and syphilis. Always remember to keep your head out of your ass and your ass out of the air. Know this about this fucked-up war that will never unfuck itself—Life in Vietnam is a sea of shit: Some people sink. Some people swim. And some people go in boats.

Clearly, there was much to think about, but still, there was far too much time for thinking. What if your boat doesn’t come in? D.C. Berry leaves a last request: "If I’m zapped bury me/with a/comicbook...."

in my new life I’ll be Clark Kent instead of Superman

And all around you are the farmers, the villagers, the VC—the enemy. John F. Howe calls them “magical....mystical”, and Yusef Komunyakaa says they move under our eyelids,
lords over loneliness winding like coralvine through sandalwood & lotus,
inside our skulls years after this scene ends.

Unaccustomed Mercy is, in many ways, more of the same. This is the work of a dozen poets, most of them veterans of a tour of Vietnam. (John Balaban was a conscientious objector during the war, but did his alternative service in Vietnam; Bryan Alec Floyd did not serve in Vietnam at all, though he is a Vietnam-era veteran.) Almost all of them were included in Carrying the Darkness (the exception, Michael
Casey, is the much acclaimed author of Obscenities, and winner of the Yale Younger Poet award—who, for some reason, is missing from the earlier volume.)

In The Iliad, Hector declares the warrior’s creed: “I have trained myself always, like a good soldier, to take my place in the front line and win glory.” Here begins the poetry of war, at least in western tradition. And now, beside Hector and Achilles, place the names of Jan Barry, Gerald McCarthy, and Horace Coleman; of Basil T. Paquet, Bruce Weigl and Yusef Komunyakaa; of Walter McDonald, Bryan Alec Floyd, and John Balaban; of D. F. Brown, Michael Casey, and Ehrhart, himself.

Isolating the soldier-poets like this, it is clear that their work is different. They are not political—the anti-war poems were the work of non-participants, for the most part. The soldiers in the jungles and rice paddies were more concerned, or so it seems, with the more personal, the day to day, “that moment, that fire fight”—as though the “whole becomes lost in the parts, and there seems to be no cosmic interplay at all”—or so suggests John Clark Pratt in the book’s preface. The poems here, page after page, are concerned with “the now”—the immediacy of war. Their subjects are taken from virtually all the aspects of the war: the jungle; friendships; brutality; fire fights; Vietnamese children; rape; death; body bags; the wounded; rocket attacks; atrocities; barrooms; whores; the aged; street scenes; arriving and coming home; guilt; loss of innocence; trauma; the marketplace; temples; memories; and so on—a veritable tapestry of the Vietnam experience.

Finding himself walking patrol on the same ground that years before had known a French Legion, and long before that, the footsteps of Genghis Khan, the irony is not lost on Jan Barry.

Unencumbered by history, our own or that of 13th-century Mongol armies
long since fled or buried
by the Vietnamese,
in Nha Trang, in 1962, we just did our jobs:
replacing kepis with berets, “Ah so!” with “Gawd!
Damn!”

The history of the land had little to do with the lives of the men who were put there, more often than not, against their will. “What did we dream of/the summer before we went away?” asks Gerald McCarthy.

It was easy to be critical, to be skeptical, to be cynical. Some men just wondered out loud. Others were too bitter. Michael Casey puts it into perspective:

   If you have a farm in Vietnam
   And a house in hell
   Sell the farm
   And go home

A recurring image in the writing from Vietnam is the idea of something being “carried,” the burdens being hauled, more than the gear strapped to their backs, the weight balanced on their shoulders. There are pictures, faces, and stories that will never be forgotten—no matter how hard the soldier tries. Bruce Weigl’s “Amnesia”:

   If there was a world more disturbing than this
   where black clouds bowed down and swallowed you whole
   and overgrown tropical plants
   rotted, effervescent in the muggy twilight, and monkeys
   screamed something
   that came to sound like words to each other
   across the triple-canopy jungle you shared,
you don’t remember it.

You tell yourself no and cry a thousand days.
You imagine that the crows calling autumn into place
are your brothers and you could
if only the strength and will were there
fly up to them to be black
and useful to the wind.
W. D. Ehrhart was a high school senior in Perkasie, Pennsylvania, the son of a minister and his wife, when he bought into the American Dream, and subsequently, into the U.S.M.C. The time and the place: it turned his life around.

