Painted Bride Quarterly

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Front cover art:
Laurel Raczka and Tony Raczka Glances and Faint Memories
Rainy Day

All day green light drips—
busted fountain in my head.
My love cooks peppers.
She hums an old song.
Warblers dance in the pansies,
clouds bump each other.
Children watch movies.
I love to watch them watching,
movies, more movies.
Red couch in the barn,
a thousand kisses fly by—
my love smiles at me.
Men with teddy bears
slump against trees in the park.
They've travelled for days.
From An Island

Fogged in all day, the long, low horns announcing
the passing of another ghostship.
But we see nothing. It's as if a curtain had been dropped.
Go back into yourself, it says. None of this matters
to you anymore. All that drama, color, movement—
you can live without it. It was an illusion,
a tease, a lie. There is nothing out here but smoke
from the rubble that was everything,
everything you wanted, everything you thought
you needed. Ships passing, forget it.
Children bathing, there's no such thing.
Let go, your island is a mote of dust.
But the horns of the ghostship say, remember us,
we remember you.
Copperhead

In the misty sleeve of a street light,
a single bat turns crooked circles
as if damaged by the dark charisma
of a copper vigilante who leaves pennies
on the eyes of dead men

his capers are loosely based on true life
murders committed before my mother
was born, committed by a slick transvestite
who left the pennies head side up
on the eyes of dead men
who had lied to women

she says I read too much pulp fiction
from the thirties and forties,
she thinks I’m fighting someone else’s war,
she fears her nightgown is worn by another
in my dreams, can’t see past the factual
to the rugged judge with the copper gun
shooting through the midnight of her body
making her a safer place to be

every night his long cloak lifts
in the wind, behind my eyes, in our bed
as our marriage falls like snake skin.
Night Landing In A Light Rain

I imagine some dream or panic breaking
Open your sleep, your eyelids darting, then flying
Apart, your forehead damp as the runway
I’m swooping toward. It would be that first

Flight together—always strange, seeing who
Drinks, who crosses themselves. You might worry
About the slickness of it all down there
Though still inside your eyes would ache,

Dry, whites mapped with bright red veins,
Skin hot and pale. As my stomach descends
Before me, I want to turn and tell you...
But your name on my tongue is swallowed up

By the man beside me laughing nervously, gulping
Something on the rocks and I suspect
Even if it were you there I wouldn’t
Say what I was really thinking:

That today at the aquarium the octopus’
Arms undulating made me want you, made
My stomach fall then, too, my chest constrict
As his tentacles rippled and waved, flags unfurling,

Red, refusing to surrender to the tyranny
Of the streaked, brittle glass they caressed,
Making unwilling voyeurs of us. Spotlit
Water coursed over his blind head, like the world

Now streaming below as I watch, cars slipping
Into an ongoing river of lights, above
Stars vibrating with heat, in the window
Your immovable face, caught between two heavens.
Third Eye For Etheridge

See the way it breathes
through stone
its various hellos

I, the sister of stone
the water who eats and polishes
what is
or isn’t known

You, the night in stone
riding outward
third in the row
of visionaries,
going home.
Upon Finding In A Volume Of William Blake A Card Pledging Love Forever From An Ex-Lover

I went looking for the "Poison Tree,"
knowing Blake’s heavy beats beat for me,
something deeper than scansion, a blood-boiling
regularity, hate’s music, the world’s other song.
He gave up on the title "Christian Forbearance,"
leaving irony to its place between Innocence
and Experience, letting irony exist as we do.
For Blake, Experience was a man with a cherub
on his head, unsmiling, balancing the weight
of good. It’s an ugly world when so much is expected,
and the trees arc over, keep us from the sky,
and one lamb suddenly becomes two, and not
just a blur of the land, a harvest waiting.
Even October’s red moon runs white, so why
shouldn’t words fade to silence and love forget
its name? Her sentiments meant something one day,
her words for years waiting like a second lamb surfacing
in a Blake plate, to bleat and please, to want
and need. And I had a richness in my pocket
I didn’t know of, a hope for the future only
something as untenable as the future could deny.
Voices

I.
Anna's Call

One a.m. the phone rings, my uncle Jeff asleep
on the couch does not move, my uncle Nick and his wife
in the other room silent, too. Joy, wake everyone up
she is gone. I make a pot of coffee in the almost silence,
the parakeet chirps a little because he hears
life, the water heater knocks, the bones of this house
pass the knowledge on, wake up, she is gone.

II.
Death

You slip under your still purple hair, out of body
in an instant, stay near the ceiling to watch.
From the fourth floor window of this hospital
you think you can see Bison's stadium,
but you know that was last night, when Anna
had fallen asleep and Nick, Jeff, and Joy
had gone home. You remember talking with them
and you know it was early because of the t.v., no one allowed
to bring clocks into this wing. And you look towards the
stark halogen
light behind the Citicorp Building, the original Buffalo Sears
and you hear the single voice of a crowd,
large moans, a long passive sigh, and then a tremendous rush
of sound—this is a baseball centered universe,
the voice says, look: Fords and Chevys
fan out concentrically like bombed out angels,
a single beam of light wedged
into the darkness above.
III.
*Teresa’s Asking*

And you wonder if this will ever make sense.
413, why 413, why this nurse
named Sally, and Doctor Clemente,
my daughter’s head drooling on the bed,
her hand unclenched by the side of her mouth,
this t.v. show and this time,
12:45 a.m.? And my home,
and child-size chair by the oven
*I have sat in for thirty years to think,*
to stay warm, these cups, and this plate with stale crumbs,
this wall paper and picture of Anna
hung so poorly, these flames and smoke
the plant never puts out,
the time clocks on the wall,
the forever men in their dirty coveralls
moving around in the morning
darkness before their shift, careful sounds
the sleepers do not hear.

IV.
*Anna*

It’s only the child’s sense that tells you.
Instinctively, you rise, don’t even look,
think about the time, the lights in the hall
that seem to come from every direction, the night nurse
who has lost her face in the tile floors, the wall,
er her starched skin and dress. *Joy, wake*
everyone up. She is gone. The lights for the Bison’s game
that went extra innings tonight, a 9 to 8 win in the sixteenth,
go off one by one, remind you of a movie you saw,
the camera at the end flying over a small Midwestern town,
a happy ending, the yellow lights of each house going black
as the camera passes through an assured snow falling.
V.

Teresa's Wandering

When Anna returns, you are not there.
You've gone to see what they will do with you.
A man you do not know, a man next to him.
And you are proud because you notice how much older
you are as they float, too, everyone ashamed
of their nakedness, and limp bodies
they cannot lie about now and say
when I was young. One man asks
the other if he listened to the game,
or was it too late. 5 to 1 top of the sixth, Bison's.
They remind you of your husband,
a man who loved baseball, too, it's the most American
sport he would say after he came home
from the plant, all day the men talking
around him in Polish, Armenian,
Spanish, a little more English worked in each time,
sometimes unconsciously using an ump's signal,
waving their arms furiously back and forth
to stop the belt, an arm or work shirt caught
in the line.

VI.

Teresa's Word

And I tell you these goddamn men never change,
home too late, and too soon as always,
still at the heads of tables despite the time,
their conversation centered around
marriage, which friend or relative has enough
signatures to run for office,
and why bother, what has it got us?
The goddamn niggers have taken over,
nobody gives a shit about the Italians anymore.
But it is the same, until one day
the old man dies and his young son,
who has secretly been seeing Black women
and Poles, girls from Victor Heights,
stands up at the head of the table,
and the goddamn kids, what do they know,
I heard they robbed A & P on the corner.
In grief, looks at his seat now empty,
reaches for the wall and hits the switch,
why must we go on like this,
he whispers like a prayer,
everyone eating as if they were still in light,
brief pauses to drink milk, water,
take in a mouthful of wine,
a voice from the oldest woman
at the table, we are sorry, son,
a man's voice from far away,
drunk and enraged,
No! It is not your place, No!