...Since 1965, when I first considered enlisting in the U.S. Marine Corps, Vietnam has been a permanent fact of my life, a chronic condition, a shadow companion as welcome as a tattoo with an ex-girlfriend’s name on it. Over the course of twenty-three years, it has become less a place or a war than a state of mind.

This is from the introduction to one of his anthologies, but hardly had to be said. One needs only to look at Ehrhart’s poems to see the pain, chronic and permanent, as well as the scars. Disillusion is tucked into every line, disappointment and guilt. Just For Laughs is his eleventh collection of poems, and while not entirely centered on the war, it would be difficult to pull the threads of Vietnam from the rich, full cloth.

When I was ten, I thought that I would live forever, I could kill whatever I pleased, I was all that mattered. How else can one explain the firecrackers stuffed down throats of frogs and lit: hop, hop, boom. A lot of laughs.

Lives were changed by Vietnam. When we were young it was frogs, and harmless snakes that we beat with sticks; older, we needed more.

The ambush lasted only seconds: caught in the open, mid-thought, they fell like ducks, wings useless, feathers fluttering. Dead, the four men sprawled beneath a squinting moon.

.....
I was elated, blood pumping
through my temples, nostrils flared:
one of those rifles was mine.
A custom ancient as the art of war.
Proof. What men need
to substitute for strength.

I kept that rifle
long enough to understand
I hope to God I never
have to find myself
in need of one again,
and one too close at hand.

The roads we take sometimes surprise us, the turns they
take. It is ten years after "the last rooftop/chopper out
of Saigon," and in New York City there is a parade.

You'd think that any self-respecting
vet would give the middle finger
to the folks who thought of it
ten years and more too late—

Ten years after the fall of Saigon, ten years after the horrors
ended and the nightmares began, Ehrhart returned to
Vietnam—to find answers, to heal wounds.

I always told myself,
if I ever got the chance to go back,
I'd never say "I'm sorry"
to anyone. Christ,

those guys I saw on television once:
sitting in Hanoi, the cameras rolling,
crying, blubbering
all over the place. Sure,

I'm sorry. I never meant
to do the things I did.
But that was nearly twenty years ago:
Enough's enough...

It is too late for "sorry"—too late to say it in Hanoi, too late
in New York City. Saigon is now Ho Chi Minh City, and
the streets there are crowded with children, "a moment’s respite from loneliness," both in their making, and as he finds them now.

It doesn’t really matter who won;
either way, you were always destined
to be one of the losers....

But there are many losers after a war. When two former adversaries meet after many years, it is much as Hardy had imagined. One rolls a cigarette for the other—he’d lost an arm “years ago somewhere near Laos.” They have a great deal in common: “Hue City. Tet. 1968.”

You lost your arm....
I lost a piece of my humanity,
its absence heavy as a severed arm—

but there I go again; those second thoughts
I carry always like an empty sleeve....

After Saigon, and after Ho Chi Minh City, there is still life. Ehrhart writes about more than the war, but the war is never very far away. It seeps into love poems for his wife, into the soft prayers he whispers into his daughter’s ear. He has become a man of compassion, of outrage, and there are political poems about El Salvador, poems from his trip to Nicaragua—but each with a bent, a personal air rather than a soapbox declaration. And in 1990, he returned for a second time to Vietnam, to Hanoi:

There in that place the Americans bombed,
where the children were sent to the hills
away from their mothers and fathers,
taking their laughter with them,
leaving their city in darkness,

in the market among the bicycles,
baskets of spices and fruit,
beer and cigarettes, burlap bags
and people singing their words
in a language forty centuries old,
in a toystore cluttered with orange
inflatable fish and wind-up monkeys
and dolls: two identical warplanes,
flight leader and wingman,
"U.S. Air Force" stenciled on the sides.

And the children touch them without fear,
pick them up with their hands,
put them into the sky
and pretend they are flying,
nothing but light in their eyes.

A kind of blindness, that's what's needed now.
Better not to know. Better to notice
the way light bends through trees in winter dusk.

What, after all, does knowledge bring? Cold rage,
the magnitude of history, despair.
A kind of blindness, that's what's needed now....