VII.
Joy and Teresa

When I walk in the room to see,
you reappear, think to yourself
I can find out what this girl wants from me,
listen to the voice in my head:
a little girl in 1910, Niagara Falls,
outside her parents' newly built house
scrubbing clothes. She is hungry
and should be getting ready for school,
smells the coffee and eyes the quarter loaf
of Italian bread she will have for breakfast.
But she will not go to school today,
the peaches are ripe and the migrants have
not yet come—climbs the orchard wall
fills a bag, eats as many as she can
and more. Stops by the diamond to pass time.
For a moment Teresa is distracted,
Our father who art in Heaven,
and then a group of young boys,
my age, hit around an old sock
filled with yarn they collectively stole,
somebody cracks a long ball, *Jesus Christ!*,
clears the houses in center field,
lifts into the sun, disappears.

You walk home from the Lockheed plant in '41,
think about that boy and ball,
his final figure after the swing
stopped and never moved again,
your hands swollen from riveting skin
on P-38 lightnings, and then to *Johnny's*,
*hallowed be thy name*, to tend bar
for the night-shift, Anna at home
managing herself, the plant-men
in after work, your husband by the radio gesturing
sweetly for you to bring him a beer,
*Brooklyn 2 to 1 bottom of the ninth*,

still tending bar at Johnny's years later;
*thy kingdom come, thy will be done*,
everyone in the room raising their hands
to block the morning light, *in heaven as on earth*,
the beautiful sound of women talking
and machines, of cigars and beer,
of a thousand voices closing in on themselves
and almost gone.
Self-Portrait with Disasters

Imagine. I once walked the entire length of Croton-on-Hudson in Hurricane Bob because I liked the smell of ozone and destruction. Then fell into snow so deep I drowned, but that was in a dream, and since then, the only thing I fear is waking. Now when people hate me they say I must think I'm a saint. When my ex-husband wants more power, he deprives our kids of safety. This, he feels, is justified as gravity or other inevitable lures of nature. The man who shot himself in Missoula, on the other hand, thought he had no power. Once, he said, he saw his wedding mattress floating down Broadway in South Yonkers. His wife had thrown it out and a flood rose and loosened it from the trash. I thought, how amazing that Broadway stretches from Albany to Battery Park and back again, that beneath my feet lies the bedrock of a shifting continent, above my head, dust of a trillion dying stars. In fact, I myself am suspended in the devastation. For this moment only, I am the light.
Water

Anna lies on her back practicing her one-handed shuffle. The cards stick. She waits for U2’s “With or Without You” to come on the old radio Hazel gave her. It only receives one pop station but that station plays the song once an hour, she is patient. She can do the three-fingered trick but not the one using her thumb and forefinger. The cards spill as the song comes on. She gets on her knees and makes herself cry.

Jesus comes through the door. He says nothing. He throws his workbelt in the corner and lets his clothes drop piece by piece into the bathroom. Anna brings the two black buckets from the yard. He is sitting in the tub, his forehead in his palms. She pours the sun-heated water down his back. Jesus smiles.

Anna wets the washrag and wrings it out on his face. The water is already grey. She lathers his back, scrapes through the suds with her nails. His hair is longer than hers, straight and black. She unbraids and brushes it. She squeezes hard for the last bit of shampoo.

“That’s it,” she says. The harsh clean scent breaks through his body odor.

“I get paid tomorrow, but only for the first two days,” he pushes his fingers between his toes. “Peanut butter again.”

Anna turns on the cold water, using a bucket to rinse his hair and body. Jesus yelps, she giggles. He gets out of the tub and hotfooted around the tile until she hands him a towel. He kisses her cheek. His lips are dry but his beard is wet. Anna pretends it is sweat.

Jesus shakes his head at her. He wraps the towel around his waist and combs his hair. It hangs just above the towel. Anna watches him while she brushes her teeth. Once Jesus saw her swallow her toothpaste backwash. She didn’t brush for three days afterward. Sometimes Jesus combs his hair away from his forehead and sprays it with Final Net. Anna feels embarrassed then.

Anna thinks about rape. Her gut is tight like she has to pee until the sun cracks the sky. She leaves the apartment and Jesus
sleeping. The air is cool but she can feel the heat coming. Her steps are long. She counts palm trees until she gets to the main drag. Lights are on in Dunkin’ Donuts but the other stores are dark.

A man slows beside her as she passes the second Circle K. She gets in his truck—she’s already five minutes late. His face is withered and brown. It doesn’t move as they drive in silence past the golf course and the baseball field: “Winter Home of the San Diego Padres.”

“I’ll give you $20 if you take off your shirt,” he says.
Anna shakes her head.
He stops the truck. “Please.”
She puts her hand on the door. “Gimme the money.”
He hands her two tens. They are greasy in her fingers. She lifts her shirt to reveal her belly button and jumps out of the truck. She runs until he passes her, his gaze stays on the road. She clears her throat and smiles.

Anna butters toast in the serving line. She gets a glob on her finger and looks at it.
“C’mon, girl,” Hazel says. Anna licks it off.
Hazel plays Howlin’ Wolf loud in the kitchen after the dining room empties. Nobody tells her to turn it down but their faces are set against her. They are jealous of her spaghetti sauce. Hazel tells Anna it’s the cocoa she adds.
Heat spreads over Anna’s body when she steps outside at break. She feels the sweat bead underneath her apron strings. Hazel brings her iced tea and a milk crate to sit on.
“You got smokes?” she asks.
“Yeah, but no matches.”
“You could light it off the sidewalk today.”
A resident walks toward them holding a plastic pitcher.
“Mornin’, Mr. Baxter,” Hazel says.
“Why you let this ape work here?” he says, jutting his thumb at Anna. “I couldn’t eat my damn breakfast—you sucking your finger.”
“I’m sorry.” Anna can hear her heart beating.
He spits tobacco on the cement. “Why isn’t my damn pitcher
full?" He waves it at them. "Goddamn place. I pay for my room. I want my water. They should fire you. Damn disgusting. Sucking your thumb."

Anna's jaw tightens. "I apologized."
"I pay for my damn food."
"Go inside, Anna," Hazel says.
Anna throws a dishrag at the wall. She kicks it and opens the walk-in door. The cold blasts her face. She sits on a box of oranges and draws her knees up to her chin. Her breath hangs in front of a can of bonitas. She supposes Circle K sells card decks.

Hazel opens the door. "There you are, Miss Ape."
Anna doesn't smile.
"Forget that fool," Hazel says. "I'll make the sandwiches."

Jesus smells like cumin. There are no sheets on the bed. He holds her wrists above her head with one hand. With the other he traces circles on her stomach. Anna thinks about dirt. A fine layer of red dust covers her shoes when she gets home. The same dust finds the bed when she leaves the window open. She wonders why Jesus' dirt is grey. She imagines spraying him with the garden hose, streams of red mud running from his pores.

"Wake up, you," Jesus says.
She opens her eyes and he kisses her temple.
"We don't have to stay here," he says.
"I got some cigarettes."
"How?" He lets go of her wrists, his hair brushes her breasts.
"Hazel bought them for me," she lies, standing. She covers her butt with her hands as she leaves the room. "Does that make you mad?" she calls.
"I don't like her," Jesus says.
Anna leans in the doorway and lights two cigarettes. She puts one between his lips. "Just because she's my friend."
"I'm going to cash my check tomorrow."
She blows smoke in his face. Jesus grabs her elbow and pulls her down, but she gets up again.
"I'm going for a walk," she says.
"Don't."
Anna walks to the El Rancho Motel. The payphone eats a quarter but Hazel answers on the second one.

"Take me for a ride."

Kids in cars fill the parking lot. They holler to each other and pass beers around. Anna likes the noise. The kids watch Hazel’s Indian sputter to a stop in front of Anna. She writes “Howdy” in the dust on the bike’s gas tank.

"Just get on," Hazel says.

Anna is glad Hazel has short hair. She watches her own twist behind her in the mirror. Her thighs tense as Hazel passes a truck. She keeps her hands on her knees.

The night is quiet when they turn off the drag. Moonlight sits still on the canals. Hazel says something over her shoulder. All Anna hears is “catfish.” She looks for Orion but can only find the Dipper. Her face feels like fingers are pushing from underneath her skin when the motor stops. The river is calm. Hazel pulls a Dos Equis from her saddlebag.

“I used to sing in a nightclub in Dallas,” she says.

“Do you want to sing now? I want you to.”

“No. Take off your shoes.”

They step out of their pants and into the water, Hazel pushing it with her shins. Anna kicks at it. She lets her knees hit the bottom.

“Want some?” Hazel hands her the beer.

Anna presses the bottle to her cheek before she drinks. It’s heavy in her throat. Hazel kneels beside her. The soft mud squeezes between their calves and thighs. Anna sinks to her butt. The water rises to her waist, wetting her shirt. She leans back and lets the river drag her hair. “Sing now.”
First Night

Again hopeful I face a man ducking
into my kitchen, the room fills
with a slow greeting, the scent of dill
hung drying in the last rectangle
of sunlight against the far wall.

As he looks around, I study
the long curve of shoulders, the hands
I've noticed each time we've met, and feel
a small reed quicken at my center.
I think, careful, reluctant

as the last carrot pulled from the long
solitary holding on in the dark.
Every gesture a test between us
in this dry season. We take wine
in clear glasses and sit by the lake

to speak the absences that define us:
the stone jetty where the blue heron
who wakes me each morning waits silent,
staring at the water's surface, the ledge
my cat suns on midafternoon, the voice

on the phone, an old student
crying at the ugliness of her life
to someone she remembers as a listener,
the bleak accordion of foster home birthdays

celebrated on the wrong date.
He takes from his billfold three faces
staring up at us, small and very far away,
and a photo of himself bearded. So much
of what we think to leave behind, we bring.

And always those two confusions, how much
can we ask, how much can we keep
if we want the life we both see, clear
and glittering beneath the surface
under the double image of lake grass
tarnishing in cool September air.
I want him to notice the way my days
hold onto their surface, to love
the shadows coming toward us across
the tops of evergreens, to want
even the darker parts we can’t foresee.
When we turn to each other on the stairs,
we tremble but do not wait, neither
of us waits to ask if after this
we can go back or on unchanged.

Desire, surprising and ruddy as the first
pumpkin flowing beneath a skein
of withered vines, our bodies are a fresh
harvest for the taking. The alarm
at five confuses us out of sleep.

By the time the heron’s shriek wakes me
again, he’s watching the sunrise
amid the squeal of trucks on the turnpike.
I don’t miss him at all
until I pull back the covers

and the new perfume of us rises
as I brush the surprising dark hair
away from the sheets. Maybe he’s thinking
how easily danger passes near us,
how to know the subtler kinds.

Then I imagine next time, how I’ll stand
with my arms around him, find the place
on his chest where my head fits, hitch my thumbs
through the loops of his jeans and mark
the day with ecstatic gestures of ordinary life.
Dancing Static

there is no movement tonight. 
the avenues are all frozen in repose. 
there is no point in travel. 
i know i will find you 
waiting in a bare-walled living room 
with the t.v. flicking shadows 
across the lamp shade.

i know i will find you there. 
i have only to turn down this street.

and i know my other friends all wait 
at the bar down by the beach. 
i could drive by there without going in 
to see their lips deprived of speech 
as another joke is told—and know that 
out here, it doesn’t matter 
what the punch line is, only the end result: 
their shoulder blades all shot up in salute, 
like soldiers who gather 
long after the war is over 
just to make sure their memories 
still serve a purpose.

i know this neighborhood consists 
of nothing but boundaries. 
porch lights mark the point 
where settlers stopped and said,

“enough! 
put the car out of its misery— 
we’re going to stay awhile!”
i feel a slow solidification
in these streets, a long aching calm,
as if the air itself could faint
and heartbeats could be tuned
like a radio dial, and someday
none of us will rise from our evening seats.

and my mother,
slumped from too much work
and a little wine, asleep
in front of the t.v. on static.
the static like another country;
the himalayas, perhaps,
as seen from the molecular level.

and the atoms swirling there
in their angry dance
are the remnants of my ancestors
beating against the glass
like moths against a porch light,
pissed off as all hell
that their kinetics will not be released
but reused again and again
to fuel our private fires.
Mr. Crunchy
—after Cornelius Eady

this dance you do, what do you call it?

this old thing? oh, i don’t know
maybe Waltz with a Hole in my Pocket
maybe the High-Voltage Serenade
maybe i dance when i sleep and i don’t know it
my follicles swaying toward star light
maybe i am photosynthesis in reverse
all crimped and fertilized under sunlight
all milk tides and electric limbs by night
see how protectively your skin is gripped to you?
force of habit, that’s all
it just never found a better dance partner
let it slip off your coat hanger bones
and find the real freedom it needs
let it have an affair with a traveling salesman
in a sleazy motel, let it assume the form for him
of an aging movie star he was in love with as a child
and as they sleep, their tattered bodies lit
by late-night TV, by its blue swarm of itemized moonlight
someone on the screen is squawking, about a 1-800 number
a place where you can dance all night
and you’ll catch me down there
at the Omnivores' Ball
swinging with the spectacle
looking for my latest victim
one who could pass as my own lonely double

this dance you do, what do you call it?

i call it the Caustic Two-Step
i call it the Tango of False Intimates
and let’s play a game
you’re the forest, i’m the defoliant
this world a ballroom of asphalt
i am not still, dumb in the sway
of static's ebb and pull, i am not
spindling out to match the galaxy's black-sun demise
i am dancing!
these rooftops, they are not still, they are leaping
black-gapped jaws lapping up the sky's oblivion
and these leaves, scattered in the streets
like the toilet paper of dead kings
they are dancing, too!
and these muddled streetlights make islands of vacancy
for us to belly-leap and frolicate aimlessly through
with any thought at all, whatever
carries us, whatever moves us
dance the Bodily Holiday!
dance the Contusion's Delight!
my skull on a blind date with the Titanic
i'm about to crack, i'm about to go down
drowning with champagne in hand

this dance you do, what do you call it?

i call it the Skin-Free Crispy
i call it the Nutra-Sweet Goosestep
and this thing between us is not love
but Waxy Build-Up
call me by my real name, Mr. Crunchy
call me by my real name, Microsoft Willy
call me sugar when i melt at your mouth-step
filled with a fever of false promises
call me Son of Cheeze-Wiz
Son of Sons of the American Spread
i will cover this landscape in redundance
i will cover it with the flu of surrender
i will check on the status of my deadened heartbeat
and i think, this will be the only sound i'm hearing
when i dance, when i dance
the only sound i will be hearing
when i dance
when i dance from now on
Leguminous

"...the rain it raineth everyday."
—Shakespeare, Twelfth Night

All spring the people here dream only of high places,
an embankment arch
 where the wind-dipped milkweed
 flares its white head when light-beams skirt
 the bridge rail,
   an angel-haired seed—chute open to the dark.

Everything's best in the beginning—windows open
and busy with plants.
Then in a sudden down-pour the drizzle specked porch
becomes a view by water,
   each drop hits the street
and bounces up—a thousand glass rabbits
careening the ground...

Nights, the big trees shake the thunder,
garden buckets and hubcaps spill
out the culvert, rush the ditch through mud-soaked vines.