This is an ugly time, a sick time, in America. We can see it in the dozens of ills and maladies around us—social and personal ailments—and in our sad enthusiasm for war. The pride we took, the glory, in our devastating bombing of Kuwait and Iraq, is troublesome. The way we discard any mention of the tens of thousands of dead people left in the wake of our record-blitz of sorties. We settled for the euphemisms: surgical strikes, collateral damage, and perhaps worst of all, friendly fire. This is a sad time in America, even for all the flag-waving, knee-jerk patriotism, and jingoistic yellow ribbons. Right or wrong, we now have to live with the reality of what has happened, with the results, and most of all, with the memories.

No doubt Desert Shield and Desert Storm will give rise to a number of poets and writers, but don’t expect the Gulf War to spew forth anywhere near the numbers that came out of Vietnam. Of course, part of it has to do with the length
of the campaign; the recent conflict was so sharp and absolute, so quick and decisive. Vietnam seemed to go on forever. Even more than duration, though, is the weight of the war.

As ugly and as trying as these last months have been, they have also been light, buoyant, held afloat of the waving hands of eighty-nine plus percent of the citizenry. Vietnam, the years of conflict, 1963-1975, and those other times, the pre-history and post-mortem, burnt the very skin off of our society. Like a battle-scarred and war-weary flag, the union was rent and frayed. There had never been anywhere near such numbers in support of the war of Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon.

The soldiers and airmen, the sailors and marines, and the awe-struck civilians—they took their pens to paper in an effort to understand, to explain, and to heal. There will come a time, and not so very far down the road, when we will realize that there is much yet to be understood about what went on in the desert beyond the Persian Gulf. Whole forests will be given over in the effort to explain. The letters, memoirs, fictions and poems will be our salves—there is much to heal.

Louis McKee

In loving memory of Etheridge Knight (1933-1991)
“One day we shall all go back—”
Metaphor as a Cliché From Which We Escape Through Reality: James Tate’s *Distance from Loved Ones*

(Wesleyan University Press, University of New England, Hanover, NH 03755; 56 pp, $9.95)

Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams have, however oversimplistically, come to represent two poles among many contemporary discussions of aesthetics. Williams is known as the “No ideas but in things” poet, while Stevens is known for such statements as “Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor.” While such statements as “poetry should show, not tell” and “existence precedes essence” can be valuable to shake a poet from the formulaic habits or assumptions that what he says is more important than how, such things like when or where he says it, the dividing line between presenting and representing, connotations and denotations, surface and depth, form and content, words and their meanings, etc., are not at all clear. These issues can’t and therefore shouldn’t be resolved. Nonetheless, it is extremely important that they be addressed.

In *Distance from Loved Ones*, James Tate is very aware of these problems. Though his poems are often recognizably about something (they present a scene or a type of character much more than do poems by Ashbery or many of the L=A=N=G=E=U=A=G=E poets), they are also meditations on their own formal characteristics. They self-referentially question their own assumptions even as they make them. But in Tate’s work, we’re never quite sure whether the subject matter or the imagery is more important, or even which came first. In an interview, Tate was quoted as saying that he wants a kind of poetry that “allows for statement in the imagery.” I’d like to show some of the ways he’s successful in that urge and why this success makes him one of the most unique and, at his best, most engaging lyric poets writing in English today.
"The Less Said" (page 49), for instance, is manifestly a scene in which parents are pretending to console themselves after the death (by circumstances that are never revealed) of their son. Yet, just as important is the more latent theme of the arbitrary nature of interpretation itself:

The parents of the deceased studied his calligraphy endlessly. Once at a card game at Furzy Park the father, Mr. Nobody, squealed, "Looky here! he was just a May fly and therefore lived a full life." A meteorite went by a second later and he said, "Or a meteorite, and he lived a full, a magnificent life." "But what about his calligraphy?" asked their hosts, Don and Dorothy. Mrs. Nobody, hoping for a thunderbolt, or at least for a petal to fall, murmured, "It was real steamy, like boiling milk. That child was nothing more than a silhouette of a geyser, if you ask me. But we miss him, don't we, Harry?" And that's when Harry said, "The less said."