So each morning seems as if washed down stairs
which creak like a dock-tied boat.
The breakfast table set,
   chair pulled out and swaying
with light, full white cup,
   spoon on its back.
Trays

Wherever we live,
Mother makes ice-cubes that taste of garlic,
Always a trace of garlic
And when she says they don’t, braced
We smell them. They still do, only a little less.

We need ice for summer where it’s dry,
Iced-tea, iced-coffee, we dance for a crackle, a chill—
Our antonym for the steaming broth we crawled from,
The involuntary memory propels us still.

My ice-cubes lately smell of garlic too;
Coming of age, first kissed
In the ice-box arboretum
I stand engulfed in the months later melange
Of garlic and onions and the unrecognized smells
Whipping the air,
Beating out basilisk breath and eye,
As flavored memories come crackling into
Consciousness in my glass.

When the bottom’s up, it’s over, the quick show.
Cool liquid sates
And the after-smell of shrinking cubes
Revives the hiss of tongue and palate
With frigid vapor.
Reaching for the Latch

Stone weary from panelling
this garrett, I dreamt
of a sun-dark girl
in hunting clothes
the shade of pine boughs.

We made love in the red-tin
glow of lantern light.
Outside, perched in the scarlet
maple, masked eyes watched,
shining, indifferent.

Maybe it was the radiator rattle,
maybe the warmth of my wife's thigh,
but I woke, damp, remembering
that I am almost forty,
that my children sleep below.

Up for coffee before dawn,
something scratches the back
screen. Strange tracks cross my porch
in the dust of first snow,
then drop behind the laurel—

I watch my gloved hand
reaching for the latch.
Feed Beetles

Sometimes the feed would crawl. I don’t remember the season, just the barn weighed down with burlap air and pig dust.

Stretching and rolling the neck of a bag, sinking a coffee can in—the dusty maze would wriggle with beetles, tiny berzerkers,

and the folds in the top of the sack would scatter fast, malicious armies. Sucking what grey breath I could,

I plunged my arm in feed, even as it swelled in tiny waves. They were enough to make you hate cattle, enough
to reach across the miles and years and cool Ohio evenings: I see them now, working hard with words that won’t come true.
Editing the Anthology

wives of famous poets
send me their husbands'
pubic hair like thread
in a sampler that writes
out "pick me"

the poems lie
flat in a closet
like those black
bugs under a
log but
I know they're
waiting in the
dark squirming
ready

upstairs even
isn't safe that
hum in the dark
special delivery
mosquitoes starved
for blood slipping
thru screens

if there's the
smallest opening
a swarm hatches
and they itch all night
My Mother and the Calendar

a ritual
like ordering
more ballet slippers
or saving samples
of perfume she'd
bring me music
boxes on sale
flashlights
azalea perfume
tuna on sale
turtle necks from
the store my
father used to
work in sneakers
the last pair
too big barrettes
butterscotch
as well as bars
to kill flies
and for the last
years, calendars
with sunrises and
sun sets on them
New England scenes
snow and blood
maples, as if by
sending me the
coming year, like
her buying marked
down Christmas
cards, she'd
be here
for it
Near Danang

We've got five minutes while the driver buys
his dope; enough time to share the small girl
who squats in the corner washing her thighs.
On the dirt floor a child tips a bowl
of goat's milk with elbows notched perfectly
then pushes himself from the room. The Sergeant
and I argue to see who's first and try
to reason but in our desire we can't
be sure of anything. Lying on top of her
she turns her face away and denies my kiss.
We move quickly like bodies must in war,
selfish as the grave is shadowless.
The Sergeant yells it's his fucking turn.
Outside the child blows the jeep's sharp horn.
Driving With The Dead

The man you love
has two fingers up his ass
at the Ramada Inn in Cleveland, Ohio.

Before he comes home
and demands desire from a night
that dreams of other men

you have left and are driving
across The United States.
Near Toledo you hear the loud dead
calling you bad names,
slurring the years where bodies forget
how they entered new positions

for sleep, for tired love.
Tonight at the motel,
you unfold a roadmap on the bed.

As you sleep, all the highways
bleed onto your face.
In the morning the car starts

like fire in dry grass.
Up ahead is a Great Lake.
Up ahead is the Heartland.
Playing Boggle in the Psych Ward

I didn’t know how to act around you at first, safe in the sunlit rec room, the bright formica tabletops, plants and smoke. I was happy enough to sit down and puzzle things out, to recognize order in chaos and form small words: ear, era, err, erase, time sifting, sifting away. My heart rose like a bird in my throat, wings beating inside a fire, my fingers trembling and scratch pad blurring to a color of ordinary sky...

I was trying to rise up out of our life and smile. The cuts on your wrists were stitched and hidden though I pictured them as little mouths the doctors had washed out with soap, toothless, tongueless, misconstrued, and puckered shut like poker faces who lost—like you, perhaps yourself again, or not, a face scrunchied up in childlike concentration over Boggle, your left hand shielding what your right hand wrote, your mute wrists keeping their secrets.
Braid

I found it when he was packing to move,
wrapped in tissue paper
inside a plastic bag
in the desk’s top drawer.
Long and soft and thick and cornsilk
gold, it made me think of the weights
a suicide ties to rope: first, the body,
then the thing that will drag it down.

Never a living thing exactly,
but also never dead, this braid
that lost its head, which he loved once.
This braid I held in my hand, careful
not to loosen its hold on itself.
Family Outing: Yorkshire

A time between. I'm ensconced
in the window seat of a bedroom
of the Black Swan.
To spend the hour I stare
into late afternoon
in the almost empty market square.

A boy of maybe six
is poked along by his mum and dad
while he licks
the ice cream he was promised if he were good
but nearly didn't get for being bad.
He tried as hard as he could.

The father's muscle shirt
exposes tattoos on the meat
of his upper arms. He must go sixteen stone.
Between the hem of her miniskirt
and her spike-heeled feet,
the mother's legs are little more than bone.

They're three on a line from good things
to a Vauxhall parked
on the cobbles at the foot of the Saxon cross
whose meaning got lost
before history. Shops that ring
the square are going dark.

The boy finds ice cream dearer
as he consumes it. By tonguing it down
in the cone, he tries to make it more.
This says clearer
than words: it's been less than the little they hoped for,
their spin to the market town.
It's the verge of night.
As the Vauxhall carries them off, the odd
woman of the village comes hobbling
past the cross, babbling
to herself, or God.
Three pubs around the square are all the light.
With Vacations Like This, Who Needs A Job

A caterpillar crawls on one
Of the two sticks rubbed together
But you thought it was a moth
To the flame. You live so long
In your head that when at first
The “real world” swings into view
Like a muscleman kicking sand
Onto a before picture, you kiss
The sand as if you’ve just spotted
Land. Yet you can’t stay on shore
Forever since it’s not a nude beach
And so things settle into a sort
Of routine. The camera’s running
So you don’t have to take notes.
Soon it’s like you shit something out
The second you swallow it, stepping
Under an umbrella that starts raining.
You better start thinking about
Trading in that hauberk of a self
For a more streamlined model which
You won’t have to sacrifice anything
For (except the feeling of sacrificing).

But then when someone calls to say
“You can’t have what you want unless
You want what you have,” I hang up,
Telling him I have someone on the
Other line, someone who says “Seeing
A shrink won’t help, being a shrink
Might.” I don’t know why I’d rather
Hear her right now. She doesn’t sing
Beyond the genius of the sea or anything.
Maybe just maybe it’s for the same reason
A man who cradles above average lyrics
In passionless tunes spends more time
Listening to a musician who has stupid
Lyrics but great melodies than the other
Way around, in this case at least.
Painted Bride Quarterly
is pleased to announce the winners of its
First Annual Poetry Contest:

☞ First Place: James R. Pack
"The Farmboy, Before He'd Seen Paris"

☞ Second Place: Brian Blanchfield
"Early Morning Mire with Betty"

☞ Third Place: Joseph Bathanti
"The Toy Warehouse"

☞ Honorable Mention
Edward Francis
Ron Houchin
Myra Van Inwegen
Roger Allen Jones
Linda Back McKay
Deborah Dashow Ruth
B. Tomasovich

Contest judged anonymously
by Louis McKee

1st, 2nd, and 3rd place poems
appear on the following pages→
The Farmboy, Before He'd Seen Paris

His morning chores done,
He slips into the profusion of corn rows
Like avenues without destination
Until, deep in the patch, he kneels
Upon the black earth, surrounded by ears.

His hands, still warm from the milking,
Choose one swollen with desire for picking.
He undresses the rough husks,
Releasing silken hairs upon his fingers;
He combs them back like a lover.

The sweet flesh pops under his teeth;
His chin and nose grow wet with juice.
The wind sighing through the tassels
Quickens into applause. Broad leaves
Clutch at him as if for balance.

He dreams of marble statues instead of
Stalks of corn: women, lips pouting,
Eyes expressionless, draw their robes
Across impenetrable vaginas; men, muscled
Like caged animals, proffer clusters of
Shriveled fruit between their thighs.
Early Morning Mire with Betty

As betty crocker played the spoons in dark pudding
and told me in white-goose-mud, lakeside,
that she'd never skinny-dipped before,

she smacked her vanilla thighs abundantly to the wet soil
awfully kissing and lifting syrupy shore,
which dripped back down in clumps each time before another gelatin slop.

Her small splotchy bitten hands cupped around
bloated coconut feet, whose rosy toes when tiny were daddy-sucked,
the kind that now are overhandled at night in bed in almost panicked misery,

and tugged them inward, jerking sunken ankle anchors in
and splattered battered paste without grace on belly folds
and savorless morsels in pubic fur, as lightly brown as modesty.

Her skin seemed almost scoured—oddly rubbed,
pinkened lips and nipples, almost swollen sores.
Though her nakedness bounded without comfort

from some private distance she loathed and needed,
her chocolate urgent eyes tried but could not retreat.
She said she knew her "some lucky man" would find

and not claim his "fine little wife." I told her
i was breaking no hearts. Later, when toweling again, i saw
her head, bobbing and smiling out of the green saucer surface—delectable.
The Toy Warehouse

The morning sun in our faces,
David and I drive to work
along Allegheny River Boulevard.
Once into what city calls country,
the black sunken mills give way
to marinas strung with pleasure boats.
We have time for two or three cigarettes,
coffee, catch some scores,
a little music on the radio.
Through the windshield,
it's all out there, green, glistening,
and there are things we think we know—
a way through all the bullshit.

The warehouse clock thuds me in for the day.
I buy a box of Junior Mints
and begin scavenging sets
out of fragmented pieces:
disembodied heads,
decapitated bodies,
thousands of wheels, blocks, cogs,
and spindles that fit nothing—
the refuse of a broken little world
I must all day make matter.

The grey metal racks of inventory
stretch row after row,
a hundred yards long,
fifty feet to the silver
insulation packed between girders,
where in a hideout of boxes
filled with dolls that talk and wet themselves
I sit smoking and reading The Idiot.
Myshkin, I think, for Christ’s sake,
brake a few jaws,
take no more shit, kiss her.
The hard-hatted pickers, filling orders, 
glide in hydraulic forklifts, 
up and down about me, 
squirting each other with water pistols. 
Each has a favorite toy 
and theft is popular. 
They keep their headgear on 
during lunch in the fly-filled break-room, 
drink coffee from smoking thermoses. 
David wanders down from his station in hobbies. 
Sitting on a bay opened for a semi 
dispatching GI Joe's, 
we smoke a roach, 
buy devilled crabs from Munch's Lunchtruck, 
kill the last few minutes 
before the horn with cigarettes.

I sift through tiny orphans, 
educational toys with Myshkin smiles: 
the fireman in search of fire, 
the mustachioed police chief locked from his jail, 
the spinstered, student-less school marm. 
Their enameled fortitude mocks me 
as I ransack piles of renegade effects, 
trying to reconnect their lives. 
How in such carefully packaged products 
does separation occur?

Returning to my Pocket Penguin, 
I await what my Dostoevsky seminar calls 
that "Explosive, typically Russian scene" 
that will lift Myshkin 
out of his existential mire. 
But he continues to stick it out, smiling, 
turning the other cheek 
again and again. 
He's a prince.
Quitting time jars me awake,
my finger still stuck
in the pages that sedated me.
David's finishing up a game of Chess
with Sneak, a guy our age with a family,
who makes extra bread fencing
kiddie pools and Lionel trains.
We keep watch while he smuggles
a load through a back entrance to his car,
then punch out and head for the bar.

Sam and Ann's beer is stunning,
the only benefit so far of being twenty-one.
The guys refer to their wives as "the Mrs.,”
"the little lady,” “the old lady,”
"the ball and chain,” “the boss.”
I sort of love these weirdos,
stealing time from their lives to bitch
it out with the toys at the warehouse.
The jukebox describes:
"a man with a union gig,
smashed-up heart,
body of a pig."

The bar is on the river,
hot, summer, still, unnaturally
green and solid. When we get good
and drunk, we goad one another
into jumping in. The sun is behind us,
so when we walk out onto the dock,
we can see, before going under,
carp feeding on our naked shadows.

Beneath there's a clockless kingdom,
a reach of merman hungering
in the river of toy souls.
They are the others who have beat it here before us.
When I open my eyes
we are not all there,
just the shirts with our name plates,
twisted in the dock pilings.
Goodbye, Thomas Wolfe

Mid-November, crisp blue sky, chilly rural Pennsylvania. I've already fed the horse and raked the dung from the stall, chopped a bit of wood, tossed a stone at the sun. The horse isn't mine; I take care of it for a break on house rent. Through the window beside my desk I see the mare now, a lumbering beast with nose to the earth crossing the pasture which is growing more stingy by the day. It is truly autumn, and last night my wife and I stood outside in coats and naked legs watching the Northern Lights, a shower of deep maroon spreading from a center directly above us into a multi-pointed star of bright red and lesser pink, long impressionist strokes from the core of heaven to a dusty black horizon. Later, my wife, more the scientist, found a book with explanations. I didn't pay attention as she read aloud, preferring to think the phenomenon the work of toothy angels and the luminous undergods of poetry.

Now I'm on my second cup of coffee, strong with milk, and while I should be working on the third chapter of my novel, or rewriting for the seventh or eighth time the problematic ending to a short story, or editing cover letters for university teaching job applications I know will be rejected, I can't help myself for lack of focus, and jump to this topic with a heart for books, those piled in a beautiful pyramid on my bedstand in particular.

Really. Just before sitting down to write, while on the edge of my bed pulling on another pair of socks (old house, drafty floors), suddenly, and for no good reason, one by one I pick up the books, leaf through each, as reverent in my touch as I am fondling a teakwood Buddha or an infant's tiny head. I don't know why. That was two hours ago and now my throat is parched. The coffee is lukewarm and smells oddly, pleasantly, nostalgic.

Books are the great ally to misfits like myself who lack even the slimmest notion of social grace. Honestly, how else would The Man Who Stinks of Horseshit get by at the English
Department Christmas party if he weren't armed with the conversational device, "Who are you reading?" Dig it. I ask this question a lot, wherever I go, to whomever I meet. As one must suspect, answers are as varied as lip-types, from the dry and thin Stephen King and James Michener, to the succulent and more mysterious Robert Lax and Juan Carlos Onetti. But vary as answers might, I've never heard anyone reply, "Thomas Wolfe." Not ever.

And precisely because of this, I've been reading Thomas Wolfe.