(lines 1-18)

The lack of imagination the characters here have is shown by the "fact" that an actual meteorite has to pass by for the father to compare him to one. However, it's obvious that Tate himself has imagined the whole scene. The father's name, Mr. Nobody, shows that Tate stands outside the poem, or that the poem stands outside of Tate. I could point out affinities with Gregory Corso's "Poets Hitchhiking on the Highway," in which charged aphoristic impressions are played off each other in a hilarious and almost gratuitous context, and with Steven's "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," in which the poet imagines that others can't imagine what he imagines, but the multi-faceted irony of Tate's adept orchestration is both more complex and more scathing than that in either of these two poems.
Is Tate indicting the characters here? Is he admonishing the lack of imagination that needs to ground its metaphors in a specific, though extraordinary, concrete occurrence? Or isn’t the whole poem itself like a meteor? Tate presents a situation using a variety of formal devices that allow him to distance himself from representing (or interpreting) it. Perhaps for Tate metaphor has become a cliché from which we must escape through reality. Yet his “reality” is rarely as mundane as a red wheelbarrow. Certainly many of his metaphors seem less extravagant by becoming rooted in a series of convincingly fabricated particulars.

Another example of this particularity occurs in “No Spitting Up” (p. 48) which begins:

“People in glass elevators shouldn’t carry snow shovels,”
I said to Sheila, because we were in one with a lady who was.

(1-2)

Tate clamps his visions onto specific scenes like a painter, and it doesn’t matter whether these settings are real or imagined. Who knows if Tate ever really was in a glass elevator with Sheila and a woman with a shovel? What matters is that he feels like he’s in one so convincingly that he allows the reader to suspend disbelief as he fleshes out a world of words-as-things through which to move the intellect they emotionalize.

Other times he allows us to disbelieve, to entertain the lurking suspicion that the poem, like the layers of an onion, isn’t really making us cry because there’s nothing underneath it. But just because we recognize a fiction as a fiction, doesn’t mean it detracts from the poem. “Black Monday” (p. 51) begins:

As a specimen I was determined to get back to the fancy little cove and spare the rabbit
his immediate spearing. And now when I allude
to a certain insubstantial cove and a rabbit
that was speared there not long ago, everyone
believes me. I describe a windmill and a pine tree,
the coat I was wearing, and the tailor who made it,
his horrible death in the granary. I darted
under the shelves and began to itemize
the contingencies: the alleged commerce, the botany
of it all...

(1-11)

Tate has to be a specimen, the cove has to be insubstantial to
be certain (in "Crimes Against the Lyric," [p. 46] he writes "The
multitudinousness of the world/stops her from having one
clean thought"). Here the "commerce," though alleged and
perhaps irrelevant (as the coatmaker’s death in the granary
is irrelevant to the specific drama of specimen and rabbit),
provides another essential element to the poem, as does a stormy
sky behind the calm person a portrait is allegedly "of" or as
do the severe brushstrokes that "obscure" a DeKooning woman.

The tension between what we see and the arbitrary baggage
of identity is even more comically expressed in "I Am a Finn"
(p. 39-40) and "I Am Still a Finn" (p. 41-42). Tate brilliantly
presents (satirizes?) the silliness of worrying about origins,
race, sex, age, about all nationalistic ways of not being able
to see the trees for the forest. In "I Am Still a Finn," he juxtaposes
two allegedly very different kinds of data. For instance:

Dean brought champagne to celebrate
my failure. He says I was just nervous.
Between 1908 and 1950, 33 volumes

of the Ancient Poetry of the Finnish People
were issued, the largest work of its kind
ever published in any language.

So why should I be nervous? Aren't I
a Finn,...

(7-14)
The logic seems so obviously askew, but at the same time, it seems that many people’s minds do work like this. This "juxtaposition" only serves to break down false boundaries so that we don’t feel it’s wrong to talk about, say, a business transaction as if it’s the kind of sex not sanctioned by the Catholic church! Here, and throughout this book, it’s the relationship of the personal pathos to the more strictly abstract lines that makes the poem compelling.

* * * * * *

"Las Ramblas" (p.32) is more archetypically surrealistic in its forsaking of conventional scene and setting for an impersonally charged labyrinth of language; it’s a more difficult poem. Here, unlike the poems already discussed, the framing and coherence of the poem isn’t as important as the mood each phrase or line yields. He writes:

Sunbaked tarantulas paused to appraise the newest bowler hats;
they have escaped from a science project and are pretending to tightrope-walk across the melting jewelry of the boulevard.

(4-6)

Later, at the halfway point of the poem, it becomes like a miniature version of Ashbery’s "Instruction Manual." Since it’s in miniature, Tate’s manual is appropriately a "brochure." Nonetheless, the obsession with directions here is placed amongst a world that never quite seems to yield satisfying meaning. The satisfaction is elsewhere; the unravelling itself is half the fun.

There is simply too much in this book to deal fully with more than a few nuances that please and interest me. "We Go a-Quilting" (p. 34) contains lines like:

There was a piazza not far away and they dreamed of pistol-whipping a missionary
or a chemist, or just splashing around
anonymously and doing their homework
behind a vehicle made of lace which
would vibrate beneath them like a stallion devoted
to his own misbehavior.

(3-9)

I like the way he makes them be "behind" what's "beneath" them; it's both a physical description and a figure of speech. Other times, the simplest thing can set Tate off. "Bewitched" (p. 7) is an account of what might go on in the mind when somebody simply asks you for the time. Yet Tate is not just flying off the handle into a solipsistic wilderness of extended metaphor. There is a strong link to an emotional reality. Some of the character studies reveal his acute perceptivity into or deep empathy with his subject matter, though I guess there's no way of proving that "Anatomy" (p. 52) is a beautifully sad and biting poem about the burden of beauty in a jealous, resentful age. "Mimi" (p. 17), a tribute to a dead friend, contains the lines "she hired a limousine / when she could have crawled." "Peggy in the Twilight" (p. 4) begins "Peggy spent half of each day trying to wake up, and / the other half preparing to sleep."

Yet, moving as these poems are, I much prefer the relationship poems to the character studies. While "A Complicated and Petty Set of Procedures in a Single Room" (p. 23) is more like "Black Monday" in that Tate calls attention to the fact that he's inventing perhaps just a little too overtly, the surrealism is so emotionalized that it's hard to believe he's not also discovering as he goes on about having:

- a brunette babysitter in the toilet
- who will be back any minute with something frozen
- that can be slammed against a lamp,...

(7-9)

Even better is "The Banner" (p. 30), which calls attention to the kind of spaces that can exist between a man and a woman:

I tugged at her sleeve: doorbell?
She hugged the arm: magpie.
Intervals went by spotlessly,
but somehow foetid, too. She stitched,
I read the Apocrypha, abruptly slammed
shut the covers, suspicious
of fumes rippling through the room.
I was poking around under cushions,
bracing myself for the worst, dead
fruit, something under the rug,
a gelatinous potato. Would you stop?
she pleaded. I'm cooking. Oh, I said
that explains everything. I stared at her
for a very long time, I felt horns
growing, meagre horns, denting my baldspot.
That book was a fake, a neon sneer
across the ages, a prolonged rasp
corrupting the squemish, among whom
I loomed as a negligible connoisseur.
I felt discouraged now as I watched
her leathery fingers unfold
her munificent banner: Endurance,
it read, as though the Bridegroom
had endowed her, and she were the Bride?
I tugged at her sleeve: telephone?
She rocked in her trance: Coyotes.

(1-26)

Thematicallly it's "the same old story." But Tate, by using
imagery to make a statement, makes it strange. Every time
I read this, I find something else. Another poem on a similar
theme whose straightforwardness does not sacrifice eloquence
is "How Happy We Were" (p. 9):

There was a spy in my life who wouldn't let me sleep.
Day in and day out she tortured me with the most sophisti-
cated
devices. At first I squealed like a pig at slaughter.
Then I became addicted. Between sessions I was agitated
and impatient. I cried, "How much longer must I wait?"
So she made me wait longer and longer. I became masterful,
a genius of the thumbscrew and rack. I didn't really need her
any longer. On her last visit she could read this in my eyes,
and it tore a hole in her through which I could see
something like eternity and a few of the little angels
whose sole job it is to fake weeping for people like us.

(1-11)
This, believe it or not, brings me to theme of Distance. The title of this book is *Distance from Loved Ones*, and surely the thread of estrangement runs though the book: men are estranged from women, children from parents, soldiers from civilians, and heathen from their deaf leader. Yet, this distance may not be a purely negative state of affairs. It’s possible that distance is a gift we receive from loved ones. This possible reading of the collection’s title becomes especially apparent in “Burn Down the Town, No Survivors” (p. 11-12). The poem ends:

I was with a friend’s wife, her  
wild mane would make such ideal kindling—  
I could have loved her but it would  
have been just more of the same,  
more petty crimes and slow death,  
more passion leading to betrayal,  
more ecstasy guaranteeing tears. I saw  
how dangerous and fragile I had become.  
I could have loved a fig right then  
with my gasoline in one hand,  
and the other fluttering between  
her breast and a pack of matches.  
My contagious laughter frightening us both,  
“No survivors,” I repeated, and  
we looked through one another,  
the work already completed.  