It starts with this: in my late-teens and early-twenties I was enamoured with Wolfe, and remember those days and weeks spent plunged into his novels with no small fondness. Long books, I recalled, passionate lyrical realism with a youthful male protagonist futilely longing the answers to a more or less benevolent moon; books to come home to at a time when the cabin reeked of silence and being alone was more burden than liberation; books to crawl into bed with in lieu of the more desired, the more dangerous flesh and breath of a woman. In other words, books that spoke to me of my own condition of post-puberty struggle which included any number of humdrum affairs with confused lovers, floundering parents, ecumenical theories of existence. And since then, for some sixteen or seventeen years now, I've kept within me a sentimental if dusty corner for Wolfe, and have recommended him once or twice along the way to others.

So it was that one day a few weeks ago it occurred to me, after noting Wolfe mentioned in an essay by Ray Bradbury (Bradbury too admits an exciting adolescent encounter with Wolfe), to take another look at him, renew an acquaintance, refresh the redolence of dream. My idea was to read—or re-read—a couple of novels, then write a short essay simply titled, "Rereading Wolfe."

It didn't take long in the stacks to discover my idea which I thought original was anything but, and by the time I left I wondered who hadn't done an essay on rereading Wolfe. I was not encouraged either by the final prognosis of so many scholars and writers, many of whom panned Wolfe entirely, refer-
ring to him as “hopelessly mawkish,” “thoroughly unreadable,” and “ tiresomely obtrusive.” The most scathing pronouncement comes in Harold Bloom’s introduction to Modern Critical Views, Thomas Wolfe, a series of collected articles Bloom edits, where he writes:

What, if anything can we do with Thomas Wolfe now.... We cannot read Wolfe. I mean this literally, having just attempted Look Homeward, Angel for the first time in forty years. There is no possibility for critical dispute about Wolfe’s literary merits; he has none whatsoever.

Deadly Words, I thought, but then, after a suck of breath and splash of cold water on the face, I got hold of myself. As much as one respects the long learning of professional scholars, one must also be cautious of falling too quickly in line with those whose ideas, however brilliantly expressed, may be narrowly formed. Bloom, for instance, sees literature on a spiral retrograde since the Seventeenth Century, an Old Testament view of things where creation reaches an apex, then, with a few exceptions (i.e. Wordsworth, Henry James), begins a steady tumble down. A prolific and certainly sharp-witted critic, Bloom’s written a good bit on contemporary literature, and though he’s gently tolerant of Snyder, he’s never given credence to Ginsberg, and in the same introduction where he kidney punches Wolfe, calls Robert Penn Warren “our leading poet.” Not exactly endeared to the avant-garde, our Mr. Bloom. Hence, I decided to push onward, give Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe’s first and perhaps best known novel, another glimpse regardless.

I’ve no need to review the book nor dance about a battery of ripe (or fatiguing) quotations—on one level my feelings about the piece, sadly to say, aren’t radically different than even Bloom’s. The story is too long and generally drags for lack of phrase to phrase, paragraph to paragraph contrast, which imbues the piece with a certain sameness and dilutes potential for dramatic as well as poetic tension. He also has the tendency, when working on the “bigger” ideas, to play abstractions into the proverbial dirt, using terms such as “Time,”
"Death," "Darkness," to define "Time," "Death," "Darkness," when he could very well anchor the abstractions in more concrete detail, which would allow us, at least to a degree, to better assimilate such exalted verbiage. For I do not believe Wolfe was intentionally trying to puddle us in obscurity, nor are his ideas so close to the edge of what can and can't be said that obscurity is indeed the best one can do.

So Wolfe is not consistent, but to say he's never good is flagrant. The writing around Ben's death near the end of Look Homeward, Angel is as good as Faulkner, which is great. In these scenes you get the feeling Wolfe's not worrying so much about the telling of a story as the telling of his own heart—that's how fresh this writing feels. The way I see it, reading Wolfe is a lot like climbing a mountain: much of the climb can seem a dross-mud drudge, but once on the peak, praying into a cold wind with a hawk's view of the solemn curve of the earth, the question of whether or not the climb is worth the result doesn't seem pertinent. Wolfe is expert at peaks, at epiphanies, at moments of realization where the geyser bursts freely, where honesty is the essence of magic, where Wolfe indeed proclaims, no matter what I am, I am. Wolfe at his best is blatantly, lusciously personal, he is at once complexly mystical and contradictory, and I think this is why the young for so long endured and enjoyed him, as they now endure and enjoy Henry Miller and Kerouac: as the work unfolds before us in hot breathless spurts and streams, we see not so much Eugene Gant or Leo Perceptied fumbling their way into this methodical discovery or that, but instead the writer himself plowing with naked fingers at the hard rock of hope, sauntering, stumbling drunk on the bitter mouthwash of love into the turmoil of loneliness, always loneliness, noble and enervating and painful. What we experience in Wolfe at his best, Miller and Kerouac always, is the writer's mind and heart splashed recklessly, artfully onto the page in brilliant and sometimes clashing hues of the soul, which, especially for the young seeking their own minds and hearts, is often and should be enough to keep us turning the pages. Here, Wolfe leading up the mountain in the short story, "Death the Proud Brother":
It was now early morning, about half-past three o'clock, with a sky full of blazing and delicate stars, an immense and lilac darkness, a night still cool, and full of chill, but with all the lonely and jubilant exultancy of spring in it. Far-off, half-heard, immensely mournful, wild with joy and sorrow, there was a ship lowing in the darkness, a great boat blowing at the harbor's mouth.

The street looked dark, tranquil, almost desert—as quiet as it could ever be, and at that brief hour when all its furious noise and movement of the day seemed stilled for a moment's breathing space, and yet preparing for another day. The taxis drilled past emptily, sparsely, and at intervals, like projectiles, the feet of people made a lean and picketing noise upon the pavements, the lights burned green and red and yellow with a small hard lonely radiance that somehow filled the heart with strong joy and victory, and belonged to the wild exultancy of the night, the ships, the springtime, and of April. A few blocks farther up the street where the great shine and glitter of the night had burned immensely like a huge censer steaming always with a dusty, pollenated, immensely brilliant light, that obscene wink had now gone dull, and shone brownly, still livid but subdued.

Then, after a short scene where city officials cart away the dead man the narrator came upon in a NYC train tunnel, the epiphany:

And again, I looked and saw the deathless sky, the huge starred visage of the night, and heard the boats then on the river. And instantly an enormous sanity and hope of strong exultant joy surged up in me again; and like a man who knows he is mad with thirst, yet sees real rivers at the desert's edge, I knew I should see light once more and know new coasts and come into strange harbors, and see again, as I had once, new lands and morning.

Compare this with the great epiphanies of Joyce and Fitzgerald. For all the repetition, it's as good. Unfortunately, unlike Joyce and Fitzgerald, Wolfe had no editorial sensibility whatsoever, couldn't leave well enough alone, and continued
on for another five pages of beatific spurt and incantation—
"...proud Earth, stern Loneliness, and Sleep...Now, Loneliness
forever and the earth again...Come to me through the fields
of night...." No kidding, if it wasn’t so bad, it’d be laughable,
poor Mr. Wolfe, in a language more exalted than Shakespeare,
going on and tediously on, one phrase just as abstract as that
preceding it. Wolfe’s problem wasn’t the mere overspewing
of words—no, for this is a necessary step in the process to find
the right words—but that he didn’t know what to do with the
mess once it hit the workbench. His ego was too ginger to
edit well; Wolfe was not a strong man. Even so, god bless the
man’s tormented spirit, “Death the Proud Brother” is a mov-
ing work and well worth the hour it takes to read.