(23-38)

“Foreign Airport” (p. 31) is a more impersonal poem (the word “I” never appears in it) that also could be read as a kind of paean to distance. Tate writes:

A mule is silhouetted  
on the runway — he’s a hybrid going nowhere. A schoolmaster offers peanuts to a bailbondsman — they discover they are both Geminis, both born in Lemon, South Dakota, on the same day, minutes apart, indeed, they are twins! They make unconvincing pledges to stay in touch, and the conversation drifts, like the aroma of a shipwreck bisecting a heartbeat in bathwater.

(2-9)
The drama of the twins has more poetic possibilities than the hybrid barren mule. Their relationship to the mule is ambivalence's relationship to ambiguity. Ambivalences are preferable to ambiguity partially because they evoke the distance. Yet perhaps distance is only "better" than the lack of drama the mule (like a eunuch?) leaves us with because it's more true to life, or more true to Tate's life at least.

But such assumptions on my part may limit Tate's achievement here too much. For if Tate just believes that a poem's success is measured by its ability to imitate the sad distances that are the truest because most difficult part of our lives, how do we explain the occasional bursts of pure giddiness this book manages to achieve without swaggering bravado? The end of "Indivisible" (p. 36) achieves something beyond an extremely articulate statement of despair over or even an acceptance of harsh distances. It doesn't seem like it's distances it's embracing. Of course, how do I know that to be "immune, beseeching" is quite the opposite of being "a hybrid going nowhere"? Another example of this pure giddiness is in the poem "Saturdays are for Bathing Betsy" (p. 8). It is a rare poem of sudsy communion. It ends:

I am not just a bunch of white stuff inside my skull. No, there is this villa, and in the villa there is a bathing pool, and on Saturdays Betsy always visits. I am not the first rational man, but my tongue does resemble a transmitter. And, when wet, she is a triangle. And when she's wet, time has a fluffiness about it, and that has me trotting about, loathing any locomotion not yoked to her own.

(16-23)

While I don't think I could single out this poem as the best in the book, I can at least enjoy the weird coziness it evokes once Tate "transfer(s) some/assets to a region where there are no thinking creatures/just worshipping ones." I think it can be said that all of Tate's dazzling pyrotechnics in this book are actually part of a very serious attempt to accept
whatever situation he’s in at the time, even if he’s “merely” inventing it. Distance is either a state he must write himself out of, or something he must write himself into. It’s an open question, but something’s burning.

Chris Stroffolino
Cipher is a new literary quarterly that surveys the constantly changing character of American letters. We publish submissions from widely varying perspectives, and each issue features both established and new writers. To receive Cipher, please send $4.00 for a single issue or $16.00 for a yearly subscription (D.C. residents please include 6% sales tax).

The editors of Cipher also request your submissions of original fiction, poetry, and essays. There is no bent but for quality: well-made literary work manifesting an awareness of technique in its varied forms and a considered relationship to the world.

Address subscriptions, single copy requests, and manuscripts to:

Cipher
c/o James Heynderickx
5415 Connecticut Ave. N.W. #819
Washington, DC 20015

Cipher editors will report on submissions within two months. Contributors will receive two complimentary copies. Submissions must include a S.A.S.E. to be returned.
Don’t Miss A Single PBQ!

Simply send in the subscription form below, along with your check or money order, and you won’t miss an issue of “news that stays news” from Robert Bly, Charles Bukowski and a host of other exciting contemporary writers. A subscription also makes a great gift for a friend, relative or favorite library. Include your name and an acknowledgement will be sent with the first issue.

Painted Bride Quarterly
PBQ • 230 Vine Street • Philadelphia, PA 19106 • USA

☐ $16 for 1 year  ☐ $28 for 2 years
(☐ This is a renewal)

Name

Address

City State Zip

Painted Bride Quarterly—Gift Subscription
PBQ • 230 Vine Street • Philadelphia, PA 19106 • USA

☐ $16 for 1 year  ☐ $28 for 2 years

Name

Address

City State Zip

Donor’s name