I don’t want to insinuate here that Thomas Wolfe’s music,
pruned or otherwise, is equivalent to the jazz of Proust,
Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Henry Miller, or Djuna Barnes, con-
temporaries or near-contemporaries among the many who now
dwarf him. But to argue as Bloom and others do that there is
nothing of value in Wolfe is a failure to see the autobiogra-
phical vitality of which Wolfe, unwittingly or not, is a Twenti-
eth Century guru. Of this vitality, Henry Miller says in The
Books in My Life, “The autobiographical novel, which Emers-
on predicted would grow in importance with time, has re-
placed the great confessions. It is not a mixture of truth and
fiction, this genre of literature, but an expansion and deepen-
ing of truth. It is more authentic, more veridical, than the
diary. It is not the flimsy truth of facts which the authors of
these autobiographical novels offer but the truth of emotion,
reflection and understanding, truth digested and assimilated.
The being revealing himself does so on all levels simultane-
ously.”

As a writer, I’m humbled by Miller’s exposition, the idea of
truth in art; truth from the Anglo-Saxon treowe, faith, trust;
and trow, to believe and suppose. It sounds easy, almost hack-
neyed, to trust in ourselves, writing what we know and what
we feel strongly, even passionately about; about ourselves,
subject matter that expands as we expand, in a language that
is uniquely, fundamentally our own. Honesty of rhythm, I
think he's implying, honesty of style, the idea of practicing the self as one practices the saxophone or foul shots, and if courageous enough, allowing that self, however dubious the recognition, to roll onto the page unhindered as it may. Idiosyncratic speech rhythms, which necessarily echo idiosyncracies of mind, which are shadowed by idiosyncracies of our time, our days, our births, our desires, our deaths. Rimbaud wrote, "The paths are rough. The hillocks are covered with broom. The air is motionless. How far away the birds and the spring are! It can only be the end of the road, ahead!"

It sounds easy, but the obvious danger: there may be a sexist, a fool, a sadist, a misogynist, a bigot, a madman at the door. There may be a talking parrot. An empty room with yellow walls. Rancid pork. Conjunctivitis.

An old discussion, exasperating and full of disguise. Do we really seek truth? Okay. Here's some truth: Wolfe, as Bloom suggests, is a goner. I know because I asked a stark-eyed, pimple-chinned boy who spends his mornings musing the implications of eroding hills, I asked if he ever heard of Thomas Wolfe, and he replied, "Bonfire of the Vanities?"

I left the kid in a field of dry wild rose bushes, then walked two miles to the river where I stood on the bank, under the sun and near the trees. In the breeze I grew chilly, and with some regret I remembered an old lover whom I love no longer, who no longer loves me, but in whose love was once a fiery and important thing. Soon, I heard night approaching (as alone one can), and I waited without hunger nor great expectation. There was no moon, but all around me the sounds of snags and owls and the river. It was peaceful there and difficult to leave. But I've learned one must let go of even peace, and with this in mind, I turned my eyes away from the stars, and started along the bank where, in the dark, the footing is never as good as I'd like it to be.
Lions and Tigers and Bears—

Oh My!

I remember Michael McClure reading one Sunday afternoon at the Y in Philadelphia. He was in good spirits and good form, and while the words of his poems played like a strange new music from his tongue, so the growls of beasts and the shrill calls of birds filled the room. It is difficult to imagine the power of McClure's work when simply reading it on the page. Typography does little. Voice, the poet's energy, and the moment—such is the poem.

In the audience that day, a fairly good-size crowd, was a man, who, for no apparent reason, began talking back to the poet. "What the hell is this?" I remember he said that. I wrote it down in the margin of my copy of The Beard, a book I'd brought along to get signed. After two or three more caustic remarks, McClure rose to the challenge. He set his poems aside for the moment and entered into a confrontation with the audience. Almost, as I remember it, enthusiastically. Almost happily.

The man wanted to know if McClure was serious; did he really think that this "stuff"—he stumbled a bit before coming up with the word—was poetry? McClure handled it well, better than most of us would have. The rest of us, by the way, were pretty much on the poet's side. We were readers and writers of poetry, and we were on Broad Street that afternoon because we wanted to hear the renowned poet read from his work. The heckler, though, was a different sort. He was someone who'd been staying at the Y, and he'd seen the handbills posted around the lobby. He had not read any poetry in years, he explained, but long before, when he was in the navy, he read quite a bit—books and poems, all that stuff. This particular afternoon—was it raining or something? Maybe it was cold? I don't recall. But he had nothing else to do, so he stopped in to see Michael McClure read poems. But this—this wasn't what he expected. Lions and tigers and bears. Oh my!

* * *
Do you have a shirt you really love?
One that you feel so groovy in? ....

I love my shirt! I love my shirt!
My shirt is so comfortably lovely.

—Donovan c. 1968

* * *

Things have changed. You only need to look as far as MTV. “I’m too sexy for my shirt,” insists an arrogant Right Said Fred in the 90s. An old television tape of Donovan has him sitting on a politically incorrect sheepskin rug brought all the way from Scotland, and when he finishes his song the studio audience throws flowers onto the stage. Right Said Fred has a different kind of rapport with their fans. Just as ardent and enthusiastic, their audience rushes the stage and throws their fists into the air as their bodies slam and the band plays, struts and snarls. We should hardly have been surprised to find the old standards’ emotions charged in the age of music videos—Soul Asylum’s complaint: “I need somebody to shove/I need somebody to shove me.” And the beat goes on. The beat goes on.

Change is not as obvious reading the poetry of Michael McClure, although it may be more so watching the poet read. The McClure who came to the Y that day was a figure of the times, a young academic (whose first published work appeared in Poetry in the mid-50s, including a villanelle, and another piece, metric and rhymed, dedicated to Theodore Roethke), turned Beat (one of the readers at Six Gallery that notorious night in ’56 when Rexroth introduced San Francisco and the world to a handful of writers including Whalen, Welch, Lamantia, Snyder and Ginsberg, who for his part read “Howl” for the first time), who blossomed in the hip 60s. Of course, this was before he befriended The Doors, before he lurched into the cadence of rock ‘n’ roll and middle age.

McClure came out of Kansas in the whirl of a twister and was set down in the Oz of San Francisco State, in the techni-
color shadow of Robert Duncan. It was at the school’s famed Poetry Center where he saw the likes of Auden, and it was at the readings of Auden and those others where he met the likes of Ginsberg. When the time is right, the right people will get together at the right place. According to Kerouac, “The San Francisco Renaissance happened one night in 1956.” While Ginsburg was concerned with social and political man, and Whalen was involved with spiritual man, and Snyder was exploring man and the land, McClure was committed to finding and releasing the animal, man. The Mammal. “Let us throw out the word man! Such poems as this translation of Nerval remind me that I am mammal!...The poem makes me see the surge of life....We become Mammals as we were once Men.”

McClure’s Meat Science Essays (City Lights Books, 1963) is full of ideas and ideals, pronouncements and raw-boned philosophies. It is in his poems, however, where one will find his energy, his strength, and his life blood.

It’s the mystery of the hunt that intrigues me,
That drives us like lemmings, but cautiously—
The search for a bright square cloud—the scent of lemon verbena—
Or to learn rules for the game the sea otters
Play in the surf.

It is these small things—and the secret behind them
That fill the heart.
The pattern, the spirit, the fiery demon
That link them together
And pull their freedom into our senses,

The smell of a shrub, a cloud, the action of animals

—The rising, the exuberance, when the mystery is unveiled.
It is these small things

That when brought into vision become an inferno.
McClure insists that his poems speak for the whole man, just as they come from the whole man, "the man of meat and spirit." His life as an artist—at least 38 collections of poetry, a couple dozen plays, two novels, and a little bit of everything else—has been a long Homeric struggle to unleash the animal inside himself.

**AND SO WE STRETCH OUT**
and raise ourselves above our own
black factories.
And we are not in search of poetry but luck
that is ten-trillion Milky Ways
that make a molecule within our chest
or a billion feathered songs sung
from horseback on a bison hunt
WHERE BEAMS OF LIGHT
flash here and there
and make new colors out of dust
that we emit in Fields of Thought.

*

**ALL STRANGE STRIPED**
**CREATURES SLITHERING**
through the roots
gin and dance
TO
**NEW MUSIC**
I am THEY or THEM!

_Rebel Lions_ is McClure's most recent collection of invocations, ejaculations and explanations, published (like most of his later volumes) by New Directions. The poems are still about language, and about the deeper inner-nature of man, the mammal, which is freed in every utterance, every sound, the truths and lies, the grunts, howls and whines.
OH
YEAAH
!
!

No,

it's oh yeah...oh yeah...; the wound papered over, making paper tygers
—WITH A BANDAID...
BANDAIDS...BANDAIDS...
—F
E
E
L
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D!

As Mammals we “bring the universe to life,” the poet says. It is less the brain than the senses which guide us. Yet it is not a primitive art being practiced here. If at times the poems are other-worldly, they are hardly mystical.

AND I AM STILL LEARNING THE SHAPE
OF THE LOVELY BOSOM:
though they are small
and soft nipples
they
are plump
with the milk
of
kindness.

Love,
like a scarlet maple leaf,
is where
one finds
it
!
The sunset is black
and green and purple
and there's the smell of pine smoke.
We are the hurdles
that we leap
to be ourselves.

This is not to say that McClure is unwilling to venture into the unknown, the bizarre, and inexplicable. He is best known, perhaps, for his '65 play, The Beard, in which film goddess Jean Harlow and hotshot Billy the Kid cross paths and swords in eternity, a "clean, well-lighted place" just this side of forever, a small simple anteroom in the Sartre mode, a place with no exit and lots of heady conversation, smart wit and absurd doubletalk. Desperation and rage surface, and more howls and whines, which are at once inarticulate and powerfully real. It is a poem of frustrated investigation, unsure of what is being sought and therefore seemingly locked into one blind step after another. Yet the exchange between the two outlaws causes sparks and is nearly hypnotic. Every line of dialogue makes a demand—on the actors, the audience, and I'm certain, on the poet.

Just as with the poetry, it is language that seems as much the topic as the medium of the play. It is often strange and exotic, but familiar and comfortable. The tone is often anxious. You get the impression that whatever is being said is important. McClure is a man of many moods, and there can be no taking him for granted. He is—as are we—defined by words.

IT IS 1939 AND THE FIRST DAY OF
WORLD WAR TWO
all flapping with banners and festoons
and scrolls and tiny gray wings
and the Nazis are invading Czechoslovakia
in khaki tanks and on motorbikes
with odd-shaped grenades and mobile cannons and THIS IS
THE END OF SANITY
(coming out of the old wooden radio)
where everything is a jigsaw puzzle of red, brown
and green maps and pastiches of psyches
where truth is ripped from what is perceivable.
It is the Victory of Propaganda, roasting Asian
rice farmers
WITH NAPALM AND ARMING FREEDOM FIGHTERS
to splatter women and children
from
HELICOPTERS.
A man and his lover may find their asses
flashed to photons.

The matter of McClure's work has remained much the same
through these nearly 40 years—a lust for living, the animal/
mammal nature, and the rejection of Cyclops intellect. Close
your eyes and listen up: the McClure who was reading at the
Y that Sunday afternoon so long ago sounds a lot like the
McClure on the videotape, Love Lion (Mystic Fire Videos, P.O.
Box 1092, Cooper Station, New York, NY 10276, $19.95).
The hedonistic zeal with which McClure reads is marched by
the rush of simple joy Ray Manzarak conjures from his piano.
Manzarak's keyboard was the backbone of The Doors, as
wonderfully magical and sensual as Jim Morrison's whiskey-
smooth voice. When "Light My Fire" ignited the new musi-
cal age, it was as much due to Manzarak's opening bars, the
steady bass chord governance, and in the album version, the
long intoxicating improv, as to the haunting voice of Morris-
on. Now he has brought that same support to another origi-
nal, primordial voice.

The music of Love Lion is a long way from what Manzarak
did with The Doors, at least 25 years farther down the road.
The piano work is lighter, and maybe more flexible, than the
droning electronic sounds suited for the 60s. It doesn't drag
for a mood, but draws it out. Manzarak knows how to march
with lyrics/words, and he moves skillfully from one musical
style to another. He is not a background player, but a co-
conspirator, a marquee performer. He steals no thunder, but
adds wonderfully to the storm.
WORDS
&
groans
like vertebrae
are real.

Every thing
at all times
is on the verge
of
liberation;

MUSCLES
crackle
when they loosen

There are obvious similarities between the images in McClure's work and those in the lyrics of the Lizard King, all the more in your mind when Manzarak is playing. Once McClure opens his mouth, however—once he begins stripping away the layers of human skin and exposes his truer self, hard and raw, raw and vulnerable, you no longer are listening to music, but are moving through poetry.

There were few people able to get into the Bottom Line the night McClure and Manzarak took the stage, but a good video store can put you into front row seats.

WE COME FROM NOWHERE AND IT'S NOWHERE
WHERE WE GO.
There's not even blackness where we go;
no silver light or sparkling snow;
no smell of Spanish roses;
no night upon the town;
and when I stand up, I know I've fallen down.
I'm on a cliff top.
Don't
send
me
a frown
Sometimes it's hard here.
The mind makes wrinkles and a frown.
You’re my Lovin’ Darling; I’ll be a man here
not some goddamn clown.
Sometimes I slip but I’m not falling down.
There’s not even blackness where we go
but I’m a man here, I’m the man you know.
We come from nowhere and it’s nowhere
where we go.
Contributors' Notes

Glen Armstrong's work has appeared in Poetry Northwest and Mudfish. His current book is published by Sideshow Press.

Nick Barrett is an English instructor at New Mexico State University, where he is also an associate editor of Puerto del Sol. His poetry has appeared in a number of literary magazines including The Sleepwalker's Journal, Cielo Azul, and Mosaic.

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Leslie Bienen has recently been published in The Cream City Review, The Journal, and The Chattahoochee Review. She has received grants from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

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Karen Blomain is the author of four books: Black Diamond (Great Elm Press), The Slap (Nightshade Press), The Rainbow, Writing the Research Paper (co-author), and Borrowed Light (Nightshade Press, 1992). Her work has appeared in Latin American Literary Review, Passages North, Short Story, The Journal of Feminist Ethics, The Christian Science Monitor, and others. She is currently editing an anthology of works by poets who write from and/or about the anthracite region of Pennsylvania.

Heather L. Hirschi is finishing her undergraduate work in English and Women's Studies at the the University of Utah.

Andrew Hoffmann's fiction has been published in Quarterly West, Puerto del Sol, Bombay Gin, The MacGuffin, and others. His poetry and non-fiction have also been published in numerous journals.

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Lyn Lifshin, a widely published poet and author of many collections of poetry, including Madonna Who Shifts for Herself and Kiss the Skin Off, is the recipient of several fellowships and grants. She recently edited Tangled Vines: Poems
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**Al Nyhart**'s poems have appeared in *Sow's Ear, The Cape Rock*, and *Puerto del Sol*.

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Chris Stroffolino has poems forthcoming in *o*blek, *Talisman, Long Shot, First Intensity*, and Go. His essay on Ken Greenley is upcoming in *Chiron Review*, and an essay on Peter Gizzi will appear in *To*.

**James Tate's** most recent books are *Distance From Loved Ones* (reviewed in *PBQ #43*) and *Selected Poems* (1991), which won the William Carlos Williams Award and the Pulitzer Prize in poetry.

**John Wheatcroft** is the author of six novels, most recently *Catherine, Her Book*. His newest novel, *Mother of All Loves*, will be released by Cornwall Books this year. He is also the author of five books of poetry, most recently *The Stare on the Donkey's Face* (Cornwall Books, 1991).

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